Society and Culture: Aspects of the First-Century World for a More Contextually Driven Exegesis

Joseph D. Fantin
Dallas Theological Seminary

Abstract: It is agreed that both context and Greek studies are essential components of the exegetical process. This article explores the function of language itself within society. The focus is not on the typical "meaning" of language as an information carrier but rather on the *meaning* that the use of particular linguistic elements brings to the communication situation. In other words, I will consider language itself as a social phenomenon. In order to achieve this goal, using Acts 21:27–40 as a test case, I will first consider selective elements of the social and historical context that when understood will contribute to recreating the context of the passage (cognitive environment). Then, with this contextual information activated in the exegetical process, I will consider the social impact of this information on two recorded speech incidents from Acts 21:27–40 resulting in a better understanding of the passage. This will demonstrate that in addition to the informational linguistic meaning, an understanding of the social use of language itself is a valuable tool for understanding the biblical text.

Keywords: Acts 21:27–40, exegesis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, New Testament backgrounds, New Testament contexts, cognitive environment, Greek, relevance theory

1. *Introduction*

Context! Context! Context! the old adage goes. In order to understand the Bible you must understand its context.[1] Often in

---

1. This is a revised version of a paper given in the New Testament

popular circles this has simply meant that one must read a passage of the Bible from within its larger literary context in the specific book. However, in more nuanced applications such as academic work or even in serious Bible study, context has come to include the historical, social, cultural, religious, etc., contexts of the author and his world. Often this information is labelled "backgrounds"; however, such a term seems to suggest that somehow this information is behind the Bible and that the Bible stands separate from it. The label "contexts" is preferred. This is a better way of describing this content because the Bible was written from *within* this sphere and is intimately connected with it.[2]

In my academic work I have become more and more convinced that an essential aspect of understanding the biblical text involves an attempt at reconstructing the original context, the cognitive environment,[3] of a specific book. We wish to get, so-to-speak, into the *sandals* of the original readers. I understand that such a task is impossible to fully accomplish for a number of reasons; however, the acknowledgment of this as a goal and the realization of the difficulty involved results in constraints on one's interpretation (what was not possibly understood in the original context cannot be the meaning today) and a certain humility about one's findings. Further, the objection that the impossibility of the task demands that it be abandoned is not

2.   See Engberg-Pedersen, "Introduction," 1–2.

3.   For a discussion of *cognitive environment* and its use in historical and exegetical work, see Fantin, *The Lord of the Entire Word*, 17–18. My view of the concept, cognitive environment, is influenced by Blakemore, *Relevance and Linguistic Meaning*, 69 and especially Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 38–46.

worth entertaining. For it is better to knowingly use limited knowledge about the ancient world while always being open to adjustments based on new learning and findings than it is to simply approach the text from a modern worldview. The latter has failed before it has even begun.[4]

The use of Greek has been an essential tool in exegesis for centuries. For some, this is the most important tool available. It is difficult to argue with this since Greek was the original language of our New Testament. It has been and remains the centerpiece of exegesis and is essential in much quality preaching and teaching. However, our understanding of Greek can unintentionally be influenced significantly by other factors such as our understanding of our own native language, Latin, or even modern Greek.

It may be preferable to view learning Greek as an aspect of the ancient context. It is not an isolated language element in the exegesis process but rather it is an essential part of reconstructing the cognitive environment. In other words, knowledge of Greek is one aspect of a reconstructed cognitive environment of the biblical communicators.

This article intends to be an exercise in just this, using the Greek language as a means of better understanding the original context. However, the focus will not be as much on Greek in the traditional manner, namely, syntactical classification, etc. This of course is a vital aspect of the process of understanding the cognitive environment. However, this cannot be our focus here. Rather, the focus will be on the use of language as a social phenomenon itself, not the content of the language (i.e., the meaning of the text). It is the use of language itself as a social tool that will enable us to understand the implied meaning of the text in a more nuanced manner.

4.   Concerning using contextual information in the exegetical process, see Fantin, "Background Studies," 167–96.

After discussing some preliminary matters, Acts 21:27–40 will be used to help demonstrate the value of such information for understanding the biblical text. This will not be a full exegetical treatment of this passage. Rather, our focus will be on the *use* of language with other aspects of the context considered as deemed necessary.

