

## **Review**

*Text, Context and the Johannine Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Johannine Writings.* By David A. Lamb. Library of New Testament Studies 477. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014. iiiix + 231 pp. Hardcover \$114.00. ISBN 9780567609564.

David A. Lamb's monograph, a revision of his doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Manchester in 2012, confronts the prevailing view that the Gospel of John and Johannine Epistles were written within a close-knit, sectarian community. Lamb challenges this paradigm (previously established by the historical-critical works of Raymond Brown, J. L. Martyn, and others) by means of a sociolinguistic analysis, namely Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) register analysis. Lamb explains the reason why he uses a methodology based on SFL register theory to test this frequently taken-for-granted view of the Johannine community in the book's purpose statement at the end of chapter 1: "What I hope to achieve is a modest contribution to the understanding of how texts, in this case the Jn writings, may convey something of their social context" (28). The assumption here is that a register analysis can recover a text's context, where a register is understood as the language that is appropriate within certain situation types.

The organization of Lamb's book reflects that of a typical dissertation. The first two chapters focus on surveying the scholarly field of how the belief in a Johannine sectarian community arose in scholarship, and how, since around 1980, this view has begun to be challenged. The whole of chapter 2 is devoted to the description and evaluation of the influential historical-critical model in the major works of Raymond Brown, whose scholarship is still considered to be the gold standard concerning the context and audience of the Johannine writings.

Lamb makes the main part of his argument in chapters 3-5, and so these chapters warrant the most attention. Chapter 3 is methodological and is concerned with the relationship between text and context, particularly how texts reveal something about their contexts of situation and contexts of culture. Lamb's method of register analysis is the first of its kind in approaching the Johannine community debate. To supplement the theory developed by Halliday, Lamb also includes the annotated framework of Douglas Biber on situational characteristics of registers and genres, which is neatly outlined in a table on p. 69. Justifying its inclusion, Lamb claims that, "It gives a more precise indication of what is meant by a context of situation and in particular the relationship between origin and audience" (68). It is important for the reader to understand that Halliday's category of register is based on the principles of how variations of situations govern the kind of language that is used in them. Thus, register, as conceived in SFL, is meant to move from context to text (i.e., top-down), but creatively, Lamb reverses this

notion to say that an analysis of the text will help to uncover a situation type (i.e., bottom-up), a method of proceeding different from reconstructing the actual context of situation, but certainly related to it.

Lamb explains that register is made up of the three variables of context of field, tenor, and mode, which correspond to the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions of language, respectively. In his model, however, Lamb determines to only focus on tenor, broken down into the three components of power, contact, and affective involvement, “as this seems the most productive way of examining the Jn texts regarding the context of situation in which they were written” (101). This seemed appropriate to Lamb because he assumes that the most efficient way of determining the context of the Gospel of John is to analyze the interpersonal meaning of the narrative asides wherein the author directly addresses the audience.

Though Lamb may be on the right track with a tenor analysis of narrative asides, his methodology has a number of problems. He states, “At the clause level, lexicogrammatical choices are reflected in the *speech functions* . . . statement, question, offer or command” (95). Here, Lamb adopts wholesale the concept of speech functions as they are conceptualized in SFL. However, SFL is a theory of the English language, and so its categories should first be re-conceptualized for Greek before using them. This becomes particularly problematic for Lamb’s model when one considers all the semantic choices made with Greek verbs. The Greek verbal system is more complex than that of English, having four distinct attitudes (i.e., mood forms), a future form, a distinct verbal aspect system, three voices, and grammatical person and number. All of these together necessitate a more delicate account of speech functions in Greek. Whereas English can be said to have four basic speech functions, Greek differs. Since Lamb does not develop SFL categories for Greek semantics, his analysis is flawed before it begins. In chapter 3, there appears only one mention of the subjunctive, one mention of the optative in a footnote, and no mention of the imperative form, the future tense-form, types of questions, nor an account of Halliday’s category of interpersonal grammatical metaphor. This only highlights more of Lamb’s need to further develop his methodology. Other interpersonal resources of language mentioned in chapter 3 are personal pronouns, kinds of adjuncts including comment, mood, and vocative adjuncts, vague references, and ellipses. While Lamb later accounts for these in the Johannine writings, he does not actually explain how they reveal specific features of context.

