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Analysis of Semantic Fields in Gĩkũyũ Church Sermons in Nyeri County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The notion of semantic field is a structural model for lexical semantics which is attributed to Jost Trier in the Semantic Field Theory. The semantic field is an indispensable part of any language since without it information may not be conveyed appropriately. To find the best way to help people comprehend semantic fields, and especially the domain of church sermons, is an issue which requires research to crystallize. However, studies conducted on semantic fields and their implications on the comprehension of church sermons remains scanty. It is against this background that the study analyses the semantic fields in Gĩkũyũ church sermons in Nyeri County, Kenya. The study employed a descriptive survey design and targeted live sermons delivered in 84 parishes of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Nyeri County, Kenya. Eight live sermons were purposively sampled. The data was collected through tape recording. A lexical semanticist was also interviewed. Content data analysis was used to analyse the semantic fields in Gĩkũyũ church sermons. Data is presented in tables in which Gĩkũyũ semantic fields used in the sermons are listed and their gloss provided. The semantic fields identified are subjected to further analyses based on the tangibility and non-tangibility criteria. The study found that semantic fields are elaborately utilized in Gĩkũyũ church sermons. Based on the semantic field analyses, the following implications for the study are noted: (i) there is merit of an extensive theoretical overview of semantic fields of church sermons (previously subject to cursory treatment), (ii) there are methodological consequences for the study of semantic fields addressing church sermons, (iii) the ability to use semantic fields correctly and appropriately is an important part of linguistic competence, and (iv) it is easier for vocabulary items that belong to the same semantic field to be understood since they will be able to form a pattern of interrelated words in a person's mind. The study concludes that, *inter alia*, the broad semantic fields are based on the key issues addressed by the sermons, that is, challenges and sins, which are believed to be part and parcel of a Christian life. The study recommends that further research on semantic fields be conducted on other items of the church service like songs and prayers.

Keywords: Church Sermons, Gĩkũyũ, Nyeri County, Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Semantic Fields.

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1. Introduction

The vocabulary of a language is essentially a dynamic and well-integrated system of lexemes structured by relationships of meaning (Boran, 2018; Jackson & Amvela, 2000). Crystal (1995) defines a lexeme or a lexical item as “a unit of lexical meaning, which exists regardless of any inflectional endings it may have or a number of words it may contain” (p.138). Similarly, Allen (2002) argues that “lexemes can be regarded as groupings of one or more word forms, which are individuated by their roots and for derivational affixes” (p. 269). Hence, the use of the term “vocabulary” or “word” has general common sense validity and is serviceable when there is no real need to be precise”.

The study of lexemes and their groupings are appropriately studied in the Semantic Field Theory. The basis of the Semantic Field Theory is strongly influenced by Saussurean structuralism’s point of view of language. Following the Saussurean view other scholars tried to organize this theory in a more structured way (Kleparski & Rusinek, 2007). The Semantic Field Theory employed in this study is attributed to the German Scholar Jost Trier whose version is seen as a new phase in the history of semantics. The Semantic Field Theory is a theory of the study of word-meanings which stresses the way such meanings are related within a particular area of the vocabulary. Each of these areas is called a semantic field (Saeed, 1997; Trask, 1997).

According to Trier, semantic fields are conceptual regions shared out amongst a number of words. A semantic field can also be called a lexical field domain. A lexical field domain refers to the combination of a bunch of words with interrelated meanings and dominated under the same concept (Zhou, 2001). Other definitions for a semantic field include: first, Bolin (2005) defines a semantic field as a group of words with related but not identical meanings that describe or pertain to one domain or semantic area; second, a semantic field denotes a segment of reality symbolized by a set of related words which share a common semantic property (Briton, 2000).

According to Wu (1998), the Trier’s Semantic Field Theory can be summarized in a number of ways. First, the vocabulary in a language system is semantically related and builds up a lexical system. Second, the system is unsteady and changes in a consistent manner. Third, since the lexis of a language is semantically related, we are not supposed to study the semantic change of individual words in isolation but to study vocabulary as an integrated system. Wu adds that, since lexemes are interrelated in sense, we need to determine the connotation of a word by analyzing and comparing its semantic relationship with other words and that a word is meaningful only in its own semantic field.

