Amen and Hallelujah preaching:
Discourse functions in African American sermons

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ABSTRACT

Numerous discourse markers have been examined in conversation and lecture contexts, but research is sparse on markers in the sermon genre and on the religious discourse communities in which sermons occur. This article examines discourse marker functions of sermonic expressions frequent in performed African American sermons (e.g. *Amen, Hallelujah, Praise God*). Functions identified include those of textual boundary marker, spiritual maintenance filler, rhythmic marker, and the infrequent call-response marker. Results support the importance of the role that culture (here, African oral tradition) plays in sermon performance. (African American English, sermons, religious discourse, discourse analysis, discourse markers, genre.)

INTRODUCTION

Many discourse analysts have explored the genres of conversation and lecture and the roles of markers within these genres; however, few studies exist on the identification and function of specific socially constructed discourse markers (DMs) in the SERMON genre. The few studies that have taken discourse approaches to sermon analysis typically have analyzed seminary-trained White preachers. These studies, particularly those of Smith 1993 and Zeil 1991, have made excellent contributions to our understanding of gender-linked differences in sermon delivery and in audience perception of those sermons. Still lacking, though, are studies that analyze DMs in African American sermons and that consider both textual and cultural influences on the roles of DMs.

Although such specific studies are lacking in the literatures of discourse and of African American culture, a number of studies have explored the broader topic of African cultural survivals in traditional Black churches. Some of these retentions have a direct connection to the performance of African American sermons.

Work on cultural "survivals" or "retentions" primarily addresses the question of whether people who are forcefully taken away from their countries leave elements of their culture behind as well, or whether they hold strongly to their native cultural practices. Herskovitz's (1958) seminal work on African cultural surviv-

als in the United States includes call-response and ritual-like dancing as examples of African retentions in Black American churches. Similarly, Lincoln 1974 argues that Blacks brought their religion with them from Africa, and that later they "accepted the white man's religion, but they haven't always practiced it in the white man's way. It became the black man's purpose ... to shape, to fashion, to recreate the religion offered to him by the Christian slave master, to remold it nearer to his own heart's desire, nearer to his own peculiar needs" (quoted in Mitchell 1970:6). Suggesting that slaves and their descendants were not stripped entirely of their African religious heritage, many researchers have illuminated similarities between African American religious practices and West African rituals (Robert 1972, Barrett 1974, Mitchell 1975, Daniel & Smitherman 1976, Smitherman 1986, 2000, Simpson 1978, Raboteau 1978, Blassingame 1979, Jules-Rosette 1980, Sernett 1985, Twining 1985, Pitts 1986, 1989).

If West African cultural retentions do exist among African Americans, it would be difficult and erroneous to discuss any aspect of the Black church without mentioning orality. Traditional West Africans and African Americans have been described as having a strong oral culture (Edwards & Seinkewicz 1991). In his work on American sermons from the time of the Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr., Warner 1999 claims that American sermons have a written foundation. What makes this claim problematic is the generalization that "American sermons" are all similar in this way. Traditional African American sermons are typically NOT first written and do not command their value in the context of WRITTEN LITERATURE. They do not conform to the criterion of being initially "reduced" (a word that might be selected by those who find orality more meaningful than literacy in their communities) to the written word. Because of the multiple cultural functions of the spoken word, African Americans have tended to value oral performance much more highly than do cultures that are closer to the literate end of the literacy-orality continuum. The traditional African American sermon is no exception. Although preachers may choose to write their sermons first, if they wish their delivery of the sermon to be accepted within traditional Black churches, the sermon must have at least the APPEARANCE of not having been finished beforehand; the Black preaching event should be constructed by both congregation and preacher, and it should be open to the direction of the "Spirit."

Edwards and Seinkewicz 1991 highlight the following specific features that all oral cultures tend to share: audience plays a central role in all performances; different audiences have different ways of expressing their approval or disapproval of the speaker; referential structure is used to unite audience and performer and to create dialogue between the two; distinct textual features of rhyme, tempo, pitch, and formulaic language are present; and aesthetic strategic elements such as elaboration, exaggeration, and metaphor are evident. That description is applicable in all particulars to the African American preaching event, but the emphasis on unity between audience and performer is especially noteworthy because the idea of a jointly produced sermon tends to influence linguistic choices

and to distinguish traditional Black churches. Specifically, if preachers and congregations prefer that the sermon not be a monologue but that pulpit and congregation both participate, verbal and nonverbal discourse markers should reflect this preference in the same way that DMs in lectures and conversation can reveal information about the roles of participants in those discourse genres.

That African American preaching reflects an oral heritage is well documented (Abrahams 1970, 1976, Mitchell 1970, Smitherman 1986, 2000, Dundes 1981, Kochman 1981, Erickson 1984, Pitts 1986, 1989). African American preaching, the most prominent and longstanding discourse event (performance) in traditional African American churches, generally can be evaluated according to how well the performers (preacher AND congregation) meet the criteria of oral tradition. Smitherman 1977 says that the dialogue between preacher and congregation ("call-response"), which begins with the preacher responding to a prior call from God to preach, serves to unify the preacher with his or her audience. In fact, personal communication and observation suggest that Black preachers who do not get congregational responses (e.g. *Amen*, *Das right*, *you sho' 'nuff preachin'*), will feel a sense of separation from the audience. Either they have "lost" the congregation by speaking "above their heads" or by boring them, or they are presenting material with which the audience totally disagrees. Silence in traditional Black churches is generally not viewed as indicative of a mesmerized or attentive audience; instead, it typically carries negative connotations. This call-response format used to unify participants is evident not only in the preaching event but also in most other African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speech events. Informal observations and personal interviews with Black preachers show that many traditional African American preachers, when speaking to audiences who do not use call-response, do not feel "at home" and may be uncomfortable with delivering sermons in those contexts. This discomfort exists because, in most Black churches, the audience's responses actually assist in the formation of spontaneous sermons, a combined effort of preacher and congregation.

