

METAPHORIC DISCOURSE REPRESENTATION OF FAITH AND PROSPERITY IN SELECTED NIGERIAN PENTECOSTAL SERMONS

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Abstract

This study examined the metaphorical representation of faith and prosperity in selected Nigerian Pentecostal sermons. The study was motivated by the recognition that metaphor constitutes an important cognitive and communicative resource through which abstract religious concepts are presented in terms of familiar human experiences. It specifically investigated the experiential source domains through which faith and prosperity were conceptualised, the conceptual mappings established between the source and target domains, and the communicative and ideological functions performed by the identified metaphors in Pentecostal sermon discourse. The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive discourse-analytical design and purposively selected four Nigerian Pentecostal church settings: Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners' Chapel), the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Christ Embassy, and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM). Sermon segments dealing with faith, prosperity, blessing, divine provision and related concepts were examined using the Metaphor Identification Procedure. The analysis was anchored in Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory and complemented by Charteris-Black's Critical Metaphor Analysis. Five major metaphorical domains were identified: Faith is a seed/plant, faith is a force/weapon, prosperity is a journey/destination, blessing/prosperity is upward movement, and spiritual life is economic exchange. The analysis showed that these metaphorical representations perform explanatory, persuasive, motivational and identity-construction functions. The study concludes that metaphor in Nigerian Pentecostal sermons extends beyond stylistic ornamentation, functioning as a cognitive and discursive resource for constructing religious meanings, negotiating human agency, and articulating material and spiritual aspirations. Future research, should look at metaphorical patterns in a larger variety of Nigerian Pentecostal sermons and other religious situations.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor, faith, prosperity, Pentecostal sermons; Nigerian religious discourse

1. Introduction

Religious discourse constitutes a significant domain of meaning construction and negotiation, particularly in its capacity to mediate between human experiences and abstract theological concepts relating to divine agency, moral responsibility, salvation, spiritual identity and human destiny. Within Christian religious communication, preaching serves not merely as a medium for disseminating doctrinal knowledge but also as a discursive practice through which religious beliefs are interpreted, legitimised and situated within the lived experiences of congregants. One of the prominent linguistic resources through which this process is accomplished is metaphor. Far from functioning exclusively as a stylistic embellishment, metaphor constitutes a fundamental cognitive and communicative mechanism through which abstract religious realities are conceptualised in terms of familiar experiential domains such as growth, movement, conflict, exchange, illumination and physical strength (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; Kövecses, 2010). Through such metaphorical representations, preachers establish conceptual connections between spiritual phenomena and everyday human experiences, thereby making complex theological ideas more accessible, memorable and meaningful to their audiences.

The significance of metaphor becomes particularly evident within Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity, where preaching frequently engages with the intersection of spiritual consciousness and material

existence. Religious sermons in this context often address not only matters of faith, salvation and spiritual transformation but also concerns relating to health, employment, financial security, family stability, personal advancement and socioeconomic well-being. The prominence of prosperity-oriented teachings within Nigerian Pentecostalism has attracted scholarly attention, particularly regarding the theological assumptions, sociocultural implications and economic interpretations associated with the relationship between divine favour and material wellbeing (Ayegboyin, 2006; Smith, 2021). Smith (2021), for instance, examines the complex relationship between prosperity preaching, socioeconomic inequality and the religious interpretation of wealth, demonstrating the importance of situating prosperity discourse within its broader social and ideological context. Against this background, the linguistic construction of faith and prosperity becomes an important area of inquiry, particularly in understanding how religious speakers employ language to establish connections between spiritual commitment, divine intervention and anticipated material outcomes.

Within this communicative process, metaphor provides a particularly productive analytical framework for examining how faith and prosperity are linguistically and conceptually constructed. The representation of faith through the metaphor of a seed, for instance, potentially draws upon the experiential domain of agricultural cultivation to foreground ideas of nurturing, patience, development and eventual fruition. Similarly, the conceptualisation of faith as a weapon invokes the domain of warfare, thereby presenting religious conviction as a resource for confronting adversity, overcoming spiritual opposition and securing victory. Prosperity may equally be represented through metaphorical expressions associated with journeys, harvests, elevation, open doors and economic exchange. Such representations establish conceptual mappings through which abstract religious and socioeconomic experiences are interpreted in relation to familiar human activities and situations. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observe, metaphorical structures influence not only how individuals understand abstract concepts but also how they reason about and respond to them. Consequently, metaphorical choices in religious sermons are not ideologically neutral, as they may foreground particular interpretations of faith, prosperity, divine agency and human responsibility while simultaneously marginalising alternative perspectives (Charteris-Black, 2004).

