



DISCOURSE STRATEGIES AND THEIR LINGUISTIC REALISATION IN JAMES BLACK'S "WHEN THE ROLL IS CALLED UP YONDER" AND ROBERT LOWRY'S "SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER"

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Abstract

Hymns have long served as a medium for expressing eschatological beliefs, shaping both communal worship and personal spiritual experience. Despite their prominence, few studies have examined how resurrection hymns employ discourse strategies to create mental imagery and personal engagement. This study addresses that gap by investigating James Black's "When the Roll is Called up yonder" and Robert Lowry's "Shall we Gather at the River," focusing on how discourse strategies are used to visualise heaven and personalise the believer's experience. The research aims to identify the linguistic devices that realise these strategies and to explore how they construct theological meaning and participant positioning. Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the primary theoretical framework, enabling analysis of the social-cognitive and ideological functions of hymn texts. Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is used complementarily to examine the linguistic devices, which bring these strategies to life. A qualitative textual analysis is employed to integrate both approaches. Findings reveal discourse strategies such as visualisation, personalisation, structural inversion, modality and lexical authority, and repetition, and their linguistic realisation. The study concludes that discourse strategies, realised through linguistic devices, are central to the hymns' communicative and theological power. It is recommended that future research extend to a broader corpus to explore how language constructs religious experience across diverse hymn traditions.

Keywords: Discourse strategies, Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic devices, Visualisation, Personalisation

Introduction

Religious hymns constitute a distinctive form of discourse through which theological meanings, collective identities, and eschatological expectations are articulated and sustained. Although frequently approached as poetic or devotional compositions, hymns may also be examined as socially situated texts that participate in the construction and circulation of belief systems. Within discourse studies, language is understood not merely as a vehicle for expression but as a form of social practice that shapes cognition and reproduces ideological structures (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). From this perspective, hymnody offers a potentially productive site for investigating how linguistic choices contribute to the naturalisation of religious worldviews.

Nineteenth-century evangelical hymns, in particular, continue to occupy a prominent place in Christian worship traditions. Two enduring examples are “When the Roll is Called up yonder” (1893) by James Black and “Shall we Gather at the River?” (1864) by Robert Lowry. Both texts centre on themes of divine judgment, heavenly reunion, accountability, and communal redemption. Their continued circulation across denominational contexts suggests that their appeal extends beyond musical composition to the organisation of meaning within their lyrical structure. However, while theological and historical discussions of such hymns are relatively common, systematic discourse-oriented investigations of their linguistic construction remain comparatively limited.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly the socio-cognitive approach associated with Teun A. van Dijk (1998, 2008), provides a useful framework for exploring how discourse may contribute to the reproduction of shared beliefs and group identities. Van Dijk (2008) argues that discourse mediates between social structures and mental representations, thereby influencing collective understanding. When applied to religious texts, this perspective enables an examination of how recurring linguistic patterns might participate in reinforcing doctrinal assumptions and communal alignment.

To complement this orientation, the study also draws on insights from M. A. K. Halliday’s functional model of language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), which conceptualises grammar as a resource for meaning-making shaped by context and communicative purpose. Within this framework, linguistic features such as pronoun usage, modality, thematic arrangement, and syntactic configuration may be examined as motivated selections rather than purely stylistic

choices. Such features can potentially illuminate how interpersonal positioning, experiential representation, and textual organisation operate within hymn discourse.

Against this background, the present study investigates the discourse strategies that may be operative in “When the Roll is called up yonder” and “Shall we gather at the River?” and explores how such strategies are linguistically realised. Rather than presupposing specific outcomes, the study approaches the hymns as texts whose grammatical and lexical patterning can be systematically analysed to determine how meaning, identity, and theological orientation are constructed. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with functional linguistic description, the research seeks to contribute to broader discussions on religious discourse and the role of language in sustaining systems of belief.

Religious Discourse and Its Relevance to Hymnody

Religious discourse refers to the use of language in ways that construct, express, and reinforce religious beliefs, values, and practices within specific communities (Barker, 2018). It encompasses both the structural features of language, such as metaphors, narratives, and rhetorical devices—and the social functions that language serves in religious contexts (Koteyko & Hunt, 2020). In the context of Christian hymnody, religious discourse functions not only to communicate theological truths but also to shape the spiritual experience of believers. Hymns, as a form of religious text, are rich sites for examining how linguistic choices both reflect and produce religious meaning (Meyer & Lundby, 2019).