Mitchell's (1970) and Davis's (1987) works on African American sermons have been useful in describing general components of a Black sermon framework. Mitchell's much-quoted work identifies two major principles crucial to Black preaching: (i) The gospel must be presented in the language and culture of the people, the vernacular; and (ii) the gospel preached must speak to contemporary people and their needs (as was the case with Black spirituals). Mitchell claims that it is impossible to provide an outline for the Black sermon, given the individuality, imagination, and spontaneity of Black preaching; he focuses instead on describing such aspects as cultural context, reasons for use of Black English in sermons, and descriptions of a sermon's climax.

Davis 1987, in contrast, gives a detailed description of the overall structure of the African American sermon as a narrative event. He identifies five major components of traditional Black sermons: (i) Preacher tells the congregation that the

sermon was provided by God; (ii) preacher identifies the theme, followed by a Bible quotation; (iii) preacher interprets the scripture literally and then broadly; (iv) each unit of the sermon contains a secular-versus-sacred conflict and moves between concrete and abstract; (v) closure is absent, and the sermon is left open-ended (1987:67–90).

Both Mitchell's general descriptive features and Davis's broad outline appear to hold true for most traditional Black sermons; still, the context within which all these components are displayed tends to be one of the oral-tradition call-response format. The sermons can be viewed as a structured stretch of discourse with room for individuality or relative creativity. Davis 1987 refutes Rosenberg's (1970) claim that Black preaching's spontaneity results from the African American folk preacher "subordinate[ing] everything he has to say to the demands of meter." Generally speaking, Rosenberg argues that Black preachers arrange all their sermons to create a musical effect.

In contrast, Davis believes that, while Black sermons appear to have uniform meter, the lengths of sermon lines vary widely. Sermon lines are irregular (made rhythmic through emphatic repetition, dramatic pause, etc.), and the most important characteristic of the African American sermonic formula is groups of lines shaped around a central theme. Theme (with irregularity and/or contrasts), not meter, is what primarily provides cohesion in African American sermons. Clearly, Black sermons are not confined to metrical demands, and both unifying theme and rhythm in a call-response format are key descriptors of the Black sermon; spontaneity exists within a specific order, or form.

Pawley's (1992) discussion of the paradoxical role of speech formula in the creative use of language is applicable to this aspect of Black preaching:

> In the production of extended discourse, formulas are essential building blocks: ready-made units which free speakers and hearers from the task of attending consciously to each word. Thus freed, they are able to focus on the larger structure and sense of the discourse, or nuances of wording or sound. In speech, as elsewhere, people prefer their novelty to come highly structured, in the form of familiar themes. Formulaic constructions provide schemas for saying new things without breaking conventions of idiomaticity and good style – something that grammar alone does not do. (1992:23)

This notion of formulaic construction in general discourse is applicable to Black preaching in that participants expect both STRUCTURE (e.g., call-response format, verbal mention of God's having authored the sermon, indication of theme and related scripture, secular/sacred conflicts, sermon elevation or climax) and FREEDOM to allow individuality and to welcome the spontaneity of the "Holy Ghost" (spirit of God). In his work on transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American gospel, Hinson 2000 highlights the connection between elevated delivery styles and supernatural empowerment in sanctified churches:

This perceived connection finds its most telling confirmation in sermons, where this same heightened style often emerges after the point of "elevation," when preachers are said to start receiving ideas and words from on high. Again the voice eases from a conversational to a poetic mode. Again the words pattern themselves into short, cadenced phrases. And again these phrases assume a distinctly melodic lilt, taking on tonal contours that lend the whole a chant-like character. In the sermon, these features emerge markedly when the preacher moves into "high gear" and the Spirit is said to take greater control of the preaching voice. At this same time, the Spirit often makes itself manifest in a variety of other ways. Preachers cry out; deacons weep; mothers leap into the holy dance. Once again, speech style and signs of the Spirit coincide. (2000:71)

Hinson's description is a perfect example of a survival of African oral tradition in the U.S., and also of the importance of individuality of expression within the culturally defined framework and formula of the African American sermon. The point of elevation of which Hinson speaks does not tend to occur at the beginning of the sermon; as with other discourse genres, there is a preferred order. The preacher and congregation must first be spiritually and physically prepared for this part of the sermon to occur. The "spirit" does not tend to make its presence known in places where it is not welcome. Hence, this usually occurs AFTER prayer and scripture have been presented. Linguistically, it occurs AFTER a gradual rise in intonation and volume.

Previous research on the traditional African American sermon has primarily highlighted its connection to the African oral tradition of call-response and the notion of an oral formula that shapes the general sermon but allows room for individuality of expression. Like other forms of spoken discourse, the sermon genre has specific, definable patterns. Even irregularity of sermon lines can be viewed as a pattern; the absence of line regularity is a significant distinguishable characteristic of the Black sermon in the same way that back-channeling, continuous floor-holding changes, and absence of immediate feedback are distinguishable features of traditional lectures as contrasted with conversation.

