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Audience Perception of Synonyms from the Pulpit: A Case among Six Church Ancillary Groups in Madina

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Abstract: This work investigated audience perception of messages that contained synonyms. Some church members opined that synonyms changed meanings of messages intended by Ministers of the Christian religion. The study was conducted among 161 church members drawn from six church ancillary groups in Madina, a suburb of Accra. The groups were selected from Orthodox, Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in Madina. A qualitative approach was used in this study. It was found that sets of words used as synonyms did not make any much difference in meaning to the majority of the members in the audience nor did it have any significant effect on their perception of the messages preached from the pulpits. The work concludes that, so long as synonym use in the pulpits does not create any misunderstanding among the audience, its' use by Ministers of the Christian faith will continue.

Keywords: Perception, Synonyms, Messages, Audience, Religious Sermon

1. Introduction

The researchers' observation from pulpits in Ghana reveals that some Ministers of the Christian faith depend on dictionary definitions for the meaning of their sermon themes and they also use synonyms suggested by the dictionaries they consult. Although some dictionaries like Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD) 2005, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) 2009, and Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD) 2009 give some pieces of information such as how formal a word is, what its part of speech; whether a word is countable or uncountable in the case of nouns. It must be stated that no dictionary presents feelings, attitudes and moods of writers or speakers, but these traits of writers and speakers account for the shades in meaning of words in the language. This presupposes that Ghanaian Ministers of the Christian religion who interchange synonyms in their sermons do not consider the nuances that may exist between the set of words they use. This then would mean that their use of pairs of words in Ghanaian English may affect audience perception of the messages they preach.

An initial enquiry by the researchers among 40 Christians through an interview at Agbogba in Accra in April 2012 showed that 30% of the members in the audience were distracted by the sets of words which were used as synonyms in the pulpits, 15% of them were confused when such

messages were preached and 55% of them followed the messages. The question, therefore, of how members of Christian churches perceive messages that make use of synonyms from the pulpit needs to be examined.

Much has been done on perception [3, 9 and 17] and synonyms [15, 1, 7 and 26]. The word *perception* originates from an old French language term '*percepcion*' which literally means the collection of rent by feudal landlords (Barnhard's Dictionary of Etymology 1988). The Latin term, *perceptio* also means '*to take possession of or to seize something with one's senses*' (Louis & Short Latin Dictionary, 1975). It is observed that the present definition of the term has maintained a degree of the original usage in that it refers to the collecting of information about the world by means of the five senses that human beings possess [6]. This follows that differences in the physiology of individuals and/or their deficiencies can cause one person to perceive the same thing differently from another person. In their words, '*the limitations of your world set the boundaries of your conscious existence*' (p. 5). Further to these physical limitations, it is revealed that the amount of information that the human senses observe at any particular time becomes so much that the human mind is unable to process everything at once [2]. This implies that human beings select pieces of information that they want to notice at any particular moment. A scholar further argues that perception of stimuli depends on the focus of the perceiver, the perceived

target and the context in which the stimuli are observed [23]. On their part, social experience and cultural background coupled with the perceiver's values, his/her attitude and personality result in differences of perception of stimuli observed [4, 15]. These writers define stimuli to include objects and subjects that have physical appearance. According to them, this could be the observation of the brightness of an object, a person's resonance or his familiarity.

For other writers, the contexts in which events are perceived influence subsequent thought and behaviour about the events [22]. According to these scholars after stimuli (i.e. a person or an object) have been experienced by the senses within a specific situation or context, they are processed through a frame of reference filter. They argue that past and present experiences associated with particular emotions and cognitions are relied on, when one wants to interpret a perceived phenomenon. They state that interpretation (i.e. of a perceived phenomenon) passes through series of stages, the most important stage being the assignment of meaning to the perceived phenomenon. Other researchers identify certain characteristics of the perceiver which could modify his/her perception of stimuli. These writers mention three of such factors which are: the background, motivation and personality of the perceiver. Other writers cite gender, personality, physiological and cognitive differences as other factors that influence perception [22]. Meanwhile, a writer identifies attitudes, interests, motives, experience and expectations of perceivers as factors that account for differences in perception when stimuli are observed [23]. There are yet other writers who say that location and time of an incident has influence on an individual's perception of stimuli [24]. The existence of people with different educational and cultural backgrounds, different values and attitudes, motivation and personality in the Christian churches, presupposes that these people may perceive messages from the pulpits that make use of synonyms differently.

