Discourse Functions of Modal Verbs ‘Will and Shall’ in Christian Prayers

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Abstract

Prayer and language can be said to share similar definition in that they are both means of communication, though in prayer, one is communicating solely with a Supreme Being. This communication implies that a prayer is a form of discourse due to the presence of interaction; as such a discourse analysis of prayer will not be out of place. This study therefore investigates the use of modal verbs by pastors in Christian prayers. This is with a view to identifying and examining the discourse functions performed by these modal expressions. The Speech Act Theory and Systemic Functional Grammar, mainly using the system of modality, are used to examine the focus of this study. Prayer utterances made by four ‘popular’ Nigerian pastors served as the data set for this study. The system of modality helps to understand the modulation and modalization of these modal verbs as used in the prayer statements, whereas the speech act analysis expresses the types of illocutionary acts the modal verbs indicate in the prayer statements. The interaction of the two theories helps to bring to fore the discourse functions performed by these modal verbs in the Christian prayers. It is noticed that a prayer statement may express more than one speech act, when this happens the acts dictate the discourse function that such modal expressions perform. This study therefore concludes that the discourse functions resultantly enhance the level of the recipient’s belief in God and His ability to grant the prayer requests.

Keywords: Christian prayers, discourse functions, prayer discourse, modal verbs.
1. Introduction

Prayer is nothing else but an intense longing of the heart. You may EXPRESS yourself through the lips; you may EXPRESS yourself in the private closet or in the public; but to be genuine, the EXPRESSION must come from the deepest recesses of the heart. - M. K. Gandhi

Prayer is the most vital part of the Christian religion. From the quote above, it can be deduced that prayer is a language on its own which comprises the combination of certain words formulated into grammatical structures (i.e. clauses and phrases) with which an individual expresses the deepest concerns of his/her heart. It has enjoyed other numerous definitions, some of which are: it is a reverent petition made to God; it is an effort to communicate with God; it is an earnest request of God for help with intense yearning. It should be noted, however, that the main locus of prayer is to communicate with a supreme being.

Bloomaert (2003) defines discourse as ‘language in action’, placing particular attention to language and to action. If prayer is considered to be a language, it follows therefore that, it can conveniently be situated within the larger purview of discourse, as such, an analysis of prayer discourse will undoubtedly avail us the understanding of the discourse features and functions of certain linguistic elements that are used in it. An important linguistic element that is used in prayers is the modal verbs.

Modal verbs function like other aspects of language as they can also be analyzed from the discourse perspective. They are used to indicate different meanings or acts like request, obligation, order and permit. Modal verbs in English are regarded as small class of auxiliary verbs. They distinguish from other verbs in that they have no participle or infinitive forms. The modal verbs that are of interest to this study are ‘Will and shall.’ These modals mostly talk about the future; ‘the most frequent choice is used to make requests when used as an interrogative and to make promises when used in declarative sentences’ (Thornburg, 2004). These modal verbs are also capable of creating or revealing the illocutionary act performed by the speaker in a statement.

This study is primarily situated within the ambits of the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as proposed by M.A.K. Halliday. This theory incorporates a semantic dimension in its interpretation of language use as being an enormous systems network of meaning potential. The system of Modality serves as the basis for explaining the functioning of the modal verbs. Likewise, insights will be derived from the speech act theory. The interaction of these two theoretical bases will adequately help to uncover the propositional effects and discourse functions of these modal verbs in prayer statements.
2. **Language and Christian prayers**

Language and Christian prayers are interestingly interrelated and intermingled. Language is seen as a tool for communication. It is a social phenomenon by which we persuade, advise, warn, request and also interchange in different ways. On the hand, prayer is defined as a means of communicating with God. To this extent, prayer can be categorized also as a language that expresses a number of actions such as thanking, requesting, adoring and supplicating. Komolafe (1992) opines that language used for religious activities such as prayer is used ‘in a manner whose sense and meaning is different from that of the ordinary day-to-day human life.’ Likewise, Houghton (2004) avers that the language used while praying is simple and has a similar sentence structure which forms a pattern for a particular group of topic in the prayer.

