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Generic Structure Potential (GSP) of Nigerian Christian Sermons: A Comparative Discourse Analysis Across Selected Denominations

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Abstract

This study examined the Generic Structure Potential (GSP) of Nigerian Christian sermons to identify recurrent structural patterns and explore denominational variation in sermon organisation. Although studies have been done on Christian sermons, very few comparative studies have been carried out on sermons among Nigerian denominations. This study aims to fill this gap.Thirty sermons, drawn from ten different denominational (Pentecostal, Mainline Protestant and Liturgical) contexts, were analysed using a stage-by-stage GSP framework to determine the presence, order, and function of structural elements. Findings revealed that the Theme of the Message (ToM), Message (Msg), Bible Reading (BR), and Call to Action (CtA) formed a stable core across all sermons, providing the central framework through which scriptural interpretation was developed and directed toward audience engagement. Optional elements, including Opening Charge (OC), Opening Prayer (OP), Declaration (D), Call to Repentance (CtR), Holy Communion (HC), and Closing Prayer (CP), occurred variably, reflecting differences in denominational practices, liturgical traditions, and preaching styles. Both the Pentecostal and Mainline Churches have liturgical procedures. While Pentecostal liturgy is spontaneous, vibrant and highly expressive, mainline liturgy is static and rigid. However, Mainline Protestant sermons demonstrated an intermediate pattern, retaining the central stages while using optional elements selectively. The study established that Nigerian Christian sermons combined both obligatory and variable elements to realise interpretive, moral, and persuasive functions. These findings contribute to genre-based research within Systemic Functional Linguistics by showing how sermon discourse achieves communicative purpose through staged, structured organisation across diverse denominational contexts.

Keywords: *Generic Structure Potential, Nigerian Christian sermons, sermon structure, denominational variation, Systemic Functional Linguistics, religious discourse.*

Introduction

Genre-based research within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has shown that institutional forms of communication tend to develop relatively stable

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organisational patterns shaped by their communicative purposes.[3] Rather than being random arrangements of linguistic units, texts are structured in ways that allow members of a discourse community to recognise how meaning is expected to unfold. Halliday and Hasan argue that language reflects social context, and that recurrent communicative activities often produce conventionalised patterns of organisation.[4] This understanding has informed a wide range of studies examining how discourse operates within professional, academic, and religious settings.[5]

Within this tradition, Hasan proposes the concept of Generic Structure Potential (GSP) as a means of describing the possible structural configurations associated with a particular genre.[6] GSP focuses on the ordering of functional elements that occur frequently enough across texts to be recognised as characteristic of a discourse type. Hasan demonstrates that genres typically consist of both obligatory and optional elements, allowing variation without undermining genre identity.[7] This approach has proved useful in analysing discourse types where communicative purpose strongly influences textual organisation. Studies applying genre-based analysis have shown that discourse structure often reflects institutional expectations regarding how communication should proceed.[8]Similar observations have been made in Nigerian discourse studies, where recurring communicative activities have been shown to generate identifiable interactional and structural patterns within institutional settings.[9]

Religious discourse provides a useful context for examining structured communication because it operates within established interpretive traditions. Crystal and Davyobserved that religious language often reflects institutional conventions that influence both form and style.[10] Preaching, in particular, involves the interpretation of scriptural texts together with the communication of moral or doctrinal guidance.[11] This dual function suggests that sermons are not simply informational texts but communicative events oriented towards shaping belief and influencing behaviour. Taiwo, in a study of English-medium Christian sermons, identifies linguistic strategies used to guide audience

[3] M.A.K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 31; J.R. Martin, English Text: System and Structure (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1992), 505.
[4] M.A.K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 10.
[5] Vijay K. Bhatia, Analysing Genre: *Language Use in Professional Settings* (London: Longman, 1993), 16; John M. Swales, Genre Analysis: *English in Academic and Research Settings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 58.
[6]Ruqaiya Hasan, "The Nursery Tale as a Genre," *Nottingham Linguistic Circular* 13 (1984): 71.
[7] Hasan, "The Nursery Tale as a Genre," 75.
[8] Bhatia, Analysing Genre, 13; J.R. Martin and David Rose, *Genre Relations: Mapping Culture* (London: Equinox, 2008), 25.
[9]Foluke O. Unuabonah, "The Generic Structure of Presentations in Quasi-Judicial Public Hearings on the FCT Administration in Nigeria in 2008," *California Linguistic Notes* 37, no. 2 (2012): 1–23.
[10] David Crystal and Derek Davy, *Investigating English Style* (London: Longman, 1969), 154.
[11] M. McCullough, *The Art of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 22.

response, including directive expressions and evaluative language.[12] These findings indicate that sermon discourse is organised in ways that support both interpretation and persuasion.

