PRAGMATIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGES FOR PEACE BUILDING AND SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

ESTHER OLASUMBO, OYEBANJO
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, AJAYI CROWTHER UNIVERSITY, OYO, NIGERIA

PETER ADELAJA OYEBANJO, PhD
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES, FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, AJAYI CROWTHER UNIVERSITY, OYO, NIGERIA, pa.oyebanjo@acu.edu.ng; adelaja77@gmail.com

KEYWORDS
Religious Language, Peace Building, Sustainable Democracy, Discourse Analysis

ABSTRACT
The role of religious languages in promoting peace and supporting sustainable democracy cannot be over-emphasised. However, the language-specific strategies used by religious leaders to foster peace or democracy in the previous scholarships require a versatile discourse. This study pragmatically examined the influence of religious languages and their influences on the promotion of peace and sustainable democracy in Nigeria, with the view to providing insight into the potential of religious discourse as a tool for peace building and democratic stability within this context. This research employed a pragmatic discourse analysis approach and data were sourced from sermons, speeches, and public messages, focusing on speech acts, contextual implications, and intended meanings to better understand how religious language influences public perceptions. Religious languages often promote tolerance, forgiveness, and mutual respect, essential values for peace building in a pluralistic society. Religious leaders employ inclusive language, appeals to common values, and narratives emphasising social harmony to encourage peaceful coexistence. However, there are instances where religious messages, particularly those with political overtones or ambiguous wording, unintentionally reinforce divisions or fuel social tensions. As a result, there is the dual nature of religious discourse: its potential to either support or undermine democratic values and social unity. Therefore, it is imperative that religious leaders and policymakers collaborate to establish guidelines for effective religious communication that aligns with democratic ideals and peace-building objectives.

Introduction

In Nigeria, religion plays a pivotal role in shaping socio-political perspectives, guiding moral values, and fostering a sense of community among its citizens. As a country marked by its rich religious diversity, with Islam and Christianity as the predominant faiths, Nigeria has witnessed the influential role religious leaders and their messages play in addressing social and political issues. The language used within religious discourse – whether in sermons, teachings, or public statements – holds substantial power to either unite or divide, to promote peace or incite conflict. Against this backdrop, the study of religious language for its pragmatic functions is of critical importance, as it reveals the potential of religious discourse as a tool for peace building and sustainable democracy in Nigeria. A pragmatic discourse analysis examines how language is used in context, focusing on how intentions, meanings, and the relationship between speaker and audience shape social reality.

Pragmatics, as a field of study within linguistics, provides a framework for understanding language in its social context, particularly how meaning is conveyed beyond literal interpretations. In the context of religious discourse, pragmatics allows for an analysis of how language is employed by religious leaders to achieve specific goals, such as promoting forgiveness, tolerance, and reconciliation, which are vital for peaceful coexistence in a diverse society like Nigeria. Austin's theory of speech acts, which categorises language functions into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, serves as a basis for understanding how religious language operates to influence public opinion and attitudes towards democratic practices.[1] Similarly, Searle expanded on this theory, arguing that language not only conveys information but also performs actions, a concept particularly relevant in religious settings where words are seen as embodying moral authority.[2]

Nigeria's socio-political history reveals instances where religious language has been used constructively to address issues of injustice, corruption, and conflict. However, there have also been cases where religious discourse inadvertently heightened tensions, often when messages were ambiguous or indirectly politicised.[3] Such occurrences underline the dual potential of religious language to either foster a sense of shared identity or deepen societal divides. As noted by sociolinguist Cameron, the power of language lies not only in its content but also in its delivery and interpretation by diverse audiences.[4] This duality raises essential questions about how religious language can be harnessed to support peace building and strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria.

In recent years, scholars and policymakers have turned their attention to the role of religious institutions in promoting sustainable democracy. With democracy in Nigeria often challenged by ethnic and religious tensions, religious leaders have a unique opportunity to bridge divides through their influential platforms. When used thoughtfully, religious discourse can support democratic values by advocating for social justice, human rights, and the rule of law. However, the potential for religious messages to be misinterpreted or manipulated necessitates a careful and contextually aware approach to discourse. As sociologist Hamad suggests, for religious language to serve as an agent of peace, it must align with the values of inclusion, equity, and respect for diverse viewpoints.[5]

This paper explored the impact of religious discourse in Nigeria through a pragmatic discourse analysis, assessing its role in peace building and democratic sustainability. By examining the linguistic strategies, intentions, and contextual nuances within religious messages, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how religious language can be directed toward fostering unity and promoting the principles of democracy. Through this analysis, the paper contributed to ongoing discussions on the constructive use of religious influence in shaping a peaceful, democratic Nigeria.

