

NEW EXPLORATIONS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND LITERATURE

**A FESTSCHRIFT FOR
PROF. SAMUEL KOLO TSWANYA**



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LEXICAL CHOICE AS A REFLECTOR OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

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Abstract

Sociolinguistic theories such as Social Identity Theory and the Theory of Act of Identity have provided theoretical supports to the fact that language has the potency to reveal its users' social identities. The present study was designed to attest this view by investigating how 100 respondents used language resources to signal their religious affiliations. Two optional essay topics based on moral issues were administered to the 100 respondents who were students of Waziri Umaru Federal Polytechnic, Birnin Kebbi. The respondents were evenly and purposively selected from the two major religions in Nigeria (Christianity and Islam). The results indicated that the respondents used allusion from the Holy Scriptures (the Bible and the Quran); and this pattern of linguistic choice helped to isolate the Christian respondents from the Muslim respondents. It was also discovered that certain lexical items which are unique expressions of each religion were used by the respondents to create socio-religious bonds with their audience. Also, it was discovered that some expressions used by the respondents are reflections of their respective religion's world-views or doctrinal position on moral issues. The study concluded that the choice of linguistic elements is capable of revealing the users' social and religious identity.

Introduction

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics which studies language in connection with social factors. It conceives an individual as an embodiment of some sociolinguistic variables (age, sex, status, geography, etc.); and that the speech has the potentiality of reflecting the social group of the individual. Oloruntoba-oju (1999, p.99) submits that "sociolinguistics deals with the linguistic indices of social interaction, that is, aspects of language that express, indicate or show evidences of the various situations obtaining in the society." Sotiloye (1999, p.187) who adopts an applied linguistic perspective to the definition of sociolinguistics, sees it as "a field of study which relates societal problems to linguistic/language problems." Aligned to this is Olaoye (1998, p.98) who asserts that "it is a field of collective term for the application of research techniques, and findings from linguistics and various social sciences to the study of language in the society." In other words, the driving force of sociolinguistics is the categorization of language users within the spheres of socio variables on the basis of features of speech which the users exhibit.

The society is structured into social groups: religious, political, economic, professional, etc. Thus, linguists have theorised that the social group, which an individual belongs to, exerts so strong an influence that reflects on the choice of

words the individual uses in social interaction. For instance, Yule (1996, p.239) states that "it (sociolinguistics) has strong connections to...sociology, through the crucial role that language plays in the organization of social groups and institutions." Ayodabo (1999, p.99) sums it up that "the society, in general, is described along various lines based on occupation, geographical location, sex, age status, etc.; and how these variables are reflected in language use." Religion seems to be the most powerful social group because it draws members from all races, cultures and all walks of life. For instance, the Christian religion and the Islamic religion spread their tentacles beyond the geographical locations of their origin and succeed to penetrate to every corner of the globe. Amazingly, not minding their local cultures or languages, all members, of each religion have common defining beliefs which bring them together under the same umbrella. Religion has the potency to influence people's thought patterns and their formulation of idea about a particular phenomenon. People's activities are programmed in such a way that members of a particular religion may either be instructed or restricted to do certain things. Religion influences conception of the world and determines the formulation of world-views by people united by the religion. Since there is an unbroken alliance between language and thought, people often unconsciously use certain linguistic elements which reflect their religious affiliation when they use language for communication purposes. This explains why Crystal, (1997, p.19) is of the view that "language is a major means of showing where we belong and of distinguishing one social group from one another, and all over the world we can see evidence of linguistic divergence rather than divergence." Against this background, this study intends to investigate how people consciously or unconsciously use language to reflect their socio-religious affiliation.

