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SYMBOLIZING IDENTITY AND THE ROLE OF TEXTS:
PROPOSALS, PROSPECTS, AND SOME COMMENTS
ON THE EUCHARIST MEAL

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Abstract: Where does text fit into a theory of social identity? Social groups consistently emerge and maintain their existence in relation to (sacred) texts: Christians with their Bible, Muslims with the Qu’ran, or socialists with *Das Kapital*. This is neither new nor surprising information. Critics are intensely aware of how individuals and groups engage in ongoing processes of identification in relation to the sacred text. In this article, I explore the relationship between social context and text and the constructive potential between the two. What are mechanisms that trigger and maintain social change vis-à-vis text and how can these dynamics be productively analyzed? It has become popular to invoke certain constructivist views of social dynamics and, in particular, to marshal the notion of “identity” as a powerful means for social-boundary maintenance and change. In relation to that propensity, this article is meant as an assessment of methodologies that may be equal to this task, touching on various theories of language and the construction of social identity, followed by exploration of a particularly promising avenue developing from theories of ecosocial semiotics. (Article)

Keywords: semiotics, identity, text, relativity, context, ecosocial, eucharist.

1. Introduction

Where does text fit into a theory of identity formation? Social groups consistently emerge and maintain their existence in relation to (sacred) texts: Christians with the Bible, Muslims with the Qu’ran, or socialists with *Das Kapital*. This is neither new nor surprising information. Critics are intensely aware of how

individuals and groups engage in ongoing processes of identification in relation to the sacred text. In this article, I explore the relationship between social context and text and the constructive potential between the two. What are the mechanisms that trigger and maintain social change vis-à-vis text and how can these dynamics be productively analyzed? This is a question of discursive agency in identity formation.¹

These are important methodological questions in the study of religion, where certain texts are given a unique status to affect and limit group behavior.² However, this unique status is relativized by the constructive potential of text in the most general of senses. Linguists, semioticians, and discourse analysts have been theorizing about such questions and biblical scholars would do well to learn from their insights. It has become popular among biblical scholars to invoke certain constructivist views of social dynamics³ and, in particular, to marshal the notion of “identity” as a powerful means to explain social-boundary maintenance and change.⁴ Given this propensity, socially-oriented linguistic theories are able to provide a more comprehensive method for integrating the social world of group behavior and beliefs with the inner workings of the text. Rather than having a general appreciation that the biblical text forms religious identity, we can

1. As Tucker has demonstrated, recent publications focused on Christian identity variously estimate the discursive agency of New Testament texts (“Christian Identity,” 71–77).

2. Gamble is right to stress early Christianity’s indebtedness to texts. Notwithstanding the importance of oral modes, early Christianity is characterized by being a literary movement where text production thrived (see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 1–41). All the more reason to firmly situate text in one’s social description of the movement.

3. See such works as Adams, *Constructing the World*; MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches*; Horrell, *Social Ethos*.

4. As Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 126–35, has argued, social identity is formed through contextualizing experience against the symbolic universe. In due course, biblical scholars have pursued this line of inquiry as well and have attempted to appropriate early Christian identity as mediated through the formative Christian texts. See Lieu, *Christian Identity*, esp. 27–61; Tucker, *You Belong to Christ*; Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus*, among others.

view such dynamics with greater nuance and articulation. This article is meant as an assessment of methodologies that may be equal to this task, touching on various theories of language and the construction of social identity, followed by exploration of a particularly promising avenue arising from theories of ecosocial dynamics.

2. *Linguistic Relativity*

Linguistic relativity proposes that one's experience of reality is relative to the structure of language and is frequently connected with the work of Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941).⁵ Sapir was attentive to the relationship of language and culture, suggesting that “language...is a perfect symbolic system, in a perfectly homogeneous medium, for the handling of all references and meanings that a given culture is capable of.”⁶ The mental dimension of this insight remained central to Sapir. Individuals only have fragmented access to their culture; thus, cultures are made of these collected and somewhat overlapping individual fragments.⁷ Whorf's work followed this

5. Hoijer writes: “The central idea of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that language functions, not simply as a device for reporting experience, but also, and more significantly, as a way of defining experience for its speakers” (“The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” 121).

6. Sapir, “Language,” 10. Whorf shares a similar attitude to language as a system (“Language, Mind, and Reality,” 257). Sapir's assertion that “Language is a guide to social reality” and a “*symbolic guide to culture*” prefigures the general tenor of social constructivism that would develop later in the sociology of knowledge (see Sapir, “The Status of Linguistics as a Science,” 162). The distinction to be made is that the subjectivity associated with linguistic relativity remains along the lines of distinct languages, whereas social constructivism is (a) less deterministic and (b) differentiates varying linguistic expression in a more nuanced way than simply distinguishing one language's structure from another's.