2. *Language as a Social Phenomenon*

There are many uses of language. We often do not consider this when using it. However, in addition to communicating propositional meaning, language can be used to comfort, frighten, assure, motivate, etc. Many might respond by stating that this is obvious and note that when one is sad, a comforting statement such as *It is okay* fits within our use of propositional language. Agreed. However, not all comforting is so linguistically transparent. For example, a child sitting on a playground crying because another child pushed him off a swing may be comforted by his mother with words such as *Let's go to the slide, Now that's really fun*, or *That child is a big bully*, or *Let's go home and have some ice cream*. These statements all communicate some sort of propositional message to the child; however, if we only assumed this meaning, we would probably miss the most important aspect of the communicative contribution, namely, comfort. There may have been no intention prior to this event to give the child ice cream. However, present circumstances demand a response of comfort that the mother feels appropriate for this situation. If successful, her words accomplish this.

There are many other uses of language that go beyond the transference of propositional information. Words can be used as physical art; an important aspect of poetry is the beauty of the sounds being enunciated, etc. This article will explore another use of language that goes beyond simple information transfer.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that communication itself is not limited to language. Language is an essential element of most communication situations but is not required for communication to occur. One can communicate much with the

point of a finger, a glance, a movement, etc. Thus communication is broader than language. As for language, the old code model of communication where one has a concept in one's mind, encodes it, sends it to another through language, and then the receiver decodes the language contribution with the result of a transfer of the information[5] does not hold up to scrutiny.[6] Rather, through the work of Paul Grice and then others such as Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, it has been demonstrated that communication occurs primarily through inference.[7] The need for this approach can be easily demonstrated. For example, the so-called literal or code model approach without an incredibly bloated collection of linguistic "add-ons"[8] is unable to handle statements such as *I have nothing to wear to the party* and *You must be 21 to enter the pub*. These can be interpreted as one not having any clothes at all or that people only 21 year of age can enter the pub (i.e., not 20 years old or 22 years old, etc.). By contrast, an inferential approach often associated with pragmatics includes aspects of communication such as intention, implication, etc. Thus, language-proper linguistic code is one of a number of elements that must be interpreted to understand a communicative contribution. In the case of the two statements above, the hearer shares a cognitive environment with the speaker thus permitting the speaker to use his or her words more economically. Each

5.   See Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 43–49.
6.   See the discussion in Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 43–60.
7.   See Grice, "Logic and Conversation," 41–58; Grice, "Further Notes," 113–27; Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*. For a discussion of the contribution these and other have made, see Fantin, *Greek Imperative Mood*, 43–65.
8.   By "add-ons" I mean linguistic rules, etc., that are added on top of basic linguistic analysis. In practice one starts with a theory that explains straightforward, so-called literal utterances and then as more complicated utterances and exceptions occur, rules are added to account for these. The result is a weak analytical tool bloated by layer after layer of rules. There is no end to these potential rules and it is difficult to find any cognitive support for this view of language (i.e., a simple tool that adds layers to account for anything that does not fall within its range of analysis). Such approaches need to be abandoned as comprehensive linguistic analytical tools.

statement is understood as *I have nothing* appropriate *to wear to the party* and *You must be* at least 21 years of age *to enter the pub*.[9]

3. *Language and Society*

Many conversations in which we engage are somewhat scripted.[10] When I meet a person at an academic conference, I (or the person I meet) will probably ask something to the effect of, *What school are you at?* This question is more specific than if we met in a more neutral context such as a bus or a restaurant which might evoke a question about the weather or a local sports team. I can be more specific because I am already making assumptions about the person by his or her presence at this conference. Although the person may be a pastor or other minister, most at the conference will have a connection to a school. Also, the question, *What school are you at?*, is general enough to leave open the role the person may have at the school. He or she may be a professor or a student. If I would have asked a student *Where do you teach?*, the person may be somewhat uncomfortable because he or she may feel the need to reply, *I do not teach*, *I am a student*. If I would have asked a professor *Where do you study?*, the person may be offended wondering why I would have not thought he or she was a professor. Back to our original question, *What school are you at?*, is also an invitation for the person to volunteer his or her academic role of professor, student, etc., without having to be offended by my

---

9.   For more detail on this approach, see Gutt, *Translation and Relevance*, 24–46.

10. This section is a simple exposition of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics can be defined as "the study of language in relation to society" (Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, 1 [Hudson uses italics for this statement in the original]). My purpose here is not to explore the field in any depth nor is it intended to critique or defend it. It is merely here to provide some theoretical basis for the main linguistic focus of the article. For helpful brief introductions, see Edwards, *Sociolinguistics* and Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*. For a helpful more detailed discussion though now a little dated, see Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*.

presumption of a lower role or being embarrassed by my assumption of a higher role.

