



A PRAGMA-SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED ANGLICAN AND CATHOLIC SERMONS IN AWKA

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Abstract

This study investigates how meaning is constructed, negotiated and communicated in the Anglican and Catholic sermons in Awka through the lens of Pragmatics and semiotics. The study adopts qualitative and quantitative descriptive research designs with data sourced from two Catholic and one Anglican churches in Awka. The data, which consist of four audio recorded Sunday sermons from St. Andrews Anglican Church, NAU; St. Joseph the Worker, NAU; and Holy Family Youth Village, Amansea were analysed using Austin and Searle's Speech Act theory and Peircean semiotics theory to show how semiotic resources are pragmatically deployed to construct meaning, foster congregational identity and enforce doctrinal points. The research instruments for the study include observation and in-depth investigation of the selected sermons. Findings from the study indicate significant similarities and differences between Anglican and Catholic sermons. While both churches leverage the shared cultural semiotic reserves of the Igbo world, differences emerge in structural formality, degree of congregational participation and prioritization of doctrinal versus exhortative messaging. The pragma-semiotic analysis of the selected Anglican and Catholic sermons showed representative speech acts predominate (85.48%), follow by the directives with 12.26%; then expressives has 1.61% and interrogate showing an imparity of 0.65%. Peircean analysis reveals a mixed strategy of symbolic authority (scripture, doctrinal assertions), indexical pointing (exempla, deictics), and iconic imagery (vivid mental prompts) that together translate belief into action. This research contributes to the fields of pragmatics, discourse analysis, religious communication and sociolinguistics by highlighting the ways faith is articulated and experienced in Awka.

Keywords: Awka, pragma-semiotic, sermons, speech acts, semiotics

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INTRODUCTION

Language remains a central medium for disseminating religious doctrines, ideologies and ethical values. It uses functions not only as a vehicle for transmitting divine messages but also serves as a tool for shaping belief systems, reinforcing doctrinal values, and constructing social realities. Within the context of Christianity, language does more than convey scriptural truth. The sermons stand out as a central communicative act through which spiritual leaders not only educate and inspire but also negotiate meaning, build community, enforce morals and give their congregants spiritual guidance. Within the liturgical traditions of the Anglican and Catholic denominations, sermons are more than structured speeches, they are complex multimodal events that employ both verbal and non-verbal elements to accomplish theological, rhetorical and pragmatic objectives (Ugochukwu, 2010; Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2013).

In the Nigeria Christian tradition, the Anglican and Catholic churches represent two of the most established denominations with deeply rooted liturgical and homiletic traditions. Anglican and Catholic sermons in Nigeria, most especially in Awka, are particularly noteworthy for their ability to blend liturgical beliefs with cultural elements. These sermons are deeply embedded in symbolic acts, visual representations and contextual cue that work hand in hand with spoken language to shape meaning and influence the congregation's interpretive process. Thus, beyond their linguistic surface, sermons in these denominations are inherently pragma-semiotically represented. Here, a pragma-semiotics analysis provides an appropriate framework to understand these sermons in their total communicative context.

Despite the growing body of work on religious discourse in Nigeria, the research conducted by Odebumi (2006), Ekeoha (2015), Ajileye *et al* (2024) and others have given more attention to the rhetorical strategies employed by the Pentecostal denomination during sermons (Ekeoha, 2015; Akinwotu, 2021; & Chiedozi, Okpala & Alaku, 2023) with Makinde (2024) investigating semiotic landscapes of religious signages in Awka. While such studies provide valuable insights; however, there is dearth of study that investigates how meaning is constructed, negotiated and communicated in the Anglican and Catholic sermons through the lens of Pragmatics and semiotics combined. Most existing works either focus solely on pragmatic strategies such as speech acts, presupposition and deixis or treat symbolic elements in isolation from language use. This has left a gap in understanding how the fusion of both the elements of pragmatic and semiotic functions in traditional Christian teaching.

Awka, the capital city of Anambra state in Southeastern part of Nigeria, serves as an ideal site for this kind of integrated analysis. Awka is a cultural and religious hub with predominantly Igbos with linguistically diverse dialects, yet it is also home to a significant population of Anglicans and Catholics with well established churches and organized liturgical practices (Eze, 2015). The Anglican churches in Awka typically adopt a liturgical structure that combines the English book of common prayer with elements of Igbo oral culture, proverbs and storytelling. Conversely, the Catholic church emphasizes sacramental symbolism, Latin chants, visual imagery and ritual actions rooted in centuries of Roman Catholic traditions (Okonkwo, 2018). Despite these differences, both denominations employ strategic communication choices that integrate semiotic and pragmatic cues to achieve intended purposes.

A pragma-semiotic study of sermons in these two denominations in Awka is therefore both timely and necessary. It helps uncover the communicative mechanisms through which preachers combine language and symbolic acts to perform pragmatic functions such as giving directives, offertories, praise, issuing warnings and encouraging faith while also reinforcing spiritual messages through culturally grounded and liturgically significant signs. For example, an Anglican priest may employ narrative and inferencing strategies grounded in local idioms while a Catholic priest may rely heavily on visual and ritual symbols such as the sign of the cross, the use of holy water or incense to reinforce spiritual themes. These strategies are not arbitrary but are deeply intentional acts of meaning making that reflect theological orientation, denominational identity and sociocultural positioning.