The linguistic features of religious discourse often include collective pronouns, metaphorical language, and future-oriented expressions which together create a sense of shared identity and eschatological hope (Vine, 2021). For instance, in hymns like “When the Roll is Called up yonder” and “Shall we Gather at the River,” the recurring use of inclusive plurals (e.g., “we,” “us”) and metaphors of gathering and eternal life function to invoke a collective future-oriented spirituality. This aligns with broader patterns in Christian discourse that emphasise community, salvation, and ultimate reunion with the divine (Cameron, 2020).

Religious discourse also relies on intertextuality the way in which texts reference, echo, and build upon earlier texts and traditions. Christian hymns often draw on biblical metaphors of judgment, resurrection, and paradise (Miller, 2022). For example, the metaphor of a “roll” being called in “When the Roll is called up yonder” resonates with imagery found in Revelation concerning the

Book of Life, a motif familiar to congregants (Freeman, 2023). Similarly, the river motif in “Shall Gather at the River” evokes biblical symbolism of life-giving water, which functions rhetorically to reinforce communal expectations of restoration and eternal fellowship (Adeyemi & Olupona, 2024).

In terms of linguistic realisation, religious discourse in hymns exhibits formulaic and repetitive structures that facilitate memorability and communal participation. Repetition and parallelism, as found in both hymns, serve not only aesthetic purposes but also discursive ones, reinforcing core theological themes of hope and unity (Schmidt & Johnson, 2019). Furthermore, the declarative mood prevalent in such hymns asserts certainty and affirmation, characteristics that distinguish religious language from other discourse types (Myers, 2021).

Therefore, religious discourse provides a valuable framework for analysing the linguistic and discourse strategies found in Christian hymns. By understanding how language constructs shared beliefs and emotional resonance, scholars can better appreciate the role of hymns such as James Black’s “When the Roll is Called up yonder” and Robbert Lowery’s “Shall we Gather at the River” in both communal worship and theological expression.

Statement of the Research Problem

Religious discourse has long attracted scholarly attention within linguistics, sociology, and discourse studies due to its central role in shaping belief systems and communal identities. Within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), religion has been examined as a domain in which language participates in the reproduction of ideology and authority structures. Fairclough (1995, 2003) conceptualises discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and constructs social realities, demonstrating how institutional texts naturalise particular worldviews. Similarly, van Dijk (1998, 2008) emphasises the socio-cognitive dimension of discourse, arguing that repeated linguistic patterns contribute to the formation of shared mental models and ideological alignment. These contributions provide powerful theoretical foundations for analysing religious language as a site of ideological construction.

In parallel, scholarship informed by M. A. K. Halliday’s functional theory of language has shown how grammatical structures encode social meanings. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) demonstrate that linguistic choices are systematically related to context and communicative purpose. Applications of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFG) to religious texts particularly

sermons and biblical narratives have revealed how transitivity patterns, modality, and clause structure function to construct authority, obligation, and communal positioning. Such studies represent a significant strength in demonstrating the explanatory power of grammar in uncovering ideological meaning.

Beyond CDA and SFG, research in religious discourse has also drawn on rhetorical and pragmatic approaches. Crystal and Davy (1969), in their early stylistic exploration of English varieties, identified religious language as a distinctive register characterised by formulaicity and ritual repetition. More recently, Wodak and Meyer (2016) have underscored the importance of analysing discourse within its socio-historical context, a principle particularly relevant to nineteenth-century evangelical hymnody. These approaches enrich understanding of religious language by situating it within broader communicative traditions and institutional frameworks.

Despite these substantial contributions, hymn discourse remains comparatively underexamined within mainstream discourse-analytic scholarship. Much of the existing research on hymns has been conducted within musicology and theology, where attention is often directed toward doctrinal themes, biographical background, or liturgical development rather than detailed linguistic analysis. While such studies provide valuable historical and theological insight, they tend to treat hymn texts as repositories of belief rather than as structured discursive practices shaped by strategic linguistic selection.

Furthermore, within discourse studies, research has predominantly focused on sermons, political-religious speeches, and media representations of religion (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). These genres are overtly argumentative and institutionally regulated, making them visible sites of ideological negotiation. Hymns, however, differ in important respects. They are poetic, repetitive, and collectively performed across generations. Their memorability and ritual repetition may enhance their capacity to internalise doctrinal assumptions within communal consciousness. Yet the specific discourse strategies through which hymns achieve this effect have not been systematically examined using an integrated CDA–SFG framework.

Another limitation in prior scholarship concerns methodological separation. CDA offers robust tools for interrogating ideology and power relations (van Dijk, 2008), but it has occasionally been critiqued for insufficiently detailed grammatical analysis. Conversely, SFG provides a comprehensive linguistic model but does not inherently foreground ideological critique. Few

studies have brought these approaches into sustained dialogue when examining hymn texts. This methodological gap limits a full understanding of how macro-level ideological strategies are realised through micro-level linguistic structures.

