Northern Caribbean University

School of Religion and Theology

THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS/

LINGUISTIC RELATIVISM

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AUTOGRAPHS

An Assignment Presented in

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HIST 315: Language, Culture and Society

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i

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Schleiermacher opines that, "human beings are on the one hand, in the power of the language they speak; their whole thinking is a product of it. The form of their concepts and the ways and means of connecting them, are outlined to them through the language in which they are born and educated; intellect and imagination are bound by it. On the other hand, however, freethinking and intellectually spontaneous human beings also form the language themselves. Through these influences, the language grows from its first raw state to its more perfect formation in scholarship and art. [1]

The Piraha, members of a hunter gatherer tribe live in the rain forest of northwestern Brazil. In a 2007 *New Yorker* article John Colapinto explains that they have have no numbers, no fixed color terms, no perfect tense, no deep memory, no tradition of art or drawing. The tribe embodies a living-in-the-present ethos so powerful that it has affected every aspect of the people's lives. Committed to an existence in which only observable experience is real, the Piraha do not think, or speak, in abstractions. It has been suggested that the Piraha's dedication to empirical reality or "immediacy-of-experience principle" explains their resistance to Christianity. [2]

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[1] Friedrich Schleiermacher, **"On the Different Methods of Translating"**, **Theories of Translation** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38. The original German was published as **Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens** and reprinted in **Sämtliche Werke, Dritte Abteilung: Zur Philosophie, Vol. 2.** (Berlin: Reimer, 1838), 207-245.

[2] John Colapinto, **"The Interpreter: Has a Remote Amazonian Tribe upended our Understanding of Language?"** (The New Yorker, April 16, 2007. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/16/070416fa_fact_colapinto) July 23, 2007

If the language of the Piraha can reflect their culture so effectively, then what of the languages that the New Testament authors used? How were they affected by these languages? Or how did they affect the languages? It is advisable that any worthwhile study of these texts entail consideration of the linguistic hypothesis proposed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf who were the proposers of the theory of linguistic relativity. These contemporaries suggested a direct relationship between language and culture; their proposition became known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The hypothesis expostulates how the syntactic-semantic structure of a language becomes a framework for the culture and world-view of a people.

The idea has been questioned by many linguists and who proposition that there is not enough empirical evidence to support it. John Lucy argues in his abstract on Linguistic Relativity that:

> Despite long-standing historical interest in the hypothesis, there is relatively little empirical research directly addressing it…a theoretical account needs to articulate exactly how languages interpret experiences and how those interpretations influence thought. This will entail integrating theory and data concerning both the general relation of language and thought and the shaping influence of specific discursive structures and practices.[3]

Despite the need for more study on the theory, this analysis may help towards understanding the inter-relatedness of society, culture, and language by looking at the phenomenon of linguistic relativity as it may have affected New Testament writers. The ideas discussed should provide useful information for further research into the application

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[3] John A. Lucy, "Linguistic Relativity," (*Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 26: 291-312, October 1997 DOI: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.26.1.291); http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.anthro.26.1.291?journalCode=anthro

of modern linguistics to New Testament hermeneutics, systematic theology, and biblical exegesis. The implications of linguistic relativity theory applied to this genre of literature are of extreme importance in light of resurgence in interest and work in biblical languages and modern linguistics in the last quarter of a century.

It is deliberate that this discussion will be tripartite, encompassing the salient elements of the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis and its application to New Testament autographs by focusing on: transcription of oral tradition, the influence of languages on the autographs, and the implications of linguistic relativity for exegesis.

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TRANSCRIPTION OF ORAL TRADITION TO AUTOGRAPHS

In the creation of the autographs or original manuscripts of the New Testament the writers encountered the difficulty of interpreting what pre-existed as oral tradition for their readers. The purpose, aim and objective of writing may have determined to some extent what was written. Implicit in their writing was the need to reach beyond then existent boundaries of politics, religion, and culture. They had to make this tradition understandable universally to enhance its portability between cultures. Michael Lucy indicates that:

> In our interactions with others, we are necessarily involved in ongoing acts of negotiation, contestation, and translation – not only between languages, but also often between implicit arrays of cultural concepts that we use to make the world intelligible to ourselves. Socio-conceptual structures of various kinds are immanent in, implicit in, everyone's speech; we could say that those structures are indexed by or invoked through what we say. The more indiosyncratic our speech seems, the more risks we take with intelligibility.[4]

