

Metaphors as a Potent Evangelism Tool: A Pragma-Stylistic Analysis of Jesus' Teachings

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Abstract

The Bible is a book of 66 books (27 New Testament books and 39 Old Testament books). The first four books of the New Testament books (i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are on the life and ministry of Jesus. As a religious injunction, Christians are expected to evangelize to unbelievers. This is the responsibility of every Christian. This study explores the style of the language of evangelism used by Jesus. The data for analysis were purposively elicited from the four books of the New Testament above (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) out of which two (2) data were randomly selected from each of the books to make eight (8) data. The selected data were analysed using the theoretical framework of Pragmatics and Stylistics. In Pragmatics, the concept of implicature was explored while in Stylistics, the study looked at Jesus' use of metaphors in his teachings while on earth. It was incumbent to look at the implicature of the selected data since metaphoric expressions are amenable to implicative interpretations to elicit meanings from them. This Jesus used light, salt, door, sheep, shepherd, vine, branches, etc. to teach important Christian lessons of dependence on God, helping others, moral living, abstinence from hypocrisy, trust in God etc. The study has thus found out that relating religious issues to other societal issues (metaphorically) facilitates the assimilation.

Keywords: metaphor, stylistics, pragmatics, Jesus, evangelism, the Bible

Introduction

Language is a major characteristic of human beings; wherever human beings exist, language exists. Language is defined by Henry Lee Smith, (1969, cited in Lawore, 2011) as, “A shared, learned, arbitrary symbol through which human beings in the same speech community or sub-culture communicate and hence interact in terms of their common experiences and expectations.” This means that every community has language which helps them to communicate with one another as they share their feelings, thoughts, ideas and interact.

Commenting on the indispensability of language to human beings Sanusi (1996 p.8, cited in Afolayan, 2011) states:

“ if you have not developed language, you simply don’t have access to most of human experiences, and if you don’t have access to experiences, then you are not going to be able to think. That is, language is very important and cannot be removed from community or else, the community is officially dead.”

Sanusi’s stance above makes it clear that every society uses language, and that language is used by every society.

Style looks at an individual’s pattern of using language. This is premised on the fact that no two individuals use language the same way and that there are myriads of linguistic affordances from which language users choose. Looking at the language and style of Jesus in his ministry is rewarding. The Bible is in two: the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament is dedicated to the life and ministry of Jesus. Particularly, the study is an exploration of the language and style of Jesus in his ministry particularly, his use of metaphor.

The Scope of the Study and Data Selection

This research bothers on the teachings of Jesus to his disciples and by extension, all Christians. The primary source of data for this study is the Holy Bible. The data for analysis were purposively selected from the four books of the Bible that account for the life and ministry of Jesus viz., Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Two data were selected randomly from each book aforementioned out of the many metaphoric expressions inherent. The data will be analysed using the theories of Stylistics and Pragmatics. Analysing some metaphoric expressions used by Jesus is a stylistic venture while exploring the implication is pragmatic.

The Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore selected metaphoric expressions used by Jesus to teach his disciples and to show that they are a potent and effective ministry tool for Jesus and by extension, all Christians who seek to evangelize. Thus, the researcher is saddled with the task of not only unearthing this stylistic and literary device as used by Jesus, but to also show how effective it was in Jesus’ ministry and how important it could be in Christian evangelism.

Pragmatics

The word ‘pragmatics, etymologically from the Greek word ‘pragma’ means ‘deed’ or ‘action’. (Osisanwo, 2008:54). The emergence of pragmatics according to Kuhn (1964, cited in Mey, 2001:4) signaled a paradigm shift from syntactic and semantic rules to language in context. This led to the consideration to context in analysing and studying language. With the emergence of pragmatics, the idea of linguistic competence was replaced with the communicative competence. (Acheaoh 2012, cited in Saba, 2018). Thus, the issue of grammaticality and ungrammaticality was no longer the focus but generating meaning from a particular context which according to Mey (2004) makes speeches both appropriate and meaningful. It has been observed that meaning is context dependent; a word or linguistic structure will mean something different when used in different contexts. Pragmatics mainly focuses on how a communicative act could be understood and produced. Since it is possible for a speaker to mean more than what is said, a pragmatic analyst looks at what the speaker means not just the meaning of the constituent words in an utterance. (Yule (1996: 3). Therefore, pragmatics is seen as the ‘above the sentence meaning’ of utterance given a particular context.

