# Neo-Marxism, Language Ideology, and the New Testament

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*This essay introduces the discipline of linguistic anthropology and, more specifically, the notion of language ideologies, arguing that it might be put to fruitful use in the study of New Testament texts. Linguistic anthropologists, working on a notion of "ideology" of clear neo-Marxist ascendency, have elaborated a very effective set of tools for the analysis of language as a social practice that both re-inscribes socio-political structures and shapes them through its creative impulses. New Testament scholars, who are bound to deal with texts that are detached from their almost irretrievable original contexts, can benefit from the help of linguistic anthropology in delineating the socio-political profiles and agendas of the writings they are working on.*

Alessandro Duranti (1997), in the very first pages of his influential textbook of linguistic anthropology, describes the history of the discipline as the development of an intellectual identity out of the conjunction of the two separated fields labelled "linguistics" and "anthropology." One could summarise this by stating that linguistic anthropology has taken the best from its two parents and tried to overcome some of their respective weaknesses.

In the present paper, I will try, at first, to sketch very briefly the intellectual contours of linguistic anthropology as a discipline by paying specific attention to the interesting concept of "language ideologies." In the second part of this contribution, I will show how some of the insights derived from linguistic anthropological observations and theorizations may prove useful for the interpretation of ancient texts and, given the interests of this journal, of biblical texts.

## 1. LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

As I was saying above, linguistic anthropology derives its disciplinary interests and its methodology from a mixture of linguistics (in particular, sociolinguistics) and anthropology. Indeed, Duranti spoke, in 1997, of linguistic anthropology as a development of the last few decades, but there is no doubt that enthnographers had paid attention to linguistic phenomena at least from Malinowski's time (if not even before his landmark contributions). The main discontinuity, however, consists in the fact that linguistic anthropologists are not engaged primarily in putting together collections of mythical tales or other folkloric narratives on the spur of the interest for something that may look "exotic" in the eyes of a western observer. Thus, not all anthropologists who are variously attentive to linguistic phenomena can call themselves "linguistic anthropologists." Again, Duranti (1997) provides a definition of the discipline that may prove illuminating: linguistic anthropology is "the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice."

Such an intellectual move is directed against structuralism and the predominant influence that structuralist analyses have exercised in the field of linguistics during the 20th century. Within a structuralist frame of interpretation, following the lead of Saussure and other theorists who have developed his undeniable breakthroughs, language has been studied almost exclusively under the point of view of its referential dimension. Thus, linguistic phenomena were charted on a series of dichotomies (social/individual, synchrony/diachrony, conceptual/material, structure/agency), of which only the first element was deemed worthy of sustained inquiry (Gal 1989: 346). In sum, words

and grammatical constructs are systematically envisioned as dependent and secondary in relationship to an "objective" reality that is given to the linguistic experience of human beings. On the contrary, linguistic anthropology, echoing the definition provided by Duranti, looks at the act of speaking as a "practice." Obviously, this post-structuralist move has antecedents that are quite freely acknowledged in the more theoretical writings of linguistic anthropologists. The very fact of envisaging speech as a "practice" recalls Bourdieu's landmark reflections on practice theory (and we will have to come back later on this point), but the genealogy can be pushed back even further. The understanding of speech as a performative act is usually attributed to Austin, but some linguistic anthropologists like to mention, with a mixed feeling of affection and repulsion, the earlier reflection of Johann Gottfried Herder. The latter is best known for his identification between language, nation, and state, an identification that became foundational for the later development of Romantic nationalist ideologies in 19th century Europe and beyond. Scholars have analysed the linguistic ideological biases in Herder's theorization, which, for instance, idolises folk poetics, while, at the same time, strips the very same tradents of this folklore of the ability of understanding their own poetic expressions and consequently reserves it for the aristocratic, educated class of which Herder himself is part. It is easy to see how such seminal reflections influenced later anthropologists - as Boas, who thought that popular metalinguistic rationalisations had only secondary significance - and historians - as Benedict Anderson, who gave a widely influential account of the birth of nationalist "imagined communities" founded on the power of print capitalism (Bauman and Briggs 2000).