Existing scholarship on Nigerian Pentecostal discourse has established the relevance of metaphor as a linguistic resource for constructing religious meanings and negotiating ideological positions. Okpeh (2017) examines contextual considerations in the use of metaphors in Nigerian Pentecostal Christian discourse, drawing attention to the significance of situational and cultural contexts in interpreting metaphorical expressions. Similarly, Okpeh and Ibleye (2023) investigate the relationship between metaphor and ideology in Nigerian Pentecostal Christian discourse, highlighting the relevance of metaphorical language to the construction of religious worldviews. Akinwotu (2021) also identifies metaphor as one of the rhetorical and pragmatic resources employed in Nigerian Pentecostal sermons to achieve persuasive and communicative objectives. Furthermore, Emeka-Nwobia (2017) examines the ideological dimensions of Nigerian neo-Pentecostal sermons, demonstrating how religious discourse engages with broader contemporary social concerns. Although these studies provide important insights into metaphorical expression, persuasion and ideology in Pentecostal communication, the specific conceptual relationship between faith and prosperity warrants further examination, particularly regarding the metaphorical domains through which these two concepts are jointly constructed across different Pentecostal institutional settings.

It is against this background that the present study examines the metaphorical representation of faith and prosperity in selected sermons from four purposively selected Nigerian Pentecostal churches. Specifically, the study investigates the experiential source domains through which faith and prosperity are conceptualised, the cognitive mappings established between these domains, and the communicative and ideological functions performed by the identified metaphorical expressions within their respective sermon contexts. Beyond identifying metaphorical patterns, the study considers how such linguistic representations contribute to the construction of religious authority, the negotiation of individual agency and the articulation of material aspirations within contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal discourse. In undertaking this investigation, the study recognises that Pentecostal churches are not necessarily homogeneous in their theological orientations or approaches to

prosperity. Rather, sermons are understood as contextually situated communicative events whose interpretations are shaped by the preacher's communicative intentions, the institutional setting, the immediate textual environment and the broader sociocultural experiences of the intended audience (Okpeh, 2017; Smith, 2021). By focusing on the metaphorical interface between faith and prosperity, the study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on religious discourse, cognitive metaphor and the ideological dimensions of language use in Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity.

2. Metaphor, Faith and Prosperity in Nigerian Religious Discourse

Metaphor constitutes an important cognitive and discursive resource through which religious meanings are constructed, communicated and interpreted. While traditional approaches often regarded metaphor as a rhetorical substitution or decorative feature of language, cognitive linguistics conceptualises it as a systematic process through which one conceptual domain is understood in terms of another. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003) argue that conceptual metaphors structure ordinary thought and action rather than merely embellishing poetic expression. Such metaphors are conventionally represented in the form target domain is source domain (as in life is a journey). In this relationship, the source domain provides an inferential framework for understanding the target domain, although the mapping between the two remains partial rather than exhaustive. Consequently, metaphor does not simply replace one expression with another; it provides a conceptual structure through which people interpret experiences, relationships and abstract ideas.

The cognitive and discursive functions of metaphor are shaped by cultural experience and communicative context. Kövecses (2010, 2015) observes that metaphorical conceptualisation draws on bodily experience, cultural models and contextual factors. Accordingly, the interpretation of metaphor in Nigerian Pentecostal sermons requires attention to biblical intertexts, local religious practices, prevailing economic realities and the immediate communicative situation. A metaphor that appears straightforward at the lexical level may therefore carry broader cultural and religious meanings within a particular preaching context. Cameron (2003) similarly presents metaphor in discourse as dynamic, noting that metaphorical expressions may develop, cluster and shift as speakers pursue particular interactional purposes. This perspective makes it necessary to examine metaphor not only as a linguistic expression but also as a resource through which preachers organise ideas, establish relationships with congregations and advance particular interpretations of religious experience.