Although I may be interested in the person's educational connection, if our conversation is anything like many other normal first-contact conversations, I have other reasons for asking this. I am trying to understand my social relationship to the person. Although I (and most others) do not like to admit it, I may interact differently with a person based on how he or she responds. In the social hierarchy of academia, I will attempt to situate both of us on that hierarchy. Of course, if I have not volunteered any information, the person will then follow with a question regarding my educational role. At least from my perspective and if he or she follows social conventions, our conversation will continue as appropriate for our social roles.

A pastor mentioned to me that when meeting other pastors for the first time, he is often asked *How big is your church?* This is simple posturing for people to navigate their perceived success in relation to the other person.

Thus, language is used to help establish relationships between people.[11] In addition to what was mentioned above, we also use language to communicate information about ourselves.[12] Again, although language is obviously being used to communicate information, much more is taking place when we describe ourselves. One chooses, tweaks, and omits information in order to create a picture of oneself in accordance with how one wants to be perceived by others. In common terminology today, one desires to create a "brand" of and for him- or herself. Such image-crafting has been going on for millennia (e.g., Julius Caesar sending his commentaries on his wars to Rome). However, today dating web sites and social media take this to a whole new level. Language (and pictures, etc.) is being used to present oneself a certain way and that affects how one is perceived in relation to others.

11. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 2.
12. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 2.

Further, we may unintentionally communicate a number of things by our accent, writing style, etc. Our speech will often betray where we are from (dialect). The place from which we come may have positive or negative implications to others in the conversation. We are all familiar with the *shibboleth* incident in Judg 12:5–6. The Ephraimites were betrayed by their speech because they were unable to make the *sh* [š] sounds and could only say *s* [s]. While a seminary student in Dallas, my wife and I were looking for apartments. In replying to an advertisement for an apartment, after hearing our voices on the phone, the apartment owner wanted to show us apartments he had not publicly listed (we did not take him up on his offer). Situations that cause less concern occur as well. When I encounter a person with a British accent, I may initiate small talk and ask him or her about what *football club* he or she supports. However, to another American, I may ask about his or her favorite *football team*. Not only is the referential sport different in the two statements, the words I use with them differ as well.

3.1 *The Influence of Language on Society and Society on Language*

Before proceeding to our Acts passage in which I hope to demonstrate the value of language's role in society, one further theoretical issue needs to be addressed. What is the relationship between society and language? In other words, does language help shape society? And/or the reverse: does society shape language?

The question of whether or not language shapes society has been ongoing.[13] Probably the most common thesis in support of the positive answer to this is the so-called "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" named after linguists Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. Concerning this hypothesis, Peter Trudgill states,

---

13.   Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 1. Also, discussed as how language shapes thought (linguistic determinism), Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, 91–105.

> [S]peakers' native languages set up series of categories which act as a kind of grid through which they perceive the world, and which constrain the way in which they categorize and conceptualize different phenomena. A language can affect a society by influencing or even controlling the world-view of its speakers.[14]

In other words, language helps shape society.

In its extreme form, this theory has been discredited.[15] Cognitive ability and thus society is not essentially shaped by language. It is possible that in some ways available linguistic categories may influence a society resulting in somewhat unique perceptions of the world.[16] However, the fact that other societies (even those with little or no cultural connection) can generally understand these differences and translate them into their own language suggests that there is no incomprehensible uniqueness in a language.

Nevertheless, different linguistic societies may have some unique perceptions. A weak form of this theory may be acceptable if not pressed too far. Although we can often translate from language to language, there is a cost involved. The translation is often much longer and somewhat paraphrastic.[17] Further, Dirven and Verspoor discuss an experiment from child researchers in which English and Korean children classify relationships between toys differently based on either the preposition system in English (*in* and *on*) or the word *kkita* ("tight fit") in Korean. English children associated putting puzzle pieces in a puzzle with putting toys in a bag (both *in*); they also associated putting a cap on a pen with putting a hat on a doll (both *on*). However, Korean children associated putting the

---

14. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 13. On the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, see also Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, 95–105.

15. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 15. Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, 101. 105. One may recall that students of the Bible made judgment values about the thought potential of Jews and Greeks based on their languages. Others have seen some languages as superior to others, labelling some "primitive." For a humorous response to this approach, see Nida, *Linguistic Interludes*.

16. See the example presented by Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 14–15.

17. Dirven and Verspoor, *Cognitive Exploration*, 140.

puzzle pieces in the puzzle with putting the cap on the pen (both *tight*); they also associated putting toys in a bag with putting a hat on a doll (both *loose*).[18] The different ways the children classified the objects suggests that their languages influenced their decisions. Thus, language has some influence on society, at least at a basic level. However, this can be overcome once one is made aware of the differences (noting the "cost" mentioned above).

