

**Language Aesthetics of Prayers in Modern Pentecostal Christian Religion**  
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**Abstract**

Prayer is petition, devotion and intercession and man has been created to desire communion with God through it. There is a void that cannot be filled by anything but genuine communion with God. No matter what man acquires, it cannot replace the fellowship that fulfils the very essence of man's being which is giving purpose to life, nourishing the core of his soul. Every area of the world has its own language, culture and practices. When a person has conceived what to say in prayer, he must do that through the use of one language or the other. Language is used by man to communicate, and for effective communication, one needs to be proficient in the use of one's language of choice. Christians use different languages to pray. This study surveyed the philosophy of art and beauty of one of such languages used in prayer in Igbo Nigerian context especially among the Pentecostal Christians.

**Introduction**

Prayer as believed and also used by people is one of the most potent forces in the world today. It is the act of attempting to communicate with a deity or spirit. Everyone can pray in one language or several languages. Prayer is intimate, personal contact with our Father in Heaven. It is heart-to-heart conversation with our loving God. Like any personal relationship, your relationship with God grows stronger and sweeter as you spend time talking together, expressing your love and the depths of your hopes, dreams, and concerns. All of us long to connect with someone who can identify with our circumstances and share in our day-to-day life. Prayer is just that personal experience and intimate connection with our loving Heavenly Father. There is much more in the Holy Bible about prayer, and much more that you learn best by spending time in prayer every day. To Ozonyiri (2002) "prayer is the engine that carries the gospel message, while fasting puts our prayer on a higher or speed gear" (p.).

Everyone can pray although God seldom hears the prayers of the unrighteous unless they are coming to him for forgiveness through Jesus Christ. But for the believer, prayer is a God-given means of enabling him to draw closer to God, to minister to others, and to receive his many marvelous blessings. Yet strangely, many Christians know very little about prayer. Some think of prayer only as "pleading with God" when a crisis comes. Others are selfish about their prayers. They pray only when they want something from God. Sadly some Christians know prayer only as something the minister does in church on Sunday morning. But the truth is that prayer is much more than any of these things. Prayer is communication of one's total being with a god. It is a sharing of oneself with God therefore it is spiritual power and God has called everyone to pray. As one prays, he or she uses different languages. Some may be known to the person whereas some may be unknown yet one uses very extensively known languages. This paper intends to x-ray the beauty of Igbo language as is being used among the Pentecostal Christians while praying to God and to his son, Jesus

Christ and to Holy Ghost. Igbo language is the language of the Igbos. Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria whose language like any other language is characterized by many dialects, but almost all the Igbo people understand the standard Igbo language.

### **Concept of Language**

Language is universally accepted as the most effective instrument used by man as he attempts to interpret the phenomena in his daily life activities. It has undeniable importance in human affairs even in prayers. Cultural development presupposes use of a language. Language is an integral part of the culture of any society. Societies with complicated cooperative functions such as those in Western culture could hardly have developed without it. Political systems are built upon our ability to communicate with each other, to formulate and exchange opinions and view points, and to try to influence each other.

Industrial development presupposes an exchange of information and long-lasting intricate organizations which would be unthinkable if people did not have a language. Conscious planning directed toward goals which lie beyond the present moment is unlikely to be able to occur to an appreciable extent in creatures that lack language. To a certain degree, distinctive linguistic practices develop with different kinds of activity. Special words express a special way to categorize objects, phenomena, and events within a certain area. A set of terms which develops makes communication among people more differentiated and effective. In this context, language can strengthen group unity.

Using language that is to some extent idiosyncratic expresses a special way of experiencing the environment. An understanding of language is also important, especially insofar as particular varieties of language are associated with particular social groups. Common opinions and values, formulated linguistically, are strengthened. Distinctiveness is increased by the special language, and this enhances the feeling of belongingness. Language does not have only the task of supplying information; it also expresses feelings and values. Many examples of this can be found in prayer. In everyday conversation, communication rarely consists only of the words needed to convey information. The words and turns of phrases we use also say something about our evaluation of what we wish to convey. According to Dr Nelson Mandela as quoted by Animalu (2001) “without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; and cannot share their hopes and aspirations; grasp their history, appreciate their poetry or savor their songs...” (p.7). Language also is used to control behaviour. This function is easily recognizable in commands, orders, and requests. Such utterances are intended to bring about certain actions in those toward whom they are directed. But we also get people to act in a particular way indirectly, by providing factual information or evaluations (Wertheimer, Bjorkman, Lundberg & Magnusson, 1986).

