

# Argumentative Rhetoric in Religious Discourse: A Study on Persuasive Strategies

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## الملخص:

من أهم الرسائل التي وجب الاهتمام بها في الخطاب الديني الرسالة التربوية التي يكون فيها المخاطب الإمام المحور الأساس لتحقيقها، وتبليغ أهم مقاصدها لدى المستمعين. وما دام الإمام هو المحور الأساس لتحقيق أهم مقصد من مقاصد الخطاب الديني عليه أن يكون على دراية واعية بالفعل التواصلي المرتكز أساسا على بلاغة الحجاج وآلية الإقناع لتصل رسالته إلى المستمع، من خلال التأثير فيه، والإيمان بفكرة الوعظ المقدمة من جهة، ومن جهة أخرى تحقيق درجة التوافق بين المستمعين باختيار أساليب مناسبة لمستوياتهم، مستقاة من واقعهم، مبنية على إستراتيجية تحقق الأهداف والمقاصد. وبذلك تحقيق فاعلية الخطاب الديني بدرجة من التوازن والاعتدال.

الكلمات المفتاحية: - رسالة الخطاب الديني - الفعل التواصلي - بلاغة الحجاج - آلية الإقناع - إستراتيجية الخطاب.

**Abstract:** In religious discourse, the pedagogical message assumes critical importance, with the Imam playing a pivotal role in its articulation and dissemination to the audience. This study underscores the Imam's need for profound awareness and mastery over the communicative act, fundamentally anchored in the principles of argumentative rhetoric and persuasive strategies. This necessity stems from the objective to ensure the message not only reaches but also resonates with the listener, thereby fostering belief in the sermon's core ideas and establishing a harmonious connection between the speaker and the audience through

strategically chosen linguistic approaches that reflect the audience's realities and aspirations. Thus, ensuring the effectiveness of religious discourse with a degree of balance and moderation.

**Keywords:** Religious Discourse, Communicative Act, Argumentative Rhetoric, Persuasive Strategies, Discursive Strategies.

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### **Introduction:**

Religious discourse encompasses a broad spectrum of educational and social objectives aimed at guiding Muslims towards a life reflective of Islamic teachings. The Imam, through his sermons and chosen teachings, navigates the diverse comprehension levels of his audience, spanning different ages, cultural backgrounds, degrees of religious adherence, and social strata. This diversity mandates the Imam to assume a significant responsibility in selecting targeted and meaningful argumentation strategies that facilitate a communicative act fostering mutual influence and belief in the presented ideas among the congregants. Achieving this level of engagement requires the Imam to employ a nuanced understanding of linguistic communication, prioritizing argumentation strategies rooted in persuasive rhetoric. This approach, informed by the reality of the audience, seeks not only to convey but also to embed the sermon's directives within the community's collective consciousness effectively.

The study initially delineates the defining characteristics of religious discourse and the preacher's style before delving into the persuasive strategies, highlighting their centrality among argumentation strategies.

### **Characteristics of Religious Discourse:**

Religious discourse is deeply interwoven with life's myriad facets, reflecting an adaptability that mirrors the evolution of a Muslim's life through ages. It extends beyond mere preaching and guidance, embracing a variety of roles and adapting its themes to address the changing dynamics of life. This adaptability aims to deepen religious awareness, reinforce Islamic values, and promote moderation over extremism. The essence of this renewal lies not only in its thematic content but also in the sophistication of its rhetoric, ensuring alignment with

innate human nature and resonating with the evolving interpretations and intellectual endeavors of Muslims across different epochs.