Within the Nigerian context, churches are typically categorised by their origin, theology and governance structure. The primary groups are Mainline Orthodox Churches such as Roman Catholic Church, Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), Nigerian Baptist and the Methodist Church. African InstitutedChurches (Aladura) such as Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S), Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), and Christ Apostolic Church (CAC). Classical Pentecostal Churches such as The Apostolic Church, Assemblies of God, Deeper Life Church and Neo-Pentecostal and Mega Churches such as Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners' Chapel), Christ Embassy, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), and Dunamis International Gospel.

Christian preaching occupies a visible role in public religious life, particularly across these different groups. Research has shown that Nigerian sermons frequently incorporate rhetorical features designed to encourage audience participation, including repetition, emphasis, and direct address.[13] Differences in denominational practice may influence how sermons are structured, especially where institutional traditions shape expectations regarding liturgy, interaction, and performative expression. While Pentecostal liturgy is vibrant, expressive with spontaneous worship, Mainline Orthodox Churches' liturgy generally follows a rigid and static written outline. Oha notes that discourse practices often reflect broader sociocultural patterns, suggesting that variation in sermon structure may be linked to differences in communicative orientation across denominations.[14]

Although previous research has examined rhetorical and pragmatic aspects of sermon discourse, less attention has been given to describing its staged structural configuration using the GSP framework. Corpus linguistic studies have provided insight into recurrent lexical patterns across discourse types,[15] but frequency-based analysis does not in itself explain how discourse is organised into functional stages. Identifying the structural sequencing of sermon discourse may therefore provide additional insight into how communicative purpose is realised through textual organisation.

Against this background, the present study examines the Generic Structure Potential of Nigerian Christian sermons across selected denominations from the

[12]RotimiTaiwo, "Response Elicitation in English-Medium Christian Sermons," *Journal of Pragmatics* 38, no. 5 (2006): 760.
[13] E.A. Adedun, "A Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Christian Sermons in Nigeria," *Journal of Language and Communication* 1, no. 1 (2010): 7; Taiwo, "Response Elicitation in English-Medium Christian Sermons," 764.
[14] Obi Oha, "Language in War Situation: A Stylistic Study of War Speeches," *Language and Literature Today* 4 (1994): 49.
[15] Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad, and Randi Reppen, *Corpus Linguistics: Investigating Language Structure and Use* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 12; Tony McEnery and Andrew Hardie, *Corpus Linguistics: Method, Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

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Neo-Pentecostal and Mainline Orthodox Churches in order to identify the structural elements that occur recurrently across denominations and to determine how variation is distributed within the genre. Particular attention is given to the ordering of discourse stages and the extent to which certain elements function as central components of sermon organisation. In addressing this aim, the study considers the following questions: what structural elements occur consistently across Nigerian sermons? which stages appear to function as obligatory components of the genre? how optional elements vary across denominational traditions? and how does the identified structural configuration contribute to understanding sermon discourse as a staged communicative practice?

Literature Review

Research within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) treats texts as structured forms of social action rather than as isolated linguistic products.[16] From this perspective, discourse is shaped by the communicative purposes that speakers intend to achieve within particular institutional contexts. Halliday and Hasan argue that language use reflects patterned choices that are conditioned by social situation, and these patterns often become conventionalised within recurring communicative activities.[17] Genre, therefore, is not simply a textual category but a socially recognised way of organising meaning. This understanding provides the theoretical basis for examining sermon discourse as a structured communicative practice rather than an instance of spontaneous speech.

