

Language Change: a Cognitive Linguistic Approach

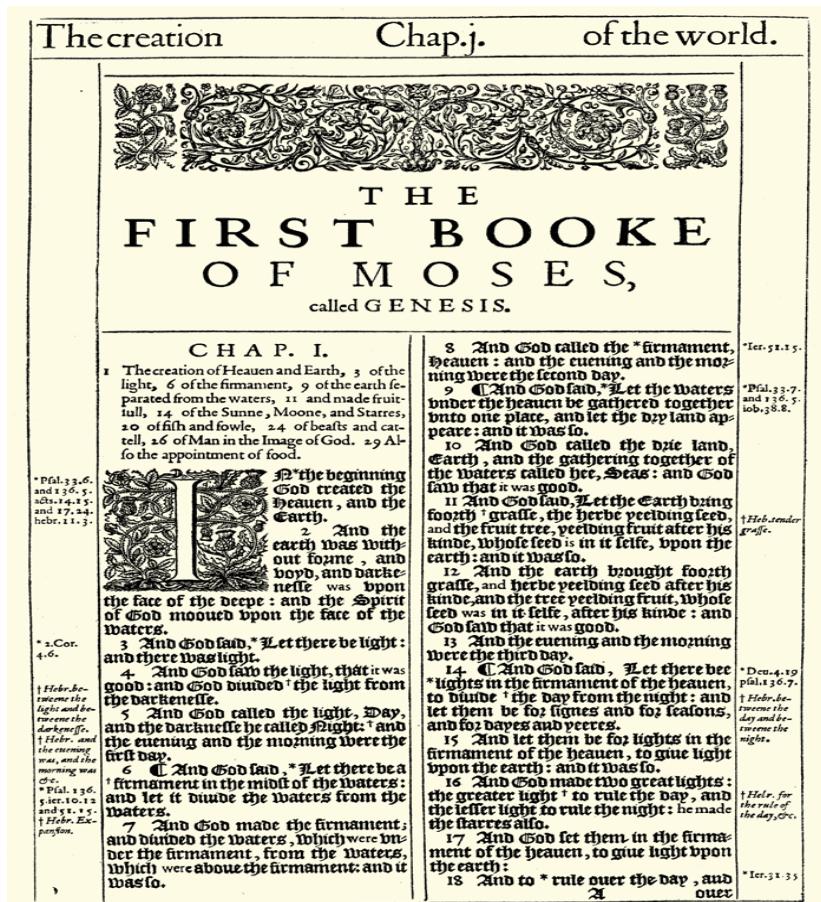
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Facsimile from the 1611 King James Bible: <http://www.biblicalscholarship.com/400th.htm>



Introduction

This paper considers an alternative approach to analyzing language change: cognitive linguistic evidence. In doing so, fundamental cognitive linguistic theories of embodiment (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), figure and ground (Ungerer and Schmid 1996:156-204), the dominant (Jakobson 1985:25-28) and image schema (Langacker 1986, 1987, 1991) will be utilized as a backbone for explaining language change. The paper starts by detailing the instruments that underpin the investigation. Subsequently, two versions of The Lord's Prayer will be presented with an explanation of their suitability as test subjects for language change. The core of the paper comprises of a cognitive linguistic analysis of language change in The Lord's Prayer between 1611 and 1977, followed by a brief consideration of the wider implications of cognitive linguistic approaches to language change. In sum, the paper aims to demonstrate that cognitive linguistics provides a methodology which can be productively used to study language change, as demonstrated by a cognitive linguistic analysis of change within The Lord's Prayer over a 366 year period.