Within this scholarly landscape, nineteenth-century evangelical hymns such as “When the Roll Is Called up Yonder” and “Shall We Gather at the River?” present a compelling case for further investigation. Although these hymns have been widely circulated and continue to shape devotional practice, their discourse strategies and linguistic realisations have not been comprehensively analysed from a critical-functional perspective. The absence of such analysis leaves unresolved questions concerning how personalisation, collectivisation, visualisation, futurity, and authority may be linguistically constructed and how these constructions potentially contribute to ideological consolidation within worship communities.

The research problem addressed in this study, therefore, lies in the insufficient exploration of hymnody as a site of strategic discourse construction and linguistic realisation. There remains a need for a systematic analysis that integrates Critical Discourse Analysis and functional linguistic description in order to illuminate how theological meaning and communal identity are discursively produced in hymn texts. By examining the selected hymns through this combined framework, the study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of religious discourse and to address the identified gap in hymn-oriented discourse scholarship.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate discourse strategies and their linguistic realisation in James Black’s “When the Roll is Called up yonder” and Robert Lowry’s “Shall we Gather at the River?” within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework complemented by Systemic Functional Linguistics. In pursuit of this aim, the study seeks to:

1. identify and analyse the discourse strategies employed in the selected hymns.
2. examine the linguistic devices through which these strategies are realised, with particular attention to grammatical and lexical patterning.
3. interpret how the identified discourse strategies contribute to the construction of theological meaning and communal identity within the hymns.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (van Dijk, 1998, 2008), which views discourse as a socially situated practice that shapes ideology and collective beliefs. It is complemented by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFG) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), which examines how grammatical and lexical choices realise meaning in context. Together, CDA and SFG provide an integrated approach to analyse how discourse strategies in the hymns construct theological meaning and communal identity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, analysing two nineteenth-century evangelical hymns: “When the Roll is called up yonder” (James Black, 1893) and “Shall we gather at the River” (Robert Lowry, 1864) (Hymnary.org). The hymns were selected purposively for their enduring popularity and thematic focus on salvation and communal devotion. An integrated Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFG) framework guided the study, enabling identification of discourse strategies and examination of the grammatical and lexical devices through which they are realised (van Dijk, 1998, 2008; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Data analysis involved careful reading of the texts, extraction of relevant excerpts, and interpretation of how linguistic patterns contribute to theological meaning and communal identity.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the selected hymns was guided by the study’s objectives: identifying discourse strategies, examining their linguistic realisation, and interpreting their contribution to theological meaning and communal identity. The integration of CDA and SFG allowed the examination of both macro-level ideological patterns and micro-level linguistic features.

“When the Roll is Called up yonder” (James Black, 1893)

Visualisation Strategy

Visualisation Strategy is used to visualise, project, and create a mental picture of what will happen after death (the roll being called and gathering of the river). A dominant strategy in this hymn is visualisation which evokes a vivid image of heaven and reunion. For example:

When the roll is called up yonder,
I’ll be there

The locative phrase “up yonder” and the future tense modal verb “will” create a sense of spatial and temporal concreteness. The structural inversion, with the dependent clause preceding the main clause, emphasises the condition (“When the roll is called up yonder”) before asserting personal certainty (“I’ll be there”), highlighting the inevitability of divine judgement and reunion. Another example reinforces heavenly imagery:

On that bright and cloudless morning,
When the dead in Christ shall rise

The adjectives “bright” and “cloudless” create a sensory visualisation, while the temporal subordinate clause placed before the main clause establishes anticipation and dramatic emphasis.

Personalisation Strategy

The hymn frequently employs personalisation, realised through the first-person singular pronoun “I,” which foregrounds the individual believer’s perspective:

And when my name is found there,
I’ll be there

This pronoun situates the reader/listener as an active participant in the anticipated heavenly event, creating an interpersonal connection between text and believer.

Collectivisation Strategy

Although centred on the individual, the hymn also evokes collectivisation through implied communal participation. Repeated choruses suggest an inclusive “we” that shares the expectation of salvation. For instance:

We will meet our loved ones yonder,
In that home of joy and peace

The pronoun “we” and the collective context reinforce group identity, balancing personal anticipation with communal devotion.

Structural Inversion

Structural inversion is a notable device. By placing the dependent clause first, e.g.:

When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound,
I will awake to meet my King.

The hymn foregrounds the temporal or conditional context before the main assertion. This emphasises certainty and theological significance, while enhancing rhythmic and mnemonic qualities.

“Shall We Gather at the River?” (Robert Lowry, 1864)

Visualisation Strategy

Lowry’s hymn employs visualisation strategy to create vivid spiritual imagery:

Shall we gather at the river?