Within this tradition, Hasan introduced the concept of Generic Structure Potential (GSP) to account for the regularities that emerge across texts belonging to the same genre.[18] Hasan's work demonstrates that genres can be described in terms of structural elements that tend to occur in predictable sequences, even though not every element appears in every instance of the text type. Her analysis of narrative texts shows that some structural components are obligatory, while others remain optional but recurrent enough to be recognised as part of the genre's structural potential. The relevance of this distinction lies in the fact that it allows variation to occur without undermining the recognisability of the genre itself. In other words, the absence of a particular element does not necessarily signal a different genre, provided that the core structural configuration remains intact.

Later developments in genre theory reinforce the relationship between discourse structure and communicative purpose. Swales observes that genres develop conventionalised organisational patterns because members of discourse communities rely on shared expectations in order to interpret texts efficiently.[19] Similarly, Bhatia shows that professional discourse often follows relatively stable rhetorical sequences that guide interpretation and constrain

[16] Halliday, Language as Social Semiotic, 31.
[17] Halliday and Hasan, Language, Context, and Text, 10.
[18] Hasan, "The Nursery Tale as a Genre," 71–72.
[19] John M. Swales, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 52.

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variation.[20] Martin, working within the SFL tradition, emphasises that genres unfold through staged progression, with each stage contributing to the realisation of the overall communicative goal.[21] These perspectives support the view that structural organisation is not accidental but motivated by the need to achieve particular social outcomes. Nigerian discourse scholars have also emphasised the relationship between language use, social context, and communicative purpose in the interpretation of texts.[22]

Applications of GSP analysis across discourse types demonstrate that staged organisation can be identified in both spoken and written communication. Research on institutional discourse in Nigeria has similarly shown that communicative events often exhibit predictable structural stages that contribute to the achievement of discourse goals.[23]Paltridge shows that academic texts exhibit predictable structural elements that reflect disciplinary expectations.[24]Eggins and Slade similarly demonstrate that casual conversation contains identifiable organisational patterns, despite appearing relatively spontaneous.[25] These studies indicate that the presence of structural patterning is not limited to highly formal texts but can also be observed in interactive spoken discourse. The implication for sermon analysis is that spoken religious texts may also display patterned organisation, even when delivery appears conversational or extemporaneous.

Research on religious discourse has drawn attention to the persuasive and interpretive functions of sermons. Crystal and Davy observe that religious language often reflects institutional conventions that shape both form and style.[26] McCullough describes preaching as a communicative activity that integrates explanation of scriptural material with guidance directed towards listeners' conduct.[27] Within the Nigerian context, Taiwo identifies linguistic strategies used by preachers to elicit responses from congregations, including directives and rhetorical repetition.[28]Adedun also notes that sermon discourse frequently combines interpretation of biblical texts with exhortative language intended to influence belief and behaviour.[29] These observations indicate that sermons are organised in ways that support both interpretation and persuasion.

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[20] Vijay K. Bhatia, *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings* (London: Longman, 1993), 13.
[21]Martin, *"English Text: System and Structure,"* 45–47.
[22]Adebola A. Adebileje and Florence O. Daniel, "Language and Society in Text: Analysing Ahmed Yerima'sPari," *International Journal of Research Studies in Education* 9, no. 2 (2020): 19–29.
[23]Florence O. Daniel and Foluke O. Unuabonah, "The Generic Structure Potential of Procedure-Based Nigerian Supreme Court Judgements," *Journal of English Scholars Association of Nigeria* 22, no. 2 (2020): 143–159.
[24] Brian Paltridge, Genre, Frames and Writing in Research Settings (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997), 64.
[25] Suzanne Eggins and Diana Slade, *Analysing Casual Conversation* (London: Cassell, 1997), 230.
[26] Crystal and Davy, Investigating English Style, 154.
[27] McCullough, The Art of Preaching, 22.
[28]Taiwo, "Response Elicitation in English-Medium Christian Sermons," 760–763.
[29]Adedun, "A Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Christian Sermons in Nigeria," 8.

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Variation in preaching style across denominations has also been documented in studies of Nigerian Christian discourse. Oha discovered that religious speech often reflects broader sociocultural patterns of communication, including emphasis on collective participation.[30]Taiwo observes that Pentecostal sermons frequently incorporate interactive elements that encourage audience involvement. Such differences suggest that structural organisation may not be uniform across denominational traditions, even where communicative goals remain similar.[31] Genre analysis therefore provides a useful framework for identifying both shared organisational features and context-dependent variation.

