

Article

“I Thought It Was Beautiful; I Just Wish I Could Understand It”: The Awkward Dance of Multilingual Worship

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Abstract: This article explores strategies for planning and leading multilingual worship. It offers an overview of translation and multilingualism for readers unfamiliar with the growing body of scholarship in these fields and connects them to the role of translation and multilingualism in Christian worship, leveraging decolonial perspectives to critique its history. This article draws from a data set of approximately 40 liturgies designed for the Course of Study School of the United Methodist Church at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. It uses selections from these liturgies to demonstrate how issues of translation and multilingualism might be dealt with in worship planning and leadership. Finally, the article points to possibilities for further exploration at the intersection between Christian worship and multilingualism.

Keywords: Christian worship; decoloniality and Christianity; liturgy; multilingualism; translation



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1. Introduction

Every year, Perkins School of Theology offers courses for licensed local pastors in the United Methodist Church (UMC) who do not have a seminary degree through a program called Course of Study School (COSS). At Perkins, COSS cohort has historically included native English and Spanish speakers, many of whom speak both languages and a few who do not. These intensive weeks of summer study, offered for many years on the campus of Southern Methodist University, include daily chapel services for students, which I have designed and led since 2019.¹

A few years ago, an English-speaking participant approached me with questions about the bilingual liturgy we had just concluded. They wanted to know more about the process of crafting multilingual liturgies, and I shared some of the principles that guided our planning of these services. As our conversation progressed, it became clear to me that this person was bothered by some aspect of the service. They asked: “I really do enjoy the hospitality of bilingual worship, but I was wondering why certain parts of the service switched to Spanish without any warning or translation”. Finally, the source of their discomfort came out: “I thought it was beautiful; I just wish I could understand it. I wish everything was translated, so we could understand what was going on the entire time”.

Who was this “we” the person was referring to? At that moment, my experience as a foreigner and non-native English speaker living in the United States shoved the “pastoral me” from the driver’s seat and I quipped: “Well, that’s how many of us feel every day”. While merely anecdotal, this occurrence illustrates some of the linguistic tensions inherent to the history and practice of Christian worship. My conversation with that worshiper reflected tensions around language and participation in worship. My response, perhaps laced with more sarcasm than it should have been, was meant to remind this native English speaker that, for those of us living in a second language (so to speak), the feeling of disorientation around language is a daily companion. A better response to that person, perhaps, would have emphasized that Christian hospitality in worship might call for a healthy dose of the liturgical awkwardness that arises from feeling “out of the loop” during a service that flows between languages.

Crafting and leading multilingual worship is not a simple undertaking.² The process is riddled with decisions about which languages to include; when to switch between them; where to source congregational music, readings, prayers, and scripture translations; considerations of liturgical flow; and nowadays, issues of copyright and streaming licenses across geographical and legal boundaries.³ This article engages with current literature in translation and multilingualism studies, seeking to provide insights from these disciplines for those planning multilingual worship. It also examines a particular attempt at crafting and leading multilingual worship: the chapel services for COSS. Between 2019 and 2023, I have planned and led approximately 40 multilingual worship services at COSS. In this article, I draw upon this collection of liturgies as a primary data source that dialogues with bibliographies from various fields, including church music studies, worship and liturgy studies, translation studies and multilingualism studies, to examine several aspects of multilingualism in religious musical practice.⁴ In the context of the particular linguistic challenges of COSS at Perkins, which is located in Dallas, Texas—an important intersection between Black, Latine and White experiences in the South of the United States—I hope to contribute to scholarly conversations about motivations and approaches to multilingualism in congregational worship.

2. Translation and Multilinguality

This article provides an entry point for those not familiar with the growing corpus of language, translation, and multilingual scholarship that can inform conversations about language in Christian worship. While I adopt a broad understanding of terms like “translation” and “content”, hoping to emphasize possibilities for engagement, I acknowledge that any and all of these concepts can be problematized and/or nuanced in various ways. I refrain from doing so because, in practice, congregations who engage with multilingualism in their worship planning are probably not dealing with conceptual nuances of theory but with the concrete difficulties of language barriers, truncated translations, and other fraught aspects of the awkward dance of multilingual liturgy.⁵ Therefore, I offer Giuseppe Palumbo’s broad definition of translation as “a text in one language that represents or stands for a text in another language; the term translation also refers to the act of producing such a text” (Palumbo 2009, p. 122). In the spirit of liturgical hospitality that fuels many such attempts at multicultural and multilingual worship, I append to Palumbo’s definition Gilmei Fleck’s idea that the exercise of translation allows different cultures and agents to establish dialogues, as well as to connect different spaces and times; what he calls a movement toward the creation of meaning across boundaries of incomprehensibility (Fleck 2023, p. 248).⁶

The term “multilingualism” has also been variously defined. Kohl and Ouyang define multilingualism in contrast to “monolingualism,” as a descriptor of “speech communities that use more than one language” (Kohl et al. 2020, p. 4). John Edwards argues that multilingualism exists as a double valency, both as a “simple description of global linguistic diversity” and as “a representation of the individual and group abilities that have developed because of that diversity” (Edwards 2012, p. 25). While many scholars distinguish between bilingualism and multilingualism, I align here with Aronin and Singleton, who employ multilingualism “in such a way that [it includes] the concepts of bilingualism and bilingual within their respective ambits” (2012, p. 7).⁷ Thus, I consider the liturgies used in COSS services multilingual even when they are only engaging with two languages, at least in part because this use conforms to Kohl and Ouyang’s idea of a speech community that uses more than one language. Further, my engagement with multilingualism also leverages the spirit of the “multilingual turn” that “challenges the hegemony of monolingualism as the norm” (Ainsworth et al. 2023, p. xvi). Aneta Pavlenko argues that the multilingual turn is nothing but a recognition that our world is “more multilingual than ever before” (Pavlenko 2023, p. 4). Others support this claim, arguing against the artificial “one-to-one match between a country and a language”, whereas in fact “all national states are multilingual” (Maiden et al. 2020, p. 70).

