

Original Research Article

Digital Pentecostalism: A Corpus-Based Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Christian Sermons on YouTube and Instagram

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Abstract: This study is a corpus-based lexico-semantic analysis of digital Pentecostal sermons mainly from YouTube and Instagram. It investigates how Pentecostal preachers use lexical items and semantic fields to establish their spiritual authority, mobilise influence, and negotiate faith identity within the platforms. The study relies on Corpus Linguistics, Lexical Semantics, and Digital Discourse Analysis, for the analysis of word frequencies, their collocational patterns, keyness, and semantic domains. Emphasis is given to how the YouTube long-form video and Instagram short-form reel shape lexical density, semantic compression, and the recurrence of key words such as 'breakthrough', 'anointing', 'fire', 'dominion', 'favour', and 'destiny'. The analysis also locates the sermons in the wider socio-religious context of contemporary Pentecostalism, by highlighting how digital intervention rearranges religious discourse into short, quotable, algorithm-friendly units of belief. The findings reveal that digital Pentecostal discourse is summarily condensed into a noticeable lexicon of not just prosperity, but spiritual warfare accompanied with miracle. The semantic patterns vary systematically between the two platforms reflecting their communicative logics. The study submits that corpus-based lexico-semantic approach provides a route for the understanding the way digital Pentecostalism is linguistically constructed and circulated.

Keywords: Digital Pentecostalism, Corpus Linguistics, Lexico-Semantic Analysis, Sermons, YouTube, Instagram.

INTRODUCTION

Religious activities in the 21st century is increasingly being mediated through digital platforms. It is generally observed that Pentecostal Christianity occupies a leading position this transformation. In recent times, several pentecostal preachers rely on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram to deliver sermons alongside with the use of the pulpit. This is done through the use of Instagram reels, live-streams, and short devotional clips. This shift carries some consequences for language especially as sermons must be designed for audiences who may scroll, skip, replay, or share, often for an algorithm that rewards brevity, repetition, and emotional intensity. Language, in this type of setting, is considered not just as a vehicle for doctrine, but a primary resource through which spiritual authority, community alignment, and religious identity are digitally constructed.

Out of the various linguistic resources drawn upon in digital Pentecostal sermons, particular lexical choice and semantic patterning are clearly indexed. Recurrent vocabularies and collocations such as 'breakthrough', 'anointing oil', 'Holy Ghost fire', 'divine favour', 'dominion', 'covenant keeper', and 'destiny helper', have formed a distinctive vocabulary that manifest Pentecostal belief and serve as markers for in-group membership. The various collocates, semantic prosodies, and distribution across such platforms provide some empirical evidences about how digital Pentecostalism is lexically structured. In Corpus Linguistics, these patterns are better examined systematically across larger samples of naturally occurring texts, instead of through anecdotes of reading of isolated sermons (Sinclair, 1991; Baker, 2006).

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This study is therefore a corpus-based lexico-semantic investigation of selected Pentecostal sermons on YouTube and Instagram platforms. The investigation seeks to explore how lexical frequency, collocation, keyness, and semantic domains construct how discourse unfolds in digital Pentecostalism, and how such platforms shape these patterns. Through a combination of corpus methods and lexical semantic analysis and some insights from digital religious discourse, the study aims to add to the ongoing scholarly conversations around language, religion, and mediation in the African and global Pentecostal universes of discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly studies on Pentecostalism, digital religion, and corpus-based discourse analysis provides the background for this study. Scholars have severally argued that Pentecostal language has a distinctive, performative, and highly patterned character, and that its recent migration to digital platforms reorganises not only its production but also its reception. When subjected to corpus linguistic tools and examination, Pentecostal language reveals some systematically deployed lexical and semantic features in its inventory.

Sinclair (1991; Aboh & Uduk 2017) argue that meaning in language is fundamentally patterned and that lexical items are best understood through their co-occurrence with other items. Sinclair's (1991) idiom principle anchors the study of the collocations and the semantic prosodies used in the analysis. When this is applied to Pentecostal sermons, this perspective reveals that words like 'breakthrough' or 'anointing' do not hang alone but they often attract predictable partners such as 'financial breakthrough', 'fresh anointing' and they often carry some levels of theological and emotional weight.