According to Claire Kramsch, oral cultures have their own forms and styles and ways of emancipating and constraining their members. [5]

Influence of Oral Tradition on Form and Style of Autographs

Whereas a good understanding of the literary genre is very important, Carson, Moo, and Morris in *An Introduction to the New Testament,* contend that most New Testament form critics have not sufficiently appreciated the dynamics and nature of oral

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[4] See Michael Lucy, "Translating Sexuality Contextually" (Talk for a panel at UC Berkeley on Gender in Translation, December 10, 2015); http://criticaltheory.berkeley.edu/events/event/gender-in-translation/

[5] Claire Kramsch, **Language and Culture. (**London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

transmission.[6] For example, the Apostle Paul expected the vast majority of the recipients of his letters to hear, not read them. He structured his compositions for the ear rather then for the eye. Pauline audiences would hear clues to meaning and structure because they had learned to communicate in a world where those clues were essential to understanding.

Casey Davis believes that over ninety percent of Paul's audience was illiterate and so recognizable structures and patterns were essential for listeners to organize what they heard in order to follow, to predict and to remember the flow of communication. These patterns were as much a part of oral communication in the first century Greco-Roman culture as periods and paragraph indentations are in modern English literature. [7]

In a primary oral culture says Walter Ong, in order to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, thinking must be in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antithesis, in alliterations, assonances, and in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. [8]

Oral compositions in the form of poetry and song are present in all societies and the reciprocal influence which flows between literature and oral artistry must not be

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[6] D. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, **An Introduction to the New Testament** (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 24.

[7] Casey W. Davis, **"Oral Biblical Criticism." Linguistics and the New Testament**. Ed. Stanley E. Porter and D.A. Carson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 96.

[8] Walter Ong, **Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World** (New York: Methuen Press, 1982), 34.

underestimated. This is especially true in cultures with a high degree of residual orality, such as those which produced the Bible and early Church literature. [9] The documents of the New Testament were written by authors who were influenced by their own literacy. However, these authors never seemed to lose track of the fact that they were addressing hearing audiences. As such, aural structural and mnemonic clues were just as important in the literary compositions of the first two centuries A.D., as in oral compositions in primary-oral societies.

Constraints of Transcription

It is highly probable that New Testament narratives were handed down orally. The laws of the formation of oral tradition are of special importance. The transition from oral to written form did not take place without interruption and led to abridgement of the oral narratives. Every tradition, especially those handed down orally, stands in an immediate relationship with the community that shapes tradition, thus reflecting the language, the society and culture of that group. In other words, the tradition itself allows certain inferences about the particular situation in the formation of tradition. [10]

Juxtaposing the Hellenistic Palestinian Jews of the era of the autographs, with the present-day Piraha tribe members of Amazonian South America, the problems of oral transcription become more lucid. The South American Piraha's speech sounds like a profusion of exotic songbirds, or a melodic chattering scarcely discernible, to the uninitiated, as human speech. Their language is unrelated to any other extant tongue, and is based on eight consonants and three vowels. It possesses a complex array of tones,

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[9] Greene, **Harvard Studies in Classical Philology** (Harvard: Harvard Press, 1951), 31.

[10] Conzelmann, Hans and Andreas Lindermann. **Interpreting The New Testament** (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 62-63.

stresses, and syllable lengths so that its speakers can dispense with their vowels and consonants altogether and sing, hum, or whistle conversations. [11]It is impossible to make their oral culture literate without losing much of the meaning of its utterances.

In a similar manner, the authors of the autographs had to transcribe oral culture with its codes which were locked in the languages and culture of the time, into literate culture. The constraint was probably most felt in recording the sayings of Jesus, whose activities reportedly inspired the autographs but who – according to Bible scholars – never wrote an autobiography. There was probably much that Jesus said in Aramaic, Hebrew or Greek dialect that were expressed orally in these languages, but defy transcription due to the limitations of the literate language.