### **Terms/words Associated with Prayers in Modern Pentecostal Christian Religion**

These terms have to be explained for clearer understanding of the various meanings and uses ascribed to them by the adherents of modern Pentecostal Christian religion. At times they are used to refer to prayer.

## **Binding and Loosing**

The Greek word for “bind” is **deo** which means to fasten or tie-as with chains, as an animal tied to keep it from straying. The Scripture declares that Jesus has given us power to bind and loose in reference to Satan and his cohorts. The context to this promise is in connection with Peter’s declaration concerning Jesus: “Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God”. Now, note the reply of Jesus:

and i say also unto thee, that thou art peter,  
and upon this rock i will build my church and  
the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. and i will  
give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. and  
whatsoever thou shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven  
and whatsoever thou shall loose on earth shall be loosed  
in heaven.(Matt.16: 18,19)

This passage has been controversial in its interpretation. But it makes a lot of sense once one has obtained a little understanding of the Christian’s power and authority over demonic spirits. What is the immediate context of the authority to bind and loose? The immediate preceding phrase is : “And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” that is the church. In other words the church is given complete authority over the “gates of hell”. In line with this view, Hammond & Hammond (1991), “the power to bind and loose in regards to Satan is described as “the keys of the kingdom of heaven”. When Satan is bound he is made inoperable. He loses his ability to act against mankind. Satan has his “strong man” appointed over nations, cities, churches, homes and individuals. God is showing that these strong men have already been defeated and bound by heaven’s power as can be seen in this sentence “for this purpose the son of God was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8b.)

The Greek word for “loose” is **luo**. It is defined as “to loose anything tied or fastened; to loose one bound; to set free; to discharge from prison. The victory over demon spirits is already won by Jesus thereby loosing every captive. So Satan is bound and the victim is loosed. Ozonyiri (2002) posits that “the sinners are in the devil’s prison yard ...it is in and through prayer that we will bind the devil, make him incapacitated, declare him spiritually disabled and plunder his spoil”. The devil took the sinners as spoils in the spiritual realm and they can only be delivered spiritually through the power of prayers.

## **Fasting**

Fasting can be said to be a voluntary and deliberate abstinence from food and drink for the purpose of concentrated prayer. Usually, only food is abstained from, but on rare occasions and for short periods of time water is abstained from as well. In public

gatherings, the early church fasted and prayed in order to know the will of God. When one begins to fast, he should get the proper mental attitude. To Pentecostal Christians, fasting should be viewed as a precious opportunity to get closer to our Lord, not distracted by the daily concern of eating. It should also be seen as a means by which our prayers may be more perfectly focused. Lindsay (1996) says that fasting reverses the order. It disciplines the soul, and in its abstinence from the earthly, it opens the door to the heavenly. It is true that prayer changes things. But of all prayers, the fasting prayer has the greatest effect of all. Therefore, to the adherent of this religion fasting is the master key to making the impossible, possible and it must not be for selfish reasons. It should only be as unto the Lord, and for the glory of God.

### **Intercession**

This has to do with spending good portion of our prayer time praying for others. Although prayer is petitioning God; although it is also seeking him in deep fellowship and communion; it is also interceding before him in the Holy Spirit. So the prayer of intercession is the third level of prayer in which we share the burden of Christ for a person, circumstances or need anywhere in the world. Intercession is the level of prayer where Christians in Pentecostal churches see themselves to become a partaker of Christ's suffering.

### **The Beauty of the Language of Prayer**

Prayers of the saints are expected to conform to a prescribed standard of divine excellence; they should fit into the approved pattern of proper prayer. They are to be addressed to the Father; should always be made in the name of Jesus Christ; must be reverential and worshipful in nature, which requirement includes use of the language of prayer and above all they must be offered in sincerity of heart, with real intent and purpose, and must come from the lips of those who have broken hearts and contrite spirits; and finally, they should be closed with the word 'Amen'. As a token of reverence and respect, when occasion permits, they should be made from a kneeling position. When we go to worship in a temple or a church, we put aside our working clothes and dress ourselves in something better. This change of clothing is a mark of respect. Similarly, when we address our Heavenly Father, we should put aside our working words (language) and clothe our prayers in special language of reverence and respect. In offering prayers in the English language, members of our church do not address our Heavenly Father with the same words we use in speaking to a fellow worker, to an employee or employer, or to a merchant in the marketplace. We use special words that have been sanctified by use in inspired communications, words that have been recommended to us and modeled for us by those we sustain as prophets, pastors and inspired teachers.