In Awka, code switching between English and Igbo is a common pragmatic feature for sermons (Igwebuikwe, 2016). This linguistic strategy serves not only to clarify meaning but also to enhance audience connection by signaling shared cultural knowledge and belonging (Blom & Gumperz, 1972). The choice of language itself often becomes a semiotic act, indicating the speaker's awareness of social dynamics, age, status or local traditions within the congregation (Myers-Scotton, 1993). By undertaking a pragma-semiotic analysis of selected Anglican and Catholic sermons in Awka, this study seeks to fill a significant research gap. It aims to uncover how religious discourse functions at the intersection of pragmatic intention and semiotic representation. Such an approach reveals the multi-layered nature of sermons as performative events where meaning is negotiated not just through what is said but also how it is said and shown as shall further be elaborated on in our literature review.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to uncover how linguistic choices, contextual cues, and semiotic resources interact to shape interpretation, influence audience response, and advance religious communication of Anglican and Catholic sermons in Awka. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify and analyze the pragmatic strategies and semiotic resources employed in the selected sermons and how they contribute to meaning-making and message delivery.
2. Explore and compare the interplay between these resources with the aim of highlighting similarities and differences in these churches' communicative style and meaning construction.
3. Assess the communicative functions and socio-religious implications of the pragma-semiotic strategies used in the selected sermons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a core branch of linguistics concerned with how context influences the interpretation of meaning in communication. Unlike syntax (which studies sentence structure) and semantics (which studies meaning in isolation), pragmatics focuses on how speakers use language in real situations and how hearers interpret utterances based on contextual factors such as shared knowledge, social relationships, intentions, and cultural norms (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996; & de Saussure, 2015; Taguchi & Kadar, 2025; & Birner, 2025).

Contemporary overviews see pragmatics not only as the study of sentence-level meaning in context (deixis, presupposition, implicature) but also as the study of language as social action (speech events, discourse structure, participant roles). Among such conceptual overviews of the pragmatics worthy of mentioning are Levinson's (1983) definition of pragmatics as "the study of those relations between language and context that are

grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language, as well as those aspects of meaning which are context-dependent.” Levinson (1983) definition highlights pragmatics as the discipline concerned with how linguistic meaning interacts with contextual factors. Similarly, Yule (1996, p. 3) focusing on how speakers convey intentions and how hearers infer meanings that are not explicitly stated describes pragmatics as “the study of speaker meaning”.

To Crystal (2011) pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication. This definition emphasizes the interactive and functional dimensions of language use, highlighting how social relationships, power dynamics, and cultural expectations shape communicative behaviour. Also, Thomas (2014) distinguishes pragmatics as “meaning in interaction”, underscoring that meaning is not located solely in words or speakers but emerges from the dynamic interplay between linguistic expressions, speaker intentions, hearer interpretations, and contextual realities. Mey (2001) further reinforces this by defining pragmatics as “the study of the conditions of human language use as determined by the context of society.”

Across these definitions, several key elements emerge: pragmatics investigates meaning beyond the sentence level, relies on contextual information (physical, linguistic, social, and cultural), and concerns speakers’ intentions and listeners’ interpretations. It also examines how language is used to perform social actions such as requesting, apologizing, or persuading, and how implicit meanings, presuppositions, and implicatures are communicated. A review of literature on pragmatics as it concerns this study is germane; thus, making pragmatics essential for studying sermons, since preaching is centrally performative and interactionally situated.

Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and sign processes (semiosis), and how meaning is generated and communicated through them. At its core, semiotics explores the ways in which meaning is constructed, transmitted, interpreted, and transformed through signs in various contexts, linguistic, visual, cultural, and multimodal (Zhao, 2025; Chandler, 2022; Cobley & Litza, 1999). The intellectual foundations of semiotics are attributed to two seminal thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1934). Although they worked independently and from different philosophical traditions, Saussure from structuralist linguistics and Peirce from pragmatist philosophy, their theories established the fundamental frameworks of modern semiotics.

Saussure (1983), in his posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics*, defined semiology (his preferred term) as “a science that studies the life of signs within society” (p. 16). He conceptualized the sign as a two-part entity comprising the signifier (the form the sign takes, such as a sound or image) and the signified (the concept it represents). Importantly, Saussure emphasized that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and maintained by social convention. For instance, there is nothing inherently “dog-like” about the word dog; its meaning arises from collective agreement among speakers.

Conversely, Peirce (1934) advanced a triadic model of the sign, consisting of the representamen (the form the sign takes), the object (the thing it refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning produced in the mind of the interpreter). He also classified signs into icons (signs that resemble their objects, such as a portrait), indices (signs that have a causal or physical connection with their objects, like smoke indicating fire), and symbols (signs that rely on convention, such as words or traffic signs). Peirce’s dynamic view of semiosis as an ongoing interpretive process significantly broadened the scope of semiotic inquiry beyond linguistics.

Semiotics as a system of meaning operates on the premise that meaning is not inherent in objects but arises through systems of differences and relations among signs. Saussure argued that “in language there are only differences without positive terms” (1983), suggesting that signs gain meaning in contrast to what they are not. This relational principle became central to structuralism, a movement that extended Saussure’s insights into cultural phenomena, analyzing myths, rituals, fashion, and media as sign systems (Barthes, 1967; & Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Barthes (1967) notably expanded semiotics into the domain of cultural studies. He proposed a two-order model of signification: denotation, the primary, literal meaning of a sign, and connotation, the secondary, culturally mediated meanings. Through connotation, signs become vehicles of myth, naturalizing ideological meanings as “common sense.” For example, a national flag not only denotes a piece of colored cloth but connotes patriotism, unity, and power.

From the contemporary point of view, semiotics has evolved into a highly interdisciplinary field, intersecting with linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, media studies, art, and communication. Scholars like Eco (1976, 1984) emphasized that semiotics is concerned with “everything that can be taken as a sign” (Eco, 1976), including texts, gestures, architecture, and social practices. Eco also highlighted the interpretive cooperation of the reader or viewer, foregrounding the active role of interpretation in the production of meaning.

In recent decades, semiotics has shifted towards social semiotics, a paradigm advanced by scholars such as Hodge and Kress (1988) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 2020). Social semiotics emphasizes the socially situated, dynamic, and multimodal nature of sign-making. It investigates how meaning-making resources (language, image, gesture, sound, spatial design, etc.) are used, adapted, and transformed across contexts and how power, ideology, and identity shape semiotic practices. Therefore, the incorporation of semiotics in the analysis of sermons is essential and contributes to investigating how meaning is construed via iconic, indexical, or symbolic.

Pragma-semiotic

Pragma-semiotic is an interdisciplinary analytic perspective that explicitly combines semiotic attention to sign systems with pragmatic attention to how signs are used in context to perform actions and produce effects. In practice, our view of a pragma-semiotic approach examines not only *what* signs mean (semiotics) but *how* sign choices function as social and communicative acts in particular contexts (pragmatics); for example, the ways words, gestures, visual props, music and ritual acts jointly do things like admonish, console, exhort, or mobilize. This perspective has been formalized in methodological discussions that present pragma-semiotic features as levels or clues that reveal ideological and pragmatic forces in texts and performances (Pérez, 2001).

