

RESEARCH ARTICLE



**A SPEECH ACT STUDY OF PENTECOSTAL GOSPEL PROGRAMME ADVERTISING**

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**ABSTRACT**

In the wake of the revolutionary shift in interest by linguists, from language form to language functions, several attempts have been made by scholars to investigate what people are doing whenever they use language, and the basis upon which the meaning of an utterance can transcend the conventional meaning of the words the speaker uses in a given conversational exchange. The current study is one of such attempts, and seeks essentially to investigate the acts contained in Pentecostal gospel program advertising. Using Austin’s (1962) Speech Act Theory, the paper analyzes as data, 12 texts of Pentecostal gospel program adverts gathered from national dailies, the television, billboards and walls of residential buildings by selected churches in Northern Nigeria. The goal of the analysis is to find out the acts contained in such adverts with the conditions necessary for the successful performance of such acts.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Ever since the posthumous publication of Austin’s ground breaking work, “How to Do Things with Words” in 1962, the attention of linguists has shifted drastically from language form to language functions. Thus, unlike earlier linguists such as Halliday (1975), Palmer (1952), Quirk (1962) and Chomsky (1965) whose aim in language study was basically in dissecting the system and conventions embedded in human language, modern linguists are increasingly becoming pre-occupied with what users of language do when they use language and the conditions necessary for valid and authentic interpretation of their utterances.

Although this new functional approach to language studies has been variously used by scholars in such

areas as courtroom conversation, commercial advertisements, radio interview, among others, little or nothing exists, to this researcher’s knowledge, on how Pentecostal preachers in Nigeria manipulate language in advertising their programmes to their audience through, especially, the print media. The need to fill this gap becomes pertinent as one observes, on daily basis, the increasing dominance of Pentecostal gospel programme adverts on the pages of newspapers, billboards and virtually every available space on the walls of residential buildings across most towns and cities in Nigeria. Although these adverts are essentially religion-based, the very important fact that they emanate from a recognized institution within the society namely, the *Church*, necessitates an intellectual inquiry,

especially in relation to how they constitute the features of language use and interpretation in the Christian religion. This is because, as Crystal (1988:5) observes,

The variety of English language encompasses all social institutions. As soon as people come into regular contact with each other, the language they use is likely to develop features which reflect the bonds that exist between them, and which distinguish them from other social groups.

It is against this background that this study examines the features of the language of gospel program adverts and the basis on which the users identify the illocutionary acts contained in such adverts with the conditions necessary for them to be a successful performance of the acts they name. This, as the study further demonstrates, is possible only when there is a contextual platform of mutual relevance, between the target audience and the programme organizers, by means of which the former can correctly infer the meaning on the latter's mind. The overall argument of the study is that words and sentences in gospel programme adverts operate on a different dimension of meaning accessible only to people with correct understanding of the social context in which the utterances are produced. Consequently, the aim of the study is to:

- a. Identify the acts contained in gospel programme adverts and the conditions necessary for their successful performance.
- b. analyze the relationship between the illocutionary forces of gospel programme adverts and the context in which they are produced.

The data for the study were gathered from the written texts of these adverts on national dailies, billboards and the walls of residential buildings in Nigeria. In all, there are about 12 of these adverts, grouped into 3 categories.

### 1.2. The Language of Advertisement

There appears to have been a timeless consensus among linguists that language exists primarily for the purpose of communication. This communicative essence of language is reflected in virtually every department of human activity, and remains one of the most cohesive pillars of the human society. In each of its sphere of communicative influence,

language wields a powerful influence over people, especially in relationship to the decisions they make vis-à-vis the choices they have. One area in which the fore-going has had an unqualified application is in the use of language within the field of advertisement. This being so, however, a sufficient grasp of the dynamics of the language of advertisement is not unconnected with the field of advertisement itself, since it is within the domain of the latter that the former derives its distinctiveness, especially in contrast to the registers of other fields, such as politics and medicine for instance. Consequently, an attempt is first made here to examine the views of a few scholars, on advertisements generally.

