

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL'S USE OF THE LANGUAGE OF IMITATION IN 1 CORINTHIANS 4

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Abstract: Paul's use of the language of mimesis (imitation) is well known. A number of notable scholars, including Willis Peter De Boer, Anselm Schulz, and Hans Dieter Betz, have produced significant monographs on mimesis in the New Testament more broadly but also, more specifically, on Paul's use of the notion. These and other works on the subject appearing from the late nineteenth to about the mid-twentieth century were primarily historical in their methodological orientation, as was typical of biblical scholarship in the modern era; studies appearing later in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century have, not surprisingly, tended to apply postmodern methodologies that move away from objective grand narratives toward the investigation of more local contexts, often attempting to elucidate the social or social-theological ramifications of the text under scrutiny. Given the generally skeptical attitude that is characteristic of postmodernity, the latter studies tend to exhibit a more critical perspective often in the name of "playfulness." The current study occupies a position on the boundary between modern and postmodern approaches, reflecting the context-oriented theoretical moorings of Systemic Functional Linguistics, which allows ample space for bringing in historical elements brought to light by cultural anthropology and social psychology. From this perspective, the current study argues that Paul utilizes mimesis to attempt to resocialize the Corinthian believers, i.e., to realign a particular moral attitude with the values and traditions of the Jesus-group that he and others (e.g., Apollos) had taught them. This should result in unity and solidarity among the believers in Corinth. (Article)

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1. *Introduction*

The language of imitation in the New Testament has occupied the attention of a number of scholars for quite some time, including significant treatments in the 1960s by the likes of Willis Peter De Boer (1962), Anselm Schulz (1962), and Hans Dieter Betz (1967).¹ Elizabeth Castelli's *Imitating Paul* (1991), which takes a Foucauldian approach to investigate the "systemic function of mimesis" and the effects of mimesis language on "the social formation of the nascent Christian communities to which Paul wrote," seems to have provided an impetus for reanalyzing mimesis (especially in Paul) with more intentional focus on the social consequences of imitation.² The most recent concentrated treatment of mimesis is that by Cornelis Bennema in *Imitation in Early Christianity* (2025), which attempts to bring together both historical and social investigations of imitation to demonstrate that in early Christianity mimesis was a "religious-ethical concept because it relates to the behavior of Christians in relation to their God and fellow Christians."³

The purpose of this essay is not to offer critical reviews of these works, although in what follows points of agreement and disagreement will certainly arise. Instead, I wish to enter the conversation, specifically about Paul's urging of the Corinthian Jesus-followers to become his imitators as found in 1 Cor 4:16. I am interested to show how Paul attempts to resocialize the Corinthian believers;

1. De Boer, *Imitation of Paul*; Schulz, *Nachfolgen und Nachahmung*; Betz, *Nachfolge und Nachahmung Jesu Christi*.

2. Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 14.

3. Bennema, *Imitation in Early Christianity*, 17. I disagree with Bennema's definition of ethics as "the moral values and principles that govern the conduct and character of a particular group of Christians or 'believers' in relation to their God and fellow human beings" (17). This conflates ethics and morality. Wayne Meeks rightly defines ethics as "a reflective, second-order activity: it is morality rendered self-conscious; it asks about the logic of moral discourse and action, about the grounds for judgment, about the anatomy of duty or the roots and structure of virtue. [Ethics] is thus . . . 'the science of morality'" (*Origins of Christian Morality*, 4). In contrast, morality "names a dimension of life, a pervasive and, often, only partly conscious set of value-laden dispositions, inclinations, attitudes, and habits" (4). Morality concerns actions and motivations; ethics analyzes and explains them.

that is, to prompt them to change, in this case, a particular moral attitude or “value-laden disposition”⁴ so that it aligns not with the values of the *κόσμος* around them (i.e., with the standards and practices of secular society)⁵ but with the values and traditions of the Jesus-group, as he had presumably passed on to them previously. This should directly impact their behavior towards one another (not to mention towards Paul himself) such that unity and solidarity will become the norm within the group and the believers’ distinctiveness from the world should be palpable.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Contours

I follow the current trend of reading biblical texts for their social or social-theological ramifications. My primary guide is the sociolinguistic methodology of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as developed and promoted by M. A. K. Halliday and his academic progeny. Additionally, I bring together SFL insights from cultural anthropology and from social psychology, especially where these two overlap. This helps to give sharper definition to Halliday’s caricature of context of culture (and to a lesser degree context of situation). I will not provide here a full description of my methodology, because doing so would likely distract the reader from the application-oriented, interpretive purpose of this article. Nevertheless, it is important to provide at least the basic contours of the methodology to aid the reader in understanding the interpretation that follows.⁶ It is important, first of all, to comment on the nature of SFL as a sociolinguistic theory.

4. Meeks, *Origins of Christian Morality*, 4. He refers to this effort as resocialization (see 8–11; *Moral World*, 13).

5. Louw and Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 1:508 (semantic domain 41.38): “the system of practices and standards associated with secular society (that is, without reference to any demands or requirements of God)—‘world system, world’s standards, world.’”

6. For fuller descriptions of the methodology, see Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 1–93. See also, Dvorak, “Considering the Constraints of Context.”

