

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND HERMENEUTICS
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In the last half of the twentieth century a small, but growing, number of biblical scholars have claimed that linguistics is a discipline that can make a significant contribution to biblical studies.¹ One of the primary ways that linguistics has been applied to biblical studies is through discourse analysis. However, linguistic methods such as discourse analysis have not been welcomed by all and have not been quickly embraced by biblical scholars in general.² Should discourse analysis be used in biblical exegesis? In order to answer this question, one must identify and evaluate the linguistic presuppositions that discourse analysis is founded upon.

At least one writer does not think that one should use linguistics in biblical exegesis, Robert Thomas. This professor of New Testament at The Master's Seminary wrote an article entitled "Modern Linguistics Versus Traditional Hermeneutics."³ In it he concludes that modern linguistics

has positive features in relation to hermeneutics when it coincides with principles of traditional grammatical-historical principles. But in an overall appraisal of the value of the

¹E. A. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 91/1 (March 1972): 73.

²Reed writes that discourse analysis has not had a "lasting, substantive impact on the whole of NT scholarship" Jeffery T. Reed, "Discourse Analysis as New Testament Hermeneutic: A Retrospective and Prospective Appraisal," *JETS* 39/2 (June 1996): 223.

³Robert L. Thomas, "Modern Linguistics Versus Traditional Hermeneutics," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 14/1 (Spring 2003): 23-45. The contents of this article are an abridgment of chapter eight in Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002).

field, it stands opposed to that traditional method in so many crucial areas that it can only detract from interpretive analyses of the meaning of the biblical text.⁴

Thomas evaluates the use of modern linguistics in biblical exegesis hermeneutically and offers a number of criticisms to support his conclusion. Thomas' article is a good place to begin an evaluation of the linguistic foundations of discourse analysis. Thomas writes, "Discourse analysis is the ultimate court of appeal for modern linguistics."⁵ Those who advocate the use of linguistics in biblical studies agree that discourse analysis is an approach to Scripture that embraces the tenets of modern linguistics.⁶

"Modern Linguistics Versus Traditional Hermeneutics"

1. *Thomas argues that "modern linguistics advocates accept the inevitability of the interpreter's bias affecting his interpretation of Scripture."*⁷

This is Thomas' first criticism of using linguistics in biblical interpretation. The difficulty with this evaluation is that the problem of the interpreter's bias is a general hermeneutics issue and is not particularly influenced by the use of linguistics in biblical interpretation. Since biblical scholars who utilize linguistics do not base their position on this subject on linguistic principles, their various views are not relevant to the question of the

⁴Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 44.

⁵Ibid., 40.

⁶After discussing semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, Jeffery Reed writes, "Discourse analysis involves all of the above disciplines of linguistics and several others." Jeffery T. Reed, "Modern Linguistics and the New Testament: A Basic Guide to Theory, Terminology, and Literature," In *Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and David Tombs, 222–265 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 247. See also Lee Martin McDonald and Stanley E. Porter, *Early Christianity and Its Sacred Literature* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 35.

⁷Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 24.

legitimacy of using linguistics in interpretation. However, the interpreter's bias is an important hermeneutical question, and its relationship to discourse analysis should be considered.

Anyone who thinks that it is important to determine the biblical authors' intention in interpretation will sympathize with Thomas' concern. Moisés Silva, whom Thomas is responding to, is also sympathetic to this goal.⁸ Silva suggests that it is not realistic to think that one can ignore or lay aside his preunderstanding, so instead he must become aware of it and allow the truth to modify his worldview when the Scripture challenges him to do so.⁹ Both Thomas and Silva seek objectivity, Silva through acknowledgment and modification, Thomas by seeking to "repress any personal expectations."¹⁰

Thomas also responds to Peter Cotterell and Max Turner on the issue of the interpreter's bias. Unfortunately, Thomas' first quote from their work was not an explanation of their own view but the description of a criticism of E. D. Hirsch.¹¹ However, the next quotation reveals (as well as other portions of Cotterell and Turner's work) that their own view is

⁸In that same passage that Thomas quotes from in his article, Silva writes, "All of this means that the object of discovering authorial intent remains valid. That when we speak of the meaning of the text our primary concern should be authorial meaning." Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 148.

⁹In another work Silva explains, "We can very easily become slaves of tradition if we ignore it or deny that we are affected by it. The most effective way to be freed from such bondage is to understand the tradition and to evaluate it fairly, accepting the good and rejecting the bad." Moisés Silva, *Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 18.