An example from recent Greek studies may illustrate how languages may grammaticalize things differently than other languages resulting in somewhat different meanings and/or emphases. Until recently, English (and many other) students of the New Testament viewed the Greek verbal system essentially as a tense-oriented system. However, after further research, scholars began to see the Greek verbal system as an aspect system.[19] It is likely that the verbal systems of the non-Greek languages known by the scholars (including Latin) influenced their view of Greek. However, problems with this understanding were evident and thus led to further research resulting in the conclusion that Greek was not a tense-based but an aspect-based language. This provided a different understanding of the Greek language that was nevertheless understandable and translatable in English and other languages. Once discovered, we have been able to adjust our knowledge of the Greek verbal system to more accurately understand the meaning of the Greek text.

3.2 *The Influence of Society on Language*

Somewhat less controversial is the notion that society influences language. One need only consider words such as the verb "google" to affirm this. However, even before recent technological advances hit the mainstream, this evidence was noted. For example, where English speakers have one word for reindeer, the Sami languages of Scandinavia have several

---

18.   Dirven and Verspoor, *Cognitive Exploration*, 140–41.
19.   See especially Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* and Porter, *Verbal Aspect*.

(different ages, etc.).[20] English speakers have little need for such distinction and of course it can be made if necessary (e.g., "young reindeer," etc.). Depending on the importance of people within the kinship group, some distinctions occur between languages (e.g., English uses "aunt" for both the paternal and maternal aunt; however, some languages make this specific in a single label).[21] Finally, values can affect language, especially when words are associated with what are considered taboos.[22] Words that sound like taboo words are often avoided.[23] Sometimes words have changed meanings. Older terms have become associated with new things. For example, I am not comfortable reading the KJV when it refers to donkeys in the terminology of previous generations.

Much more can be said about this area. It is fascinating; however, it has less relevance for our purpose here.

4. *The Context of Acts 21:27–40*

This article has suggested that an essential component of the exegetical process is to attempt to reconstruct as much of the relevant ancient cognitive environment as possible. The more knowledge we share with the participants in the original communication situation, the more we are able to understand the intended meaning of the text. This process helps us to understand implied information that the author did not include in his original message because it was taken for granted. This aspect of the process is intended to prepare us for our main purpose. Specifically, this article explores the social use of language.

Before we turn to the social use of language in portions of Acts 21:27–40, we need to consider aspects of the context that will contribute most to highlighting the social aspect of the passage. This selective information will be useful when we turn

---

20. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 15–16.
21. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 16 (see 16–18 for this topic).
22. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 18–20.
23. For examples, see Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 18–20.

our attention to the Acts passage. The purpose here is to lay the ground work for our Acts discussion, not engage the text at this point. Further, a full discussion of the context is beyond the scope of this work. Craig Keener's recent commentary and Ben Witherington's Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Acts provide a wealth of contextual information, 82 and 23 pages respectively on this passage, much of which is dedicated to contextual discussion.[24] My focus will be limited to a few areas that will be essential for developing the social use of the language in the next major section.

4.1 *Immediate Literary Context*

In Acts 21:27–40, Luke records Paul's arrest in Jerusalem where he was accused of a number of things including defiling the Temple. This passage is preceded by Paul's arrival and reception in Jerusalem (21:17–26). The church is excited to hear the reports about what God is doing among the gentiles (21:19). However, it is also mentioned that many Jews have heard that Paul was instructing Jews living among gentiles to stop obeying the Law (21:21). The church decides to take decisive action to dispel this false rumor and it is agreed that Paul will purify himself and pay expenses for others to complete their Jewish vow requirements (21:22–24). By doing this, Paul will demonstrate that these rumors are false and he himself obeys the Law (21:24). Paul then purifies himself and goes to the Temple and helps the others fulfill their cultic requirements (21:26).

4.2 *Profaning the Temple*

It is no surprise that the defiling of the Temple was a most serious offense to the Jews. This included non-Jews going into parts of the Temple that were forbidden to gentiles. One need only recall the atrocities of Antiochus IV in the middle of the second century BC (see 1 Macc 1:54–55; 2 Macc 6:2) and the less insidious acts of Pompey one hundred years later (see Josephus, *Ant.*, 14.71–72). Of course, this has roots in the Old

---

24. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3113–95 and Witherington, *Acts*, 642–65.