2.1 SFL as a Sociolinguistic Theory and Model

As one reads Halliday, especially his earlier works, it seems as though he would have preferred alternative terms to “sociolinguistic” or, at the very least, a specific definition of the term in reference to his own theory and model.⁷ He tended to use such terminology as “language and social man,”⁸ “socio-semantic” (or “sociological semantic”),⁹ and “social-semiotic,”¹⁰ with the last of these being the label on which he settled. One reason for such alternative terminology is that as the field of sociolinguistics was developing in the 1960s and 1970s, it came under the influence of American structuralism (especially the Chomskyan variety),¹¹ and as a result the discipline shifted away from a more social, “ethnographic-descriptive” view of language to a more “psychophysiological” or “logical-philosophical” perspective.¹² This latter perspective is much too idealistic and individualistic for Halliday, tending as it does to consider language as a form of linguistic knowledge, inclusive of competence and performance (to use Noam Chomsky’s terms), that resides in the brain or mind of the individual.¹³

By contrast, Halliday staunchly maintains that “language is as it is because of the functions it has evolved to serve in people’s lives”; thus, interpreting language requires proceeding “from the outside inwards, interpreting language by reference to its place in the social process.”¹⁴ When viewed this way,

society rather than the individual is at the centre of the picture, and the individual’s language potential is interpreted as the means whereby the various social relationships into which he enters are established, developed, and maintained. This means that we are taking a functional view of language, in the sense that we are interested in what language can

7. For Halliday’s view on what might fall under the purview of sociolinguistics, see Halliday, “Aspects.”

8. See, e.g., Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 8–35, 211–35.

9. See, e.g., Halliday, *Explorations*, 72–102.

10. See, e.g., Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 108–26.

11. See Chomsky, *Language and Mind*.

12. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 12; “Language as Code and Language as Behaviour,” 4. See also Dvorak, ““Evidence That Commands a Verdict,”” 205–12.

13. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 3–5; 13.

14. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 4.

do, or rather in what the speaker, child or adult, can do with it; and that we try to explain the nature of language, its internal organization and patterning, in terms of the functions that it has evolved to serve.¹⁵

This is where the notion of language as social semiotic becomes meaningful in two important ways (if I may risk oversimplification). First, this is Halliday's way of referring to language as a semiotic system—but not in the same way as Ferdinand de Saussure, who proposed a system in which a sign is a psychological or cognitive relationship between signifier (the mental impression of the sound of a word) and signified (the concept or mental representation of that to which a signifier refers).¹⁶ Instead, Halliday construes language as a system of semantic networks from which language users make selections to make and exchange meanings during interactions with one another.

Related to this is the second important element meant by the label “social semiotic,” namely, that language is (socially) functional.¹⁷ As noted in the block quotation above, a functional view of language assumes that language users employ language to perform social actions and activities, including such things as the establishment, development, and/or maintenance of social relations. Language as a system comprising an indefinite number of semantic networks provides a robust resource for “doing” these social activities. Put differently, the potential options in the various semantic networks in the linguistic system realize a meaning potential, the realization of behavior potential: “‘can mean’ is ‘can do’ when translated into language.”¹⁸ If language is the meaning potential, then text in either spoken or written form is meaning, what the language user wants to “do,” in actualized form. For example, in 1 Cor 4, Paul wants to counter the expectation among Corinthian readers that he will not come to visit them in person and add the additional expectation that, if the Lord wills for him to visit, he will challenge the haughtiness of “some” of the Corinthian believers. The Greek language offers a number of options for creating such an expectation (potential), but Paul (proba-

15. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 16.

16. See de Saussure, *Course*, 65–120.

17. See Hernández-Campoy, *Sociolinguistic Styles*, 131–34.

18. Halliday, *Explorations*, 51.

bly tacitly) makes specific choices from the systemic potential to realize the sense of expectation and to communicate it to the readers (actual). This is apparent at 1 Cor 4:18–19:

18 Ὡς μὴ ἐρχομένου δέ μου πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐφυσιώθησάν τινες· 19 ἐλεύσομαι δὲ ταχέως πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἂν ὁ κύριος θελήσῃ, καὶ γνώσομαι οὐ τὸν λόγον τῶν πεφυσιωμένων ἀλλὰ τὴν δύναμιν·

18 Now, some are haughty as though I am not coming to you. 19 But I expect to come to you soon, if the Lord should determine so, and I expect to discover not the [mere] talk of those who are haughty but [their] effectiveness.

First, note the use of the future form in v. 19 (ἐλεύσομαι, “I will come”; γνώσομαι, “I will discover/make known”). The future form in Greek realizes expectative attitude, thus actualizing the semantics (meaning) of expectation that Paul wants to communicate.¹⁹ Second, note how the semantics (meaning) of countering a point is created by Paul’s syntactic selection. Interpersonally, this is a selection from the semantic domain of appraisal and its subdomain of engagement.²⁰ Paul concedes that some among the Corinthian believers—and he assumes that these “some” are among the readers of the letter—have become haughty (“puffed up”) because they assume that he will not visit them in person. He uses the disjunctive conjunction δέ to signal his counter point that subverts the mistaken point of view that he presumes is held by “some.” Much more could be said here about these specific selections, but the point is to illustrate Halliday’s view of language as a systemic semantic resource, a meaning potential (which itself is a realization of a behavior potential) from which language users make selections to actualize the meanings they wish to make through the use of language. This is what makes Halliday’s theory and model of language not only *linguistic* but social or *sociolinguistic*.

19. See Porter, *Idioms*, 44–45.

20. Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 67–82 (esp. 74–75).

