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# The discourse of divorce in conservative Christian sermons

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## Abstract

Work on religious discourse is still limited and linguistic research on preaching scarce. The present study makes explicit the ways that pastors in the conservative Protestant Christian church preach about divorce. Relying on a corpus of sermons on divorce from SermonAudio, this study employs theoretical and methodological principles derived from corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. In so doing, it explores in what terms pastors frame and approach the topic of divorce and what their language reveals about how they want their listeners to perceive divorce. Findings point to two dominant Discourses of divorce in popular conservative Christian sermons: Divorce as a Highly Restricted Space and Divorce as Male. These Discourses frame divorce in terms antithetical to the reality of divorce and likely bolster statistics on divorce in the Christian church. This study challenges existing linguistic work on sermons which often concludes that contemporary preaching has largely departed from presenting absolutes.

**Keywords:** discourse of marriage, Christian divorce, religious discourse, theolinguistics, corpus linguistics

**Introduction**

In 2012, after several years of a flurry of publications about divorce rates among Christians and non-Christians, Glenn Stanton, writing on a popular American evangelical website, announced that

> People who seriously practice a traditional religious faith—whether Christian or other—have a divorce rate markedly lower than the general population. The factor making the most difference is religious commitment and practice (Stanton, 2012).

He based this conclusion on studies by Wright (2010) and Johnson et al. (2002), bolstered by similar findings by other sociologists (Wilcox & Williamson, 2006). The 'religious commitment and practice' Stanton cites from these studies relates mostly to church attendance. Wilcox and Williamson's (2006) analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households, for example, found that Americans who go to church several times a month were about 35% less likely to divorce than those with no religious affiliation.

Findings such as these were widely reported across Christian media, with many Christians expressing relief and encouragement. In 2014, Shaunti Feldhahn, author of the popular book *The Good News about Marriage*, said in an interview for various news outlets (see Strand, 2014):

> Pastors need to know this … People need to be able to look around the average congregation and say, 'You know what, most of these people will have strong and happy marriages for a lifetime.'

Against the backdrop of such claims, this paper examines the discursive ways in which divorce is framed and characterized within this context of weekly Christian church attendance, specifically, in sermons.

The term *discourse* is by no means straightforward and has been defined in various ways. One useful distinction is that between 'little d' and 'big D' discourses. The former refers to language in use in stretches of text above the sentence level and the latter refers to a combination of language and the world(s) around the language. For example, the individual sermon texts in this study are a form of discourse. As they assemble and in so doing reflect, create and sustain meanings in community, they contribute to a set of Discourses. James Paul Gee explains this distinction (Gee, 2004, p. 18), writing:

> The key to Discourses is 'recognition.' If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others *recognize* you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer).

The Discourse(s) of divorce produced and reproduced in the weekly Sunday Christian sermon are also situated within other, inter-related Discourses. One significant example is that of the 'good family.' This is a form of spiritual capital documented consistently in the literature on evangelical Protestants' concern about perceived decline in the cultural value of the family (see Brooks, 2002; Hobbs, 2018a; Hobbs, 2018b). The institution of the family is, for many Christians, part of the bedrock of the Christian church and of society (Edgell, 2003). This is of course largely due to the great importance the Bible places on the family, beginning with the Creation account in Genesis, the codification of the family's health in Mosaic law, the protection of the institution of marriage and punishment of those who violate it, and so on (see Campbell, 2003). And yet, whereas many scholars argue that the Bible unabashedly documents God's love for and engagement with individuals from a variety of families, the post-1950s American Christian church, particularly its conservative branches, places

arguably unparalleled focus on the traditional, nuclear family with children and on its role in providing believers with satisfaction and happiness (Edgell, 2003). Indeed, the blessing of a 'good family' is often where Christians believe God most obviously makes his abundant love manifest in the lives of believers.

The ideal of the 'good family' for many Evangelical Protestants involves male authority over wife and children, a complementary division of labour between husband and wife, and obedience in children (Edgell, 2003). In practice, for many, this image implicitly requires that the husband act as primary breadwinner and that the wife oversee the home and children. Together, husband and wife work in their separate spheres, resolving any breakdowns which occur by, for example, counselling. Many Christians therefore view divorce as either a last resort or no option at all.

Such values are, arguably, reactionary to changing cultural perspectives on marriage and divorce. Christopher Ash (2003) along with countless others (see also Basch, 2001; Brake, 2015) have documented the change in public perception of marriage beginning as early as the nineteenth century from marriage as economic and functional (and before that from marriage as sacrament), as designed for procreation, toward a view of marriage as relational or affective, whose end goal is to fulfil a romantic ideal, to ensure happiness. This sea change is perceived negatively by many Christians (Balswick & Balswick, 2007), who argue that commitment has been sacrificed for self-fulfilment.

The blame for this shift, according to many in the Christian church, lies primarily with more recent developments, particularly with feminism and the establishment of no-fault divorce. Conservative Christians in particular consistently associate divorce with feminism and see

divorce as a consequence of what they believe to be rebellion against God's design for marriage and gender relations (Hobbs, 2015). Such attitudes are easy to locate. Mohler (2005) writes that

> Behind all this [no-fault divorce] is an ideological revolution driven by feminism and facilitated by this society's embrace of autonomous individualism…. Divorce – once a matter of shame and tragedy – is now celebrated as a positive good…. That's where the Christian church must enter the picture and provide leadership. Where are our pastors on the question of divorce? Why are so many pulpits silent on this issue? … Where is the recognition that divorce is an affront to the glory of God and a sin that is expressly described in the Bible as an evil that God hates?

