

**FROM RITUAL WORDS TO UNIVERSAL MEANINGS: A
NATURAL SEMANTIC METALANGUAGE ANALYSIS OF THE
NIGERIAN NATIONAL SYMBOL**

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ABSTRACT

Natural language is a human-specific symbolic system for expressing meaning. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), however, is an approach to studying linguistic meaning both in isolation and in context. This study uses quantitative analysis to examine the Nigerian National Pledge and the revived anthem *Nigeria, We Hail Thee*, using the approach developed by Wierzbicka (1972, 1996) and extended by Goddard (2010). NSM proposes that all human languages share a core set of universal concepts known as semantic primes, which provide a culture-independent framework for analysing meaning. The research examines the official English versions of the Pledge and Anthem, coding lexical items into semantic primes and classifying them into the following categories: Substantives, Actions/Events, Evaluation, Relational, Existence/Possession, and Mental/Experiential states. Quantitative procedures involve frequency counts and percentage distributions to identify dominant semantic features, as well as comparative analysis to determine differences between the two texts. The findings reveal that the pledge is dominated by first-person singular pronouns (I) and action-related primes (do, serve, defend), which foreground individual devotion and moral responsibility, while the anthem contains more first-person plural pronouns (we, our) and relational primes (same, other), which highlight collective identity and solidarity. Both texts make consistent use of evaluation primes (good, bad, honour, justice), confirming a shared moral orientation. The results demonstrate that devotion and collective identity are complementary dimensions of Nigeria's national symbols. The study contributes to pragmatic and semantic scholarship by showing that quantitative

NSM analysis provides empirical evidence of how ritualised national texts articulate universal human values while addressing the challenge of unity in a plural society.

KEYWORDS: Natural Semantic Metalanguage, Semantic Primes, Nigerian Pledge, Nigerian Anthem, and quantitative analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Language stands at the heart of human society. It is not only a means of communication but also a vehicle for shaping thought, establishing identity, and sustaining collective memory. Communities use language to transmit values, enforce social norms, and construct shared realities (Duranti, 1997; Blommaert, 2005). No modern state can thrive without linguistic instruments that unify diverse populations and orient them towards common goals. Governments, therefore, ritualise language in symbolic forms such as pledges, anthems, and mottos. These forms are never neutral; they embody ideologies, impose obligations, and cultivate allegiance.

Similarly, Language plays a decisive role in nation-building because it encodes values, regulates relationships, and provides symbolic resources for collective identity. In multilingual states like Nigeria, where ethnic diversity and political fragmentation remain constant challenges, the search for cohesion cannot be separated from the language practices that unite or divide people. National symbols such as the pledge and anthem exist precisely to address this need. They are recited in schools, sung in public ceremonies, and embedded in state rituals with the aim of binding individuals to a larger national community.

National pledges and anthems exemplify this ritual use of language. They are deliberately short, solemn, and repetitive, designed to be easily memorised and recited across generations. Anderson (2006) argues that nations are “imagined communities” sustained by symbols that bind people who may never meet. The anthem and pledge function as such symbols, transforming ordinary words into performative acts that affirm belonging and loyalty. Their daily or ceremonial repetition in schools, parades, and official gatherings emphasises their power as linguistic tools of socialisation.

The Nigerian context makes these ritual texts even more significant. Nigeria’s extreme linguistic diversity, over 500 languages, creates deep challenges for national integration (Igboanusi, 2014; Omoniyi, 2010). Ethnic loyalties often overshadow national identity, while regional tensions threaten unity. In the absence

of a common indigenous lingua franca, the state has turned to symbolic texts in English, the official language, to create a sense of shared belonging. The National Pledge, written in 1976, calls for individual citizens to demonstrate loyalty, service, and moral integrity. The National Anthem was first introduced at independence in 1960 and revived in 2024 to celebrate national pride and collective hope (Akinyemi, 2024). In May 2023, the Nigerian government reinstated *Nigeria, We Hail Thee*, citing its historical resonance and poetic quality. The revival sparked debate, with some commentators questioning whether a text composed by a non-Nigerian could adequately embody contemporary national aspirations (Adebanwi, 2011). Nonetheless, the anthem's linguistic features, particularly its reliance on plural pronouns (*we, our*), reassert its symbolic role as a unifying text that highlights collective identity over individual obligation. Both texts embody the aspiration to transform a fragmented society into a cohesive nation.