Some preliminary background

Traditionally, the study of language change has focused around the lower and central levels of the linguistic scale: phonology, morphology, lexicology and syntax/semantics. For example Freeborn initiates his prefaces to the second edition of *From Old English to Standard English* by stating:

The text of the first edition has been completely revised and enlarged to include nearly two hundred historical texts, of which more than half are reproduced in facsimile. The facsimiles are primary sources of our knowledge of the language, illustrating the development of handwriting, printing, punctuation and spelling in a way which is not possible using modern printed versions of old texts. (Freeborn 2006:xi)

The words I've underlined highlight the abstraction 'knowledge of the language' within 'punctuation and spelling' which is commonly used as the basis to study language change. Freeborn continues (2006:xii): 'Change takes place at every level of language: Lexical... Semantic... Syntactic... Phonological.'; the striking contradiction here is that 'every level' only includes the mid and lower levels, namely: lexical, semantic, syntactic and phonological. Hogg and Denison (2006) in *A history of the English language* split their book into nine chapters: Overview, Phonology and morphology, Syntax, Vocabulary, Standardization, Names, English in Britain, English in North America, English worldwide. The core focus, once again, is on the central and lower regions of the linguistic scale (as I've underlined). April McMahon's 1994 edition titled *Understanding Language Change* has twelve chapters (Introduction/Three views of sound change./ Sound change 2/Morphological change/Syntactic change 1/Word order change and grammaticalization/Semantic and lexical change/ Language contact/Linguistic variation/Pidgins and creoles/Language death/Linguistic evolution) which cover a wide area, with the notable exclusion of the pragmatic and socio-linguistic levels, as well as language use, meaning and understanding—none of these three volumes list the words 'meaning' or 'understanding' in their indexes.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of works such as the ones by Freeborn, Hogg & Denison and McMahon, this paper offers an alternative approach which concerns itself with language user construal rather than language assembly, and a cognitive linguistic framework is proposed to better reflect this aim. In recent years, cognitive science has been increasingly used by linguistic analysts, as evidenced by Patricia Canning's (2008) article '*the bodie and the letters both*': '*blending*' *the rules of early modern religion* which uses Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, Turner 2006) to analyze a sixteenth century poem called *JESU*; the abstract states: 'To date, no-one to my knowledge has applied this theory in an early modern text'. Although Canning wasn't specifically concerned with language

change, but rather ‘the material effects of this cognitive linguistic phenomenon in the significantly literary theological context of early modern England’, (the abstract’s closing statement), Canning’s use of cognitive linguistic tools to understand meaning has set a precedent that the current essay adheres to.

In summary, this paper considers language change through a user centric approach—moving beyond ‘knowledge of the language’ into ‘knowledge of the use of the language’.

Cognitive linguistic tools

This section outlines the cognitive linguistic tools chosen for the study: image schema, the dominant, and figure and ground, as well as relating them to the study of language change.

Image Schema

To understand *image schema* we first need to outline the pivotal cognitive linguistic notion called *embodiment*. Joan Bybee (2007:969), a leading scholar within diachronic linguistics and language change, states that: ‘...even the most abstract of grammatical notions can be traced back to very concrete, often physical or locational concepts involving the movement and orientation of the human body in space...’. A number of her books and articles (1984, 1994 and 2001) highlight embodiment at both the core of language and of language change, as do many other diachronic linguistic practitioners (Anderson 1971, Haspelmath 1989, Heine, Claudi and Hunnemeyer 1991). So, within Cognitive Linguistics, researchers understand embodiment to be a fundamental mechanism forming human language; physical, personal and social—neuroscience and psycholinguistics are two supporting legs that provide empirical research (Raymond Gibbs probably being the best known exponent).

From the 1970’s when Lakoff and Johnson’s study on metaphor began to elaborate a theory of embodiment, many related theories have been developed; one being image schema, which was developed by Johnson in the early eighties. He says: ‘patterns emerge

primarily as meaningful structures for us chiefly at the level of our bodily movements through space, our manipulation of objects, and our perceptual interactions' (1987:29) which links to Bybee's words above in respect to the body and its movement through space as being directly analogous to core language creation. An often cited example is the CONTAINMENT image schema where the experience of our body moving through containment experiences is prevalent and central to language: we take a pencil 'out' of a pencil case then hold it 'in' our hand; we get 'up out of' bed then go 'into' the kitchen, sit 'in' a chair then dip our biscuits 'in' our tea. As can be seen in these examples, prepositions are very often signals of spacial movement, of image schemas, thus for our analysis of The Lord's Prayer we will use image schemas to analyze the change in prepositional phrases over time.

