

# A Speech Act Analysis of Selected Christian Hymns

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***Abstract-*** *This paper focuses on the use of hymns to convey religious messages aimed at making the consumers take the actions communicated by the composers. Many of the hymn consumers seem to pay more attention to their lyrics and rhythms than to the messages and the actions required of them by the composers. Though the hymns can be analyzed using other theories of language, this paper sets to apply John Searle's Speech Acts theory as the theoretical and analytical frameworks to the analysis of the selected hymns so as to enable a better understanding of the actions communicated by their wordings. Using deliberate sampling, the researchers chose five hymns that exemplify the use of different speech acts in hymns from five popular Christian hymn books available in this part of the world. It was discovered that assertives, commissives, directives, expressives and declaratives all feature in the selected hymns and that the wordings of the hymns fit their communicative intents. It concludes that hymns not only enliven the spirit and gladden the heart by supplying sweet melodies, they communicate messages that embody the actions the composers require of the consumers in the service of their God.*

***Indexed Terms-*** *Christian hymns, John Searle's speech Acts, religious messages, God, composers*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Hymns are used in praise and worship during religious gatherings. In Christendom, hymns accompanied, sometimes, by the notes of an organist, and /or supported by a choir are used during gatherings like Sunday services, burials, dedications, thanksgivings, prayer meetings, etc. They communicate messages bordering on Christian virtues, ethics, salvation, holiness, judgment, the nature of God, and many other issues of life, death, the world as well as the mysteries of heaven, hell and eternity. Religion is a belief system that models the lives, thoughts, and conducts of those who practice it to suit its teachings. It is a "belief and ritual concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and

forces" (Wallace 1966 as cited by Kottak 2015, p, 232). Uka (1994) sees it as "a reality in human experience which describes man's relationship with the supernatural world or the ultimate reality, generally referred to as God" (p. 18). The supernatural beings of religion, in addition to God himself include spirits, demons, souls, ghosts, deities, Satan, which exist in the realm beyond that of human being Since the beings do not exist within our material world, belief in them is based on faith. The Christian religion sprang from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Christian hymns consist of songs "that deal with the activities of the Christian faith" (Nwachukwu, 2012, p. 75). They are written to edify, uplift, motivate, encourage, cajole and touch the hearts of their users. He further explains that hymns can be viewed as a way or an art of preaching. It then means that it has to reveal God's or Christ's presence and calls human beings into responsible and authentic existence. In any Christian programme where hymns are used, they connect the hearts of the people to God, and lit them up. When hymns warm the hearts of people in a service "Christ our Lord will be lifted up and His Spirit dwells therein (Bexter and Videt, 2000, P. 40)". In other words, hymns have that quality of adoring and exalting God. They "give expression to our deepest emotions" and this they do using language (Mckinney, 1940, P. 4).

Religion is practiced in specialized, high, emotive and symbolic language ideal for addressing and communicating with the supreme being deified in the religious belief. Religious language is generally intricate because it is a spiritual language as distinct from "worldly communication used by professional communicators" (Adebayo and Zulu, 2018, p. 23). This explains why the language of hymns is different from our everyday language use. Nwachukwu affirms that Christian hymns demand subversive language – events that overthrow the present structures of language (P. 75). What this implies is that the use to

which we put language determines what language we use and how we use it. It allows for the choice of a word or expression rather than the other. So, the particular wording chosen for a text shape the meaning communicated by the text, as well as gives insights into the intention of the writer.

For all communication, to a greater or lesser extent is an exercise in control, an attempt to assert one's own position and to persuade the other to accept it. When somebody says, or writes, something, it is with the intention of getting the addressee, the second-person party to think or feel or act in a certain way.... (Widdowson, p. 67).

Christian hymns are composed by humans under the influence of the Holy Spirit. These hymns which dwells on different aspects of human life in relation to fellow humans, nature and God himself, as they journey through life unto eternity, have messages demanding certain actions from man. These actions can only be carried out if the consumers of the hymns realize that the actions are expected of them and pay undivided attention to interpreting their wording.

