

A Pragma-Discourse Study of Selected Excerpts from the Book of Genesis

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Abstract

The importance of language to man cannot be overstressed as it is the means by which humans interact in diverse situations. This paper examined selected excerpts from the book of Genesis to identify the discourse features, the speech acts performed by the participants and the observance of conversational maxims in the conversations analyzed. Consequently, conversational analysis and the speech act theory (specifically Searles 1969 classification) were employed as relevant approaches for the analysis. The study revealed that the conversation had obvious discourse opening/closing, turn-taking and adjacency pair as common discourse features. Also, directives in the form of questions are the predominant speech acts though, there are few instances of declarative. The findings also revealed an obvious non-observance of conversational maxims of quality and quantity. This study has established that participants in a communicative event carefully select their utterances to express their intended meanings, being mindful of their roles.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Discourse analysis, Speech acts, Conversational analysis, Conversational maxims.

Introduction

Language, a natural phenomenal gift to man has been the chief means of interaction in human society and through it, societal progress in all aspects of life has been made possible. Though a complex phenomenon, human linguistic ability engenders the articulation and expression of thoughts, ideas and feelings which are important for sustainable human relations and overall societal growth. The complex nature of language is prominent at the discourse level where participants in a speech event creatively use words and utterances to enunciate explicit as well as implicit meanings influenced by different contextual variables. Oftentimes, speakers in a conversation craft their utterances in a manner that requires the listeners to make an inference by relying on available contextual cues to appropriately interpret the meaning of the utterances since their responses are determined by their ability to understand the intended meaning(s) of the speaker. Understanding and interpreting utterance meaning in any speech event implies that language users must possess some pragmatic abilities as pointed out by Grundy (2008) who posits that understanding one another in any form of conversation depends on the ability of language users as pragmatically skilled conversationalists to recognize the meanings contained in their utterances. From a pragmatic perspective, even the most ordinary statement which may be considered meaningless can be loaded with meanings that can be unravelled by careful inferential

interpretation. Understanding and responding appropriately to intended meanings, therefore, form the bedrock of pragmatic enquiries into language use such as this study which seeks to investigate discourse features as well as the speech functions of selected conversations from the canon of scriptures. The objectives of the study include the investigation of how the power or authority of speakers determines their contribution to the discourse; the identification of dominant speech acts performed by the participants and access the extent to which conversational maxims are observed.

Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis and Context

People's interaction with one another and their environment through language has become the bedrock of discussions in the linguistic fields of pragmatics and discourse analysis. These linguistic disciplines are interested not so much in the formal properties of language but in the practical use of language for communication in different socio-cultural contexts. In other words, what people do with language in the social situation they find themselves is of immense interest to pragmatists and the discourse analysts. Pragmatics as a linguistic field came to limelight between 1960 and 1970 through the works of Philosophers like J.L Austin, H.P. Grice, John Searle and the like. As a linguistic term, Pragmatics is said to have been employed first by Charles Morris, a philosopher whose main focus was semiotics or the science of signs. In the course of his inquiry, he considered pragmatics as the study of the relation of signs to users. In other words, pragmatics is concerned with the interrelationship between language forms, messages and the users and not just with language as a system or product (Bossan, 2017).

According to Yule (1996), pragmatics as a linguistic field is primarily concerned with the study of meaning communicated by a speaker or writer and interpreted by the listener or reader. In addition, it is the study of how people communicate more than their utterances. Yule's views highlight the place of participants in meaningful exchanges in particular contexts by revealing how language users are central to the context in which communication takes place concerning other contextual factors. In another submission, he considers pragmatics as the study of invisible meaning and that interlocutor must necessarily depend on shared assumptions and expectations which provide some insights into how more meaning is communicated than what is said. The above submission brings implicature to the fore in the sense that in a communicative situation, participants do sometimes mean more than what is merely communicated in their utterances. Levinson's (1983) view of conversational implicature as one of the presumed focal phenomena to be considered in any definition of pragmatics strengthens Yule's submission. By implication, conversational implicature is a critical aspect of pragmatics and from the preceding discussion, participants, shared meaning and implicature are relevant considerations in pragmatic studies.