It is noteworthy that Herder's influential theorising on language is experiencing a small renewal of interest among New Testament scholars as well, due to his prizing of orality over against literary traditions (for instance, Dunn 2003: 149). However, it seems that the just mentioned linguistic ideological criticism might adequately show the dangers inherent within such an intellectual move. Herder's own ideological biases would be revived with the difference that now the writers of New Testament texts substitute the folk poets and modern Christian exegetes take the place of the European enlightened and educated aristocracy (of which anyway also Christian ministers and preachers, as Herder himself, formed a significant part).

However, what is judged more productive within Herder's thought on language is the fact that he famously distinguished between the *energeia* (*Tätigkeit*) of language as activity and the *ergon* (*Werk*) of language as a product. Such a distinction, of clear Aristotelian ascendency, was later picked up by Humboldt and rendered almost foundational in the establishment of philosophy of language as a discipline (Mueller-Vollmer 1989). Notwithstanding Herder's influence and in large part because of the enormous success of the competing Sussaurian structural approach, Euro-American theorising on language has historically tended to stress the second facet of Herder's understanding of linguistic phenomena (the *ergon*) and hence has reified social practices of communication. Hence, language is appreciated only for its admittedly narrow referential function and its role is reduced to that of a tool that humans employ to transmit thoughts from one to the other.

An entirely different approach to linguistic phenomena is enshrined in the fundamental realization that humans do not speak language, but language speaks them (Lecercle 2004). This becomes even clearer when linguistic anthropologists, following the above mentioned definition given by Duranti, look at language as *energeia*, a practice through which humans are obviously shaped and constrained by socio-political conditions, but at the same time a practice that enables them, as speakers, to play a role in shaping and transforming those very conditions. As stated by Paul Kroskrity while describing the advantages of the methodology adopted by most linguistic anthropologists: "one of the key advantages of such semiotic-functional models is the recognition that much of the meaning and hence communicative value that linguistic forms have for their speakers lies in the 'indexical' connections between the linguistic signs and the contextual factors of

their use – their connection to speakers, settings, topics, institutions, and other aspects of their socio-cultural world" (Kroskrity 2000: 8).

## 2. LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

After this – out of necessity – too brief presentation of the discipline of linguistic anthropology, I move to the two first items in the title of the present paper. Language ideology has become a central notion in some of the most recent works in linguistic anthropology and, as evidenced by the presence of the term "ideology," its conceptualization is heavily indebted to neo-Marxist theorizations. In the introductory article to a collection of contributions devoted to linguistic ideology, Kathryn Woolard sums up a series of ways in which "language ideology" has been used by anthropologists (1992: 237-239): even though the list ends up being quite varied the presence of neo-Marxist thinkers and authors as sources of inspiration is paramount and this cannot be unexpected, if one takes into due consideration Woolard's expressed "emphasis on the social origins of systems of signification."

The latter observation leads to see quite clearly why the pair formed by "language" and "ideology" has substituted, in the parlance of this subfield of anthropology, the more traditional "language" and "world view." Such a change marks a significant shift in the methodology and the interests of the discipline. While "world view" has a true nineteenth century bourgeois ring to it and "suggests reflection and mastery of a repertoire of forms and meanings, neglecting the way in which culture is shaped in everyday practices below the threshold of awareness, today both theoretical inclination and the ethnographic data force us to admit the fragmented and contingent nature of human worlds, as opposed to their 'wholeness' and persistence. Thus, where 'world view' would once have served, 'ideology' is often heard, suggesting representations that are contestable, socially positioned, and laden with political interest" (Hill and Mannheim 1992: 381-382).

As observed above, the genealogy of the concept of "ideology" in linguistic anthropology is varied and is traced back – for instance by Briggs (1992: 387) – to Gramsci's thought on cultural hegemony (1971) or to the way in which the relationship between power and ideology has been revisited and recast in varying forms by theorists such as Bourdieu (1977), Williams (1977), and, more recently, by Terry Eagleton or the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1980 and 1987).

As noted by Woolard, language ideology does not have a single definition on which all scholars seem to agree and one might share with the American anthropologist the view that this is a strength of the concept. However, for the purposes of the present contribution, I think that an apt definition could be the one taken from an article of Judith Irvine and widely employed by others in scholarly writing within the discipline: language ideology is "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (Irvine 1989: 255).