The paramount goal of religious discourse is to achieve excellence in both its structure and substance, elevating its function to encompass a holistic role while remaining attuned to contemporary times. It employs distinctive stylistic mechanisms and themes that engage with both the material and spiritual aspects of Muslim life, adhering to principles that the Imam steadfastly follows to convey the intended messages effectively. These principles include:

- **Interactive Engagement:** Religious discourse is fundamentally interactive, aiming to resonate with the audience through compelling argumentation. Its efficacy is gauged by its capacity to influence the listener's perspective and beliefs, moving beyond mere comprehension to actively shape attitudes and convictions towards specific beliefs or actions.<sup>1</sup> Linguists, including Benveniste, characterize discourse as inherently aimed at impacting the listener, defined as an exchange where the speaker's intent is to affect the listener in a specific way.<sup>2</sup>

Charles Bally, a stylistics pioneer, identified two types of discourse: emotionally neutral and emotionally charged. He articulates this distinction by observing, "In reality, language unfolds both an intellectual and an emotional dimension across all its manifestations. The prominence of each dimension varies significantly, influenced by the speaker's inherent predisposition, their socio-cultural milieu, and the particular context in which they are situated."<sup>3</sup> Religious discourse falls into the latter category.

- **Exhortative Style:** Religious discourse employs sermon-style delivery to reach hearts through rhetoric that evokes emotions, spurs moral actions, and deters wrongdoing<sup>4</sup>. This method aims to captivate the audience by leveraging emotion within a framework of authenticity, thereby influencing the recipient. T.S. Eliot's

<sup>1</sup> Belkacem Dafa, "The Strategy of Argumentative Discourse: A Pragmatic Study in Arabic Advertising Message – Journal of the Laboratory, Research in Language and Algerian Literature, University of Biskra, Algeria, Issue 10, 2014, p. 494.

<sup>2</sup> Ibrahim Sahrawi, "Literary Discourse Analysis," Dar Al-Afaq for Publishing, 1st Edition, 1999, pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Rabeh Bouhouche, "Stylistics and Discourse Analysis," University of Annaba Laboratory, Algeria, p. 88

<sup>4</sup> Saleh Al-Qurashi, "A Critical Study from the Book of Preaching Discourse: A Critical Review of the Styles and Contents by Abdullah Rifoud Al-Sufyani," <https://makkahnewspaper.com/article/24004>

concept of the 'objective correlative' encapsulates this interaction between the speaker and the audience, positing it as an external manifestation of an internal psychological state<sup>5</sup>. The sermon resonates when the conditions of this correlative are fulfilled, engendering an emotional and cognitive impact that fosters belief in the conveyed idea, thereby leading to a state of empathetic resonance in the listener.

The profound impact of sermons is a topic of considerable interest among scholars. with the 'essence of preaching' described in "Adwa' al-Bayan" as "speech that softens the hearts."<sup>6</sup> Preaching, thus, is a deliberate stylistic choice by the speaker aimed at edifying the audience with holistic religious guidance, grounded in Qur'anic verses and Hadith. It employs strategies that soften hearts, refine the soul, heighten piety and benevolence, and caution against the snares of temptations and whims. These objectives are pursued by the Imam through a multifaceted approach of enlightenment and remembrance, encouragement and warning, designed to inspire and deter, in equal measure.

A sermon's exhortatory effectiveness hinges on its foundation in impeccable scientific and theological principles, reinforcing the primary aims of Qur'anic revelation as exemplified in these verses:

“O mankind! There hath come unto you an exhortation from your Lord, a balm for that which is in the breasts, a guidance and a mercy for believers.”<sup>7</sup>

“This is a declaration for mankind, a guidance and an admonition unto those who ward off (evil)”<sup>8</sup>

“But remember Allah's grace upon you and that which He hath revealed unto you of the Scripture and of wisdom, whereby He doth exhort you”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chris Baldick, "The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms," p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Al-Amin Al-Shanqiti, "Adwa' al-Bayan," Beirut, Dar Al-Fikr, Vol. 3, p. 349.

<sup>7</sup> Quran 10:57.

<sup>8</sup> Quran 3:138.

<sup>9</sup> Quran 2:231.

“And all that We relate unto thee of the story of the messengers is in order that thereby We may make firm thy heart. And herein hath come unto thee the Truth and an exhortation and a reminder for believers”<sup>10</sup>

And verily We have sent down for you revelations that make plain, and the example of those who passed away before you. An admonition unto those who ward off (evil).<sup>11</sup>

These verses are to admonish the faithful and to remind them of the Qur'an's teachings, a sentiment echoed across several verses emphasizing admonition and exhortation as a cornerstone of the Qur'anic message.

