

Tenor in Electronic Media Christian Discourse in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines tenor in electronic media discourse in Nigeria. Tenor is one of the register variables identified by Systemic linguistics. The paper looks at how preachers use their social role to relate with their audience in such media discourses as radio, television and the Internet. The preacher is usually the dominant speaker so he determines how his imaginary audience will respond to his message. Being the sole speaker, this increases his power to control the discourse. He uses mainly interrogatives, imperatives and declaratives to elicit responses from his imaginary listener/reader. Whichever electronic media used, the personal tenor of the discourse is that of the preacher as the knower/expert, while it has the pragmatic force of persuasion, exhortation and challenge for the listener.

Introduction

Studies on religious language have identified highly distinctive discourse identities in such domains as prayers, sermons, Bible studies, invocations and other ritual forms. Crystal (1994:371) identifies religious English as probably the most distinctive of all occupational varieties.

This study focuses on a form of religious discourse, which is channelled through the electronic media. It looks at one of the three variables of situational features (identified by Halliday (1978: 32) that determine registers – **tenor** (the two others being **field** and **mode**). Other scholars who have worked on registers looked at how these situational features are used to make sensible predictions about text types (see Ellis and Ure, 1969; Gregory, 1967; Rothery, 1980; Leckie-Tarry 1995; Eggins, 1994; Eggins and Slade, 1997).

The data for this study was drawn from Christian messages on radio and television in the Southwestern Nigeria. These Christian messages were monitored in twenty-four radio and television stations, which were mostly government-owned. Most of the messages were rendered in English, while very few ones were rendered in Yoruba (the lingua franca of the area). There were also instances of messages rendered in English with simultaneous Yoruba translations. We also had messages characterized by switching and mixing of the linguistic codes (ie, English and Yoruba). The major focus in the analysis is the role structure into which the participants in the discourse fit and how this determined how they made and interpret meaning in the discourse. In addition to this, web pages of some Christian organizations were visited to observe the organisation of discourse there.

Language and context

It is impossible to determine what most utterances mean without having some knowledge of the situations in which they occur. Such situations are generally referred to as context. Context here does not only refer to the linguistic context, ie, those utterances that precede and follow an utterance but also “the surrounding physical context (where the language is used, the objects there and the actions taking place), previous conversations between the participants, relevant aspects of their life histories, the general rules of behaviour the speakers obey, their assumptions about how the various bits and pieces of the world function, and so on” (Wardaugh, 1985:101). So, scholars in Functional Linguistics often talk about the:

- Physical context – where the language is used, everything in the physical environment that contributes to meaning in the discourse;
- Linguistic context – the utterances before and after the one under consideration;
- Social context – the social relationship between the interlocutors and the setting of the language users;
- Epistemic context – the background knowledge shared by the language users (see Leckie Tarry, 1995)

Studying language without consideration for the context in which it is used is like trying to study the cardio-vascular system as a complete separate entity from any other part of human or animal anatomy. Language can not be seen as being independent of its context because the context actually determines the function. Language creates context, helps structure reality and is not separate from its use. Context creates possibilities for interpretation and helps remove multiple ambiguities that utterances would have had if they had occurred in isolation. Users of a language share knowledge of the world around them and observe the conventions about what can properly be said to whom, where and on what occasion. The use of indexical expressions in conversation shows us how meaning interpretation can be dependent on context. Words such as 'this', 'you', 'there', 'then' cannot be understood without a recourse to the context in which they are used.

Much has been done towards developing models, which relate text to context. One of the most influential work in this area is that of Halliday (see Halliday, 1973, 1978, 1985). Halliday's model sees a simultaneous relationship between the situation, the text, the linguistic system and the social system (1978: 142). The notion of context of situation derives from the research work of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who studying the culture of people living in a group of islands in South Pacific Ocean, made interesting observations about their language and the relationship between the language and the situation in which these people lived (see Ogden and Richards, 1923). The theory of context of situation has been successively adopted and further developed by Systemic Linguistics. Firth in 1950 developed Malinowski's ideas within the framework of features under four headings:

- the participants
- the action of the participants
- other relevant features of the situation
- the effects on the verbal action

Hymes also outlined some important features of the context of situation (message, form and content, setting, participants, purpose, key, channel, norms and genre) (see Hymes 1974: 54 – 61).

