
Language as a Vehicle of Communication in Christian Religion

Ugoji, Stellamaris.C.
Department of Languages,
Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Anambra State
Ugostella4amaris@yahoo.com; 08035645375

Abstract: *Contemporary works in the philosophy of religion have been much occupied with problems created by the distinctively religious uses of language. This paper examines religious language by x-raying both its meaning and the challenges associated with it. The paper also looked at the relationship between language and religion. It argues that, in as much as there are identified problems with religious language, it has helped in understanding religious experiences which make belief or faith to be a reality. This paper concludes that Religious language communicates and expresses ideas, emotions and convictions to the audience.*

Key words: Language, Communication, Christian Religion

1.1 Introduction

Christian Religion Studies (CRS) is one of the major subject missionaries bequeathed to Nigerian education system on the establishment of schools by the 19th century missionaries. The aim was to train people who will be of immense help to the colonial trinity goals (God/Christianity, government/colonization, and Gold/commerce). To achieve the above, the major curriculum contents of their educational system were Bible knowledge, Arithmetic and English language for communication. To implement fully the contents, adequate attention was given to the understanding of the place of God in man's life (Njoku & Njoku :17). During the missionary era, bible knowledge otherwise known as CRS was a core subject. Subsequently, after independence, government took over schools and there was a clarion call for review of curriculum in 1983. The call was because of criticism leveled against colonial education, which some scholars viewed as being too arts oriented and so such lacked relevance to Nigerian upliftment, political emancipation, and infrastructural development (Ocho cited in Njoku, and Njoku :176). Ocho further explained that the situation led to the modification of the curriculum with greater emphasis on sciences and technological subjects.

Following the shift in the study of Christian Religious Studies, motivation started dwindling, and interest in the subject dropped. It was observed that the teaching of the subject witnessed slackening of control by principals, head teachers, teachers' lack of commitment and other defects such as students' dishonesty, examination malpractices and disrespect to mention but a few.

In support of the above assertion, Ndawa cited in Njoku & Njoku :176 maintained that pupils nowadays are groomed to be intellectual giants in science and technology with little or no interest in the moral growth, this he referred to as spiritual dwarfism. He noted that some of the pupils may join secret cults to perpetuate evil in diverse forms. In this way the goals and objectives of including CRS in the school curriculum has been jeopardized.

The major aim of inclusion of CRS in the education curriculum is to raise generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, appreciate dignity of labour and those moral values specified in the broad national aims as good citizens. While at the secondary levels the subject is meant to prepare learners for useful living through inculcation of Christian attitudes and values, and to prepare learners for higher education (Akubue :16-17).

Language is the expression and communication of emotions, ideas, or thoughts between human beings by means of speech and hearing. It refers to the sounds spoken and heard being systematized and confirmed by usage among a given people over a period. By using these vocabularies and phraseologies, religious beliefs were transferred and retained from one generation to another within the body of oral literature, the spoken tradition of a society.

Scientific and archeological discoveries are expressed in language. Every kind of idea or feeling is given through the medium of language. Most natural, religious ideas are also represented in language. As a result, religion has developed its own register and consequently it has generated some peculiar “text variety” (Ugwueze and Ezenwa: 74). The effect is that any single religious organization forms a speech community with its own vocabulary pronunciation and phraseology which are not generally used or even known throughout the border community.

Once a language becomes associated, with religious worship, its believers often ascribe virtues to the language of worship that they would not give to other language even their native tongues.

Religious or sacred language is vested with a solemnity and dignity that ordinary languages lack. Consequently, the training of priests in the use of religious language becomes an important cultural investment, and the use of the language is perceived to give them access to the body of knowledge that untrained lay people cannot have. The sacred languages typically preserve characteristics that would have been lost during language development. In other cases, it may simply reflect archaic forms of a living language.

