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Language and the Church in Kenya: Unity, Diversity or Unity in Diversity?

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ABSTRACT

Religion is an important aspect of the life of man and the society. This is because it is an important tool for relations within the society. Religion brings unity among people and the society at large. The unity of the church is of utmost importance for Christian religion and is, therefore, non-negotiable given that it determines the church. However, cultural and language differences exist even within churches of the same belief. So, in the church, should diversity violate unity and vice versa? The function of language in the church in the light of unity and diversity is therefore important. Which language should be used for the sake of the unity of the church in a diversified multilingual Kenyan environment? English, Kiswahili, local languages or an amalgamation of the three? Given that preaching is a social act, the study to which this paper is based adopts a descriptive design and discusses the social functions of language in religious sermons, showing how diversity in language is used in church to foster or hamper unity. The study demonstrates that different languages are used to elicit different social responses, thereby achieving different social functions and effects in the coordination of church activities. The ultimate goal being that respect for each other leads to recognition of the other, culminating into deep Christian confidence. Language is, therefore, used to bring a diversified people together as a unified community of faith, hence promoting unity in diversity in the church.

Keywords - Language and the Church; Unity in Diversity; Social function; Sermon; Code Mixing and Switching.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and society is a strong one and cannot be ignored (Rotila, 2019; Verster, 2022). The greatness of the importance of religion to society can be traced throughout history (Rotila, 2019). Religion has a role in shaping every society and its people (Verster, 2022). Social virtues, good morals and good social values are infused into the society through religion. Social cohesion and individual peace are created in the society by religion, with the aim of having a unified society (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Sloman & Fernbach, 2017; Smith, 1981; Sosis, 2009; Teehan, 2018). All these are achieved through religious teachings in church sermons that tell people to behave well, do good and refrain from wrong doings.

Church sermons are delivered to a diversified and multifaceted audience through language (Adebayo & Zulu, 2021), at a specific time and place, and to elicit specific responses and effects. In a multilingual society like Kenya, the language to be used in delivering the sermon to achieve the desired response and effect becomes paramount. Therefore, the dilemma that most preachers face when delivering their sermon is the choice of the language to use when, where, to whom, and for what effect.

Statement of the Problem

Imparting Christian and religious doctrines in the church is a social endeavour enacted through language. The church, Religion and Christianity as a whole thrive on the use of language and the choice of the language to use in these endeavours becomes paramount. Multilingual communities face the challenge of deciding which

language to use to achieve desired effects in these contexts; and each language is ingrained in the specific culture of these communities. The church in Kenya as a multilingual society with a diversity of languages and cultures, has to decide on which language to use in its church activities. Therefore, which language among the many languages, in existence in Kenya, is the best to use in the church to achieve the desired effect? Further, does the language chosen for use in a given church context serve to unify, divide or unify diversified congregants? These are the questions that this paper set out to answer.

Objectives of the Study

The paper was based on the following objectives.

1. To find out the language(s) used in specific contexts in the Church in Kenya
2. To explain the functions of the language(s) used in specific contexts in the Church in Kenya
3. To establish whether the language(s) used in specific contexts in the Church in Kenya brings about unity or disunity in the Church

The Church and Unity

The church has been seen as the second most unifying factor of mankind (Sanneh, 1989). This is because a united front is always stronger than a front in disunity (Sanneh, 1989). As seen in the unity of Christ with the Father, unity in the church is theologically crucial. This is because Christians are seen as children of God and therefore need to be one and in complete unity as siblings of one family (Volf, 1998). In this way, unity in church acts as a product and proof of the gospel as well as a powerful witness of the truth of the gospel (Schaaf, 2000). Given that the world we live in today is fragmented, diverse and with many instances of counter cultural unity among diverse people, a unified church is crucial in the society (Pieter, 2021). A unified church fosters friendship. In a unified church, the would-be natural enemies become siblings in Christ. All in all, a unified church acts as a powerful alternative to a world in which people seem not to agree on anything or bear to be around people who are different from them (Brett, 2017). As the bible puts it, the essentiality of unity in the church is imperative to its existence and the existence of the society as a whole, because the church is the body of Christ, and a body cannot be in disunity or disharmony with itself (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998; Volf, 1998). If disunity occurs, the body principally ceases to be a body and becomes a disjointed group of individuals (Brett, 2017; Pieter, 2021).