Baker (2006) develops specific corpus methods for doing discourse analysis by emphasizing that keyness, frequency lists, and collocational networks often expose ideological patterning in large text collections. This framework is found to be directly relevant to our digital sermon corpora because it enables the researchers to compare the sub-corpora, in this case, YouTube versus Instagram sermons, and also to identify those lexical items that most sharply differentiate between them. Keyness analysis specifically provides a systematic way to identify the vocabulary that is most characteristic of digital Pentecostal discourse.

Stubbs (2001) in his study, foregrounds the study of words and phrases as transmitters of cultural meaning, by revealing that recurrent lexical patterns encode shared evaluations and worldviews. This view of semantic prosody explains why particular Pentecostal keywords frequently attract positive or negative evaluative environments. The term 'favour' typically collocates with 'divine agency and abundance', while 'enemy' often collocates with 'defeat', 'shame', and 'spiritual warfare'. Such prosodies constitute some lexicalized Christian theology.

Coleman (2000) proposes a foundational sociological framework for the account of the globalisation of charismatic Christianity, by stressing the centrality of language, particularly the language of prosperity, faith, and blessing, in constructing transnational Pentecostal identity. This study lends credence to the interpretation of lexical patterns in digital sermons as elements of a globally recognisable Pentecostal register which transcends platforms and borders.

Meyer (2010) studies Pentecostal media practices in Africa and contends that Pentecostalism has long been shaped by an aesthetics of mediation in which sound, image, and spoken word are co-constitutes of religious experience. This framework locates digital sermon within the ecology of a longer trajectory of Pentecostal media innovation, ranging from use of cassette tapes or video CD plates to satellite television and social media. Language, in this trajectory, is continually reshaped and retooled for the new media space.

Campbell (2012) provides the concept of digital religion, where she argues that religious practice online is not just an ordinary extension of offline practice but a separate social and communicative form. This framework stresses how platform designs, algorithms, and user practices reposition religious discourse. When this is applied to digital Pentecostal discourse, it attracts attention to how YouTube and Instagram, despite their different affordances of length, image, and interactivity, generate various lexical and semantic patterns in sermons.

Hutchings (2017) analysis online Christian messages and discovers that digital sermons and devotionals most times feature condensed, quotable, and shareable formulations. This observation is potent enough for the present study because it predicts that Instagram sermons, constrained by short video formats, will tend to display higher lexical density and greater reliance on formulaic phrases than the YouTube sermons.

Scholarship in Pentecostal language use in Africa beginning to tilt more closely to lexicon and metaphor. Chilwa (2012) examines the discourse of Nigerian Pentecostal websites and demonstrates how lexical items like 'miracle', 'breakthrough', and 'deliverance' construct online religious identity. Adedun and Mekiliwa (2010) analyse sermons of Nigerian Pentecostal preachers and note some distinctive vocabulary related to empowerment and prosperity. Ihejirika

(2019) investigates Pentecostal broadcasting networks in Nigeria and emphasises how radio and television sermons demonstrate some identifiable lexical style that is currently migrating into the social media environment.

Recent scholarly investigations have focused on the interface between Pentecostalism and social media. Asamoah-Gyadu (2020) contends that African Pentecostal preachers rely on YouTube and Facebook to project charisma and to broaden their transnational congregations, through the deployment of keyword-rich language of anointing and dominion. Ojebode and Adegoke (2022) analyse Instagram devotionals in Nigeria and reveal how short reels condense specific Pentecostal themes into popular slogan-like formulations targeted for sharing. Ukah (2023) investigates the political economy of digital Pentecostalism and posits that certain lexical choices in online sermons consistently align with the commercial logic of platform visibility, thereby demonstrating some degree of emotionally charged and repetitive vocabulary.

On the whole, this body of scholarship demonstrates that Pentecostal discourse manifests a distinctive lexicon, whose digital forms are shaped by platform affordances, within which corpus methods are well favoured to exposing its patterning. Even though most existing studies rely on qualitative readings of individual sermons or on general accounts of digital religion, relatively few offer a sustained corpus-based lexico-semantic comparison of sermons across online platforms. This study seeks to fill this existing gap by drawing on the resources of Corpus Linguistics, Lexical Semantics, and Digital Discourse Analysis to examine Pentecostal sermons on YouTube and Instagram.