Moreover, there is widespread recognition that translation and multilingual studies are by nature interdisciplinary endeavors. Translation studies “addresses a wide range of questions” (Bermann and Porter 2014, p. 6) and is “interdisciplinary from start to finish” (Yazici 2009, p. 8). In fact, argue Wakabayashi and Kothari, translation “should be problematized in inverted commas to suggest the scope of activities and concepts” associated with it in different languages, “as well as the dangers of extrapolating from English practices and conceptualizations” (Wakabayashi and Kothari 2009, p. 7). If such is the case, recognizing the multidisciplinary of translation and multilingual studies includes recognizing the cruciality and agency of practices and conceptualizations from outside the English-language center of intellectual gravity, as we shall see.

To add another layer of complexity to the issue, the translation of liturgical texts and congregational music is fraught with particular complexities. Lucile Desblache offers a typology of the translation of song words, including transcription, intralingual, and interlingual translation (Desblache 2018, pp. 312–14). She also suggests the term “transcreation” to depict other-language versions of songs, where “new words, which are intended to fit an old tune, convey a fresh semantic and poetic message, which may or may not be in line with the original text” (Desblache 2019, p. 248). For her, the translation of music “involves the transfer or mediation of some elements of a musical text to enhance its meaning for its intended audience” (Desblache 2018, p. 298). I take her reference to “some elements” as an acknowledgment that it is not possible to translate all aspects of music between languages and the cultures linked to them; in fact, this would not be the ultimate objective of music translation, because “there is an element of desired untranslatability in the translation of musical texts, governed by the necessity to allow space for the expression of emotions, of dissent or resistance” (Desblache 2018, p. 304). Thus, dealing with music translation means embracing what Desblache calls “partial untranslatability” (Desblache 2018, p. 308).

That untranslatability can reside in and between any of the component elements of a song, religious or otherwise. Speaking specifically of religious hymns, Dinda Gorlée says that “new interpretation and translation is a common presence in psalmody and hymnology”, and these transformations can happen “in the music, in the text, or in both music and text” (Gorlée 2005, p. 27).⁸ Throughout the history of Christianity, argues Gorlée, “both music and text are constantly rearranged and retranslated” in order to help them fit the expectations of participants and/or ideological proclivities of institutions, in a constant process whereby congregational songs are “upheaved, refixed, translated and retranslated” (Gorlée 2005, p. 33).

The dynamics of upheaval that Gorlée mentions reflect the extent to which the history of Christianity is a history of cultural shock and negotiation. From liturgical languages used across geographic boundaries to more blatant instances of colonial oppression that include language erasure or tight control, beneath the surface Christian worship has been a battleground from the linguistic perspective, even as religious institutions presented as consolidated organizations. Within that history, liturgists and other church leaders have experimented with multiple approaches to the leveraging and control of the language of and in worship. The enforcement of language and the enforcement of liturgy frequently come hand in hand. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, insisted on the preservation of Latin as the approved liturgical language for use across its sphere of influence for centuries. For Desblache, even as the church “imposed Latin as the sole language for sung liturgy and religious music pieces from the ninth century throughout Europe, it encouraged the standardization of musical forms as [a way] of spreading its power and ideologies” (Desblache 2019, p. 204).

In fact, for Tom Hare, “a history of the translation of the Bible is in many a history of the Bible itself” (Hare 2014, p. 534). He argues that Christianity has relied upon translation, most notably Jerome’s Vulgate, and that the Bible continues to be the most widely translated book today (Hare 2014, p. 533). There are other examples, such as the Buddhist Sutras, the Hindu Vedas, the Quran and the Hadith. In each of these cases, translation has been treated differently; in some cases, no translation is allowed, while in others—and such is the case

with the King James version of the Bible, for instance—a translation has “achieved iconic status” (Edwards 2012, p. 58). A similar connection can be drawn between the Russian Orthodox Church and Church Slavonic.⁹

Victor Westhelle lays bare this history when he connects the history of Latin American colonialism to the “missionary efforts of mainline churches in reproducing in the mission field their own church doctrine, liturgy, and rituals underwritten by centuries of European, and later North-American, piety and religious fervor” (Westhelle 2010, p. 61). From the perspective of the liturgies of Western Christianity, these aspects of power and their colonial expressions, whether missionary or economic, have resulted in a configuration whereby English has been considered the lingua franca of many traditions, especially in the Northern hemisphere.

During the modern missionary movement, while some attention was paid to the translation of hymns, this attention rarely contemplated multilingual dynamics during worship itself. The work of Joan Larie Sutton (1930–2016) exemplifies the mindset of most mission boards in the North in relation to the translation of congregational music. Sutton worked in Brazil for many years as a missionary through the International Mission Board, and translated a significant number of hymns to Portuguese, as well as liturgical works such as Handel’s *Messiah* and Brahms’s *Requiem*. Sutton’s work was crucial to the spread of Protestant hymnody in Brazil. While she in fact encouraged her seminary students to compose worship songs in Portuguese, much of her own work revolved around translation (Mulholland et al. 2001, pp. 35–36).¹⁰

While the work of Sutton and others before and after her was certainly important in hymn translation, it is also true that throughout much of the world touched by the combination of colonial economic and political interests, and by the spread of Christianity through the modern missionary movements that rode on the coattails of those colonial routes, English was implicitly or explicitly considered the lingua franca of Christian worship in the Protestant world, much like Latin in the Roman Catholic world.

