

SIX ESSENTIAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES OF REGISTER ANALYSIS FOR NEW TESTAMENT EXEGESIS

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Abstract: This article addresses the methodological potential of register analysis for New Testament exegesis. In contrast to sociolinguistic approaches that focus on linguistic variation according to user, such as dialects or idiolects, register analysis centers on language according to use, offering a distinct linguistic perspective on how New Testament texts encode and construct their contexts of situation. There are, however, challenges that beset the application of register analysis in New Testament studies, including differing views on register, the linguistic limits of register analysis, and the definition and differentiation of levels of context, among others. This article addresses these challenges by establishing a set of foundational principles for register analysis in New Testament studies and providing examples of these principles through application to New Testament texts that demonstrate their potential for advancing our understanding of how New Testament texts function within their sociolinguistic contexts. (Article)

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1. *Introduction*

In the field of sociolinguistics, the concept of register provides a distinct perspective through which to examine language varieties. A language variety refers to texts (spoken or written) that share characteristic social or situational features.¹ While varieties can be

1. See Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*; Martin, “Language”; Eggins and Martin, “Genres and Registers”; Lee, “Genres”; Nunan, “Exploring Genre and Register”; Ferguson, “Dialect, Register, and Genre.”

characterized by group associations such as socioeconomic class, geographical region, ethnicity, and the like (i.e., dialects) or the peculiar linguistic habits of individuals (i.e., idiolects), registers are defined by the situational contexts in which they occur.² This serves as a fundamental distinction: the way language is used is necessarily influenced by social and situational circumstances and variables, since speakers or writers communicate through patterns that enable mutual comprehension within their linguistic communities. Register analysis, therefore, offers a powerful framework for examining how situational contexts constrain linguistic choices and create recognizable language varieties.

Register analysis is valuable for scholars interested in the intersection of language and social context, and this naturally extends to New Testament studies. However, there are challenges to this approach in New Testament studies, ranging from differing perspectives on register to a general resistance to using or genuinely engaging linguistic approaches to study the New Testament.³ To address these obstacles in this article, I will draw on Douglas Biber and Susan Conrad's linguistic textbook *Register, Genre, and Style* as a starting point to introduce a theory of register, provide a guiding set of principles for register analysis for the study of the New Testament, and demonstrate its value both in terms of current achievements and future potential in New Testament studies.

2. The categories of genre, style, and text type can be included alongside register as Biber and Finegan ("Introduction," 4) state, "In addition to the term *register*, the terms *genre*, *text type*, and *style* have been used to refer to language varieties associated with situational *uses*. All these terms are distinguished from *dialect*, which is used to refer to language varieties associated with groups of *users*."

3. For example, in Hallidayan linguistics, register is defined as language variety according to socio-situational use, but in Labovian sociolinguistics (now dated), the term "register" is typically restricted to occupational situations. See Hernández-Campoy, *Sociolinguistic Styles*, 33. Cf. Coupland, *Style*, 12–14.

2. Register and Register Analysis of New Testament Greek⁴

The definition of register varies among sociolinguists. Certain linguists treat register as essentially equivalent to dialect, viewing both as varieties of language that are linked to certain groups of language users.⁵ Nevertheless, the differentiation between registers and dialects holds considerable importance for separating language according to *use* and language according to *user*, given that the social dimensions influencing the linguistic characteristics found in texts can be determined both by the situations in which language occurs and by the group that employs it, and these social dimensions do not necessarily overlap or depend upon one another.⁶ The notion of register followed in this article, therefore, concerns language use in relation to situational context. From this perspective, the linguistic features of a text can be interpreted *functionally* according to the contextual variables with which they correlate. As Biber and Conrad explain this concept, “The description of a register covers three major components: the situational context, the linguistic features, and the functional relationship between the first two components.”⁷ Establishing this as a foundation is important because register analysis begins with a more precisely delimited definition of context than what typically appears in biblical studies, and the manner in which one defines context

4. This section of this article draws on and further develops my treatment of register analysis of biblical Greek and Hebrew in Dawson, “Register, Genre, and Style.”

