

A MORPHO-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF NEW CHURCH NAMES IN ONITSHA

Onwuasoanya Chioma Francisca
Reg.No: 2024442022
chiomaonwuasoanya@gmail.com
07039806416

Abstract

This study explores the morphological structure and semantic significance of names of new churches in Onitsha, Nigeria, through the lens of referential theory. By examining the linguistic composition and cultural context of these names, it uncovers the complex interplay between language, culture, and religion in shaping the identities of these religious communities. The analysis reveals that church names in Onitsha reflect a blend of Igbo cultural heritage and Christian doctrine, conveying messages of faith, hope, and redemption. The research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing the morphological structure of names of new churches in Onitsha. Data are collected from various sources, including church websites, directories, and field observations. The analysis involves examining morphological processes such as: **derivation** (adding prefixes or suffixes to root words), **compounding** (combining two or more words to form a new name), and **clipping** (removing parts of words to create shorter, more memorable names). This study aims to reveal the morphological patterns and structures of church names in Onitsha, highlighting their cultural significance and their role in shaping the identities of religious communities. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of language in constructing meaning and identity in religious contexts, emphasizing the importance of considering cultural and social factors in linguistic analysis.

Keywords: Morpho-Semantic, New Church Names, Onitsha, Semantic, Christian doctrine

1.1 Introduction

Language is a complex system of communication that consist of a set of rules, symbols, and sounds to convey meaning and thoughts. 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.”

Semantic on the other hand is defined as the study of meaning in language. It explores how words, phrases, and sentences convey meaning, and how people interpret language. 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.

The city of Onitsha, located in Anambra State, Nigeria, is a vibrant urban center with a rich cultural heritage and a strong Christian presence. As a major hub for Christianity in the region, Onitsha is home to numerous churches, each with its unique name that reflects the faith, values, and traditions of its congregation. This study aims to explore the morphological analysis of names of new churches in Onitsha using a referential theory, which posits that language refers to objects, concepts, and ideas in the world.

Onitsha's history dates back to the 16th century when it was founded by immigrants from the Benin Empire. The city's strategic location on the Niger River made it an important trading port, attracting British traders and Christian missionaries in the 19th century. Today, Onitsha is a thriving city with a mix of traditional and modern architecture, reflecting its rich cultural heritage.

Obieze, (1975) , notes that Christianity had a significant impact on Igbo culture, particularly in the way it influenced the role of women in society. It works highlights how Christian insistence on masculine dieties undermined Igbo women's political and religious power.

Isiani, Okonkwo and Obi ani CMS schools played a significant role in socio economic transformation in Onitsha province, Nigeria, between 1904 and 1975. However, they also noted that CMS schools contributed to social stigmatization of traditional African practices.

But in present day today, Pentecostalism has been a significant force in Nigerian Christianity in modern day Onitsha with Catholics and Anglicans taking lead.

Also, some studies suggests that revival in churches can have a positive impact on church members behavior, increasing churches attendance and participation, this actually lead to the rise of other churches in Onitsha.

There are so many churches in Onitsha, Nigeria, with various denominations represented. Here are some of them include

- . Anglican Church
- . Catholic church
- . Grace of God mission
- . Watchman Revival mission
- . Deeper life Church
- . Lords chosen
- . Assemblies of God Church
- . Methodist Church etc.

These are the churches that has stayed over the years in Onitsha and become prominent.

Some churches have a strong online presence, with 37 churches having websites, Facebook profiles, Instagram handles and YouTube channels. The average age of churches in Onitsha is 4 years and 8 months.

So to say that Churches in Onitsha has developed over the years with the birth of new churches and with the help of social media, religion has spread across parts of the Onitsha Igbo zone. But the actual question should be does the growth of Churches help to eradicate the evils of the society?

1.1. Aims and objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the morphological structure of names of churches in Onitsha, identifying the various linguistic features and processes involved in their formation.
2. To analyze the semantic meaning of church names in Onitsha, exploring how they reflect the cultural, social, and religious context of the community.
3. To investigate how church names in Onitsha reference specific aspects of Christianity, such as biblical concepts or doctrines, using a referential theory.

