

A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF BEGGING DISCOURSE BY THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The article seeks to explore the societal perceptions and interpretations of the discourse used by the visually impaired people when begging in Zimbabwe. The paper analyses the expression of words in speech and songs during the begging process. The study emerges out of the realisation that there is a high rate of people with visual impairment begging in streets and buses. These people use spoken discourse through singing and chanting when begging from the society. Despite the economic hardships in Zimbabwe, the visually impaired are always begging and highly active on a daily basis. It is against this realisation that the article focuses on how this discourse is perceived and interpreted by different people in Zimbabwean societies. The paper provides a socio linguistic analysis of the language used during begging by the visually impaired. The main focus is on the societal perceptions and interpretations of the discourse used by the visually impaired people when begging. The article uses a qualitative research methodology with purposive sampling technique employed to gather data from the passengers in buses, the visually impaired and their guides and from bus drivers and conductors. Random selection of some people was also done to get their perceptions and interpretations on the discourse by the visually impaired people in the streets. Guided by the critical discourse analysis theory, the paper argues that the discourse used by the visually impaired is largely 'politicised' so as to appeal to people's minds and get the assistance they need.

Keywords: *Society; Perceptions; Interpretations; Begging Discourse; Visually Impaired; Zimbabwe; Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

Introduction

Begging discourse is a common form of language used by beggars in any society especially when the subjects feel they have a right to do so. Buses, street pavements among other places are a common place for this type of language in Zimbabwe. Discourse embedded in these songs and chants carries the art of persuasion that is used to trigger sympathy from passers-by to give aims to beggars. This, 'however' has aroused many debates and controversies and it is this that the article deals with. The reactions, societal

perceptions and interpretations that come out of the discourse used in begging is key in this discussion. Using discourse analysis, the article brings out societal perceptions and interpretations from the discourse used by the visually impaired beggars. However, it is of paramount importance, at this point, to understand begging and the relationship that is there between begging and impairment. According to Katsande (2014), begging evolved in Southern Africa through the influence of colonialism and linked with institutionalised religion and traditional cultural conceptions. Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists equate giving, particularly, by blind beggars, as some form of salvation. In other words, one cannot fail to equate begging by the visually impaired people to colonial creation practice which necessitated Europeans to stamp Christianity in Africa. The International Labour Organisation (1993: 10) in its research findings noted that:

When a person has a visible or perceivable disability, it is assumed by others that the person cannot survive and has to depend on the care of his/her parents or the welfare of the community. Sometimes, deprived of opportunity and steeped in ignorance, some disabled persons themselves seem to believe so.

This, therefore, means that begging among the visually impaired in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular, has become more like an obligation. The beggars are allowed to get into the buses for free, occupy any space in town to perform their 'duty'. Kennedy and Fitzpatrick (2011) assert that begging is generally, viewed as an activity which emanated from poverty and destitution. One is useless to fend for himself hence, needs the mercy of others to survive. The impact of colonialism for example, slavery and loss of fertile lands by the blacks contributed to the rise of poverty in Africa hence, people whether disabled or not resorted to begging.

More so, Bose and Hwang (2002), and Collins and Blomley (2003) define begging as the act of stopping people in the streets to ask for assistance, for example, in the form of food or money. It is a request directed to the rest of the society to bring oneself out of misery and poverty. In this regard, begging can be defined as an act performed in public spaces, kindly asking for help from the society either in cash or goods so as to sustain oneself out of hunger caused by unemployment and poverty. However, this article is focussing on begging by the visually impaired in particular. Muromo (2004) notes that there is a close relationship between impairment and begging. This authority further asserts that people with sight impairment face life challenges which lead them to resort to their other senses to make meaning of the world. Some of the life challenges that the visually impaired face include discrimination, unemployment and poverty. As a result, the visually impaired people resort to begging. In support of the same view, Adedibu (1989:36) reiterates that a significant proportion of street beggars are physically handicapped or disabled, thus, visually impaired are part. Therefore, there is a close link between impairment and begging. The article explores societal perceptions and interpretations of the discourse used by the visually impaired in Zimbabwe. This is done through analysis of the discourse in the lyrics of the songs and chants that they use when begging. The songs and chants that are used in this article were randomly selected when the beggars were begging in buses and along street pavements.