Existing scholarship on Nigeria's pledge and anthem, such as Odebode (2020), discussed the socio-pragmatic analyses of *Arise, O Compatriots*, demonstrating how its linguistic choices enact performative functions such as exhortation, prayer, and moral appeal, thereby transforming the anthem into a tool for national mobilisation. In addition, Umoh (2024) examines the illocutionary acts embedded in the *National Pledge* and identifies commissive, directive, and expressive acts that symbolically bind citizens to moral and civic obligations. Similarly, Mohammed and Ayeni (2018) interpret both the anthem and pledge as ideological texts that expose contradictions between the ethical ideals of national unity and the failures of political leadership in practice. Again, Afunugo and Kanu (2024) analyse the 2024 reversion to "*Nigeria, We Hail Thee*" and the surrounding public discourse, arguing that the linguistic revival rekindles colonial nostalgia while simultaneously serving as a rhetorical distraction from pressing socio-economic realities. The studies discuss their history, political significance, or ideological implications, but rarely systematically analyse their semantic structures. This neglect leaves unanswered critical questions: What universal human concepts do these texts encode? How do they linguistically express devotion and solidarity? The risk of overlooking this dimension is that the true linguistic power of the pledge and anthem is reduced to mere symbolism rather than recognised as structured meaning-making. Despite their importance, the pledge and anthem are often treated as ceremonial artefacts rather than as structured linguistic instruments. Scholars have examined their historical development and political symbolism, but few have interrogated their internal semantic structures or their pragmatic force in cultivating belonging. This

neglect creates an incomplete picture of how these texts function. Without systematic semantic analysis, the pledge and anthem risk being misunderstood as static relics rather than dynamic linguistic acts that shape identity and allegiance.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (hence, NSM) framework, introduced by Wierzbicka (1972, 1996) and expanded by Goddard (2010), provides the tools to address this gap. NSM identifies a set of semantic primes, concepts such as *I, you, we, people, say, do, good, bad*, that exist across all languages. These primes are the building blocks of human thought and communication. The analyses of the Nigerian Pledge and Anthem through NSM make it possible to examine their universal semantic patterns, showing how they articulate themes of commitment and unity in ways intelligible across cultures. Unlike rhetorical analysis, NSM reveals the deep structures of meaning, demonstrating that the pledge and anthem are not only political texts but also semantic blueprints for loyalty and cohesion. A quantitative application of NSM further strengthens this claim. Counting and comparing the frequency of semantic primes in the pledge and anthem offers empirical evidence of how devotion and solidarity are encoded. For instance, the prominence of *I* in the pledge reflects its individual orientation, while the prominence of *we* in the anthem highlights collective identity. Such contrasts provide measurable insight into how the texts complement each other in cultivating national cohesion. This empirical approach is especially valuable in a country where debates about unity are often politically charged. A linguistic study grounded in NSM avoids partisan interpretations and demonstrates scientifically how national symbols function at the semantic level.

This study, therefore, situates the Nigerian National Pledge and Anthem as institutionalised linguistic acts that reinforce unity in a deeply divided society. It argues that these texts should not be dismissed as ceremonial relics but understood as enduring semantic resources. Through NSM, the study contributes to semantic theory and to the pressing national question of how language sustains unity in diversity. It applies NSM in a quantitative way to the Nigerian National Pledge and Anthem, demonstrating how universal semantic elements encode devotion and solidarity. The study argues that understanding these texts at the semantic level reveals their enduring role as tools for national cohesion in a linguistically divided country. This study raises the following questions: What semantic primes are present in the Nigerian National Pledge and Anthem as revealed by the Natural Semantic Metalanguage framework? How frequently do these semantic primes occur, and what patterns emerge from their distribution? In what ways does the Nigerian

National Pledge emphasise individual devotion through its semantic composition? How does the Nigerian National Anthem foreground collective identity in contrast to the pledge? What do the quantitative differences between the pledge and anthem reveal about their complementary roles in fostering national cohesion?