Religious Language Discourse: Conceptual Clarifications

Religious language has long been a subject of interest among scholars who study its role in shaping social and political landscapes, particularly in diverse and multi-religious societies like Nigeria. Many researchers agree that religious discourse can wield significant influence, often acting as a catalyst for both

conflict and peace, depending on how it is employed. One of the primary approaches in understanding this power is through pragmatic discourse analysis, which focuses on how language is used within its social context, examining the intentions behind statements and the effects they have on audiences.

Austin's foundational theory of speech acts emphasised that language is not merely a tool for conveying information but is also a means of performing actions.[6] According to Austin, utterances in religious contexts can be classified as locutionary, illocutionary, or perlocutionary acts, each serving distinct functions that influence the behaviour of listeners. Austin's ideas were later expanded by John Searle, who asserted that language functions extend beyond communication to include actions, such as promoting social harmony or instigating divisive behaviours.[7] This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for religious discourse in Nigeria, where religious leaders possess immense authority, and their words can significantly impact public sentiment.

Several scholars have applied pragmatic theories to study religious language in Nigeria. Okoye notes that the interplay between language and power is evident in religious discourse, as religious leaders use speech acts to influence both personal and collective identities.[8]This influence becomes crucial in a nation characterised by ethnic and religious plurality, where messages of peace or division can easily sway public opinion. In a similar vein, Mustapha argues that religious discourse in Nigeria often oscillates between messages of unity and division, depending on the socio-political context, with some leaders promoting tolerance while others, knowingly or unknowingly, intensify societal divisions.[9] This ambivalence in religious discourse underscores the importance of critically analysing the language strategies used in religious settings to determine their potential for peace building.

Furthermore, Hamad has examined the dual potential of religious language, suggesting that while it has the power to build bridges across social divides, it can also be used to strengthen existing boundaries, particularly in regions experiencing socio-political tension.[10] Hamad's work is instrumental in understanding the delicate balance religious leaders must strike in promoting messages that are both spiritually uplifting and socially constructive. Similarly, Deborah Cameron's work on the power dynamics in spoken discourse provides insight into how religious language can serve as a subtle but potent tool for social control or reform.[11] Cameron argues that language is inherently tied to power structures, and in the case of Nigeria, this means that religious leaders' words hold the capacity to shape socio-political realities significantly.

Scholars have also recognised the challenges in aligning religious discourse with democratic values. Joseph Gifford, in his analysis of religion and politics in Africa, highlights that while religious messages often promote values like justice and compassion, there are instances where these messages inadvertently conflict with democratic principles, especially when they undermine secular governance structures.[12] The complex intersection between religious authority and democratic governance poses a challenge for peace building, as some religious messages may emphasise obedience to spiritual leaders over democratic engagement. Haynes similarly notes that religious discourse, particularly in pluralistic societies, can at times conflict with the ideals of inclusivity and equal representation essential for democracy.[13]

Despite these findings, existing literature has not adequately addressed the specific pragmatic strategies religious leaders in Nigeria use to promote peace or encourage democratic principles. Most studies have either focused broadly on the impact of religious discourse on social behaviour or examined the potential for conflict within religious rhetoric. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring how pragmatic discourse analysis can be applied to religious language in Nigeria, particularly to identify strategies that contribute to peace building and democratic sustainability. By doing so, it will provide a nuanced understanding of how religious discourse can be used constructively in Nigeria's socio-political environment, ultimately offering practical insights for both religious leaders and policymakers.

Analysis of Religious Discourse in Nigeria

Religious discourse in Nigeria has proven to be a powerful instrument that shapes the nation's socio-political and cultural landscape, often reflecting and reinforcing the complex

dynamics between diverse ethnic and religious communities. This discourse, expressed mainly through sermons, religious gatherings, media broadcasts, and printed literature, serves not only as a means of communicating spiritual doctrines but also as a channel for social influence. Analysing the language used by Nigerian religious leaders reveals how such discourse can encourage peace, coexistence, and even sustainable democratic practices, but can also inadvertently fuel division when manipulated towards personal or political ends.