Nonetheless, since the earliest days of Christianity, unity in the church has been a challenge to achieve (Brett, 2017; Pieter, 2021). The church always endeavours to get Christian belief and behaviour right. However, this is normally hampered by the open-ended nature of scripture interpretation. This in turn leads to very strong feelings and obdurate opinions on all manner of Christian theology and praxis (Sanneh, 1989; Shelly, 2021). The open-ended nature of scripture interpretation leans greatly on cultural and linguistic diversity, which are other aspects that pose great challenges to unity in the church (Hadebe, 2017; Hendriks, 2021; Kingsley, 2018; Michael, 2020; Modise, 2020; Sebahene, 2020).

Even though Christianity has since the beginning been global and transcultural, local cultures and contexts have created a multiplicity of Christian identities and permutations (Soegianto & Abigail Lolong, 2023). For instance, the shape of Christian practice in a Kenyan megachurch such as the All-Saints Cathedral in Nairobi looks different from the practice in a Kenyan small local church such as the Rambira ACK church in Asembo. On the other hand, the different languages that are at the disposal of the church in a multilingual setup like Kenya resulting from linguistic diversity poses a challenge to unity in the church. Of the many languages that would exist in a congregation as determined by how linguistically diverse the congregation is, which one should be used over the other and why? Or should the different languages in existence be mixed? And why? Unity amidst such diversity is one of the most brilliant and yet challenging things about Christianity (Adebayo & Zulu, 2021; Pieter, 2021).

Cultural Differences, Language Differences and Unity in the Church

Multicultural societies are the epitome of life. To live a life wrapped in one's own cultural context, separate from others' cultural contexts is an impossible truth about life. This is because humankind is not universal for the fact

that each one of us is born and bred in a specific context with its own customs, traditions and languages (Chiblow & Meighan, 2022). Each one of us is a cultural creature because our separate and specific cultures have shaped us into what we are. The different cultural identities eminent in our lives and societies cannot, therefore, be ignored. Nonetheless, the possibility of people being very particular about their own identities and at the same time being in harmony with other people's different identities is not far-fetched (Fernandez, 2023; Soegianto & Abigael Lolong, 2023). This is because unity can never be found in uniformity, but only in diversity (Bryant, 2019; Goranson, Maria, & Joy, 2020; Sujit, 2008; Word by Word, 2016). In this way, ignoring cultural identities is opening doors to more problems and misunderstandings than to more solutions and understandings.

Language is one of the most ordinary and most important part of humanity (Tribus, 2017). Language shapes and patterns our thinking and all our doings (Altarriba & Basnight-Brown, 2022; Barber & Stainton, 2010). A language enables us to express our thoughts and feelings. A language is essential for our welfare including emotional welfare. Even though we are born in multilingual contexts in which one or more languages are being spoken, each one of us speaks a specific language - our mother tongue or first language. Our first languages or mother tongues are unique to us. We did not choose them. We just picked them from the societies we found ourselves growing in (Li, 2022; Shivani, & Tamilselvi, 2024; Trudgill, 2000). These are the languages that we think in, understand and can best express ourselves in. And even though each one of us may be able to speak an additional language(s) to our mother tongues, these are choice languages we learnt and are practicing according to the need. It is our mother tongues that bestow on us an identity that is unique to us and comprises the foundation of culture that is equally unique to us (Arshad & Chung, 2022; Berry, Lonner & Best, 2022). Nonetheless, in as much as language is important for our humanity and identity, it can also be the birthplace for our misunderstanding and division as evident in the dangers of ethnic identity and ethnic cleansing (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009). This then implies that there is no single church in the world that can have congregants of the same culture and language. There will always be people in the church with different cultural and linguistic orientations.

