



Nordic Conference

# The Construction of the "I" in the Lord's Prayer: A Social-Constructive Discourse Analysis

## *Introduction*

This paper addresses how the "I" of the praying individual is constructed in the interaction with the divinity in the praying of the Lord's Prayer. This approach draws on social-constructive theory on identity formation and developmental psychology and a close reading of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 and the Sermon on the Mount. It is the assertion of this paper that a discourse analysis of the Lord's Prayer that takes into account the social and psychological processes that are instigated and put into motion in the interaction with the divine, help us understand how the spiritual formation and personal development of the praying individual takes place. Another useful tool in this analysis is systemic functional linguistics.

I approach the field of practical theology as a New Testament scholar, which means that I will probably violate a number of rules that are acknowledged in your discipline. Nevertheless, I believe that any theological discipline, whatever it may be, benefits from having its starting point in the New Testament which ultimately is the basis for any spiritual praxis.

Practical theology—and particularly the practice of prayer—peculiarly spans both the worlds of the text and that of its practical expression. Therefore, I think systemic functional linguistics, or SFL, is a particularly suitable approach for the analysis of the Lord's Prayer. SFL includes both *intra-linguistic* features, i.e. the written text itself, and *para-linguistic* features, i.e. the spoken text with properties such as pitch, accent, modulation and speech rate, but also—included by some researchers—non-vocal features, such as facial expressions, hand gestures and eye movement.<sup>1</sup> Systemic Functional Linguistics, with its three metafunctions brings together the worlds of interpersonal communication and human experience into a textual expression, whether it is written or spoken, as in the Lord's Prayer.

## *The Lord's Prayer as a Paradigm of Prayer*

The Matthean version of the Lord's Prayer is without doubt the most well-known prayer in Christianity. Wherever used the prayer is often done with in 30 seconds. My assumption here is that the prayer rather than being a short prayer is a prayer paradigm, i.e. listing a range of topics to be touched upon in prayer. I base my assumption on a set of indicators. In the short one-verse prelude to the Lukan version, it is stated that "Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray ..."

This passage seems to indicate that Jesus spent time praying for a while, and other passages in the gospels indicate that Jesus sometimes was up praying during the night. His prayer life also appears as relational in character, with Jesus in close interaction with the Father. Both the immediate and broader contexts of the gospels thus indicate the strong likelihood that when Jesus then instructs his disciples on how to pray, he is not suggesting that their prayer life should consist of praying a 30-second-prayer once a day, but was rather indicating the thematic content

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<sup>1</sup> <http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/paralinguisticterm.htm>, (accessed 10 October 2016)