Purpose of the Study

The study is underpinned on the philosophical foundation of sociolinguistics that socio variables of language users are reflected in their language use. Religion is therefore used as social variable in this study. In so doing the study will:

- a. explore how the lexical choices of the respondents allude to their respective Holy Scriptures (the Bible and the Quran); with a view to discovering how the patterns of lexical choice isolate or distinguish the Christian respondents from the Muslim respondents;
- b. discover certain lexical items which are unique expressions of each religion; thereby revealing how the respondents use such expressions to create social bonds with their audience;
- c. discover how some expressions used by the respondents reflect their respective religion's world-views or doctrinal positions on moral issue; and,
- d. identify the registers common to both religions (the Christianity and the Islam) and those that are peculiar to each religion.

Research Methodology

The work is a quantitative research which explains issues factually and systematically. The method used in the collection of data for the study was the administration of a test on one hundred polytechnic students, who are users of English language. They were purposively selected from the four colleges of Waziri Umaru Federal Polytechnic, Birnin Kebbi. Because religion bothers on moral issues, there is a strong indication that the respondents would use religious expressions in their answers. The test consisted of two optional Essay/Letter Writing questions which are thematically based on moral issues.

1. Write a letter to a close friend of yours in another higher institution advising him/her to reconcile with his/her father whom he/she disagreed with over a serious matter.
2. Write a letter giving moral advice to a friend of yours who confided in you that he/she did something evil that provoked his parents.

The respondents were instructed not to write their names. The study was limited to the lexical items used by the respondents to identify their religious affiliation. The scripts were read and isolated into either of the religious groups on the basis of expressions or registers in the scripts that signal religious identity. Expressions culled from ten scripts from each religious group were used in the explanations. Errors committed by the respondents were undermined since the scope of the study is purely on speech as a signal of social identity. Therefore, each verbatim excerpt is embedded within brackets as whole to avoid unnecessary attention to every error within the brackets.

Theoretical Framework

There exist some influential theories of sociolinguistics such as the Deficit Hypothesis theory, the Variability theory, the Wave theory, Social Identity theory, the theory of Acts of Identity and the theory of Linguistic Relativism and Determinism. Two of these theories, which are the theory of Acts of Identity and Social Identity theory, conceive human speech as a signal of social identity. The major assumptions of these theories are discussed as follows.

The Theory of Acts of Identity

Le Page (1974) champions the Acts of Identity theory in the studies of Creole. Central to this valuable theoretical legacy in sociolinguistics is that the linguistic behaviour of an individual is a means to reveal the social group the individual belongs. Hudson (1996), the exponent of the theory explains that difference in the speech of people is a sociolinguistic factor through which people can be situated into social groups. Hudson (1996, p.46) submits that:

the people around us belong to a variety of social types, and we have to decide where we ourselves belong among these types. If different types speak differently we can use our own speech to signal these choices...our speech can be seen as an Act of Identity.

Following Hudson's theory, other sociolinguistic scholars have worked extensively to corroborate his view. Stockwell (2002, p.1) asserts that "all

language events consist of a piece of language in a social context...The language used in particular situations determine the nature of that social event." Thornborrow (2004, p.158) also adds that "one of the most fundamental ways we have of establishing our identity, and of shaping other people's views of who we are, is through our use of language."

Fundamental to the theory is the assumption that the choice of expressions and vocabularies can be interpreted in order to locate the user within a particular social group. Hudson (1996, p.46) corroborates this view when he points out that: we can interpret register differences in terms of the model of acts of identity. Each time we speak or write we not only locate ourselves in relation to the rest of society, but we also locate our act of communication itself to a complex classificatory scheme of communicative behaviour.

The theory is also cognizant of the possibility that an individual may willingly for some reasons decide to hide his identity to a social group. This explains the reason why Hudson (1996, p.40) states that "the influence of an item stops when individuals choose for some reasons not to identify themselves with the social group which uses it." It is apparent that the theory holds the view that every social group consists of a piece of language peculiar to the group.

Social Identity Theory

The display and manipulation of language resources to reveal personal identity in a social context within linguistics is also explained in what is known as Social Identity Theory. The theory is described by Meyerhoff (2006, p.13) as:

the way in which individuals can strategically use language as a potent symbol of identity when testing or maintaining intergroup boundaries. This can take place as either *divergence*, when one highlights the differences between the identity group one belongs to and that of one's interlocutor, or as *convergence*, when in order to help form or nurture a social bond with the interlocutor, and to show solidarity and amiability towards that person, one may use language to play down the differences between oneself and the other person.

