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A Hallidayan Approach to Orality and Textuality and Some Implications for Synoptic Gospel Studies

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Abstract: This paper explores how Hallidayan systemic-functional theory and method can advance current discussions of orality and textuality in Gospel Studies. Theoretically, the Hallidayan view challenges Kelber's view of the discontinuity between oral and written media, establishing a continuum between spoken and written language. An application of Halliday's method for measuring the degree of orality in a text demonstrates its relevance for Greek texts. As far as the Temple cleansing episodes are concerned (Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; and John 2:13–22), the data conform to the general consensus that Markan language is more spoken language. (Article)

Keywords: spoken and written language, Halliday, Systemic Functional Linguistics, lexical density, grammatical intricacy, oral tradition.

1. *Introduction*

In the beginning, people talked about Jesus.[1] His sayings and deeds were told and re-told orally. Out of constant repetition, the

1. Form criticism presupposes an interim period during which news about Jesus was transmitted orally before the writing of the Gospels. The existence of this phase of oral tradition is now hardly disputable. See Redlich, *Form Criticism*, 34; Stein, *Synoptic Gospels*, 175. Instead of focusing on literary dependence among the Synoptic Gospels, James D.G. Dunn's work turns our attention to the dynamic role of the oral stage in developing, preserving, and transmitting oral tradition. See his collection of essays in *Oral Gospel Tradition*.

primitive form of Jesus traditions came into being at some point in the early Christian period, some of which arguably could have been circulated and transmitted in written form. The circulation of oral tradition[2] might have started right after Jesus's death and resurrection and then continued until the writing of the Gospels or even after the Gospels.[3] In the end, oral traditions, memories, and notes were collected into a book for unclear reasons.[4] If I describe this process by paraphrasing M.A.K. Halliday's illustration for how spoken language turns into written language, it would be like this: Jesus's life and sayings were narrated, memorized, transmitted, and proclaimed in the form of speech. As time went by, oral tradition "had to be reduced to a form where it *existed* rather than simply *happening*."[5]

Given the pre-Synoptic oral stage, one might wonder if oral characteristics are still retained in the written Gospels. If so, how can we recognize them? Burnett H. Streeter regards "repetitions, redundancies, and digressions" as the marks of oral language in the Gospel of Mark.[6] Criticizing Streeter, William R. Farmer contends that "the notion that the alleged crudeness of Mark's Greek is due to its close relation to living speech owes nothing to any known scientific study of the problem of the differences

2. I will use Dunn's definition of oral tradition, that it is "oral memory" and "its primary function is to preserve and recall what is of importance from the past. Tradition, more or less by definition, embodies the concern for continuity with the past, a past drawn upon but also enlivened that it might illuminate the present and future" ("Reappreciating," 15).

3. Scott D. Charlesworth argues that "the impact of orality on the transmission of canonical gospel tradition seems to have fallen away in the first half of the second century." See Charlesworth, "End of Orality," 351.

4. Helmut Koester introduces some thoughts about reasons for Gospel writing. See Koester, "Written Gospel," 294–95.

5. The original version of Halliday is this: "Language had to be reduced to a form where it *existed* rather than simply *happening*—where a text could be referred to over and over again, instead of having to be performed each time like the literature and sacred texts of oral communities. In modern jargon, a *process* had to be transformed into a *product*" (*Spoken and Written Language*, 39–40 [emphasis original]).

6. Streeter, *Four Gospels*, 163.

between spoken and written language."[7] This old debate is the focus of the present article.

Biblical scholars have adopted the way that classical studies seek out signs of orality in ancient Greek and Greco-Roman literature.[8] Classical studies stresses "the mnemonic base of the thought and expression in primary oral cultures."[9] This perspective led to an interest in mnemonic devices and styles such as repetition with some variation, "ring-composition," or "narrative bones."[10] I believe, however, that linguistics provides an alternative way to approach this query. Since Ferdinand de Saussure gave precedence to speech over written texts, orality and textuality have been important topics in modern linguistics.[11]

This paper explores how Halliday's systemic-functional approach might contribute to our understanding of the relationship between spoken and written language. More

7. Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 170.

8. Kelber, "Mark and Oral Tradition"; Dewey, "Orality and Textuality"; Hurtado, "Greco-Roman Textuality"; Foley, "Memory in Oral Tradition"; Byrskog, "From Orality to Textuality"; Kirk, "Orality, Writing, and Phantom Sources"; Riesner, "Orality and Memory." For a summary and introduction to New Testament research on orality, see Iverson, "Orality and the Gospels"; Riesner, "Orality and Memory"; Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition*.