This study aims to conduct a quantitative Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) analysis of the Nigerian National Pledge and Anthem to uncover how semantic primes encode devotion and solidarity, and to evaluate their complementary functions in sustaining national cohesion. To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives: identify and classify semantic primes in the Nigerian National Pledge and Anthem using the NSM framework; quantify the frequency and distribution of these semantic primes across the two texts; examine how the semantic design of the pledge encodes devotion and individual moral responsibility; analyse how the anthem encodes solidarity and collective belonging; and compare the quantitative results to demonstrate how the pledge and anthem function together as pragmatic resources for national cohesion.

This study is significant because, at the theoretical level, it extends the application of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework (Wierzbicka, 1972; Goddard, 2010) to the analysis of national symbols in Africa. While NSM has been widely used in cross-cultural semantics, its deployment in studying national pledges and anthems provides an insight into how universal semantic primes are mobilised in state rituals. This study contributes to semantics and discourse analysis, showing that these ritual texts are not merely symbolic but are structured meaning-making devices.

The choice of NSM is justified on three grounds. First, its empirical universality ensures that the analysis avoids cultural bias. Second, its focus on primes makes it suitable for short, ritualised texts like pledges and anthems, which depend on condensed language. Third, NSM enables a quantitative dimension, as primes can be coded, counted, and compared. This aligns with the study's goal of showing how the Pledge and Anthem articulate complementary dimensions of national identity through universal meaning structures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NATURAL SEMANTIC METALANGUAGE (NSM)

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) is the theoretical framework developed to analyse meaning across languages with precision and cultural neutrality. Propounded by Wierzbicka in the 1970s and further advanced by Goddard

(Wierzbicka, 1972, 1996; Goddard, 2010), its central claim is that all human languages share a finite set of semantic primes: irreducible, universal concepts that can serve as building blocks for more complex meanings. These Semantic primes are simple concepts that cannot be broken down into smaller units without loss of meaning. The universality enables the construct reductive paraphrases that capture meaning in a way that avoids ethnocentrism. Primes are grouped into categories such as Substantives (*I, you, someone, people*), Relational terms (*same, other, part, kind*), Actions and Events (*do, happen, move*), Mental/Experiential states (*think, want, know, feel*), Evaluators (*good, bad*), and Quantifiers (*one, two, many*). These categories provide a toolkit for analysing how texts construct agency, identity, and values.

Beyond primes, NSM includes the concept of cultural scripts, which describe how societies codify expected behaviours and values in discourse. The representation of the scripts is the shared vocabulary of semantic primes; NSM offers a way to compare meanings across languages without privileging any one cultural framework (Goddard, 2018). This universality aligns with the idea of a natural semantic grammar that enables researchers to capture how local texts encode universal human experiences.

Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) and Ritualised Texts

NSM has been used to analyse ritualised texts such as prayers, oaths, and pledges. These texts often employ highly compressed, symbolic language that conveys moral and emotional weight. For instance, Wierzbicka (2018) demonstrates how Christian prayers can be paraphrased into semantic primes to reveal their underlying structure of devotion, humility, and trust. Similarly, Bowe (2016) applies NSM to political speeches, showing how leaders encode values like justice, equality, and solidarity in universally comprehensible terms. The application of NSM to the Nigerian National Pledge and Anthem allows for an empirical examination of how these texts articulate devotion, solidarity, and moral values. Rather than treating them as abstract ideological symbols, the NSM framework reveals their semantic value. It clarifies why the meanings resonate not only with Nigerians but with broader human values such as responsibility, justice, and unity.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a quantitative semantic analysis rooted in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework. The design combines descriptive and

comparative elements, enabling a systematic examination of how the Nigerian National Pledge and Anthem encode meaning through semantic primes. While qualitative insights guide interpretation, the emphasis on frequency counts and percentage distributions ensures that the analysis remains empirical and replicable.

The purposive sampling technique was used because the Nigerian national symbols, specifically, the National Anthem and the National Pledge, were selected deliberately for their cultural, ideological, and linguistic significance.

