

## “I’m Praising God in the Language that He Loves”: Language Use in Religious Discourse

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**Abstract:** Religion has been a key factor in the linguistic inquiry. Due to its significance in social life, it came to be in an intertwined relationship with language. Much of linguistic research has focused on this relationship in institutionalized settings such as schools, mosques and churches. Yet, the study of the interaction between language use and religion in less or non-institutional settings has not attracted much attention. This study responds to this need by exploring the use of Arabic within an English-language Friday sermon to address a multilingual religious community at an on-campus Muslim prayer site in New Zealand. Drawing upon data from semi-structured interviews with 10 volunteer sermon presenters, the study identifies various motivations and functions of using Arabic in the Friday sermons from the sermon presenters’ perspectives. The overall conclusion is that Arabic language use in the Friday sermons goes beyond the communicative aspect of language.

**Keywords:** Arabic, Friday sermons, functions, motivations, religious discourse

### 1. Introduction

This study explores the use of Standard Arabic (henceforth Arabic) expressions and larger language chunks such as Quranic verses and invocations in Friday sermons delivered in English in less institutional settings, namely, an on-campus Muslim prayer site. Specifically, it is an attempt to answer the question of why Friday prayer sermon presenters, in a New Zealand on-campus prayer site, use Arabic when addressing non-Arabic speaking audience. The motivation of this research is twofold. First, an observation in the literature was that much of linguistic research efforts have often been devoted to exploring the interaction between language and religion in institutionalized settings (e.g., AlSaawi 2017; Omoniyi & Fishman 2006). Yet, we still know little about such interaction, especially in less or non-institutionalized settings (Spolsky 2003, 2009). Second, a personal observation attracted my attention upon my arrival in New Zealand in 2016. This motivation increased during the 22 Sociolinguistics Symposium in 2018 when a colleague presented his work with non-Arabic speaking Muslim migrants claiming that his participants had ‘pretended bilingualism’ since they used Arabic for religious purposes only. I found myself curious to check whether such a finding would apply in the case of Friday sermon presenters. Thus, I decided to explore the reasons behind using Arabic in the Friday sermons as perceived by the sermon presenters.

This study contributes to the growing body of research in the field of sociolinguistics, especially language use in religious contexts. To achieve the research goal, this study answers the overarching research question: *Why do Friday*

*sermon presenters use Arabic when delivering the sermons to non-Arabic speaking audience?* This question encompasses the following two sub-questions:

1. What are the motivations for using Arabic in the Friday sermon?
2. What are the functions of using Arabic in the Friday sermon?

This article is structured as follows: First, the article begins with the research motivations and contribution to the field followed by its objective, questions, and a description of the research context. Second, a review of related studies is presented. Third, an elaboration of the adopted methodological approach is offered. Fourth, the distillation of results is discussed with reference to previous research. Finally, concluding remarks are offered towards the end of this article.

### **1.1 Context**

This study was conducted in an on-campus prayer site at a New Zealand University. The site consisted of two separate prayer rooms (one for males and one for females) which were offered by the university to the students’ Muslim club. Being a student-run and university-supported club, the Muslim club administration seemed to have no political or ideological interests or affiliations with external bodies (except the university). The main and only aim of the club was to support international and local students (about 300 registered members) during their studies through holding a wide range of academic, cultural, and religious activities. The study focused on one of the religious activities, which is attending prayers, specifically the Friday noon prayer. The Friday noon prayer (aka Dhuhr) consisted of a (Friday) sermon and the prayer. The Friday sermon was a unidirectional religious speech delivered by volunteer (often postgraduate) male students, hailing from different countries and mainly speaking languages other than Arabic. The sermon delivered on campus was in English. Yet, it was never without the use of Arabic, apart from quoting Quranic verses. Again, the structure of the sermon was no similar to its Arabic counterparts. The sermons presented in the prayer site included three sections. Namely, the opening (written and spoken in Arabic), the content was the main body of the sermon (written and spoken in both Arabic and English), and the closing section was mainly invocation (written and spoken in Arabic). The content section is the focus of analysis in this study. It is worth noting that the aforementioned characteristics of the university Muslim club allowed for freedom of linguistic choice when delivering the sermons. Furthermore, being a member of the club high committee, I am certain that neither the university nor the club administration did impose any restrictions on the volunteer presenters’ language choice, and that the presenters delivered the sermons at their own discretion.

The audience of these sermons was mostly university students (males and females). There were some other audience such as those who work in or near the university campus. Like sermon presenters, the audience had different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The audience included international students from Asian and African countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Somalia. The approximate number of the Friday sermons audience was 35 males and 20 females.