It is worth noting that the expression lingua franca, or “language of the Franks”, originally referred to “the mixture that Arabs (and others)” in the Eastern Mediterranean “heard the ‘Franks’ of different mother tongues using among themselves” during the Crusades. This lingua franca developed, into the 19th century, “to include instances where a single language provided the necessary bridging” (Edwards 2012, p. 48). While Edwards does acknowledge the need for linguas francas as a means of “cross-group communication”, he also mentions (in the same paragraph) the “linguistically ‘murderous’ potential of the English language” (Edwards 2012, p. 25). In other words, the need for translation and multilinguality is always imbricated with questions of power, an issue that seemed to be a blind spot in early scholarly examinations of translation. Doorslaer and Flynn describe how even late 20th century approaches to translation demonstrated “a lack of concern” for questions of power and identity (van Doorslaer and Flynn 2013, p. 3). The situation has since begun to change, and Fleck highlights how previous notions about the “invisibility” of the translator have been debunked (Fleck 2023, p. 259).

In all of these cases, languages and translations “may exert considerable influence on the identity of the user” (Aronin and Singleton 2012, p. 72). In fact, for Fleck, the colonization of minds, identities, and imaginations through the use of translation in the colonial projects could be considered more lasting and profound than its geographical ramifications (Fleck 2023, p. 251). In other words, translation has served as a vehicle to convey a religious message but has also helped shape theology, populate the religious imagination, and form liturgical language whenever and wherever religion has crossed language boundaries.

Therefore, it is crucial that current examinations of translation and multilinguality account for the positionality of the translator as well as for broader issues of power and the performance of ritual. The positionality of the translator is what Waisman calls the “specific site” of the translator, which includes “the entire cultural sociohistorical context in which translators perform their task” (Waisman 2004, pp. 11–12). Consequently, argues Waisman,

any translation is dated because it reflects a “specific point in time” (Waisman 2004, p. 202). Second, within the context of a broader discussion of translation and coloniality, one must consider the force of religious and liturgical texts and actions in actual performance. For Cláudio Carvalhaes, liturgical rituals not only organize religious life but also “interpret the life of the individual and the group in the world and consequently interpret the world itself” (Carvalhaes 2015, p. 3).¹¹ In this sense, the history of Christian liturgy is as much a history of religious power as it is a history of piety, because “whoever holds religious power defines, allows, authorizes and demands the proper practices/behaviors of the faith” (Carvalhaes 2015, p. 4).

The second half of the 20th century witnessed a burgeoning interest in the expression of diversity through and in Christian liturgy. The Second Vatican Council opened up linguistic possibilities that had been unavailable until that moment in the Catholic world. In addition, the establishment of the World Council of Churches created a lattice upon which church bodies could connect and interface, making room not only for comparative studies of liturgy and the language contained in it but also for questions about the role of language in praying, reading, chanting, and singing across linguistic boundaries.

Further work by the World Council of Churches, along with connected initiatives such as the *Global Praise* publication series by GBGMusik in partnership with the General Board of Global Ministries of the UMC (Kimbrough and Young 1996, 2000, 2004), demonstrated the burgeoning market for worship resources in languages other than English in North America. In recent decades, many North American denominations have provided resources for multilingual worship. An important first step across the mainline church world has been to offer worship resources in languages other than English. The strategy of the United Methodist Church (UMC) provides one example among many. After the publication of the *United Methodist Hymnal* in 1989 (United Methodist Church 1989), the UMC approved the publication of a second official Spanish hymnal, *Mil Voces Para Celebrar* (MVPC), in 1996 (Martinez 1996). Another official hymnal followed in 2001 (United Methodist Church 2001), this time a bilingual English–Korean publication titled *Come, Let Us Worship*. Other denominations followed similar strategies.¹²

While such publications have addressed the need for worship resources in other languages, they have not focused specifically on multilingual worship (save for a few exceptions, such as *Come, Let Us Worship*, which does provide at least a few resources clearly intended for bilingual worship in English and Korean). More recent publications, such as *Santo, Santo, Santo/Holy Holy Holy*, published by GIA in 2019 (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship 2019), reflect updated standards in relation to the treatment of language in congregational singing specifically. The editors of this hymnal paid careful attention to the original language of each song, its translation, and the order and layout of the languages in each piece, with the goal of inviting congregations to “embrace ways of singing that strengthen empathy, mutuality, and hospitality within the body of Christ” (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship 2019, p. 6).

Overall, scholars have noticed an increase in scholarship and resources addressing multilingual worship. This increase reflects a deeper paradigm shift at the other side of translational power dynamics: that of liberation. Carvalhaes has identified the growing influence of liturgists from the Global South who contribute new ways of speaking about liturgy and worship, “radically changing a field that relied on European/US thinking” (Carvalhaes 2015, p. 7). From this perspective, translation can go both ways; while it has historically enabled colonial oversight, it can also be used to dismantle such structures. As Bermann and Porter describe, translation can facilitate imperialistic aspirations but also resistance to them (Bermann and Porter 2014, p. 9). Desblache provides the example of Martin Luther, who “transgressed the Catholic Church’s moral order and did so with the help of translation” by composing music, borrowing melodies, and adapting texts from non-liturgical sources (Desblache 2019, pp. 205–6). Thus, music translation, just like the translation of other texts, can protect the dominant discourse but can also serve as “a liberating instrument for the voices of peripheries” (Desblache 2018, p. 300).

It is in that spirit of liberation that my considerations about the translation of liturgical texts and congregational song lyrics are offered here. As mentioned before, in order to craft liturgies that are more than a mere spread of statistically equivalent liturgical components in more than one language, worship planners must work with multiple sources at a time and negotiate questions of sense, balance, simultaneity, sequentiality, and transitions between different languages. Even in cases where a selection of congregational songs does include multiple languages, questions remain about scriptural passages, prayers, other readings, the language of the sermon, and other aspects of the worship experience.