While classical pragmatics focuses on linguistic acts, a pragma-semiotic approach expands “acts” to multimodal sign ensembles (verbal text + gesture + music + liturgical objects + spatial choreography). Pragmatics explains the *function* of utterances in context; semiotics provides vocabulary for *which* sign resources (modes) are available and how they encode meaning (indexicality, symbolism, iconicity). We therefore propose that Pragma-semiotic analyses treat sermon events as networks of pragmatic acts instantiated across modes, e.g., a preacher’s solemn declarative + raised hand (gestural index) + organ pedal (acoustic index) functioning together to produce an authoritative declaration. The complementarity of pragmatics and semiotics is argued by contemporary scholars who map pragmatic acts onto multimodal sign systems (Solomon-Etefia & Nweya, 2017; Robbin & Lawal, 2022).

Empirical Overview

Empirical studies reveal how related studies carried out in previous research contribute to situating our study within this envisaged framework and methodological perspective. While specific studies focusing on Anglican and Catholic churches in Awka are not readily available, we can draw insights from related research works. These studies examined the pragmatic acts and analysis of selected sermons in Pentecostal churches, while the other studies the pragma-semiotic analysis of a Catholic bishop’s communiqué on the Ebola pandemic, these sermons have been of help to this work.

Solomon-Etefia and Nweya (2017) in their study on Pragma-semiotics analysis of a Catholic bishop communiqué adopted Mey’s Pragmatic Act theory (2001) and Saussure’s model of semiotic signs as frameworks for data analysis. Their analysis reveals how the Catholic bishop responded to the 2014 Ebola crisis as well as the significant liturgical changes this brought to the Nigeria Catholic churches. The work examined how signs were used in the communiqué to address health concerns and how good hygiene should be treated as urgent. The study identified pragmatic functions such as counseling, cautioning, commanding and threatening conveyed through direct speech acts and contextual features like shared situational knowledge and cultural references. Semiotic elements observable in the analysis includes the use of symbols such as Holy communion, self-signing with holy water, and the sign of peace with each carrying specific meanings within the religious context, thereby providing semiotic interpretation of the signs visible and discusses the impact of the communiqué of the Catholic faithful at the University of Ibadan.

Also, Robbin & Lawal (2022) in his study of the pragmatic acts in selected sermons of Bishop David Oyedepo accounts for and analyzed the pragmatic features used in the sermons using Jacob Mey’s (2001) Pragmatic act theory. The study identified key pragmatic features such as assuring, informing, instructing, prophesying and advising. The research examined four (4) purposively selected sermons from over 11,800 and analyzed 59 significant excerpts to identify the pragmatic acts, underlying contexts, themes and implications of the messages. The six main themes that emerged include gratitude, faith, marriage, financial dominion, giving and humility, and shaped by contextual factors like history, prayer and philosophy. The study used pragmatic tools such as inference, shared situational knowledge and metaphor to explain how Oyedepo’s sermons convey meaning and influence his congregants. The findings highlight the sermon’s role in evoking divine power, demystifying spiritual truths and enhancing preaching practices in religious education. By applying Mey’s pragmatic act theory, the study contributes to the growing field of pragmatics of religion, especially in African Christian contexts; it affirms that sermons are not just spiritual talks but are rich in communicative strategies that fulfill various pragmatic functions as well as encourage the integration of pragmatic insights into homiletics and Christian education.

Furthermore, Bahago’s (1999) pragmatic analysis of the language of religion in selected sermons of William Kumuyi x-rays how language used in Christian sermons. The study focuses particularly on how meaning is constructed and interpreted between pastors and congregations during religious discourse. Drawing on Austin

and Searle's Speech Act theory and Grice's Cooperative principle, the research investigates how illocutionary forces (what the speaker intends to achieve with their utterances) are conveyed and understood in sermons. Bahago (1999) emphasized that religious language often deviates from everyday usage. Utterances that may seem absurd in other contexts can carry deep spiritual meaning within religious settings due to shared assumptions and contextual understanding and the fact that sermon language often functions at a symbolic or associative level, relying heavily on shared knowledge and cultural context. The findings revealed that a successful sermon communication is not just about correct grammar or sentence formation, but hinges heavily on pragmatic elements like speaker intention, context and hearer's ability to infer meaning. Pastors use utterances not merely to inform, but to perform actions such as warning, instructing, blessing, and the congregation interprets based on the situational context and shared religious background. This study showed that understanding in this setting involves more than decoding words, it requires sensitivity to contextual cues, speaker's intentions and the pragmatic forces behind utterances. Contextual features such as the setting, audience expectations and doctrinal beliefs serve as constraints and enablers in the interpretation process. Ultimately, the research confirmed that pragmatic principles are essential to interpreting religious languages and that sermons operate through a complex interplay of linguistic, social and spiritual elements. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of religious communication, demonstrating how meaning is pragmatically constructed and negotiated in church settings.

In the course of review of literature, a google scholar search shows that despite the growing body of study done to analyze various religious languages, more interests have been given mainly to the Pentecostal churches with limited interest being given to Catholic and Anglican denominations most especially churches in Awka. This creates a gap in literature from theoretical and methodological point of view. Furthermore, while previous studies focused on pragmatic analysis with limited studies on pragma-semiotic from comparative lens, this gap in literature makes our present study unique compared to previous pragmatic studies. Because of this dearth of research, this study aims to breach the gap by studying both the pragmatics and semiotics of the selected sermons with a focus on Anglican and Catholic churches.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To have a broader knowledge of this study, our study is framed around Austin and Searle's speech act theory, and Piercean's semiotics to enable the analyses of data presented for this study.

