

## GENERAL LINGUISTICS AND SOME EXEGETICAL FALLACIES

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It's the year 4009.<sup>1</sup> Archaeologists excavating a site in central North America have hit the mother lode: a large repository of texts in a West Germanic language known as "English." One of the texts includes this sentence:

When at the beginning of the revolution it had been feared that, as in 1905, the upheaval would be a short-lived episode in the history of the educated upper classes and leave the deeper layers of society untouched, everything possible had been done to spread revolutionary propaganda among the people to upset them, to stir them up and lash them into fury.

Some time later, in a commentary on these lines, a famous scholar made the following observations.

The word "revolution" has the basic meaning "progressive motion of a body around a center or axis." The English-speaker's concept of a "revolution" was as a phenomenon that was inevitably cyclical. "Episode" literally means "upon the way in" (Greek ἐπί + εἴσοδος). It is therefore an apt term for what follows "upon" a situation like the one the author describes.

In the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome, the Furies were vengeful divine beings who punished violations of hospitality or familial relations. Thus to "lash someone into a fury" is to flog someone for the purpose of turning him or her into a demigod endowed with supernatural powers and bent on revenge. Note that the main verbs in the sentence are both English past perfects ("had been feared," "had been done"). They are also in the passive voice, with the agents unexpressed. This reflects the worldview of the native English speaker, in which social change is a product of unknown, impersonal forces.

What would be wrong with the interpretation above? Nearly everything, and yet one frequently finds very similar arguments in commentaries on Scripture. Unfortunately, such arguments have a way of becoming exegetical commonplaces that are difficult to dis-

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<sup>1</sup>Introduction adapted from Moisés Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p 11ff.

lodge. They give every appearance of having penetrated the inner workings of a text. They seem to justify the many years spent mastering the Bible's original languages, something that many laypeople (and a few pastors) are hard put to understand. They appear pregnant with edifying thoughts and homiletical possibilities, and for too many commentators on Scripture, the potential of a proposition to inspire is somehow more important than whether it is true.<sup>2</sup> Many do not realize that, due to a fundamental misunderstanding of how language works, the text is being comically over-interpreted; or that however stimulating the exegesis might be in its own right, it does virtually nothing to help the reader understand what the author wanted to say.

Each of the fallacies in the exegesis above can be easily identified—and similar errors prevented—through an acquaintance with a few principles of general linguistics. Popularly, a “linguist” is a person interested in or good at languages. Properly speaking, however, linguistics is the systematic study of the structure and use of language as a human phenomenon. While a few linguists are polyglots, most are not. Many work almost exclusively with languages that are spoken in remote areas and by handfuls of people. This is not (usually) due to a general scholarly preference for the obscure, but to the fact that a linguist's goal is not to learn to speak or read a particular language. It is to investigate the ways in which language accomplishes those tasks in communication that are fundamental and universal.

Debates about linguistic issues are at least as old as Plato's *Cratylus*, but linguistics as a systematic discipline is relatively young and still maturing. This can lead a student to a certain amount of frustration. Categories and terminology can change completely from one author to another and between one scholarly conference and the next. Enough principles of linguistics have become settled conclusions, however, to make the discipline useful for exegetes of Scripture. Recent Bible commentaries make extensive use of linguistic arguments, and a certain familiarity with these is helpful for evaluating and using these commentaries profitably. But it is also useful for anyone who wants to elucidate the meaning of a biblical text with the confidence that what he or she has discovered in the text is really, objectively there.

Sub-disciplines within linguistics include phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, historical linguistics, and socio-linguistics. This list is not exhaustive and will undoubtedly meet with some disagreement. New sub-disciplines are born frequently, and old ones die off or are folded into

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<sup>2</sup>To paraphrase Alfred North Whitehead.

one another.<sup>3</sup> This article will survey a few principles of semantics, cognitive linguistics, and discourse analysis especially as these are helpful in exposing the fallacies in the fictional interpretation offered above.