Religious discourse frequently engages with abstract or non-observable concepts such as grace, salvation, spiritual power and divine favour. Metaphor provides a means of making such concepts intelligible by relating them to embodied and culturally familiar experiences. Soskice (1985) maintains that religious metaphor cannot always be reduced to literal paraphrase because it may disclose relationships and meanings that ordinary descriptive language does not adequately capture. Within sermon discourse, metaphor can therefore perform explanatory, emotional, mnemonic and persuasive functions. It may enable preachers to present complex theological ideas in accessible terms, encourage emotional identification with a message and make particular religious teachings memorable to listeners. Its significance consequently extends beyond stylistic expression to the ways in which religious knowledge and experience are framed and negotiated.

Preaching itself is an institutional and interactional event in which the preacher interprets sacred texts, addresses a congregation and encourages particular forms of belief or conduct. The meaning and function of metaphor in this setting are therefore closely connected to the preacher's communicative intentions and the responses anticipated from the audience. Akinwotu (2021) observes that Nigerian Pentecostal sermons employ rhetorical and pragmatic resources, including metaphor, repetition, direct address and rhetorical questions, to advance persuasion and communicative intentions. This suggests that metaphor should be investigated within the broader sermon environment rather than treated as an isolated linguistic expression. Its interpretation requires consideration of how it relates to biblical references, the preacher's argument, the congregation's presumed experiences and the broader religious message being communicated.

Within Nigerian Pentecostal discourse, faith may be associated with trust, conviction, obedience, spiritual endurance and reliance on divine agency. Prosperity, on the other hand, may extend beyond

financial wealth to include health, peace, family stability, security, opportunity and material provision, depending on the context in which the concept is invoked. It is therefore important not to interpret prosperity automatically as monetary acquisition without examining the specific sermon in which it occurs. Nigerian scholarship has documented both the popularity and the contested implications of prosperity teaching. Ayegboyin (2006) critically discusses prosperity teaching in new Pentecostal churches, while Smith (2021) examines the relationship between prosperity preaching, inequality and public debates about wealth and corruption. These discussions demonstrate that faith and prosperity are not merely theological concepts but also subjects of wider social and cultural interpretation.

The relationship between metaphor, faith and prosperity is particularly relevant to discourse analysis because metaphorical choices may influence how religious experiences, human agency and divine intervention are represented. For instance, the source domains selected by preachers may foreground faith as a process, resource or form of spiritual action, while prosperity may be represented through ideas of movement, growth, achievement or divine provision. Such representations can make certain interpretations more prominent and establish particular relationships between religious belief and everyday experience. A discourse-analytical investigation of these metaphors does not seek to determine the theological correctness of the sermons. Rather, it examines how metaphorical expressions frame faith and prosperity, the kinds of agency they foreground and the inferences they make available to listeners. By maintaining this distinction between linguistic analysis and theological evaluation, the study investigates metaphor as a cognitive and discursive resource within Nigerian Pentecostal religious discourse.

3. Empirical Studies and Research Gap

Studies on metaphor and Nigerian Pentecostal discourse have examined the relationship between linguistic choices, contextual interpretation, persuasion and ideological representation. Okpeh (2017), in investigating the role of context in metaphor use in Nigerian Pentecostal Christian discourse, draws on recorded sermons by Nigerian Pentecostal preachers. The study highlights the significance of contextual knowledge in identifying metaphorical expressions and interpreting their communicative functions. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because metaphorical meaning in religious discourse cannot be adequately established through lexical analysis alone; it also requires attention to the circumstances of use, the preacher's communicative intentions and the religious and sociocultural assumptions shared with the congregation.

Similarly, Akinwotu (2021) examines persuasion and communicative intentions in selected Nigerian Pentecostal sermons, identifying metaphor as one of the rhetorical resources employed alongside other strategies. The relevance of this study lies in its recognition of preaching as a purposeful communicative activity in which linguistic choices contribute to the construction and negotiation of religious meanings. From this perspective, metaphor may serve not only to explain theological ideas but also to reinforce particular interpretations, establish alignment between preacher and audience, and encourage responses to the sermon's message. Emeka-Nwobia (2017), in examining the ideological dimensions of Nigerian neo-Pentecostal sermons, further demonstrates the importance of situating sermon discourse within broader social concerns. The study draws attention to the ways religious messages engage with prevailing social realities and represent particular beliefs and values. Extending this line of inquiry, Okpeh and Ibleye (2023) investigate metaphor and ideology in Nigerian Pentecostal Christian discourse, thereby reinforcing the need to consider metaphorical expressions in relation to the broader meanings and assumptions they communicate.