Modern English has no special verbs or pronouns that are intimate, familiar, or honorific. When we address prayers to our Heavenly Father in English, our only available alternatives are the common words of speech like you and your or the dignified but uncommon words like thee, thou, and thy that were used in the King James version of the Bible almost five hundred years ago. There is nothing wrong with these words used in King James Bible for in our day the English words thee, thou, thy, and thine are suitable for the language of prayer but with the emergence of modern English and new words formed there is a drop of those old archaic words for

new ones. This notwithstanding, in our prayers we use language that is dignified and different, even archaic.

The question is this: Is it important that we use the words, thy, thine, thee, and thou, in addressing Deity; or is it proper when directing our thoughts in prayer to use the more common and modern words, you and yours? Some are of the opinion that the older words should always be used. Their reason is that the Eternal Father and his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, should never be approached in prayer in the familiar expressions so commonly used in addressing human beings. The Father and the Son should always be honored in our prayers in the utmost humility and reverence. These common pronouns, you, yours, may with perfect propriety be used in addressing our equals. In the days when the Bible was translated into English it was common for men and women to greet each other using the pronouns thy and thine, thee and thou. As time went on and men and women became more worldly minded, such a custom was discontinued, and these more formal pronouns were confined to their manner of speech in addressing royalty or persons of great distinction and in poetical expressions. Prayer and poetry certainly would miss much of their value if this were changed. To understand the use of language one must also understand the possibilities for expression offered by the language.

Only through an awareness of language can one truly appreciate its use, not only in literature but also in everyday life like prayer life. In countries with republican forms of government, where every man feels himself equal to his neighbor, the use of the more formal pronouns was discontinued. Moreover the farther man gets away from the true worship of God, and his mind pictures deity as a force, or an invisible shapeless spirit, something intangible and incomprehensible, the tendency is natural for respect and reverence to diminish. Today the scientific world and the religious world have forsaken God as a personal being, and therefore their tendency is a natural one to look upon him as a being who is unworthy of divine worship. Many of the modern scholars especially the atheists among them have gone so far as to teach and maintain that God is the imaginary creation of the mind of man, and that he has become "progressive," from age to age since the days of the "cave-man," to the present enlightened age. A volume might be filled with illustrations of the truth that the language of nations is a mirror in which may be seen reflected with unerring accuracy all the elements of their intellectual as well as of their moral character. This certainly is true. Therefore as mankind gets farther and farther away from the worship of the True and Living God, the less respect and reverence man will give to God. Therefore, this reverence being weakened or missing, the less inclined are men to look upon the Supreme Being with awe, humility, and reverence. The language of prayer should be humbly given with praise and thanksgiving

**Worship** is one form of praying to God Almighty and probably other deities. A couple of examples of these words in Igbo and English would be enumerated here. They are as follows:

Chi na Eke! ----- Supreme God

A kwa A kwuru----- Immovable God

A maama a masiamasi----- All knowing God

Odogwu na Dimkpa n'agha----- A mighty warrior

Ebube gi juru ebe niile-----Your glory fills everywhere etc

The following words are used to portray the majestic nature of the Supreme God as an Omnipotent, Immanent, Omnipresent, Omniscient, etc. The words are embellished to convey the true nature of the highest God. In English, we have the following words of prayer as well:

God the Father of all creation, (Jehova Adonai –Hebrew word),  
our sovereign Lord, (Jehova Makediskem- Hebrew word),  
the Lord our Sanctifier, (Jehova El-Shaddai –Hebrew word)-  
the all sufficient God Almighty. To you we give all thanks,  
praise, worship and adoration for your inestimable love for  
humanity personified in your son Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world.

The above words ascribe to God all glory, honour, power, praise, majesty, dominion, excellence, pre-eminence and thanksgiving. This is a disposition of a heart of gratitude as one worships God in his prayers. A person's emotional state will affect that person's use of language. God is adored by calling him by his titles which one had known. Every human language is a creative system in that the system enables its users to regularly produce and comprehend new sentences-sentences that a particular speaker may have neither heard nor produced in the past. The Pentecostal Christians use extensively new words which they produce from Igbo language to describe the majestic and sovereignty nature of God Almighty. Some examples are:

Ikuku ama n'onyia-----The wind that cannot be trapped.