Christian prayers are requests made to an omnipresent God whose name is known to those who worship Him and who has replaced all covenantal bargains by His incarnation, death and resurrection. The individual’s expectation as regards the requests made is directly proportional to his/her recognition of and relationship with these theological assumptions. In this vein, certain individuals are revered as having an extremely accurate relationship with the omnipresent God; hence, prayer made by such people is always considered a priority by God. These people are commonly referred to as the pastors or ministers of God. Christian prayers vary in types, some of which are agreement prayers, personal prayers and intercessory prayers. Of interest in this study is the intercessory prayer.

An intercessory prayer is an act of praying for other people. While interceding in prayer for people, the pastors frequently use modal verbs, perhaps unknowingly, when expressing the prayer statements. However, it is noticed that this frequent usage of modal verbs in the (prayer) discourse between the individuals and the Supreme Being has certain functions they are invoking. As such, this study is interested in deciphering these perceived functions through a data-driven approach.

3. **Aim and objectives**

The aim of this study is to examine the discourse functions that English modal verbs perform in Christian prayers. The specific objectives that guide the discussion in this study are to:

i. identify and explain the discourse functions performed by the modal verbs in the prayer statements
ii. identify and explain the illocutionary acts the modal verbs are expressing in the prayer statements
iii. examine the propositional effect(s) of the prayer statements on the participant involved in the prayer discourse
4. Previous works

Shala and Shima (2012) assess the speech acts of curses and prayers in Persian. Using Searle’s (1975) version of Speech Act Theory, they discover that prayers and curses are classified as expressive acts, since they reveal the speaker’s attitude and feelings towards the proposition (i.e. prayers and curses).

Bankole and Ayoola (2014) carry out a Systemic Functional analysis of Christian Women Mirror magazine to examine how the systems of mood and modality are creatively used in them. Using Hallidayan’s SFG, they discover that most articles in the Christian magazines carefully employ and manipulate their grammatical choices to express the propositions in the magazines. As a result of this, the intended persuasive outcome expected from the reading of these magazines is achieved. They conclude that the relationship between the lexico-grammar (modality) analysis and the speech functions (mood structure) of the clauses are due to the need to get the readers persuaded about the Christian ideology.

Assessing the particular speech acts of modal verbs in the use of language by the politicians, Khalid and Zhang (2013) assert that the speeches of the politicians in general, and Barack Obama specifically, mainly involve the speech act of request. The use of modal verbs ‘can, will and must’ functions to express the speech act of request in the analysed speech. They conclude that speech act of request is the most frequent act prevailing in the political speeches which mostly happens in an indirect manner.

This present study will appropriately consider the findings of the above related works to see how they can provide insights and guide for the current study. In addition, this present work will examine the discourse functions that certain illocutionary acts perform through the use of modal verbs in Christian prayers, and its importance to Christian religion. This is noticeably absent from the finding of the previous works on religious discourse.

5. Theoretical frameworks

Two major theories serve to accurately expatiate on the focus of this study. They are: Systemic Functional Grammar and Speech Act theory. The Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) was proposed by M.A.K. Halliday (1985), and its view of language emphasizes that the grammar of a language is a system of options from which speakers choose according to the social circumstances. That is, any form of language use is a harmonious network of linguistic elements that coalesce to realize particular language functions based on the social context. These language functions, according to Halliday and Hassan (1989), ‘are interpreted not just as the use of language but as a fundamental property of language itself’ because ‘the organization of every language is explained in terms of its functional capacity.’

