

The language of destructive cults

Richard Watson Todd

While most religions are seen as being socially beneficial, a few are clearly evil. The most notable examples are those cults which engaged in mass suicide, such as Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate. Peoples Temple founded by Jim Jones became infamous when first the group killed an American congressman and his entourage and then committed mass suicide with over 900 people dead in the jungles of Guyana. Similarly, the UFO millenarian cult called Heaven's Gate led by Marshall Applewhite gained prominence when 39 members committed suicide so that their souls could hitch a ride on a comet.

While there are many religious cults in existence, only a few of them become destructive. Is there any way to identify which cults are likely to turn destructive? In this article, we compared the sermons of Jim Jones and Marshall Applewhite with those of two well-known mainstream Christian preachers (Billy Graham and Rick Warren) using three types of keyness analysis (keywords, key semantic tags and key parts of speech). Similarities between the Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate sermons may be indicators of destructive cults which could be used to analyse the sermons of the leaders of other cults to see if they may become destructive.

Keyness analyses generally produce findings concerning aboutness (or content) and style. Keywords can provide information about both; key semantic tags tend to highlight content; and key parts of speech usually focus on style.

For content, both Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate are markedly different to mainstream Christianity, but also differ from each other. While the mainstream preachers focus on *God*, *Jesus* and *love* – concepts traditionally associated with religion, the cult sermons rarely refer to such familiar concepts. Instead, Jim Jones' sermons are political with consistent reference to socialist issues and critiques of current world events. Marshall Applewhite's sermons combine science fiction themes (e.g. *planet*, *spacecraft*) with popular psychology (e.g. *mind*, *behavior*). Given these differences, the content of sermons is unlikely to be useful in identifying potential destructive cults.

For style, on the other hand, Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate share features which are distinct from mainstream religion. Both make extensive use of othering, creating an *us* versus *them* dichotomy separating the cult from wider society; both make substantial use of intensifiers (e.g. *very*, *certainly*) to make their language stronger; both use negation (e.g. *not*, *never*) frequently; and both use elaborative discourse adding *that*- and *if*-clauses to their sentences. For example, in one of Marshall Applewhite's sermons, we find "in other words there can be what humans would call space aliens that (elaborating) certainly (intensifying) aren't (negating) in our (othering) father's house". These style features may provide an early warning system to identify cults that are likely to become destructive.

This article is based on Palayon, R., Watson Todd, R. and Vungthong S. (2020) The language of destructive cults: Keyness analyses of sermons. *Communication & Language at Work* 7(1), 42-58.