

A NATURAL LANGUAGE APPROACH TO KOINE GREEK EXEGESIS

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Abstract: This paper argues that a natural language approach to the Greek of the New Testament is needed in order to perform the kind of exegesis that recognizes crucial characteristics of Greek as a language and that takes into account important developments in linguistic thought about language. The paper questions many of the ways that exegesis is done in contemporary New Testament studies by failure to use a natural language approach. Two major examples of exegetical approaches are used to exemplify some of the problems that arise when the Greek language of the New Testament is not seen to be a variety of Koine Greek of the Hellenistic or Greco-Roman period. (Article)

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1. *Introduction*

This paper addresses the question of how we as students of the New Testament should approach exegesis in relationship to the Greek language.¹ As we know from surveying various introductions to Greek exegesis—at least for those that still include or emphasize the need for using the original language of the New Testament (and those volumes appear to be diminishing in number)—the ways that Greek is discussed vary widely both

1. This paper, along with the two that follow in this volume, was first delivered in the session on “What Is Lacking in Exegesis?” of the New Testament Greek Language and Exegesis section of the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting in San Antonio, TX, on 14–16 November 2023.

quantitatively and even qualitatively. There are, perhaps, some indications that we are, at last, moving away from a positivist approach to Greek in discussions of exegesis, but for the most part treatments of exegesis still maintain views of Greek that do not necessarily reflect what I would consider to be linguistically informed views suitable for use in exegesis. I believe that this stems, at least in part, from our view of exegesis. Many if not most introductions to exegesis, and even some more advanced works in the field, appear to treat exegesis in univocal and unitary ways, that is, as though exegesis is a “thing.” In other words, exegesis is a known and recognized concept, to which is attached a procedure that is widely accepted. The individual treatment, where it varies from other similar treatments, does so to refine and improve upon what is assumed to be an agreed-upon set of concepts that constitute what we call “exegesis.” There are a few—although arguably only a very few—introductions to exegesis that attempt to move beyond this traditional exegetical paradigm by introducing some more recent areas of consideration, such as discourse analysis or types of ideological or literary criticisms.² However, these treatments also appear to function from the standpoint that exegesis remains a static and established concept, to which these other areas, as interesting as they may be and as necessary as they are to introduce in an attempt to be current in research, are added. The basics of what constitutes exegesis remain the same, even though these additional elements are added to enhance the exegetical powers of the interpretive model being presented.

In this paper, I wish to question many of the assumptions that are embedded within this description of approaches to exegesis.³ I first of all wish to question the assumption that exegesis is a

2. Erickson, *Beginner's Guide*; Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*.

3. I use an intentionally broad definition of what constitutes an approach to exegesis, incorporating in my purview introductions to exegesis but also works that are styled as introductions to biblical interpretation and even collections of essays on various dimensions of such exegesis. I realize that I run the risk of overgeneralization in my comments, but they are based upon years of working in the exegetical environment.

“thing,” rather than it being a broad and expansive and undefined term that encompasses all of the various ways by which interpretation may be enacted, whether there is a clear procedure or not. Teachers who ask (or tell) their students to exegete a passage, without having discussed what constitutes exegesis—no doubt their approach to exegesis, rather than an open discussion of the panoply of possible exegetical elements that might be involved—are being unfair to their students and the exegetical process. We must always define what we mean by exegesis, the assumptions of the method or methods being used, and the procedures that are being recommended (because they too may be varied according to the interpretive interests of the exegete). However, this is not the focus of my paper. The focus of my paper is the second point that I wish to make, and that is that, within the realm of exegesis—an admittedly relatively narrow world, one narrower than I think that it ought to be—there is also a problematic view of Greek. That is, just as exegetical methods cohere around a relatively small set of notions regarding such things as textual criticism, historical backgrounds, higher criticism, and the like, so is there a recurring and common view of the Greek language. This view of the Greek language is one that, I believe, is generally linguistically uninformed, provides a questionable description of the Greek language, enshrines practices that do not help in the understanding of text, and therefore cannot be relied upon to provide the kinds of exegetical results that are being sought. In this paper, I wish to focus upon those views of Greek and propose that a natural language approach to New Testament Greek provides a much more fruitful means of describing and understanding the Greek language.

2. What is a Natural Language Approach to Greek?

I begin by defining what I mean by a natural language approach to Greek and then distinguishing it from those that are not

natural language approaches.⁴ A natural language approach to Koine Greek is an approach that treats the language of the Greek New Testament as a broad variety of the common Greek language that was used throughout the Mediterranean world of the first century during the so-called Greco-Roman period.⁵ This language was the regularized and common form of the administrative language, Great Attic, of ancient Athens that was adopted by Alexander the Great as the language of his conquest of the eastern Mediterranean, from Greece to Egypt to the Indus River. This was a language that had local and regional minor dialectal variations in phonology, probably dependent upon the native language of its users, but was for the most part a syntactically dialectless variety that was employed for common communication by a wide range of users. These users encompassed the varied social, educational, and economic strata of Greco-Roman life, from the elites to the peasants, who were compelled to communicate with others who themselves represented shifting societal patterns. Many Koine Greek users had other indigenous languages as their first language (L1), with Koine Greek as their second, common communicative language (L2), used to transact business especially with those from outside their immediate social sphere. Over time, this language came to be the first language of increasing numbers of people who were born into contexts where they were in constant language contact with others, such as soldiers and government officials, who would not know the local indigenous languages, but who were nevertheless in positions of political and economic power and who needed to be served by others.

As a result, there were hierarchies of language use within the Mediterranean world, with Koine Greek serving as the *lingua franca*, that is, the common language for commerce and administration. Within some areas, it would have been the first

4. I realize that there are other definitions of natural language approaches. I do not mean natural syntax or living languages approaches.