2.2 Register, Context, and Text

The actualization of semantics (meaning) in texts is referred to by Halliday as the process of realization.²¹ Such realizations, as Halliday notes, do not typically occur “willy-nilly” but in relatively consistent semantic patterns that he calls registers. A register is a functional variety of realizations constrained by two levels of context.²² The most immediate constraint is the context of situation in which the realization occurs. In Halliday’s model, situational context is made up of three features: field, the social action that is taking place, the participants involved in the social activity, and the circumstances of the activity; tenor, the social roles of the participants involved in the social action and their social relationships to one another and the types of speech acts in which they engage on the basis of their social roles and relationships; and mode, the part that language plays in the social action that is going on, its symbolic organization, its mode, and how it relates to and relays the structure of the social action.²³

Briefly, by way of example, several situational factors are evident in the text at 1 Cor 4:14–21 that play a constraining role. These include but are not limited to the following:

Field	Participants: Paul; the presumed readers of the letter (more specifically, a subset of the presumed readers who have become haughty); Timothy; Christ Jesus; churches everywhere
	Social action: generally, responding to what is considered inappropriate behavior in the community (haughtiness), concomitantly providing correction and creating both a sense of expectation among the readers and a sense of urgency to comply

21. “Realization is probably the most difficult single concept in linguistics. It is the relationship of ‘meaning-&-meant’ which, in semiotic systems, replaces the ‘cause-&-effect’ relation of classical physical systems. Unlike cause, realization is not a relationship in real time. It is a two-way relationship that we can only gloss by using more than one word to describe it: to say that wordings (lexicogrammatical formations) *realize* meanings (semantic formations) means both that wordings express meanings and that wordings construct meanings” (Halliday, “Systemic Grammar,” 210).

22. See Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 60–64; Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 38–39. Halliday bases his theory of context on the work of Malinowski (“Problem of Meaning”) and Firth (*Papers*); Hernández-Campoy, *Sociolinguistic Styles*, 131–34.

23. Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 12.

	Overall, the field is non-activity structured yet is specific ²⁴
Tenor	Paul: an apostle of Christ Jesus (1 Cor 1:1), who here identifies himself as the “father” of those presumed to be reading the letter, who because of this social role considers himself as one who may make demands on others in the colloquy, ²⁵ so the status is unequal between Paul and the putative readers and solidarity is relatively close but is put at risk at key moments in the text ²⁶
	Readers: portrayed as Paul’s children but also those who are or have been subject to other “guides” (i.e. pedagogues); ones who, socially, are appropriate to be given demands in the colloquy
	Timothy: exemplar “child” of Paul; one who may mediate appropriate values and behavior (appropriate for the Jesus following group) to those reading the letter, apparently especially to the “some” who have become haughty
	Jesus the Messiah: the supreme exemplar, to whom all believers, including Paul and Timothy, are subservient and, presumably, the one whose values and behavior are to be demonstrable in the lives of all to associate (“follow”) with him
Mode	Written mode, likely to be read aloud to the believers in Corinth
	On a monologue to dialogue cline, the text is monologue as there is no visual or aural contact between Paul and the recipients of the letter; ²⁷ that said, rhetorically or instrumentally, the text is heteroglossic, written dialogically to engage alternative points of view
	The text exhibits cohesion and coherence via various cohesive ties including organic ties such as conjunction and concomitant “taxis,” as well as componential ties such as reference, deixis, semantic and lexical chains
	The text exhibits information flow by way of Prime and Subsequent, Theme and Rheme, and Topic and Comment, ²⁸ as well as varying prominence, markedness, and grounding ²⁹

The second level of context that constrains the meaning(s) (i.e., social behavior/action/activity) of a text is the context of culture.

24. See Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 24–25.

25. Dvorak, “Evidence That Commands a Verdict,” 215–16.

26. See Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 25–26.

27. See Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 26–27.

28. See Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 96–127. Dvorak, “Review of Porter and O’Donnell.”

29. See Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 128–89.

Stanley Porter notes that context of culture is “a notoriously difficult concept to define, even within Systemic Functional Linguistics, and has led to numerous definitions.”³⁰ This is due at least in part to the fact that the notion of culture itself is difficult to define. Halliday, following Bronisław Malinowski, views culture as comprising both ideological and material components.³¹ Helen Leckie-Tarry, by whom Porter is influenced,³² helpfully provides more specificity in this regard and offers a description of context of culture that aligns nicely with Halliday’s context of situation. Whereas context of situation comprises field, tenor, and mode, which realize ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning respectively, Leckie-Tarry argues that context of culture is essentially epistemological, comprising ideational knowledge, interpersonal knowledge, and textual knowledge.³³ Briefly, ideational knowledge, “organized by schemata, represents the ‘world of ideas,’ the knowledge resources of a culture” or “the factual, institutional and ideological background knowledge prevalent within any society or culture.”³⁴ Interpersonal knowledge “relates to how people behave in particular situations” as well as to the “relative emphasis that a culture assigns to the Ideational and Interpersonal functions in a given situation.”³⁵ Textual knowledge is knowledge that “is gained from other texts, including knowledge of intratextual and intertextual contexts,” involving “conventions for the realization and organization of texts, such as elements of coherence and cohesion activities, knowledge of the means by which entire texts are structured (generic knowledge) and knowledge of semantic relations.”³⁶

There are several advantages to Leckie-Tarry’s perspective on context of culture. First, it does not bracket out either the material or the ideological components at the expense of the other. In his discussions of context of culture or the “social system,” Halliday

30. Porter, *Hermeneutics, Linguistics, and the Bible*, 124.

31. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 68.

32. See Porter, *Hermeneutics, Linguistics, and the Bible*, 127–30.

33. Leckie-Tarry, *Language and Context*, 23–24. See Porter, *Hermeneutics, Linguistics, and the Bible*, 127–29.

34. Leckie-Tarry, *Language and Context*, 23.

35. Leckie-Tarry, *Language and Context*, 23.

36. Leckie-Tarry, *Language and Context*, 23–24.

often foregrounds the ideological at the expense of the material; this is perhaps most evident when he engages Basil Bernstein's "codes" as a way to describe the different kinds of semantic configurations, as defined via the social system, that connect to various registers.³⁷ In traditional historically-oriented biblical studies, the material is often foregrounded at the expense of the ideological.³⁸ Leckie-Tarry's model achieves a relative balance between these components, and it is consonant with an approach that starts with the definition of culture from cultural anthropology and subsequent description of how culture constrains the use of language because it constrains the kinds of situations that may occur at all in a culture and/or the situational elements (field, tenor, and mode) of any given situation.³⁹ This also opens opportunities for utilizing alternative disciplines such as social-psychology to help elucidate specific cultural constraints on meaning(s). For example, in the study of 1 Cor 4:14–21, one must attempt to understand the role of the *πατήρ* in the first century, not only in an historical sense (e.g., structurally) but in a social sense (e.g., what would be appropriate or expected social activity of a "father").

