

FAITH AS THE PIVOT FOR THE MIRACULOUS: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF A BIBLICAL TEXT

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Abstract

Discourse is about communication. An exchange of communication content with both parties being satisfied with the meaning; exchange is usually what successful communication entails. This article thus investigates a discourse situation in which a man needs healing for his sick son. In the course of his interaction with the healer who is to help his son, it was discovered that he was not too sure of the ability of this healer. A chosen linguistic performance was used to express this doubt. The result was a communication breakdown. The seeker and the sought could not find a common ground. The focus of this article is therefore to ascertain the reason for this communication breakdown. The article investigated such linguistic devices as the register, topic focus, contextual clues, as well as the cohesive ties within the text. It also looked at the paralinguistic element, intonation, as represented graphologically, which is considered an important semantic element in analysing the text. The major finding in the course of the analysis of the discourse content through such linguistic instrumentation is that the communication breakdown is due to topic conflict. It is found that faith is a necessary ingredient for the seeker of spiritual help. The article thus concluded that for effective hermeneutic studies, linguistic instruments are a necessary option for a full interpretation of biblical texts, especially considering that the texts were originally products of linguistic choices.

Key Words: Discourse Situation, Communication Breakdown, Topic Conflict, Discourse Analysis, Faith, Linguistic Choices, Biblical Hermeneutics

Introduction

Faith is an abstract feature of the Christian walk. It is a common belief that it is impossible to receive from God without faith; that is, a faith that has no back-up. It seems that the whole of the Christian life itself hinges on faith. However, the question is: what level of faith does one need to have to be able to satisfy the requirements needed to attain the miraculous?

Many may contend with this, but it seems that the Bible alone may be able to give the answer concerning this. In fact, when one looks at the Scripture, 'faith like a grain of mustard seed' (Matt. 17:20),¹ one tends to conclude that not much faith is actually required. However, in saying this, is there any quality required for this quantity?

A look at the text in Chapter 9 of the Gospel according to St. Mark may help us acquire an answer to this question. A discourse analysis of this text is done in this article to find out

¹ Thomas Nelson Inc., *The Holy Bible (KJV)*.

whether mere faith or extraordinary faith is required to obtain a miracle. Moreover, what is the required quality of this faith?

Discourse Analysis and Hermeneutics

Discourse analysis has been described by Brown and Yule² as the analysis of language in use. Language is used to perform the roles of passing information and maintaining social relationships. The discourse situation normally involves people at a particular time, in a particular place and for a particular reason.

Hermeneutics remains an important aspect of biblical studies because, as noted by Nihinola,³ the correct interpretation of Scriptures remains the centre of the Christian theology. Interpretation of scriptures is thus what hermeneutics involves. To him, hermeneutics is deeply involved in communication because ‘we give or write to give meaning’ (Nihinola, p. 3). If this is the case, there is an important link then between hermeneutics and discourse analysis. As noted above, discourse is about language in actual use, which is really language as a means of communication. One could then be correct in stating that hermeneutics is a kind of discourse analysis in the field of biblical studies.

Nonetheless, as this study is a linguistic inquiry into a biblical concept, it seems to make much of sense to link the two fields in interpreting the selected biblical text to be analysed in this study. After all, doing a linguistic analysis of a biblical text to unravel its hidden meanings appears like doing a linguistic analysis to extract the meaning content of a linguistic usage in a particular context. This study is thus very relevant to the understanding of the communication event that transpired in the book of Mark 9:21-23.

This article thus looks at the discourse situation contained in this selected text. It analyses a conversational extract from the Holy Bible and investigates some linguistic features that have consequences for the interpretation of the text. Because discourse analysis is essentially about analysing discourse in context, this article presents the context of the occurrence of the discourse situation. This is due to the fact that context is usually very crucial to textual interpretations. Context here means the circumstances surrounding the discourse at the period of its occurrence.