5. See, e.g., Holmes, *Introduction*, 246; Wardhaugh, *Introduction*, 51.

6. Irvine (“‘Style’ as Distinctiveness,” 27) misunderstands Halliday’s view of register as being conflated with his notion of dialect since social situations are often distinguished by the types of language users that comprise them. However, Halliday stressed that register and dialect should be viewed as two sides of the same coin, yet still defined distinctly as situational varieties of language and regional varieties of language. Cf. Coupland, *Style*, 14. For discussion of registers as varieties of language distinct from dialects, see Catford, *Linguistic Theory*, 84–85; Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 34; Halliday and Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text*, 41; Leckie-Tarry, *Language and Context*, 6–7. Cf. Crystal, *Dictionary*, 409.

7. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 6.

substantially affects the methodological approaches and research questions that can be applied to textual analysis.⁸

A major component of how register analysis defines context is with the differentiation between the context of culture and the context of situation in a stratificational model of text and context. The context of culture represents the broadest and most abstract level of context, recognizing that cultural features constrain social practices and the varieties of language that are employed. The context of situation is a more concrete level that realizes features of the context of culture and sets the more immediate and occasional constraints on language that condition the linguistic potential of a language user's utterance.⁹ Putting this succinctly, J. R. Martin and David Rose explain, "We could say that speakers' cultures are instantiated in each situation in which they interact, and that each interactional situation is manifested verbally as unfolding text, i.e. as text in context."¹⁰ Register analysis, accordingly, examines both how situations constrain the use of language and how linguistic features encode the situations in which they are produced. This form of analysis, however, involves considerable complexity. There are several principles Biber and Conrad outline that describe an appropriate application of register analysis. These principles can guide the examination of the contribution of register analysis to the study of the Greek New Testament. It is to these principles that I now turn.

8. On the issue of defining context and its importance for biblical interpretation, see esp. Porter, *Hermeneutics, Linguistics and the Bible*, 93–140.

9. The linguists who have successfully theorized the distinction between these levels of context within an explicitly linguistic framework, such as J. R. Firth and M. A. K. Halliday, recognize their indebtedness to Bronisław Malinowski, whose understanding of "the meaning of any significant word, sentence or phrase is the effective change brought about by the utterance within the context of the situation to which it is wedded" (Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, 213). See also Hasan, "Place of Context," 168–70, for an explanation on the relationship between language and context in light of the concepts of realization and instantiation.

10. Martin and Rose, *Genre Relations*, 8.

2.1 *Principles of Register Analysis*

2.1.1 *Principle One.* The first principle holds that although registers exhibit variation in their situational and linguistic features, “the situational characteristics of registers are more basic [i.e., primary] than the linguistic features.”¹¹ This principle acknowledges that all language users employ language across diverse contexts, under varying circumstances, and for distinct purposes, and these behavioral patterns cannot be dependably inferred from any particular set of linguistic choices alone. Approaching texts in this manner can result in serious misinterpretations of a text’s register, along with its genre and communicative purpose. To illustrate this principle, one may consider the comparable linguistic features found in ancient Greek decrees and Greek prefaces to various literary or technical compositions. The recognition that Greek decrees and Greek literary prefaces exhibit similar linguistic features has directly contributed to certain problematic interpretations of the preface to Luke’s Gospel (1:1–4). Although decrees and prefaces display certain linguistic features in common, including an initial “since” (ἐπεὶ/ἐπειδὴ) clause, an enactment clause introduced with ἔδοξε(ν), and a purpose clause introduced with ἵνα or ὅπως—though not necessarily in the same sequence—the situations in which these linguistic features appear differ considerably. In some instances, they appear within the setting of a public council and the inscriptions that record the council’s pronouncement, while in other cases, they appear at the opening of literary compositions to present their genre and subject matter. The situations from which such texts emerge are foundational in establishing how the linguistic features function regardless of any shared grammatical structures they may possess. In the instance of Luke’s preface, therefore, it would be erroneous (and a mistake that some scholars have indeed committed) to prioritize certain linguistic features over situational variables, which leads to the attempt to ascribe to Luke’s preface the properties of a Greek decree with any implications this might potentially carry for the writing’s rhetorical character and

11. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 9.

the profile of the original audience.¹² Consequently, particular linguistic features do not always serve as dependable markers of a text's register, given that different registers frequently incorporate comparable linguistic features. For this reason, situational variables must receive priority as the essential constraints that establish the functionality of the linguistic features within a discourse.