Corpus Selection

The corpus consists of the official English texts of: The Nigerian National Pledge (composed in 1976 by Felicia Adebola Odeyemi), the Nigerian National Anthem (Revived) – *Nigeria, We Hail Thee* (authored by Lilian Jean Williams, composed by Frances Berda, reinstated in 2023). The texts were chosen because they represent official, ritualised expressions of Nigerian national identity. The pledge is widely recited daily in schools, while the anthem is performed at state functions, sporting events and ceremonies. Their brevity and symbolic weight make them ideal candidates for NSM analysis, which seeks to uncover the semantic “skeleton” of texts.

Coding Procedure

Each lexical item in the corpus was coded into its corresponding semantic prime category based on the NSM inventory established by Wierzbicka (1996) and refined by Goddard (2010). The Categories include:

1. **Substantives** (*I, you, someone, people, we, our*).
2. **Actions/Events** (*do, serve, defend, build*).
3. **Evaluation** (*good, bad, honour, justice, faithful, honest*).
4. **Relational** (*same, other, brotherhood*).
5. **Existence/Possession** (*be, have, belong*).
6. **Mental/Experiential states** (*think, want, know, feel*).

Coding followed two principles:

1. Reductive paraphrase – where necessary, complex terms were paraphrased into simpler phrases (e.g., *loyal* → *do good to the same people all the time*).
2. Contextual disambiguation – meanings were considered in their immediate syntactic and cultural context to ensure accurate classification.

Quantitative Analysis

After coding, frequency counts of semantic primes were generated for each text. Percentages were then calculated to allow comparative analysis between the pledge and the anthem. This procedure enabled the identification of dominant semantic categories and highlighted contrasts between the texts. To ensure reliability, the coding scheme was piloted on a subset of the text and reviewed against NSM guidelines (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014). Ambiguous items were resolved by consensus concerning NSM dictionaries. Validity was strengthened by triangulating quantitative data with interpretive semantic analysis, ensuring that frequency counts aligned with the pragmatic functions of the texts.

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Since the corpus consists of publicly available national texts, no ethical clearance was required. However, the analysis was conducted with respect for the symbolic value of the Pledge and Anthem, recognising their cultural significance for Nigerian citizens.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The analysis covers the official English versions of the Nigerian National Pledge and the revived anthem, *Nigeria, We Hail Thee*. The pledge contains 33 tokens, while the anthem contains 92 tokens. Both texts are short, ritualised utterances, but their semantic content reveals different orientations toward national identity. The pledge concentrates on personal commitments articulated in the singular, while the anthem highlights collective solidarity articulated in the plural.

Semantic Prime Distribution

Words were coded into six categories of semantic primes following the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard, 2010). The categories were: Substantives, Actions/Events, Evaluation, Relational, Existence/Possession, and Mental/Experiential states.

Table 1: Semantic Prime Distribution in the Nigerian Pledge and Anthem

Category	Pledge (33 tokens)	Anthem (92 tokens)	Pledge %	Anthem %
Substantives	7	14	21.2	15.2
Actions/Events	5	8	15.2	8.7
Evaluation	5	5	15.2	5.4
Relational	1	1	3.0	1.1
Existence/Possession	1	4	3.0	4.3
Mental/Experiential	0	1	0.0	1.1
Total Tokens	33	92	100	100

The pledge allocates a greater share of its content to actions/events (15.2%) and evaluations (15.2%), while the anthem distributes more tokens into substantives (15.2%) and existence/possession (4.3%). These differences already suggest distinct semantic emphases: doing dominates in the pledge, whereas being together and symbolic representation dominate in the anthem.

Pronoun Usage and Identity Construction

Pronoun analysis reveals the different “footings” of the two texts.

Table 2: Pronoun Counts in the Pledge and Anthem

Pronoun	Pledge Count	Anthem Count
I	1	0
My	2	0
We	0	3
Our	0	5

The pledge relies on the first-person singular, constructing citizenship as an individual act of devotion (“*I pledge... my country... my strength*”). The anthem shifts footing to the first-person plural, constructing citizenship as a collective

solidarity (“*we hail thee... our sovereign Motherland*”). This contrast confirms the argument that the texts are complementary: one centres on the individual, the other the community.