Theoretical Framework

Three complementary theoretical strands underpin this study: Corpus Linguistics (CL), Lexical Semantics (LS), and Digital Discourse Analysis (DDA). These three frameworks account for the analytical tools required for the investigation of how lexical and semantic patterns both constitute digital Pentecostal sermons on YouTube and Instagram.

Sinclair's (1991) and Baker's (2006) view of corpus linguistics hold that linguistic meaning is fundamentally categorized and that these categorizations can better be observed in large collections of naturally occurring text. Key techniques include frequency analysis, concordancing, collocation, keyness, and cluster analysis. When applied to Pentecostal sermons, such techniques allow the investigator to identify which words are most characteristic of the discourse, which lexical partners they attract, and how their distribution differs across sub-corpora.

Lexical Semantics, in the view of Stubbs (2001) and Cruse (2011), examines the meanings of words and the relations that exists among them in terms of synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, semantic fields, and semantic prosody. This view provides the conceptual framework for grouping the identified Pentecostal keywords into coherent semantic domains such as 'spiritual warfare' ('fire', 'enemy', 'battle', 'victory', etc.), 'prosperity' ('breakthrough', 'favour', 'wealth', 'abundance'), 'embodiment' ('hand', 'head', 'blood', 'touch'), and 'covenant' ('promise', 'covenant', 'oath', 'faithful', etc.). This mapping provides the interpretation of frequency and data collocation in a theologically meaningful term.

The views of Campbell (2012) and Jones, Chik and Hafner (2015) on Digital Discourse Analysis, reveal that language in digital environments is shaped by the availability of platforms, including format constraints, algorithmic updates, and user practices like sharing and commenting. It maintains that a particular lexical item may function differently in a long YouTube sermon and a short Instagram reel because the communicative situation may be different. This framework guides the platform-comparative dimension of the study.

The idea of integrating these frameworks is supported by Baker's (2006) methodology for corpus-based discourse analysis and by Hutchings' (2017) study on condensed religious language online. Baker offers a systematic procedure for migrating from frequency to interpretation, while Hutchings provides a rationale for expecting distinct lexico-semantic profiles across platforms. These frameworks, together, enables the researcher to analyse digital Pentecostal sermons as sites where lexicon, semantics, and platform architecture combine to produce meaning in texts.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a combined method research design anchored in corpus linguistics together with qualitative discourse-analytic interpretation. The data consist of a purpose-built corpus of Pentecostal sermons sourced from YouTube videos and Instagram reels of specific Pentecostal preachers. The sermons were purposively selected in order to ensure a balance between the two platforms, covering both male and female preachers, and also, the inclusion of both African and diaspora ministries. The YouTube sermons were sampled from full-length messages, while Instagram sermons were sampled from reels and IGTV-style clips running within a range of 30 seconds to 3 minutes.

The procedure for analysis combines standard corpus techniques with lexico-semantic interpretation. At first, frequency lists and keyword lists were drawn up for the whole corpus and for the YouTube and Instagram sub-corpora using established corpus tools. Keyness was computed by comparing each sub-corpus with a general reference corpus of

contemporary English for the purpose of isolating the vocabulary most characteristic of digital Pentecostal sermons. Next, the high-frequency and high-keyness terms were subjected to collocational and concordance analysis so as to reveal the recurring lexical partners and semantic prosodies. The third stage is where the identified keywords were grouped into their various semantic domains such as 'spiritual warfare', 'prosperity', 'embodiment', 'covenant', and 'destiny', and their occurrences across various platforms was examined.

Insights from Digital Discourse Analysis further guided the analysis. Particular attention was given to how platform affordances, video length, captioning, and hashtag use, correlate with lexical density, predictable patterns, and semantic compression. The secondary sources, such as scholarly works on Pentecostalism, digital religion, and African Christianity, were consulted in order to strengthen specific contextual interpretations. Combining these approaches allows the methodology to a nuanced examination of the way digital Pentecostal sermons are lexico-semantically organised and delivered to consumers on YouTube and Instagram.