Although corpus linguistic research has made it possible to identify recurrent lexical and grammatical patterns across large collections of texts, frequency patterns alone do not fully explain how discourse achieves coherence at the level of structure.[32] GSP analysis addresses this limitation by focusing on the sequencing of functional elements rather than on isolated linguistic features. Hasan emphasises that identifying structural potential requires analysis of multiple texts in order to determine which elements recur consistently enough to be considered characteristic of the genre.[33] This approach is particularly relevant to sermon discourse, where meaning unfolds through a progression of interpretive and directive stages.

Despite the relevance of genre theory for analysing institutional discourse, relatively limited attention has been given to the structural organisation of Nigerian Christian sermons using the GSP framework. Previous studies have tended to focus on rhetorical strategies or pragmatic features, leaving the staged configuration of sermon discourse less clearly described. Examining sermons through the lens of Generic Structure Potential therefore provides an opportunity to identify how structural organisation contributes to the communicative function of preaching across denominational contexts.

Methodology

This study employs Generic Structure Potential (GSP) analysis to examine the structural organisation of selected Nigerian sermons. GSP provides a systematic framework for identifying the sequence of obligatory and optional elements in a discourse genre, highlighting how communicative purposes are realised through linguistic and rhetorical choices.[34] The approach is particularly suited to sermon analysis, as sermons are structured communicative events designed to inform, persuade, and guide listeners.

The dataset consists of thirty sermons representing multiple denominational traditions in Nigeria, selected purposively to capture variation in preaching

[30]Oha, "Language in War Situation," 49.
[31]Taiwo, "Response Elicitation in English-Medium Christian Sermons," 764.
[32]Biber, Conrad, and Reppen, Corpus Linguistics, 12; McEnery and Hardie, Corpus Linguistics, 5.
[33] Hasan, "The Nursery Tale as a Genre," 74.
[34]Vijay K. Bhatia, *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings* (London: Longman, 1993), 16; J.R. Martin, "Genre and Language," in *Genre and Institutions*, ed. F. Christie (London: Cassell, 2009), 13.

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style, theological orientation, and audience engagement. Each sermon was transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic and rhetorical features essential for structural analysis. The texts were then examined to identify recurring stages and moves, including introductory elements, thematic presentation, doctrinal exposition, illustrative examples, exhortation, and conclusion. Emphasis was placed on both obligatory elements, which appear in all or most sermons, and optional elements, which may vary depending on denominational style or preacher emphasis.

Analysis followed a stage-by-stage GSP framework. Each sermon was coded for the presence, order, and linguistic realisation of structural elements. This included identifying textual markers such as signals of transition, emphasis, and evaluation. Interpretive attention was given to how each stage contributes to the overall communicative purpose of the sermon, particularly in terms of persuasion, moral instruction, and audience alignment.

To enhance analytical consistency, the identification of structural stages was guided by clearly defined functional criteria derived from Hasan's GSP framework.[35] Each sermon was examined multiple times to ensure that the classification of stages revealed their communicative function within the discourse. Therefore, this approach provides a clear framework for understanding how Nigerian sermons are organised to achieve their rhetorical and communicative aims, while highlighting variation across denominational traditions.

Results and Discussion

Generic Structure of Nigerian Sermons

The study examined thirty sermons from ten different denominations. Based on the dataset, the proposed generic structure is as follows:

(OC) ^ (BR) ^ (OP) ^ ToM ^ Msg ^ (CtA) ^ {D} ^ (CtR) ^ (HC) ^ (CP)

In this representation, the caret symbol (^) indicates sequential progression of sermon stages, showing how discourse unfolds in a linear order from one functional move to another. Elements enclosed in round brackets ( ) represent optional stages that may occur in some sermons but are not structurally required for the realisation of the genre. Curly brackets { } indicate recursive elements, which may occur more than once within a single sermon depending on rhetorical emphasis and communicative need. In the present dataset, Declaration (D) is the only stage identified as recursive due to its repeated use as a performative and affirmational strategy in sermon delivery.