A good number of the consumers of Christian hymns pay more attention to the melody, rhythm, instrumentation, the vocalization, the choir, and less to the interpretation of the message embedded in the wording of the hymns. When the intended message encoded in any communication channel fails to be decoded by the receiver, communication has not taken place. This paper aims at creating awareness in the consumers to always search for embedded meanings in hymns.

A number of researches have been conducted on hymns in this part of the world. Ogunleye (2021) studied "Beyond Hand Waving: Indices for Hymn Leading in Corporate Christian Worship, while researched on "Singing and Worship in an Anglican Church Liturgy in Egba and Egba West Dioceses, Abeokuta, Nigeria". Adebayo and Zulu came from the angle of the "Use of Language and Communication among the Pentecostal Evangelical Charismatic Churches in Durban, South Africa. Christian hymns have not been studied using the speech acts theory as far as these researchers know and that is the motivation for this study. It uses Searle's five classifications of the

illocutionary point to unearth the meaning of the messages conveyed by the five hymns selected for this study.

The following research questions were answered in the course of the study:

- i. Are the five classifications of the illocutionary point represented in the selected hymns?
- ii. Does the language of the hymns convey the intentions of the writers' locutions ?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### • Language

According to Prasad (2009) "language is a system of conventional, spoken and written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate" (P. 2). It is a creation of humans as social beings, and through it they interact with one another. A society without a language is inconceivable since chaos and disorder are bound to be rife in it. So, communication in society happens chiefly by means of language (Mey, 2001, P. 6). Through it, human beings interact with one another and their environment, and make sense of the world around them. In the words of Verghese (2005)

Man has many achievements to his credit. Science and technology, the conquests and exploration of the normally inaccessible regions of the earth and of outer space...But none of them is as great an achievement as his ability to use language; for without the use of language the other achievements would not have been possible. Language, in fact, is the great tool which has made human civilization possible (8)

Language can thus be said to be at the core of humanity. In fact, it is species specific to humans, that is, it is uniquely human. We are rational beings and language is the tool we use for rationalization. Without language and rationalization, there would not have been civilization. It is a means of forming ideas as reflections of reality, and exchanging them in the process of interactions.

Language is inseparably connected with people who create and use it. It is a code system; a carrier of information which is capable of transmitting only

intended meaning. Once the addressee fails to decode the intended meaning, the message is not communicated and the communication system is said to have failed. It also reveals man's socio-cultural beliefs and thoughts. The traditional linguist believes that language has an intended meaning and that the recipient has only but to understand the meaning by interpreting it accurately to make communication work. So, we can deduce different meanings from the same language used in different contexts. Contexts, therefore, fixes the meaning of words, giving them specific meanings as intended by speakers. Hearers, also depend on it to arrive at the intended meaning of the speaker.

- Hymns

The word *hymn* according to Wilson is derived from the Greek word which means "a song of praise" (151). A writer of hymns is known as a hymnodist. The singing or composition of hymns is called hymnody, and a collection of hymns is called a hymnal or hymn book. Hymns may or may not include instrumental accompaniment. According to Nwogu (2001), a hymn is a type of song usually religious, specifically written for the purpose of adoration or prayer and typically addressed to a deity or deities or to a prominent figure or personality (p. 74).

Christian hymns are often written with special or seasonal themes and these are used on holy days such as Christmas, Easter, and the feast of all saints, or during particular seasons such as Advent and Lent. Others are used to encourage reverence for the Holy Book or to celebrate Christian practices such as the Eucharist or Baptism and other events. Some hymns praise or address individual saints, particularly the Blessed Virgin Mary. Such hymns are particularly prevalent in Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and to some extent High Church Anglicanism.

Christian hymns are written in the language of Christian Religion. Its language focuses on the Christian faith, conduct and pursuit. It contains the linguistic elements of some of the doctrines of the Bible like Heaven, Hell, resurrection, trinity, salvation, baptism, rapture, great tribulation, etc. In any religious discourse whenever a statement is made, it is for a purpose. So, it is very vital to find out what the language intends to convey.