From the foregoing, it should be obvious that this article takes an essentially structural approach in its analytical procedure. This is because language is the essential tool used to construct the biblical text, which is analysed in this article. It looks at the linguistic features occurring in the text, how they advance the meaning of the text and help in its interpretation. The linguistic instruments employed include the analysis of the register, topic focus, contextual clues and elements, as well as the cohesive ties within the text. The paralinguistic element, intonation, as represented graphologically, is considered as an important semantic element. All these are to help in unravelling the actual linguistic meaning in the text (cf. Daniel, 2009). We believe this is what textual interpretation of the Bible entails.

The Text

- v. 21 (1) Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”
- v. 22 (2) “From childhood”, he answered. (3) “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. (4) But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

² G Brown and G Yule, *Discourse Analysis*.

³ Nihinola, Emiola, CTH 601: Biblical Hermeneutics.

- v. 23 (5) “If you can?” said Jesus. (6) “Everything is possible for him who believes.” (7) Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”
- Mark 9, verses 21-23.⁴

The discourse structure of the text is conversational. This is established in line with Olateju’s (2004) description of turns, following Jaffe and Felstein (1970) and Gallois and Markel (1970), as ‘solo talk which starts when someone starts to talk and ends when another speaker starts speaking’ (p. 157). It is thus obvious that the presence of distinct turns in the text being analysed in this work presents us with the conversational structure of the data.

The turns in the Bible passage selected here are marked graphologically with quotation marks, “ ”, to indicate direct speech in the prose structure. Also, the turn taking has consistency in that it indicates clear turn taking by the interlocutors. Other such graphological markers such as the query mark, ‘?’, and exclamation mark, ‘!’, are used to indicate paralinguistic features.

Register

Register is the language peculiar to a particular area of human endeavour. It has to do with the field of discourse in a particular discourse situation (Adetugbo, 1997). Martin and Rose (2003) actually assert that discourse register goes beyond just the field of discourse to include the tenor and the mode of the discourse. However, Adetugbo’s (1997) position on register agrees with our view of the concept. This suits our purposes in this study and we will thus follow this position in delineating the register form in the selected text.

In the text that makes up the data in this study, ample examples of biblical register exist. Words such as *belief* and *unbelief*, which indicate faith, are veritable examples of the biblical register mode. A lexical feature such as *Jesus*, which is repeated twice, is another indication of the biblical register.

There are seven paratactic sentences in the text. Structurally, each of the sentences is divided into three verses. Verse-structure is, of course, another feature of the biblical register, while parataxis is also a common feature of this register type. The cohesive ties formed by conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, and *if* are also indicators of the biblical register.

Context

The discourse context involves two interlocutors. This marks the tenor of the discourse as proposed by Martin and Rose (2003) in line with Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics theory. There is, however, the focus of the discourse, a sick boy. The interlocutors are the boy’s father and Jesus Christ, a supernatural Being, who the boy’s father hopes may be able to heal his son. There is also an audience surrounding them. Nonetheless, this audience is not too essential for the interpretation of this text, except that it concerns Jesus’ disciples, who had tried to cast out the demon having possession of the boy before the arrival of Jesus, but to no avail. This fact seems to have implication for the text in that it becomes the root cause of the topic conflict in the communication exchange – the querying of Jesus’ ability by the boy’s father. The tenor of the discourse is therefore clearly established.

⁴ International Bible Society, *The Holy Bible (NIV)*.

Linguistic Analysis

Having highlighted the context in which the discourse situation occurred, this article now investigates the linguistic and paralinguistic features that make up the text. It also examines the implication of these features for the interpretation of the text. Within the ideational structuring of the text, it is obvious that the most effective way of deciphering the semantic content in the discourse situation chosen here is a structural analysis of the linguistic elements that make up the selected text in order for them to yield maximally their semantic content for them to be hermeneutically enriching. This is done subsequently.

