TEXT AS A GUIDE TO AUTHORIAL INTENTION: AN INTRODUCTION TO DISCOURSE CRITICISM

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Events of profound significance sometimes slip quietly onto the stage of history. The impact of such events is often felt only gradually, but when it is, the course of history is forever changed. One such event that has profound promise for Biblical studies occurred in the field of linguistics. In 1958 a paper entitled "Shipibo Paragraph Structure" was written. This work, so obscure that it was not finally published until 1970, is now considered to be the first of a rapidly expanding list of studies that have investigated the post-sentence-level surface structural features of human language.[1] Prior to that work the focus of linguistics had been exclusively on the smallest units of language: syllables, phrases, clauses, sentences.

Within the past three decades, however, an ever-increasing amount of attention has been given to the study of the larger units of human communication, from paragraphs to entire genres.[2] It is now recognized that human communication as it is normally practiced actually occurs only above the sentence level. Patterned expectations exist in every language for every communication task involving human language. These language-specific parameters exist with regard to the typical length of text in which a given task is to be performed (we often become impatient with the pastor who preaches "too long"), concerning the order of information presentation (sometimes we tell the punch line "too early" in a joke), and concerning the kind of structures that are to be used to perform a given task (young children in America are not to use imperatives when addressing their parents). These expectations are so fixed within a given language/culture for a given communication task as to amount to rules.

Research into the surface structural dynamics of text at higher organizational levels has opened up new insights into human language that promise to

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[1]See J. Loriot and B. Hollenbach, "Shipibo Paragraph Structure," *Foundations of Language* 6 (1970) 43–66, dealing with the surface features of the Shipibo language that were used to mark beginnings and ends of paragraphs, as well as cohesive devices that were used to tie discourse-level features together.

[2]More recent published works include the following: R. E. Longacre, *Discourse Grammar* (New York: Plenum, 1983); G. Brown and G. Yule, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983); M. Hoey, *On the Surface of Discourse* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1983); J. Grimes, *The Thread of Discourse* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975).

sharpen our abilities to analyze the Biblical text.[3] These insights are now utilized in a new form of Biblical text analysis known as discourse criticism. Of special interest to the theological community is the fact that discourse criticism claims to be able to aid the researcher in the tricky business of making judgments concerning authorial intention within Biblical texts. As such it is establishing itself as another tool to be used at the workbench of Biblical exegesis.

I. BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF DISCOURSE CRITICISM

Discourse criticism works from a set of assumptions about language heavily influenced by discourse linguistics. Some of the more basic assumptions about language that this form of textual analysis works with are listed below.[4]

1. *Language is a code.* In order for the written communication process to occur it is necessary for both the writer and the reader to share a set of symbols that are understood by all parties to possess certain agreed-upon meanings. As such, communication requires a convention of significance. This basic truth about language presents something of a problem for those who study the Biblical text, for many aspects of the convention of significance for the original languages are either no longer accessible to us or have not yet been identified. If anyone doubts this, one need merely review scholars' opinions of the Hebrew verbal system.[5] To say that we do not yet understand all of the language code of the Biblical languages is not to say that we cannot recover any more of the code than we now possess. In fact, discourse criticism permits us to do just that.

2. *Most of the communication process occurs at the subliminal level of human consciousness.* Human communication is an exceedingly complicated process involving a large number of constantly varying factors. Because the human mind can consciously process only a small number of the elements involved in the communication event, the greatest number of language variables must be processed subconsciously. Though a person usually never stops to think about the subconscious dimension of the communication process, he or she

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[3]Works treating specifically the Biblical text include F. I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); R. D. Bergen, *Discourse Criticism: Introduction, Methodology, and Application to Genesis 1:1—2:3* (Fort Worth, 1982); J. Beekman, J. Callow and M. Kopesec, *Semantic Structures of Written Communication* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1981). This last-named work is now being thoroughly revised and updated by K. Callow. Theses and dissertations relating to discourse analysis of the Biblical text include N. A. Bailey, *A Tense-Aspect-Discourse Study of the Hebrew Perfect Verb in the Genesis Narrative* (University of Texas at Arlington, 1983); R. D. Bergen, *Varieties and Functions of Waw-Plus-Subject-Plus-Perfect Sentence Constructions in the Narrative Framework of the Pentateuch* (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986); C. D. Fennig, *The Semantic Function of* Waw *in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (University of Texas at Arlington, 1986); C. Hallberg, *A Study of Theme in a Biblical Text: 1 Samuel 3* (University of Texas at Arlington, 1987).

[4]Similar treatments of the following points can also be found in Bergen, *Discourse Criticism*, and *Verb Structural Profiles of the Narrative Framework of the Pentateuch* (Fort Worth, 1983).