Research on components of the lecture and conversation discourse genres and of boundaries that divide them have shown that, although specific characteristics help to distinguish lecture from conversation, there is often some overlap; discourse analysts have identified this as "fuzzy boundaries" of discourse genres. In a study of therapeutic discourse – the type of discourse used in psychotherapy sessions – Ferrara 1994 proposes a seven-part model that, she states, can be used to differentiate conversation (or "the unmarked form of discourse") from other types of discourse. She includes in this model such features as RECIPROCALITY (knowledge that participants will share the floor by negotiation) and PARITY (agreement among participants to share power equally). Conversation is characterized by negotiation for the floor, interchanging of turns, spontaneity, and verbal participation by two or more participants; lecture typically does not share those

characteristics. Dudley-Evans & Johns 1981, however, identify several different STYLES of lecture (reading, conversational, and performance styles); the conversational style could suggest that the boundaries between lecture and conversation may not be as clear-cut as often believed. That is, it is not necessarily the case that all lectures are devoid of features typically found in conversation, such as floor sharing and negotiation.

Not only have discourse analysts studied characteristics of these two genres as a whole; many have also examined a number of discourse markers within the two genres and have shown that linguistic utterances previously viewed as insignificant often play important roles in production and comprehension of texts. Schiffrin 1988 highlights multiple functions of markers such as *well* and *you know* in conversation. Chaudron & Richards 1986 shed light on different functions of micro- and macro-markers as aids in the comprehension of lectures.

The African American sermon is an interesting genre for linguistic analysis for two reasons. The first is the strong sociolinguistic connection between African and African American cultural norms and specific linguistic features that typically appear almost exclusively in church settings; and second, from a discourse analysis perspective, this genre also provides an excellent example of the "fuzzy boundaries" of genres more broadly. The African American sermon has features both similar to and different from those found in lecture and conversation, and these features are primarily linked to and perhaps shaped by a distinctly African American emphasis on oral tradition that is expected in traditional Black church services. Specifically, shorter utterances within the larger African American sermon reveal both structured and spontaneous culturally shaped discourse.

Most references to such shorter religious formulaic expressions as *Amen* concern expressions the congregation utters as a part of call-response. Smitherman 2000 illustrates this well: "In the sacred style, the minister is urged on by the congregation's *Amen's*, *That's right, Reverend's*, or *Preach Reverend's*. One also hears occasional *Take your time's* when the preacher is initiating his sermon, the congregation desiring to savor every little of this good message they bout to hear" (2000:64). What has not been examined is PREACHERS' use of such expressions and the role(s) that their use of them plays in sermon performance. Focusing particularly on discourse functions of markers in sermons preached in traditional Black churches, this study highlights a genre that is underexamined from a discourse perspective and its specific discourse markers that have not been fully analyzed; it also shows the import of both textual and cultural analysis for comprehension of roles discourse markers can play.

The primary question examined in this study is whether call-response is the sole function of traditional Black preachers' utterances of specific religious formulaic expressions (e.g. *Amen*, *Hallelujah*, *Praise God*), or whether these expressions also have other discourse-marking functions. I hypothesize that although the preacher may utter such expressions as *Say Amen* that appear on the surface to have a call-response function (preacher directly and specifically soliciting a

congregational response), we cannot assume that the illocutionary force, or speaker's intention, is solely that of a call for congregational response. To comprehend fully the function(s) of such expressions, we must consider both text and cultural analysis. Call-response is certainly evident in traditional African American sermons, but preachers' specific utterances that initially APPEAR to observers to elicit a response may in actuality serve some other function within the preaching discourse. I will use both significant consideration of African American church cultural norms and textual analysis to determine what the functions of these utterances are.

METHOD

The discourse community discussed in this study includes six preachers and congregations representing a traditional African American worship style that includes such West African cultural survivals as call-response, shouting, "holy dancing," and speaking in tongues, along with sermon characteristics described by Davis 1987 (preacher's indication of "message sent from God," literal and broad scripture interpretation, secular vs. sacred conflict, moves between concrete and abstract) and by Mitchell 1970 (use of vernacular, connections to contemporary needs, spontaneity and individuality in performance, climax). Instead of focusing on one denomination, I selected independent nondenominational churches with preachers and members who had backgrounds in different denominations, but all with a common "traditional Black worship" thread; the most common backgrounds included Pentecostal Holiness, Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and Baptist. The primary reason the pastors had left these denominations had little or nothing to do with the style of worship; that was typically maintained in their independent churches. Reasons for leaving tended to center on a desire for freedom from standard hierarchies or on preachers' "call from God" to establish a church or churches through which their God-given visions could be realized without hindrance from denominational authorities who might not "see" the same vision. The six churches also represented different regions of the U.S., again with the common bond of "traditional Black church" format and style; cities included Los Angeles and Oakland (California), Salisbury (Maryland), Jacksonville (Florida), and Memphis (Tennessee). Three preachers were female (two pastors and one "evangelist"[2]), and three were male pastors. All the preachers were older than fifty, and all had more than ten years of preaching experience.

Before collecting tape-recorded sermons preached in these churches, I participated in numerous services and compared those experiences with my childhood experience and knowledge of the culture (my mother was an evangelist, and my stepfather an apostle/pastor/evangelist, in the types of churches described in the study). I conducted informal interviews with preachers and church members to solidify my understanding of the community. (For detailed descriptions of my

personal experiences and of interviews with pastors, see Wharry 1996.) I then selected six sermons (60–90 minutes in length) that had been previously audio-taped. Since it was common practice for the services to be tape-recorded so people could hear the sermons again or so that members who missed the service could listen to the message, the preachers were aware that they were being recorded, but they were not aware that their sermons would later be analyzed by a researcher.