A second benefit of Leckie-Tarry's model of context of culture is that, although it is epistemologically oriented, it does not reduce "knowledge" to mere rationality. Much like in modern educational epistemology, where knowledge is modeled more robustly,⁴⁰ Leckie-Tarry avoids reductionism by anchoring knowledge in ideational, interpersonal, and textual semantic categories. This model allows interpreters to consider people as "fluent" not only in language but in (sub-)cultural norms as well. As I have put it elsewhere, such people are aware consciously or subconsciously

37. See, e.g., Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 67–68.

38. See Dvorak, "Considering the Constraints of Context," 136–37.

39. See Dvorak, "Considering the Constraints of Context," 137–45.

40. Typical models of knowledge in educational literature include the following, although it is not uncommon for several of these categories to be combined: declarative knowledge (know-what), procedural knowledge (know-how), strategic knowledge (know-when), conceptual knowledge (know-why), tacit knowledge (sense knowledge ["common sense"]), relational knowledge (know-who), axiological knowledge (know-worth [values]), distributed knowledge (know-where), and metacognitive knowledge (self-knowledge ["know thyself"]).

of the logonomic system (a term borrowed from social semiotics), which is established tacitly through socialization (much like Bernstein's codes), and they live and behave (including linguistic behavior) by these rules—or they may flout these rules as a way to kick back against them.⁴¹ In this vein, when interpreting 1 Cor 4:14–21, it is important to ask the critical question of what kind of pride, what sorts of boasts (claims to honor) would have been appropriate in the Greco-Roman κόσμος and in the Roman city of Corinth so that it becomes possible to determine how and why Paul saw boasting and haughtiness as being inappropriate conduct in the group of Jesus followers.

Finally, it is a strength of Leckie-Tarry's model that it includes "textual knowledge." This is a key feature in that it includes the notion of intertextuality. As Jay Lemke has put it, intertextuality is less about the use of particular words or phrases or quotations and such, and more about "common semantic patterns," common meanings and ways of making meanings across the texts of a (sub-)culture.⁴² How cultural knowledge is organized, recalled, and brought to bear across a plethora of situations dialectically constrains (in the sense of restrains) meaning(s) and constrains (in the sense of compels) meaning(s). As meanings are construed and re-construed in a given (sub-)culture or social system, they affect whether and how a situation occurs and unfolds but then feeds back into the (sub-)culture or social system and likely effects some sort of systemic change. This is reminiscent of Halliday's classic "climate to weather" analogy in his discussion of instantiation.⁴³ In short, Leckie-Tarry understands that culture is never static but is dynamic. This means that both the ideological and material components of culture are also dynamic.⁴⁴

One final comment here has to do with text. As mentioned previously, a text is actualized meaning potential or "what is meant" by the language user.⁴⁵ More specifically, text comprises the lan-

41. See Dvorak, "Considering the Constraints of Context," 137–41.

42. See Lemke, "Intertextuality," esp. 85–87; Dvorak, "Considering the Constraints of Context," 141.

43. See Halliday, *Halliday's Introduction*, 27–28.

44. See Dvorak, "Ask and Ye Shall Position the Readers," 200–204.

45. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 109.

guage user's semantic selections, and these are encoded into the lexicogrammar of the language (words, grammar, and syntax). Interpreting the meaning(s) of the texts of the New Testament requires an analysis of the various lexicogrammatical elements of the text across its multiple levels (from morpheme to word, from word to word-group, from word-group to clause, from clause to clause-complex, from clause-complex to text). Much of contemporary biblical studies is still dominated by word studies, as if the meaning of a text is simply the sum of all of its lexical parts. Of course, this is not the case. The meaning(s) of a text is always more than the sum of its parts. This is due to texturing, the production of text under the constraints of context of situation and of culture. As one negotiates interpersonal/social relations when producing a text, the language user may opt for different modalities in order to protect or perhaps to risk solidarity among the interactants. This may result in the use of assertive attitude (indicative) as opposed to directive attitude (imperative) as one engages another in values negotiation. It may result in different strategies of argumentation as well, which will be encoded in text through conjunction (logic) and appraisal (evaluation).

For example, in 1 Cor 4:14, Paul uses the term *νουθετῶ* ("I correct, admonish"). A word study might offer some help to an interpreter in the sense that Paul chose this word as opposed to another word such as a form of *λέγω* or something (paradigmatic choice). However, the syntagmatic choices made in the clause are also revealing. Note that the clause uses negation (*οὐκ*) and a conjunction (*ἀλλά*) to create a countering structure ("not [that] but [this]") within a single primary clause. This first participle (indicating purpose ["in order to shame you"]) is countered and supplanted by the second (also indicating purpose ["in order to correct/admonish you"]). This means that correction (*νουθετέω*) opposes and, in fact, replaces shaming (*ἐντρέπω*). Dialogically, this indicates that Paul perceived that some from among his readers held the view (perhaps he had evidence of this) that he was using negative shame as a way to reposition them. However, as we will see below, it is unlikely that Paul would do such a thing and become guilty of the very attitude that he wants the Corinthian believers to avoid. To correct this view, he selects from the linguistic system the syntac-

tical structure that he did as his meaning was realized in the lexico-grammar.