The recent revival of interest into orality and textuality can be credited to Milman Parry's work on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which was then developed by his followers. Ong summarizes Parry's revolutionary discovery that "virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition. These can be reconstructed by careful study of the verse itself, once one puts aside the assumptions about expression and thought processes engrained in the psyche by generations of literate culture" (*Orality and Literacy*, 21). For some literature concerning orality and literacy in classical studies, see Parry, "Oral Verse-Making I"; Parry, "Oral Verse-Making II"; Lord, *Singer of Tales*; Havelock, *Preface to Plato*; Ong, *Presence of the Word*; Goody, ed., *Literacy*; Havelock, *Literate Revolution*; Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*; Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*; Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*; Worthington, ed., *Voice into Text*; Watson, ed., *Speaking Volumes*; Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Scodel, ed., *Between Orality and Literacy*.

9. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 36.

10. Tarrant, "Orality and Plato's Narrative," 139–40.

11. Saussure, *General Linguistics*, 23–24.

specifically, the objectives of this paper are twofold. First, it will propose a theoretical perspective informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) in order to provide a principled presentation of the relationship between spoken and written language. A discussion of some implication for Gospel Studies will follow. Second, the paper will propose a linguistic method for identifying the degree of orality in text, discuss its limitations when applied to Greek, and then examine a story shared by the four Gospels—the event in which Jesus clears the temple courts (Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–22).[12] Ultimately, this article argues first that a Hallidayan approach to spoken and written language places them, not in opposition, but along a continuum. Secondly, it will conclude that Mark's temple cleansing episode is the closest to spoken language along the continuum of orality and textuality, on the grounds of both lexical density and grammatical intricacy.

2. *A Hallidayan Approach to Orality and Textuality*

2.1 *Placing Spoken and Written Language on a Continuum*

In history, literate culture follows oral culture. Nevertheless, the former never replaces the latter.[13] Both coexist even though now we are living in a literate dominant culture, which was not the case for the ancient world. If this is so, how can we describe the relationship between spoken language and written language? Is textuality a mere representation of orality? Or is writing the basic form of language to be analyzed? Do they contain certain distinctive natures that deserve individual treatment? It is not an easy task to answer these questions simply because there are similarities and differences between the two language forms.

Among linguists, we see diverse views on the relationship between speaking and writing. No consensus has been reached. Ong briefly summarizes some perspectives from different

12. I include the Gospel of John in my analysis in order to extend the scope of the Synoptic Problem. See Porter, "Synoptic Problem," 93, 97.

13. Iverson, "Orality and the Gospels"; Riesner, "Orality and Memory."

linguistic circles in regard to the relationship between spoken and written language:

> Earlier linguists had resisted the idea of the distinctiveness of spoken and written languages. Despite his new insights into orality, or perhaps because of them, Saussure takes the view that writing simply represents spoken language in visible form . . . as do Edward Sapir, C. Hockett and Leonard Bloomfield. The Prague Linguistic Circle, especially J. Vachek and Ernst Pulgram, noted some distinction between written and spoken language, although in concentrating on linguistic universals rather than developmental factors they made little use of this distinction.[14]

The predominant trend of modern linguists has been to undervalue textuality as compared to orality. Proponents of Transformational Generative Grammar theoretically hold to this view. In their actual analysis of language, however, they focus on an idealized version of language which is closer to its written form rather than "actual speech."[15] Douglas Biber points out the inconsistency in the way that those linguists have treated speaking and writing: "In theory, writing is disregarded as secondary and derivative from speech. In practice, however, speech is also disregarded as unsystematic and not representative of the true linguistic structure of a language."[16] This contradiction originated in *intuitive* impressions[17] that "written language is structurally elaborated, complex, formal, and abstract, while spoken language is concrete, context-dependent, and structurally simple."[18] The failure to synthesize common and distinctive features of speech and writing caused the above inconsistency. Therefore, understanding what is in common and what is not must be at the heart of any appropriate presentation of the relationship between the two.

Halliday made significant advances in this regard. Common features among spoken and written language are derived from

14. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 18.
15. Biber, *Variation*, 7.
16. Biber, *Variation*, 7.
17. Porter, "Orality and Textuality," 4.
18. Biber, *Variation*, 5. For further general descriptions of writing, see Biber, *Variation*, 47.

the use of the same system. For instance, English, either spoken or written, is still English in that "they are both manifestations of the same underlying system."[19] But the point is that they are different kinds of English corresponding to or evoked by different situations.

