

BILINGUALISM IN ACTS 21:37-22:2 AND LANGUAGE CHOICE IN MINISTRY

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Abstract: *This paper examines the cultural and linguistic implications of bilingualism in Acts 21:37-22:2 and its relevance to the Sri Lankan church. The article examines how Paul's strategic alternation between Greek and Aramaic in the same incident enables him to locate himself authentically vis-à-vis adversarial audiences. The paper draws parallels with Sri Lankan society where Christianity is perceived as a foreign religion and English language fluency as a mark of socioeconomic power. By examining Paul's example and its applicability, the paper encourages bilingual Sri Lankan Christians to be conscious of language choice and its implications in the life and ministry of the church.*

Keywords: *Bilingualism, code-switching, inclusivity*

1. Introduction

Language as a cultural marker of belonging or otherness has significant implications in postcolonial societies like Sri Lanka, where English is still considered an elite language of social demarcation. Since Christianity came to Sri Lanka on the wings of European colonialism, Christian nationals are commonly identified as perpetuators of a foreign culture.¹ The use of English in church worship and evangelisation, in contrast to the virtually exclusive use of vernacular languages in the religious activities of other faiths, further reinforces that perception. However, bilingualism or trilingualism (fluency in a combination of English, Sinhala or Tamil) is considered a highly desirable competency in Sri Lankan society. In Acts 21:37-22:2, Luke

1. G.P.V. Somaratna, *The Foreignness of the Christian Church in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Colombo Theological Seminary, 2006), 5.

records a curious episode in which bilingualism plays an important role. Paul uses both Greek and Aramaic in a critical moment to his advantage. This article explores the cultural-linguistic significance of this episode in which the ability to speak both the vernacular language and the cosmopolitan ‘lingua franca’ is presented as advantageous to Paul’s credibility in a situation where his Jewish/Hellenistic and imperial/indigenous loyalties are violently challenged. This article employs the sociolinguistic analytics of ‘code-switching’ to demonstrate how the choice of language functions in societies where they signal important ethnoreligious and sociopolitical self-identifications.

2. Cultural context of Acts 21:37 – 22:2

Acts narrates a cultural context marked by social and theological tensions. On one hand, Jesus is presented as the long-awaited Israelite Messiah his own people rejected.² On the other hand, he is embraced by non-Israelites who were considered outside the covenant community. The early church struggled with the confusion and controversy resulting from different factions trying to determine their identity in relation to Second Temple Judaism. Acts shows the early church grappling with the long-held Deuteronomic perspective that obedience and disobedience to the Torah entailed decisive consequences.³ In response to threats against the sanctity of the temple and traditional Jewish culture under Hellenisation in the intertestamental period (c. 420 BC – AD 1) strict adherence to the Torah began to take center stage in Jewish religious life. Alexander the Great (c. 356 – 323 BC), who conquered the eastern Mediterranean region and the Persian Empire up to its Indian border, sort to promote the Greek way of life by introducing its culture through the establishment of Greek

2. Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 14-15

3. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 587-588.

style cities across his vast empire.⁴ The Jewish response to Hellenisation consisted of varying degrees of assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation.⁵ For the most part the two cultures coexisted with the Jews assimilating to a certain degree through adoption of Greek language and names. Improved conditions for travel within the Greek (and later Roman) Empires allowed the diaspora Jews to make pilgrimages for various festivals. Jewish males in the diaspora also made a practice of paying the temple tax after the temple was rebuilt by Herod the Great (c.72 – 4 BC).⁶ Improved communication allowed the Jewish diaspora to remain connected with Jerusalem and the fortunes of their homeland.

Those who did not abandon the Jewish lifestyle altogether found that the observance of Torah gave them a sense of cohesion and preserved their distinctiveness as a group across the diaspora. They continued their strict adherence to Torah, including the rejection of idol worship, practicing circumcision, following dietary stipulations, and observance of the Sabbath. Diaspora Jews were more keenly aware that such practices protected them from being fully assimilated into the dominant Hellenistic culture in which they were a scattered minority. This may help us understand why it was the visiting diaspora Jews from the Province of Asia (mod. Türkiye), rather than local Palestinian Jews, who brought the charge of defiling the temple against Paul in Acts 21.⁷

Luke, to whom both tradition and scholarship attribute the authorship of Acts, was very probably an

4. David deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha. Introducing the Apocrypha: message, context, and significance*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 45.