Halliday (1973) reduced the language system to a set of functional components, which he later named metafunctions. They are also regarded as the knowledge speakers have of the context of situation of the language they use. They are: the ideational knowledge (the world of ideas, knowledge of a culture, or the background knowledge prevalent within the society and culture gained by means of direct experience and knowledge derived from the existing sets of texts in the culture); the interpersonal knowledge (knowledge of how people behave in particular situations, ie, the degrees of formality that a culture assigns to these particular situations, and the roles that people assume as a consequence); the textual knowledge (knowledge gained from the other texts including the knowledge of intra- and inter-textual contexts, conventions for the realization and organization of texts such as elements of cohesion and coherence, knowledge of how the entire text is structured) (see Leckie-Tarry, 1995).

Register studies and stylistic variation

The notion of context is central to the study of register. According to Leckie-Tarry (1993), situational features (context) determine what linguistic features are used. Register first came into general currency in the 1960s, first used according to Halliday by Reid in 1955 and later developed by Ure and Ellis (1977). Halliday et al. (1964) described it as 'a variety according to use' in the sense that each speaker has a range of variety to choose from at different times.

They further pointed out that when we observe language activity in the various contexts in which it takes place, we find differences in type of language selected as appropriate to different types of situation (p. 87). Register therefore, is determined by what is taking place, who is taking part, and what part the language is playing (Halliday, 1978: 31).

Scholars of register studies and stylistic variation have identified three abstract situational features, which will, in any given situation, influence language use. Halliday particularly developed these three main parameters, which are useful for characterizing the nature of the social transaction of the participants, to understand how the language acts and how it is being used in a particular field of discourse. These contextual features are the field of discourse, the mode of discourse, and the tenor of discourse. They are also called the register variables (see Eggins, 1994: 52).

The field of discourse refers to what the text is all about, *ie*, the social activity in which language plays a part. This, according to Rothery (1980: 7), is most clearly reflected in the lexical items chosen.

The mode of discourse refers to the channel of communication (written, spoken, spoken-to-be-written, written-to-be- cited, *etc*). It involves distances of two kinds:

- How far the language of the text is from the activity it describes, for instance, speech is close to the activity it describes, while writing is far from it.
- How far removed speakers and listeners are from one another, for instance, speakers and listeners are closer in face-to-face interaction while they are farthest in writing.

The tenor of discourse refers to who is taking part, and this includes the role relationships, which obtain between the language users in a particular situation (teacher-pupil, preacher-congregation, parent-child, *etc*).

Gregory (1967) further differentiates between personal addressee relationship and functional addressee relationship, *i.e.*, personal and functional tenor respectively. Personal tenor realises the interpersonal function of language, *i.e.*, the role relationship that exists among the participants. It also refers to social roles of the participants, *e.g.*, expert-layman, *etc*.

Functional tenor has to do with the speaker's or writer's purpose in the situation. This determines the type of discourse. For instance, the purpose may be to persuade, exhort, discipline, *etc*. This, in turn, determines the schematic structure of the text (see Rothery, 1981: 9). This paper focuses on one of these contextual features that determine register – tenor, and examines its role in electronic media Christian discourse in terms of how it affects the kind of language chosen.

Tenor in discourse

Tenor of discourse as identified in the last section is one of the three contextual variables which is significant for the choice of situational features that determine register. Participants in any discourse have social roles and relationships, and in each discourse, the participants produce or hear features of language that are typical of the activity involved. Such roles could be permanent attributes such as mother-child, or roles and relationships specific to the situation, *e.g.*, doctor-patient. This indicates that different individuals may assume different role relationships at different linguistic situations. For instance, a doctor will only be one at the hospital and may be a father or a preacher in some other linguistic contexts. Somebody may be a patient on the hospital bed and a teacher or driver in other specific situations.

Through the exchange of verbal meaning, one could also determine who at any time is the knower, *i.e.*, somebody who already knows the information and the non-knower, *i.e.*, a person to whom the information is directed with regard to any particular subject matter (Berry, 1981). It is likely that the knower will speak more often than the non-knower, thereby dominating the discourse.

The tenor of a discourse also determines the choice of lexical items, which may reflect intimacy, equality, solidarity, friendliness and so forth, as in the situation of lovers' conversation, conversation of colleagues, friends and peer group. The vocabulary may also be highly specialized and technical such as used by professionals in the pursuance of their jobs, or the language of research article, which presupposes that the co-participants have the same intellectual and research concerns.

The field of discourse has a primary influence on the tenor variable. A field with a high degree of formality relations produces an impersonal, official and frozen linguistic behaviour, while a field with a low degree of formality relations produces a personal and intimate behaviour. Where the setting is highly institutionalized, a higher degree of formality will tend to prevail, *eg*, public lecture. Where however the institution is more in the nature of a social practice in the society, levels of formality will tend to be lower (see Leckie-Tarry, 1995: 39).

