IMPLICATING ORALITY IN THE SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF BIBLICAL PARABLES: "THE SOWER", AND "THE MUSTARD SEED"

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Abstract

This paper examined the import of orality in the syntactic structuring of the Biblical parables. One of the major characteristics of language is its flexibility in response to contextual use. Contextual influence on language does not only manifest in lexical choice-making, but it also extends to the manner of structuring an expression. The paper relied on M.K.A Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics to contend that the choice of language (in this paper, structural choices) is necessitated by the function expected of the expression. It also posits that Biblical parables constitute identifiable context of language use, involving the teller of the parable; those that the parables were told; and the socio-cultural background that generated the parable. Thus, the conclusion of the paper is that the choice of language in the Biblical parables can be connected with an attempt to retain their fidelity to their oral version, and this can be assessed through examining the syntactic choices of the sentences.

Keywords: *Language, context, orality, syntax, biblical parable*

Introduction

Language is the major tool for communication that is unique to the human being. It is characterized by many features, which include systematic rules of description, productivity, and flexibility in use. Language is rule-governed, and this helps in the possibility of its description at the various levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Furthermore, the rules of language exist at the universal level, but then, applied as they fit into the characters of every language to produce various human experiences and activities. This is where flexibility and productivity come in. According to Lyons (1981, p. 22)

The productivity of communication-system is the property which makes possible the construction and interpretation of new signals: i.e. of signals that have not been previously encountered and are not to be found on some list- however large that list might be – of prefabricated signals, to which the user has access. Most

animal communication-systems appear to be highly restricted with respect to the number of different signals that their users can send and receive.

Thus, as much as the structure of every language can be analysed in terms of sentence, clause, phrase, and word, the nature of patterning these structures vary from English, French, Latin, and other languages. English sentence patterns align with these conventional segmentations. Furthermore, according to Halliday (1976), the way an expression is structured is necessitated by the function it is set to perform, which on the other hand is a reflection of the intention of the user.

Again, language is dynamic from the manner it responds to the environments or context of use. Every context of language use offers occasion to explore the flexibility at the identified levels (phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics). Such context can be geographical, professional, textual, etcetera. Geographical context creates opportunity for dialectal flexibility. Profession brings about unique register and peculiar sentence structuring. Textual context initiates peculiar interpretation of a text, by drawing a triad between message creation and message reception.

The interest of this paper is on flexibility arising from textual context. The paper evaluates the import of orality in the syntactic choices of the texts (Biblical parables). Two parables, "The Sower" and "Mustard" have been selected for analysis to illustrate how the oral background of the parables influenced the syntactic structuring of the parables as written in the Biblical Book of Mathew.

Conceptual Review: Concepts that are critical to the analysis of the paper are examined in this section. They include: context and language, Biblical parables and orality.

Context and Language: According to J.R. Firth who is credited to be the major proponent of context in language, words do not mean in isolation, rather in relation to the environment or situation or context of use. Context to him "is the relation of patterned activity to the non-linguistic features of the situations in which language is used" (cited in Olu Tomori 1977, p. 45).

Yule (1997, p.129) emphasises the importance of context in the description of language. Talking about two types of context, each playing very important roles in the description of language in use, Yule argues that the physical context considers "the time and place in which we encounter linguistic expressions". His explanation is that, birthday party, burial ceremonies, church service, political rally and so, are all different kinds of physical contexts and each exerts different forms of influences on language. The second kind of context according to Yule is the linguistic context, also known as co-text. The linguistic context of a word refers to other words or phrases or sentences that are used in its company. The surrounding co-text, according to him, generates a reciprocal relationship among words used in expressions and this to a great extent influences the interpretation of the affected words. Thus, both the physical and the linguistic contexts play vital roles in the description of language use in texts since expressions do not mean in isolation.

This paper is convinced that Biblical parables have the possibilities of making use of language in a relatively unique manner as different from other contexts like law, engineering, advertising and so on. This is because the intentions of Christ in using the parables as a simple and accessible tool to teach his followers hold possibilities of influencing the language choices and patterns.