5. See Horrocks, *Greek*, 24–127, for a useful overview of the language, here enhanced with my own views on multilingualism, prestige languages, and the like.

language and within others the second language, but in most, if not all these broader units of organization—whether geographical or, more likely, administrative—it would have been the prestige language. In other words, it was the language that held the most prestige, because of the necessity of using it to communicate with the elites who held power. This would have been true in Egypt, where demotic may have been the first language of the lower classes, but where Greek was the language of the upper social levels and especially of the ruling Ptolemaic rulers, until the arrival of the Romans in the first century BC. However, even though the Romans would have used Latin as a political or administrative language, Greek remained the prestige language and the lingua franca within that context. A similar scenario was present in the northern Mediterranean, including Asia Minor. Whereas there may have been some local varieties of languages (e.g. Lycaonian as in Acts 14:11), Greek constituted the lingua franca and the prestige language. This linguistic description included the indigenous population, the ruling elites, and also the Jews, who had communities throughout the Diaspora. This linguistic situation is readily seen by the role that the Septuagint played within Jewish religious life of Egypt and other Diaspora communities, and even in Palestine. Within Palestine, the situation was perhaps slightly more complex. It is arguable that Aramaic may have been the prestige language of Jews in Palestine, with Hebrew being a restricted variety for religious purposes known only by a limited number of the religious elite. However, whether Greek was the prestige language or not, it remained the lingua franca of Palestine, used by the Jews, any remaining Greeks, and their Roman occupiers.⁶

Such a characterization of Greek has not always been the case—and in fact is not always the case today, especially in some discussions of Greek in exegesis, where non-natural language characterizations continue.⁷ As early as the seventeenth

6. On many of these language factors, see Porter, *Criteria for Authenticity*, 127–41 and 164–80; Porter, “Complex Multilingualism,” 115–31.

7. For a history of discussion of the nature of the Greek of the New Testament, see Porter, “Introduction,” 11–38.

century, but especially in the early nineteenth century, some scholars noted that the Greek of the New Testament had linguistic features that differed from the classical authors who were the center of appreciation within what became known as classical philology, with its emphasis upon the most literarily accomplished written texts of the ancient world. This led to various non-natural language theories to account for these differences, theories that persisted until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and even to today. These theories, which attempted to account for the linguistic differences between the language of, say, Homer or Plato or Thucydides and that of the New Testament, developed in two related ways. The first was to formulate a division between the purists and the Hebraists. The problem was that the Greek of the New Testament, even with its own register variation, did not fit the category of “pure” Greek in that it had many features different from the Greek of the classical period (e.g., loss of the optative and dual number, among others) and so it appeared that it must fall within some other category. One of those categories to hand was the Hebraic hypothesis, that is, that the Greek of the New Testament, because it was written by Jews (at least in many instances, Luke being a problematic exception), reflected a Hebrew-language heritage and adopted many Hebraic characteristics (such as paratactic *καί*). The Greek of the New Testament seemed, according to this view, to be a form of Hebraic Greek. Another group of scholars found this theory unsatisfactory and degrading of the Greek of the New Testament. Rather than describe it as in some way inferior to other Greek (an unsuitable category for the language of the Bible), they exalted it and posited that it was a special form of Greek, not just through language contact, but through the contact of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Greek of the New Testament was a special form of Greek, a Holy Ghost Greek, that was inspired by God and suitable for revelation in the New Testament.

These views were seriously and, I would say, irredeemably undermined by discovery of the documentary papyri in Egypt. These primarily occasional texts written by a wide range of people, from the illiterate (who required scribes) to the elite,

despite their phonological variation based upon sound shifts, provided instances of language in the same variety as the texts of the New Testament (whose manuscripts, incidentally, were later seen to include the same kinds of phonological variations). This eliminated the Hebraic or Holy Ghost hypotheses and resulted in what I have called the natural language view. This view has persisted, although it was interrupted after the Second World War by a revival of the Semitic-language hypothesis (and even a form of the Holy Ghost hypothesis now characterized in terms of Synagogue Greek). However, those who argued for the Semitic-language and related hypothesis posited a form of Greek that they believed constituted a new, mixed dialect, unfortunately one that may have reflected phonological variation but did not reflect syntactical variation and did not establish itself as a variety within Koine Greek. I believe that the various non-Koine Greek hypotheses are not based upon solid linguistic evidence, especially as sociolinguists would establish such criteria, but are based upon theological presuppositions regarding language, to the point of it influencing their views of both the Old and New Testaments and the languages in which they are written. The natural language approach to Greek adopts its description of Koine Greek as an appropriate view of language with which to undertake exegesis.

However, a natural language approach to Greek also requires more than simply one's view of the variety of New Testament Greek. A natural language approach requires a view of language itself. Such views are appropriately derived from contemporary linguistics. Natural language is language that is used by actual language speakers or writers. In contemporary linguistics, speech often takes priority over writing. However, ancient languages are limited by their epigraphic remains and so recognition must be made of some of the differences between spoken and written language. This natural language is the product of diachronic change, even if it is synchronically studied as a network of interrelated systems that represent the language potential. This difference between language as product or an instance of language and language as process or system identifies the variation between what is typically referred to as an idiolect and

a dialect, or, more broadly, my language and the language that I use, or perhaps even better, the difference between text and code. Meaning in language is determined by contrasts or choices or oppositions within the language system (Saussure's *valeur*), and these choices within the language are part of wider contextual considerations. These contexts range from the immediate language context (or cotext) to situations that typically elicit such language and the cultures in which these languages and texts exist. The purpose of language is not just to convey ideas or information, but to do a variety of other things, such as establish and guide relationships among people. The functions of language are many and varied, but they are central to the use of language, even if these functions must be transferred into language structures that require our close attention.⁸ There is much more that can and probably should be said about how a natural language is defined, but I think that this suffices at least for the present situation.