Some 17th century elements of the English languages, for instance, remain current in protestant Christian worship through the use of King James Bible or older versions of the Anglican Book of common prayer. In more extreme cases, the language of the liturgy is no longer comprehensible without special training. In some instances, the sacred language may not even be or have been native to a local population, that is, missionaries or pilgrims may carry the religious language to people who never spoke it, and to whom it is altogether alien language.

Several languages have been used as religious languages. They include Classical Arabic for Muslims who believe it to be the only language of the Qur’an. It differs from the various forms of contemporary spoken Arabic. The core of the Hebrew Bible is written in classical Hebrew referred to by some Jews as the “Holy language”. Hinduism is traditionally considered to have one liturgical language “Sanskrit”. The churches which trace their origin to the apostles have continued to use the standard languages of the few centuries after Christ’s Ascension. These include Latin in the Catholic church, Greek in the Greek orthodox church and Greek Catholic church. Coptic in the Coptic Orthodox Church and Syriac in the Syriac churches (Ugwueye & Ohaeto :175).

Besides sacred languages, there are phrases or statements that could be labeled as religious sayings. If the conversation was to turn to discussion about God or Virgin Mary or Angels, then the language drifts from the

everyday to the religious, mysterious, sacred, or metaphysical. Many doubt the truth of such statements yet they are said often.

It is within the purview of this paper to discuss language as a vehicle of communication in Christian Religion, the relationship between language and religion with a view to understand the meaning and the challenges associated with religious language.

2.1 Conceptual Review

Language

Language is the most important aspect in the life of all beings. Humans speak about ten thousand dialects. Although most of these sounds differ from one another, all possess the same characteristics of language: a collection of symbols governed by rules and used to convey messages between individuals. On the most obvious level, language allows us to satisfy basic functions such as describing ideas, making requests, and solving problems. Beyond these functions, the way we use language also influences others and reflects our attitudes in more subtle ways.

Beside shaping the way we view ourselves and others, language reflects our attitudes, feelings of control, attraction, commitment, responsibility—all these and more are reflected in the way we use language. (Adler & Rodman: 99-106). We use language to express inner thoughts and emotions, make sense of complex and abstract thought, to learn to communicate with others, to fulfill our wants and needs, as well as to establish rules and maintain our culture.

According to Umera, Nwangwu & Ezekwe (58) language is a coding system and a means by which information may be transmitted or shared between two or more communicators for purposes of command, instruction, or play. David Crystal (2015) defines language as a system of conventional spoken, manual. Or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. I can say that language is a means of self-expression.

Language as a Means of Communication

Language is the most powerful, convenient, and permanent means and form of communication. Non-linguistic symbols such as expressive gestures, signals of various kinds, traffic lights, road signs, flags etc. are also means of communication, yet they are not as flexible, comprehensive, perfect, and extensive as language is.

Language is the best means of self-expression. It is through language that humans express their thoughts, desires, emotions, feelings; it is through it they store knowledge, transmit message, transfer knowledge and experience from one person to another, from one generation to another. It is through it that humans interact. It is language again that yokes present, past and future together.

Language is a Social Phenomenon

Language is a set of conventional communicative signals used by humans for communication in a community. Language in this sense is a possession of social group, an indispensable set of rules which permits its members to interact with each other to cooperate with each other: it is a social institution. Language exists in society; it is a means of nourishing and developing culture and establishing human relations. It is as a member of society that a human being acquires a language.

Language is Arbitrary

By the arbitrariness of language, we mean: there is no inherent or logical relation or similarity between any given feature of language and its meaning. That is entirely arbitrary, that there is no direct, necessary connection between the nature of things or ideas of the language. Furthermore, these are at variation in different languages of the world and have no uniformity.

Language has been described as “the vehicle of thought”. It is almost the only means of communicating thoughts and feelings available to man. There are other means of course, like the para-linguistic form (signs and symbols). Even so, in its spoken and written forms language remains by far the commonest means of communication. Linguistic studies have discovered that the emergence and development of language has contributed more than any other factor in bridging the wide silence that would have characterized the existence of the early man. It still plays the same role today. It is the sole and life-blood of communication.