Various studies have also employed semantic fields in different domains. Kleparski and Rusinek (2007), for example, investigate the effect of semantic field of words on their change over time. There are also some studies based on the Porzig’s view of semantic field. Schmitt (1999), for example, develops a research to assess the vocabulary part of the TOEFL test. Schmitt scrutinizes how deeply the questions in this test, are understood regarding the “association, collocation and word class knowledge” (p. 189).

The study found the lack of ability of the TOEFL test to help learners reach the deeper level of comprehending the words under question in the test. In another study, Chonghong (2010) investigates the contribution of the Semantic Field Theory in vocabulary instruction. Chonghong employs some techniques to assess vocabulary acquisition in terms of collocation and metaphors. He would describe the results as follows: The study is of pedagogical significance in that it helps to enlarge learners’ vocabulary by constructing paradigmatic relations of new items and to deepen learners’ mastery of vocabulary, mainly connotation and collocation, by constructing syntagmatic relations of the new items (p. 50). Mei (1987) also notes that the main aim of the Semantic Field Theory is to analyze the relationship between genus and species of lexical study. Mei, therefore, suggests that the words of a language system are related with each other and form a complete lexical system.

The proponents of the Semantic Field Theory argue that the theory is in compliance with brain theories which suggest that there is a good organization of semantic fields in the human brain (Aitchison, 1994; Rogers, 1996). That is, the Semantic Field Theory discourages the conceptualization of a lexicon as a mere aggregation of idiosyncratic items (Kittay & Lehrer, 1992). Changhong (2010), for instance, argues that the Semantic Field Theory is of pedagogical significance in that it helps to enlarge learners’ vocabulary by constructing paradigmatic relations of new items and deepens learners’ mastery of vocabulary; mainly connotation and collocation, by constructing syntagmatic relations of the new items.

It is, therefore, feasible to enlarge vocabulary gradually and deepen the understanding of vocabulary items on the basis of semantic fields. Therefore, the Semantic Field Theory is a general guide for research in descriptive semantics, and undoubtedly increases our understanding of the ways the lexemes of language are interrelated in sense.

The present study analyses semantic fields in church sermons in Gĩkũyũ. The study focuses on Gĩkũyũ because, according to Finke (2003), majority of Agĩkũyũ nowadays consider themselves to be Christians. In addition, Christianity among the Agĩkũyũ is a century old and there have been many Kikuyu Christians from the onset (Lonsdale, 2015). Moreover, Gĩkũyũ is a growing language spoken as a first language by 6.6 million people in Kenya and its speakers constitute one of the largest linguistic groups in Kenya (National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). In recent years, Gĩkũyũ has spread into other parts of Kenya and although it does not have official status in Kenya, it plays an important role being spoken as a first language by the Agĩkũyũ. Gĩkũyũ is also being learned as a second or third language by non-kikuyus and is also taught in schools, used in news media, radio programmes, TVs, videos and cinema.

Generally, the reviewed studies have informed the present study in terms of the structure, theory and methodology. However, they have not discussed in details the best way to help people comprehend semantic fields, and especially the domain of church sermons, which is an issue that requires research to crystallize. In addition, studies conducted on semantic fields and their implications on the comprehension of church sermons remains scanty. These are some of the research gaps that the present study addresses. In the next sections, the study looks at the methodology, findings and discussion, conclusions and policy implications, and recommendations.

2. Methodology of the study

The study employs a descriptive survey design. A descriptive survey research allows the study to focus on people, their opinions, attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and motivations (Kerlinger, 1993). A descriptive research design is applicable to the current study as data collected was in the form of oral words, that is, semantic fields uttered during the delivery of Gĩkũyũ church sermons. The descriptive research design also allows generalization of the data collected from the sample to a wider representation of the population. The study involved the researchers attending church services in order to collect data through tape recording.