Testament which provide relevant instruction and examples
(Ezek 5:11; 23:38; on the tabernacle which preceded the Temple,
see Lev 20:3; Num 19:20). The famous Temple inscription first
discovered in 1871 with a second example found in 1935[25] states,
"Let no foreigner enter within the screen and enclosure
surrounding the sanctuary. Whosoever is taken so doing will be
the cause that death overtaketh him" (OGIS 598; tr. Strachan of
Deissmann[26]). Although Sherwin-White seems skeptical about
the Jewish authority to put anyone to death,[27] the statement of
Titus recorded by Josephus is hard to dismiss, "... Was it not you
that ranged along it those slabs,engraved in Greek characters and
in our own, proclaiming that none can pass the barrier? And did
we not permit you to put to death any who passed it? Even were
he a Roman?"[28] These passages suggest that the Romans did
allow the Jewish authorities to put people to death who had
defiled the Temple. Given the "exception-type" language of
Josephus's Titus, it seem likely that this was a special
circumstance.[29]

4.3 *Egyptian and an "Egyptian" in the Empire*
Egypt had been a great empire for many centuries before the
New Testament period. Its large empire absorbed many peoples
and with it aspects of various languages which became

---

25. Barrett, *Acts*, 2:1020. See also Josephus, *Ant.* 15.417–418 (Marcus
and Wikgren, LCL) and note (d).

26. Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East*, 80.

27. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 38. He also suggests that the
wording of the inscription is "very curious" and what is threatened here should
be viewed as a "lynching" not execution.

28. Josephus, *War* 6.124–126 (Thackeray, LCL). Sherwin-White does not
believe the speech itself by Titus is factual (Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*,
38). This is consistent with his position mentioned here. It is worth noting that
the Flavian Dynasty was Josephus's patron family. How likely would it be to
create a speech that suggests a provincial religious body had the authority to
put Romans to death if not accurate?

29. See also Tajra, *Trials of St. Paul*, 123; however, Tajra cites no ancient
evidence in support.

incorporated into Egyptian through loan words, etc.[30] However, it was the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rule of his successors in Egypt (Ptolemies) in the late fourth century which resulted in the Hellenization of Egypt.[31] Greek became the language of the Egyptian government for almost a thousand years.[32] There is evidence that the Ptolemaic rulers spoke a form of classical Greek staying close to Attic pronunciation; however, the local elites developed their own standard of pronunciation.[33]

Interestingly, the Ptolemaic and the early Roman rulers favored the Greek language over Egyptian to such an extent that "The strong position of Greek limited the written production in the Egyptian language, which already in the first century CE had virtually disappeared from the administration."[34] After almost three centuries of Ptolemaic rule, it seems Cleopatra VII was the first to actually learn Egyptian (Plutarch, *Antony* 27.4).[35] If this is accurate, the implications are significant. It is likely that there would have been a significant social distinction made between those who could speak Greek and those who could not speak Greek. Language was a means of identifying one's ethnic identity.[36] It follows that the latter group was barred from direct access to much of what Egypt could provide. They were essentially stuck in their place without very many options. Thus, language was a sign of social status. At the time of Paul, it is likely that this was a distinction of different languages. Earlier,

---

30. Ray, "Greek, Egyptian, and Coptic," 812.

31. Ray, "Greek, Egyptian, and Coptic," 812.

32. Ray, "Greek, Egyptian, and Coptic," 812.

33. Horrocks, *Greek*, 165–66. Although this is specifically about pronunciation, it follows that these speakers would have attempted to continue the Attic linguistic elements in other areas also.

34. Torallas Tovar, "Greek in Egypt," 256.

35. Torallas Tovar, "Greek in Egypt," 256; Thompson, "Cleopatra VII," 333.

36. Torallas Tovar, "Greek in Egypt," 256. It is likely that Greek with a strong local accent would also be seen negatively. However, for the purpose of this article, I will focus on the significant difference between languages and not on dialects of the same language. Concerning the Acts passage, I will suggest the distinction of languages is the issue (see below).

there may have been an even more complex distinction with the Royal family and its Attic pronunciation at the top of the social hierarchy, then the rest of the Greek-speaking Egyptians, and finally those who did not speak Greek at all.

In addition, there seems to be some evidence that Romans, Greeks, and Jews all thought of Egyptians as inferior.[37] Certainly, if true, an Egyptian who only spoke an Egyptian language was susceptible to discrimination and other forms of suspicion.

Before leaving our discussion of Egypt, it is worth selectively noting one person of history that is relevant to our passage. Of course, selecting one historical element is not ideal methodologically; however, our purpose is to illuminate Acts 21:27–40 and this is sufficient for the limited purpose here.