This work aims to find how church audience with different backgrounds and traits perceives pairs of words that Ministers of the Christian faith interchange in the pulpits and the effects that such words have on their perception of the messages preached. In order to realize this goal, two questions were formulated to guide the collection of data.

1. How does audience perceive sets of words used as synonyms in messages preached by Christians Ministers?
2. How does the audience perceive the messages from pulpits that make use of synonyms?

2. Literature Review

In language, some words become obsolete, giving way to the creation of new ones. In British English, for instance, the word '*frumsceaft*' was widely used until the 14th century when it was overtaken by the borrowed French word '*creation*' which was used alongside with it [10]. Different dialectical English-speaking people also use different words to refer to the same person, thing or concept. While the British child uses '*candy floss*', the American child would use '*cotton candy*' for the same type of sweet made from sticky threads of sugar around a stick [21]. While the British speaker of English uses '*football*', '*aerial*', '*windscreen*', '*aeroplane*', '*vest*', '*lift*' and '*tram*' his American counterpart uses '*soccer*', '*antenna*', '*windshield*', '*airplane*', '*underskirt*', '*elevator*' and '*streetcar*' respectively (Davies cited in 21). In one country, dialectical differences turn to use different words for the same thing. Trudgill, (1990 cited in 21), says that Londoners tend to use '*armpit*' in London dialect of English while people from Bradford use '*armhole*' in their dialect to depict the same part of the body (p. 331).

There are other occasions where the use of pairs of words suggests overlaps in meaning of words in the language. A case in question is the words '*mad*' and '*insane*', both meaning 'mentally ill' (p. 94 [13]). We notice that while the first two situations prevent the occurrence of pairs of words from having the same meaning in language, the later ones introduce words that have a shared area of meaning. In other words, there is an overlap of meaning between the pairs of words. When this happens, each pair of words can be used interchangeably but where both words connote different things they cannot be interchanged [13, 25]. For instance, the word '*mad*' can be used interchangeably with '*insane*', but when '*mad*' is used to mean '*angry*' as in '*Lisa is very angry at Tim now*', '*mad*' cannot be interchanged with '*insane*' [21]. The overlapping of words in sentences is what some authors refer to as synonyms. In this work, the researchers aim to investigate sameness of meaning of pairs of words used interchangeably in pulpits and the way the audience perceive messages that make use of synonyms by Ministers of the Christian religion who speak Ghanaian English.

Synonyms originate from the Greek word *sunonumon* meaning '*having the same meaning*' [13]. According to a writer, synonyms are 'words that have the same or nearly the same meaning and such can be used interchangeably' (p. 309 [19]). Following this definition, it can be said that Ghanaian Ministers of the Christian religion who consistently use a number of biblical words interchangeably in messages in their churches are using synonyms. This would then mean that when they interchange a word for another, the Ministers may mean that the words which they interchange have either the same meaning or they are similar in meaning. It also follows that the Ministers who interchange words in their messages imply that they can use one of the words in the set at any given time while the other can be ignored at that given moment. When that happens, the word that is not used at that particular time becomes redundant at that moment. As these authors state, 'it will be inefficient to have two words or phrases whose meanings will be absolutely identical in all contexts, and that complete synonymy is, therefore, rare or non-existent' (p. 230).

In other words, these writers are saying that redundancy in language is a luxury that no world language can afford. If this is so, then how does an audience perceive pairs of words used interchangeably in messages from the pulpits? Does the pair of words used interchangeably make any difference in the

perception of the messages among audience? Some authors state that some words which appear to have the same meaning may be used in the same context and when that happens the meaning of both words diverges slightly [18]. In the examples, 'I spent my *holidays* in Texas' and 'I spent my *vacation* in Texas', they argue that in the first example, occasions such as Independence holidays, Easter and Christmas breaks can be one's holidays but not necessarily part of the person's vacation. This is also the position taken by a writer when he states that in any language, there exist words which are very similar in meaning but the sets of the words which are synonymous in their nuclear meaning contain certain additional positive or negative overtones [16]. He adds that words which may be similar in meaning will probably not have exactly the same usage in sentence and paragraph structures. One may be formal and another less formal or one word may be appropriate in one situation and the other appropriate in another situation.

