USAR Journal Of Arts,Humanities and Social Sciences(USARJAHSS)
Homepage: https://usarpublisher.com/usarjahss/
Volume1,issue 4,June,2025 ISSN: 3107-3980(Online)

NAMING AND DESCRIBING AS CRITICAL STYLISTIC FEATURES OF SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN SELECTED CHRISTIAN SERMONS

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17010878

Article History

Received:23-08-2025
Accepted:26-08-2025
Published:31-08-2025

Abstract

This study explores how Nigerian pastors strategically use language in sermons to construct ideological meanings and address socio-political issues such as corruption, inequality, and insecurity. Using Lesley Jeffries' (2010) Critical Stylistics framework, specifically the tool of Naming and Describing, the study analyses ten purposively selected sermons delivered between 2020 and 2023, during periods marked by national crises and elections. Through naming strategies like metaphorical labelling and ideological contrasts like "no more rigging," "died like a fowl", pastors challenge political realities and encourage civic engagement. The findings support recent research showing the pulpit as a platform for political critique and moral guidance. In view of this, the study reveals how religious rhetoric reframes political discourse and positions the Church as an agent of social transformation. It recommends broader comparative studies across African nations to better understand the role of sermons in shaping civic consciousness and advocating for reform across the continent.

***Keywords**: socio-political, ideology, civic engagement, language and power, sermon*

1.1 Introduction

Language mediates every aspect of human experience, shaping and reshaping people's perceptions of the world. As the primary tool for expressing thought and emotion, language provides the framework through which human realities are interpreted and constructed (Galperin, 1968). The concept of meaning is often examined through language, which functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a powerful force in shaping social and emotional responses. Eyisi (in Emeka-Nwobia, 2015) highlights the all-encompassing nature of language, noting its use in expressing a range of human emotions: love, hatred, anger, joy, as well as commentary on politics, religion, education, and everyday interaction.

Language use significantly influences communicative competence. According to Chukwuka (2015), language enables individuals to engage in complex thinking and theological interpretation, affirming its central role in satisfying communicative needs within society. This is especially evident in religious contexts, where English has

become the dominant language for sermon delivery in many Nigerian churches. Scholars such as Faleye and Fajobi (2019) observe that religious discourse reflects distinctive linguistic patterns rooted in spiritual, doctrinal, and social contexts. Ogunrinde and Adedoja (2020, p. 25) further explain that sacred texts, such as the Bible, Koran, and Pali Canon, shape religious expression in both spoken and written forms. Preachers often use formal, sometimes archaic, language such as: "thou" and "thee" to convey reverence and authority. They also employ specialised terms like "salvation" and "grace" to articulate complex theological concepts. Despite this, religious language frequently mirrors prose in its simplicity and clarity to ensure comprehension (Adeyemi, 2016). Thorne (2008) argues that religious language serves both expressive and persuasive (conative) functions, aiming to evoke emotions and direct moral behaviour. While this distinction is helpful, the nuanced interplay between these functions invites further exploration.

1.2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the socio-political discourse embedded in selected sermons delivered by ten influential Nigerian pastors between 2020 and 2023. Guided by Lesley Jeffries' Critical Stylistics model, the research aims to uncover how linguistic features, particularly naming and describing, analogies, and negative labelling, are used to construct ideological perspectives and communicate socio-political concerns such as inequality, exploitation, and identity. Purposive sampling was used to select ten sermons; one from each pastor, based on their thematic relevance, denominational diversity, and the pastors' public influence. These sermons were chosen for their engagement with contemporary issues, particularly during the COVID-19 period and the lead-up to Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The preachers include Pastor E. A. Adeboye, Dr D. K. Olukoya, Prophet Israel Oladele, The Most Rev. Dr Olusegun Akinwale, Bishop Ephraim Ikeakor, Apostle Helen Ukpabio, Rev. (Mrs) Funke Felix-Adejumo, Apostle Joshua Selman, Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka, and Bishop Matthew Kukah. The sermons were sourced from online platforms and transcribed verbatim after multiple playbacks, resulting in texts ranging from 5 to 19 pages. These transcriptions formed the primary data for analysis, enabling the identification of stylistic patterns relevant to the study's ideological focus.