Theoretical Underpinning: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Discourse evolves over time in line with the dynamic nature of culture, and so do the identities and power relations that they build. The concept of ‘discourse’ defines language as occurring in specific social contexts reflecting specific modes, expectations, ideological pressures and presumptions. Thus, a given society and culture ‘... can be seen as built up of recognisable “discursive practices” such as those used in educational, legal, religious or political contexts’ (Allen, 2000: 211- 212). The manifest face of discourse is ‘text’. It is what the audience hears or reads for example what is heard when the visually impaired are begging in buses and street pavements. In the same vein, critical discourse analysis focuses on how social relations, identity, knowledge and power are constructed through written and spoken texts in communities, schools and classrooms. Critical discourse analysis refers to the use of an ensemble of techniques for the study of textual practice and language use as social and cultural practices (Fairclough, 1992b). In this case, begging songs and chants were created on the basis of the power to trigger sympathy and empathy from both those one travelling on buses and the general public. It builds from three broad theoretical orientations. First, it draws from post-structuralism, which suggests that discourse operates laterally across local institutional sites, and that texts have a constructive function in forming up and shaping human identities and actions. This is a truism in as far as begging discourse is concerned. The discourse shapes their actions in being determined to receive. Secondly, it draws from Bourdieu’s sociological assumption that actual textual practices and interactions with texts become ‘embodied’ forms of ‘cultural capital’ with exchange value in particular social fields. Thirdly, it draws from the neo-Marxist cultural theory with its assumption that discourses are produced and used within political economies, and that they produce and articulate broader ideological interests, social formations and movements within those fields, (Hall, 1996).

Discourse and language in everyday life may function ideologically. This means that discourse may be used in favour of a certain group to promote their philosophy and at the expense of the other. In line with the songs and chants used by the visually impaired, songs and chants that are sung during begging promoted their ideologies in believing that they were vulnerable people who live on people’s mercies. The songs and chants may be used to make asymmetrical relations of power and particular textual portrayals of social and biological worlds appear given, common sensical and ‘natural’. Accordingly, the task of critical discourse analysis is both deconstructive and constructive. In its deconstructive moment, it aims to disrupt and render problematic the themes and power relations of everyday talk and writing. In its constructive moment, it has been applied to the development of critical literacy curriculum that aims at the expansion of students’ capacities to critique and analyse discourse and social relations, and towards a more equitable distribution of discourse resources (Fairclough, 1992a).

The central concern of discourse analysis in this article is to facilitate a linguistic analysis of discourse used by the visually impaired in order to reveal how institutionalised agents of power use language to gain and perpetuate hegemonic control and influence over targeted subjects (Fairclough, 1992). In this case, the language used by the visually

impaired is considered to be powerful in controlling and influencing people to act upon their need. This is so because they use fearful, threatening and Christian-like discourse, which makes their target feel obligated to act upon the songs or chants. Critical discourse analysis examines the dialectical relationship between language use (discourse) and social practice and culture. The adjective ‘critical’ in critical discourse analysis denotes such social orientation and this goal specifies the implications of texts or utterances in terms of social relations of power. Critical discourse analysis research has thus, focused on text and talk in the social and political context (van Dijk, 2003:252). In this regard, the focus of discourse in the article is on the talk as the beggars will be singing and chanting. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with:

... questions about the way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance, whether they are part of a conversation, or a news report or other genres and contexts. Thus, the typical vocabulary of many scholars in critical discourse analysis will feature such notions as ‘power’, ‘dominance’, ‘hegemony’, ‘ideology’, ‘class’, ‘gender’, ‘race’, ‘discrimination’, ‘interests’, ‘reproduction’, ‘institutions’, ‘social structure’ and ‘social order’, besides the more familiar discourse analytical notions (Van Dijk, 2003: 353 – 354).

From the above definition, because of its neo-Marxist, socio-cultural awareness and commitment, critical discourse analysis can be termed a militant approach to the study of discourse, seeking to unpack ideologies of certain social groups that dominate others. Prominent in the critical discourse analysis framework are concepts of hegemony, discourse and text. On the basis of this theoretical paradigm, this article elucidates the use of language (discourse) as it is used by the visually impaired in Zimbabwe and how the society perceives and interprets such language.