The major assumptions of the theory are explained in terms of convergence and divergence. When a speaker consciously or unconsciously exploits the various linguistic resources available to him to create or reinforce a bond between him and the listener; the speaker is doing so to create an impression that he identifies himself with the listener as belonging to the same social group. This is explained in terms of what is called convergence. Also, a speaker may consciously or unconsciously use language resources to create a social distance between him and the listener. This is explained in terms of divergence.

Data Presentation and Data Analysis

Linguistic Expressions Uniquely Identifying Muslim Respondents

Extract 1

I was expecting that your father would be very bitter when he visited us in the campus and see me wearing hijab and you did not cover your own body properly despite all his warning. All you need to do is to beg him. (sic)

Through the choice of the lexeme "hijab", two sociolinguistic variables (sex and religion) are revealed in the above excerpt. Microsoft Encarta (2009) reveals that "Hijab refers to the modest, covering dress that Muslim women wear when they are outside their homes or in the presence of men not closely related to them." The use of hijab is unarguably estranged to the Christian. Therefore, the choice of the lexeme in the above admonition demonstrates how the respondent consciously or unconsciously signals her socio-religious affiliation.

Extract 2

It is bad to turn down your parent instructions because of the lady you want to marry. Please, obey your parent and fear the judgment day when the Almighty God will weigh our good and bad deeds in the balance. [sic]

The extract above contains an idiom: "the Almighty God will weigh our good and bad deeds in the balance" which overtly tracks down the cosmological context of the admonition. The expression is a reflection of an Islamic doctrine which states that on the judgment day, he whose good deeds weighs heavy in the balancing scale of God shall inherit the paradise; but he whose good deeds weighs light shall be plunged into the blazing fire. The Christian doctrine, which holds the view that the blood of Jesus atones for the sins of mankind, does not support the idea that good works alone can save. The expression overtly projects Islamic doctrine, therefore, it signals the religious affiliation of the respondent.

Extract 3

I want to advice you that you should beg for your father forgiveness and not disobey him again because the angel in your left side is recording every evil you do in your life. Do away with boyfriends as your father wish. (sic)

It is certain that both the Christian religion and the Islamic religion believe in the existence of angels which is underpinned in the respondent's counsel. For instance, the Muslims believe that God assigns two Angels (Roqib and Atid) to monitor the deeds of every individual. The expression "the angel in your left side is recording every evil you do" is a reflection of this view. Dallal, Ahmad S. (2008) affirms this when he says "according to Islamic tradition, angels...serve as a guardian, a recorder of deeds" To the Christians; such a view is estranged. The choice of such an expression aptly demonstrates that the Islamic religious doctrinal position intrudes to shape the thought pattern of the respondent.

Extract 4

I will not like that your parent would think I am the one causing you to disobey them because I am your only friend they know with you, your parent are your guidance because God guide who He will, and that is why you must try and do what they tell you. (sic)

Regard for parents is a dominant theme of both religions. However, the idiom "God guide who He will" [sic], which the respondent deployed in his admonition, is an allusion to the Holy Quran (16:95) which says "God leads astray who He will and guides who He will." Through this idiom, the respondent wants his erring friend to conceive the parents as an agent that God uses to guide him/her. The employment of an allusion drawn from the Holy Quran can therefore be seen as a linguistic vestige which hints the religious affiliation of the respondent.

Extract 5

Your parent is fighting you because you no longer observe the five daily prayers regularly because of the nature of your work, but remember that I am working in the same office with you and I also am trying to do my daily duty to the Almighty. (sic)

Prayer, which is the core message in the respondent's admonition, is a common practice in both religions. However, two expressions are germane to our analysis in the above respondent's admonition to his/her friend. First, the expression "observe the five daily prayers" is indicative of the Muslims' obligatory daily prayers (*Salat*). Second, the expression: "I am also trying to do my daily duty to the Almighty" is an allusion drawn from the Holy Quran (5:35) which says: "O you who believe! Do your duty to Allah and fear Him." In terms of the concept of "Convergence" introduced by the proponents of Social Identity theory, the employment of the expression drawn from the Holy Quran is not only a linguistic vestige which hints the religious identity of the respondent but also creates an impression that he identifies himself as belonging to the same religion with the recipient.