- Speech Acts:

The Speech acts theory was propounded by John Austin, an Oxford philosopher, in his 1962 posthumous publication, *How to do Things with Words*. It was further developed by his student John R. Searle. A speech act is an utterance that has a performance function in language and communication. It is concerned with how our words are used to carry out actions like greeting, pronouncing, apologizing, etc, the moment they are uttered. In other words, they are those utterances that perform an action. In the words of Mey (2001), "speech acts are verbal acts happening in the world" (p. 95). Lyons (1981) sees speech acts as the theory of saying as doing within the framework of social institutions and conventions' (p. 175). Nazi and Gautam (2010) define speech acts theory as "a theory of language use, which is basically, concerned with how people use language for the purpose of communication" (p. 199). It sees language as action rather than a tool to convey information or express opinion or feelings.

Austin initially drew a distinction between constatives and performatives, whereby he identified constatives as having truth values, and performatives as words used to do things and which have felicity conditions that apply to them. Felicity conditions are those appropriate conditions that must be satisfied for a speech act to be felicitously. . Performatives according to him take speech act verbs. He discarded this distinction due to the inconsistencies he observed among constatives, and replaced them with the three dimensional classification of speech acts into the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

- Locutionary Act - This is the utterance itself. It is the "sentence with a grammatical structure and a linguistic meaning" which the speaker produces (Finnegan, 2012, p. 305).

- Illocutionary Act - It is the most significant in speech acts theory because it carries the force of the speech act. Illocution is the intention behind the locution. In other words, it means the extra meaning which is conventionally associated with the utterance. "Illocutions are what is done in saying something" (Verschueren, 2003, p. 22).

- Perlocutionary Act – It is the effect of the locution on the hearer. That is, what the act does to the actions or thoughts of the hearer. For instance, if a visitor to your office says “it is hot in here?”, the perlocutionary effect should be for you to turn on the air conditioner or switch on the fan.

Austin also classified speech acts according to their illocutionary force into verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives and expositives. This classification marred by overlapping criteria received strong criticisms from Searle, Leech and others, and led to Searle’s (1975a) modification of the classes into the assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and Declarations.

- Searle’s Classification of Speech Act

John Searle’s classification of speech acts is the theoretical framework that underlies this study. To him, speaking in a language is illocutionary act. Consequently, his theory of speech act is based on Austin’s illocutionary acts with the aim of finding rules for performing the act. He criticized Austin’s classification based on incompleteness, inconsistencies, etc, most of which arose from his attempt to match every speech act with a speech act verb. Searle used only four out of the twelve criteria Austin outlined for the classification of speech act. They include:

- Illocutionary point (The force of the speech act),
- Direction of fit (how the speech act fit into the world and vice versa)
- Expressed psychological state (of the speaker: a “belief” may be expressed as a statement, an assertion, a remark, etc.
- Content ( what the speech act is about; eg. a promise to attend the party has the same content as a refusal, and so on)

( Mey, 2001,

p. 119)

Searle’s classification of speech act is described below:

- a. Assertives: Their other name is representatives and they are the illocutionary acts that represent a state of affairs in the world” (Mey, 2001, p. 120). Examples include:. stating, claiming, hypothesizing, describing, telling, insisting, suggesting, asserting, or swearing that something is the case. Assertives can be true of false.