## **2. Language and religion**

Religion has been a key factor in the linguistic inquiry. Due to its significance in social life, it came to be in an intertwined relationship with language. This is vividly clear in Omoniyi's and Fishman's (2006) edited book in which the mutual effect of language and religion is demonstrated in relation to societal multilingualism (Omoniyi 2006), language use (Chew 2006), and language choice (Pandharipande 2006), to name a few. More recently, the study of language and religion has developed, having the emergence of 'theolinguistics' which considers the study of religious language such as investigating how people talk to and about God and the religion as well as why people make certain linguistic choices and what they accomplish (see Hobbs 2021).

Scholars have taken different approaches to explore the interaction between language and religion in the society at both macro and micro levels. At the macro level, language policy and planning (Spolsky 2009), education (Anderson, Mathys, & Cook 2015) and heritage language maintenance and shift (Dweik, Nofal, & Al-Obaidi 2019) are good examples whereas the analysis of prayer and religious songs (Ingold 2014) exemplifies the micro level of interaction.

Researchers have also drawn upon various theoretical frameworks to understand the interplay between language and religion. Among these, code-switching and diglossia have been central in bi and multilingualism research, showing a wide range of functions and patterns of language use (Alaiyed 2018; AlSaawi 2017; Bassiouney 2013; Ferguson 1959). For instance, AlSaawi (2017) investigated using Arabic in Friday sermons in the UK. Alsaawi (2017) drew upon observed and reported data from Asian Pacific participants and concluded that Arabic was used in the sermons for various purposes, such as historical authenticity and religious authority, exposing audiences to Arabic, linguistic accommodation, and overcoming a lack of easy equivalents in English.

Similarly, the diglossic use of language varieties has been central to the study of language and religion. Standard Arabic and its varieties have been intensively studied since the time of Ferguson's seminal work in the 1950s. Ferguson (1959) stated that Standard Arabic and its varieties had their functions and contexts of use, noting that Standard Arabic was spared for religious purposes. However, Ferguson's statement did not go unchallenged (see Alaiyed 2018; Bassiouney 2013). For example, Alaiyed (2018) studied the use of Standard Arabic and Najdi Arabic (a regional variety spoken in Saudi Arabia) in religious sermons. Alaiyed (2018) found that Imams strategically switched between Standard Arabic and Najdi Arabic for a variety of purposes. Bassiouney (2013: 63) suggested that Egyptian colloquial Arabic was used to help create an informal relationship between the speaker and his audience, without changing the speaker's role, the religious teacher, and "to create solidarity and also more importantly to trigger the associations of the two different varieties in the audience's mind, and thus leave the utmost effect possible on his/her audience" (Bassiouney 2013: 64).

In non-Arabic speaking contexts, research has shown that Arabic still preserves its use in religious speeches and contexts (AlSaawi 2017; Harmaini 2014; Spolsky 2009; Welji 2012). Harmaini (2014), for example, showed how non-Arabic

speaking Muslims used Arabic to express their religious identity in all walks of life. Furthermore, Nofal (2023) concluded that Arabic expressions in Friday sermons was found to be frequent in the New Zealand context, accounting for about 60 words per thousand.

Researchers have also drawn upon different methodological tools to get a better understanding of the dynamics of language use in religious discourse, including ethnographies and surveys. Recently, technological advancements have allowed for using techniques of Corpus Linguistics (CL) to explore how text producers use language in religious speeches, providing insights into language use based on quantitative measures of the language used in the texts (Baker & Vessey 2018; Esimaje 2014; Nofal 2023). Esimaje (2014: 1) focused on lexis of English in Christian sermons to discover whether there was a network of lexis peculiar to sermons and showed that “the key lexis of the sermons is different from the key lexis of general English.” Baker and Vessey (2018) explained how religious discourse was implemented in extremist discourse. Baker and Vessey (2018) noted that Arabic was used in the English texts to legitimise the text and the writers’ messages. In a recent work, Nofal (2023) explored language use in a corpus of 182 English Friday sermons. Drawing upon CL techniques and discourse analysis, Nofal showed how the use of Arabic in the sermons served various functions including, indexing religious identity, building rapport between the presenters and audiences, connecting the worshippers to wider Muslim communities, and legitimizing the text.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants in this study were 10 members of a Muslim club who presented the Friday sermons in an on-campus prayer site in New Zealand. The participants covered a wide range of demographic characteristics. Their ages ranged between 23 and 40, hailing from different countries including Bangladesh (n=1), Indonesia (n=3), Malaysia (n=2), Pakistan (n=2), Saudi Arabia (n=1), and Yemen (n=1). The participants were multilinguals, speaking two to four languages. Their linguistic backgrounds included Achinese, Arabic, Bangla, English, Hindi, Indonesian, Malay, and Urdu. Most of them studied Arabic as a foreign language (except two whose first language was Arabic). All participants spoke English as an additional language and were (post)graduate students in different fields of study, including humanities and social sciences, engineering, and biomedical science.