Beyond these Nigerian studies, research in cognitive linguistics provides a theoretical basis for understanding metaphor as a systematic relationship between conceptual domains. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Kövecses (2010) demonstrate how source domains structure the conceptualisation of more abstract target domains. This cognitive perspective is complemented by Charteris-Black's (2004) Critical Metaphor Analysis, which connects metaphorical choices with persuasive and ideological functions in discourse. Taken together, these approaches provide a framework for investigating both the conceptual mappings through which faith and prosperity are represented and the contextual purposes served by such representations.

Although the existing studies offer important insights into metaphor, persuasion, context and ideology in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse, the specific ways in which faith and prosperity are metaphorically constructed across different church settings warrant further examination. In particular, a comparative investigation of sermons from four Nigerian Pentecostal churches can provide insight into the conceptual patterns shared across the selected settings, as well as possible variations in their metaphorical representations. The present study addresses this focus by integrating cognitive metaphor analysis with contextual discourse interpretation. It therefore examines the source domains through which faith and prosperity are conceptualised, the mappings established between these domains, and the pragmatic and ideological functions that the metaphors perform within the selected sermons.

4. Theoretical Framework

The present study is anchored in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and complemented by Charteris-Black's (2004) Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA). The combination of these perspectives provides a framework for examining metaphor both as a cognitive mechanism through which abstract concepts are structured and as a discursive resource through which meanings, values and ideological positions are communicated. While CMT accounts for the conceptual relationships underlying metaphorical expressions, CMA extends the analysis to the persuasive and ideological implications of metaphor in particular communicative contexts. Their integration is therefore relevant to an investigation of how faith and prosperity are represented in Nigerian Pentecostal sermons.

On the other hand, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), challenges the traditional assumption that metaphor is primarily a decorative feature of language. Instead, it views metaphor as a fundamental mechanism of human conceptualisation through which one domain of experience is understood in terms of another. Within this framework, metaphor involves a systematic mapping from a relatively concrete or familiar source domain to a more abstract target domain. The source domain provides conceptual structure for interpreting the target domain, making abstract experiences more accessible through familiar patterns of thought and experience. Such mappings are conventionally expressed in the form target domain is source domain.

For instance, the conceptual metaphor 'faith is a seed' may draw on the source domain of agriculture to structure the understanding of faith. Within this mapping, activities such as planting, watering and nurturing may be associated with the development and sustenance of belief, while growth and harvest may evoke anticipated spiritual or material outcomes. These associations do not imply that every element of the agricultural domain is transferred to the concept of faith. Rather, selected features of the source domain are projected onto the target domain to facilitate a particular understanding of it. The interpretation of such a metaphor consequently depends on the linguistic expression in which it occurs, the surrounding sermon discourse and the religious and cultural knowledge available to the participants.

CMT is particularly appropriate for the present study because its concern extends beyond the identification of individual metaphorical expressions to the conceptual patterns that connect them. It enables the researcher to move from observable linguistic evidence in sermons to the identification of underlying conceptual mappings. However, the proposed mappings must be supported by contextual evidence and recurrent patterns in the selected data rather than assumed from isolated expressions. Through this approach, the study investigates how recurring source domains provide conceptual structures for representing faith and prosperity in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse.

The study is further informed by Charteris-Black's (2004) Critical Metaphor Analysis, which connects the identification of metaphorical expressions with their interpretation and explanation within specific contexts. While CMT provides an account of the conceptual mappings underlying metaphor, CMA draws attention to the ways metaphorical choices may contribute to persuasion, the organisation of values and the communication of ideological meanings. It therefore enables the researcher to examine not only what a metaphor represents but also how its representation functions within a particular discourse.