Without the emergence and use of language, there can be no communication at all, whether written or oral. Life, itself, would have been paralyzed. For business purpose of every kind or for individual purpose, efficiency is liable to turn from time to time to communication in speech and writing. Language as a means of communication cannot be eliminated. Rather, the need for higher standards of clear, precise, and purposeful expression grows constantly with the increasing complexity of life and society. Language is therefore the primary means of communication with which the earliest human beings exchanged ideas.

Language performs various functions in the life of human beings.

Fundamentally, language is used by human beings to communicate ideas, thoughts, feelings and values of various kind. It is a carrier of thought which is used in making statements and in giving various kinds of information. As a means of communication, language is used to effect social interaction. It could be a religious, cultural, political, economic matters. In whatever context, language is used to nurture, organize and perpetuate human life. When we correct, advice, punish or reward, we are using language to control behavior and instill discipline in society.

Communication

communication is the transmission of information from sender to receiver. It is a two way process that involves the transfer of messages or ideas using symbols that will be understood by the interacting parties.

Communication is said to be dynamic, cyclical and continuous and is made up of many elements.

The intended effect was usually limited to making the receiver aware of some points of view, new products, or course of action. Neither the social process of communication nor the influence of communication on behaviour received enough consideration.

By the 1990s, the conceptual framework for communication had expanded dramatically. The key program elements of strategic communication identified the audience participation, recognition of behaviour change as both a social and an individual process, use of mass media, and development of entertainment for educational purpose-are rooted in new conceptual framework of communication and behaviour change.

This communication was redefined as a “process in which the participants create share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding” (Kincaid, cited in health communication :18). Mutual understanding builds the foundation for mutual agreement, which in turn makes collective action possible. Communication in this way sometimes even has effects on the audience contrary to those intended. One of the

main lessons learned over the last twenty-five years is that effective communication begins with the audience, the client, or the consumer and continues over time as a process of mutual adjustment and convergence.

Even without any communication media, people communicate, exchange ideas, and alter their behaviour. But the unprecedented growth of mass media—first print, then radio, now television and computer communication—has raised new possibilities for rapid global communication and this new theories about how people may react and change because of mass media. The emphasis throughout is on expanding the role that communication plays in religion, health programs, institutionalizing a systematic approach to developing communication programs, and stimulating the level of creativity needed to make communication effective.

Religion

Etymologically, religion is derived from the following:

Religando- Meaning refattening up or binding back. This is the opinion of Lactantius because for him, religion expresses a situation which God over powers man, whereby, binding him (man) to Himself.

Religendo-relegere: to re-read. This is the opinion of Cicero, since for him, religion is the fruit of assiduous study or meditation.

Re-elegere:- re-election, in which St Augustine sees the idea of re-election, by which God chooses to re-establish man in grace after man had lost former grace by sin. (Madu: 18).

Metuh cited in (Madu: 20) sees Religion as an institutionalized system of symbols, beliefs, values and practices focused on questions of ultimate meaning.

Religion here brings to the fore the meaning relevance and purpose of reality.

In a wide sense, religion can signify a moral relation and feeling of dependence on a transcendental Being which is superhuman and terrestrial.

Religion and its role of human life defines Religion as an all round movement in the light of faith in one God and a sense of responsibility for the formation of thought and belief for the promotion of high principles of human immorality for the establishment of good relation among members of the society and the elimination of every sort of undue discrimination.

The New International Webster's comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language Encyclopedic defines religion as a belief binding the spiritual nature of man to a supernatural being, as involving a feeling of dependence and responsibility together with the feelings and practices which naturally flow from such a belief. It is also an essential part or a practical test of the spiritual life. (Webster: 1064).

Teague (21) states that religion and culture are similar in that they both provide systems of authority, canons of order, and moral codes that coerce and seduce their followers.