- b. Directive: An illocutionary act urging the addressee to do something. It directs the hearer to do as the speaker says. E.g ordering, commanding, daring, defying, challenging. “Directives are particularly sensitive to the contexts of speaking and to specific social characteristics of the issuer and addressee. Their complexity stems from the fact that a speaker should phrase a request so as to have the greatest likelihood of positive result...speakers must be sensitive to the addressee’s feeling (Mey, 2001, p. 120).
- c. Commissive: An illocutionary act urging the speaker (i.e the one performing the speech act) to do something. They bring about obligation on the speaker. E.g. promise, threatening, intending, having to do or to refrain from doing something.
- d. Expressive: An illocutionary act that expresses the mental state of the speaker. They are usually subjective. Examples include congratulating, thanking, deploring, condoling, welcoming, and apologizing. Cooke (1997) defines expressive as those speech acts that raise claims to truthfulness of the speaker (p. 72).
- e. Declarations: An illocutionary act that brings into existence the state of affairs to which it refers. E.g: blessing, firing, baptizing, bidding, passing sentences, excommunicating. According to Nazi and Guatam (2010), declaratives are speech acts that change the world via their utterances. They bring about a correspondence between the propositional context and the world. In order for declarations to be performed appropriately, the speaker must have a special institutional role in a specific context (p. 207). An example may be given from a wedding ceremony. After the exchange of vows by the bride and bridegroom the officiating minister then says “I pronounce you husband and wife, immediately he says it, it stands! They automatically become husband and wife. It can be found in the story of creation in the book of Genesis, for example “let there be light”, and there was light.

- Methodology:

The research design adopted for this study is qualitative descriptive research. Using deliberate sampling technique, five songs were selected from five widely used hymn books in Christian worship in the South Eastern Nigeria where this research was

conducted. Those selected hymn books are Great Gospel Songs and Hymns, Songs that touch the heart, Redemption songs, Songs with a message, Broadman Hymnal. One song each was purposely selected from each book to exemplify how they belong to the five classes of speech acts. Some of these selected hymns have three, four or five stanzas, so the researchers used one stanza and the chorus/refrain of each hymn for the analysis. The hymn books are readily available in hard copies.

### III. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### Assertive Speech Act

Hymn 1: Power in the Blood by L.E. Jones (From Songs with a Message. No. 117)

Would you be free from your burden of sin?  
 There's power in the blood, power in the blood,  
 Would you o'er evil a victory win?  
 There's wonderful power in the blood  
 Chorus:

There is power, power, wonder working power  
 In the blood of the Lamb,  
 There is power, power, wonder working power  
 In the precious blood of the Lamb.

The hymn begins with a rhetorical question which portrays sin as heavy and burdensome. But the burden of sin has a cure in the blood of Jesus as indicated in line two where it states that "there is power in the blood". The blood in question has the power to wipe sins away and make whole again. In line three, another rhetorical question "would you over evil a victory win" features as a kind of appeal to the emotions of the users to take actions to liberate themselves from the power of sin. This assertion is to awaken in them the desire to win over sins as contained in "there is wonderful power in the blood".

In the chorus that follows, , the writer makes it point blank that it is not ordinary "power" but "wonder-working power" in the blood of the Lamb who is symbolically Jesus Christ. All these states unequivocally that Jesus Christ is the Lamb in question and His blood has the power to atone for our sins, if we could only 'come' unto him just as we are. The assertive speech act contained here takes the form

of statements, commendation, encouragement and affirmation.

The assertions here come with pieces of specific information that help to remind Christians singing or listening to this hymn about God's saving grace and the wonder working power in the blood of Jesus Christ. The language of the hymn displays persuasion aimed at achieving the intention of leading the congregation or audience to follow a given line of action which in this case is to forsake sins and run to the saving blood of Jesus.

This hymn speaks to every Christian that sings or listens to it that the "blood" of Jesus Christ is effective in cleansing from sin. This *blood* has *wonder-working power* that can save, heal, cleanse and purify whosoever that comes to Jesus Christ. In this regard, every participant in any Christian programme where this hymn is sung needs to understand the action(s) the hymn required of him or her.

#### Hymn 2: Expressive Speech Act

Does Jesus Care? by Rev. Y.E Greafy (from Redemption Songs (RS))

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained;  
 Too deeply for mirth and song;  
 As the burdens press and the cares distress;  
 And the way grows weary and long?

Chorus:

O' yes He cares, I know He cares;  
 His heart is touched with my grief;  
 When the days are weary, the long night dreary,  
 I know my Saviour cares.