Speech Act Theory

This theory was introduced by Oxford philosopher J.L Austin in his book "How to Do Things with Words" in (1962). The theory was further developed by an American philosopher who is also his student in (1979). The speech act theory is a subfield of pragmatics that concerns itself with the way in which words can be used not only to present information, but to carry out actions. It serves as a tool for analyzing the way utterances relate to behavior. Austin (1962) rejected the notion earlier promoted by the logical positivist (the traditional language style), that a non-tautological sentence is meaningful if only the truth or falsehood of the sentence could be established. Here, meaning of utterances can be described in terms of their truth or falsity; the logical positivists further stated that the basic principle of language is to describe the state of affairs by using statement and that basic sentence style is to describe. But Austin and other ordinary language philosophers did not agree with these assumptions about language. Austin (1962) further made some important observations which gave rise to his criticisms. He claimed that logical positivism involves a descriptive fallacy, in the sense that it treats acts of description as primary and more or less ignores other functions of language. To him, language is far more than making declarative statements or utterances that can be judged based on the truth or falsity of the utterance. Austin further points out that much of the conversations are made up in different forms, like question, command, statement, exclamation, and wish.

Locutionary Act

A locutionary act consists of an identifiable set of words or sentences. It is the linguistic form of utterances, sounds, phones, morphemes, syntax, word semantics which goes into the mental grammar that helps us produce the actual utterance. Locution is simply the linguistic properties of utterance (Austin,1962). Locutionary act refers to the physical action of the mouth when the speaker says something which includes the selection of dictions, intonations and grammatical structure. On this note, Yule (1996) posits that the illocutionary act is the most basic introductory speech that produces expressions. In other words, it involves basic linguistic action through sounds. It involves the literal meaning of what is being said focusing on the language and syntax used without considering the intent or context behind it.

Illocutionary Act

Illocutionary act consists in a further conversational act performed in or by the act of uttering in a given context. It studies more on the intentions of the speaker or the intended purpose of the utterance made by the speaker (Austin, 1962). The illocutionary act is the core of a speech act, the performance of an act of saying something (Searle, 1979). In performing speech acts, the speaker requires actions through the speech delivered to the listener. This is used so the listener does what the speaker wants. According to Yule (1996), an illocutionary speech act is an action intended through communicative activities in speech. The concept of illocutionary acts is used to provide pragmatic effects and roles of an utterance such as pleading, reprimanding, cautioning, threatening as in "Those who lie shall go to a place where one shall burn for eternity".

Perlocutionary Act

Perlocutionary act is the theory which consists of an act, event or a state of mind resulting from the illocutionary act. In other words, it deals with the recipient and how the utterance made by the speaker affects the receiver. Perlocutionary act is often overlooked because of its slight similarity to illocutionary act (Austin, 1962). It is the effect caused by the utterance delivered by the speaker. According to Yule (1996), perlocutionary acts depend on the utterance of the speaker and the assumptions of the listener. The concept of this act relies on the listener's interpretation of what is said. Austin also placed great emphasis on the ways in which illocutionary force is determined by the setting in which an utterance is made. A statement like "I do" would not count as a completion of a marriage ceremony if it were uttered in a professional setting in response to the question "do you have an appointment with the boss?".

Additionally, Austin's theory of speech acts was considerably extended and refined by his student John Searle. In the past three decades, speech act theory has become an important branch of the contemporary theory of language mainly due to John Searle and H.P. Grice's influence, whose ideas on meaning and communication have stimulated research in philosophy and in human and cognitive sciences. Searle's speech act theory explains how words cannot only inform, but also perform actions through speech. In his book "Expression and Meaning", Searle (1979) instead of focusing on performative verbs, distinguished several dimensions of variation in which illocutionary acts differ from one another. To begin, the illocutionary point is the purpose of the utterance. The illocutionary point of a description is different from, let us say a command, but a command and a request have the same illocutionary point in the sense that they both attempt to get the hearer to do something (Searle, 1979). Searle's illocutionary point is part of Austin's illocutionary act. In any case, there is something that distinguishes illocutionary acts and it is their direction of fitness. Searle is also conscious of the additional requirements for non-linguistic institutions to exist, which prompted the establishment of the five illocutionary point. From Searle's point of view, there are only five illocutionary points that speakers can achieve on propositions in an utterance.

Piercean Semiotics

Semiotics is the systematic study of signs and sign processes (Peirce, 1931; & Nöth, 1990). In other words, it is the study of signs, symbols and signification to process and communicate meaning. It was defined by one of its founders the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) as "the study of the life of signs within society". Although the word was used in this sense in the 17th century by the English philosopher John Locke, the idea of semiotics as an interdisciplinary field of study emerged only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the independent work of Saussure and of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

Peirce's (1931) work in this field was anchored in pragmatism and logic. He began writing on semiotics, which he also called semeiotics, meaning the philosophical study of signs in the 1860s and devised his system of three categories around that time. During the 20th century, the term "semiotics" was adopted to cover all tendencies of sign research including Ferdinand de Saussure's "semiology", which began in linguistics as a completely different tradition. Among Peirce's major contributions to semiotics was the categorization of signs into three main types, namely, an icon which resembles its referent such as a cross representing Christ's crucifixion. An index which is associated with its referent e.g. making the sign of the cross. Symbol which is related to its referent only by convention as in traffic signals, or liturgical colors like purple for Lenten period and advent. Peirce further demonstrated that a sign cannot have a definite meaning, for the meaning must be continuously qualified.

Peirce (1931) adopted the term semiosis and defined it to mean an action or influence which involves a cooperation of three subjects such as signs, its object and its interpretant. These three subjects are fundamental to Peirce's understanding of logic as formal semiotic. By logic he means philosophical logic. In Anglican and Catholic sermons, Peircean semiotics helps us analyze ritual gestures (index), visual icons that reinforce theological concepts and vestments, altar setting as symbolic signs used in conveying sacred meanings. These signs are not isolated from the sermon, but they interact with the spoken words, enhancing the meaning and reception of the message. Peircean semiotics provides the semiotic lens for analyzing how non-verbal elements support the preacher's intent.