Edward said sees religion as an obstacle to true "intellectualism". He struggled with the pain of seeing how religion blocks intellectual enquiry, enforces group conformity, and suggests subjugates people through the cultivation of violent passion. Religion is for him the equivalent of dogmatism, illiberalism, scape goating, arbitrary power, anti-democratic authority, and the propensity to dissemble and lie. (Teague:21).

Religious belief is one of the important elements which constitute the tradition of a community. All the experiences, of our ancestors are preserved as cultural memory, including their life and death experiences, their interactions with the environment and, last but not the least, their hopes and dreams for the future. Every

religion has a unique tradition revelation. Such revelation is not a supernatural, miraculous intervention of God in our history, but this abiding presence in human life as recognized by people in a faith experience.

There are, perhaps, six basic cultural functions of religion (Dennis Teague:21).

- 1. Psychological**-Religion provides support, consolation, and reconciliation.
- 2. Transcendental**-It provides security and direction.
- 3. Sacralization**-It legitimizes norms and values.
- 4. Prophetic**- It criticizes norms and values.
- 5. Identification** – Religion gives the individual a sense of identify with the distant past and the limitless future.
- 6. Maturation** _ It marks the individual’s passage through life for him and his society.

Relationship between Language and Religion

Some elements of relationship exist between language and religion

Language is related with religion because without language we wouldn’t have the Holy Bible in our hands. Above all this without language in religion the language wouldn’t be spread around the world. We wouldn’t have known English without Latin. Without language there will not be all the religions that are in the world nowadays.

Acquiring a religion involves to some extent learning a new vocabulary and syntax. It would be impossible to acquire a religion without the medium of language. Because what is said may particularly condition what can be thought, the use of speech pattern will have subtle psychological effects on the speakers, tending to limit what can be named and hence what can be thought. Hence, religion and language are closely connected to each other. The tie that exists between language and religion is such that enables language to be used for intra-group communication within religious settings. In this context, language functions to help maintain conformity to religious values, beliefs and ritual practices. “Religious jargons that are uncommon outside a religious group may be expressed, syntax may become more formal or even archaic, and style of speaking such as a particular cadence, resonance and intonation pattern that is characteristic of the group-may be adopted. The underlying message communicated by these is “we are a unified group with common religious values and beliefs (176). Language and religion are related in the sense of uniting their users. People who speak the same tongue are likely to be closer and friendlier than others who do not understand the language of communication.

Language as a Vehicle of Communication in Christian Religion

Without language systems and other important tools of communication, we could not carry on the thousands of organized group activities and lead our interdependent lives.

Language seems to be the primary prerequisite need and the most important tool in communicating Christ, to other people. In fact, without having understood any language, no communication could be possible. We use creativity in language to communicate with others effectively, express ourselves and what we believe in, and persuade others of what is best to be done. This shows that people may agree about the facts and differ intensively about the interpretation. “The facts that religious discourse deals with are perfectly ordinary empirical facts like what happens when we pray; but we are tempted to call them supernatural facts because our way of living is organized round them; they have for us value, relevance, importance, which they would not have if we were atheists” as stated by (Mitchell:90).

The tie that exists between language and religion is such that enables language to be used for intra-group communication within religious settings. In this context, language functions to help maintain conformity to religious values, beliefs, and ritual practices.

A typical example of an in-group linguistic identity is the phenomena of Glossolalia (speaking in tongues). This is “the production of sound sequences that have no conventional meanings in speech like acts) (Ugwueye & Ohaeto: 176) which often occurs during ecstatic trance states. In Nigeria for instance, glossolalia is commonly associated with pentecostals and spirit filled Rev Fathers in Catholic Church where it is understood as “a gift of the spirit” in which the speaker is believed to be either praising God in angelic language or is into a spiritual war-fare. In the later, the common belief amongst the members of the Pentecostal churches is that glossolalia often confuses or throws the devil off balances.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the use of Latin language makes the worship unique for example I believe in God which can be sang like Credo, let us adore forever the most Holy Sacrament which can be sang as Adoremus in Aeternum Sanctissimum Sacramentum. The divine praise as “Benedictus Deus” Glory be to the father and to the Holy Spirit as Gloria Patri, et filio spiritui sancto e.t.c (Mbaka: 152-155).