Table 1: Generic Structure of Nigerian Sermons and Their Function

Stage	Full Name	Function in Sermons
OC	Opening Charge	Sets the tone and establishes initial audience engagement.
BR	Bible Reading	Grounds the sermon in scriptural authority.

[35] Hasan, "The Nursery Tale as a Genre," 71–72.

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OP	Opening Prayer	Prepares the spiritual atmosphere for the sermon.
ToM	The Theme of the Message	Indicates the central focus of the sermon.
Msg	Message	Develops the main teaching or interpretation.
CtA	Call to Action	Encourages audience response and behavioural change.
D	Declaration	Expresses collective faith affirmations.
CtR	Call to Repentance	Invites moral reflection and repentance.
HC	Holy Communion	Enacts doctrinal meaning through ritual practice.
CP	Closing Prayer	Marks the formal conclusion of the sermon.

Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Table 1 further elaborates the functional roles of each stage within the sermon structure. The Theme of the Message (ToM) and Message (Msg) constitute the core obligatory components of the genre, as they occur consistently across all sermons and realise the central interpretive and doctrinal function of sermon discourse. These stages are typically preceded by optional framing elements, such as Opening Charge (OC), Bible Reading (BR), and Opening Prayer (OP), which situate the sermon within a worship context and provide scriptural grounding. Although Bible Reading is highly frequent, its occasional absence indicates that it is better interpreted as a near-obligatory element. The remaining stages function as variable and context-dependent components of sermon organisation. Call to Action (CtA), Call to Repentance (CtR), and Declaration (D) operate as responsive and persuasive moves that contribute to audience engagement and may occur iteratively depending on the preacher's rhetorical strategy. Holy Communion (HC) is restricted to liturgical contexts, while Closing Prayer (CP) functions as a conventional terminal stage marking sermon closure.

Therefore, the structure shows a flexible Generic Structure Potential in which a stable interpretive core is combined with optional and recursive elements. This configuration shows how Nigerian sermons achieve both structural regularity and contextual variation across denominational traditions. These findings align with Systemic Functional Linguistics, which views genre as a staged, goal-oriented form of social action, where textual organisation reflects communicative purpose. This implies that the sermon structure reveals a progression from scriptural grounding to interpretation and audience response, underscoring its dual function of meaning-making and persuasion.

Distribution of Structural Elements in Nigerian Sermons

Table 2: Frequent Distribution of Structural Elements in Nigerian Sermons **(n = 30 sermons)**

Stage	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**	**Interpretation**
Opening Charge (OC)	21	70.0	Common but not structurally required.

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Bible Reading (BR)	28	93.0	Near-obligatory element
Opening Prayer (OP)	17	57.0	Moderately used; context-dependent
The Theme of the Message (ToM)	30	100.0	Structurally central
Message (Msg)	30	100.0	Core of the sermon discourse
Call to Action (CtA)	27	90.0	Strong persuasive function
Declaration (D)	19	63.0	Style-driven, more in Pentecostal settings
Call to Repentance (CtR)	14	47.0	Occurs selectively, often theme-driven
Holy Communion (HC)	8	27.0	Restricted to liturgical contexts
Closing Prayer (CP)	24	80.0	Conventional but not universal

Source: Authors' analysis, 2025

Table 2 shows that Nigerian sermons exhibit a generally stable but flexible structural pattern. The most consistent elements are the Theme of the Message (ToM) and Message (Msg), each occurring in all sermons (100%), which indicate their role as the core obligatory components of the genre. These stages provide the primary framework through which sermon discourse is organised and developed. However, Call to Action (CtA) (90%) and Bible Reading (BR) (93%) also occur with very high frequency, which suggest that they function as near-obligatory elements. Although their absence in a small number of sermons is evident, the finding reveals that they are not strictly required in all instances of the genre. This supports a flexible interpretation of GSP in which some elements are highly recurrent but not universally fixed.