7. See, for example, Sapir, “Concept of Personality,” 590–97.

trajectory and insightfully acknowledged that the formative nature of language is primarily unconscious.⁸

The value of linguistic relativity is found in its attempt to relate language to the construction of societal and cultural norms. Sapir and Whorf both appreciated the role of the individual within the linguistic-cultural system, the emphasis of which is a viable way to explain identity formation. Language features within a larger system of human behavior and can apply to the material elements of individual and communal identity. However, extreme relativity has proven problematic insofar as it lends itself to linguistic determinism; i.e., the potential for making new meaning is entirely restricted by the linguistic structure and different languages imply different ways of conceptualizing the world.⁹ Many linguists have identified these inherent problems and have sought to develop or distance themselves from deterministic leanings.¹⁰ Even so, there are trajectories that have persisted within a variety of linguistic paradigms. These legacies are worth pursuing.¹¹

8. Whorf illustrates this well by drawing upon the way in which scientific (or unscientific) language affects perceptions of the physical universe (see Whorf, “Language, Mind, and Reality,” 250–51).

9. See Sapir, “Language,” 10; although Leavitt argues that determinism is a false characterization of the position (*Linguistic Relativities*, 167). Linguistic determinism has been particularly problematic in biblical studies, especially as seen in the biblical theology movement, which suggested that the language of the different Testaments was constrained by categorically “Hebraic” and “Greek” modes of thought. This view has been ably taken to task in Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 8–20; and Porter, “Two Myths,” 299–307.

10. In spite of the psychological element of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Leavitt argues that the cognitive revolution, especially Chomskyan universalism, effectively killed linguistic relativity (Leavitt, *Linguistic Relativities*, 165–69).

11. Though not immediately relevant to the subsequent discussion, some important developments of linguistic relativity can be found in Gumperz and Levinson, eds., *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*.

3. Legacies of Linguistic Relativity

A provocative development of linguistic relativity is the cognitively-based articulation of metaphor theory that began with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.¹² Their theories have seen metaphor as an intrinsic feature of natural language that affects the conceptual mappings of language users, the developments of which reflect an extreme constructivist approach.¹³ The manipulation of metaphorical expression has the ability to alter conceptual mappings, especially when unique metaphorical blends are concerned.¹⁴ With this view in mind, documents can take on a formative quality and affect the individual's perception of reality, resulting in modified behaviors. This can affect an entire community when certain texts are widely disseminated. The question of identity remains unanswered within the paradigm, yet conceptual metaphor theory is suggestive of how reality construction occurs for the individual.¹⁵

Speech-act theory reflects another descendant of relativism. Austin's and Searle's work has emphasized the performative element of "constative" language.¹⁶ This model primarily

12. For an appeal to some of Whorf's hypotheses from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory, see Lackoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 304–35.

13. See, most importantly, Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. They argue that "truth is always relative to a conceptual system, that any human conceptual system is mostly metaphorical in nature..." (*Metaphors We Live By*, 185). See also Fludernik, Freeman, and Freeman, "Metaphor and Beyond," 385.

14. See especially Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 39–58, who suggest that the blending of conceptual space allows for the construction of new realities.

15. Though, for example, Aasgaard's study on the metaphor of siblingship in the New Testament (*My Beloved Brothers and Sisters*) is suggestive of conceptual frameworks for elements of Christian boundary maintenance and in-group relations. Cf. Harland, "Familial Dimensions of Group Identity," esp. 491–92.

16. See Austin, who identified three types of speech-acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Illocution can be distinguished from locution insofar as illocution possesses a type of *force* that is distinguishable from more

expresses the mind-language interface and, at best, can suggest some ways in which actions result from language use.¹⁷ More recently, however, Searle has pushed the theory further by investigating potential social elements of speech acts. Searle asks “how there can be an epistemically objective social reality that is partly constituted by an ontologically subjective set of attitudes.”¹⁸ Searle satisfies this query by identifying that language is in some sense always performative (even without possessing a performative verb), and that performance constitutes the creation of social (or institutional) reality.¹⁹ Language constructs the symbols that represent and thus create institutional realities and language realizes the three institutionalizing features identified by Searle: collective intentionality, assignment of function, constitutive rules.²⁰ It is from here that we return, full circle, to the basic tenets of speech-act theory. The analysis of the performativity of language in terms of symbolizing reality can

“literal” locutionary meaning. Perlocutions can therefore be distinguished from these others as they “will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons” (Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 1–3, 6, 99–101; Levinson, *Pragmatics*, 236). Searle disputes Austin’s distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts, because they are not mutually exclusive categories (see Searle, “Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts,” 406–407).

