



LUND UNIVERSITY

The Language of the New Testament

Rydbeck, Lars

Published in:
Religion Past and Present, sub voce Bible III,3

2007

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Rydbeck, L. (2007). The Language of the New Testament. In *Religion Past and Present*, sub voce Bible III,3 (Vol. II, pp. 12-13). Brill.

Total number of authors:
1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

of selection. Here, the early church withstood both the temptation to a reduction (Marcion, Tatian) and the danger of an inflation (Gnosticism) of its definitive texts. With the canon of 27 texts, the church retained a plurality, without making pluralism its program.

T. Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, 2 vols., 1888, 1892 • A. von Harnack, *Das Neue Testament um das Jahr 200*, 1889 • H. Lietzmann, "Wie wurden die Bücher des NT heilige Schrift?," in *idem*, *Kleine Schriften II*, ed. K. Aland, TU 68, 1958 (= 1907), 15–98 • J. Leipoldt, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, 2 vols., 1907, 1908 • A. Jülicher & E. Fascher, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 1931, 451–558 • H. von Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel*, BHTh 39, 1968 • W.G. Kümmel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 1978, 420–451 • E. Käsemann, ed., *Das Neue Testament als Kanon*, 1970 • K.H. Ohlig, *Die theologische Begründung des neutestamentlichen Kanons in der Alten Kirche*, 1970 • A. Sand, *Kanon. Von den Anfängen bis zum Fragmentum Muratorianum*, HDG I 3 a (I), 1974 • K. Aland, "Die Entstehung des Corpus Paulinum," in: *idem*, *Neutestamentliche Entwürfe*, TB 63, 1979, 302–350 • W. Schneemelcher, "Bibel. III," TRE VI, 1980, 22–48 • F. Stuhlhofer, *Der Gebrauch der Bibel von Jesus bis Eusebius. Eine statistische Untersuchung zur Kanongeschichte*, 1988 • D. Trobisch, *Die Entstehung der Paulusbriefsammlung*, NTOA 10, 1989 • B.M. Metzger, *Der Kanon des Neuen Testaments*, 1993 • U. Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 1996, 401–418 • U. Schmid, *Marcion und sein Apostolos*, ANTT 25, 1995 • D. Trobisch, *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments*, NTOA 31, 1996.

Udo Schnelle

3. The language of the New Testament. Scholars have taken two main positions in their evaluation of the language of the NT. Either this is seen as part of the development of written Greek from → Alexander the Great until the 1st century CE (Deissmann, Moulton, Wifstrand, Rydbeck, Horsley), or else the language of the NT is unique and must be considered an independent phenomenon outside and alongside the usual development of the Greek language (Wellhausen: a semiticizing Greek; Turner: a special form of Christian Greek, an *ad hoc* language inspired by the Holy Spirit).

In order to speak appropriately of the language of the NT, one must first say something about the 3000-year history of Greek. In this history, the so-called classical Attic prose (c. 400 BCE) is a late phenomenon; but it was this uniform Attic that was adopted by the rising superpower to the north, Macedonia, as the diplomatic language it employed in its dealings with the Greeks. This universal Attic was spread throughout the entire Near East thanks to the conquering expeditions of Alexander the Great, and Attic became the common language of the Hellenistic world, known as ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος/*hē koinē diálektos* (or *koinē* for short); this expression is found in a text by the Epicurean philosopher Colotes (born c. 325 BCE). – From 50 BCE, the epoch of Hellenistic Greek was increasingly replaced by the reaction of the pseudo-classical movement in language and style, which demanded a return to the authors of the classical period ("classicism" or "Atticism"). The consequence of

this classicistic linguistic reaction was that most of the literature of the last three centuries BCE was forgotten, and has not survived. Thanks to the interest of Christians in the LXX, however, the most extensive text of the Hellenistic age was preserved. Together with the historians Polybius and Diodorus, the LXX is the most important monument of literary *koinē*, just as the NT is without doubt the most important example of a literary *koinē* from the 1st century CE which is as yet untouched by classicism. From the 2nd century CE onward, Atticism dominates both the pagan linguistic development and the Greek of the first Christian theologians.

The scholarly investigation of *koinē* has attempted to take into account not only the written language (literary *koinē*), but also the daily spoken language, which increasingly deviated from literary *koinē* towards the end of the 1st century BCE. Until the 19th century, the only point of comparison with the NT was writers whose works had survived in manuscripts. Then inscriptions began to be used as comparative material, as were the papyri, discovered towards the end of the century. It was Deissmann's achievement to have removed the NT from its linguistic isolation and demonstrated by means of the papyri that the phonology, flexions, and lexicon of the NT belong to the linguistic development of its age. Deissmann's preference for the "demotic language" in the NT and the papyri is due to ideas about the "people" which were common currency in his period. He saw the NT as the great "people's book," written by the people, for the people, and in the language of the people. It later became clear first, how difficult it is to identify the language spoken by the uneducated people, and secondly, that the papyri must be interpreted as representatives of the standard *koinē*, not of the Greek vulgar tongue, which remained (and remains) an unknown quantity. Thirdly, scholars recognized the high degree of uniformity in *koinē* as early as 100 BCE, seen for instance in the agreement between Polybius and the Greek epigraphic material. This uniformity in written Greek is, up to the present day, perhaps the most striking characteristic in the history of the Greek language.