Where bright angel feet have trod?

The adjectives “bright” and “angel” provide sensory cues, while the locative phrase situates the believer in a tangible heavenly landscape. Another example:

On the margin of the river,

Washing up its silver spray

The imagery of flowing water enhances the physical and symbolic representation of salvation, engaging both imagination and emotion.

Personalisation and Collectivisation Strategies

The first-person plural pronoun “we” appears repeatedly, e.g.:

Shall we gather at the river?

The beautiful, the beautiful river?

This invites communal participation while maintaining personal engagement. Similarly, in:

Yes, we’ll gather at the river,

That flows by the throne of God

The pronoun “we” reinforces the collective anticipation of spiritual reunion, blending individual devotion with group identity.

Modality and Authority Strategy

Subtle modality conveys divine authority and certainty. For example:

And He’ll bear us safely over,

Where the bright river flows.

The modal verb “will” expresses certainty, while the lexical choice “safely” implies divine protection. This conveys ideological reassurance and strengthens doctrinal authority.

Structural Inversion

Lowry occasionally uses structural inversion to foreground the temporal or conditional clause, as in:

Shall we gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river?

Here, the interrogative dependent clause precedes the main action, emphasizing communal reflection and inviting participation before commitment.

Comparative Interpretation

Across both hymns, several patterns are evident:

Visualisation uses sensory language and locative or temporal markers to make theological concepts tangible.

Personalisation (I) and collectivisation (we) balance individual devotion with shared religious identity.

Structural inversion foregrounds conditional or temporal contexts, enhancing emphasis, memorability, and rhythm.

Modality and lexical authority express certainty and divine legitimacy, supporting doctrinal assurance.

Repetition in choruses reinforces mnemonic retention and performative engagement.

The findings demonstrate that discourse strategies are systematically realised through grammatical, lexical, and syntactic devices. The integrated CDA–SFG approach allows interpretation of both ideological significance and linguistic manifestation, showing how these hymns construct theological meaning while fostering communal identity.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of “When the Roll is called up yonder” and “Shall We Gather at the River?” reveals that nineteenth-century evangelical hymns employ multiple discourse strategies to construct theological meaning and communal identity. Visualisation realised through vivid locative and descriptive language, aligns with prior research emphasising the role of imagery in religious discourse (Crystal & Davy, 1969; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). By creating tangible representations of heaven, these hymns engage the believer’s imagination, making abstract doctrinal concepts more concrete and emotionally compelling.

Personalisation and collectivisation were realised primarily through pronouns, with “I” foregrounding individual devotion and “we” reinforcing communal participation. This dual focus on individual and collective experience mirrors van Dijk’s (2008) notion of positive in-group representation and Halliday’s (2014) interpersonal metafunction, which situates participants in a network of social relations. The hymns thus function both as personal devotional tools and as instruments for reinforcing communal cohesion, bridging individual spirituality with group identity.

The use of structural inversion, where dependent clauses precede main clauses, emerged as a distinctive linguistic device. In lines such as “When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there,” inversion foregrounds the conditional or temporal context, emphasising the inevitability of divine action before asserting personal commitment. This finding extends prior SFG-focused studies on religious texts, which often discuss transitivity and modality but rarely examine clause ordering as a deliberate discourse strategy. Structural inversion, combined with repetition, also enhances rhythm and memorability, key features for oral and congregational performance.

Modality and lexical authority markers were found to strengthen doctrinal certainty. In both hymns, future-tense modal verbs (“will”) and lexical cues (“safely,” “bright”) convey inevitability, divine legitimacy, and moral assurance. This aligns with previous CDA research showing that religious discourse often encodes ideology subtly through linguistic choices (van Dijk, 1998). The hymns’ modality functions not only to assure the believer but also to reinforce the authority of the theological message, illustrating the intersection of ideology and grammar.

Overall, these findings highlight the interdependence of discourse strategy and linguistic realisation. Visualisation, personalisation, collectivisation, structural inversion, and modality work in concert to produce texts that are cognitively engaging, emotionally resonant, and socially cohesive. Unlike previous hymnological studies that emphasised historical or doctrinal content (e.g., Crystal & Davy, 1969), this study demonstrates the systematic ways in which language structures both belief and communal identity, filling the gap identified in the literature regarding the linguistic mechanisms of hymn discourse.

In conclusion, the study confirms that integrating CDA with SFG provides a powerful analytical lens, capturing both ideological intent and linguistic form. It also suggests that hymn texts, often



overlooked in discourse research, are rich sites for exploring the intersection of language, ideology, and collective religious experience.

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