Mey (2001), defines pragmatics from a societal perspective when he points out that pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society. From his submission, the social context in which utterances are expressed should be an important consideration in defining pragmatics other than just participants, shared meaning and implicature. Social context is very relevant in pragmatics because the correct interpretation of the meaning of an utterance is possible with reference to the social environment of the speakers. Odebunmi (2015), drawing insights from some scholars like Levison and Yule, defines pragmatics as "the study of meaning that is constrained by discourse participants, context-determined or context-shaped roles, access to shared or accommodated beliefs, negotiation of discursive choices and interactive orientation" (p 199). From his definition, identified elements which are crucial in defining

pragmatics include the participants, the discursive context which influences their use of language, what they take for granted or accept as part of the context, their mutually constructed meaning of words and their preferences of the interpretation of the meanings of the utterances. The preceding discussion highlights an important fact that in any interactive situation, participants' language use is greatly influenced by various contextual variables which must be relied upon for the proper explication of communicated messages.

Discourse analysis is another aspect of linguistic study that has attracted the attention of many scholars who are interested in the functions of language in society. According to Kamalu and Osisanwo (2015), discourse analysis is a field of linguistics which has drawn some of its theoretical and methodological analysis from academic disciplines such as sociology, linguistics, philosophy and psychology. Through this linguistic field, models and methods of studying educational, cultural and communication issues have emerged. Like pragmatics, discourse analysis emerged as a discipline in the 1960s and early 1970s through the works of different philosophers like J. L. Austin (1962), Dell Hymes (1964) and the like. Zelleg Harris (1952) is credited with the first use of the term discourse analysis to refer to a method of analyzing connected speech or writing for continuing descriptive linguistics beyond the limit of a simple sentence at a time as well as a means of correlating culture and language (Kamalu & Osisanwo, 2017, Ezeifeke, 2018). Ibileye (2017), maintains that discourse is a pervading phenomenon by which human interaction in society is governed sometimes unconsciously and it has been considered by scholars "as the authentic product of human interaction as well as being the concrete aspect of the abstractness of communication" (p.1). He points out that from scholarly works such as Stubbs (1983) and the like, human essence is defined by discourse because it reveals the wants of speakers, who they are and what they do. This suggests that what people do with language and their identity is revealed through discourse. Therefore, studying discourse has the advantage of revealing the true nature and essence of human relations.

Discourse has been defined simply as language in use which can either be spoken or written while discourse analysis is the analysis of language in use. (Brown & Yule, 1983 quoted in Kamalu & Osisanwo, 2017). Analysis of language in use means the set of norms, preferences and expectations which relate language to context. The organization of language above the sentence level is also considered discourse analysis. Kamalu and Osisanwo (2015), observe further that discourse analysis is not restrictively concerned with studying only the formal properties of language but also considers the actions accomplished by language users in social and cultural contexts so long as their language is characterized by coherence. They quoted Cooks (1989) description of discourse as the language used for communicating something that is considered coherent which may or may not be a correct sentence or series of sentences. Following from this perspective, therefore, discourse analysis is a study of the features that enhance discourse coherence. From Cooks' view, what is important in discourse is not how a text conforms to grammatical rules but that it communicates and that is also recognized as a coherent text. Kamalu and Osisanwo (2015) conclude that what matters in the study of discourse, whether as language in use or as language beyond the clause, is how language users organize their speech into a coherent piece such that it communicates something to the receivers. The above view brings to the fore the relationship between language and the context of use as well as the relevant role of coherence in discourse. The primacy of language use is to communicate meanings that are interpretable within a given

context, which when defined, the meaning of expressions and the role of participants in a discourse are easily determined and interpreted.

Context occupies a central place in language use as revealed by the scholarly attention that it has attracted in works of famous linguists such as Malinowski (1923) whose use of the term context of a situation marked the beginning of the linguistic study of context as an important aspect of pragmatics and discourse analysis. His studies have shown that meaning explication is very difficult without reference to the socio-cultural background of the speakers. Odemunmi (2005) quoted in Odebunmi (2016) views context as the “spine of meaning” taking into consideration the importance of extra-linguistic factors in explicating meaning (p.14). Furthermore, drawing insights from the views of Van Dijk (1977) and Owen (1977), he provides another definition of context “as the condition that constrains the determination of the propositions of an utterance or the understanding of an event or discourse” (p.13). Ezeifeka (2018), asserts that utterances by participants in a speech event occur in a particular spatio temporal situation involving the speaker and the hearer, their performed actions at the time and the various external objects and events. These and other features of particular speech events are referred to as the context of the situation/culture. Thus, in language use, expression, meaning and context are inseparable as noted by Finegan (2012). Similarly, Eggins (1994) claims that context can be deduced from a text and that this is proof of the interface of language and context. Therefore, how language is used can be predicted from a context based on the linguistic patterns in a text, and this further attest to the claim that the relationship between language and context is symbiotic.