Such comments underscore the significance of the traditional family in the Christian church and call for Christians and specifically pastors to speak out firmly and powerfully against divorce as an enemy of Christianity. As Phillips (1991) writes, conservative Protestant Christians have historically viewed divorce as both contrary to God's design for the family and as a trigger for the collapse of the family and the social order. About the Victorian American moralists who helped lay the foundation for this cause, Basch (2001, p. 188) writes:

> [T]hey advanced their argument by using marriage as a signifier of law and order, and by equating divorce with political chaos. And when they championed the self-sacrificing communitarianism of marriage against the selfish individualism of divorce, they defined their campaign as nothing less than a contest between Christians and infidels … between order and anarchy.

Some religious leaders have gone so far as to identify rising divorce rates as a sign of the End Times, urging women to reject what they see as a feminist pursuit of economic freedom and

to return to their place in the domestic sphere, thus avoiding a higher risk of divorce which (they believe) naturally follows from such freedom (Bartkowski, 2001).

Returning again to the lower divorce rates among active church-goers cited by various sociologists, Christian leaders may conclude that marriage within Christianity is alive and well. However, a rather more complex picture of divorce within Christianity emerges from figures from a national AARP survey (Montenegro, 2004), among what is known as midlife divorcees, people who experience a divorce in their 40s, 50s or 60s. Significantly, this study contained a representative sample from Baptist, Protestant, and Catholic Americans, a group who tend, on average, to divorce later in life compared to those who have no religious affiliation. Findings from this study suggest that religion seems to have no significant impact on factors such as which party initiates the divorce and the reasons for divorce. Across the board, two out of three divorces are initiated by women (see also Coltrane & Adams, 2003). The top reasons women give to end a marriage, including women who identify as Christian, are physical and/or psychological abuse, followed by their husband's infidelity and/or drug and alcohol abuse. For men, the primary reasons are falling out of love with their spouse or having different values or lifestyles. Such statistics run counter to what some have suggested is a view within Christianity of divorce as a primarily male action, revolving 'round the husband's need for separation rather than the wife's need for survival' (Levitt & Ware, 2006, p. 213; see also McClure & Ramsay, 1998).

Bringing together the aforementioned aspects of the socio-cultural context, a troubling picture emerges. Though we may conclude that divorce rates among Christians are lower than that of non-religious people, we must also consider, first, that more than one in four women experience some kind of intimate partner violence in their lifetime (Breiding, Chen, & Black,

2014) and second, that American women are divorcing their husbands later in life and largely as a result of some kind of abuse. This suggests that some, perhaps many Christian women who face abuse are not seeking divorce. Reasons for this are likely to include, again, the strong anti-divorce mentality among many Christians, including those in the United States. Where is this anti-divorce mentality articulated? And in what ways is it articulated? The next section will explore the significance of the Christian sermon within the Christian context.

**The Christian Sermon**

Sermons are a particularly important form of discourse within both evangelical and non-evangelical Christian communities, both in the western world and internationally. Sermons are delivered weekly, sometimes more frequently, and many Christians download sermons during the week for extra listening. Lucy Rose, Professor of Homiletics, identifies four types of contemporary Christian preaching and their primary purpose, though these can combine in any one sermon. First is traditional preaching, whose aim is to persuade the congregation of a truth claim. Sermons can also be kerygmatic, communicating 'the unchangeable heart of the Christian gospel' (Rose, 1997, p. 42). In transformational preaching, the 'purpose is to facilitate an experience, an event, a meeting, or a happening for the worshipers' (p. 60). And a conversational model of preaching has as its purpose week after week 'to gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the church are refocused and fostered' (p. 4). Rose and others argue that traditional preaching is less common in contemporary contexts, signalling a

> shift from traditional argument-centered and deductive preaching *at* listeners to what is commonly known as 'New Homiletic' or 'turn-to-the-listener' preaching (Malmström, 2016, p. 561).

Whatever the type, the sermon is the location where Christians are given instruction in the Bible, and it is pervaded by strong ideological features and is a powerful influence on the people engaged. The Christian sermon, within the larger genre of the religious sermon, is not unique in this way. Patrick Gaffney (1994) documents, for example, the importance of the Friday sermon in promulgating the message of Islam, and Satoshi Ishii (1992) likewise explores the centrality of the sermon but in Buddhist preaching in Japan.

Linguistic work specifically on sermons is limited but nevertheless rich. This includes Dzameshi's (1995) study on politeness behaviour in sermons and Cheong's (1999) genre analysis of 15 sermons in Korea, the Phillipines, and the USA. Aleksandra Bizjak Končar (2008) builds on these with her analysis of rhetorical units and lexico-grammatical features in a corpus of 50 Slovenian sermons as does Ethelston's (2009) work on evaluation in evangelical sermons. Singh and Thuraisingam (2011) conducted critical discourse analysis of the use of contradiction in a small corpus of six sermons from three religions. Analysis focused on modes, quotations, personal narratives, and lexis, considering the ways in which these language choices reconcile religion with postmodernist thought. And most recently, Hans Malmström's (2016) sermon study examines metadiscourse in contemporary preaching in 150 sermon manuscripts.