A lexical semanticist was also interviewed on the following research questions: “(i) What should the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Nyeri County do to promote Gĩkũyũ church sermons; (ii) What is the role of the government and linguists in the promotion of Gĩkũyũ church sermons; and (iii) Should teachers enlighten learners on semantic fields in Gĩkũyũ?” The data collected was classified and analysed. A total of eight live sermons were sampled through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a selection method where the investigator relies on his / her expertise or expert judgment to select units that are representative or typical of the population (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Purposive sampling also enables the researcher to select cases that are available for the research. Moreover, purposive sampling helps the researcher to select respondents that can best help them to understand their central phenomenon (Cresswell, 2012).

Therefore, the researcher in the current study purposively sampled 10% of the sermons delivered in the 84 parishes of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Mt. Kenya Region, Nyeri County. 10 % was used because Neuman (2003) indicates that 10% - 20% is an adequate sample in a descriptive study.

The study utilized a tape recorder to collect data. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), tape recording is an instrument in which the interviewer’s questions and the respondent’s answers are recorded by using either a tape recorder or a video recorder.

This study used a tape recorder as it involves collecting data from live performances which are not easily recorded by note taking. Rapley (2007) recommends tape recording as an important research instrument in qualitative research as he posits that “the actual process of making detailed transcripts enables you to become familiar with what you are observing. You have to listen / watch the recording again and again...” (p.50).

Data was tape recorded and then the researcher played the tape for transcription purposes which allowed the identification of semantic fields before subjecting the data for analysis. Content

analysis was employed to analyse the use of semantic fields in the delivery of church sermons. Kerlinger (1986) defines content analysis as a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. Data analysed qualitatively is presented by verbal descriptions and explanations. The semantic fields are identified and explained. The semantic fields collected are presented in Gĩkũyũ orthography and their gloss provided.

3. Findings and discussion

The study sought to analyse the semantic fields employed in Gĩkũyũ church sermons. The tape recorded eight sermons are used to investigate the semantic fields employed in Gĩkũyũ church sermons as discussed below:

Table 1: Semantic fields in gĩkũyũ church sermons

| S/No | Semantic Field | Gloss | No. of Lexical Items |
|------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Mũndũ | Person | 15 |
| 2 | Shaitani | Satan | 3 |
| 3 | Mehia | Sins | 10 |
| 4 | Mathĩna | Challenges | 9 |
| 5 | Dini | Religion | 8 |
| 6 | Kanitha | Church | 5 |
| 7 | Cĩga | Organs | 5 |
| 8 | Ukristũ | Christianity | 13 |
| 9 | Nyamũ | Animals | 3 |
| 10 | Mahinda | Time | 8 |
| 11 | Nyũmba | Relation | 6 |
| 12 | Ngai | God | 4 |
| 13 | Meigwi | Feelings | 7 |
| 14 | Ndari | Numbers | 6 |
| 15 | Ibuku rĩa Ngai | Bible | 8 |
| 16 | Mũtĩ | Tree | 3 |
| 17 | Kĩama | Organisation | 4 |
| 18 | Irũngo | Position | 3 |
| 19 | Irio | Food | 5 |
| 20 | Mũtungatĩri | Pastor | 3 |
| 21 | Mũhĩrĩga | Clan | 6 |
| 22 | Rũrĩrĩ | Tribe | 5 |

Table 1 highlights the 22 semantic fields that were employed in the eight church sermons in the study. It is also evident from the table that some of these semantic fields are very broad for example, *mũndũ* (human being) and *ũkristũ* (Christianity) and *mehia* (sins) with 15, 13 and 10 lexical items in terms of lexical frequency respectively. This clearly shows that semantic fields are elaborately utilized in Gĩkũyũ church sermons. However, there are others that are quite limited, for example, *shaitani* (satan), *mũtĩ* (tree) among others which comprise only three lexical items.

