

Linguistic Factors as Influence on Evangelization: A Case Study of Selected Christian Churches in Nigeria

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Abstract

The centrality of language in human existence defines the human society. The problems in society can therefore not be resolved without recourse to the medium of world-hood realities because the transmission of human social values and control are determined by the competences and performances of language and its enabling capabilities. It is also through the subtle use of language (with the inherent words) and its persuasive techniques that one can make others think, act and change their worldviews towards an intended direction. This can only be achieved through appropriate knowledge and use of the codes of language in use and their social implications which exposes communicative competence. Evangelization is a social phenomenon that demands appropriate language use, as such the thrust of this paper is to establish the linguistic factors that can enhance or retard evangelization. To do this effectively, a questionnaire with ten linguistic factors was used to solicit the people's view on the retardation or enhancement of this communication act of evangelization by linguistic factors. For the purpose of this, Enugu metropolis (Nigeria) was used. A sampling technique was used to select two churches from the ten identified clusters of the metropolis and same sampling technique used to select thirty (30) respondents from each of the churches to make six hundred respondents. It was revealed that majority of the respondents (85%) accepted the propositions while only 17% of the respondents rejected them.

Keywords: Evangelization, Linguistic factors, Sermons, Competence, Churches

1 Introduction

Religion can be viewed from two major perspectives –as a people's belief and opinion about the existence and nature of a supreme being who is divinely involved in the meaningfulness of the affairs of man; and as an institution or system with specified beliefs. Seen as a type of belief or as an institution, religion relies on language as having the criterion of meaning in all about religion no matter which. It is therefore necessary to note that language is an important phenomenon in any religious affair which has necessitated a number of "unprecedented, intellectual interests in language" in relation to religion, (Holt, 2006) in the recent past. This is more so in the Christian religion which uses evangelization as a means of preaching the gospel and perpetuating the religion.

Some scholars like Desiano (2010) are of the opinion that there is failure in Christian evangelization as a system of making people develop positive values, morals and mentality in the interest of the society. In this regard also, Rice (1983:84) adds that "for in all Bible ages Christ has not failed, but the church has failed, Christianity has not failed, but the preachers, the Christians and teachers have failed". In the quest to find out how this failure came about, it was observed that it is in communication. Hesselgrave (1991:26) clearly states "communication has become a problem with which the church every-where are wrestling". Communication is a speech act in line with the "Co-operative Principles" of Grice (1975). Grice believes that every communication has recognizable goals with specific ways of achieving them. In discussing the usefulness of the goals, Wardhaugh (2006) refers to the ways of getting at them as "felicity conditions". Effective evangelization therefore depends on appropriate outcome. This study was embarked upon to ascertain if there are other linguistic factors outside grammar that can cause failure in the Church's evangelization or enhance evangelization.

1.1 Nigeria and Language Issues

In a multilingual nation like Nigeria where English is used in a non-nation environment, there is bound to be ingenious use of the language which is determined by the purpose of the communication. This may not be peculiar to Nigeria as other multilingual nations experience almost the same. English, having come to stay in Nigeria, is localized and nativized to take some of the linguistic features of the host environment in intonation, sentence structures, patterns of word formation, semantic extensions, except culture. From the religious perspective, Nigeria is unofficially polarized (though not in a razor-cut style) with the Muslim faithful mostly in the Northern part of the country and the Christian faithful mostly in the South with the mixture of traditional worshippers and religio-neutral persons found in all parts of the country. The different groups of worshippers mean different linguistic codes. While the Muslims use mainly Arabic, the Christians use English language (Nigerian English), indigenous languages, and code-mixing of the two codes according to host environments. These add to the multiplicity of language codes in Nigeria with their inherent rooted cultures; though what the religious groups use is best called registers. There are arguments on the existence of religious language. Harris (2002) would argue that what is often referred to as religious language cannot stand the test of language since

there can be no translation of any of them into other languages or vice versa. He adds:

The grammar which Christians employ, even when theology, is simply that of the language which they speak- Greek, Latin, English, e.t.c. it is not true that religious language is grammatically “strange”. An error in English grammar is an error even when found in a book of theology.