Extract 6

I am disappointed that your father has to persuade you over the pilgrimage to the holy land which must be done at least once in one's lifetime if someone is financially and physically fit. You are more richer than me, and I performed this duty last year. Please, try to settle this quarrel with your father. (sic)

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem is a common practice in Christian religion. Also, pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) is fifth of the Five Pillars of Islam which is considered a religious duty in the Quran. However, the choice of obligatory modal verb "must" in the expression "pilgrimage to the holy land which must be done at least once in one's lifetime...fit" is indicative of Quranic stance on the issue of performance of pilgrimage to Mecca, if all conditions (financial capability and health condition) are fulfilled. In Christianity, pilgrimage to Jerusalem is voluntary and not a cardinal doctrine of the Bible. Therefore, choice of the obligatory modal verb "must" hints the religious background of the respondent.

Extract 7

This will be the second time you disagree with your daddy over the Toyota car you want him to buy for you. Your father know why he does want to buy it for you. Think of what our religious leader tell us that every servants of God must obey their parents and try to understand him. (sic)

The expression "every servants (sic) of God" is common to both religions but with different usages. The Muslims use the expression to refer to every follower of Islamic faith; while the Christians use the expression as a title to refer mainly to their religious leaders. The Christians would rather use the expression "child of God" to refer to every believer. Since the theme of the message centres on the duty of every believer, it can be safely concluded that the choice of the expression implicitly reveals the writer to be a Muslim.

Extract 8

Dear friend, why are you so adamant to your parent? It is not good at all because we are taught that anyone who disobey their parent will not follow the Prophet of God to enjoy in the paradise.(sic)

It is the universal teaching of both religions that there is a reward for believers who obey and honour their parents as indicated in the above respondent's advice to his erring friend. However, the choice of the expression "the Prophet of God", which is a Muslim referring expression to Muhammad (SAW), is indicative of the respondent's religious affiliation. The Christian religion does neither associate any Prophet of God with the day of judgement nor does it use the expression to refer to Jesus as the the religious leader who would lead his followers to paradise. For this reason, the choice of the expression isolates the respondent as a Muslim.

Extract 9

Friend, I will not like you to reject the lady your father want you to marry as a second wife. She is religious and educated. Your father is rich and he is ready to finance your marriage. Remember that I am also having three wives and I am treating them equally as religion taught us. (sic)

The practice of polygamy which is the central theme of the above respondent's creative admonition is common in both religions. However, polygamy, which is legal under the Islamic law, is disfavoured and condemned in Christendom. In terms of the concept of "Convergence" introduced by the proponents of Social Identity theory, the choice of the pronominal lexeme "us" in the expression: "I am treating them equally as religion taught us." helps to isolate both the respondent and the recipient as Muslims. This is because the idea of equality of treatment or equal dealings among wives is not a subject in Christian religion which emphasizes monogamy. The choice of the lexeme "us" also creates an impression that he identifies himself as belonging to the same religion with the recipient.

Extract 10

I want to advice that you should call two elderly people to beg your parent for you to forgive you because if they don't forgive you, your life will not be good. When they beg them finish, try to give alms to the poor so that God will forgive your sin against your parent. (sic)

The expression: "try to give alms to the poor so that God will forgive your sin" unveils the religious background of the respondent. One of the five fundamental teachings of Islam is alms-giving, otherwise referred to as *sadaqa* (voluntary charity) and *zakat* (Obligatory charge). Dallal (2009) reveals that "zakat is considered an expression of devotion to God. It represents the attempt to provide for the poorer sectors of society... a means for a Muslim to ... attain salvation." In an admonition of this kind, a Christian would not recommend alms-giving as a means to get appeasement or propitiation for sins. The choice of this expression in the respondent's admonition readily heralds the religious affiliation of the respondent. Therefore, this is a demonstration of the fact that speech has an underlying function of revealing the social identity of the user.