By combining speech act theory (pragmatics) with Peircean semiotics, a pragma-semiotic approach to sermon analysis enables examining how preachers use words to act and how verbal and non-verbal signs work together to shape meaning. For example, in a Catholic homily, when the priest says, “this is the body of Christ” (a performative speech act) while lifting the host (an iconic and symbolic sign), this moment becomes a multi-layered meaning making event consisting of both pragmatics and semiotics. Austin and Searle’s speech act theory and Peircean semiotics provide the theoretical tools needed to study sermons. Through pragma-semiotics, we can understand not only what is said in Anglican and Catholic sermons, but how it is said and how meaning is enhanced by signs, symbols and ritual performance.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts qualitative and quantitative descriptive research designs, which enables an in-depth exploration of both the contextual language use and the symbolic representations embedded in the sermons. The qualitative and quantitative data for the study comprise four audio recorded Sunday sermons from Two Catholic Churches and One Anglican church namely: St. Andrews Anglican Church, Unizik, St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church, Unizik and Holy Family Youth Village Catholic Church, Amansea. Two sermons were audio-recorded from the Anglican church on June 22, 2025 and July 6, 2025 with the sermons titled “The Hour of Salvation” and “Faith” respectfully. For the Catholic Churches, the sermon titled “Hospitality” was obtained from the Holy Family Youth Village Catholic Church on the 17th August, 2025 with Rev. Fr. Gabriel as the officiating Priest while the sermon titled “Path to Salvation” was collected via audio-record from St. Joseph the Worker, Unizik on the 13th July, 2025 with Rev Fr Vitus Onyekaba celebrating the mass of the day. The sermons were audio-recorded via the use of phone recorder by one of the authors.

The gathered information is scrutinized and meticulously used in achieving the aim of this research. The data collected were analyzed using the framework of pragma-semiotics, which blends elements of speech act theory and Piercean semiotics. Pragmatic analysis focuses on illocutionary acts, contextual features, and the semiotics analysis involves identifying signs, symbols and icons in the sermon’s delivery, interpreting symbolic gestures and visual elements.

As part of the data coding, we applied heuristic rules to assign a primary Searle speech-act category (Directive, Representative, Expressive, Declarative, Commissive) and a Peircean sign type (Symbol/Index/Icon combinations) to each clause. By using Speech acts as part of the frameworks, we distinguished locutionary (what is said), illocutionary (what the speaker does by saying it: assert, command, invite, bless), and perlocutionary (intended or typical effect on the hearer). Where the sermon used scriptural quotation or liturgical formulae we noted performative/ritual force (e.g., “The Lord be with you”). Also, Searle categories enable us to classify illocutionary acts into Searle’s five broad classes: representatives (asserting, stating), directives (requests, exhortations), commissives (promises/commitments - rare here), expressives (blessings/wishes), declaratives (ritual/official statements). We also observed that some utterances perform hybrid functions (e.g., a rhetorical question that both asserts and directs).

Through Peircean triadic mapping, each selected utterance was read as a representamen (the sign as spoken), an object (what the sign refers to in the world or culture as in “Abraham’s hospitality”), and an interpretant (the meaning/effect produced in the hearer). On this note, we labeled signs iconic (imagery/metaphor), indexical (pointing indicators to social reality), or symbolic (conventional, cultural or linguistic signs) to show how the sermons depict meaning via the various resources used in the texts under analysis. Where appropriate we include likely felicity conditions (e.g., scriptural quotation gains traction because it shares authoritative resources in congregation). Data for the study were validated for consistency by the researchers to ensure that audio recorded data are logically consistent with the transcribed texts before analysis.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the four sermons revealed a rich interplay of pragmatic and semiotic signs. In this section, we present the pragma-semiotic analysis in tabular forms showing the Speech Acts (Austin & Searle) and Peircean semiotic readings for each sermon. Here we present a speech-act analysis (locutionary/illocutionary/perlocutionary where appropriate; cum Searle category), a Peircean triadic reading (representamen, object, interpretant) and sign type (icon/index/symbol) on the pragmatic function as well as likely felicity conditions/effects.

Table 1: Anglican Sermon I - Speech Acts (Austin & Searle)

S/N	Example utterance (source)	Locutionary content	Illocutionary force (Austin)	Searle category	Perlocutionary effect/pragmatic aim
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1	“Faith that does not move us to love, to serve, to give, to forgive - that faith is empty, it is dead.”	Proposition: faith without deeds = dead	Verdictive/constative (evaluative assertion) – speaker judges/assesses	Representative (asserting a state of affairs)	To evaluate, persuade congregation to value works; evoke guilt/motivation to act
2	“Imagine a brother or sister who has nothing to wear and nothing to eat...”	Directive imaginal prompt: picture a needy person	Commissive? (not promising) - more directive/elicitive to imagine	Directive (eliciting mental simulation/empathy)	Elicit empathy and readiness to help; prepare for call-to-action
3	“Let us therefore examine ourselves today.”	Imperative-like inclusive formula	Directive/exhortation (attempt to get audience to self-reflect)	Directive	Trigger introspection and self-assessment; prepare for behavioural change
4	“And may we, like Abraham, be called friends of God...”	Blessing / wish	Performatives (blessing) - speaker invokes a desired state	Expressive/Declarative (blessing)	Create communal aspiration; ritual closure; strengthen solidarity

Table 1 above showed that Anglican Sermon I relies strongly on representatives (assertions about faith and works) and directives (exhortations to act/reflect). The expression “Faith that does not move us to love, to serve, to give, to forgive - that faith is empty, it is dead” is asserting a state of affairs. The expression depicts Austin’s (1962) illocutionary force, a Verdictive/constative (evaluative assertion) where the speaker judges/assesses the audience. Perlocutionary effects evidence in the sermons are persuasion, conviction, and mobilisation. In the expression, “Let us therefore examine ourselves today.” is a directive/exhortation that triggers introspection and self-assessment; prepare for behavioural change (Austin, 1962).