One notable feature of religious discourse in Nigeria is its reliance on persuasive and authoritative language that appeals directly to the emotions and identities of its audience. As Mustapha observed, the language choices of religious figures are designed to inspire a sense of community and commitment among followers, often invoking themes of unity, justice, and moral accountability.[14] However, the pragmatic implications of such discourse vary depending on the intent behind the message and the socio-political context in which it is delivered. For example, when religious leaders employ rhetoric that emphasises shared values and common objectives, they can play a significant role in reducing tensions and bridging the divides between Nigeria's various religious groups.[15]

Conversely, the analysis of discourse sometimes shows a more divisive tone, particularly in contexts where religious affiliations intersect with ethnic or political loyalties. Cameron's research into discourse power dynamics highlights how language can serve as both a unifying force and a tool for social stratification, depending on how inclusivity or exclusivity is embedded within the communication.[16] In Nigeria, some religious messages unintentionally reinforce boundaries between communities by promoting exclusive identities that alienate members of other faiths, thus weakening the potential for peace building and democratic collaboration.[17] This use of language that subtly discourages diversity or prioritises one belief system over another can undermine the broader objective of national cohesion.

Religious discourse in Nigeria also carries substantial pragmatic weight when addressing issues relevant to governance and democracy. According to Austin's speech act theory, religious utterances often act beyond mere statements, embodying social actions intended to influence followers' behaviours and beliefs.[18]This is particularly visible in sermons that address ethical governance, human rights, and the responsibilities of leaders. Many Nigerian religious leaders utilise their platforms to advocate for accountability, emphasising moral leadership as a cornerstone of just governance. This approach can resonate with democratic ideals by promoting values that align with transparency, equality, and respect for the rule of law.[19]

However, religious discourse in Nigeria does not always align smoothly with democratic principles, especially in cases where religious authority conflicts with the secular governance structure. Some scholars, like Hamad, have noted that while religious language can foster a sense of justice, it occasionally challenges democratic norms by promoting loyalty to religious leadership over state institutions.[20] This dual role of religious discourse – in both supporting and challenging governance – illustrates the complexity of using religious language as a tool for peace building and democracy.

In sum, an analysis of religious discourse in Nigeria highlights both its constructive and obstructive potentials. Religious language, when pragmatically applied with inclusivity and democratic values in mind, can serve as a bridge between communities and as a foundation for sustainable peace. However, it also has the capacity to deepen divides when it becomes overly exclusive or hierarchical. The careful management of religious discourse by leaders who understand its power is thus essential in ensuring it contributes positively to Nigeria's diverse society and democratic future.

Role of Religious Language in Peace Building

Religious language holds a powerful influence in shaping social dynamics and fostering peaceful coexistence in societies. In Nigeria, a nation characterised by its religious and ethnic diversity, religious language can play a pivotal role in peace building by promoting messages of tolerance, compassion, and unity. When employed with intention and sensitivity, religious discourse has the capacity to inspire

and mobilise communities towards constructive engagements, reducing tensions and addressing misunderstandings. Nigerian religious leaders, especially from Christianity and Islam – the country's two predominant faiths – utilise language not only to teach spiritual values but also to encourage social harmony and resolve conflicts.

One of the essential functions of religious language in peace building is its ability to evoke a strong sense of shared values and collective identity. As Sanneh noted, religious discourse often emphasises common humanity and ethical imperatives, such as justice, mercy, and reconciliation, which can resonate deeply across divides.[21] In Nigeria, these shared values are frequently invoked by religious leaders who address their audiences on issues of national unity and social stability. Through preaching and community dialogues, religious language provides a moral framework that highlights the benefits of living peacefully and cooperatively with others, regardless of differences in faith or ethnicity.[22]

Moreover, religious language in Nigeria often includes traditional expressions and metaphors that bridge modern concepts of peace with established cultural values, making it more relatable to the general population. For example, terms like "brotherhood" and "neighbourly love," which are central to both Christian and Islamic teachings, are used to foster interpersonal relationships and collective responsibility among individuals. Yahaya observed that religious expressions that call for solidarity and empathy are often more effective than secular appeals in the Nigerian context, as they carry with them a divine endorsement that resonates strongly with believers.[23] This use of language to foster peace is further supported by the structure of religious gatherings, which allow for communal experiences where messages of peace can be collectively absorbed and enacted in everyday life.