[5]For a survey of this problem cf. L. McFall, *The Enigma of the Hebrew Verbal System* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982).

nevertheless receives a significant portion of the information being transmitted in a typical communication event at this level and uses this information to draw conclusions about the message being sent.

To say that most of the communication process occurs at the subliminal level does not mean that the normally subliminal factors cannot be investigated. In fact, each of them can be. They are subliminal simply because in normal communication people choose to overlook them. Subliminal factors in written communication include size of information units (e.g., sentence length, paragraph length), order of information presentation (e.g., subject-verb-temporal phrase, temporal phrase-subject-verb), and kind of information being presented (e.g., employment of pronouns instead of nouns, employment/omission of adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions).

3. *Subliminal factors in human communication contain data essential for making judgments about authorial intention.* Like the proverbial underside of the iceberg, most of the surface structural data in a text that is crucial in making judgments about an author's intentions is found in the portions of the communication process that are normally invisible to the reader. Unfortunately it is these very portions of the language code that have been ignored or inadequately treated in traditional Biblical language grammars. Forms of Scriptural text analysis based primarily on the linguistic understandings of traditional grammars therefore face some significant handicaps. Discourse criticism argues that the subliminal factors must be studied to gain a more adequate grasp of authorial intention.

4. *The language code is genre-specific.* Every communication task within a given language has a set of agreed-upon expectations associated with it. For example, sentences that carry forward the event-line of stories (narrative discourse) differ from sentences that are used to convey the directions for baking cakes (procedural discourse). Events in English stories are related by means of sentences containing past-tense verbs, while cake-baking directions in English use imperative verbs. The differences in code between communication tasks serve as determinative hints helping the reader figure out the writer's intentions.

5. *Though the specifics of each language code are unique to a given language, a common set of principles governs the structuring and application of the language code in all languages.* While others certainly exist, some of the most relevant of these universal language features are listed below.

(1) Language texts are composed of successively smaller organizational units of language. One of the most basic contributions that discourse analysis has made to the field of language studies is the recognition that language is multi-tiered. Like the human body, which is composed of harmoniously integrated systems composed of organs, which are in turn made of cells consisting of subcellular structures, which integrate molecules made up of atoms, which are themselves ordered patterns of subatomic particles, so is human language hierarchically organized.

Letters and vowel points function as the lowest echelon in the Biblical lan-

guage texts. These in turn form syllables, which may be used to create words. Words may be integrated into phrase patterns, which can be arranged into clauses, which in turn may be woven together into sentences. Sentences in turn may be ordered in such a way as to create paragraphs, which may be structured so as to create episodes (narrative discourse). Higher structures of language include (among others) episode clusters, stories, story cycles, subgenres, and genres. The number of organizational levels present within a text depends upon the complexity and type of the communication task.

(2) Each successively higher level of textual organization influences all of the lower levels of which it is composed. Language is organized from the top down. Thus within narrative, story-level considerations place constraints upon episodes, paragraphs, sentences, clauses, phrases, words, syllables, and letters, while word-level considerations place constraints only upon syllables and letters.

For example, the decision to write a sermon for an American evangelical audience places constraints upon the number and size of points that may be present within the text. These points restrict the number and type of paragraphs that may be in them, which in turn control sentence types and sizes. Sentence types delimit the number and types of clauses that are present in them, and so forth. Upper levels of text organization, such as genre, place broad constraints on all lower levels, including paragraph and word choice. Thus certain illustrative stories (usually a paragraphic-level feature) and words (particularly vulgar expletives and certain anatomical terms) are mandatorily excluded from the subgenre "American evangelical sermon."

(3) Language texts are grammatically and semantically contoured. Not every part of a text is intended by the author to be equally significant. At every level of textual organization some portions of each structure are encoded as being more important than others. The information of more central significance is often called "nuclear," while the other material is often called "marginal."

This concept is easily seen at the lowest levels of language. At the word level, suffixes and prefixes are considered marginal—that is, they serve as mere modifiers (fine tuners) of a more significant concept. In the word "houses" the final "s" is a (marginal) plural marker added to the nuclear word "house." In the phrase "green houses" the word "green" is understood to be less important than "houses." Just as simple phrases possess margins and nuclei, so also do higher levels of textual organization, including clauses, sentences, paragraphs and stories. In the English sentence "I think that green houses are pretty" the word "that" is considered marginal. It may be omitted without damaging the essential semantic content of the sentence. At still higher levels it may be noted that jokes and illustrative materials within sermons are usually marginal (of secondary importance to the major thrust of the overall text).

