The (Protestant) Bible, the (printed) sermon, and the word(s): The semantic structure of the Conformist and Dissenting Bible, 1660–1780[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Using co-occurrence methods for identifying semantic structure in texts, we first describe the structure of the Protestant Bible, focusing on the ways in which contents of the Bible are organized in both the New and Old Testaments. We introduce a strategy for capturing the co-occurrence of nouns and verbs in windows defined by verses that progressively move across the text, from start to finish in a manner similar to reading. We then consider how Dissenters and Conformists used the Bible by locating Biblical verse in sermons printed in England during the period from 1660 to 1780. We describe how chapters are linked by themes over time, by dissenting and conformist religious communities, and map Dissenter and Conformist uses of the Bible onto its semantic structure. We show that it is possible to induce a semantic network image of the Bible, that this structure serves as a skeletal frame for interpretation, thereby highlighting different contents as central to denominations' religious inspirations and concerns.

1. Introduction

Critical commentary on the Bible has led to widely differing religious, social, and political movements. Analyses of Biblical verses have energized competing intellectual traditions. And translations of the original Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic have shaped various vernacular interpretations. Heterodox readings or interpretations of the otherwise shared Old and New Testaments have also led to lengthy and bitter disputes, separations (or migrations), and imprisonment and slaughter of those found to interpret Biblical meaning different from that accepted by the majority or by those in power.

Yet most studies of disputed Biblical commentary focus on this or that interpretation—how do groups differ on the *adiaphora* (things indifferent to salvation), the proper meaning of the rite of communion or order of the Mass, the larger implications of terms such as *ecclesia* (church, congregation) or *presbyteros* (elder, minister) in the original Greek. To our knowledge, no one has tackled the

Bible's semantic structure as a whole. This is due in part to the complexity of the task (although there are certainly numerous works which provide a book-by-book guide to the Bible). As a result, commentators are unable to reveal, in any systematic manner, how the sematic structure of the Bible links to the structure and content of theological dispute.

This article offers a method to identify the semantic structure of the Bible. It considers how concepts, for example vices and virtues, are linked. It maps out the interwoven structure of the Old and New Testaments. It then considers how the various nouns and verbs in the Bible are related to one another *as it was used*. To do this, we consider the Bible as expounded in sermons printed in English, specifically by comparing those delivered by Protestant preachers identifiable as Anglican or Nonconformist (Dissenters) between 1660 and 1780, that is over the course of the long eighteenth century from the Restoration of Charles II to the eve of both American independence and an industrial revolution based on cotton, coal and iron.

The meaning of the Bible has been a serious business conducted by serious people with serious stakes in the outcome. Uncovering the semantic structure of the Bible is a very different project than the religious project of revealing the Bible's ultimate meaning. The distinction between ultimate meaning and the structure of conversation is not trivial. The fact that countless numbers of people have been killed, had their careers cut short, their opportunities blocked, their properties seized, and their children murdered in the name of the truths believed revealed within the Bible is perhaps sufficient reason to insist that we are not trying to ascertain ultimate meaning. We are instead first interested in structure, and secondly in how actors navigate the structure of texts to communicate and contest critical issues of identity and belief. In this regard, then, structure, as we will show, is the skeleton on which are hung a wide variety of answers to questions of meaning and action.

1.1. Roadmap

We first discuss the historical context in which the sermons we rely on were written and delivered. We then discuss our data and methods. We then identify the semantic structure of the Bible, inducing a partition that neatly disentangles (in a semantic network perspective) the Old and New Testament. We then identify the communities of this semantic structure, focusing explicitly on the cluster of concepts we associate with sins and virtues. We refer to these communities as topics. This viewpoint provides one kind of mapping of the Bible, a mapping based entirely on the pattern of co-occurrence of nouns and verbs found across a moving window of verses in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, much as someone reads. We then turn to the Bible in action. By drawing on the explicit linkage between verse and sermon theme for over 20,000 sermons delivered in England (by Dissenters and Conformists) from 1660 to 1780, we induce a dual mapping of Biblical chapters tied by shared themes, and themes tied by Biblical chapters. We then embed the theme structures we observe into the semantic space defined by our first analysis, first for Conformists and then for Dissenters. This enables us to observe Dissenting and Conformist semantic network positions, and sheds light on the critical religious issues that distinguished each party.

We thus make two independent contributions. First, we induce a semantic structure for the Bible. Second, we show how this structure provides a skeleton for revealing religious movements in action. The latter is a historical contribution − providing a new strategy for thinking about what mattered to Dissenters and Conformists. The former is a structural contribution − showing how the analysis of structure can reveal new meaning in arguably one of the most studied texts in the world − the Protestant Bible. Linking these two foci is the idea that how things are used reveals both their content and their structure, and provides a mapping for understanding contestation amongst real groups of people (Bearman, 1997; Bearman, Faris, & Moody 2009; Sewell, 1989).

2. Historical context for preaching in the long eighteenth century

England and Wales saw the Restoration of both Church and State. Monarchy was restored through the accession of Charles II, whose father Charles I had been executed in 1649 during what is sometimes termed the Puritan Revolution of the 1640 s and 1650s. The Anglican Church of England, which had basically ceased to exist when the bishops had been abolished in the 1640s, returned from 1660 onwards. Soon bishops were in each diocese, and Anglicans sought ways to eject Presbyterian, Independent (Congregational), and even Baptist ministers who had been "intruded" during the said Puritan Revolution. According to the Act of Uniformity, by Bartholomew Day (24 August) 1662 all ministers were to subscribe to the 39 Articles of the Church of England and to hold services according to the newly revived Book of Common Prayer. If they refused to do so, they were to resign or be ejected. Between 1660 and 1662 nearly 2000 of the 9000 + ministers in England and Wales were ejected and replaced (Appleby, 2014).

Between the Restoration (1660) and the Revolution of 1688-89, harsh laws (those known as the Clarendon Code, as well as the Test Act, etc.) attempted to further silence the ejected ministers, a situation relieved only briefly when Charles II in 1672 and then James II in 1687 and 1688 issued Declarations of Indulgence which allowed in effect limited freedom of worship for both Protestant Nonconformists and Catholics, although in both cases, most feared that it was the latter that they most sought and both periods of "indulgence" were overturned—one by the Test Act of 1673 and the other by the Glorious Revolution (Key, 1990, 1994, 2014). The Test Act of 1673 legislated that all government officers had to take communion (according to the Church of England) and an oath against transubstantiation. After the Revolution of 1688-89, under the new monarchs William and Mary, a limited Toleration Act of 1689 allowed all Trinitarian Protestants (but not Unitarians) to worship in peace. The Test Act regarding office holders, however, remained in force, and was not fully repealed until 1828. The combination of the Test Act and the limited toleration after 1689 did create a gray zone for some Dissenters (mainly Presbyterians, or those earlier termed Puritan) who remained closeted, occasionally conforming, or, as their opponents feared, as hidden Dissenters (Haydon, 2002).

Against this background, throughout this early period and beyond, different religious groups pursued varied strategies in response to state repression. Some moderate Dissenters were reluctant nonconformists, and hoped that efforts towards "comprehension," or