It is worth adding that most linguistic anthropologists would rather talk of "language ideologies" and avoid the use of the singular. Indeed, the latter may give the wrong impression that these scholars would actually be working with a notion of "ideology" strictly understood only as the curtain behind which state apparatuses hide the reality of power and class domination from the acknowledgment of the subordinates. That such an almost exclusively negative understanding of "ideology" would be problematic is freely recognized by many linguistic anthropologists, even though, again in the words of Kathryn Woolard, this view appears to have been bequeathed "through fundamentalist Marxist positions … to empiricist American sociology" (1992: 238). The same Woolard seems to prefer Althusser's notion of "ideology" as an aspect of "lived relations," with a strong emphasis on subjectification as in this definition of Terry Eagleton (1993: 39): "a particular organization of signifying practices which goes to constitute human beings as social

subjects, and which produces the lived relations by which such subjects are connected to the dominant relations of production in society."

On the contrary, the choice of the plural form in "linguistic ideologies" emphasizes the fact that the analytic instruments required by this type of studies have to be far more sophisticated and attuned to the diversity of phenomena. Social groups are indeed differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity, and also a number of other elements that are indexed in their respective uses of and theorizations about language, while, at the same time, these very linguistic uses and theories contribute to instantiate socio-economic differences or negotiate and challenge positions of subordination. Thus, Kroskrity can identify this as one of the four features of language ideologies that are shared and put to work by a majority of the anthropologists working in the field: "language ideologies are profitably conceived as multiple because of the multiplicity of meaningful social divisions (class, gender, clan, elites, generations, and so on) within sociocultural groups that have the potential to produce divergent perspectives expressed as indices of group membership" (Kroskrity 2000: 13).

Furthermore, the notion of "language ideologies" is one of the areas in which linguistic anthropology more effectively shows how the dichotomies inherent in the Saussurean project for the study of language can be overcome. This is stated quite clearly again by Susan Gal: "authorized or hegemonic linguistic practices are not simply forms, they also carry cultural definitions of social life that serve the interests of the dominant class […] The capacity of language to denote, to represent the world, is not considered transparent and innocent, as in many anthropological accounts of worldview, but is fundamentally implicated in relations of domination" (Gal 1989: 348). This renders the notion of language ideologies (and the entire enterprise of linguistic anthropology as it has been sketched above) a tool that breaks sharply and provocatively with some of the longest standing traditions in Western European thought. It is not by chance, I submit, that Judith Irvine opens one of her seminal articles by observing that "perhaps one of the most durable legacies of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* is its radical separation of the denotational sign (qua sign) from the material world. This conception of the sign has endured not just because of the effectiveness of Saussure's own formulation, but probably also because it was consonant with ideas already having a long history in the Western intellectual tradition – most particularly, the separation of mind from body" (Irvine 1989: 248).

In the present article, my claim will be that some of the analytical instruments employed by linguistic anthropologists and, in particular, the category of language ideologies may prove useful for the study of New Testament texts (taken as a sample that actually stands for all the other texts and documents transmitted from antiquity). Here, I must introduce a caveat in the form of a premise to the argument that I will try to develop in the following pages. The notion of language ideologies is frequently employed and invoked by linguistic anthropologists in order to study and analyse secondary and tertiary rationalisations and justifications of perceived language structures and uses articulated by users as sets of beliefs about language.

This is a somewhat narrower field than that that I have been sketching so far, but it is obviously most rewarding for scholars working on contemporary cases and dealing with the way in which modernity has naturalized the link between language communities and identity. This is true even at the level of academic enterprises, as the above mentioned example of Herder shows very well. Moreover, powerful institutions like nation-states and schools have reified and naturalised language and its rules in the service of colonisation and domination, while minorities have frequently absorbed such an ideological stance or challenged it in subtle and ambiguous ways. Thus, linguistic anthropology offers to scholars formidable tools for the analysis of worldwide and particularly European history in the last two centuries: for instance, Woolard's studies (1985) on language variations in Europe have provided almost prophetic insights on the complex and every day more problematic situation of minorities within the European Union.

I do not think that this type of approach would be unproductive for the study of language ideologies in antiquity and in scholarship on antiquity. On the contrary, it appears quite clear that the widespread naturalisation of the dichotomy between an Aramaic-speaking and a Greek-speaking Christianities, which is still current in some debates, as, for instance, that concerning the "historical Jesus," could most certainly benefit from the use of the notion of language ideologies (for the 19th century, and with a scope that only touches in passing on the subject matter of language, this has been recently attempted by Moxnes 2009).

However, I would like to point the attention of the readers of the present essay in a different direction.