2.0 Review of Earlier Studies

The evolving discipline of Critical Stylistics (CS), a subfield of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), has gained scholarly attention for its effectiveness in revealing hidden ideologies and power structures in discourse. Researchers have increasingly employed this approach in analysing political, literary, and religious texts, emphasising how language is used to shape, reflect, and manipulate socio-political realities. Adegolu and Adetunji (2019) critically analysed Pastor Tunde Bakare's political sermons, focusing on how he uses linguistic resources to frame leadership and citizenship responsibilities. Their study revealed Bakare's radical ideological stance, showcasing how stylistic markers were employed to evoke political consciousness among his audience. While the study successfully highlights Bakare's use of discourse to stimulate democratic engagement, its focus on a single figure limits the broader applicability to other influential pastors. A comparative approach involving multiple clerics, as adopted in the current research, would offer a more holistic insight into how religious discourse influences socio-political values in Nigeria.

Similarly, Oseni and Odebiyi (2021) examined naming and describing in Nigerian budget speeches to uncover embedded political ideologies. Although their focus was governmental rather than religious, the linguistic features analysed, especially naming strategies, align with the tools applied in this study. Their findings that "positive naming was frequently employed to foster favourable attitudes" echo the rhetorical techniques used in sermons to persuade or mobilise congregations.

Babatunde and Olanrewaju (2024) conducted a critical stylistic analysis of Wole Soyinka's *Taming the Monster*, using Jeffries' (2010) textual-conceptual functions. They identified tools such as exemplifying, naming, and describing as central to Soyinka's critique of societal corruption. Like Soyinka's speech, pastors often adopt these tools to address moral decay, corruption, and leadership crises, making CS a suitable framework for sermon analysis. Their study validates the value of stylistic tools in revealing

socio-political ideologies embedded in language, which this current study expands upon by examining sermons across denominations. Omeiza (2021) explored ideological discourse surrounding Nigeria's RUGA policy through critical stylistic analysis of television interviews. His work showed how language encapsulates public dissent and governmental critique. However, integrating media framing and background of interviewees, as suggested, could enhance understanding of how ideology is shaped by context; an approach this study takes into account by examining both linguistic tools and socio-political background of sermons.

Gambari-Olufadi and Salihu-AbdulAkeem (2022) investigated how critical stylistic tools like analogy, pun, and personification were used in Tanure Ojaide's poetry to reflect on issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study parallels this by exploring how religious language during the same period reflects public anxiety, offering spiritual framing for political and social disillusionment. A comparative approach across genres, as suggested by the authors, further legitimises the inclusion of sermons in stylistic and ideological analysis. Adekunle and Oke (2021) also conducted a critical stylistic analysis on Osofisan's Morountodun, identifying tools such as representing actions, naming, and speech representation to unveil political consciousness. Their analysis, while literature-focused, emphasises the potential of stylistics to uncover latent ideological positions, a key objective in this research.

Kucelman (2016) emphasised exemplification in academic writing, arguing that discourse is a dialogic process requiring shared understanding between writer and reader. Although not religious or political, his argument about the interconnectivity of discourse strategies supports the multidimensional nature of sermon delivery, which often blends exemplification with other devices like listing, contrast, and negation to shape audience perception. Maledo and Ogheneakpobor (2022) analysed metaphor and naming in Stephen Kekeghe's Rumbling Sky, demonstrating how metaphors construct Nigeria's socio-political space. While their study focused on poetry, the metaphorical mappings and ideological underpinnings resonate with sermon rhetoric, especially when pastors critique governance or moral decay. Elsheheimy et al. (2022) applied a wide range of CS tools to examine racism and slavery in The Help and The Known World, revealing how differing narrative styles shape ideological standpoints. Their method affirms the importance of diverse stylistic tools for unpacking layered meanings—an approach mirrored in this research's analysis of sermons.

While these previous works have significantly advanced CS scholarship, few have applied the model specifically to Nigerian religious discourse. Pastors, wielding substantial influence in socio-political matters, often engage in indirect political commentary through sermons. Their sermons are more than spiritual exercises; they are ideological vehicles used to address corruption, injustice, and governance failures. As Adegolu and Adetunji (2019) and Babatunde and Olanrewaju (2024) suggest, such discourses are instrumental in shaping civic awareness. This study fills a critical gap by analysing how Nigerian pastors employ linguistic constructions, particularly naming, describing, analogy, and negation to express socio-political ideologies. Through a multi-pastor, multi-sermon approach, it offers a broader view of how religious language reinforces, critiques, or resists political narratives in Nigeria.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the principles of Critical Stylistics (CS) developed by Lesley Jeffries (2010, 2014), which focus on the textual significance embedded in language. Rooted in Halliday's ideational function of language, CS explores how linguistic choices shape particular versions of reality with ideological implications. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) argue that language comprises structured networks of choices that enable specific meanings. Building on this, Jeffries maintains that meaning is shaped through the stylistic selection of linguistic elements, offering a framework that blends stylistics with the ideological insights of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Jeffries (2014) explains that CS emerged in response to CDA's growing prominence in exploring ideology through language. It aims to provide systematic tools for analysing how texts convey implicit ideologies. Jeffries (2010) contends that earlier approaches, such as Critical Linguistics and CDA, lack comprehensive analytical frameworks for exposing

embedded ideologies. To address this, she proposes ten tools for analysis, including Naming and Describing, Representing Actions/Events/States, Equating and Contrasting, and others, each designed to uncover the worldview encoded in texts.