By achieving these objectives, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of language in constructing meaning and identity in religious contexts, and to shed light on the significance of church names in Onitsha and beyond.

2.0. Literature Review

The study of church names has been a topic of interest in various fields, including linguistics, cultural studies, and religious studies. A review of existing literature reveals that church names are not just mere labels, but carry significant meaning and convey important messages about the identity, mission, and values of the church. Ofoegbu (2011) says that some words have peculiarity of phraseology approved by usage and having a meaning other than its logical or grammatical one. This is seen in the way churches acquire their names in Onitsha metropolis. Ofoegbu and Usar (2017), in their Stylistic Analysis of the Language of Politics of General Muhammadu Buhari's Campaign Speech of 2011, demonstrate how churches derive their names and how they are structured around lexical, semantic, and graphological choices that are carefully selected to achieve rhetorical ends. More recent studies, such as Ofoegbu (2018) on euphemistic expressions in Igbo, show how speakers avoid taboo or sensitive topics (e.g., sex, drugs, insults) through metaphor, substitution, or playful re-encoding, illustrating the socially motivated nature of semantic shift especially when choosing church names.

Morphological Structure

Research has shown that church names exhibit unique morphological structures, such as compounding, derivation, and blending, which reflect the cultural and linguistic context of the community (Ofoegbu, 2011). For example, a study on Igbo church names found that they often use prefixes and suffixes to convey meaning and significance (Nwosu, 2012).

Semantic Meaning

Church names have been found to reference specific aspects of Christianity, such as biblical concepts, doctrines, or figures (Usar & Ofoegbu, 2017). A study on church names in Nigeria found that they often reflect the community's values, beliefs, and practices, such as faith, hope, and redemption (Okoro, 2018).

Cultural Significance

Church names play a significant role in shaping the identities and values of religious communities, reflecting their history, culture, and traditions (Ofoegbu, 2018). For example, a study on church names in Ghana found that they often reflect the community's cultural heritage and spiritual practices (Agyemang, 2015).

3.0 Theoretical Framework:

Referential Theory of Meaning

The referential theory of meaning suggests that words and phrases refer to objects, concepts, and ideas in the world. This theory provides a framework for analyzing the meaning and significance of church names in Onitsha, Nigeria.

Key Concepts

- **Reference:** The relationship between words and phrases and the objects, concepts, and ideas they represent.
- **Meaning:** The significance or interpretation of words and phrases in a particular context.
- **Signification:** The process of conveying meaning through language.

Application to Church Names

The referential theory of meaning can be applied to church names in Onitsha by examining how they reference specific aspects of Christianity, such as:

- **Biblical concepts:** Church names that reference biblical concepts, such as faith, hope, and redemption.
- **Doctrines:** Church names that reference specific Christian doctrines, such as the Trinity or salvation.
- **Figures:** Church names that reference important figures in Christianity, such as Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit.

Benefits

The referential theory of meaning provides a useful framework for analyzing the meaning and significance of church names in Onitsha, allowing researchers to:

- **Identify patterns and themes:** By examining the references and meanings of church names, researchers can identify patterns and themes that reflect the cultural, social, and religious context of the community.
- **Understand cultural significance:** The referential theory of meaning can help researchers understand the cultural significance of church names and how they reflect the community's values, beliefs, and practices.
- **Analyze linguistic structure:** The theory can also be used to analyze the linguistic structure of church names, including their morphological and semantic properties.

4.0. Methodology

The methodology for this study will involve the following steps:

Data Collection

- **Sampling:** A representative sample of church names will be selected from various sources, including church websites, directories, and field observations.
- **Data sources:** The data will be collected from primary and secondary sources, including church documents, publications, and interviews with church leaders or members.