Once we hold this functional point of view, we can describe the relationship between spoken and written language in a different way than traditional linguists have done. The fundamental argument of the functional view is that language has a job to do in its social context: "Language is as it is because of the functions in which it has evolved in the human species."[20] This perspective sheds light on the differences between orality and textuality. The fundamental differences between the two are attributable to different functions assigned to them.[21] In this sense, Halliday argues that "writing and speaking are not just alternative ways of doing the same things; rather, they are ways of doing different things . . . We achieve different goals by means of spoken and written language; but neither has any superior

19. Halliday, "Differences," 77.

20. Halliday, *IFG4*, 31. Let me be clear about two points regarding the functional view of language. First, language is closely related to social interactions. Simply put, no communication means no need of language. Language functions in such a way as to enable people to interact. This function of language has a huge impact on society. On the flip side, language is shaped by its surrounding environment. In this vein, the arrow of influence between language and society (or context) is bidirectional. Second, the function of language is not limited to enabling communication. It is also a repository of knowledge. Through communication knowledge is exchanged. According to Halliday, the transition from a nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyle to agricultural farming and settlement gave birth to more complicated information that stretched the limits of the capacity of oral transmission. As a result, writing came into being in order to accommodate more intricate practices and knowledge. See Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 39; Halliday, *IFG4*, 4.

21. Functional differences are not the only way of describing the differences between orality and textuality. For example, Larry W. Hurtado focuses on differences in terms of the process of composition: "As any of us practiced in both oral and written composition know, there are differences in the processes, the dynamics, and the results" ("Greco-Roman Textuality," 94). However, the strength of Halliday's point of view would be its consistency in that it views diverse language phenomena from one functional perspective.

value over the other."[22] If it were otherwise, the emergence of textuality would have completely taken over orality. But, in fact, this has never taken place. They coexist because of their different functions. As a result, they are not replaceable, but rather complementary.

On the basis of this observation, I would argue that Halliday's understanding of the relationship between the two media of communication would be best described as a continuum from orality to textuality.[23] This is backed up by his claim that "I am far from wishing to suggest that spoken and written language are separate, discrete phenomena . . . Most texts lie somewhere in between."[24] Halliday also made a point along these lines that "[f]or one thing, 'written' and 'spoken' do not form a simple dichotomy; there are all sorts of writing and all sorts of speech, many of which display features characteristic of the other medium."[25] Here I visualize the discussion with this representation:

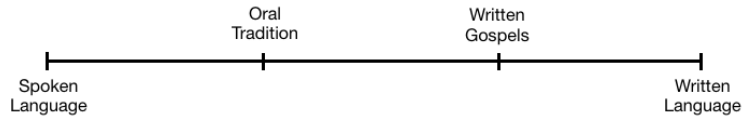

Figure 1. The Continuum of Spoken and Written Language

As we can see, it is not a matter of determining whether an actual text employs either spoken language or written language, but a matter of determining to what degree a given text reflects the typical characteristics of spoken and/or written language. As

22. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, XV.

23. To my knowledge, Halliday does not use the word *continuum*. I adopt this term from Deborah Tannen. She places orality and textuality in a "continuum reflecting relative focus on involvement vs. content." See Tannen, "Oral/Literate Continuum," 3–4.

24. Halliday, "Differences," 77. Albert B. Lord regards oral and literate culture as being "contradictory and mutually exclusive" (*Singer of Tales*, 129).

25. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 32. See also Tannen, "Oral and Literate Strategies."

a result, it is fair to say that oral language and written language are distinguishable but inseparable, interpenetrating each other.

2.2 *Drawing a Line between Spoken and Written Language*

How, then, can we describe the differences between the two modes of communication? Halliday works out three general dimensions of difference.

First, speaking and writing do "not incorporate all the meaning potential" of each other.[26] The prosodic (e.g. intonation) and paralinguistic (e.g. facial expression) features of spoken language cannot be expressed by written language, whereas the system of punctuation that encodes boundary markers, status markers, and relation markers cannot be shown by spoken language.[27]

Second, "speech and writing are in practice used in different contexts, for different purposes—though obviously with a certain amount of overlap."[28] Simply speaking, we are asked to submit a written application for a job. Then, though not always, we are called for an interview. The context of writing an application in your room is different from that of answering questions in an interview. In Halliday's words, this difference in "register" results from different situational variables, including what is going on (field), who are taking part (tenor), and what role language is playing (mode), with different language varieties activated by different situational variables.[29] Tannen's illustration can be taken into account as a way of describing the distinctiveness of general situations of writing and speaking:

> In a broad sense then, strategies associated with oral tradition place emphasis on shared knowledge and the interpersonal relationship between communicator and audience. In this, they 'elaborate' what Bateson (1972) calls the metacommunicative function of language: the use of words to convey something about the relationship between communicator and audience. Literate tradition emphasizes what Bateson calls the communicative function of language: the use of

26. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 93.
27. See Table 3.2 in Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 35.
28. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 93.
29. Halliday, *IFG4*, 33–34.

