

RELIGION AND LANGUAGE: A CURSORY SURVEY OF THE NATURE AND STATUS OF LANGUAGE USE IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Edward Chijioke, Isaiah I. Agbo & Goodluck Kadiri

Abstract

Language is the expression and communication of emotions, ideas or thoughts between human beings by means of speech and hearing. The concept of language as well as the varied uses to which man puts it, is hydra headed. Studies of religious language tend to work with a rather static, simplistic view of language as possessing one criterion of meaningfulness and one basic form. A linguistic approach suggests, however, that language is much more complex, with ongoing questions of how meaning works, how language is comprehended or learned, and so forth. The grammatical resource of mood and transitivity employed by the preachers enables us to access and appraise individual and group experiences, and inter group relations in social interactions. In Nigeria, and elsewhere, sermons are regarded as an art that integrates scientific analysis, literature and imaginative composition (Vaessen, 1998). How this "imaginative composition" which is universally acknowledged in sermonic discourses, applies to Nigeria, a nation that uses English as a second language is the concern of this paper. This study analyses the nature and status religious language in Christian Nigerian Society. The Theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) forms our theoretical anchor pin.

Introduction

Art in its diverse semiotic forms and dimensions been used to express human conditions and experiences. Every message that is disseminated is inscribed with framing. In framing, every explicit elements of a text lead the text producer to textualize the world in a particular way, more so, in a way that leads the audience to interpret in a manner intended by the producer (Fairclough, 2001). Religion is perceived to be most effective way to control the minds of the people. In fact, whether it is Christianity or Islam has a way of the psyche of many people.

In Nigeria, religion plays a prominent role in every aspect of our national life. Most national, State and Local Government events in the country are heralded with prayers of hypocritically commit things into the hands of God even when the outcome of such events have predetermined by men whose interactions are far from being godly. Unfortunately, most people seem to respect their leaders above God Almighty. It is not out of place to hear statements like "My pastor/Imam said this is how we should things". All this negates the facts that it is only God that we should that should have adulations. Rather than get more focused on the challenges of governance, our leaders are busy traversing one religious centre or another or organizing hypocritically religious programmes that run contrary to their ungodly practices. Religious leaders ought to be epitome of goodness and morality and are supposed to live lives worthy of emulation. These leaders show very high traits of personality disorder and schizophrenia when they mount the pulpits, they constantly lie to their congregations that God told them so and so when God has not told them anything and they claim how they made sure it was God. They claim to hear the voice of God or see visions which are either lies or auditory

and visual hallucinations, which are features also seen in schizophrenia.

The message of Christianity places great premium on the meaning that is intended as well as the language with which the meaning is conveyed with the latter relating to style and diction. Right from the age the religion was received, there has been a great emphasis on decorum and elevated style in the language employed to communicate the faith. With the Pentecostal movement gaining ascendancy, Christian preachers and translators of the Bible strive to employ the everyday use of language to facilitate comprehension and sustain the attention of their audience. It has also been observed that the Contemporary preachers painstakingly try to maintain their lionised personal image in the sight of their congregants. As a critic of the Contemporary preachers Johnson (2010) opined, the congregants hold the pastors in reverence.

The Contemporary preachers have become more flamboyant in their use of language on pulpits. Perhaps, the explanation for this development can be found in the observation in Oakley (1987) that members of congregations have become accustomed to listening to expert communicators on radio and television, they are consequently more exacting in their demands of those who preach from the pulpit on Sundays. Oakley (4) concludes "If, therefore, the minister is to display an equal competence in preaching the Word, he will need to develop all this skills as he adapts himself to different kinds of audiences and addresses them in terms suitable to their conditions and outlook.

The acquisition and use of language in the Nigerian contemporary Christian society includes both verbal and non-verbal behaviour, and any given linguistic expression is itself but one element in an element in a whole nexus of activity which occurs in a context. The meaning of a word, expression, or sentence depends upon its particular employment or application in a given language situation. Wittgenstein (1974) likens words and sentences as tools with which one can make particular moves in language usage. In order to know the meaning of a sentence, one should not ask what it pictures but rather what job or task it performs. The agreement among people of what they say or do in actual cases is what determines whether a particular utterance or action accords with a given role. Rather than to say that people agree in using language a certain way because they follow rules, it is more accurate to say that their agreement fixes the meaning of the rules and defines their content ; in order words, human practice establishes what the rules are.