¹⁰Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 25. It is not the purpose of this paper to propose an answer to this problem. However, it seems more realistic, and thus more helpful, for one to strive for objectivity by acknowledging the inevitability of presuppositions and understand them so that he does not allow them to determine his exegesis and so that his exegesis might in turn modify his presuppositions. See Stanley E. Porter and Kent D. Clarke, "What is Exegesis? An Analysis of Various Definitions," In *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 13-15.

¹¹E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

problematic. Although Cotterell and Turner acknowledge the danger of the interpreter's bias and suggest that one should utilize a method that will test one's reading of a passage, they do not seem to have any real hope that one can attain enough objectivity to attain any certainty in his interpretation.¹²

This uncertainty does not fit well into a person's theology who maintains that the purpose of God's Word is to communicate truth to His people and that they are expected to respond in obedience. Thomas said it well: "God's purpose in granting biblical revelation to the human race was to make His will known, not to create uncertainty among the recipients of His revelation."¹³ However, it must again be emphasized that a view of uncertainty is not inherent to linguistics and discourse analysis. In fact it may be argued that discourse analysis, with its focus on the original situational and literary context, helps the interpreter to discern the author's meaning of the text in spite of his preunderstanding. Richard Erickson suggests that linguistic analysis "can cooperate with hermeneutics, for example, . . . 'by distancing the interpreter from the text and allowing it to speak in its particularity.'"¹⁴

*2. Linguists assume "that the language of the Bible will bear all the characteristics of human language in general as propounded by modern linguistic study."*¹⁵

¹²They write that because of the interpreter's bias, "We may never know whether we have fully grasped the 'discourse meaning' of any particular writing." They also write, "At best we can hope to approximate to the discovery of the author's meaning. . . . It may be difficult to establish even the strong probability (let alone certainty) of any single hypothesis about the 'original meaning' of an ancient text." Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 69, 71.

¹³ Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 38.

¹⁴Richard J. Erickson, "Linguistics and Biblical Language: A Wide Open Field," *JETS* 26/3 (Sept 1983): 261. Within this statement he quotes from A. C. Thiselton, "The Semantics of Biblical Language as an Aspect of Hermeneutics," *Faith and Thought* 103/2 (1976): 118.

¹⁵Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 25.

In contrast to Thomas' last criticism, this one is certainly an assumption that is inherent to linguistics. If the above assumption is true, then it seems unnecessary to ask if biblical exegetes should use linguistics, which is the study of how language works, to better understand the language of the Bible.¹⁶ An accurate understanding of how language works in general would certainly help someone to interpret specific occurrences of language. Erickson argues,

As a scientific analysis of language and language meaning (fundamental characteristics of the "Word of God"), linguistics and semantics and the results of the application of their methods to the Biblical texts can form the basis both of exegetical and hermeneutical "rules" and of the raw material on which these rules operate.¹⁷

In light of this obvious application of linguistics to biblical interpretation, one way to deny the usefulness of linguistics is to claim that the language of Scripture is unique and therefore cannot be compared to language in general. Thomas writes, "Inspiration impacted the form, style, and words of Scripture so that the result is not just another form of human communication."¹⁸

A survey of the history and development of New Testament Greek and its comparison with contemporary Greek literature leads one to conclude that the New Testament "is written in a form of non-literary Greek of the Hellenistic period."¹⁹ The form, style, and words of the New Testament are not different from the Greek of its time. Thomas writes, "To be sure, God used normal human language when He inspired the Bible, but the ultimately divine origin of that

¹⁶As Stanley Porter observes, "the study of the New Testament is essentially a language-based discipline." Stanley E. Porter, "Discourse Analysis and New Testament Studies: An Introductory Survey," In *Discourse Analysis and Other Topics in Biblical Greek*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, 14–35 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 14.

¹⁷Erickson, "Linguistics," 260.

¹⁸Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 29

¹⁹Stanley E. Porter, "The Greek Language of the New Testament," In *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 105. See his discussion of New Testament Greek, 99-106.

language certainly puts it into a unique category.”²⁰ If God used normal human language, why should we not expect it to “bear all the characteristics of human language in general?” Scripture is certainly to be viewed as unique and different from all other writings based on its inspiration of God. The Bible is certainly not “just another form of human communication,” but it is not less either. It is not the language of the Bible that is unique; it is the message, inerrancy, and truth that place it in a unique category. It seems, then, that there is no inconsistency in affirming that Scripture is the inspired Word of God *and* that God used normal human language that is comparable to all human language.

The assumption that biblical languages “bear all the characteristics of human language in general” is central to discourse analysis. Discourse analysts are interested, in part, in identifying the smaller units that a discourse consists of, determining how those parts relate to one another and contribute to the whole, and discovering the overall structure and theme of a discourse. This is done by observing the discourse markers, rhetorical devices and structure that naturally occur in all languages or that occur in particular languages and cultures.