According to Halliday and Hassan (1989), there are three general (Meta) functions which language fulfill at a time; each function operating proportionately with a distinguish system. These functions are the ideational, textual and interpersonal functions. The ideational function communicates the events and objects in the world; it is realized by the transitivity system. The textual function constructs links with itself and with features of the situation in which it is
used; it is realized by the theme and rheme system. The interpersonal function establishes and maintains social relations; it is realized by the systems of mood and modality. Since this study is mainly focused on modality, the interpersonal function will serve as the major concern.

Modality is the language system which functions to establish, change and maintain social relations between speakers. Modality lies between the positive (yes) and the negative (no) polar of propositions. Saragih (2007) sees modality as ‘a personal judgment on opinion.’ This is possibly because modality reveres not only the linguistic elements but also the opinion and judgment of the speaker on the context of the clause. Hence, perspective, attitude and personal judgment of the speaker to the context of the clause is considered primary to modality. This suggests that any form of language use is potential for the use of modality because, over and above what has been said; modality takes into consideration the relevance of linguistic and extra-linguistic contextual factors in the production and interpretation of modal utterances in discourse.

Based on Gonzalvez García’s (2000) explanation, modality consists of modalization and modulation. Modalization, otherwise known as epistemic modality, expresses possibility, necessity and prediction based on the proposition of the discourse. Modulation or deontic modality expresses permission, obligation and volition on the proposition of the discourse. In this study, the interaction of modalization with modulation will help to bring to light the discourse functions of the modal propositions.

The Speech Act Theory also counts as an inevitable theoretical basis for this study. The theory as propounded by J. L. Austin (1962) in his work of monograph, How to do things with words distinguishes three kinds of acts. These are: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The locutionary act is what the speaker says with determinate sense and reference, and the illocutionary act is what the speaker intends to convey by his utterance such as offer, promise and advice. While the perlocutionary act refers to the results of the audience from that saying such as persuading, misleading, and convincing (Levinson, 1983: 263). In his classification of speech acts, Austin took the English illocutionary verbs (performative verbs) and divided them into five categories: Verdictives, Exercitives, Commissives. Behabitives, and Expositives. Searle (1975) developed the theory of speech act and proposes taxonomy of illocutionary acts as five kinds of action that one can perform in speaking; these are assertives, directives, commissives, expressive and declarations.

1. Assertives (Representatives): The speaker commits to the truth of the expressed proposition as in asserting, concluding. Examples are: boast, assert, claim and predict.

2. Directives: This category of speech act is represented by the fact that the speaker attempt to get the hearer to do something. Examples are: request, pray and advise.

3. Commissives: The illocutionary point of this kind of acts is that the speaker commits her/himself to some future course of action. Examples are: promise, pledge and threaten.
4. Expressives: In this kind of speech acts the speaker is capable of expressing some kinds of psychological state such as feeling sorry or thanking. Examples are: apologize, thank and congratulate.

5. Declarations: In this category, the speaker change the external condition of an object, by other words changes the world.

It is believed that the incorporation of these two theoretical bases will enable this study to find out exactly the discourse functions of modals in the Christian prayer statements.

6. Methodology

The data for this study include recordings of preaching cum prayer sessions of four purposively selected ‘popular’ Nigerian pastors. They are: Pastor E.A. Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God, Pastor David Oyedepo of Winners Chapel, Pastor W.F. Kumuyi of Deeper Life Bible Church and Pastor D.K. Olukoya of Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries. The recordings were done with the aid of a phone enabled for such purpose during live broadcasts of the churches’ programs.

For the purpose of this study, only prayer statements that include modal verbs ‘will and shall’ were selected. These prayer statements were either uttered during preaching or during prayer session which often times comes after the preaching. The selected prayer statements were transcribed. The linguistic elements were analyzed for modality and speech acts to reveal their discourse functions.

7. Research Procedure

The study is expounded within the theory of Speech Act as remarked by Searle (1975). The analysis is categorized into two sections. The first section is based on the interaction of the supreme God with the modal verbs and the second, based on the interaction of the other participants (the pastor and the recipient of the prayer) with the modal verbs in the prayer statements. In the two sections, the focus will be on identifying and explaining the illocutionary acts of the propositions made in the prayer statements through the use of ‘will and shall’. Also on how each participant in the prayer discourse processes the proposition expressed in the prayer statements, which in turn reveals its discourse function.

