



Figures of Rhetoric in the Language of Nigerian Christian Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Sermons are regarded as an art that integrates scientific analysis, literature and imaginative composition (Vaessen, 1998). The Christian sermonic discourse is highly persuasive and relies on rhetorical figures and devices to achieve its goals of calling people to decisions and modification of behaviours and warning them of future events (Baumann, 1972). How this 'imaginative composition', which is universally acknowledged in sermonic discourses, applies to Nigeria, a nation that uses English as a Second language is the concern of this paper.

The paper examined figures of rhetoric in ten selected Christian sermons preached over a period of ten years. It was found that the figures of rhetoric used included logical argument, pathetic argument, rhetorical questions, restatements/repetitions, three-part lists, possibility talk, imagery/metaphors, stories and songs. The paper concluded that there is a marked shift from conventional/traditional biblical metaphors to socio-culturally determined metaphors that reflect the Nigerian Christian space and ideology.

Key words: rhetoric, Christian, sermons

INTRODUCTION

Analyses of persuasive discourses (for instance, adverts and political speeches) have over the years been of some interest to linguists in the examination of discursive varieties of language in society. However, public address and rhetoric in religious discourses (also a persuasive genre) seem to have received little attention by linguists, especially in a second language environment such as Nigeria. Religious language, as pointed out by Crystal and Davy, as far back as 1969, is a significant and distinct variety of language within any society. In their words, "the kind of language a speech

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community uses for the expression of its religious beliefs on public occasions is usually one of the most distinctive varieties it possesses” (p. 47).

Religious rhetoric and the uses of language in sermonic discourse therefore should be of interest in discourse studies in any analyses of language use in society. The current study examines figures of rhetoric in Christian sermonic discourse in a second language environment, Nigeria. Such examination should enrich our knowledge of the uses of language and the peculiarities of religious rhetoric within the second language socio cultural context of the study.

Rhetorical Figurations in Discourse

Rhetoric is that field of language often associated with the uses of language for the intent of persuading. Burke (1969, p. 43), for instance, defines rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.” Vaessen (1998) underscores the negative and manipulative connotation that rhetoric often has in discourse, because it is restricted to the power of the ‘rhetor’ (the speaker) and with the meanings he gives to reality, and the effects that the speech has on listeners or the public. Usually, rhetoric in public speaking implies the skill of elegant and persuasive speaking. Persuasion therefore is the ultimate goal of rhetoric. Aristotle (1933) in his classic work *Rhetoric*, distinguishes three approaches or means of persuasion produced by the rhetoricians art or skill. These approaches or proofs (Greek, ‘pistis’): Logos, Ethos and Pathos are considered the core of oratory among the ancient Greeks or Romans. True persuasion, therefore, rests on a speaker’s use of logical, ethical and emotional appeals to his audience.

Logos or the use of arguments, reasoning or the power of the word is considered the proper task of rhetoric, that is, the use of logical proof or evidence is considered superior to other ways of persuading. Speakers, through inductive and deductive reasoning and carefully crafted arguments are known to win over hearers.

‘Pathos’ or emotional appeals persuade hearers through profuse repetitions, vivid imagery, high incidence of emotional and mellifluous language, rhythmic language and other affective devices that leave deep impressions on the mind. Johnstone (2002) identifies this as ‘presentational persuasion’ which ‘sweeps’ or carry along the hearers. Through ethical appeals to the moral character of the speaker, audiences are also induced to trust or believe in a speaker’s words. The need to secure goodwill or respect of hearers, therefore underlie the use of ‘ethos’ as a rhetorical style. In sermonic discourse, rhetorical style of speakers is usually targeted at inducing behavioral changes in hearers and not just to convey information or biblical knowledge. Sermons are classified as persuasive discourses, for they rely heavily on rhetorical figures and devices to achieve speakers’ goals and aims. In sermonic oratory also, one basic emotion that speakers seek to arouse is that of belief and trust in God.