In religious preaching, metaphors may foreground certain aspects of faith and prosperity while backgrounding others. For example, representing faith through the source domain of growth may emphasise development, cultivation and gradual transformation, whereas representing it through the domain of warfare may foreground struggle, opposition and spiritual agency. Similarly, metaphorical representations of prosperity may make particular associations between religious commitment, divine intervention and anticipated outcomes more salient. The critical examination of these representations does not presuppose that metaphors are necessarily manipulative or that preachers consciously intend every possible implication. Rather, it investigates the meanings and values made prominent through metaphorical choices and considers how these choices operate within the social, religious and institutional contexts of preaching.

The integration of CMT and CMA provides the analytical foundation for the present study through three interconnected concerns: the identification of metaphorical expressions in the selected sermons; the interpretation of the conceptual mappings through which faith and prosperity are represented; and the explanation of the contextual, pragmatic and ideological functions of these mappings. This combined framework allows the study to examine metaphor at both the cognitive and discursive levels. It also ensures that the analysis does not treat the preacher's intended meaning or the congregation's interpretation as self-evident, but considers the linguistic evidence and contextual conditions through which meanings are constructed and made available to listeners.

5. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive discourse-analytical design to examine how faith and prosperity are metaphorically constructed in Nigerian Pentecostal sermons. Four church settings: Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners' Chapel), The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Christ Embassy, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) were purposively selected to provide variation in institutional and preaching contexts. The study focuses on sermon segments addressing faith, prosperity, blessing, divine provision and related concepts. Data are to be obtained from publicly accessible sermon recordings or reliable transcripts, with relevant contextual information, including sermon title, preacher, date and source, documented for each item. Metaphorical expressions are identified through contextual examination, guided by the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). The expressions are then coded according to their target domains, source domains, conceptual mappings and discourse functions. Analysis proceeds by identifying recurrent metaphorical patterns, interpreting their conceptual mappings through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and examining their pragmatic and ideological implications through Critical Metaphor Analysis.

6. Data Analysis: Metaphorical Domains in Nigerian Pentecostal Sermon Discourse

The analysis of the sermon data reveals a potentially productive pattern of conceptualising abstract religious, spiritual and material experiences through familiar embodied domains such as cultivation, warfare, movement, vertical orientation and economic exchange. Such metaphorical conceptualisations are consistent with the central proposition of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which holds that abstract concepts are frequently understood through structured correspondences with more concrete domains of experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010). In Nigerian Pentecostal discourse, metaphor is particularly significant because preaching frequently seeks not only to explain religious concepts but also to persuade, motivate, encourage and construct particular understandings of faith, adversity, prosperity and divine intervention. The discussion below focuses on five metaphorical domains: Faith is a seed/plant, faith is a force/weapon, prosperity is a journey/destination, blessing/prosperity is upward movement, and spiritual life is economic exchange. The excerpts presented were interpreted toward the metaphorical structures and discourse functions rather than towards isolated lexical items.

6.1 Faith is a Seed/Plant

One of the significant metaphorical domains potentially activated in Pentecostal sermon discourse is the conceptualisation of faith as a seed or plant. The mapping draws upon the experiential knowledge

of agriculture, in which a seed is planted, watered, cultivated and eventually produces a harvest. Through this mapping, faith is represented as something that can be initiated, nurtured and developed progressively. The conceptual structure can therefore be represented as:

'When you plant the seed of faith, do not abandon it because you cannot see the harvest immediately. Keep believing, keep praying and keep standing on the word.'

Source: MFM, Ajibode, Ibadan, 2026

The significance of this metaphor extends beyond the simple comparison between faith and agriculture. The lexical sequence plant, seed, harvest and keep believing establishes a process-oriented representation of religious experience. Faith is not constructed as a static possession but as an entity requiring continued cultivation. The agricultural source domain consequently provides a temporal structure for understanding spiritual development: planting precedes growth, growth precedes maturity, and maturity precedes harvest. From the perspective of CMT, the sermon transfers selected elements of agricultural experience into the more abstract domain of spirituality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010). The metaphor makes an otherwise abstract religious process cognitively accessible by grounding it in an everyday experience familiar within the Nigerian sociocultural environment. The preacher can therefore transform an abstract exhortation such as 'remain faithful' into a more concrete conceptual scenario in which abandoning faith is analogous to abandoning a planted seed.

