

BOOK REVIEW

Snyder, Julia A., *Language and Identity in Ancient Narratives: The Relationship between Speech Patterns and Social Context in the Acts of the Apostles, Acts of John, and Acts of Philip* (WUNT, 2.370; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). xvi + 329 pp. Pbk. € 84.00.

This monograph derives from a doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Edinburgh in 2013. According to Snyder, the study attempts to address a core question in biblical and early Christianity studies, that is, ‘why the writer said it this way’ (p. 1), using the sociolinguistic concept of speech variation. Snyder argues that previous scholars who have studied ancient literature rarely consider the range of social factors that may affect a speaker or writer’s choice of words and expressions. One of these social factors is the audience of the speaker or writer. She thus states, ‘This book will demonstrate that audience identity must be taken into account whenever the significance of a word or expression in ancient literature is discussed, through three case studies of ancient texts in which ways of speaking correlate with the identity of a speaker’s addressees’ (p. 1; cf. pp. 2, 16). More specifically, she states, ‘Each case study in chapters 2–4 will examine whether characters’ speech patterns co-vary with the identity of their addressees’ (p. 10). These three case studies, the author says, analyze the relationship between speech patterns and social context in three ancient narratives—the Acts of the Apostles, the *Acts of John* and the *Acts of Philip*. Snyder’s overall objective is to provide comparative speech data that can account for the relationship between speech patterns and social context, which in turn can serve as a basis for making literary and theological claims.

This author’s work provides a number of positive contributions to biblical and early Christianity studies. One is that her study highlights the significance of sociolinguistic theories in analyses of ancient texts, a subject that is now receiving increasing attention among biblical scholars. Another is that her use of single-manuscript texts as base

texts points to the fact that eclectic and reconstructed texts are not necessarily ‘more reliable’ or ‘better’ texts. As Snyder points out, an eclectic text is only useful ‘if one assumes that every individual whose words are reflected in the various manuscripts used language in the exact same way’ (p. 20). A third positive contribution is that her study, by linking linguistic variables with their social meaning, demonstrates the importance of the role language played in the formation of Christian identity. The idea is that a person’s Christian identity is practically seen in or determined by the kinds of words and expressions they use. A fourth and last positive is that her study indicates that before one can make theological claims based on specific texts, one would need to support and substantiate such theological claims by considering and interpreting the sociolinguistic contexts of the words by the use of an appropriate methodological tool.

Despite these positive observations, readers may find Snyder’s book difficult to read in terms of both the author’s presentation of her material (notably in the introduction), and the general nature of the subject of sociolinguistics, which often needs more extended discussion, something that Snyder fails to provide. I would have wanted to see a more detailed description and explanation of the sociolinguistic theoretical framework the author employs in her study. Specifically, in the discussion of speech variation, explanation as to which component should be given priority in the textual analysis and a discussion of the contextual relationship of the various components would be beneficial for the reader. For instance, Snyder needs to show how the participants, social setting, topics, purposes, genres, etc. of a particular speech instance actually relate to an individual’s way of speaking, especially as she acknowledges that these contextual factors are significant for determining the meaning of an author’s word or expression. There are also other problems in the author’s use of sociolinguistic theories in conjunction with the goal of her investigation. I will note some of these, after I give a brief overview of the chapters of the book.

Snyder’s book is divided into five uneven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the goal and purpose of the study, and the methodology and procedure of the author’s investigation. The introductory chapter seems to be too concise and slightly unclear at many points with reference to the author’s overall discussion of her subject, leaving me uncertain as to whether I have accurately and judiciously stated above what the author was actually attempting to do. Moreover, I am also unsure what

the author means in her assessment of previous studies, when she says that they rarely consider the range of social factors that occasioned a speaker's linguistic choices. Is Snyder referring to biblical and early Christianity studies in general, or to some particular studies that also employ sociolinguistic theories and concepts? While the former may be correct, the latter is actually not necessarily true. This, in fact, is evident in Snyder's survey of past scholarly works. A mere five- to six-page survey of previous scholarly works is insufficient to support her claim.

Chapters 2–4 present the analysis of the relationship between the speech patterns and social context of the selected texts in the Acts of the Apostles, *Acts of John* and *Acts of Philip*. In each chapter, Snyder presents her material in an orderly format, discussing chronologically the base text used for her analysis, the structure of the chapter, the dynamics of Christian identity, and the linguistic and social variables examined. The primary linguistic variables she examines are 'full noun phrases that function as substantive references to Jesus and the apostles' god [e.g. ὁ θεός; τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ; Ἰησοῦς; ὁ κύριος; ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ Ἰησοῦ], and as plural forms of address [e.g. ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί; ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται] (pp. 21-22). The social variables she describes via an ethnographic approach include the 'Christian' status of speakers and addressees and their 'Gentile-Jewish identity'. An itemized inventory of these linguistic and social variables can be found in the appendices at the end of the book.