The concept of context is dynamic hence it is ever-changing and fluid. This fluidity is the reason why what obtains in a particular context is likely to vary in another, given the same subject matter and the same or different participants. Mey (2001), opines that the changing nature of context enables the interaction between participants in a communicative event and their linguistic expressions are considered meaningful within the social situation in which they find themselves. He adds that context as a user-oriented concept differs according to the user, user group and language. It is central in language use because it allows speakers in a communication process to maximize their linguistic resources leaving out details in some particular utterances. Thus, the claim that discourse varies across different social contexts makes it a difficult term to define as rightly observed by Huang (2007):

Context is one of those notions which is very widely used in linguistic literature, but to which it is very difficult to give a precise definition. From a relative theory-neutral point of view, however, context may in a broader sense be defined as referring to any relevant features of the dynamic setting or environment in which a linguistic unit is systematically used. Furthermore, context can be seen as composed of three different sources...there is the physical context.... The second type is the linguistic context, which refers to the surrounding utterances in the same discourse.... Thirdly, and finally, we have the general knowledge context (pp.13-14).

Halliday (1978), views context as an environment because “language comes to life only when functioning in some environment” (p.36). Naturally, language is used often concerning situations where people interact with one another and it is on the basis of their interaction that utterances derived their meanings. It can be concluded that language use becomes more meaningful within the social environment in which speakers find themselves.

The role of context from the discussion above cannot be taken for granted when dealing with issues relating to pragmatics and discourse analysis. The relevance of context in language use cannot be ignored because of its contribution to what is directly and indirectly communicated (Spencer-Oatey & Zegarac, 2010). On a general note, there is a contextual dimension to almost every utterance naturally expressed in a speech event where participants are actively involved in language use. It is these contextual variables that determine largely the choice of utterances, how they are expressed as well as how they are understood.

Theoretical Framework

The development of conversational analysis (CA) as an approach to discourse study has been credited to scholars such as Harvey Sacks. This theory came to the limelight in the 1960s through the studies of scholars whose attention was on the social organization of everyday interaction. These scholars were concerned with how speakers in a communicative event can structure and organize utterances in the particular contexts they find themselves. CA is primarily concerned with the analysis of naturally produced texts in natural talk settings (formal and informal) to unravel how particular utterances in conversations are interpreted by speakers. The main emphasis of CA is the interactional and inferential consequences of the choices that speakers make between alternative utterances. Conversational analysis can be employed in the study of both formal (institutional discourse) as well as informal discourse and this is contrary to early concern on the study of talk in an informal setting on the basis that formal discourse is governed by different orders of constraints. The approach can also be used to study verbal, non-verbal as well as paralinguistic features of speech such as pitch, volume, pauses, and starts (Olateju, 2003).

How people meaningfully conduct themselves in different social situations is the goal of CA and this implies a concern with the accomplishment of conduct and practice in whatever form. Heritage (1998) quoted in Abraham (2017) maintains that CA concerns the description of moral and institutional social interaction order as participants engage one another in normal linguistic discourse. He points out that observing the moral and institutional orders is what makes social action and interaction mutually meaningful. Primarily, CA focuses on common features such as the manner in which participants engage in normal conversations, take turns, manage discourse interruptions/interjections, opening and closing of discourse, correction of errors, negotiate topics, repair speech, etc. In this submission, Heritage (1998) stresses the central role of context in CA when he points out that it is an approach that is interested in the existing relationship between meaning and context in interaction and this interest is demonstrated by creating a synergy between meaning and context in any discourse. He also posits that linguistic utterances or actions are integral aspects of context. Therefore, CA simultaneously analyses linguistic behaviour or action, context management and inter-subjectivity. These are the objects of the participant's actions even though the procedures on which these activities are based are non-active hence the likelihood of non-adherence to them by participants in a communicative event. For a conversation to be sustained, there must be cooperation between the participants and this explains Grice (1975) emphasis that conversational implicature depends on the cooperative principle (CP) made up of four maxims; The maxim of quantity, which requires a participant to contribute as is expected (not more or less). Maxim of quality requires that a speaker's contribution should be truthful, with no falsehood and no information which lacks adequate evidence. Maxim of relation expects that a speaker's contribution should be relevant. Lastly, the maxim of manner demands that every

participant should be perspicuous, avoid obscurity of expression, and ambiguity and should be brief and orderly.

Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory propounded by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) is one of the pragmatic theories employed in the study of texts when investigating the meanings that are contained in utterances expressed in a particular situation. The theory emphasizes the fact that people perform different actions/functions through the utterances they make. According to Austin (1962) in his book *How to Do Things with Words*, utterances that people make are not just mere information but action. This implies that speakers, through their utterances accomplish a lot of actions such as betting, promising, christening, swearing warning, commanding or ordering, etc. Mey (2001), submits that by merely making an utterance, a speaker is at the same time doing something with his/her words. Therefore, he considers speech acts as verbal actions occurring in the world and this suggests that all around the world, people perform communicative acts with their words.

There are distinctions in the speech act theory and the first major one is the distinction between the constantives and performatives. While the constantives refer to utterances which can either be true or false, performatives are utterances used to perform actions which can be felicitous or infelicitous. Another distinction identified by the proponents of the theory is the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The locutionary act refers simply to the actual expression of an utterance; the illocutionary act refers to the speaker's intended meaning and the perlocutionay act means the effect of the utterance on the hearer/ listener.

Speech acts can be considered successful if they meet certain conditions referred to as felicity conditions. The first condition is the preparatory condition. The second is the executive condition and the third is the sincerity condition. An illocutionary act would be considered felicitous when these conditions are met (Bossan, 2017).

Different classifications of speech acts have been provided by scholars. However, for the purpose of this study, Searle's (1969) classification is employed and this is briefly explained below:

Representatives/assertive: These speech acts are used to describe processes, states, and events in the world and a speaker is committed to the truth of what has been spoken.

Directives: The function of these speech acts is either to urge or persuade the hearer to carry out an instruction. 'Directives include questioning, commanding, inviting, and requesting. The response to the instruction may be in the form of a verbal response or physical action.

Commissives: In these speech acts, the speaker commits himself to future action and these include: promising, offering, challenging, vowing, betting, etc.

Expressives: Speakers use these speech acts to express their psychological state, i.e., feelings, and attitude towards certain situations. These include apologizing, congratulating, thanking, insulting, rebuking, condoling, complaining, etc.

Methodology

The study sourced data from the New International Version (NIV) on account of its more scholarly and modern use of the English language. Five excerpts were purposively selected from the book of Genesis chapters three, four, sixteen and eighteen. The selection was predicated on the

involvement of different participants (God, Satan and humans). The selected texts were analyzed for their speech acts type, discourse features and adherence to conversational maxims.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Excerpt one

¹ Now the serpent was craftier than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?” ² The woman said to the serpent “we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden but God did say “you must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die”. ⁴ “you will not surely die” the serpent said to the woman, ⁵ “for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:1-5).

Excerpt one is a conversation between two discourse participants (the serpent and the woman) in the Garden of Eden. Naturally, in every spoken discourse, there is always a participant who initiates the conversation in any form he/she decides depending on the other participants in the communicative events. In this instance, the first discourse feature is a talk initiation by the serpent as a discourse feature which began in the form of a polar interrogative that required a yes or no response from the woman. By putting a question across to the woman with reference to God’s instruction concerning a specific tree in the garden, another important feature of conversation is revealed which is elicitation in talk. The process of demanding a response from the woman was initiated and naturally, feedback was given as observed in the verse that follows. From the brief dialogue between the two participants in the text above, adjacency pair as a discourse feature emerged in the question-and-answer pattern. The conversation terminates with an affirmative utterance from the serpent which was made to make the woman disobey God’s instruction.

It is interesting to note that at the beginning of verse four, the serpent employed the word “surely” in his utterance “You will not surely die” as a discourse marker to give credence to his proposition thereby persuading the woman to eat the fruit for the apparent advantages of becoming like God and knowing good and evil. The speech acts in the excerpt above include:

Directives: this is a question that the serpent asked. “Did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?” Another directive which is an order or a command is seen in the woman’s response. It is a repetition of God’s instruction. “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden...”

Representative: (assertion) “You will not surely die”. Embedded in this utterance also is the speech act of persuasion.

Examining the excerpt above from Grice ‘s Conversational Maxims, it can be seen that the woman observed some of the maxims and flouted others. From their interaction, the woman supplied more information to the question than demanded when she said “you must not touch it”. Taking her statement literally, she failed to observe the maxim of quantity by supplying more information because the command in Gen. 2:7 is not that they should not touch it, but that they were not to eat the fruit of the tree. The aspect of touching the fruit in a literal sense is additional information to the question.