The creation of a sermon, according to Vaessen (1998) is an art, integrating scientific analysis, literature and imaginative composition. The sermon has also been described by Baumann (1972), as the central idea of the worship service and the “integrative factor” for all other aspects or facets of the service. Sermons are a subtype of religious discourse. They are planned, formal and public discourses that are essentially orally delivered. Sermons serve to confront people with options, to call them to decisions, to warn of future events and to call for modification of behaviour (Baumann, 1972). To achieve this aim, the preacher resorts to rhetorical figures as a tool to alter the beliefs, attitudes and values of his hearers towards some pre-determined goals. Some of these devices include logical arguments, passionate and emotional appeals as well as ethical proofs.

The Corpus

Data for this study was gathered from ten Nigerian sermons preached over the last decade between 1999 and 2009 within Lagos, Nigeria. This study was restricted to Lagos, a city/state in Nigeria because it is a pot pourri of all peoples, tribes and cultures in the country. It is therefore a microcosm of the larger Nigerian society. Lagos is also a former political capital city of Nigeria and the present commercial nerve centre of the nation.

The study examines figures of rhetoric in the ten sermons. Other studies which have undertaken examination of other persuasive discourses such as politics and advertising (e.g. Cook, 1992; Garfinkel, 1978; Adedun, 2003; Opeibi, 2004; Awonusi, 1996; 1998) as well as other sub genres of religious discourse (e.g. Gumperz, 1982a; Dzameshie, 1992; Burton, 1997; Osakwe, 1991; Daramola 2006) have described the use of rhetorical figures in their work. These, however, are distinct from the current work which is an examination of sermonic discourse, a sub type of religious discourse within the second language environment. This micro study, however finds meaning within the larger framework of other macro studies on religious discourse and its sub types.

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Logical Argument Strategy

The use of logical arguments and reasoning are considered superior in the art of persuasion. Preachers, in the sermons examined, often marshal facts, reasons and intellectual arguments to convince hearers of biblical claims. Such arguments are supported with profuse citations and quotations from biblical texts which form the premises upon which speakers hinge their points. Multiple texts are cited to further confirm worldviews and beliefs expounded by the preacher. This is illustrated by the following excerpt:

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I'm going through all these scriptures because I have always told you one thing, anything I say that cannot be supported by the Bible..., but if you can find it in the Bible, then you can be sure, forever o Lord, thy word is settled.

(Excerpt: 'It is Raining' by Pastor E.A. Adeboye)

The presupposition here is that the Bible is true, the Bible is God's word and the Bible provides enough evidence and proof upon which truths are expounded. Hearers therefore are not expected to disbelieve, doubt or dissent, but to accept, believe and be convinced.

A pattern emerges from preachers' use of Bible texts as logical proof, for it is usual for speaker to cite the text, reinforcing it with phrases such as, "God said", "The Bible says", "God promised." These nominal structures illustrate the fact that embedded within these logical proofs are ethical appeals, not to the moral character of the speaker, but to the character of God. To the preacher, God cannot lie and if God said it, then it is so.

Through inductive and deductive reasoning also, speakers often support their arguments. At times, a speaker states a major premise or generalization which he then, by deductions, supports or confirms with copious biblical reference e.g.