The participants were selected based on their role as sermon presenters at the time of data collection. The only criterion for selection was that they should have delivered at least two sermons in the prayer site. The participants were contacted in person, with the help of the Muslim club administration in some cases. Since I was a member of the Muslim club, participating in the community, I had already gained access to the community before data collection. This facilitated contacting the participants.

### 3.2 Data

The data used in this study came from a wider project that aims to delve into the relationship between language and religion from different perspectives. Data from semi-structured interviews, held with 10 sermon presenters between December 2019 and February 2020, was used in the current study. The interviewees were postgraduate students who voluntarily delivered the Friday sermons. The interviews were conducted in English, with an average length of 40 minutes. Although the interview schedule was prepared beforehand, many other questions were generated in the interviews because the interviews were treated as an interactional encounter rather than a source of reported data (Talmy 2010). This means that my participants and I co-constructed the interaction and knowledge sharing, and locally negotiated meanings among us. This in turn enabled me to (1) reflexively recognise that data was collaboratively produced rather than merely reported (Talmy 2010: 132), and (2) focus not only on the content but also on *how* it was shared. The interviews were audio-recorded and then fully transcribed and coded using the qualitative data software NVivo 12. Next, the data was analysed using Braun's and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis to identify salient patterns in the data supplemented by discourse analysis.

I recognised my voice, positionality, reflexivity, and ethical considerations at all stages of the research. I reflexively recognised the interaction between me as a researcher and the participants, research settings and procedures (Glesne 2011). This included acknowledging not only my position and emotions (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey 2020), but also my epistemological stance and my personal experience, background and opinions on the topic being researched, and interpreting the data (McKinley 2020). Thus, I critically questioned my position, power relations, my decisions and interpretations on an ongoing basis in order to minimise any subjective perspective, fixed understanding or assumptions. Ethical considerations such as consent, anonymity and confidentiality of the data were given priority in this study. The participants were given information sheets and consented in writing prior to data collection. Also, pseudonyms were used, and personal and private information was deleted from the data to achieve anonymity.

## 4. Results and discussion

This section presents the distillation of results, focusing on the participants' reported perspectives and experiences. That is, the findings being presented constructed what the participants believe they feel/do rather than what they actually feel/do even though the text does not explicitly state so. A range of themes pertaining to the goal of the study emerged in the analysis and could be categorised under three main themes, namely linguistic awareness, motivations for using Arabic and functions of using it in the sermons. I elaborate on these themes in the succeeding subsections, with illustrative examples from the data.

### 4.1 Linguistic awareness

Language awareness is a central issue in multilingual research, especially language choice and codeswitching (Verschik 2017). The most salient theme in the data

raised the issue of linguistic awareness. The participants touched upon two fronts of awareness in the data. While the first referred to their awareness of two languages in the sermon (code-switching), the second illustrated being aware of the Arabic origin of the expressions used. Having a close look at the data, it was noticeable that the awareness of the origin of some expressions created variation in the level of awareness of using Arabic in the sermons.

Not unexpectedly, all participants showed awareness of using Arabic in the sermons. The awareness of using Arabic varied among the participants as per their perceptions of the origin of the religious vocabulary used in the sermons. eight participants (including the two Arabic speakers) were fully aware of their use of Arabic in the sermons whereas two of them indicated that their use of Arabic is limited. Following are some illustrative examples. Excerpt 1 comes from an interview with Zaher (a doctoral student from Pakistan) and shows complete awareness of language use.

**Excerpt 1**

**Mohammed:** what language or languages do you use in the khutbah [sermon]?

**Zaher:** i mostly use english and some words of arabic as well. you know, it’s a religious thing.

**Mohammed:** do you use words from other languages? like namaz?

**Zaher:** no no. if i do no one will understand except the pakistanis.

the thing I am not aiming to [i.e., addressing only Pakistanis]

As shown in Excerpt 1, Zaher shows complete awareness of not only using Arabic in the sermon, but also its wide use within Muslim communities because of the type of speech he delivers. Being ‘a religious thing’, he believes, Arabic should be used in the sermon (When asked elsewhere to clarify what he meant by ‘religious thing’, he noted that the sermon is an integral “part of the Friday noon prayer and that’s why Arabic should be used”). Additionally, the excerpt shows how Zaher is aware of the consequences of language use and that seems to be the reason why he does not use common religious vocabulary (e.g., the Persian and Turkish namaz [prayer]) from other languages such as Urdu. Seemingly, Zaher assumes that only English (the lingua franca) and Arabic (the language of religion) are the proper languages in this multilingual context to be inclusive rather than addressing a certain group, e.g., the Pakistani audience.