This concept's significance is particularly highlighted in its presentation in Surah Taha, which showcases the priority and careful attention given to admonition: "Ta-Ha. We have not sent down to you the Qur'an that you be distressed but as a reminder unto him who feareth"<sup>12</sup> (Surah Taha 20:2).

The term "exhortation" is frequently prefaced by an imperative, acting as a vehicle to embody the essence of exhortative discourse and remembrance. It underscores the imperative nature and significance of leveraging such discourse in directing a multitude of messages to the community, as articulated in the divine injunction: " Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in the better way."<sup>13</sup> This directive emphasizes the use of wise and benevolent admonition and exhortation, coupled with respectful and rational debate, as prescribed in Islamic teachings.

In Islamic jurisprudence and ethics, a distinction is drawn between two types of exhortation: commendable and otherwise. The former, as enjoined by Sharia, aligns with the divine legislation and the Prophetic model; it is characterized by adherence to God's law and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. This form of admonition aims to fulfill the intended noble objectives, guiding the community with wisdom and moral integrity.

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<sup>10</sup> Quran 11:120.

<sup>11</sup> Quran 24:34.

<sup>12</sup> Quran 20:1-2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Quran 16:125.

Conversely, admonition that is based on ignorance and disseminates falsehood, engaging in spurious arguments, unsubstantiated narratives, and mythical stories, is deemed non-commendable. Such discourse not only lacks a foundation in Islamic jurisprudence but also misleads individuals with vulnerable spirits, potentially leading them to perdition in both the temporal and eternal realms.

Preaching and exhortation must also be considerate of the audience's broader welfare, avoiding potential harm even when intentions are noble. Different approaches are required for addressing the fearful and despondent compared to those flaunting their sins.

Preaching encompasses three principal characteristics: one pertains to its effect, while the other two are linguistic strategies.

1. **Influential Nature of Exhortative Discourse:** This form of discourse is profoundly moving—it softens the heart, induces tears, and resonates deeply within the soul. Its use of encouragement (*targīb*) serves as a directive, motivating positive behaviors and attitudes.
2. **Prohibitive Aspect of Exhortative Discourse:** Conversely, it employs admonition (*tarhīb*) as a preventive tool, aiming to deter undesirable actions or attitudes<sup>14</sup>.

For effective preaching, it is essential for the orator to strike a balance in their delivery, tailoring it to the context to ensure the message is fully comprehended and internalized, thereby achieving the dual objectives of encouragement and admonition.

### **Preaching Styles:**

The delivery of religious and educational messages is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor, particularly given the variation in preaching styles among its practitioners. This diversity facilitates a categorization into distinct types :

1. **The Accomplished Communicators:** These individuals stand out due to their advanced linguistic skills and deep scholarly knowledge. Their messages are precisely targeted and clearly understood by a broad audience, characterized by a dynamic and impactful style that captivates and deeply resonates with listeners, fostering emotional

<sup>14</sup> Ali Al-Tantawi, "Islamic Chapters," Dar Al-Da'wah, Damascus, 1st Edition, 1380 AH, p. 97.

connection and belief in the presented concepts. These preachers excel in the art of communication, a critical skill often lacking in others.

2. **The Compelling Stylists:** Preachers in this category are noted for their appealing approach to sermon delivery, adeptly engaging with audiences at an intellectual level that matches their capacity for understanding<sup>15</sup>. They have a knack for unfolding meanings in an intriguing manner that captures attention, presenting ideas in a way that is both thought-provoking and enjoyable. Despite their engaging delivery, they may sometimes lack the methodological discipline necessary for logically organizing and critically selecting ideas, occasionally leading to sermons that may veer into inaccuracies. This oversight can inadvertently propagate misconceptions, clouding the clarity of Islamic teachings within the Muslim community.
3. **The Scholarly but Stylistically Deficient:** This group possesses the academic credentials but lacks the essential stylistic and methodological foundations for effective sermon delivery. Their preaching lacks the linguistic impact, diversity, and artistic construction necessary to engage listeners fully. Their choice of content often fails to evoke the desired emotional response, leaving the audience untouched by the depth and significance of the message. Regrettably, many mosques are filled with preachers of this ilk, where the potency of impactful communication and persuasive delivery is markedly absent.

