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Lexico-Semantic Features of Some Religious Messages of Selected Pentecostal Churches in Lagos State Nigeria

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Abstract

This work examined the way language operates in the domain of religious discourse. The way and manner in which language was manipulated to produce impact by notable clerics in their messages was examined. The research applied the speech acts theory by Searle, 1969 as the theoretical framework. The data for the analysis comprised of the complimentary messages by three (3) general overseers of three (3) churches, namely: The Redeemed Christian Church, The Living Faith Church a.k.a Winners Church and The Living spring Chapel International. The study discovered that commissures dominated the texts as the messages were characterised by predictions, prophecies and promises to give hope and anticipation for better things. The analysis of linguistic features in the sample illustrated the fact there was a preponderant use of simple sentences because they made meaning and interpretation of words easier and messages straight forward for the desired impact. The study concluded that the clerics have skillfully manipulated linguistic and rhetorical resources to pass messages to the people. The linguistic analysis revealed how language has been creatively put together to compliment, persuade, assure and motivate the people to a change of lifestyle and better way of life in the society.

Keywords: Pentecostal, Complimentary, Lexico-Semantics, Linguistic Analysis

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Introduction

The ritual during celebrations such as birthdays, graduations, Eid-el Fitri, Christmas or New Year in most parts of the world to send complimentary messages to friends and loved ones in order to felicitate with them is also common in Nigeria. It has been observed recently though that certain notable clerics use these messages to express their good wishes and to communicate their sentiments to their congregation on the occasion of the New Year festivities in a new dimension. Many of these, rather than being limited to encomiums, show a deviation from the normal pattern to include supplications, prophecies and certain themes for the New Year. Quite a large number of works have been carried out on compliments and compliment responses which include: (Herbert, 1986; Manes and Wolfson, 1980; Jaworski, 1995; Yuan, 2002 and Ruhi, 2006). Yi (2002) quoting Holmes (1988:485) defines compliment as a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some good (possession, characteristic skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer as indicated in Natalie (2003).

Adeyanju (2005) examines Adeboye's "Seasons Greetings" from a stylo-semantic perspective. He uses Halliday's meta-function of language and Adegbija's layers of meaning to reveal a deviation from the normal pattern of complimentary expressions contained in most greeting cards because language serves many functions which are ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday and Hassan, 1976; Halliday, 1985). For instance, our texts portray an established relationship between the writers (the general overseers in this case) and their addressees (the members of their churches and those who share the same mutual contextual beliefs. This substantiates Ogunsiji (2001) that the interpersonal function helps to establish and sustain social relationship. The writers stand as mediators between God and the members of their churches. Thus, they write messages to maintain/sustain social/spiritual relationships with their congregation and all who share the same mutual contextual beliefs by using it to inform, encourage, persuade and motivate in order to bring about certain changes in the lives of the people. Thus this work is significant in that it seeks to explore the pattern of the messages and how the clerics have been able to skilfully manipulate linguistic and literary resources to bring about messages that change people's lives.

Statement of Problem

Language as seen by Austin (1962) is a kind of social activity which performs several functions and in the field of religion it is obvious that language plays a paramount role in propagating various religious beliefs, doctrines, practices etc in sermon delivery and other religious messages such as new year complimentary messages. It has been noted though that when certain notable clerics in Nigeria use complimentary messages to convey their good wishes, rather than being limited to encomiums, they show a deviation from the normal pattern to include supplications, prophecies and certain themes for the New Year. This study therefore seeks to explore the deviation from the normal pattern of compliments in the realm of religious discourse. In pursuit of this major objective, the researcher will focus on the following issues:

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1. how linguistic and literary resources of language are used in handling the themes
2. how language is used to derive meaning

It also hopes to provide insight into the way language operates in the domain of religious complimentary messages and to show the way and manner in which language is manipulated by the clerics to create change and creative impact in lives of members.