I then transcribed the sermons according to intonational units, identified each instance of the formulaic expressions (*Amen*, *Hallelujah*, *Praise God*, etc.) used, and examined the textual (e.g. preceding and following text) and situational (e.g. audience participation) context of the expressions. A major reason for the selection of the *Amen* and *Hallelujah* kinds of expressions is that these are often associated with call-response functions (expressions used by the audience as backchanneling cues for the preacher), but preachers use them in their sermons as well. Mentions in earlier studies of a preacher using these expressions often view this as a call for the audience to respond verbally (e.g. *Amen church*, *Somebody say Amen*). As discussed previously, these preachers' utterances may or may not actually have a call-response function, and if they do, this may not be their sole function. Another initial response to observing these utterances could be to label them as verbal or pause fillers; however, preliminary observations of the situational context and more specific textual analysis could suggest that these expressions have functions other than call for response or pause filler.

RESULTS

Although the primary goal of this study was to explore discourse functions of utterances, one immediate observation was that gender-linked differences appeared to exist in the degree of variety of formulaic expressions used. Female preachers were likely to produce a greater number of different tokens, while male preachers tended to stick with one expression. Further analysis of this and other gender-linked differences in Black preaching will be explored in a separate study.

General results of the functions of expressions examined show that the TEXTUAL BOUNDARY MARKER was the most frequently occurring function (77 out of 112 cases, or 69% of the cases examined, had this function). All of the tokens (*Amen*, *Hallelujah*, *Praise*, *Glory*, *Bless*…) functioned at least four times as textual boundary markers (see Table 2). This function was divided into three subcategories: text type change, topic/subtopic boundary, and topic continuity. Only 1 of the 112 tokens identified in the sermons had a call-response function (see Table 1).

A second significant function appeared on the surface to be simply as verbal filler, but these expressions actually functioned not only to give preachers time to think about their next statements or to fill space while members of the congregation were "caught up in the Spirit." Here, preachers' choice of religious for-

TABLE 1. *Frequencies and percentages of roles for combined expressions.*

	Raw frequency	Percentage of expressions functioning in indicated roles
Textual Boundary	77	69%
Call For Response	1	1%
Spiritual Filler	23	21%
Rhythmic Marker	10	8%
Multiple Roles	1	1%
Total	112	100%

TABLE 2. *Raw frequencies of expressions by role.*

	Textual boundary	Call for response	Spiritual filler	Rhythmic marker	Multiple roles	T
Amen	28	1	12	1	1	43
Hallelujah	16	0	2	5	0	23
Yeah Lord/Hey God	4	0	0	0	0	4
Praise	4	0	6	0	0	10
Thank	12	0	1	4	0	17
Glory	5	0	1	0	0	6
Bless	4	0	1	0	0	5
Mercy	4	0	0	0	0	4
Total	77	1	23	10	1	112

mulaic expressions instead of such secular and typical pause fillers as *uh* suggests a function of maintaining spiritual discourse during these moments. These markers, labeled SPIRITUAL DISCOURSE MAINTENANCE markers, represent 21% (23 out of the 112) of the formulaic expressions examined.

RHYTHMIC MARKERS, a third function that represents 10 of the 112 markers identified, reinforce the importance of preachers' establishing a rhythmic balance both within the sermon itself (as an individual performer) and with the audience (as a co-performer). This function, perhaps more than others, shows the importance of discourse community knowledge for comprehension of the roles formulaic expressions can have.

The least common function of sermonic formulaic expressions was CALL-RESPONSE. Even though we might expect more of these expressions to function in

this way, in my data only once did a preacher use expressions like *Will you say Amen?* or *Amen?* for the purpose of eliciting a congregational response.

Overall results suggest that religious formulaic expressions in traditional African American sermons tend to function primarily as textual boundary markers, but they can also have three other qualitatively significant roles. Though less frequent, all these assist in making the sermon performance characteristically African American.

The following section includes explanations and examples of the aforementioned roles: textual boundary markers, spiritual discourse maintenance markers, rhythmic markers, and call-response marker. Preachers' utterances, with formulaic expressions set in bold, are written in lines according to intonation units. Instances of members of the congregation responding in a call-response manner are indicated in parentheses as "congregational response" because, in most cases there was not one single, uniform response; different members of the congregation tended to use different expressions simultaneously. In a separate work, I will explore individual members of the congregation and their response preferences (e.g. *you sho nuff preachin* vs. *alright now* vs. *Glory!* vs. *Amen preacher* vs. simply standing with hands on hips and head nodding while saying nothing). This may reveal interesting information about the role of linguistic individuality (verbal and nonverbal) within the larger group context. Because of the present study's emphasis on the PREACHER's use of formulaic expressions, those are highlighted. General observations suggest that even though different audience members choose different expressions to express their agreement with the preacher, the varied utterances serve a similar purpose that allows for joint production of the preaching performance.

Textual boundary markers

Items placed in the textual boundary category included markers of (i) text type changes (changes or moves from one text type or speech event to another; e.g. narration to evaluation, constructed speech to statement of proposition, scripture reference to personal experience); (ii) topic or subtopic boundary (changes from one discourse topic to another; e.g. change from talking about legalism in the church to speaking about having riches); and (iii) topic continuity (used for returns to previously introduced topics after a digression). Although there are differences among the three markers identified, they share a role of signaling change within the text.

Following are examples of the three types of textual boundary markers.

(1) *Text type change*
    none of us today,
    that I know of,
    is in jail! (congregational responses)
    Lord have mercy, (congregational response)
    ..so we shouldn't be:,
    in prison,
    in our mind.