Table 2: Anglican Sermon I - Peircean Semiotics (selected items)

S/N	Utterance (quote)	Representamen (sign vehicle)	Object (what sign refers to)	Interpretant (effect/meaning created)	Sign type (Peirce)	Comment/pragmatic role
1	“Faith without work is dead.”	sentence (verbal symbol)	the relation between private belief and public action	faith that lacks action is ineffective/morally deficient	Symbol (conventional linguistic sign)	Generalising moral claim; functions as normative sign prompting behaviour
2	“Imagine a brother or sister who has nothing to wear and nothing to eat...”	mental-image prompt via language	a concrete needy person / poverty	empathy and moral obligation to act	Iconic (imagery invoked) + Index (points to social reality)	Uses vivid image to index social reality and create affective response
3	“Look at Abraham, our father in faith.”	narrative example	Abraham’s life and actions	Abraham as model of faith-through-action	Index (refers to biblical exemplum)	Mobilises cultural authority to

					+ Symbol (cultural/religious reference)	legitimise the exhortation
4	Repetition: "Let our faith shine through the deeds... our hands that give, our feet that serve..."	repetitive coordinated phrases	embodied acts of service	embodiment of faith as praxis	Indexical (points to embodied acts)	Materialises abstract faith into bodily actions (encourages praxis)

The excerpts in Table 2 above represents Anglican Sermon I. From Peircean Semiotics point of view, the sermon mixes symbolic (scriptural maxims), indexical (pointing to social situations), and iconic (imagery prompts) signs to move audience from belief to action. As shown in the above table, the expression "Look at Abraham, our father in faith" mobilises cultural authority to legitimise the exhortation; this is achieved through indexicality (Index) with refers to biblical exemplum; and use of Symbol which relies on cultural/religious reference. Among other uses of indexicality which points to embodied acts is the repetitive coordinated phrases "Let our faith shine through the deeds... our hands that give, our feet that serve...", an embodiment of faith as praxis which materialises abstract faith into bodily actions (encourages praxis).

Table 3: Anglican Sermon II - Speech Acts

S/N	Example utterance	Locutionary content	Illocutionary force	Searle category	Perlocutionary aim
1	"Our topic for today is the hour of salvation is now."	Statement that shows urgency – now	Declaration/topicalising	Representative with hortatory framing	Create urgency; set up immediate call to conversion
2	"Do you know that today will be some people's last day on earth and they don't know?"	Rhetorical question/warning	Directive (prompt awareness); representative (assertion)	Representative/Directive	To shock, provoke immediate response; lower deferral to 'later'
3	"Come to Jesus now, come and receive salvation"	Explicit invitation	Directive (imperative)/performative invitation	Directive/Commissive (inviting commitment)	Produce conversion decision; immediate action (altar call)
4	"Christ said, come to me all ye who are tired..." (quotation)	Scriptural citation	Appeal to authority; representative	Representative (quoting as evidence)	Legitimize speaker's exhortation; increase compliance

Table 3 represents Speech Acts found in the Anglican Sermon II. The table shows a strong mix of directive speech acts (calls to action) and representatives (authoritative claims, scriptural references) to drive urgency. For instance, the use of rhetorical question "Do you know that today will be some people's last day on earth and they don't know?" is both directive and representative. It is used to shock, provoke immediate response; and lower deferral of Christ call to salvation to 'later'.

Table 4: Anglican Sermon II - Peircean Semiotics

S/N	Utterance	Representa- men	Object	Interpretant	Sign type	Comment
1	“The hour of salvation is now.”	temporal deictic phrase	immediacy of salvation opportunity	postponement is dangerous; act now	Index (deictic) + Symbol (religious concept)	Deictic anchoring to present moment => pragmatic pressure to act
2	“If you are living a live, and you are living without Jesus, that live you are living is worthless?”	contrastive moral claim	life without Christ	existential insufficiency; need for conversion	Symbol (religious meaning)	Moves from personal identity to evaluative judgement; constructs moral binary
3	Scriptural quotation (“Come to me...”)	quoted scripture	Jesus’ offer of rest	authorizes call to salvation	Symbol (sacred text)	Appeals to high-trust sign to secure compliance

Table 4 represents Peircean Semiotics use as shown in Anglican Sermon II; the data showed a mixture of Index and Symbols. For instance, the expression “The hour of salvation is now.” index temporal deictic phrase, a pragmatic pressure to act anchoring to present moment or act now to avoid danger. The rest of the expressions symbolize religious cum sacred meaning.

Table 5: Catholic Sermon I – Speech Acts

S/N	Example utterance	Locutionary content	Illocutionary force	Searle category	Perlocutionary aim
1	“I term my message this evening as ‘sacrificial hospitality’.”	Naming the theme	Declarative (naming/ labeling)	Declarative/ Representative	Frame the sermon and set interpretive lens
2	“It is good to do good not because of what we will get in return...”	Moral claim/norm	Verdictive/ evaluative	Representative	Reframe motives; discourage transactional ethics
3	“The Lord be with you” - <i>Priest</i> / “and with your spirit” - <i>Congregants</i>	Liturgical exchange	Performative/ liturgical greeting	Expressive/ Declarative (ritualized speech act)	Establish ecclesial solidarity & ritual alignment
4	“Abraham is teaching us that it is good to do good...”	Expository claim	Representative/ didactic	Representative	Interpret biblical exemplar as moral model; encourage imitation

Table 5 above on Catholic Sermon I uses more declaratives to name and ritualize (liturgical formulae), and representatives to teach moral norms. In the sermon, the expression “I term my message this evening as ‘sacrificial hospitality’” depicts a declarative statement, framing the sermon and set interpretive lens, while the expression “Abraham is teaching us that it is good to do good...” is a didactic claim that depicts biblical exemplar as moral model; the priest here encourages members to imitate such an exemplary good deed.

Table 6: Catholic Sermon I – Peircean Semiotics

S/N	Utterance	Representa- men	Object	Interpretant	Sign type	Comment
1	“sacrificial hospitality” (theme label)	phrase = compound conceptual sign	hospitality performed selflessly	hospitality as moral ideal, not transactional	Symbol (conventional term with cultural/religious resonance)	Frames subsequent discourse by charging the term with ethical value
2	Narrative of Abraham hosting strangers	Narrative depiction (verbal icon)	Abraham’s act of hospitality	hospitality yields blessing; moral exemplar	Index/Icon + Symbol	Narrative functions as index to moral outcome (childbirth as reward), reinforcing behavior
3	“it is good to do good not because of what we will get in return”	prescriptive sentence	motive for moral action	altruism as virtuous	Symbol	Attempts to shift cultural semiotic of reciprocity to gratuitous giving

In Table 6 above, we present Peircean Semiotics on the Catholic Sermon I. The sermon adopts a mixture of Index, Icon and symbol as semiotic resources in the meaning process. For instance, Abraham’s act of hospitality depicts a narrative process (verbal icon) that functions as index to moral outcome (childbirth as reward for hospitality yields blessing) and reinforces behavior as moral exemplar.