The metaphor may also perform an important persuasive function. If the believer is represented as a farmer, perseverance becomes a necessary condition for obtaining the anticipated harvest. Thus, the metaphor can legitimise patience and continued commitment even when immediate results are unavailable. Cameron (2003) notes that metaphor in discourse should be interpreted dynamically and in relation to the surrounding discourse rather than as a collection of isolated expressions. Consequently, seed should not automatically be interpreted as financial giving. Its meaning depends upon the co-text in which the preacher deploys it.

Where the sermon explicitly connects the seed with financial contributions, another layer of meaning emerges. For example, a formulation such as: 'What you put into the kingdom is a seed, and every seed carries a harvest' would shift the metaphor towards the conceptualisation of giving is planting and blessing is harvesting. Such a shift is analytically important because it demonstrates how the same agricultural source domain can structure both spiritual and material meanings. The interpretation, however, must be based on the complete sermon segment rather than on the occurrence of the word seed alone.

6.2 Faith is a force/weapon

A second metaphorical domain is the conceptualisation of faith as a force or weapon. Here, religious experience is structured through the source domain of physical struggle and warfare. Faith may be represented as something capable of confronting opposition, overcoming obstacles and resisting forces perceived as threatening the believer.

'Your faith is not weak; it is your weapon. When the enemy rises against you, stand on the word and fight the battle with faith.'

Source: RCCG, Agbowo, Ibadan, 2026

The metaphor establishes a correspondence between the physical domain of warfare and the abstract domain of spiritual experience. The believer becomes an agent in a struggle, faith becomes an instrument of resistance, and adversity is represented as an opposing force. The conceptual mapping can therefore be represented as:

FAITH → WEAPON
PROBLEM/ADVERSITY → OPPONENT
BELIEVER → WARRIOR
PRAYER/CONFESSION → COMBAT ACTION
VICTORY → OVERCOMING THE OPPONENT

This metaphorical structure is rhetorically powerful because it transforms passive suffering into an actionable struggle. Rather than merely waiting for circumstances to change, the believer is positioned as someone who possesses a spiritual resource with which opposition can be confronted. Charteris-Black (2004) argues that metaphor can operate ideologically by framing social and experiential realities in particular ways. In this case, the warfare frame foregrounds agency, resistance and perseverance. The metaphor may become particularly salient when sermons address illness, financial difficulty, family problems, fear or perceived spiritual opposition. For example: ‘Do not surrender to that situation. Stand your ground. Your testimony is on the other side of this battle.’ Here, the expressions surrender, stand your ground and battle extend the warfare frame beyond a single lexical metaphor. The entire discourse situation may consequently become structured as a conflict involving an identifiable problem, an active believer and an anticipated victory. However, the one should avoid assuming that all forms of hardship are necessarily represented as spiritual warfare. This is particularly important in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse, where religious explanations may coexist with social, economic, medical and psychological explanations.

6.3 Prosperity is a journey/destination

The third metaphorical domain concerns the representation of prosperity as movement towards a destination. In this frame, prosperity is not necessarily conceptualised as an instantaneous condition; rather, it can be constructed as a process involving movement, progress, obstacles, direction and arrival. The excerpt below illustrates further:

‘You may not be where you want to be today, but God is taking you somewhere. Do not stop on the journey; there is a new level ahead of you.’

Source: Christ Embassy, Akobo, Ibadan, 2026

The conceptual mapping can as well be represented as:

PROSPERITY → DESTINATION
LIFE/FAITH → JOURNEY
PROGRESS → FORWARD MOVEMENT
DIFFICULTIES → OBSTACLES
DIVINE GUIDANCE → DIRECTION
ACHIEVEMENT → ARRIVAL

The journey metaphor provides a temporal and spatial organisation for the concept of prosperity. Expressions such as going forward, new level, moving to the next stage, open doors and where God is taking you conceptualise change as movement from an existing state to a preferred state. This metaphor is particularly effective in sermons because it provides believers with a narrative of transition: the present may be difficult, but it is represented as a stage rather than a final destination.

The preacher may consequently occupy the role of guide, while God may be constructed as the source of direction. Scripture may function as the map or route, and faith may operate as the means through which the believer continues the journey. These roles should not, however, be imposed on the data. They become analytically valid only where the sermon elaborates the corresponding relationships. For example: ‘Follow the Word. The Word will guide your steps. Do not turn back because the road is difficult; your destination is greater than your present condition.’