Having given this description of Koine Greek in relation to other Greek, and then identified some of the larger linguistic considerations of a natural language, I am acutely aware that most descriptions of the Greek of the New Testament, especially as they are found in books on exegesis, have surprisingly little in common. This is not simply because such comments on language are non-existent within exegesis books—although many do lack them—but that the kind of language used, when it is, does not resonate with the description above. This leads one to believe that there are numerous false assumptions being made about language, especially the Greek of the New Testament. There are many different possible reasons for this. One might be the limits of linguistic knowledge of the writers of the books on exegesis. There probably are such limitations, because few of the authors of such books would probably consider themselves linguists.

8. Those who are attentive to linguistic theory will notice that, although my description is sufficiently generic for practical purposes, it is also clearly dependent upon Systemic Functional Linguistics for its characterization. There are many introductions to the basics of SFL. The standard introduction is Halliday, *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

They would probably consider themselves theologians or possibly historians. A second might be that they have a very different view of language than is claimed in the description above. The description above does not give a privileged linguistic place to the Greek of the New Testament but places it within a socio-historical context in which it is a semiotic system used for communicative and functional purposes. This is not the usual reason for studying Greek given in such works on exegesis.

3. *What Is Not a Natural Language Approach to Greek?*

This leads to a discussion of what a natural language approach to Greek exegesis is not. It is not, unfortunately, much of what still appears in New Testament studies in various forms. I will identify three areas where it is most obvious that a natural language approach is not being used, though I could find more.

3.1 *Word Studies*

Word studies continue to be promoted in various ways in New Testament exegesis. A natural language approach to Greek is not against the notion of words or even of words being described as having some sort of meaning. In fact, there is an entire area within linguistics called lexical semantics that is an active and lively field of discussion. But that field is far less certain in its methods than are most biblical scholars when they undertake their traditional word studies.

The typical word study in New Testament studies—and I admit that I too was taught this way and wrote such word studies—has three major characteristics: it is unrelentingly diachronic, confused over word and concept, and polysemous. The typical word study is diachronic in that it begins with the earliest Greek evidence, usually Homer if the lexeme appears in the two epics or occasionally some of the other early archaic authors such as Hesiod, and then proceeds to the classical period and then to the Septuagint, before discussing the use of the word in contemporaries such as Josephus and possibly Philo, perhaps considering the papyri and some pertinent inscriptions, and then

turning to the New Testament, proceeding sub-corpus by sub-corpus to appreciate the different meanings of the word in the various New Testament authors, finally culminating with a synthesis of the results. Somewhere along the way, the word study will probably make a statement to the effect that, for example, “λόγος is דבר in the Old Testament,” or words to that effect, indicating that there is some kind of equivalence between the two. Then the use of דבר will be discussed in the Hebrew Bible, possibly some extra-biblical Hebrew texts (such as inscriptions), and then some contemporary Hebrew or even Aramaic texts, such as the Qumran literature, again before these results are brought together with those for the Greek lexeme.

It is hard to know where to begin with a critique of such a procedure. I can only mention a few of the problems. The first is that this is a diachronic study, in which all the problems of diachrony are present.⁹ These include the incompleteness of the evidence, problems of interpretation of texts especially those that are found in non-standard contexts (such as papyri or inscriptions, but also in obscure non-standard texts), and, quite frankly, the general lack of relevance of the data upon the meaning of the lexical item in the Greek of the New Testament and its contemporary literature. Modern linguistics continues to practice a historical and comparative paradigm in historical linguistics, but such linguistic study is much more concerned with phonology and morphology than it is semantics, especially because of limitations of the textual evidence. James Barr rightly pointed out over a half century ago the limitations of etymologically based arguments for determining word meaning.¹⁰ His critique included the recognition both that most etymologies are precarious at best (and often folk etymologies,

9. The distinction between synchrony and diachrony was probably one of the most important developments in intellectual thought of the last two hundred years. However, there are problems with synchrony, as well as diachrony. SFL tends to retain some elements of diachrony, although its reliance upon systems and networks is overwhelmingly synchronic. See Porter, *Linguistic Descriptions*, 42–43.

10. Barr, *Semantics*, passim.

along the lines of those found in Plato's *Cratylus*) and that they are not determinative for later meaning, as interesting as they may be along the diachronic way.

The second major problem is the way that non-Greek lexical evidence is included within the discussion. Many such word studies appear to treat a word in Greek and one in Hebrew as translational equivalents, when there are few such equivalents between languages. The lexical stock of one language rarely has one-to-one correspondence with the stock of another language. Some languages have a variety of words to discuss a concept, whereas other languages have relatively few. This means that just because one word in Hebrew is often or even regularly translated with another in Greek does not indicate that they have the same semantics. The reason that they are often equated in this way seems to be that scholars confuse word and concept. They observe that the word translated "word" in English is often *λόγος* in Greek (although certainly not the only one to be translated this way or to be used within the same semantic domain) and often *דבר* in the Hebrew Bible, and so these two words must "mean" the same. Since the focus of the word study is often the concept, rather than the lexeme, words that seem to be about the same concept—often determined on the basis of a gloss, rather than an actual definition—are discussed as if they are equivalent. There is the further issue of just how relevant the usage in one language is for another, unless it can be shown that there are clear instances in which there is language contact and with it lexical interference (not just enhancement, borrowing, or calquing [a loan translation]). There may be some instances in the New Testament, since the vocabulary of a language is more subject to lexical interference than is the grammar, but this must be shown and not assumed, as word studies tend to do, especially as seen in theological dictionaries that emphasize that individual words have theological meanings.

