Stephen's Martyrdom in the Holy Bible: Investigating His Defense Speech Using Conversation Implicature and Language Expectancy Theory

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examines Stephen's defense to the 'false charges' brought against him in the Bible vis-a-vis his death through stoning. Although few scholars have written some things on Stephen and his defense speech, none has linked his death to the content of the speech itself and his linguistic choice but rather to the beliefthat he was killed based on his religious belief. Using Grice's conversational implicature and Language Expectancy Theory, the authors discovered that Stephen violated Grice's maxim of relevance by not addressing the substance of the question posed to him by the High Priest with the implicature that he might have said those things he was accused of which were blasphemous. Also, towards the end of the defense, Stephen employed verbal aggression which is a clear case of negative violation of expectations of language use, hence another probable reason for Stephen's death.*
KEYWORDS: Stephen, defense speech, language expectancy theory, implicature, sanhedrin

INTRODUCTION

Human beings in all areas of human endeavor make use of language to realize their mission and vision to a large extent. Also, through the instrumentality of language (written or spoken), people more often than not portray the kind of person they are, that is, whether they are respectful, proud, kind, intelligent, compassionate, stubborn, remorseful, rigid, flexible, and so on. Apart from somebody's appearance and dress which are the first windows through which people or interlocutors can judge somebody outright (rightly or wrongly) at first contact, what somebody says and how he/she says it is the next available means by which people are immediately judged or evaluated with either negative or positive consequences. In every human society, certain occupations require more of spoken language than the written form. For example, teachers/lecturers, lawyers, and ministers of God (both Christian and Muslim) use more of spoken language than the written form to carry out

their spiritual assignments with the consequence that sometimes they may be wrongly interpreted, the message or utterance may be maliciously twisted and the encoder may be falsely accused based on what he/she says.

When one is falsely accused sometimes and one is given a chance to defend oneself before a panel/judge/committee/Council with the necessary backing to listen to the defense, two factors which are contents of one's response to the accusations and the language used by one in addressing members of the panel/committee or Council are crucial in determining their decision. Under the contents of the defense, it is important to take a look at the relevance of the defense to the accusations on ground and the implicatures that one has passed across either intentionally or unintentionally. Under the language used, it is essential to investigate whether the language employed by the person is polite or face-threatening and whether it contains instances of verbal aggression or not. It is based on the above that this paper examines the famous defense speech of Stephen in Act 7 in the Holy Bible and determines whether his death through stoning was really as a result of his religious belief (hence, his being called a martyr after his death) or as a result of the contents of his defense (which border on meanings that he might have passed across either intentionally or unintentionally to the council and other listeners) as well as his use of language.

The Personality of Stephen, his Arrest and Defense

The name 'Stephen' comes up in the Holy Bible in the Acts of Apostles, Chapters 6 and 7. He is among the seven deacons that are appointed by the Apostles for a special purpose. Wikipedia clarifies the point that Stephen's name is first mentioned in Acts of Apostles as one of those to distribute food and charitable aid to the poorer members of the community. By origin, he is a Greek-speaking Jew. Hoeck (2016, p.8) asserts that 'Stephen…was a Hellenist, one of the Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora, many of whom came to visit or dwell in Palestine.' One other significant thing about Stephen is that he is known as a martyr in the Christian world. Hoecks (2016, p.3) puts it clearer by writing that ''From Acts 7, we know that he became the very first person to shed his blood in witness for Christ.'' For clarity, the verses (Acts 6: 8-15) which indicate the circumstances leading to his arrest, and his consequent defense speech is fully reproduced below.

> Stephen, a man richly blessed by God and full of power, performed great miracles and wonders among the people. But he was opposed by some men who were members of the synagogue of the freedmen (as it was called), which included Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria. They and other Jews from the province of Cilicia and Asia started arguing with Stephen. But the Spirit gave Stephen such wisdom that when he spoke, they could not refute him. So, they bribed some men to say 'we heard him speaking against Moses and God' In this way, they stirred up the people, elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and took him before the Council. Then they brought in some men to tell lies about him. 'This man' they said 'is always talking against our

sacred Temple and the Law of Moses. We heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will tear down the temple and change all customs which have come down to us from Moses!' All those sitting in the Council fixed their eyes on Stephen and saw that his face looked like the face of an angel.

From the above, we are made to believe that some people told lies against Stephen upon which he was asked to defend himself. This is clear from Acts 7 vs1 'The high Priest asked Stephen, ''is this true ?'' As from this point, Stephen started his defense speech.

