

## ***LIFE IS LIKE TENNIS: SERVE WELL AND YOU SELDOM LOSE***

Issues in building a corpus of American church marquees

This paper discusses the extent to which it is possible to reconcile theory and practice in the compilation of a corpus of language that is not typically subjected to academic scrutiny: the particularly American form of advertising found in church marquees. Such marquees are outdoor changeable copy or LED signs, typically located on church property but visible to passing motorists. They serve various purposes, which include informing the congregation of church events, boosting the church's attendance –and by extension– finances, and allowing the minister a means of influencing and/or serving the local community. In essence, these signs are billboards for the Lord, one-sentence sermons. Active users change their captions weekly (Rentaria 2005, Shafir 2007).

Messages on these signs are of academic interest for the study of metaphor, as deliberate use of conventional metaphor (Steen 2008) provides one effective means of fulfilling church requirements, given the necessarily severe space restrictions of the medium. Documented examples of church messages from how-to books as well as both online and coffee-table photo collections of marquees are replete with pithy captions such as the light-hearted *For a healthy heart, give your faith a workout* or play on words *To prevent sinburn use sunscreen*, the more ominous *Turn or burn*, and the thought-provoking *Aim at nothing and you will always hit it* (Claassen 2005, Glusenkamp 1996, Harvey 2007, Paulson and Paulson 2006, Verbrugge 1999)

To investigate the extent to which such documented collections of church signs reflect actual church practice, a small corpus of weekly photos of church marquees was collected over a four-month period in 2010. Baptist, Methodist, Congregationalist and Pentecostal denominations are represented in the data, together with non-denominational Christian churches.

The present paper focuses on the collection methods employed and the corpus itself, given the lack of consensus over precisely what a collection of language must contain to be deemed a corpus (see e.g. Bowker 2007: 303, Francis 2007: 285, Leech 2007: 316, Tognini-Bonelli 2001: 53). Theoretical considerations such as *representativeness*, *design criteria*, *purpose of corpus*, *length*, and *authenticity* are juxtaposed against the many practical constraints encountered during the collection process of such under-examined, eclectic material.

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