(4) Present within the language code is the capacity to indicate the level of significance for each organizational unit of language. Without this factor language would fail at one of the most basic tasks for which it was created: the impartation of authorial intention to the target audience. This is a fundamental axiom of all human communication and serves perhaps as the basic motivation behind the act of composing written text.

(5) The significance level of an organizational unit within a text is desig-

nated by the writer through the employment of the language code. Of special interest for Biblical studies are those language devices that are used by a writer to highlight portions of text. It is to this point that the next section of this paper is dedicated.

II. DISCOURSE-GRAMMATICAL FEATURES USED TO MARK POINTS OF AUTHOR-INTENDED SIGNIFICANCE WITHIN TEXT

Modern linguistics recognizes that when an author creates a text he personally considers certain portions of his literary creation to be more important than others. To help the audience figure out which portions he considers to be more significant, the author drops certain hints in the text. These hints are created by manipulating three variable factors: (1) order of information, (2) quantity of information, and (3) type of information.

These hints are often based on what I call the "norm-deviation principle." Within any given language there is a normal profile for a communication unit performing a given task—that is, there is a typical unit length, a standard order for information presentation, and a set of usual kinds of information that are found within that unit. These norms vary from language to language and even from language task to language task. An indigenous language speaker learns his or her language's norms slowly and arduously by repeated exposure to the language over a period of years. The rules are complex enough that many who speak a given language even for a lifetime master them only incompletely.

Though Biblical scholars can never have the advantage of being indigenous speakers of Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, they may still recover the norms for the Biblical languages to a remarkable degree by means of extensive statistical studies. Such careful statistical analysis of the extant Biblical language documents can produce a remarkably accurate reconstruction of each language's norms. To be done properly, these statistical studies should be done on a genre-by-genre basis. They should also be carried out for every level of textual organization.

Any unit of human communication may be highlighted by simply modifying the order, quantity, or type of information present within it. Each of these three types of textual emphasis is listed and discussed below.

1. *Order-based highlighting.* One of the most basic ways of drawing attention to information in a text is by departing from the expected order of presentation. Those parts of a text that are absent from their conventional place are naturally conspicuous. A skillful communicator recognizes this (consciously or subconsciously) and uses this factor effectively to control theme production in a text. Two types of inversions occur in texts: grammatical/syntactical, and semantic.

One the most obvious ways in which information may be made prominent is through the deviation from statistically normal word order within clauses. Within Biblical Hebrew narrative this is accomplished by putting some element other than the verb word at the front of a clause (e.g. Gen 1:1). However, it may also be done at the sentence, paragraph, episode, story, or even story-cycle level. Changes in the customary order in which information is presented

in each of these structures serves to bring attention to the misplaced information and thus to contribute to the author-guided process of theme production.

Semantic, or content-related, highlighting based upon information order can occur in several forms. For years literary scholars have been aware that certain parts of stories have natural prominence. The peak, or author-intended point of greatest actional/thematic interest, of a typical story occurs within the final twenty-five to fifty percent of the composition. (How many Perry Mason cases are solved before the last fifteen minutes of the show?) By positioning events in the final half of a typical Hebrew narrative composition, the author draws special attention to them. Thus the events of the final chapter of Jonah can be considered to be of greater thematic interest than those of the first chapter.

Chronological displacements within narrative also serve on the semantic level to draw special emphasis to material and thus to indicate points of author-intended significance. A prime example of this is the so-called second creation story found in Gen 2:4–25. This series of events obviously occurred prior to the events of 2:1–3, yet it is presented afterwards. This chronological reversal serves the semantic function of highlighting certain aspects of God's creation of humanity.

2. *Quantity-based highlighting.* An extremely important factor in textual highlighting, especially at the higher levels of textual organization, is that which relates to the quantity of material present within the unit. Quite frequently an author will use the variable of quantity to indicate the portions of text that the author himself considers to be of greatest significance.

Clauses, sentences, paragraphs, stories and story cycles in narrative genre materials may be made more prominent by departing significantly from established norms. Normally this kind of highlighting occurs when a unit becomes particularly long. A fine example of this feature is found in Exod 12:29b, where a verbal structure fourteen words in length is found.[6] This happens to be the longest structure to that point in the first twelve chapters of Exodus. In a similar way the longest episodes within a story are naturally understood to be the most prominent and thus to contain the author-designated information of greatest significance. For example, within the story of the seven days of creation the sixth episode (Gen 1:24–31) contains 149 words, more than twice as many as any of the other episodes in that story.