> words to convey information or content. This gives rise to the idealization that language can be "autonomous" (Kay, 1977)—that is, that words can carry meaning all by themselves, and that it is their prime function to do so.[30]

Halliday also notes along these lines that "the most obvious feature that marks off written language is that it is not anchored in the here-and-now, not tied to the environment in which it is produced in the way that conversation is."[31] Therefore, speaking and writing are different registers, or language varieties.[32]

Third, what is described in a spoken form is different from what is described in a written form. One of Halliday's metafunctions is the ideational function of language: we use language to present our experience.[33] Halliday elaborates on the different nature of realities presented by different modes of language as follows: "Writing creates a world of things; talking creates a world of happening."[34] By choosing a different medium, we describe our experiences of reality in a different way.

So then, what is the most appropriate way to describe the relationship between spoken and written language? In the history of linguistics, some have treated the two as totally distinct media whereas others have seen them as identical. From a functional point of view, however, they serve different purposes in different contexts, even though they do similar things (such as describing the outer world, enacting social interactions, and the like). Since they perform similar functions in different ways, one variety is

30. Tannen, "Oral/Literate Continuum," 2–3.

31. Halliday, "Differences," 70. See also Kay, "Language Evolution"; Olson, "From Utterance to Text."

32. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 44.

33. Halliday proposes three METAFUNCTIONS of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In some places, a logical METAFUNCTION is also included, often as part of the ideational. The ideational METAFUNCTION refers to our use of language to represent the world and experience. The interpersonal METAFUNCTION refers to our use of language to communicate with one another. The textual METAFUNCTION refers to our way of weaving meanings into a coherent message or text.

34. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 93.

never totally distinct from the other. Moreover, their coexistence is evidence for their different roles. In the end, it is best to place spoken and written language on a continuum.

2.3 *Theoretical Implications*

What effects does a Hallidayan approach have on the study of oral tradition in New Testament scholarship? There are at least two implications.

The first implication is that, on the basis of the continuity between spoken and written language, we can presume that the ancient writings preserve some of the characteristic linguistic features of orality. Werner Kelber stresses the discontinuity between oral and written media because of an alleged deconstruction of orality and replacement by textuality in Mark.[35] Criticizing Kelber, Joanna Dewey argues that "in a manuscript culture with high residual orality, there is considerable overlap between orality and textuality."[36] Her argument is founded on the two observations that (1) the Gospels were meant to be heard and (2) "oral techniques continue to influence writing."[37] A systemic-functional approach supports Dewey's argument. Halliday also argues for the continuity of utterance and writing, which enables spoken language to be found in written texts:

> In origin, written forms are derived from spoken ones, and inevitably in its early stages writing reflects fairly closely the spoken language of the community (though not necessarily that of spontaneous conversation—other registers are likely to need writing down first). But since writing is a conscious process, written language is on the whole conservative, whereas speech is spontaneous and so spoken language tends to be innovative.[38]

The preservation of oral characteristics in writing can take place even unconsciously, as Byrskog argues: "The oral character of the material is thus caused not by the fact that the evangelists

35. Kelber, *Oral and the Written Gospel*, 95.
36. Dewey, "Oral Methods," 33.
37. Dewey, "Oral Methods," 33.
38. Halliday, "Differences," 64.

were unliterary but by the overarching oral mind-set influencing even advanced literary forms of communication."[39] No matter to what degree, oral characteristics of language remain in written documents without being fully dissolved.