This last group largely typifies the prevailing religious discourse experienced by the Muslim community, which is characterized by a stylistic uniformity. This community routinely participates in religious observances, from attending prayers to listening to sermons, including the pivotal Friday sermon, Eid sermons, and educational sessions conducted before the Friday prayer and between the Maghrib and Isha prayers.

Unfortunately, this discourse frequently adheres to a uniform exhortative style, often devoid of the critical elements necessary for its efficacy, notably the strategic use of argumentation techniques to genuinely influence the congregation.

### **The Art of Persuasion in Religious Discourse**

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<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Mounir Hijab, "The Media Dictionary," Dar Al-Fajr, Cairo, Egypt, 2nd Edition, 2004, p. 11.

In religious discourse, persuasion emerges as a fundamental strategy, weaving through the fabric of argumentation with precision and intent.

**Linguistic Roots:** At its core, "persuasion" suggests an appeal or a plea, with roots extending to notions of satisfaction and acquiescence. It implies a transition from seeking to achieving contentment, encapsulating the idea that true wealth lies in contentment, contrasting starkly with the despair of unwarranted submission<sup>16</sup>.

**Conceptual Framework:** Persuasion, within academic discourse, is recognized as a blend of cognitive and procedural tactics aimed at influencing another's stance<sup>17</sup>, nudging them towards a particular idea or action through reasoned argument, counsel, and logical appeal<sup>18</sup>.

This strategy stands as a cornerstone of religious discourse, where deliberate messaging is designed to resonate deeply with the audience. It harnesses persuasive communication to stimulate introspection, targeting specific behaviors and attitudes with the objective of molding choice.<sup>19</sup>

In the realm of stylistics, discourse is seen as a vehicle for conveying messages with the intent of affecting the receiver, searching for effective impact factors to validate the message and realize its dissemination objectives. This process, known as argumentation, underscores the intentionality behind speech aimed at influence.<sup>20</sup>

**Contemporary Discourse** emphasizes the social dimensions that imbue phrases and expressions with their distinctive meanings. Michael Short describes discourse as a linguistic exchange that constitutes a pact between speaker and listener, a reciprocal activity shaped by its social objective.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lisan al-Arab, entry "qana'a", 8/298, and Mukhtar al-Sihah, 1/231.

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah bin Muhammad Al-Awshan, "How to Convince Others," Dar Al-Asimah, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 1st Edition, 1423 AH, p. 26

<sup>18</sup> Ibrahim Abu Arqoub, "Social Communication and Its Role in Social Interaction," Majdalawi Publishing and Distribution, Amman, Jordan, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> Ali Al-Tantawi, "Islamic Chapters," Dar Al-Da'wah, Damascus, 1st Edition, 1380 AH, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Muhammad Mounir Hijab, "The Media Dictionary," Dar Al-Fajr, Cairo, Egypt, 2nd Edition, 2004, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ayoub bin Musa Al-Kafawi, "Al-Kulliyat," Beirut, Al-Resalah Publishers, p. 4.

Chaim Perelman characterizes argumentation as a collection of techniques within discourse aimed at convincing the recipient of our propositions or enhancing their level of conviction.<sup>22</sup>

Dr. Abu Bakr Azawi views argumentation as a sequence of reasoned arguments within discourse, driving towards a particular conclusion.<sup>23</sup>

Argumentation bifurcates into pragmatic and rhetorical forms, with rhetoric serving as a powerful tool for persuasion. Rhetoric, succinctly, aligns speech with situational demands<sup>24</sup>. The context of religious discourse, inherently admonitory, educational, and guiding, mandates adherence to Islamic doctrinal principles.

**For religious discourse to be effective, it must be:**

- **Accessible to diverse audiences:** When addressing the general populace, the discourse should be straightforward and comprehensible, shying away from intricate scientific details inappropriate for the lay audience. Tailoring the message to the audience's level is vital for effective pedagogy and knowledge transfer.

