

REFLECTIONS ON TRANCELINGUALISM

Insights from Sacral Communication in Folk Poetry and Traditional Singing



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ABSTRACT

The article gives a brief introduction to the author's notion of sacral communication. The concept, referring to a field as a cultural universal, provides a relevant approach to the multidisciplinary fields of communication theory and anthropology of arts and religion as well.

Spiritual and religious language, or trancelingualism, is a component of sacral communication, but the latter encompasses additional nonverbal elements as well. This study focuses on the multimodal manifestation of trancelingualism within the context of sacral communication, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. This study argues that trancelingualism in folk poetry cannot be disentangled from translingualism, which opens intertextual dimensions that not only exist within the productive dimensions of that specific language but also transcend cultural boundaries.

Among scientific studies on religious language and magical power of words, this study refers to basic scholars such as Maurice Bloch. To better understand the mechanism of religious and artistic texts, it suggests applying the autocommunication concept of Juri Lotman.

By using these theoretic frames, the author tries to find relations of the pragmatic use of traditional singing, folk poetry and archaic folk prayers in the Hungarian oral tradition using code-switching.

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual and religious language (or “trancelingualism,” as Johanna Domokos terms it in the introduction to this book) is a component of sacral communication, but the latter encompasses additional nonverbal elements as well. This study focuses on the multimodal manifestation of trancelingualism within the context of sacral communication, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Furthermore, the religious or spiritual language expressed through folk and modern art forms—whether in archaic or contemporary songs or

poems—can be seen as an immediate manifestation of trancelanguaging. This specific register of language exists within the broader context of everyday language use, with other registers serving as key references in its definition. Without delving into the details, this study argues that trancelingualism in folk poetry cannot be disentangled from translanguaging, which opens inter-textual dimensions that not only exist within the productive dimensions of that specific language but also transcend cultural boundaries. This is due to the religious and spiritual arcs that do not recognize linguistic borders.

Sacral communication may be defined as a universal human phenomenon that manifests in various forms across different cultures and religions. It occurs when individuals or communities establish connections with supernatural powers or forces. Approximately three decades ago, as a young scholar in the field of folk religion, with a particular focus on folk prayers and songs, and concurrently teaching communication theory and semiotics at Pécs University, I focused on a significant gap in terminology and theoretical frameworks between these disciplines. This observation spurred a need for conceptual clarity within both the fields of folkloristics, anthropology of religion, and music, as well as within communication theory. There was an evident necessity to develop a framework that could adequately describe the shared human experience of communicating with the supernatural. This phenomenon, undoubtedly a cultural universal, had not been adequately addressed in terms of communication theory at the time.

In response to this scholarly gap, I endeavored to construct a concept and theoretical framework for “sacral communication” by the late 1980s. My doctoral thesis, completed in Hungarian in 1995 and titled *Szagrális kommunikáció* [Sacral Communication], summarized this research.¹ The purpose of the thesis was to draw attention to this phenomenon, contribute to its general theory, particularly by including folk prayers, and to offer an example of empirical research of prayer and praying in anthropology of religion. This work was subsequently published in two editions and has become an extensively used university textbook in Hungary.²

¹ Irén Lovász: *Szagrális kommunikáció. Népi imádságok pragmatikai, antropológiai megközelítése* [Sacral Communication. The Pragmatics of Folk Prayer and the Anthropological Approach], Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Doktori tanácsa (15.805) / PHD thesis, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1995.

² Irén Lovász: *Szagrális kommunikáció* [Sacral Communication], Budapest, European Folklore Institute, 2002, Budapest, KRE–L'Harmattan, 2011 (2nd edition).

CHANNELS, MODES, ELEMENTS AND EXAMPLES OF
SACRAL COMMUNICATION

Sacral communication manifests through various modes and channels that align with general communication theory. The different communication channels can only be described in a taxonomic system.³ These modes include first of all the verbal channel that carries trancelingualism, secondly the great variety of non-verbal channels, and thirdly the so-called cultural signals as well. What are these channels, elements and examples of sacral communication? In my book (Lovász, 2002, 2011)⁴ I define them in the following way:

I. Verbal Channel (prayer, verbal elements of religious rituals, mantras, etc.);

II. Non-verbal Channels

1. Vocal communication (e.g., paralinguistic signs such as sniffing, crying, intonation, rhythm, singing, and music)
2. Silence as communication (e.g., meditation, contemplation, as practiced, for example, by Jesuits, Buddhists)
3. Mimic communication (e.g., trance states)
4. Gaze communication (e.g., expressions of devotion)
5. Olfactory communication (e.g., the use of incense)
6. Communication through movement
 - a. gestures (such as clasping hands in prayer)
 - b. postures (such as bowing)
 - c. proxemics (regulation of spatial distances in churches, shrines or other sacral spaces)
 - d. kinesic communication (movements, dances during religious rites, calvary walk)
 - e. tactile communication (such as touching holy objects, a statue with a hand, a cloth, a green branch, a kiss)
 - f. sacral eating and drinking (e.g., the consumption of wafers, bread, or wine in religious contexts);

III. Cultural Signals (e.g. clothing, hairstyle, body decorations, badges).

A crucial aspect of understanding sacral communication is defining the medium through which such communication occurs. My primary focus was on verbal modes / trancelingualism of sacral communication, particularly in folk prayers. The first inquiry was whether the distinct nature of religious language could be identified and described.

³ Béla Buda: *A közvetlen emberi kommunikáció szabályszerűségei* [Systematics of Direct Human Communication], 1974, 1979, 1986 (3rd, revised edition), Budapest, Animula, 69–110.

⁴ Lovász 2011, 20–21.

While a few scholarly works on religious language, or as defined in this context, trancelingualism, have been published, there is still limited research on this subject. Scholars, including anthropologists and philosophers, have explored the nature of ritual language in preliterate cultures, often emphasizing the power attributed to ritual words. Notable works such as Bronislaw Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935),⁵ and subsequent articles on anthropological linguistics inspired by speech act theory by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969),⁶ have significantly contributed to the field of ritual speech.⁷

Maurice Bloch (1974), a prominent anthropologist, posits that the key distinction between religious and everyday language lies in formality.⁸ He argues that formalized speech, including ritualized speech, prayers, and songs, represents a process of linguistic formalization, where intonation and musical elements serve as integral components. According to his studies, special intonation might be one of the cases of formalization. Formalized speech, intonation formulas and prayers, as well as singing are steps of formalization. There is a little difference between singing and intonation. The song is nothing but the end of the transformation process that began with formalization. Singing is often one of the most important and primary creative parts of religious actions.

In his view, formalized speech features restricted syntactic rules, limited vocabulary, and a characteristic ritualized intonation. Ritual language, as compared to everyday speech, may also be impoverished in terms of syntax, but it remains central in both political and religious contexts. That is how formalisation of language is related to power.⁹

In recent years, I have become particularly interested in the significant role of the human voice in both sacral and broader spiritual communication, as well as in its capacity for healing, both for individuals and communities.¹⁰ Research indicates that the utterance of sacral or magical words, often accompanied by specific intonations and timbres, can possess powerful and transformative effects. The creative power of the spoken word is often attributed not solely to its semantic content, but to the pragmatic and performative

⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski: *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, New York, Routledge, 1935.

⁶ J.L. Austin: *How to do things with words*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1962; J. Searle: *Speech Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

⁷ S.J. Tambiah: The Magical Power of Words, *Man*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1968, 175–208; R. Finnegan: How to do things with words: Performative Utterances among the Limba of Sierra Leone, *Man*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1969, 537–552; S.D. Gill: *A theory of Navajo Prayer Acts. A study of Ritual Symbolism*, Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1974.

⁸ Maurice Bloch: Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is religion an extreme form of traditional authority?, *European Journal of Sociology* vol. 15, no. 1, 1974, 55–81.

⁹ Bloch 1974, 60.

¹⁰ Irén Lovász: On the Healing Power of Traditional Singing and Human Voice in Hungarian Culture – Past and Present, *Medicinskaja Antropologija i Bioetika / Medical Anthropology and Bioethics*, 2018/1 (15), https://medanthro.ru/?page_id=3594&lang=en

dimensions of pronunciation. This underscores the belief that the act of speaking, the utterance itself, rather than the words alone, can invoke supernatural power.

PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF TRANS- AND TRANCELINGUALISM:

My research along the decades¹¹ has particularly focused on the performative aspects of prayer and other traditional speech genres of the vernacular such as curses, blessings, and incantations.¹² In my paper (Lovász, 1993),¹³ I argue that prayer should not merely be viewed as a text, as was often the case in earlier studies, but as a speech act—a ritual performed through speech, song, or vocalization. Rooted in the ancient belief that the spoken word holds creative and transformative power, prayer serves as one of the most prevalent forms of verbal sacral communication across diverse religious traditions.