Many scholars have given their near-consensus opinions on the defense of Stephen in Acts 7 that it is irrelevant to the issue at hand. Marshal (1980, p. 131) declares that the purpose of the speech is still a subject of dispute. He continues that it is a lengthy recital of old testament history, which discusses in detail what appears to be insignificant points and which culminates 'in a bitter attack on the speaker's hearers.'

Koivisto (1987, p. 101) writes that Stephen's speech 'is clearly the longest speech in the book of Acts…' He continues that 'the content of the speech is held by some to be little more than a dry recitation of the history of Hebrews having little to do with the judicial framework into which the author of Acts has placed it.'' The two scholars above have clearly shown that the defense speech of Stephen is irrelevant to the question asked by the Chief Priest above which is an opportunity for Stephen to defend himself. In the same vein, Dibelius (1978) as cited in McCallum (n.d.) reveals that the irrelevance of Stephen's speech has constituted a real problem to exegesis and that it is impossible to find any connection between the account of the history of Israel given by Stephen at the defense and the accusation leveled against him. Peterson (2014, p. 350) avers that 'for generations, scholars have struggled with the purpose, content and uniqueness of Stephen's extended speech in Acts 7, *especially his selected abridgment of Israel's history'* (our emphasis). The subtle meaning in the underlined part of the quotation is that's Stephen's defense speech is just a mere summary of the old testament and that he totally neglected the issue at hand, that is, he failed to address the substance of the charges or accusations against him.

No doubt, the irrelevance of the defense speech of Stephen to the charges leveled against him has been acknowledged, but not the likely implicatures in it. Furthermore, Stephen's peculiar use of language towards the end of the speech has not received scholarly attention. It is precisely because of the failure to take note of the above two issues that Matthews (2010, p. 3) writes that 'as with many martyrdom tales, the precise reason for Stephen's rejection and death is not clearly stated.' Also, on p. 4, the scholar avers that 'the grounds for the martyr's death are not obvious.' Thus, the main aim of this paper is to show that Stephen might have been killed as a result of the implicatures in his acknowledged 'irrelevant' defense speech and as a result of his linguistic choice towards the end of the speech which is clearly a case of violations of language expectations.

The Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin refers to the Council that sat to hear Stephen's defense speech. Because of the significance of this group of people to Stephen's situation, it is only appropriate to see how the Council or Sanhedrin has been explained by different authorities. *Encyclopedia of the Bible* reveals that the Sanhedrin refers to 'Jewish council of *Supreme authority'* (our emphasis). *Encyclopedia Britannica* writes that Sanhedrin was a term applied to various bodies but became especially the designation for the *SupremeJewish Legislative and Judicial Court* (our emphasis). Furthermore, the Sanhedrin is presented as a political and judicial council headed by the high priest. Don Stewart (n.d) declares that Sanhedrin 'is a combination of two Greek words meaning "seated together" and that 'they were a ruling body of seventy-one members with the High Priest as the Chief Officer.' All the above have shown that the people referred to as the Sanhedrin in the Jewish community were very powerful individuals and they performed both judicial and legislative functions. The power of the Sanhedrin is given prominence with the use of 'supreme' which is underlined above. If the Sanhedrin performed both legislative and judicial functions as revealed above, it logically follows that they were aware of the implicatures in Stephen's lengthy but irrelevant response to the accusations leveled against him. They would not have equally failed to interpret correctly the opinion of Stephen about them, taking note of his linguistic choice towards the end of the defense speech.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because of the scope of analysis required in this paper, the authors make use of two theories. They are: H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle and Lang

uage Expectancy Theory.

H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle.

H.P. Grice, a philosopher in his work (1975) proposed that there are certain implicit conversational rules which people follow in order to ensure a successful interaction. These conversational rules have been called maxims by the philosopher and they are four in number, which are briefly explained below. These four maxims also have sub-maxims.

1. Maxim of Quantity

- Make your contributions to the conversation as informative as necessary.
- Do not make your contributions to the conversation more informative than necessary.

2. Maxim of Quality

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

3. Maxim of Relevance

- Say only things that are relevant.

4. Maxim of Manner

- Avoid obscurity of expression
- Avoid ambiguity
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness)
- Be orderly

(Grice 1989, p. 27) as cited in Denham and Lobeck (2013, p. 343)

Denham and Lobeck (2013, p. 344) provide more details on the above writing that;

> At its core, the cooperative principle means that in conversation; we don't lie, nor do we assume our conversational partner lie – we are sincere, and for the most part, we contribute relevant information. Grice recognized the difference between sentence meaning and speaker intention … He proposed that speakers assume that the hearers can interpret additional meaning based on the context or communicative situation and does not rely on the meaning of the words alone. Grice refers to this kind of meaning as speaker meaning.