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Emancipatory Aspects of Transcription

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It is a peculiar advantage that we have in the New Testament the impression made by Jesus upon minds endowed with a determination to teach his sayings and expound on Christian ethos. There may be in the writings of Paul and John, a certain element that is derived from the current ideas of the time, but behind and beneath this element we can see a fresh and vivid impression that comes straight from the facts. [12]

The existence of a stock of positively evaluated and oft-repeated discourses in any society is a phenomenon made possible by an oral tradition. Dogs and apes, have no language, and as a consequence no literature. One of the most important things about human language is that it serves as the medium for literature. The literary tradition of a

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[11] John Colapinto, **"The Interpreter: Has a Remote Amazonian Tribe upended our Understanding of Language?"**

[12] William Sanday**, "Interpretation of the Gospels" Essays in Biblical Criticism and Exegesis** (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 36.

community, in turn, is a vital mechanism in the training of the young in culturally approved attitudes and patterns of behaviour; it serves to transmit the moral fiber of the community from one generation to the next. [13]

A deeper perspective may include consideration that though their minds were impressed by Jesus these authors had to write in a language that had its own cultural bias which was freely imposed by what is now known as redaction on their autographs. Third century theologian, Tertullian advocated that thought and language are inseparable.

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[13] Charles F. Hockett, **A Course in Modern Linguistics** (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), 564.

INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE ON THE AUTOGRAPHS

Tertullian deals with the question of how the Logos (word) of God can be spoken of as something proceeding from God and yet also be called God Himself (the prologue of John's Gospel). He explains that it is because the very thoughts of God take shape in discourse, the "Word" being none other than the objectified form of God's thoughts.

Whatever you think, there is a word; whatever you conceive, there is reason. You must needs speak it in your mind; and while you are speaking, you admit speech as an interlocutor with you, involved in which there is this very reason, whereby, while in thought you are holding converse with your word, you are (by reciprocal action) producing thought by means of that converse with your word. [14]

The autographs were written for a multi-ethnic society emerging from Jews, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Orientals and possibly others. The chief languages were Hebrew, Aramaic, Koine Greek, Latin and Persian. However the language of the Greeks was enjoying a hegemony and hence the New Testament autographs were written in Koine Greek, the *lingua franca* of the 1st century A.D in the Roman Empire.

Evidence of Pragmatic Linguistics

The writings collected in the NT are representative, not so much of the formal or artistic, but of the popular type of literature. The Koine Greek was the vernacular of that era, by virtue of the fact that it had developed into a global language in the wake of the worldwide expansion of Greek tradition during the period of "Hellenism". A. T.

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[14] Peter Holmes, **Against Praxeas The Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, vol. XV** (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), 170.

Robertson suggests that Greek literature is the one entirely original literature of Europe. Homer, Aristotle, Plato, not to say Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are still the modern masters of the intellect. The Greek language remains the most perfect organ of human speech and largely because they studied diligently how to talk. [15]

Christianity experienced its Genesis at a time when the Koine dialect of Greek epitomized the modern principles of pragmatic linguistics. It may be debated that Greek verbs are the most expressive of all languages, but their participles have no match. Indeed it was a most suitable language to espouse Christianity, with its many performative utterances purported by Christ, such as, "I will come again and receive you unto myself." The authors were able to verbalize their recollections of Jesus and their own thoughts quite comprehensively. Other characteristics, such as the replacement of infinitives as verbal complements by subordinate clauses and the formation of the future with auxiliary 'will', are ascribed to the influence of Greek. [16]

Language Sophistication

The concept of the equation of language and culture maintains that a language's structure tends to condition the ways its speakers think, for example, the way a people views time and punctuality may be influenced by the types of verb tenses in its language. New Testament autographs reflected (especially the texts of St. Luke and Hebrews) a high level of language sophistication. This is an indication that the authors possessed well-developed cognitive and communication skills. Their copious use of recursion to

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[15] Robertson, A. T**. The Grammar of the New Testament Greek in the Light of Historical Research** (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 46.

[16]Turner, Nigel, J. H. **A Grammar of the New Testament Greek J.H Moulton Volume III**. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 40.

add depth and give clarity to utterances, also may attest to their heuristic skills, as in, (Ephesians 4:11-14**) "**It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, [12] to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up [13] until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. [14] Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming."