The performative efficacy of prayer is exemplified by the notion that prayers spoken in special languages or uttered quietly, such as contemplative or meditative prayers, hold particular significance. St. Augustine's famous proposition "He who sings prays twice" encapsulates the idea that singing enhances the potency of prayer. This concept is widely acknowledged in rural Hungarian communities, where it is believed that singing strengthens the power of prayer. This belief became evident during my fieldwork in the Gyimes [Ghimes] Valley of Transylvania, where local people, though unaware of the theological origins of this sentiment, firmly believed that singing intensified the effect of prayer.¹⁴

Following my field research, I applied many of these findings in the production of my CD album, integrating archaic folk prayers, incantations, and blessings, alongside the local knowledge surrounding them.¹⁵

¹¹ Irén Lovász: Sacred Language and Secret Speech, in M. Hoppál – J. Pentikainen (eds.): *Northern religions and shamanism*, Budapest–Helsinki, Finnish Literature Society (SKS/FLS), Akadémiai Kiadó, 1992, 39–45; Irén Lovász: Boundaries Between Language and World in "Archaic World Concept", in L. Petzoldt (ed.): *Folk Narrative and World View: Vorträge des 10. Kongresses der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Volkserzählforschung (ISFNR) Innsbruck 1992*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1996, 263–269; Irén Lovász: Oral Christianity in Hungary: Interpreting Interpretations, in Jon Davies – Isabel Wollaston: *The Sociology of Sacred Texts*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, 72–82.

¹² About the theoretical questions of the related folklore genres see also: James Alexander Kapaló: Genre and Authority in the Genesis of Charm and Prayer, *Incantatio*, vol.1, no.1, December 2011, 79–101.

¹³ Lovász 1993, 78–81.

¹⁴ Anonyma, born 1944, Gyimesfelsőlok, Fieldwork recording on 01 August 2019 by Irén Lovász.

¹⁵ Irén Lovász: Healing voice/ Healing Voices IV., SVCD07, Siren Voices 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHb1I43-taA>, lyrics in English translation: <https://lovasziren.hu/userfiles/domain187/d/3/d3c5270b0b287dd31ece7169d7be3990.pdf>

AUTOCOMMUNICATION AND SACRAL COMMUNICATION

To better understand the function of sacral communication within religious and literary texts, including poems and songs, it is helpful to consider Juri Lotman's concept of two models of communication in culture,¹⁶ Lotman distinguishes between *I-he communication*, in which information flows unidirectionally from the sender to the receiver, and *autocommunication*, where a reciprocal flow of information occurs.

Autocommunication, characterized by two-way information exchange, prioritizes the reception and transformation of the *communicative code* rather than the transmission of information itself. This model fosters *self-reflection*, *self-discovery*, and *psychological healing*, serving a *transformative* rather than purely communicative *function*. In Lotman's view, religious and artistic texts are prime examples of autocommunication. These texts do not merely impart new information but facilitate a qualitative transformation in the identity of the recipient, reshaping their self-image.

Autocommunication suggests a *two-way flow of information and reformulating the addressee*.¹⁷ In other words, autocommunication is oriented towards the *reception of code*¹⁸ rather than the reception of information.¹⁹ So the *creative function* rather than the communicative functions becomes autocommunication's priority. This kind of communication is *beyond the syntax and grammar, thus it is more psychological, latent and unlimited*. Autocommunication also helps to evoke the sense of "*self-existence, self-discovery and auto-psychotherapy*".²⁰ Autocommunication enhances the ego or the team spirit of a group. Instead of adding information *quantitatively* to the previous amount of information of the receiver, it leads to *qualitative* change of the ego.

Thus, autocommunication is able to serve the healing, therapeutic function of art and religion in the deep levels of consciousness. This kind of

¹⁶ Jurij Lotman: O dvuh modeljah kommunikacii v sisteme kulturi, in *Trudy po znakovim Sistemam* 6. Tartu, 1973. 227–243; See also: Juri Lotman: Two models of communication, in Lucid, Daniel P. (ed., trans.): *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*, Baltimore–London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, 99–101; Yuri Lotman: *The Universe of the Mind: The Semiotic Theory of Culture*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1990. https://monoskop.org/images/5/5e/Lotman_Yuri_M_Universe_of_the_Mind_A_Semiotic_Theory_of_Culture_1990.pdf (accessed 09 January 2024).