8. Data Analysis

The acts performed by the modal verbs vary on the propositional effects of the prayer statements on the participants involved. Hence, it will be unsurprising to find out, as this work reveals, that a modal verb (will or shall) can carry more than one speech act in a particular prayer statement. This understanding is derived from the role each participant plays in relation to the stated prayer. To broadly examine the foregoing, the data have been segmented into two categories and are discussed below.

Category 1
Excerpts:
1. Hear tonight, the Lord will wipe away your tears
2. God shall make you a divine showroom to display His power and prosperity
3. Because you have decided to praise him (God), God will level the road before you.
4. The Lord will cause abundance to follow you now and forever.
5. The Holy Spirit shall deliver you from yourself into God’s plan for you this year
6. God shall waste all your wasters.
7. The Lord shall help you to live within His ordained capacity for your life.

The participants in these prayer statements are God, the Supreme Being who is being prayed to; the pastor who is making the prayer statements and the recipient of the prayer; the individual being prayed for. In this category, God and the pastor are considered the active participants who dictate the act(s) indicated by the modal verbs ‘will and shall.’

1. **Assertive (Representative):** The use of ‘will and shall’ by the pastor in the prayer statements above show that he is positively committed to the truth of the expressed prayer statements. This derives from his ultimate belief in God to grant the request made at no distant future. For instance, in excerpt 1, it is the pastor’s belief in God’s ability to wipe humans’ tears that made him boastfully assert that the recipient’s tears will soon be wiped away. Likewise in excerpt 7, the belief in the capacity of God to do all things gives the pastor the assurance to affirm that the Lord shall help the person being prayed for to live within God’s ordained capacity for his life. This is also true of other prayer statements in this category as the pastor asserts them based on his unwavering belief in God’s ability to grant them.

2. **Commissive:** To see these modals ‘will and shall’ as expressing a commissive act, the attention is shifted to God as the actual speaker while the pastor is considered as a pseudo speaker through whom the act is expressed. In other words, the pastor is performing the act on God’s behalf. As such, God is seen as the illocutionary agent whose intention is committed to the actualization of future promises and actions. For instance, the use of ‘will’ in excerpt 4 shows the intention of God as believed and indirectly expressed by the pastor to cause abundance to follow the recipient of the prayer at the present time and a particular time in the future. In excerpt 7 also, ‘shall’ depicts God as committing to a future occurrence of helping the recipient of the prayer to live within God’s ordained capacity for his life.

3. **Discourse functions**

In this first category, the discourse functions performed by the acts expressed in the prayer statements are prophesying and promising.

1. **Prophesying**

Prophesying entails saying/stating what will happen in the future. This is a major feature of an intercessory prayer in the Christian religion. According to the Christian injunctions, righteousness is considered a major prerequisite for prophecy. Since pastors (active
participants in the prayer discourse) are generally considered to be usually righteous, it follows that they have the spiritual wherewithal to engage in the act of prophesying.

The discourse function of prophesying is expressed by the assertive speech act, indicated in terms of the pastor’s belief in God. This function is understood through the pastor’s use of modal verbs ‘will and shall’ in his interceding prayer statements. Like the act of prophesying, these modal verbs are usually making reference to a future occurrence. As such, the pastor commonly makes use of this modal element as a tool for prophesying while interceding.

In excerpt 4 ‘the Lord will cause abundance to follow you now and forever,’ the choice of ‘will’ evidently points to the fact that the pastor is not only relating the prayer to the present situation (i.e. follow you now), but he is also prophesying into the future (i.e. follow you forever). Also, ‘shall’ in excerpt 5 is used by the pastor to achieve the prophesying discourse function. This is because it has helped the pastor to convincingly express the message in the said prayer to be an occurrence that is going to last for the rest of the recipient’s life; a projection that continues into the future.