The division of power in an interaction is also a feature of the tenor of discourse. This is an essential factor in understanding how texts mean. Power obtains in a discourse when one participant is able to control the behaviour of the other. For instance, this is typical in many formal linguistic settings such as lecture and sermon, where the speakers in principle are uninterruptable and they possess the power to control their listeners. The bases of power are many. Older people are assumed to have power over younger ones, parents over children, employer over employees, the rich over the poor, *etc*. In casual conversation, it has been observed that some classes of people get to be speakers more frequently than others, *eg*, men may hold the speaker role longer than women (Eggins, 1994: 193).

Tenor in Christian discourse in the electronic media in Nigeria

The use of the electronic media in disseminating religious information to a larger audience in Nigeria came with the advent of the charismatic movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Before then, the print media was used for the same purpose mostly by orthodox church organizations. Charismatic preachers are committed to the spread of the gospel and in the modern times, they engage in the use of modern technologies such as the radio, television, and the internet to facilitate the dissemination of the gospel (see Hackett, 1998:7). Our focus in this study is mainly on the two most widely used electronic media for disseminating information on Christianity, and these are the radio and television. We also observed the internet discourse, which is written to be read, and therefore different in terms of mode from the television and radio media.

Electronic media Christian discourse refers to any language situation in which Christian messages are disseminated through the use of the electronic media. With the advent of charismatic movements in Nigeria and their rigorous drive to evangelize, preaching of the gospel, which hitherto had been limited to churches and crusades, was extended to other domains such as inside buses and taxis, in the offices, at school, in the prisons, in the hospitals, and so forth.

The gospel is also popularly preached through the print media. One popular evangelistic print media is the tracts. In addition to this, stickers (placed on cars, doors to houses, offices, handbags, etc) are also used. Newspaper, a fast growing print media is one of the avenues being exploited by Christian organizations to disseminate the gospel. It is not unusual to find several columns, especially in Sunday newspapers devoted to one kind of Christian message or the other. Apart from this, many Christian organisations have their in-house bulletin and magazines through which various information on their activities and Christian doctrines are documented. There are also several independent (non-Church-based) magazines springing up which are mainly for evangelistic purposes. The use of billboards is also gaining wide acceptance among various Church organisations in Nigeria.

The large coverage television and radio give to information makes them to be favoured by most Christian organizations. These media can be used to reach several people at a time without having personal contact or face to face interaction with them. In contemporary times in Nigeria, the ability of a Christian ministry to preach the gospel through these media is seen as a measure of success for such organizations. This will not only afford the ministry the opportunity to preach the gospel but also to create awareness about the ministry's regular and special activities. The television is of particular advantage to Christian organizations because it is both an audio and visual media, unlike the radio, which is only audio. The audience can watch the programme and react to it.

Pentecostal and evangelistic organizations are more involved in regular radio and television preaching than other Christian organizations and the reason is quite obvious – reaching out for more souls who will join their organizations and then become hopefuls for the Kingdom of God. Some organizations have regular weekly programmes in one electronic media or the other, while some other big Christian ministries have programmes in most media organizations in Nigeria. Since radio and television pro-

grammes involve a lot of financial commitment, some organizations which cannot generate or commit such huge finances to electronic preaching wait to take advantage of free sponsorship provided by politician and philanthropic citizens during special Christian celebrations like the Easter and Christmas. It is also common for preachers to solicit for financial support from their audience and listeners to sponsor the programme.

Radio and television preaching has two major ways of recording, and this largely depends on the time slot available for the transmission. The first way is largely an unedited live transmission of religious meetings such as crusades, rallies and church services. This is more common in television preaching. The purpose is to allow a wider audience that live within the areas of coverage of the media organizations to watch the programme live. The preacher, who is aware of this arrangement takes care of the immediate context of the message (of people listening to him in a large auditorium or an open air venue, as well as the perceived anticipated context (of people watching the programme or listening to it in their sitting rooms at home, in their cars while driving, etc). He alternates between addressing the people physically present with him and those watching or listening to the programme.

The second mode is that in which the linguistic output is sometimes rehearsed and performed to fit into a time slot allotted for the transmission after the recording. The preacher addresses an imaginary audience or listeners. He therefore perceives and anticipates the context in which the people can either only hear his voice and see him, but he cannot see them, or they can only hear his voice, cannot see him and neither can he see them.