Further looking at the meaning of Pragmatics, Stalnaker (1972:383) opines that Pragmatics is ‘‘the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed.’’ Furthermore, that pragmatics seeks to ‘characterize the features of the speech context which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence’. The scope of pragmatics includes deixis, presupposition, implicature, speech act etc. (Stalnaker, 1972:383)

Theoretical Framework

Implicature

Implicature, coined by Grice (1975) in ‘‘Logic and Conversation’’ refers to what is suggested even though not expressed overtly. Implicature shows a distinction between what is said and what is implied by the utterance. According to Peccei (1999), Grice divides the Cooperative Principle into four conventional maxims namely; quality, quantity, relation and manner.

The Maxim of Quality: Make your contribution one that is true and not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Maxim of Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required; don’t say too much or too little.

The maxim of Relation: Make your contributions relevant (Stay on the topic).

The maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief. Be orderly.

According to Grice, if any of the maxims is flouted, it results to implicature.

Implicature therefore, is the meaning that is derived when any of the Griceans is flouted.

Stylistics

While style is simply the pattern of doing something such as dancing, sitting, eating, walking etc, stylistics on the other hand is simply the study of style. In language study, style is described as the pattern of speaking, writing or performing (Leech, 1969). Leech and Short (1981) opine that the word ‘‘style’’ has a fairly non-controversial meaning. According to them, style refers to the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person and for a given purpose. Leech and

Short restrict style to the use of language considering the context of use and the purpose for which it is used. Oloruntoba-Oju (1999) also sees the notion of context as primary to the study of style. Style according to him may differ in terms of place, time individual or modality. Ekwutosi (2009) defines stylistics as: a branch of linguistics which studies the features for the distinctive uses of varieties of language in different situations. In the opinion of Simpson (2004), to do stylistics is to explore the use of language especially how it is creatively used. Creative use of language is therefore the crux of stylistics. It is well known that language has linguistic affordances from which the language user can choose depending on the context of use. Stylistics therefore, explores an individual's linguistic choices which can then be used that characterize that author.

Stylistics can basically be divided to Linguistic Stylistics and Literary Stylistics. Linguistic stylistics (proposed by Donald Freeman in 1968, cited in Fish 1981) developed by David Crystal in 1968 seeks to explore the deployment of linguistic resources or devices in writings which is done on the various levels of language: syntax, phonology, lexis, semantics and pragmatics. Types of sentence or sentence structure is considered at the syntactic level; at the level of phonology, the analyst could consider the patterns of speech sounds, meter, rhyme etc.; consideration could be given to content and function words, foreignisms, borrowed words, frequency of nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. at the lexical level; at the semantic level, attention could be given to denotative and connotative meanings.

This study focuses on Literary Stylistics. To Carter and Simpson,

Literary Stylistics is concerned with providing 'the basis for fuller understanding, appreciation and interpretation of avowedly literary and author-centred texts.' This is the exploration of the stylistic devices that are employed by a particular author to communicate his message. (1989).

Literary Stylistics from the above definition focuses on the interpretation and analysis of literary works. The aim is to explore how the author has used language (his linguistic choices) and attempt to characterize the author based on those linguistic choices. Literary stylistics studies literary devices and figurative tropes such as simile, metaphor, parallel constructions, allusion, personification, oxymoron, etc. This study, though a literary stylistic study, is restricted to metaphor. The aim is to explore selected metaphoric expressions used by Jesus in his ministry and determine how effective it is for Christian evangelism.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Christians as (Metaphorically) the Salt of the World

Datum 1

Ye are the salt of the earth,
but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?
It is thenceforth good for nothing,
but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.(Matthew 5:13)

Analysis: In the datum above, Jesus in his teachings metaphorically referred to his disciples as the salt of the earth. An indirect comparison is made by Jesus between his disciples and salt. Jesus expects his disciples to act just as salt, but, what is the function of salt? Salt is used to season food. It is the commonest food seasoning as without it, food may not be palatable hence, it is a very essential food ingredient. Jesus' metaphoric expression above is to drive home his point from the known to the unknown: the function of salt to food should be the function of his disciples to the earth that as important as salt is to food so should his disciples and by extension, Christians be to the earth. Jesus emphasized the uselessness of salt if it loses its savour and by extension, the uselessness of one's Christianity if it is devoid of core religious tenets.