1. *"This word has the basic meaning . . ."*

Two closely related fallacies are usually involved in statements like this one. One is known as "illegitimate totality transfer," which is essentially the notion that everything that a word *can* mean is at least potentially relevant every time it occurs.<sup>4</sup> The other is the idea of a "base meaning" to which every possible meaning of the word is ultimately reducible. I find it useful to distinguish the "base meaning" fallacy from the etymological fallacy discussed below. An interpreter may not necessarily attempt to deduce the "total meaning" or "base meaning" from the word's etymology, although this happens very often.

To illustrate: "dog" can mean "a four-footed animal that barks, wags its tail, and chases cats." This meaning would undoubtedly account for the majority of usages. Knowing this meaning would also help a non-native speaker to understand certain other meanings that the word can have ("dog his steps"), though it would not be very helpful with others ("put on the dog"). But for decoding the word in some of its uses, knowing this "basic meaning" would be useless. For example, what connection is there between "a friendly, barking quadruped" and "a device consisting of a spike or metal used for gripping or holding something as by driving or embedding it in the object"? Even if we could discern a connection, how would that help us understand a sentence like, "The lumberjack buried his dog in the log"?

Similarly, Moisés Silva observed that while in his native language (Spanish) *llave* can indicate a key, a faucet, or a wrench, nobody would ever conclude from this that native Spanish speakers use the same object for all three purposes.<sup>5</sup> But interpreters sometimes draw essentially the same conclusion about a biblical word. Witness, for example, the attempts to find one English meaning that will fit every occurrence of Hebrew  $\text{דָּבַר}$  or  $\text{דָּבָר}$  or of Greek παρακαλέω—regardless of the verb's subject, object, or wider context. Another example is that the claim that because the Septuagint uses πρόσφορα to translate "bread of the presence" in 1 Kings 7:48, the connotation "bread of the presence" is at least latent in every New Testament usage.

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<sup>3</sup>Discourse analysis, for example, involves both semantics and pragmatics and has been linked with both.

<sup>4</sup>James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p 218.

<sup>5</sup>Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p 25ff.

When appeal is made to etymology, as in the case of παρακαλέω, (“alongside” + “to call”), the problem is compounded further as we see in the next section.

2. “This word comes from the word(s) . . .”

This is the etymological or root fallacy: the idea that the search for the origin of a word will uncover the “basic meaning” of which all uses are derivations, and will therefore yield special insight into what the word “really” means.<sup>6</sup> Etymologies are fascinating in their own right and a legitimate interest for historical linguistics. But for interpreting a text, they are usually of very limited value.

It is easy to see why if we understand “meaning” primarily as “that which a speaker or writer intended to say.” Very rarely is a speaker or writer invoking a word’s pedigree at the moment that he or she speaks or writes it. English “companion” is one of hundreds of examples. Anybody with a remnant of Latin knows that, by etymology, my “companion” is “he with whom I share (*cum*) my bread (*panis*).” But exactly how would this help a non-native speaker understand what a contemporary author usually means by “companion”? In the same way, the origin of “nice” is the furthest thing from the mind of someone who calls you “a nice person.”<sup>7</sup> and to dissect “butterfly” or “pineapple” would do very little to help a non-native speaker of English understand either word.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, an author can make a conscious decision to use a word in its etymological sense, as we do in systematic theology when we use “providence” to mean God’s “foresight.” And in a synthetic language like Greek (i.e., a language that allows compound words) it can be helpful to recognize a word’s components (Example: ὀφθαλμοδουλία in Ephesians 6:6). This is especially true if the author coined the word on the spot, as seems to be the case with ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος in 1 Peter 4:15.<sup>9</sup>

But etymologies are useful primarily when we are dealing with a language, like biblical Hebrew, in which we have a relatively small corpus and thus a relatively small sample of usages. When we encounter a word that is unattested elsewhere, often we make our best guess about what it means based on an apparent tri-literal root or on a similar word in a cognate language. If the meaning that

<sup>6</sup>Barr, p 159.