Oke mmiri na-ebu ogwe-----A great flood that carries bridge

Ugwu a na-arị a tughị egwu-----A hill that is being climbed without fear

Otu anya na-ele ụwa-----One eye that watches over the earth

O gara ije n'ogwu-----One who walks on thorns

The above examples simply testify to the fact that language is a system for the communication of meaning and every language meets the communicative needs of its users. The users coined these words and they extensively used them to portray God as a being who does things that are beyond physical realizations. These words express the fact that God Almighty is awesome and sovereign. Take for instance, in the last example, one cannot simply walk on thorns otherwise he will sustain injury. But to God, he does things beyond one's comprehension. The Holy Bible states also that Jesus walked upon the sea in Mark 6: 48-49. There are other language devices that are usually used by Christians while praying to God Almighty. They include the following:

## **Metaphor**

This is a figure of speech which involves comparison between two things in which one object is identified with another. These two things in ordinary usage are different from each other. The comparison is implied for it is not signified by the signature words 'like' and 'as'. Metaphor is a condensed or compressed form of comparison or description. Christians use metaphor so commonly to create images of God as a creator, omnipotent, transcendent, immanent, judge, immortal, omnipresent, omniscient etc. Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) points to the fact that these words or phrases ascribe traits, properties, qualities or characteristics to the Supreme Being. From these attributes one sees what the people really think God is, what they consider to be his nature and what they believe to be his role and position in relation to the world and the supersensible realm. For instance:

Ọnwa na-etiri ọha	the moon that shines for all
Ụkpaka na-agba na mba	the bean seed that explodes in a far place
Ebube Eluigwe	the glory of heaven
Anyaanwụ Ụtutu	the morning sun
A gbakwuru e zuru ike	He who one runs to and have rest

Okediadi (2003) has one poem that ascribes to God some of these qualities or characteristics. An excerpt of this poem is

O duputa o kpere azu	he sends and protects at the back
Omee ihe ukwu	he who does mighty things
O bata udo adiṛi	he who comes in and peace reigns
Ntutu mmiri na-ebu ogwe	the drops of rain that carries bridge
O mere onye nwuru anwu o bilie	he who raises the dead
O mere onye ngworo o gaa ije	he who makes the lame to walk
O mere nwaanyi aga o buru nne	he who gives a barren children
O me mgbe o tara ike	he who does difficult things

## **Repetition**

This is achieved in a prayer through the successive recurrence of words, phrases or the entire lines or sentences. This is often done for the purpose of emphasis, for the expression of emotion. Leech (1983) defines it as "A fundamental...device of intensification. To call it a 'device', indeed is to mislead, for repetition is almost involuntary to a person in a state of extreme emotional excitation" (p.78). Some

prayers require a great deal of repetition for there to be a response. There are many types of repetition ranging from free repetition, epistrophe, and anaphora but only epistrophe abounds much in the prayers of the Christians. Some prayers require a great deal of repetition for there to be a response.

In Epistrophe, the repeated word or phrase usually comes last in the utterance. This is usually realized in the concluding part of every prayer said by any adherent. It is the word 'In Jesus Name-Amen'. It is usually repeated in moments of extreme emotional excitement or grief. It signifies reaching an agreement or conclusion that the God almighty has answered the prayer and will continue to do everything one has asked from him. Some examples are:

Ọ bu n'aha Jisọs                      Amin!                      In Jesus name                      Amen!

Ọ bu n' ike na ọbara Jisọs      Amin!                      In the power and blood of Jesus  
Amen!

Anyị na-ekele gi, o bi n'igwe nke atọ. Anyị na-asị ka ekele niile na otito niile diri gi  
ebighiebi n'aha Jisọs Amin! (We are thanking you, he who lives in the third heaven.  
We are saying let all thanks and glory be given to you forever in Jesus name- Amen!)

### **Personification**

This is speaking through the lips of a person not present. God is usually referred to as inanimate object that is endowed with human qualities and characteristics. Good examples abound in Igbo language. Take for instance:

Oke mmiri na-achụ igwe ewu oso-A heavy rain that pursues fleet of goats

Anyaanwụ na ọnwá na-akpọ isi ala nye ya-Sun and moon bow down before Him

Ikuku ama n'onyá                      The wind that does not get trapped

These are attributes to God. The natural phenomenons which are inanimate are given the characteristics of human being thereby making them do the things associated with human beings. Many of these devices still abound but this paper highlights on the above ones.

### **Conclusion**

Prayer being an act of attempting to communicate with a deity or spirit. Purposes for this may include worshipping, requesting guidance, requesting assistance, confessing sins, as an act of reparation or to express one's thoughts and emotions. The words of prayer may take the form of intercession, a hymn, incantation or a spontaneous utterance in the person's praying words. Prayer may be individual or group, formal or spontaneous, silent or spoken. It is the natural result of a person's belief in God; it is at the center of worship. Language has been seen as a means for understanding people and their minds in relation to the world.



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