The present study aims to contribute to this emerging area of work on religious language, specifically sermons, by making explicit the Discourses embedded within sermons on divorce found in a corpus of Christian sermons, answering the following questions:

1. What is divorce? In other words, in what terms is divorce defined? What language collocates with divorce?

2. What kinds of reasons are given for divorce? How are these reasons given legitimacy or illegitimacy?
3. Who divorces? Is there, for example, even-handedness in terms of sex (male and female) in the action of divorce?

**Methodology**

This study is founded on theoretical and methodological principles derived from corpus linguistics (CL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), a combination known as corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis. Regarding the former, the growing impetus of CL methods, involving the study of language using samples of authentic text, has revolutionized all areas of modern linguistics and provided opportunities for quantitative/qualitative research in the exploration of language communities worldwide. CL offers an effective means of examining larger patterns within the public discourse of sermons among prominent Christian church leaders. Regarding the latter, this study also relies on concepts derived from CDA, namely that public discourse often 'serves the interests of powerful forces over those of the less privileged' (Huckin, 2002, pp. 158–159) and that language use, as a form of social practice, may facilitate such abuses. CDA (see Fairclough, 1992; Kress, 1990; Van Dijk, 1993; Van Leeuwen, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) acts as a tool for examining what a speaker or writer does through discourse and how this 'doing' is linked to the exercise of power, dominance, and social inequality in various contexts. This way of approaching the data was appropriate due to the sociocultural context surrounding the texts, which previous sections elaborated.

The grammatical theory upon which CDA is typically based is Hallidayan systemic functional grammar, which views grammar not as a set of rules but as a range of choices

(Richardson, 2006; Van Dijk, 1993) which indicate how a speaker or writer views the events about which he or she is talking. These choices reveal themselves at the level of the text (lexis, grammar, information structure), at the level of interaction (who is allowed to speak, about what, when, and to whom), and at the level of larger social context (the historical and cultural situation in which the text was created). When discussing how a speaker or writer talks about an event, for example, worth consideration are the ways in which that person represents social actors, what kinds of acting they are doing, and in what contexts and manner they carry out those actions. This examination offers a window into the mind of the speaker and how she or he views the actors involved.

***The Sermon Corpus***

The data are 31 of the most popular (most frequently downloaded) sermons on divorce from Sermon Audio, 'the largest and most trusted library of audio sermons from conservative churches and ministries worldwide,' which hosts, for free, over 1 million audio files of sermons, which are freely accessible ('SermonAudio.com,' n.d.). As of September, 2016, these 31 sermons were downloaded 77,720 times. Sermon transcription was funded by a Faculty Small Grant from the University of Sheffield. The selection process occurred as follows:

1. Identify the 100 most popular (most frequently downloaded) sermons on the site.
2. Listen to the start of each sermon and eliminate those with poor sound quality, duplicate sermons with different titles, and miscategorised sermons (off-topic).
3. Identify the first sermon by each speaker appearing in the top 100 list. This resulted in 40 sermons.
4. If each speaker's first sermon was part of a two-sermon series, both of which appeared in the top 100, I included the entire series. If the first sermon was part of a

series which was not in the top 100, I eliminated the speaker from the corpus. Longer series were not included to achieve some parity of speaker in the corpus. This resulted in 48 sermons.

Finally, I prioritized popularity in order to bring the corpus to a manageable size of 31 sermons. I did not listen to any sermon beyond the first few minutes during the selection process, and most of the speakers were unknown to me, which allowed me to select fairly objectively. The resulting corpus of 1,643 minutes (227,157 words) captures the most frequently accessed perspectives on divorce from Sermon Audio. After the sermons were transcribed, I listened to five of the sermons to check for accuracy.

The corpus comprises sermons by 27 male pastors: (Reformed) Baptist (22 sermons), Presbyterian (4), Free Presbyterian/Free Reformed (3), Family Integrated (1), and United Reformed (1). Twenty-five of these pastors preached these sermons while working in churches in the USA, one in England, and one in Australia. The reference corpus in this study comprises 101 sermons (743,693 words) from Sermon Audio, on a range of topics, excluding marriage and divorce. These sermons were selected since transcriptions were already available on Sermon Audio, and no more than two sermons from the same speaker were used.

***Procedure***

In order to facilitate the identification of larger patterns in my corpus, I used the corpus tools WMatrix (Rayson, 2009) and Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) which calculate key semantic concepts, keywords, key parts of speech and collocations and produce concordance lines for each, among other processes. Keywords are identified by compiling wordlists for both a corpus and a reference corpus and then identifying words which are statistically more frequent in one corpus as opposed to the other. Key parts of speech are calculated in a similar

way but using a grammatical tagger. WMatrix calculates another kind of keyness comparison, that is, groups of semantically related terms (concepts) which differentiate one corpus from another (Prentice, Rayson, & Taylor, 2012). For this study, I set the cut-off at LL = 10.83, which resulted in 59 key semantic concepts. Other studies using WMatrix in similar ways include Veronika Koller's work on religious and political metaphors in corporate discourse (Koller, 2009) and Emilie L'Hôte's study of New Labour discourse on globalization (L'Hôte, 2010; see also Rayson, 2009).