Chapter 2 consequently explores the speech patterns of Christian characters and how these patterns relate to their social context in the Acts of the Apostles, using Codex Vaticanus (B or 03) as a base text. Snyder observes that the ways and forms of address used by Christian characters 'co-vary' (a term that the author should perhaps define more clearly) with the Christian status and Gentile-Jewish identity of their addressees. The term ἀδελφοί (brothers), for instance, Snyder says, was only used to address Christian and non-Christian Jews but not non-Christian Gentiles.

Chapter 3, using *Patmos* 188 (R) and *Mezzojuso* 2 (Z) as base texts, argues that Christians were the intended audience of the *Acts of John*. Snyder points out that John, when addressing Christians, uses such substantives as κύριος (lord) and an unmodified form of θεός (God). When addressing non-Christians, however, John employs a modifier for these forms of address (e.g. 'my God'). Snyder further notes that

this ‘Sociolinguistic variation in AJ [i.e. *Acts of John*] contributes to a portrayal of conversion as a process and calls into question the common view that AJ was written for a non-Christian audience’ (pp. 3, 224).

Chapter 4 explains how *Xenophontos* 32, the base text Synder uses for analyzing the speech patterns in the *Acts of Philip*, is a collective narrative of five independent sections and thus reflects the work of a redactor. Snyder says that the differences in speech patterns among these independent sections suggest that the study of speech variation can shed light on the processes involved in the composition of ancient texts. The chapter also demonstrates how addressee-related speech variation is linked with constructions of Christian identity. She points out, for example, that Philip’s distinctive use of the terms ‘god’ and ‘brother’ may be correlated with the terms ‘belief’ and ‘brother’, signifying two different aspects of Christian identity.

Chapter 5 concludes the book with a summary of each of the chapters that highlights the implications of the fact that there is speech variation in texts (i.e. both similarities and differences) that line up with their social contexts. The chapter also discusses whether ancient texts provide reliable historical information about actual ancient conversational practices and provides further avenues for future research.

I wish now to note three significant problems with the author’s overall theory in achieving the goal of her investigation.

The first problem concerns the author’s assertion that ‘why the writer said it this way’ constitutes a core question in biblical and early Christianity studies. This assertion is true with reference to the discipline of sociolinguistics, since register analysis, stylistic analysis and ways of speaking are clearly some of the major subjects of interest in sociolinguistic studies. However, this is probably an inaccurate claim with reference to biblical studies and early Christianity studies in general. Scholars in these fields typically have more specific goals for their investigations, and they utilize sociolinguistic concepts, which include, among many others, ‘ways of speaking’, to achieve their defined investigative goals.

A second problem, despite the author’s acknowledgement that various contextual factors affect people’s speech in specific contexts, concerns the selection of the ‘audience’ component as the focus of analysis. Sociolinguists would typically take into account at least four sociolinguistic elements—participants, social setting, purpose and

topic of conversation—to analyze a particular situational context. It is difficult to provide an accurate correlation between linguistic variables and their social meanings if these four elements are not factored in the analysis. In fact, ‘audience’ only constitutes one of the elements in analyzing participants’ relationships in their use of linguistic symbols and codes in conversations. Audience alone cannot be determinative of the relationship between speech patterns and social context. Speech patterns are also influenced and constrained by the social setting in which a conversation takes place, such as the formality or informality of the speech event, and the purpose and topic of the conversation, which may require the use of specific linguistic codes and symbols. In other words, conversations between speakers and their audience do not take place abstractly—audience identity is correlated with social identity, that is, the social membership(s) of the audience.

The third and final problem, a result of the second problem, is the author’s identification and description of the social variables, such as ‘Christian’ status and ‘Gentile-Jewish identity’ that she attempts to correlate with a set of linguistic variables. One would think that notions of status and identity are interpretations gleaned from the text and can only be determined by establishing the link between the linguistic variables of the text and their social meaning. Snyder, however, seems to create two separate means of linking these two variables. She uses, on the one hand, an ethnographic approach to define what it means to be ‘Christian’ and to possess a ‘Gentile-Jewish identity’, while identifying, on the other hand, a different set of (participant-related) linguistic variables to analyze their co-variation or correlation. In short, the linguistic variables that she identifies and examines are not part of the ethnographic components (e.g. the foregrounded themes of evangelistic speeches, conversions, sermons, prayers and miracles) that she considers to be ‘Christian’. For this reason, as interesting and perhaps even convincing as her literary and theological observations are, they are not transparent to her sociolinguistic methodological framework. Nevertheless, this book still provides an insightful study, showing how sociolinguistic theories can be used as a methodological tool for biblical and early Christianity studies.

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