Excerpt two

⁹ But the Lord God called to the man, where are you? ¹⁰ He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid”. ¹¹ And he said “who told you that you were naked?” “Have you eaten from the tree I commanded you not to eat from?” ¹² The man said, “The woman you put here with me--she gave some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” ¹³ Then the Lord God said to the woman “what is this you have done?” The woman said “the serpent deceived me and I ate”. ¹⁴ So the Lord God said to the serpent, “because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals” ...(Genesis3:9-11).

Excerpt two is a discourse between God, the first human couple and the serpent. This occurred after they had eaten from the forbidden tree following Serpent’s persuasion. The man and the woman realized the obvious consequence of their disobedient action and decided to hide from the all-seeing God. Their disobedience prompted the interaction in excerpt two initiated by God. The entire discourse took place in the context of the garden and this time between four (4) participants with God being the first speaker.

Apparent discourse features in the conversation are **discourse participants** (God, the man, the woman and the serpent), **discourse opening/ talk initiation** as well as **elicitation in a talk** which are all embedded in God’s question to the man “where are you?” It is this interrogative that opened up a dialogue between God, the man and his wife. In this conversation, each participant contributed to the flow of the discourse by responding to the questions asked by God. The discourse began specifically with a choice of who the **next speaker** (the man) would be because the utterance of God specifically was directed to him.

In conversational analysis, the current speaker could decide to summon the next speaker either by name-calling, pointing or asking him/her specific questions as is the case in the excerpt above. Evident also in the conversation is adjacency pair which occurred in the form of questions and answers. From the two questions “where are you?” and “who told you?” The man was required to provide simple and clear responses. Unfortunately, he failed in this regard. The speech acts that feature in the text are:

Directives: These are clearly seen in the questions God asked them; “where are you?”, “who told you that you were naked?”, “have you eaten from the tree I asked you not to eat?”, and “what is this you have done?” The interrogatives reveal God’s displeasure towards the man and his wife because of their disobedience.

Concerning the conversational maxims, there is clear evidence of non-observance of the maxims of quantity and relevance in the responses of the man and the woman. Instead of telling God where he (the man) was direct, he supplied information that was irrelevant to the question when he said “I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked”. This is not an appropriate response to the question “where are you?”. The man’s response to the question “have you eaten from the tree which I asked you not to eat from?” is equally inappropriate because the question required him to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but he veered off by passing the blame to the woman who gave him some of the forbidden fruit. The woman likewise, instead of responding accordingly, blamed the serpent. The discourse closed when God pronounced a curse on each of them.

Excerpt three

⁵ But on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favour. So, Cain was very angry and his face was downcast ⁶ then the Lord said to Cain “why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door, it desires to have you but you must master it.... ⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, “where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know” he replied, “am I my brother’s keeper?” ¹⁰ Then the Lord said, “What have you done?” Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.... ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground...Cain said to the Lord, “my punishment is more than I can bear” (Genesis 4:5-11).

Discourse features in the text above are; discourse opening, turn-taking as well as adjacency pair. The interaction which began with an interrogative sentence was predicated on Cain’s act of killing Abel (his brother) because of anger and jealousy toward him.

The dominant speech acts in the text are:

Directives: “why are you angry?”, “Why is your face downcast?” “If you do right, will you not be accepted?” “Where is your brother?” “What have you done?” These questions were directed at Cain to reveal deeper the issues in his heart. The intended meanings in these directives are deeper than mere superficial enquiry.

Declaration: “Now you are under a curse”. This is God’s pronounced punishment of Cain.

“My punishment is more than I can bear”. This statement is a lamentation by Cain as a reaction to the curse placed on him.

Concerning conversational maxims, Cain’s response to God’s questions suggests a deliberate violation of the maxims of quantity, relevance and manner. Instead of responding to the question, he insolently asked God “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Excerpt four

⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram “you are responsible for the wrong I am suffering, I put my servant in your arms and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me”. ⁶ Your servant is in your hands”, Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best”. Then Sarai ill-treated Hagar, so she fled from her. ⁷ The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring that is beside the road of Shur. ⁸And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” “I am running away from my mistress Sarai”, she answered. ⁹Then the angel of the Lord told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her”. ¹⁰The angel added, “I will increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count”. ¹¹The angel of the Lord also said to her, “you are now with child and you will have a son, you shall name him Ishmael”, for the lord has heard of your misery. (Genesis 16:5-11)

The discourse in excerpt four resulted from Sarai’s decision to have children through her maid, Hagar whom she handed over to Abram (her husband) as a wife. This occurred on account that Sarai as at then was barren.