Despite the usefulness of WMatrix in determining significant concepts of meaning, these groupings are not always reliable since meaning fluctuates with context. I therefore examined the key semantic concepts further using concordance lines to check for miscategorisation. The next stage was coding these concepts into larger functional groupings, out of which emerged the Discourses of divorce. For example, the semantic category 'parts of buildings' was grouped under the heading of 'The Authority of the Rules' since the most frequent keyword in this category, *passage*, was actually a reference to a portion of the Biblical text. Similarly, the semantic concept 'textures' was grouped under 'The Causes of Divorce' because of the particular meaning of *harden* in a Christian context ('because of the hardness of your hearts'). Seven of the 59 key semantic concepts did not fit into any thematic category, and I deemed them as peripheral to the main Discourses.

In order to delve deeper into these Discourses, I examined key parts of speech and keywords and a wordlist within Sketch Engine to identify any frequently occurring words which WMatrix overlooked or miscategorised and to assist in identifying grammatical patterns within the Discourses. I examined patterns surrounding keywords and other lexical items within key semantic concepts, focusing on collocations, which are words that occur

frequently in combination to a statistically frequent degree. Sketch Engine represents these via a word sketch:

> a one-page summary of the word's grammatical and collocational behaviour. It shows the word's collocates categorised by grammatical relations such as words that serve as an object of the verb, words that serve as a subject of the verb, words that modify the word, etc. (Sketch Engine, n.d.)

I also, on occasion, used WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2004) to create concordance lines using specific parameters, as later sections will detail. Finally, in addition to using corpus tools in the present study, I read all texts multiple times to further contextualize and make sense of patterns across the texts.

**Findings**

Examination of key semantic concepts within the corpus, using WMatrix, facilitates construction of a picture of the ways pastors preach about divorce. Appendix 1 contains all of these semantic concepts, grouped into thematic categories by examining concordance lines for each. Females are more frequently mentioned than males, though WMatrix does not include *husband* or *wife* in this concept, warranting further exploration of the gendering of divorce, which a later section will discuss. Also prominent is a focus on setting rules, that is, what is allowed, what is lawful, what is (un)ethical, and what is required. This is supported by the related concept of the Bible as an authority on divorce and its assumed clarity on the topic. A final significant category is a group of semantic concepts linked to the causes of divorce, that is, connections between something a husband or wife has done and the divorce that follows. The following sections will explore each of these thematic categories or Discourses.

***Divorce as a Highly Restricted Area***

The strongest Discourse within the corpus is linking divorce with the setting of clear boundaries, pointing to the authority of God via the Biblical text in setting those boundaries, and identifying the specific nature of those boundaries. In fact, 50 of the key semantic concepts identified within WMatrix are linked to this Discourse, pointing to much to explore within each.

A Sketch Engine word sketch of *divorce* (see Figure 1) likewise reveals a characterization of divorce as bounded by rules set by God and points to the importance of legal language in accomplishing this. Among the most frequent modifiers of *divorce*, for example, are *lawful, legitimate, biblical,* and *legal.* Such language appears again when examining verbs with *divorce* as the object, two of the top four most frequent being *permit* and *allow.* The use of legal language in this Discourse is further echoed in such key semantic concepts as 'allowed' and 'lawful' as well as the unexpected concept of 'entertainment generally.' In the latter, we encounter frequent reference to the phrase 'innocent party' (miscategorised by WMatrix) which also appears high on the list of key multi-words in Sketch Engine.

[Figure 1 about here]

The word sketch of *divorce* also pointed to *divorce* + BE as a frequent structure, occurring 149 times in the corpus (also identified in WMatrix as a key semantic concept, that of 'existing,' and a key part of speech, that of VBZ). Searching for this structure in the corpus, reading each occurrence in context, and grouping them thematically reveals that divorce is once again framed primarily in terms of boundaries, that is, what is sinful, what is forbidden,

what God hates[1]. Below is a list of the most frequent themes derived from all instances where pastors made statements about the nature of divorce (*divorce* + BE), listed in order of frequency, with items related to boundary-making in bold:

- **sinful**
    - **in and of itself (i.e., 'sinful')**
    - **as a result of sin (i.e., 'a result of sinful, rebellious behaviour')**
    - **because it is against God's design (i.e., 'contrary to the way God created marriage')**
- violence (i.e., 'tearing apart of what God has put together')
- common (i.e., 'rampant')
- **forbidden or restricted (i.e., 'out of bounds,' 'never an option')**
- **permissible in certain circumstances, restricted (i.e., 'not permitted except in the case of …')**
- easy (i.e., 'a very easy and casual thing')
- **something that God hates (i.e., 'evil in God's sight')**

In a very few instances in the corpus, pastors broke with these themes. One pastor, for example, called divorce a 'merciful provision.' Overall, however, we see divorce discussed in terms of the setting of boundaries by an authority.