17. This model has gained the most traction in the context of theological interpretation rather than more historically-oriented studies. See, e.g., Thiselton, “The Supposed Power of Words,” 283–89; Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, esp. 272–312; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*.

18. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society*, 113. Note that in Searle’s investigation, the mind remains as a primary point of interest (see chs 2–4).

19. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society*, 115. Three features are essential to the formation of institutional structures: (1) collective intentionality, where individual intentions coalesce with the apparent intentions of others in the group; (2) assignment of function, at which point collective agents designate functionality to something; and (3) constitutive rules, which imply the regulation of an action but also function to constitute the very thing they regulate (118–24).

20. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society*, 132–34.

apparently be reduced to various types of speech-acts that have been identified by theorists since Austin.

There is little doubt among these theorists that the relationship between social realities and language is a constitutive one. The question is, how can a cognitive (and thus individualistic) approach to language adequately contribute to modeling social change?²¹ I am inclined to agree with Lemke's observation: linguistic models that focus on the mental are not useful for appreciating social and material elements of language.²²

4. *Social Semiotics*

Alternatively to the cognitive approaches mentioned above, sociolinguistic theories better position themselves to model the symbolic mediation of reality. Perhaps the most explicit and rigorous linguistic development comes in the form Halliday's social semiotics. Hints of linguistic relativity remain, although social constructivist tendencies loom large as well as the influence of such important thinkers as Malinowski, Firth, Bernstein, and members of the Prague School.²³ The social semiotic insight is to understand language as a type of social behavior,

21. I think that Searle's work (Searle, *Mind, Language and Society*) especially reflects this tension.

22. Lemke, *Textual Politics*, 9. This statement is only strengthened by the fact that analysis is limited to ancient texts, for which there are no native speakers to consult or study.

23. An interesting essay is Halliday, "Foreward," 232–30, which is very clear about the relationship between Halliday's own theories and Bernstein's sociological work. A pertinent concept is the relationship of social situation and language. Thus, Firth would argue for a "contextual theory of meaning," by which he means *social* context ("Linguistic Analysis as a Study of Meaning," 14; Firth, *The Tongues of Men and Speech*, 110–14). See also Firth, "Ethnographic Analysis," 146–47, which is explicitly indebted to Malinowski. Compare the significant quotation: "The study of a native language must go hand in hand with the study of its culture" (Malinowski, "Practical Anthropology," 29). Note that Leavitt sees the Prague linguistic school as an important parallel to linguistic relativism (Leavitt, *Linguistic Relativities*, 189–92).

i.e., a sign system that mediates social activity.²⁴ Halliday sums up the relationship between language and social context in this way:

the relation of language to the social system is not simply one of expression, but a more complex natural dialectic in which language naturally symbolizes the social system, thus creating as well as being created by it.²⁵

Given this general perspective on the nature of language, social semiotics is an ideal theory for modeling how discourse constructs social realities and hints at how identity can be conceived of within this framework. Indeed, Halliday has implied as much, even as far as to suggest that the language of early Christianity functioned to resocialize its adherents from their previous social norms.²⁶

Social semiotic theory, stemming from Halliday, but also benefitting from a range of contributions from other linguists, articulates a robust theory of language well suited to thorough analyses of texts. Several important features of this theory can be briefly observed. (1) Language is stratified into a “three-level coding system,”²⁷ related by means of realization. External to the linguistic coding system are additional strata (often called context of situation and context of culture).²⁸ Realization effectively models how linguistic form (i.e., wordings) relates to linguistic meaning (i.e., semantics), or how linguistic meanings construe/create social situations, etc. (2) Language is able to perform three general functions, which realize three general properties of social

24. See Halliday, “Language in a Social Perspective,” 43–46; Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 1–5, 21–27.

25. Halliday, “Functional Relationship,” 251.

26. In particular, this is done through the notion of an *antilingu*age. See, for example, Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 169–71. In this case, Christian identity is conceived of relative to what it is not. Note that Halliday sets himself firmly in the social constructivism camp, developing certain of Berger and Luckmann’s proposals.