DISCUSSIONS

To a very large extent, digital Pentecostal sermons on both YouTube and Instagram are constituted through a dense and identifiable lexicon common to preachers, ministries, and national contexts. These lexical patterns do not just add colour to religious rhetoric; but they also encode theological assumptions about divine power, human needs and struggles, and the divine paths for the manifestation of blessings. When subjected to corpus examination, they reveal a discourse that is quite stable in its core vocabulary and also responsive to the affordances of each of the platforms (Sinclair, 1991; Baker, 2006).

In terms of keyness, the analysis reveals minor set of items which dominates the digital Pentecostal corpus, including items such as 'God', 'Holy Father', 'Jesus', 'Son', 'Holy Spirit', 'anointing', 'breakthrough', 'favour', 'fire', 'dominion', 'destiny', 'covenant', 'blood', 'glory', 'testimony', and 'manifest'. Most of such items are rare or non-salient in general reference corpora of contemporary English, which goes to prove that digital Pentecostalism operates within a specialised type of register. Such register operates as a lexical carrier of identity and by hearing or reading these words, they immediately signal that a certain individual is a member of Pentecostal discursive universe (Stubbs, 2001; Coleman, 2000).

The way the keyword 'breakthrough' collocates with other words in the analysis illustrates how meaning is constructed through lexical partnership. Within the corpus, 'breakthrough' often collocates with lexical items such 'financial', 'sudden', 'divine', 'supernatural', 'marital', and 'long-awaited'. Such collocations position the term 'breakthrough' as an experience that is both material and supernatural, something expected though delayed, which will ultimately be delivered through divine intervention. The semantic prosody of 'breakthrough' is predominantly positive and future-oriented, and it resonates as a lexical anchor of prosperity theology in digital form (Sinclair, 1991; Chilwa, 2012).

The term 'anointing' is another lexeme that displays a comparably high collocational presence. It collocates with words such as 'fresh', 'divine', 'heavenly', 'double', 'prophetic', 'apostolic', 'mantle', 'flow', carry, etc. Such lexical items construct 'anointing' as something transferable, renewable, and hierarchically transmitted substance flowing from God to anointed leaders and then to followers. The metaphorical entailment of the term 'anointing' as a quasi-material substance is further reinforced by its frequent co-occurrence with some verbs of transmission such as, 'receive', 'release', 'impart', 'activate', which goes on to produce a lexicalised theology of spiritual empowerment (Meyer, 2010; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2020).

Vocabulary of spiritual warfare also constitute a densely populated semantic domain in the corpus. Such items as 'attack', 'protection', 'fire', 'enemy', 'battle', 'arrow', 'altar', 'blood', and 'destroy' recur frequently, mostly in the prayer segments of the sermons. Also, concordance lines display some levels of recurrent formulations like 'every arrow of the enemy', 'back to sender' and 'by fire, by force', and they often function as easy prayer formulas. Their semantic prosody tend to be oppositional and combative, constructing the spiritual domain as a battle ground in which the believer is constantly involved in (Baker, 2006; Ihejirika, 2019).

The prosperity domain is often indexed by 'favour', 'transformation', 'wealth', 'abundance', 'increase', 'upgrade', 'elevation', 'promotion', 'relocation', 'higher ground', etc. Such lexemes appear prominently and they often overlap with the semantic field of destiny such as, 'purpose', 'calling', 'assignment', 'next level', etc. such collocational patterns demonstrate that prosperity items most times cluster with certain temporal markers such as, 'soon', 'this year', 'this month', 'this season', thereby producing a discourse of available, imminent, and datable divine action. This temporal projection is of theological significance because it constructs blessing as something that is certain and immediate (Coleman, 2000; Ukah, 2023).

Embodiment vocabulary such as, 'face', 'leg', 'hand', 'head', 'blood', 'touch', 'body', 'womb', 'voice', etc., appear predominantly in both sub-corpora although with different operations. In the YouTube sermons, such embodiment terms typically manifest in long teachings about healing, deliverance, and consecration. Meanwhile, in the Instagram reels, the same terms are concentrated in short declarative prayers, like 'the Hand of God is upon you', which function as portable blessings suited to sharing. The corpus thus reveals how the same lexico-semantic item is repositioned for separate communicative purposes (Hutchings, 2017; Campbell, 2012).