Although the preacher continues with the "prison" subtopic introduced earlier in the text, **Lord have mercy** appears between a literal presentation of *jail* and a figurative or abstract concept of *prison in our mind*. The preacher clearly has not uttered this expression to elicit a response, since the congregation has already responded. This textual boundary is reinforced by the short pause and *so*. Even if one argues that the preacher may have used this utterance to extend time for formulation of following words (a verbal filler role), an explanation of why he uses this utterance at this point in the discourse can be based on the change that takes place – the move to the abstract. If there is any call for response here, it is the preacher's statement that nobody in the congregation is in jail, coupled with his change in intonation. When it is time for the change from the literal *jail* to the abstract *prison in our mind*, the preacher is not doing this alone; the congregation is actively participating, with anticipation that the preacher will make this point personally relevant.

Ex. (2) is a similar case of formulaic expression functioning as a marker of text type change:

(2) …to be restored in the spirit.
  ..a spi:ritual restoration.
  ..a spi:ritual revival.
  ..a spi:ritual resurrection.
  ..a spi:ritual refreshing. (congregational responses)
  ..a spi:ritual revitalization. (congregational responses)
  ..Praise God.
  .. a spi:ritual rejuvenation. (congregational responses)
  ..Thank you Lord. (congregational responses)
  ..Glory to God. (congregational responses)
  ..Hallelujah.
  ..the word "restoration" comes from the word "restore",
  ..which means turn ba:ck,
  o:r,
  to rebuild.

What is perhaps most notable about this excerpt is the preacher's effective use of lexical and phonological repetition (alliteration); the "spiritual r…" unit is similar to units Tannen 1989 selected from orations by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson as exemplary involvement strategies used in oratory. The focus here, though, is on the placement and function of formulaic expressions in the text. There is a noticeable difference between what precedes the *Thank you Lord*, *Glory to God*, *Hallelujah* string of utterances and what follows. Not only is there a move from synonymous statement of the preacher's sermon topic to definition; in addition, the sound (especially the rhythm) of her "spiritual r…" unit is strikingly different from the *word "restoration"* section. With the definition section, the preacher decreases speech volume, congregational responses temporarily cease, and a less heightened emotional atmosphere is created. This change is introduced by the three formulaic expressions along with phonological prominence.

Items in the "text type change" category do not signal major changes in the topic or subtopic of the sermons examined, even though this is the most common type of textual boundary marker for conversations. Instead, this kind of discourse marker signals a change from one speech event to another. The next section explains the better-known "topic boundary marker" function.

Topic Boundary

Examples (3–4) show formulaic expressions appearing not between different textual types but between different discourse topics or subtopics:

> (3) you say "well this is mind over
>   matter".
>   no this is the word of Go:d,
>   over matter. (congregational response)
>   ..this is the words of God over the problem.
>   this is u:sing the words of Go:d,
>   over the negative.
>   this is using the word of Go:d,
>   over**..Amen** the strategy and the tricks
>   of the enemy. (congregational response)
>   **…Amen**. (congregational response)
>   …so then,
>   …as a person with blood pressure says,

The second *Amen* in (3) appears just after the preacher has completed a *this is … word of God* unit with high congregational involvement. The end of this unit is signaled by lowered volume, a long pause, **Amen**, a following pause, and *so then*. This is not a change in the larger sermon topic but a change in the speaker's subtopic, from the theoretical *using the word of God* to his specific example of a person with high blood pressure who uses *the word* to get healed.

A second example of subtopic boundary marker shows an even stronger content contrast. In (4), the speaker sets up a contrast between Black legalistic churches and White charismatic (more lenient) churches, and places ***Thank you Jesus*** at the boundary between the two groups being contrasted:

> (4) … I look good 'cause I don' covered
>   up a few things.
>   (congregational response)
>   …and y'all gonna put me in hell,
>   you ain't gon' put me in hell behind
>   that foolishness.
>   (congregational response)
>   I ain't goin' to hell behind that.
>   (congregational response)
>   **Thank you Jesus**. (congregational response)
>   you go right over,
>   and I'm gon' preach it,
>   and I I don't mean to put nobody–
>   –down,
>   but you go to Morris Cerullo's–
>   –meetings,
>   you go to uh uh Marilyn Hickey's–

–meetings,
you go to any of these meetings,
you know who's sitting up there?
thousands of you:r people.
(congregational response)
. . . and I don' went to see them,
for myself. (congregational response)
. .and you know who's writing checks–
–for five hundred dollars,
and a thousand dollars?
and supporting they ministry?
. .yo:ur people. (congregational response)
. . .and they be there with pants on,
they be there with lipstick on,
they be there everything on,
but you know what,
cancer's being healed,
(congregational responses through next seven intonation units)
high blood pressure being,
all kind of miracles is being–
–wrought,
'cause they up there talking about–
–nothing but the po:wer!
of the living God!

In the unit preceding the preacher's ***Thank you Jesus***, she complains about Black church members judging people for wearing makeup. What follows the expression is a strong contrast to the legalistic attitudes and behaviors of Black church members; she discusses both the different way that Blacks behave when they attend White churches (as opposed to their behavior at their own churches) and the absence of legalism at the White churches visited. She says that there are miracles at some White churches even though they "be there with pants on, they be there with lipstick on, they be there [with] everything on."

The topic boundary marker signals a change from one discourse (sermon) topic or subtopic to another topic not previously occurring in the current discourse. The following section provides examples of a third type of textual boundary marker, the "topic continuity" marker.