This study specifically employs the tool of Naming and Describing, which examines how language constructs social reality by the lexical and grammatical choices made in referring to people, objects, or concepts. As Al-Zubaidi and Al-Mamoori (2023) note, naming extends beyond nouns to include adjectives, modifiers, and nominalised verbs. This tool is particularly valuable for identifying biases and ideological positions embedded in the selected sermons, though it necessarily limits the study's analytical breadth.

3.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

Adegoju and Adetunji (2019) note that Nigeria's strong religion-state ties have led to the rise of a religious bloc actively engaging in socio-political discourse. The pulpit now serves as a key platform for pastors to express political views, signalling a shift in the role of religious spaces. Lesley Jeffries' (2010) critical stylistic tool, naming and describing, explores how language labels entities, uncovering ideologies, attitudes, and power structures embedded in the choice of names and descriptions within texts. Examples from the texts are:

i. "You must make sure there is no more rigging in Nigeria" (Text 1)

Jeffries (2010) asserts that naming plays a pivotal role in shaping ideological meaning and can establish authority, especially in religious discourse. In this statement, "rigging" is explicitly labelled as a negative and corrupt act, reflecting the persistent issue of electoral fraud within Nigeria's political system. Pastor Adeboye's declaration functions as a socio-political critique, echoing observations by Osasona (2017, cited in Adegoju and Adetunji, 2019), who highlighted Pastor Bakare's vocal condemnation of corruption and economic mismanagement. The phrase "no more" communicates urgency and the necessity to halt electoral malpractice. Furthermore, the use of the pronoun "you" addresses the audience directly, assigning them the civic responsibility to act. This imperative tone reinforces a call for transparency and democratic accountability in Nigeria's electoral process.

ii. "He died like a fowl, as if the major battle really was a battle against his potential" (Text 2)

Here, the pronoun "He" refers generally to an individual, allowing broader interpretation and universal application. Naming the concept of "potential" shifts focus from a singular event to a symbolic loss, highlighting the struggle against systemic forces that hinder personal growth. Olukoya's metaphorical language frames death as undignified, equating it to the slaughter of a "fowl", a symbol of insignificance and wasted life. The repetition of "battle" intensifies the metaphor, underscoring the idea that society, through poor governance or systemic failures, actively suppresses individual potential. This critique transcends the personal, offering a socio-political commentary on how structural oppression, poverty, or corruption can stifle growth and dignity.

iii. "If there's any money you want to give this church and you've not been able to invest into your life better keep the money now" (Text 3)

Fowler (1981, cited in Iman & Salih, 2020) views language as a structured system that facilitates meaning-making. In this case, "money" functions both literally and symbolically, representing individual agency and capacity. Prophet Ogundipe emphasises personal financial responsibility over religious giving, using naming to prioritise self-investment. Referring to "this church" localises the discourse and subtly critiques institutional expectations around offerings. The directive "better keep the money" positions financial self-sufficiency as a moral obligation. Ogundipe's stance challenges conventional norms, urging socio-political consciousness about economic inequality and suggesting that religious obligations should not override practical needs.

iv. "You must stand tall and defend the Church. You must be courageous to defend the church. Defend the constitution of the church. Defend the policy of the church" (Text 4)

The repeated use of "you" directly engages the audience, calling them to action. The noun "Church," alongside

"constitution" and "policy," highlights key institutional elements perceived to be under threat. The verb "defend," repeated for emphasis, implies urgency and a sense of looming danger, possibly from societal or governmental interference. This call to action implies the Church's role extends beyond spiritual duties into the socio-political sphere. The phrase "stand tall" metaphorically conveys pride, resilience, and moral fortitude. The call to defend the Church's foundational values mirrors broader political resistance against forces that threaten cultural or religious autonomy.

v. "Today, what are we suffering, many men and women in the name of preacher, pastor, evangelist, super-apostle, bishop, arc-bishop... don't know the way of the kingdom have become the leaders of the children of the kingdom" (Text 5)