Research Methodology

Using qualitative research method, the researcher randomly selected passengers in the bus and passers-by in street pavements where the visually impaired people sit to beg. The choice of the bus and street pavement was based on the idea that these beggars performed their activities there, and the people selected in the interviews were appropriate in the sense that they witness such performances as they are done. Interviews were important in revealing individual opinions about the type of language (discourse) that the beggars use. This helped the researcher to get the perceptions and interpretations that these people portray in the process. The study also employed observation method in the process of data collection. Observation of the activities during the begging process especially in buses helped the researcher to have an appreciation of people’s perceptions and interpretations hence, coming up with valid information for discussion about the subject.

An Analysis of the Songs and Chants by the Visually Impaired People in Zimbabwe

As has been alluded to in the previous sections, begging discourse is characterised by songs and chants done by the visually impaired in a bid to receive and gain sympathy that is needed in their circumstances. This section analyses the discourse that the beggars use and at the same time, brings out the perceptions and interpretations that the society deduced from such.

In their endeavour to attract passengers' attention in buses, beggars usually sing in pairs holding their plate or cup for the offering. These beggars use funeral songs or church choruses to make their pleas reach their target audience. One song they sing:

1. *Tiende tiende, tiende kudenga*
2. *Tinoona mavanga mumaoko ake*
3. *Vanokumbira vanopiwa, vanotsvaga vanowana* (Mathew 7 vs 7-8)
4. *Vachitenda kuti Jesu ndiye ishe wavo*

Translation

1. Let us go to heaven
2. To see the scars in his hands
3. Those who ask will be given, those will seek who find [Mathew 7 vs 7-8]
4. Believing that Jesus Christ is their Lord

The lyrics in the song above reflect a begging mood where the singer is enticing the audience (public/passengers) that when somebody has asked, it shall be given to them and when they seek, they will find, God being their helper. In other words, the song is persuasive in nature where people are not given room for failure to give as it is written (Matthew 7 vs 7 -8), '*Vanokumbira vanopiwa, vanotsvaka vanowana...*' (Those who will ask shall be given, those who seek will find...). In the song, the blind beggars are reminding their audience that there is somewhere where we would go. This is manifested when they say, '*Tiende tiende, tiende kudenga kunoona mavanga mumaoko ake...*' (Let's go to heaven to see the scars in his hands...). In other words, the audience are given the basis for the benefit of giving, which will allow them to go and see the scars in his hands. This automatically, translates to the idea that failure to stretch a hand, one will not be able to witness Jesus's scars in heaven. Thus, the lyrics used there are capitalising on the dialectical relationship between language use (discourse) and social practice and culture. In light of the above song, the society interprets and perceives the discourse as persuasive and threatening. The discourse is persuasive in the sense that a Bible verse is quoted where it is written, 'Ask and it shall be given.' Somehow, the passengers and passers-by feel they have an obligation to give even if they do not have.

Furthermore, keeping in line with the Christian ideology, beggars use hymnal songs or choruses from different denominations. An example of a song is as follows:

1. *Hatina musha panyika, Hatifari kuva pano*
2. *Zvinofadza moyo yedu, Kutsvaka musha unouya*
3. *Musha une runyararo, Vafambi vachazorora*
4. *Dai ndine mapapiro, ndaiuya ndizorore*

Translation

1. This earth is not our home, We are not happy to be here
2. It brightens our hearts, to work for the home in heaven
3. That home is peaceful, everyone will die and rest there
4. If I had wings, I would fly and rest there

In day to day living, this song is usually sung during funerals. The song communicates that people are just passers-by on this earth. This, therefore, means that earth is a temporary shelter hence, all are destined for a better place in heaven. In light of this, the beggars use such songs in begging as they would want to remind their subjects that despite the privilege of having eye sight, there is a common place for everyone. This is manifested in the lyrics, ‘*Vafambi vachazorora*’ (Everyone will die and rest there). So, it is a clear indication of a choice of discourse that appeals to their hearts and touches their subjects’ inner part. Therefore, discourse and language in everyday life may function ideologically. The implication here is that discourse may be used in favour of a certain group to promote their philosophy at the expense of the others. Additionally, this means that the ideology that the visually impaired beggars adopted is in line with giving them a sense of control over their subjects. Although they embark on a certain formula to win the hearts of the ordinary person, their move creates a perception in the minds of people. In view of the song illustrated above, passengers and passers-by allude to the view that they perceive the discourse to be too catchy than the usual. The society cannot avoid to be threatened and reminded of death.