## 3. LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES AND NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

I will argue that linguistic anthropology and, more in particular, the notion of language ideologies can prove themselves useful to New Testament scholars for two main reasons.

First, New Testament and biblical studies deal almost exclusively with representations of the past mediated through texts. The effort to integrate more and more effectively biblical research with the other disciplines that concern themselves with the past and its remnants (for instance, with archaeology in Nasrallah 2010) has been constantly growing in recent decades. However, even if one has to resist the post-structuralist tendency to "textualise" all sorts of sources, surely one must also admit that the evidence, which we have to take into consideration, presents features that are significantly different from those of the evidence anthropologists deal with. If, for the latter, knowledge of cultural phenomena is attainable also through media that are not necessarily linguistic or through a productive study of linguistic and non-linguistic media in their integration, this is not true for a biblical scholar. Therefore, the borrowing of some tools developed by linguistic anthropology looks all the more a needed and beneficial course of action. Moreover, particularly for those of us who are specifically interested in writing a social history of early Christianity, a different kind of approach, more mindful of what I tried to sketch briefly in the first part of this talk, may prove itself the only viable way to avoid some unfortunate mistakes. A widespread methodological approach adopted by scholars concerned with the social history of early Christian groups consists in reading back from the texts a whole set of social structures and situations, without paying enough attention to the fact that to construe all the literary and linguistic characters of a given document as necessary products of distinct and identifiable socio-political phenomena is a seriously flawed epistemological procedure. I think that we have here a very problematic survival of a functionalist paradigm that has been almost completely abandoned, at least in this form, in the social sciences (and for which a very pointed criticism was already developed in Giddens 1981). Problems become even less manageable when the above mentioned strategy is employed with the goal of reconstructing the history and ideological profile of the communities that are presupposed to have stood "behind" the texts at our disposal. Thus, we end up with long books detailing, in a highly speculative fashion, the contrasts and internal developments of these "communities," mere constructs that acquire an agency of their own and seem to become something more than the convenient heuristic tools that they ultimately are. The approach of linguistic anthropology, grounded as it is on a conceptualisation of language as a practice, offers the opportunity to reverse this problematic scholarly procedure and to emphasize, as an appropriate and productive subject of analysis, what a text can "do," at the socio-political level, through its speech structures, its genre, the ideological weight embedded in its very syntax and grammar. A methodological reversal comparable to the one proposed in a recent article by Martin Ebner (2010) on the social message of the historical Jesus.

There is admittedly a more general disadvantage that historians have to face if their work is compared to that of linguistic anthropologists: the latter rightly stress the importance of analysing speech acts in their situational context, since conditions may vary widely and contexts exercise a

significant influence on meaning and communication (see, for instance, Duranti 1986). Unfortunately, this type of reconstruction (apart from exceptional cases) is forever lost when we come to the study ancient texts. It is something that cannot be changed – even despite the current increasing interest in orality in the field of biblical studies – and hence one ought to add it to the long list of items that should give pause to historians and exegetes when they are tempted to draw too definitive conclusions and to claim to have achieved the highest degrees of plausibility in their results.

The complicated and much discussed issue of "agency" can be invoked as the starting point to talk about the second advantage I can see in the utilisation of linguistic anthropology. For many historians and biblical interpreters the notion of "agency" has now become extremely important and at the same time extremely problematic, as New Testament texts are frequently being read as instances of "resistance" to imperialistic tendencies in ways that oftentimes appear to be nothing else than thinly disguised attempts at apologetics. One may say something very similar about linguistic anthropologists as well. Given their above mentioned interest in ideology, in the understanding of language in its socio-political context, and of speech acts as means through which human beings shape reality, an equally clear understanding of "agency" as an effective analytic tool becomes a necessity (see Ahearn 2001). One of the biggest problems in employing the complex notion of "agency" in all fields stems from the fact that, in a number of instances, agency is understood as being coterminous with intentionality or awareness. Obviously, in a historical perspective, such often unacknowledged equation leads to entangled and usually inconclusive discussions about the identification of authorial intentions in ancient (and modern) texts. While the most traditional historical-critical approaches had no hesitation in detecting intentionality and solid awareness of theological goals "behind" New Testament texts, the more recent critical discussion on the indeterminacy and unknowability of hidden authorial intentions suggests that claims of this magnitude should be abandoned. Hence, are we left without the possibility of locating any type of agency in biblical texts? A good starting point may consist in severing the link between agency and intentionality. Again, linguistic anthropology may prove of help in achieving such a goal. Indeed, linguistic structures are social practices that humans reproduce oftentimes without clear intention or even awareness of their ideological import, while, at the same time and in specific occasions, the very same speakers are perfectly able to formulate intentional rationalizations and justifications for their linguistic uses (see Silverstein 1981, Duranti 2004, and Donzelli 2007).