The third major problem is the theory of lexical semantics used in New Testament studies. The question of how to determine lexical meaning is admittedly complex and widely disputed in lexical semantic studies. It depends upon whom one asks, but some would say that monosemy is predominant in

lexical studies.¹¹ I doubt this. I suspect that most lexical studies are polysemous, and this seems to be expanding with the increased influence of cognitive linguistics, with its typological meanings. However, I think that there are good reasons for taking what Charles Ruhl has called a “monosemic bias” toward lexical meaning.¹² This means that lexical items have a broad abstract sense, the kind of sense that one might imagine a word having that is in a thesaurus entry, in which a wide variety of words are used as imperfect attempts to capture the semantic range of a word, to the point that there is no single or even several words that capture it but an abstract sense of what the word means. This abstract and minimal meaning is then modulated and constrained by the cotext—especially by its use in the clause, but also by other factors—to the point where one is, if compelled, able to give a suitable translation. Words, therefore, rather than having maximal meanings (often maximal theological meanings), have minimal meanings, in which the cotext does not create the meaning but constrains the abstract meaning of the lexeme.

Monosemy addresses and answers the kinds of questions sometimes inadvertently raised in New Testament studies when scholars assert that, although context determines meaning, there is a core meaning of the word.¹³ I am not happy with this formulation, because it implies a more solid and focused meaning of the word than I believe exists, but it does recognize that we in fact functionally assume monosemy in much of our discussion, including when we create metaphors, in which an abstract meaning is required in order to understand the force of the metaphor. Therefore, rather than needing word studies of the kind that we have traditionally used in New Testament studies, we need cotextual studies that move beyond the word (to the clause, at least) to indicate how the word is modulated in its

11. Cruse, *Meaning in Language*, 94.

12. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*. Among many studies published recently, see Wishart, “Monosemy in Biblical Studies,” 99–126.

13. For example, Thiselton, “Semantics and New Testament Interpretation,” esp. 79.

meaning within that context. This moves away from the kind of word theology that is so often found within not just word studies but commentaries and other New Testament studies, in which individual words are treated as if they have maximal meaning and then explicated at great length without pertinent attention paid to their context, including grammar and other textual features. Barr was correct in asserting that theology rests not in the word but in the phrase and the sentence as the minimal units of theological meaning.¹⁴

3.2 *Grammatical Studies*

New Testament works on exegesis often include some comments on Greek grammar. Such works, I have found, appear to be conflicted about what to say about the language. But one observation seems to hold throughout and that is that few of them recognize that the study of the Greek of the New Testament has gone through several periods of development—periods that are relatively independent of, even if influenced by, the shifting views of the variety of Greek of the New Testament discussed above. The history of Greek grammatical discussion since the time of the Enlightenment (before that it was dominated by categories from Latin language discussion, since Latin was the language of scholarship) has gone through three major periods: the rationalist, the comparative-historical, and the modern linguistic periods.¹⁵ These periods do not correspond with their equivalents in general language study but are later than general linguistics by a generation or more. The rationalist period extended from roughly 1800–1860 and corresponds with the Greek grammar of Georg Benedikt Winer and is still found in most elementary Greek grammars and even some recent scholarly works.¹⁶ Rationalist discussion of language demands

14. Barr, *Semantics*, 213, 233, 263.

15. See Porter, *Linguistic Descriptions*, 10–73, for a recounting of the history drawn upon in this paragraph.

16. Winer, *Treatise on the Grammar*. This work was published in German from 1822 to 1855 in Winer's lifetime, and then in several editions after that, as well as in several English translations.

that languages follow rationalist and empirical standards of consistency and evidence, typified by strict temporal reference. The comparative-historical period extended from roughly 1860–1960 and corresponds with the Greek grammars of Friedrich Blass and later Albert Debrunner, James Hope Moulton, and A. T. Robertson (the three standard reference grammars of New Testament Greek) and several intermediate Greek grammars.¹⁷ Comparative-historical discussion of language demands that languages are placed within their historical contexts and in comparison with similar and different languages, such as Greek with Sanskrit or Latin or Hebrew or Aramaic, without a sense of system but with comparison of individual elements, such as a case or tense-form. The modern linguistic period extended from 1961 to the present and corresponds with the important inaugural work of Barr on semantics—a work that was thoroughly immersed in structural linguistics of the twentieth century, including emphasis upon language as system, synchrony over diachrony, and *valeur*—and includes discussion of such topics as verbal aspect and discourse analysis, among others.

I find it interesting to note how many introductions to exegesis have not yet decided whether the Greek language should be examined on the basis of comparative-historical criteria since the major reference grammars of New Testament Greek reflect this approach, or whether one should attempt to examine it on the basis of modern linguistics—although this would introduce a major challenge for those educated in the old paradigm (which means most involved). As a result, some of these exegetical introductions present what they consider to be the essential basics of Greek—often based upon the comparative-historical paradigm and therefore questionable

17. Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar*, originally published by Blass in German in 1896, with Debrunner becoming editor in 1913 with the fourth German edition; Moulton, *Moulton's Grammar of New Testament Greek, Volume 1: Prolegomena*; Moulton and Howard, *Moulton's Grammar of New Testament Greek, Volume 2: Accidence and Word-Formation*, but whose third and fourth volumes, by Nigel Turner, follow the Holy Ghost rather than Moulton's Koine Greek hypothesis; Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*.

since many of the foundations of this approach have been challenged by modern linguistics—but then also try to introduce some of the more recent discussions, such as that of verbal aspect. Such exegetical introductions—when they do attempt such updated discussions—regularly fail to note that, to a large extent, they are comparing dissimilar things, or at least using different lenses or frameworks to examine the same thing. The comparative-historical approach to language was diachronic, comparative, historical, and highly rule-based, whereas the modern linguistic approach is incommensurable with this paradigm in its synchronic, systemic, and descriptive rather than prescriptive paradigm. Thus, it is not just a matter of seeing whether one can bolt on a verbal aspect system to the Greek verb, but of seeing the implications of what verbal aspect indicates for the entire Greek verbal system, which includes many other systems, such as attitude and causality, besides aspect. In other words, the entire Greek language system must be examined, since the individual parts or elements that comprise it are part of the larger network of systems that constitute the potential of the language. All of these and more must be considered in a natural language approach to Greek exegesis.

