

## SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED ANGLICAN CHURCH NAMES IN THE DIOCESE ON THE NIGER

Achugbu, James Chigozie

Department of English

Chukwuemeka Ojukwu University Igbariam,

Anambra State

jamesachugbu@gmail.com

07037670280

### Abstract

This study examines the semantic dimensions of Anglican Church names within the Diocese on the Niger, the oldest diocese in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion). It explores how the naming of parishes embodies theological meaning, spiritual identity, and cultural context. Employing semantic field theory, the research categorizes parish names into apostolic, Christological, doctrinal, angelic, eschatological, pastoral, and contextual types. Using qualitative analysis supported by descriptive data, one representative church name from each of the twenty Archdeaconries of the Diocese was examined to reveal patterns of meaning. The findings demonstrate that Anglican Church names in the Diocese function as vehicles of theology, ecclesial memory, and mission, articulating both continuity with apostolic faith and adaptation to Igbo Christian culture.

**Keywords:** Semantic, Anglican Church, Names, Diocese on the Niger, Semantic Field

### 1.1 Introduction

Language is not merely a system of grammar and vocabulary; it is also a repository of culture, values, and traditions. Ofoegbu (2021) posits that the human language is very unique because it has its own structure and its own system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns. This simply means that there are rules governing the organization of sentences in a language. Ofoegbu (2012), building on his earlier works, defines language as “the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate.” He further emphasizes that “language is man and man is language. Ofoegbu and Usar (2018) repeat and expand this definition, stressing that language is not only a system of communication but also a fundamental tool for expressing human experiences. The emphasis here remains on the exclusivity of language to humans and its indispensability in social life. Among the most striking features of natural language is the use of idiomatic expressions. According to Ofoegbu (2024) “language is man and man is language”. Life has no meaning without language. Language is a means of interaction among people of the same community. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) reaffirm earlier views, calling language “the human system of communication ... man and man is language ... man uses language for his everyday interaction.”

Language serves as a key instrument for expressing theology, culture, and identity within religious institutions. In the Anglican Communion, names given to parishes and churches are not random labels but deliberate linguistic and theological choices. The Diocese on the Niger, established in 1864, represents the cradle of Anglicanism in southeastern Nigeria. Its parishes, distributed across twenty Archdeaconries, bear names that reveal deep semantic and spiritual significance.

Church names such as St. Peter's, Holy Trinity, Church of the Resurrection, and Chapel of Divine Compassion communicate more than identification; they function as theological statements and cultural symbols. They reflect the Diocese's missionary heritage, doctrinal emphasis, and the indigenization of Christian faith within Igbo society. Hence, a semantic study of these names reveals how language encodes theology and how naming operates as a medium of ecclesiastical identity.

### 1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The central aim of this research is to analyze the semantic and theological meanings embedded in the names of Anglican Churches within the Diocese on the Niger.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify and categorize Anglican Church names based on their semantic and theological features.
2. Examine how these names reflect the doctrinal, pastoral, and missional priorities of the Diocese.
3. Explore how the naming of churches contributes to the cultural and spiritual identity of the Anglican community in southeastern Nigeria.
4. Demonstrate how parish names function as tools for theological education, memory, and mission.

### 1.3 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major semantic categories of Anglican Church names in the Diocese on the Niger?
2. How do these names reflect the theological and missional character of the Diocese?
3. In what ways do church names embody local culture and spiritual experience?
4. What are the pedagogical and ecclesial implications of naming within the Anglican tradition?

## 2.1 Literature Review

The study of semantics provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how meaning is constructed and conveyed through language. Ofoegbu (2011) posits that semantics covers such areas like idioms, figurative language, euphemisms and many other aspects of language related to semantics. As Lyons (1995) observes, semantics examines the relationship between linguistic signs and what they signify, which makes it particularly relevant for interpreting how names function as carriers of meaning. In this sense, naming becomes a semantic act—a deliberate process through which linguistic forms encode values, beliefs, and social identity. Names, especially within religious settings, are rarely arbitrary; they are semantically motivated to project theological convictions and collective ideals. Ofoegbu (2022) defines Semantics as the study and analysis of meaning and the meaning of a word is the idea a word conveys in the heart or mind of the speaker or hearer.