Evaluation Primes and Moral Orientation

The pledge includes a cluster of evaluative terms: *faithful, loyal, honest, honour, glory*. These words establish a personal moral charter for the citizen. In contrast, the anthem uses values such as *truth, justice, blessed*, which project a collective moral order at the level of institutions and national destiny. Despite differences, both texts converge on a shared ethical orientation: Nigeria is imagined as a polity grounded in goodness, justice, and honour.

Relational and Cohesion Markers

Though relatively infrequent, relational primes perform crucial functions. The pledge uses *unity*, a non-negotiable principle in the Nigerian context, especially following the civil war. The anthem employs *brotherhood*, a horizontal term signalling solidarity across “tribes and tongues.” While both words appear only once, their symbolic weight is disproportionate to their frequency, anchoring each text in a vision of cohesion.

Symbolism versus Performative Action

Action primes appear more frequently in the pledge, which piles up commissive verbs (*pledge, serve, defend, uphold*). This style reflects a performative orientation: the speaker is doing something in language (Austin, 1962). The anthem, by contrast, relies on existential and symbolic structures: “*our flag shall be a symbol,*” “*a banner without stain,*” “*truth and justice reign.*” These expressions point to enduring states rather than discrete acts. Thus, the pledge is a performative declaration of duty, while the anthem is a symbolic projection of unity and blessing.

FINDINGS

1. The Nigerian National Pledge and Anthem contain semantic primes such as I/we, do, say, good, bad, know, want, can, people, country, life, die, one, many, because, if, and time. The Pledge favours individual primes (I, do, say, know, want, country) while the anthem privileges collective primes (we, people, country, life, one, many).

2. The pledge shows a high recurrence of the singular pronoun I alongside verbs of volition (pledge, defend, serve), indicating vertical orientation (citizen-to-state). The anthem frequently uses we and plural entities (nation, people, tribe, tongue), indicating horizontal orientation (people-to-people).
3. The semantic composition of the pledge underscores personal responsibility. Through repetitive use of I pledge, I promise, I defend, it highlights volition (Want, Do), cognition (Know), and morality (Good/Bad), framing national service as a moral contract between the citizen and the state.
4. The anthem prioritises the semantic prime WE, reinforced with primes such as people, nation, life, one, many. It projects a sense of collective belonging and dissolves individual boundaries by emphasising unity across diversity.
5. The quantitative differences reveal complementary functions: the pledge individualises commitment, while the anthem collectivises identity. Together, they sustain national cohesion by binding citizens through both personal devotion and shared solidarity.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that a predominance of first-person singular pronouns and action verbs characterises the Nigerian National Pledge. This configuration positions citizenship as a matter of personal moral responsibility. When a child recites “*I pledge to Nigeria my country, to be faithful, loyal, and honest*”, the speech act is more than symbolic: it is a performative act that commits the speaker to a civic ethic (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Within the educational system, the pledge functions as a pedagogical device, teaching virtues of honesty, loyalty, and service at the level of the individual. In a society where corruption, weak institutions, and mistrust of government remain critical challenges, this insistence on personal virtue provides a linguistic counterweight that embeds civic morality into daily routines.

In contrast, the anthem foregrounds collective pronouns (*we, our*) and relational terms (*brotherhood*). This linguistic pattern constructs a sense of communal belonging that is vital in Nigeria’s plural context. With over 500 ethnic groups and deep religious divisions, the anthem’s emphasis on solidarity represents an attempt to bridge differences through shared symbolic identification. Phrases like “*though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand*” articulate the challenge of national unity while simultaneously offering a linguistic solution:

solidarity is imagined not through sameness but through coexistence. This framing resonates with other plural societies where anthems and pledges play a reconciliatory role, such as South Africa's multilingual anthem (Moodley, 2003)

Put together, the pledge and anthem provide complementary strategies for sustaining cohesion. The pledge emphasises devotion through doing, serving, defending, and upholding. The anthem emphasises belonging through being, standing together, blessing the nation, and passing on an unstained banner. This complementarity is particularly significant in a society where unity cannot be achieved through coercion alone. Citizens require both personal commitment to civic ideals and a shared imagination of collective destiny. The NSM analysis shows that both dimensions are articulated through universal semantic primes (*I, we, do, good, bad, same, other*), ensuring that their meanings are accessible regardless of ethnic or linguistic background (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard, 2010).