Cross-referencing key parts of speech within WMatrix with key semantic concepts also points to certain grammatical patterns within this Discourse. Three of the most frequent

[1] Some of the results for *divorce* + BE were due to erroneous syntactic parsing in Sketch Engine. In these cases, I examined whether or not the context indicated that the pastor was making a statement about the nature of divorce. For example, I excluded cases such as 'Now, what's important about divorce is what God thinks about it,' and included cases such as 'The third reason why you shouldn't get a divorce is, is breaking your word.' In the latter, the pastor went on to clarify that divorce itself constitutes a breaking of one's word.

patterns include use of focusing adverbs, negative markers, and modality, examples of which are below.

1. focusing adverbs (semantic concept 'if' in Appendix 1; see Downing & Locke, 2006)

   'I believe I was taught that passage means one wife **even** if the wife dies.'

   (https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11501125442)

   'The **only** way that the person can remarry is by the death of that mate.'

   (http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3901194058)

2. negative markers (semantic concept 'negative' in Appendix 1)

   'But I've fallen out of love. **No.** But my mate doesn't love me. **No.** But I am so unhappy. **No.** But this can't be what God wants because I am so unhappy. **No.** But we are incompatible. **No.** But we've grown apart. **No.** But we might sigh at such a thing that really goes on, but we were not really married in God's eyes. **No.** But he is not safe. **No.** But she is not a good Christian. **No.'**

   (http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3130572956)

3. modality (semantic concept 'strong obligation or necessity' in Appendix 1)

   'And so I believe we **should** not seek divorce.'

   (http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3130572956)

   'We **must** remain unmarried or seek reconciliation.'

   (http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=6230484251)

This Discourse is further extended via the frequent use of discourse markers (a key part of speech category known as ordinal numbers in WMatrix) linked to the 'linear order' key semantic concept, which facilitates an organized account of the rules and how to abide by them. An example comes from one of the Baptist pastors in the corpus.

> But and if she depart, Verse 11, let her remain unmarried, that's the **first** probability, the **first** alternative, or be reconciled to her husband, that's the **second** alternative,

> either to remain unmarried the rest of the life or be reconciled to her husband (https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3901212359, emphasis mine)

Finally, while there is not space to discuss this further, close reading of the texts revealed that a focus on rules and evaluation is accomplished using additional grammatical means, which did not appear in any of the lists of key features produced by WMatrix and Sketch Engine. An example is concessive cancellative discourse markers, which concede the truth of a previous statement yet deny the potential consequences of such a statement (Bell, 2010).

> 'But **nevertheless** it [remarriage after an illegitimate divorce] is considered adultery by God, and that's just not the only passage that teaches it.' (https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=6206111747)

The use of language which establishes the firm boundaries of divorce points to the pastors' assumption that the rules are clear. But the clarity of the rules is also evident in the pastors' use of adverbs of certainty, linked to the key semantic concept of 'likely.' The rules are not only fixed, they are 'very clear,' 'quite clear', abundantly clear', and 'absolutely clear.' In fact, the word 'clear' appears 151 times in the corpus alongside other references to clarity such as the phrase 'no two ways about it.' One pastor put it like this,

> And these are very clear passages indeed, in fact Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 are also clear, very clear, if the words are properly understood. And so they should never permit the remarriage of divorced people in these scriptures. (https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11501125442)

References to the presumed clarity of the rules go hand in hand with appeals to the authority of the rules. Relevant WMatrix semantic concepts include 'speech: communicative,' pointing

to the frequency with which pastors refer to what authoritative figures 'say.' A word sketch of this verb reveals that significant authoritative figures are Jesus, Paul, the Bible, God, and the Lord, and the importance of authority is further emphasized by repeated references to specific parts of the Biblical text and the frequent words *verses, words, chapters, books* and *passage* (see semantic concepts 'language, speech and grammar' and 'the media: books').

Finally, we find in the divorce corpus key semantic concepts linked to the causes for divorce which pastors mentioned, for example, the semantic concept of 'cause and effect.' Other key concepts such as 'relationship: sexual' pointed to a tendency for pastors to point to infidelity more frequently than other causes of divorce (see Appendix 1). In order to explore this further, I read every text, identified every reason for divorce given and grouped these into thematic categories. As seen in Figure 2, sexual infidelity is the most frequently cited Biblical (presumably justified) grounds (19 times), and 'no longer attractive' (that is, a wife's appearance) is the most frequently cited unjust reason at 19 times. Abuse is mentioned two times as justifiable grounds and 11 as unjust grounds.

[Figure 2 about here]

However, the portions of the Biblical text that pastors cited correlated with the frequency with which sexual sin was mentioned. Matthew 19, for example, mentioned an extraordinary 385 times in the corpus across 29 sermons, recounts Jesus talking about sexual immorality as grounds for divorce. We might think it understandable that sexual infidelity receives considerable emphasis in light of this. However, we also might consider the extent to which such an emphasis distances women from the action of divorce, given the current socio-

cultural context in which physical and/or psychological abuse is the most common reason women seek divorce rather than marital unfaithfulness.