Within Christian traditions, scholars have emphasized that institutional names, particularly church names, serve as symbolic texts that communicate doctrine and identity. Umera-Okeke and Idegbekwe (2018), in their sociolinguistic study of English Pentecostal names in Nigeria, demonstrate that religious names encapsulate the faith commitments and evangelistic vision of congregations. This supports Crystal's (2008) broader argument that names are integral to the communicative function of language, extending beyond identification to connotation and symbolism. Similarly, Agbo, Opata, and Okwueze (2022) reveal that religious and environmental factors significantly influence naming practices among the Igbo, suggesting that names often mirror people's perception of divine intervention, protection, and destiny. Their findings imply that naming within religious contexts, such as the Anglican Church, also serves to situate faith within the cultural and environmental realities of believers.

From another angle, Onumajuru (2016) explores the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of Igbo personal names and concludes that naming practices express communal beliefs, aspirations, and social experiences. This reinforces the idea that names are embedded with intentional meaning, often functioning as symbolic statements about faith, hope, and human experience. Such perspectives affirm that church names—like personal or community names—are not mere labels but condensed expressions of theology, spirituality, and social identity. In a related linguistic domain, Ofoegbu & Usar (2018) contribute a morpho-semantic perspective that is methodologically insightful for the present study. His analysis of lexical creativity in Nigerian political speeches shows how speakers manipulate word formation and meaning to reflect ideology and project identity. This insight is transferable to religious naming: just as political actors coin or combine expressions to convey persuasive messages, church communities select and structure names such as Christ the Redeemer or Church of the Resurrection to evoke particular theological images and emotional resonance. Ofoegbu's emphasis on the interplay between morphology and semantics therefore provides a valuable lens for interpreting the symbolic depth embedded in Anglican church names.

Furthermore, the indigenization of Christianity in Africa, as Mbiti (1991) argues, has transformed religious expression from missionary imitation to cultural reinterpretation. This process is evident in the evolving naming patterns within Nigerian churches, where early missionary-established congregations bore traditional Anglican names (e.g., St. Peter's, St. John's), while newer parishes increasingly adopt aspirational or contextualized names (e.g., Victory Parish, Emmanuel Church). These naming shifts represent both continuity and innovation—retaining theological roots while embedding meaning in local experience.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the literature converges on the idea that names function as semantic and symbolic constructs through which communities articulate faith, culture, and identity. However, while prior studies have addressed the sociolinguistic and pragmatic features of naming among Nigerian Christians, there remains limited empirical investigation into the semantic structures and symbolic representations of Anglican church names within the Diocese on the Niger. This gap underscores the necessity of the present study, which aims to provide a systematic semantic analysis of these names to uncover their theological and cultural meanings. More recent studies, such as Ofoegbu (2018) on euphemistic expressions in Igbo, show that semantics covers other areas of language associated with meaning. Ofoegbu and Usar (2017), in their *Stylistic Analysis of the Language of Politics of General Muhammadu Buhari's Campaign Speech of 2011*, demonstrate how Nigerian political discourse is structured around lexical, semantic, and graphological choices that are carefully selected to achieve rhetorical ends.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Semantic Field Theory and Theological Semiotics as its theoretical frameworks. Semantic Field Theory, as developed by Trier (1931) and Lyons (1977), posits that words derive meaning from their relationship within a network of related concepts. Applied to this study, church names derive significance within the larger semantic field of Christian theology and ecclesial practice.

Theological Semiotics views names as signs that carry theological and cultural connotations. Each church name is a signifier whose referent is a doctrinal, biblical, or spiritual truth. Together, these frameworks allow a systematic interpretation of Anglican Church names as linguistic symbols that express the Diocese's faith, memory, and mission.

## 3.1 Methodology

The study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. Data were collected from diocesan records, parish directories, and field observations across the twenty Archdeacons of the Diocese on the Niger. A purposive sampling technique was used to select one representative parish from each Archdeaconry. Each church name was analyzed based on four parameters: Church Name, Location (Archdeaconry), Semantic Category, and Symbolic Meaning.