However, the role of religious language in peace building is not without its challenges. There are instances where religious language, if misinterpreted or used in a divisive context, may inadvertently fuel misunderstandings or conflicts. To address this, scholars like Swidler argue that religious leaders must be intentional in their language choices, ensuring that they prioritise inclusive and conciliatory language over sectarian expressions.[24] In Nigeria, religious language has been most effective in promoting peace when it transcends denominational boundaries and emphasises universal principles that appeal to a broad audience. Swidler's perspective on interfaith dialogue reinforces the need for religious language to encourage mutual respect, particularly in multicultural societies like Nigeria.[25]

Furthermore, religious language often plays a significant role in peace-building initiatives at the grassroots level. Religious leaders serve as mediators in communities, using language that emphasises forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Oluponna pointed out that Nigerian religious leaders are frequently involved in interfaith initiatives, using religious texts and teachings as tools to resolve local disputes.[26] Such initiatives can be instrumental in preventing conflicts from escalating, as they provide a platform for dialogue grounded in mutual respect. These leaders often quote religious scriptures to remind communities of their moral obligations to seek peace and unity.

Religious language in Nigeria holds immense potential for peace building. By framing peace as both a divine mandate and a communal duty, religious discourse can inspire a spirit of cooperation that transcends sectarian lines. However, its effectiveness relies on careful and deliberate use that favours inclusivity over exclusivity. With the commitment of religious leaders to promoting messages of peace and unity, religious language can be a valuable resource for fostering sustainable peace and supporting Nigeria's journey towards a more harmonious and democratic society.

Religious Discourse and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria

Religious discourse plays a vital role in shaping political values and attitudes, impacting Nigeria's democratic landscape in complex ways. Given the significant influence of religious leaders and institutions in Nigeria, religious language often intersects with political dialogue, thereby affecting public opinion, electoral decisions, and even the policies that define democratic governance. In a country where religion is intertwined with cultural identity, religious discourse frequently guides citizens in interpreting democratic ideals like justice,

equality, and accountability. The ability of religious language to affect democracy is, however, a double-edged sword, with both constructive and potentially destabilising outcomes depending on the intent and application of religious expressions.

Religious leaders in Nigeria often serve as intermediaries between the government and the public, using religious language to either endorse or critique political leaders and policies. This role is particularly crucial in a society where public trust in governmental institutions is low, and religious organisations often command greater respect and loyalty. Hodge notes that religious rhetoric can mobilise communities to hold leaders accountable, fostering democratic values through appeals to moral duty and divine justice.[27] By invoking shared religious beliefs, leaders can unite diverse groups under common goals, such as fighting corruption or ensuring fair elections. Religious language thus becomes a vehicle for reinforcing principles that are essential for a sustainable democracy.

However, religious discourse can also complicate Nigeria's democratic process when it becomes a tool for division rather than unity. When religious leaders favour certain candidates or parties, it can lead to polarisation along religious lines. This politicisation of religious language undermines democratic ideals by fostering sectarianism rather than focusing on candidates' merit or policy proposals. As Paden emphasises, this kind of discourse creates a "political tribalism" that can disrupt democratic development, especially when religious identities are leveraged to secure votes or political influence.[28] In such instances, religious language diverts attention from substantive democratic processes and instead creates divisions that can lead to violence and societal fragmentation.

Despite these challenges, there are ways in which religious discourse contributes positively to Nigeria's democratic sustainability. Religious leaders have used their platforms to encourage peaceful political participation, especially during elections, urging their followers to engage responsibly and avoid electoral violence. This influence is rooted in the moral authority that religious figures possess, allowing them to promote civic responsibilities as an extension of religious duties. Oduah observes that religious leaders in Nigeria have repeatedly called for tolerance and respect for democratic outcomes, framing democratic engagement as a part of one's faith commitment.[29] By fostering a culture of dialogue and tolerance, religious discourse can help create an environment in which democracy thrives sustainably.

Religious discourse also offers an avenue for addressing governance issues, such as human rights, that are essential for a functional democracy. Religious texts and teachings on justice and human dignity provide a basis for advocating for the rights of citizens, often challenging government actions that violate these principles. Adesoji points out those religious organisations in Nigeria have historically played a role in defending the marginalised and speaking out against injustices; thereby contributing to democratic ideals.[30] This aspect of religious discourse becomes especially critical in a society where state accountability is sometimes weak, positioning religious institutions as guardians of democratic values.

While religious discourse has the potential to either support or hinders democratic sustainability in Nigeria, it remains an undeniable force within the political landscape. The effectiveness of religious language in supporting democracy depends largely on how it is used – whether it fosters unity and accountability or sows division and partisanship. To harness religious discourse as a constructive influence, leaders must prioritise messages that emphasise democratic values, discourage sectarian biases, and promote peaceful political engagement. When applied thoughtfully, religious language in Nigeria can enhance the democratic experience, grounding governance in ethical principles that resonate across religious divides.