On the other hand, moderately frequent elements include Opening Charge (OC) (70%), Declaration (D) (63%), and Opening Prayer (OP) (57%), which show stylistic and denominational preferences. In contrast, Call to Repentance (CtR) (47%) and Holy Communion (HC) (27%) are clearly optional and context-dependent, with HC largely restricted to liturgical traditions. Closing Prayer (CP) (80%) appears as a conventional but not universal concluding stage, indicating that sermon closure is structurally expected but not fixed in form across all denominations. Therefore, the distribution suggests that Nigerian sermons are organised around a dual structure consisting of a stable core (ToM, Msg) and a set of high-frequency but variable supporting elements (BR, CtA, OC, OP, D, CtR, HC, CP). This agrees that the sermon genre operates with a flexible Generic Structure Potential, where obligatoriness is restricted to core interpretive stages, while other elements vary according to denominational practice and communicative intent.

Denominational Variations in Nigerian Sermon Structure

The analysis demonstrates that while Nigerian sermons share a common structural core, notable variations emerge across denominations, particularly in the use and distribution of optional elements. These differences are largely

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shaped by doctrinal orientation, liturgical tradition, and modes of congregational engagement. For instance, Pentecostal and charismatic churches exhibit the most elaborate and expanded structures. In these settings, elements, such as Opening Charge (OC) and Declaration (D) occur with greater frequency and consistency. The Opening Charge typically functions as an energising prelude, preparing the congregation for active participation, while Declarations serve as performative utterances that reinforce collective belief and spiritual affirmation. The relatively high presence of these elements within the dataset reflects a preaching style that prioritises immediacy, emotional engagement, and audience interaction. In addition, the frequent inclusion of Call to Action (CtA) further underscores the action-oriented and transformative intent of sermons within this tradition.

By contrast, liturgical denominations, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, display a more regulated and predictable structural pattern. Sermons within this category consistently incorporate Bible Reading (BR), the Theme of the Message (ToM), Message (Msg), and often Call to Repentance (CtR), but are more distinctively marked by the inclusion of Holy Communion (HC). Unlike in Pentecostal contexts, where structural flexibility is more evident, the presence and sequencing of elements in liturgical settings are largely determined by established ecclesiastical frameworks. As such, variation is minimal, and optional elements are incorporated in accordance with prescribed service orders rather than individual preacher preference.

Mainline Protestant denominations, including Methodist and Baptist churches, occupy an intermediate position. The data indicate that while these traditions maintain the core structural elements, BR, ToM, and Msg, their use of optional stages such as Declaration (D) and Call to Repentance (CtR) is less consistent. In some instances, these elements are entirely absent, suggesting a more restrained and text-focused preaching style. Opening Prayer (OP) and Closing Prayer (CP), however, remain relatively stable features, reflecting an emphasis on maintaining a formal liturgical frame without the extensive performative additions observed in Pentecostal settings.

Across all denominations, certain elements remain structurally stable. The Theme of the Message (ToM) and Message (Msg) are universally present, while Bible Reading (BR) and Call to Action (CtA) occur with near-universal frequency. This consistency suggests that denominational variation does not extend to the foundational components of sermon discourse but is instead concentrated within the optional and context-sensitive stages.

Functional Interpretation of Stages in Nigerian Sermons

The distribution of structural elements suggests that each stage contributes differently to how meaning is constructed within the sermon. Rather than functioning as fixed steps, these elements work together to move the discourse from scriptural grounding to practical response. Bible Reading (BR) provides the basis upon which the sermon is built. Its high frequency shows that preaching remains strongly tied to scripture, with the biblical text serving as the starting point for interpretation. The Theme of the Message (ToM) then

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narrows this focus, making explicit what the sermon intends to address. This helps to organise the discourse and gives the audience a clear sense of direction. At the centre is the Message (Msg), where the text is explained and related to everyday concerns. This is where the preacher develops meaning, often moving between explanation and application. The consistency of this stage across all sermons reflects its central role in shaping the overall discourse. The movement towards response becomes more evident with the Call to Action (CtA). Its frequent occurrence indicates that sermons are not simply explanatory; they are directed towards influencing behaviour or belief. Where present, the Call to Repentance (CtR) introduces a more specific form of response, usually tied to moral reflection. Its lower frequency suggests that it is used selectively, depending on the emphasis of the message.

