

TEXT, CONTEXT AND THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY:

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE JOHANNINE WRITINGS¹

David A. Lamb

This thesis examines the social context of the Johannine writings from the perspective of sociolinguistic theory of *register*. In particular, it considers the validity of the *Johannine Community* model.

The idea of a distinct Johannine community lying behind the production of the Gospel and Epistles of John has become, to use Thomas Kuhn's terminology, a *paradigm* within Johannine scholarship over the past fifty years. The key works in establishing this paradigm were the two large Anchor Bible commentaries on the gospel published by Raymond Brown in 1966 and 1970, and the slim volume published by J. Louis Martyn in 1968, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. Other scholars, from Wayne Meeks and his 1972 essay 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism'² onwards, have used sociological insights to depict the Johannine community as a sectarian group, opposed both to wider Jewish society and to other Christian groups.

However, in the past twenty years or so the very concept of a Johannine community has been increasingly challenged from a variety of perspectives. So, in view of these recent challenges to the paradigm, it is important to examine how scholars have moved from the *texts* of the Gospel and Epistles to the *context* of a Johannine community and, specifically, of a sectarian group outside of mainstream early Christianity. For, apart from a few references to the patristic writings, it is only the Johannine texts themselves that scholars use to construct

¹ David A. Lamb, 'Text, Context and the Johannine Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Johannine Writings' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Manchester, 2011). Supervisor: Dr Todd Klutz.

² Wayne Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972): 44-72.

this community. And once constructed, the community then serves as a major tool in the interpretation of these texts.

One reason for the challenge to the community paradigm lies in the shift away from traditional *historical-critical* exegesis in favour of *synchronic* approaches which emphasise the Johannine texts in their final form (as much as that can be established), and which draw on a variety of insights from literary and cultural studies. However, illuminating though such readings of the Johannine writings have been, I question whether words can ever be divorced from their socio-historical contexts. Indeed, it is the contention of the discipline of sociolinguistics that language is a *social* phenomenon: just as we learn and use language in social situations, so our spoken or written communications always betray some trace of particular socio-historical situations. Thus, if the Johannine writings were the product of a clearly defined social group that existed towards the close of the First Century CE, then we would expect the language of these writings to reflect such a social grouping. My aim is to test the validity of this proposition through a critical examination of the Gospel and Epistles from the sociolinguistic perspective of *register*.

Chapter 1 ('The Rise and Fall of a Paradigm? The Johannine Community in Recent Scholarship') provides a brief sketch of key works associated with the rise and possible fall of the community paradigm. It summarises the proposals of Martyn, Brown and Meeks, as well as those of Culpepper, Cullmann and Wengst, and it suggests reasons for the rise of the paradigm. It then looks at other scholars, such as Morris, Carson and Köstenberger, who defend apostolic authorship and also considers the work of Hengel, Brodie, Kysar, Thyen, Bauckham, Klink and Reinhartz, who have all questioned the community paradigm, and it draws together reasons for its possible demise.

Chapter 2 ('The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Development of Raymond Brown's Model of Community') considers in more detail the particular contribution of Raymond Brown, whose works on the Johannine writings have had such a major international impact. Brown regarded his model of the Johannine community as a key to understanding these writings, and I examine how this exemplar of a careful and judicious use of the historical-critical method moved from the texts to a social context, noting his rejection of a sectarian understanding of the community. However, I suggest that his reliance

on the historical-critical method and belief in its 'scientific' value mean that he disregarded other significant ways of relating text to context.

Chapter 3 ('Text and Context: The Contribution of Sociolinguistic Theories of Register'), sets out the methodological basis for a *sociolinguistic* understanding of the relationship between text and context. It concentrates on the *register analysis* approaches of the sociolinguists Michael Halliday and Douglas Biber, and, above all, on the concept of *tenor*, that dimension of discourse which reveals the interpersonal relationships of its interlocutors. It considers the appropriateness of applying modern sociolinguistic theory to Koine Greek texts and lists various lexico-grammatical and discourse features of *tenor* that correlate with interpersonal relationships in terms of *power*, *contact* and *affective involvement*. It is these features which I believe can be most usefully applied to the Johannine texts to indicate something of their social context.

Chapter 4 ('The Antilanguage Antisociety: The Contribution of Sociological Commentators') considers the work of a number of recent sociological commentators, including Malina, Peterson, Neyrey, Thatcher, Rohrbaugh and Esler, who have constructed a sectarian model of the Johannine community by drawing on sociolinguistic terms derived from Halliday, namely *antilanguage* and *antisociety*. I argue that these scholars have not been sufficiently rigorous in their handling of these sociolinguistic terms and the ideas lying behind them. Indeed, it is my contention that their notion of a sectarian Johannine community is not in fact derived from sociolinguistic evidence.

In Chapter 5 ('The Register of the Johannine Writings: Do They Reflect a Particular Community?'), which comprises the major textual work in my thesis, I analyse a number of passages from the Gospel (focusing on the 'narrative asides') and Epistles in which the author has made deliberate reference to the actual process of communication. The discourse and lexico-grammatical features considered are those which are prominent in revealing the *tenor* of the discourse. In particular, I look at the following features:

1. The use of 'new' words.
2. The *speech function* of clauses, that is, whether they are in the form of statement, question, offer or command.
3. The *Modulation* of clauses through the use of modal auxiliaries and Mood and Polarity Adjuncts.
4. The use of *personal pronouns*, particularly emphatic nominatives.
5. The use of *Vocatives*.

6. The use of *ellipsis* or what Biber calls 'vague references'.

These linguistic features are then categorised in terms of *power*, *contact* and *affective involvement*, and I summarise my conclusions as follows:

1. A consistent feature of these texts is that the author has the *power* in the relationship with readers. The writings, including perhaps surprisingly the Epistles, do not invite reciprocal discourse. This power is most evident in the Gospel and 1 John. There may be some weakening of it in 2 John and more so in 3 John.
2. There is no evidence of *contact* between author and readers in the 'narrative asides' of the Gospel. There is some evidence for it in 1 John, more in 2 John, and particularly so in 3 John.
3. There is no evidence of *affective involvement* in the 'narrative asides' of the Gospel. And I argue, against the view of many commentators, there is little evidence for it in the Epistles. So that where potential terms of affection, such as ἀγαπητέ/ἀγαπητοί are employed, the emphasis is on their rhetorical value rather than their being indicators of existing close relationships.

Overall, it is my contention that the *register* of the Johannine writings does not indicate the *context of situation* of a close-knit community. While many commentators, following the lead of Brown and others, have readily fitted the language of the Gospel and Epistles to a community *Geschichte*, seeing it even in terms of sectarian *antilanguage*, I believe that there is little or no linguistic evidence for this. However, there is some evidence that the Epistles, particularly the shorter letters, may indicate a loose network of church groups.

In Chapter 6 ('Conclusion: The Death of the Johannine Community?'), I conclude that a sociolinguistic examination of selected passages from the Johannine writings does not support the idea of a close-knit sectarian group and, in fact, provides only scant support for the concept of a Johannine community at all. However, drawing on the work of the Canadian historian Brian Stock's notion of 'textual communities', I propose a 'Johannine Community' that is a loose network, an embryonic *textual community*, which gives particular status to the written text of the gospel, and one or more of whose associates writes letters, two of which may be addressed to other associates of this group.

Finally, I conclude with a plea for caution in the use of all Johannine community models.