Radio and television Christian discourse has a schematic structure that can be generalizable to some extent is stated below:

Musicals – Introduction of preacher/ministry – Prayers – Message – Call for feedback – Musicals – End of the programme

Another electronic media for Christian discourse, which is yet to be widely in use in Nigeria for that purpose is the Internet. It is however fast gaining use among some big Christian ministries. Such ministries acquire web pages where they highlight their doctrines, beliefs and activities. Very few of them have regular and periodic preaching columns on the web page. The Internet became popular in Nigeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The mode is restricted to the educated, particularly, the computer literate people, since the message is written to be viewed. In addition to this, there are series of steps to be taken to reach the web pages and this makes it less accessible to people unless they deliberately go out to search for the page.

Fig 1: typology of electronic media Christian discourse

TYPE	MEDIUM	MODE	INTERLOCUTORS	CONTEXT
Unedited live transmission	Television	Audio-visual	Worshippers/ audience at home	Immediate/ anticipated
Pre-recorded	Television	Audio-visual	Viewers at home	Anticipated
Unedited live transmission	Radio	Audio	Listeners at home, in the car, etc.	Immediate/ anticipated
Pre-recorded	Radio	Audio	Listeners at home, in the car, etc.	Anticipated
Pre-recorded	Internet	Visual	Browser at internet café, at home, etc.	Anticipated

Analysis and findings

The linguistic medium selected in the radio and television Christian discourse is largely determined by the location and the target audience. About 80% of the discourses are carried out in the national linguistic code, which is English. The others are in the local languages of the setting. Since most of the media outfits are situated in the urban areas like Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, Akure, Osogbo, and Ado-Ekiti, there is an assumption that majority of the listeners were educated. This assumption which cuts across most major programmes on the radio and television in Nigeria may be wrong especially if one considers the literacy level of the country. According to UNESCO World Statistics, 51.7% of the total population of Nigeria is literate in English.

One major goal of the preacher is to be understood and actually allow the audience/listeners to make commitments. It is not common for preachers in the radio and television to assume that their audience/listeners are familiar with the topic, so the messages are usually rendered in simple language with little or no specialized vocabulary use. The messages are explicit and simple. If at all any specialized lexical items are used, the preacher takes time to define and explain such items. He tries to achieve this goal by being as explicit as possible.

The language usually has the pragmatic force of persuasion, and sometimes with warning as an underlying tone. In addition, they also exhort, admonish and chasten. They teach some basic Christian doctrines through which some challenges are thrown to the listener/audience. Preachers try to be as polite as possible in order not to negate their messages or discourage their target audience/listeners. Even when they need to condemn some practices such as smoking, drinking, prostitution, pools betting, etc., they do it in a polite manner knowing the purpose of the message – winning souls.

Preachers control the discourse from the beginning to the end. When they ask questions, they are typically rhetorical and at best are meant to set the audience/listener in meditative mood, for example:

When you die, what do you take to heaven?

Since the interlocutors are imaginary, this increases preachers' power to control the discourse. They know it all and say it all and even if they will ever get any response to their message, such responses will come later in form of telephone calls or letters which most of the time they would have solicited during the message.

The vocative forms used are typically the neutral forms, since the preachers are addressing people whose personalities they are not sure for example:

You my listener...

However, sometimes, when specific people are addressed, preachers may use their profession (*teacher, policemen, trader, etc*) or use descriptive words depicting their action (*prostitute, drunkard, liar, etc*) to turn attention to such people, e.g.:

You teachers aiding and abetting your students in exam malpractices...

Prostitutes, listen to me, your body is God's gift to you...

Preachers also get the attention of their listener/audience by trying to exhaust the list of possible target listener/audience types. This is usually done to prevent a situation in which some of the listeners/audience will exonerate themselves from any blame that may come from the message, eg:

Listen to me, you may be a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, a father, a mother, a boss, a worker, a rich man, a poor man, whoever you are, this message is for you...

Even after listing the possible target audience/listener, the preacher sometimes still uses the indefinite pronoun *whoever* (as we can see in example 5), which has the function that the message is meant for everyone listening or watching.

Tenor of discourse determines the choice of interpersonal system of mood, *ie*, patterns of clause types such as declarative, imperative, interrogative and exclamatory. Radio and television Christian discourse is typically characterized by declarative forms, *ie*, forms that convey information or make something known. Declaratives are used to present factual and fictitious information. Sometimes, sto-

ries are told to illustrate Christian principles. Declarative forms are also used to challenge the listener/audience, e.g.:

When you have received Christ, what you have received is eternal life – zoe.