The use of multiple religious titles: "preacher," "pastor," "evangelist," and so on, serves as a critique of religious leadership. While these titles denote authority and spiritual responsibility, the accompanying clause "don't know the way of the kingdom" negates their credibility. Bishop Ikeakor implies a profound leadership crisis where those in authority lack genuine spiritual grounding. The phrase "leaders of the children of the kingdom" portrays a mismatch: spiritually unqualified individuals are guiding the faithful. This analogy may be extended to critique political systems where unqualified leaders occupy crucial roles, highlighting socio-political dysfunction masked by titles and appearances.

vi. "They are the same. When you go, the same thing the native doctor would demand from you. It's the same thing the church would demand" (Text 6)

In this analogy, the speaker equates certain Christian practices with those of "native doctors," challenging the perceived moral superiority of the Church. The term "native doctor" carries socio-cultural connotations of traditional spirituality often viewed skeptically in Christian contexts. Ukpabio's juxtaposition of church and native doctor practices critiques the perceived syncretism and exploitative nature of some religious institutions. The repeated phrase "the same thing" emphasises this perceived parity. It suggests institutional corruption and commodification of spiritual services, which raises questions about religious authenticity and ethical standards. This critique reflects broader socio-political concerns about trust, exploitation, and institutional accountability.

vii. "Many people's lives and destinies have been wasted because they were not helped on time" (Text 7)

The noun phrase "lives and destinies" underscores the value and promise of human potential. The verb "wasted" conveys irreversible loss due to delayed support. Adejumo's statement points to systemic failures, whether governmental, communal, or institutional, that hinders individuals' development. The phrase "not helped on time" stresses the importance of timely intervention. It critiques a socio-political structure in which bureaucratic inefficiencies or societal neglect contributes to the squandering of human resources. This description calls for proactive policies and community responsibility in preventing such losses.

viii. "Ignorance or incomplete knowledge of God's financial system: This is the first reason for poverty in the body of Christ" (Text 8)

Apostle Selman names: "ignorance" and "incomplete knowledge" as the root causes of poverty within Christian communities. This negative labelling positions poverty as primarily a spiritual, not economic, issue. By referring to "God's financial system," Selman constructs an alternative framework in which divine principles, not secular strategies govern wealth. This reflects a theological perspective that promotes spiritual education as a pathway to prosperity. The implication is that socio-economic challenges can be overcome through spiritual enlightenment. Naming poverty as a result of spiritual deficiency shifts the discourse from structural inequality to personal religious understanding, reflecting a specific ideological stance within prosperity theology.

ix. "Generation that is looking for magic not for miracle, because miracle comes from God" (Text 9)

Father Mbaka's use of "magic" and "miracle" draws a stark dichotomy. "Magic" is associated with deception and shortcuts, while "miracle" is divine and authentic. The contrast critiques modern society's tendency to seek instant solutions without faith or effort. Labelling the current

generation as one that prefers "magic" indicates a spiritual and moral decline. This analysis implies that socio-political instability, corruption, or personal crises may stem from spiritual shallowness. Mbaka's statement is not merely spiritual admonition; it is a critique of contemporary culture's impatience and detachment from divine principles, suggesting that societal renewal begins with spiritual redirection.

x. "Nigeria may be a collapsing state, but those who want Nigeria's oil are feeding fat and doing pretty well" (Text 10)

Bishop Kukah names Nigeria directly as a "collapsing state," using a powerful metaphor to highlight national decay. The phrase conveys institutional failure, economic instability, and a weakening governance structure. In contrast, "those who want Nigeria's oil" represents internal and external exploiters thriving amid national suffering. The phrase "feeding fat" paints a picture of unethical profiteering. Kukah's juxtaposition underscores a socio-political divide between the ruling elite or foreign investors and the ordinary citizen. His critique focuses on resource exploitation, corruption, and inequity, pointing to the moral consequences of political mismanagement. The metaphor vividly illustrates the ethical imbalance and parasitic relationship within Nigeria's political economy.

3.0 Findings

and spiritual frames. By using language that aligns with their congregations, they place themselves as both spiritual leaders and socio-political commentators. Through the critical The findings align with recent scholarly arguments that religious spaces in Nigeria have increasingly become sites of civic engagement and political commentary (Adegoju & Adetunji, 2019; Ogunyemi, 2021; Akintunde & Opeibi, 2022). In Text 1, Pastor Adeboye's use of "no more rigging" directly names electoral malpractice, reinforcing public disillusionment with flawed democratic processes. This aligns with Odebunmi's (2020) assertion that the pulpit is often used to challenge governance failures and mobilize political awareness. The phrase, while brief, names a systemic issue and simultaneously signals a shift in the Church's rhetorical posture toward active political involvement.