Review of Related Literature

Register according to Dell Hymes (1972) is language use in situation and the concept of Pentecostal language brings to the fore the issue of register. Longe (1995) believes that appropriateness often leads to the adoption of the notion of restricted language which is characterized partly by the patterns of lexical collocation. For instance, Pentecostals, like some other Christians call one another brother and sister. The language of Pentecostalism is expressed through every facet or environment in which the church exerts its influence. Most of the words and phrases common to the Pentecostal church have their origin in the Bible and have meanings unique to the people who use them. Some of the terms are restricted to only the initiates and as such may be misunderstood by non-Pentecostals. For instance, instead of talking about the impending rapture, Pentecostals would talk about when Jesus will return to take away His people (Ekeoha, 2007). Again, when Pentecostals talk of leaving Egypt and crossing the Red Sea into the Promised Land, they are talking about the believer's zeal in abandoning the old way of life to a new one where Jesus reigns.

On compliments Holmes (1995: 3) observes that sociolinguistic studies in comparison with the speech act theory have primarily focused on the affective function of compliments "to convey feelings and reflect social relationships". According to Manes & Wolfam (1980), a majority (85%) of the compliments used one of the three (3) syntactic categories (appearance/possessions, performance, skills/abilities, personalities, traits) and 97% fell into nine categories. In spite of the vast literature on religious discourse, the area of compliments has received little attention in the area of research. This work is interested in reviewing compliments as employed by these clerics in their New Year greetings to their members so as to explore if there is any deviation from the normal pattern of complementary expressions.

Methodology

The research methodology adopted for this study is the non-experimental approach of research which is mostly used in language studies (Obilade, 1987, Akande, 2006). The study population was notable Pentecostal churches in Lagos State. These are the teachings and messages from the pastors. A random sampling technique was employed in this study using texts already in print and data were randomly selected from members/ church offices such as The Redeemed Christian Church, The Living Faith Church aka Winners Church, The Living Waters ministries a.k.a Grace Family Church and The Living spring Chapel International.

Language and Religion

It is obvious that language and religion are closely related because language plays a paramount role in propagating various religious beliefs, doctrines, practices etc. As such, Ayeomoni (2003) quoting Mazrui (1995) opines that language is a very important point of entry into the habit and thought of a people. According to Crystal (1987:348) "a close relationship exists between language and religious beliefs". In other words, every field of human activity has a certain measure of stylistic predictability due to its preference for certain lexical, syntactic and rhetorical hallmarks (Osundare, 2003). For example certain lexical features facilitate its location in different areas of activity and words like "grant", "beseech",

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"Lord", "thine", "blessing", "Jesus Christ", "Amen" would for instance immediately identify the text in which it occurs as a religious text. The language of religion is used in sermon delivery, Christian books, religious posters and leaflets, tracts, newsletters and other messages. Ogunleye and Olagunju (2007) also rightly observe that the language of religion is not limited to religion or liturgical use alone. Many expressions today have their origins in the Bible and are used freely now such as "widows mite", "good Samaritan" etc. No wonder the language of religion has aroused a lot of interest in research work because they are now used outside religion to achieve certain purposes.

Donovan (1976:2) purports that "without a medium such as language, religion would be largely a private affair, harder to share even than aesthetic experience or deep emotion". The implication therein is that without a medium such as language it will be almost impossible to express our religious beliefs. The fact that religious beliefs play a significant part in influencing social behavior cannot be overemphasized. Works on the influence of religious beliefs on individual and social behavior include those of Greeley, 1977; Hirschman, 1983; LaBarbera, 1987 and Birch et al., 2001, Odebunmi 2007 among others.

An Overview of the Theoretical Framework:

This research work will be approached from a pragma-stylistic point of view because this will assist in the analyses and proper understanding of the content and the context of the selected messages. It is of note that the pragmatic theory offers considerable input into the definition, discussion, and explanation of style in texts, most importantly because how something is said is part of what is said. The relevance of pragmatics in descriptive stylistics is further explained in its inclusion as one of the various levels of language description. According to Alo (1998), the descriptive study of style rests on the analysis of language resources which can be found at the various levels of language description such as Phonology (sounds/sound effects), Lexis (word usage and diction), Grammar (word and sentence structure), Semantics (units of meaning) and so on. In this work, the researcher analyses some of the different levels of language description. We are looking at these texts from a stylistic point of view because texts arise from social situations and differ from writer to writer. Abdelbasset (2018) agrees that the style of any writer could be of distinctive features when compared that of other writers. Kress (1985:18) says they are constructed with specific purposes by one or more speakers or writers, and meanings find their expression in a text in concrete situations of exchange. The form and functions of language are therefore inseparable, bearing in mind that circumstance (Kress and Hodge (1979), Christopher Hart, Betsy Rymes, Mariana Souto-Manning, Cati Brown & Allan Luke (2005).