Summary

The study established that religious language plays a dual role in Nigeria's socio-political landscape, with the potential to either strengthen social cohesion and democratic ideals or to fuel division. Through a pragmatic discourse analysis of sermons, public speeches, and religious messages across Christian and Muslim communities, it was found that religious leaders often employ inclusive language, appeals to mutual respect, and shared ethical values to encourage peace and coexistence. However,

messages with political undertones or ambiguous wording have, at times, unintentionally reinforced ethnic and religious divides, showing the sensitive nature of religious discourse. The findings emphasised the dual power of religious language to either foster democratic values – such as justice, tolerance, and accountability – or unintentionally contribute to social fragmentation depending on the context, tone, and purpose.

Conclusion

The study concludes that religious language, when used judiciously, holds great potential as a tool for promoting peace and sustaining democracy in Nigeria. Religious leaders have an influential role in shaping social attitudes and guiding their followers toward a vision of unity and ethical governance. To harness this influence effectively, it is essential that religious discourse prioritises inclusivity, avoids partisanship, and focuses on shared values. By adopting a thoughtful and cooperative approach to communication, religious leaders and policymakers can ensure that religious language contributes positively to Nigeria's socio-political stability, peace, and democratic future.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed

i. It is recommended that religious leaders and policymakers jointly develop guidelines for religious discourse that align with democratic ideals and peace-building objectives.
ii. Training programs focusing on pragmatic communication skills can be organised for religious leaders and political office holders to help them understand the impact of their language choices on social attitudes and behaviours.
iii. By fostering interfaith initiatives, religious and political leaders can promote peace and democratic engagement across religious and ethnic divides.
iv. Religious leaders should be encouraged to adopt a non-partisan, values-based approach when discussing political matters. Instead of endorsing specific candidates or parties, leaders can focus on ethical governance, justice, and social accountability.
v. Continuous research into the influence of religious language on social attitudes and political stability is essential for keeping pace with societal changes.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962, 94-107

[2] J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969, 23-34

[3] P. Gifford, *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya*, London: Hurst & Company, 2009, 128-133

[4] D. Cameron, *Working with Spoken Discourse*, London: SAGE Publications, 2001, 45-52

5 E. Hamad, *Language, Religion and Conflict in Sudan: The Politics of Islamic Identity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 78-83

[6] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 101-107

[7] J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, 15-26

[8] M. Okoye, *Language and Power in Nigerian Religious Discourse*, Ibadan: University Press, 2003, 45-52

[9] I. Mustapha, Religion, *Society, and Power Dynamics in Nigeria*, Lagos: Spectrum Books, 2007, 89-96

[10] Hamad, *Language, Religion, and Conflict in Sudan*, 78-83

[11] Cameron, *Working with Spoken Discourse*, 34-40

[12] P. Gifford, *Christianity, Politics, and Public Life in Africa*, London: Hurst & Company, 2009, 134-142

[13] J. Haynes, Religion, *Conflict, and Politics in Nigeria*, London: Routledge, 1996,, 54-62

[14] Mustapha, *Religion, Society, and Power Dynamics in Nigeria*, 89-94

[15] Okoye, *Language and Power in Nigerian Religious Discourse*, 57-62

[16] Cameron, *Working with Spoken Discourse*, 34-39

[17] Mustapha, *Religion, Society, and Power Dynamics in Nigeria*, 105-109

[18] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 101-107

[19] J. Gifford, *Christianity, Politics, and Public Life in Africa*, London: Hurst & Company, 2009, 134-140

[20] Hamad, *Language, Religion, and Conflict in Sudan*, 78-83

[21] Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, 59-62

[22] F. Onuoha, *Religion and Peacebuilding in Nigeria: A Study of the Role of Religious Leaders in Kaduna State*, Ibadan: University Press, 2015, 114-118

[23] M. Yahaya, *The Language of Peace in Nigerian Religious Contexts*, Jos: African Studies Centre, 2014, 85-89

[24] L. Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 123-126

[25] L. Swidler, *Making the World Safe for Diversity: Dialogue and Cultural Harmony in the Global Era*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018, 142-145

[26] J. K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 71-75

[27] J. L. Hodge, *Faith and Governance: The Role of Religion in Democratic Societies*, London: Routledge, 2016, 112-115

[28] J. Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 82-85

[29] C. Oduah, "Nigerian Religious Leaders Call for Peace during Elections." Journal of African Studies, vol. 34, no. 2, 2018, 43-47

[30] A. Adesoji, *Religion and Social Justice in Africa, Ibadan: Spectrum Books*, 2017, 89-92