I end the description of the theory and method here at a point that seems premature. There are certainly other elements of my methodology (e.g., Appraisal Theory), but I have outlined that methodology elsewhere in multiple publications. I will leave the reader to find the details of appraisal there. Nevertheless, I believe that I have provided the core of what underlies the exegesis and interpretation that follows in the next section.⁴⁶

3. *Brief Analysis of 1 Cor 4:14–21*⁴⁷

From a social perspective, to this point in the letter, Paul has certainly laid writer-reader solidarity on the line.⁴⁸ The very opening of the letter body comprises an accusation (even if indirect) of schisms and rivalries (1:10–12), apparently based on such things as who was baptized by whom and/or this or that leader's eloquence of speech (1:13–17). Regardless of what specific standards the Corinthians were using to distinguish among themselves, the main fault that Paul assesses against them is that they were relating to one another in a way that was not consonant with the value of humility that the message of a crucified messiah demands (1:18–25). In ch. 2, Paul strongly insinuates that the Corinthians, no matter how wise or spiritual they may claim to be, are not spiritual and cannot, thus, know the deep things of God, and, therefore, are not actually wise but foolish (2:6–16). In ch. 3, he portrays the Corinthians as fleshly and unable to be addressed as spiritual people because they are spiritually immature, still requiring milk and incapable of eating solid food (3:1–3). The evidence of this is in their behavior: they live according to human standards which results in jealousy and strife (3:3). They cannot correctly evaluate Paul or Apollos (or, for that matter, any other faction leader) for

46. See Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction; Exploring Interpersonal Meaning*.

47. Translations from the Greek text are my own, unless otherwise noted. References to clause numbers follows the OpenText.org model (version 0.11), available at "OpenText.org."

48. Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 184; Clarke, "'Be Imitators of Me,'" 343.

what they really are: *servants* of God, each with specific responsibilities given to them by God who is their master (3:5–9). Paul goes on to say in no uncertain terms that some (perhaps *someone* [τῖς (3:18)]) in Corinth are caught up in self-deception, thinking of themselves as wise by the standards of the world, to which he responds: “If anyone thinks of him/herself as wise in accordance with this world, she or he must become a fool in order to become [truly] wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God . . . Thus, no one is to boast in humans . . .” (3:18–19). Yet it seems that the Corinthians are doing exactly that, which is why Paul must remind them of what has been written “so that one of [them] be not inflated on behalf of one against another” (4:6).⁴⁹ In summary, Paul has been on the attack against the Corinthians’ boastful and haughty attitude which, ironically, has not gained them any honor but only negative shame because their deeds are endangering, if not destroying, the group of believers, as is evidenced by the schisms and rivalries. Indeed, Paul has come on strong and has really risked writer-reader solidarity!

Andrew Clarke says that, in 4:14, Paul’s tone “abruptly mellows,” presumably because of the “kinship glaze” that he brushes into the colloquy at this point.⁵⁰ However, while I agree that the tone has lightened, the degree to which it mellows is ever so slight and does not last very long.⁵¹ Paul continues to challenge the Corinthians’ haughty attitude, but he shifts the social domain, the social script, from which he argues—and this change in field and tenor has important implications for the meaning of vv. 14–21.

The clause in v. 14 is at once socially and semantically weighty, and it really sets up for how Paul tries to position the readers vv. 14–21 and even into ch. 5.⁵² The clause here comprises a denial and counter pair. Semantically, denials are a form of disclaiming, which is one way linguistically to contract dialogue within a text. Denials invoke other utterances or, as in this case, alternative points of view in order to reject them, to show that they are unsus-

49. The English rendering here is from Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 344.

50. Clarke, ““Be Imitators of Me,”” 343.

51. Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 184.

52. Dvorak, “Chapter 2: The Grammar of Urgency.”

tainable in some way, usually in order to replace them with another presumably more appropriate point of view.⁵³ Key clues for identifying denials are negative polarity and/or the use of negatively charged lexis.⁵⁴ When a denied point of view is supplanted, the new point of view often appears as a counter following some sort of disjunctive conjunction like ἀλλά,⁵⁵ and this what we find here: “I do *not* write these things for the purpose of shaming you *but* for the purpose of correcting [you] as my beloved children.”

The point of view that Paul denies is that he is writing to shame the readers. Mark Finney says that this denial is “a rhetorical move since [Paul] is, in fact, trying to shame them into re-evaluating their views and lifestyle.”⁵⁶ However, Finney misses a crucial point. Shaming, as a social action, occurs in the world by the standards of the world; it is what the social elites or the boastful (the “wannabe” elites) engage in as they compete for honor via the social “game” of challenge and riposte, a “game” that assumes a hierarchy of degrees of status.⁵⁷ Here, Paul denies playing such a social game with the Corinthians, for if he was doing so, he would essentially be guilty of the very thing for which he has been chiding the Corinthians. He, thus, supplants the perspective that he, himself, has been playing by the world’s rules and shaming the readers with the point of view that he is simply living into his role as their father in the faith by providing correction as he deems necessary.⁵⁸

Castelli is most certainly correct to say, “The image of the father must be read in cultural context, that is, in relationship to the nature of the paternal role in Greco-Roman society,”⁵⁹ but her Foucauldian methodology requires her to be suspicious of social institutions (such as kinship), to consider all types of relationships as “political” (and, hence, about power, by which she seems to

53. Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 73.

54. Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 73.