A second implication of Halliday's view is that we need to pursue a balanced description of oral and written culture in the NT era. As Porter and Dyer rightly observe, there is "a tendency in current NT scholarship to emphasize the *oral* aspects of the culture at the expense of the milieu's *written* culture."[40] Paul J. Achtemeier is one example of this trend in his claim that "the oral environment was so pervasive that *no* writing occurred that was not vocalized. That is obvious in the case of dictation, but it was also true in the case of writing in one's own hand. Even in that endeavor, the words were simultaneously spoken as they were committed to writing, whether one wrote one's own words or copied those of another."[41] He concludes that "dictation was the only means of writing."[42] Along similar lines, Daniel W. Ulrich argues that "lack of punctuation or even spaces between Greek words" reflects the history of the development of language from orality to textuality.[43] In order to read such texts, one needs to have pre-knowledge or memorization of the content beforehand, although, during the transitional period, written texts might have been used as a complement to oral performance.[44]

I highly doubt, however, if Achtemeier's view is balanced and sensitive enough to fairly represent all communication in the ancient world. Initially, he sought to break the stereotypical perception that the "written word" was then "the primal form of communication" as it is today.[45] He achieved this goal, but he

39. Byrskog, "The History of the Synoptic Tradition," 550.

40. Porter and Dyer, "Oral Texts?" 329 (italics original).

41. Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat," 15.

42. Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat," 15.

43. Ulrich, "Missional Audience," 69. See also Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat," 10. Halliday also mentions ancient Greek texts without spaces and punctuation (*Spoken and Written Language*, 32–33).

44. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism," 124–26. See also Horsley, "Oral Performance and Mark."

45. Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat," 4. See also Ong, *Orality and*

seems to have pushed his argument too far, resulting in an unbalanced view of ancient communication.[46] In this regard, Byrskog provides a better illustration of the relationship between orality and literacy, arguing that "in the ancient Israelite culture, orality and literacy emerge not as opposites or alternatives, but as ends of a continuum, with various types of literature to be placed at one point or the other along the spectrum."[47] In approaching the ancient world, we should presume the co-existence of oral and written culture, and we should not neglect the importance of writing.[48]

3. *Measuring the Degree of Orality in Texts*

3.1 *Lexical Density and Grammatical Intricacy*

As I have illustrated above, spoken and written language do not oppose each other; instead, they form the two poles of a continuum. Because of continuity and overlap between the two media, in most cases, we do not identify a text as either oral or written. To be sure, we still have to deal with written New Testament documents, but there is no doubt that they retain both oral and written characteristics of language. Keeping this in mind, we need to consider how we can measure degrees of orality and textuality.

Literacy, ch. 1; Havelock, *Literate Revolution*, 48.

46. Kelber, *Oral and the Written Gospel*, 140–83; Dewey, "Textuality in an Oral Culture," 37–64; Dewey, "A Re-Hearing of Romans 10," 109–27.

47. Byrskog, *Story as History*, 115–16. This is the main argument of Susan Niditch (see Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*). Vernon K. Robbins ("Oral," 77) presents a more detailed and complex reality: an oral culture, scribal culture, rhetorical culture, reading culture, literary culture, print culture, and hypertext culture.

48. Colin H. Roberts characterizes the Greco-Roman world as follows: "The world into which Christianity was born was, if not literary, literate to a remarkable degree . . . Clearly, the Christian movement sprang up in a milieu that both in its Jewish and in its Hellenistic loyalties had long set a high premium on the written word" ("Greco-Roman Textuality," 15–16).

Halliday first points out a critical fact that has been neglected for a long time, which is that differences are noticeable at the discourse level:

> It is not easy to find any general descriptions of the difference between speech and writing—partly because linguists have usually concentrated their efforts on describing the linguistic system that lies behind both of them, and partly because until recently they have neglected the study of one fundamental aspect of language, that of discourse, or connected passages of language in actual use, whether spoken or written, and this is where many of the differences lie.[49]

Upon the above premise, Halliday puts forward that written language is characterized by a high lexical density, that is, "written language displays a much higher ratio of lexical items to total running words."[50] For his analysis, he divides words into "lexical items [content words]" and "grammatical items [function words]."[51] Lexical items are *lexical* since "they function in lexical sets" characterized by an open (unlimitedly extendable) system of contrasts.[52] By contrast, grammatical items are *grammatical* in the sense that they enter into a closed system of contrasts.[53] For example, in the system of English possessive pronouns, *yours* contrasts with *mine*, *his*, *hers*, *its*, *ours*, *yours* (pl.) and *theirs*. No other contrasts exist. However, a lexical item such as *flower* can be contrasted theoretically with unlimited items in unlimited dimensions (e.g. *vase*, *bloom*, *tree*, *rose*, *lily*, *plant*, *nature* and so on). Written documents in general are more lexically dense than speeches. In order to measure degrees of density, Halliday proposes measuring "the number of lexical items per [non-embedded] clause."[54]

As regards spoken language, Halliday characterizes it as having a higher "grammatical intricacy," a claim that runs

49. Halliday, "Differences," 69.
50. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 61.
51. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 63.
52. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 63.
53. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 63.
54. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 75. Halliday explicitly mentions "ranking" clauses, which refers to non-embedded clauses. See Halliday, "Spoken Language," 168.

counter to general expectations.[55] Traditional views have depicted spoken language as being "formless and featureless."[56] Halliday, however, argues that comparing a dictated transcript of speech with a polished written text is unfair from the outset. As he rightly underlines, spoken language is not created to be dictated.[57] An unedited draft of writing would be more comparable with a dictation.