Figure and Ground

Construal is at the heart of this cognitive linguistic tool, where construal implies a choice of linguistic explanation between participants, features and their relations, for example: the dog is under the table/the table is over the dog, are two construals of the same information, both offering different interpretations that lead to differing mental processing and understanding. Verhagen (2007:48) aptly explains: '*a cluster of stars and specs of light in the sky* evoke their objects of conceptualization by combining several elements into a whole in some particular way, while the lexical item *constellation* does not' (original italics).

Figure and ground was introduced into linguistics from gestalt studies in psychology, by Talmy in 1978. Talmy explained how the 'figure' is perceived as the prominent coherent element when set against a 'ground'; in my example above, 'the dog' is initially the figure set off against 'the table' (the ground), whereas 'the table' is figured in the second sentence which results in a different understanding of the same situation. To paraphrase Verhagen (2007:50): lexical items, different lexical verbs, progressive verb constructions and active/passive distinctions, are all examples of figure and ground. He offers

the progressive construction of the verb ‘to be’ as an example where *be+V-ing* ‘can be said to impose a particular profile on the interpretation of the clause, backgrounding any boundaries of the designated process, irrespective of the meaning of the verb’. Thus, noun phrase and verb phrase change in The Lord’s Prayer will be analyzed utilizing Figure and Ground.

The Dominant

This tool derives from Cognitive Poetics rather than Cognitive Linguistics, and is a commonly used tool (initially discussed by Roman Jakobson in the Matejka and Pomorska collection), highly productive for linguistic analysis. Stockwell (2002:14) explains the tool as: ‘The feature that is determined to be the organizing element, or seems most striking in the text’, going on to state ‘The dominant is a sort of super-foregrounded figure, around which the rest of the literary text is dynamically organized’. Notable examples would be Graham Greene’s use of a Catholic theme in *Monsignor Quixote*, Zadie Smith’s very detailed descriptive writing in *On Beauty* and the use of simple rhyming within children’s nursery rhymes—where theme, description and rhyme, are the respective dominants.

Within The Lord’s Prayer, the largest area of language change can be attributed to function words (pronouns, conjunctions and determiners), and is thus considered the dominant for the purposes of this language change analysis.

***The Lord’s Prayer* (<http://www.lords-prayer-words.com/>)**

How old texts *thought* in comparison to present day texts is a rarely explored question, but one that this paper attempts to shed light upon. Cognition centered analysis of a Middle English (ME) and Early Modern English (EME) texts when compared, via a similar process, to a Present Day English (PDE) text could afford exceptional insight into language change at the cognitive level. Most EME texts avail an unstable variety of English (highly dialectal and variable), and this paper insists on a standard vernacular—or the closest approximation

available. One text stands out due to its consistent English: the King James Bible (KJB); with the advent of the printing press, 'English' gaining high status in areas such as politics, court language and politics, as well as the power struggle between the Vatican and English kings, the pieces of the historic jigsaw were in place to develop a standardized national English: the KJB. And, within the greater text, the Lord's Prayer, specifically interests us because of its manageable size and regular usage throughout the last 400 years, offering a great opportunity for comparison.

King James Version/Middle English Version (MEV): these are the words from the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, taken from the King James Bible (authorized version of the scriptures; King James Version - 1611)

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.

Amen.

Present Day English Version (PDEV): adopted by the Church of England in 1977

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and for ever.

Amen.

No	Function Word	Verb Phrase	Noun Phrase	Prepositional Phrase	Punctuation
1		<i>which</i> <i>art-0</i>			
2	<i>thy-your</i>				
3	<i>Thy-Your</i>				
4	<i>Thy-your</i>			<i>in earth-on</i> <i>earth</i>	<i>Thy-your</i> <i>in earth,-,on</i> <i>earth</i>
5					
6			<i>it is-0</i>		
7	<i>this-today</i>				
8	<i>And-0</i>				
9			<i>debts-sins</i> <i>our</i> <i>debtors-</i> <i>those</i> <i>who sin</i> <i>against</i> <i>us</i>		
11	<i>And-0</i>				
12					<i>from evil:-</i> <i>from evil.</i>
13					0-(new line)
15	<i>and-0</i>		<i>thine is-0</i>		
16			<i>(embedded)</i> <i>and the</i> <i>glory-</i> <i>(compound)</i> <i>0-are</i> <i>yours</i> <i>(new line)0-</i> <i>now and</i>		
18					<i>for ever:-now</i> <i>and forever.</i>

Cognitive linguistic analysis of language change

Below, a table details the differences between the MEV and the PDEV; the MEV is the prototype. (Note: The prototypical six lines have been extended to seven lines in the PDEV.)