An interesting and significant example may be drawn from an examination of the use of gendered pronouns in English, a subject that has expectedly received a good deal of attention from linguistic anthropologists. Briefly, one could start from observing that, since at least the 18th century, English grammarians and other language theorists have spent a lot of energies in the attempt to dislodge the pronoun "he" from its traditional position of dominant indefinite index (exemplified at best in the only apparently amusing slogan "Everyone in New York state is entitled to an abortion if he wants it!"). Therefore, it is quite common nowadays to see that various techniques are applied in order to further the use of a more inclusive indexical reference system. However, while English speakers witness and are influenced, on one hand, by this conscious and powerful effort at the establishment of an alternative systematization supported by a strong political thrust, on the other hand the actual results in everyday language practice can be described as mixed or confused at best. A number of linguistic anthropologists have suggested that this partial failure may depend on the fact that too radical a blurring of the distinction between "he" and "she" may entail an unconscious undermining of the other (and equally pressing, from an ideological point of view) hegemonic relationship embedded in the distinction between the two pronouns "he" and "she" on one side and "it" on the other side. To quote from a recent review of the problem in Hill and Mannheim (1992: 389-390, to which this section is more generally indebted):

Although it is in an arena of conflicts, the category system continues to function in everyday contexts even for speakers who are examining and even purposefully remodelling their behaviour, for, even if one part of the category system is brought into conscious contention, other parts remain in place unchallenged. The category system creates a particular cultural hegemony, the unquestioned acceptance, by both men and women, of men as a normative, unmarked category of persons. The hegemonic structure is reproduced below the speaker's threshold of awareness, consciously. The different systems move back and forth across the threshold of consciousness, occasionally emerging into direct, purposive conflict.

I think that this ability of moving its analytical focus "across the threshold of consciousness" may be rightly considered a great strength of linguistic anthropological theorisation and of the notion of language ideology, in particular (this also the reason why I briefly stated that a definition of language ideology should not become too precise, unless we want to run the risk of losing its potentially very valuable benefit). Indeed, this dual understanding of language as both social practice and conscious theorisation highlights once more the analytical opportunity of using the concept of language *ideology*, since the latter is best conceived by employing a similarly dual model (Eagleton 1993:74-75). Moreover, such an ability may prove itself quite useful in disentangling biblical research from too strict a connection between agency and intentionality.

## 4. A NEW TESTAMENT CASE STUDY

In the final section of the present contribution I would like to conclude by providing a test case of the way in which insights and theorisations drawn from linguistic anthropology and, in particular, the analytical concept of language ideology may prove themselves useful for the reading of New Testament texts. Since I mentioned in brief the interest of linguistic anthropologists for the theme of gender and language, it could be easy to conclude here with a reference to the way in which gender is indexed in the Jewish and Christian sources. Doubtlessly, given the richly ideological discussion that currently obtains on this subject matter particularly in the field of biblical translation, this choice would certainly offer a number of useful case studies showing the analogies and differences in comparison to the treatment of English indexical pronouns that I described a few paragraphs above. Many scholars have noted how some of those texts, in which an original condition of androgyny is imagined for humankind, tend, on one hand, to dissolve the distinction of gender, but, on the other hand, when they come to describe the androgynous or asexual being created by God, oftentimes go back, as a default or neutral indexical designation, to the masculine. A representative and well-studied instance is found in Philo's description of the mythic *Ur-Adam* as an asexual being, but unmistakably referred to by employing masculine pronouns (see Mattila 1996 or Meyer 2003: 76-107). This could be a significant example of the way in which language uses are influenced by a situation of gender inequality and, at the same time, reinscribe and strengthen it below the threshold of consciousness, even when there might be actual space for a challenge or, at least, for a countercultural move. However, even though such a case study looks certainly intriguing and attractive, I would like to propose an example of more explicitly political nature.