<sup>7</sup>“Nice” is usually traced to the Latin “nescius”, “ignorant.” Obsolete English meanings are “coy”, “reluctant”, and “trivial.”

<sup>8</sup>D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p 28.

<sup>9</sup>Jeanine K. Brown, “Just a Busybody? A Look at the Greco-Roman Topos of Meddling for Defining ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος in 1 Peter 4:15,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 3 (2006), p 550.

results fits the context well, the proposal is worth considering. If the suggested origin for the word follows accepted rules for word derivation or change across languages, the proposed meaning becomes even more likely.

Notice, however, that even this makes etymology a last resort—something to fall back on when the factor that is normally decisive in determining meaning (usage) is limited or unavailable. It is completely illegitimate to use etymology to plumb alleged “depths of meaning” that are inaccessible to the reader who simply surveys usages of the word in context. Older reference works are replete with examples of this, however, and similarly flawed “word studies” continue to make the rounds of preachers and writers who haven’t gotten around to updating their libraries.

One example nearly as bad as the explanations of “episode” or “fury” above seems to have begun with Trench<sup>10</sup> and been continued by Robertson and Hofman.<sup>11</sup> This is the proposition that a ὑπηρέτης (e.g., 1 Corinthians 4:1) is by etymology an “under-rower” (ὑπό + ἑρέσσω), the oarsman on the bottom rank of a trireme. Such an oarsman, the story goes, would toil away in the bowels of the ship with no chance of sharing in the glory of battle. In fact, he wouldn’t even know where the ship was going. His job was simply to follow instructions precisely, to pull on his oar when commanded and until he was told to stop, and to work in perfect harmony with those around him. All this makes him the perfect model of a “servant” in Christ’s Church—faithful, hardworking, and the consummate “team player.”

There is no doubt at all that this is what a servant of Christ should be like. This conclusion, however, should be drawn from the numerous passages that actually say so rather than from an etymology for ὑπηρέτης—particularly from one that is in all probability false. A glance at Liddell-Scott reveals that there are very few places in classical Greek in which a ὑπηρέτης is a rower (though a large number of references in which he is a “servant” of some other kind). And there is no evidence that, in classical Greek, the ὑπό prefix had anything to do with the bottom rank on a trireme.

But even if classical usage supported the interpretation (which it does not), this would prove nothing. In the New Testament, a ὑπηρέτης is simply never a “rower,” let alone an “under-rower.” There is nothing the least bit nautical about any of the contexts in which ὑπηρέτης is used in the New Testament, and thus no evidence that the evangelists

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<sup>10</sup>Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 9th ed. (London: MacMillan, 1876), p 48.

<sup>11</sup>According to Carson, p 27f.

or apostles who used the word had anything connected with rowing in mind. Furthermore, if the fine qualities listed above inhere in the “basic meaning” of ὑπηρέτης, we might ask how they apply to the temple police in John 7:32 or the prison guards in Acts 5:22. For certain audiences, to exploit homiletically the example of the trireme-rower given above might be legitimate. But it would be no more “textual” than to use as an illustration the nose tackle on a football team, the shipping clerk in the bowels of corporate headquarters, or the first-grade teacher in a Lutheran elementary school.

Similar appeals to a “basic meaning” derived from etymology have bedeviled the discussion of whether μονογενής comes from γεννᾶν, which would seem to legitimize the translation “only-begotten,” or from γίνεσθαι, which would not.<sup>12</sup> The entire argument assumes that if the word’s etymology could be ascertained, then so could its meaning, when this is simply not true. Time would be better spent surveying actual uses of μονογενής, noting the point under discussion in each context and seeing what general conclusions about its meaning might be warranted. Another example is the oft-heard observation that “apostle” is the equivalent of “missionary,” derived as it is from ἀποστέλλειν, to “send away.” New Testament usage suggests otherwise. When the New Testament calls someone an “apostle,” most often the point is his having received an authoritative commission, not the fact of his being “sent out” or “sent away.”<sup>13</sup>