According to Brown and Yule (1993:1), discourse is language in use, which translates to a functionalist paradigm where emphasis is on the use of language as a functional components, which cannot be divorced from the societal usage of that particular language. In respect of this submission, the use of funeral songs and Christian songs has become the modus operand for the beggars to gain the compassion of the ordinary people. The other song that is used by these beggars goes;

1. *Munoshamisa Ishe Jesu, mandiregerera zvitema zvangu*
2. *Mandibhabhatidza nemweya wenyu, munoshamisa Jesu*
3. *Tarirai ropa rashe riri pamuchinjiko, ngaaukudzwe ishe Jesu*

Translation

1. You are amazing Lord Jesus, you have forgiven my sins
2. You have baptised me with your spirit, you are amazing Jesus
3. Look at Jesus’ blood on the cross, you have forgiven my sins

The above song is also putting Jesus as the sole yard stick for one to be pushed to give. When the song is sung, the perceived interpretation becomes the one too appealing to the audience. The society is reminded that there is Jesus' blood on the cross hence, giving should not be an option. In the lyrics, '*Munoshamisa Ishe Jesu*' (You are amazing Jesus Christ) the audience already feels as though they would have betrayed the marvellous being of Christ by not giving a hand. Accompanied with the same spirit, '*Tarirai ropa rashe riri pamuchinjiko*' (Look at Jesus' blood on the cross) is also putting the society in a reflective mode. It means that lest you forget the wonderfulness of Christ, the blood is there to witness it. This discourse is quite powerful on the part of beggars as it is rightly chosen for the purpose that it is used for which is to draw sympathy. In light of that, Thomas *et al.*, (2004) argue that the role of discourse is to shape the beliefs of people who establish certain ideologies as common sense which, in turn, influences behaviour. Thus, the beggars have already established that the ideology of Christ is the one to embark on to appeal to their audience. Thomas *et al.*, (2004:114) further say:

Language can be powerful, particularly if a speaker tries to exercise control over other speakers. From the moment they start asserting their ideologies to their constituents', politicians in particular are keenly aware that they must use powerful or persuasive language. More powerful linguistic devices such as the metaphor, euphemism parallelism and the use of the pronoun are needed to increase the potency and persuasiveness of language.

Thomas *et al.*, (2004) are of the view that language is influenced by one's ideology and this also means that songs which are used by beggars are not mistakenly chosen but have a persuasive influence upon the society.

As has been alluded to, Christianity is a product of colonial creation thus, the use of Christian songs by the visually impaired touches the hearts of many to act upon the situation. In developing countries like Zimbabwe and other countries, the way beggars are treated is different from the way they are treated in developed countries. This is in support of the colonial nature that Africans have inherited. Khan (2013) observed that beggars in developed countries get money by performing their arts and skills yet in developing countries, they survive on the mercy of the society. This means, the concept of begging in European countries and in Africa can be viewed from two different perspective . In support of the same view, Harrison (1993) alluded that disabled people in developing countries such as Zimbabwe have become more marginalised and oppressed as a result of capitalist tendencies rooted in colonialism and globalisation as these have now virtually crippled the economies, societies and politics of these countries. Political instabilities that currently characterise Zimbabwe, unemployment among others highly contributed to making the disabled feel that having impairment is a misfortune, hence, begging becomes a surviving strategy.

To add to the ongoing discussion, there are chants that are used in the process of begging and they too create various perceptions in the society in which they are used. When the beggars move around singing, they at some point abandon singing and use chants to gain attention from their audience:

1. *Tariro yedu ndimi vana vaMwari*
2. *Kurarama kwedu ndimi*
3. *Chekudya, chekupfeka zvinobvawo kwamuri.*
4. *Tibatsireiwo tatambura vana vaMwari*

Translation

1. Our hope is in you, children of God
2. For us to survive, it is you
3. What we eat, what we wear comes from you
4. Help us, we are troubled children of God