Conversely, Biber and Conrad further explain that "the linguistic *differences* among registers can be derived from situational differences, because linguistic features are functional."¹³ This point holds particular significance for register analyses of New Testament texts where much of the historical context is unknown and where interpretive efforts are made to reconstruct elements of the historical context. While we do not have access to the material settings (sometimes referred to as the physical environment or the context of utterance)¹⁴ in which the New Testament writings were composed, the functional nature of linguistic features means that characteristic differences among registers can reveal aspects of the contexts of situation that gave rise to them. These differences, in turn, may clarify elements of the historical context insofar as they correspond to the text's constructed context of situation. This is because registers follow patterns of instantiation derived from a system of situation types, and these patterns provide a means to define context more precisely and in a way that can lead to more confident conclusions regarding what can be verified linguistically about the contextualized meanings of the New Testament writings.¹⁵

2.1.2 *Principle Two*. The second principle of register analysis holds that "registers differ in their characteristic *distributions* of pervasive linguistic features [and their respective functions], not

12. For a fuller explanation of the problems of interpreting Luke's preface in light of the structure of Greek decrees, see Dawson, "Does Luke's Preface Resemble a Greek Decree?"

13. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 9 (italics mine).

14. See, e.g., Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, 112–13.

15. For further explanation of how patterns of instantiation constitute situation types, see Halliday, *Halliday's Introduction*, 28–29.

the single occurrence of an individual feature.”¹⁶ Put another way, few registers can be identified on the basis of unique lexical or grammatical features, so the frequency with which features typically occur in a register must be taken into account to understand how to analyze such features. The patterned usage of the vocative case (or the “nominative of address” in the plural) across different registers can demonstrate this point.¹⁷ Although the vocative appears throughout the New Testament, analysis shows notable variation in how forms of address function across text types or registers. In Paul’s epistolary discourse, the plural form ἀδελφοί functions as a discourse marker of communal address, consistently functioning textually to delineate a new stage of the discourse as Paul transitions to different topics or shifts his rhetorical stance at the mainline level of the discourse. In his letter to the Romans alone, this function of this form can be observed nine or ten times, each time marking a shift in the discourse (Rom 1:13; 7:1, 4; 8:12; 10:1; 11:25; 12:1; 15:14, 30; 16:17).¹⁸ In contrast, narrative registers such as the Gospels and Acts utilize vocatives differently, usually reserving them for instances where characters pray or cry out (e.g., κύριε, σῶσον [Matt 8:25]), call attention (ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται [Acts 3:12]), engage with other characters, whether in contexts of confrontation (γραμματεῖς καὶ Φαρισαῖοι ὑποκριταί [Matt 23:13, 15]), contexts of reverence (κύριέ μου, σὺ οἶδας [Rev 7:14]; cf. John 21:15), or merely to address someone (γύναι, τί κλαίεις; [John 20:15]; Κορνήλιε, εἰσηκούσθη σου ἡ προσευχή [Acts 10:31]). In narrative expressions, vocatives tend to assume a function tied more closely to the syntax of the clause and therefore become

16. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 9. I have added “and their respective functions” to this principle because while the same linguistic features can be used regularly across registers, their differing functions can create the primary means of register differentiation.

17. I refer to the vocative as a case here as a matter of convenience, recognizing that it may not be accurate to consider the vocative as a true case in light of its formal restrictions. At best, it is a limited or restricted case. See Porter, *Idioms*, 87–88; Porter and O’Donnell, “Vocative Case in Greek,” 38–39.

