

SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT:
INTRODUCTION

Stanley E. Porter
McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, Canada

The five papers that appear in this volume of *Biblical and Ancient Greek Linguistics* (BAGL) were all presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Boston, MA, 18–20 November 2025. The first four papers, by Stanley Porter, James Dvorak, Jonathan Watt, and Sung Min Park, were presented as the invited papers of a session entitled “Sociolinguistics and the New Testament” sponsored by the New Testament Greek Language and Exegesis Section. The session was chaired by Dr. David Mathewson of Denver Seminary. The fifth paper, by Zachary Dawson, was presented in the open paper session of the same New Testament Greek section at the same conference. Together, the papers introduce the field of sociolinguistics and demonstrate how it has been used and has continuing potential for its use in New Testament Greek studies.

The invited paper session and Dawson’s paper were very well received by well-attended and interested audiences. Porter opened the invited session with a paper that surveyed the field of sociolinguistics from its roots to its current developments and practices in New Testament studies. Sociolinguistics does not fall within the mainstream of what is typically called theoretical linguistics but represents socially oriented language study that encompasses a variety of approaches that react to the formalist linguistics that has been dominant in North America. After describing its origins, Porter defines the major approaches to sociolinguistics as they have developed. He then provides an overview of various applications of sociolinguistics within New Testament studies. A final section provides a guide for those interested in exploring further these areas within a range of publications.

Porter's paper is followed by the other papers as examples of how sociolinguistics has been and continues to be used to gain insights into the New Testament. James Dvorak draws upon Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a context-oriented and hence social semiotic to explore the use of mimesis in First Corinthians by Paul to resocialize his Corinthian audience so that they follow him and establish proper boundaries within the Christian community. Systemic Functional Linguistics, although on the edges of sociolinguistics in some ways, has established itself as a rigorous social-language model, and this is demonstrated in Dvorak's paper as he examines the social context of the letter.

Jonathan Watt deals with a specific issue in sociolinguistics, namely, contact linguistics. Contact linguistics is concerned with the effects and results of languages when they come into contact. This is a very important issue in New Testament studies, even though it has not been widely explored from an informed linguistic perspective. New Testament scholars have typically approached the issue simply in terms of identifying Semitisms. In this article, Watt defines the issues and treats the major topics relevant for New Testament study: code-switching, in which language users switch among their available language varieties; the use of loanwords from another language; translations of place names; calques, in which a word is taken over directly from one language to another; and language labels, where it is important to clarify how languages are labelled and the implications of such labelling.

Sung Min Park introduces historical sociolinguistics as a means of commenting upon the Corinthian letters. Of recent provenance, historical sociolinguistics confronts the major issues in attempting sociolinguistic study of historical languages. Park identifies what he and some others have called a third wave in sociolinguistics and discusses how social identities and linguistic ideologies are transformed by language. In particular, Park utilizes the five-stage indexical cycle to identify the various stages of development and transformation of language usage within a social context. This is applied to the Corinthian letters by working through each of the steps in the cycle.

In the final paper, Zachary Dawson addresses the concept of register in sociolinguistics and New Testament studies. Register has been introduced, especially by those in SFL, as a highly pro-

ductive analytic tool in studying the language of the New Testament. In this paper, Dawson identifies six principles for register analysis. These six principles revolve around situational and social features and their variations within texts. Along the way, he offers several examples where register has been drawn upon in productive New Testament studies.

There are many more topics within sociolinguistics worth introducing and others needing further exploration within New Testament studies. These five papers, however, offer a useful introduction to encourage those who have not yet discovered sociolinguistics to begin to think in terms of the social and contextual factors that influence language use.