On the other hand, the language of the Piraha lacks recursion and other elements of cognition and communication. The Piraha do not make long or medium term plans, and they have no knowledge of their history or origin. They provide support for Whorf's argument that the words in our vocabulary are an indication of how we think. They do not have words for numbers above two and thus they have limited ability to work with quantities greater than that. [17]

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis may be applied to shed light on the philosophical or theological tradition of Greek New Testament autographs the same manner that the hypothesis is employed to explain the differences between German, French and English philosophical traditions. German philosophy's idealist, unitary and systematic tendencies are attributed to German's end-verbs, case system, root morphemes and initial qualifiers. French philosophy's dualism and rationalist analysis are ascribed to that language's more abstract signifiers and its description by progressive discrete divisions. And English philosophy's skeptical materialist empiricism is attributed to English's mixing of French

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[17] John Colapinto, **"The Interpreter: Has a remote Amazonian tribe upended our understanding of language?"**

and German syntax and lexicons, and to the higher incidence of passive constructions in English. [18]

Hellenistic Hegemony

The Near East as a whole and Palestine and its Jewish residents more particularly first came under Greek influence in the fourteenth century B.C. E. As trade connections increased, this influence became much more extensive, and during the Persian period Greek coinage became the standard in the Land of Israel. The cultural phenomenon called Hellenism had a lasting impact on Judaism and the Jewish people. Hellenism was a synthesis of Greek (Hellenic) culture with the native cultures of the Near East. It was a dynamic phenomenon, with the ever-evolving Hellenistic culture continually becoming the raw material for new synthesis with other native cultures not yet under its sway. [19]

People who identify themselves as members of a society acquire common ways of viewing the world through their interactions with other members of the society. Common attitudes, beliefs and values are reflected in the way the members use language. The idea of commonality also manifests in the diachronic view of culture whereby societies represent themselves in their technological achievements, their monuments, their works of art, and their popular culture. This material culture is reproduced and preserved through institutional mechanisms that are a part of the culture. The Greek language played a major role in the perpetuation and preservation of Hellenistic culture, particularly in its printed form. [20]

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[18] William Harvey, **"Linguistic relativity in French, English, and German philosophy," Philosophy Today(** 40: 273-288,1996).

[19] Lawrence H. Schiffman, **From Text to Tradition**, (New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House Ltd, 1991), 60.

[20] Claire Kramsch, **Language and Culture. (**London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.

Hellenistic dominance was hegemonic and authoritative in representing and speaking for the other cultures. It is reckoned that New Testament autographs were coloured by the Hellenistic worldview which pervaded the social order in that era. The textual data were acquired and disseminated within the periphery of the Hellenistic domain. An example of this was the rise of many of the elements of classical anti-Semitism having its root in Hellenism.

From a later perspective, anti-Semitism has two basic features; one is economic and social, and the other is the later motif of the Jew as a Christ-killer. Judaism was regarded as a barbarous superstition, and the Jews were said to be misanthropes who hated all other people. The narratives of the New Testament that characterize the Pharisees and the Sadducees (the guardians of Judaism) as adversaries of Christianity may have been a consequence of Hellenistic hedgemony. Nevertheless Hellenistic interests sought to synthesize the ancient traditions of the people of Israel with the new "modern life" of the Hellenistic world. [21] The didactic quote from Matthew 22:21 "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's", exemplifies this desire for synthesis.

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[21] Lawrence H. Schiffman, 90.

IMPLICATIONS OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY FOR EXEGESIS

Idioms and Discourse Accents

Idioms are speech forms of a given language that are peculiar to themselves grammatically, while idiomatic expressions are peculiar to, or characteristic of a given language. [22] Some theorists maintain that the peculiarities of a given language do not significantly affect the thinking of those who speak or write in that language, and so the differences between languages are largely accidental or irrelevant to the meaning of the text. These theorists have a very optimistic view of the ability of translators to put the meaning of a text into different languages in ways that are perfectly natural or idiomatic for the "receptor" languages. Thus although it is true that the meanings of words only partially overlap between languages, nevertheless all languages can talk about the same meaning, and possibly about all meanings; it is just that translators may have to use entirely different constructions, or resort to paraphrases. [23]

Other writers maintain that differences between languages are such that an accurate translation must frequently be unidiomatic in the receptor language, because the idiomatic constructions and usages of the receptor language cannot capture the foreign modes of thought which are inherent in the language of the original text. The difficulty of idioms may be resolved by the exegete's appreciation for the speech community in which the idiom originated. The religious community of Christians had their own rhetoric which gave them their peculiar discourse accent shared within the community of Christians. [24]

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[22] **The American Heritage College Dictionary** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 674.

[23] D.A. Carson, **Exegeitcal Fallacies** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 63.

[24] Claire Kramsch, **Language and Culture** (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

Words such as salvation, faith, and the cross had their own connotations within the community and the exegete must be familiar with the relevant hermeneutics.