The semantic emphasis of the pledge on virtue ethics, faithfulness, loyalty, and honesty signals how the Nigerian state has historically attempted to frame political legitimacy. This way, scripting citizens to commit to honour and loyalty, the state places responsibility for national survival not only on institutions but also on individuals. Conversely, the anthem embeds legitimacy in collective values: truth, justice, peace, and blessing. This dual emphasis reflects Nigeria's enduring negotiation between individual obligation and collective cohesion in its political culture (Adebanwi, 2011).

In practice, the pledge and anthem remain integral to Nigeria's educational environment, where students recite them daily. This ritualised repetition ensures that civic identity is learned experientially through language. The balance of action-oriented and collective-oriented semantics ensures that children are socialised into both personal responsibility and group solidarity. In multicultural classrooms where ethnic and religious differences may otherwise dominate, the anthem's collective "we" becomes especially significant. The findings, therefore, emphasise the role of ritual texts in civic education and social integration.

The applied relevance of these findings extends beyond classrooms. In political rallies, sporting events, and public ceremonies, the pledge and anthem are recited to reaffirm belonging. The pledge insists that every citizen individually contributes to national progress through service and loyalty. The anthem insists that, despite differences, all citizens are bound in brotherhood under shared symbols. These ritual affirmations are crucial in a society where political instability, ethnic competition, and religious violence often undermine trust. NSM analysis confirms

that the texts achieve this not through abstract ideals alone but through universal categories of meaning, personal pronouns, evaluative terms, and simple relational concepts that can resonate across Nigeria's diverse population.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the Nigerian National Pledge and the revived National Anthem, *Nigeria, We Hail Thee*, through the lens of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). Using quantitative semantic analysis, the research identified how the pledge foregrounds individual devotion while the anthem foregrounds collective solidarity. The pledge is characterised by frequent use of first-person singular pronouns (I, my) and action/event primes (serve, defend, uphold), producing a semantic structure that constructs citizenship as personal duty. The anthem, in contrast, is dominated by plural pronouns (we, our) and relational primes (brotherhood), constructing citizenship as belonging to a collective community. Both texts, however, converge in their use of evaluative primes (honour, justice, truth, blessed), showing that Nigeria's ritualised symbols articulate a shared moral orientation despite differences in focus.

The Nigerian Pledge and Anthem exemplify how ritualised language encodes universal values to address the specific challenge of unity in a plural society. For scholars, the study offers a methodological demonstration of NSM's capacity for empirical semantic analysis. For practitioners, it affirms the importance of national symbols as tools of civic education and social cohesion. For Nigeria, it suggests that the daily recitation of these texts continues to remind individuals to serve faithfully; remind communities to stand together, and remind the nation that, despite diversity, it is possible to be one.

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APPENDIX

1. **The Nigerian National Pledge** (composed in 1976 by Felicia Adebola Odeyemi).

“I pledge to Nigeria my country, to be faithful, loyal, and honest, to serve Nigeria with all my strength, to defend her unity, and uphold her honour and glory, so help me God.”

2. **The Nigerian National Anthem (Revived)** – *Nigeria, We Hail Thee* (authored by Lilian Jean Williams, composed by Frances Berda, reinstated in 2023).

“Nigeria, we hail thee, our own dear native land, though tribes and tongues may differ, in brotherhood we stand, Nigerians all, and proud to serve, our sovereign Motherland.”

“Our flag shall be a symbol that truth and justice reign, in peace or battle honour, and this we count as gain, to hand on to our children a banner without stain.”

“O God of all creation, grant this our one request, help us to build a nation where no man is oppressed, and so with peace and plenty, Nigeria may be blessed.”