

MANAGING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN A RELIGIOUS PLACE: THE MOUNTAIN OF FIRE AND MIRACLES MINISTRIES (MFM) HEADQUARTER AS A CASE STUDY

Kenneth E. Obiorah¹ and Ayodeji A. Adedara²

¹Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies, University of Lagos

²Department of English, University of Lagos

Abstract

This paper contributes to the discourse of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, focusing on its language dimension and its relevance to socio-political life. Utilising literature review, participant observation and questionnaire administration, the researchers gathered and analysed data on patterns of language usage in services held at the headquarters of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM). The major objective of the study was to examine the management of linguistic diversity in the church, given its position as one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in Nigeria that draws its membership from all over the country. Findings show that while English and Yoruba dominate the linguistic landscape of the church, other indigenous Nigerian languages also receive considerable attention during worship sessions on Sunday, Monday and Wednesday. Regarding the adoption of these other languages especially in the language-specific fellowship cells, it may be observed that the MFM has been promoting the use and preservation of Nigerian languages, as advocated in the Nigerian Constitution and the National Policy on Education. The authors suggest, however, that more attention needs to be paid to orthographic issues in the onscreen subtitling of translated glosses of the local languages.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), Pentecostal Christianity, religious discourse, translation

Introduction

Although a discursive shift is now becoming apparent in Nigeria concerning the general perception of religion as an integral element of social life, Pentecostal Christianity continues to exert itself over the thoughts, speech and actions of all demographic categories in the country. Given the increasingly less restrained reactions to the pronouncements, lifestyles and actions of many ‘men and women of God’ – as exposed in the mainstream media and social media – it may now be suggested that the power of religious discourse is starting to wane, rapidly yielding to a more secular way of confronting ‘the human condition’ (Thomas Keating, 1999; Bednarik, 2011). A few reasons may be adduced to this trend in the Nigerian context. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, many believed that religious institutions did nothing or too little to support their suffering members in cash or kind. Not a few were outraged that religious leaders continued to request the payment of tithe and offerings from people whose incomes had reduced drastically or been cut off outright.

Moreover, in light of the greater exposure afforded by social media platforms, religious leaders have started to face closer scrutiny from the public, especially when obviously questionable behaviour is involved. There is also the issue of giving tacit or overt support to politicians who constantly fail the people without receiving any serious criticism from the clergy who promoted their candidacy to the electorate in the first place. Furthermore, not a few believe that even as many ‘false prophecies’ have dented their reputation, many clerics have frequently acted in ways that suggest their overarching objective is achieving material enrichment at the expense of their mostly hard-pressed – yet tithe-paying – members.

Accordingly, religious sceptics are increasingly finding justification for their stand that religiosity in Africa is eroding critical cognitive capacity (Anele, 2014; Obo et al., 2017) and encouraging the ‘cargo cult’ mentality (Inglis, 1957; Stanner, 1958; Worsley, 1959; Long, 1974; Dalton, 2000) as well as citizen docility in the face of scandalous government performance. Perhaps the most common linguistic manifestation of this socio-cognitive stance is the now trite Nigerian Pentecostalist expression “*It is well*” – a one-size-fits-

all response suggesting the abandonment of initiative and action to divine power regarding the Nigerian condition.

Nevertheless, Nigerian Pentecostalism, since its emergence in the second half of the twentieth century has remained a potent force in private and public life (Magbadelo, 2004; Wariboko, 2014; Osatowie, 2023). Given their origins in the city, Nigerian Pentecostal churches deserve to be viewed as contributing to the nation-building process since they mostly aggregate people from varied ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Among the most prominent Pentecostal denominations are the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry (MFM), the Deeper Life Ministry (DLM), the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Christ Embassy, and Living Faith Church Worldwide – all of which draw their membership from the entire south of the country and some parts of the north. How these churches have managed the linguistic diversity of their members should be the concern of sociolinguistic investigation in the Nigerian context.