The attainment of unity in the church depends on how Christians view themselves within the body and how they view others in and outside church (Brett, 2017; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998; Verster, 2019). The main cause of disunity in church stems from Christians acting selfishly and considering themselves better than others (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009). A church will only reflect the heart of God when it intentionally appreciates the cultural and language differences of everyone (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009). This is because the bible explains that genuine cultural and language diversity in church is designed by God to help in the facilitation of reconciliation and restoration of identity (Schaaf, 2000). Therefore, what is needed for cultural and linguistic diversity to be real in the church is deliberate and calculated effort to create a safe space for intentional, active and continual conversations that encourage mutual appreciation of individual cultural and linguistic realities (Wardhaugh, 2010). Though the unity in Christ does not mean or is not equal to sameness, it requires accommodation and appreciation of diversity (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009). It requires that the church accepts people from various cultural backgrounds, different trajectories of life, different ways of expression, different ways of engagement and create opportunities for all to contribute to all aspects of church life (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009).

Social Functions of Language

Language is not only used as a means of communication. It is also used as a means of creating a people's world and worldview (Li, 2022; Shivani & Tamilselvi, 2024). A community designs and furnishes its own world, it decides what is good, what is bad, what is important, what is unimportant, and who should behave in which way (Tribus, 2017). All these happen through language because nothing has meaning apart from the value given to it by the community and its individual members through language (Tribus, 2017). Thus, a community creates its own interpretation of life and its own view of the world through language, which is also used to express it. It is through its world view that a community is provided with a sense of order and security, an ordered social life, and answers to its members to questions of identity (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Todd, 1990). As a result, the human family contains as many world views as there are human communities, and each community contains as many variations of its world view as it has members whose memory, meaning and power is evoked through and by language.

Language is also used to give names and assign value to persons, objects, places, events and experiences including sermons. Naming something places it into a world view so that it can be responded to and manipulated

appropriately by the community and its members as something with a given value and honour (Trudgill, 2000). Different names for the same thing can lead to quite different social effects (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). A crusade at a market place, to spread the gospel, can be named an act of outreach fellowship. But if the same act is labelled a sect or a cult, the effect is quite different. It may not be viewed in the positive but in the negative as more of a defection and with negative connotations that do not foster the spread of the gospel or the work of God. So, the wording used, which gives names to what is being said, is key in determining the interpenetration and meaning of what is being said. And all these are affected by the world view of the people interpreting and giving meaning to what is said as members of a given community and as individual members in that community.

Closely related to the giving of a name is the use of metaphors and images. Metaphors, as figures of speech, encode experiences in rich forms of language pregnant with information that can evoke the power of world views making them genuine or ingenuine and with specific behavioural results (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). As a result, the names and metaphors used in religious discourse and contexts need to be chosen with careful attention to yield desired results. This is because, different images lead to different ways of conceiving the sermon, they also lead to different relationships between the speaker and the hearer and at the same time they also lead to different social effects. This is because in as much as they are intended to appeal to the same world view, the Christian word view, they also appeal at the same time to different world views determined by the different communities the congregants belong to and each individual Christian congregant. In this way, preachers need often than not to carefully calculate the social effect of their language.

In as much as language creates and sustains a world view, it can also cause members of a society to see the world in new ways. Language is a loaded weapon that pictures things in ways that are meant to elicit a specific evaluation from the community, usually an evaluation of approval or disapproval (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). It can cause listeners to think afresh about the meaning and organization of their lives. It can act as an assault upon consciousness intended to reorient the hearers into seeing the world in new ways, hence reevaluating the social value and role of things, something that triggers them to think and act in certain ways. In essence, this is what the preacher intends the sermon to achieve. To persuade and convince the congregants to take his/her side of looking at the word of God as expressed in the sermon delivered and at the same time to appeal to them to change their thinking and behaviour in line with the message of the sermon and hence pleasing God. In this case, what the preacher expects from the congregants is more of approval than disapproval.

