

# A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Equivocation in a Religious Text

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## **Abstract**

*This study looks over equivocation in religious texts as one of the strategy employed by preachers in their sermons. Its intent is exhibiting the types, functions, and stylistic tools of equivocation utilized by a religious man who is regarded as an authorize person in his society. In a sense that preacher cannot get rid of equivocation and he appoints it using different stylistic tools. Additionally, he employs it for different reasons.*

**Keywords:** *Critical stylistics, Equivocation, Ideology.*

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## **1.1 Introduction**

Critical stylistics provides the lost link (ideology) between stylistics, (i.e.) the detail tools of analysis for understanding how text works on the basis of the linguistic choice and critical discourse analysis, (i.e.) the general theories for elucidating the effect the text can have, regarding social and political contexts in which texts are read or produced; so it is a development of both approaches (Jeffries, 2019).

Studying a preacher's ideology in a religious text is not an easy action; thus most researchers employ subjective approaches to scrutinize this ideology. The present study espouses critical stylistic as an approach to detect ideologies in preacher's speech objectively as it is based on a set of functions or tools to be adopted in the analysis.

Speakers' attitudes and ideas to various things in the real world usually direct their options of the expressions, words and even their way of speaking. One of these things is the issue of equivocation through which a preacher everywhere can employ language to affect his audience when he offers his view about something.

Equivocation is a statement that is not literary false but that cleverly avoids a nasty truth (Web source 1). It enables the speaker or writer to avoid a firm commitment to any certain position which is a practical way of avoiding hard questions or counterarguments. Formally, equivocation can be used to make a deceptively persuasive argument (Web source 2).

Equivocation is also described as doublespeak. It is the use of an ambiguous term in more than one sense, so making an argument misleading (Web source 3). It occurs where the same word is used, but has two or more different meanings, bringing to easy confusion as at least one of the meaning is likely to be wrong. It can be either intentional or unintentional. When one person attempts to send a message and the other attempts to interpret the original meaning. Additionally, equivocation leads easily to confusion, which is a mental state where people become open to suggestions. It can therefore be intentionally used as a persuasive device (Web source 4).

Similarly, equivocation is to speak in a way that is intentionally not clear and confusing to conceal the truth, (i.e.) being indirect, digressing, evasive, and beat around the bush which is circumlocution. A lengthened, roundabout mode of speech is allowable for the sake of variety or emphasis, or when a direct assertion might be offensive; but when none of these ends is accomplished, it is feeble and unaffected (ibid.).

It is a form of writing where the writer uses exaggeratedly long and complex sentences in order to convey a meaning that could have otherwise been conveyed through a shorter, much simpler sentence. It involves stating an idea or a view in an indirect manner that leaves the reader guessing and grasping at the actual meaning (Web source 5).

The previous definition is the operational one.

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Broadly speaking, the study has not received its due attention additionally; very little is known about the purposes of employing equivocation in religious texts.

Precisely, this study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What is (are) the stylistic tool(s) used in this sermon?
2. What stylistic tools the preacher prefers to use?
3. What is the function(s) of equivocation sought by the preacher?

## 1.2. The Aims of the Study

This study aims at:

1. Identifying the stylistic tools employed in this sermon.
2. Determining the most prevailing stylistic tool the preacher prefers to use.
3. Pinpointing the functions of equivocation sought by the preacher.

## 1.3 Hypotheses

In relation to the aims mentioned above, it is hypothesized that:

1. Equivocation demands a variety of stylistic tools. The stylistic tools include naming, equating, prioritizing and metaphors.
2. The most dominant categories of stylistic tools are naming and describing and prioritizing which are employed by the preacher in this sermon.
3. Equivocation is used to fulfill certain functions such as rhetorical effect, evasion and implications.

## 2. Critical stylistics

Critical stylistics (CS) henceforth as a term is first coined by Lesley Jeffries (2007: 1) when she tries to investigate the main power in hegemonic discourses on females body in society so as to find out whether these discourses incorporate feminist ideologies successfully. In his Marxism approach, Fairclough (2001:21-2) distinguishes three levels of CDA, naming: description, interpretation and explanation.

CS emerged as a method of exposing "the ideology in any text, if it is agreed or not" (Jeffries, 2010b:410). It offers a detailed systematic linguistic and tacks about the lack of analytical methods. Jeffries and Walker (2012:74) suggest that CS intends to reveal power relation by working on textual level in analyzing texts since its core intention is on who has the power to determine hegemonic discourses with the access to media and knowledge as a means of text production.

On his own side Tabbert (2013:76) points out that the core focus of stylistics is the analysis of both literary and non-literary texts using analytical techniques and methods from linguistics to expedite the study of style. Stylistics can be compared with critical linguistics, not with CDA, it is a method of research since it offers a set of tools to answer questions about text (i.e.) what the text means, and how the text means. Unlike CDA, one facet of stylistics detects ideologies in text, but it is the core focus of CDA, CDA sheds light only on the analysis of non-literary texts. Jeffries (2014: 412) declares that CS makes up a set of textual conceptual functions, with the aim of performing a level of meaning between language function and form which begins with Halliday's (1994) meta-functions of language, since these functions construct world views. Precisely speaking, CS is interested in revealing and uncovering "hidden ideologies in texts and then in discourse" via providing a set of tools to reveal these ideologies.