¹⁷ Lotman 1990, 22.

¹⁸ Lotman 1977, 100.

¹⁹ It would be interesting to take into consideration Lotman's notion in the study of code-switching in arts as well. To see how it could support the message to be transculturally accessible. See: Irén Lovász: Multimodal Code-switching in my World Music Art, in Marianna Deganutti–Johanna Domokos–Judit Mudriczki (eds): *Code-switching in Arts*, Budapest, KRE–L'Harmattan, 2023, 163–170.

²⁰ Lotman 1990, 29.

code-switching could involve the superego in the autocommunicative process of artistic and religious texts.

Lotman could transform Jakobson's speech-based model²¹ into a cultural-mechanism-based model.²² Lotman reveals a *two-way* flow of information: he views the feedback loop in transmission of information as a space for the addresser's – who could be the addressee as well – reflexive thinking.

Thus, autocommunication is a relevant model mainly for the creative function of cultural texts and *intertextuality within cultural space*. The notion of autocommunication can also explain how cultural information serves the function of infinite "*self-rebuilding*" (in Lotman's word: *perestroika* [rebuilding] of the self). According to Lotman, for artistic and religious texts it is typical, but any text can become autocommunicative.²³

This notion of autocommunication is particularly relevant in sacral communication, where texts like prayers, mantras, and folk laments evoke profound self-reflection and self-rebuilding.

Presumably, this particular second code is what also provides the specificity of sacral communication, since communication takes place between I and I but the context and code of the message changes in the person during the communication. That is, the Self changed itself during the communication process: it is the same Self, but not the same anymore.²⁴

We could also recognize that folksongs, lyrical texts, songs, laments, ballads, religious texts affect the ego of the reader/receiver/listener, who might be the same as the performer! This is the case if you sing or mumble a lament to yourself. It is often a very private act or ritual in a rather meditative, contemplative state of mind.

When we use a text *as a code*, we say to ourselves:

*"This touches me! This is meant for me.
This is my life; this could be my life".*

²¹ Roman Jakobson: Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics, in Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.): *Style in Language*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960, 350–377.

²² About the applications and comparison of Lotman's model in the discipline of semiotics see also: Le Han: Juri Lotman's autocommunication model and Roland Barthes's representations of Self and Other, *Sign Systems Studies* 42(4), 2014, 517–529; Juri Lotman's autocommunication model and Roland Barthes's representations of Self and Other, *Sign Systems Studies* 09.01.2025.

²³ See Henri Brous's idea on strategic plans as mantras in planning of an organisation by autocommunication – a way to induce vision to the organisation, in Henri Brous – Henrik Gahmberg: *Semiotic of Management*, Helsinki, Helsinki School of Economics C:53, 1988. 97–110.

²⁴ Lotman 1973, 228–229.

ARCHAIC FOLK PRAYERS AND AUTOCOMMUNICATION

Recalling and describing the “story of suffering” of Good Friday by the typical attitude of the Franciscan tradition, *Imitatio Cristi* (“*I imitate Christ. It is a wish to suffer and die together*”) is the main motif, the central theme of Hungarian archaic folk prayers.²⁵ This kind of autocommunicative function of reciting these ancient sacred texts could be the reason for the strong efficacy of praying these archaic folk prayers.²⁶ And also the reason for the fact that the secret, hidden practice of reciting these archaic folk prayers has been kept for centuries in the vernacular.

Since both the texts and their performances were held to be illicit by the church for centuries, they had to be practised in secret, they have preserved ancient features of worldview and language of the early Hungarians. Both the *sacred* and the *secret* imply special linguistic form, special speech acts and special pragmatic conditions. These texts were means of a secret, hidden, underground, illegal communication with the Sacred.²⁷

There is no request in the text of these archaic prayers: there is no need for that. The secret of their efficacy is in the closing formulas, also according to the users, reciters of these texts.²⁸

“Sacredness was always the guarantee of keeping these texts constant, unchanged. The speciality of this genre is the *concluding formula*, which provides the authorization and indeed the divine certification of the utility and efficacy of the texts. The words are as follows:

*Krisztus urunk maga mondta,
szent szó, szent beszéd:
aki ezt az imádságot elimádkozza,
megnyeri a mennyeknek országát,
hét halálos bűne megbocsáttatik.*

²⁵ The pioneering publication by the leading scholar of this folklore genre in Hungarian folkloristics: Zsuzsanna Erdélyi: *Hegyet hágék, lőtőt lépék. Archaikus népi imádságok* [Going uphill and downhill (arch., in a rough translation). Archaic Folk Prayers], Budapest, Magvető, 1976, 1978.