Therefore, language is a social construct and is not only used to convey information, but also for personal and social identity. It is used to establish, reinforce and maintain social relations. It is used to show membership and belongingness in a group. It is used to consciously express one's distant stance from the membership of a group. It is used to mark out different degrees of social proximity and distance. It is used to show familiarity, to draw attention, to show respect, to facilitate being heard and to facilitate being accepted. However, it can also be used for controlling others and for social conflicts and confrontation between different groups if the sense of social identity is narrow.

Preaching as a Social Act

A social act is an act that is intentional, has an aim, is planned, has a purpose, and which encompasses another self in the sense that by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual(s), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course (Danziger, 2023; Deppermann, 2021; Schaaf, 2000; Slutskiy, 2021). How then is preaching a social act?

Preaching is a social act because it is a communicative act that manifests cooperative behaviour. It is made up of a set of utterances that are used by the preacher to perform some sort of linguistic action or function in communication (Danziger, 2023; Deppermann, 2021; Slutskiy, 2021). The set of utterances that is the sermon is used as an overt attempt to influence the addressee (congregant), either in the form of soliciting specific and momentary cooperation or in the form of providing it (Sosis, 2009). It is therefore, intentional, requires reciprocity from the addressee and occurs in a particular context that should not be ignored for appropriate effect and response (Holmes, 2013; Tribus, 2017; Trudgill, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2010).

Preaching as a social and communicative act is facilitated through communication and communication occurs

through language (Danziger, 2023; Deppermann, 2021; Holmes, 2013; Schaaf, 2000; Slutskiy, 2021; Tribus, 2017). For communication to be effective a message must be received (heard or read), understood, accepted and acted upon (change behaviour or attitude). If this does not happen communication has failed and participants in a communication event get frustrated and resentful (Holmes, 2013; Schaaf, 2000). As a tool of communication among the members of a society, language is influenced by the very society where it functions. Differences in language is the most obvious barrier to communication as two people speaking two different languages differ in their linguistic ability and can thus not communicate with each other (Brett, 2017; Holmes, 2013; Schaaf, 2000). The message that is to be communicated occurs as a thought in the mind of the sender. This thought has to be converted into an expressible form (code), that is, words and/or gestures (Brett, 2017). Words constitute language, which is a code that can only be understood if both parties give the same meaning to the symbols that are used. Language is stored in the brain of human beings in form of lexical items and rules that determine how these items structure and function. Therefore, language, thought and culture are intertwined because thoughts and culture are expressed through language (Barber & Stainton, 2010; Holmes, 2013; Li, 2022; Shivani & Tamilselvi, 2024; Trudgill, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2010). To produce real speech, lexical items are retrieved from the brain and structured according to language specific rules and culture. In this way language, thought and culture have to work together as a system in the production of speech.

Therefore, for communication to be effective there is need to use a language that both parties understand factoring in the linguistic ability of the communicants in the language, the amount of vocabulary they share and their culture (Tribus, 2017). In this case, in Kenya, the best language to be used for communicating the message of the sermon to the congregants should be their first languages as these are the languages that they know, have high linguistic abilities in, understand best, identify with and express their culture and their identity. However, given the multilingual and cosmopolitan nature of Kenyan churches, the use of first languages or mother tongues becomes a challenge. Christianity in Kenya has historically relied on the English language as the language of the colonists and missionary with a few cases and efforts to integrate Kenyan mother tongues into the Christian ministry. Translating the bible and Christian procedures and proceedings as well as books into the mother tongues has not yielded much, strengthening and fostering the use of English (Sanneh, 1989). Similarly, Kiswahili as the national language in Kenya has played a major role in inhibiting the use of mother tongues in Christian ministry. In cosmopolitan instances where English cannot be used, the fallback language is always Kiswahili, the national language. However, to drive the point home given the individual word views that people have and the foreign nature of English and Kiswahili to the Kenyan populations, alluding to and using mother tongues to pass and drive the message home to elicit and invoke the desired effect has become common place in Kenya.