For scholarly or specialized audiences, the preaching should lean on rigorous scientific analysis and focus on imparting practical ethical insights, enriching the discourse with relevant quotations, detailed expositions, and nuanced argumentation.

- **Founded on specific speech act directives:** Exploring speech acts is crucial to understanding linguistic pragmatics<sup>25</sup>. Here, it is essential to touch upon the most significant aspects that John Searle identified within the theory of speech acts concerning directives; these are defined as a set of actions directed by the speaker towards the listener to encourage them to perform a specific act. "The perlocutionary goal is the speaker's attempt to guide the listener to do something or to affect them in such a way that they undertake a specific action (...) The direction of fit is from the

<sup>22</sup> Samia Dridi, "Argumentation in Ancient Arabic Poetry," 1st Edition, Al-Kutub Al-Haditha World, Tunisia, 2008, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Abu Bakr Al-Azawi, "Language and Argumentation," Al-Umdah for Printing, 1st Edition, 2006, Morocco, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Jahiz (Amr ibn Bahr), "Al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin," Vol. 1, edited by Darwish Joueid, Al-Asriyah Library, Sidon, Beirut, Lebanon, 2003, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> Abdulhadi bin Zafir Al-Shahri, "Discourse Strategies: A Linguistic Pragmatic Approach," Dar Al-Kutub Al-Jadida Al-Mutta'hida, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st Edition, 2004, p. 21.

world to words (saying), and the sincerity condition involves a genuine desire or intention."<sup>26</sup>

These directives consider the listener as the central axis in achieving the speech act's purpose; because "the condition for the success of the directive is the listener's ability to perform the requested action."<sup>27</sup> Thus, the listener's responsive action is critical for the effectiveness of the directive, which can be categorized into two types: commissive directives and psychological directives.

### Essential Techniques of Persuasion

Mastery of persuasion in religious discourse involves several key techniques:

- **Engaging the Listener:** Persuasion transcends mere speech; it incorporates diverse methods aimed at a singular purpose without overwhelming the audience with an excess of objectives. Importantly, the speaker must avoid scattering the listeners' focus, particularly when opening multiple lines of discourse that could dilute the main idea. Furthermore, employing narrative techniques that captivate the audience enhances comprehensive understanding. Creating a sense of intrigue is vital for engagement, serving both to entertain and to maintain the audience's focus on the discourse.
- **Progressive Revelation:** Effective speakers introduce their persuasive tools gradually, in a manner that allows the audience to absorb information in a state of calm and assurance<sup>28</sup>. This methodology aligns with foundational learning principles advocating for incremental knowledge acquisition. Ibn Khaldun emphasized that learning unfolds progressively, with the presentation of knowledge in a structured, gradual manner facilitating deeper understanding and mastery over time.<sup>29</sup>
- **Strategic Planning:** Persuasion operates as a rhetorical strategy, with its definition and application varying according to the specific field of knowledge. It is the pathway

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<sup>26</sup> Muthana Kazim Sadik, "Stylistics of Argumentation: Pragmatic and Rhetorical," Kalima for Publishing and Distribution, Beirut, 1st Edition, 1436 AH-2015 AD, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>28</sup> Aywaj Adhra, "Persuasion Techniques," an article published on the World Wide Web on 12/12/2012.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn Khaldun Abdul Rahman, "The Introduction," edited by Abdullah Mohammed Al-Darwish, 1st Edition, Dar Yarab, 2004, Vol. 1, p. 255

chosen to achieve desired outcomes across different human endeavors, intersecting with various contexts (social, cultural, commercial, linguistic, etc.). Strategies evolve in response to changing circumstances and are shaped by the contextual environment. Abdulrahman Al-Abdan and Rashid Al-Duwish describe strategies as deliberate approaches designed to address a particular issue, achieve certain goals, or manage specific pieces of information. Essentially, a strategy is a mental blueprint for attaining a set objective.<sup>30</sup> The maritime analogy provided by Al-Shehri illustrates how sailors plan their voyages by anticipating potential challenges and conditions encountered at sea (such as winds, storms, icebergs, and tides) and mentally charting the most efficacious course to their safe harbor, thus realizing their pre-defined objectives.