18. P46 and B omit ἀδελφοί in 15:30, but attestation of its inclusion is stronger: Ⲙ, A, C, D, F, G, Ψ, 33, among other manuscripts. According to the NA27/28, Rom 1:13 is the only instance of ἀδελφοί that is not used at a textual break in the discourse, although one could very well make the case that a minor paragraph division (an increased space) is appropriate at Rom 1:13.

more akin to a clausal component as opposed to a discourse marker.¹⁹ They are also used principally within dialogue, often to initiate an exchange or introduce a speech. This distinction in the characteristic usage and frequency of the vocative lies not in absolute presence or absence. One can easily find instances of different uses of the vocative, such as in Luke's preface (κράτιστε Θεόφιλε [Luke 1:3]), where the dedicatory address to Theophilus functions like a clausal element (though still an address) and is not part of character dialogue; or in the letter of James, where James's "speech in character" or diatribal style invokes an imaginary interlocutor with a vocative (ὦ ἄνθρωπε κενέ [Jas 2:20]), thus creating character dialogue within epistolary discourse. Nevertheless, this principle regarding characteristic *distributions* of linguistic features prevents attributing significance to a single instance of a linguistic feature without assessing how that feature functions across the broader landscape of its typical distribution within and between text types.

2.1.3 Principle Three. The third principle is that "register analysis requires both situational and linguistic analysis, often applied cyclically."²⁰ The concepts of top-down and bottom-up processing, employed to explain the constraints of larger units of meaning (discourses, paragraphs, sentences) on smaller units of meaning (words, word groups, clauses) and vice versa, are relevant here for describing the relationship between linguistic and extralinguistic (i.e., contextual) features of texts, since register serves as the interface between the two.²¹ Situational variables constrain the language potential of an utterance, and the linguistic features of a text encode and thereby reveal or construct the context of situation. Furthermore, since language use can create change within a situation, this impacts shifts in register and the genre(s) of a discourse as it develops, providing additional evidence for the functionality of register variation.

19. Porter and O'Donnell, "Vocative Case in Greek," 44–45.

20. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 9.

21. For more on top-down and bottom-up processing, see Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, 234–36; Porter, *Idioms*, 298–301.

Register analyses within the broader field of sociolinguistics often begin with some examination of the context of situation.²² However, this approach is not typically the case for register analyses of the New Testament writings since the only access to the biblical texts' contexts of situation is through the analysis of the texts themselves. This is illustrated, for example, through the register discourse analysis of Stanley Porter, who has developed a discourse analysis model based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) register theory²³ consisting of well-defined register variables and the semantic systems with which they correspond.²⁴ Porter recognizes the necessity of beginning with the texts themselves:

The benefits of SFL register analysis are several . . . Since ancient languages are restricted to their epigraphic remains, a method that is able to link form and meaning is to be highly desired . . . [By] conceptualizing various features as expressing respective semantic systems, SFL's

22. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 10.

23. This can be observed in numerous articles and books, but see esp. Porter, "Dialect and Register"; "Register in the Greek of the New Testament"; *Letter to the Romans*, esp. 25–35, though the commentary itself is described as a register discourse analysis; *Linguistic Analysis*, 124–27, 145–58; *Pastoral Epistles*; Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis and the Greek New Testament*, 53–95. Any mention of others who have published articles or monographs applying register analysis to New Testament Greek would be unfairly selective as well as unnecessary here to demonstrate the value of register theory for the study of New Testament Greek.

24. Register variables in SFL are theorized as the aspects of a situation that make a difference in the way language is used. According to Halliday and proponents of SFL, the aspects of a situation that bear consequences on a language user's linguistic choices are the (1) field: what is being talked about with the language; (2) tenor: the role relationships between the participants in the interaction; and (3) mode: the role the language plays in the communicative act. These variables are then reflected in the various functions of language, where ideational meaning construes experience and so realizes the field of discourse, interpersonal meaning enacts social relationships and so realizes the tenor of discourse, and textual meaning organizes a text and so realizes the mode of discourse. Further description of this theory is too complex for discussion here, but see Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 60–64; Eggins, *Introduction*, 90–114.

framework helps to prevent selective analyses that account for only a small handful of linguistic features.²⁵

Given that many of the register analyses that have been applied to New Testament aim to recover historical knowledge concerning the circumstances surrounding its texts' production, Porter's words offer an important corrective to the limits of register in terms of what type of information can, in fact, be determined. The significance of this can be demonstrated through an example.