In summary, the Discourse of Divorce as a Highly Restricted Area emerged as a key semantic concept and was further supported when examining keyword lists, key parts of speech, word sketches, and collocations of *divorce*. What is surprising is the strength of this Discourse, in light of evidence that Christian sermons are themselves already marked by the language of boundary-setting. For instance, the reference corpus in this study, when compared to the American English 2006 Corpus (AmE06) (see Potts & Baker, 2012) contains such key semantic concepts such as 'unethical,' 'entire; maximum' and 'strong obligation or necessity.' This indicates that the topic of divorce is a particularly rule-bound topic within an already fairly rule-bound set of discourses. A Discourse of divorce as bound by clear, authoritative, fixed rules is also consistent with the literature on clerical perspectives on divorce, where 'The social pressure to attempt to remain married [is] exacerbated by the pressure to avoid God's disapproval of divorce' (Levitt & Ware 2006b, p. 218). The message is that divorce is rule-driven and formulaic, with restricted access. Whatever a listener is thinking, whatever their situation, the message is that divorce is likely unjustified. Divorce is possible only if one's circumstances fit within the limited ones described, and even then as a last resort.

***Divorce as Male***

The WMatrix semantic concept 'people: female' has a LL score over ten times that of 'people: male' (383.42 vs. 34.99). This is particularly significant considering that in the reference corpus, 'people: female' is not key, when compared once again to AmE06. In order to explore this further, I used WordSmith Tools to identify first all instances where *man*, *men*,

*husband*, *he*, *woman*, *women*, *wife*, *she*, or *lady* appeared within five words to the left of *divorce* and its synonyms. This resulted in a total of 232 instances, 158 of which (68%) involved a male agent (see Figure 3). This patterning can be at least partially explained, once again, by the passages of the Bible to which pastors refer, that is, to the prolific references to Jesus talking to the Pharisees in Matthew 19 and to Paul addressing rampant divorce initiated by men in time of the Corinthian church.

[Figure 3 about here]

However, excluding these references to the Biblical text, pastors in most cases still describe men as the primary social actors in their stories and anecdotes about divorce. In fact, in removing all references to the action of divorce where pastors cited the Bible (171 out of 232 instances), divorce becomes even more male-dominated (45 out of 61 instances or 74%).

Further, we can look beyond just these instances where the action of divorce is obviously gendered. Pastors also on occasion used seemingly inclusive pronouns like *I, you*, *everyone*, *anyone*, and *whoever* to refer exclusively instead to men or, less frequently, women. This was observed by examining those instances of seemingly inclusive pronouns whose gender could be determined via concordance lines (see examples below).

1. *I, you, we, they* (75 out of 80 instances were male)

   'You can't divorce your wife on those grounds.'

   'He says, well, I'm going to divorce you.'

   'They had a right to divorce their wives …'

2. *everyone* (22 out of 22 instances were male)

   'Everyone who divorces his wife except for …'

3. *anyone* (14 out of 15 instances were male)

   'I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife…'

4. *whoever* (80 out of 85 instances were male)

   'Whoever divorces his wife except for immorality …'

   'Whoever puts away his wife …'

In summary, despite the fact that femaleness was, as mentioned earlier, a significant semantic concept in the divorce corpus, women are framed primarily as receivers of divorce rather than initiators. Although in most cases of divorce in the United States, women initiate divorce, pastors in the corpus in this way represented divorce as a largely male action. Though beyond the scope of this paper, worth exploring is the extent to which pastors are, in fact, addressing their sermons primarily to men. Indeed, examination of the wider context via close reading might reveal further gendering of seemingly inclusive pronouns, as in the following excerpt, where *you* moves from potentially inclusive to exclusively male, again suggesting a discourse of men talking to men:

> So what does repentance look like? Well, repentance does not look like breaking up a marriage. If *you are married to somebody*, just, I mean, think about this, you've got *some guy John Dell and he marries young and he gets divorced*, and he is not a believer. Fifteen years later, he comes to Christ, and he remarried in the meantime, and looks back and he goes, 'Wow, my divorce to my first wife wasn't legitimate, and so what in the world do I do with my wife of the last 15 years or so?' Well the answer is not divorce her, can we be clear about that? (emphasis mine) (http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=26121351590)

**Discussion**

This paper has presented evidence demonstrating two dominant Discourses of divorce in popular conservative Christian sermons: Divorce as a Highly Restricted Area and Divorce as Male. Each of these Discourses constructs and reconstructs a strong anti-divorce mentality. The pastors in this corpus accomplish this by framing divorce as very narrowly and rigidly defined, by appealing to the authority and, notably, the clarity of God and the Bible in setting boundaries around divorce, and by limiting their references to potential causes of divorce to a narrow range. The evidence that pastors tend not to associate the action of divorce with women further distances women from the action of divorce.

Consider again the larger sociocultural context in which these sermons occur, where some religious leaders celebrate Christian divorce statistics and in which divorce is viewed as a feminist inroad, an enemy to Christianity. Set within this environment, the Discourses of divorce foster an environment where divorce is largely forbidden, particularly for women. Given this distancing of Christians from divorce, the statistics on divorce in the church are therefore unsurprising. Further, in almost every way, divorce is framed within terms antithetical to the reality of divorce. Whereas the pastors in this corpus define divorce primarily in terms of rules, the adoption of no-fault rules legislation in the United States[2] has made divorce not easier *per se* but more accessible to women (Phillips, 1991). Whereas the pastors in this corpus highlighted sexual unfaithfulness and downplayed spousal abuse as grounds for divorce, statistics demonstrate that such intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most frequent cause for divorce in the USA. Whereas the pastors in this corpus painted divorce as a male action, it is women who are most frequently divorcing.