Let us take into consideration the Lord's prayer, arguably a piece of tradition that can be safely extracted, for the purposes of the present examination, from its current context within the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, since its presence in the Didache witnesses to the fact that the text probably originated and was employed as an independent liturgical text from a very early date. First of all, a small piece of traditional historical criticism: the second half of the prayer (composed by a series of sentences that are often identified as "we petitions") recalls, down to its very phrasing, some formulae that are typical of Hellenistic royal ideology. It is important to emphasize that the latter reference should not lead the reader to think specifically or exclusively of those treatises composed by rhetoricians and philosophers (as, for instance, Isocrates) in order to teach monarchs the

appropriate way to rule and govern their subjects. In the case of elite intellectuals as, for instance, Dio of Prusa the final product is literature for the smallest and most refined echelons of the imperial society, unlikely then to be known or appreciated by the composer(s) of the Lord's prayer. However, there were obviously other ways through which royal propaganda could reach into the everyday experience of common people. Here are the first lines of PTebt 1.5, a papyrus of 118 BCE that preserves a Ptolemaic edict with which the sovereigns promulgate a general amnesty of crimes and debts (taxes) for all their subjects in order to celebrate appropriately the year of their enthronement.

> King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra the sister / and Queen Cleopatra the wife proclaim an amnesty for / all their subjects (ἀφιᾶσι δὲ τοὺς ὑπὸ τὴν βασιλείαν πάντας) for errors, crimes, / accusations, condemnations and charges of all kinds up to the 9th of Pharmouthi of the 52nd year / except the persons guilty of willful murder or sacrilege. / They have also decreed that persons who have fled because they were guilty / of theft or subject to other charges shall return to their own homes / and resume their former occupations […] / and their remaining property shall not be sold […] / And they release everyone from debts (Ἀφιᾶσι δὲ πάντας τῶν ὀφειλομένων) for the period / up to the 50th year in respect to the farming of the grain tax and the money taxes, except of / hereditary lessees who have given a surety.

Even debts contracted between individual subjects with no relations to the royal treasury were remitted – hence, one can easily see how the phrasing of such influential political statements could impact even the lives of the people who were farthest from the elites (for a more thorough analysis of these parallels, see Bazzana 2011). Apart from the striking formulaic similarity, what is worth noting here is the fact that the second half of the Lord's prayer fits perfectly the ideological import of Hellenistic kingship as this can be gleaned from documentary texts. The sovereign is not entitled to dominate because he or she is simply more powerful than or feared by everyone: the "right" to govern comes also from caring for the welfare of the subjects, by feeding them when there is a famine, by remitting their dues when the burden proves excessive, and ultimately by keeping the cosmic order in balance. Certainly, the Lord's prayer transfers this ideological nexus from a human being to God following a Near Eastern tradition of theological-political thought that goes back well before the Hellenistic times, but the constitutive elements and their relationship remain the same. Speaking of "resistance" in this case seems acceptable only if the term "resistance" is heavily qualified as a challenge that actually leaves untouched the fundamental system of cultural hegemony and even re-inscribes it most of the times.

However, let us pay attention to the specifically linguistic aspect of this issue, as promised at the beginning of this treatment of the Lord's prayer. Some noteworthy grammatical and syntactic structures appear in the first half of the text, which is often described as composed by "you petitions". Here the theme of agency must come to the fore, since one of the petitions (actually two, if one considers the Matthean version of the prayer) is in a passive voice, while the other has an abstract subject (the *basileia*). The overall effect is certainly emphasized by the fact that the two sentences constitute a synonymous parallelism, as maintained by many exegetes. As far as the sanctification of God's name is concerned the actual agent is somewhat concealed by the choice of a passive structure. Surely, due consideration of the Semitic habit of portraying God's actions in this way should lead the reader to conclude that, most probably, the intended agent of the sanctification is God himself, but there is no doubt that the sentence remains more ambiguous than it would have been if an active voice had been used. Imagining that the implied agents could be human beings cannot be ruled out in principle.