27. Halliday, “Functional Relationship,” 251.

28. See, for example, Hasan, “Semantic Networks,” 105; Halliday, *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 25.

contexts. Language mediates social relationships (the interpersonal function), language symbolizes ideas and logical relations (the ideational function), and organizes such information so that it is comprehensible (the textual function).²⁹ (3) Language has meaning in a specific utterance because of what it can mean. Halliday models this dynamic through a systemic approach to linguistic description. The specific choices made by a language user in a particular context are selected from a system of choices. Such choices make up the meaning potential of language.³⁰ These three theoretical elements provide a helpful means to understand the potential that language has to reflect, but also manipulate, social realities because of the correspondence between linguistic form and (social) meaning. Since language is a primary means of constructing social realities, social semiotics can articulate such formation quantitatively and with precision. Indeed, if social identity is negotiated against symbolic universes, then social semiotics is a significant starting point in understanding how such identity is formed through discourse.

Admittedly, there are a few methodological steps that are missing in this framework. The most significant of these is that Halliday's work could benefit from more robust theorizing of what social identity is and how it might be constructed in relation to broader cultural contexts. This would be followed by relating these extra-linguistic concerns to linguistic choices made in particular texts. I will consider three options for this task: Roger Fowler's *Literary Stylistics*, Norman Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis*, and Jay Lemke's and Paul Thibault's *Ecosocial Dynamics*.

29. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 45–46; Halliday, "Functional Relationship," 256–57.

30. Hasan et al., "Semantic Networks," 697; Halliday, "Social Perspective," 46–47.

5. Potential Developments from Social Semiotics

5.1 Fowler and Literary Stylistics

Fowler's discourse model is developed specifically for the analysis of literary texts. While he draws heavily upon Halliday's functional grammar, Fowler expands the scope of his work by incorporating insights from literary and philosophical theory, especially from Barthes and Bakhtin. According to Fowler, this allows his work to better accomplish his goals of literary criticism through a fuller understanding of textuality.³¹ Fowler's discourse model, besides being a model that appreciates literary creativity and the affective nature of texts, is fundamentally concerned with discourse as a social phenomenon. Indeed, Fowler very much fits into the social constructivist school.³² Berger and Luckmann's suggestion that conversation is the primary and unconscious means by which social realities are constructed and maintained (a point that Halliday follows), allows Fowler to appreciate literature as the means by which the status quo of meaningful exchange undergoes experimentation and play.³³ This has implications for how perceptions of reality can be manipulated by literary creativity—stylistic variation influences perception.³⁴ Fowler's appeal to Halliday's notion of *register* is promising as it allows a more nuanced view of reality construction: language use reflects "the viewpoint constituted for X in

31. See Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, 1–16. In spite of these additions, it is clear that Fowler is heavily indebted to Halliday, not only for his architecture of language, but also for certain critical priorities Fowler adopts.

32. See Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, 26–30. Fowler suggests that the objective world is appreciable only through our constructed classification systems. He calls this system by a number of terms including "common sense," "worldview," and "ideology" (26).

33. Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, 30; Fowler, *Literature as Social Discourse*, 25. Cf. Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 152–55.

34. This is, however, a complicated thing to measure, since, as Hoey has shown, even creative literary expression tends to follow established (even if unconscious) patterns of language use (see Hoey, "Lexical Priming and Literary Creativity," 7–30).

this register.”³⁵ Fowler is attentive to the function of author as a partially creative entity; the ideological, political, and social elements of discourse “go far beyond the control of the writing subject.”³⁶ Yet, for all the power of Fowler’s model to apprehend the nuances of the discursive construction of reality, it is limited in its ability to articulate the construction identity within that matrix.

5.2 Fairclough and Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) takes many of its cues from social semiotics in the way that it appreciates the relationship of language and society and in terms of the multifunctionality of texts.³⁷ Granted, CDA encompasses a variety of approaches to linguistic analysis, yet it is consistently undergirded by the desire to access the social and political/ideological features of language use.³⁸ Fairclough develops a “version of ‘critical discourse analysis’” in order to do social research and analyze social change.³⁹ This is a model that appreciates developments in social theory,

35. Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, 12.

36. Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, 233.

37. See Fairclough and Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 258, 262; and Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, 5, which make specific references to the work of Halliday and Hasan. See Chouliaraki and Fairclough, *Discourse in Late Modernity*, 139–55, for a more detailed engagement of the relationship between SFL and CDA.

38. See Wodak et al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 7–8; Fairclough and Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 262–68, for a survey these various approaches.

39. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, 2; Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 62. Fairclough actually resists the stabilization of method within CDA, seeking to bring theoretical elements from discourse and social theory in a way that is most beneficial to the task at hand (see Chouliaraki and Fairclough, *Discourse in Late Modernity*, 16–17). Henderson’s article documents well the critiques of Fairclough’s eclecticism, though views it as helpful, at least in her own work in educational discourse (Henderson, “A Faircloughian Approach to CDA,” 9–24). Porter also raises some concerns with this eclecticism and implies that some of the perspectives appealed to are at odds in some important ways (Porter, “Is Critical Discourse Analysis Really Critical?” 47–51).

though, where textual analysis is concerned, Fairclough is decidedly Hallidayan. Discourse is not simply the “reflex of situational variables,” but relates to social situations dialectically.⁴⁰ CDA makes some important statements about discourse; i.e., its relationship to social and political structure, discourse as ideological, and discourse as social action, to name a few. It is, in fact, primarily concerned with the notion that discourse has the power to shape political and ideological practice.⁴¹ Here, the way in which Fairclough relates text, discursive practice, and social practice is instructive.⁴²

Identity formation does figure into Fairclough’s approach in a way that is absent from Halliday and Fowler. However, this is primarily focused upon authorial identity, rather than discursive agency and the formation of readers.⁴³ Further limitations persist. Fairclough’s, as well as Fowler’s, model limits the power of discourse in social-reality construction to the ideational function of language, a restriction that I think is unfortunately short-

40. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 63–64. Note that Fairclough does not wish to over-state the constructivist position.

41. See Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 66–67; Fairclough and Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 271–80. Porter argues that if certain ideological assumptions do not impose themselves upon textual analysis, the sensitivity of CDA to ideological issues arising from the text presents a welcome development of Halliday’s model (Porter, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 51).

42. See Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 73, for a helpful diagram of this relationship, and pp. 73–99 for elaboration of these themes. The diagram models the move from text, to production/distribution/consumption, to its manifestation in power relationships and social action.

43. See Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 64–65. This is exemplified in Fairclough’s analysis of some of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s speeches (Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, 174–84). A promising development within CDA may be the work of Wodak et al.; however, they do not fall directly in line with Fairclough’s approach (particularly his Hallidayan bent), and their articulation of a theory of identity is not articulated as an implicit outcome of the process of constructing symbolic universes (see Wodak et al., *Discursive Construction*, 10–48).

sighted.⁴⁴ In addition, CDA's interdisciplinary nature makes it difficult to appropriate as a holistic discourse model. Utilizing various theories, especially from related disciplines, can be helpful only insofar as their goals are commensurable. While Fairclough's model is useful for providing some insights into the social and political agenda of social semiotics, it is lacking in its ability to accommodate the theoretical dimensions of identity formation of readers.

5.3 *Lemke, Thibault, and Ecosocial Dynamics*

Lemke's and Thibault's insights build upon Halliday's social semiotic framework by attempting to model the linguistic construal of ideology and its material affects within human behavior.⁴⁵ Material, as well as linguistic, reality is the breeding ground for cultural variance through which communities establish meaning—semiotic systems provide a context for meaningful action.⁴⁶ Thus, language should be understood as a feature of ecosocial dynamics.⁴⁷

Lemke's model provides the opportunity to detect how new identities and social relationships can be formed through conflicting social institutions.⁴⁸ For Lemke, and indeed the biblical

44. See Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 169; Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, 210–32. The social relationships of those involved in the communication and how this is mediated through discourse (the interpersonal function) is an important part of constructing a symbolic universe.

45. In fact, language must be appreciated in light of other social semiotic practices.

46. Lemke, "Discourse, Dynamics, and Social Change," 245.

47. Lemke, *Textual Politics*, 9–10. These operate in relationship to the ecosocial system: "a human social community taken together with the material ecosystem that enables, supports and constrains it" (Lemke, *Textual Politics*, 119). It is a hybrid of Halliday's social semiotics and ecosystem dynamics adapted from the field of biology (Lemke, "Language Development and Identity," 69–71).

48. See Lemke, "Identity, Development and Desire," 17–42; also Lemke, "Language Development," 72. Lemke argues that "Identities can be conceptualized... as being constituted by the orientational stances we take, toward others and toward the contexts and effects of our own utterances, in enacting roles

scholar, institutional conflict is a dynamic that is primarily measured in discourse. Thus, the construction of social identity is paralleled in language use; the “social construction of the material subject” involves the conscious desire to effect material change through the use of language.⁴⁹ Given Lemke’s perspective on the heteroglossic nature of meaning, he articulates two important ways in which discourse construes identity: (1) it involves conflict and (2) it produces a dynamic and constantly emerging identity.⁵⁰ Identities lie in the tension between one’s position within the socio-cultural system and the habitual disposition towards particular actions.⁵¹ Social identity is essentially contrastive in the sense that, what Lemke calls, “subcommunities” use the culturally shared semiotic systems with varying effect. Lemke writes: “each subcommunity constructs a different

within specialized subcultures by speaking and writing in the appropriate registers and genres” (Lemke, “Language Development,” 68). See a similar discussion in Thibault, *Social Semiotics as Praxis*, 315–46.