One significant point from the above is that on some occasions, interactants do not intentionally follow the above maxims/rules in order to pass across certain meanings. That is, the current speaker can violate a maxim to generate an implicature. Implicature means additional meaning(s) that are passed across during interactions beyond what has been linguistically expressed by the speaker.

The theory is relevant to this work because the authors discover that Stephen violated both maxim of quantity and maxim of relevance in his defense speech. This violation leads to several implicatures which the Sanhedrin could not have failed to interpret which might have led to his being stoned.

Language Expectancy Theory

Language Expectancy Theory (LET) was first put forward by Burgoon and Miller in 1985 and later reviewed by Burgoon and Burgoon (Ryan, 2014). It is a theory that has its focus on persuasion. It asserts that every use of language in a particular society for the purpose of persuasion rests on certain socio-cultural as well as psychological norms shared by the people of that society.

Ryan (2014, p.2) explains that:

> The LET is a theory based on the study of persuasion. The theory assumes that people have expectations about what types of language are normal to use when trying to

persuade other people. People in any culture have expectations about the proprieties and efficaciousness of perusable acts.

From the above, it is discovered that there is a specific 'bandwidth' (Ryan, 2014, p.2) of expectations of language use in any discourse meant for persuasion. When language outside this region or bandwidth is used, people listening will be surprised and possibly shocked (changingminds.org/explanations/theories/language_expected_htm).

Clarifying the point further,

www.communicationtheory.org>langauge_expectancy_theory reveals that:

> It can be said that we all have our expectations when we talk with other people about the do says and do not says; these do says and do not says are based on an enduring pattern … and when people use the languages which are not expected in the common pattern, there will be positive or negative responses of persuasion.

According to scholars, expectations of communication are derived from three factors which are: the communicator, the relationship, and the context of discourse. Using Wikipedia as our source, it is revealed that under communicator, individual variables such as ethos or credibility of the source, personality, appearance, social status, and gender are significant. By relationship in this context, it is meant the existing relationship between the receiver and the communicator of the message as well as other factors like attractions, similarity, and status equality. Under context, both the physical context of the interaction as well as the emotional states of the interactants are considered. Wikipedia adds that 'privacy and formality constraints on interaction' are considered under this factor.

LET, according to Wikipedia has seventeen (17) propositions, but the first six propositions summarised (by Wikipedia) into two are the ones that are directly relevant to this work. These are;

i. People create expectations for language. Those expectations determine whether messages will be accepted by an individual. Breaking expectations positively results in a behavior change in favor of the persuasive message while breaking expectations negatively results in no change or an opposite behavior change.

ii. Individuals with perceived credibility (those who hold power in a society) have the freedom during persuasion to select various language strategies (wide bandwidth). Those with low credibility and those unsure of their perceived credibility are restricted to low aggressive or compliance – gaining messages to be persuasive.

This theory is relevant to this work because of the following reasons:

i. In the context of our data, we can identify the communicators as (i) the Council/Sanhedrin headed by the High Priest on the one hand and Stephen on the other.

ii. In terms of relationship, the data reveals that it is that of the Council (the Sanhedrin) and the accused.

III. The context is formal.

IV. Lastly, Stephen's defense/ speech violates expectations from Chapter 7 verses 51-53.

METHODOLOGY

The choice of the Bible version for this paper is *The Good News Bible*. It is adopted because of its clarity of language. This is made possible through its adoption of Modern/Contemporary English. The analysis is carried out under two main sections which correspond to the two theories adopted for the research. In essence, Acts 7, 1-50, and verse 56 are analyzed by looking at the implicatures in the Grice's maxims that are violated in the defense speech under consideration. The second section is analyzed by looking at violations of language expectations by Stephen and its consequences (Acts 7: 51-60).

Data Analysis

This section discusses the application of the two theories to the work with a special focus on why Stephen's audience might have decided to stone him to death.