The bibliography I have engaged with here provides insights into the questions of translation, multilinguality, and coloniality that worship designers must engage with in their planning process. It provides a framework of sorts, providing some conceptual clarity and terminology for conversation, both scholarly and practical. With this literature in tow, we now shift from the abstract to the concrete. The COSS translations we will engage with here represent one effort in space and time to deal with such questions and complexities. With these challenges in mind, I offer here a set of possibilities for dealing with language and translation in worship planning that range on a spectrum between sequentiality and simultaneity. Throughout, I focus on multilingualism as the through-line, or central organizing principle, of liturgical planning in more than one language.

3. Patterns and Possibilities for Multilingual Worship at COSS

Perkins' COSS program is sponsored by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church ([Course of Study School n.d.](#)). Conducted in partnership with several theological schools, including Perkins, this five-year curriculum is required of all clergy not enrolled in a seminary degree program. According to Methodist historian Ted Campbell, for many years it was the main avenue of theological education for Methodist clergy (Campbell 2024).^{13,14} Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students travelled to the Perkins campus in Dallas, TX, for in-person classes and study. Between morning and afternoon sessions, students would gather for worship in Perkins Chapel. Since 2019, I have been planning and leading most of these services.

While there certainly is scholarly interest in issues of worship in relation to language, culture, and ethnoraciality ([Dougherty and Huyser 2008](#); [McCarron 2014](#); [Ramos et al. 2020](#)), COSS services present a unique opportunity for continued development. Multilingual or even bilingual services are frequently exceptions to the norm in the United States of America. At COSS, on the other hand, all services are at least bilingual, and sometimes involve more languages. Moreover, because I work with COSS faculty, staff and students toward several consecutive services, there is ample opportunity for formal feedback and informal interactions (including the level of participant engagement from day to day) that impact how these services are planned and led. Over the years, I have received feedback from readers, church musicians, theology professors, pastors, and lay leaders in Spanish and in English about what they thought worked well in these services and what, well... did not work at all. Therefore, over my five years of involvement with COSS, the services I planned and led in that context not only represent my own ideas and strategies for multilingual worship but also reflect the feedback of others involved in the worship life of COSS. This feedback, along with our trial-and-error lessons from planning and leading each year's sessions, have transformed how I approach design and execution for the next year's services and coalesced into the principles I will outline in this article.

I offer these considerations about multilingual worship on a spectrum. On one pole of the spectrum stand sequential possibilities: instances in which languages are negotiated sequentially during worship. The other pole of the spectrum is occupied by the simultaneous use of more than one language at a time in worship. Between those two, possibilities exist for weaving language together in many ways. I begin here with the sequential possibilities, and then move on to the ones that involve simultaneity.

I begin with the time-honored "word-for-word" arrangement that one may encounter, for instance, in sermon translation. The order of these language alternations, whether

following a prepared script or translated on the spot, follow a similar pattern: content is delivered in one language, followed by a rendition in another. In COSS liturgies, I tend to avoid this pattern, although it does surface in a few instances.¹⁵ An example is the greeting from the Feast of Beginnings, the first COSS service of every summer:

This is a day of new beginnings! ¡Nuevos comienzos trae este día!
 New friends, new classes, new challenges await us.
 Nuevos amigos, nuevas clases, nuevos retos nos esperan.
¡Nuevos comienzos trae este día! This is a day of new beginnings!
 Dios está con nosotros; damos un paso confiando en Dios.
God is with us; we step out in faith.
 This is a day of new beginnings! ¡Nuevos comienzos trae este día!
 Glory be to God on high! ¡Gloria a Dios en las alturas!^{16,17}

As in most cases in which this arrangement is applied, the content is conveyed in both languages in alternation. Nevertheless, the predictability of the translation pattern is broken halfway, between the second and third lines, with the preservation of Spanish. The use of the responsorial format, and the fact that both congregation and leaders are required to speak both languages, helps convey a horizontality in the reading. In other words, one language is not necessarily subservient to the other.

Using the antiphonal format for sequential translation in liturgy offers other possibilities. One strategy that has been particularly well-received in COSS services is to use responsorial language-shifting to highlight the multilingual nature of the liturgy, thereby dismantling an implicit expectation of sequential, word-for-word translation: that any content will be systematically delivered in all languages. But while the implicit understanding of word-for-word sequential translation is that it can, somehow, convey the same content in all the languages involved, both translation studies and multilingual studies have demonstrated that such a promise is impossible to fulfill, as I state earlier in this article. One way to highlight the impossibility of word-for-word translation in the antiphonal format is to set it up as a conversation between languages instead of an attempt to translate content. One example employed in several COSS liturgies uses a prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer* (The Episcopal Church 2007, p. 57), altered to reflect both English and Spanish:

O heavenly God, in whom we live and move and have our being:
Te suplicamos humildemente que nos guíes y gobiernes con tu Santo Espíritu,
para que en todos los afanes y quehaceres de nuestra vida no te olvidemos,
sino que recordemos que siempre caminamos en tu presencia;
 por Jesucristo nuestro Señor. **Amén.**¹⁸

The rhythm of the language shifting is slightly different in this second prayer than in the previous example. In performance, this type of configuration offers an opportunity for the multilingual aspect of the liturgy to be highlighted. By providing the congregation with a more extended clause in Spanish, it emphasizes the multilingual dynamic as an added layer that contributes to the texture of the service. Another example of the same technique illustrates a slightly different rhythm of translation but operates according to the same basic principle. The following is a dismissal prayer used in COSS liturgies:

Santo Dios, envíanos el Espíritu del Cristo resucitado.
So that we may see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and love with our lives.
Enséñanos a orar hasta que Cristo venga otra vez. En su nombre lo pedimos.
 Hasta entonces la jornada continúa. Until then, we walk, we pitch our tent, we walk again.
 And may God guide us on our way. Y que Dios dirija nuestro caminar.
Amén.¹⁹

In this instance, content is distributed in English and Spanish for both leader and congregation, but cross-references are built into both languages. “Until then, we walk”, for instance, is complemented by “que Dios dirija nuestro caminar” in the following line. As a

whole, the parts of the petition reinforce and enrich each other, even as they afford a notion of what is being asked for in both languages.