Language structures may also be made more prominent grammatically as they contain unusually large numbers of statistically rare structures. While most episodes within Hebrew narratives contain some irregular verbal structures, some episodes contain many times more than is typical. The sixth episode of the story of creation contains nine irregular narrative framework constructions.

One of the most common forms of semantic quantity-based highlighting occurs when the ratio between the number of explicit verbal actions and the

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[6]According to the methodology used in the production of Bergen, *Verb Structural Profiles*, the verbal unit is composed of the following words: *wa-YHWH hikkâ kōl bĕkôr bĕ'ereṣ miṣrayim mibbĕkōr par'ōh . . . 'ad bĕkōr haššĕbî . . . wĕkōl bĕkōr bĕhēmâ.*

amount of clock time elapsed in the story increases significantly. For example, though each of the episodes in the story of creation is of equal length, the sixth episode contains eight events—thirty-three percent more than the third episode and one hundred percent more than each of the other five.

Semantic quantity-based highlighting can also occur within narrative by increasing the number of participants and/or referents present within a given episode. In narrative episodes intended by the author to be taken as particularly significant, it is common to have most (if not all) of the cast of characters explicitly mentioned or present in the action. A typical example of this is seen in Num 13:26–33 (the report of the spies), where Moses, Aaron, the entire Israelite community, the ten spies, Caleb, and Joshua—in other words, the universal set of characters—are all present in the action. Furthermore the Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites and Nephilim are all mentioned in quotations in this short section and thus indirectly brought onto the stage.

The employment of longer than normal quotations and uncharacteristically large numbers (e.g. the mention of massive casualties in 2 Kgs 19:23) as well as other quantitative modifications such as repetition of literary phrases or formulae also give semantic prominence to a section of text. A writer will thus commonly place the ideas he considers to be of greatest thematic significance within the longest quotes (e.g., Exod 25:1b—30:38, a divine quote 2,552 words long dealing with the tabernacle and priesthood).

3. *Type-based highlighting.* The final major factor within the language code that may be manipulated is that of unit type. A skillful writer will express ideas or events that he considers to be especially significant by means of unusual kinds of information-bearing structures. .

This may be carried out grammatically/syntactically on the word level by using statistically unusual vocabulary, rare verb forms (e.g. Exod 16:14c), or irregularly formed words (e.g. Gen 30:38e). Above the word level it may be accomplished by the usage of statistically rare clause, sentence, or paragraph types (e.g. Exod 10:14c, an asyndetic clause with a fronted prepositional phrase). Clauses and sentences may be made deviant either by the omission of expected information (e.g. Gen 19:23a, omission of normally mandatory conjunction), or by the inclusion of normally absent information (e.g. Genesis 1, overuse of explicit subjects in unambiguous contexts).

Type-based highlighting in the semantic realm of a text occurs most obviously when extraordinary events occur (e.g. Exod 14:21–28, parting of the Re[e]d Sea). But it also happens when events take place at unusual locations (e.g. a desert mountain, Exodus 19—20) or at unusual times (e.g. at night, Ruth 3:8–15).

Semantic highlighting of this variety is realized additionally through the event-line employment of nonhuman subjects. Thus an action performed by God is marked by the author as more thematically central than an otherwise identical action by a human being (e.g. speaking, Job 8:1; 38:1). Event-line references to inanimate objects (e.g. Exod 9:23c, fire) and portions of the human body in contradistinction to the entire person (e.g. Gen 45:26e, the heart) also serve semantically to betray points of author-intended significance. Furthermore the employment of verbs that imply intensity of action or emotion (e.g.

Ruth 3:8, Boaz' actions after being awakened) serves semantically to highlight an episode. By noting those episodes within a narrative that contain the highest number of such features, the reader can accurately draw conclusions about which parts of a text were considered by the original writer to be the most important.

III. A DISCOURSE-CRITICAL STRATEGY FOR DISCERNING AUTHORIAL INTENTION

Discourse criticism assumes that the writers of the Biblical texts intended certain ideas to be gained from their compositions by the reading audience. It assumes further that the authors communicated their intentions successfully to their original audiences, skillfully using both the conscious and subliminal dimensions of their indigenous language codes.

Discourse criticism also recognizes that the effect of theme within a text is the result of an author's bringing together of a constellation of various unusual or marked grammatical and semantic features within a text. No one particular feature is always used to mark the thematic centers of a text. Rather, intricate combinations of factors are interwoven in constantly varying patterns by the composer to direct the audience's attention particularly to certain portions of the text. Therefore a truly adequate approach to determining authorial intention within a text must investigate a document with a rigorous sensitivity to the writer's usage of information order, quantity and type.