These writers use these two examples to buttress Larson's argument. That is shown in the statements, 'he is such an *adolescent*' and 'he is a *youth*' [18]. In these examples, the contexts vary slightly. Both words used in the sentences, refer to people about the same age. However, these writers argue that the former word that is, '*adolescent*' connotes the idea of '*immature*' in the sentence above while the latter is used in the general sense of the word [18]. A writer supports this stand when he writes that, there are many occasions where one word is appropriate in a sentence, but its synonym becomes odd [27]. He argues that whereas the word, *answer* fits in the sentence: 'Karen had only one *answer* correct on the test', its near-synonym, *reply* will sound odd. A writer states that the word '*comprehend*' and '*intoxicated*' are more formal than '*understand*' and '*drunk*' respectively [21]. While these words are used in formal speech, '*peril*', '*pedagogue*', '*conjuncture*' '*ammunition*', '*euphoria*' '*immense*', '*lavatory*' and '*magnanimous*' the later ones are used respectively in informal speech: '*danger*', '*teache*r', '*guess*', '*weapon*', '*happiness*', '*huge*', '*toilet*' and '*kind*' (LDOCE, 2009).

Furthermore, another author states that in a single sentence, one of two or three words may serve the desired purpose, but that does not mean those words have the same meaning [12]. He explains that conventional usage of language has given most words certain associations and connotations which make it impossible for a free substitution of one word for another. He cites the examples below to hammer home his message. *Alter* and *change* appear to be synonyms but '*he changed his pants*' differs remarkably from '*he altered his pants*'. Similarly, *brief* and *short* seem synonymous but, '*I will be there shortly*' and '*I will be there briefly*' are not the same. Another writer states that although two words may be referring to a particular referent, they could differ in the emotive and expressive meaning they convey [8]. The verbs '*smile*' and '*sneer*' share a common action of making one's mouth curve upwards but the difference between them is that while '*smile*' has a positive connotation as it is an action of expressing friendliness and happiness, '*sneer*' has clearly negative meaning *to smile* or *to speak* in a very unkind way to

show you have no respect for someone or something (LDOCE, 2009, P. 1664).

3. Methodology

This work used the qualitative approach. Questionnaire based on portions of some transcribed messages spanning from 1993- 2013, were administered to 163 members of the Christian faith who had no hearing defects. The population had different educational backgrounds. Gender and age was also factored in during the selection of groups for the research. The questionnaire dealt with pairs of words which were used as synonyms. These respondents were to indicate 'yes' if the pairs of words used in each transcribed sermon meant the same thing, and 'no' if the pair of words had different meanings. Again, they were to indicate, 'I don't know' if they were unsure. 'I don't know' scored 1 mark; 'No' scored 2 marks and 'yes' scored 3 marks. 161 questionnaires were retrieved. The retrieved questionnaires were made up of 50.9% males and 49.1% females. 61.5% were made up of youth (i.e. between 10-35 years) and 38.5% were adults (i.e. 36 and above); 19.9% of them had non-tertiary education while 80.1% had tertiary education. On audience perception of messages from the pulpits, they were to tick one of the following: I follow the messages, I get confused, and I get a different meaning of the messages. They were also given the chance to indicate other effects as well. The sampled population was drawn from some identifiable groups in Orthodox, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Madina District of the Greater Accra region. These identifiable groups were Bible Class, Sunday School, Women's Ministry, Men's Ministry, Youth Ministry and Prayer Force. These groups were identified and chosen for the research because of their interest in Bible study which featured at least three times on their programmes a year. It was the belief of the researchers that groups that had times to study the Bible would have a better understanding of messages from the pulpits that made use of synonyms. Madina was chosen as the research area because there were a cluster of the major churches found there. It, thus, made it easier for a researcher to move from one church to another without much transportation difficulty. Responses to the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

4. Data Analysis

A preliminary investigation into the use of synonyms reveals that most words that are used interchangeably in the pulpit connote different shades of meaning. Below are some examples. For the purpose of anonymity, the names of the local churches have not been mentioned in this work.

The first sermon was preached on the morning of 2nd October 1994 at 11.45 in the morning in an orthodox church in the Western region of Ghana. The title of the sermon was *Living Righteous Lives*.

1) As a Christian, you have to live *righteous* lives. I mean, you have to live *holy* lives. Your failure to do so will mean your rejection by God. May this not be your portion, in Jesus name.