What then is a proper and principled approach to spoken language? First of all, it should be discussed in relation to written language, whose chief characteristic is a high lexical density per non-embedded clause. Conversely, Halliday argues, spoken language is more lexically sparse. Lexical sparsity is a by-product of different ways of presenting the world. Halliday elaborates on this as follows: "Written language represents phenomena as *products*. Spoken language represents phenomena as *processes* . . . A piece of writing is an object; so what is represented by written language is also given the form of an object . . . But when you talk, you are doing; so when you represent by talking you say that something happened or something was done."[58] According to Halliday's model, language variations are governed by contextual factors. That is to say, fundamental characteristics are rooted in the immediate situation in which language use occurs.

As a result, more nouns created by way of nominalization are used in written language in order to describe reality in terms of objects, whereas more verbs are used in spoken language in order to describe reality in terms of on-going processes. In English, verbs rarely stand on their own but accompany other elements, and as a result more verbs produce more clauses, which results in lexical sparsity. Similarly, because spoken language uses more clauses, the clause complexing in spoken language is expected to be more complex (or intricate) than in written language. No precise method is provided by Halliday for

55. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 76.
56. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 76.
57. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 77.
58. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 81 (emphasis original).

any quantitative calculation of the degree of complexity of complex clauses, but the general principle is given that "the more intricate a given clause complex is, the more likely it is that it happened in speech rather than in writing."[59] Halliday concludes that complexity is characteristic of both spoken and written language. However, the nature of their complexity is quite different:

> While speech and writing can both be very complex, the complexities tend to be of different kinds. The complexity of speech is choreographic—an intricacy of movement. That of writing is crystalline—a denseness of matter. In linguistic terms, spoken language is characterized by complex sentence structures with low lexical density (more clauses, but fewer high content words per clause); written language by simple sentence structures with high lexical density (more high content words per clause, but fewer clauses).[60]

3.2 *Limitations of the Hallidayan Model for Greek*

Having introduced Halliday's methodology, we need to think through any anticipated limitations. First, SFL descriptions are based primarily on English, and a direct application to another language would be problematic. Halliday suggests that, for English, spoken language is expected to produce a measure of less than three for lexical density, whereas for written the expectation is a measure of more than three. This paper will not apply these exact criteria to the analysis of Greek texts, but it will presume that Halliday's general framework has some implications for languages generally, even if the expected measures will differ. Recognizing the relative nature of the difference between written and spoken language, lexical density analysis will be used in order to compare a number of chosen episodes from the Gospels. This will allow us to observe the relative position of each episode along a continuum of orality and textuality.

A second possible limitation relates to the long-standing assumption that the Greek Gospels translate texts that were

59. Halliday, "Spoken Language," 169.
60. Halliday, "Differences," 77.

originally Aramaic. This assumption has recently been challenged by those who argue that Jesus and his disciples were bi-lingual, speaking Greek as well as Aramaic.[61] I would argue that, even if Jesus's sayings were translated, his stories were likely re-told and transmitted in Greek for Greek-speaking audiences from the very beginning. So, unless documents in Aramaic were placed into the hands of the Evangelists, we are on safe ground exploring the orality of the Greek sayings.

A third limitation is rooted in the fact that Halliday does not provide exact criteria for quantifying grammatical intricacy.[62] This study will adopt the model suggested and tested by Porter, which quantifies grammatical intricacy by measuring the average number of non-embedded clauses per clause complex.[63] His model is suggestive even if not conclusive. Along with this method, Porter puts forward the hypothesis that in Greek a lower measure of grammatical intricacy is indicative of more spoken language.[64] This is because the written language of Attic (or Atticistic) Greek is generally characterized as being grammatically intricate along with the frequent use of hypotaxis.[65] Under

61. See, e.g., Gleaves, *Did Jesus Speak Greek?* and Ong, *Multilingual Jesus*.

62. Quantifying degrees of grammatical intricacy does not seem to have been Halliday's prime objective. He seems to be more interested in dispelling "the myth of structureless speech" by demonstrating how many hypotactic and paratactic relations clause complexes of spoken language have. See Halliday, "Modes of Meaning," 58–60,