Table 7: Catholic Sermon II – Speech Acts

S/N	Example utterance	Locutionary content	Illocutionary force	Searle category	Perlocutionary aim
1	“Christ presented himself as one who has come to bring enmity between lovers...”	Explanatory assertion about scripture	Representative (interpretive claim)	Representative	Reframe Christ’s mission to highlight cost of discipleship
2	“If we look at what is happening in the world... you must follow the narrow path.”	Advisory exhortation	Directive (moral instruction)	Directive	Encourage moral discipline and resistance to peer pressure
3	“we must be ready to walk on thorny roads and carry our cross”	Metaphorical admonition	Directive/ exhortation	Directive (also expressive through metaphor)	Prepare congregation for hardship as part of faithful life
4	“Praise be to Jesus”/ “Amen.” (congregational response)	Valediction/ liturgical closure	Expressive/ ritual affirmation	Expressive/ Declarative	Reinforce communal identity and closure

Table 7 on Catholic Sermon II reflects a mixture of expressive, directive and representative in their perlocutionary acts. Such locutionary as explanatory, advisory, admonition enables a persuasive sermon. For instance, the expression “If we look at what is happening in the world... you must follow the narrow path.” depicts words of encouragement on moral discipline and resistance to peer pressure while the need for the congregation to prepare for hardship as part of faithful life is depicted via the expression “we must be ready to walk on thorny roads and carry our cross” as a Directive, an exhortation cum admonition to bear the cost of following Christ.

Table 8: Catholic Sermon II – Peircean Semiotics

S/N	Utterance	Representamen	Object	Interpretant	Sign type
1	“narrow path”	metaphorical phrase	the difficult normative road to salvation	discipline and sacrifice are required	Metaphor transforms abstract ethical demands into embodied pathway image
2	“walk on thorny roads and carry our cross”	metaphor + scriptural reference	suffering/discipline of discipleship	resilience is evidence of authentic faith	Mobilises well-known Christian sign (cross) to motivate endurance
3	“be ready to endure one or two pain or hardship”	prescriptive statement	requirement of discipleship	normalizes suffering as part of spiritual growth	Counters consumerist comfort narratives; revalues hardship

Table 8 above depicts Iconic metaphor as well as Index/icon (metaphor) and Symbol as semiotic resources for making meaning. The use of “narrow path”, and “walk on thorny roads and carry our cross” are metaphorical phrases that enact scriptural references. The iconic metaphor transforms abstract ethical demands into embodied pathway image while the indexical cum iconic use of “walk on thorny roads and carry our cross” mobilises well-known Christian sign (cross) to motivate endurance.

Table 9: Combined Quick-Reference Table – Speech Acts by Sermon (Summary)

S/N	Sermon	Dominant categories	Searle	Typical illocutionary forces	Typical perlocutionary aims
1	Anglican I	Representative; Directive; Expressive		Assertion of moral truth; exhortation; blessing	Persuade to act; produce introspection; motivate charity
2	Anglican II	Directive; Representative		Urgent invitation; warning; scriptural appeal	Prompt immediate conversion; create urgency
3	Catholic I	Representative; Declarative; Expressive		Didactic assertions; ritual performatives	Model moral behaviour; ritual solidarity
4	Catholic II	Directive; Representative; Expressive		Exhortation to discipline; interpretive assertion	Prepare for disciplined Christian life; shore up resilience

Table 9 provides a cumulative summary of the Speech Acts found in the four sermons analyzed. The table presents the dominant use of directive; representative and declarative in their representation with varying degrees of illocutionary and perlocutionary forces.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the coded data extracted from the four sermons, the distribution by Searle category is represented in the tables below. This enables the percentage overview in the predominant use of the various Searle categorization.

Table 10: Showing Frequencies on Anglican Sermon I

S/N	Searle category (Anglican Sermon I)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Representative (asserting, stating)	70	83.33%
2	Directive (exhortation, invitation, command)	12	14.29%
3	Expressive (blessings, liturgical responses, wishes)	2	2.38%
4	Declarative (naming, formal declarations/labels)	0	0.0%
5	Commissive	0	0.0%

	Total	84	100.0%
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The 84 tokens above correspond to the representative examples tabulated in the data for this study. From Table 10, descriptive quantitative results on the speech acts showed that 83.33% represented by frequency of 70 indicated Representative (asserting, stating) category; while 14.29% represented by 12 frequency of occurrence depicted Directive (exhortation, invitation, command) and 2.38% are categorized under Expressive (blessings, liturgical responses, wishes). Each token was assigned to the single most prominent illocutionary class for clarity of summary. The overwhelming representative illocutionary acts with small shares of directive and expressives align well with Searle (1969) and Austin's (1962) speech act theory and with empirical studies of religious and public speech and signals a discourse whose chief communicative goal is to inform and claim.

Table 11: Showing Frequencies on Anglican Sermon II

S/N	Searle category (Anglican Sermon II)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Representative (asserting, stating)	65	76.47%
2	Directive (exhortation, invitation, command)	14	16.47%
3	Expressive (blessings, liturgical responses, wishes)	1	1.18%
4	Declarative (naming, formal declarations/labels)	0	0.0%
5	Commissive	0	0.0%
	Total	80	100.0%

The 80 tokens above correspond to the representative examples tabulated in the data from Anglican sermon II. From Table 11, descriptive quantitative results on the speech acts showed that 76.47% represented by frequency of 65 depicted Representative (asserting, stating) category; while 16.47% with 14 frequency of occurrence depicted Directive (exhortation, invitation, command) and 1.18% are categorized under Expressive (blessings, liturgical responses, wishes). Each token was assigned to the single most prominent illocutionary class for clarity of summary. The above discussion is in parallel with empirical studies on religious and public discourse which report representative as the most frequent class, directives as the most secondary and expressive as relatively rare (Akmal *et al.*, 2020).