5. Ibid., 46-48

6. David deSilva, "Jews in the Diaspora," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 276.

7. Scott A. Moreau, "Do the Right Thing – But Results are Not Guaranteed" in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, edited by Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 280.

educated Gentile with a good knowledge of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures)⁸ as attested by his frequent use of the OT in both his works.⁹ As a Gentile affiliated with a still largely Jewish Christian movement, Luke would have understood well the tensions between Jews and Gentiles. It is not surprising, therefore, that he goes to great lengths to stress the inclusivity of Jesus' ministry by describing encounters with Roman authorities. These encounters include the Centurion whose faith Jesus marvels at (Lk 7:1-9) and another Centurion who acknowledges Jesus' righteousness at the foot of the cross (23:47).

3. Incident at the Jerusalem Temple (21:27 – 22:29)

On their arrival in Jerusalem, Paul and his companions (including Luke) are welcomed by James and the Torah-observing Jerusalem church but warned that the report circulating in the city alleged that Paul had been preaching that adhering to Torah was no longer obligatory for Jews who believed in Jesus and lived among the Gentiles (Acts 21:17-26). To counteract this false impression, James urges Paul to make a public demonstration of Torah observance by performing visible acts of piety along with four other men. The plan backfires when a group of diaspora Jews from the Roman province of Asia Minor notice Paul in the temple courts, restricted to Jewish men, and raise the alarm that he has brought in men whom they mistakenly assume to be Greeks (vv.27-29). In a crescendo of dramatic tension, Luke narrates how Paul is dragged away from the temple precinct which is shut behind him while the crowd of "rioters" (v. 32) proceed to beat Paul with intent to kill. He is saved by Roman guards who arrive to investigate why the "whole city was aroused" (v. 30).

8. Vernon K. Robbins, "The Socio-Rhetorical Role of Old Testament Scripture in Luke 4–19," in *Z Noveho Zakona /From the New Testament: Sborník k narozeniam prof. ThDr. Zdenka Sazavy*, edited by Hana Tonzarova and Petr Melmuk (Praha: Vydala Cirkev ceskoslovenska husitska, 2001), 81.

9. Bock, *Luke*, 6.

The confusion of the mob is further highlighted by their inability to answer the commander as to who Paul is and what his crime is. Paul is then arrested but has to be carried to the barracks because the mob still attempts to lay their hands on him all the while demanding his death.

4. Paul's Bilingualism

Acts 21:37-22:2 is clearly intended to lead up to Paul's defense found in 22:3-22. Verses 21:37-22:2 tie the events of ch. 21 with the speech and events of ch. 22. Most major translations frame Acts 21:37-22:2 as a single unit.¹⁰

The events of 21:37-22:2 are somewhat puzzling and almost comical at first glance. Paul who is hoisted above by the angry crowd, speaks in Greek to the Roman commander, politely requesting a private word. The commander's surprise is expressed in his question, "Do you speak Greek?" He had assumed that Paul was an Egyptian brigand who had previously attempted a revolt in Jerusalem. Paul informs the commander saying, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city" (21:39). The conversation causes the readers to focus on the individuals while the shouts and violence of the mob rages around them. Paul's self-identification somehow seems to hold weight with the commander. It seems like he agrees to allow Paul to address the crowd entirely based on this one statement. Standing on the steps, Paul tries to silence the crowd. He then uses Aramaic to address them. He addresses the crowd as "Brothers and fathers," entreating them to hear his defense. Luke is careful to explain that "when they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet" (22:2).

Luke evidently attributes some importance to Paul's change of languages.

By speaking to the Roman commander in Greek and clarifying his identity Paul is distinguishing himself as a citizen of respectable stock.¹¹ The ability to speak a

10. E.g. NIV, NASB, NKJV, and NRSV.

11. Daniel K. Christensen, "Roman Citizenship as a Climactic

cosmopolitan language helped Paul gain favor with the person in authority and thereby succeeded in addressing the crowd.

Paul uses Aramaic to address the crowd. He begins with “fathers and brothers” traditional and respectful form of address, also used by Steven in (7:24).¹² Being addressed in their own mother tongue causes the agitated crowd to quiet and listen. For the second time, Paul’s choice of language has enabled him to capture the attention of his intended audience. Paul’s who has been accused of being a law breaker by the diaspora Jews is identifying himself with the Jews of Jerusalem by speaking in Aramaic.

5. Code-switching

The way in which Luke depicts Paul’s use of language can be described as a form of code-switching, “the process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another depending on the social context or conversational setting.”¹³ This term is normally applied to “the use of two or more languages in one speech exchange ...between turns, within turns, and between constituents of single sentences,”¹⁴ whereas Paul addresses one interlocutor in one language and the other in another. However, its function is comparable to that of Paul’s language alternation. According to Benjamin Bailey, “Code-switching reflects sociohistorical meaning and boundaries, but it can also be used to negotiate and redefine them.”¹⁵ The commander’s response reveals how language influenced his perception, shifting his view of Paul from that of a likely criminal to a person of standing worth hearing.¹⁶ Code-switching here

Narrative Element: Paul’s Roman Citizenship in Acts 16 and 22 Compared with Cicero’s Against Verres,” *Conversations With the Biblical World* 38 (2018): 69.

12. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Perlego. (Eerdmans, 1997), 668.

13. “Code-switching,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/code-switching>.

14. Benjamin Bailey. “Switching” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, no ½ (June 1999): 241

15. *Ibid.*, 243.

16. Christensen, “Roman Citizenship as a Climactic Narrative

functioned to challenge the commander's prejudice and establish Paul's legitimacy as someone who could engage at a high intellectual and cultural level.

Paul, aware of the prejudices that existed in his society, uses language to circumvent these prejudices and achieve his ends. The use of Aramaic signalled cultural solidarity and respect for his Jewish heritage. Rather than appearing as an outsider catering to Greek-speaking elites, Paul positioned himself as one of them, someone who shared their language and concerns. Luke notes that the crowd fell silent when Paul spoke in Aramaic (Acts 22:2), indicating a suspension of hostility, at least temporarily. This reaction underscores the emotional and symbolic importance of language. Aramaic resonated as a marker of shared identity, subverting the mob's perception of Paul as a traitor to Jewish customs.¹⁷ Paul's code-switching challenged biases on both sides. To the Romans, speaking Greek demonstrated competence and civility. To the Jews, speaking Aramaic reaffirmed his cultural roots and mitigated accusations of disloyalty. Each language choice exploited the assumptions of the audience to defuse tension and claim a hearing.

6. Application to Ministry in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's linguistic and cultural diversity mirrors the complexities of Paul's world. Christianity's association with colonialism has often fostered perceptions of it as foreign.¹⁸ Regardless of denomination, there is a tendency for churches to gravitate toward Western practices or to remain insular subcultures. Overcoming this requires a deeper understanding of societal dynamics. Just as Paul navigated multilingual contexts with sensitivity, the Sri Lankan church must address its surrounding pluralism with humility and care.

Element," 70.

17. Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 668.

18. Somaratne, *Foreignness*, 4.

6.1 The Value of Bilingualism

Paul's example highlights the importance of bilingualism in bridging cultural gaps. Sri Lankan churches, particularly in contexts involving rural and urban divides, can benefit from encouraging bilingual or trilingual ministry practices.¹⁹ Language is relational. Even imperfect attempts at using someone's heart language can build trust and present the gospel more meaningfully. For example, teams from city churches who engage Tamil-speaking communities or rural Sinhalese audiences often witness a shift in receptivity when they communicate in the vernacular. Language use signifies effort, respect, and solidarity.²⁰

6.2 Considerations for Language Use in Multilingual Contexts

Bilingualism is a powerful tool for engaging diverse groups with varying linguistic preferences and fostering connections across cultural divides. It can help address prejudice and break down stereotypes, as demonstrated by Paul's inclusive approach. However, multilingual communication also comes with challenges, such as unclear messaging or diluted communication, making it essential to assess the audience's primary language and cultural context for effective outreach.²¹ Sensitivity to linguistic hierarchies and power dynamics is critical to avoid marginalisation or exclusion. Selecting the appropriate language requires careful consideration to prevent deepening divisions—relying solely on English, for example, may perpetuate

19. Michael Lessard-Clouston and Paul Switz, "Is English a Blessing or a Curse in Missions?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 51 (2015): 394, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282673175_Is_English_a_Blessing_or_a_Curse_in_Missions.

20. J. Haas, D. D. Walsh, and M. S. R. Marroquin, "Enhancing Cultural Competence in Counselor Education through Sociolinguistic Awareness," *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling* 6, no. 3 (n.d.).

21. Lessard-Clouston and Switz, "Is English a Blessing or a Curse," 399.

socio-economic disparities, while ignoring local languages risks alienating larger populations.²² By adopting an inclusive and thoughtful approach, communicators can navigate these complexities and promote equitable engagement.

7. Conclusion

Paul's example in Acts 21:37-22:2 reveals the strategic potential of bilingualism in ministry. His ability to adapt to the linguistic and cultural contexts of his audiences was instrumental in creating opportunities for his message to be heard. For a multicultural, multilingual society like Sri Lanka, the implications are profound. Language choice in mission is not merely about communication but about relationship-building and bridging divides. By following Paul's example, the church can better proclaim its message of inclusion and redemption to a diverse world.

22. Ibid.