Advertisement is a complex phenomenon which, according to Satarupa (1999), involves the organization of text that provides information about a product or service along an anchorage of image that suggests some cohesion of logical linkage leading to a meaningful interpretation to the target audience. In advertisement, there is a deliberate attempt to familiarize consumers on the existence or qualities of a product, service, business, or an event in order to encourage them to buy and use it. And because of the continual emergence of new products, technologies and services, advertisement, according to Spincer (1999), has not just become the inevitable outcome of a capitalist society, but is an integral part of our social life and economic system. Spincer (1999) further opines that advertisement itself can be classified into commercials and non-commercials, on the basis of the object and purpose involved in it. Commercial adverts according to him, are sub-classified into commercial consumer adverts and prestige adverts. Whereas the former relates to adverts on consumer goods such as cosmetics and medicine, the latter includes services like banking and insurance. In non-commercial adverts, according to him, selling and buying are not involved, and certain ideas, morals or appeals are usually communicated to the public from government agencies or associations. It is to this latter category that we classify gospel programme adverts.

Advertisement is type of communication and therefore language use within its domain has generated considerable intellectual attention among

linguists. For instance, Leech (1996) attempts a comprehensive study of the language of advertisement as it relates to such aspects of linguistics as grammar, vocabulary, rhetoric, discourse and rhyme, with particular focus on how these areas of language are manipulated in advertisement on television. Leech (1966) also demonstrates how the use of words, phrases and classes constitute a unique characteristic of advertising language.

In their study of the language of advertising in the commercial press, Vestergaard and Schroder (1985) analyse how the expressive, informational, contextual and directive functions of language are manipulated in advertisements to encourage consumers to patronize a particular product.

In Jefkin's (1985) view, the language of advertisement is characterized by a number of preferred linguistic techniques and patterns, some of which include simple, personal and colloquial style with a familiar vocabulary having such phonological devices as rhyme and alliteration to sustain consumers' attention, and a generous use of superlatives and hyperbole in characterizing products with often indirect reference to rival products.

### 1.3. The Nature of the Study

The study is essentially pragmatic in nature. Pragmatics itself is an area of language studies which, according to Leech and Short (1981:290), is concerned with

that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered.

The pragmatic investigation of language seeks to unveil how more is communicated by speakers than what they literally say and the basis on which the meaning of an utterance can transcend the conventional standard meaning of the words the speaker uses. In pragmatics, we seek to find out the relationship among the meaning of words, what speakers mean when uttering those words, the particular circumstances of their utterance, their intentions, actions and what they manage to communicate in the final analysis.

The foregoing in summary suggests that pragmatics is the analysis of language in relation to context which, according to Lyons (1977), is the totality of the extra-linguistic features that have relevance to a communication act. These extra-linguistic features, in Firth's (1957) conception, relate to the social and cultural background that language forms can depend on. In the current study, there is a deliberate attempt to identify the acts contained in gospel programme adverts and analyze the contextual basis on which the target audience of such adverts interpret the illocutionary forces of the acts.

### 1.4. THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

Being pragmatic in nature, the study, apart from using insights from Bach and Harnish's (1979) mutual contextual beliefs and the *relevance* maxim of Grice's (1975) cooperative principles, relies essentially on some portions of Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory. The Speech Acts Theory, as proposed by Austin (1964) and later modified by Searle (1969), outlines a five-category classification of illocutionary utterances according to their illocutionary force, and further provides the conditions that guarantee the successful performance of the utterances that belong in each category. The acts in this classification that relate to the current study are commissives and declaratives, in addition to the perlocutionary effects of these acts on the hearers. Commissives are the speech acts that commit the speaker to do some future action, and the condition for their fulfilment depends on the speaker and not the hearer. The next are declaratives whose successful performance guarantees that the propositional content of the act corresponds to the world.

