

A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC STUDY OF LANGUAGE USE IN DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

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Abstract

Language is one of the best gifts that man is ever endowed with. Human beings developed language in order to communicate with one another within a speech community. A speech community is made up of people who use a given language which need not have any social or cultural unity. It is based on this that the church qualifies as a speech community. This paper therefore, is an attempt to carry out a socio-linguistic survey of language use in different Christian denominations, in expressing their religious beliefs and faith. These denominations include: Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox. The paper carried out a survey of the expressions used by these different Christians denominations during their worship and its effects on them. The descriptive method of data analysis was used in the analysis of data gathered for this work. The paper carried out a socio-linguistic analysis of language use in different denominations under different headings. The speech patterns and language codes of the denominations were collected and analysed the under different headings. The findings from this research revealed that though Christians worship the same God, but the languages used by different denominations differ. The work also showed that the difference amongst the different denominations is just in the choice of words, semantic interpretation of the scriptures and not philosophical one. This work should be of great relevance to researchers on language use.

Keywords: Socio-Linguistic, Language, Christian denominations, Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants.

Introduction

Language is a conventionalised and natural symbol used by man in communication. Language according to Wardhaugh (2000) is essentially a set of linguistic items as, sounds, words, grammatical structure etc. Bell (1976) as quoted by Olaoye (2008) sees language as 'a system of signals conforming to the rule which constitutes its grammar, that is, a pure code or communication system'. Olaoye (2008) defines language as a means by which people from the same and related community interact and express their thoughts and feelings to one another. Gimson (1980) sees language as a system of conventional symbols used for communication by a whole community. It is made up of words employed in art, in branch of knowledge or professions, in modes of speech, diction and articulate expression of thought and feelings by human beings.

From the above definitions, it can be seen that language is always meant for the society and therefore is independent on the society. Language is a societal possession and individuals have access to it and constantly show this by properly using it. It helps to insure a certain amount of societal uniformity thereby facilitating communication in the society. Descartes (1937) avers that it is a remarkable thing that there is no man so dull and stupid, not even lunatic that they cannot arrange various words and form a sentence to make their thoughts understood which no animal however perfect or well-bred can do same. Chomsky (1970) asserts that the capacity for free, appropriate and creative use of language as an expression of thought with the means provided by the language faculty is a distinctive feature of human species having no significant analogy elsewhere. To arouse appropriate feelings and responses in people, certain structural and lexical possibilities of a language are exploited by communicators.

Lepage (1971:9) enumerates four functions of language for an individual. These include:

- a) By the acquisition of speech habits of his society; an individual becomes a full member of a society, contributing his responses to the common stock which could be easily recognized and stimulate reactions from others which he could also understand'
- b) It offers him a tool for exploring and analysing his own conceptual processes in the sense that it helps him understand his own thoughts and imposes on him the thinking habits of his community, as crystallized in the lexicon of his language.
- c) It gives access to the experiences of others, depending on the adequacy of his response and that of others.
- d) It offers an individual greater possibility of self-expression than he could have without it.

It can be seen from the above definitions of language that, language plays a significant role in human communication and when the intended meaning is not met then communication loses its focus. The definitions also show that language is a learned behaviour and its use does not occur as a response to stimuli. It is one road of thinking which makes human society habitable. Every human language is resourceful and is capable of expressing the thoughts and feelings of its users. It is used as a tool for the exchange of ideas, a means of passing information, for expression of emotions, an instrument for phatic communion which is the social function of language. The phonology, grammar and lexis of language vary tremendously not only from one social group or the other but also in term of inter-communication between social groups and the interaction of human relationships.

Language as described above is principle means of communication of ideas and social interaction which represents the nature and the culture of the society. It represents the nature and future and the cultural while sociolinguistics shows what Language and the society looks like.

Review of Related Literature

Sociolinguistics

The term sociolinguistics, a most recent field of study is concerned with the study and investigation of the relationship between language and the society. It relates societal problems to language problems. It has a strong connection to anthropology through the investigation of language of language and culture and to sociology through the crucial role that language plays in the organization of social groups and institutions (Crystal, 1987:421). Holmes (2013) asserts that, the interest of Sociolinguists from the above definitions is in studying the social, political, cultural and linguistic situations within a given speech community to see how

language choice and use reveal the value and cultural beliefs and practices of the community. Sociolinguistics focuses on the ways people use language to express social class, group status, gender, religion or ethnicity and it looks at how they make choices about the form of language they use. Sociolinguists believe that language occurs in social contexts and norms. As an approach that studies everyday spoken language in its social context, sociolinguistics provides a fruitful starting point for these considerations.