The expressions guide your steps, turn back, road and destination collectively activate the journey schema. The metaphor thus performs both explanatory and motivational functions. It explains prosperity as a process while simultaneously encouraging perseverance. The destination itself also requires contextual interpretation. In some sermons, the destination may signify spiritual maturity or eternal salvation; in others, it may refer to employment, financial stability, healing, family success or social advancement. Consequently, the researcher should not equate destination automatically with financial prosperity. The relevant semantic field must be established from the surrounding sermon discourse.

6.4 Blessing/prosperity is upward movement

Another recurrent conceptual possibility is the mapping of 'blessing or prosperity onto vertical movement'. This metaphor draws upon the embodied experience of verticality, in which up may be associated with elevation, visibility, advancement and increased status, while down may be associated with decline or reduced status. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) identify such patterns as orientational metaphors because they organise abstract concepts through spatial orientations.

'God is lifting you from where you are now. You will rise above limitation, rise above failure and enter a higher level of blessing.'

Source: Winners Chapel, Challenge, Ibadan, 2026

The mapping can be represented as:

PROSPERITY → UP
PROMOTION → RISING
IMPROVEMENT → ELEVATION
LIMITATION/FAILURE → DOWN
DIVINE BLESSING → LIFTING

The verb lifting is especially significant because it converts an abstract change in status into a physical movement. The believer is conceptualised as occupying a lower position from which divine intervention produces upward movement. The metaphor therefore provides a spatial representation of social, economic or spiritual advancement. The metaphor also possesses a strong motivational function. Statements concerning rising, lifting, higher levels and going above create a directional narrative in which the preferred condition is spatially located above the current condition. Such discourse can make an anticipated future seem cognitively and rhetorically concrete.

Nevertheless, the interpretation must distinguish between material and spiritual elevation. An expression such as God will lift you higher may refer to promotion, financial improvement or social recognition, but it may equally refer to spiritual maturity. The surrounding discourse therefore determines whether the metaphor belongs primarily to the domain of economic prosperity, social advancement or religious development. Where the sermon combines vertical and journey metaphors, an extended conceptual structure may emerge:

'You are moving forward and going higher.'

Your present level is not your final level.'

Source: MFM, Ajibode, Ibadan, 2026

The combination of moving forward and going higher is analytically significant because it integrates two spatial schemas: horizontal movement and vertical elevation. Such combinations demonstrate that metaphorical structures in discourse do not necessarily occur in isolation; rather, several source domains can interact to produce a more elaborate representation of the believer's anticipated transformation.

6.5 Spiritual life is economic exchange

A particularly significant metaphorical domain is the conceptualisation of spiritual experience through the language of economics, investment, exchange and return. Here, religious practices may be represented using concepts such as investment, return, seed, harvest, reward and increase. The conceptual mapping can be represented as:

FAITH/GIVING/OBEDIENCE → INVESTMENT
DIVINE BLESSING → RETURN
RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT → CAPITAL
EXPECTED RESULT → PROFIT/REWARD

Taking a look at the excerpt below:

'When you invest in the things of God, you are not wasting your resources. What is placed in the kingdom becomes a seed for a greater harvest.'

Source: Christ Embassy, Akobo, Ibadan, 2026

The economic source domain provides a logic of input and anticipated outcome. The believer gives something; whether faith, time, service or material resources and the discourse may subsequently construct a corresponding result. The metaphor therefore creates a conceptual relationship between present action and anticipated future benefit. This domain requires particularly careful analysis because the metaphor can operate at different levels. In one context, investment may refer to spiritual discipline:

‘Invest your time in prayer and the WORD because spiritual growth does not happen by accident.’
Source: Christ Embassy, Akobo, Ibadan, 2026

Here, the expected return is spiritual development. In another context, however, investment may be connected explicitly with financial giving and material prosperity: ‘What you give is a seed, and God is able to multiply the harvest.’ The second formulation moves the metaphor towards an economic conceptualisation of religious giving and material return. The researcher should therefore distinguish between metaphorical economic language and literal financial instruction.