During the governorship of Felix (AD 52–59),[38] an Egyptian false-prophet arose and caused significant trouble in Judea. Josephus states,

> At this time there came to Jerusalem from Egypt a man who declared that he was a prophet and advised the masses of the common people to go out with him to the mountain called the Mount of Olives, which lies opposite the city at a distance of five furlongs. For he asserted that he wished to demonstrate from there that at his command Jerusalem's walls would fall down, through which he promised to provide them an entrance into the city. When Felix heard of this he ordered his soldiers to take up their arms. Setting out from Jerusalem with a large force of cavalry and infantry, he fell upon the Egyptian and his followers, slaying four hundred of them and taking two hundred prisoners. The Egyptian himself escaped from the battle and disappeared.[39]

In this passage and the parallel in *Jewish War*, Josephus notes that the Egyptian escaped. The *Antiquities* passage here states that he "escaped (διαδράς) and disappeared (ἀφανὴς ἐγένετο)," leaving no finality to the potential trouble he may still cause (at

---

37. See Keener, *Acts,* 3:3178–80, and the literature cited there.

38. The termination of Felix's governorship is disputed. Here I follow Bruce who bases this date on coinage (*New Testament History*, 345–46).

39. Josephus, *Ant.,* 20.169–172 (Feldman, LCL). See also Josephus, *War* 2.261–263. For a brief discussion of both passages, see Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 464.

least for the people who lived at the time of the recorded event). Thus, during the time of Paul there was a man at large whose actions resulted in horrible damage to many lives, and probably more importantly, disrupted the Roman peace. Such an individual would have caused the empire to be on alert.[40]

5. *Acts 21:27–40 and the Social Use of Language*

I am now prepared to discuss the social use of language in Acts 21:27–40. Since speech seems to be most naturally used for social purposes, this is what will be examined. Three speech incidents occur in this passage: verses 28, 36, and 37–39. I will only discuss the first and the last.

Some may correctly note that these speech contributions are delivered through the pen of the author of Acts, Luke. We do not have direct access to the original statements. This is not the place for debating the accuracy of reported speeches in Luke's writings. Whether or not this reflects historical reality has no impact on my conclusion. The effect of the statements on the narrative is the same.

5.1 *The Accusation: 21:28*
Paul is seen in the Temple and because he is seen earlier with Trophimus, a gentile from Ephesus (Acts 21:29), an accusation is made by Jews from Asia against him (Acts 21:28):

> People of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our Law, and this place; in addition also, he has brought Greeks into the Temple and has defiled this holy place.[41]

---

40.   A further helpful contextual issue for understanding the Acts passage would be to explore the relationship between local city-citizenship and Roman citizenship. However, this is less significant for the particular focus of this paper. For helpful information on this, see Keener, *Acts,* 3:3178–87; Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 141–42; and Tajra, *Trial of St. Paul*, 76–80.

41.   All New Testament translations are my own.

A number of charges are brought against Paul. It is uncertain whether the accusers actually believed all their charges or were exaggerating (they certainly used hyperbole in their accusation, "teaching everyone everywhere"). Nevertheless, these Jews probably had previous experience with Paul in Asia and saw him as a threat to them and/or Judaism. Luke's narrative makes it clear that the charges are baseless. Nevertheless, the intended audience, the Jews in Jerusalem, believed them, banded together, and rushed the Temple, seized Paul and tried to kill him (21:30–31). The Roman tribune and his soldiers intervened and rescued Paul.

The charges against Paul for his teaching may be based on a misunderstanding of Paul's words. Certainly, neither in Acts nor in his letters does Paul teach against the Jews, their Law, or the Temple. Nevertheless, based on his views and his gentile mission, it is understandable that he could be perceived this way by some.[42] This is unfortunate because Paul's presence in the Temple was intended to demonstrate the opposite.

It is probably no accident that the final charge, defiling the Temple, is included and emphasized (a further clause is used to develop the charge against the Temple) even if only based on speculation. It is this charge that holds the most serious consequences. This seems to be the only charge that could result in capital punishment. Thus, the statement made by the Asian Jews is much more than a list of charges. It is a call to the Jews to rise up and kill Paul.[43] The arrival of the Romans is in response to the unrest. There is no indication that they understood what the commotion was about. They save Paul; however, this does not mean they would not have allowed Paul to be killed if the charge of Temple defilement was proven.