David Lamb's sociolinguistic study of the Johannine writings (i.e., the Fourth Gospel and epistles of John) offers such an example.²⁶ Lamb demonstrates a strong grasp of register theory as drawn from the work of Halliday and Biber.²⁷ His application of this theory engages the question of what a register analysis reveals about the relationship between the author and the audience of the Johannine writings and whether Raymond Brown's theory of the Johannine community can be sustained in light of the results of such an analysis. Lamb's analysis focuses exclusively on the register variable of tenor, making his study a partial register analysis.²⁸ This approach is presented as partial in the sense of being focused since his aim is to understand the types of role relationships shared between the author and his audience. The criticism could be made, however, that focusing only on tenor brackets out important aspects of register analysis related to the mode and field of discourse that are necessary to understand the context of situation more fully, which could, in turn, influence how one understands the role relationships of the author and audience in a fuller light. This point recalls the first of Biber and Conrad's principles discussed above. Without the analysis of each situational variable that influences linguistic decisions, the linguistic features that correspond only to tenor relations can only be partially understood and are even susceptible to being misinterpreted.

Awareness of the distinction between context of situation and the physical environment of the author is maintained in Lamb's analysis, although his conclusions regarding the social distance

25. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 126.

26. Lamb, *Text*.

27. Lamb, *Text*, 71–76.

28. Lamb, *Text*, 95–102.

between the author and his audience are based on subjective interpretations of linguistic features that bear directly on the author's personal involvement with his audience (e.g., kinship lexis such as *τεχνία*, *πατέρες*, *νεανίσκοι*, and *παιδιά*).²⁹ Regardless of whether one finds Lamb's conclusions convincing, his modeling of register analysis for the Greek of the New Testament and the kinds of historical critical questions his register analysis engages exemplify the potential this approach has for the study of the Greek of the New Testament.³⁰ At the same time, they also present a cautionary warning: attempting to leverage one set of linguistic features over others potentially distorts the context of situation and makes the interpretative finding vulnerable to criticism. Register analyses have great potential for contributing to questions of a text's historical context, but they should be conducted in a manner that brings together the full scope of how linguistic features and contextual variables relate to one another rather than isolating preselected features that are interpreted independently of other functions of language.

2.1.4 *Principle Four*. The fourth principle of register analysis states that "register variation has a functional basis."³¹ Register analyses incorporate (or at least ought to incorporate) an explanation of why certain linguistic features are employed in particular contexts, since it is inadequate merely to state that a linguistic feature occurs with some frequency without providing an explanation as to why this is the case. For example, certain registers characteristically exhibit a higher potential and greater frequency of the imperative mood, and one can note that at the Garden of Gethsemane in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus makes use of numerous imperative verb forms (26:36–45). As the scene shifts back and forth between Jesus addressing his disciples and praying to God the Father, however, a pattern emerges in the way this linguistic feature functions

29. Lamb, *Text*, 179–80. I have provided a more detailed assessment of Lamb's monograph in Dawson, Review of *Text*.

30. At the risk of not mentioning other noteworthy studies, some recent examples employing register analysis include Martín-Asensio, "Procedural Register"; Liu, *Register Variation*.

31. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 10.

in the discourse, which correlates with the specific shifts in register that distinguish exhorting others on the one hand and praying to God on the other. The pattern established when Jesus addresses his disciples involves the use of second-person imperatives without the use of second-person pronouns; the directive attitude is conveyed in the manner one might expect an authority figure to issue demands to subordinates in a moment of urgency. In contrast, the imperative verb forms in Jesus' prayers are expressed only in the third person as opposed to the second, functioning as indirect commands. These are accompanied with a second-person pronoun that refers to God the Father and are qualified with other language that expresses submission and reverence ("not as I will, but as you [will]" [26:39; cf. v. 42]). Consequently, the linguistic variation in the Greek verbal system and the use or non-use of personal pronouns reflect variations in alternating registers within the same setting in Matthew's Gospel. Moreover, if the setting of the Garden of Gethsemane establishes a boundary for the context of situation, then we can identify sub-registers within larger registers, where sub-registers align with different functional bases. There is, in fact, some additional insight we can derive from this example when considering the next principle of register analysis.