Furthermore, through the use of ‘will and shall’ in prophesying, both the epistemic and deontic scopes of modality are realized. The pastor, who is the locutionary agent and the source of modality prophesizes based on his belief in and bond with God in such a way that leaves no room for doubt pertaining to the prayer statements made. This enhances his will and authority to prophesy; a modulation of the deontic modality.

2. Promising

Promising is an act of intimating someone about one’s intention to fulfill or not to fulfill an expectation. In Christian prayers, a promise can be taken to mean an infant form of response to prayer requests. The promising discourse function is expressed by the commissive speech act which projects the intention of the speaker to fulfill some future actions. In so doing, the important linguistic elements that point at God’s intention are the modal verbs ‘will and shall’ as used by the pastor in the prayer statement.

However, in this study, the prayer statements that denote this discourse function are uttered by an indirect source, hence, it is termed an indirect promising. It has already been established that the pastor is a pseudo speaker in the discourse. This is because he cannot grant the recipient’s request; rather it is only God who has the capacity of making promises and granting requests. Likewise, looking at the structure of the prayer statements in the excerpts, the subject of the main clause is the Supreme Being (God or Holy Spirit) who is ordinarily the performer of the actions stipulated by the verb of the clause; this invariably makes the Supreme Being the person engaged in the act of promising. But when the pastor utters this prayer statement, he is considered to be making the promises on God’s behalf.

With this in mind, we can aver that the pastor is only performing the act of promising on behalf of God. For instance, in excerpt 7, ‘the Lord shall help you to live within His ordained capacity for your life,’ it is noticed that a promise of ‘help’ has been made by the pastor. Unfortunately, he does not have the wherewithal to fulfill this promise, only God does. As a
result of this, God is considered in this study to be the main speaker who has promised but has only projected the promise through the prayer statement uttered by the pastor.

Furthermore, excerpt 1-7 will count has performing a function of promising because they satisfy certain conditions for analyzing such promise utterances.

Firstly, the propositional content performs some future action (A) by the speaker (S). For instance in the excerpts 5-7, the propositional elements, which are the prayer statements, clearly show God as being committed to performing actions such as helping, providing, delivering in the present and also in the future.

Secondly, a statement will count as promise if the hearer (H) prefers speaker’s doing A to his no doing it. The hearer here is the recipient of the prayer, and he utterly believes in the accomplishment of the prayer statements uttered by the pastor. As such, he would want the expressed prayer statements to be fulfilled. However, he knows that the pastor cannot actualize this; rather it is God who is promising and who is capable fulfilling such promises. For instance, whenever the pastor makes a prayer statement in the recording (E.g. because you have decided to praise him (God), God will level the road before you; the Lord will cause abundance to follow you now and forever), the recipient(s) of the prayer responds by saying ‘amen’. This shows that the person willingly prefers that the speaker (God) does the action expressed in the prayer statement.

Thirdly, the speaker seeks to do A. This means that merely projecting the prayer statement through the pastor shows God’s readiness and willingness to perform the action expressed. In addition, the non-inclusion of a negator (not) in the excerpts also shows that the speaker (God) who is promising is committed to doing the actions embedded in the prayer statement.

All these point to the fact that the use of the modal verbs in prayer statements uttered by the pastor also functions as promising. This discourse function is also realized through the interaction of the modalization and modulation scopes of modality. In that, the locutionary agent, God is seen as being committed to an obligation to fulfill certain promises that count as necessity for those who believe in Him and have made certain requests.

Category 2

The attention in this category is shifted to the person who is interceding and the person being interceded for. The interaction of their roles in the prayer discourse will be examined to reveal the acts performed through the use of modal verbs ‘will and shall’. Consider the following excerpts:

8. You shall see the glory of the Lord manifesting in your life
9. You shall trample upon the serpents and scorpions assigned to put you to shame
10. You will display God’s power and prosperity
11. My prayer is that, you will get your bearing right on time
12. As the Lord, the author of this commission liveth, you will get to the top
13. You will not get up late for the plan of God
14. You shall grow in God ordained capacity for your life
15. Because you have opened your mouth to praise the Lord tonight, I pray that you will not run another man’s race.