55. See Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 74–75; “‘Prodding with Prosody,’” 100–101.

56. Finney, *Honour and Conflict*, 108.

57. See Malina, *New Testament World*, 33–36; Rohrbaugh, “Honor,” 113–16.

58. See Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 188.

59. Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, 101.

mean coercion and manipulation), and to assume that individualism and “difference” is to be preferred over group values and identity. This results in such problems as confusing “unity” or “oneness,” which Paul argues for, with “sameness,”⁶⁰ and eventually leads her to an anachronistic and ethnocentric interpretation of Paul’s use of mimetic language (as well as, in my opinion, many of the ancient sources she brings to bear in her argument).⁶¹ In short, she misses the point communicated in the deny + counter clause in v. 14 that “Paul’s emphasis through the letter is to draw a contrast between himself and those models which are typically found in the surrounding society.”⁶²

Linda Belleville’s interpretation is likely to be more appropriate. She points out that

[i]n Greco-Roman society, fathers in particular were expected to model appropriate ethical behavior, thereby educating their children in the way of a virtuous life (e.g., Isocrates, *To Demonicus* 4.11: “Regard your father’s conduct as your law and strive to imitate and emulate your father’s virtue”). In Judaism, the father’s role was to exhort, encourage, and exemplify the life that is “worthy of God” (so, e.g., 1 Thess 2:11–12 . . .).⁶³

This is the identity and role that Paul adopts in relation to the Corinthians. He writes, “For [even] if you would happen to have a myriad of guides⁶⁴ in Christ, indeed you do not have many fathers; for I fathered you in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (v. 15). The protasis of the third-class condition that he uses here (“For [even] if you would have a myriad of guides . . .”) makes salient that others (e.g., Apollos) may have provided and may con-

60. See the critique in Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 371–73; also Thiselton, *Interpreting God*, 140–44.

61. See the critique in Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 144–46.

62. Clarke, ““Be Imitators of Me,”” 344 (referring to the point made by Witherington).

63. Belleville, ““Imitate Me,”” 121; Clarke (““Be Imitators of Me,”” 343–44) also quotes (Pseudo-)Isocrates. DeSilva (*Honor*, 188–90) points out further that, while the father was primarily responsible for passing on tradition to the children (esp. to sons), mothers played a vital role in educating the children in a household. See also McVann, “Family-Centeredness.”

64. Belleville, ““Imitate Me,”” 122: “nannies.”

tinue to provide guidance to the congregation. But this is followed by an apodosis (“indeed you do not have many fathers”) that accomplishes at least two things. First, it shifts attention from the role where division and strife appear to have reared their heads. Second, it reduces the multiplicity of voices (heteroglossia) vying for the Corinthians’ attention to one, that of the father. The third clause in the verse (“for I fathered you in Christ Jesus through the gospel”) identifies Paul’s as the single voice to be heeded.

Verse 16 contains the mimetic imperative, but Paul introduces it with nuance. Rather than simply state the directive straightforwardly, Paul introduces it with παρακαλῶ (“I urge”).⁶⁵ This results in a structure in which the imperative is presented as a projection:

Projecting clause:	παρακαλῶ ⁶⁶ . . . ὑμᾶς “I urge you.”
Projected clause:	μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε “Be[come] imitators of me.”

Logico-semantically, Paul projects an idea rather than a locution, and the idea is his rather than someone else’s. The urging or encouraging he communicates to the Corinthian readers is his subjective desire, and what he desires appears in the projected clause: “Be[come] imitators of me.” Because of the subjective nature of desideration, those to whom the desideratum is communicated will still sense that the decision to fulfill the desire or not lies with them. However, in this instance, that sense is mitigated (at least textually) by the fact that the desideratum, i.e., what father Paul wants of his children, is expressed in directive attitude. Imperatives (directive attitude) are highly contractive if not monoglossic since, textually, they do not acknowledge any action other than compliance. This means that, to Paul’s way of thinking from what

65. Thiselton (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 114 [italics original]), drawing upon Carl Bjerkelund, argues that this lexeme “draws its force from a relationship of friendship, trust, or official status between the writer and the addressee(s), not on sociorhetorical causal force.” The effect of the verb, then, is to soften the directive, which Thiselton renders with “I ask you, then, take your cue from me.”

66. I understand παρακαλέω to be a verbal process, even though Louw and Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 1:423 (semantic domain 25.150) say that the process could be verbal or non-verbal.

we can tell from his linguistic selections, there really is no room for negotiation on the matter. He fully expects his readers to grant his desire.

Bennema helpfully marshals significant historical evidence showing that imitation was an appropriate and fairly typical means of motivating those who share a social system to enact certain values or virtues in their own lives as a means of promulgating the group's values and protecting its boundaries,⁶⁷ and as Belleville and others have noted, in the Greco-Roman world and especially in Jewish subculture, parents, especially fathers, were appropriately held up as exemplars to be emulated.⁶⁸ Yet how might we understand this socially and interpersonally? Wayne Meeks draws on a social-psychological model suitable for answering this question and helping us to interpret Paul's calling the Corinthian believers to imitate him, namely that of reference groups and/or reference individuals.⁶⁹ Social-psychologist Herbert H. Hyman is credited with coining the term "reference group,"⁷⁰ and the further explorations of Harold H. Kelley and Tamotsu Shibutani helped to bring clarity and conciseness to the definition of the term, viz., "any collectivity [or individual representative of a collectivity], real or imagined, envied or despised, whose perspective is assumed by the actor," where *perspective* means 'an ordered view of one's world—what is taken for granted about attributes of various objects, events, and human nature.'⁷¹ With this model in view, interpreters of Paul may ask,

[i]n his admonitions, what reference groups and individuals did Paul assume would be effective, or did he want to make effective, for the people to whom he was writing? . . . What are Paul's own overt or implied reference groups and individuals? Who were those whom Paul might imagine looking over his shoulders, or the shoulders of his audience? Who were those before whom they would like to feel proud or

67. Bennema, *Imitation in Early Christianity*, 29–99.

68. McVann, "Family-Centeredness."

69. Meeks, "Circle of Reference."

70. Hyman, "Psychology of Status," 5–38 and 80–86. See also the essays in Hyman and Singer, eds., *Readings*, esp. 147–65.