Lexico-semantic Features

A writer can achieve elegant variation with the knowledge of synonyms, antonyms etc. Here are some of the ways the writers have used words, vocabularies and different expressions to negotiate meaning in the corpus.

Lexical Choices

Writers often make deliberate lexical choices to influence meaning in their texts. Therefore, the choice of certain lexical items in a text may be used to derive meaning in such a text. For instance, the lexical items in our texts keep them in the foreground of religious discourse. Some of such words are: Christ, Christmas, Lord, God, Divine, blessings, beloved, visions, Jesus, victory, Glory, heaven, holiness, beseech, prophecy,

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Religious Words

These are words that point to this field as that of Christian religion. In the data, such words include the following:

| LEXICAL ITEMS | TEXTS WHERE THEY ARE REPEATED |
|---------------|-------------------------------|
| Christ | 1,2,6 |
| Lord | 2,3,7,12 |
| God | 1,2,4,5,9,11 |
| Divine | 4,5,6,7,8,9,11,12 |
| Glory | 1,3,5,9,12 |
| Prophetic | 1,5,8,9 |
| Peace | 2,3,6,10 |
| Christmas | 2,3,4,5 |
| New Year | 2,3,4,6,11,12 |
| Mighty | 4,11 |
| Restoration | 1,12 |
| Celebrations | 5,11 |

Fig 1: The repetition of the same item of vocabulary and the texts where they are located in the data

Religious words are used in New Year complimentary messages to inform, motivate and assure the members of a better year ahead of them. Here are some of its uses in our text in italics:

- (i) You will be kept by the *mighty* hand of *God*
- (ii) *Divine* direction will be available for you

Lexical Cohesion

Cohesion according to Wikipedia, “is the grammatical and lexical linking within a text or sentence that holds a text together and gives it meaning” but we are interested in the lexical cohesion which in this case has to do with the content and knowledge of the surrounding context. Abatta, A. (2017) purports that lexical cohesion is divided into three subcategories namely: repetition, synonymy and collocation but we shall discuss under the broad headings of lexical relations and collocations.

Lexical Relations

Lexical Relations constitute significant lexico- semantic features relevant to this study. Odebunmi (2006) says that lexical relation or meaning relations simply refers to the relationship of meaning between words and utterances in language. **Synonym**, the concept of similarity or sameness of meaning of word are often used in the data by the pastors to encourage and bring hope to the people. For instance the text, ‘This is our year of enviable *liftings, progress, and promotions*’ by Pastor Oyedepo is to assure and motivate the people. It serves as a way of emphasising that good things come from God in similar ways. Two lexical items are synonymous if they share a general semantic feature.

Antonymy according to Babatunde 1995 in Odebunmi 2006 is the relationship that holds between a proposition and its negation. **Antonyms** prevalent in the data depict the negativity in relation to the works of the enemy (devil) in contrast to the good things from God. Below are some examples from the texts:

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i. Every form of *barrenness* shall be turned to *fruitfulness* -**Text 5**

ii. God is set to turn your *mourning* into *dancing* - **Text 9**

The pastors use the antonymous relationship of bareness and fruitfulness; mourning and dancing to portray a stop of negativity in the lives of the believers.

Collocation

According to Oyeleye (1985) collocation is the category that accounts for the tendency of certain lexical items in a language to occur close to each other. Following this definition, we note that some lexical items occur close together in the data. Below are some examples:

Merry Christmas, Season's greetings, New Year, King of kings,

Showers of blessing, Good news, Eagle's wings, Holy Spirit.

Some of the frequently used collocations prevalent in New Year complimentary messages are 'Seasons Greetings, Merry Christmas and New Year, Showers of blessing etc. This is exemplified in:

i.) Merry Christmas (**Texts 2, 3, 4**)

Here merry collocates with Christmas showing that Christmas which is a Christian festive period that marks the birth of the 'Messiah' collocates with merry to indicate the mood and joy radiating at the period.

ii) Happy New Year 2008 - (**Text 6**)

New Year collocates with happy showing the beginning of a new year is a time usually accompanied with joy and happiness.