An analysis of the second petition for the *basileia* reveals other interesting aspects. First of all, one must note that linguistic anthropologists, working on "ergativity" (that is the way in which speakers embed agency in grammatical structures), have been able to formulate an "animacy

hierarchy" that seems to enjoy widespread applicability (Ahearn 2001: 120-124). This hierarchical model measures the degree of probability that a linguistic item may be given agency (by way of the ergative indicators appropriate for a given language) within a sentence. The hierarchy is expectedly topped by first persons singular and plural ("I" and "we"); then we have, in descending order, second persons, third persons, proper names, common human names, common animal names, and finally, at the bottom, common inanimate names. The latter is exactly what happens in the petition here at issue - hence, it is not surprising that commentators have been puzzled over the meaning of a sentence in which the "coming" of an inanimate *basileia* is announced. John Meier – just to mention an example taken from a very influential reading of the Lord's prayer - admits with great honesty the problem, but then goes on to conclude that the petition is only a more abstract formulation of the biblical principle that God is king (Meier 2003: 366). However, a more thorough consideration of other bodies of material outside the Hebrew Bible could have offered Meier a better way out of this conundrum. I have already spoken of the role of Hellenistic royal ideology in the second half of the prayer, but an interesting feature of Egyptian political theology needs to be mentioned at this point. In many Egyptian texts composed already before the Greek colonization the abstract concept of kingship (with all the ideological appendages mentioned above) had acquired a remarkable autonomy from the concrete person of the sovereign. Through a characteristic form of hybridization, this abstract notion of *basileia* became a cornerstone of Hellenistic royal ideology, founded as it was on the two above-mentioned pillars of military power and care for the welfare of the subjects. It will not surprise anyone to learn that the notion of *basileia* could be employed to question or censure the behaviour of an actual king, as in the many recorded instances of more or less open tactical opposition of the Egyptian priestly elite to the sovereign's perceived violation of sacred ancestral rights (Bazzana 2010).

However, the linguistic and, I would argue, ideological ramifications deriving from the choice of such an abstract noun as the subject of a sentence cannot be dismissed so easily. Again, John Meier gets rightly frustrated when he tries to grapple with the fuzzy notion of agency conveyed by the "you petitions": "certainly only God can make his kingdom come", he seems to exclaim, and "all this does not exclude, but rather presupposes, the idea that humans will respond to God's sanctification of his name with praise and obedience" (Meier 2003:367-370). Admittedly, such a conclusion can scarcely be avoided. The enormous weight of the autocratic royal ideology embedded in the second half of the prayer (as studied briefly above), coupled with the patriarchal incipit of the entire text, almost compels readers and – more generally – users of the prayer to understand their own actions as nothing more than mere humble and forever inadequate responses to the infinite and overwhelming care of the divine godhead.

However, the very hesitancy in Meier's exegesis reveals that the text could be read in a significantly different way. The fact that even powerful ideological constructs are open to marginal and often merely parodic, but nevertheless real, countermoves is noted by many theorists. This is indicated also by linguistic anthropologists who employ the category of language ideology. Such an observation cannot surprise whoever takes into consideration the creative nature of speaking conceived as a social practice. In the words of Susan Gal: "the sociolinguistic evidence argues for a less totalizing conception of societal reproduction …, one that emphasizes the active, though often self-defeating, resistance of subordinate groups through solidarity-based linguistic practices" (Gal 1989:354).

In the case of the Lord's prayer, the fuzziness of divine agency could open up space for an alternative source of agency, possibly human; one can see faint evidence of this even in the second half of the text, which otherwise is so thoroughly dominated by the authoritarianism of Hellenistic royal ideology. The important petition for the remittance of debts is indeed qualified by a very odd conditional clause. This is particularly evident in the Matthean version, where the verb that expresses human remittance is an aorist, suggesting that human remittance is actually expected to

precede the divine action (Rügger 2009). This interpretive possibility is defended forcefully (even though with a certain amount of inconsistency, given the statements quoted above) by Meier himself: "making God's final forgiveness for individual believers depend on their forgiveness of others in the present moment may create problems for Christian theology, but, since Jesus was not a theologian, he seems sublimely unconcerned" (Meier 2003: 372).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this essay I introduced the discipline of linguistic anthropology and, more specifically, the notion of language ideologies, arguing that it might be put to fruitful use in the study of New Testament texts. Linguistic anthropologists, working on a notion of "ideology" of clear neo-Marxist ascendency, have elaborated a very effective set of tools for the analysis of language as a social practice that both re-inscribes socio-political structures and shapes them through its creative impulses. New Testament scholars, who are bound to deal with texts that are detached from their almost irretrievable original contexts, can benefit from the help of linguistic anthropology in delineating the socio-political profiles and agendas of the writings they are working on.

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