Table 12: Showing Frequencies on Catholic Sermon I

S/N	Searle category (Catholic Sermon I)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Representative (asserting, stating)	83	94.31%
2	Directive (exhortation, invitation, command)	4	4.55%
3	Interrogative (asking question)	1	1.14%
4	Declarative (naming, formal declarations/labels)	0	0.0%
5	Commissive	0	0.0%
	Total	88	100.0%

Furthermore, the 88 tokens above correspond to the representative examples tabulated in data for Catholic sermon I. From Table 12, descriptive quantitative results on the speech acts showed that 94.31% represented by frequency of 83 indicated Representative (asserting, stating) category; while 4.55% represented by 4 number of frequency of occurrence depicted Directive (exhortation, invitation, command) and 1.14% are categorized under interrogative (asking question) and commissive is represented by 0,0%. Each token was assigned to the single most prominent illocutionary class for clarity of summary. The strong representative dominance in the table above further reinforces Austin and Searle's claim that illocutionary types correlate with communicative goals, especially when the goal is to inform and assert (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; & Brinton, 2023).

Table 13: Showing Frequencies on Catholic Sermon II

S/N	Searle category (Catholic Sermon II)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Representative (asserting, stating)	47	81.03%
2	Directive (exhortation, invitation, command)	8	13.79%
3	Expressive (blessings, liturgical responses, wishes)	2	3.45%
4	Interrogative (asking question)	1	1.72%
5	Commissive	0	0.0%
	Total	58	100.0%

From the coded data extracted from the Catholic Sermon I, the distribution by Searle category is represented in the table above. The 58 tokens above correspond to the representative examples in data Catholic Sermon II. From Table 13, descriptive quantitative results on the speech acts indicated that 81.03% represented by frequency of 47 as Representative (asserting, stating) category; while 13.79% represented by 8 number of frequency of occurrence depicted Directive (exhortation, invitation, command). Also, 3.45% and 1.72% are categorized under Expressive (blessings, liturgical responses, wishes) and Interrogative respectfully. Each token was assigned to the single most prominent illocutionary class for clarity of summary. The token distribution above also has a theoretical implication and aligns with Austin (1962) and Searle’s (1969) postulation that accounts for why representatives are so dominant in the table above. First, sermons and many ritualized religious utterances often prioritize propositional content especially when the primary communicative goal is to inform, remind, or argue. At this point, sermons are shown to produce more representative acts than commissives or expressives. In contrast, directives appear as an instrumental complement, while expressives appear only when the speaker switches to affective or evaluative functions as is the case in the above table (Ireeri, *et al.*, 2015).

Table 14: Showing Frequencies on Cumulative Distribution

S/N	Searle category (Cumulative)	Anglican Sermon (Frequency)	Catholic Sermon (Frequency)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Representative (asserting, stating)	135	130	265	85.48%
2	Directive (exhortation, invitation, command)	26	12	38	12.26%
3	Expressive (blessings, liturgical responses, wishes)	3	2	5	1.61%
4	Interrogative (asking question)	0	2	2	0.65%
5	Declarative (naming, formal declarations/labels)	0	0	0	0.0%
6	Commissive	0	0	0	0.0%
	Total	164	146	310	100.0%

From the coded data extracted from the four sermons, Table 14 above depicted cumulative data with 310 salient utterance tokens. The descriptive quantitative results on the speech acts showed that 85.48% indicated Representative (asserting, stating) category; with 12.26% depicting Directive (exhortation, invitation, command); while 1.61% and 0.65% are categorized under Expressive (blessings, liturgical responses, wishes) and Interrogative respectfully. Comparatively, the table indicates predominant use of Speech acts in the Anglican sermons over the Catholic ones.

CONCLUSION

The pragma-semiotic analysis of the selected Anglican and Catholic sermons in Awka shows that representative speech acts predominate (85.48%), serving to construct the doctrinal and moral frame which enables directives (12.26%) to effect behavioural change; ritualized expressives (1.61%) and interrogate (0.65%) the members to consolidate communal alignment and felicity conditions. Peircean analysis reveals a mixed strategy of symbolic authority (scripture, doctrinal assertions), indexical pointing (exempla, deictics), and iconic imagery (vivid mental prompts) that together translate belief into action.

Findings from the data presentation showed that both Anglican and Catholic sermons combine *representatives + directives + expressives*, but with nuanced weighting: Anglican sermons in the sample foreground immediate calls to action (strong directives), while Catholic sermons foreground ritualized framing and exemplarity (declarative theme labels, liturgical expressives). This aligns with broader liturgical differences: Anglican preaching often emphasizes exhortation and evangelistic urgency in the corpus, while Catholic sermons in the corpus emphasize ritual framing and exemplification. Thus, liturgical exchanges such as “The Lord be with you” are genuine performatives evidence in these sermons; they enact ecclesial solidarity and thus create a social environment conducive to compliance with directives.

From a semiotic lens, the data showed that assertions are often supported by scriptural citation (symbolic authority) and exempla (indexical pointing to biblical models), while directives are deictically anchored (e.g., “now”) to generate urgency. Repetition and vivid imagery function iconically to produce affective interpretants (empathy, moral shame, aspiration). In this way, the sermons are shown to rely on semiotic strategies to secure felicity. While this study is limited to four selected sermons, with two each from Anglican and Catholic sermons in Awka, we recommend the need for future research that expands corpus size (other denominations; lay preaching;

radio sermons) and run multivariate analysis to explore whether sermon function (e.g., funeral vs. call-to-conversion) predicts distribution of speech acts.

The study has an implication for linguistic and semiotic scholarship, providing a holistic framework for understanding how Christian messages are encoded and decoded in contemporary Nigerian worship settings. From homiletics and pastoral communication, the study reveals how sermon effectiveness is shaped not only by theological depth but by the preacher's strategic deployment of linguistic politeness, biblical intertextuality, metaphor, visual symbols and gestures to unpack spiritual engagement and emotional resonance. The study also has an implication for interdenominational communication, supporting ecumenical programmes and dialogue forums within Awka and beyond.

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