So far, we have just introduced some of the basic elements of the Greek language, when there is much more that can and should be discussed in a natural language approach to exegesis. I find it helpful to think in terms of what is sometimes referred to as the rank scale.¹⁸ The rank scale states that elements of the language occupy varying ranks, from the word to word group to clause to beyond. From what I have said above, one can rightly imagine that words, although they are often the focus of much exegesis, occupy a relatively minor place within the Greek language system according to rank. Words mostly occupy various functional roles on the basis of their use within word groups, such as the nominal group. The nominal group is a group of words that expand a noun or a noun equivalent. The head term of this group, the noun or equivalent, may be expanded by a

18. I directly draw upon Systemic Functional Linguistics at this point. See Halliday, *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 7–10.

variety of elements, such as a specifier (usually the article) and a variety of modifiers such as a definer (usually an adjective but also a variety of other elements that may be used to define). The head term may also be modified by a qualifier (usually an element in the genitive that restricts the meaning of the head term) and a relator (usually a preposition with its own phrase). These various groups are what comprise the elements of the clause. The clause consists of several components, such as the subject, predicator, complement, and adjunct. The predicator is the heart of the clause and it contains the process, usually a verb. The subject is the agent of the process and the complement, where one appears, is the focus or recipient of the process. Adjuncts are optional elements comprised of various types of words or groups, such as adverbs or prepositional phrases, that indicate circumstances, such as time or place or manner or means. Clausal elements are arranged in various patterns that indicate the ways in which information is structured: prime and subsequent for the clause, theme and rheme for the clause complex, and topic and comment for the paragraph and beyond. Clauses enter into relations with each other, either paratactically or hypotactically. Those that enter hypotactically may be embedded or they may be added in various ways. We may also move beyond the clause and even complexes of clauses to larger units, such as what might be called the paragraph or even larger groupings until we have a complete text. Thus, there are larger patterns of meaning than just a clause or even a complex of clauses. These patterns include a variety of textual means by which a text is constituted, such as cohesion. Textual cohesion—that is, the means by which a text is a text—is related to textual coherence. We have at this point moved far beyond what is usually found within studies of Greek exegesis—although I would argue that all of what I have said above reflects a natural language approach to Greek. A natural language approach does not indicate a simplistic basic description of a few elements of the language, but it implies a suitable descriptive mechanism to capture the language as it functions in context so as to be described adequately from the word to the text.

3.3 *Presuppositions about Language*

The final category I will discuss here is various views that sometimes make their way into expositions of Greek exegesis that reveal a non-natural agenda for the study of language, usually a theological one. As noted above, a natural language approach is fundamentally synchronic and systemic in nature, that is, it treats the language as a simultaneous system that captures the potential of the language. However, there are several unhelpful stereotypes that have made their way into exegesis that hinder such study. As examples, one sometimes finds characterizations of the Greek and Hebrew languages, such that Greek is cyclical and Hebrew is linear, Greek is temporal and Hebrew is aspectual, Greek is static and Hebrew is dynamic, Greek is abstract and Hebrew concrete, and humanity is dual in Greek and unitary in Hebrew. Before we proceed further, I note that these stereotypes are recounted by Barr in his *Semantics of Biblical Language*, where he disputes and, I would say, refutes all of them.¹⁹ In fact, what he points out is that Greek is much more like Hebrew than the stereotype depicts, so that it has aspect as does Hebrew, and therefore it has many of the same characteristics regarding its dynamic, linear, and temporal characteristics. However, the kinds of stereotyped views are the basis of the Biblical Theology movement, which had a tremendous influence on twentieth-century biblical theology and is enshrined in the major theological lexicons, especially the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)* and to a lesser degree in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)*, in which words are seen to be the primary carriers of theological meaning rather than the larger context.²⁰

More than that, it is sometimes asserted that Greek and the theology of the church fathers in their use of it inherited patterns of Greek thought that are antithetical to the kind of unaffected

19. Barr, *Semantics*, 8–20. For an assessment of Barr, see Porter, ed., *James Barr Assessed*.

20. Kittel and Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary*; Brown, ed. and trans., *New International Dictionary*.

thought of the Hebrews. There is thus, so it is said, a relationship between language and thought, such that language determines thought and thereby how the early Christians should have thought and then did so as is reflected in their affected Greek language. With this return to theories of Semitic Greek, we have come full circle by means of what is sometimes referred to in linguistic circles as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.²¹ The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—named after the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, who did work on Native American languages—is a theory of linguistic determinism. There are various degrees of determinism attributed to this theory, from a relatively mild view that there is some relationship between language and thought, such that some languages make it easier than others to express certain concepts, to a hard view that there is a deterministic way in which language dictates and controls how the human language user can and is able to think. As examples, claims have been made regarding kinship terms or color terms or temporal references. Some languages are more specific in identifying kinship, so that it would be easier to refer to one's mother's aunt as opposed to one's father's aunt. Some languages have a multitude of color terms or terms for snow or for any number of different things, so that it would be easier to refer to gradations of these items by means of individual lexical items. Some have gone so far as to contend, however, that if some languages are tenseless then the users are unable to make temporal distinctions. This is not the place to discuss the full effect of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, but I think that it is fair to say that a moderate view is appropriate. Some elements of language do make it easier to talk about certain things—such as more words for colors, when confronted by a wide artist's palette—but it has not been shown that those without such elements in their language cannot conceive of such concepts and that this limits their ability to talk about them. What is often found is that sometimes such abundant elements help, but sometimes they hinder communication—such as having to identify whether an aunt is matrilineal or patrilineal when it

21. See Porter, *Hermeneutics, Linguistics, and the Bible*, ch. 4.

may not be known. Those without such abundance are still able to make similar distinctions but they must do so by other means, such as modification or periphrasis. Despite this discussion, some treatments of exegesis still persist in assuming some unfounded notions regarding language, including the relations of Greek and Hebrew and how these languages affect their users, with references being made to such things as Greek (bad!) and Hebrew (good!) mindsets.