Sociolinguistic can therefore be seen as practical, scientific discipline which researches into the language that is actually used, either by native speakers or foreigners in order to formulate theories about language change. There are numerous factors influencing the way people speak which are investigated by sociolinguistics. These include social class, social context, geographical origins, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age and religion, which are the interests of this paper.

Society and Language Determinants

In every society there are factors that determine language use. The determinants of language use in a society are the factors that determine acceptable linguistic forms in a given society. The language in use in some situations is not appropriate in some others. Since language does not occur in a vacuum, it is made possible through the basic requirements in a given society. Apart from the general societal requirements, there is also language use required in certain situations of professional touch. In certain situations requiring professional touch or vocational appeal, there are linguistic requirements for such situations. For instance, in a school environment, it is expected that the teacher should be careful in his language use since he has learners all around him, because they may learn all that he says or does; therefore any linguistic aberration by the teacher may be copied as appropriate by the learners.

Social life, including language use, is governed by norms – socially shared concepts of appropriate and expected behaviour. The most basic of these concepts are acquired in early childhood through socialisation. In the case of language norms, this means that the first language norms adopted are the ones of everyday spoken language. Compared to the prescriptive norms of the standardised language, these uncodified norms are perhaps less conscious, yet more natural, in every sense of the word: they are more numerous, acquired earlier in life and mastered by all native speakers. They also historically precede the norms of the standard language, and in communities without a written language they are the only norms available. Labov (1972) stressed the importance of these naturally occurring norms for linguistic description. He both encourages to take the norms of the vernacular as the basis of grammatical description as well as to discuss more thoroughly the nature of language norms. Norms are inherently social.

Religion

Religion is a cultural phenomenon which has a major feature in the Nigeria society. The daily involvement of religion in all aspects of daily living and thinking by members of society is a common thing in our contemporary society. Religion defies easy definition but can commonly be understood as a group of attitude or beliefs that concern an object; real or imagined, or a system of thoughts that are considered divine, sacred, supernatural, of higher truth and the values, practices, moral codes and rituals that are associated with such system. Christianity is one of such religions that are based on the teaching of Jesus Christ. The spirit, beliefs, principles and practice of this faith are mainly found in the Bible. In the course of communication during public and private worships, certain expressions are used amongst Christians.

This paper identifies how language functions in Christianity and brings out some expressions / utterances that are used by Christians during worship and their effects on them. This paper therefore, is an attempt to carry out a socio-linguistic survey of language use in different Christian denominations, in expressing their religious beliefs and faith. The paper discovered, over a period of time, that there are some expressions and language that are used by Christians in expressing their belief and faith which are dependent on the denomination in question. While some are generally used, others are specific depending on the denomination. The paper identified these expressions and their functions according to the denominations. Certain expressions and utterances are used amongst Christians in the course of interaction and expression of their faith and religious beliefs.

Language, communication and Society

There is a symbiotic relationship between language, communication and Society. Language serves as an instrument of communication. Interaction between human beings is made possible with the use of language while communication is the carrier of social processes; it enables men to be social beings. Man exists in a society and is in frequent contact with his fellow beings in the society as man cannot exist in isolation. Ideas, feelings, information, emotions etc. are communicated by man's use of language. Communication is a very important and inevitable part of human existence and language is a tool employed by man to achieve this. Apart from being a means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people, daily activities are also carried out by people through communication by the use of language. The growth, development and survival are possible due to a system of communication.

The circle of communication however proceeds through a number of stages conceived by the transmitter, encoded and relayed through a particular route to a recipient who then decodes and interprets and finally confirms to the sender that the message has been understood. Language is an inborn and essential part of man; it is man's means of meaningful communication that reflects every facet of man's attitude and behaviour. A great deal of importance is attached to language as it is a tool that man employs in communicating others in the society and also a means of resolving problems and tensions that arise from human interactions and behaviour. No sector of society is exempted when we talk about language as a means of communication.

Language cannot exist in a vacuum; it cannot be separated from the society because it is the major medium through which ideas are passed across in social integration. Fasold (1984) asserts that language is an ever evolving process on the planet earth varying from culture to culture and from place to place depending on the need of civilisation par time. The culture of the society is expressed through language. A social group is can co-operate effectively within a language environment when the value assigned to signs and symbols clearly understood by the parties involved. For example, if a person decides to use the word 'warm' to stand for an elephant or the colour blue, to represent the leaves on a mango tree, one will only be creating confusion because he has moved beyond the boundaries of common and acceptable symbols in a particular social group. Stock and Widdowson (1994:10) states that, "the use of a particular language or dialect is an important factor in the cultural identity of a group of speakers." A person's language may be a means of identifying his position on a social or cultural scale. Crystal (1989) asserts that our use of language can tell our listener or reader a great deal about ourselves and in particular about our origin, social background, level of education, occupation, age, sex and personality.