The Dominant: function words

The sheer number of function word revisions (over 40% of changes identified), and their commonly held subject position (3 out of the 5 MEV sentences begin with words highlighted in this section: *Thy, And, And*), cognitively determines them as the preeminent textual alteration; the dominant.

The three instances of *thy* can be considered a standard socio-linguistic change which heavily impacts the sense of the prayer. Freeborn notes in *A Course Book in English Grammar* (1995:77) that ‘the older forms of the 2nd person pronoun were once used to mark **social relationships** between speakers’ (original bolding). *Thy/thine* were the highest status terms with *thou/thee* as high status terms while *ye/you/your/yours* were the standard status terms. *Thou/thee* (although ‘*thou*’ was considered archaic by the seventeenth century) are still used in a few dialects, but *thy/thine* (which would be used to address Gods, Kings and Lords) fell out of use by the end of the middle English period—this convergence of pronouns falls in-line with the historic development of democratic institutions and social equality, and as such demonstrates how society and language naturally mirror one-another; the impact for the prayer is that *Our Father* loses status, linguistically speaking, in the PDEV.

Additionally, *Thy* from the middle clause in the second line is very powerful in the MEV/EME where the word form status and capitalization both spotlight and refigure *Our Father*. The PDEV moves towards grounding this effect by removing both spotlights; replacing *Thy* with a basic *your*.

The deicic weakening device of changing *this day*, where the deicic *this* spotlights the deicic centre very much at the moment of

speaking, to *today* where the far less emotive generic adverbial is occluded by the verb *give*, has the effect of removing the immediacy and intimacy of the request/utterance.

The two *Ands* in sentence initially position ground the sentences, thus enabling *this day* to further hold the deicic centre and figured position; highlighting the intimacy and directness of communication with *Our Father*; removing them in the PDEV diminishes the strength of the bond to *Our Father*. Removing *and* from *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory*, deconstructs the equilibrium between *kingdom/power/glory* with *kingdom* being occluded by *power* and *glory*.

Considered as a whole, the function word alterations produce the effect of cognitively detaching the reader's affinity with God and heaven (present in the MEV) whilst augmenting the more worldly appeal of power and glory (in the PDEV).

Figure and Ground: verb phrases

Even though only one verb phrase change takes place between the two prayer versions, being associated with the very first noun phrase, which is the focus of the entire prayer, it naturally obtains special significance. The MEV immediately spotlights and figures *Our Father* because of the initial subject positioning which is maintained throughout the prayer. The subject, *Our Father*, is followed by an embedded phrase *which art in heaven* (where the modern translation of *which art* becomes 'who is') that acts as an attractor further figuring *Our Father*; a very powerful initial subject position figuring.

In contrast, the PDEV removes the embedded verb phrase, leaving a much weaker preposition phrase: *Our Father in heaven*. Whilst we can't say that the alteration fully grounds *Our Father*, it certainly detracts from the force exhibited by the MEV/EME; thus, being in initial noun phrase position, limiting the force which *Our Father* holds upon the entire prayer—*Our Father*, God, has been linguistically relegated in the PDEV.

Figure and Ground: noun phrases

It is refers to and spotlights (foregrounding) God's will (*Thy will be done*); by removing *it is*, the PDEV occludes *Thy will* with *on earth*—a textual movement away from God towards mankind.

The next noun phrase changes are superficially apparent: *debts/our debtors* in the MEV to *sins/those who sin against us* in the PDEV, where a physical entity, *debt*, is replaced by a moral entity, *sin*; foregrounding man's spirituality, rather than the worldly of the MEV.