It is worth noting that non-Pentecostal denominations like the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church also use multiple languages during their services. For instance, the Catholic Church uses Latin, English and the local languages for different aspects of its services. Latin is the major language for Catholics celebrating Mass in Rome and other parts of the world, but the force of diversity has made it imperative to accommodate the languages of the local environment. In the big Nigerian Pentecostal churches, multiple services are a norm and officials use different local languages for conducting praise and worship, preaching, and passing general information, thereby fostering a sense of inclusion among congregants. Accordingly, this study focuses on the impact of multiple language usage in The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry, one of the largest Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria.

Language and Pentecostal Practice in Nigeria

Since the translation of the Bible into Yoruba by Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the language question has featured significantly in Christian worship and evangelisation in Nigeria. Inevitably, the work of translation entailed the development of orthographies for Yoruba and other Nigerian languages. According to Igboanusì (2006), “Christian missionaries laid the foundation for the study of the indigenous languages, especially Igbo” (p. 152). To be sure, language is a major element for communicating with God and other worshippers (Essien, 2003), accordingly, some studies have examined the use of language in Pentecostal settings. Adekunle and Soku (2015) investigated the effects and usefulness of language styles in the spread of the gospel of Christ, focusing on Orthodox and Pentecostal denominations. Differences and similarities were found between the spoken and written forms of language as used in the denominations. In the same vein, Anyanwu et al. (2016) undertook a comparative analysis of the use of English in Nigerian Orthodox and Pentecostal churches in the Owerri metropolis, aiming to identify the language usage patterns of the denominations. They discovered that pastors employed a special language style to facilitate attention and retention on the part of the congregants. Ugot and Offiong (2015) examined language use in churches in Calabar, Cross River State. Finding a link between Church doctrine and language use patterns, they noted that literary devices shape all aspects of language and communication during preaching and prayer; therefore, they concluded that the Church also influences the host community linguistically. The present study focuses on the management of members’ linguistic diversity in the MFM.

Methodology

This study adopts the framework in Kouega (2008, 2011), which involves a two-step procedure. According to Kouega, the first step is to break a religious service into different sections and to collect data on them using the participant observation method, the questionnaire, interview, and informal discussion by checking what language is used in each of the constituent parts of the religious service and for what purpose. For his studies, Kouega engaged 20 research assistants to attend at least three of the three to five Sunday masses celebrated in various Catholic parishes in the city of Yaounde, Cameroon. While attending the masses, the research assistants were to provide specific answers to nine prepared questions focused on various aspects of language use in the church and in which activities they were used. Analysis of the data revealed, among

other things, that several languages were used in the Catholic parishes in Yaounde. For example, French was used for all activities including reading the gospel, preaching, reading the epistles and singing, while English was heard in a limited number of parishes. While Latin was used for rituals, Pidgin English was used in early morning masses in one parish as well as in songs in a few parishes. Moreover, Igbo was used for singing in a parish hosting a large community of Nigerians. The present study uses this same framework to describe language use in services held at the headquarters of the MFM. We consider this framework to be suitable for the present study.

Setting, Informants and Instruments

The setting for the study is the MFM Headquarters, while the informants are church elders, choir leaders and congregation members. The researchers administered 100 questionnaires and also engaged in personal observations at random Sunday services, sessions of Monday Bible Study and Wednesday Manner Water services. During the services, they took notes on language practices in the church. Those who filled the questionnaire were also interviewed after each service.

Languages used during MFM Services on Sunday, Monday and Wednesday

In the MFM, the three key service days are Sunday, Monday and Wednesday. Collectively, the services involve preaching, testimony sharing, and prayer and singing. While the Monday service involves preaching, prayer and singing, the Wednesday service incorporates preaching, prayer, testimony sharing, and singing. Below is a breakdown of activities in the church and the languages used:

Table 1: Different Services in MFM

Service	Activities	Language
Sunday	Preaching Testimony Prayer/Speaking in Tongues Singing	English Yoruba English & Yoruba English, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Hausa, French, Swahili & other African languages
Monday	Preaching Prayer Singing	English, Yoruba English, Yoruba English, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik
Wednesday	Preaching Prayer Singing	English, Yoruba English, Yoruba English, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, French, Swahili

As Table 1 shows, English and Yoruba are the major languages used for services in the church. While the former is the driving language, the latter is the main interpretation language for preaching. The logic for this arrangement is simple enough: Membership of the MFM cuts across all the Nigerian ethnic groups, hence the need for the lingua franca; similarly, the MFM Headquarters is in Lagos, a southwestern state that is Yoruba-dominated, hence the need for the language of the immediate environment to take precedence among the indigenous languages. Although Nigerian Pidgin English is popular, it is not used in this church, like other Pentecostal denominations, probably owing to its relatively low prestige in religious settings.