The writer asks a question that arouses sentiments and emotions, "Does Jesus care, when my heart is pained?" i.e., when I am terribly disturbed about a situation, that I cannot even sing. When the burden presses so much and the worries and cares distress and even the way grow weary and long, does Jesus care? The chorus provides the response, "Oh yes, He cares!" "I know He cares". The hymn show that the heart of Jesus is touched with the challenges the consumers of the hymns, as people living on earth, contends with. It is the manner in which the discourse is presented that enables the writer communicate with the user. The tone helps the user to draw the expected interpretation of the hymn.

By starting this hymn with a question: Does Jesus Care? The hymn writer appeals to the hearts and sensibilities of the users. For example, in this hymn there are expressions of pity, anger, bitterness, regrets and discontent. This hymn shows expressive speech acts because it raises claims to the truthfulness of the speaker, for surely Jesus cares.

Hymn 3: Directive Speech Acts

Yield not to Temptation by H.R. Palmer (Redemption Songs, No. 679)

Yield not to temptation,  
 For yielding is sin;  
 Each victory will help you,  
 Some other to win;  
 Fight manfully onward, dark passions subdue;  
 Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.  
 Chorus:  
 Ask the Saviour to help you;  
 Comfort, strengthen and keep you;  
 He is willing to aid you, He will carry you through.

The Hymn writer commands the users not to yield to temptation because “yielding is sin”. He wants them to triumph over temptation and be victorious. Palmer commands every one that uses this hymn to “fight manfully onward” and “subdue evil passion”. He emphasizes that Christians should always “look unto Jesus” that when they do so, He (Jesus) will help them.

In the chorus, he uses this imperative (command) “Ask the Saviour to help you”, to “comfort”, “strengthen” and “keep you”. He asserts in the third line of the chorus that “He (God) is willing to aid you”. In the last line of the chorus, he affirms that “God will carry you through”. The “you” in the third and fourth lines refers to whoever that calls upon the name of the Lord for help.

Through this hymn, Christians are directed on what should be their conduct as pilgrims on earth. This hymn calls them to order and puts them through in the face of many challenges. It helps Christians to know the importance of prayer in order not to fall into temptation, peradventure it (temptation) comes their way. To achieve this objective, the writer uses a courteous tone to appeal to users.

Hymn 4: Commissive Speech Acts

I shall be no stranger (Redemption Songs. No. 450)

When the pearly gates are opened,  
 To a sinner saved by grace;  
 When through everlasting mercies,  
 I behold my Saviour's face.  
 When I enter in the mansion,  
 Of the city Bright and fair  
 I shall have a Royal welcome,  
 For I'll be no stranger there  
 Chorus:  
 I shall be no stranger there,  
 Jesus will my place prepare,  
 He will meet me, He will greet me  
 I shall be no stranger there.

In this hymn, E.E. Hewitt highlights the expectations and desires of a Christian who has worked for his/her salvation at . He gives promise/assurance to sinners “saved by grace” that once they turn to Jesus they will experience a royal welcome in heaven at the end of their sojourn on earth.

In the chorus, he reiterates that the saints shall not be a stranger there in heaven, for Jesus will prepare a place for them . He (Jesus) will meet and welcome the saints home. This hymn has many commissives exemplified by the use of modal auxiliary verbs “shall not be stranger”, “shall have a royal welcome”, “will be no stranger”, “will meet”, “will greet “and finally “shall be no stranger”.

The use of ‘shall’ shows the intention of the speaker and as well his commitment. The speaker knows that since he has done all that is required of him to do to enter into the kingdom of God, nothing will make him to be a stranger there. He therefore vows that He will never be a stranger there. Quirk and Greenbaum (2012) assert that the conscious use of *shall* indicates willingness on the part of the speaker in first, second and third person” (p. 66). The speaker says that “Jesus will my place prepare”, He will meet me. He will greet me”. Here “He” (the speaker) asserts a promise. He promises himself a royal welcome from Jesus Christ on his return to his eternal home. Thus, the use of ‘shall’ and ‘will’ in this hymn explores the promises and how effective they are.

Hymn 5: Declaration Speech Act

Peace be Still (Broadman Hymnal. No. 471)

Master the tempest is raging, The billows are  
tossing high!

The sky is over shadowed with blackness,

No shelter or help is nigh,

“Carest thou not that we perish?”