Implicature: Jesus' teaching and admonition above is to both inform his disciples that they have a key role to play on earth and to enjoin them not to lose their true identity as Christians. Christians can lose their 'saltiness' when they derail from Christian religious practices which according to Jesus will make them relevant in the world. This religious saltiness includes showing love to everybody, giving of alms, helping the poor, praying for others etc. by implication, when a Christian stops doing the aforementioned, he has lost his relevance (saltiness) as a Christian. Jesus used a metaphor to communicate this message to his disciples instead of say, a simile in order to how important it is to Christian living. Simile may not have conveyed it as strongly as metaphor has.

Christians as (Metaphorically) the Light of the World

Datum 2

Ye are the light of the world.

A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. (Matthew 5:14)

Analysis: Jesus in the above datum directly (metaphorically) likened his disciples (Christians) as the light of the world. This was done to drive home his point. Everybody who has seen light knows the joy whenever there is light and the frustrations whenever it is interrupted as darkness will immediately take over. In our world today, it has become much more important as many home and office gadgets need power to function. Basically, and in the above context, light helps to be able to see so as not stumble nor fall as a result of not seeing the way due to darkness. The role that light plays in opposition to darkness is what Jesus ascribed to his disciples (Christians).

Implicature: As light and darkness are in contrary distribution, so also should Christians and the 'world' (unbelievers) be: wherever there is darkness, there will be no light and, wherever there is light, there will be no darkness. The metaphoric use of 'light' refers to the Christian religious activities that differentiate Christians (light) from the world (darkness). Since 'light' and 'darkness' are in contrary distribution as mentioned ab initio, the implication of Jesus expression above is that any Christian whose lifestyle is not different from that of unbelievers is not a true Christian. This message helps Christians to know that Christianity is not just on the lips but in deeds. Jesus may have resorted to the use of metaphor probably to let the disciples know the importance of this teaching. By the above datum, any Christian who engages in unchristian activities has ceased to 'shine' as the 'light' and as rather become darkness. Darkness therefore, refers to unchristian activities engaged in by unbelievers which could also be engaged in by backslidden Christians.

Datum 3

Christians as (Metaphorically) the Sheep while Jesus, the Shepherd

And Jesus saith unto them,
All ye shall be offended because of me this night:
for it is written,
I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered. (Mark 14:27)

Analysis: The above datum talks about the shepherd being smitten consequently scattering the sheep. The above metaphoric expression was made by Jesus just before his arrest which led to his crucifixion. In the above datum, Jesus (metaphorically) referred to himself as the shepherd while the disciples, as the 'sheep'. Every flock of sheep needs a shepherd to take care of them and to protect them from predators especially wolves. As long as the shepherd remains with them, they are together and safe but once the shepherd is no more, the flock scatters. This tells of the importance of the presence of the shepherd to the sheep. Jesus, in order to explain his relationship with his disciples metaphorically referred to himself as the shepherd while his disciples (Christians), the sheep. As a shepherd cares for his sheep so does Jesus care for his disciples; as a shepherd provides for his sheep so does Jesus provide for his disciples (Christians); and, as a shepherd protects his sheep so does Jesus protect his disciples (Christians) His use of metaphor instead

Implicature: The implication of the above datum is that a Christian is nothing without Jesus; with Jesus, a Christian enjoys all the benefits of having a shepherd while without Jesus, a Christian is without care and protection and vulnerable to attacks by the devil. The above datum in addition to informing the disciples (Christians) about what was going to happen to Him (Jesus) and them (Disciples) that night, it is also informing Christians about the benefits derivable in Jesus and how indispensable he is to them. To be without a shepherd (Jesus) as Christians would be to indulge in unchristian activities that are capable of keeping Jesus away from them.