During prayer sessions, prayer points are interpreted in Yoruba; interestingly, however, the interpreter may also switch to speaking in tongues alongside the person driving the prayer. During testimonies, the role of Yoruba as a language of interpretation may also change, especially where a testifier has to switch to Yoruba so that English then becomes the interpretation language. While praise and worship sessions are conducted in English and Nigerian languages, English is the more dominant language. Songs may also be rendered in

Swahili and French, although not very commonly. To help congregations sing along, as the lyrics are displayed on screen.

Time Allotted to Different Languages at MFM Headquarters

We present below a table showing the extent of use of the various languages at the MFM Headquarters.

Table 2: Duration of Services in MFM

Service	Language	Duration
Sunday (7 a.m.-11 a.m.)	English	3hrs (42.9%)
	Yoruba	3hrs (42.9%)
	Other Languages	1hr (14.2%)
Monday (5 p.m. - 8 p.m.)	English	2hrs 45 mins (47.8%)
	Yoruba	2hrs 45 mins (47.8%)
	Other Languages	15 mins (4.3%)
Wednesday (4 p.m. - 8 p.m.)	English	3hrs (42.9%)
	Yoruba	3hrs (42.9%)
	Other Languages	1hr (14.2%)

As Table 2 shows, English and Yoruba take the most service time at the MFM Headquarters, with Igbo, Hausa, Swahili, French and Efik being allotted minimal time, probably because they are not languages of the immediate environment. Nevertheless, compared to the Monday service, the Sunday and Wednesday services use more of the other languages. English and Yoruba receive equal time allotment, i.e. 42%, while other languages take up 14% of the service time. On Monday, English and Yoruba take up 42% and other languages use 4.3% of the time – mostly song time, as it is the case with the Sunday service. Similarly, on Wednesday, English and Yoruba also dominate, taking up 42% while other languages retain 14.2%. This is understandable, given that English speech is translated into Yoruba and vice versa at every point.

The use of multiple languages is perhaps one way to provide a sense of belonging for people who attend the ‘big’ service of Sunday. It is therefore not surprising that the Monday service uses mainly English and Yoruba, since fewer people attend it. Below is a summary of the percentage time allotment for the different languages during the weekly services.

Table 3: Time allotted to each language in a week.

Language	Hours	Percentage
English	8.45	44.4%
Yoruba	8:45	44.4%
Other Languages	2:15	11.2%

Table 3, shows that English and Yoruba take up 44.4% of allotted service time per week, while other languages use up 11.2%. It is, however, not clear whether the use of these languages is affected by the linguistic background of the lead speaker or reflects a strategic effort by the church to retain members. It is obvious, though, that the manner in which the songs are subtitled is meant to enable members to learn them. For Igbo and Hausa, songs in these languages are sometimes translated into English or subtitled on the screen, thus proving that the aim is generally to get people to sing along.

Linguistic Repertoire of Congregants at MFM Headquarters

To elicit information on the linguistic repertoire of congregants at the MFM Headquarters, the researchers issued copies of a questionnaire to some members of the church. Respondents were asked to indicate if they speak one or more languages, and their responses are presented below.

Table 4: Members that speak one or more languages

Language	Score
Members that speak one language	10(10 %)
Members that speak more than one language	90 (90 %)

Members of the church are either bilingual/multilingual speakers, and it is possible that some of them picked up another language by virtue of their constant participation in praise-and-worship sessions in church, since song subtitles are always presented on the screen. It is worth observing, though, that the subtitles are not always correct. Below are some song samples in Igbo and Yoruba from the MFM services monitored.