## 2. Tools of Critical Stylistics

### 2.1 Naming and Describing

Jeffries (2010a:17) states that there are different ways through which texts might be said to 'name' the world. In naming, there might be a certain choice between two or more than two ways of indicating or referring to the same thing (i.e.), the name for a person could be changed with another one which refers for the same person. Jeffries (ibid.) adds that there are other ways of naming that might have ideological impact in a particular context. Furthermore, she suggests that there are three essential ways where naming can create ideological meanings in texts. First, a noun is selected out of the obtainable alternatives, second other information contained in the noun groups or the noun phrases, third the way where activities and processes described by verbs might be altered into nouns by a process known 'nominalization' with a specific ideological ranges. In another words, she (ibid.:20) declares that naming is a wide descriptive notion that covers a number of linguistic notions:

- 1- The chosen name is to indicate a reference.
- 2- The structure of a noun phrase and modifies can determine the quality of referent, ( i.e.) describing.
- 3- The resolution to utilize a certain name not the other is expressed as a verbal process, (i.e.) nominalization.

### 2.2 Equating and Contrasting

Jeffries (2010a:51) specifies that a text tells what their writers/speakers think as equivalent or contrasting. The textual conceptual function of equating and contrasting is concerned mainly with construction of oppositional and equivalent meanings. Additionally, English has more synonyms than other languages due to its rich history. **Opposition** is more salient than other types of relations. CS is based on textual sense relations. In a prior remark Jeffries (2007:105) points out that building new opposites rely on the understanding of conventional opposites such as high/ low, good/ bad. She (2010a:53) states that equivalent and oppositional meanings can be constructed by syntactic triggers. She (ibid.) adds that there are fewer triggers of equivalence than of oppositions such as noun phrase apposition, **parallel** structures, relational insensitive transitivity options, as well as metaphor and simile that are built to make conceptual equivalence. Furthermore, she (ibid.:54) declares that the cognitive processes are used to interpret textually constructed equivalence. Concerning oppositions, Jeffries (ibid.) points out that the construction of opposites is very complex however, there is an ideal structure which is most common for equivalence and opposition. For the former, the copular structure ( X is Y) while for the latter, negated opposition (X, not Y).

- 1-It was X, Y. ( here to set up equivalence), (e.g.) It was fury, incompetence.
- 2-It was X not Y ( here to set up opposition), (e.g.) It was car-maintenance, not cake decorating.

Apposition, equivalence, is used in the first example, (i.e.) it is implying a type of equivalence between two words, in a sense that two words refer to the same referent. Since *fury* is a synonym of incompetence and anger, it is a synonym of inadequacy which it out of context. The reader can construct a context where these words can have the same referent, a typical example appears in news where the position as well as the name of a character would be written attaching noun phrases as in Mr. Mark, the Prime Minister.

Opposition sets up in the second example where two unrelated entities, (i.e.) a negative- positive couple of structures, however the speaker begins intuitively to find a context where these entities may be seen as opposites so as to detect a certain ideology, for example *car maintenance* is related to masculine activity whereas *cake decorating* is related to feminine activity ( Jeffries, 2010a: 52-7). Consequently, these relations of opposition and equivalence set between phrases and words created in a text can be tested by using syntactic triggers. Additionally, there are subtypes of opposite that can be recognized to create ideology in a text. These are complementary, gradable antonym, converse, and reverse opposition. Complementary oppositions such as male/ female, alive/ dead are mutually exclusive in the logical term, so if it is not male, it is female. Gradable antonym such as rich/poor, long/short are those relations where there are values between these entities additionally these relations are realized by their ability to use intensifies as well as the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives. Converse oppositions such as husband/wife, buy/ sell are couple of words that have a various aspects on the same scene that is either a relationship or a transaction. They are mutually dependent that can create ideologies by depicting opposites from distinct point of view. Finally, reverse oppositions such as arrive/depart, pack/unpack are actions in which the reverse of each other. Thus the positive evaluative force of *arrive, pack* and their negative counterparts *depart, unpack* can construct ideology in a text.

### 2.3 Prioritizing

This section concentrates on the syntactic possibilities for prioritizing some comment or information over other, building on previous knowledge of information structure, transformational choices and subordination.

### **3.Equivocation**

According to Kareem (2015:8), equivocation is often defined as the misleading use of a word, phrase or sentence with multiple meaning, (i.e.) when language is understood in two or more ways, equivocation exists. McArthur (1992:378) points out that equivocation is from Latin *aequivocatio* / *aequivocatio* having equal voices or meaning, almost translating Greek *homo-numia*, (i.e.) the same name. It is worth mentioning that ambiguity and uncertainty that arise from unclear meaning. An equivocal usage can be interpreted, in accordance to the context, in two or more ways, for example, "bank" is either a financial place or a side of river. It is used in the sense of either ambiguity or vagueness. Grambs (1989:116) suggests that "to deliberately confusing language to deceive or mislead, or ambiguity through choice of words; make double meaning or evasive statement". Copi (1968:77) clarifies that the fallacy of equivocation is to employ a word or phrase in two different senses.