63. Porter, "Orality and Textuality," 6–7, 9–14. My analysis is based on OpenText.org for identifying clauses, and on the punctuation boundaries in the UBS3 (revised) for determining clause complexes. The OpenText.org project is informed by SFL, so it is relevant to this study. I agree with Porter's justification of the use of the UBS3 (revised) that "any decision regarding punctuation is subject to criticism, but the UBS3 uses a punctuation system that may have more similarities to modern punctuation and, because of this, provide a stronger basis for comparison with data gathered from English" ("Orality and Textuality," 10 n. 33).

64. Porter, "Orality and Textuality," 9.

65. Porter, "Orality and Textuality," 9. At this point, Porter agrees with Geoffrey Horrocks's view on the history of the development of Greek language. See Porter, "Orality and Textuality," 9; Horrocks, *Greek*, 32–127, esp. 33–37.

the condition of the firm residue of the periodic style of classical Greek in the written Koine Greek, greater grammatical intricacy may in fact be more characteristic of written language in Greek.

3.3 *An Analysis of Temple Cleansing Episodes in the Gospels and Some Implications*

Keeping these limitations in mind, I will examine four parallel stories of Jesus cleansing the Temple in Matt 21:12–17, Mark 11:15–19, Luke 19:45–48, and John 2:13–22. The purpose of this comparison is to examine to what degree they differ in terms of oral characteristics, given that the same event is being described. A reasonable size for sampling was not given in Halliday's theory. However, judging from the fact that he uses an interview and a short paragraph, these texts should serve the purpose of exploring a Hallidayan analysis.

Lexical Density	Matthew 21:12-17	Mark 11:15–19	Luke 19:45–48	John 2:13–22
Non-embedded Clauses	18	17	9	28
Content Words	78	53	46	92
Functional Words[66]	40	44	20	76
Content Words per Non-embedded Clause	4.3	3.1	5.1	3.2

Table 1: Lexical Density

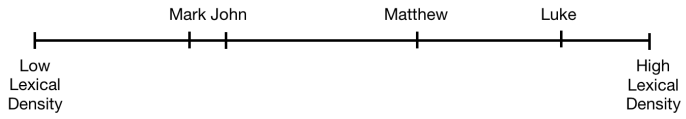

Figure 2. Lexical Density of the Temple Cleansing Episodes

66. Function words, at least in English, are "determiners, pronouns, most prepositions, conjunctions, some classes of adverb, and finite verbs (Determiners include the articles)" (Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 61). In my analysis, finite verbs are not counted as function words.

In regard to lexical density, the Markan temple cleansing episode displays a higher degree of orality than the episodes in the two other Synoptic Gospels. The episodes in Luke and Matthew are *relatively* higher in their lexical density as compared to those in Mark and John, both of which show almost the same ratio of content words to non-embedded clauses.[67] This indicates that Luke and Matthew are *more* reflective of written language; by contrast, Mark and John seem *closer* to or more reflective of spoken language. Keeping in mind that these numbers are relative, not absolute, I conclude that to some extent, the data conform to the purported consensus that Mark is the closest to orality among the Synoptic Gospels.

Grammatical Intricacy	Matthew 21:12-17	Mark 11:15–19	Luke 19:45–48	John 2:13–22
Non-embedded Clauses	18	17	9	28
Total Clauses	29	22	16	34
Clause Complex	6	7	3	8
Non-embedded Clauses per Clause Complex	3	2.4	3	3.5

Table 2. Grammatical Intricacy

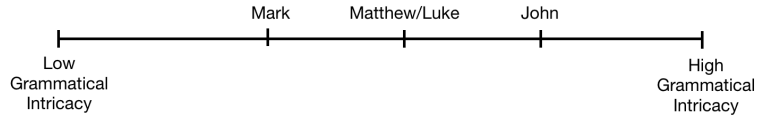

Figure 3. Grammatical Intricacy of the Temple Cleansing Episodes

As far as grammatical intricacy is concerned, the results of my brief analysis seem to favour Porter's hypothesis. Mark has both the least grammatical intricacy and the lowest lexical density, a correspondence that makes sense if both of these are characteristic of spoken language. By contrast, Matthew and Luke describe the same event in a more grammatically

67. Notably, the lexical density of Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4:7–26 is even lower, measuring only 2.2.

complicated way, which can be seen as a reflection of their relative nearness to written language. John's episode, however, displays the highest grammatical intricacy, which runs counter to the widely accepted simplicity of John as well as to the result of a correspondence between low grammatical intricacy and low lexical density. Halliday acknowledges the possibility that, in English, lower lexical density sometimes occurs with the lower grammatical intricacy, as when a spoken dialogue has a simple structure. It should also be remembered that the Temple cleansing episodes are only a small fraction of the Gospels, and Porter's analysis shows that grammatical intricacy can vary chapter by chapter.[68] We should be very cautious about jumping to premature conclusions. If one wishes to describe the language of an entire Gospel, the whole text must be examined.