YORUBA SONG

A Oluwa etobi,
Etobio o,
Ẹtobi.
Koseni ta le fişakawe reo,
Etobi,
Oluwaa.

IGBO SONGS

A Idi ebube,
Idi ekene,
Chi m dị elu
naraekene,
sosọ bu onye dielu,
chika dibia narakene.

From a linguistic perspective, it can be observed that the Yoruba tonal marks are missing and there is no vowel length distinction in the Igbo gloss. Below are improved versions of the glosses.

YORUBA SONGS

A Òlùwà ẹ tóbi',
Ẹ tóbio o,
Ẹ tóbi.
Kò s'ẹni ta le fi ş'àkàwé rẹ o,
Ẹ tóbi,
Ólúwaa

IGBO SONGS

A Ị dị ebube,
Ị dị ekene,
Chi m dị elu nara ekene,
sosọ gi bu onye dị elu,
chi ka dibia nara ekene.

Besides the poor orthography used for the local languages, the English translations do not appear to be semantically accurate. The obvious risk here is that learners may be misled about the standard way of writing those languages, thus suggesting the need for engaging language experts in this regard.

Impact of Multilingual Practice at MFM Headquarters

Respondents were also asked whether they considered themselves to be learning a new language as they followed the screen subtitle prompts. All the respondents deemed themselves to be learning new words from another language. Accordingly, they were asked about how they felt when listening to talk or song in other indigenous languages during the service.

Psychological Effect of Multilingual Practice at MFM Headquarters.

Table 5: Members responses to the language use in MFM

excited	75 (74.6 %)
Bad	0%
indifferent	17(24.4 %)

A total of 74.6% of the respondents stated that they were ‘excited, 17.4% said they were ‘indifferent and none of them reported feeling ‘bad’. Observation reveals that those proficient in a particular local language could be easily identified based on their level of participation in singing a song in that language. This was frequently the case with songs rendered in Yoruba. Comparatively, songs rendered in Efik or Swahili tended to be rendered in lower volumes owing to the much lower number of their speakers.

Language-specific Fellowship Cells at MFM Headquarters

At the MFM Headquarters, there are various language-specific fellowship cells. The study identified the following fellowship cells: Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Hausa, Edo, and Niger Delta. The cells aim at the intermingling of members as they share the gospel in the local languages. Their meeting points are usually the church or its vicinity. Expectedly, their programmes are written in the cell language and targeted at only its speakers. Members of the cell also evangelise in areas dominated by fellow members of the ethnic group. The church management believes that using the native language will enable the preacher to pass accurate information while creating the needed enabling and friendly environment.

Language Igbo fellowship Yoruba fellowship Efik fellowship Hausa

Table 6: the indigenous language fellowship

Fellowship	language	language	language	language	Number of respondents	%
Igbo	Igbo				24	100
Yoruba		Yoruba			30	100
Efik			Efik		10	100
Hausa				Hausa	6	100

As Table 6 shows, the indigenous languages dominate the language-specific fellowship cells.

Conclusion

At the MFM Headquarters, the activities of praying, singing and preaching, as well as conducting the activities of fellowship cells, involve significant linguistic diversity. While the church may have no official language policy, it is obvious that there is a conscious effort to address the matter of linguistic diversity in the church. Nevertheless, English and Yoruba presently dominate activities in the church, with Hausa, Igbo and other indigenous tongues featuring in singing and fellowship interactions. Given this scenario, the church may be seen as promoting these languages and following the spirit of the Nigerian national language policy. In the first place, the church deploys English as a general language, just as the country has English as a lingua franca. Similarly, just as the National Policy on Education encourages the teaching of the language of the immediate environment in the school system, the church promotes the use of Yoruba alongside English. Moreover, the church supports the preservation and growth of other indigenous languages particularly in its language-specific fellowship cells. It would appear, however, that such cells might be marked by lower levels of educational attainment. While this attempt to cater to multilingual

identity remains commendable, more deliberate planning needs to be done especially concerning the frequently wrong orthography used for the screen subtitling of the translation glosses for the Nigerian languages. It is especially important to avoid teaching non-standard writing conventions to the younger generation and the public at large.

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