Language is the expression and communication of emotions, ideas or thoughts between human being. It refers to the sounds spoken and heard being systematized and confirmed by usage among a given people over a period of time (Stephenson, Voorhees and Morris 2009). Language depends on context for ideal communication. The primary implication of the above is that language is shaped by variety and function. Religious language is so removed from everyday conversation as to be almost unintelligible, except to an initiated minority. Religion itself is often emotive, serious and spiritual, not addressing the mundane but the Grand. Its language therefore reveals grave, sober, solemn, and serious discourse matters. Moreover, religious language is bent to suit the phenomenon and personality of that which is referred to. The language is figurative in nature and most often, embellished with metaphors and paradox. Words which in order situation would seem meaningless, absurd or self-contradictory are accepted as potentially meaningful in a religious setting. Again, language of religion is sometimes ambiguous. This means, it has more meanings or interpretations than the surface meaning. The above statement is confirmed in Etim's assertion (2007:27):

Religious language is meaningful but only within a context. The meaning of religious words then can best be understood not abstractly but within the context in which it is used. Meanings are derived only when placed in a context. Karl Max's observation that 'man is driven to religious feelings by exploitation' suggests the exploitative and oppressive nature of the language of religion. Thus language of religion, like any other profession, could be manipulated to appeal to the psychology of the oppressed. Words like, Amen, Alleluia, Pastor, etc. are all Latin words in the structure of religious language. Going by its etymological derivation, religion itself is from the Latin words *Ligare* (meaning to bind) or *Relegere* (meaning to unite or to link) This definition captures the bi-polar nature of religion which involves a relationship between ...

(Etim, 2006).

Religious language relies on employing just the right image/words in a manner that thwarts critical analysis and places rhetorical tokens beyond redemption (Mayhew, 1997). The preachers do brand their language eloquently to claim that abundant wealth is waiting for only those who pay their tithes (Udegbe, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a field that is concerned with studying and analyzing written and spoken texts to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and biases. It examines how these discursive sources are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political, religious and historical context. In a similar vein, Fairclough (1993) defines CDA as discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationship of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events, and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (p.135).

To put it simply, CDA aims at making transparent the connections between discourse practices, social practices, and social structures, connections that might be opaque to the layperson. According to Halliday (1978), language performs simultaneously three macro-functions: the ideational function (language represents the experience that speakers have of the world), the interpersonal function (language reflects the experience of speakers' own attitude and evaluations and establishes a relationship between speakers and listeners) and the textual function. This last one allows speakers to produce texts that are understood by listeners and, furthermore, connects discourse to its co-text and context.

Critical Discourse Analysis shares affinity with Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Linguistics. They share the idea that discourse or word choices are systematic, and are ideologically based. "Our words are never neutral" (Fiske, 1994), they convey how we see ourselves, our identity, knowledge, values and beliefs. They are politicized, even if we are not aware of it, because they reflect the interests of those who speak. CDA sees itself not as a dispassionate and objective social science, but as engaged and committed; it is a form of intervention in social practice and social relationships. Critical analysts are thus concerned with uncovering the ideological assumptions hidden in the structures of language to help resist and overcome various forms of power abuse. In addition to the question of power in discourse there is the question of power over discourse, which is partly a matter of access.

According to Fairclough, power is not an explicit top-down relationship. On the contrary, power and dominance are subtle, indirect and in many situations they are jointly produced when dominated groups are persuaded that dominance is natural and it is therefore legitimized (Van Dijk, 1993). If the minds of the dominated accept the dominance and act in the interest of the powerful, dominance turns into hegemony.

CDA is naturally embedded within Critical Theory, a paradigm developed in the last three decades whose critical impetus originates in the Frankfurt School, especially Habermas. As Wodak and Meyer (2009) recall, in 1937 Horkheimer urged social theory to critique and change society, which meant to improve its understanding by integrating social sciences, to show how social phenomena are interconnected, to produce knowledge that helps social actors emancipate themselves from domination through self-reflection, and to describe, explain and eradicate delusion, by revealing structures of power and ideologies behind discourse, that is, by making visible causes that are hidden.