Certain covenant lexical items, such as 'covenant', 'promise', 'oath', 'faithful', 'altar', 'seed', and sacrifice', connects the discourse to biblical intertextuality. The concordance lines reveal that such items often occur in stretches of sermon that reference Old Testament figures or New Testament promises, which often reflect financial obligations regarding tithes, offerings, and seed-sowing. The semantic prosody of such covenant language is that of a binding reciprocity: 'God is faithful to His promises', and 'believers are enjoined to act faithfully in return', often through 'material giving' (Stubbs, 2001; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2020).

A comparison of the platforms reveals a systematically significant differences between YouTube and Instagram sub-corpora. For example, the YouTube sermons show, not just lower lexical density, but higher extensive narrative patterns with broader semantic range, inclusive of exegetical vocabulary such as 'Old Testament', 'New Testament', 'commandment', 'verse', 'chapter', 'context', 'meaning', 'Greek', 'Hebrew', etc. The Instagram sermons, contrastively, display higher lexical density, greater predictability, and a much narrower semantic range full of declarative prayer and prophetic pronouncement. Lexical items such as 'declare it', 'confess it', 'receive it', 'claim it', 'it is done', 'in Jesus' name' recur with a higher relative frequency on Instagram (Baker, 2006; Ojebode & Adegoke, 2022).

Also, discourse markers of interactivity differ across the two platforms. The YouTube sermons carry more of second-person plural address systems. For example, terms such as 'brothers and sisters', 'church', 'saints' 'believers', 'brethren' and more references to physical location such as, 'here in this auditorium', 'in this house', 'this congregation', etc. meanwhile, the Instagram sermons depend more heavily on singular second-person address, such as, 'you watching this', 'whoever is watching' etc., which goes to reflect the intimate, one-to-one framing nature of the reel. Such pronoun patterns reveal how the a preacher may lexically reconfigure the addressee in order to fit common platform practices (Jones, Chik & Hafner, 2015; Hutchings, 2017).

Formulaic language, such as 'in the name of Jesus', 'by the blood of Jesus', 'receive your breakthrough', 'the God of abundant prosperity', constitute a defining feature of the corpus and this aspect is particularly dense on Instagram. The formulas operate as portable, quotable units that eventually manifest as captions, comments, and re-shared clips on both platforms. Such high recurrence pattern lends support to the notion that digital Pentecostal language is optimised for online circulation, not just for pulpit delivery (Sinclair, 1991; Ukah, 2023).

The use of evaluative lexis and intensifiers such as, 'immortal', 'mighty', 'powerful', 'awesome', 'unstoppable' and superlatives like 'everlasting', 'greatest', 'highest', 'biggest', is pervasive across the corpus. The concordance analysis reveals that such items collocate majorly with divine elements and outcomes to produce some evaluative climate full of exuberant affirmation. On the other hand, the negatively loaded lexical items become restricted to the negative forces or spiritual adversaries. Terms such as 'enemy', 'devil', 'witchcraft', 'curse', 'destroyer' 'darkness', are used to produce a picture of an antagonizing force which is already marked from theological worldview (Stubbs, 2001; Chilwa, 2012).

To further deepen the significance of the lexical findings is the intertextual and multimodal dimensions of the texts. Several high-frequency phrases in the corpus are either drawn from or reflect certain biblical passages, gospel hymns, as well as some earlier Pentecostal broadcasts. For example, on Instagram, such phrases are often paired together with captions, hashtags, and background music in order to reinforce their semantic force. The lexical patterns in the corpus eventually become embedded into the wider multimodal ecology of digital Pentecostal discourse (Meyer, 2010; Campbell, 2012).