Insights from Bach and Harnish's 'intention and inference' approach to speech acts, built around their theory of 'contextual mutual beliefs' provides a platform for the study to determine and analyse the basis upon which the members of the Christian community identify the acts contained in gospel programme adverts. This is especially so in the light of the three basic assumptions, outlined in the theory, which are shared by the general members of the linguistic community for whom the act is meant. This integrative theoretical model provides a basis for establishing the pragmatic features of gospel

programme adverts and the role of context in evaluating the meanings of such adverts.

TABLE A

Advert	Act-type	Mutual Contextual Belief	Relevance	Perlocutionary Effect
“There shall be showers of blessing”.	Commissive	This figurative expression is predicated on God’s promise to Christians in the book of Zechariah10v1. The advert is a promise of unlimited, abundant blessings (most times conceptualized in material terms) to the target audience who believe its validity, since it is a quotation from the Bible.	The act is relevant being a quotation from the Bible.	The act is re-assuring and persuasive.
“Bringing many sons to glory.”	Commissive	“Sons” in biblical language is in common gender, applicable to both men and women. This advert is therefore meant to be understood as an invitation to all Christians.	The act is relevant.	The act is persuasive.

1.5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The first advert on this table is, based on the Austinian classification of speech acts, a commissive in which the organizers of the programme appear to commit themselves to a course of action which is an assurance of “showers of blessings” on the expected participants of the programme. The successful performance of this act depends fundamentally on the mutual understanding shared by both the organizers of the programme and the supposed targets of the advert that the former is only giving the assurance contained in the propositional content of the act on behalf of God. This is all the more so as the act is a direct quotation from the Holy Bible. Given, therefore, the highly sacrosanct nature of religion, in gospel programme adverts,

language is sometimes exploited and manipulated to convince and persuade the target audience, especially when such an advert relates to material blessings and prosperity, as is the case with the one under analysis.

The second advert on this table, also a commissive, presents through the use of the word “sons”, a peculiarly Christian use and interpretation of language. “Sons” in bible language is a generic term referring to both men and women. Based on this contextual belief, therefore, the target audience of this advert automatically understand it as an invitation to the Christian community, and the word “glory” appears deliberately used to capture their interest.

TABLE B

Advert	Act-type	Mutual Contextual Belief	Relevance	Perlocutionary Effect
“My enemy, enough is enough”	Warning	Although this advert is captured in the first person pronoun, the Christian community understand it to be an invitation to come and experience solution to the problems of life which most Christians believe are caused by “enemies”.	That act is relevant in its conformity with the belief among Christians that all human problems are traceable to an “enemy”.	The act is captivating and highly persuasive.

"It is finished"	Declaration	This was the last recorded statement of Jesus on the cross. Christians believe that through this utterance, human suffering was brought to an end, and those who believe may walk in liberty.	The act is relevant to Christian beliefs.	The act is re-assuring.
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**DISCUSSION**

Although the first advert on this table is a warning and is captured in the first person (to a second person), the Christian community understand it to be an open invitation to them to come to the programme in question. The direct reference to an enemy coupled with the dialogic nature of this reference appears to be an attempt by the organizers of the programme to capture the attention of the target audience. This is because of the general belief among most Christians that every problem in life is traceable to some 'enemy' who could either be a human being or a spiritual being. Situated within the context of this belief and the understanding by the target audience that the organizers of the programme are only performing the act on God's behalf, the act is persuasive.

The second advert is a declaration in which the organizers of the programme attempt to be changing the world of the target audience by representing it as having been charged. The successful performance of this act is predicated on the significant fact that the act is a quotation of the last recorded statement of Jesus on the cross before he died. Consequently, the organizers of the programme, within the context of Christian beliefs, are only performing the act on behalf of Jesus Christ whose words Christians believe do not fail. Therefore, the perlocutionary effect of this act on the target audience is getting them persuaded to attend the programme, since every good Christian is expected to believe the words of Jesus.