No one who knows Hebrew or another Semitic language can fail to be impressed by the Semitic tone and flavour of the New Testament. It would seem that there are places in the New Testament which are so heavily Semitic that they cannot be understood within the normal rules of Greek grammar. For exegesis, such passages would need to be understood using the grammatical rules of Hebrew or Aramaic. [25]

Discourse Analysis in Exegesis

Questions regarding linguistic relativity and exegesis must extend to textual coherence. This has been the focus of a recently developing field of study within modern linguistics known as discourse analysis. Broadly defined, discourse analysis is founded on two fundamental assumptions. First, analysis of language, especially discourse, must take into consideration the functional nature of language. Humans principally use language in a cultural context. These values must be factored into any analysis of the use of language. The linguistic data under inspection should consist of actual instances of language used in socio-cultural contexts. Secondly analysis of any language must be performed from the vista of complete discourses, as opposed to single sentences, clauses, or words, and even pericopes. [26]

The process of discourse analysis liberates the exegete of the nuance of translating or interpreting each word as they appear. He must view the language as an instrument of thought or as the primary domain of the theology being espoused in the discourse. He

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[25] D.A. Carson, **Exegetcal Fallacies** (Grand Rapids: Baker Press, 1984), 187.

[26] Stanley E. Porter and D.A. Carson (Eds.), **Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research** (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 92-93.

15

must understand how things were said, and why they were said in a specific context of situation as well as in the larger context of culture. The exegete may then culturally realize the pragmatic meaning for a proper interpretation. [27]

Words, Concepts, and Realities in Exegesis

Although there are no extensive discussion of the ways in which language influences thought in the philosophical literature of ancient times, it is apparent that one of Plato's chief concerns was to examine how words might relate to concepts and to realities, and to show how men go astray in their thinking when they use words without adequate analysis of the concepts they are supposed to express. [28] Similarly, the concepts and realities typical of the New Testament autographs were explicitly expressed in terminology that was uncharacteristic of ordinary language.

It would appear that there was a gradual development of Christian vocabulary which diverged from the ordinary vernacular language of the time as the authors defined their words instead of resorting to naïve and common expressions. This process must be reciprocated as the concepts and realities are expressed in words during exegesis/interpretation. The exegete must therefore be concerned that ordinary language is not sufficiently exact or unambiguous for exegetical purposes and must use the "technical" vocabulary commensurate for the task.

Many of the terms used by theologians today (e.g. propitiation, omnipotence) were taken directly from ecclesiastical Latin without ever having been part of a vernacular tongue. The exegete must explore the connection between language and mode

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[27] Claire Kramsch, **Language and Culture** (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 25.

[28] Frederick J. Church, **The Trial and Death of Socrates, being the Euthyphron, Apology, Crito and Phædo of Plato, translated into English by F. J. Church** (London: Macmillan & Co., 1880), Introduction, xli.

of thought. By surveying the whole scope of a language, fields of thoughts are surveyed, and as the individual learns to express himself with exactness, a treasure of determinate concepts will be gathered. [29]

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[29] Michael N. Forster**, "Herder's Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation: Three Fundamental Principles," The Review of Metaphysics 56** (December 2002).

CONCLUSION

In review, the research has explored the "trinity" of language, culture and society using the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as its locus. The tri-axial discussion may have provided enough food for a linguistic foray into the fabric of the New Testament. The dimensions considered in brief were oral to written tradition, influence of language, and exegetical implications. Each triad was further triangulated to provide argumentation for: form and style of autographs, pragmatics, hedgemony, discourse analysis and the proper use of words.

The phenomenon of linguistic relativity in New Testament autographs may raise theological questions that pertain to the accuracy of the transcription of oral tradition and the thoughts of the authors. Scriptural hermeneutics may benefit from exegetical methods that are commensurate with linguistic relativism. The arguments presented may help towards a better understanding of the inter-relatedness of the "trinity". This research should provide useful information for further research into the application of modern linguistics to supplement conventional systematic theology and traditional methods of biblical exegesis.

The implications of the linguistic relativity theory applied to this genre of literature are of extreme importance in light of dynamic studies in the language of the autographs. It is desired that these ideas may prompt linguistic and theological responses towards linguistic relativity and the New Testament in the form of research and the development of more eclectic approaches in order to achieve balance.

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