It is also possible to couple this multilingual responsorial format with a refrain, especially in contexts where language shifting is an unfamiliar practice to the congregation, or in which most participants are not at least partially bilingual or multilingual. The following congregational response, from the *Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (Anglican Church of Canada 1985, pp. 118–19), was modified to provide the congregation with a Spanish-language litany in response to the intercessory prayers:

Keep us, O Lord, as the apple of your eye.

Guárdanos bajo la sombra de tus alas.

For the peace of the whole world, we pray to you, Lord.

Dios, ten piedad.

For those who are weary, sleepless, and depressed, we pray to you, Lord,

Dios, ten piedad.

For those who are hungry, sick, and frightened, we pray to you, Lord.

Dios, ten piedad.

For rest and refreshment, we pray to you, Lord.

Dios, ten piedad.

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping, that awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.

Amen.²⁰

In this prayer, participants who struggle with the opening phrase in Spanish have several opportunities to rehearse the Spanish response each time and become more comfortable with it between leader petitions, which in turn offers them a chance to take a mental breath and prepare for the next repetition.

Another possibility that highlights language shifts in congregational singing leverages sequential shifts between verse and chorus or refrain, or by singing different hymn stanzas in different languages. This strategy is particularly helpful in bilingual contexts, such as multigenerational Latine churches in the United States, where first- and second-generation immigrants may be more familiar with the Spanish version of a song, while younger participants (who may or may not be exposed to Spanish at home and have adopted English as their native language) relate more readily to the English lyrics. By alternating between languages, multiple immigrant experiences are contemplated and participants are invited to connect through singing. I have used this strategy for contemporary worship songs on some occasions, but it has worked particularly well with established hymns that are known across geographical and language boundaries precisely due to the colonial enforcements that have upheld them outside of their Euro–North American birthplace. In these cases, singing in both languages appears to create space for cross-language relationship building, therefore providing a hymn with the potential to shift from an alienating sign of colonization to a hospitable opportunity for multilingual engagement: an example of how translation—even translation meant to enforce a particular theological perspective in another language—might be turned upon its head, subverting the power configurations of the colonialist history of much worship repertoire.

These types of responsorial formats, or alternation between song sections, have one thing in common: they presume structural space between language shifts. In other words, participants can expect a language shift at specific inflection points in the structure of the reading or song: a change between verse and stanza, a verse of poetry, or another sectional subdivision. But what happens when these shifts are played with, compressed, made mid-sentence or mid-melodic line? This question opens a second sequential opportunity for multilingual engagement: weaving languages together not only between choruses and refrains but at any point within a reading, prayer, or song section.

When sequential language shifts are thus compressed together or set at unequal and/or unpredictable points in the liturgical element, they become a kind of multilingual “weaving together” that produces an altogether different result. An example from COSS arises from a mashup between versions of a prayer of confession and proclamation of grace sourced from the *United Methodist Hymnal* and from *Mil Voces Para Celebrar*, the English- and Spanish-language UMC hymnals:

Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart y con frecuencia no hemos sido una iglesia fiel. No hemos cumplido con tu voluntad, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, no hemos amado a nuestro prójimo y no hemos escuchado la voz del necesitado. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, mediante Jesucristo nuestro Señor. Amen.

Escuchen las buenas nuevas: “Dios muestra su amor para con nosotros, en que siendo aun pecadores, Cristo murió por nosotros” ¡En el nombre de Jesucristo ustedes son perdonados! Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God’s love toward us.

¡En el nombre de Jesucristo eres perdonado(a)! In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!²¹

Theoretically, this technique is straightforward: to simply weave together English and Spanish portions of a liturgical component, be it a congregational song, a reading, or a portion of scripture. In practice, participants are required to redouble their attention to their reading in preparation for the language shifts. Because of that renewed attention, this weaving technique provides a new texture, a new flavor, even to well-known liturgical texts. This flavor arises precisely from the fact that language shifts are not smooth or imperceptible; they call attention to themselves because of the shift itself and because content “tastes” different in different languages. To recite “No hemos cumplido tu voluntad, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, no hemos amado a nuestro prójimo y no hemos escuchado a la voz del necesitado” is different from engaging with the same words in only one language. The recitation “tastes” different on the tongue.

The same technique can be employed in musical compositions as well as readings and prayers. I composed a piece for COSS services that offers a modified version of the priestly blessing from Numbers 6: 23–27 in English and Spanish, shifting between languages with each clause (Figure 1):

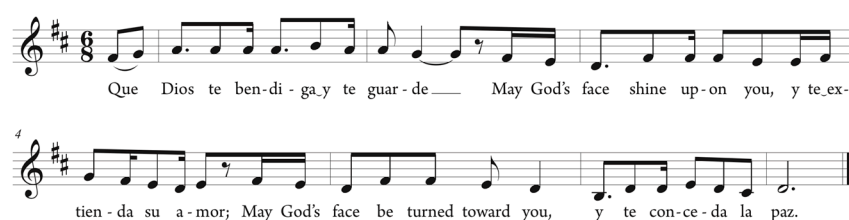


Figure 1. Score of “Bendición/Blessing” by Silva Steuernagel (2020a).

As with alternating verses in hymns or sections of congregational songs, this composition illustrates the compression of idioms into a new, interwoven artefact that leverages the shift between languages to draw in both English and Spanish speakers. Granted, the learning curve for songs like this is steeper than if they were monolingual, but that is precisely the highlight: multilingualism as a characteristic, not as a flaw or hurdle to be erased. Since 2020, when this song was composed, participants have learned to enjoy its unique flavor as a summary of COSS worship experience.