While chapter 3 is found lacking in methodological development, chapter 4 is where the book makes its most significant contribution to scholarship. Lamb recounts how Halliday’s notion of antilanguage, a phenomenon of how sects develop new patterns of language to distinguish themselves from the wider society, has been used habitually by NT scholars, especially social-scientific critics, to support the view of a Johannine sectarian community. In this chapter, Lamb surveys the works of Bruce Malina, Norman Petersen, Richard Rohrbaugh, Jerome Neyrey, Tom Thatcher, David Reed, and the co-authored work of Philip Esler and Ronald Piper, most of which build

upon Wayne Meeks' contention that John's gospel reflects a sectarian counter-cultural community, and which use Halliday's antilanguage theory to promote this view. Lamb criticizes these scholars for leveraging sociolinguistic terminology such as antilanguage, relexicalization, overlexicalization, resocialization, and metaphor to support their arguments for the sectarian Johannine community without providing sufficient *linguistic* evidence for their predetermined views. Further, Lamb correctly stresses that Halliday's work is limited in its research scope of test cases, a point Halliday himself acknowledges but his users ignore. Therefore, where Halliday would consider his hypothesis in need of further investigation, Lamb shows how biblical scholars have made the tentative conclusions of Halliday's work a doctrine. Lamb's thorough critique of using antilanguage to support the sectarian Johannine community hypothesis should not go unnoticed or be lightly dismissed.

In chapter 5, Lamb brings his method of register analysis to bear on the narrative asides in the Gospel of John, a section of 1 John, and all of 2 and 3 John. To focus attention on sections of John's gospel that would yield the most productive evidence for the relationship between text and context, Lamb isolates five passages where the author (or narrator) directly addresses the audience (Jn 2:21-22; 12:16; 19:35-37; 20:30-31; 21:23-25). Lamb follows the idea that the tenor relations between the author and the audience are most likely discernible in the locations where narrative discourse is suspended and the audience is addressed directly. This choice also has potential implications for literary criticism of John's gospel because previous studies that investigate narrative asides have based their conclusions concerning the relationship between author and (implied) readers on historical-critical assumptions, not linguistic grounds, as Lamb points out. Throughout the analysis of John's gospel and three epistles, Lamb consistently concludes that the author exhibits power toward his audience, but with "little evidence of *contact* or *affective involvement*" (cf. 161, 166, 171, 173, 183); however, Lamb argues this on very little linguistic evidence, which is likely due to the oversimplification and inapplicability of his model for the Greek language. Lamb identifies numerous statements with indicative mood forms, but his model is poorly equipped to deal with instances of non-indicative mood forms and questions that occur in his selected texts. The reader is also left wondering what Lamb means by power, contact, and affective involvement, all of which go undefined in the book.

There are some notable issues in Lamb's analysis pertaining to vocative adjuncts. While Lamb argues that vocative adjuncts are criteria for determining affective involvement, when the vocative adjunct *ἀγαπητέ* appears in 3 John, Lamb claims that its use is "counter-intuitive" because "people who know each other well do not generally use obvious terms of affection" (192). Thus, ironically, Lamb argues in his analysis that the presence and absence of vocative adjuncts *both* indicate low affective involvement. In fact, this seems like a case of special pleading because here is an instance where Lamb's model points in the opposite direction to the conclusion he wants to make.

That Lamb is forcing his analysis to come to his predetermined conclusions is further evidenced in his treatment of the fictive kinship language in 1 John 2:7-17. In another instance of irony, Lamb appeals to the textual metafunction and mode of discourse, one of the register variables he brackets out of his model, to argue against any interpersonal function of fictive kinship language. He dismisses the vocatives *ἀγαπητοί*, *τεχνία*, *πατέρες*, *νεανίσκοι*, and *παιδιά* as simple “discourse marker[s] to indicate new sections of material” (179). This ignores the fact that all three metafunctions of language (according to Halliday’s model) operate in text simultaneously. As a result, showing how a word functions textually does not disqualify it from having ideational or interpersonal functions. Thus, Lamb makes subjective judgments to keep his conclusions on each Johannine document homogenous. He appears to be too invested in denouncing the existence of a sectarian Johannine community.

The final chapter of the book is titled “Conclusion: The Death of the Johannine Community?” This title is curious because, given the direction of analysis, it would appear that Lamb would answer in the affirmative; however, he does not. Lamb does not think that the Johannine community paradigm needs to be abandoned, but it should be modified to reflect the social functions of linguistic features. By concluding that the Johannine documents display power, but little contact and affective involvement, Lamb sees a more likely depiction of the context as a “textual community” where there was “a loose network rather than a specific *Johannine Community* or *school* with its own distinctive sociolect, ritual practice and codes of conduct” (203). Such a hypothesis is feasible, but Lamb’s analysis is not compelling enough to give this conclusion much credence.

Scholars and graduate students interested in how modern linguistic theory can be applied to the New Testament will benefit from reading Lamb’s monograph. *Text, Context and the Johannine Community* makes a valuable contribution to scholarship by employing a new model to an ongoing debate in New Testament studies at a time when new models are much needed. However, those who are familiar with modern linguistic theory, especially SFL, will find Lamb’s model lacking, and those who are not could be given a false impression of what a register analysis should yield in terms of social and contextual conclusions on the Johannine corpus.

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