4. *Evaluations of Language Approaches to Greek Exegesis*

My examples in the previous section of non-natural language approaches have not been taken from any single book. Instead, they have drawn on the kinds of examples that I have regularly found in a variety of works on or about exegesis.

At this point, I turn to books that consciously identify themselves as exegetical guides to examine how they approach questions of language. I have not examined all such works, but it is surprising to see how little is said about Greek in those works that I have examined. Some do not deal with Greek in any significant way, while a few do offer some comments. Very few treat all the major dimensions that I have noted above. I will deal with two examples that treat both lexis and grammar as a means of illustrating a natural language approach to Greek exegesis. These two works are the chapters on word studies and grammar in *Interpreting the New Testament Text*, edited by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning,²² and *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*, by Craig L. Blomberg with Jennifer Foutz Markley.²³

4.1 *Word Studies*

I begin with word studies. I divide my comments on the chapter concerning “Lexical Analysis” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text* into three sections.²⁴ The first concerns how we define

22. Bock and Fanning, eds., *Interpreting the New Testament Text*.

23. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*.

24. Bock, “Lexical Analysis,” 135–53.

meaning. It is clear from the outset that the author, Darrell Bock, has a polysemous view. He outlines six different definitions of meaning—entailment, emotive, significance, encyclopedic, grammatical, and figurative—with encyclopedic including all the possible meanings of a word. Besides the fact that these definitions are not all valid or even defensible in terms of lexical meaning but may be extensions of meaning based on context (such as figurative meaning), the major problem is that, from the start, the assumption is that words have multiple meanings, and that poses the major problem: how do we determine the meaning in context from a multiplicity of meanings?

The second concerns diachrony and synchrony. Bock assumes that both are not just possible but desirable, even if synchrony is “perhaps” the more important.²⁵ Bock lays out four diachronic stages of Greek—classical, Hellenistic-biblical (Septuagint), Hellenistic-nonbiblical (Koine), and biblical (New Testament) uses—and two synchronic stages—Hellenistic-nonbiblical (Koine) and biblical (New Testament) uses. Hellenistic-nonbiblical (Koine) and biblical (New Testament) are not diachronic stages, as the author himself indicates by labeling them as synchronic. In other words, the author has muddled the categories being used. In support of the analysis, the author recommends use of standard lexicons, including the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, and the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (EDNT)*, especially for diachronic study. One major lexicon that is not, so far as I can determine, even mentioned in the entire discussion is Louw and Nida’s semantic domain lexicon,²⁶ even though one of Bock’s presuppositions is that words have a range of meanings, and the goal of lexical study is to “establish the precise meaning of a word.”²⁷ Bock includes examination of biblical Hebrew in relation to study of the usage in the Septuagint. The author also suggests that further steps would be to investigate patristic authors and other Jewish

25. Bock, “Lexical Analysis,” 142.

26. Louw and Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon*.

27. Bock, “Lexical Analysis,” 138.

and later rabbinic writings. The fascinating thing about this suggested process for word study is that, in the end, the author says that the goal is to establish the meaning of the word in the New Testament, for which one examines how it is used within the New Testament or one of its sub-corpora. This makes the rest of the study apparently redundant. Further, the lexical example that Bock uses is not a very helpful one, since he chooses the word ἀρραβών. Since this is a Hebrew loanword into Greek, first, it is not used in all of the diachronic strata that the author proposes; second, it has limited distribution in extra-biblical literature; and, third, it does not present a representative example for study of natural Greek, apart from some restricted evidence of language contact in the lexicon of a language. It is difficult to know what to make of this entire discussion of lexical study, since so much of the apparatus is apparently unnecessary. In the final stage of determination, one is left with the New Testament and without any clear synchronic procedure by which meaning is determined.

The second example is by Blomberg and Markley.²⁸ They too have a chapter on word studies. Blomberg and Markley, first, attempt to address some of the problems with determining lexical meaning (especially confusion of word and concept), but they end up endorsing polysemy, in which words are said to have not just a semantic range but “a range of meanings, so that one word does double (sometimes even triple and quadruple) duty with regard to the concept [sic; they must mean *concepts*] it symbolizes.”²⁹ Their further use of the language of denotation and connotation does nothing to relieve this problem, especially when they say that the meaning of a word “is discernible only as a word functions in a context that consists of at least a sentence or, even better, a discourse—that is, the structural segment of language of one or more paragraphs or their oral equivalent.”³⁰

28. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 117–42 on “Word Studies.”

29. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 119.

30. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 122. They at this point cite Barr, *Semantics* (but with no page number). It is unclear to what they refer, although they seem to be confusing his statements about theological meaning with

Their second consideration is diachrony and synchrony. Blomberg and Markley make the quizzical statement that, “While we will discuss the potential benefits of diachronic analysis, the priority in determining word meaning should almost always go to the findings of synchronic analysis.”³¹ They appear to realize that there is a problem with word studies and attempt to distance themselves from the practice, going so far as to say that “meaning is derived from context, which is responsible for accurately expressing a concept.”³² They never ask or answer how it is that a context—apart from the words and grammar—can convey such concepts. In fact, they go on to create their own confusion of word and concept when they deal mostly with English examples in their discussion. Concerning published works that are helpful for lexical study, Blomberg and Markley endorse the same kinds of works as does Bock, including the standard lexicons, but also including Louw and Nida as an important lexicon. However, these lexicons are followed by theological dictionaries (as well as concordances). When it comes to a procedure for determining meaning in context, diachrony emerges once more. Blomberg and Markley posit that the “range of possible meanings” of a word “is determined by looking at a word’s usage throughout history and across the New Testament canon.” The diachronic use apparently provides “the different options for the word’s synchronic usage.”³³ They then posit examination of similar categories as Bock—classical, Septuagint (and along with it Hebrew), nonbiblical contemporary, and New Testament use—to provide this range. It is unclear, however, how all of the previous study has a bearing on determining meaning, since at this stage they say that one “gather[s] potential definitions” by “assessing the meaning of a word in other New Testament writings,”³⁴ for which one really

general meaning.

31. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 123.

32. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 123.

33. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 131.

34. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 134.

only needs a concordance after all.³⁵ In the end, what is required is that the interpreter choose one meaning from the options available, which one does by apparently weighing diachronic and synchronic meanings, context, and whether exegetical word fallacies have been committed (on which see below). One might have just as much luck with a dart and a dart board.

4.2 *Greek Grammar*

If one is to establish word meaning in context (something I have tried to nuance above), then one would think that introductions to exegesis would have robust discussions of Greek grammar, since the grammar of the language is the major component of the context (or better cotext). One of the problems of much Greek exegetical study is the failure to define context, or better levels of context. Context is admittedly complex, but as it is being used in this discussion it must include grammar, since the text is the maximal linguistic unit and the major component of what one might call situational context.

It comes as a major disappointment, therefore, that the chapter on “Grammatical Analysis” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text*, while longer than in other works (at least the book has such a chapter), is disappointingly unhelpful and possibly even misleading.³⁶ The author, William Johnston, makes a distinction between grammar as referring to elements such as parts of speech and morphology, including tense, voice, mood, and cases, and syntax as referring to how clauses are organized. This distinction itself is problematic regarding meaning, since Greek, as a morphological or fusional language, relies heavily upon its morphology in meaning making. Johnston appears to place more emphasis upon syntax as providing the basis for interpretation of the New Testament text, especially when clauses are outlined and diagrammed.³⁷ The problem is

35. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 135.

36. Johnston, “Grammatical Analysis,” 57–72.

37. The author even endorses understanding English syntax as helpful in this regard (Johnston, “Grammatical Analysis,” 58). This exegesis volume also has a major chapter on sentence diagramming, Smith, “Sentence

complicated further by discussion of grammar, in which grammatical analysis is seen to be the process of “selecting the right category from among a list of possible meanings.”³⁸ Johnston describes the situation in which there is a list of possible categories, any one of which might be correct, thus making determining the right one difficult. This approach resembles the kind of presentation too often found in Greek grammars such as Daniel Wallace’s grammar.³⁹ Wallace’s grammar evidences a rationalist approach to language study, reflected also in Johnston’s treatment, in which there is an attempt to decipher the “right” answer, even though there is no clear procedure and most choices look equally valid. The extended example of grammatical/syntactical analysis that Johnston provides confirms this observation. The analysis for the most part consists of a series of labelings and maximalist interpretations of individual grammatical phenomena. For example, in Eph 2:2, the author parses the verb *περιπατήσατε* as an aorist, and states that “[t]he tense (aorist) deserves attention.” There is no rationale given for this, certainly not linguistic, in which the aorist is the least marked of the tense-forms (assuming that there is a Greek verbal system, something the author does not appeal to). The rationale is apparently theological, because the verb is said to be “probably a constative aorist summarizing

Diagramming,” 73–134. The major works on sentence diagramming—as this article points out—are Reed and Kellogg, *Graded Lessons in English* and then Reed and Kellogg, *Higher Lessons in English*. As Smith says, their system for diagramming “has remained essentially unchanged since it was introduced in 1875” and “is the standard for diagramming English sentences” (75n5). In other words, this notion of English sentence diagramming was developed according to principles of traditional grammar (reflecting rationalist and comparative-historical criteria) for the English language. It is a great mystery to me how this has come to be seen as something important for contemporary linguistic study of ancient Greek.

38. Johnston, “Grammatical Analysis,” 58.

39. Such a statement calls into question the statement by Gordon D. Fee that Wallace’s grammar “is easily the most important grammar now in use for exegetical work” (Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 73), and with it Fee’s understanding of Greek and the place it plays in exegesis.

the pre-salvation lifestyle of the audience.”⁴⁰ That is a lot of weight to put on an aorist indicative verb, parsed out of syntactical context. The author proceeds accordingly, dealing with individual words and phrases. The notion of clauses and the ordering of their elements and how clauses are complexed plays only a minor part at best in Johnston’s exposition. This approach is, unfortunately, all too common in exegetically based works, including many if not most commentaries.

The treatment of “Grammar” in Blomberg and Markley’s book starts out with the recognition that clauses and sentences, and how they are related to each other, are central to understanding the grammar of a text.⁴¹ However, the chapter quickly goes downhill after that, to the point where one realizes that the study of grammar, at least in this book, is mostly seen as a way of proving selected theological points and avoiding other theological difficulties. Blomberg and Markley focus an entire section on what they call “categories of grammatical forms,”⁴² which at least recognizes the significance of elements of the Greek language. However, they also include some highly questionable comments that reveal that they do not have a notion of language as system or of how such a system is organized. So they selectively identify two sets of elements as what they call “particularly crucial” and “frequently important.”⁴³ These two partial and unsystematic lists make it difficult to know how the various elements were selected, especially when the relationship of the verbal aspects and the tense-forms (where five are identified as important: present, future, imperfect, aorist, and perfect in that order) are not explained, nor what it means to subcategorize participles and imperatives (I am not sure I know what they are talking about). They even make some questionable calls in their presentation of Greek, when they say that Greek has two “past tenses.”⁴⁴ The examples that are then cited are not

40. Johnston, “Grammatical Analysis,” 63.

41. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 143–65 on “Grammar.”

42. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 149.

43. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 150.

44. Blomberg with Markley, *Handbook*, 150. Blomberg and Markley

examples that raise interesting questions regarding Greek per se, but are ones that have theological significance, such as Phlm 6 and the issue of evangelism, Rom 8:28 and the problem of bad things happening to good Christians, John 1:1 and the divinity of Jesus, 1 Cor 13:8 and the use of the middle voice verb (an instance where Blomberg and Markley are not cognizant of recent discussion of the meaning of the middle voice, still entertaining categories of deponency and middle voice confused with active voice, apparently an attempt to avoid a cessationist interpretation), and Rom 9:22–23 and a debate over predestination. There is no significant discussion of linguistic units larger than the word or phrase in any of these major texts, thereby reducing Greek grammar simply to the smallest units of analysis rather than the ones that carry more semantic and even theological weight.