To be done properly, however, such a task can obviously be extremely complex. First of all, it must be done from original-language texts. Second, it must be done by someone who has a precise knowledge of all of the norms of the variable factors present in the language code. Third, it must be carried out by someone who has the capacity to assimilate vast quantities of data into manageable, comprehensible packages. Fourth, it must be done by someone who has massive amounts of time to investigate such details.

Unfortunately, persons fitting this description are in short supply. However, attempts have been underway for some time now to overcome this problem. During the past seven years the present writer has had the opportunity to work in conjunction with the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Dallas, Texas, and the University of Texas at Arlington in undertaking a project to produce a discourse-critical profile of all of the narrative materials within the Hebrew Pentateuch. During this time a serious attempt has been made to establish a number of the statistical norms of various features present in Biblical Hebrew narrative.

This year Hannibal-LaGrange College has designated resources to carry out the twofold task of producing a database of macrolinguistic Biblical Hebrew information and developing a computer analysis program that will be able to map out points of author-designated significance within the Biblical text.[7] Versions of the program that now exists actually produce graphs of Scripture that indicate the relative degrees of linguistic prominence of the low-level structures

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[7]Further details about this project may be obtained by writing the author in care of Hannibal-LaGrange College, Hannibal, MO 63401.

in a text. While the already-developed computer model is still too simplistic to account for the dazzling complexities of human communication (it only accounts for six grammatical and semantic factors), it still produces some remarkable results. The successes of these initial undertakings suggest that further efforts are justified.[8] Indeed, it seems probable that even more impressive results may be expected in the foreseeable future as more factors are taken into account and as the model is expanded to handle multiple tiers of textual organization.

IV. Summary, with Implications

Human language, being a code, possesses means by which an author's intentions may be conveyed to one who is privy to the code. Every human language code is hierarchical and contains vast numbers of variable factors at every level of textual organization. The multiplicity of variables can be classified into three basic categories: order, amount and kind. Material is encoded by an author as more or less significant through the manipulation of these three variables. For the purposes of producing author-intended themes within a text, a writer will especially control these variables at the higher levels of textual organization (sentence and above). Materials are marked as important through the employment of language- and genre-specific features that are statistically deviant from the normal patterns of communication for that language and genre. Highlighting normally occurs through the simultaneous manipulation of several different variables in a text.

Though the languages used to record the Biblical record are all dead, existing only in a fixed nonspoken form, extensive stretches of text have been preserved. From these it it possible to determine essential features of certain of the language- and genre-specific codes, particularly those of Hebrew and Greek, which have the largest textual databases from which information may be drawn.

Discourse criticism has three primary purposes: (1) the discovery of the statistical structural and semantic norms of the Biblical languages for each genre and for each level of textual organization, (2) the development of computer-based tools that can identify and analyze the discourse linguistic features of Biblical text, and (3) the interpretation of these analyses for the purpose of Biblical exegesis. In the foreseeable future practitioners of discourse criticism will produce software capable of performing high-level textual exegesis, including the precise computerized identification and ranking of points of author-intended significance. Such futuristic tools, like their relatively unsophisticated counterparts being produced today, would be primarily based on verifiable statistics. As such they have the potential to produce a new standard of objectivity and accuracy in Biblical textual exegesis.

Clearly this approach to the Biblical text has potentially revolutionary implications for the field of Biblical studies. At least the following are to be noted: (1) Because it is fundamentally grounded in the grammatical structures of the

[8]See Hallberg, *Study*.

text, discourse criticism has the potential to serve as a corrective for forms of exegesis that look only at notions. (2) Because it is informed by a fuller understanding of language made possible by modern linguistic studies, it provides superior explanatory power for particular features of the Biblical text. Basically speaking, it updates Biblical criticism with the latest in discourse linguistic insights. It provides a theoretical framework for dealing with certain problems that have troubled Biblical scholars in the past. Questions dealing with repetitions, variant styles, genre switches, and other unusual phenomena within Biblical texts can now be dealt with on a broader base. (3) Discourse criticism provides a theoretical framework within which basic questions of sentence-level and post-sentence-level grammar may be answered. With this tool Biblical scholars have the possibility of producing scientific Biblical grammars beyond the clause and sentence levels up to the paragraph and post-paragraph levels of language.

Clearly this approach to the Biblical text also has potentially revolutionary implications for the field of Biblical hermeneutics. At the very least it will clarify as never before the semantic content of the structures themselves, not merely the semantic content in these structures. Discourse criticism has extended our awareness of what may be known about a text. It has taught us to ask new questions of the text. At the same time it has suggested a means by which the answers may be known. As these answers are being discovered, the results are a heightened and growing appreciation of the complexity and beauty of the Biblical text and its message.