How canst thou lie asleep

When each moment so madly is threatening

A grave in the angry deep?

Chorus:

“The winds and the waves shall obey my will

Peace be still”

Whether the wrath of the storm tossed sea,

Or demons or men or whatever it be,

No water can swallow the ship where lies,

The master of ocean and earth and skies,

They all shall sweetly obey my will; peace be still!

Peace be still!

They all shall sweetly obey my will peace, peace  
be still!

The writer of this hymn, Mary A. Daker, refers to the words of Jesus while He was sailing on a boat with his disciples. When the tempest started raging, Jesus arrayed the fears of his disciples and calmed the storm with just an utterance, “peace be still”. Immediately, the storm ceased. This is a typical example of declarative speech act. Jesus who made the declaration contained in the hymn has the authority to make it and all the felicity conditions are satisfied for it to be felicitous. He used mere words to cause or bring about a change in the world. This shows that there is power in the words of Jesus and enjoins every user that no matter what the tempest may be: poverty, sickness, hardship, trials, persecution, once Jesus curses the tempest of life troubling Christians, it must subside.

In the chorus He declares that “they all shall sweetly obey His will, “Peace be still”. This gives courage to every user of this hymn.

The analysis above clearly indicates that speech acts theory is a theory of language and communication. The five classes of speech acts as identified by Searle are fully represented in the hymns analyzed in this study. It was observed that the language of any Christian hymn is designed deliberately to capture the emotions, sentiments, feelings and desires of the

consumers. Hymn writers also understand how forceful and important language could be in passing across their intended message. To this effect, Yule (1996) states that “When we read or hear pieces of language; we normally try to understand; not only what the words mean, but what the writer or speaker of those words intend to convey” (p. 27). In other words, hymn writers mean more than what is written down in their hymns. So, a user who limits himself to singing the wordings of hymns as many do, without considering the meanings attached to words used may not get the message communicated in the hymns.

Hymn writers, therefore can be said to manipulate language in various ways in order to convey their message. It is through the understanding of the messages of the hymns that actual communication between the writer and the user takes place. That is when the hymns minister to and touch the hearts of the users, and make them take a positive line of action as required in the hymn. For example, the hymn used to exemplify the Expressive speech act soothes the aching heart, consoles a broken heart and encourages the weary and fainting pilgrim. This was achieved through the language the hymn writer employed. The researchers observed that language plays a vital role in understanding a hymn because language is said to be the dress of thought, and the ability to use language appropriately can affect one’s understanding of a hymn. All these are inherent in the five hymns analyzed. They also helped to create emotions in the hearts of the singers and listener. In . it is the use of appropriate and adequate language of religion in the analyzed hymns that really helped to make them “songs that touch the heart”.

The researchers also observed that in the five hymns analyzed, the writers used simple language to communicate their messages. Honestly, there are some hymn writers who take delight in using difficult expressions and also some hymn writers’ messages are difficult to understand. Such discourages Christians from using such hymns in their programmes, because they can hardly understand the message of the writer.

Indirect speech acts are also used in hymns. Some hymn writers use sentences that have interrogative structure but functions as declaratives or statements. In the hymn *Does Jesus care?*, the hymn writer made use of direct speech act in the sense that the sentence

is interrogative in structure and also in function, because the writer in the first line of the chorus of that hymn give the answer by saying “O yes He cares”. All these help to beautify the hymn, motivate the users, and direct them to pursue a positive action.

#### CONCLUSION

This work has shown that Searle’s five classifications of the speech act theory provide sufficient tools in finding out how Christian hymns impact positively on members of the congregation. It also shows how motivating the language of the hymns could be. It is hoped that this study will help users of Christian hymns to maintain a focus when singing or listening to hymns since it is an eye opener to how the songs represent the objectives of the writers. For instance, some hymns can motivate one to pray, some hymns can convict a sinner and melt his/her heart to seek God, some hymns can reveal the power in the blood of Jesus and make a Christian know the effectiveness of the blood of Jesus. Some hymns can move a Christian to adore and worship God.

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