Harris (2002)

He concludes that it is difficult to discuss religious language as a unit as it exists only as “Christian discourse, Islamic discourse, Buddhist discourse, etc.”

Religious register (Christian) here is better referred to as a jargon (a type of register) where the characteristics or differences can be found only in its deep grammar” or figurative use. Uhumwangho (2000) sees it as a deliberate and evocative use of terminology and phraseology which can be affected by the environment and other linguistic variables.

2. Review of Literature

Evangelization as speech act is not much beyond language which is governed by a number of contextual factors like attitude, abilities, circumstances, and beliefs of the participants. A look at some of the phenomena that bear on it may be useful.

2.1 Communication

A very common way to define this may be to see it as the transfer of meaning or as exchange of information, Lane (2010). Whichever perspective one takes, it involves sending (encoding and transmitting), message, and the receiver (decoding and understanding). The extent to which an intended meaning is extended is dependent on these complementary issues. Unless meaning is appropriately extended, there is no communication.

2.2 Appropriateness in Language Use

Appropriateness in language is the essence of communication. It entails those psychological, intellectual, and environmental issues that participants must share to enable transfer of information. Driscoll and Brizee (2012) are of the view that “inappropriate language use can damage your credibility, undermine your argument, or alienate your audience your audience”. Widdowson (1989:128) would add that it “may have to do with access which is relatively independent of the analytic knowledge of grammar as defined in Chomsky’s original concept of competence”. This access is what is taken here as the linguistic factors that can influence evangelization as communication event.

2.3 Preaching and its Social Implication

The Church is a social institution with the duty of preaching. Preaching, as a way of urging people to accept certain ideas for transformation is useful in the society and should be safeguarded. Kraft (1979:345) adds that “such transformation is accomplished by bringing Christian understanding of super cultural truth to bear on the world-view of the culture”. Okonkwo (1998:253) adds that the message of preaching “should have a cultural validity or else the message cannot transform the hearers”. The preacher tries to get the people transformed through his persuasion into a new world-view. But if for any incompetence the message is lost, it becomes what Lewis & Codeiro (2005:16) call “a plug and play approach”.

Empirically, literature exposes some failure due to linguistic incompetences in Christian evangelization. Taking from this, Taiwo (2007) looked at communicating Christian religious message through the electric media as he looked at twenty-four government owned electronic media organizations in Nigeria. Though his stress was on “Tenor”, the conclusion portrays Christian discourse in Nigeria as highly institutionalized with the preacher as the dominant speaker who “determines how his audience will respond to his message” characterized by information and directives. In another vein, Acheoah (2013) looked at new practices in Nigerian churches which revealed about nine new notable practices. According to him the practices have negative effects on the churches, adding also that religious leaders are contributive to these practices which bring crises in “Pentecostal Churches”. These linguistic negative practices mark some failure.

Again, from Ghana, a study by Coker and Narty (2012:554) reveals that preachers have failed to persuade their audience since they use “intemperate and indecent language” which is “at variance with the faith they profess”. They added that foul language has no place in sermonic discourse. Their conclusions reveal that the pastors have “little or no knowledge of euphemisms or social mores” for which the people are known for. They also have unforgiving spirits. This clearly shows that the linguistic competence of the pastors cannot enhance evangelization. Many other studies in support of the issue here abound, but cannot be contained in this study.

3. Theoretical Underpinning

This study is an ethnographic one backed up by the speech act theory, which examines the culture bound implicature of speech in evangelization. As speech act, evangelization relies on the pragmatic theory and its entailments. Its notion is that every utterance is a performance that has not just semantic context, but also social factors which is aided by context/environment. The theory supports the study of context, text, and their functions

as dependent on the knowledge of the speaker and hearer which is the condition (felicity condition) for effective delivery of message.

4. Methodology

This study covers Enugu Urban in Eastern Nigeria. The area is used because of its metropolitan nature, the large number of churches, and proximity to the researcher. Grouping the area into ten clusters, the purpose sampling technique was used to select twenty churches from each cluster. Simple sampling technique aided the selection of thirty respondents from each of the churches to have six hundred respondents for the closed ended questions as items of the questionnaire. The data from the questionnaire was coded and presented in a table and analyzed with the mean and standard deviation (SD). Any datum with 2.50 mean and standard deviation of 0.05 is accepted while anything less is rejected.