Linguistic Expressions Uniquely Identifying Christian Respondents

Extract 11

It is not good to disobey parents' instructions because sin against parent is a sin against God, I want to tell you to find time to beg your dad to forgive you and please go back to Calvary where we can obtain mercy and forgiveness on this issue. (sic)

Certain linguistic items such as "sin", "good", "God" and "forgive/ness" in the respondent's admonition are conventional to both religions. However, the choice of the expression "go back to Calvary where we can obtain mercy and forgiveness" is a reflection of a Christian teaching that recommends a spiritual journey (to Calvary where Jesus was crucified) involving prayers for forgiveness of sins. Moreso, in terms of the concept of "Convergence", the choice of the word "we" in the expression readily reveals the religious belief which both the respondent and the receiver mutually share.

Extract 12

That you disobey your father is very bad and ddoes not show you have the fear of God and your parent. We are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, therefore disobedient to parent is not godly. (sic)

In the above excerpt, the expression "We are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God" collapses two Biblical allusions (Gen. 1:26 and Psa. 139:14). The respondent uses the expression to remind his friend that ungodliness is not a part of God's perfect nature which they share and to condemn the act of disobedience to God and parents. The Islamic doctrine maintains that God does not share His Divinity with either animate or inanimate object; therefore the writer of the above excerpt is a Christian. This also sustains the major thesis of this study.

Extract 13

Let others disobey their parent, but not you. Let others join secret cults, but not you, because children of God like us must not involve in those things. Please and please shun bad group that your parent hate. (sic)

In the respondent's exhortation to his friend, the expression "children of God" is unique to Christianity as a referring expression to the followers of the faith. The Muslims would rather consider the expression sacrilegious to their faith because the religious doctrine holds that God does not share relation with His Creatures. (See extract 7 above). The respondent however, employs the expression to signal his affiliation to Christianity as a socio-religious group.

Extract 14

It is written that children should obey their parents in all things forthiswell pleasingunto theLord. Consider this statement and do not provoke the Lord our saviour who died for us by disobeying your parent. (sic)

The respondent makes allusion to the Bible (Col. 3: 20 & Eph. 6:1) in the first sentence of the admonition which functions as a premise for the second sentence. In the second sentence, the expression "the Lord our saviour who died for us" implicitly suggests the socio-religious group which the respondent belong to. The expression is a reference to Jesus Christ whom the Christians esteem as the saviour of mankind. It is certain that a Muslim respondent would not use such an expression. Therefore, the respondent uses the expression to locate him/herself to Christianity as a socio-religious group.

Extract 15

How can I be happy when you are not in agreement with your daddy? I even pray in tongues for you yesterday so that your father will forgive you. Please, stop having dealing with that girl since your father reject her. (sic)

Prayer is conventional to both religions as the respondent hints his reader. However, the phrase "pray in tongues" is a reference to a manner of prayer in Christianity when the believer is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The issue of praying in tongues is alienated to the Muslims. Therefore, the respondent uses the phrase to insinuate his religious identity. On the basis of this fact, we can isolate the respondent as a Christian.

Extract 16

Please, always use our devotional manual because some sacred hymns like No. 372 would teach you how to relate with your father better, also be contented with what he give you so that he will not fight you again. (sic)

The practice of using a devotional manual for daily meditation and prayer as recommended by the respondent to his erring friend is commonly found in

Christianity. Reference to sacred hymns is a strong basis to locate the respondent within Christendom to which he uses the expression to identify himself with. Such ideas as these are estranged to the Muslims. Hence, the choice of these expressions practically demonstrates that speech is a signal of social identity.