A relative similarity was found in Hamid’s interview with some nuance subtleties. Hamid (a doctoral student from Bangladesh) was aware of the inclusion of Arabic in the sermons he presented. Yet, his knowledge of the origin of the religious vocabulary he used in the sermons made his level of awareness a bit different, as shown in Excerpt 2. The Excerpt comes from the beginning of the interview with Hamid and seeks to elicit the languages he uses in the sermons.

**Excerpt 2**

**Mohammed:** what language or languages do you use in the *khutbah*?

**Hamid:** emm i think my *khutbahs* are in english and arabic.

**Mohammed:** do you think you use Arabic a lot in the *khutbah*?

**Hamid:** no. i usually use Arabic to quote the quran.

**Mohammed:** emm so when you use terms like *doua'* [invocation] and *khutbah* do you consider these arabic?

**Hamid:** honestly i don't know. so, even if these words are arabic, i do not know whether these are in arabic or not because we use them back home. so i use these words because i think people know them.

Excerpt 2 shows that although Hamid consciously uses Arabic in the sermons he delivers, he is not completely aware of whether the words he uses belong to Arabic. His negative response to whether he uses Arabic a lot in the sermons indicates that using Arabic is exclusive to quoting Quranic verses. Furthermore, his honest declaration of not knowing the origin of some religious words, e.g., *doua'* and *khutbah* suggests that his conscious use of Arabic is limited to quoting the Quran. Because religious words were acquired natively during his childhood (as he explicitly stated elsewhere in the interview), Hamid perceives these words as an integral part of his first language and a common language within the Muslim communities he belongs to either locally (in Bangladesh) or internationally (including New Zealand). Perhaps Hamid here refers to the notion of 'translanguaging' (Otheguy, García, & Reid 2015). From a translanguaging perspective, languages are not separated in the bi- multilingual speaker's linguistic repertoire. Rather, the speaker deploys their "full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (Otheguy et al. 2015: 281). A similar view but with more explicit account was offered by Rowny (a doctoral student from Indonesia) who referred to using Islamic terms as his first language:

i use English, Arabic and my mother tongue ... you know, we know these words from childhood. they are like our language.

Having presented the participants' awareness of using Arabic, I now turn to the participants' motivations for using Arabic in the sermons.

#### 4.2 Motivations for using Arabic

Prior to presenting the motivations for using Arabic in the sermons, it is necessary to distinguish between the motivations and functions (which will be presented later). In the case of Arabic language use, while Arabic has a wide range of functions including a marker of linguistic, religious or ethnic identities (Jaspal & Coyle 2010), and legitimation (Baker & Vessey 2018), the motivation is what causes the speaker to apply a certain function such as language policies, ideologies and status.

Religious discourse contributes to the speakers' and their audience's sense of belonging to certain a group (Ferguson 1982). Additionally, linguistic practices are central to expressing a sense of belonging and group membership (Nofal 2020). Thus, language practices and religious discourse complement each other in prioritizing a certain language. This was evident in the data as my participants

seemed to view Arabic as a common language that connects them with their Muslim communities whether the immediate or ‘imagined’ community (Anderson 1991). The most salient commonality in the participants’ accounts regarding using Arabic in the sermons was their perception of Arabic as a common language. Most importantly, the wide use of certain Arabic words among Muslims, as Hamid suggested, encouraged sermon presenters to use Arabic. In this regard Hamid noted:

i feel that there are some words that are more understandable so that’s why i use them. so i feel like if i say salah, then more people will understand than when i say namaz because namaz is more used in the Indian subcontinent... so it is like a common language in the community.

Hamid believes that Arabic words that relate to religious practices such as *salah* (prayer) are more likely to be understood than what would be called ‘regional Islamic terms’ like *namaz*. Being aware of the diversity in the prayer site, his use of Arabic is targeted at the Muslim community. While this could be seen as a pragmatic choice about what this specific audience would understand, Hamid and some other participants indicated that Arabic Islamic words are well known among Muslims all over the globe. When asked why not to use the English words (which the audience would know), many participants ascribed using Arabic Islamic terms to what they believed as the language of all Muslim communities. While the language background of the community could be seen as a driving force towards the choice of language and these choices are site-specific, viewing Arabic as a common language among Muslims was clearer in Excerpt 3. Yazan (a doctoral student from Indonesia) explains why he thinks that people understand Arabic religious expressions in Excerpt 3.

### Excerpt 3

**Yazan:** from my experience, I went to countries like malaysia and singapore and attended Khutbas there. people there use Arabic words. And I sometimes download khutbahs from websites from different countries. I found the same thing. even here [at the university], we are from different countries and when we talk about islam and ibadat [religious observances] we all use the same words.