1. Violations of Grice's Conversational Maxims in the Defence and its Implicature.

In section 2 of this work titled 'The Personality of Stephen, his Arrest and Defence,' verses 8-15 of Chapter 6 have been quoted in order to reveal the accusations brought against Stephen. Also, Chapter 7[-1] is quoted which gives opportunities to Stephen to defend himself. It is important to note that the question asked Stephen by the High Priest in Chapter 7 v1 that 'Is this true?' indicates that the members of the Council/Sanhedrin did not have any bias mind against Stephen when the trial started and that they wanted to judge Stephen based on his response. However, the response of Stephen to the question above right from verse 1 of chapter 7 to verse 50 is not relevant at all. This assertion has already been substantiated with the views of some scholars in section two of this work referred to above. Verses 2-7 of chapter 7 reproduced below show the beginning of his defense.

> [2]Stephen answered, "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! Before our ancestor Abraham had gone to live in Haran, the God of Glory appeared to him in Mesopotamia. [3] and said to him, leave your family and country and go to the land that I will show you. [4] And so he left his country and went to live in Haran. After Abraham's father died, God made him move to this land where you now live. [5] God did not then give Abraham any part of it as his own, not even a square meter of ground, but God promised to give it to him and that it will belong to him and to his descendants. At the time God made this promise, Abraham had no children. [6] This is what God said to him "Your descendant will live in a foreign country where they will be slaves and

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they will be badly treated for four hundred years. [7] But I will pass judgment on the people they will serve and your descendants will come out of that country and will worship me in this place."

The verses reproduced above clearly indicate that the beginning of Stephen's defense speech has nothing to do with the accusation against him.

From verses 8-50, Stephen's defense speech centers around the story of notable figures in the old testament and their exploits especially regarding the sojourn of the Israelites in the land of Egypt, their forty years wandering in the wilderness, and their eventual move to the land of Canaan. Notable names in the Old Testament like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David, and Solomon are mentioned. The summary above has confirmed the irrelevance of Stephen's defense to the question asked by the High Priest. Furthermore, a close study of the defense speech reveals that Stephen violated the maxim of relevance and maxim of quantity from which implicatures can be drawn.

The implicature from the above is that Stephen actually said those things or something close to those things he was accused of and as a good deacon and a follower of Jesus Christ, he did not want to tell a lie. In other words, since Stephen is silent over the accusations, it follows that he actually admitted to having been guilty of the accusations. Koivisto (1987, p.103) writes that 'If these charges were sustained, the Sanhedrin could classify this as blasphemy and Stephen would be perceived as having committed a capital offense.' Capital offense, by its nature, is punishable by death.

Another maxim that is violated by Stephen is the maxim of quantity which stipulates that 'Do not give more information than is necessary for the purpose of the current exchange'. In chapter 7, verse 1, the High Priest asked Stephen a very straight forward question which requires straight forward explanations but which Stephen failed to provide. Instead of this, he launched into a lengthy story about some periods and events in the Old Testament. The implicature inherent in this violation of maxim of quantity is that he knew more than the council members when it comes to some events in the Old Testament or that he needed to remind them of what they might have forgotten in the Old Testament. This implicature, which the authors of this paper know will not be lost on the members of the Council, could form part of the reasons for stoning Stephen.

II. Violations of Expectations of Language use by Stephen

Stephen in his defense speech violated some expectations of language use. In other words, he spoke outside the bandwidth expected of him. This is confirmed from verses 51-60 of the chapter reproduced below.

> [51]How stubborn you are! "Stephen went on to say "How heathen your hearts, how deaf you are to God's message! You are just like your ancestors: you too have always resisted the Holy Spirit! [52] Was there any prophet that your ancestors did not persecute? They killed God's messengers, who long ago announced the coming of

his righteous servant. And now you have betrayed and murdered him. [53] You are the ones who received God's law, that was handed down by angels – yet you have not obeyed it!" [54] As the members of the Council listened to Stephen, they became furious and ground their teeth at him in anger. [55] But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw God's glory and Jesus standing at the right-hand side of God. [56] 'look!" he said, ' I see heaven opened and the son of man standing at the right-hand side of God!" [57] With a loud cry the members of the Council covered their ears with their hands. Then they all rushed at him at once, [58] threw him out of the city, and stoned him. The witness left their cloaks in the care of a young man named Saul. [59] They kept on stoning Stephen as he called out to the Lord, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' [60] He knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!' He said this and died.