3. *“The hermeneutics of modern linguistics must be integrated with human discoveries in other secular fields.”*²¹

Those who seek to know the truth of God from Scripture and to test all truth claims by that revelation can sympathize with Thomas’ concern that our approach to Scripture not be informed by theories or perspectives that are not in keeping with God’s Word. Thomas writes, “Modern linguistics draws upon several secular fields of knowledge in building its own system

²⁰Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 26.

²¹Ibid., 25.

of analyzing human language.”²² It appears that Thomas would want to exclude any “secular field of knowledge” from biblical interpretation. Silva points out that other such fields are expected to be consulted in biblical studies:

While biblical commentators, for example, are expected to make responsible use of ancillary disciplines—such as archaeology, textual criticism, classical studies, and so on—linguistic theory is virtually absent from the standard commentaries, even though a commentator must deal constantly with the nature of language before drawing exegetical conclusions.²³

Historical study, for example, is ideally a descriptive enterprise that is heavily used in biblical studies to understand the Bible’s historical context. Sometimes historical studies are carried out with agendas and presuppositions harmful to good interpretation, but it can still be utilized if it is executed with an informed caution. Likewise, linguistics is ideally a descriptive discipline: it simply seeks to describe how language works. David Black writes,

Adherence to the linguistic point of view entails a preference for a more revealing and exact description, and eventually explanation, of linguistic facts, but it need not entail a rejection of traditional values and emphases. Since it is a descriptive discipline, linguistics does not, because it cannot, prove or undermine any theological or philosophical position.²⁴

4. “*A pronounced tendency of modern linguistics is to downplay the importance of diachronics in lexicography.*”²⁵

This is an accurate description of how linguistics is applied to biblical studies. Of all the contributions that linguistics has made to exegesis, the principle that synchronic studies

²² Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 27.

²³ Moisés Silva, “Forward,” In David Alan Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek: A Survey of Basic Concepts and Applications* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), ix.

²⁴ David Alan Black, “The Study of New Testament Greek in the Light of Ancient and Modern Linguistics,” In *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 249

²⁵ Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 31.

should be primary (as opposed to diachronic studies) has had the most lasting and far reaching influence. There is a consensus among biblical scholars that James Barr, in his *Semantics of Biblical Language*, permanently changed lexicography by evaluating it from a linguistic perspective.²⁶ He writes,

Etymology is not, and does not profess to be, a guide to the semantic value of words in their current usage, and such value has to be determined from the current usage and not from the derivation. Hundreds of examples could be adduced where words have come to be used in a sense widely divergent from, or even opposed to, the sense of the forms from which they were derived.²⁷

If Barr is correct, and most biblical scholars believe that he is, then linguists are right in focusing on synchronic words study over diachronic word study. Most books on hermeneutics and exegesis warn the reader not to determine word meaning from etymology, but to find it by understanding the word's use at the time of writing and its literary context.²⁸

Thomas argues for the importance of diachronic studies by stating that “an interpreter must reconstruct the history in order to appreciate what was subconsciously available for an ancient culture and therefore an implied element in his usage of a given word.”²⁹ This single,

²⁶See David Alan Black, “Hebrews 1:1–4: A Study in Discourse Analysis,” *WTJ* 49 (1987): 175; Silva, “Forward,” ix; D. A. Carson, “An Introduction to Introductions,” In *Linguistics and the NT: Critical Junctures*, ed Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 18; Anthony C. Thiselton, “Semantics and New Testament Interpretation,” In *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 75.

²⁷James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1961), 107.

²⁸See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 35ff.; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 69-71; William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1993), 187-88; J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 129.

²⁹Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 32. In his book, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, Thomas admits that older meanings of words often become obsolete. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 205. Therefore it must be the subconsciously implied element of the communicator which is supplied by past, possibly

unsubstantiated claim simply does not stand against the clear evidence presented in Barr's "epoch making book."³⁰ Thomas claims that "the traditional method is, of course, just as interested in synchronics as is the modern linguist."³¹ However, most scholars acknowledge the abundance of evidence supplied by Barr concerning the overall practice of word studies at the time of his writing and agree with Grant Osborne when he writes, "Until recently scholars believed that the key to a word's meaning lay in its origin and history."³²

Closely associated with a focus on synchronic word study is the linguist's dependence upon context for determining word meaning. To know the meaning of a word is to know how it is used, in the cultural context and time in which it is used and in the particular situational or literary context in which it occurs. In this approach to word meaning, one can see the importance of discourse analysis, which emphasizes the context of the entire discourse to determine the meaning of paragraphs, sentences, and words. The more one understands the context, the greater his ability will be to discover the intended meaning of the words within it.