5. Presentation and Discussion of Data

Hesselgrave (1991) argues that evangelization as missionary work is the task to make disciples and reinforce the Christian message behaviourally through language. Language as the conventional functionality of man therefore demands some linguistic competence that is beyond just grammaticality, lack of which can retard or enhance evangelization. The following table is used to ascertain such linguistic factors.

Table 1. Linguistic Factors that Retard or Enhance Evangelization

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	ΣFX	\bar{x}	St.D	DECISION
I	The use of the language of the immediate environment can enhance evangelization	350 58%	199 33%	51 9%	-	600	3.50	0.65	ACCEPTED
II	The use of language of immediate environment retards evangelization.	51 9%	198 33%	227 38%	124 21%	600	2.29	0.89	REJECTED
III	The use of Nigerian English enhances evangelization most.	25 4%	364 61%	186 31%	25 4%	600	2.65	0.63	ACCEPTED
IV	Exemplary life of preachers greatly enhance evangelization	336 56%	189 32%	75 13%	-	600	3.44	0.71	ACCEPTED
V	Using appropriate language according to the audience enhances evangelization.	274 46%	275 46%	51 9%	-	600	3.37	0.64	ACCEPTED
VI	Not using the language of immediate environment retards evangelization.	111 19%	350 58%	89 15%	50 8%	600	2.76	0.80	ACCEPTED
VII	The use of English and Igbo languages together (code-switching) enhances evangelization	38 6%	537 90%	25 4%	-	600	3.02	0.32	ACCEPTED
VIII	Using examples from people's language enhances evangelization.	187 31%	413 68%	-	-	600	3.31	0.46	ACCEPTED
IX	Preaching without practice or preparations greatly retard evangelization.	361 60%	200 33%	39 7%	-	600	3.64	0.62	ACCEPTED
X	The lack of knowledge of the people's language and background greatly retards evangelization.	221 37%	265 44%	50 8%	64 11%	600	3.07	0.94	ACCEPTED
	TOTAL AVG.	33%	50%	13%	4%	600	3.11	0.67	ACCEPTED

Description of the table

The propositions of the items of this table are close ended to save cost and time since the purpose of the study is to ascertain the factors that can enhance or retard evangelization only. It can be observed from the sum total of the sections that majority of the respondents agree with the propositions of the items with up to 83% attesting to the items. Out of the ten items, nine scored above the bench mark mean of \bar{x} -2.50; while only one item has the mean score of \bar{x} -2.29 which is below the set bench mark. Since the total percentage rejection is 17%, the table upholds that there are sociolinguistic factors that can retard or enhance evangelization.

6. Result

The deductions from the discussion above are as follows:

- a. The use of the language of the environment enhances evangelization (x-3.50);
- b. The exemplary life of preachers enhances evangelization (x-3.44);
- c. Using the variety of English the audience would understand enhances evangelization (x-3.37)
- d. Lack of preparedness of preachers retards evangelization (x-3.64)
- e. Lack of grounding in the audience's world-view retards evangelization (x-3.07).

Suffice it to add that each of these findings have extended linguistic issues that can still be investigated. Considerations of these results would help preachers avoid undesired language use or linguistic inappropriateness.

7. Conclusion

Preachers are persuaders who should have some integrity, credibility and linguistic competence. Esimaje (2012:24) would add that "if the sermon-giver and his audience draw from the same pool of lexis, communication in the genre will not only be enhanced, but its teaching and practice would align. Supporting him, Kishik (2008:89) states that "if you do not play according to certain rules, then you do not communicate with those who do follow the rules...". Playing according to these rules is possessing the communicative competence necessary for effective communication, which Nye (2004) refers to as the possessing of soft power.

Preachers as evangelizers should acquire some competences in the language of the environment of their preaching to have the soft power (persuasive) to make their audience change their attitudes, beliefs, and world-view. Improvement on appropriateness and competences in language is improvement in evangelization efforts for a better African environment.

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