**Mohammed:** so, you believe that muslims around the world understand these Arabic words.

**Yazan:** of course they do. for me i use them because they are used in sermons everywhere.

As shown in the excerpt, Yazan relies upon his personal observation to explain his use of Arabic religious words. To him, his travels to other countries where he attended Friday sermons and Islamic websites as a source of preparing sermons for his audience contribute to the conceptualisation of Arabic as a common language within Muslim communities. Additionally, he qualifies this view by offering the example of his meetings with other Muslim students (and/or friends) on campus. Thus, such linguistic practices seem to be a reflection of the practices from the wider Muslim community in the immediate community.

The second motivation for using Arabic in the sermons was traditions. The participants ascribed their use of Arabic to the Islamic religious traditions. Some participants referred to the Islamic traditions as *sunnah* (which means the traditions

and practices of Prophet Muhammad, that constitute a model for Muslims). For example, Yahya (a doctoral student from Pakistan) believed that

any khutbah in any language should be on the lines of sunnah. so, we try to align with the similar style. we want to do what our muslim ancestors did.

To Yahya, using Arabic in the Friday sermon is an attempt to conform to the Islamic practices which were performed by Prophet Mohammed and his companions. What is interesting here is Yahya's reference to the Prophet and his companions as ancestors which suggests conceptualising these traditions as part of his heritage. This view was also held by other participants. For example, Zaher (in Excerpt 1) and Tareq (an MA student from Indonesia) who offered more explicit account in the following comment.

... i deliver the khutbah according to the islamic traditions, yeah ... so i just wanna follow the tradition. i don't wanna- i don't wanna distort the heritage. so, because i know what sharia [Islamic Law] says and what rukun [pillar] of khutbah is, it's also like the requirement of khatabah [oration].

Tareq here distinguishes between optional and compulsory traditions and touches upon two key points. First, Tareq refers to the Islamic traditions of delivering the sermon as a 'heritage' he wishes to keep intact. The word 'heritage', again, reminds us of the sense of belonging to the Muslim community, whether immediate or imagined. Thus, Tareq seems to perceive such religious traditions as a heritage he cherishes and desires to maintain. Such a view makes Arabic an integral part of this heritage which in turn motivates him to use Arabic in the sermons. Similar views held in the literature regarding other languages. Hindi and Farsi are perceived as heritage language for Indians and Iranians respectively even though they do not have ancestral ties with these languages (Nofal 2020; Salahshoor 2017). Second is the reference to the basic elements of the Friday sermon that must not be abandoned. Tareq believes that using Arabic is a religious obligation. Thus, sermon presenters are supposed to use Arabic under a religious obligation (i.e., Sharia Law) without which the sermon is considered void in the sense that it lacks one of its important elements, i.e. using Arabic. In addition to religious obligation, rules of genre influence aspects of language use (Muntigl & Gruber, 2005). Being part of the Arabic oration, contemporary Friday sermons and other forms of religious discourse continue to be powerfully influenced by the classical Arabic oration (Qutbuddin 2019: 433). Tareq perceives the sermon as belonging to the Arabic oration genre in which sermon presenters use language according to specific rules, including using Arabic.

In tandem with the stimuli of heritage and genre, the data also revealed that some participants used Arabic in the sermons because Arabic had a special bond with God. Hamid was an illustrative example. He commented on his use of Arabic rather than English expressions, saying:

... the difference is i am praising god in the language that he loves, in his language. so just praising him the way he wants us to praise. so, if i do it in this particular way it will be like more acceptable to god. so yeah.

According to Hamid, the underlying motive of preferring to use Arabic expressions is that God loves, wants and accepts Arabic. This way he conforms with the ideal manner of praising God, by using the language God loves and accepts. While this is merely Hamid’s personal opinion, it uncovers the links between language ideologies and language choice. Thus, Arabic language use is triggered by such language ideologies. In turn, using Arabic could be seen as a performance of rituals that gets him closer to God rather than a means of communication with his audience.

The last motivational theme in the data was pertinent to the translatability of the Islamic terms. Some participants ascribed their use of Arabic to their inability to find the perfect English equivalents that convey the full meaning of the Arabic ones. For example, Zaher pointed out that:

sometimes i don’t find a suitable word in English, so i use it directly from Arabic.

Another view was offered by Tareq when he commented on his use of Arabic expressions rather than English or his first language, as shown in Excerpt 4:

**Excerpt 4**

**Tareq:** there are words that we cannot translate to english or indonesian, sadaqa and charity are not 100% the same. i feel like if i say charity i do not feel the meaning as sadaqa, eh?