5. *Thomas claims that "another pronounced tendency of modern linguistic lexicography is to emphasize that a word cannot denote a concept."*³³

Although linguists are certainly concerned with the distinction between words and concepts, they do not exactly claim that a word cannot denote a concept.³⁴ Thomas argues that

obsolete, usages that justifies doing etymological studies. Attempting to reconstruct subconsciously implied meaning from past usages seems to transgress the traditional exegetical practice that he is trying to preserve.

³⁰Thiselton, "Semantics," 75.

³¹Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 33. In his book, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, Thomas admits that older meanings of words often become obsolete. It is difficult to understand why he would continue to argue for etymological word studies.

³²Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 69.

³³Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 33.

“through extensive usage in various contexts, some words do equate to concepts and so would dispute the claims of modern linguistics that words and concepts must be distinct from each other.”³⁵ This argument betrays a misunderstanding of the discussion. Just because a word may symbolize a concept, that does not mean that words and concepts are not distinct from one another.³⁶ Black explains, “All languages have several ways of expressing a concept, and rarely does a concept consist of only one word.”³⁷ Furthermore, a word may be able to designate more than one concept when it appears in different contexts.

Equating words and concepts is the mistake for which Barr criticizes Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary*.³⁸ A single New Testament concept may be expressed by several different words.³⁹ Therefore in order to grasp the New Testament’s understanding of a concept, a study must be done of all the words that may denote that concept. It is true, as Thomas asserts, that traditional exegesis has valued Kittel’s *Dictionary* and other lexical works of the same nature. However, if the work is flawed in its method, and therefore does not accomplish what it has set out to do, and does not supply the Bible student with the information he needs, then a new approach is warranted.

³⁴Cotterell and Turner indicate in their examples that the word “boy” does, as some level, represent the English speaker’s concept of a boy. Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 116-17.

³⁵Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 34. It is difficult to understand why Thomas, in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, writes that “words and concepts should not be confused with each other.” Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 205.

³⁶Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 205.

³⁷Black, “Linguistics,” 123.

³⁸Barr, *Semantics*, 206ff.

³⁹Black, “Linguistics,” 123.

In addition to the fact that concepts are rarely represented by only one word, in most cases it requires more than one word to communicate a concept. Barr extends this principle to theological concepts: “It is the sentence (and of course the still larger literary complex such as the complete speech or poem) which is the linguistic bearer of the usual theological statement, and not the word (the lexical unit) or the morphological and syntactical connection.”⁴⁰ This linguistic phenomenon again emphasizes the importance of discourse analysis for exegesis. The most accurate identification of the concepts that words and their combinations communicate will depend on an understanding of the entire discourse. Also, since theological ideas are communicated primarily at the sentence level and above, then the study of the relationships of sentences and paragraphs (a central concern of discourse analysis) is essential.

6. *Thomas writes that linguists maintain that “the biblical languages have nothing unique to say, based on their syntactical relationships” and that grammatical relationships are unimportant.*⁴¹

This topic is closely related to the discussion of whether or not biblical languages bear the characteristics of all languages. If they do, as we have discussed above, then it follows that Greek grammatical structure is similar to the grammatical structure of other languages. In the passage from E. A. Nida that Thomas is referring to, Nida is making the point that Greek grammar is not different from other languages.⁴² This statement is very different from saying that the Bible has nothing unique to say. To say that Greek grammar must be unique in order for the message of Scripture to be unique is a confusion of the content (semantic meaning) and form

⁴⁰Barr, *Semantics*, 263.

⁴¹Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 36. Thomas asserts that a quote from Silva “reflects the unimportance placed upon grammatical relationships found in Scripture.” Ibid.

⁴²Nida, “Implications,” 83.

(syntactical structures) of the biblical languages, which is the very principle that Nida is describing in Thomas' next quotation.⁴³ Concepts are not determined by syntactical forms.⁴⁴ The content and message of the Bible is absolutely unique because it is inspired by God, but this does not require that it is communicated through some special form of grammar.

Nida uses this distinction between concepts and structure to develop a method, called "transformational-generative grammar," that attempts to remove the grammatical structure of a passage and only focus on the concepts. This approach to Scripture is mostly used by Bible translators and may be helpful in exegesis as one attempts to understand a passages concepts. However, Thomas is right in suspecting a weakness in this approach that potentially neglects the importance of syntax.⁴⁵ It is also possible, though, to take the Bible's God inspired structure seriously and still benefit from understanding this relationship between concepts and syntax.