Thus, the Asian Jews understood their Jerusalem context well. They chose their words to accomplish their goal. The charge of

42. See Keener's discussion of Paul's Temple theology (*Acts,* 3:3150–52).

43. See the discussion above in 4.2. Also, Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 63 and 212, nn. 54 and 55.

defiling the Temple was essentially an order to kill Paul.

5.2 *The Egyptian*

Through recent events and possibly through some information from the crowd (21:33), the Roman tribune apparently believed he had in his custody the Egyptian false prophet that had caused so much trouble in the past. I realize there is significant debate on whether the tribune associated Paul with the Egyptian prior to or only after Paul spoke. I am assuming the former but with acknowledgment that this conclusion is not without problems.[44] Also, if the latter is concluded, those aspects of my analysis that are not dependent upon the specific identification of Paul as the Egyptian false prophet are still valid (my purpose is to demonstrate the social use of language). If the tribune believed Paul to be the Egyptian, this is one reason the tribune may have wished to intervene. This man should face Roman justice.

However, the tribune is surprised when Paul speaks. Luke records the conversation as follows (Acts 21:37–39):

> While Paul was about to be brought into the soldier's camp, he said to the tribune, "is it permitted that I say something to you?" And he [the tribune] replied, "Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who in the past started a revolt and led four thousand assassins out into the desert?" And Paul replied, "I am a Jewish man from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city; I ask you, allow me speak to the people."

---

44. The use of the negative οὐκ in a Greek questions usually assumes a positive answer (BDF §440; for οὐκ with ἄρα as here, BDF suggests "astonishment"; §440[2]).This would seem to suggest that it is Paul's use of Greek that leads the tribune to make the identification. Although with some differences and not all explicitly using Greek grammar for their conclusion, see Bock, *Acts*, 657; Witherington, *Acts*, 661. However, it seems preferable to see that it is Paul's use of the Greek language that causes the tribune to question his original conclusion that this was the Egyptian (see Bruce, *Acts*, 412; Conzelmann, *Acts*, 183; Pervo, *Acts*, 553). One cannot make too much of the intended expectation for the answer to the question with οὐκ. Rather, as Pervo suggests, "Interpretation must be based on the narrative, rather than on historical or linguistic argument" (*Acts,* 553, n. 32).

As noted above, there are a number of fruitful areas of inquiry related to the social use of language in this passage (e.g., Paul's claim of have citizenship with the city of Tarsus). However, I will limit my discussion to the mis-identification of Paul as the Egyptian false prophet.

The tribune assumes he has the Egyptian false prophet in custody. The scale of the disturbance due to Paul's presence may have led to this misunderstanding. In light of the notorious nature of this individual, the modern reader may wonder why he was mis-identified. However, we must remember that the absence of photographs, etc., made it difficult to identify people without whom one did not have personal experience. It is the actions and response of the crowd that led to this identification, not Paul's physical characteristics.

This response suggests that the Roman believed that this Egyptian false prophet was of low birth and status. This may be true. He apparently did not speak (or was thought to have not spoken) Greek.[45] It appears that the Romans did not even attempt to talk with him. They were probably on their way to interrogate Paul when he spoke. The assumed language difference and the contempt that they had for the Egyptian made communication unlikely. However, once Paul asks his question, the entire situation changes. The change is not the result of the content of the words Paul spoke. He did not persuade the tribune of anything with his propositional information. It was simply Paul's ability to speak Greek that impacted the situation.

---

45. It is possible that it is Paul's "high" dialect or accent of Greek expressed in his question recorded in v. 37 (εἰ ἔξεστίν μοι εἰπεῖν τι πρὸς σέ;) that gets the tribune's attention ("the quality of Paul's Greek" [Pervo, *Acts*, 553]; see also Keener, *Acts,* 3:3168–72). However, without strong evidence to the contrary (I do not believe that the wording of the question is strong evidence), it seems that this is a language not a dialect or accent issue. How can one make dialect conclusions with such a small sample and how can one know accent without oral communication or statements making this explicit? Nevertheless, the social implications would be the same. Conclusions here based on the difference in language can be applied to differences in dialect and accent. Dialects and accents viewed as inferior would have social consequences.

Thus, with Paul's simple statement, everything changed. He no longer was seen as the infamous criminal. Nor was he viewed as a lowly Egyptian. Instead, Paul's use of Greek elevated him in the eyes of the tribune. It is possible that Paul's claim of citizenship in Tarsus was intended to build upon the tribune's question. This association would possibly make Paul's Greek even more impressive.[46]

Here then is another example of language making an impact on an event beyond the content of the statement itself. The use of Greek by Paul has given him a higher standing in the Roman tribune's eyes. It is likely that this change in perception resulted in the tribune allowing Paul to address the Jewish people and to avoid interrogation (at least for the time being).