Textual cohesion is a semantic relation between the linguistic features in a text as postulated by Halliday and Hasan.⁵ This article does not pretend to attempt the analysis of the selected text out of context as Brown and Yule⁶ have accused many scholars of doing in the past. Yule⁷ also avers that beyond cohesive ties lies coherence, which eventually helps to arrive at interpretations that structural elements alone cannot make clear in the linguistic structures of a discourse. Thus, the effort in this study is to connect cohesion to its implication for semantic interpretation in the light of the context of the discourse situation.

In the selected text, a misnomer in the discourse situation arises with the pronouncement of Sentence 4: “*But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*” by one of the interlocutors, the boy’s father. It elicited a response in a question form as we have it in Sentence 5: “*If you can?*” said Jesus.

The deployment of Sentence 5 seems to hang on the questioning of the supernatural ability of Jesus by the other interlocutor in saying ‘*But if you can...*’ in Sentence 4. The fact that Jesus chose on these words in an interrogative form raises the poser: Why did Jesus have to do that?

A systematic, linguistic interrogation of the phrase again may yield the answer. ‘*But*’ is an adversative introducer of the clause, which is already implying a negative; ‘*If*’ is a conditional adverbial, indicating possibilities; that is, it may be possible or impossible – this is contrary to Jesus’ supposed supernatural status. ‘*Can*’ is another lexeme that indicates ability which the main verb ‘*do*’ expresses in Sentence 4. If someone says ‘I can do it’, s/he is saying s/he has the ability to do something. ‘*You*’ refers, actually, to the person of Jesus.

In essence, the clause seems to question Jesus’ ability as can be observed from the above semantic interpretation of the words in the clause. This doubt in his ability is what Jesus has chosen in turn. It seems to indicate a lack of common ground between Jesus and the man seeking healing for his son. This lack of common ground is naturally related to how much Jesus can do in helping the man’s son to obtain the desired healing.

Jesus’ additional statement in his turn seems an indictment of the man on this score; it seems the man does not believe in the doctor (Jesus, the healer) before coming to him for help. Jesus says in Sentence 6: “*Everything is possible for him who believes.*”

The man’s response gives an insight into his comprehension of Jesus’ preceding statement in Sentence 6. He does not quarrel nor justify himself; instead, he asks for help to have the ability to believe. Sentence 7: *Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”* This response “*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!*” essentially reveals the boy’s father’s agreement that he actually doubted the omnipotent power of Jesus Christ. It thus restores their communication common ground, their point of communication concord.

⁵ MAK Halliday and R Hasan, *Cohesion in English*.

⁶ G Brown and G Yule, *op cit*.

⁷ G Yule, *The Study of Language*.

The fact that Jesus repeated the clause *'If you can'* condemns the man's attitude and he quickly changes it. Topic conflict thus gives way to topic unity.

How did language create this situation and also solve it?

The man's choice of words, as already stated, brought about a halt in the course of the discourse situation. This is not a verbal halt but that of topic. It led to a change in the topic and thus generated topic conflict. The issue is no longer strictly of a healing process but that of establishing the ability of the healer. It has led to lack of coherence because they are no longer in tune. This is of course informed by the socio-cultural knowledge that you believe in who can help and ask for help, instead of castigating or despising it.

Cohesive Ties

There is cohesion in the text. As already stated, cohesion also indicates semantic relationships, and it indicates coherence. The text exhibits both in that through linguistic features the text is well linked structurally. The orderly structuring also helps to maintain it as a coherent whole.