Next Thomas quotes Black and Silva side by side and indicates that they are making the same point, when, in fact, they are discussing two separate issues.⁴⁶ Black continues the same subject of "transformational-generative grammar," and goes on after this quote to mention its weaknesses.⁴⁷ Silva's comment is about verb tense and aspect. He makes a valid point that many times in exegesis and theology too much weight is given to a single verb tense, instead of

⁴³Nida states, "The requirement that language provide for novelty means that conceptual determinism based on syntactic forms is basically false." Nida, "Implications," 84.

⁴⁴Nida explains, "One must recognize that there is no one-to-one correlation between the semantic level and the actual syntactic structures of the discourse. This means that the same underlying structure may give rise to more than one form of expression and that seemingly identical forms of expression may go back to quite different underlying structures." Nida, "Implications," 80.

⁴⁵Black, *Linguistics*, 140.

⁴⁶Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 36.

⁴⁷Black, *Linguistics*, 140.

allowing the larger units and context to reveal the author's emphases and message.⁴⁸ It is possible that at times Silva appears to place less weight on grammatical considerations as he should. However, it is also possible to acknowledge the importance of the context of words and verb forms and still take grammar seriously.

A limited survey of the approaches of those who use linguistics in exegesis will reveal that they take the syntactical surface structure of the text seriously.⁴⁹ Grammar is an important part of exegesis that is necessary for grasping the sentences and paragraphs of which discourses consist and is therefore an essential step in doing discourse analysis.⁵⁰ Grammatical features of

⁴⁸Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 36. Silva concludes, "An interpreter is unwise to emphasize an idea that allegedly comes from the use of a tense (or some other subtle grammatical distinction) unless the context as a whole clearly sets forth that idea. . . . No interpretation is worth considering unless it has strong contextual support." Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics*, In *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, Vol. 4. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 118.

⁴⁹Black describes the importance of syntax: "One must always begin with syntactic features, which have priority since they constitute ways in which basic relationships between fundamental units are most clearly marked. But stylistics and rhetorical features must also be considered when one is attempting to analyze the total semantic content of any colon or paragraph."⁴⁹ Black, "Hebrews 1:1-4," 175-76. Black gives a traditional amount of space for grammar in his book on New Testament exegesis. David Alan Black, *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry: A Practical Guide for Students and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 66-67, 75ff.

George H. Guthrie and J. Scott Duvall also include a traditional amount of space for grammar and syntax in their linguistically informed exegetical approach. See George H. Guthrie and J. Scott Duvall, *Biblical Greek Exegesis: A Graded Approach to Learning Intermediate and Advanced Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 101-102, 122ff. Elsewhere Guthrie explains that "what the discourse analyst suggests is that this focus [on Greek grammar at the sentence level] be expanded," (not removed), to a consideration of roles at every level of the discourse." George H. Guthrie, "Discourse Analysis," In *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 258.

Others also emphasize the importance of grammar: In linguistics, "discussions of such elements of Greek structure as the verb . . . or the case of a noun in terms of the choices available to the language user would also be necessary." McDonald and Porter, *Early Christianity*, 35; and Reed writes, "A semantic analysis also encompasses grammatical meaning, which is quite important in the case of an inflected . . . language such as Greek." Reed, "Modern Linguistics," 232.

⁵⁰Observe Guthrie's method. Guthrie, "Discourse Analysis," 260. Also note the importance of grammar in the discussion of the top-down approach below.

the text also play a role in discourse analysis beyond its contribution to the meaning of the text. As Levinsohn and Guthrie show, these features are indicators of shifts in the discourse and are helpful in identifying unit boundaries and other elements of a discourse.⁵¹

7. *Thomas claims that linguists do not believe it is possible to find the biblical author's intended meaning.*⁵²

It must be made clear, once again, that this issue is certainly an important concern for hermeneutics, but it is not inherently related to linguistics. It is true that some linguists, like Barr, maintain that the interpreter cannot and should not attempt to recover the author's intended meaning.⁵³ However, it is possible to apply linguistics to biblical interpretation and also assert that it is feasible and necessary to discover the author's intended meaning. The interpreter's understanding of meaning and where it is located (the author, the text, or the audience) is essentially a theological concern.⁵⁴ Barr locates meaning in the text and not in the message the author is attempting to communicate. For him the text is autonomous: "A document takes on a sort of life of its own and has its own meaning, created and expressed by its own wording and its own shape."⁵⁵ This corresponds to the structuralist's view of the text.⁵⁶ Since discourse analysis is related to structuralism in many of its linguistic presuppositions and goals, it is important to

⁵¹See Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2000), 279ff.; and George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 54.