### 3. “The basic concept of a ‘revolution’ is . . .”

For linguists, a primary characteristic of language is its arbitrariness. In other words, contrary to Plato’s argument in the *Cratylus*, there is ultimately no reason other than convention that the friendly, barking quadruped lying on my floor as I write this should be called a “dog” rather than something else. This is obvious from the fact that often it is called something else—a כּוּלֵּי, κύων, *canis*, *Hund*, *chien*, *cão*, or *perro*. There is almost never any discernible connection between a word and its referent. Onomatopoeia are sometimes considered an exception. But even here, American roosters say *Cockadoodledoo!* and Brazilian roosters say *Cocoricó!* even though the actual sound that comes out of both birds is identical. Even with onomatopoeia, the connection between a word and its referent is not a necessary one.

In part because a language is a set of arbitrary symbols, languages can use a single word to indicate several different referents, or use several words for the same referent (known as synonymity). It makes no difference whether the referent in question is a barking quadruped,

<sup>12</sup>Carson, p 29f.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

the sound from a rooster, or a theological concept. Concepts and the terms used to express them are not reducible to one another. The same term can be used for multiple concepts, and the same concept can be referred to by any number of terms.

This makes a “theological lexicon” or “theological dictionary” a questionable enterprise both on linguistic and theological grounds. There is much that is valuable in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), for example. But as a tool for language study, its weakness is on display in those many articles that purport to give a definition for a word, but launch instead into a protracted excursus on a concept that soon leaves the word far behind. Zimmerli and Jeremias’s article on  $\pi\alpha\iota\varsigma\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$  is one example. We begin by discussing the meaning of  $\text{עֶבֶד}$ , but soon find ourselves discussing a servant or servants of God who are called something else entirely.<sup>14</sup>

Its failure to distinguish terms from concepts would make TDNT just as inadequate as a work of theology. The biblical concept of “sin,” for example, is simply not the sum total of the passages that use  $\text{חַטָּא}$  or  $\acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\alpha}\nu\epsilon\upsilon$ .<sup>15</sup> There are passages that are highly relevant for this doctrine that use a different word for “sin” (or none at all). There are also passages that use  $\text{חַטָּא}$  or  $\acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\alpha}\nu\epsilon\upsilon$  that would be irrelevant. This means that the argument that Scripture rarely refers to believers as “sinners,” whether or not it is correct, is theologically inconclusive.

The flawed linguistic principles underlying TDNT were convincingly demonstrated by James Barr in his *Semantics of Biblical Language*, and his critique has become the standard work on the subject. He argues:

Theological thought of the type found in the NT has its characteristic linguistic expression not in the word individually but in the word-combination or sentence . . . [Since] important elements in the NT vocabulary were not technical . . . the attempt to relate the individual word directly to the theological thought leads to the distortion of the semantic contribution made by words in contexts.<sup>16</sup>

Simply put, the failure to distinguish between a word and a concept loads individual words down with more freight than they can carry. It posits arcane, technical senses for words whose authors considered them quite ordinary, and whose common English translations are very adequate. Frequently the result is an exegesis that bogs down before it even approaches the point of the sentence or the text

<sup>14</sup>V, pp 654-717.

<sup>15</sup>Silva, *Biblical Words*, p 26f.

<sup>16</sup>Barr, p 233f.

as a whole—i.e., it stops well short of what the author actually wanted to say (See below).

#### 4. *This reflects the worldview . . .*

There is a widely- and deeply-held belief that language is essentially the same thing as thought, and that therefore to speak a different language is to think thoughts that differ essentially. As Benjamin Lee Whorf put it, “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages.”<sup>17</sup> In its most radical form, “linguistic determinism” holds that what we can think about and how we can think about it have already been decided for us by the language that we happen to speak. From this it would follow that prospects for cross-cultural communication (including translation) are bleak indeed. The possibilities for comparative philology, however, are boundless.