On the whole, this analysis suggests that both the YouTube and Instagram digital Pentecostal sermons are organised around a stable core lexicon within a set of recurrent semantic domains, and that the platform affordances shape the density, and the interactive framing of the lexicon. This pattern is not incidental from a corpus based lexico-semantic point of view because it is the linguistic infrastructure through which digital Pentecostalism is constructed, circulated, and consumed in this contemporary media space (Sinclair, 1991; Baker, 2006; Hutchings, 2017).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study presents the following key findings revealing how language operates as a resource for constructing digital Pentecostal discourse:

- i. Digital Pentecostal sermons are mainly dominated by a specialised lexicon which includes terms like ‘God’, ‘Jesus’, ‘Holy Spirit’, ‘anointing’, ‘breakthrough’, ‘favour’, ‘fire’, ‘dominion’, ‘destiny’, ‘covenant’, etc. Such lexical items serve as recognisable markers of Pentecostal identity across the two platforms.
- ii. The key lexical items exhibit consistent collocational patterns and positive semantic prosodies that lexicalise a theme of religious prosperity, spiritual empowerment, and imminent divine action.
- iii. Vocabulary items such as ‘back to sender’, ‘reject’, ‘fire’, ‘enemy’, ‘arrow’, ‘blood’, and ‘altar’, etc., suggest spiritual warfare and they are highly patterned and they operate as portable prayer formulas that recur across various preachers and the two platforms.
- iv. The YouTube sermons display lower lexical density with a broader semantic range, which include exegetical vocabulary. The Instagram sermons reveal higher lexical density, with stronger formulaicity, and a much narrower semantic range dominated by declarative prayer and prophetic declarations.
- v. Pronominal and interactive patterns differ across the two platforms. While YouTube favours collective address forms, Instagram favours intimate second-person singular address forms, which mirror the communicative logic of each of the platforms.
- vi. Evaluative and formulaic language is optimised for circulation online, thereby producing quotable units as well as an evaluative climate of exuberant affirmation that link digital Pentecostal discourse to the sharing and visibility practices of social media.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital Pentecostal sermons on both YouTube and Instagram are constructed through a distinctive and highly patterned lexico-semantic design. A core vocabulary of divine agency such as, ‘anointing’, ‘divine intervention’, ‘breakthrough’, ‘spiritual warfare’, ‘covenant’, ‘blood of Jesus’, ‘destiny’, etc., anchors the discourse. Collocation and semantic prosody bind these terms into coherent theological lexicon.

It is noted that it is platform affordances that shape how this vocabulary is deployed on the two platforms. While YouTube supports extended teaching and exegetical range, Instagram condenses the same theological repertoire into a saturated, formulaic, and shareable units. When viewed together, these patterns position digital Pentecostalism as a linguistically constructed phenomenon where meaning, affect, and identity are constructed by way of carefully structured lexical choices.

From Corpus Linguistics perspective, Lexical Semantics, as well as, Digital Discourse Analysis, the findings of this study underscore that online religious discourse is not transparent or incidental, it is but an organised system prepared for both spiritual and algorithmic circulation. A better understanding of contemporary Pentecostalism therefore calls for sustained attention focusing on such digital lexicons, with an understanding of how it is preached, shared, and lived.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study therefore recommends the following, based on the findings, for scholars, religious leaders, media practitioners, and digital literacy educators who are concerned with religion and language online:

1. Religion and language scholars should adopt corpus-based approaches so as to complement qualitative readings of sermons. This will help to unfold the systematic lexical and semantic patterns that shape contemporary religious discourse.
2. Researchers should expand corpus- based studies of religious language. More research should be carried out on digital religious discourses in Nigerian languages like Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo and Jukun for the purpose of documentation of how indigenous semantics interacts with the universal Pentecostal lexicon.
3. Linguists should build and sustain an annotated corpus on Nigerian Pentecostal sermons from social media platforms. This will enhance more studies in religious discourse, pragmatics, as well as, computational linguistics.
4. From a multimodal perspective, it is recommended that further studies should investigate how lexico-semantic choices interact with visuals, music, captions, and emojis on Youtube and Instagram so as to create meaning in digital Pentecostalism.
5. Digital Religious Discourse should be included in the linguistic curriculum. Departments of English and linguistics should develop courses and modules on Language and New Media and Religious Discourse aimed at training students in analyzing digital texts using corpus linguistic tools.
6. Digital literacy programmes based on faith communities should introduce critical language awareness lessons to help believers to understand how lexical repetition, formulas, and evaluative framing operate in the online sermons they consume and share with others.

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