The scope of CDA is not only language - based. Its critical perceptiveness attracts scholars from various disciplines, as well as activists. Their concern lies with unveiling patterned mechanisms of the reproduction of power asymmetries. From its inception, CDA was a discipline designed to

question the status quo, by detecting, analyzing, and also resisting and counteracting enactments of power abuse as transmitted in private and public discourses. For some, to be critical might imply to be judgmental. However, this is not the case here, because as Jager and Maier (2009) state, this kind of critique "does not make claims to absolute truth". CDA is understood to be critical in a number of different ways: Its explicit and unapologetic attitude as far as values and criteria are concerned (Van Leeuwen, 2006); its commitment to the analysis of social wrongs such as prejudice, or unequal access to power, privileges, and material and symbolic resources.

All that have been discussed above on the CDA reveal that there have continual subjection of group of people to prejudice, unequal access to power, denial of social justice etc. by preachers in our present day Contemporary Christian Nigerian Society. In light of the above, we shall go further to discuss the Nature and Status of religious language in Nigeria.

Nature and Status of Religious Language in Nigeria

Religion is cultural and has been explained within the limits of languages. Religious understanding is a function of knowledge and experience of the individual or community concerned. Thus, religious experience cannot be explained outside the context of languages. Religion and language are distinguishing components of accepted behaviours of any group of people. Both are ways of life of people. Religion and Language are vital components of culture of any particular place or people. In other words, religion, language and culture are too interrelated that one cannot be easily separated from the other.

Every religious experience will therefore bring a religious language hence religious culture. The culture within which a religion is raised always colours the language and concept of the religion. Language is like a mirror of facts, and if it does not correspond to it, it is false. From the foregoing, what makes propositions true or false are facts. Language cannot therefore be used to speak about realities outside the world; and whatever language speaks of that lies outside the world is nonsense.

Beside sacred languages, there are phrases or statement that could be labeled as religious sayings. It would be impossible to acquire a religion without the medium of language. Religion and Language are closely connected to each other. The tie that exists between language and religion is such that enables language to be used for extra- group communication within religious settings. Religion is seemingly universal in all human societies. We cannot do without language in any society. Be that as it may, just like religion, can be beneficial or harmful or even neutral.

Language and religion are related in the sense of uniting users. Religion has such a binding force among its votaries that sometimes supersede that of siblings. In fact, some Christian conservatives and Christian denominations address one another sheepishly as "brother", "sister" or even "elder". In the same manner, language and religion individually or collectively, can be strong determining factors for employment, admission into schools, marriage and a whole lot of other cooperation, unions and solidarity. Besides that language and religion relate positively, they also possess, by their nature, the capacities to be exploited for negative purposes. Manipulators of language and religion have used them in the past for the destruction of many lives. Language and religion can successfully be used to hide the truth from the people. They could be employed to cause confusion, disunity and war in the society.

Religious language nowadays is based on outside experience. Believers strongly rely on faith which remains unshaken in the face of worldly evidence. Language is never meaningless, so long as the interlocutors understand the concept behind what they are communicating on. The value of any statement therefore is based on its pragmatic value of the proponent. Pragmatics, describes how the linguistic features of utterances are related to the communication situation, (Austin, 62). Also, in Austin's speech act which insists on how to use language to do things. This invariably applies to religious issues.

For instance, when one says "God is love", one is simply confirming and sharing one's own moral principles and hence the statement has meaning and action of faith can emanate as a result. These statements may not have objective value but they have religious meaning or value. By its

nature, religious language derives its meaning from the fact that while its concepts may not clearly describe objects in the world the way they are, they do have a set of definition which is accepted by its users. In this way, religious language can be seen as adapting to how the view of the world changes.

It is as a result of world changes that brought about what we are witnessing among the users of language in the Christendom today. Language users (preachers) are even ready to lie, misrepresent facts, threaten, abuse, malign and dehumanize anybody who confronts their prejudices. They do not focus on the issue with the view of understanding the point of view of those who oppose their position, but attack the person and seek to undermine their integrity. Instead of arguing their case to enlighten people on the reasons behind their prejudiced attitude on language use, they preach and quote from the Bible various chapters or verses to displace such move.

Language, like man or other living organism, has a fluid nature with the capacity to adapt to any situation, context, place, time or to any given shape, form or use as determined by its users. Language is used to control behaviour. This function is so easily recognizable in commands, orders, and requests. Such utterances are intended to bring about certain actions in those toward whom they are directed. There is no doubt that language of the religion (especially in the Contemporary Nigerian Christian Society) is used by pastors and reverends to get people to act in a particular way they want (Lundberg, 1996)

Every human language is a creative system in that the system enables its users to regularly produce and comprehend new sentences - sentences that a particular speaker may have heard or produced in the past. The Pentecostal Christians use extensively new words which they produce from the Igbo Language to describe the majestic and sovereignty nature of God Almighty. Language has been seen as a means for understanding people and their minds in relation to the world. The essence of using a language in any sector is to communicate. Religious languages communicate and express ideas, emotions, and convictions to faith audience.