Thus, the language of the parables is likely to reflect some peculiar syntactic patterns that are close to the oral versions, as well as Christ's personal idiolect.

Christ lived among the Jews, and knew how difficult it was to convert them. He, therefore, adopted the parable technique which reduced His teaching about heaven to known earthly stories that existed among the people. So He must have adapted the story patterns to suit his unique teachings.

Biblical Parables and Orality: Language, literature, and religion are interwoven in accounting for different aspects of human life. The Bible is one of the most popular religious literatures. Within the Bible context, there are various linguistic and creative features that are exploited in delivering the spiritual messages. One of the major tools used by Jesus Christ in the gospels of the Biblical New Testament, for instance, is parable.

The term parable has been defined by different authors from different perspectives. Generally speaking, a parable is seen as allegories and stories in which some things stand for something else in a story. Literarily, it is a figure of speech which presents a story, typically with moral lesson at the end. By extension, it is a short didactic story that is meant to teach moral or principle. It makes use of human characters in believable situations so that the reader or listener feels able to relate (https://literarydevices.net).

A parable is usually short and narrative, telling stories about human beings, and presented so as to stress the tacit analogy, or parallel, with the general lesson that the narrator intends to bring to the audience. The major essence of parable is to teach or to make abstract ideas and experiences more perceptible to the audience. In most cases, the narrator relies on imageries and phenomena that are close to the environment of the audience, using what they know to teach them what they do not know.

Biblical parables are figurative narratives that are true to life and are designed to convey through analogy some specific spiritual truth(s) usually relative to God's kingdom and programme. They are usually presented as metaphors or similes drawn from nature or common life, presented in a manner that is capable of arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness. Thus, the Biblical parables present a communication context involving the user of language (Jesus Christ), His followers as the receiver to whom He has said something, and the message(s) which are embedded in the parables. A reader is expected to read the language of the parables functionally along the line of their contexts of use.

It is germane to examine the phenomenon of translation in recognition of the fact that the Biblical parables were told orally by Christ, and may have existed in the Jewish stock of parables. There is the general assumption that the original language of the Bible is the Hebrew language. Today, the Bible has been translated into numerous languages of the world, including English, in an attempt to bring its message closer to the people. Therefore, forms of translation must have taken place in the process of transforming the oral messages into the written form. Zimmermann attests to this fact of translation in his position that,

"…Jesus' words in the Biblical texts were not passed on to us completely intact. Between Jesus' act of speaking and the act of writing the words down in the Gospels there is gap of at least forty years – a gap of time in which the texts, during the oral and written translation

process, were expanded, interpreted and changed" (2009, p.159).

It is also pertinent to note that various versions of the Bible that exist. The paper has made use of the Revised Standard Version. Therefore, one can not rule out the implications of translation on the language of the various editions.

Just like other concepts used in different fields of study, translation which belongs to the field of language study has received different scholarly definitions. For instance, translation according to Singh, cited in Doofan (2010, p. 117) is "a process based on the theory that, it is possible to abstract the meaning of a text from its forms and reproduce that meaning with the very different forms of a second language". Doofan further explains that an "ideal translation will be accurate as to meaning and natural as to the receptor language forms used. An intended audience who is familiar with the source text will readily understand it. From this explanation, it could be deduced that the major interest of translation is on meaning. Agreed that scholars have identified different types of translation, but central to the process is to assist the receiver to pick the message of the text.

There are issues that are fundamental to this definition. First, translation is not limited to one level of language. It is not only a matter of reconstructing meaning through lexical and structural replacements. This is essential because meaning making is not limited to the individual meaning of words alone. We also have sentential meaning, hence the inclusion of the structural level. Again, there is the contextual dimension to translation. Context involves the social and the cultural. Thus, the idea of translation involves a holistic enterprise of reconstructing the entirety of processes that significantly impact on the message delivery of a text. The processes in the context of our paper include:

Interlingual process: from Hebrew language which is claimed to be the original language of the Bible, to other languages, including the English language

Intercultural transfer: from the Jewish culture which is the original cultural and oral background of the Biblical stories and parables

Intertextual transfer: from the original texts to their present forms

Extralinguistic transfer: from the original texts in their original contexts, to their current states.