So far, we have moved from amply spaced, word-for-word sequential translation modes into various patterns that highlight the richness of language in multilingual worship in different ways. The notion of compression moved us away from the sequential pole of the multilingual spectrum, ever closer to the second large cluster of possibilities on that spectrum: that of simultaneity.

The boundary between compressed language shifts and the actual overlapping of languages in liturgy is a fuzzy one, made even fuzzier due to the dithering and participatory discrepancies that characterize corporate worship broadly speaking. Elsewhere, I have used Thomas Turino's repurposing of Charles Keil's notion of participatory discrepancies to describe the unique texture of congregational singing, characterized as it is by "simultaneous variables in singing and other forms of participation" (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 92). In multilingual congregational singing or recitation, these discrepancies, which I describe as "a sonic marker, a textural sign of participation" (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 93), are amplified by the overlapping of two or more languages spoken simultaneously. Once again, the mark of engagement in multilingual worship is not uniformity but diversity.

As I mentioned earlier in this article, worship at COSS has followed a directive on the multiplicity of language that resists colonial aspirations of linguistic control and oversight, not only in relation to music but other parts of liturgy as well. This pedagogy seeks to reinterpret misguided paradigms of corporate Christian worship. The portraits of adoration in the book of Revelation provide an appropriate example. In the seventh chapter of Revelation, John describes "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" who cried out in a loud voice (Revelation 7: 9b–10a, New Revised Standard Version). The colonial proclivity for oversight and control requires that in this scene, every person in the multitude—especially the majority whose native language falls outside the normative linguistic boundaries of empire—cry out together in one tongue, one language. In the case of Western Christianity, this normativity has tended toward the English language (and preferably in Western hymnic form, singing in four-part harmony, and accompanied by a pipe organ).²² In this skewed interpretation, all have been absorbed into the culture of the empire. Language variety has disappeared, and multilingual worship is erased in a process not unlike the consolidation of the various liturgies of medieval Europe into the unified matrix of the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne.²³

The language reality of COSS requires that its worship life reflect a different paradigm, which recognizes that the sound of the worshipers in Revelation is not the sound of consolidated empire. Instead, it is the sound of many languages and accents, the sound of variation, that characterizes the collective cry of God's people. According to this directive, the doxological impetus behind the acclamation of the gathered people in Revelation is a phonetic and linguistic tapestry that highlights, celebrates, and mirrors God's multi-faceted creation through the texture of multilingual worship. In that sense, COSS worship has worked to create room for multilingual recitation, prayer, and singing.

This posture requires pushing past even the scripted weaving together of languages reflected in "Bendición/Blessing" and toward an invitation for participants to speak and sing in the language they are comfortable with, without feeling that they are deviating from a linguistic norm. While it remains true that even word-for-word sequential translations generate rich theological resonances that are distinct from monolingual worship, planning for simultaneous languages creates linguistic hospitality and nurtures a liturgical environment that celebrates a unique multilingual tapestry: a sonic trademark of the awkward dance of multilingual worship.

This posture requires specific preparation: sourcing materials in all languages to be included; translating and adapting wherever necessary; engraving scores or providing hymnals that include originals and translations; and providing instructions, written or verbal, that help usher participants into liturgical performance. These instructions may be invitations for people to step out of their comfort zone and experience a language they are not comfortable with; or they may invite participants to worship in their preferred language without having to worry that their participation will be negatively received by others. In both cases, the result is a texture of linguistic simultaneities.

Furthermore, leaders must model multilingual aspirations during the service and potentially rehearse multilingual speaking and singing in order to provide an example for participants to follow. At COSS, we regularly invite participants to sing in two or more languages at the same time. We have used, for instance, "Te invitamos, oh Cristo/Come,

Be Among Us, O Jesus” (Anonymous 2019)—an anonymous Latin American composition rendered in English by Greg Scheer—on multiple occasions. Our experience at COSS is that initially, participants tend to self-organize, collectively gravitating to English or Spanish according to the loudest voice in the room.²⁴ But over the years, they have come to relish the multilingual texture generated by overlapping two or more languages: a multilingual paradigm shift.

In some cases, we have experimented with bilingual textures, such as English and Spanish, and with trilingual textures. At COSS, this has meant including, for instance, songs with Portuguese as another Latin American language. One example is “En tu misericordia danos paz/Em tua misericordia dá-nos paz/Lord, in Your Mercy Give Us Peace”, a song composed by Argentineans Gerardo Oberman and Horacio Vivares (Oberman and Vivares 2019) and translated into Portuguese by Simei Monteiro and into English by Kathryn Ray.²⁵ Another is “Pelas dores deste mundo/Imploramos tu Piedad/For the Troubles” (Gaede Neto 2019). Originally written in Portuguese, it features Spanish and English versions by Simei Monteiro, Jorge Lockward and Juan Gattinoni. This practice could certainly be extrapolated to include as many languages as are appropriate to the worshiping congregation. The more languages are overlapped, the more complex the resulting multilingual tapestry. In all cases, this invitation moves the gathered congregation away from aspirations of homogeneity and into worship spaces that highlight and celebrate the multilingual nature of Christian worship.

4. Multilingual Flow: Considerations and Conclusions

A key question that surfaces from the examination of these liturgies is: what have we learned about worship design, leadership, and congregational participation in relation to multilingual engagement? In the context of this special edition of *Religions*, I offer three considerations on planning and leading these services that may shed light upon “the motivations for and approaches to multilingualism” in worship (Perigo and MacInnis 2024).