In this regard, the utterance is a lament from the beggar saying ‘if you do not give us, who else will give us.’ It is as though the passers-by and the passengers are given sole responsibility for the upkeep of these people. ‘*Tariro yedu ndimi vana vaMwari Kurarama kwedu ndimi, chekudya, chekupfeka zvinobva kwamuri*’ (Our hope is in you, children of God, you are our survival, for us to eat and wear it is because of you). This reflects the powerful use of discourse. The speaker chooses discourse that has a social and cultural effect. So, by addressing their audience as *vana vaMwari* (children of God), the beggars give the society a position of responsibility, which makes them win their compassion hence, receiving gifts. On the other hand, the general public perceives this as too persuasive as they are left with no option except to give. Thus, Hanchao (1999) describes most beggars as ‘cunning parasites’ who take advantage of human compassion to make a fortune.

In the same spirit of expressing their perceived suffering, beggars also know the importance of language to their audiences. The use of an alternative language like Ndebele also shows that the beggars really understand that their society comprises of people from different linguistic backgrounds. They would also chant:

Sizani umpefumulo kaTixo zihlobo ukuphila kwethu yini
(Help the spirit of God my dear relatives, our survival is in your hands)

1. *Ngincela uncedo zihlobo zami kwala icoi n10c inengi yoneyo mbijana*
2. *elilayo. Lingathi mhlawumbe sifuna imali kwala abalempahla sepa amafutha*
3. *kumbe okokudla lingancede*

Translation

1. May I have help dear friends and relatives, even a 10c coin is enough to help.
2. if that is what you have. Do not think we are after money, we only need help.
3. even those with clothes, soap, lotion even anything to eat you may greatly help.

Although these beggars will explore on various ways to appeal to their audiences, this type of language was perceived as offensive and annoying to some of the interviewed respondents. ‘... *i10c inengi yoneyombijana elilayo. Lingathi mhlawumbe sifuna imali kwala abalempahla sepa, amafutha kumbe okokudla lingancede*’ (...even a 10c coin is enough to help if that is what you have. Do not think we are after money, we only need help, even those with clothes, soap, lotion even anything to eat you may greatly help). This type of statement reflects on a society that seems to be ignorant of what these beggars are experiencing hence, the people are offended by such type of language. One woman also gave an example of a visually impaired beggar when he or she receives a gift. She said that the words that the beggar uses to show his or her gratitude are emotionally offensive to those people who might not have offered any gift to him or her. When given a gift, the beggars will utter such words as:

1. *Maita zvenyu mwana waMwari*
2. *Mwari vawedzere pamatapudza*
3. *Mwari aropafadze mabasa emaoko enyu*
4. *Maratidza rudo rwenyu kunherera isina muchengeti*

Translation

1. Thank you child of God
2. May God supply you in doubles from where you subtracted
3. May God bless the works of your hands
4. You have shown your love to an orphan without a guardian

With regard to this type of utterance made by the visually impaired, one interviewee said this type of language was offensive because it seems as if only those who managed to offer gifts were the only ones who had love in their hearts and were the true Christians. Too much praise in this case, makes some members of the society to appear as if they do not deserve God’s blessing. On that same utterance, one bus conductor commented that ‘the language used to show gratitude for receiving a ten cents coin is a mockery in the sense that the words that they use appear as if they have been given a big gift. When one looks at it closely, it can be a way of challenging the one who offered that coin to add more money as well as the other person who did not contribute anything to give.’

Adding more to the chants that are used in begging, the idea of putting fear in society through discourse is also perceived in the language that the beggars use. The majority of the Zimbabwean population are Christians and the use of Christian ideology in begging is a tool that the beggars have seen ideal to achieve their cause. In doing so, the study realised that there is an element of blaming creation hence offensive to many Christians. Such an utterance that brings out that perception goes as follows:

1. *Tinokumbirawo rubatsiro vanhu vaMwari*
2. *Tinotoshuvawo kuti dai tichionawo semi*
3. *Haisi mhosva yedu kuti tive zvatiri,*
4. *Iye Nyadenga ane chikonzero*

Translation

1. Can you help us people of God
2. We wish we could see like you
3. It is not our fault to be what we are
4. God himself knows the reason.