Declaration (D) serves a different purpose. It does not extend the argument but reinforces it, often through repeated or collective expressions. Its uneven distribution across the dataset points to its association with particular preaching styles rather than with structural necessity. Other elements, such as Holy Communion (HC), operate within a more restricted context. Its presence reflects denominational practice rather than general sermon structure. In contrast, Opening Prayer (OP) and Closing Prayer (CP) function more broadly as framing devices, marking the beginning and end of the sermon while situating it within a religious setting. Hence, the stages reflect a progression from authority, through interpretation, to response. What varies is not the core purpose of the sermon, but the means through which that purpose is realised.

Recurrent Structural Patterns in Nigerian Sermons

Across the dataset, certain regularities can be observed in how sermons are organised, even though not all elements appear in every case. The structure tends to follow a loose but recognisable progression. In most cases, the sermon begins with preparatory elements such as an Opening Charge (OC) or Opening Prayer (OP), although these are not consistently present. What follows with much greater regularity is the Bible Reading (BR), which introduces the scriptural basis for the message.

The central portion of the sermon is more stable. The Theme of the Message (ToM) is typically stated early, after which the Message (Msg) develops this focus in detail. These two elements form the core around which the rest of the structure is organised, and their presence is consistent across all sermons analysed. The closing stages show more variation. The Call to Action (CtA) appears in most cases and marks a shift towards application. In some sermons, this is followed by Declaration (D) or Call to Repentance (CtR), depending on the emphasis being placed. Where relevant, particularly in more formal settings, Holy Communion (HC) is incorporated before the conclusion.

The sermon usually ends with a Closing Prayer (CP), although this is not universal. Its absence in a few cases suggests that closure can be achieved in different ways, depending on the context. What emerges from this pattern is not a fixed sequence but a consistent core surrounded by flexible elements. The sermons tend to move from scriptural grounding to explanation and then to response, even though the specific components used to achieve this may differ.

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This balance between regularity and variation reflects the broader diversity of Nigerian Christian preaching while maintaining a shared structural logic.

Conclusion

This study examined the Generic Structure Potential (GSP) of Nigerian Christian sermons in order to identify the recurrent structural patterns that characterise sermon discourse across denominational contexts. Findings show that Nigerian sermons exhibit a relatively stable organisational core consisting of the Theme of the Message (ToM), Message (Msg), Bible Reading (BR), and Call to Action (CtA). These elements occur with high frequency across the dataset and appear to function as the central framework through which scriptural interpretation is developed and directed towards audience response.

In addition, the analysis demonstrates that the sermon genre retains a degree of flexibility through the inclusion of optional stages such as Opening Charge (OC), Opening Prayer (OP), Declaration (D), Call to Repentance (CtR), Holy Communion (HC), and Closing Prayer (CP). The distribution of these elements varies across denominations and appears to be influenced by doctrinal orientation, liturgical tradition, and expectations regarding audience participation. Pentecostal sermons tend to incorporate performative elements such as Declaration (D) and Opening Charge (OC) more frequently, reflecting a discourse style that prioritises immediacy and collective engagement. By contrast, liturgical traditions display greater structural regularity, with elements such as Holy Communion (HC) occurring within established ecclesiastical frameworks. Mainline Protestant sermons occupy an intermediate position, maintaining the core structural sequence while showing selective use of optional stages.

These findings contribute to genre studies within Systemic Functional Linguistics by demonstrating that Nigerian Christian sermons can be described through a patterned configuration of obligatory and optional elements that together realise the communicative purpose of religious instruction and persuasion. The identified GSP pattern shows how sermons move from scriptural authority to interpretation and ultimately to audience-oriented response.

Recommendations

A relatively small dataset drawn from selected denominations was used for this study. Future research may consider analysing a larger number of sermons in order to confirm whether the structural pattern identified in this study remains consistent across a wider range of churches. A broader dataset may also make it possible to observe more subtle differences in how particular denominations organise sermon discourse. Further studies may also examine other aspects of sermon communication that were not included in the present analysis, such as voice quality, pauses, audience responses, and other features of spoken interaction. These elements may provide additional insight into how sermons achieve their persuasive effect beyond structural organisation alone. In addition, comparative research involving sermons from other countries or religious traditions may help determine whether the structural pattern

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identified in this study reflects a specifically Nigerian practice or a more general feature of religious discourse. Such studies may contribute to a deeper understanding of how genre structure operates across different cultural and institutional contexts.

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