Conscious or unconscious linguistic determinism underlies the attempt to draw sweeping conclusions about a people’s worldview from its language. In biblical studies, the result at one time was the popularity of books with titles like *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, many of whose arguments linguists today find embarrassing. These include:

- 1) The Israelites tended to see reality as a totality, eschewing the distinctions of which the Greek mind was so fond.<sup>18</sup>
- 2) Hebrew has no neuter gender because to the Semitic mind all things are alive.<sup>19</sup>
- 3) “It is the nature of the Greek language to be exact, subtle, and clear.”<sup>20</sup>
- 4) The Hebrew vocabulary is built up from verbal roots, and its preferred word order (VSO) puts the verb first. This demonstrates that the Hebrew worldview was dynamic rather than static.
- 5) Greek creates abstract nouns out of verbs, proving that the Greek worldview was static rather than dynamic.
- 6) Because the Hebrew language is so economical, it was the ideal language in which to record the vast span of history in the Old Testament.

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<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (NY: William Morrow & Co., 1994), p 49.

<sup>18</sup>Barr, p 13 *et passim*. One wonders whether the frequent use of *הִפִּיל* in *hifil* (“to distinguish”) in Genesis 1 or Leviticus 20 indicates that here God is really thinking Greek, not Hebrew.

<sup>19</sup>Norman Geisler and William Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 219. Quoted in Silva, *Biblical Words*, p 21.

<sup>20</sup>H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Chicago: Aldine, 1951), p 27f.



- 7) Greek is the ideal language in which to record history because its tense system can distinguish complex relationships of time.<sup>21</sup>
- 8) Because Greek is so precise, it was the ideal language for the New Testament, with its theological concepts that demand precise expression.
- 9) The “speech of the Semites is still formed well back in the throat and abounds in guttural sounds, as is the case with all primitive peoples . . . [who] have not yet become masters of their mouth.”<sup>22</sup>
- 10) A clumsily literal translation is a good way to make the reader or hearer aware of the stark difference in worldviews between source language and target language.

The problem with these arguments is not only their inappropriate value judgments. Nor is it merely the fact that—like all stereotypes—they tend to be impervious to disproof. For instance, their proponents remain untroubled by the fact that plenty of inscrutable nonsense has been written in Greek,<sup>23</sup> or that philosophy of great subtlety has been written in Hebrew. Nor is the real problem the fact that these observations contradict one another, so that proponents who agree that the Hebrew and Greek worldviews are very different draw sharply different conclusions about what the difference might be.

The real problem is that, at least in linguistics, “linguistic determinism” has had to be modified radically if not discarded altogether. In cognitive linguistics, debate continues about exactly how much a language reveals about and influences the way that its speakers think. For example, what (if anything) should we conclude from the fact that Dyirbal, a language spoken by Australian aborigines, has one semantic category that includes “women, fire, and dangerous things”?<sup>24</sup>

But there is nearly universal agreement that thought and language are not the same thing. A basic principle of cognitive linguistics is that human beings do not think in a particular language, but in a kind of “mentalese” which is translatable into practically any language at all.<sup>25</sup> When someone who is acquiring a second language

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<sup>21</sup>Carson, p 45.

<sup>22</sup>J. P. Koehler, “The Wonderful in Luther’s Poetry,” in Curtis Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Gospel* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1997), vol. III, p 501f. Ironically, this could be said of German.

<sup>23</sup>A classicist friend points out what a wonderful device the Greek genitive absolute can be for concealing what one really means.

<sup>24</sup>The title of George Lakoff’s recent book. It does not follow that for speakers of Dyirbal “women, fire, and dangerous things” have something in common on the conceptual level.

<sup>25</sup>Pinker, p 44ff.

says, "I can think in Spanish," she isn't really thinking in Spanish—or in English either. She has simply achieved enough skill to be able to translate her "mentalese" into Spanish directly, without having to route it first through her mother tongue.

The implication for biblical studies is that ham-handed comparisons of, e.g., the Hebrew verb system with the Greek verb system are unlikely to reveal any really useful insights about the way that speakers of these languages think, or to be of any real help in understanding a particular text. And it would be absurd to give more attention to observations of this kind than to those direct statements in which native Hebrew or Greek speakers actually tell us what they think.