Mood and Modality

The grammatical systems or categories of Transitivity, Mood and Modality, and Theme correspond respectively to the three metafunctional categories according to Daramola (2005). The systems of Mood and Modality correspond to the interpersonal and metafunction. Both concern the participants' expression of such nuances as attitudes, propositions, possibilities and familiarity.

The Mood System

The Mood system according to Halliday (1978) is related to the interpersonal function of language. It refers to functional types of clause which include declarative, interrogative and imperative.

Mood Network

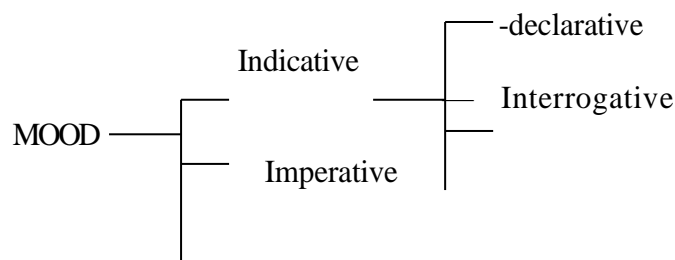


Fig 2: Mood Network

Most of the instances of mood that occur in the data are in form of declaratives and imperatives. However, there is a dominant use of declaratives by the pastors because the messages are mainly in the form of statements. The **declaratives** are exemplified through the following examples:

(i) Every struggle shall be turned to miracles (**Text 5**)

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(ii) Your impossible doors shall be opened (**Text 11**)

Imperative sentences are commands and they appear in different forms. The clerics use imperative statements to get their members to perform certain actions as is illustrated through the following example from Pastor Adeboye's New Year message of 2008 in **Text 2**:

Tighten your belt, swing to action...

Assault your mountains with new aggression

In the above example we see the cleric prescribing and recommending certain actions for his members so as to accomplish the theme for the New Year.

The Modal System

On **modals**, Halliday (1979) opines that the use of modals expresses ability, permission, inclination and necessity. According to him, this is related to the ideational function of language. In the data, the clerics employ modals to express the ability to achieve certain things or the certainty of the fact. Below are some uses of 'will' reflecting certainty by Pastor Emmanuel.

(i). You **will** not die this year – **Text 11**

(ii) I **will** cancel whatever will cause you pain and sorrow – **Text 11**

Other instances of use of modals produced in our corpus include 'may' and 'might' which reveal probability from **Text 2** and **4** below by Pastor Adeboye.

(iii) **May** your tide for the better turn – **Text 4**

(iv) **May** the-new year see your dreams fulfilled – **Text 2**

Another example is in the use of the word 'shall' which express compulsory demand. Pastor Oyedepo and Emmanuel in **Text 6** and **12** respectively through the use of the modal '**shall**' encourage their members that definitely they will be divinely helped and free from reproach.

(vi) On the wings of eagle you **shall** be carried with dignity to your destiny and you shall be supernaturally nourished all through the year 2008 (**Text 6**)

(vii) As the eight day is for circumcision, this New Year, reproach **shall** be far from you (**Text 12**)

Syntactic Parallelism

Syntactic Parallelism is the deliberate repetition of words or sentence structures for effect in accordance to the accepted structures of syntax. Syntactic Parallelism characterise the major part of the text which makes for emphasis. They also make the texts poetic in such a way that the readers can read and enjoy them. The compliments are creatively put together in such a way that the members will not only receive the messages therein but can also enjoy them. The following examples are found in our corpus:

S V O A
It / will mark / the end / of your reproach

S V O A
It / will mark / the end of your shame

S V O A
It / will mark / the end / of your delay

Pastor Emmanuel in **Text 10** uses this strategy of syntactic parallelism (SVOA) whereby the adjectival phrase is realised as a preposition) to express hope and transformation in the minds of his members. Thus, he uses this to show the end of reproach, shame and delay in their lives.

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Sentence Types

Syntactic patterns will deal on two aspects: sentence structure and functional sentence types.