[2] No fault divorce legislation allowed 'couples to end their marriages without the need to prove to courts that fault grounds for divorce existed' (Leeson & Pierson, 2017, p. 423).

We may speculate as to why these pastors' Discourses so clash with the reality of divorce. Considering evidence that religious language contains primarily male images and metaphors (Ruether, 2002), it is perhaps unsurprising that the sermon corpus contained evidence that these male pastors may be directing their sermons primarily at men, even when using seemingly inclusive language. Indeed, the perspective of women may not be at the forefront of their minds, particularly in light of religious leaders' tendency toward 'a sense of disbelief or denial that IPV could occur within their community' (Levitt & Ware, 2006, p. 217).

While socio-culturally contextualizable more widely, the divorce sermons in this study have been removed from their initial, localised form and context. First, they underwent change via transcription, and it is likely that analysis which accounts for verbal language would have pointed to additional meanings beyond this paper's scope. Second, the online listener lacks certain contextual details to which the original Sunday church pew audience had access. There are hints of this local context in a few of the sermons, for example, one pastor stating he is preaching on the topic because of a wedding involving a divorced woman that had taken place the previous day. But even with such clues, one cannot listen to or read these sermons as did a member of the church in which it was preached, though by listening to them online or reading transcripts, we share the sermons' alternate context with other listeners.

It is also important to note not all the pastors in the corpus relied on the two Discourses to the same extent. Some pastors' language pointed to a more nuanced perspective than that of others, and one pastor mentioned abuse as Biblical grounds (see Hobbs, 2018a). However, the Discourses discussed in this paper were both frequent and prominent, consistently used across the texts.

This paper has contributed to the growing body of work on the language of sermons and on religious language more widely. In particular, it qualifies existing linguistic study of homiletics, which heretofore has not examined the gendered nature of audience engagement in contemporary preaching. It has also added to understanding of attitudes towards divorce within the Christian church, which has been documented primarily using self-reported data. Perhaps most importantly, however, this paper has challenged work on homiletics which suggests, like Singh and Thuraisingam that

> The language of the clergy has expanded from being purely theological and biblical to being inspirational and motivating; from presenting absolutes to delivering sermons that are subjective and more practical (Singh & Thuraisingam, 2011, p. 400).

Indeed, there is strong evidence that absolutes remain important within at least conservative Christianity. Counter to what some linguistic work on Christian sermons assumes, therefore, not all contemporary Christian preaching should be classed as 'New Homiletic' or 'turn-to-the-listener,' within which 'many claims … typically resist a characterization as true or not true' (Malmström, 2016, p. 574). On the contrary, dogmatism in preaching is indeed alive and well.

Finally, this paper has only scratched the surface of these linguistically rich sermons. Directions worth pursuing include a description of generic features of the sermons, exploration of language about sex, and examination of metaphor. Findings here have indicated that to be Christian is to be anti-divorce. A further question that remains is: what other topics within conservative Christian sermons are similarly marked by boundary formation? Studies taking up this question contribute to our understanding not only of the ways Christians talk about particular topics but also the ways they construct their identity.

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Appendix 1. WMatrix semantic concepts in divorce sermon corpus

| Discourse | Sub-Discourse | Key Semantic Concepts (in order of LL frequency within each Discourse) | Examples (in order of frequency) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Divorce as Male | | people: female | woman, women, female, lady, ladies |
| | | people: male | man, men, male, eunuchs, guy |
| Divorce as a Highly Restricted Area | Divorce as Bound by Rules | allowed | let, right, allowed, permitted, allow |
| | | comparing: different | another, exception, separate, separation, exceptions |
| | | if | even if, as long as, whether or not |
| | | non-religious | unbelieving, secular |
| | | mental object | view, matter, subject, issue, idea, principle |
| | | unethical | adultery, sin, immorality, sins, sinful |
| | | lawful | lawful, innocent, legally, lawfully, justice |
| | | strong obligation or necessity | should, need, must, have to, ought |
| | | negative | not, -n't, no, nothing, nor |
| | | exclusion | except for, apart from, excluded, disqualify, other than |
| | | time: beginning | still, remain, goes on, continue, go ahead |
| | | constraint | bondage, bound, regulating, fix, attached |
| | | linear order | then, first, second, third, first of all |
| | | evaluation: good | better, greater, superior, surpassing, exemplary |
| | | avoiding | avoid, neglect, breach, neglecting, avoided |
| | | entire; maximum | extreme, extremes, utmost, as much as possible |
| | | not allowed | forbidden, forbid, rules out, prohibited, forbidding |
| | | existing | is, -'s, be, are, was |
| | | entertainment generally | party, as in 'the innocent party' |
| | | quantities: little | also, more, as well, too, further |
| | | degree: boosters | very, really, more, so, indeed |
| | | comparing: similar | same |
| | | comparing: similar, different | reconciled, reconcile, reconciles |
| | | dislike | hates, hate, is against, hated, isn't for |
| | | quantities: many/much | also, more, as well, too, further |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | inclusion | involved, include, includes, included, including |
| | suitable | appropriate, relevant, suitable, qualified, qualifies |
| | no constraint | liberty, loosed, freedom, released, release |
| The Authority of the Rules | speech: communicative | says, say, said, saying |
| | education in general | teaching, teach, taught, study |
| | language, speech and grammar | verse, word, verses, read, words |
| | evaluation: good/bad | standard, standards |
| | dislike | hates, hate, is against, hated, isn't for |
| | the media: books | chapter, book, deuteronomy, books, chapters |
| | parts of buildings | passage, passages |
| The Clarity of the Rules | likely | no matter what, definitely, no matter how, definite, for anything, no two ways about it, clear, clearly, certainly |
| | degree: diminishers | simply, merely |
| | degree: boosters | very, really, so |
| | detailed | very, certain, particular, exactly, specific |
| The Causes of Divorce | if | if, ifs |
| | relationship: intimacy and sex | sexual, sexually, intercourse, lovers, prostitution |
| | cause and effect | why, reason, cause, because of, reasons |
| | relationship: sexual | prostitute, prostitutes, lusting, lusted, lascivious |
| | evaluation: good/bad | unfaithfulness, infidelity |
| | no personal relationship | desertion, estranged, separated, defection, grown apart |
| | the media | pornography |
| | Texture | hardness, hard, hardened |
| | sensory: touch | touch, touched, touches, caress, fondle |