Theoretical Framework: The theoretical framework adopted in the paper is M.A.K Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, SFL. Basically, the theory is built on the premise that language is functional, and that language contains a system of interrelated alternatives from which users draw for meaning-making interests.

This study believes that the writers of the parables under study have drawn from the various alternatives available at the various levels of language description, especially, the syntactic. Again, their choices must have been informed by the need to effectively communicate Christ's intended messages embedded in the parables.

Halliday (1976) on the uniqueness of SFL, states that "it is not a 'structural' grammar (nor a 'structuralist' grammar in the American sense); such grammars are syntagmatic, having structure as the organizing concept, and so using special devices to relate one structure to another. Again, Halliday states that a grammatical analysis which the structuralists emphasize "treats linguistic items not as expressions but as FORMS. To put the same thing in an everyday terms; in grammar, we are exploiting language not as sound or as writing but as wording". But in functional linguistics, the main attention is not on the constituent structures, but on higher units, where the grammatical structures are explained by reference to the meaning.

Halliday (1976) further states that the relationship between the meanings and wordings is never arbitrary. Rather, "the form of the grammar relates naturally to the meanings that are being encoded. Functional grammar brings this out, it is the study of wording but one that interprets the wordings by reference to what it means".

Three basic assumptions guide functionalism. First is that the functions which a language performs shapes the structure it takes. Secondly, the meaning of words should incorporate their functions within the larger sect of sentence. Finally, the nature and function of language is shaped by the context of use.

According to Halliday, SFL is different from other varieties of functional linguistics in the sense that SFL views language as containing a system that affords the users the privilege of selecting from alternatives in response to the demands of context of use. In his words, (2014, p.23),

> Systemic theory gets its name from the fact that the grammar of a language is represented in the form of system networks, not as an inventory of structures. Of course, the structure is an essential part of the description; but it is interpreted as the outward form taken by systemic choices, not as the defining characteristic of language. A language is a resource for making meaning and meaning resides in the systemic pattern of choice

There are two basic components of the systemic functional theory. They are system and functional. According to Halliday (2014, p.22), in language, "any set of alternatives with its condition of entry constitutes a system". Explaining what a system in SFL is, Eka (2001,p.25) states that, "when at a given place in the structure, there is an allowance for the choice among a small fixed sets of possibilities, we can claim to have a system". Thus, the system aspect of the theory is what accounts for the choice which language users explore in making their language suitable for a given context. In the context of this paper, it is the choice which the writers of the parables make at the syntactic level so as to effectively communicate their messages of interest.

From the point of view of function, Halliday (2014, p.31) posits that "functionality is *intrinsic* to language. That is to say that the entire architecture of language is arranged along function lines". Halliday further states that language is as it is because of the function which it performs to the human specie. By implication, the choice a user makes from the system network of a language is determined by the intended function which the user wants the language to perform. In this manner, system and function are interrelated.

Therefore, to what extent do the syntactic choices of the parables take them close to their messages which originally were presented in the oral form?

Analysis

The three parables for analysis in this section are "The Sower", "Mustard Seed" and "The Weed". **"The Sower"** is found in Mathew Chapter 13, Verses 3-9. The story presents a sower who went out to sow seeds. The seeds fell on different environments: on the foot path, on the rocky soil, on the thorn, and on good soil. While the others could not thrive owing to unconducive environment, those that fell on good soil survived and thrived. This story draws from familiar practices in agriculture which the audience was bound to recognize. The major concepts: seed, sower, hard paths, rocky soil, thorns, good soil, are common to the experiences of the audience, hence Christ exploited their commonness to teach His lessons.