⁵²Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 37-38.

⁵³Thomas quotes Barr from "Literality," *Faith and Philosophy* 6/4 (October 1989): 423.

⁵⁴Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 9.

⁵⁵Barr "Literality," 423.

⁵⁶Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 27.

distinguish between the two. Structuralism focuses exclusively on the structure of the text and not its authors or readers. Discourse analysis also focuses on the structure, but it does more.

Black writes,

As long as scholars direct attention to isolated structures of a text, they will encourage the view of the text as an autonomous object. Discourse analysis corrects this view by requiring that a text be viewed not only as an object of grammatical analysis but as an act of communication between a writer and a reader.⁵⁷

After Barr, Thomas quotes from Cotterell and Turner. Unfortunately this citation does not refer to authorial intention at all, but is simply a description of the difference between denotative and connotative meaning.⁵⁸ Thomas' second quote from Cotterell and Turner is not a description of their view either, but a description of a common objection to Hirsch.⁵⁹ However, later in the same chapter, when they respond to those objections, Cotterell and Turner agree with the criticism that Hirsch underestimates the significance of "our present understanding of our world," and how that prevents the interpreter from being objective. The issue of subjectivity has been dealt with above in response to criticism one.

The real difficulty of Cotterell and Turner's perspective on the interpreter's ability to comprehend the authorial intent is their agreement with Hirsch: "The original meaning is hidden from us, and we have no way of resurrecting it."⁶⁰ This is not a criticism of Hirsch's work, which

⁵⁷David Alan Black, "Discourse Analysis, Synoptic Criticism, and Markan Grammar," In *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis*, ed. David Alan Black with Katharine Barnwell and Stephen Levinsohn (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 97.

⁵⁸Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 46. Thomas states, "That 'connotative meaning' for Cotterell and Turner is the obstacle that hides a pure understanding of authorial intention." Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 38. This is not Cotterell and Turner's point here. In fact, they warn, "The interpreter of the Bible must be aware of the real danger of importing into an ancient culture the connotative perceptions with which he is familiar in his own culture." Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 46.

⁵⁹Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 58.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 68.

is a sound approach to interpreting literature in general. Hirsch argues that the meaning of a work is the meaning that the author intended but that one cannot know that he has ever discovered it because the author himself is not accessible. However, he maintains that it is possible to have a valid interpretation of the author's intention based on the evidence in the text. Cotterell and Turner accept this approach in the interpretation of Scripture and, as was noted above,⁶¹ appear to conclude that it does not allow for a great deal of certainty for one's understanding of the author's intention.

Again, this uncertainty does not fit well into a person's theology who maintains that the purpose of God's Word is to communicate truth to His people and that they are expected to respond in obedience. When applying Hirsch's approach to Scripture, one must consider his view of inspiration and the present work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. Should this unusual presence of the author, the authoritative claim of Scripture on truth, and the nature of the canon not change the level of certainty that he interpreter can hope to attain?

The use of linguistics in biblical interpretation does not necessarily involve a denial or skepticism concerning the possibility of discovering authorial intention. In fact, a linguist's understanding of communicative acts and the importance of the situational context causes him to focus on the author and his agenda. Many bible scholars desire to use linguistics in order to identify the author's intention and believe that linguistic approaches, such as discourse analysis, greatly improve one's ability to do so.

8. *“Modern linguistics is more pessimistic about success in the interpretive task than traditional hermeneutics.”*⁶²

⁶¹See footnote twelve above.

⁶²Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 38.

In this section Thomas asserts that linguists do not expect certainty or precision in the results of their exegesis. To summarize the above discussion on the certainty of interpretation, that the interpreter's presuppositions or the inaccessibility of the author's intentions make certainty in interpretation impossible is not a necessary result of applying linguistics to biblical studies. Whatever level of certainty is necessary for clear understanding and obedience must be possible since this is the purpose of God's Word for His people.

However, this should not cause the interpreter to underestimate the influence of his presuppositions or the difficulty of discovering the author's meaning. There is a danger in being overly confident in one's own interpretation. Thomas quotes M. Stuart, whose optimism for successful communication is simply unrealistic: "Has any part of our race, in full possession of human faculties, ever failed to understand what others said to them, and to understand it truly? . . . Surely none."⁶³ The answer to this question is obviously "yes!" Although we can have confidence and faith in what God's Word says, especially when it is very clear, it is also becoming for the Christian to have an attitude of humility as he wrestles with the evidence and his own worldview and limitations.