Topic continuity

The previous two types of textual boundary markers (text-type change and topic boundary) are similar to the third, topic continuity, in that all three function to signal textual change: however, topic continuity suggests a return to something previously mentioned in the text. In (5), the preacher utters a formulaic expression after a diversion and before a return to the topic that appeared before the diversion:

(5) . .now there are two points in–
      –the Bible,
      that are very important,
      in your understanding.
      I don't wanna preach.
      I said "God shall I preach or – teach?"

God says. ."you just open your–
–mou:th." (congregational response)
. . .I don't wanna preach.
. .I wanna tal:k
. . .**Amen**.
. . .listen.
. . .uh,
. .there are two points,

Beginning with the fourth line in (5), the preacher creates a diversion by using meta-language: He comments about his delivery of the sermon. Earlier in the sermon, the preacher had produced several units of talk with high volume and pitch. He now wants to *calm down* a bit and just *teach*, but after his constructed speech of his talk with God, the congregation gives praise again. It must have been *you just open your mou:th* that triggered a response. After the praise, the preacher says again that he doesn't want to preach but that he wants to teach instead. This is followed by a pause and *Amen*. After *Amen*, other signals of textual change appear (e.g. pause and *listen*). This is not a topic change, though, because he is just repeating the point he mentioned at the beginning of this unit (i.e., there are two points), before the diversion. An interesting note about this preacher's mention of his struggle to teach and to resist preaching is that, for most congregation members like those in this study, sermon discourse that lacks a high level of rhythmic intensity and sounds like "lectures" is not classified as "real preachin' "; that kind of discourse, for them, lacks an important spiritual dimension and is classified as "teaching" (something "unsaved folks" do). See Wharry 1996 for a detailed discussion of interview results on the teaching/preaching distinction.

In (6), a formulaic expression appears before a return to a topic and after a related subtopic:

(6) . .and the scripture teaches,
     that there is power,
     . .the power to get you over,
     . . .Amen.
     and get you through your valley.
     . .power,
     to restore your health.
     . .power,
     to bring success. .and the blessings–
     –of God into your life.
     . .power to turn your situation–
     –around.
     . . .and it is all in the power of the–
     –words that can come out of your–
     –mouth.
     . .o:r,
     . .on the other hand,
     power to cast you down to the lowest–
     –hell.
     power to impoverish you,
     power to send you to an early and a–
     –premature grave.

power to rob you of the blessings–
–and the privileges of sonship.
and,
uh **Amen** association with Christ.
power to bind you,
power to curse you,
power to defeat you,
a:ll in the power of the to:ngue.
(congregational response)
…Somebody say Amen.
(congregational response)
…words! (congregational response)
…words. (congregational response)

The first two expressions in (6) appear to function as fillers, with the first *Amen* appearing as the preacher is trying to set up what will be a very effective rhythmic *power* series and the second appearing at a place in the *power* series after an intonation unit considerably longer than other units in the series. *Somebody say Amen* is clearly different from the first two formulaic expressions in this excerpt. It appears immediately after the preacher finishes his *power to* unit and before a return to an emphasis on *words*, mentioned 15 lines earlier and previously in the sermon. Although this expression may appear to be a call for response if viewed out of context, looking at both the congregational expressions preceding it (suggesting no need to call for a response) and the falling intonation of the utterance suggests a different function. *Somebody say Amen*, along with pause and intonation changes, signals a return to a previous lexical theme. The preacher clearly was not asking people to "say Amen"; people were already participating verbally during this part of the sermon. Instead, he uses this expression to signal that he is leaving the subtopic of power and returning to his previous emphasis on words.

Spiritual discourse maintenance marker

Examples (7–8) illustrate a role that may initially appear as a verbal filler role. Holmes & Stubbe 1995 claim that this is one of the more simplistic functions of pragmatic devices. While they agree that utterances previously identified by some linguists as verbal fillers or as hedges may have the suggested functions of allowing time for verbal planning or of creating a hedging effect (suggesting insecurity of disempowered groups), Stubbe & Holmes claim that closer contextual analysis of these expressions (e.g. *you know*, *I mean*, *sort of*) reveals a greater and more complex range of meanings.

The results of this study support Stubbe & Holmes's claim regarding range of meanings for expressions that appear to be used to allow time for planning utterances. Although a number of preachers' sermonic *Amen*s may have a space-filling function, their choice of words is significant. In the specific context of African American sermonic discourse, that only 21% of such expressions seem to function in this manner is not quantitatively significant. Qualitatively, however, these occurrences are remarkably significant in that preachers choose to select "religious-sounding" expressions to be consistent with the preaching context in places where,

in secular settings, they might use *uh* or other fillers. To maintain the spiritual atmosphere and not disrupt the continuity of the sermon and flow of the Spirit, preachers tend to use fewer "secular" verbal fillers. Because of their double function as both fillers and maintainers of the spiritual environment, these expressions have been labeled SPIRITUAL DISCOURSE MAINTENANCE FILLERS.

In (7), the preacher uses both and interrupts two secular verbal fillers with *Amen*:

(7) ...God wrote his fi:rst word to–
        –mankind,
        in stone.
        ..he didn't write it on paper,
        he didn't write it on (?),
        he didn't write it on anything that–
        –was transitory,
        that could fade away,
        that could be uh,
        ..Amen uh,
        ..smudged over,
        but he wrote it on sto:ne.