Mustard Seed" also derives its subject matter from agriculture. It is found in Mathew Chapter 13, Verses 31-32. This parable is one of the short parables in the Bible. It is narrated in one long windy sentence. The parable talks about the mustard seed which is seen as small; but which when planted also produces great shrub. As in the other parables, this has also made use of metaphorical representations that are commonplace to the audience. Mustard seed represents that which is negligible, but which turns out to be important and great at last.

Syntactic Analysis of the Parables

Clause Length and Combination: One major syntactic feature of the parables is the length of the sentence structures, which unarguably is connected with their narrative form. The long sentences come in varying lengths and forms: complex, compound and compound complex patterns. Let us examine some excerpts from the selected parables as illustration.

"The Sower" contains five sentences of different clause combinations, out of which only one (the first sentence) is simple: Simple + multiple + compound-complex + multiple + compound

Independent clause

Simple Clause : A sower went out to sow

dependent clause   Independent clause   Independent clause

Multiple Clauses : And as he sowed,// some seeds fell along the path,// and the birds

Independent clause

came// and devoured them.

Independent clause   dependent clause

Compound-Complex Clauses: Other seeds fell on the rocky ground// where they had

Independent clause   dependent clause

not much soil,// and immediately they sprang up;// and since they

dependent clause   Independent clause

had no depth of soil,// but when the sun rose,// they were scorched.

Independent clause   Independent clause   Ind. clause

Multiple Clauses: Other seeds fell upon thorns,// and the thorns grew up// and choked them.

Independent clause   Independent clause

Compound Clauses: Other seeds fell on good soil// and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

S/No	CLAUSE COMBINATION PATTERN	TYPE OF SENTENCE
1	Independent	simple
2	dependent + independent + independent + independent	complex
3	dependent + Independent + dependent + dependent + dependent + independent + dependent + independent	Compound complex
4	independent + independent + independent	multiple
5	independent + independent	compound

Interestingly again, some of these clauses are characterized by syntactic oddity, arising also from the closeness between the oral and written versions of the parable. No doubt, the parable teller (Jesus Christ) did not tell the parable in writing. What we read is a translation from the oral version, and the efforts to retain the texture of the parable may have resulted to some oddity in the use of conjunction.

English language makes use of two groups of conjunctions to link clauses, the subordinating and the coordinating. The nature of the conjunction influences the status of the clause which it introduces (subordinate or main clauses). For instance, while "as", "since" subordinate a clause, "and", "but", coordinates. However, some of the clauses in this parable are introduced by both subordinating and coordinating conjunctions at the same time, thereby creating seeming syntactic confusion. Consider these excerpts from the parable:

(a) "**And as** he sowed…," (sentence 2, clause 1).
(b) **and since** they had no root…(sentence 3, clause 4)
(c) **But when** the sun rose…, (sentence 3, clause 5)

The highlighted elements are coordinating (and, but) and subordinating (as, when, since) conjunctions used together. In these instances, they appeared at the beginning of the clauses. Thus, one can assume that in each case, the first conjunctions (and, and, but) respectively, serve more as transitional markers than syntactic conjunctions. They function more as devices for narrative cohesion (taking the parables as discourse) than syntactic conjunctions. Therefore, the clauses they introduced have been classified as subordinate in this analysis, with the notion that their presence has no syntactic input nor does their absence portend any syntactic damage. Consider the following:

(and) As he sowed

(and) since they had no root

(but) when the sun rose

The words in bracket are without doubt syntactically redundant but textually or narratively significant. They are used to hold the narrative and oral texture of the parables.

Another noteworthy feature in this parable is the use of shared element which has helped to retain the oral texture of the parables. Let us examine some instances from the parable.