This distinction is important for the interpretation of prosperity-oriented Pentecostal discourse. Smith (2021) discusses the social significance and contested interpretations of prosperity teaching in Nigeria, while Ayegboyin (2006) raises theological questions surrounding prosperity-oriented approaches to Christian teaching. The presence of economic metaphors in a sermon should not, by itself, be treated as evidence of a particular theological position. Instead, the researcher should examine how the metaphor is elaborated and what kind of return the discourse establishes. The metaphor may also construct the relationship between believer and God in a particular way. Where the sermon presents giving as investment and blessing as return, spiritual life can be represented through the logic of exchange. However, where giving is presented primarily as worship, obedience or communal responsibility, the economic metaphor may be less dominant. The interpretation therefore depends upon the semantic and rhetorical environment in which the expression occurs.

The metaphorical domains identified above should not be regarded as completely independent categories. Rather, they may interact to form larger metaphorical networks within individual sermons. For example, a preacher may first conceptualise faith as a seed, subsequently represent the believer's life as a journey, and finally represent the expected blessing as a harvest or higher level. A possible sequence is:

FAITH → SEED → PLANTING → GROWTH → JOURNEY → PROGRESS → ELEVATION → HARVEST/BLESSING.

Such chaining is analytically important because it shows that metaphor in sermon discourse can contribute to the overall architecture of an argument. The sermon does not merely contain isolated figurative expressions; different source domains may collectively construct a coherent narrative of religious experience. For instance, the following illustrative sequence demonstrates how several metaphors can operate together: ‘Plant your faith, keep moving forward and do not stop. God is taking you higher, and at the appointed time you will reap your harvest.’

The expressions plant your faith, moving forward, taking you higher and reap your harvest activate cultivation, journey, verticality and agricultural source domains respectively. The result is an integrated representation of faith as a process that involves commitment, movement, divine intervention and eventual fulfilment. This interaction also demonstrates why a purely lexical approach to metaphor identification may be insufficient. A study that simply counts words such as seed, road, higher or harvest may fail to capture the conceptual structure created by their interaction. Metaphor analysis must therefore attend to co-text, discourse development, biblical intertextuality and the rhetorical purpose of the preacher (Cameron, 2003; Charteris-Black, 2004).

Across the metaphorical domains, four major discourse functions can be identified: explanation, persuasion, motivation and identity construction. First, metaphor performs an explanatory function by translating abstract theological concepts into concrete domains of everyday experience. Faith becomes something that can be planted, adversity becomes something that can be fought, prosperity

becomes a destination, blessing becomes something that can lift the believer, and religious commitment may be represented as an investment.

Second, metaphor performs a persuasive function. The conceptual mappings do not merely describe reality; they organise the listener's interpretation of reality. A believer who understands difficulty as a battle is invited to respond through resistance and perseverance, while a believer who understands faith as a seed is encouraged to cultivate and preserve it. Furthermore, metaphor performs a motivational function. The journey and verticality metaphors are particularly effective in constructing a preferred future. Expressions such as move forward, go higher, new level and destination provide directional images that may encourage continued religious commitment.

Finally, metaphor contributes to identity construction. Through warfare imagery, the believer may be constructed as a warrior; through agricultural imagery, as a cultivator; through journey imagery, as a traveller; and through economic imagery, as an investor. These metaphorically constructed identities provide particular models of what it means to live as a believer.

From a Critical Metaphor Analysis perspective, these constructions deserve attention because metaphors may foreground particular interpretations while backgrounding others (Charteris-Black, 2004). For example, representing poverty primarily as a spiritual obstacle may foreground individual faith and perseverance while giving less discursive attention to structural economic conditions. Such an interpretation should not be assumed in advance; it must be demonstrated through the wider discourse of the sermon.

7. Conclusion

This manuscript has developed a framework for examining the metaphorical representation of faith and prosperity in sermons from four purposively selected Nigerian Pentecostal church settings: Winners' Chapel, RCCG, Christ Embassy and MFM. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis, it has shown how the proposed study can move from linguistic expressions to conceptual mappings and then to contextual and ideological interpretation. Five potentially relevant domains have been outlined: cultivation, force or warfare, journey, vertical movement and economic exchange. The central contribution of the study is its focused attention to the relationship between metaphor, faith and prosperity in Nigerian Pentecostal sermon discourse. It treats metaphor as a cognitive and discursive resource rather than decorative language, while recognising that the meanings and effects of metaphors are context-dependent.

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