But if there is bad news here for linguistic determinists, there is good news for cross-cultural communication. If language and thought are not the same, then the likelihood increases that what can be said in one language can be said in another. It will have to be said differently, of course. But substantive communication across cultures, including translation, is indeed possible.

##### 5. *"This word . . ." "That word . . ."*

An important meta-observation about the fictional interpretation with which we began is that it focuses almost exclusively on individual words. In a great deal of uninformed commentary on Scripture, these are assumed to be the primary carriers of meaning. The meaning of a sentence, it is then assumed, is the sum of the meanings of the words that comprise it.

It may be that these assumptions are reinforced by traditional methods of language learning, in which students are taught the alphabet, then phonetics, then morphology, then a vocabulary; and finally how to combine words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. Perhaps this approach to language learning is unavoidable to a degree. But if students conclude that exegesis is primarily a matter of reversing the process by which they learned the language in the first place, they have been misled.

One result of this tendency is a predilection for crudely literal translations that communicate either nothing or inaccurately in the target language. This is especially obvious in the case of idioms—for example: Hebrew  $\int\eta$   $\eta\eta$ , which usually means not "Who will give?" but "If only . . . !" To realize that this is the correct translation requires looking outside the constituents of the phrase to its use in a sentence. But it is not unheard-of for students to be rewarded rather than corrected for translations like "Who will give?" Some even come to regard such a translation as somehow reflecting a high view of Scripture, as

if it were an act of reverence for a text to remain ignorant of what its author actually wanted to say.

The enduring popularity of “word studies” often seems to reflect this assumption that it is mainly single words that carry meaning and that to understand every word in a sentence is to understand the whole. There may be an additional factor. Carson proposes that when an exegete’s language skills begin to slip, he becomes unable to read text in quantity, and he tends to forget about grammar and syntax altogether. To consider a paragraph or even a sentence in the original language is beyond him; but he can still consult his dictionary and create a “word study.” Therefore, he is liable to any number of mistakes caused by faulty semantics.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned above, another appeal of “word studies” is the tangible payoff for original language study that they seem to provide. Benjamin Chapman’s splendid *New Testament Insert* contains a word of advice about this.

A note of warning! If you do a massive word study on, say, ἀκολουθεῖω in Matt. 8:19, and after all that work decide that in fact it means nothing more than “to follow,” a meaning you could have gotten right out of the NIV, you may become disenchanted with the value of all your Greek learning. After all, how can you say, “In the Greek, this word literally means ‘to follow,’” when anyone with a Bible can readily spot that? In fact, you may have stumbled on the true value of Greek exegesis: that while it occasionally yields insight into individual words, its goal is to help you to follow the flow of sentences and paragraphs.<sup>27</sup>

Actually, a focus on individual words is both too broad and too narrow. The smallest unit of language that can carry meaning or grammatical function is not a word, but a part of a word (known as the “morpheme”—e.g., the suffix on a Hebrew verb in *qatal*). Zoom out a bit and you have a word; but a word is (usually) not yet a predication. That is, normally a bare word does not yet propose something that, for example, can be either true or false. For that, you need a sentence.<sup>28</sup> If this is true, then the sentence—not the individual words in it—ought to consume most of our time and energy. But in the fictional commentary above, a study on the sentence-level is glaringly absent, although it would have brought the commentator much closer to an understanding of what the author was actually trying to say.

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<sup>26</sup>Carson, p 66.

<sup>27</sup>Benjamin Chapman and Gary Steven Shogen, *Greek New Testament Insert*, rev. ed. Quakertown, PA : Stylus, 1994, electronic (unpaginated) edition.

<sup>28</sup>Under “sentence” many linguists include what is called a “clause” in traditional grammar.