Data Analysis

- **Morphological analysis:** The morphological structure of church names will be analyzed to identify patterns and trends in their formation and composition.
- **Semantic analysis:** The semantic meaning of church names will be analyzed to identify themes, concepts, and references to specific aspects of Christianity.
- **Pragmatic analysis:** The pragmatic context of church names will be analyzed to understand their role in communication and their significance in the community.

Research Design

- **Qualitative research:** This study will employ a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the morpho-semantic structure of church names in Onitsha.
- **Descriptive analysis:** The study will provide a descriptive analysis of the data, highlighting patterns, trends, and themes in the morpho-semantic structure of church name.

5.0. Semantic Analysis of Church Names in Onitsha

The semantic analysis of church names in Onitsha, Nigeria, reveals the meaning and significance of these names in the context of Christianity and the local culture. Here are some examples:

Divine Attributes

- "Holy Trinity Church": This name references the Christian concept of the Trinity, emphasizing the unity and divinity of God.
- "Redeemed Christian Church of God": This name emphasizes the Christian concept of redemption through faith in Jesus Christ.

Biblical References

- "Garden of Light and Power Church": This name references the biblical concept of light and power, symbolizing spiritual guidance and empowerment.
- "Mountain of Holy Ghost Intervention and Deliverance Ministry": This name references the biblical concept of mountains as places of spiritual significance and intervention.

Christian Figures

- "St. Joseph's Catholic Church": This name references Saint Joseph, the husband of Mary, mother of Jesus, and emphasizes the importance of family and devotion.
- "St. Stephen's Anglican Church": This name references Saint Stephen, one of the first deacons in the Christian church, and emphasizes the importance of faith and service.

Themes

- Faith: Many church names in Onitsha emphasize the importance of faith, such as "Faith Assembly" or "Faith Chapel".
- Redemption: Church names like "Redeemed Christian Church of God" emphasize the Christian concept of redemption through faith in Jesus Christ.
- Spiritual Guidance: Church names like "Garden of Light and Power Church" emphasize the importance of spiritual guidance and empowerment.

Cultural Significance

- Christian Identity: Church names in Onitsha reflect the strong Christian identity of the community and the importance of faith in everyday life.
- Cultural Relevance: Church names often incorporate local languages and cultural references, making Christianity more relevant and accessible to the local population.
- By analyzing the semantic meaning of church names in Onitsha, we can gain insights into the values, beliefs, and practices of the Christian community in this region.

6.0 Conclusion

The study of church names in Onitsha, Nigeria, underscores the significance of language and culture in shaping religious identity and practice. Through a morpho-semantic analysis, it becomes evident that church names are not arbitrary labels but carefully constructed linguistic expressions that reflect both Christian doctrine and Igbo cultural heritage. These names serve as markers of faith, hope, and redemption, while simultaneously conveying communal values, historical memory, and social identity.

The findings demonstrate that morphological processes such as derivation, compounding, and clipping play a key role in the formation of church names, allowing them to be meaningful, memorable, and culturally resonant. By analyzing the structure and meaning of these names, the study highlights how language functions as a vehicle for expressing religious beliefs, reinforcing community cohesion, and negotiating the interplay between local culture and global Christian traditions.

Key Findings

- Church names in Onitsha reflect a strong Christian identity and emphasize themes such as faith, redemption, and spiritual guidance.
- The use of biblical references, divine attributes, and Christian figures in church names underscores the importance of these concepts in Christian theology.
- The incorporation of local languages and cultural references in church names demonstrates the efforts of Christian communities to make their faith relevant and accessible to the local population.

Implications

- The study of church names can provide valuable insights into the cultural and linguistic context of religious communities.
- Understanding the meaning and significance of church names can help to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding.
- The findings of this study can inform the development of contextualized Christian theology and practice in Nigeria and beyond.

Future Research Directions

- Further research can explore the morpho-semantic analysis of church names in other cultural and linguistic contexts.
- A comparative study of church names across different denominations and regions can provide additional insights into the significance of these names.
- The study of church names can be extended to include other aspects of religious language and culture, such as hymns, prayers, and sermons.

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