71. Meeks, "Circle of Reference," 306.

fear being shamed, by whom they would be praised or blamed? Who were those whose values Paul's audience had internalized?⁷²

Here in 1 Cor 4:15, Paul appears to recognize—if we may put it in terms of the model—that each of the various factions among the Corinthian believers potentially came to exist as a result of their imagining the various παιδαγωγοί as the reference individuals before whom they would like to feel proud and whose values they have internalized. However, none of these παιδαγωγοί planted the gospel seed or laid the foundation of Christ in Corinth. Only Paul was their father in Christ, and as such, he was responsible for conveying the values of Christ and, thus, the one whom they should imitate. Paul does add Timothy to the Corinthians' circle of reference, but not as just another pedagogue; rather, as Paul's "beloved and faithful child in the Lord" (τέκνον ἀγαπητόν καὶ πιστόν ἐν κυρίῳ), Timothy is the personal representative of Paul who faithfully emulates the values that Paul teaches "everywhere in every congregation" (καθὼς πανταχοῦ ἐν πάσῃ ἐκκλησίᾳ διδάσκω), and whom the misguided Corinthian believers can expect to remind (ἀναμνήσει [note the future form which grammaticalizes expectation])⁷³ them of Paul's ways in Christ Jesus (τὰς ὁδούς μου τὰς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) (1 Cor 4:17).

What exactly does Paul want his Corinthian children in Christ to emulate? What are the "ways" of Paul of which Timothy will remind them? Some say it is his general pattern of behavior or manner of living; others understand it to be something tantamount to "obey my commands."⁷⁴ A more specific answer may be gleaned from the immediate co-text. In v. 18, there is a clause complex, the first clause of which is a so-called genitive absolute: ὥς μὴ ἐρχομένου δέ μου πρὸς ὑμᾶς. Genitive absolutes function "to draw the reader's attention to certain background information with

72. Meeks, "Circle of Reference," 306–7.

73. Porter, *Idioms*, 43–44.

74. See Belleville, "'Imitate Me,'" 122, and references there. Clarke, "'Be Imitators of Me,'" 342: "[Paul] is reinforcing the content of his teaching by referring to the conduct of his life" (see also 344–46). Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 371: "Paul's thrust is in part *by your conduct prove your parentage*" (italics original).

more prominence than other circumstantial participles do.”⁷⁵ “The information in the [genitive absolute] acts as an essential frame in which to interpret the information in the main clause, or of an even larger discourse”⁷⁶—and this is not just a linguistic structural frame, but also a socio-semantic frame. Here, the basic socio-semantic frame generated by the genitive absolute is “I am not coming to you,” which is further nuanced with the addition of the particle ὥς prior to the participle. This, according to Nigel Turner, expresses “subjective motive,” something like “*assuming that* I am not coming to you.”⁷⁷ Whose “subjective motive” it is—or at least whose it is according to Paul—becomes clear in the primary clause on which the genitive absolute is dependent: it is an indefinite “some” (τινες) from among the Corinthian believers, and that indefinite “some,” on the basis of their assumption, are “puffed up” or “haughty.” Here the term φυσιόω describes an attitude that is the opposite of humble. If humility is “a socially acknowledged claim to neutrality in the competition of life,” and if a humble person “does not threaten or challenge another’s rights,” then haughtiness describes a person who attempts to better him-/herself at the expense of others, who seeks to acquire more than others, and who strives for honors that others now enjoy.⁷⁸ This is very much on theme with what Paul has addressed to this point in the letter, al-

75. Dow, “Genitive Absolute,” 151. As I observe in my “Counter-Hegemonic Strategies in 2 Peter” (69), some grammarians (e.g., Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 221) claim that genitive absolutes function as a “switch reference,” indicating a transition from one topic (or scene) to another; others (e.g., Brooks and Winbery, *Syntax*, 137) assert that they simply fulfill the same function as circumstantial participles. Although genitive absolutes do tend to occur at “hinge points” in discourse and although they do to some extent overlap in function with circumstantial participles, they achieve a semantic purpose greater than merely changing topics/scenes or simply providing the details of attendant circumstances.

76. Dow, “Genitive Absolute,” 151.

77. Turner, *Syntax*, 158.

78. Humility is a value that directs persons to avoid claiming more for themselves than has been duly allotted to them; it is “a socially acknowledged claim to neutrality in the competition of life” rather than to attempt to better oneself at the expense of others, to acquire more than others, [or] to strive for honors [that] others [currently] enjoy,” which are actions that betray a proud and arrogant—“haughty”—attitude (Malina, “Humility,” 99).

though he has tended previously toward forms of *καυχάομαι* (1:29, 31; 3:21). The first use of *φυσιώω* appears in 4:6, where it links semantically with *καυχάομαι* in v. 7, and then again here in v. 18, in v. 19, and once more in 5:2. Although I would not call this a “spike” in usage, it nevertheless is a blip on the radar that must be reviewed.

I disagree with Belleville who says it is “doubtful . . . for epistolary reasons that vv. 14–17 is to be linked that closely with the concrete concerns of the preceding chapters,”⁷⁹ for Paul makes the link explicit in 4:6–7. As we noted earlier, the Corinthian believers had adopted many of the secular standards of their age, which had led them to boasting, to elevating certain personalities (apparently of some of the so-called pedagogues), and then to distinguishing (i.e., dividing) themselves on the basis of these worldly standards. Paul speaks of this as boasting. To combat this, in 1 Cor 3:1–4 Paul reduces such conduct to immaturity, being fleshly, and merely human. If any distinctions are to be made about certain leaders or among themselves, it should be on the basis of humility: “What are Paul and Apollos? *Servants* through whom you came to believe” (3:5). After describing their ministry (service), Paul then says, “So then, no one is to boast in humans” (3:21). Then in 4:1, “A person should think of us [i.e., Apollos and me] in this way: as *servants/attendants/helpers* [ὑπερέτας] of Christ and *stewards* [οἰκονόμους] of the mysteries of God.” Then, crucially in 4:6–7:

6 I apply these things, brothers and sisters, to myself and Apollos for you, so that you might learn, “Not beyond what is written,” in order that not one of you is *puffed up* on behalf of one over against another.
7 For who distinguishes you? What do you have that you did not receive? But if you received [it], why do you *boast* as though not having received [it]?