- In Sentence 1, *Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"* The referring expressions *'Jesus'* and *'the boy's father'* instantly introduce the interlocutors. The *'he'* in the interrogative of the same sentence, however, refers to *'the boy'* pre-modifier in *'the boy's father'*. Also, *'he'* indicates the boy to be the gaze direction of the interlocutors. *'This'* as demonstrative pronoun is an indicator of a state of being, referring to the same boy's state of illness.
- Sentence 2: *"From childhood", he answered.* This is an elided clause which is presented like a phrase structure in response to the interrogative in Sentence 1; *'he'* in Sentence 2 is, however, co-referential with *'the boy's father'* in the previous sentence.
- *'It'* in Sentence 3: *"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him"* is also referring to a state of being. It has its referent outside of the text. It is referring to an exospheric element known to both participants. The fact that it is not questioned by either of them shows that it has meaning in relation to a referent in previous discourse. The pronominal *'It'* is never repeated in the course of the discourse text but it indicates that it has something to do with the boy's sick state in the context of use. (One could thus be correct to decipher *'It'* to be exopherically referring to a demonic spirit afflicting the boy from the context of the biblical text as a whole). Yule (1996) extensively discusses the relevance of world knowledge shared by interlocutors making for coherence in a discourse event. This exospheric referent exemplifies his position very well in that neither party sought for clarification of *'It'* in this discourse extract; *'him'* refers to the object of the statement while *'or'* indicates the two probable places the agent *'It'* may cast the boy at different times.
- *'You'* in Sentence 4: *"But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."* – has anaphoric co-referent with Jesus in sentence 1. This *'you'* is, however, elided from the two other clauses in Sentence 4.
- *'us'*, twice stated in Sentence 4 by the boy's father, co-refers himself and his son. It is also a formal usage or what is called the royal *'us'*, which actually also implies that the problem of the sickness of his son is equally his. The pronoun also serves as a super-ordinate for both *'he'* and *'him'*, which refers to both of them previously.
- *'You'* in Sentence 5: *"If you can?" said Jesus;* still has Jesus as co-referent but with a different meaning placed on it as he questions the man's doubt. However, *'him'* in Sentence 6: *"Everything is possible for him who believes."* is non-referential in the text.

Its reference is in the wider world; it is not particular. It bears what Donnellan calls 'attributive referent' (quoted by Brown and Yule, 1983). This kind of referent means 'whoever'. The relative pronoun 'who' is an anaphoric referent to 'him'. 'Everything' is also a non-referent expression.

- Moreover, 'the boy's father' is repeated in Sentence 7 and 'Jesus' in Sentence 5. The change to 'I', 'me', and 'my' by 'the boy's father' in the direct speech mode is significant. It is indicative of the fact that he takes full responsibility for the doubt to be his own fault. These pronouns are co-referent with 'the boy's father', thus still maintaining cohesion and coherence.

Ellipses

Ellipses are usually surface omissions from structural forms. We have established from the beginning that the discourse structure is conversational. Obviously, the ellipsis is a common feature in verbal dialogic. It is thus not surprising to see this feature in the text. The contribution ellipses make to the meaning content of the text is discussed below.

- *from childhood* in Sentence 2 is a prepositional phrase in answer to a full clause question. The clause has been elided. Pronominals are elided in Sentence 4, *you* before "...take" and before "...help", and also before "...help" in Sentence 7. All these affirm the conversational nature of the selected text as well as indicate its naturalness thus enhancing the reality of the turns taken by the interlocutors.

Repetitions

Repetitions are usually a rhetorical device meant to be used for emphasis. Essentially, repetitions are meant to be used to affirm the clarity of the communication content being passed across. However, a structural analysis reveals that structures essentially communicate in terms of the structural make-up of the elements used. Two essential structural forms noted to have communicative relevance in the selected text are nominal and verbal repetitions. Repetitions in the text are noticed at two basic linguistic levels, *viz.* nominal and verbal.

Nominals

Repetition of nominals in the text easily reveals the interlocutors in the discourse event under focus in this text. In the selected text, the interlocutors are thus manifested as Jesus and the boy's father as seen below:

- 'Jesus' and 'the boy's father' are repeated twice: 'Jesus' in Sentences 1 and 5 and 'the boy's father' in Sentences 1 and 7.