My first consideration is that thematic cohesiveness is crucial to the effectiveness of these services. Concerns over multilingualism create their own center of gravity and can deeply alter the design and leadership of worship. While it may be possible to theologically justify engagement with worship for the sake of multilingualism alone, the pastoral goals of communal worship life at COSS include other aspects beyond language. Thankfully, our experience is that worship can certainly be experimental and a rehearsal of many things, and having a sturdy thematic through-line that participants can connect with adds both purpose and direction to the experience.²⁶

Every year, in preparation for COSS, the program leadership discusses an overarching theme for all the services within that cycle. In 2019, services during the first week focused on questions of belonging and marginalization in relation to God’s kingdom. Throughout that week, each service focused on marginalized archetypes of biblical society—the orphan, the widow, the stranger—and arrived at a broad understanding of the people of God. In 2020, COSS leadership decided to focus on consolation and reassurance as central liturgical themes amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting theme was “Liturgies of Peace and Strength for a Time of Crisis”. Throughout the two weeks of worship, services gravitated around themes such as “God’s Grace in an Unforgiving World”, “Hope for the Hopeless”, and other similar engagements with God’s presence during a time of heightened anxiety and loss. Consequently, in 2021, under the title “Liturgies of Hope for a New Today”, COSS liturgies invited participants to contemplate God’s renewal in a world attempting to discern what life might look like after the peak of the pandemic. These liturgies began with lament for those lost to COVID-19 and coaxed worshipers into memories of Jesus’s touch, God’s voice, and the Spirit’s whisper. Much as multilingual engagement adds nuances to well-known congregational songs and biblical passages, in each of these cases, the multilingual nature of the worship services added new dimensions to the themes and benefited from the clear thematic structure of these governing narratives.

Within these larger thematic arches and in each liturgy, a second consideration refers to flow. Clergy, liturgists and worship leaders frequently speak of the awkward pauses that characterize gaps between liturgical moments, failed and badly rehearsed transitions between songs, and other infelicities of flow during worship. Scholars of music (Turino 2008, pp. 30–31) and music cognition (Margulis 2013, p. 25) have adopted Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, a state in which one is completely immersed in something (Csikszentmihalyi 2014, p. 230). My own ethnographic work in Christian worship has shown how participants fall into and out of flow during the course of a liturgy, hovering “at the fringes, negotiating their participation as the ritual activity unfolds” (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 91). In the context of multilingual worship, given the added cognitive load of switching between languages and the self-consciousness that comes along with an invitation to worship in a language that is not one's own, flow becomes even more important.

If the threat of “falling out of flow” already looms large over liturgy broadly speaking, worshipping in more than one language generates further rough edges, new snags, for participants' attention to hook onto and away from immersion in the experience. The temptation for languages and shifts between them to be construed as “distractions” is significant. In order to reduce anxieties around this issue, it is crucial for liturgical leaders to rehearse transitions and coach all who are participating in the liturgy about what will take place. How are participants being instructed to participate? Have leaders rehearsed their own transitions to model the engagement that worshipers are being invited to emulate? Nevertheless, I argue that the goal of preparation is not to erase language shifts or simultaneities because they might offer the potential for distraction; instead, the goal is to rehearse with a mind to embody the multilingual nature of the experience. In summary, all that can be done to preserve flow should be considered with extra care in order to counter-balance the fragility of multilingual worship, in which negotiations of language occupy so much of participants' bandwidth as they attempt to engage with unfamiliar sounds in their mouths and hard-to-read words on the page.

In certain cases, preserving flow might mean building in teaching moments during the liturgy, or time for rehearsal before the service. When leading COSS liturgies, I frequently factor in time to teach a new chorus in all included languages before inviting participants to sing along, and I program enough repetitions to allow them time to familiarize themselves with it. Having said that, to the greatest extent possible, I strive to not present myself as an expert in any and all languages that may be involved in the service. Instead, I try to rely on native speakers of any languages included to provide authoritative models that can honor participants' attempts to speak or sing in a new language. Of course, in contexts like COSS, in which many participants are already at least partially bilingual, negotiating language shifts becomes easier. Similarly, congregations who have had time to rehearse language shifts (either in the context of worship or elsewhere) will move beyond self-conscious liturgical awkwardness to a more confident engagement with these spoken and sung repertoires. In Texas, it is common for multilingual speakers to shift between and mix languages throughout the day. Having rehearsed the practice in their daily lives, they are less ruffled by these dynamics in worship.

A final comment about flow refers to what I dub the “direction of language” in multilingual worship. It is particularly important that worship designers and liturgists account not only for language distribution—how much of each language is being contemplated in the liturgy—but also for order. If, for instance, every element of the liturgy appears in English before any other language, it quickly becomes apparent to the congregation what the normative, “native liturgical language” of the experience is expected to be. I am not suggesting here that a quantitative balance between languages needs to be preserved at all times; in fact, in certain situations, repeating one element may be as effective as introducing many new ones. Consider the example of “Dios, ten Piedad” given earlier in this article, which uses repetition as rehearsal with the intention of helping non-native Spanish speakers become comfortable with one clause. In our experience, each repetition of

the litany in Spanish accrues further gravitas in response to the English-language petitions. This directionality of language constitutes an important aspect of multilingual flow, and attention to this aspect will facilitate participation, especially because “non-Western ideas and practices should not and do not require validation by the West” (Wakabayashi and Kothari 2009, p. 6). Attention to flow can help prevent any implied suggestion that English is the “actual” language of Christian worship, while any translation of that English is simply a conveyance of the *sacra lingua franca* in another. Such is not the case.

Overall, multilingual worship provides an opportunity for participants to step into the language-scapes of others and create environments in which the awkward liturgical dance of negotiating unfamiliar languages unites worshipers instead of driving them apart through implied or explicit enforced normativities. The multilingual nature of these spaces generates further topics for researchers interested in such matters. Questions around digital mediation and multilingualism quickly surfaced for COSS in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and have not receded. Instead, digital mediation has become an increasingly crucial consideration in multilingual worship, including the role of artificial intelligence in facilitating multilingual participation with resources such as automatic captioning and others.