2.1.5 Principle Five. The fifth principle holds that "registers can be identified on different levels of specificity."³² I have just noted how sub-registers embedded within broader registers result in functional variation that is relevant to interpretation, but it is also valuable to be able to characterize registers according to broader descriptions for other reasons. Biber and Conrad explain that at the broadest level, registers can be distinguished as either written or spoken registers.³³ Initially, this might seem to be inconsequential for New Testament studies since all New Testament texts are written texts. Nevertheless, there are ways that identifying registers in this broadest sense can aid in addressing a range of critical issues in New Testament studies. There are New Testament texts

32. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 10.

33. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 32–33. Cf. Halliday, "Differences," 78; *Spoken and Written Language*, 44–45; "Language and Social Man," 93–97.

that can be productively compared in light of their features that tend more or less toward written or spoken registers. I will review one such example below. Further, when understood as a continuum, certain biblical texts would predictably display the features of written discourse, such as historiographical or narrative texts, while one might expect to see other texts, even embedded texts, display features more characteristic of spoken language (despite being preserved in the cultural practices of writing), such as speeches, conversations, or even letters.³⁴ The capacity to differentiate between written and spoken types of discourse can aid in gauging the extent to which speeches have been stylized to read like written discourse or made to imitate or even preserve the natural features of orality.³⁵ The difficulty, naturally, lies in establishing an accurate understanding of the distinguishing characteristics of written and spoken registers.³⁶

Halliday's linguistic work in English on this topic, consisting of an entire book and multiple articles, theorizes that the difference between orality and textuality can be determined on the basis of two features: lexical density and grammatical intricacy.³⁷ Written language, according to Halliday, is characterized by a higher lexical density than spoken language. He indicates that written language contains a higher ratio of lexical items (i.e., content words) to grammatical items (i.e., function words) than does oral language in the total running text.³⁸ Additionally, Halliday counters the view held by others that "spoken language is, in fact, no less structured and highly organized than the written," which argues against assumptions that oral language bears more primitive

34. See Porter, *Linguistic Descriptions*, 168–78. Cf. Porter and Dyer, "Oral Texts?"

35. Cf. Porter, "Thucydides."

36. Biber (*Variation*, 5) provides a summary of the views generally held among linguists, while accounting for some lack of agreement and even opposing views: "The general view is that written language is structurally elaborated, complex, formal, and abstract, while spoken language is concrete, context-dependent, and structurally simple. Some studies, though, have found almost no linguistic differences between speech and writing, while others actually claim that speech is more elaborated and complex than writing."

37. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*. See also Halliday, "Differences"; "Spoken and Written Modes."

38. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 61.

features and is thus inferior to written discourse.³⁹ Nevertheless, according to Halliday, spoken and written language still exhibit differences in their characteristic structures, which he accounts for with the notion of grammatical intricacy. Halliday explains that, whereas written language has higher lexical density, written and spoken language still tend to make use of the same lexical items, the difference being that written language uses fewer clauses than spoken language.⁴⁰ This often results in spoken language consisting of long, complex sentences of recursive paratactic and hypotactic nexuses.⁴¹ The differences between spoken and written language, therefore, are not based on one being more complex than the other; rather, spoken and written language are complex in different ways—written being “static and dense” and spoken being “dynamic and intricate,” and these differences are a result of the “more general phenomenon of variation in language, that is of register.”⁴²

There are, naturally, challenges that will confront analyses seeking to assess the level of textuality versus orality of New Testament Greek, such as establishing what constitutes a truly oral text in a culture where we lack access to the spoken language. Further, Halliday’s conceptions regarding grammatical intricacy in English need to be tested more rigorously for Greek. This is because Greek literary discourse, which held Attic Greek as the height of the language, was known for its periodic sentences, which displayed complex grammatical intricacy. As Porter explains, “If koine Greek is the regularized Great Attic Greek utilized across virtually all social, economic, and educational strata during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, its decrease in periodicity and increase in parataxis in the written language may indicate changes to the written language effected by the spoken language.”⁴³ The implication of this process is that “rather than grammatical intricacy indicating origins in spoken language for En-

39. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 79. Some have gone so far as to characterize spoken language as “formless and featureless” (76).

40. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 81.

41. Halliday, “Spoken Language Corpus,” 169.

42. Halliday, “Differences,” 78.

43. Porter, *Linguistic Descriptions*, 170.

glish, the relative lack of grammatical intricacy, compared to Attic (or Atticistic) Greek, indicates origins in the koine spoken language, even if conveyed through the graphic channel.”⁴⁴ However, despite more work needing to be done to validate or alter Halliday’s criteria, a couple of promising studies have been conducted that provide insights and invite further work in this area.

One such study is Ji Hoe Kim’s 2019 article that addresses the question of oral tradition and its bearing on parallel Gospel texts.⁴⁵ There are many views regarding the oral history behind the Gospel texts and the process of textualization that eventuated in the four Gospels that comprise the canonical set.⁴⁶ However, these approaches do not employ the distinctly sociolinguistic insights Halliday’s approach provides regarding the characteristic features of written and spoken language as different language varieties, which opens a door for a fresh approach for analyzing questions about the Gospels’ orality and textuality. Kim explains,

As language varieties, [written and oral language] share the same language system, which makes them similar, but they also have characteristic tendencies, which makes them different. Halliday locates the cause of the differences between them in their different contexts of situation and their different functions in those corresponding situations. Moreover, Halliday’s framework describes a continuum between spoken and written language, which allows for a more balanced view of the relationship between orality and textuality in the ancient world.⁴⁷

In his article, Kim examines the account where Jesus clears the temple courts—an account common to all four Gospels (Matt

44. Porter, *Linguistic Descriptions*, 170.

45. Kim, “Hallidayan Approach.” Porter’s study (*Linguistic Descriptions*, 168–78) applying Halliday’s criteria of orality and textuality to the New Testament has a broader range of application as it probes the validity of Halliday’s criteria by comparing various texts from across the New Testament, including the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), Acts 12 and 18, and an aggregation of Rom 2 and 1 Cor 4, which generally yielded the expected results of the Sermon on the Mount reflecting the highest levels of spoken language, Acts 12 and 8 the highest levels of written language, and the letters situating between the two.

46. For example, see Kelber, “Mark and Oral Tradition”; *Oral and the Written Gospel*; Dewey, “Oral Methods”; Byrskog, “From Orality to Textuality”; *Story as History*; “When Eyewitness Testimony”; and Riesner, “Orality.”

47. Kim, “Hallidayan Approach,” 129.

21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–22), which provides a test case whereby all four Gospels can be placed on a continuum of orality (i.e., closest to spoken language) versus textuality (i.e., closest to written language) with respect to a shared episode. Along the continuum, Kim plots locations for “oral tradition” and “written gospels,” since the Gospels underwent a process involving oral transmission, which, while spoken, is at the same time characterized by features of iterability and removed from the environment in which the original sayings and events occurred that are recorded in the Gospels, implying that oral tradition, being more formalized and not bearing the characteristics of conversation, will situate between registers of speaking and writing.⁴⁸ The plotting of “written gospels” between written language and oral tradition recognizes that the textualization of oral transmission affects the medium, but the emergence of the written texts would not have completely overtaken the oral nature of the Gospels in their process of development.⁴⁹ Thus, according to Kim, analyzing the orality and textuality of the Gospels “is not a matter of determining whether an actual text employs either spoken language or written language, but a matter of determining to what degree a given text reflects the typical characteristics of spoken and/or written language.”⁵⁰

Kim’s analysis yields interesting findings about the temple cleansing in the four Gospels. He discovers that the Gospel of Mark is the least lexically dense of the four Gospels when comparing the parallel passages of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple in each Gospel account. Mark is closely followed by John, which has slightly higher lexical density, next followed by Matthew, and then Luke, which has the greatest lexical density. Furthermore, Kim finds that Mark has the lowest grammatical intricacy, followed by Matthew and Luke sharing equal levels, and John displaying the highest grammatical intricacy.⁵¹ These facts suggest Mark has

48. Kim, “Hallidayan Approach,” 119. According to Halliday (“Differences,” 70), “the most obvious feature that marks off written language is that it is not anchored in the here-and-now, not tied to the environment in which it is produced in the way that conversation is.”