Thomas then quotes Cotterell and Turner to demonstrate that linguists assume "imprecision in biblical communication."⁶⁴ Their point here is that sometimes biblical writer's use synonyms for stylistic purposes, and do not intend to make a distinction between the words. If the writer did not intend to make the distinction, then it is not a case of imprecision and to make a distinction is move beyond the author's intention. The real question is whether or not biblical writers ever use synonyms stylistically in this way. If a writer did not intend a distinction

⁶³Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 38.

⁶⁴Ibid., 39.

between synonyms, then to understand them as merely synonyms does not reduce “exegesis to a ‘ballpark’ estimate of what were the intentions of the human author and, ultimately, of God who inspired the Bible.”⁶⁵

Interestingly, the key to an accurate understanding of what the biblical writers are communicating (instead of a ‘ballpark’ estimate) is not a focus on individual words or verb forms, but on the larger context.⁶⁶ This is perhaps the primary contribution of discourse analysis to exegesis. The point here is that linguists claim that their approach provides a better grasp of the meaning based not on the precision of the language, but on a sufficient understanding of how language works and on view of the entire discourse.⁶⁷ It is not a contradiction to claim that the language of the Bible is no more precise than any other language *and* that the interpreter can gain an accurate understanding of the text.

9. “*Modern linguistics emphasizes the dominance of discourse considerations in determining meaning.*”⁶⁸

Linguists certainly do emphasize the dominance of discourse considerations in determining meaning.⁶⁹ Thomas’ main concern is that, as Black explains, “discourse is analyzed

⁶⁵Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 39.

⁶⁶Thomas objects to this principle in his next criticism. A response will be provided below.

⁶⁷Thomas quotes Black in the next section about discourse about this principle: “A spoken or written word in isolation may have many different possible meanings, but a discourse, which is the environment in which words exist, imposes limitations on the choice of possible meanings and tends to shape and refine the meanings of each word.” Black, *Linguistics*, 138. Erickson maintains that linguistic analysis “affords Biblical theology and exegesis the needed sobriety—that is, a means of obtaining clarity, precision, and verification in the treatment of linguistic data.” Erickson, “Linguistics,” 260.

⁶⁸Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 39.

⁶⁹Guthrie and Duvall write, “Linguists insist on the priority of context for determining meaning.” Guthrie and Duvall, *Biblical Greek Exegesis*, 15.

from the top down.”⁷⁰ Thomas writes, “In taking a larger section of material to analyze before probing the details within that section, a person can come up with a goodly number of different understandings of what an author mean.”⁷¹ This statement is a good assessment of the approach that he has described. However, discourse analysts do not take “a larger section of material to analyze before probing the details within that section.” Instead, they do what Thomas claims traditional exegetes do: analyze “the details within the epistle before moving on to the overall emphasis.”⁷² Reed describe the process,

The study of larger discourse units, however, does not eliminate the need for investigating words and clauses. Discourse analysts advocate a bottom-up and top-down interpretation of discourse. The analyst might begin at the bottom with morphology, moving up through words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs . . . until reaching the top, namely, the discourse. From here the direction is reversed to see how the larger discourse influences paragraph construction, and on down.⁷³

Discourse analysts analyze from the top by putting more weight on the whole discourse for meaning, but they do not start at the top.

Assuming that discourse analysts do start at the top, Thomas accuses them of subjectivity and attempts to substantiate this by demonstrating how Silva and Black disagree with one another concerning the overall theme of Philippians.⁷⁴ The problem with this comparison is that Silva is not even doing a discourse analysis of Philippians. Even if discourse

⁷⁰Black, *Linguistics*, 171.

⁷¹Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 40.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 41.

⁷³Jeffrey T. Reed, *A Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, ed. Stanley E. Porter, vol. 136 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1997), 28. Guthrie also proposes that the discourse analyst begin with the microstructure and continue to move back and forth between micro and macro structures. Guthrie, “Discourse Analysis,” 260.

⁷⁴Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 40.

analysts do disagree (and they do), this does not invalidate the legitimacy of using the method in biblical interpretation? Thomas claims that there is a consensus among traditional exegetes as to the theme and purpose of Philippians. A small sampling of traditional evangelical commentaries demonstrates that this is not accurate.⁷⁵

If linguists are right in their assertion that context is more important for determining meaning than morphological and lexical analyses, then discourse analysis has the right focus. Furthermore, it uses a good understanding of language to inform its analysis of the entire discourse and therefore has a more accurate knowledge of the context.