The final clause in the penultimate line of the MEV/EME starts with *[For] thine is*, but it's replaced in the PDE version by *are yours* which is situated at the end of the clause. Both the status of *Thine* and holding subject position are foregrounding devices whereas a standard possessive pronoun/determiner and holding final clausal position are not—once again the PDEV removes linguistic devices which foreground *Our Father*.

The above effect (*For thine is*) of spotlighting *Our Father* in the MEV/EME is magnified, re-spotlighted (re-foregrounded), by compounding (*,and the power, and the glory*) which refers to *thine is* on each occasion. The PDEV's *For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours* doesn't spotlight *yours* (our father's) at all.

The addition of *Now* in the last line of the PDEV adds a propinquity of time that the MEV, which focuses on *Our Father* for whom time is immaterial, doesn't exhibit. The general shift away from God as the foregrounded subject of the MEV towards man as the theme of the PDEV designates time, *Now*, as pertinent.

Image Schema: preposition phrases

In earth is a CONTAINMENT image schema where the 'trajector' (our father's kingdom) is contained and thus restricted within the 'landmark' *earth*. The PDEV version uses a different image schema where *on earth* has the same 'trajector' (our father's kingdom) and the same 'landmark', but the PATH image schema *on* is, as the name suggests, a single point within a much wider context—a

journey. When considered in unison with the next phrase which is also a CONTAINMENT image schema (*in heaven*), the MEV/EME shows two distinct CONTAINMENT image schemas whereas the PDEV contruels one image schema leading into another; a PATH leading to a CONTAINMENT/earth leading to heaven—a journey ending in heaven; the motivation of the journey is ‘man’s plight/path’ whereas the MEV emphasizes *Our Father’s* kingdoms.

Image Schema: punctuation

The example immediately above is also supported by the change in punctuation, where the MEV uses standard comma usage for compounding two independent clauses, but the PDEV removes the comma which created a dependency; indeed ‘*on earth as in heaven*’ could almost be understood as a noun phrase (NP+PP=NP).

The penultimate line of the EME/MEV’s ‘*from evil:*’ is changed to ‘*from evil.*’ in the present day English version, and this has two effects: the prayer is extended by one line in the PDEV; the colon in the EME/MEV acts as an ENABLEMENT image schema which is completely disregarded in the PDEV, with the effect that *Our Father* who enables our deliverance in the EME/MEV no longer does so in the PDEV—it is left to us; God’s power is diminished in the PDEV (a consistent pattern). The author’s desire to detach the correlation of *Our Father* with the enabler of deliverance is so keen that they are prepared to add an new line to the prayer—the singly most visible change.

The MEV/EME ends the prayer with a CONTAINMENT image schema, *for ever*, which limits man’s potential—we are contained/we are limited. But, the PDEV changes to a PART_WHOLE image schema, *Now and for ever*, which also exhibit a PATH and SCALE image schema qualities; these image schemas empower man as being part of a whole, the figured element on a path and a member of a scale. Additionally, in the PDEV the immediacy of *Now* is figured by initial sentence position, punctuation and subject position, a striking change from the MEV/EME—now (time) has no meaning for an eternal God,

but is very relevant for mankind.

Interestingly, the different cognitive linguistic tools show similar language change effects:

- **The dominant** shows *Our Father* losing status in the PDEV.
- **Figure and ground** shows a textual-theme movement away from God towards mankind in the PDEV.
- **Image schema** shows a movement away from the MEV's focus on God's enablement towards the PDEV's focus on Man's plight.

Future implication for a cognitive linguistic approach to language change

This paper proposed examining cognitive linguistic evidence for language change in order to shed light on how texts 'think', or more correctly: how texts direct construal.

This analysis of the Lord's prayer has demonstrated the power of cognitive linguistic tools to illuminate meaning and understanding in a way that traditional grammar/lexical centric techniques don't address because they are focused on form and functions rather than our cognitive processes and meaning creation. As such, cognitive linguistics offers excellent potential to supplement existing techniques and reach beyond our current understanding of language change.

Moving beyond this paper, salience and entrenchment are two further cognitive linguistic primaries which should be added to our analytical arsenal to help explain word choices and construals through socio-linguistic and cognitive processes; I believe at this point we would have begun to deeply understand language change and what texts think.

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