Christian preaching- the sermon- aims at creating a world or society that is shaped by the gospel and hence expects or requires the members of such a society to rely on the gospel in all their endeavours and workings (Smith, 1981). Therefore, preachers are conscious of the social function of the language of the sermon, and thus use language in such a way as to encourage social effects that are appropriate to the gospel (Teehan, 2018). To achieve this, preachers, in some instances, take pleasure and give regard to rendering the sermon in their local dialect, thus communicating the essence of Bible messages in ways that English language could not have been able to do (Sanneh, 1989). Such instances of the sermons have done much in Church teaching, indicating that mother tongue is a key factor in communicating to an audience during preaching. The role of mother tongue in communication during the sermon can, therefore, not be underplayed if the message of the gospel is to reach people accurately and yield the desired effect.

In this vein, code mixing and code switching has become common to bring the gospel as close as possible to the people (Bhatia, 2021; Dewi, 2021; Ezeh, Umeh & Anyanwu, 2022; Shet & Premkumar, 2022). In the process of spreading the gospel, English, Kiswahili and Kenyan native languages have been used to make sure that the message of the sermon is conceived as desired and with the desired effect. The objective has been to enable the conception of the sermon accurately and not in different ways. For instance, if one conceives the sermon as an argument hence a quarrel, is different from another person conceiving the sermon as therapy hence consoling and soothing. All these perceptions are different with different effects. In one instance, the effect is positive and in the other the effect is negative. The behavioural outcome elicited by each effect affects the congregation. A congregation that feels discouraged by the sermon withers off and responds negatively to the sermon, while a

congregation that is soothed and encouraged by the sermon blossoms and responds positively to the sermon (Nyevilley, 2019).

Code mixing and code switching necessitated by the need to pass on Christian teachings and the gospel accurately and to achieve the intended goal of it has, therefore, brought diversity in the church in terms of several languages and tribal identities (Bhatia, 2021; (Dewi, 2021; Ezeh, Umeh & Anyanwu, 2022; Shet & Premkumar, 2022). Nonetheless this diversity brings some concern. There is the fear and feeling that this diversity may lead to disunity in the church, by developing tribal and/or regional identification in the church (Teehan, 2018). The result being the creation of a pull between two sides in the church, that is, the side of particular identity and the side of universal unity. To avoid getting into an unpleasant situation, the church should endeavour to always remain open to these two sides instead of ignoring either of the sides (Sosis, 2009). The understanding being that using one language, English or Kiswahili, at the expense of local languages, may serve to perpetuate universal unity whose aim is to solve the problems of tribalism and regionalism. However, this will be ignoring or downplaying the importance of diversity in languages and cultural identity. To strike a balance, therefore, it would be beneficial to allow a development of unity in diversity by mixing and/or switching these languages, with the ultimate aim of reaching out to everyone fairly and equally by factoring in their language and cultural identities and contexts (Sanneh, 1989; Schaaf, 2000; Todeva & Cenoz, 2009). It is not, therefore, uncommon to find in the modern Kenyan worship more than one services conducted in a day, predominantly on Sundays, at different times and in different languages. And again, it is not uncommon to find different languages being used at different times or mixed in the same service. There are also specific services for specific groups of people: the youth, the teens, the children, the elderly, men only, women only in which different languages are used in specific ways to pass the gospel message in the respective sermons.

CONCLUSION

Language is not only used to convey information but also to carry out a number of social functions including promoting personal identity, social identity, social relations, belongingness, being accepted, enabling the control of others, for social conflicts and confrontation between different groups. The language a speaker chooses to use, in which way and for whichever function depends on the communicative intend of the speaker. Diversity in language and culture, in the world at large and in the church in particular, may result to ethnic pride, racism and exclusion of others when used in an exclusivist manner. In such cases, language and cultural diversity is like a punishment to humanity. However, inclusive use of language and cultural diversity enhances the search for genuine unity and becomes a blessing for people and peoples. Therefore, there is need for the church to recognize its diversity as united Christians, and encourage worshiping congregations to cultivate, celebrate, and preserve that diversity. This should be one of the strengths and hall marks of Christianity and Christian worship, whose aim would be to express the cultural norms of the people, in the heart language of the people, springing from deep within the identity of the community, and not segregated but invented in each sermon based upon the composition of the congregation present, when and where.

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