10. *Linguists claim that the biblical authors use stylistic devices such as redundancy, ambiguity, and vagueness.*⁷⁶

These matters of style are related to linguistics in that the linguist assumes that the Bible uses normal human language. Normal human language is sometimes redundant, ambiguous, and vague.⁷⁷ Instead of discussing these aspects of language, the real question is

⁷⁵Thomas claims the concensus is in favor of Homer A. Kent's opinion that Paul is writing primarily to thank them for their gift.

Gordon D. Fee writes that the purpose is "your progress and joy in the faith" and the Philippians' affairs. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 39.

Peter T. O'Brien lists four possible reasons and states that Paul wrote "especially to urge his Christian friends to stand firm for the gospel and to be united in Christian love." Peter T. O'Brien, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 38.

Gerald F. Hawthorne lists eight possible reasons and concludes that his desire to give thanks for the gift "surely cannot be the sole purpose for writing the letter, or even the chief purpose." Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), xlviii.

F. F. Bruce writes, "His principle purpose was evidently to encourage a spirit of unity among them." F. F. Bruce, *Philippians* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989), 19.

⁷⁶Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 41.

⁷⁷Thomas actually argues that the "NT writers in general did not concern themselves with stylistic matters such as avoiding repetition" because "their language was the language of the man on the street." What is at issue here is simply the nature of language. Thomas, "Modern Linguistics," 41.

whether or not God used normal human language or not when he inspired Scripture. Thomas at one point claims that he did,⁷⁸ but then goes on to deny that the biblical languages actually bear any qualities of normal human language. For linguists to say that they do does not require that we cannot accurately understand the message. Redundancy, for example, is actually a means by which the content of language is preserved. Reed explains the need for redundancy in general communication, “Such redundancy ‘serves to reduce the likelihood of an error in the reception of the message resulting from the loss of information during the transmission.’”⁷⁹

When responding to the ambiguity of language, Thomas writes, “Traditional hermeneutics has limited each passage one meaning and one meaning only, unless a contextual feature indicates an exception.”⁸⁰ In Thomas’ quote of Silva, Silva makes the same point, “Before drawing such a conclusion, however, one should have fairly strong contextual reasons.”⁸¹ Black explains that “true ambiguity (as distinguished from vagueness) is rare. When it does occur, it usually results from our ignorance of the original context rather than from the deliberate intention of the author.”⁸² In other words, linguists agree that the interpreter is seeking a single meaning and only if the context requires it should any notion of ambiguity be taken.

⁷⁸ Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 26.

⁷⁹ Reed, “Modern Linguistics,” 226. Nida agrees, “The fact that language in discourse is approximately fifty percent redundant, whether on the phonological, syntactic, or semantic levels is important, and this helps one realize why verbal communication cannot be on hundred percent efficient. Such a measure of redundancy is essential if verbal communication is to overcome physical and psychological ‘noise.’” Nida, “Implications,” 74.

⁸⁰ Thomas, “Modern Linguistics,” 42.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸² Black, *Linguistics*, 129.

If the Bible was written in normal human language and if normal human language has qualities such as redundancy (and these really become the two main questions concerning linguistics and biblical interpretation),⁸³ then discourse analysis is very important for exegesis. The biblical writers obviously use repetition of themes and ideas in order to communicate their message. It is the overall discourse and larger sections of Scripture that provides the necessary contextual information for making exegetical decisions concerning word meaning and theological content.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The two most important assumptions that must be made in order to use linguistics in biblical interpretation are: 1) The Bible is written in normal human language that bears all the characteristics of normal human language and 2) The whole discourse and larger units of the text are more important for discerning meaning than words phrases and sentences. If these can be accepted, and it seems that there is every reason to do so, then discourse analysis makes a very important contribution to traditional exegesis.

Thomas has raised a couple of important topics that are not intrinsically related to the use of linguistics in interpretation: the interpreter's bias and the possibility of discovering the author's original meaning. There is no reason a linguist cannot aim for these two important goals: objectivity and identifying the author's message. Furthermore, if the two main tenets of linguistics for interpretation hold true, then discourse analysis provides an excellent method of achieving these goals.

⁸³Although some of the issues concerning these questions have been introduced in this paper, answering them requires a much more extended discussion.

⁸⁴Barr explains, "It is the sentence (and of course the still larger literary complex such as the complete speech or poem) which is the linguistic bearer of the usual theological statement, and not the word (the lexical unit) or the morphological and syntactical connection."⁸⁴ Barr, *Semantics*, 263.

Thomas has many legitimate concerns. His desire to preserve a worldview and faith that maintains a high regard for the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and to utilize an exegetical procedure that will most effectively discern its truth is imperative. Discourse analysis may be one of the most important exegetical tools for these very purposes.

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