1. When you look at everything that God did, you will discover that He is a God of abundance. **(major premise/generalization)** There are millions of birds but the sky is so big that they never collide. He gave them the heavens in abundance. **(proof)**. There are countless number of fishes but God gave them so much water that they could swim and do whatever they like without colliding **(proof)**. There are so many millions of human beings on the surface of the earth but there is so much air to breathe that nobody needs to pay for it at all. **(proof)** Extract: it is About to Rain', - Pastor E.A. Adeboye). In the extract, the preacher states a general belief – God is a God of abundance. He then proceeds to provide three proofs: there are millions of birds with ample space to fly, countless number of fishes with so much water to swim in and, millions of human beings with so much air to breathe. Preachers, in addition, could inductively prove arguments from minor proofs leading to a logical conclusion, as in:
 2. And when you read Genesis chapter 24, you will see the kind of person Abraham was ... (he) had flocks, had silver, gold, menservants, maidservants, camels and asses. In short, he was a wealthy man. **(minor premise)** And you know that Isaac was wealthier than his father And for Jacob, he was even wealthier, far, far wealthier than Isaac. **(minor premise)** So, God says, if you want to know my three best friends, they are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. **(minor premise)** The elders say, "The rich befriend the rich and the poor befriend the poor." **(Minor premise)**

In Haggai, chapter 2, verse 8, he says, "Silver is mine, gold is mine." **(minor premise)** In Psalm 50, verses 10 and 11, he said, "Every beast in the forest,

they are mine.”(minor premise)Believe me honestly, our daddy is wealthy.(generalization)

This preacher arrives at the logical conclusion that God is rich, providing proofs (the friends of God are rich; God created the whole world) leading to this generation.

The Pathetic Argument

The rhetorical style of preachers in the sermons examined is predicated primarily on their use of ‘pathos’, or affective devices that arouse the emotions and incite action. This includes vivid imagery, profuse repetitions, analogies and stories, rhetorical questions, and other affective devices which are used to achieve force, directness, freshness, variety and interest, and which are calculated to leave a deep effect and impression on the mind.

Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical Questions (RQs) are used both as logical and emotional arguments to influence the mind of hearers and to persuade them to action. By their nature, RQs do not demand answers from addresses; rather they induce moral and religious sentiments in the audience and raise thought-provoking issues that set hearers thinking about the truth or appropriateness of what they have believed or accepted. Rhetorical questions are also used pragmatically by speakers to avoid committing face-threatening acts (FTAs). Rather than state the obvious - ‘bald-on’ - speakers imply the obvious and thus subtly lead hearers to arrive at logical conclusions, on their own. For this reason, RQs are at the heart of respect behaviour. Examples are:

3. If a person is created for something and that person, for one reason or the other does not fulfill that for which he or she is created..., what do you think the manufacturer will say to him?
4. What is spirit? Is it looking at the stars in the night or sitting down somewhere like a guru and crossing your legs to be going into a trance?
5. Who told you that God is not more than enough?
6. Is it not better to be slow and be sure than to be fast and fail?

Restatements/Repetition

Orators and public speakers often draw attention to parts of their speech through the use of parallelisms or restatements, which express several ideas or thoughts in a series of similar structures. The overall effect of this is to heighten the emotional tone of the speech thereby making it more memorable. Repetition in discourse performs a number of other functions: it is a form of back channeling, gap filler, a cohesive device in the structure of the discourse, a memory aid and it is used to reinforce or emphasize points made by speakers.

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A close examination of the texts reveals clausal, phrasal and lexical repetitions such as:

7. Your star must rise. Your star must rise. Your star must rise.
8. I see you growing greater and greater and greater and greater and greater.
9. Above all, apart from learning from the insects, learning from the ants, learning from the fowls, learning from the beasts of the field and learning from the fish in the sea, we can also learn from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dialogic repetition also contributes to the rhetorical impact of the sermons. Using this style, speakers engage their listeners in repetitive dialogues in the form of initiation – response patterns e.g.

10. S: Tell someone, “Cheer up.”
H: Cheer up
S: He said, “I have overcome the world.”
H: I have overcome the world.
S: I refuse to be sick
H: I refuse to be sick
S: The wisdom of God
H: The wisdom of God.