**Mohammed:** yeah, i know. but could you explain this further?

**Tareq:** i- i mean, when you hear words like charity or prayer, this does not give religious emtions or holiness. there is something in the heart beating. you know something spiritual when you hear the word sadaqa.

In Excerpt 4, Tareq links using Arabic expressions to the assumption that some Islamic terms are untranslatable. He believes that Islamic terms are not translatable. To qualify his claim, he offers the example of *sadaqa* and *charity*, highlighting the emotional interpretations of such terms. It can be noted that Tareq draws upon my status as an insider by using *eh*, a discourse marker in New Zealand English denoting an affective dimension of communication (Vine 2016). In doing so, he relies on my insider knowledge (as a Muslim or an Arabic speaking interlocutor) to foreground the emotional layer of meaning of the word *sadaqa*. This is explicitly stated after my request for clarification. At this point, Tareq refers to the lack of religious emotional aspect and spirituality of the English word, *charity*. In the same vein, AlSaawi (2017) reported that his participants ascribed using Arabic due to the richness of Arabic vocabulary in terms of connotations rather than the literal meanings. Moreover, many scholars suggested that translating Islamic discourse into English could result in the loss of some linguistic contents. For example, Errihani (2011: 387) stated that Islamic discourse and Arabic are inseparable because “[t]ranslating the sermon from Arabic immediately results in the loss of many stylistic features, such as rhythm, internal rhyme, alliteration and onomatopoeia.”

Having presented some motivations behind using Arabic in the sermons, I now turn to presenting the functions of using Arabic.

### 4.3 Functions of using Arabic

According to Pandharipande (2006), language functions and power determine language use for religious purposes. This argument was valid in the data. Arabic served a range of functions in the sermons. Five main themes were identified as functions of Arabic language use in the data. A function repeatedly reported in the literature was that Arabic serves as an emblem of identity. Arabic as a liturgical language was often constructed as a marker of religious identity (Jaspal & Coyle 2010) due to its status as the Islamic lingua franca (Al Shlowiy 2019). The first and most prevailing function in the data was pertinent to using Arabic as an expression of the religious identity. For example, Nimer (an MA student from Saudi Arabia) stated that:

many people use arabic to show their identity. yeah, it's important to use arabic to include everyone under one community.

Remarkably, Nimer begins the response to why he uses Arabic in the sermons with recruiting and echoing other people's practices using a 'doubled-voice discourse' (Bakhtin 1994), perhaps, to validate his use of Arabic as what he sees as a common practice of expressing identity. It could be that Nimer's linguistic background as a speaker of Arabic that makes him view using Arabic in the sermons as a common practice to express religious identity. Seemingly, this in turn contributes to viewing Arabic as an inclusive language assembling his audience under the umbrella of the Muslim community since it is the language everyone knows in the community. Nimer, Hamid and Zaher share the view that Arabic functions as an inclusive language. Hence, the three can be seen as practising linguistic accommodation to index and achieve solidarity among and with the audience (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland 1991). This was clear in Yahya's comment about quoting Arabic Quranic verses in the sermons rather than using English exegesis. He said:

every muslim knows the quran, so it creates a sense of unity. i believe reciting arabic ayahs [Quranic verses] strengthen our bond with each other.

Yahya appears to draw upon the assumption that Muslims know the Quran to qualify his statement about the role of Arabic within the Muslim community. To him, Arabic unites community members and strengthens the bonds among them (Mathiot & Garvin 1975). In so doing, sermon presenters viewed Arabic as a marker of religious identity which could help them to build a strong rapport with the audience.

The second function of using Arabic in the sermons was related to the presenter's argument building strategies. Seemingly, the sermon presenters utilized the prestige function of language (Mathiot & Garvin 1975) to build and shape their thoughts in a way that allowed for presenting a well-built argument. For example, Tareq was very expressive when he directly stated the function he assigned to Arabic in his sermons:

arabic can support my point or argument about something about what i'm gonna discuss

Tareq also linked such a function to the advantage that Arabic has as the language of the Quran and Prophet Mohammed. He said:

if you want to say something especially from a religious perspective, you know, you have to quote from the quran and from the hadith to give the basics (of this). i mean the basic text we can stand on.

Tareq’s comment shows the link between the function he assigned to Arabic and its status and authority in Islam. He qualifies his point by addressing the interactant’s epistemic stance and by evoking shared religio-cultural knowledge that the interlocutor or the vague ‘you’ is expected to know about what represents the *basic text* that one *can stand on* to support their argument. This view corresponds with Sami’s view (a doctoral student from Yemen). Sami said:

when you deliver the khutbah with a certain ayah [Quranic verse] in arabic, i think it will be more acceptable by the audience than using english because in arabic it is like supporting evidence. i’m not sure it can be called authority ... i think when we use Arabic, our words become stronger than using only English. people will know this comes from god; what god wants. so, we can deliver what god wants in a specific direction from the quran.