Datum 4

Christians as (Metaphorically) Fishermen

And Jesus said unto them,
Come ye after me,
and I will make you to become fishers of men. (Mark 1:17)

Analysis: The above datum is a metaphoric expression by Jesus as he called some of his disciples into ministry. It is an expression that spells out the mandate of the disciples as his followers. The Disciples though would no longer catch fish but men, were metaphorically referred to by Jesus as fishers. An understanding of the above is an understanding of what the disciples were expected to do as Jesus' followers. Jesus must have used metaphor of 'fishing' to relate to their mandate as disciples because Simon Peter and Andrew his brother (Mark 1:16) were fishermen; they were fishing when Jesus called them. The choice of 'fishers of men' was deliberate because as fishermen, they would lucidly understand the ministry he was calling them to. This was also to take them from the known (catching fish) to the unknown or new (catching men).

Implicature: The metaphoric use of ‘fishers of men’ for the disciples who would be evangelizing to people is appropriate since they were professional and seasoned fishermen. Their knowledge and experience of going out to fish, exercising skills and patience would be of great help when they go out to evangelize to people hence, the use and appropriateness of the above expression by Jesus. The implicature of the above expression is that a lot is required of them as disciples and by extension, a lot is required of every Christian. The toil and pains of fishing every day, sometimes catching few and sometimes catching nothing would be their fate as they go out to evangelize. Nothing is as difficult as getting someone to change their ways of doing things especially their habits. Eventually, an evangelist may be successful but not without patience. This is what Jesus through the above datum was trying to communicate to his disciples and to Christians today.

Datum 5

Unbelievers are (Metaphorically) Blind

And he spake a parable unto them,
can the blind lead the blind? (Luke 6:39)

Analysis: The above expression is succinctly put in Matthew 15:14 as, ‘...they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, they both shall fall into the ditch.’ The above metaphoric expression was made by Jesus concerning the Pharisees who were the so called religious leaders at that time. Addressing the Pharisees, Jesus metaphorically referred to them as ‘the blind’ who were trying to lead the lead. In Jesus’ ministry on earth, the Pharisees were the major opposition he had to face even though ‘they were working for the same God’. No wonder, Jesus metaphorically pointed out their true position by calling them ‘blind’ even though they claimed to see. The Pharisees had eyes and could see but Jesus used metaphor to liken them to blind people. This passed an important message to the disciples. With this expression, they got to know that the revered Pharisees regarded highly were not different from the followers they were leading.

Implicature: Jesus’ words in the above datum was by implication an admonition to Christians to beware of hypocrites who outwardly portray themselves as holy but are inwardly not. This will also serve as caution to Christians to ensure that they are not just Christians on the lips but in deed. This tells that it is possible for one to engage in religious activities such as attending church services regularly, fasting, belonging to one or more units in the church such as choir, ushering, prayer, Bible studies etc. just as the Pharisees yet lacks the true essence of Christianity and therefore, cannot be said to be a Christian. (Matthew 7:21). Christians are urged to practice their religion wholeheartedly and avoid hypocrisy.

Datum 6

Christians as (Metaphorically) Labourers

Therefore said he unto them,
the harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few:
pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest,
that he would send forth labourers into his harvest. (Luke 10:2)

Analysis: Jesus metaphorically referred to his disciples as labourers. Jesus' disciples were not farmers but Jesus using metaphor referred to them as labourers. This was done in order to drive home his point. His choice of metaphor as opposed to simile gives more weight to the issue; it establishes a very close affinity between being a labourer (farmer) and being a preacher (an evangelist). An understanding of farming activities helps to understand Jesus' point in the above datum.

Implicature: It is understood generally that farming (especially manual farming) is very strenuous no wonder a lot of people avoid farming even though it is the source of food. The above metaphoric expression by Jesus was intentional to establish a connection farming and preaching the good news. The metaphoric 'harvest' represents those who are yet to accept the message of Jesus while the metaphoric 'labourers' represents preachers. Jesus was in a way saying that there were few preachers while those to be preached to were many; this is the same situation today. Though Jesus urged more people (Christians) to join the evangelism force, his metaphoric statement provides information as to the nature of what they are called to do. The implication is that preachers will suffer just like farmers in the course of evangelizing. Farmers weed, plant, make ridges, irrigate (where necessary), apply fertilizer or manure etc. and wait for months before harvest. In the same vein, preachers will be persecuted, rejected, imprisoned, go hungry, lack material things, sleep in the cold etc. in the course of preaching the gospel.