The words in each of the semantic fields in this table share a semantic property, for example, *ngoro* (heart), *moko* (hands), *ciande* (shoulders), *magũrũ* (legs), and *maitho* (eyes) under the semantic field of *cĩga* (body parts), all share the same semantic property of the fact that they are all parts of a human body. This concurs with Boran's (2018) view that vocabulary of a language is organised into fields within which words interrelate and define each other in various ways. This also is in consonance with Lehrer's (1985) view that fields are often defined by subject matter such as body parts, landforms, diseases, colours, foods or kinship.

The semantic fields identified were subjected to a further analysis based on tangibility and non-tangibility criteria. Tangibility, on one hand, refers to the perceptibility by the senses especially the

sense of touch while non-tangibility, on the other hand, refers typically to something that cannot be touched (Rundell & Fox, 2009). This analysis is illustrated and presented in bar graphs as shown below:

Figure 1 above shows that 14 semantic fields used in Gĩkũyũ church sermons referred to tangible objects, that is, things that are in actual form and substance. For example, *nyamũ* (animals) and *nyũmba* (house) can be seen and touched. However, *nyũmba* (house), in Gĩkũyũ is also used to refer to relation as per the context in this study and is, therefore, under the tangibility concept. Of the semantic fields under the tangibility concept, *mũndũ* (human being) is the broadest with 15 lexical items. This implies the significance of human nature to the theme of religion. The semantic field *nyamũ* (animals) is the most limited with only 3 lexical items. This illustrates the minimal relationship between religion and animals. This is in agreement with Croucher, Zeng, Rahmani and Sommier’s (2018) view that religion is an essential element of the human condition. The finding is also consistent with Geertz’s view (1973) that religion is a “system which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men” (p. 90). However, this finding is in disagreement with Marx and Engels (1975) who view religion as a classic example of alienation, exploitation and domination. Figure 2 below highlights the semantic fields in Gĩkũyũ church sermons based on the non-tangibility criterion:

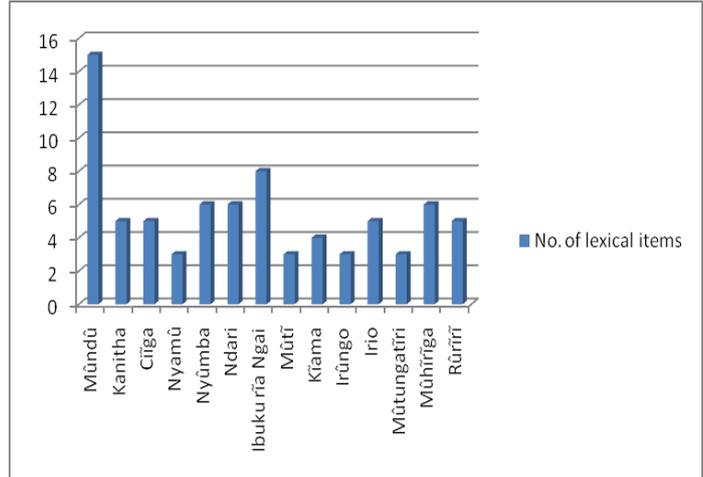


Figure 1: Semantic Fields Used in Gĩkũyũ Church Sermons Based on the Tangibility Criterion

Figure 2 shows that nine semantic fields used in Gĩkũyũ Church Sermons are categorized in the non-tangibility concept. *Mehia* (sins) and *mathĩna* (challenges) are the broadest with 10 and nine lexical items respectively. This illustrates the fact that sins and challenges are part and parcel of religion, the context under which the subject of the study, sermons, falls. Sermons are always geared towards fighting sins and encouraging Christians in being strong in order to overcome challenges in life. It is always clear in the sermons that human beings cannot evade sins and challenges and hence their high frequencies. This finding is in agreement with Okulate’s (2013) view that challenges come to different people in different ways and even though we may not determine the type of trial we will experience, we can always depend on God to overcome. Jordan (2011) also concurs with this that storms will come but they do not have to overcome us. Sermons also encourage Christians to resolve conflicts which are part of the challenges they face. However, this finding disagrees with Croucher, Zeng, Rahmani and Sommier (2018) who argue that religion is, nevertheless, commonly accepted as a potential escalating factor in conflicts. Currently, religious conflicts are on the rise, and they are typically more violent, long-lasting, and difficult to resolve.