There is no uncleanness in the nature of God.

Until you know you have been created holy, you cannot be holy

Since the preaching is meant to educate, create awareness and spread knowledge about the gospel, it is not out of place that it is typically dominated by declaratives.

When interrogative forms are used at all, they do not have the illocutionary force of eliciting any verbal response rather to provoke deep thought on what is being questioned, eg:

Will you still continue in your evil ways? (Polar interrogation)

Why do you continue to allow yourself to be cheated by the enemy?

(Wh- interrogation)

Interrogation is also used as a hearing-check strategy. This strategy is used to check whether the listener is actually following (see Olateju, 1998: 35) eg:

Are you listening to me?

Hello?

These forms are used despite that the preacher does not get any confirmation to them since his listener/audience are imaginary.

Imperative forms are sometimes also used. They are implicitly addressed to the listener/audience with an implicit 'you' as the subject to demand that *he/she* do something, *ie*, immediate compliance is needed. Imperative is one of the mood types that positions the speaker as having some power over the addressee, since according to Eggins and Slade (1997:88), 'you can only direct somebody to do something if you assume the dominant position'. In this kind of discourse, there is lack of the kind of reciprocity you find in casual conversation. The preacher is giving knowledge and oftentimes, demanding, while the listener/audience very often are complying. The non-reciprocity of these roles is a clear indication of unequal power relations between the preacher and his listener/audience. Immediate compliance is elicited when the preacher expects the listener/audience to act in a particular way or say something, eg:

Please open your Bibles with me to...look at verse...

Now, listen to me...

Everybody say...

You can stretch forth your hand towards the screen and say after me...

Forms 13, 14 and 15 are typical of unedited transmission of live performance (the forms were originally spoken to a live audience) though now being used for imaginary audience. Form 16 is restricted to recorded discourse addressing an imaginary audience/listener. The context of an audience/listener watching the message from their television screen is already reflected in the form used. This directive has the presupposition of faith, which is the pivot of the Christian belief, that is, the preacher has the belief that power flows directly to any contact with the medium through which his message is being channeled. In other words, whatever prayers he made will be answered and whatever confession people make as a result of his prompting will work out for them.

Another major pattern that enacts roles and role relations in discourse is that associated with modality. Modality according to Eggins and Slade (1997:74) 'covers a range of options open to interactants to temper or qualify the message'. The preacher has the social role that confers power on him to use a lot of directives, thereby expecting obligations from the listener/audience, eg:

You must accept Christ today

Preachers may also want to appeal to the psychology of the listener/audience capability by using forms that help them (the listeners) to build confidence in themselves and their ability, eg:

You can make it, don't allow the devil to deceive you to give up

Preachers can further strengthen this by expressing his conviction about the inclination of his listener/audience, eg:

I am convinced you have in you what it takes to be successful in life if only you can tap into your God-given potentials.

The Internet as a medium for disseminating Christian message has a different mode from the radio and the television. Despite its similarity to the television (both transmitted through the screen monitor), the Internet is primarily visual, ie, specially designed as a page or more to be read and digested. The World Wide Web (www) allows people to create home pages "speaking aloud" about themselves or their organizations to millions of people around the whole world spanning different cultures. Like any other form of writing, it is space-bound and carefully organized and structured. The readership is not clearly determinable; however, the designer/writer tries to meet the need of a very wide readership as he presents a clear and unambiguous text.

The Internet discourse in Nigeria is conducted in English, since that is the country's official language. It must be admitted here that the use of the internet in Nigeria is still largely limited to that of a forum for advertising the Church or Christian ministry. Web pages typically feature the origin of the organization, their beliefs, the organogram of their regular activities, etc. Web pages are rarely used as an avenue for preaching the gospel in Nigeria. When they are used, the vocative form is neutral and the mood patterns of the clause types are typically declarative. It is not common to have imperative forms or directives.

Whichever electronic media is used, the message is the same – the gospel, Christian doctrines and the goal of winning souls for God's kingdom. The personal tenor is that of the preacher as the knower/expert, while the reader is the non-knower. The functional tenor is to persuade, exhort and challenge the hearer/reader.

It is clear from the foregoing that electronic media Christian discourse in Nigeria is a highly institutionalized discourse in which there is lack of the kind of reciprocity that characterizes casual conversation. The preacher is usually the dominant speaker and he determines how his imaginary audience will respond to his message, which is typically characterized by information and directives.

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