49. See, especially, Lemke, *Textual Politics*, 80–99, 100–129; Thibault, *Social Semiotics as Praxis*, 223–29. One of the difficulties with social constructivism and certain postmodern developments therein has been the loss of the subject. Lemke argues that notions of subjectivity and self are themselves culturally constructed conceptions and may not be reflective of alternative experiential modes. The self needs to be seen, not as an irreducible category, but as an interactive category corresponding to social relations/communities, and, more importantly in relation to the material universe (a reaction against the “Cartesian split between the mind and matter”) (*Textual Politics*, 99). In this vein, the differentiation between the individual agent and the social group is a perspectival reality, more than it is an ontological reality.

50. Lemke develops this notion of emergence in Lemke, “Material Sign Processes and Emergent Ecosocial Organization,” 183–85; and also in Lemke, “Text Production and Dynamic Text Semantics,” 32–44, with respect to emergent meaning as texts are produced. This is an important relationship if identity formation is realized in the linguistic structures of text.

51. See Lemke, “Identity, Development and Desire,” 21. A key piece of this description is how identity is mediated across multiple timescales. This affects the way we can conceive of agency and social positioning (23–26). See also Lemke, “Across the Scales of Time,” 273–90 (esp. 282–86, cf. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 48); and Lemke, “Texts and Discourses in the Technologies of Social Organization,” 131–47, with respect to the role of texts in this process.

reality by the views it formulates in language on any matter, and it constructs its views always and only from a particular social position of interests and values *vis-a-vis* other possible or actual views.”⁵² Therefore, while an entire population may share sets of semiotic possibilities (what Halliday would call “meaning potential”) it is the way in which subgroups within a population select symbols from the potential—a *semiotic formation*—that delimits the group from others. Understanding the language potential and the choices made within it that are reflected in a particular discourse provides a window into the identificatory behavior of a subcommunity in contrast to others.⁵³

Semiotic formation is not a static enterprise; that is, the system of choices is not necessarily fixed. Taking cues from Foucault’s theory of discursive formation, Lemke states that semiotic formations are subject to “a complex dialectical interdependence with the material dynamics of social communities.”⁵⁴ Language users (i.e., linguistic communities) exist within and participate in the continual manipulation of semiotic resources. The reconstrual of such resources is an identity forming exercise characterized by a tension between system-changing and system-maintaining discursive relations.⁵⁵ Lemke models this dynamic as a dual-level concern. First, semiotic relations describe how social actions as meaning relate to other social actions. Second, material relations describe how behaviors relate to the physical enactment of other practices.⁵⁶

Lemke’s model is amenable to the present task through its emphasis on internal textual politics allowing for the emergence of new social worlds, its perspective of language as an ecosocial

52. Lemke, “Discourse, Dynamics, and Social Change,” 246.

53. Using language from Bakhtin, Lemke suggests a relationship between *heteroglossia* and *heteropraxia* (Lemke, “Discourse, Dynamics, and Social Change,” 247).

54. Lemke, “Discourse, Dynamics, and Social Change,” 249. Cf. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 209, cited in Lemke, *Textual Politics*, 30.

55. See Thibault, *Social Semiotics as Praxis*, 225.

56. See Lemke, “Discourse, Dynamics, and Social Change,” 249.

phenomenon, and an explicit interest in identity formation. Perhaps one of the most beneficial and unique features of the ecosocial semiotic perspective is its appreciation of the text itself as dually a semiotic and material artifact. A text is available for the integration of multiple timescales (e.g., momentary behavior vs. an entire lifetime) “that enable the participants in meaning-making activity to co-ordinate and integrate their contributions” to identificatory behavior.⁵⁷

6. *Where Do We Go From Here?*

Of these various theories, the ecosocial semiotic perspective has the greatest potential for understanding and modeling the discursive agency of New Testament texts for identity formation. It incorporates the powerful analytical tools of Halliday’s functional grammar with a more robust understanding of social qua discursive system relations. Ecosocial semiotics insists that the material world must take a more central role in our linguistic theorizing, so that a robust theory of textuality involves semiotic and material considerations. Perhaps, responding to this insistence, New Testament linguistic research ought to be attentive to the material culture of the first century. As we seek to understand the discursive agency of New Testament texts, the material features of texts themselves come in to play as well as the material (and social) contexts of the earliest readers. On a very basic level, we understand that texts such as Pauline letters or Gospel documents were widely disseminated and read, allowing early churches to engage in the social dynamics described above on