In **Sentence 4,** there is the case of shared subject. Consider the extract:

*Other seeds fell on the thorns//, and **the thorns grew up// and choked them**.*

The highlighted clauses form a compound structure of two independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction (and). But the second highlighted clause has no subject, so it shares the subject **(the thorns)** with the preceding clause. The clauses could have been:

Other seeds fell on the thorns, and the thorns grew up, and (The thorns) choked the seeds)

The rewritten version above obviously sounds textually drab and gauche hence the three clauses were collapsed into a sentence in the parable. Again, instead of repeating the subject "the thorns" in the last two clauses, they were allowed to share it, making the rhythm of the structure brisk.

Similarly, in the last sentence of the parable, there is the case of shared predicator (verb) element:

*Other seeds fell on the good soil// and **brought** forth grain//, some a hundredfold/, some sixty/, some thirty.*

From the deep structure point of view, the last three groups (phrases) contain fresh information that ought to exist in separate clauses: *Some (brought) a hundredfold, some (brought) sixty, some (brought) thirty.* Existing in the same sentence with the other parts implies that they share from the structural elements in the sentence. Therefore, the predicator element, *brought*, has been suppressed in the latter parts of the sentence due to the nature of the text, which was originally speech. Speech, we know, is usually rapid and spontaneous, so much so that some structural elements are often suppressed, implied or omitted.

The parable "Mustard Seed", unlike "The Sower" is narrated in one long sentence:

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed// which a man took and sowed in his field//; it is the smallest of all seed//, but when it has grown//, it is the greatest of shrubs// and becomes a tree//, so that the birds of the air come// and make nests in its branches.

Eight clauses can be isolated from this lengthy sentence thus: independent + dependent + independent + independent + independent + independent + independent + independent.

We also notice the dominance of independent clauses in the sentence. Again, we notice that in the coordination of the clauses, some are marked by lexical items, while some are also unmarked, but rather indicated using semi-colon. Consider the following:

*...**and** sowed in his field//; it is the smallest of all seeds*

Again, we notice the oddity in the manner of linking the fifth clause, **but when** *it has grown,* which is similar to what we identified in "The Sower". As we identified in "The Sower", this clause has contradictory linking words (*but* as a coordinator, and *when* as a subordinator). However, the first (but) is better treated as a discourse transitional marker than a syntactic link. It is the second (when) that has better syntagmatic relationship with the rest of the clause elements. Thus, the clause can better read: *"when it has grown"* than *"but it has grown"* within the context of the text.

The oral implications on the syntactic structure of the parables so far discussed, could also be noticed in "The Weeds". The parable has two identifiable internal parts. The first part takes a narrative pattern while the second part is in the form of a dialogue. Our interest is on the first part which reads

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man// who sowed good seed in his field;// but while men were sleeping//, his enemy came// and sowed weeds among the wheat//, and went away//. So when the plants came up// and bore grain//, then the weeds appeared also//. And the servants of the householder came and said to him…

This sentence has nine clauses with the combination pattern: independent + dependent + dependent + independent + independent + independent + dependent + independent + dependent

As we noticed in the other parables already analysed, there is oddity in linking the third clause of the first sentence with both coordinating (**but**) and subordinating (**while**) links:

but while men were sleeping

In the same manner that we differentiated between syntactic link and discourse link in the other parables, **but** in this clause is more of a discourse connective than a syntactic link. It is actually the subordinator, **while** that has greater syntagmatic relationship with the rest of the elements in the clause, and within the larger context of the sentence:

Notable also in the syntactic structure of the parable is the use of shared element. In the clauses: *his enemy came// and sowed weeds among the wheat//, and went away//,* there are three clauses that share the same subject (his enemy). So, at the deep structure level where comprehension takes place, the clauses would read:

His enemy came

(His enemy) sowed weeds among the wheat

(His enemy) went away.

CONCLUSION

The paper has examined the oral implications in the syntactic choices of the selected parables. The essence of the analysis is to illustrate the connection between the structure that expressions take and the contextual background of such expressions. This is in agreement with Halliday's assertion which the paper relied on in its theoretical framework. Thus, it is contended that text creation should anticipate reception, and this is not limited to the lexical choices that we make, but also the syntactic structuring of the expressions.

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