From the above, it can be confirmed that Stephen is guilty of verbal aggression. Oregon.edu>verbalAgrressive reveals that verbal aggression is a predisposition to attack the self-concept of others and it is associated with name-calling, the use of threats and so on (emphasis is ours). Another definition of verbal aggression is taken from Reitman (2004) which states that:

> Verbal Aggression can be defined as deliberately harmful behavior. That is typically both unprovoked and repeated. It is an intentional abuse of power, such as teasing, taunting or threatening, that is initiated by one or more individuals of relatively greater status or power (by the virtue of their number or size) against a victim of somewhat lesser status or power.(cobbsuccessforall.com>2014/5)

Stephen, as a person who has been accused of blasphemy, is not expected to attack the Council members in his use of language. However, he does this through expressions like 'How stubborn you are', 'How heathen your hearts,' 'How deaf you are to God's message!' and so on. In fact, verses 51-53 attack the council members openly.

Taking a look at the second definition of verbal aggression above, it is clear that Stephen's verbal attack on the Council is totally unprovoked as well as intentional. The above is one aspect of where he violates language expectations in his defence speech. Furthermore, taking a look at the second view of verbal aggression above, the expectation is that it is somebody who has greater power or status over his/her interactants that should show evidence of verbal aggression in his/her language use. However, in the case of Stephen, the reverse is the case. That is, he has no credibility, meaning that Stephen is not a powerful person or that he is a person of low status in the society compared to the members of the Council or the Sanhedrin. Given the above, it is totally unexpected that a person without credibility should be aggressive in his use of language. In essence, Stephen has gone out of the bandwidth expected of a person of his status when trying to persuade his listeners. In fact, there is another verbal aggression in verse 56 of the excerpt quoted above which is in the form of taunting

and which carries the implicature that the Council members are not holy; that they are sinners; that it is because of these two factors that they are unable to see Jesus Christ (whom he, Stephen can see) standing at the right hand of God.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The paper argued that Stephen's violation of Grice's maxims of relevance and quantity might have led to several implicatures. For example, his violation of the maxim of relevance might have given rise to the implicature that he was actually guilty of the charges brought against him since he did not in any way deny the charges but rather chose to say things that were not relevant to the accusations. On this assertion, Gealy (1962) cited in McCallum (n.d.) writes that 'How are we to explain the fact that Steven does not really speak to the charges brought against him?' The only way to 'explain the fact' is through implicature inherent in his violation of the maxim of relevance as explained above – that he was actually guilty of the charges and the Council members were able to accurately interpret the implicature. Regarding the nature of the charges, David Larsen (2019) declares that 'anciently, the charge of blasphemy was punishable by death and seems to have involved a range of possible offenses or perceived insults against God and/or the Jewish religion in general.' (bookofmormoncentral.org>blog) So, the first point above has shown that Stephen's death might not have been due to his religious belief but rather to his being guilty of blasphemy.

Apart from the above, Stephen might have been killed because of his violation of expectations of language use. He is guilty of verbal aggression in the forms of name calling and taunting. In terms of status and power, Stephen was not supposed to employ verbal aggression when addressing the council members. According to medium.com>acts_study_guide>the_story_of_stephen,

> The Sanhedrin consisted of Chief Priests or the heads of the twenty-four classes into which the priests were divided, elders, men of age and experience, and scribes, lawyers or those learned in the Jewish law. The number of members is usually given as 71. The president of this body was a styled nasi (a Hebrew title meaning prince in Biblical Hebrew), and was chosen based on his eminence in worth and wisdom.

The nature, composition, number, and status of the members of the Council show that Stephen's violation of expectations of language use needed to be negatively responded to. Bearing in mind that he had initially been guilty of blasphemy and later violated language expectations through aggression, the listeners had no option other than stoning him to death.

In conclusion, based on the application of the two linguistic theories adopted for this work, there is no clear evidence that Stephen was killed based on his religious belief but rather based on the fact that he admitted being guilty of the charges against him by not addressing them either advertently or inadvertently in his defense speech as well as by violating expectations of language use through verbal aggression. On the whole, the paper has revealed that speakers in any communicative

encounter should be cautious of the implicatures they might be passing across either intentionally or unintentionally by violating Grice's conversational maxims especially when they are interacting with educated or intelligent people or those who are good at interpreting both covert and overt meanings during interactions. Also, the paper has shown that employing any form of verbal aggression during interactions with people of higher status when the main goal of such an interaction is to persuade will always produce negative results. At the same time, resorting to verbal aggression in any persuasive encounter lowers the speaker's personality because verbal aggression has been ''viewed as a skill deficiency whereby an individual lacks the verbal skills required to deal with normal disagreement and everyday frustrations.' (oregonstate.edu>VerbalAggression).

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