The Minister was delivering a sermon on the need for Christians to live lives worthy of Christ. In the first sentence he qualified the '*lives*' that he expected Christians to live as '*righteous*' and in the second sentence, he qualified it as '*holy*'. When the preacher introduced the phrase, '*I mean*' he implies that both his first and second sentences mean the same thing. But we notice that the adjective in the first noun phrase '*righteous lives*' suggests what God did and continues to do for Christians; for instance, '*how he called them, washed away all their sins and put His Spirit in their hearts to guide them so that they might not sin against him*'. The adjective in the second noun phrase, '*holy lives*', deals with ethical conducts. It suggests what Christians do right or put right in their relationship with God; for example, '*how they live their physical lives here on earth, do the will of God, obey all his commandments and treat their neighbours as themselves*' (1Pt. 1:16). This means that the preacher's use of the set of words connoted different ideas.

The second sermon was preached on 1st November 2006 at 10.13 in the morning in a Pentecostal church in the Volta region of Ghana. It was titled *David and Goliath*.

2) When David heard what Saul said, he was *annoyed*. In other words he became *angry*. This holy anger urged him on to defeat Goliath.

In this excerpt from the sermon, the Minister used the word '*annoyed*' in the first context to describe the emotional state of *David* when he heard the speech of *Goliath*. In expatiating the point raised in the first context about the danger, the preacher introduced the word '*angry*'. By starting his sentence with, '*in other words*', the preacher implies that the words '*angry*' and '*annoyed*' are synonymous. This may be misleading. According to a writer "a person may get angry over the killing of a baby but will be annoyed at someone's chewing a gum loudly" (p.341 [20]). From this explanation, we notice that *anger* has a moral connotation but *annoyance* does not. He also states that difference in response tendencies can also determine what may be termed *annoyance* or *anger (p. 341)*. Thus, a person who is annoyed often tries to hold his feeling and may want to leave the scene as fast as possible but the angry person might go out of his way to seek confrontation. This means that the word *anger* demands expression.

The third sermon was about Faith and Divine Healing. It was preached on the afternoon of 29th May 2011 at 1.11 in the morning in a charismatic church in the Eastern region of Ghana.

3) Immediately, the woman with the issue of blood touched Jesus cloak, she was *delivered*. She was *healed* from the issue of blood. You also need to touch the cloak of Jesus today and your story will never remain the same.

In this transcribed part of the sermon, the Minister was preaching on the theme '*Faith* and *Divine Healing'*. In that sermon, he used the word '*delivered*' and '*healed*' interchangeably. But one observes that the context in which the preacher used the two words is different. This means that the two words cannot have the same meaning. '*Healing*' from the context is used in a generic sense to include relief from spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, and demonic conditions.

But in the second context the word '*delivered*' is used specifically to refer to the cessation of the blood. In this regard the preacher used the word '*healed*' to mean restoration of the physical condition of the woman.

5. Test of Research Questions

5.1. Research Questions 1

Research Question 1: How does audience perceive sets of words used as synonyms in messages by religious Ministers?

Table 1A. *Audience and their perception of 'righteous' and 'holy'.*

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No	29	18.0
	Yes	130	80.7
	I don't know	2	1.2
	Total	161	100.0

The sampled size responded to whether the two words above were the same in meaning as used in a sermon.

Table 1A presents the responses of audience, concerning the words '*righteous*' and '*holy*' used as synonyms in a transcribed message. In the table, 18.0% of the audience stated that the words '*righteous*' and '*holy*' did not mean the same thing. There were 80.7% who said it meant the same thing while 1.2% said they were unsure if there was any difference between both words. From the table the majority of the members in the audience perceive both '*righteous*' and '*holy*' as having the same meaning. That is to say that majority of members did not perceive any difference in meaning between the two words.

Table 1B. *Audience and their perception of 'annoyed' and 'angry'.*

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No	44	27.3
	Yes	98	60.9
	I don't know	19	11.8
	Total	161	100.0

The audience responded to whether '*annoyed*' and '*angry*' used in a given sermon meant the same thing to them.

Table 1B presents audience's response to the alternation of the words '*annoyed*' and '*angry*' in a transcribed message. 27.3% of the sampled population stated the two words used did not mean the same thing. 60.9% of them expressed that both words meant the same thing and 11.8% of them were not sure if the two words meant the same thing. This means that the majority in the audience perceive the two words as having the same meaning.

Table 1C. *Audience and their perception of 'faith' & 'belief'.*

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No	57	35.4
	Yes	100	62.1
	I don't know	4	2.5
	Total	161	100.0

The audience responded to whether '*faith*' and '*belief*'

meant the same thing as used in a transcribed sermon.

Table 1C shows the responses of audience regarding the words '*faith*' & '*belief*' which were used as synonyms by a Minister. From the table, 35.4% of the respondents said the two sets of words did not mean the same thing and 62.1% of the members said they meant the same thing. There were 2.5% of the members in the audience who were unsure if the set of words used in the transcribed text meant the same thing. From this table the majority of the sampled population perceived that the set of words used in the pulpit had the same meaning.