The kind of language used in socialisation differs from one social situation to another; the language used in a particular situation such as; between a doctor and his colleague or in

banking is used to suit the situation in which it is being used also. The language used at a formal gathering will be different occasions to communicate ideas. Knowledge of proper language use at a given time or situation for communication is required for it to have an impact on the listener(s) or reader(s). Man's society and civilisation are chronicled by languages; therefore, as development occurs new words are coined to cope with them. Crystal (1989) explained that, in recent times, whole new areas of expressions have emerged, in relation to such domains as broadcasting, popular music, computing and commercial advertising. Spread styles associated with the press, religion, medicine and science, commerce, politics and law have over a long time scale developed.

Language and Religion

A divine being is said to have invented speech and /or writing and given it to mankind. One of the first things Adam did according to the book of Genesis in the Bible (the Holy book of Christians) was to name the acts of creation. Another similar story is that of Egypt Mythology of the god named *Thor*, who was believed to be the creator of speech and writing (Petersides R.D. 1976). In Hindus, it is Braham who gave the knowledge of writing to the Hindus. All over the world, the supernatural provides a powerful set of beliefs about the origin of language. Religious associations are particularly strong in relation to written languages because writing is an effective means of guarding and transmitting sacred knowledge. Literacy was only available only to the elite, in which priests figured prominently.

Sacred Writings

At the centre of all world's main religion lies a body of sacred writings revered by believers. Scrupulous attention is to identify or preserving the linguistic features of the original text. Often, the text is accompanied by a long tradition of commentary, which may itself take on special religious significance. Examples of such long tradition religions according to Peterside (1976) include:

i) Buddhism:

The Pali canon, based on oral tradition, which contains the teaching of the Buddhist from many countries. But comparable text came to exist in other languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, as the religion evolved.

ii) Christianity:

The Bible consists of 39 books of the Old Testament written in Hebrew and the 27 books of the New Testament written in Greek. Several other writings, known collectively as Apocrypha and preserved only in Greek, have controversial status. A Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate, is prominent in the Roman Catholic tradition. According to the Watch Tower and tract society (1996), the bible was written by some 40 different men over a period of 1600 years. It is made up of 66 little books. Those who wrote the Bible were inspired by God; they wrote His thoughts and theirs. God, therefore, is the Author of the Bible (11 Timothy 3:16, 11 Peter 1:20-21). God made sure that the Bible was accurately copied and preserved. More Bibles have been printed than any other book.

Hinduism:

The Vedas is a wide range of texts written in Sanskrit and preserved largely through a meticulous oral tradition, which takes particular care over accuracy or pronunciation.

iii) Islam :

The Muslims believe the Qur'an was dictated to the Prophet Mohammed by Allah, during the

month of Ramadan. It is written in classical Arabic in a style which is considered miraculous beyond the ability to imitate. The memorisation of the text in childhood acts simultaneously as introduction to literacy.

iv) Judaism:

The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, especially as found in its first five books, is traditionally said to be written by Moses. This later resulted into varieties of Hebrew, and some Arabic form of the language in a large collection of oral and written commentaries on the Bible known as the Talmud.

Not all religions favour the translation of their sacred books; Judaism, Hinduism and Islam especially stress the sacredness of the language itself and resist translation, whereas Buddhism and especially Christianity actively promote it. In Christianity the belief is that every man in every language should read and understand the word of God. But ultimately, all major religion's works are translated either from one language into another or from an older variety of language into a modern.

Varieties of Religious Language

The most striking feature of a religious language is its heterogeneity, deriving from the wide range of activities involved in public and private worship and the involvement of religious in all aspects of daily living and thinking. Several varieties, all distinctive in their use of linguistic structure are widely encountered. These include:

- i) **Liturgical Forms:** Both spoken and sung liturgy are produced by individuals and in unison, as monologue and dialogue. It also includes such acts of innovate or, petitions, doxologies (statement of glory or praise), intercessions, thanksgiving, rosaries, litanies, chants, hymns, Psalms and canticles. It also includes preaching from formal written sermon to spontaneous monologues or even dialogues (as the congregation reacts) and sometimes involve elements of song or chant).
- ii) **Ritual Forms:** is used in relation to cultural or social practices, such as baptism, funerals, confessions, meal times, remembrance services, weddings, meditations, cleansing rites, vows, exorcising and the blessing of people, objects or places.
- iii) **Readings:** from sacred texts, in an original language or translation, with varying degrees of literalness, formality and modernity. The text itself contains or a wide range of varieties such as parables, psalms, historical narrative, apocalyptic description, poetry and paradox'
- iv) **Doctrinal Statement:** as expounded in official "canonical" documents, creed, articles of faith, expository pamphlets, courses of instruction, catechism and these days, teachings on cable television. Closely associated with this, there is the dimension of theological language, as expounded by theological, biblical scholars and other religious professionals.
- v) **Private Affirmations:** These are beliefs in supernatural beings, expression of identity and conversion, ecstatic prayers, prophesying, spirit possession and testimony giving.

Research Methodology

The descriptive research design was employed in carrying out this research. The primary and secondary means of research method were used in gathering the data for this paper. The primary means employed used include, oral interviews, and personal observation, use of

informants and the administration of questionnaires to Christians across Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal Churches. 90 questionnaires, 30 each, were distributed across these churches. The respondents fall within the age brackets (15-17), (18-50), (50 and above). The area of the research focus is Nasarawa State. The secondary means of data collection include the use of available religious texts, and other library materials both published and unpublished. The data collected for this work were analysed using the descriptive survey method of data analysis. The knowledge of the researcher to a large extent helped in facilitating the analysis of the data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data gathered were analysed in this section. The following questions raised in the background to this study were answered in this section. What are the expressions that are used by Christians? Are all Christians familiar with these expressions and utterances? What role does language play in Christianity? Do these expressions have any effect(s) on the lives of the users?

Table 1 : Expressions /Utterances used by Christians According to Church Denominations

S/N	Expression	Usage	Church Denomination
i	In Jesus' name	-----before or at the end of a prayer	All Denominations
ii	I am/You are covered by the blood of Jesus	During prayer	All Denominations
iii	Holy Ghost Fire consume----	For prayer against Enemies	Mountain of Fire
iv	Offering Time - Blessing Time	During offering/ Offering	All Denominations
v	The Lord is good - All the time	During Testimony and thanksgiving	All Denominations
vi	Praise the Lord— Halleluyah	During Testimony and thanksgiving	All Denominations
vii	To the glory of God or to God be the glory	During Testimony and thanksgiving	All Denominations
viii	There is no one like Jesus	During Praise and Worship	All Denominations
ix	Push: Pray until something happens	During the Prayer of encouragement	Pentecostal

x	By God's grace	During the prayer of encouragement	All Denominations
xi	God is looking for people FAT; faithful, available and teachable	During admonishment	Pentecostal and Orthodox
xii	Glory to Jesus-Honour to Mary	A kind of Greeting	Catholic
xiii	The Lord is my/your/our strength	During prayer of encouragement	All Denominations
xiv	God is surer than the surest, mightier than the mightiest, bigger than the biggest.	During Praise and Worship	Pentecostals (Redeemed Christian Church)
xv	I reject it in Jesus' name	During Prayer	Pentecostals
xvi	Bless you ----Bless you	A way of greeting	Pentecostals (Living Faith Church)
xvii	It is well in Jesus name	During Encouragement	All Denominations
xiii	It shall come to pass	During Prayer	All Denominations
xix	Be blessed in Jesus Name	During Encouragement	All Denominations
xxi	Repent or you Perish	During Admonishment	Pentecostal (Deeper Life)
xxii	Back to sender in Jesus' Name	During prayers against enemies	Pentecostal and Orthodox
xxiii	May the peace of the Lord be with you— and with your spirit	During Mass	Catholic Church
xxiv	The devil is a liar	During times of trials	All Denominations
xxv	The Lord is in control	During encouragement	All Denominations
xxvi	The Grace in fellowship	During departure from service	Pentecostals and Orthodox
xxvii	The Lord is in control	During encouragement	All Denominations

Table (1) indicates the utterances and expressions that are used by different Christian denominations during service. These are grouped below through the following language use or choice at different occasions of language use. The use and meaning of some words are appropriate at certain points or occasions to exercise one's faith or belief and on certain purposes or aims. This is because the accurate use of language could go a long way in enhancing the confidence of the believers in their religion. For Christianity to have an impact in the lives of Christians, the appropriate use of language is very important. Below is a list of language use in various Christian activities as shown in the above table.

i) Language of Worship/ Exaltation

Examples include the following:

- i) To God be the glory
- ii) The Lord is good; response: All the time
- iii) Praise the Lord response Amen/ Halleluyah
- iv) There is no one like Jesus
- v) In Jesus name
- vi) By God's grace
- vii) God is surer than the surest, mightier than the mightiest

In the course of worshipping God by Christians, the language that dominates here is laudatory, positive and emphasising the unequalled ability, uniqueness, might and strength of God, placing God higher than every other divine being or person. These expressions are used mostly during testimonies and thanksgiving services in Churches and to exalt God for his good deeds, for instance, on occasions of child dedication, anniversary celebrations, thanking God for deliverance etc.

ii) Language of Administration/ Exhortation

The following expressions/ utterances are presented here:

- a) Repent or you perish
- b) Rapture is coming
- c) The day of judgement is coming soon'
- d) Rapture is coming'
- e) 'Jesus is coming soon'
- f) God is looking for people that are faithful, available and teachable'

These expressions are made by Christians (e.g. preachers, Bible scholars, Ministers of God etc.) to urge other Christians to shun evil or sinful activities. The words 'death', 'rapture', 'judgment', 'perish' etc, elicit fear in people/ Christians, instil fear on Christians, hence the language used here would go a long way in discouraging them from indulging in evil, sinful or immoral activities and probably to adhere to the teaching of the Bible.

iii) Language of Comfort/ Hope/ Encouragement/ Consolation

Here we have expression/utterances such as:

- i) The Lord is in control.
- ii) It is well in Jesus name.
- iii) You will never lack in Jesus'.

- iv) May the peace of the Lord be with you; response: and also with you'.
- v) 'You are blessed'/ 'be blessed in Jesus name'.
- vi) With God all things are possible.

These expressions are made by Christians who are confronted with difficult or negative situations or circumstances as, financial, marital and social problems, discouragements, depressions, death etc. the pronouncement of the above expressions, the Christians that are in will be comforted, encouraged and be hopeful in life.

At times, language is used to make certain negative or unpleasant situation circumstance appear light and its usage lessens the burden in the life of the user. This shows that, language is capable of bringing good results to the user when used appropriately used.

- iv) Language of Confidence and faith.

The following expressions/ utterances are made by Christians:

- i) I am covered by the blood of Jesus
- ii) Back to the sender in Jesus' name
- iii) Fear not, for I am with you
- iv) The devil is a liar
- v) Holy Ghost Fire consume
- vi) I shall not die but live to declare the good works of God

The expressions above are mostly made or used by Christians when they are confronted with fearful situations of death, spiritual attack, sicknesses etc.

Discussion on Findings

The data collected was analysed and its usage, effects, familiarity and attitude of user based on situation and user's Church was brought out. The researcher discovered from the data above that, the language use in Christianity, most obviously, is generally laudatory, positive, unreserved and also emphasized the influence, the choice uniqueness, strength, might and ability awe of God through Jesus Christ, and the need for adherents of Christianity to experience the impact of Christianity, enhance and maintain people's interest in the religion. Christianity has in various ways influenced the choice of vocabulary and grammar as is reflected in the utterances or expressions in language use in different Christian activities above. Indeed, the appropriate use of language brings about effective communication which provokes positive and active reactions in the lives of Christians. The researcher also discovered that most Christians are conversant with the expressions above. This gives a reflection of the significance of sociolinguistics, as a field of study; the fact that certain language(s) is/are only peculiar to only a group of people in the society. Expressions such as: in Jesus name, the Blood of Jesus, Holy Ghost Fire etc. could only be appropriately used and understood by only Christians.

The responses shown from research carried out indicate that a great number of Christians are conversant with the above expressions in Table 1. It also gives a reflection of the extent of the popularity of the expressions among Christians. It was also discovered that, the use of the expressions in Table 1 cuts across the different denominations which include, Protestant, Catholic and Pentecostal. One can also deduce from the responses that the majority of the Christian use the above expressions while expressing their religious belief.

Conclusion

This work shows that Christianity relies almost totally on the use of language like other religions. It can indeed be asserted in the conclusion that language plays a very important role in Christianity. It is a tool that is employed by Christians during communication whether individually or as a group to bring about effective communication with the ultimate goal of enhancing the confidence of Christians in their Faith or beliefs. It was also seen in the work that, language is employed by Christians during communication to convey their thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions, desires etc. within the framework of their religion. The use of expressions above brings about positive impacts on their lives as revealed in this research. The work also shows that language plays a great role in recording of facts, as in the recording of past events and in passing God's instructions to the people.

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