## 3.2 Data Presentation

| Church Name                | Location (Archdeaconry)            | Semantic Category       | Symbolic Meaning  |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| All Saints' Cathedral      | All Saints' Cathedral Archdeaconry | Pastoral/Eschatological | Represents the communion of all believers, both living and departed, united in Christ.    |
| Christ Church, Onitsha     | Onitsha Main Archdeaconry          | Christological          | Proclaims Christ as the center of worship and mission, emphasizing salvation through Him. |
| St. John's Church          | Onitsha South Archdeaconry         | Apostolic               | Reflects the apostle John's message of divine love, revelation, and discipleship.         |
| St. Michael and All Angels | Nkpor New Covenant Archdeaconry    | Angelic                 | Symbolizes divine protection, spiritual warfare, and victory over evil.                   |
| St. Andrew's Church        | Obosi Archdeaconry                 | Apostolic               | Denotes missionary zeal and the call to evangelism after the example of Apostle Andrew.   |
| St. Matthias' Church       | Nkpor Archdeaconry                 | Apostolic               | Represents faithfulness, perseverance, and continuity in apostolic succession.            |
| St. Paul's Church          | Oba Archdeaconry                   | Apostolic               | Embodies missionary passion, theological reflection, and steadfast faith.                 |
| St. James' Church          | Awada Archdeaconry                 | Apostolic               | Highlights the apostle's emphasis on faith expressed through works and perseverance.      |
| St. Thomas' Church         | Oyi Archdeaconry                   | Apostolic               | Signifies conviction, restored faith, and confession of Christ as Lord and God.           |

|                             |                              |                      |   |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| St. Luke's Church           | Oyi Central Archdeaconry     | Apostolic            | Emphasizes healing, compassion, and service, reflecting Luke's gospel ministry.         |
| Church of the Ascension     | Ascension Archdeaconry       | Doctrinal            | Focuses on Christ's exaltation, victory, and the Church's participation in His mission. |
| Mount Zion Church           | Nnobi Archdeaconry           | Eschatological       | Symbol of God's eternal reign, victory, and the gathering of the faithful.              |
| Chapel of Divine Compassion | Ogidi Archdeaconry           | Pastoral/Community   | Expresses God's mercy and love through acts of compassion and social ministry.          |
| St. Peter's Church          | Abatete Archdeaconry         | Apostolic            | Stands for leadership, confession of faith, and the foundation of the Church.           |
| St. Mark's Church           | Omagba Archdeaconry          | Apostolic            | Reflects evangelistic witness and the spread of the gospel message.                     |
| St. Faith's Church          | Onitsha Central Archdeaconry | Doctrinal/Pastoral   | Symbolizes steadfast belief, hope, and trust in God's promises.                         |
| Our Saviour's Church        | Ugwuagba Archdeaconry        | Christological       | Proclaims Christ as Redeemer and Saviour of humanity.                                   |
| Immanuel Church             | Inland Town Archdeaconry     | Christological       | Signifies God's abiding presence—'God with us.'   |
| St. Paul's Church           | Alor Archdeaconry            | Apostolic            | Emphasizes missionary calling and doctrinal soundness following Apostle Paul.           |
| St. Augustine's Church      | Divine Grace Archdeaconry    | Contextual/Doctrinal | Represents divine grace, intellectual faith, and spiritual transformation.              |

### Data Analysis and Discussion

The data reveal a dominant pattern of Apostolic and Christological naming, followed closely by Doctrinal and Pastoral categories. The prevalence of apostolic names such as St. Peter's, St. Paul's, and St. Mark's highlights the diocese's continuity with the foundational witnesses of the Christian faith. Christological names such as Christ Church, Immanuel and Our Saviour's emphasize Christ's centrality in Anglican theology and worship.

Doctrinal names like Holy Trinity and Ascension reinforce theological teaching, while angelic names such as St. Michael and All Angels resonate with local cultural concerns for protection and divine intervention. Eschatological and experiential names including Mount Zion and St. Augustine's show the Diocese's dynamic engagement with contemporary spirituality and contextual theology.

Overall, the naming patterns demonstrate that Anglican parishes in the Diocese on the Niger communicate a theology of continuity, mission and contextual adaptation. Church names serve as catechetical tools, memorial markers and instruments of identity formation.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that the naming of Anglican Churches in the Diocese on the Niger performs significant semantic and theological functions. Church names encapsulate doctrine, embody spiritual meaning, and express communal memory. Through apostolic, Christological, doctrinal, angelic, and contextual naming patterns, the Diocese articulates its identity as both a custodian of apostolic heritage and an active participant in the evolving context of Igbo Christianity.

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