Neither Paul nor Apollos were self-made men. They were appointed by God to be his servants, and to each of them was given a role. Further, any “success” in their respective ministries is attributed to God, not to them (“and God gave the increase” [3:6]). Paul argues the very same case for the Corinthian believers. *God* has made them “somebodies”; they are not self-made honorable peo-

79. Belleville, ““Imitate Me,”” 123.

ple and, in fact, had God not made them “somebodies” they would have remained “nobodies” adrift in the world (1:26–31).⁸⁰ God has graced them, so why do they boast as if they were not graced, as if they are attempting to be “self-made”? In doing so, they become haughty and their haughtiness and distinction-making carves up the body of Christ and knocks chunks of stone out of the walls of the temple of God (which they are [3:16–17]), which could lead to the destruction of the congregation and bringing shame and dishonor to the name of God.

So then, what Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate is his humble servanthood, which requires using the gifts that God has given to his glory and not their own (I refer you here to 1 Cor 12 for Paul’s discussion on this topic). It is also worth noting briefly that *φυσιώω* appears again in 5:2 (note also Paul’s assertion in 5:6, “Your boasting is not good”). Among the believers there is a “man who has his father’s wife,” a type of *πορνεία*, says Paul, that is not even found among the heathen (5:1). When he says, “But you are haughty/proud,” he is not necessarily saying that they are proud to have such a thing among them, as if it is a badge of honor. Rather, the language of being puffed up speaks to the fact that divisions exist and, therefore, their moral boundaries are weak and porous. If the Corinthians were living by the values of the kingdom of God, the right kind of separation should occur (i.e., a separation based on kingdom values not secular values): the deviant man should be expelled. This is what their father, Paul, would have done if he had been with them—and in fact, he says, he is with them in spirit. Thus, he expects them to do as he would have done; that is, he expects them to imitate him as it pertains to this situation.

Moving ahead in 1 Cor 4, Paul plans to visit Corinth again, if the Lord should intend so and he plans to assess the haughty believers when he gets there: *γνώσομαι οὐ τὸν λόγον τῶν πεφυσιωμένων ἀλλὰ τὴν δύναμιν* (4:19). Paul will test them (i.e., “will come to know” [*γνώσομαι*]) *not* as the world would measure, i.e., on the basis of their talk (perhaps a reference to rhetorical skills, but more likely to the content of their boasts) but on the basis of their ability (*δύναμις*), for “the kingdom of God [God’s power] is not [demonstrated] in talk but in ability.” Thiselton, follow-

80. See now Dvorak, ““Prodding with Prosody,”” 108–13.

ing Wolfgang Schrage, rightly argues that δύναμις is about *power*, but not in the postmodern sense that Castelli assumes; rather, it has to do with *social ability* or *social influence*, and when it is contrasted with λόγος (“speech or talk”), it signifies the ability to carry a deed through with effectiveness.⁸¹ Anthony Thiselton writes, “When [Paul] comes to Corinth, he will discover . . . whether those concerned are mere windbags who merely talk . . . or whether these are *solid effects* that indicate what they can do.”⁸² I would modify this statement by adjusting the final part to say “what God can do through them,” since Paul has urged them to take up the status and role of servants. The question here is whether or not the Corinthian believers are destroying solidarity with their boastful, arrogant speech or fostering unity through the gifts with which God has graced them.

The two questions that Paul asks in 4:21—“What do you want? Should I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness?”—have been understood by many as a warning, if not a threat.⁸³ Given the context, I wonder if David Garland (following Ceslas Spicq) has a valid perspective in saying that Paul returns here to the contrast between the παιδαγωγοί and the πατήρ. Although the ῥάβδος could refer to the father’s “rod of correction” of Old Testament and LXX traditions,⁸⁴ in the immediate context it seems more likely that it symbolizes the disciplinary responsibilities to be carried out by the pedagogues.⁸⁵ The contrast, then, would stress that “the apostle’s love is that of a father, without violence, all gentleness and serenity; it persuades rather than rails.”⁸⁶

4. Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated several things in this brief exposition. First, 1 Corinthians, as with all of Paul’s letters, has as its social purpose the (re-)marking of the community’s boundaries, which

81. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 376–77.

82. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 376–77.

83. Cf. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 378.

84. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 378.

85. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 148.

86. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon*, 3:169 (quoted by Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 149).

is part and parcel with moral (re-)formation or resocialization, to use Meeks's term. Second, Paul's directive to the Corinthian believers to imitate him as their father in Christ is intended as a call to them to return to the values (tradition) that he had taught them, especially to avoid boasting and becoming puffed up based on this or that influential pedagogue. This results in division, which if left unchecked will ultimately destroy the congregation. Third, the addressees must live by the value of humility that the message of a crucified (and resurrected) Messiah demands. Fourth, envy, strife, and the resulting division makes moral boundaries excessively porous, as is evidenced by the issue covered in 1 Cor 5. Paul wants the Corinthians to have him—and ultimately Christ Jesus—as their reference individual, whose values they will internalize and the one before whom they will be praised as they reify those values in their lives.

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