Text 2 features Pastor Olukoya's metaphorical naming in "died like a fowl," which critiques the Nigerian state's disregard for human life. This naming encapsulates public despair over insecurity and poor governance, echoing Ukeje's (2022) findings that religious rhetoric in Nigeria increasingly reflects societal trauma. His further reference to "potential" as what died constructs a critique of lost national productivity, illustrating Jeffries' (2010) point that naming can reveal embedded ideologies.

In Text 3, Prophet Ogundipe challenges exploitative giving by naming "money" as central to misused religious expectations. This aligns with recent critiques by Ogunyemi (2021), who found that sermons in urban Pentecostal settings increasingly call for financial prudence amid economic hardship. Naming here challenges existing norms, repositioning the Church as a place of personal accountability rather than ritualized sacrifice.

Text 4 uses repetition of "defend the Church" to build an ideological narrative of religious persecution. Naming the Church as an embattled institution reflects what Ibrahim (2021) calls the "spiritualization of civic duty," where pastors encourage congregants to perceive religious identity as under attack, often as a proxy for broader societal threats.

In Text 5, Bishop Ikeakor's listing of religious titles such as "bishop," "reverend," and "super-apostle" becomes a critique of poor leadership, mirroring Eze's (2023) observation that both religious and political spaces in Nigeria are saturated with title inflation and leadership without accountability. Naming in this sermon serves to delegitimize empty credentials and redirect authority to ethical standards.

In Text 6, Apostle Helen Ukpabio equates "church" with "native doctors," destabilizing institutional religious authority. Her naming strategy critiques the commercialization of spirituality, consistent with Idowu's (2022) study, which documents increasing public dissatisfaction with transactional religion. Her repetition of "the same thing" condemns spiritual malpractice and implicates both traditional and modern religious agents in systemic exploitation.

Text 7 names "lives and destinies" as casualties of delayed

intervention, pointing to governmental and community inaction. This complements Ekanem's (2022) work, which highlights how religious rhetoric frames public-sector failure as a moral concern. The naming personalises the problem, making institutional negligence a spiritual and societal indictment.

In Text 8, the naming of "God's financial system" constructs a counter-narrative to economic hardship. This reflects the theological reframing noted by Ojo and Adebanjo (2021), where spiritual paradigms are employed to instill hope amid pervasive poverty. However, this naming risks individualizing socio-economic struggles, thus diverting attention from structural issues.

Text 9's contrast between "magic" and "miracle" critiques societal impatience and superficial faith. Father Mbaka's naming strategy reflects societal discontent with rapid success culture—a theme also observed in Akinade (2020), who warns that the craving for instant gratification mirrors political corruption and spiritual immaturity.

Finally, Text 10 employs the phrase "collapsing state" and "feeding fat" to name Nigeria's decline and elite exploitation. Bishop Kukah's imagery aligns with Nwosu's (2023) discourse analysis, which demonstrates how clergy use evocative language to awaken moral consciousness and hold political actors accountable. His naming paints a stark picture of national decay, but also locates blame in both internal and external systems of greed.

In sum, these findings reinforce Jeffries' (2010) claim that naming and describing is a powerful linguistic tool for encoding ideology. Recent scholarship confirms that Nigerian preachers are increasingly assuming prophetic roles, using sermons not only to teach doctrine but also to confront injustice, reframe societal values, and empower civic action. Through strategic naming, these pastors construct potent counter-narratives that challenge systemic oppression and promote accountability.

4.0 Conclusion

These pastors utilise a blend of personal, symbolic and direct language to engage their audiences in socio-political discourse. Their use of nouns, noun phrases, pronouns, and metaphors serves to personalise national issues. They frame socio-political struggles within spiritual narratives and challenge systems of inequality and corruption. Their sermons often critique societal leaders, power structures and cultural practices through religious stylistic of naming and describing, they call for societal reform through spiritual revival and divine intervention. The commonality in their discourse lies in their use of language to simplify complex socio-political realities into moral and spiritual battles.

5.0 Recommendations for Further Studies

This study is not a conclusive one, and it therefore, recommended that future researchers should conduct a comparative study of socio-political discourse in sermons from pastors in different African countries such as Ghana, Kenya or South Africa to explore similarities and differences in the use of rhetorical devices and ideological themes. This is because it will provide a broader understanding of how religious discourse influences socio-political thought and identity across different cultural and national contexts within Africa, expanding the findings beyond Nigeria.

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