57. Thibault, *Brain, Mind and the Signifying Body*, 51; Thibault, *Social Semiotics as Praxis*, 225–26. Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 59, has made the important observation that “the physical character of ‘text’” has functional symbolic significance. While specifically directed at canon formation, this observation has broader implications for the early Christians and their sacred texts, since the collection of scriptures into a canon is but one of the interrelated elements—also including biographical and doctoral [i.e., authorial/pseudepigraphal] elements—of textual reception (cf. Marguerat, *Paul in Acts and Paul in his Letters*, 5–21).

multiple occasions and in varying (even if the variance was only slight) social and material settings. Thus, a general appreciation for the literary culture of ancient societies and even the variance therein of particular geographical areas (e.g., was the literary culture of Ephesus different than that of Jerusalem?) will contextualize assessments of discursive agency and identity formation. On the other side of the equation, there is a constitutive difference between, say, a Gospel and a letter. Differences occur in terms of their respective semiotic arrangements but also in how the contents of the letters relate to the material world and mediate relationships between senders and receivers. Identity forming processes would operate in proportion to such generic differences. Pertaining to issues of Christian origins, further exploration is warranted in addition to these suggestions.

At this time, I will explore the discursive agency of certain New Testament texts in relation to the celebration of the eucharist as identity formation. Developments in eucharistic practice, for example, would have derived from or at least been informed by a number different New Testament texts. Arguably, the eucharist was itself an exercise in social formation, which involved symbolic/material elements. New Testament texts, the eucharistic meal, and the social agents involved form an interesting matrix of ecosocial dynamics qua identity formation.⁵⁸

58. Participation in the eucharist is often identified as a socially formative institution—ritual practice integrates communal identification with Jesus’ sharing of bread and wine as his body and blood or with the crucifixion that followed (e.g., Horrell, *Social Ethos*, 87–88; MacDonald, *Pauline Churches*, 69–71; Lampe, “The Eucharist,” 36–49; and esp. Theissen, *Religion*, 126–28). Smith argues that the conflicts in Corinth and Galatia resulted because meals themselves create social boundaries (*From Symposium to Eucharist*, 174–75). Taussig’s study of early Christian meals promotes the notion that the eucharist functions as identity performance (*In the Beginning*, 19–20, 173–92). Within this paradigm, removal of the socially formative role of texts is an unfortunate symptom. At best, Horrell identifies Paul’s comments as the primary first-century window into this social process (86). As we will see, text itself is another important variable in such identificatory processes.

6.1 *Text, Genre, and Christian Identity*

A first and probably obvious difference between the Pauline discussion of the eucharist meal and those found in the Synoptics is that of generic structure. The recounting of Jesus and the Twelve in the upper room occurs in a narrative form. However, the epistolary genre of 1 Corinthians affords Paul the opportunity to expound upon that story—in a way that Gospel texts cannot—such that it relates directly to the particularities of the Corinthian Christ group. This is because the epistolary genre itself developed to facilitate direct interaction between senders and receivers and included such features as paraenesis.⁵⁹ Linguistic, and thus social, proximity is created through the more frequent use of first- and second-person references as opposed to third-person references, which are more pronounced in narrative discourse.⁶⁰ The depiction of Jesus and the Twelve in the Synoptics is not far removed from Paul's description in 1 Cor 11:23–26. What the Synoptics lack in explicit and direct application to the social behaviors of a church, they make up for by extended description of the events of the Last Supper contextualized within a narrative of the life of Jesus. For example, the sharing of bread and wine took place during the Passover meal and included the interspersed words of Jesus.

6.2 *The Eucharist Meal as Social Setting*

Neither Pauline nor Gospel texts directly influenced the earliest development of the eucharist. Meyer has argued that the earliest Christian kerygma was instrumental for Christian identity formation (he would prefer the term self-understanding), and Acts 2:46 suggests that sharing in communal meals was an immediate result of such kerygmatic activity.⁶¹ Synoptic accounts of the

59. See Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 22–23, 92–97.

60. Porter, “Register in the Greek New Testament,” 223. First Corinthians 11:18–22, 26–34, is full of second-person references, especially second-person plural pronouns.