The purpose of such dialogues is to create rapport and harmony between participants in the discourse while also heightening the emotional tone of the sermon. It is evident from the occurrences of these patterns that sermons, especially within the Nigerian socio religious context can no longer be said to be monologic in form. There is a marked shift not only in thematic preoccupation but also in style, from traditionally monologic and non reciprocal forms to more participatory forms. Baumann (1972, p. 28), asserts, “Preaching is a two way street.” “The monologic illusion,” he further opines, “is being seriously questioned as the parishioner is not content to be preached at. He wants to participate.” Larsen (1989, p. 69) also concludes, “performative discourse and participative actions are at the heart of biblical communication.”

Three-Part Lists

Three-part lists or triads are commonly used by orators and political speakers. Cockcroft and Cockcroft (1992) point out that when orators have one point to make; they often do it using three-part lists, which are thought aesthetically pleasing to the ears. Three-part statements are however, not peculiar to political oratory as they are also used copiously in the sermons e.g.

11. Stop trusting in your abilities; stop trusting in your expertise, stop trusting in your skills.
12. And he leaped, he walked, he ran.
13. You are not here by accident. You are not here by incident. You are not here by circumstances.

14. It is a multibillion organization, running *stress* free, debt free, bank support free.

Speakers sometimes make these more memorable through alliterative devices as in:

15. The confidence of faith, the courage of faith, the conviction of faith.

Possibility Talk

Persuasive discourses are often associated with futuristic and possibility talk (Hayakawa, 1963; Kinneavy, 1971). It is through this high incidence of possibility talk that the speaker makes something improbable appear possible. It is for this reason that rhetoric is often associated with insincerity and irrational belief without knowledge. The preachers in their sermons also make use of possibility talk. For example:

16. Poverty is going to become a thing of the past.
17. I see all your troubles coming to an end.
18. There's a brighter future on your way.
19. Brother, you are going places. There's no stopping you.

Such 'faith talk' is common in religious rhetoric as the preacher seeks to offer worshippers protection against contingency and the puzzling nature of the world. In Baumann's (1972) words, "One of the natural allies of the preacher is the anxiety of man." As men seek security, identity and purpose in life, it is the job of the preacher to present lofty ideals of hope, survival, security and a better life.

Imagery and Metaphors in Sermonic Discourse

Images and metaphors are a vital part of sermonic rhetoric, for they are the 'ornamentation' required to make sermons memorable and vivid. Indeed, powerful images remain vital to effective discourse. In tackling the challenge of trying to communicate abstract and profound concepts of God, heaven, spirit, etc in ways that make them seem concrete, preachers rely on images such as metaphors, similes and personification. Vaessen (1998) opines, "Rhetoric, when expressed by means of metaphor becomes a powerful tool to interpret reality in new ways." This ability of the preachers therefore to turn the ears of his audience into eyes constitutes an essential element in his success and effectiveness. For Larsen (1989, p. 40), "Words, propositions and carefully reasoned arguments are less appealing (in sermons) than images." This is also true in the sermons examined, as preachers rely heavily on images and other socio culturally constrained metaphors that rouse the emotions more than on logic and proofs to persuade their listeners.

Titles of sermons are picturesque as they evoke mental images that are long lasting. They also provide a contextual background for the development of the propositions that follow. Examples include:

20. Leaping high in the Leap year
21. It is about to rain

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22. Antidote for worry and anxiety

23. The King is not yet dead

The sermon texts also use metaphors that make comparisons vivid, more forceful and memorable. There are images from agriculture, business, food, governance and warfare registers, as in:

24. If you *sow* bountifully, you will *reap* bountifully.

25. Except a *grain of wheat* falls to the ground, it cannot bear fruit.

26. He says, "I am the *good shepherd*."

27. Seek ye first the *kingdom* of God.

28. There shall be *showers* of blessing.

29. Jesus, the *great physician*.

In a socio cultural milieu where traditional concepts and ethos are often mixed with religious ideologies, much of metaphorical usages in the texts are socio culturally constrained. Cultural discourse, according to Kalu (2008) has aided the growth of Christianity in Africa because of its cultural fit into indigenous worldviews. Indigenous worldviews are often therefore intertwined with charismatic and pneumatic elements of religion. In this way, discourse is shaped by the world and discourse itself shapes the world (Johnstone, 2002). Take for instance, the following statements:

30. If you are ever attacked by sickness....

31. Some of you have been in a satanic bus stop.....

32. For God... you call [him] 'sea never-dry'....

33. Every satanic mortar, pounding my breakthrough....

34. Any power sending my money into a demonic bank....

35. Tonight, put the enemy's gear into reverse action.

Departing from familiar and conservative biblical metaphors, preachers introduce creatively shocking and unconventional images which however fit into the addressees' mental framework or schema, for they reflect the Nigerian Christian's ideological worldviews. Metaphors therefore, in religion are socially constructed and interpreted.

The reason for this departure from conventional images may be, as Burton (1997, p. 5) opines, "nothing is more hackneyed or dull than the themes of religion that preachers have rehearsed for centuries." This may account for the peculiarity of creative coinages emerging in Nigerian Christian sermonic discourse in the last decade.

Other rhetorical figures used in the sermons include similes, hyperboles and personifications. For example:

36.be wise as serpents and gentle as a dove.(Simile)

37. the election petition hanging upon Nigeria.... like the sword of Damocles (Simile)

38. Money answereth all things (Personification).

39. The whole world will become your parish (Hyperbole)

40. Leaping high in the leap year. (Pun).

41. Jesus lived a dead life (Oxymoron)

42. a lamb of God married to a lion of the devil (Antithesis)

Rhetorical Function of Stories and Songs

Stories or what Johnson (2002) refers to as ‘analogic rhetoric’ have always been used as tools by preachers to illustrate, explain and exegete biblical truths. Such stories, whether historical, biblical, contemporary or autobiographical create analogies between prior situations and current ones, thus serving as proof to time-tested truths and current beliefs being expounded. Stories therefore serve as logical proof, convincing hearers of the validity of the claims being made by the preacher. In the sermons, preachers rely heavily on the story telling motif, drawing examples from Bible stories as well as contemporary ones.

Songs, on the other hand, are emotional or affective devices that arouse feelings and pathos.

Singing has always been associated with religious rituals and ceremonies as it is a means through which worshippers express religious emotions and feelings. Music creates a pathos or mood in worshippers thus lifting them to metaphysical realms where hopes are further raised by fervent and ecstatic singing. Songs are usually also used as sermon-initiating or sermon-closing devices. However, it is not unusual for a speaker to burst spontaneously and effusively into singing mid sermon. Often, such songs are repeated a number of times with speakers code switching to native language, accompanied with vigorous and intensive clapping, dancing and instruments. Rhetorically, songs are thought to prepare the mood for the preacher to deliver his sermon. In singing together, preacher and audience also become symbolically one, attuning as worshippers to one God.

CONCLUSION

Christian sermonic discourse, in Nigeria is a highly persuasive one to which goal the preacher deploys rhetorical figures and devices. This study demonstrates that preachers in the Nigerian socio cultural context rely heavily on pathetic or emotional appeals more than logical or ethical proofs as a means of persuasion. Were the preacher to pick between logic and pathos, he would rather pick the latter, for, effective religious discourse at least in the Nigerian context, depend more on emotional appeals. Preachers, also, are often not in need of ethical proofs, as they do not project their personalities nor do they speak for themselves. The preacher’s authority is often not a moral one, resting on who he is, but a religious one founded on the institution which he represents and the God for whom he speaks.

This study also notes that there is a marked shift from conventional and traditional biblical metaphors to socio culturally constrained metaphors that reflect the Nigerian Christian’s ideology and religious worldviews, thus confirming that metaphors in discourse are socio-culturally determined.

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Finally, the study demonstrates the effect of religious rhetoric and the preacher's style also on worshippers' feelings, intellect and actions, thus displaying the intricate link between rhetoric and persuasion.

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