**TABLE C**

Advert	Act-type	Mutual contextual Belief	Relevance	Perlocutionary Effect
"Fire from heaven ...God of Elijah".	Commissive	"Fire" among Christians is believed to be both a destroying agent and a purifying agent. The advert has a subtle allusion to Prophet Elijah in the Holy Bible who was said to have brought down fire from heaven.	The act is relevant to the expectation of the target audience in gospel programmes.	Although the act is re-assuring, the use of the word "fire" here is ambiguous which appears to be deliberately allowed by the organizers of the programme to stimulate the audience 's curiosity.
"Soaring with wings like the eagle".	Commissive	The eagle among Christians is believed to be a unique bird, symbolic of strength, power, newness and unprecedented achievements, and these are what, by the use of this metaphor, the organizers of the programme are promising the target audience.	The act is relevant especially in its use of the metaphor of the eagle which is widely believed and accepted among Christians.	The figurative reference to the eagle makes the act highly persuasive to Christian audience.

**DISCUSSION**

The first advert here is a commissive the propositional content of which is a promise of 'fire' from heaven. Fire within the Christian circle is a symbol of both purification and destruction. In failing to specify which applies in this context, the advert above is ambiguous and this, coupled with the highly sensational nature of its language, appears intentionally allowed by the organizers of the programme to arouse the audience's curiosity and thus bring them to the programme. The subtle allusion made to prophet Elijah in the Holy Bible who was said to have brought down fire from heaven provides a context of mutual understanding between the target audience and the organizers of the programme, by means of which the advert can be accepted and understood, its sensationalism notwithstanding.

The second advert on this table uses the metaphor of the eagle which, within the context of Christian belief, symbolizes power, newness and unprecedented achievements, and these are the propositional contents of this act, as a commissive. As a commissive, too, the act is performed in the interest of the target audience, and the condition for its successful performance hinges on the understanding that the promise of "soaring like the eagle" is made by the organizers of the programme, on behalf of God whose words, the audience believe, cannot fail.

All the adverts analyzed in this study can, within the context of Christian beliefs, be said to conform to the *relevance* maxim of Grice's co-operative principles. This is so because besides the references and allusion made to the bible (like the allusion made to Prophet Elijah on Table C and the quotation of Jesus' last statement on Table B), the organizers of these programmes are considered, within the Christian circle, to be making these acts on God's behalf and by His directive, and so whatever they say cannot be considered irrelevant.

### 1.7 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that first, commissives are more predominant, from the pragmatic point of view, in gospel programme adverts than the other acts outlined in the Austinian classification of speech acts. This, perhaps, is informed by the understanding that the target audience will be more disposed to attend a

programme if their expectations are raised in promises by the organizers of the programme. Furthermore, the study reveals some striking similarities and differences between the language of advertisement in the Christian circle and in the commercial or secular world. First, in relation to their similarities, there is usually a deliberate attempt in gospel programme adverts (just like in commercial adverts) to exploit and manipulate certain properties of language to capture the attention of the target audience. In the analysis of this study, for instance, the generic use of words like 'sons' on Table B, the sensational and ambiguous use of the word 'fire' and the metaphoric use of the word "eagle", both on Table C, are deliberately intended to stimulate the audience's curiosity and capture their interest. However, such a seeming exploitative and manipulative use of language in gospel programme adverts is not usually expected to be interpreted by the audience as an attempt by the programme organizers to play on their psyche, unlike what obtains in commercial or secular adverts. This is so because, as the analysis of this study revealed, the language of gospel programme advert is usually couched with quotations from, and allusions to, the Holy Bible which the Christians consider to be the final arbiter on all issues relating to their faith. This fact, coupled with the understanding that the organizers of the programme are performing the acts contained in these adverts on God's behalf, provides a contextual basis for why the language of advertisement within the Christian circle can be hardly described by the target audience as being deceptive.

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