What would have happened if the commentator above had taken a careful look at the sentence? He would have found one temporal clause—"as in 1905" (which has the deep structure<sup>29</sup> "This *happened* in 1905")—nested within another temporal clause: "When . . ." The banal observation that the two main verbs are in the past perfect might have led him to the useful conclusion that this sentence breaks the linear time sequence of the narrative in order to provide background information. That, in turn, would have led the interpreter to investigate the sentence's connection both to what precedes and what follows, and perhaps to diagram these connections. He would then have discovered that the sentence is part of a direct characterization of a minor character named Pamphil Palykh, the purpose of which is to explain how Palykh came to be highly thought of despite his repugnant qualities.<sup>30</sup> At this point, the interpreter would not only have reached a useful understanding of what the sentence means. Knowingly or unknowingly, he would have entered the world of discourse analysis.

It might be useful to define "discourse analysis" as "grammar on the macro-level." It investigates the relationship of one sentence to another, or one paragraph to another, in much the same way that syntax investigates relationships between constituents of a phrase, clause, or sentence—although the kinds of relationships involved can be very different.<sup>31</sup> In his *The Grammar of Discourse*, for instance, Robert E. Longacre begins with a taxonomy intended to help the reader answer the crucial question, "Exactly what kind of discourse am I reading?" He then lists a finite number of ways in which predications can be joined together into sentences and paragraphs, explains the purpose for each method, and shows what the pattern of methods selected by an author reveals about his or her message.

Discourse analysis also investigates the question of cohesion. In other words, does the discourse "hang together" and "lead somewhere"? If so, how has the author achieved this? Naturally, different discourse types cohere in very different ways. For example, both narrative and procedural (e.g., a cake recipe) texts normally have a backbone of linear, temporally-sequenced material from which digressions occur as necessary. Exhortations or dogmatic treatises function very differently.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>The term "deep structure," so impressive when dropped casually into a conversation, means nothing more than what the sentence fundamentally communicates. The same "deep structure" can be expressed by any number of different "surface structures."

<sup>30</sup>The sentence is from Boris Pasternak, *Dr. Zhivago*, Max Hayward and Many Harari, transl. (NY: Pantheon, 1958), p 349.

<sup>31</sup>Joseph E. Grimes, *The Thread of Discourse* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p 4.

<sup>32</sup>Grimes, p 257.

Prominence, both within the sentence and within larger units, is another important area of investigation for discourse analysts. An understanding of how prominence functions in the language and in the kind of text under study is extremely useful for the exegete who wants to determine “What did the author consider most significant?”—and to avoid an exegesis that “majors in minors.”

But an understanding of how cohesion and prominence work is valuable for creators of discourse, not just for consumers. Discourse analysis can provide a homiletician with a set of tools for fixing a broken sermon—e.g., one that doesn’t hang together or lacks impact. It also suggests an approach for teaching homiletics across cultures. One method, of course, is to impose a Western theme-and-parts, deductive model on cultures that simply don’t talk this way. A better method might be to select models of discourse that cultural insiders report are effective, and to seek to determine how these speakers or authors have succeeded in their task—as, for example, E. R. Wendland has done with the Chichewa sermons of Shadrack Wame in *Preaching that Grabs the Heart*. A culturally-appropriate homiletics could then be distilled from these models. Such an approach would be a massive undertaking. But in the long run it might entail less work, and less frustration, than insisting that preachers everywhere must learn to preach and listeners to listen in the same way that Westerners do.

Is discourse analysis—for that matter, is linguistics—an infallible guarantee of exegetical probity? Of course not. Silva himself points to the potential misconception that linguistics somehow obviates the need for reader intuition and plain common sense.<sup>33</sup> Another misconception would be the notion that as complex a phenomenon as language can be reduced to a list of formulae. When we approach a text, particularly one that is inspired, linguistics will not tell us everything we need to know. Often its chief value lies in helping us to define precisely what it is that we do not know. On the other hand, it often enables an interpreter to demonstrate that an interpretation has in fact originated with the text and not merely with the interpreter him—or herself. That is, linguistics not only has proven value for exegesis. It is a natural ally of sound hermeneutics.

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<sup>33</sup>Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture*, p 122.