#### **3.1 Uses of Equivocation**

According to Kareem (2015:13), there are two intended purposes for equivocation. Firstly, it is to play on the meanings of a word, phrase and sentence for rhetorical impacts that are either seriously or humorously. Secondly, it is to conceal something internal.

##### **3.1.1 Evasion**

Grambs (1989:116) suggests that evasion is a serious reason for equivocating about the addresser's message. It is simply used to avoid talking about something directly or dealing with something frankly. Consequently, to equivocate is to make an evasive statement or double meaning. He (ibid) adds that euphemisms are used in this regard to avoid mention something in a direct way, thus speakers use them because of their taboo connotations. According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (2001:87), equivocation is defined as a way of speaking or behaving that is not clear or definite and it is intended to avoid the truth, thus equivocation can be used in a sense of evasion.

##### **3.1.2 Rhetorical Effects**

For Simpson and Weiner (1989:1393), pun is the use of a word in such a way as to propose two or more meanings or associations, or the use of two or more words of the nearly same sound with different meanings so as to produce a humorous effect. In fact, it is used for rhetorical effects that are either seriousness or humorous. Equivocation occurs simply because the hearers may not be aware of the sense of the word or phrase used by the speaker.

##### **3.1.3 Implications**

Kareem (2015:15) claims that speakers equivocate about their ideas, beliefs, thought viewpoints...etc. Equivocation is used to intentionally put out of sight certain things such as the truth conditions about the human life. Different people perceive these ideas, thought, beliefs in different manners. Interpretations of the same speech encoded by the speakers are set differently. These interpretations occur due to critics/ speakers' background and their style. They are understood as a group of various linguistic and nonlinguistic factors that can be realized as the implicated ideas.

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#### **3.2 Types of Equivocation**

According to Kareem (ibid.:16), many people use language in versatile ways for different purposes and on different occasions. Additionally, English language contains words and expressions with multiple meanings employed in such a way that creates confusion and equivocation for the readers / hearers. Equivocation varies from one context to another as well as from one style to another. It should be mentioned that a number of elements can affect the manner of representing a text such as author, readers, hearers, subject matter, kind of communication...etc.

He (ibid.) adds that communication is known as the contact between living persons that can take versatile forms such as spoken, written, photography, gestures...etc. Furthermore, equivocation in a communication can be of three dimensions: lexical, structural and non-verbal. The present study focuses on lexical and structural equivocation only.

### 3.2.1 Lexical Equivocation

The basic type of equivocation is lexical where words and morphemes of many languages are used equivocally intentionally or unconsciously. Additionally, words and morphemes can be used equivocally phonetically, semantically or even phonologically, for example, light is opposite of dark / heavy; sentence is punishment / group of words (Kareem,2015:17).

### 3.2.2 Structural Equivocation

For Kareem (2015:18), structural equivocation results from the structure of the phrase, sentence and then the whole text, (i.e.) a phrase or a sentence may have equivocal structure that intends to express two interpretations such as 'Arabs like haunting hawks' is ambiguous due to its construction by the addresser. The equivocation is between the noun phrase 'haunting hawks' consisting of participle attributive adjective and its head noun as well as the embedded participle clause 'haunting hawks' consisting of a non-finite verb and its object. In a prior remark, Brown and Miller (1980:121) mention that "part of understanding English structure is understanding what goes with what".

### 3.2.3 Non- verbal Equivocation

For Kareem (2015:18), non-verbal equivocation means the use of words and visual components such as signs, postures, physical gesture, movements clothes, music and other man made materials.

## 4. Statistical Results

The data selected is an American sermon which is entitled " Waiting for the Real Trump" by Michael Dyson. It is taken from official website. It is about USA presidential elections in (2016) . The date is purposely nominated since it has seen the strongly turbulent era in the American overall policy where preaching and religious are requisite to an ethical community.

The purposes beyond essentially selecting this sermon to be the data of the current study are interposed in the idea that it is modern sermon that is politics in their main theme and it is the model of the American sermon about elections (2016). Furthermore, it is preached in such a period that performs a critical political time of the American history where the social and political circumstances are brought into light. Consequently, this sermon tackles the USA presidential elections as the prime theme as well as other social, political, and other economic crises, (i.e.) it is a modern sermon in its own nature that is politics in their main topic as well as it is delivered in a critical time of the USA history where many difficult events take place.

The following table shows general thorough scores achieved by applying the eclectic model developed to examine data under scrutiny. It is limited to three functions of Jeffries model (2010) because the other functions are either repeated or do not introduce element- based statistical results.

**Table (1) The Distribution of Functions in Dyson' Sermon**

Name of Function	Total Instances in Data	Percentage of Instance in Data
Naming and Describing	276	47.50
Equating and Contrasting	87	14.97
Prioritizing	196	33.73
Total	559	99.99

The previous table shows the dominance of the instances of two functions which have the highest results. These are naming and describing and prioritizing. This is an indication that Dyson prefers to use these functions appropriately to delegate their speeches with various ideologies.

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