61. See Meyer, *The Early Christians*, 36–52. It is not uncommon to equate the term *κλῶντες...ἄρτον* with the eucharist meal. See discussions in

Last Supper and Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 11 thus intrude upon communal practices already well-established in ecclesial settings. The socially formative potential of these texts is highly relativized by the symbolic/material activities already present within those communities. Differing generic structure responds to such environments in different ways. For example, that Paul can explicitly counter the apparently unethical behavior of the Corinthian Christians is a unique feature of epistolary discourse. For the Corinthian Christ group, identity formation depends upon their reception of Paul's injunctions in relation to their actual material practices. This would occur at the immediate reception of the letter and later be integrated onto subsequent enactment of the eucharist meal.⁶² On the other hand, the Synoptic accounts do not reference any specific communal practices that need to be corrected or augmented. Indeed, the structures of biographical or historical genres do not typically allow for such specific appropriations.⁶³ In this case, Synoptic accounts provide more abstract contact with the Jesus tradition, while the Pauline text provides a directed interpretation of that tradition. Readers and hearers of each of the Synoptics would have greater freedom in their identificatory processes, not limited by the explicit agenda apparent in an epistolary text. Further research is required to tease out how the discursive structures of narrative and epistolary structures mediate identity formation, but the above observations are suggestive of future lines of inquiry.

Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 80–84; Stegemann and Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 280–85.

62. The act of participation in the meal functions as heterochronic mediation, where “longer-term processes and shorter-term events [are] linked by a material object that functions in both cases semiotically as well as materially” (Lemke, “Scales of Time,” 281). Letter and the bread and wine would perform such functions.

63. The narrative features to which I refer are broad enough to encompass the four canonical Gospels, regardless of their precise genre designations (and they may indeed reflect slightly different generic categories).

6.3 *Social Agents and Social Positioning*

It has been suggested that the eucharist meal takes on much of its form and even significance from a matrix of cultural practices, including Jewish Passover rituals and Greco-Roman symposia.⁶⁴ The early readers of the Gospel and Pauline texts would likely have different identity forming experiences given their own particular cultural situatedness. For example, some recent work has inquired into the place of women and slaves in ancient meal practices, developing, in some ways, from Theissen's inquiry into social status and conflict at the Corinthian meal.⁶⁵ That Paul's discussion of the meal is closely connected to issues of gender in Corinth and that no women are mentioned in the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper provided different textual worlds with which readers could identify. How would a man or woman identify with these texts differently? Postmodern notions of hybridity are instructive here. Social identity occurs within networks of identification, which vary for individual readers.⁶⁶ Institutional or religious identity (what we often call Christian identity) is a higher-scalar abstraction of the lower-scalar identities performed by individual Christians at a given moment in

64. Boulton has recently and forcefully advocated for the relation of the eucharist and Passover, suggesting that the former is "unintelligible" apart from the latter ("Supersession or Subsession?" 21–22; also Petuchowski, "Do This in Remembrance of Me," 293–98). For a broad overview of these issues see Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*; Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmal und Mahlgemeinschaft*; Taussig, *In the Beginning*, 21–54. Smith's and Klinghardt's (followed by Taussig) argument, however, is that the eucharist meal emerged within a network of common banqueting traditions in the broader Greco-Roman world. Thus, proposals for a single origin are untenable.

65. See especially the various essays found in Smith and Taussig, eds., *Early Christian Meals*; cf. Theissen, "Social Integration and Sacramental Activity," 145–74. In contrast to Theissen, Smith distinguishes between status and social class (*From Symposium to Eucharist*, 193). Økland makes analogous, even if more general, assertions regarding the Corinthians' reception of Paul's discourse on gender relations and issues therein (*Women in their Place*, 241–45). It is notable that Burton's study suggests that, moving into the Hellenistic period, the role of women in Greco-Roman banquets was an expanding one ("Women's Commensality," 143–65).

66. See Lemke, "Identity, Development and Desire," 18.

time. Ecosocial dynamics pushes us to inquire into the material realities present in social identification. Material elements are immediate within said identity performance and allow for the integration of scalar diversity. For example, social status (including gender) within a community often translated to seating arrangement during community meals.⁶⁷ Reclining position has interesting traction with the Gospel of John's account of the last supper. The Gospel takes great care to describe the beloved disciple's reclined position next to Jesus, which evidently gave him special status to inquire of Jesus regarding the identity of his betrayer (John 13:23–26).⁶⁸ It is possible that participants in the eucharist would identify differently with this story given their own reclining position.

7. Conclusion

It is possible to hypothesize *ad nauseum* variables that might affect an in depth study of the role of texts in early Christians' identificatory processes. Suffice it to say that the suggestions above provide a window into possible avenues for further study. The role of text has been under-theorized in general studies of early Christianity and ecosocial semiotic theory emerges as an excellent addition and corrective over and above several competing alternatives.

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67. See Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 42–46. Jesus' remarks in Luke 14:8 relate well here.

68. That the beloved disciple reclined next to Jesus is mentioned again in John 21:20 is notable.

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