Seemingly, Sami’s perception of the sermons is influenced by his identity as a researcher who uses supporting *evidence* to deliver a *more acceptable* and *stronger* argument. Moreover, Sami connects Arabic to the divine *authority* accorded to it as the language of the Quran (although he hesitates to call it authority). His view that Arabic is a means to convey the commands of God makes it uncontested. It can be noted that although Tareq and Sami have different linguistic background (Tareq’s L1 is Indonesian and Sami’s L1 is Arabic), they both view using Arabic in the sermon as a solid ground for the sermons they present due to the connection between Arabic and the Islam.

Arabic language use seems to serve the instrumental function of persuasion. The participants use Arabic as a means of shaping their audience’s attitudes towards the points they raise. This leads to the third function which relates using Arabic to the status accorded to Arabic as a ‘sacred language’ (Amara 2018). Being the language of the Quran and rituals, Arabic holds a prestigious and holy status. Arabic is seen as a tool to make an impact on the audience as Hamid pointed out:

for me actually, it has more value to the audience ... and this is the convention. that's why i think it increases the- imp- or has an impact on people about the things i am talking about in the khutbah.

To Hamid, Arabic is a valuable language in the eyes of the audience. Such value seems to create different kinds of impact on the audience. For example, Rowny used Arabic as a pedagogical tool to build trust with his audience.

arabic gives me credibility. The audience will be aware that the speaker understands Arabic. Understanding Arabic will give the impression that the speaker can understand the primary sources of religious studies which are written in Arabic.

Rowny here links Arabic language use in the sermons to achieve *credibility* of his role as a sermon presenter who is expected to be knowledgeable. Drawing upon his Arabic language skills, he seems to use Arabic as a tool to achieve

trustworthiness of the content he presents. This is directly connected to his ability to gain access to the *primary sources of religious studies*. Seemingly Rowny applies ‘mental crossing’ in which he switches to Arabic which enables him to fulfill pedagogical effectiveness and invoke professionalism and expertise (Chew 2013).

Like Rowny, Yahya linked using Arabic expressions to efficiency and the divine origin of the Arabic expressions used. In his responses to whether he deliberately edited the sermons he downloaded from Islamic websites, he said:

i do change some islamic terms instead of the English ones to make it original and easy ... reciting ayahs in arabic gives an essence of being original so it creates a stronger influence on audience ... it [using Arabic words] connects them to the concept being told more efficiently.

Two main points can be inferred from Yahya’s comment. First, Arabic seems to index the divine origin of the words being uttered as the words of God. Quranic verses are undoubtedly believed to be the words of God. Yahya’s reading of the divinely revealed words can be seen as recontextualization of the (divine) linguistic form to create a *stronger influence* on the audience through the legitimacy and value (the divine origin) accorded to that form. Second, Yahya connects using Arabic with the audience’s cognition. To him, Arabic is a stimulus to enhance the cognitive links that the audience already had with the original linguistic form which in turn enables him to convey his message *efficiently*.

Similar views were echoed in the data but with a different take. Some participants viewed their use of Arabic as adding a holy aspect to the sermons. Such a view could be ascribed to the language ideologies the participants (and Muslims in general) have towards Arabic and its indispensable relationship with the Islamic rituals. For instance, Zaid (an MA student from Malaysia) said:

maybe i want to express the holiness of this khutbah as part of our juma’a [Friday] prayer.

While holiness may be counted as a motivation to use Arabic, Zaid considers using Arabic as contributing to the holiness of the sermon as a religious practice rather than to the points he discusses in the sermon. This way, Zaid implies that a sermon without Arabic might not be perceived as part of the *juma’a prayer*. He also implicitly suggests that he is aware of the cultural norms of the Muslim community, and thus using Arabic makes the sermon culturally (religiously to be specific) acceptable to the audience.

The fourth function was pertinent to the addition of an aesthetic aspect to the sermon. Arabic Friday sermons are replete with rhetorical devices (Errihani 2011) which, apart from being persuasive, adds beauty to the sermon. Some participants, e.g. Zaher, Nimer and Yazan, used Arabic in the English sermons because they believed it to add an element of beauty to the sermons. For example, Zaher indicated that “it’s a good mixture to make the sermon beautiful and catch more attention.”

Zaher here refers to using Arabic along with English in the sermon as a *mixture* that might help increase the interest of his audience in the sermons as well as avoid being boring. This strategic use of Arabic was supported by the metaphor Nimer referred to.

it is kind of change in the routine. i found it nice to recite an ayah in Arabic, for example, and then explain it in English yeah kind of weaving Arabic and English in one colourful textile. yeah, these are the reasons.