Extract 17

Try to see whatever your father do to you as your own cross that you must bear, remember that there is a crown laid down for us after this life. I appeal to you to obey him so that you will not miss the crown. (sic)

The central teaching of both religions is the reality of life after death. However, if we conceive the phrase "cross that you must bear" as reference to Jesus exhortation to believers (See Mat. 16:24), we will conclude that the respondent employed the phrase to signal his religious background. Also, the phrase "a crown laid down...life" is a reference to the hope of believers in Jesus; (See Phil. 4:1, & 2Tim. 4:8). These phrases give us a strong conviction that the respondent is a Christian. Hence our speech is a signal of our social affiliation.

Extract 18

I want to plead with you not to tell lies to your daddy again because all unrighteousness is sin, and the wages of sin is death. Return the money you steal from your father's safe and never do it again. (sic)

Both religions condemn sin of any kind. Nevertheless, the respondent's admonition contains two Biblical references which are bases for situating him/her within the Christian social group. The expression "all unrighteousness is sin" is reference to 1Joh 5:17; while the expression "the wages of sin is death" is a reference to Rom 6:23. These are common expressions which the Christian use to condemn sin. For these reasons, we assume that the Christian doctrine shapes the thought pattern of the respondent to use those expressions.

Extract 19

Because you know that your daddy is very tough in dealing with you, it is better you confess the evil that you do to the man of God in our fellowship so that he can assist you to beg him. (sic)

The church leader (Pastor, Evangelist, etc.) is referred to as a "man of God" in the Christian folds. Such an expression is rather sacrilegious to the Muslims. Also, the phrase, "our fellowship" (a spiritual gathering) is preferably used among the Christians to avoid the use of the word "gathering" which denotes a social group. Through those expressions the respondent consciously or unconsciously signals his/her religious affiliation to Christianity. In terms of the concept of "Convergence", the employment of the pronominal lexeme "our" in the underlined expression likewise creates an impression that the respondent identifies himself as belonging to the same religion with the recipient.

Extract 20

I am disappointed that you can be rude to your father despite your ambition to become a minister of God, I become your prayer partner because of this ambition, change your attitude and be a good example.
(sic)

The phrases "a minister of God" and "prayer partner" are peculiar to the Christians. The religious leaders are referred to as Ministers of God, while the idea of prayer partner relates to an act of having a prayer associate supporting someone in prayer over a matter. Unarguably, the choice of the expressions hints the fact that the respondent is a Christian.

Some Registers of Religions

The various registers in the table below were garnered from scripts where the respondents explicitly reveal his/her religious affiliation through the use of such expressions "as a Christian" or "as a Muslim".

Registers Peculiar to Christianity	Registers Peculiar to Islam	Registers Peculiar to both Religions
Church, the Bible, Jesus, tithe, sanctification, baptism, Saviour, God's grace, the anointed, anointing, rapture, pastor, apostle, evangelist, deliverance, atonement, minster, priest, Pope, altar, choir stalls, service, clergy,	Muhammad, the Quran, Allah, ablution, turban, imam, mosque, hijab, zakat, hajj, sheik, sunna, jumada,	God, forgiveness, prayer, sin, hell, prophet, confession, repentance, the Almighty, submission, Scripture, angel, heaven, paradise, faith, belief, follower, believer, pilgrimage, holy land, congregation, repentance, Satan,

1.8 Conclusion

The widely held stance, that our speech signals our social identity maintained by the theories of sociolinguistics, has been investigated in this study. The study has been able to demonstrate that people of religions differ in the choice of expressions to reflect their beliefs. It was also discovered that on moral issue, religions doctrinal positions intrude to shape the thought patterns of the one hundred respondents used for the study. We discovered the importation of various registers and allusions peculiar to each religion (the Christianity, and the Islam) in the exhortations of the respondent. On the bases of these discoveries, it is safe to conclude that speech has an underlying function of identifying the social group of the user. We therefore recommend to the linguists to investigate this fact in other social situations. As it has been demonstrated, this work is a contribution to the general modelling of language, especially the theory of Acts of identity which maintains that speech is a signal of social identity.

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