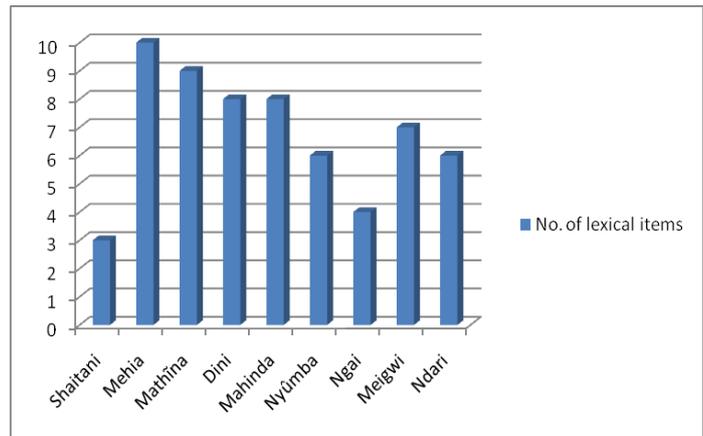


Figure 2: Semantic Fields in Gĩkũyũ Church Sermons Based on the Non-Tangibility Criterion

4. Conclusions and policy implications

The study identifies 22 semantic fields used in the eight Gĩkũyũ sermons in the study. The study, therefore, concludes that semantic fields are extensively used in Gĩkũyũ church sermons delivered in

Nyeri County, Kenya. The study also notes that some of the semantic fields analysed are quite broad while others are a bit limited. The study concludes that the broad semantic fields are based on the key issues addressed by the sermons, that is, challenges and sins, which are believed to be part and parcel of a Christian life. The study notes that the 14 semantic fields are based on the tangibility criterion while only nine are based on the non-tangibility criterion. The study, therefore, concludes that sermons mainly address tangible objects in a Christian's life. The semantic field of human beings is the broadest while that of animals is the narrowest. The study, therefore, concludes that there is minimal relationship between animals and religion, under which sermons fall. Sermons are intended for human beings not animals. The study also concludes that it is feasible to enlarge vocabulary gradually and deepen the understanding of vocabulary items on the basis of the Semantic Field theory. However, the issues discussed in church sermons may vary in level of generality, but they all have relevance to the congregation as they represent attempts by the preachers to simplify comprehension of the lexis by combining theory and application.

Based on the findings and discussion of the study of what may be considered a "neglected linguistic study of church sermons", the following implications for the study are noted: (i) there is merit of an extensive theoretical overview of semantic fields of church sermons (previously subject to only cursory treatment) for future semantic analysis, (ii) there is methodological consequences for the study of semantic fields addressing church sermons, (iii) the ability to use semantic fields correctly and appropriately is an important part of linguistic competence, and (iv) it is easier for vocabulary items that belong to the same semantic field to be understood since they will be able to form a pattern of interrelated words in a person's mind.

5. Recommendations

From the interview conducted with the lexical semanticist, the study makes several recommendations. First, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Nyeri County should be encouraged to use Gĩkũyũ in their church sermons as well as in the other items of the church service programme, for example, songs and prayers. This will go a long way in promoting Gĩkũyũ among young children and the youth. The lexical semanticist argued that this will "equip Gĩkũyũ speakers with a good command of the language which will enable them to explore the semantic fields in Gĩkũyũ intensively". Second, the government and linguists should come up with programmes that will promote Gĩkũyũ. For example, the learning of Gĩkũyũ and other indigenous languages should be emphasized in schools to make the speakers of different indigenous languages more conversant with all the spheres and usage of their languages. Lastly, teachers should be encouraged to enlighten learners on matters regarding semantic fields in indigenous languages. This will help foster confidence in the learners with regard to their own languages. This will in turn encourage the learners to recognize and appreciate the similarities and differences in their language structures and that of other languages; hence, encourage more scholarship in Gĩkũyũ.

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