²⁶ Lovász 2011, 76–77.

²⁷ Lovász 1992, 39.

²⁸ Lovász 2011, 72.

In English:

*Our Lord Christ said himself,
sacred word, sacred speech:
whoever prays this prayer mornings and evenings,
wins the kingdom of heaven,
his seven deadly sins will be remitted.*²⁹

(My translation)

While reciting these prayers, the person praying experiences Christ's life and death or Mary's pain just the same as when walking the Stations of the Cross. The Way of Cross, the Calvary, helps people experience the sacred event of the past and makes it more personal through repetition. These texts do the same thing: by reciting them the scene from the Bible is ritually repeated, personally experienced, recalled and validated to the one who recites them. During the course of experiencing the story, the people praying often begin to cry. Women praying experience Mary's pain as if it were their own.³⁰

The feeling of "*I experience Mary's motherly pain*" is working in the self-reflective process of relativisation, how "*I reflect on my own personal pain*": effectively serving psychological, mental healing purposes of art and religion.

In a religious context – according to my anthropological fieldwork experiences – if a woman recites a lament of Virgin Mary, she may say: "*This is me, this is my pain. I could feel Mary's pain. But to compare it to my real pains, it makes it relatively bearable, not that painful anymore.*" That was the case of the woman whose religious world I studied, including the pragmatic use of her daily prayers. That is how she could survive her stroke for 28 years, due to her intimate, deep religious relation to the Virgin Mary, and reciting regularly Mary's mourning for Christ, her laments over her Holy Son. It really helped in relativising her own personal tragedy and pain.³¹

Such experiences illustrate how sacral texts can serve as vehicles for psychological and emotional healing, facilitating self-therapy and reflection. Thus, sacral and artistic texts operate as transformative codes that enhance the ego and facilitate personal and spiritual healing.

²⁹ Lovász 1992, 43.

³⁰ Lovász 1993, 76.

³¹ For more precise details and description of the case study, see: Lovász 2011, 133–143.

SUMMARY

This study interprets mystical poetry in a broad sense, encompassing verbal texts of sacral communication from Hungarian folklore. Both trancelingualism and translingualism can only manifest together within the framework of autocommunication. Autocommunication is what motivates the creator of such texts, and it is also the form through which the audience receives these texts as a sacral act or mystical poetry.³² It is especially relevant in approaching individual performances of folk poetry, folk songs, folk prayers and laments – since in these cases the self-reflective and auto-therapeutic function of reciting artistic and religious texts is obvious and evident.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a traditional Hungarian folk song, which metaphorically represents verbal sacral communication and the healing role of singing. In this song, singing is portrayed as an act of prayer and an avenue for psychological self-therapy:

Én vagyok az, aki nem jó, fellegajtó nyitogató.
 Nyitogatom a felleget, sírok alatta eleget.
 Sírok titkon, ne lássa más, hull a könnyem, mint kútforrás.
 Hull a könnyem, hull előmbe, hull a gyászos kebelembe, hateha...³³

I'm the one who's not good, an opener of cloud-gates.
 I often try to open up the sky, I cry plenty under it.
 I cry in secret, don't let anyone see, my tears fall like a fountain.
 My tears fall, fall in front of me, fall into my mournful bosom ay-ay-ay...
 (My translation)

The symbolic language in this folk song resembling also the Christian psalms, illustrates how sacral communication, through prayer or song, can function as an act of connecting the mundane with the supernatural, the profane to the sacred.

³² About complexity of the question concerning the creator, author, sender and receiver of mystical poetry, see: Irén Lovász: "It is the Mind That Hears it, Not the Ear..." Sounds, Lights, Visions in Peasant Mysticism, in Miklós Vassányi – Enikő Sepsi – Anikó Daróczi (eds): *The Immediacy of Mystical Experience in the European Tradition*, Cham, Springer-Verlag, 2017, 255–261.

³³ Irén Lovász: Fellegajtó CD, Hungaroton Classic 2005. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsgyIAvBN8E>

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