Table 1D. Audience and their perception of 'healed' and 'delivered'.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No	63	39.1
	Yes	95	59.0
	I don't know	3	1.9
	Total	161	100.0

The audience responded to whether '*healed*' and '*delivered*' meant the same thing.

Table 1D shows the responses of our sampled population with regards to the alternation of the words 'healed' and 'delivered'' in a transcribed message from the pulpit. 39.1% stated the two words did not mean the same thing. 59.0% said both words meant the same thing and 1.9% expressed that they were not sure if the two words meant the same thing or not. This means that the majority in the audience hold the view that the two words connote the same idea.

Table 1E. Audience and perception of 'advertise' & 'proclaim'.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No	65	40.4
	Yes	89	55.3
	I don't know	7	4.3
	Total	161	100.0

The audience responded to whether '*advertise*' and '*proclaim*' meant the same thing.

Table 1E shows the percentages of respondent with regard to the word '*advertise*' & '*proclaim*' that were alternated in the transcribed text given them. 40.4% of the respondents stated that the two words used in the sermon did not connote any difference in meaning. 55.3% indicated that the two words meant the same thing and 4.3% of the respondents could not tell if there was any difference between the two words or not. In this table, the majority in the audience agreed that the two words used in the sermon connoted the same meaning.

Table 1F. Audience and perception of 'reign' and 'rule'.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No	24	14.9
	Yes	131	81.4
	I don't know	6	3.4
	Total	161	100.0

The audience responded to whether '*reign*' and '*rule*' meant the same thing.

Table 1F presents percentages of the audience and the way they perceive the words, 'reign' and 'rule' used synonymously in a sermon that was transcribed for them. In the table, 14.9% stated that both words meant different things. 81.4% of them said the two words meant the same thing and 3.7% of them said they could not tell if any difference existed between the two words. From the table, the majority perceived that both words have the same meaning.

Table 1G. Audience and perception of 'equity' and 'fairness'.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No	34	21.1
	Yes	118	73.3
	I don't know	9	5.6
	Total	161	100.0

The audience responded to whether '*equity*' and '*fairness*' meant the same thing.

Table 1G shows that 21.0% stated that '*equity*' and '*fairness*' meant the same thing. 73.4% of them wrote that both words had the same meaning and 5.6% were not sure whether there was any difference between both words. This means that the majority of the sampled population perceived both words to mean the same thing.

5.2. Research Questions 2

Research Question 2: How does the audience perceive the messages from pulpits that make use of synonyms?

Table 2. Audience and effect on synonyms on messages.

Response	Frequency	%
I follow the message well:		
Men	49	30.4
Women	61	37.9
Total	110	68.3
I get confused :		
Men	12	7.5
Women	8	4.9
Total	20	12.4
I get a different meaning to the message:		
Men	21	13.1
Women	10	6.2
Total	31	19.3

Table 2 presents the responses of audience with regards to how synonyms affected their perception of messages preached. The table indicates that 68.3% of the audience followed the messages and 12.4% got confused because of the use of synonyms. 19.3% of the audience got different meanings to the messages which made use of synonyms. From table 2, the researchers notice that majority of the sampled population got the messages despite the use of synonyms. This shows that the use of synonyms did not have much effect on audience perception of the messages preached from the pulpits.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The goal of this study was to investigate how the audience perceived some words that were interchanged in pulpits in

Ghana and to examine whether such sets of words affected audience perception of messages that were preached from the pulpits. The study was conducted in only one district in the Greater Accra region and, therefore, the findings on the use of synonyms in achieving communication goals might not cover some cases in other districts. However, the work provides a framework for undertaking similar studies in other areas as well as contributing useful references for further studies in the field of synonyms. It was discovered that majority in the audience did not perceive any difference between pairs of words that were used as synonyms in the pulpits by the Ministers. In other words, for the majority of the members in the audience all pairs of words used in the messages connoted the same meaning. Again, since the sets of words used meant the same things to the majority of the members in the audience, the synonyms did not have any meaningful influence on their perception of the messages preached. In the light of these findings, it can be said that Ministers of the Christian faith will continue to use synonyms as a way of clarifying their messages so long as the synonyms do not misrepresent the messages to their audience. The researchers suggest that further research must be conducted in the teaching of synonymy in Ghanaian schools.

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