Figuratives in Religious Language

Religious language is often poetic, with such literary devices as antithesis, paradox, inversion and metaphor. Such expressions could be found in the Biblical books and from the preaching of pastor and reverends. In religious language foregrounding of the style as well as of theme of preaching is frequently found. This is very common and usually used device that is very present in sermons of preachers. A person's emotional state will affect the person's use of language. The user's of language in the Contemporary Nigerian society coin new words and they extensively use them to portray God as a being who does things that are beyond physical realizations.

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which we speak about one thing in terms that are usually employed to talk about something else. Although metaphor is ubiquitous within ordinary as well as within explicitly poetic, such expressions of metaphor as characterized in religious language in Nigeria is found in John 11:25 where Jesus says

"He that believeth in me though he were dead, yet shall he live". This is a paradoxical statement. Again, John 1:16 there is the use of inversion in "of his fullness have we all received..." rather than the direct from "we all received of his fullness".

Figurative expressions constitute one of the unique characteristics of the language of religion. Also this can found in John 1:29 - "Behold the Lamb of God". This is another example of metaphor. Moreover, "Behold I come like a thief" is a simile used in Revelation 16:15. This is an indirect comparison of a thief with Jesus who will have to come for his people without a notice. A thief visits uninvited and unexpectedly and that is how Jesus will come. Another example of paradox used in religion is "...washed their robes and made white in the blood". This would mean impossible or folly literally because blood is red and the white robe would be stained with blood. But there is an underlining meaning to this expression which refers to redemption of the soul.

Also, there is the use of emotive adjective such Excellent, Omnipotent, Mighty, Wonderful, Good, Faithful, Holy, Marvelous, etc which are commonly employed to refer to God /Jesus. These lexical items are carefully chosen as the attributes of God /Jesus and when these are used in religious

circle, they are understood by the initiated minority. Excellent simply means above all in quality, omnipotent means above all power, in might (Mighty) etc. There is an employment of unusual collocation in religious language often involving deviant forms as well as ungrammatical structures in English. Furthermore, religious language employs archaisms, etc. In the book of Psalm 116:15, ".....precious in the Lord is the Death of his saints" is an unusual collocation. Death is never precious; it is painful, heartbreaking, ugly, yet it is said to be precious in this context. This may be vague to the non-initiates. But it means going to be with God after death. Again, "verily, verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the son of man, and drink his blood; ye have no life in you".

Indeed, the above poses another semantic problem to the non-initiates of Christianity because it is usually collocated. The expression simply refers to the Lord's Super or Holy Communion taken by Christians; it does not suggest cannibalism as non-initiates would think. There are such combinations as "drinks" and "blood", eat and flesh, precious and death, etc. which must be understood only in context. Also, "therefore speak I unto them" show a deviant form in modern English structure. Thus, the proper subject - verb order is reversed in "speak I" which should read "I speak". However, formal religious English is characterized by certain deviation from the expected order of elements within sentence and clause structure. There is also the use of inversion in "... of his fullness have we all received" (John 1:16) rather than the direct form "We have all received of his fullness".

Conclusion

The essence of using a language is to communicate. Religious language communicates and expresses ideas, emotion and convictions to faith audience. The study has revealed how individuals and groups in Nigerian society perceive and interact with each other because of their religious identities and beliefs. The study shows that language use in religious contexts is ideologically mediated because it enables individuals and groups to express their beliefs, attitudes and biases towards others. The text therefore shows how individuals and groups use language to construct individual and collective ideologies and identities, legitimize their actions, and justify acts of violence against others. These individuals and groups attempts to persuade or coerce others to accept the world view and ideology they present.

The study shows that congregants are largely in approval of the type of language under discussion. However, the few dissenting voices are worthy of attention. The content handled by the preacher is of utmost importance and there is need to prevent any hindrance to its assimilation. Preachers who adopt this style must be mindful of the comprehensibility to their congregants given the fact that the level of congregants' education differ from one to the other. Moreover, the morality of the preacher is undermined when absolute statements made, misrepresent reality as in the case of a statement like "A man who executes God's counsel diligently soon becomes an executive."

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