Even in Anglican Communion, the use of language is also important because if you don’t belong to that communion, you will not understand the language they are using. For example, the Rev may say God be with you and the response will be the same with your spirit; etc..

It was argued sometime that languages could be thought of as parasites or viruses to their hosts. Languages are not static but evolved overtime; they behave in fact like living organisms. Language and religion are related in the sense of uniting their users. People who speak the same tongue are likely to be closer and friendlier than others who do not understand the language of communication. This is seen clearly where people of diverse dialects converge in a place. Religion has such a binding force among its votaries that sometimes supersede that of siblings. In fact, some Christian conservatives and Christian denominations address one another as “brother”, “sister” or even “elder”.

In the same manner, language, and religion, individually or collectively, can be strong determining factors for employment, admission into schools, marriage and a whole lot of other cooperation, unions and solidarities. Besides, language and religion relate positively, they also possess, by their nature, the capacities to be exploited for negative purposes. Language and religion can successfully be used to hide the truth from the people. To understand religious language which falls under what Crapo calls “restricted code” is not easily decoded especially if one is not an insider (179) language is the prerequisite for communication, interaction thought language constitutes identity and social adaptation, and so language can be seen as a vehicle of communication in Christian religion.

3.0 Methodology

The researcher adopted the qualitative approach using secondary sources of data from journals, textbooks, and internet to determine the role of Language as a Vehicle of Communication in Christian Religion.

4. Findings

Challenges in using Language to Communicate in Christian Religion

Contemporary work in the philosophy of religion has been much occupied with problems created by the distinctively religious uses of language. The problem of religions language considers whether it is possible to talk about God meaningfully if the traditional conceptions of God as being incorporate infinite, and timeless, are work for accepted. Because these traditional conceptions of God make it difficult to describe God, language of religion has the potential to be meaningless (for example, “God loves mankind”) refer to a special kind of fact-religious as distinguished from scientific fact. It is obvious that many, perhaps all, of the terms that are applied in religious discourse to God are being used in special ways, differing from their use in ordinary mundane contexts. For example, when it is said that “Great is the Lord”, it is not meant that God occupies a large volume of space; when it is said that “the Lord spoke unto Joshua” it is not meant that God has a physical body with speech organs which set in motion sound waves impinged upon Joshua’s eardrums. (John, Hick: 6).

The use of connotation

The doctrine of “analogical prediction” as it occurs in Aquinos in philosophy of Religion online teaches that when a word such as “good” is applied both to a created being and to God, it is not being used univocally (that is, with the same meaning) in two cases. God is not good in identically the sense in which human beings may be good. Nor, on the other hand, do we apply the epithet “good” to God and man equivocally (that is, with completely different and unrelated meanings).

Thus, when we say that God is good, we are saying that there is a quality of the infinitely perfect being that corresponds to what at our own human level we call goodness. In this case it is the divine goodness that is the true, normative, and unbroken reality, whereas human life shows at best a taint, fragmentary, and distorted reflection of this quality.

Only in God can the perfections of being occur in their true and unfractured nature. Only God knows, loves, and is righteous and wise in the full and proper sense. The doctrine of analogy provides a framework for certain limited statements about God without infringing upon the agnosticism, and the sense of the mystery of the divine being which have always characterized Christian and Jewish thought at their best.

The use of symbols

An important element in the thought of Paul Tillich is his doctrine of the “symbolic” nature of religious language. Tillich distinguishes between a sign and a symbol. Both point to something else beyond themselves.