Datum 7

Christians as (Metaphorically) the Branches while Jesus, the Vine

I am the vine, ye are the branches:
He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit:
for without me ye can do nothing. (John 15:5)

Analysis: The above were Jesus' words to his disciples concerning his relationship with them. He metaphorically referred to them as the branches while he, the vine. A vine is a plant that produces fruits. It has branches on which leaves and fruits grow. As it is with all trees, the branches survive from the nourishment that comes from the tree. Jesus' use of metaphor helped to strengthen the message; the inseparableness of the branches from the vine. Jesus was teaching them to know that they should always remain with him as the branches with the vine; the nourishment of the branches depends on their connection to the vine.

Implicature: The metaphor of Jesus as the 'vine' and his disciples (Christians) as the 'branches' is very key in Christianity. The word 'Christianity' itself has its etymology from 'Christ' which shows that there will be no 'Christianity' without 'Christ'. The implication of Jesus' metaphoric statement above is that nobody becomes a Christian by themselves but by Jesus. Becoming a Christian therefore, is not in the religious activities alone but in knowing and having Jesus. Jesus was teaching all Christians to depend on him for everything (as the branches, the vine). Surprisingly, bearing a Christian name will not also qualify one as a Christian but having Jesus; a Christian will therefore be that person that depend on Jesus completely for everything: help, direction, provision, healing, protection etc.

Datum 8

Jesus as (Metaphorically) the Door

I am the door:
by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved,
and shall go in and out, and find pasture. (John 10:9)

Analysis: Jesus in the above metaphorically referred to himself as the ‘door’. Jesus directly compared himself with a door. This was to create a close affinity between him and what the door is used for. A door grants access in and out of an enclosed area. Typically, a door is used for buildings for entrance and exit.

Implicature: Jesus’ expression above relates to him being the access (door) to salvation (“...he shall be saved”). Christianity teaches about salvation from sins (lying, cheating, fornication, stealing, killing etc.) which according to Jesus can only be gotten through him. Jesus’ use of the definite article ‘the’ (“the door”) means that there is only one way to salvation which is through him. The implication is that any search for salvation elsewhere apart from Jesus is fruitless. The second portion of his expression “...and shall go in and out, and find pasture.” Means that those are saved by Jesus enjoy the benefits of that salvation. Jesus used metaphor to communicate to his disciples to teach them that he only could save. The use of the metaphoric ‘door’ is important to help the disciples who and Christians who know the important function of the door in a building to be able to know the importance of having and knowing Jesus.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Bible is a book of 66 books (27 New Testament books and 39 Old Testament books). The first four books of the New Testament books (i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are on the life and ministry of Jesus. Christians have been enjoined to evangelize to unbelievers. This is the responsibility of every Christian. And, in doing that, Jesus through the above study has shown that one of the potent means of effectively doing that is through the use of metaphors.

Metaphor as a stylistic device has shown in the study helps the addressees to easily relate with the subject of discussion. Jesus used light, salt, door, sheep, shepherd, vine, branches, etc. to teach important Christian virtues such as dependence on God, helping others, moral living, abstinence from hypocrisy, trust in God etc. As Jesus’ disciples following the footsteps of Jesus, adopting the master’s pattern is a necessity

Apart from showing that metaphor was a great tool for evangelism for Jesus, hypothetically, the study also shows it to be a great evangelism tool for his followers (Christians). The study has thus found out that relating religious issues to other societal issues (metaphorically) facilitates the assimilation.

In conclusion, the study has classed Jesus in a way as a metaphorist whose success in ministry in a way connects to his style of ministering which includes in this case, the use of metaphors. As Christians study the ministry of Jesus, they will undoubtedly study his style. Adopting metaphor also in ministering will facilitate learning. This study will be helpful to Christians and scholars who seek to study the ministry of Jesus in relation to his style.

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