Register Discourse Analysis of Acts 15: The Tenor of Participant Social Structure

The Jerusalem Council account in Acts 15:1-35 is a pivotal narrative episode in the life and history of the early church. The narrative begins with a challenge from proponents of the Mosaic tradition (Acts 15:1, 5) while leaders of the early church argue their case by exercising their power of status through a series of negotiated moves to influence the decisions of the leaders (Acts 15:6-22). With its variety of interpersonal social exchanges, Acts 15:1-35 affords an excellent text for observing social dynamics in the early church. The goal of this paper is to examine Acts 15:1-35 to determine the tenor of participant social relationships. Following the model of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this paper employs the methodology of register discourse analysis to determine the tenor of the passage. SFL is the model of choice for this research because of its capacity to analyze non-configurational, morphologically rich, epigraphic languages like ancient, Koine Greek. Tenor concerns the social relationships of the biblical text within a context of situation. The three primary ways tenor is recognized is through: 1) the attitudinal semantics by examining speech functions, clause types, and mood/attitudinal relationships; 2) the grammatical indications of person by considering personal deixis; and 3) the lexical specifications. Lexical specification consists of the social relationship distinctions between the extra-linguistic roles (first-order roles) and intra-linguistic roles (second-order roles), primary and secondary roles, categories of situational roles, and elements of social deixis. The three primary areas reveal the context of situation pertaining to the social roles of the participants in the text. Register discourse analysis allows the investigator to examine the interaction between the interpersonal (tenor), ideological (field), and textual (mode) metafunctions, but the primary focus for this paper is the interpersonal metafunction. The key elements of field and mode are discussed at appropriate junctures, but the larger emphasis is upon tenor and the social dynamics operating in the speeches of Acts 15. The clause level is of key interest in this study, so the semantic features in the text are observed at the sentence level or below. This paper presents the model of SFL using the methodology of register discourse analysis employed in the study. Next, the paper presents a sample analysis from Acts 15:1–5 drawn from the larger study of the entire chapter of Acts 15. Conclusions are drawn and presented.