Verbs

The verbs repeated in this text also easily reveal the fact that ability and faith are the issues in this discourse event. One can clearly see that the verbs repeated appropriately show this fact as seen below. The repetition of 'can' and 'believe' easily make obvious this fact while the repetition of the word 'help' also shows that a need is also an issue here. Thus one easily sees that need meets with ability or non-acceptance of the ability to create the communicative event being looked into in the selected portion of the Bible under consideration in this study. The verbs as repeated are presented below:

- 'help' – Sentences 4 and 7; 'believe' – Sentences 6 and 7 and 'can' – Sentences 4 and 5.

Graphological Representations of Paralinguistic Markers

Graphological representations are usually the only available way to indicate phonological content in a written discourse. The intonational forms that should have been phonetically communicated are made clear through graphological employments. These are clearly marked out and their communication contents made obvious in the text.

The query mark ‘?’ is repeated twice in Sentences 1 and 5 to indicate interrogation while the exclamation mark ‘!’ in Sentence 7 clearly reveals the man’s deep emotional and vocal expression of his repentance at doubting Jesus’ healing ability.

Adjacency Pairs

Another linguistic form that could be found in the text is the adjacency pair. Adjacency pair has to do with forms that normally go together. Olateju (2010) asserts that it has to do with turns that are dependent on each other. Examples of adjacency pairs include socio-cultural acts such as greeting, linguistic acts like question and possible answer(s), command and response, etc. In the discourse event under consideration in this article, the adjacency pair observed is that of question and answer.

The adjacency pairs of question and answer found in the selected text include those in Sentences 1 and 2-4, as well as 5. Ogunsiji (2011) views answers to questions as informative speech acts. It is thus expected that the questions asked in this text should have their answers giving information to the ‘questioner’: the one asking the question. However, Sentence 7 cannot be regarded as an answer in this sense but an indirect retraction of the veiled question in Sentence 4. These again enhance the turns and make the conversational structure to flow in a coherent manner. It is also in the course of the adjacency pairing that the topic conflict in the conversational process is established as well as resolved. Jesus’ ability that is questioned receives an immediate repudiation. The repudiation eventually results in a recant.

Intonation

Intonation is a very powerful communicative device (Daniel, 2009). It is thus obvious that intonation has a powerful effect on the semantic content of Sentence 5. This led to a change of attitude of the boy’s father in sentence 7. This international pattern is graphologically indicated with a query mark in Sentence 5. It apparently makes the boy’s father realise his own foolishness in doubting the supernatural ability of Jesus. Evidently, it succeeds greatly in doing this as the boy’s father actually realises his indiscretion and recants his earlier implied unbelieving position.

Conclusion

We have tried to look at a text in the Bible involving a situation in which a man needs a healing miracle for his son. Obviously, he has faith; this is what brought him to Jesus to seek for help for his gravely ill son. However, in the course of the diagnostic conversation between the seeker and the healer, there is some misunderstanding of the ability of the miracle worker. This of course leads to the mild chastisement of the seeker for his lack of absolute faith in Jesus, the healer. We have shown through various structural devices such as repetitions, ellipses, graphological representation of paralinguistic forms, adjacency pairs, and intonation the fact that the man’s faith was not qualitative; and this is what led to the topic conflict and, consequently, communication breakdown in the biblical text

analysed. It becomes obvious then that the faith of the man is not qualitative; that is, not total in the source of his miracle as shown by his doubting statement, 'if you can'.

The significance of this to the interpretation of the Bible in terms of understanding the concept of faith for the working and receiving of miracles within the biblical world, is that faith is not just the expression of belief; it has other elements that indicate the absoluteness or otherwise of faith. The linguistic analysis applied to this seemingly simple Bible passage in the Gospel according to St. Mark chapter 9, verses 21-23 reveals so many deeper issues that a surface reading might not have shown. One could thus conclude that a careful application of linguistic tools can be very important in unravelling the true semantic contents of biblical passages. The article thus recommends that different levels of linguistic analysis be employed for hermeneutic purposes. One may be astounded about the amount of previously hidden rich semantic contents in the Bible that could be brought to the fore.

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