In the latter part of this excerpt, the preacher appears to be searching for words. It was not unusual that formulaic expressions that did not appear at textual boundaries and were not elicitations of audience responses were accompanied by *uh*. It appears that the inclusion of ***Amen*** lessens the appearance of the preacher's having moved out of the spiritual; his ***Amen*** seems to suggest that even though he may need time to *get his words together*, he is not relying totally on the secular self but is still in the spiritual realm. Although this expression is surrounded by other hesitation markers (i.e. *uh)*, this is not a requirement for the spiritual maintenance filler role.

In some cases, as in (8), a religious formulaic expression may be used instead of *uh* to replace a pause or to shorten the length of pause:

(8) ...this is the word of God over the–
        –pro:blem.
        this is using the word of Go:d,
        over the negative.
        this is using the word of Go:d,
        over. ..**Amen** the strategy and the–
        –tricks,
        of the e:nemy. (congregational responses)

Here the formulaic expression is preceded by a pause and followed immediately, without pause, by the rest of the intonation unit members. It would not seem strange if this speaker had used *uh* here instead of ***Amen***. Using ***Amen*** helps the preacher to avoid a noticeably long pause that might disrupt the flow of his sermon. Also, since the expectations of this particular discourse community include spiritual or religious language, using ***Amen*** or similar expressions instead of *uh* or other nonreligious fillers helps the preacher to seem more "together."

TABLE 3. *Preachers' percentages of roles for all expressions combined.*

	Textual boundary	Call for response	Spiritual filler	Rhythmic marker	Multiple roles	T
Preacher #1	65%	0%	20%	15%	0%	100%
Preacher #2	50%	5%	40%	0%	5%	100%
Preacher #3	70%	0%	0%	30%	0%	100%
Preacher #4	85%	0%	10%	5%	0%	100%
Preacher #5	60%	0%	40%	0%	0%	100%
Preacher #6	92%	0%	8%	0%	0%	100%

Although the function of spiritual discourse maintenance fillers is viewed as qualitatively significant (Table 1), for no preacher in the study did more than 40% of expressions examined function as fillers alone (Table 3). As stated previously, the textual boundary marker functions were by far the most quantitatively significant.

Rhythmic marker

Another discourse function identified appeared on a surface level to be a verbal filler as well, but upon further examination of both textual and situational context, it seems clearly to function in an interestingly different manner. Preachers may use the rhythmic marker, or enhancer, function either to strengthen the rhythm of a set of utterances or to keep themselves in tune with what the audience is doing by letting the intonation pattern match the flow of the service. In the latter sense, the preacher is responding to the audience. Although the use of formulaic expressions as rhythmic markers was evident in only two of the six sermons, the significance of this marker lies in textual-cultural connections and, more specifically, points to a function that may have genre implications. Davis 1987 has shown that African American sermons have irregular lines that are made rhythmic by such devices as dramatic pause and repetition. The results of my study show that formulaic expressions are also used to aid in the establishment of that rhythm.

In (9), **Hallelujah** is used as a rhythmic enhancer; these strategically placed expressions appear in a climactic part of the sermon. They are used in places where some preachers might take audible and rhythmic breaths throughout the most intense passages. Although these too could be classified as verbal fillers, the purpose of filling the pauses is strikingly different. The use of these expressions in this unit is by no means simplistic. The preacher ("performer" comes to mind here) is catching his breath in a rather rhythmic way that actually enhances the high emotional level of the preaching event; he is not just tired and in need of taking a breath, nor does he appear to be searching for words:

(9) . . .some of our mi:nds,
are so narrow. (congregational response)
to fee:l,
that Go:d,
only have,
yo:ur people,
(congregational responses follow each of the following intonational units in this section)
as being,
his church.
Hallelujah.
Je:sus,
suffered too lo:ng,
Hallelujah.
to die for a few people.
Thank you Lord.
He die:d,
That the whole wo:rld,
would have an opportunity,
to be saved.
but what he sai:d,
Hallelujah,
he sai:d,
Hallelujah,
he said to Peter.
Hallelujah.
fee:d,
my lamb.

In (10), another type of rhythmic marker is identified, but this one could be labeled more specifically as a "flow gauger" rather than as an "enhancer" (as in 9). As a rhythmic marker, the formulaic expressions used tell us something about the rhythm of the utterances or signal prominent rhythmic activity. This use shows the speaker's greater attention to the audience's behavior rather than an intentional creative performance strategy. Furthermore, this function is one that appears to work perfectly with African American sermon performance styles:

(10) I want you to . .speak to me,
and God said "they're fighting–
–battles that are already won.
(congregational responses begin and gradually lessen in intensity throughout the next four intonation units)
. . .Tha:nk you Jesus.
. . .Tha:nk you Jesus.
. . .Tha:nk you Jesus.
. . .Thank you Lo:rd.
. . .And so, (much higher pitch)
. .we find today. .that,
the spirit of God is,
show:in us the way.

As the congregation "goes up in praise" when hearing *fighting battles already won*, the preacher uses the formulaic expressions highlighted above. Interesting to note is that the fourth token (***Thank you Lo:rd***) has intonational and lexical changes. Instead of stressing ***Tha:nk***, the first word in the formulaic expression

unit, he places emphasis on the last word and changes from ***Jesus*** to ***Lord***. The ***Tha:nk you Jesus*** expressions appear to be functioning to show the verbally active audience that the preacher is "with them"; complete silence on the part of the preacher might have weakened his perceived support of the congregational praise. He is essentially following the audience's lead. The preacher's intonational and lexical changes with the fourth token (***Thank you Lo:rd***) have a different function, though: This phonologically prominent formulaic expression is not a rhythmic marker, but seems to function as a textual boundary (specifically, topic continuity) along with the following *and so*. It signals a move from praise and a return to the sermon topic.