There are four participants in the text, (Sarai, Abram, Hagar and the angel of the Lord). Discourse features noticeable in the excerpt are; **discourse opening**; this is seen in Sarai’s complaint to her husband for Hagar’s disrespect on the basis of her being pregnant for Abram. Abram took the floor

and made his contribution as he permitted Sarai to deal with Hagar as she wished. **Turn-taking** is another obvious feature in the text as shown by the contributions to the discourse by all the participants. The question/answer interaction between the angel and Hagar gave rise to the **adjacency pair**. The conversation ended with the angel's instruction to Hagar to go back and submit to her mistress.

The speech acts in the text include **expressive**, (Sarai's complain to Abram in verse 5), and **directives** (Abram's words to Sarai, "do whatever you think best"). Another **directive** is the angel's question to Hagar in verse 8 "where have you come from, and where are you going?" and his command to her "Go back to your mistress and submit to her". The discourse ended with a **declaration** (the speech act of promising) by the angel "I will so increase your descendants".

In the text, all the participants observed the conversational maxims. However, Hagar flouted the maxim of quantity by not supplying full information to the angel's questions. She did not respond to the question "where are you going?"

Excerpt five

¹ The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby, when he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ³ He said, "if I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by". ⁴ Let a little water be brought and then you may all wash your feet and rest under the tree, ⁵ let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way now that you have come to your servant. "Very well" they answered, "do as you say". ⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, "quick" he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread..." ⁹ "Where is your wife, Sarah?" they asked him, "there in the tent" he said. ¹⁰ Then the Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife will have a Son..." ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" ¹³ Then the Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh and say, "will I really have a child now that I am old?" ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son. ¹⁵ Sarah was now afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh" but he said, "yes you did laugh" (Genesis 18:1-14).

The discourse features in the above excerpt are discourse opening, discourse closing, adjacency pair and speaker change. These manifest very clearly in the speech of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham initiated the talk by inviting the three men he saw standing. He invited them to rest under the tree as a meal was prepared for them. The speech acts prevalent in the text include:

Directives: Abraham's invitation to the men to rest under the tree; his instruction to Sarah to bake bread; the visitors' questions: "where is your wife Sarah?" (v9) and "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (v14). Sarah's question, "will I have this pleasure?"

Commissive is another speech act that can be seen in the text and this is the promise of a son made to Abraham and Sarah by the Lord. "I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife will have a son". The same promise is repeated in verse 14 as the discourse draws to a close.

With regards to the maxims, Sarah did not observe the maxim of quality when she lied that she did not laugh (v15). This was her response to the Lord's question in verse 13 "why did Sarah laugh and say will I really have a child now that I am old?". The discourse ended as the Lord asserted "yes you did laugh".

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that language as a meaning-making resource is a context-bound phenomenon wherein the role relationship of participants in a communicative event determines the flow of discourse and the speech functions accomplished through their utterances. The study has achieved the task of discovering the correlation between language use and the power or authority of speakers. It has shown that in a speech event, the power continuum is germane in the tenor variable of social contexts, particularly where participants of unequal power are involved. The result of the study has given ground to assume that speakers with higher authority are more likely to initiate and/or elicit talk in a context where speakers of unequal authority are involved in discourse. The goal of this study also was to establish the extent to which speakers observe conversational maxims. From the result, the human participants to some extent flouted the maxims of quantity and manner and this led to the conclusion that in a speech situation, participants in a subordinate position are more likely to flout conversational maxims particularly when under pressure.

Furthermore, based on the analytical tools employed, the result has shown that directives which occur as interrogatives are the dominant speech functions in the texts analyzed. The interrogative utterances identified had other indirect functions other than eliciting information, hence, the conclusion that in discourse, questions can be used to perform different speech acts aside from their function of eliciting information. In this study, the idea that language use can reveal the roles of participants in a given social context has been established as whether the speakers have equal or unequal power manifest in their utterances. Generally speaking, how participants in a discourse negotiate and communicate meaning depends on who they are, their relationship and their understanding of the entire social context.

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