4. *Conclusion*

This paper has sought to reorient some traditional approaches to orality and textuality in biblical studies by employing a new linguistic framework, informed by SFL. Halliday's work helps us more clearly define the relationship between spoken and written language and their differences. As language varieties, they share the same language system, which makes them similar, but they also have characteristic tendencies, which makes them different. Halliday locates the cause of the differences between them in their different contexts of situation and their different functions in those corresponding situations. Moreover, Halliday's framework describes a continuum between spoken and written language, which allows for a more balanced view of the relationship between orality and textuality in the ancient world.

In my application of Halliday's model to the four Gospels (Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–22), I have measured the lexical density of all four episodes, confirming the general belief that Mark contains more characteristics of spoken language than the other two Synoptic

68. In Porter's analysis, the grammatical density of Matt 5:3–48 is 2.5, but that of Matt 6:1–34 is 1.9. See Porter, "Orality and Textuality," 10.

Gospels. This stylistic closeness to oral language has been regarded by some interpreters, whether consciously or unconsciously, as evidence of Mark being the oldest Gospel.[69] The underlying assumption seems to be that Mark's orality reflects its source material. Nevertheless, it is not straightforward to establish Markan priority on the basis of this orality, because, according to Halliday, a text's degree of orality is not determined by what sources it draws upon but by contextual factors related to the expected social function of a text. In other words, Mark's spoken language is not necessarily indicative of his sources (oral tradition), because it could also be motivated by his situation (register). If the presence of more oral characteristics is not necessarily a reliable indicator of Mark being more primitive or earlier, arguments for Markan priority based on Mark's living speech should be carefully reconsidered. This need for caution is reaffirmed by the fact that John is the *second* closest to spoken language, even though it is generally believed to be the latest Gospel.[70]

As regards the measures used to quantify spoken and written language, my analysis indicates that the Matthean and Lukan Temple cleansings have relatively higher grammatical intricacy than the Temple cleansing in Mark. This result appears to support Porter's hypothesis. The method is, however, still preliminary and inconclusive, given certain persistent limitations. First, as Halliday mentions, no system of punctuation was employed in ancient Greek texts.[71] As a result, different

69. There has been a tendency to discuss orality mostly in relation to Mark. See Kelber, "Mark and Oral Tradition"; Kelber, *Oral and the Written Gospel*; Dewey, "Oral Methods"; Botha, "Mark's Story as Oral"; Bryan, "As It Is Written"; Hurtado, "Greco-Roman Textuality"; Myllykoski, "Mark's Oral Practice"; Horsley, "Oral Performance and Mark."

70. Although the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple in John addresses the same event, we should admit the fact that there are significant differences in terms of lexical items and content than that of the Synoptic Gospels. Halliday compared written and spoken accounts of the same event with similar lexical items (*Spoken and Written Language*, 79–80). In this sense, the implications of John's Gospel are again limited and tentative at best.

71. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, 32–33.

modern editions of the Greek New Testament put punctuation marks in different places. This makes the identification of clause complexes much more subjective. Second, we have access only to texts that have been through the conscious process of polishing and editing. The structural complexity of earlier texts may have been simplified by later editors.

Although my findings are tentative and only suggestive, the method clearly warrants further development. I will conclude, therefore, with three suggestions for further study. First, it would be good to see comparative research implementing this methodology at the macro level, involving the entirety of all four Gospels. Second, we can also apply this methodology to distinctive units informed by form-critical approaches at the micro level. This may indicate differences among types of units in terms of the distinction between spoken and written language. Third, we need to think about different means of presenting the outer world as an on-going process with differing relevance to different languages. For example, Mark's frequent use of the so-called narrative present has long been recognized. This high number of narrative presents could perhaps be regarded as an indicator of spoken language, given that the Greek imperfective presents an action "*as being in progress*."[72]

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72. Porter, *Idioms*, 21 (italics mine).

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