Another important dimension of multilingual worship, connected as it is to questions of mediation and virtuality, refers to the translation of worship songs marketed across the globe by transnational worship agents like Hillsong, Bethel, and Elevation Worship, to name but a few. How have perceptions of translation changed as worshipers have gained increased access not only to a song’s translation in their native language but also to songs’ original English versions as well? What does normativity mean in these configurations from the perspective of language, and how do worshipers negotiate such configurations in the construction of their own piety and religious identity?

Amid questions like these, scholarly investigations of multilingual phenomena in Christianity are essential to increase comprehension of how Christian worship continues to unfold into current realities of an interconnected world. Perhaps one way to further such investigations is to embrace what Kohl and Ouyang have dubbed “creative multilingualism”. They propose the term as a provocation “to think of language not as typically homogeneous, monolithic and unified, but as intrinsically diverse-languages” (Kohl et al. 2020, p. 6). Theirs is an invitation to move from thinking about languages as ossified artefacts to thinking about language with a fluid organicity that reflects the myriad ways that people negotiate sense and community in human experience. For Kohl, creative multilingualism reflects that reality because it makes explicit “the creative processes that are at work in our use of languages, in the many ways in which languages connect, meld and bring forth new varieties, and in the living interaction between languages” (Kohl 2020, p. 223).

I would suggest that worship planning is also a process whereby new liturgical fusions and flavors are created as people interact with each other and the world around them. COSS liturgies are certainly a result of the process of exploring the awkward interstices between languages and expectations about what Christian worship should or should not sound like. While this article focuses on one particular set of multilingual liturgies in a particular context, I offer these considerations in the hope that they will help scholars and practitioners shed further light on the varied expressions of Christian worship that unfold in and between different languages.

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Notes

¹ While COSS has recently moved fully online, it still includes daily chapel services.

² Throughout this article, I employ “worship” and “liturgy” somewhat interchangeably, although I do tend to favor “worship” when speaking of the experience as a whole, and “liturgy” when referring to discrete portions of the worship order or its unfolding in time.

- COSS liturgies draw from a wide variety of sources, with due permissions and attributions indicated throughout and covered by Perkins' copyright licenses and use permissions of various kinds. In this article, I attribute authorship and copyright of prayers, readings and songs under the same expectations of fair use that govern other literature engaged with in the context of research and academic writing.
- I must note that my involvement with COSS predates my engagement with much of the literature presented in this article. In this sense, the article does not seek to demonstrate how the literature may have shaped worship planning. Instead, I seem to examine COSS liturgical experience through the lens of the literature, thereby providing a systematized framework for others attempting to develop similar projects.
- Other stakeholders of multilingual worship development in North America take a similar approach. As an example, see (Huyser-Honig 2011).
- Unless otherwise noted, all translations from non-English language sources are my own.
- Aronin and Singleton provide a helpful overview of the history and wide-varying definitions of multilingualism (Aronin and Singleton 2012, pp. 1–9). Overall, in this article, I distinguish “multilingualism” and “multilinguality”. I take “multilinguality” to refer to the quality of multilingual worship in which more than one language is being used. “Multilingualism” is distinguished from “multilinguality” by referring to an intention to practice, plan for, or study the multilinguality of such experiences.
- Other scholars primarily focus on the text as the locus of song translation (Hui-tung 2018, p. 351).
- For information about the history of Church Slavonic, its religious uses and its revival in post-Soviet Russia, see Bennett (2011).
- Very little is available in English about Sutton's life and legacy. Most biographical information is in Portuguese (Mulholland et al. 2001). Sutton's papers are available as part of Baylor University's Brazilian Baptist Music Missions Collection: <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartextcollections.com/arts-collections/joan-sutton-brazilian-baptist-music-missions-collection> (accessed on 15 January 2024). (Joan Sutton Brazilian Baptist Music Missions Collection n.d.).
- For a discussion of the distinction between “religious text” and “sacred/holy text”, see Hassen and Şerban (2018, p. 327). Here, I use “religious”, “sacred” and “liturgical” texts in a broad way, including the language of prayers, readings from translated Scripture, and lyrics of congregational songs.
- Such as Concordia Publishing House's *¡Cantad al Señor!* (Hintze and Puig 1991).
- E-mail communication with the author, 23 February 2024. Campbell is the Albert C. Outler Professor of Wesley Studies and Church History at Perkins, and an authority on the history of North American Methodism. For more information about the history of Methodist theological education, see (McCulloh 1980).
- For a history of Perkins School of Theology, see Allen (2011).
- Preaching is an exception. I encourage COSS preachers to engage creatively with language. While some do flow between English and Spanish seamlessly, others stick to alternated expositions in two languages.
- This invocation, used at the opening of the Feast of Beginnings, was written by COSS liturgy team before my time. It first appeared in the 2007 worship guide, and is used here by the permission of Dr. Roberto Escamilla, who served as the Worship Coordinator for COSS that year.
- Throughout this article, where bold is used in the context of liturgical readings and responses, it serves as a cue for the congregation to join.
- Wednesday, 20 July 2022.
- Monday, 8 July 2019.
- Tuesday, 27 June 2023.
- From the Communion liturgy, *UMH*, (1989, 12)/MVPC (1996, 10).
- For more on decolonizing Western notions of congregational singing, see (Silva Steuernagel 2020b).
- For a detailed account of the history leading up to the ecclesiastical and liturgical reforms enacted under Frankish rule, see Herrin (2021). Although her book is not focused on liturgical history, it provides a well-researched account of the events and shifting politics connected to the development of the Roman rite and its enforcement over and against other rites practiced throughout the Christian West, or what she describes as “liturgical uniformity within the Frankish territories” (Herrin 2021, p. 432).
- Wednesday, 30 June 2021.
- Tuesday, 29 June 2021
- “Repetition opens up the possibility of looking at the performance of church music as a rehearsal of piety that occurs in revolving micro- and macro-cycles: the weekly liturgy and the church calendar” (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 187).

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