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff suggested that the panhellenic written language based on Attic, which developed in the aftermath of Alexander, was roughly comparable to the "Hochdeutsch" of the first half of the 20th century. After Augustus, a classicizing variant of literary *koinē* developed, which turned the clocks of the language 400 years back. In the imperial age, the Christian church preserved this artificial Atticizing language; thus, the linguistic ambitions of the church were clearly different from the language which it found in its NT. Scholars in recent decades have spoken of different variants of literary *koinē* or else, following modern Anglo-American linguistics, of "registers" or of a phenomenon of "poly-

glossia" (Blomqvist: synagogal translation-Greek, descriptive prose texts, paraenetic-epistolary *koinē*, etc.).

There may be a kind of intermediary layer between the Hellenistic literary *koinē* which we find in Polybius and the genuine classicistic prose of the imperial age (Rydbeck), with agreements between the NT and this potential intermediary prose which (like the NT) remained untouched by classicism. As already indicated, the Greek of the papyri does not correspond to demotic everyday language: to a very large extent, it corresponds precisely to the *Sachprosa* of the written language. This is why we can ascribe the Greek of the NT to this layer of prose, although spoken Greek does occasionally emerge in Mark.

Neither the Hellenistic literary *koinē* nor the artificial Atticistic language of the imperial age is a monolithic entity. Both contain a variety of levels of literary *koinē* or of high Atticistic prose, and in many cases we see the personal variants of individual writers. The NT was written before the Atticizing linguistic reaction had won the day on a broad front. Atticism must be understood as a reactionary linguistic and cultural movement; the Hellenistic *koinē* was born of a conservative linguistic and cultural climate which did indeed build on Attic prose, but allowed the individual writer a relatively wide freedom of movement. This is the explanation of the various examples of literary *koinē* which have left their mark on NT Greek: the various translation strata of the LXX Greek, and the representatives of the so-called intertestamental literature, especially *1 → Enoch* and the *→ Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which influence the Greek in James, the letters of Peter, and Hebrew.

Many influences flow into the NT. The Greek of the LXX is particularly important for the linguistic forms of the synoptics and Acts; for these writers, the LXX is the classic edifying text which they quote and freely integrate into their literary composition. It is here that the root of Luke's classicism lies, not in the pagan classicism of the imperial age (cf. Wifstrand, *Lukas*, arguing against Norden). At least five linguistic styles can be distinguished in the NT, which have the same basis in relation to phonology, flexions, syntax (with the exception of passages which imitate the translation-syntax of the LXX), the formation of words, and the meanings of words: viz., the customary literary *koinē* which goes back to the Hellenistic period. Group I: Paul. Group II: John (and the letters of John). In linguistic and stylistic terms, Paul and John are two unique individuals. Group III: the synoptic Gospels and Acts, a group characterized by a septuagintal atmosphere and general semitic influences on phraseology and the sequence of words. Group IV: Revelation, where the author is a stylist with a mind of his own, who deliberately deviates from normal Greek grammar. Group V: the Catholic Epistles,

Hebrews, and the Pastoral Letters. This group is distinct from the other groups in two ways (cf. Wifstrand, *Stylistic Problems*): first, their authors favor the customary Greek style of descriptive, analytical, and paraenetic prose, rather than the style employed in the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels or in the appeals and argumentation of Paul. Secondly, the style of the catholic epistles is strikingly similar to that of later Christian literature. The apostolic and later fathers of the church write in a style which recalls that of James and the letters of Peter. The roots of this linguistic style lie in the edifying language of the hellenized diaspora synagogue; this is why one could call the Greek of the synagogue a biblical or Jewish Greek, although one must be aware that the biblical-Jewish element is restricted exclusively to phraseology and sentence-construction, whereas the phonology, standard forms, normal syntax, formation of words, and most of the meanings of words follow standard *koinē*. During the imperial age, the semitic influence on the language of Christian theologians gradually disappeared. The influence of the LXX was restricted to allusions and direct quotations. Nevertheless, the basic linguistic tone of the earliest church never fell completely silent.

Standard grammar: F. Blass, A. Debrunner, & F. Rehkopf, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, 1896, ¹⁷1990 • G.B. Winer, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Sprachidioms*, 1822 • J.H. Moulton, *Einleitung in die Sprache des Neuen Testaments*, 1911 • J. Wellhausen, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, 1911 • E. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa*, 2 vols., 1915, 1918 • U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Geschichte der griechischen Sprache*, 1928 • A. Wifstrand, *Epochs and Styles*, 2005 (which includes, on pp. 17–27 and 46–58, the two papers referred to in the text) • N. Turner, *Syntax* (published as vol. III of J.H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*), 1965 • L. Rydbeck, *Fachprosa, vermeintliche Volkssprache und Neues Testament*, 1967 • G.H.R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, V: Linguistic Essays*, 1989 • T. Engberg-Pedersen et al., eds., *Sproget i hellenismen*, 1995 (including J. Blomqvist, "Diglossifönomi i den hellenistiska grekiskan," and L. Rydbeck, "Det nytestamentliga språkets inplacering i den samtida språkmiljön") • G. Horrocks, *Greek: A History of the Language and its Speakers*, 1997. Lars Rydbeck

IV. Dogmatics

1. Bible and dogmatics. Every aspect of the Christian faith and life is constitutively related to the Bible. It is the task of the dogmatic study of the Bible to clarify its significance for the Christian faith and the Christian life, thus formulating criteria for appropriate ways of handling the Bible in the Christian church, ways in keeping with the Bible's significance. For dogmatics, the intellectual exposition of the truth of the Christian faith in church doctrine, the Bible is relevant above all in two ways: as a witness to the origin of the Christian faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ, God's salvation for the world; and as witness to the truth of the Christian faith, a truth based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This double relationship to the Bible finds expression in