### **Analysis**

**Objective:** The aim is clear: to reach the intended destination.

**Contextual Framework:** The overarching context is the sea.

**Elements of Context:** These include winds, storms, icebergs, tidal movements, and the dynamics of ship navigation.

**Activity:** Sailing is the central action.

**Agent:** The sailor<sup>31</sup> embodies the agent of this narrative, illustrating that strategy is essentially about navigating contextual elements. This concept holds true across life's various domains, including the strategic construction of discourse by the speaker.

### **Strategic Foundations in Persuasive Discourse:**

The strategy of a discourse leveraging persuasion lies in the structured and cohesive application of language, tailored to fit the situational demands.<sup>32</sup> Effective discourse results from deliberate, ongoing planning, with persuasion being a prominent strategy.

### **The Essence of Persuasion:**

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<sup>30</sup> Al-Shahri, "Discourse Strategies," Umm Al-Qura Magazine, "Strategy Governing the Arabic Language as a Second Language," p.53

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

This strategy highlights the speaker's authority within their discourse, succeeding when it effectively convinces and influences the audience. It's premised on the notion that understanding of the self emerges only through recognition of the other<sup>33</sup>. Persuasion is marked by a drive to convince and is universally applicable, embraced by individuals across societal echelons, including leaders, educators, and community figures.

In the context of religious discourse, the Imam's role as an influential figure and resonant voice among the congregation necessitates the selection of a strategy that solidifies his logic, disseminates his teachings, and aligns with the discourse's contextual elements. The ultimate aim is to persuade and impact the audience. Achieving this means successfully extending his influence over the majority of listeners by delivering a discourse that is both comprehensive and cohesive, guided by a strategy where persuasion is central. This method ensures the religious message, rich in diverse dimensions and emotions, is managed by a balanced intellect adept at steering each aspect and emotional stance. It organizes these elements into a holistic, logically structured narrative as initially envisioned by the speaker, ensuring the message reaches the audience, imbued with the persuasive mechanism as the discourse's primary and most fitting strategy.

### **Conclusion:**

This research delineates the communicative approach to religious discourse, centering on persuasion as a pivotal strategy within argumentative techniques. Persuasion emerges as the optimal communicative linguistic tool in the directive process, which the Imam employs to significantly impact listeners. Key findings of this study include:

1. Religious discourse stands as a paramount concern within discourse analysis.

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<sup>33</sup> Mariam Ait Ahmed, "The Dialectics of Dialogue," Casablanca, Morocco, Dar al-Najah al-Jadida, 1st Edition, 2011, p. 98.

2. Persuasion emerges as the cornerstone strategy in interactive communicative processes.
3. Exhortative sermons leverage stylistic strategies grounded in scientific principles.
4. Diverse categories of preachers exist within the transmission of religious messages.
5. Persuasive communication plays a crucial role in activating internal communication.
6. Speech acts are underpinned by specific directives.
7. Persuasion ranks as a leading strategy in exhortative discourse, facilitating the influence process.
8. Essential techniques and characteristics of persuasion demand the speaker's attention.
9. Effective religious discourse captivates and serves a clear purpose.
10. Religious discourse that utilizes persuasion is predicated on a premeditated strategy.
11. Exhortative-style religious discourse adheres to contextual and situational characteristics.

Currently, religious discourse often overlooks the manner in which communicative processes are executed. Imams, despite their extensive knowledge in Islamic studies, may not fully grasp the significance of communicative acts, argumentation mechanisms, and persuasion techniques. Similarly, listeners have not achieved a sufficient level of awareness or understanding of the concepts and sermons delivered, largely because the messages have not resonated deeply enough to foster belief and adoption of the ideas.

This research presents a critical examination and responses regarding the most effective means of enhancing the communicative act's efficacy through persuasion. This approach aims to fulfill the objectives of religious discourse, notably in influencing the listener to such a degree that they not only believe in but also embrace and act upon the ideas presented. Achieving this level of impact signifies the successful realization of the communicative strategy within religious discourse, effectively bridging the gap between the speaker's intentions and the listener's belief and action.

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