4.3 *Presuppositions about Language*

The two volumes that I have examined on exegesis—both recent treatments of the subject—make reference to many of the exegetical fallacies that are to be avoided in exegesis. Even though these are generally well presented, this does not mean

apparently favorably cite the quotation by Scot McKnight that “his seminary Greek teacher declared ‘that exegesis is essentially understanding the genitive case, the article, and the aorist tense’” (McKnight, “Editor’s Preface,” 10, who acknowledges that “[p]erhaps this is an overstatement,” although he then goes on to endorse it as providing great exegetical rewards). This reveals the lack of understanding of language as system, since each of these elements belongs to a different system or subsystem within Greek, the first two in the nominal system and the last in the verbal system. Further, the aorist tense-form is far from being the most important element to understand the Greek verbal system, being the least semantically marked. This kind of statement is probably driven by theological concerns. For example, the genitive case is used in some constructions with theological significance (such as the so-called subjective or objective genitive), the article in Greek clearly does not correspond to the English definite and indefinite article system (and is problematic in such passages as John 1:1), and the aorist is often misunderstood in relationship to punctiliar or once-for-all action regarding events such as the resurrection. There are similar treatments found elsewhere. See Muraoka, *Why Read the Bible*, 69–77.

that there are not violations of them, as I have noted above. More important is what ideas about language seem to emerge from these two treatments. There are several things to note.

The first is that the task of exegesis is to establish *the* meaning of the text. Various caveats are expressed in both books regarding the ease or difficulty of exegesis, but both remain firmly wedded to the idea that exegesis is about determining the singular meaning of the text. The chapter by Bock on lexical analysis in *Interpreting*, even before discussing anything else, claims that the first rule of doing a word study is to “initially pursue the meaning intended by the author for his original audience,” a statement emphasized by italics.⁴⁵ Blomberg and Markley act similarly when they introduce examples that make an exegetical difference and attempt to refute certain readings, even where such refutation demands that they engage in what must be seen as highly suspicious reasoning. This is clearly not a natural language approach to Greek, where one must recognize that our descriptions of language are always incomplete. As one linguist once stated, “all grammars leak,” by which he meant that no description of Greek can explain every element or function of the language.

The second idea is that words have multiple meanings and these meanings are of primary importance when they have theological significance. Despite claims to the contrary regarding diachronic study or even the importance of context in relationship to the meanings of individual lexical items (or their range of meanings or multiple meanings), the emphasis throughout both discussions is upon words having a variety of meanings and these meanings appear—at least in their most important instances—to be theological. This is not a natural language approach to Greek, where there are no theological words, but only theological contexts. The words of Greek are simply the words of Greek and are not theological ciphers. They are instead entities that contribute minimal meaning within a context that then establishes theological meaning by means of clauses and beyond.

45. Bock, “Lexical Analysis,” 137 (emphasis removed).

The third idea is that grammar, like lexical study, is essentially confined to the lower levels of language, such as words and word groups. In some ways, this is understandable and appropriate for Greek, a heavily morphological language where morphological choice has semantic significance. Greek uses many synthetic forms to indicate verbal aspect, attitude, and causality (for the most part), whereas in other languages—such as English—periphrasis is more common. Therefore, it is appropriate to examine Greek morphology—at least so far as one recognizes its semantics. However, the rank scale dictates that we move from the word to the word group and then to the clause and beyond. One of the most important features—and one consistently ignored by exegesis—is the clause and its organization and relationships. Blomberg and Markley identify several types of clausal relations and this provides useful information, but this is only a very small part of their discussion and not emphasized when they treat individual examples. However, these clauses and their relations into clause complexes and then their composition into paragraphs and larger units are the fundamental meaning units that create texts, and it is these units that convey theology. Recognition of this is missing almost in its entirety in these discussions.

The fourth idea is that neither of the studies shows itself to have major regard for the major discussions within linguistics—including within New Testament Greek linguistics—of the last twenty-five or so years. There is some mention of some recent topics—the major one being verbal aspect and its possible relationship with tense—but most of the others are not to be found. As a result, the kinds of descriptions that are being made by Greek linguists are not being included within proposals regarding exegesis. There are many possible reasons for this. Some of it may simply be the complexity of the field that does not allow a single person to be aware of such issues. This is a genuine consideration. However, since the individual chapters in *Interpreting* were written by individual scholars, who presumably have some expertise in the area, this reason does not seem adequate at least for this book. Another reason, and one far more likely, is that those attempting to describe exegetical

methods have a different set of presuppositions than do those who focus upon language. Some of these presuppositions concern traditional ways of thinking about language, but others are clearly linked to theological commitments. Whatever the reason, the natural language approach is not being considered as it should be.

5. Conclusion

A natural language approach to Koine Greek exegesis is clearly missing in much exegetical work, at least as evidenced in a wide variety of ways in which exegesis is performed and especially as seen in two recent treatments of the topic. A natural language approach demands that one approach the language of the Greek New Testament from a linguistic perspective that recognizes the language as a variety of Greek used within the Greco-Roman world of the first century. This entails that this description should draw upon ways of describing language used by those outside of biblical studies, including various categories from modern linguistics. I have used a particular framework in my description. However, I believe that, regardless of whether I used this one or another, the kinds of views of language that are found in exegetical works are generally out of keeping with advances in natural language descriptions by linguists. The result is that our exegetical tools and, more importantly, our exegetical approaches are not current with contemporary thought about language. New Testament studies is a textual discipline, and therefore a linguistic discipline, and it therefore demands that our approaches to interpretation of the New Testament avail themselves of appropriate views of language to ensure that the next generation of exegetes has an appropriate framework for their work.

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