In these prayer statements, the pastor who is interceding is directly addressing the recipient of the prayer, as noticed by the choice of the second person pronoun form ‘you’ in the prayer statements. This is done in a bid to rouse the belief of such person and get him spiritually optimistic for answers to the prayers. In view of this, the modal verbs ‘will and shall’ that situate these propositions are deduced to perform a directive speech act.

1. **Directives**: The use of ‘will and shall’ in this category of prayer statements indicates that the pastor tries to get the recipient of the prayer to see himself as the performer of the action stated in the prayer. This in turn will spiritually elevate the individual’s belief in the prayer statements as he expects the fulfillment of the promises. For instance, in excerpt 14 ‘you shall grow in God’s ordained capacity for your life,’ the pastor directly addresses the recipient, who also considers himself as the main addressee, to whom the action is attracted. This understanding gets him to enhance his belief in the prayer and willfully desires the response.

**Discourse function**

In this category, the discourse function performed by the act expressed is assuring.

**Assuring**

Assuring is a discourse function that states that something is definitely going to happen, especially when elements of doubt are observed towards the subject matter. The illocutionary act that expresses this discourse function is the directive act. In Christian prayers, the belief system of the person being prayed for is needed in its absoluteness; else, there might not be answers to prayer requests as expected. Thus, the pastor needs to carefully choose certain linguistic elements that will motivate and enhance the recipient’s belief in God and in the prayer.

In excerpt 11 ‘my prayer... you will get your bearing right on time,’ the use of modal verb ‘will’ suggests an occurrence that is going to happen, relating it further to the subject (you) of the main clause- the person being prayed for, and the other elements in the clause (e.g. right on time) reveals that the pastor is overtly assuring the recipient that he will get his bearing at a particular time. This statement of assurance invariably hoists the belief of the recipient in the uttered prayer.

In addition, as seen in the other excerpts, the pastor is visibly assuring the person being prayer for through the use of ‘will and shall’. The recipient of the prayer statements is assured of not running another man’s race (excerpt 15), of getting to the top (excerpt 12), of seeing the glory of the Lord manifesting in his life (excerpt 8) and so on.
9. Conclusion

It might be overambitious to draw broad conclusions based on a study of a limited number of prayer statements by selected Nigerian pastors. Nonetheless, certain patterns are observable from this investigation. This study reveals the preponderance of modal verbs such as will and shall in intercessory prayers of the Christian pastors examined. Using Searle’s (1975) model of Speech Act Theory and Modality as explained in Hallidayan SFG (1985), an examination of the use of these modal verbs ‘will and shall’ reveals that the pastors use it to achieve certain discourse functions such as prophesying, promising and assuring.

Furthermore, the speech act analysis of the modal expressions reveals that prayer statements that incorporates either ‘will or shall’ is capable of performing more than one illocutionary act. The distinction in the kind of act performed lies in the roles each participant in the discourse plays and how the proposition affects each participant. As such, a prayer statement can perform both assertive and commissive speech acts based on the relationship of the participants to the proposition.

In addition, this study exposes the fact that both the epistemic and deontic modality relates at a level to disclose the discourse functions of the modal verbs as used by the pastors during intercessory prayers.

Considering all these, it is discovered that as much as the pastor is committed to the truth of the prayer statements and also believes in it, the recipient of the prayer must also operate at the same level of belief for a positive outcome. Therefore, this study concludes that the choice and use of modal verbs (will and shall) in Christian intercessory prayers functions to enhance and elevate the recipient’s level of belief in God and the expressed proposition; likewise in God’s ability to grant the prayer requests.
References


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