Unlike the textual boundary marker and spiritual filler functions, the rhythmic marker role is clearly tied to performance (in an oral-tradition sense). As discussed by Wharry (1996, chap. 3), one of the important criteria for good African American preaching is that the preacher be a good "performer"; it is important that the preacher not "lecture" or "teach," but "preach." This role is not likely to appear in conversation (except in AAVE conversations) or lecture (but cf. Dudley-Evans & Johns 1981 on the performance style of lecture).

Although the rhythmic marker function is a perfect example of a discourse marker strongly connected with traditional African American culture, the predominant call-response format seen in traditional Black churches is displayed in the overall service and in congregational responses, but it is infrequently a function of the preacher's formulaic expressions.

Call-and-response marker

As stated previously, the call-and-response function is the label applied to formulaic expressions used by a preacher to elicit a response from the audience. Only one of the 112 expressions in the study functioned mainly as a call for congregational response:

> (11) . .we try to understand everything
> (congregational response)
> . .and there's some things in this life,
> that you just absolutely not gonna–
> –understand.
> **. . .Will you say Amen?** (congregational response)
> . . .there are some things that you're not–
> –gonna understand,
> . .you will just have to,
> . .believe it,
> . .and,
> . .do it. (congregational response)

Although the preacher received responses to his statement about people trying to understand everything, there were no responses to the following line, which is really the main point. The speaker pauses and then says, with question intonation, ***Will you say Amen?*** This gets a response, and the preacher repeats the main point.

An important note is that there were other cases of expressions with *Say Amen* that did not function as calls for audience response, illustrated in (12):

(12) …the scripture says,
　. .life and death,
　. .are in the to:ngue.
　. .either one.
　. .either one.
　. .life,
　. .or death,
　. .are in the tongue
　…**Will you say Amen?**
　. .I recently read,
　. .about a doctor,
　. .who to:ld one of his patients,
　. .that she needed,
　. .an operation

In this example, ***Will you say Amen*** is not functioning as a request for action (response), and the congregation understands that; they do not give a response here. This is the beginning of the preacher's sermon, and he is not really desiring *Amen*s yet. Instead, he is using this utterance to signal a change from scripture reference to exemplary personal experience, a textual boundary marker function.

A similar example of an utterance that appears on the surface to be a call for response but that functions differently is the following:

(13) …most people offer absolutely no: resistance,
　when the enemy comes in like a flood,
　they accept whate:ver,
　the devil brings,
　against them and into their lives,
　. .and they offer no resistance. (congregational responses)
　…**Say Amen**
　…I want you to kno:w,
　that when we realize the power of wo:rds,
　. .and the power of a positive confession,
　the power of a positive acknowledgement,
　. .things are going to begin to happen,
　. .in. .our. .lives.

In this excerpt, also from near the beginning of a sermon, ***Say Amen*** signals a contrast between negative (not resisting the devil) and positive (recognizing the power of words and using positive confessions to cause great things to occur in our lives). This formulaic expression functions not as a call for response but as a textual boundary marker.

That only one formulaic expression functioned as a call for response does not suggest a lack of importance for call-response in African American sermons. Instead, this may indicate that the preacher has other strategies for "calling." Most often, the preachers in this study appeared to rely more on phonological prominence; the congregation is well attuned to the preacher's rhythm and can interact accordingly, without the need for a direct call to say *Amen*.

CONCLUSION

Findings show that multiple functions exist for religious formulaic expressions in African American sermons, and that identification of these roles requires both textual and discourse community knowledge. Knowing that *Somebody say Amen* is not necessarily a call for response requires contextual analysis, just as the identification of the rhythmic marker function requires an understanding of the importance of oral-tradition "performance" in African American discourse communities. The use of *Amen*, *Praise God*, and similar expressions as spiritual maintenance fillers is connected with the importance of "sounding spiritual" and the strong preaching/teaching distinction in this particular religious discourse community. That is, to preach a good traditional African American sermon, the preacher and congregation must display oral-tradition features (some of which are aided and/or represented by formulaic expressions). Although such features as call-response and establishment of rhythm connect the African American preaching style with secular AAVE styles, the "spiritual" language distinguishes them. In addition, the call-response and rhythmic marker functions point to the African American sermon as a discourse genre that crosses the boundaries of conversation and lecture. Like participants in conversation, the preacher and congregation jointly produce the sermon, and both use socially constructed DMs in that production. Like a lecturer the preacher is still clearly in charge and has the power to change or support the flow of the church service by using a variety of verbal strategies (e.g. "flow gauger" rhythmic markers). Clearly, the most common function of *Amen*s was to signal textual boundaries (69%). This again points to a similar function of "sounding spiritual" while performing a different function – in this case, alerting the congregation to coming changes in discourse topic or returns to previous discourse. Preachers could choose to use more secular cohesive markers (e.g. *on the other hand*, *in contrast*, *however*), but although these mark boundaries, they do not reinforce the spiritual tone of sermonic discourse as do religious formulaic expressions such as *Amen* and *Hallelujah*.

NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Jane H. Hill and an anonymous reviewer for critical suggestions, thought-provoking questions, and encouraging comments on earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to thank Carol Lynn Moder for invaluable suggestions and support during the development of the doctoral dissertation upon which this article is based. I am especially grateful to the preachers and church members whose lives and expressions make this work possible.

[2] An "evangelist" is a preacher whose primary ministry involves travelling to different churches to preach, unlike pastors, whose main ministry usually involve providing spiritual leadership and preaching at one home or local church.

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