6. *Conclusion*

This brief article has attempted to demonstrate that in addition to carrying content in a communication situation, language can also be used in a social manner. This "meaning" is not part of the "linguistic meaning" of the text. This was demonstrated in Acts 21:27–40 in two ways. First, Paul is charged with violating the Temple. This offense, if proven, will result in the death of the offender. It is likely that Paul's accusers knew this and this is why the charge is included and highlighted in their accusation. Second, Paul's use of Greek elevates his status in the opinion of a Roman tribune. This results in Paul avoiding interrogation for the time being and being given permission to address the crowd.

The social use of language cannot be ignored. Acknowledgment of this use of language and active incorporation of this information will result in more complete exegetical results.

---

46.   Returning to the option not concluded above that the tribune did not associate Paul with the Egyptian until after he spoke, the social use of language is still evident. In this case, Paul was assumed to be a lowly troublemaker. His use of Greek would result in the tribune assuming that he was the Egyptian. Thus, Paul's explanation is intended to dispel this association.

Bibliography

Barrett, C.K. *The Acts of the Apostles*. 2 vols. ICC. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994–1998.

Blakemore, Diane. *Relevance and Linguistic Meaning: The Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse Markers*. Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 99. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Bock, Darrell L. *Acts*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007.

Bruce, F.F. *New Testament History*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980.

_____. *The Book of Acts*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.

Conzelmann, Hans. *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*. Translated by James Limburg and A. Thomas Kraabel. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

Deissmann, Adolf. *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*. Translated by Lionel R. Strachan. Reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.

Dirven, René, and Marjolijn Verspoor. *Cognitive Exploration of Language and Linguistics*. Cognitive Linguistics in Practice. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998.

Edwards, John. *Sociolinguistics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Engberg-Pedersen, Troels. "Introduction." In *Paul Beyond the Judaism/ Hellenism Divide*, 1–16. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

Fanning, Buist M. *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*. Oxford Theological Monographs. Oxford: Clarendon, 1990.

Fantin, Joseph D. "Background Studies: Grounding the Text in Reality." In *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, edited by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning, 167–96. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006.

_____. *The Greek Imperative Mood in the New Testament: A Cognitive and Communicative Approach*. Studies in Biblical Greek 12. New York: Peter Lang, 2010.

_____. *The Lord of the Entire Word: Lord Jesus, a Challenge to Lord Caesar?* New Testament Monographs 31. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011.

Grice, H. Paul. "Logic and Conversation." In *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 3: Speech Acts*, edited by P. Cole and J. Morgan, 41–58. New York: Academic Press, 1975.

_____. "Further Notes on Logic and Conversation." In *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 9: Pragmatics*, edited by P. Cole, 113–27. New York: Academic Press, 1978.

Gutt, Ernst-August. *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. 2nd ed. Manchester: St. Jerome, 2000.

Horrocks, Geoffrey C. *Greek: A History of the Language and Its Speakers*. 2nd ed. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Hudson, R.A. *Sociolinguistics*. 2nd ed. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Keener, Craig S. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary.* 3 vols. to date. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012–2014.

Nida, Eugene. *Linguistic Interludes*. Santa Ana, CA: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1947.

Pervo, Richard I. *Acts: A Commentary*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2009.

Porter, Stanley E. *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood*. 2nd ed. Studies in Biblical Greek 1. New York: Peter Lang, 1993.

Rapske, Brian. *Paul in Roman Custody*. The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting, vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Ray, J. "Greek, Egyptian, and Coptic." In *A History of Ancient Greek: From Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, edited by Anastossios-Fivos Christidis, 811–18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Rowe, C. Kavin. *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Schürer, Emil. *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*. Revised and edited by Geza Vermes et al. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973.

Sperber, Dan, and Deirdre Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

Tajra, Harry W. *The Trials of St. Paul: A Juridical Exegesis of the Second Half of the Acts of the Apostles*. WUNT 2.35. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989.

Thompson, Dorothy J. "Cleopatra VII." In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by Simon Hornblower et al., 333. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Torallas Tovar, Sofia. "Greek in Egypt." In *A Companion to the Ancient Greek Language*, edited by Egbert J. Bakker, 253–66. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. 4th ed. London: Penguin, 2000.

Sherwin-White, A.N. *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament: The Sarum Lectures 1960–1961*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1963.

Witherington, Ben, III. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.