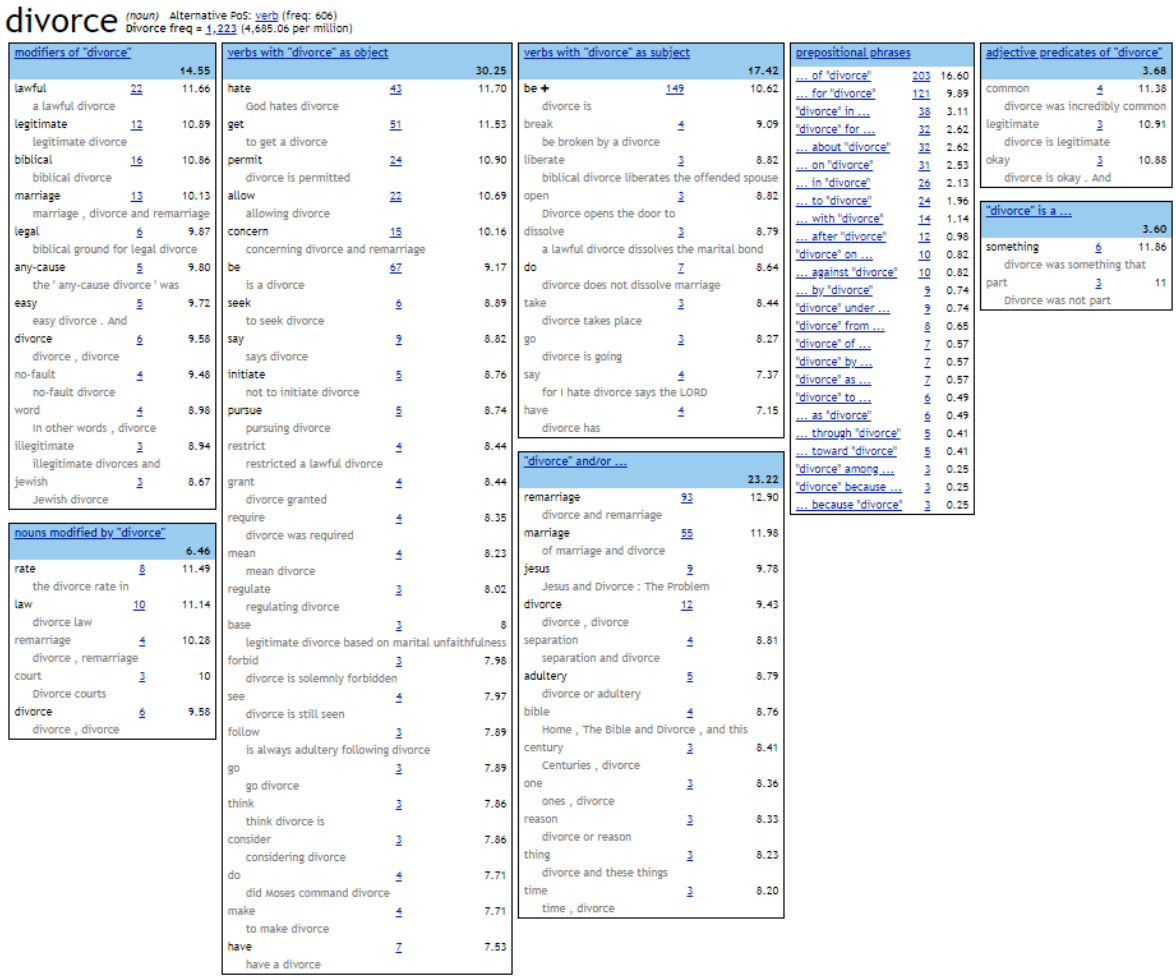


Figure 1. Word sketch of *divorce*

Figure 2. Unjust and 'Biblical' grounds/reasons cited for divorce

Figure 3. The gendering of the action of divorce (including quotation of the Bible)