49. Kim, “Hallidayan Approach,” 117.

50. Kim, “Hallidayan Approach,” 117.

51. Kim, “Hallidayan Approach,” 128.

a closer proximity to the oral tradition among the Synoptic Gospels based on levels of lexical density, while the practice of Gospel writing developed into a more textualized register or genre in Matthew, Luke, and John.⁵² However, questions about how to analyze grammatical intricacy remain, especially given John's high grammatical intricacy and relatively low lexical density. Kim cautions that his study is based on only one episode from the Gospels, and so any conclusions are tentative, but further investigation is surely warranted.⁵³

2.1.6 *Principle Six*. The sixth principle of register analysis states that "register analyses must be based on a representative sample of texts."⁵⁴ Since registers are varieties of language that emerge within specific situational contexts (i.e., text types), it is essential to analyze a sufficient number of texts from those contexts to assess reliably linguistic features in relation to situational factors rather than dialectal or idiolectal variation. This requirement presents a challenge for the study of New Testament Greek due to its limited corpus compared to those of modern languages. Despite this limitation, corpus linguistic methods offer a viable approach for collecting data and comparing texts based on shared linguistic features in order to establish registers of ancient languages from a finite set of texts. Matthew Brook O'Donnell's effort to compile a register-balanced corpus of koine Greek texts provides the best attempt to resolve this limitation thus far, or at least that of which I am aware.⁵⁵ The reality of a restricted corpus poses potentially the greatest challenge for register analyses of New Testament Greek,

52. Kim, "Hallidayan Approach," 129–31. See also the chapter on orality and textuality in Porter, *Linguistic Descriptions*, 157–78.

53. Kim, "Hallidayan Approach," 131.

54. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 10.

55. O'Donnell, *Corpus Linguistics*. There are other insightful corpus linguistic studies on New Testament writings, such as that of Van Nes (*Pauline Language*), who has used a statistical analysis to quantify and assess the linguistic variation within the Pauline corpus with the specific aim of challenging the presumption that linguistic variation points to author variation. While not a study of register, van Nes's work demonstrates the potential for addressing questions of a variationist sociolinguistic nature even within a finite corpus as small as the New Testament letters of Paul.

since, according to Biber and Conrad, the three methodological conditions for register analysis are: “(1) the need for a comparative approach; (2) the need for a quantitative analysis; [and] (3) the need for a representative sample.”⁵⁶ There are, however, available approaches and ways of using and modeling register theory for the study of New Testament Greek that do not make the challenge of a finite corpus an insurmountable hurdle.

3. Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to describe a basic set of guiding principles for applying register analysis to New Testament Greek, not least because there have been ways in which interpretations of New Testament passages, and even of whole books, have gone astray. By maintaining a linguistically informed understanding of the relationships and distinctions among situational variables, linguistic features, distributional patterns, and text types, and by integrating a bi-directional top-down/bottom-up analysis, interpreters of the New Testament can avoid methodological pitfalls that have featured prominently in earlier approaches. The functional basis of register variation in New Testament texts is not arbitrary but is responsive to the communicative demands of specific contexts. While challenges remain—particularly the finite nature of ancient corpora—recent advances in systemic-functional and corpus linguistic approaches demonstrate the viability of register analysis for the Greek of the New Testament. The path forward, however, requires not only methodological rigor, embracing the principles I have discussed here and more, but also an openness to engage seriously with sociolinguistic theory and method.

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56. Biber and Conrad, *Register, Genre, and Style*, 51.

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