The above discourse is lamentable language which leaves a lot to be desired. It is so sorrowful that one cannot avoid to feel pity for the person lamenting in that manner. When somebody says, '*Tinotoshuwo kuti dai tichiona semi, haisi mhosva yedu kuti tive zvatiri...*' (We really wish we could see like you, It is not our fault to be what we are), as a passenger listening to the lamentations, one cannot avoid to feel like it is not by mighty that you see, it is more as if you are reminded that there is someone above who has control over everybody and that alone moves the hearts of many. This type of language is perceived to be deplorable and is used so that the beggars can be felt sorry for and be seen as worth of compassion.

Although many felt that there was too much exaggeration of the situation and that begging seems to be the only way that these people can do to make a living, this article is taking into consideration that there are social and cultural factors which influence one's choice of words as manifested in begging discourse by the visually impaired.

Nevertheless, perceptions are created through language which manifests the idea that language cannot be used in isolation. The idea that language cannot be used in isolation is also supported by Bleiker (2000) who discusses how language can be used to mount dissent acts and activities by a people in a society. In this context the act of begging is the one that makes the visually impaired people chose a certain way of speaking to lodge their plea to the travelling public. These beggars go as far as using intimidating discourse in their chants as in:

1. *Haungazive kuti mangwana akatakurei*
2. *Dzimwe nguva uchaitawo seni, ukada rubatsiro kuvanhu*
3. *Tibatsireiwo vana vaMwari.*

Translation

1. You do not know what tomorrow holds
2. You might be like me and need mercy from the people
3. Help us children of God.

This discourse is, therefore, perceived as catchy, sorrowful and threatening by the people who were interviewed during the session. However, this discourse is offensive as well, it is invidious to the ordinary people as they are made to live in fear that maybe tomorrow, it will be their turn. Hence, even the effort of giving is not done from deep down as it should be, but it is a way of trying to protect oneself from the unknown. All this is done under the pretext of playing around with language which Bleiker (2000) refers to as language in politics in which case the language of begging and convincing is under play that gives beggars power to discern on the other for their benefit. This idea is best summarised when he says:

Languages are never neutral. They embody particular values and ideas. They are an integral part of transversal power relations and of global politics in general. Languages impose sets of assumptions on us, frame our thoughts so subtle that we are being entrenched through this process... Language then is no longer seen as mere medium of communication. It is also the very site where politics is carried out. Critiquing practices of global politics is thus, a process that cannot be separated from critiquing the language through which these practises have become normalised and objectified (2000:215).

Thus, language has power to change situations in the environment that it is used. However, although, there are various perceptions about the discourse that beggars use in begging, some respondents indicated being used to the skill beggars used and are no longer moved by the singing nor chanting. Of importance to note is the perception of different ideologies in begging. It has been highlighted in the beginning that beggars are more inclined to the Christian ideology in their endeavour hence, conflict of religions in the process. One respondent revealed that he is a strong believer of African Traditional Religion, therefore, he does not believe in the Bible. This meant the biblical verses as well as religious songs used by the visually impaired beggars were of no importance to him. He said there is no reason that he should give to a beggar because he or she uses biblical verses and songs to convince him. This respondent moreover, said that this language, to him, causes religious conflicts because if someone like him believes in African Traditional Religion and a beggar begs using biblical chapters to beg, then to him it does not make any difference. This respondent added that he offers gifts to the visually impaired beggars whenever he feels like giving not because he has been inspired by the biblical verses, songs or sorrowful chants that they use. He said generosity is the concept that inspires someone to give, not the use of Christian like language. He added that beggars should just beg from the society without sticking to any religion.

Conclusion

When all has been said and done, it can be safely concluded that language is an important tool in creating various perceptions and interpretations when used by a certain group of people. The article has demonstrated that the discourse that is used by the visually impaired in begging certainly generates different insights as illustrated in the article. The language used is deemed to be persuasive, arrogant, offensive, threatening, catchy and too much praises among others. Although the discourse is perceived in these ways, it is the same language that is 'politicised' to change people's minds into helping these beggars. The most exciting observation from the discussion in the article is the idea that beggars have chosen to use a Christian ideology, which appeals to most of their audience as they move around. However, the research has observed that it is not everyone that is moved by the Christian songs, verses or sorrowful chants that the beggars use since some people do not follow the same religion.

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