Our findings are presented in the Table below:

| TABLE 1 | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--|
| SENTENCE TYPES | NO.OF SENTENCES | PERCENTAGE % | EXAMPLES |
| SIMPLE | 125 | 45.29 | I will put an end to your dry season.(Text10) We must put the word of God to work as a lifestyle (Text1) |
| COMPOUND | 24 | 08.70 | Jesus visited her and her son came back to life (Text5) This is why life without God is vanity and life without Christ is full of crises. (Text6) |
| COMPLEX | 113 | 40.94 | I will ensure that a final end comes to all delays in your life (Text11) As the eighth day is for circumcision, this New Year reproach shall be far from you (Text12) |
| COMPOUND-COMPLEX | 14 | 05.07 | I rejoice, sing and dance because this is my year of fulfilment in Jesus' name (Text8) Yea, this is the year you have long waited for and it shall be a testimony loaded year for you says the Lord (Text6) |
| TOTAL NO. OF SENTENCES | 276 | 100% | |

Fig 2: Sentence types from data

Fig. 2 shows the four "major sentence types i.e. simple, compound, complex and compound-complex are attested in the data but in varying degrees. Out of a total of 276 sentences found in our text, 125 are simple, 24 compound, 113 complexes and 14 compound-complexes.

A syntactic look into our data reveals the predominant use of simple sentences. This is because simple sentences are used by the pastors to pass across their messages to their readers in such a way that they would grasp them easily. They make meaning and interpretation of messages clear. Just an idea is given in a sentence because of the intention to make their messages clear and straight forward to achieve impact.

(i) 'I will put an end to your dry season' – (Text 10)

This is a simple sentence that has one idea, that of an end coming to the persons worry and dryness. That God will make unfruitfulness come to an end. This message is clear.

(ii) 'To God alone be all the glory' - (Text 5)

This sentence has the single idea that only God should be praised for all blessings. This of course goes straight to illustrate the Christian belief that God exists and that nothing could be achieved without the assistance of God.

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Compound sentence is another common feature in religious complimentary messages. Here language is used to create impact through the use of comparism and analogies expressed through the compound messages. This can be seen in the following examples:

- (i) *Disasters will happen in many places this year, but no evil shall touch you* (Text11)
- (ii) *Jesus visited her and her son came back to life* (Text5)

The above sentences contain two independent clauses and no subordinate clauses. Though this shows that the messages in each clause are independent with none depending on the other, the two when joined together with the conjunctions bring out greater effect on the reader. Taking example 1 for instance, that *disasters will happen in many places this year* could create fear in the hearts of the people but the second clause added by the pastor, tones this down with the comforting / encouraging words that *no evil shall touch* them. Hence the sentence creates assurance.

Complex sentences are also commonly used in religious messages. These help to pass information when the need arises for extended sentences and proper explanations to be made as seen below:

- (i) The above scriptures constitute the anchor of *the prophetic signal I have received for the Winners family* regarding the year 2007 (Text1)
- (ii) ...From the three prophetic scriptures above, *it is conclusive that our season of Laughter is finally here* (Text5)

Compound-complex sentences are not frequently used in religious complimentary messages probably because clerics need to be exact and straightforward for better understanding of their messages.

In conclusion, the peculiar contextual situations in the pastors' use of language are also examined through their choice of lexical items. The major sentence types found include simple, complex, compound, and compound-complex (multiple) sentences. These sentences are mainly in statements but commands are not left out. Simple sentences are dominant in the data because compliments are short and direct messages and as religious messages, they need to be straight forward to achieve meaning. In this stylistic analysis, Olajide's (2003) view of stylistics has proved to be relevant since the researcher has attempted to identify and explain the prominent items in the data. The finding of this study should therefore, properly increase the linguistic awareness of clerics to create more effective messages since unlike most season's greetings that limit themselves to showering encomiums to their addressees, these ones are unique in that they serve as the medium to convey prophesies for the new year as communicated in the themes. They also serve as the medium to encourage and motivate the members to achieve them. The present study is not in any way exhaustive because it has been limited mainly to the area of the linguistic style. Thus, this researcher wishes to suggest that further study should be carried out that will be more comprehensive.

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