

Freshening Up Your Bible Study with Dr. Jim Coakley

Dialect/Register

Introduction

Just as we are aware of various dialects (southern, Bostonian), style of speech (formal “thou” and informal “you”) and tone (boastful or deferential) so the same language phenomenon is present in the Bible in subtle and not so subtle ways. The official linguistic term is “register” but it is a helpful item to track as we read the Scriptures

Dialect/Register Definition

The speech acts of individuals in the Bible are often used to foreground a person’s status or character. This is clearly done by focusing in on “what” is expressly communicated but it can also be done subtly in detecting “how” things are said and what vocabulary they use. For instance, when making a request of someone with higher status (president, boss) a petitioner will often use deferential, non-direct forms of communication but that same person will be more direct and demanding when petitioning someone of equal (friend or peer) or lower status (parent to child, teacher to student).

Examples:

Dialect

- 1) Pronunciation of “Shibboleth/Sibboleth” Judges 12:1-15
- 2) Sennacherib’s Field Commander speaking in Hebrew/Aramaic - Isaiah 36
- 3) Peter is “outed” by his Galilean accent when he is betraying Jesus Mark 14:70

Formal/Informal

- 1) Ruth/Boaz Ruth is very deferential with her words and Boaz is tender almost patronizing with his conversation with Ruth. You clearly detect a cultural and generational “age gap” in how they speak that belies that Boaz is a much older man than the younger Ruth.
- 2) Paul addressing the High Priest (Acts 23:5) Paul failed to recognize the status of the court rulers.

Crowd Noise

- 1) Giddy babbling women around Saul all seemingly talking at same time (1 Sam 9:11-13)
- 2) The sailors on the ship peppering Jonah with questions simultaneously (Jonah 1:8,10)

Garbled Speech

- 1) Boaz’s Foreman Ruth 2:5-7. Ruth 2:7 is notoriously difficult because it is not normal Hebrew language. It is intentional because the foreman is hemming and hawing, struggling at how to respond because he is not sure how his boss Boaz will respond to a foreigner gleaning in his field without asking him first
- 2) Reuben’s muttering (perhaps to himself?) Gen 37:30 . literally it reads “the child is not, and I, to where shall I come?” which is awkward and smoothed out in English translations to “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?” but Reuben’s actual garbled language reflects his distraught frame of mind.

So what’s:

1. The Biblical authors use techniques to allow us to experience the drama of the characters in the Bible that reflects our same “humanness” so we can more intimately relate to them.
2. Provides us with helpful character insights based off not only their words but how those words are said. It is not always “what is said” that is important but sometimes “how things are said.”