In this comment, Nimer explicitly links using Arabic to innovation (i.e., changing the routine). Breaking routines is widely thought of as a way to avoid boredom. Besides, Nimer metaphorically conceptualises the sermon as a *colourful textile* through which he can capture the audience’s attention, as he mentioned elsewhere in the interview. Similarly, Zaid noted that “it grabs the attention of your audience when you use mix rather than English.”

It can be argued here that language use in the sermons functions as the rhetorical devices which Arabic oration is replete with. While imams use repetition, the loudness of voice and narratives in Arabic sermons to achieve their intended goals such as persuasion (Errihani 2011: 388), using Arabic could serve similar goals in multilingual settings.

The fifth function was related to adding emphasis to the point being raised. Othman (2006) stated that bilinguals in the UK use English along with Arabic for emphasis and clarification. Similarly, the data showed that the participants used Arabic to emphasise what is said. For example, Hamid said (in two separate but related comments):

i use this kind of words [Arabic Islamic words] to emphasise what they mean to us.

... it's like emm it- it emphasises the importance of the holy value of what i am saying

Hamid’s comments foreground the role of Arabic in emphasising not only the meaning of what is said, but also its *holy value*. Hamid’s comments suggest that he is aware of two layers of meaning that Arabic conveys. While the first is pertinent to what the Islamic term actually means to Muslims, the second highlights the emotional aspect of that term as being *holy* and coming from God. Thus, by using Arabic words he invokes the audience’s cognitive and emotional links between the linguistic form and the ritual practice it refers to. In this regard, ALSaawi (2017: 87) reported that imams in the UK strategically used Arabic in the sermons to “emphasize particular situations or meanings and to stress aspects that it is believed to be important for Muslims to understand (i.e. religious ideas).”

## 5. Concluding remarks

The study reported in this article contributes to the field of language and religion by focusing on language use in Friday sermons delivered in non-institutionalised settings. The study has explored Arabic language use in religious discourse to uncover why Friday sermon presenters use Arabic when delivering sermons to non-Arabic speaking audience. The overall conclusion is that Arabic language use in the Friday sermons goes beyond the communicative aspect of language. Arabic language use is triggered by its status as a sacred language and the perceptions towards it as a lingua franca among Muslims.

The overriding influence of religion on language use derives from the wide belief that Arabic is a common language within Muslim communities. The status

that Arabic enjoys as a common language to Muslims allows for a dramatic transformation in its use from being an additional language (e.g., second or foreign language) into an integral part of both the Islamic heritage and genre rules. While the former, according to the participants, refers to the Islamic traditions and obligation, the latter shows the inclusion of Arabic in the sermons as mandatory in the Arabic oration genre to which the sermons belong. Likewise, the holiness and the divine origin accorded to Arabic foreground the issue of the untranslatability of Islamic expressions and the Quran. There is a common view that translating Islamic expressions from Arabic into other languages does not convey the exact meaning as Arabic does. This is ascribed to losing the connotative meanings linked to Arabic, including the emotional aspect of these expressions.

This study has revealed that Arabic serves various functions. The primary function of using Arabic is indexical rather than communicative. That is, Arabic language use functions as a marker of religious identity. The sermon presenters use Arabic to build strong relationships among and with the audience. Furthermore, drawing upon the holiness and authority accorded to Arabic as the language of Islam, sermon presenters strategically use Arabic to support the points they are making. They believe Arabic to be uncontested supporting evidence and solid grounds to build their arguments and deliver the intended message. This is mainly achieved by increasing the impact on the audience since Islamic texts, including the Quran and Hadith, are originally in Arabic. The study has also revealed an interesting function of Arabic language use, i.e., innovation. The data has shown that some sermon presenters use Arabic to add an aesthetic aspect to the sermon. They believe that using Arabic in the sermon makes the sermon more beautiful and grabs the audience's attention. Finally, Arabic language use brings emphasis to both what is said and the holiness of the sermon itself.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the study of language and religion by highlighting the complexity of language use in religious discourse. When we look at language use in religious contexts, we shall find much complexity to look at. Religious languages such as Arabic and Church Latin have been often described as glossolalia (e.g., Harkness 2021) when used by individuals for religious purposes without speaking (or understanding) these languages. In addition to that, linguistic terms such as 'pretended bilingualism' have recently appeared to refer to more or less the same linguistic phenomenon. Yet, Recent sociolinguistic research has shown the functionality of language as indexical rather than a mere means of communication (Eckert 2008; Yoder & Johnstone 2018). Against this backdrop, I hope to have shown that language use in religious discourse is not restricted to communicative use in the broad view. Rather, it contributes to communicating identity, belonging and emotions.

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