But a sign signifies that to which it points by arbitrary convention as for instance, when the red light at the street corner signifies, that drivers are ordered to halt. In contrast to this purely external connection, a symbol “participates in that to which it points”.

A symbol “opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us” and at the same time “unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul” corresponding to the new aspects of the world that it reveals.

Tillich holds that religious faith, which is the state of being “ultimately concerned” about the ultimate can express itself only in symbolic language. “whatever we say about that which concerns us ultimately, whether or not we call it God, has a symbolic meaning. In no other way can faith express itself adequately. The language of faith is the language of symbols (Paul Tillich :42).

Another major problem with religious language lies with the phenomenon of language change. Language/shift can make traditional language incomprehensible to the later ages. So also the change in meanings of the religious expressions which can be obvious not minding the retaining of the meaningfulness of the statements but a different meaning from its original denotation. In such situations the later generations may be unaware that their understanding of a religious text might be quite different from that of their fore bearers (Ugwueye & Ohaeto: 180).

The philosophy of Religion by John H. Hick and Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia online refers to the term “religious language” by medieval thinkers as descriptive terms that are applied to God. Some of these statements are religious statements: “God loves mankind”, “Great is the Lord”, “God is good”, “Loving”, “command”, “forgives” “hears”, “speaks”, “will” and purposes is relatively unproblematic. “God is merciful”, “Angels are on guard”, “Holy Ghost fire pursue them” e.t.c. The questions might be: Is God good in the same sense as “Obama is good? Is God merciful in the same sense as Mother Theresa was, Are Angels on guard in the same way security men guard a place? Does Holy Ghost fire pursue people the same way Police pursue criminals.

The use of ambiguous words

The ambiguity in meaning with respect to answers to the above questions constitutes what is known as religious problem. The problem of religious language started with the practitioners of the Abrahamic religions tradition, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Since God is thought to be incorporeal, infinite and timeless, the predicate applied to corporeal, finite and temporal creatures would not apply to them. This problem is a philosophical one that has engaged the attention of scholars since years.

The use of Parables

Another Religious Language is the use of parable.

Jesus introduces parables as a means of teaching; kingdom truths. The purpose is because it is a “mystery” He spoke many things to them in parables saying “Behold; a sower went out to sow “And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside, and the birds came and devoured them. some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth.

“But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away”. “And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them.

But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop, some a hundred, some sixty, some thirty.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear”.

The parable of the sower explained “when anyone hears the word, of the kingdom, and does not understand it then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.

“But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately received it with joy; “yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and cares of the word and deceitfulness of riches choked the word, and he becomes unfruitful.

“But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces some a hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty”. From this explanation we can see that the language of religion is very mysterious and cannot be understood by a lay person. (Math. 13:4-9 and 19-23).

5. Conclusion

Multiple solutions have been suggested and defended over time. These include: that all statement about God is meaningless. Traditionally, religious language has been explained as via negative analogy, symbolism, or myth, each describes a way of talking about God in human terms. The via negative is a way of referring to God according to what God is not; analogy use human qualities as standards against which to compare divine qualities.

Many scholars including Ayer, in Wikipedia, maintained this view. He argued that religious language must be meaningless because the propositions it makes are impossible to verify.

Furthermore, they suggest that all attributes predicated of God are to be interpreted equivocally with respect to what they mean in reference to creatures.

More so, various parables have also been proposed to solve the problem of meaning in religious language. R.M Hare used his parable of a lunatic to introduce the concept of “bliks”- unverifiable beliefs according to which a worldview is established-which are not necessarily meaningless. Basil Mitchell used a parable to show that faith can be logical even if it seems unverifiable. John Hick used his parable of the celestial City to propose his theory of eschatological verification, the view that if there is an afterlife, then religious statement will be verifiable after death.

Language has been seen as a means for understanding people and their minds in relation to the world and a vehicle of communication in Christian Religion

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