



## The Relationship Between Language and the Bible: Discourse Approach

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### Abstract

Language is a means of communication between people. Human beings interact by talking to one another through language and this is equally portrayed in the Holy Bible where it is recorded that the use of Language came about through God himself in the beginning; both in the written and spoken form of Language use. This means of communication is known as the discourse in which its nature of coherent structure has to be studied; Genesis chapter 4 verses 6- 16 have been purposefully selected because it contains the concept of discourse in language based on discourse rankscale. This study focused more on the use of “discourse rankscale” in analyzing selected conversations from the Bible. Coulthard (1975) proposed a five-unit rankscale for discourse to be: Lesson, Transaction, Exchange, Move and Act. Hence, the study finds fourteen (14) Acts present whereby the acts are performing different functions. The identified act provided information, response, and request for information. There are six (6) moves in the discourse which are subdivided into three (3) simple moves and (3) complex moves. Thus, using the familiar hierarchical grammatical structure in conveniently describing what happens in discourse analysis; it has been observed that conversation or discourse in the Bible has rank-scale manifestation in looking at the elements that the discourses constitute.

**Keywords:** Discourse, communication, language, Bible, linguistics

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## 1. Introduction

Language and understanding are evident throughout the Bible. Throughout his creative work, God named things (Gen. 1:5-10); it is assumed that people understand language and the things, ideas, or concepts to which these words refer. Similarly, in Genesis 2:19 when Adam named the creatures, the understanding of what they were (the concepts) and what they were called (the symbols) is taken for granted.

Jesus reveals that some will hear but not understand. He also shows that when people don't understand, they often need explanation in order to comprehend (Mark 4:13-20). From 1 John 5:20, we know that Jesus, “the Son of God, has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true”.

Names for things and ideas may be random, as most linguists suggest, yet they work together in a comprehensive and comprehensible system (Field 2005, Part 1). As Vande K. (1991) posits that, the human language facility appears to be innate and involves a complex system of symbols and concepts that enables us to be creative and to understand the communication of God and others. When possible, learners should view the connection that exists in the target language, as well as those between the learner's native language and the one the learners are learning. This results to why some writers try to explain complicated connections between language and thought.



Linguistics, the scientific study of language, can be described as a "crossroads discipline. Language is connected to human experience; linguistics is a point of centralized traffic, intersecting with fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, pedagogy, philosophy, neurology, computer science, history, and theology. The Bible as a linguistic artifact and its interpretation will be unrelated to what the readers think about language" (ibid., p. 134). The major movements of contemporary linguistics have impacted and even "changed the course of biblical studies" (ibid., p. 135). 2 Post-modernism has demonstrated views of language that are antithetical to the Bible as a record of God's authority.

Analyzing biblical content through a linguistic lens enriches understanding and appreciation of God's Word. Having a biblical worldview as a point of departure also aids in discerning among a variety of theories presented by linguists with world views of various stripes. Viewing the Bible through linguistics and out of the conviction of Christian faith facilitates intelligent engagement with contemporary philosophy and aids in the task of interpreting God's Word.

Conducting linguistic analysis of the Bible narrative reminds one of the humanity and authenticity of the Bible's authors and its protagonists. Its writers occasionally struggle to communicate the ineffable. All of them labor to deliver a God-given message they have been called to share. As described by Ellen White (1958: 2) these changes have not always been to the benefit of belief in the Scripture. As Ward (2002) observes, "[The] growth of philosophical and biblical interest in language and literature might be thought at least to open the possibility for a renewed conception of what the Bible is and of how it functions, and therefore of a renewed confession of the doctrine of the Scripture. In fact, though, among theologians who have been influenced by the focusing of interests in language and literature, new linguistic and literary conceptualities are often taken to confirm and deepen, rather than to challenge, the disrepute into which doctrines of the Scripture have fallen. This state of affairs is not necessary, however." (pp. 4-5). Nevertheless, "recently, a small number of theologians have adopted the basic concepts of speech act theory for theological purposes, finding in them the resources to develop a renewed conception of Scripture which remains largely in line with orthodox Protestant doctrines of Scripture" (ibid., pp. 13-14).

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers. (p. 21)

At times the Bible authors also transmit seemingly mundane information fascinating to the linguist. In reading these everyday details, one is struck anew by the Scripture's highly accurate reflection of even commonplace human experience that is surprisingly recognizable in modern times. Though separated from these individuals by time and space, viewing them through a linguistic lens throws them into sharp relief, fills in their outlines, and makes them come alive as the thinking, feeling, speaking, and believing individuals they once were.

Taking God at His word, as communicated through the Bible, encourages the examination of linguistic assumptions and hypotheses in the greater light of the Scriptures. (Ellen White 1954):

In Linguistics wide range of style and subjects, the Bible interests every mind, and it is a means of appeal to people. The Bible provides the principles of government for the control of the state, the regulation of household-principles that human wisdom cannot be equaled to, and the most profound philosophy, poetry and sublime that are laid down to guide humans.

## **Theoretical framework**

According to Osisanwo (2003), for meaning to be relevant, the contexts and situation must be established. These situational contexts are examined by pragmatics. Sinclair and Coulthard (1977) defined discourse analysis as the study of conversation; that is, pragmatics is the study of how a writer, or a speaker encodes messages and how the readers or the listener of the message decodes the message.

Cook (1999:4) identifies different ways of categorizing discourse; by situation, function, participants, text, substance, or by a combination of these factors. Brown and Yule (1983) categorized discourse function into two. These are transactional and interactional functions of discourse. Transactional discourse focuses on the passing of information from one person to another while interactional involves discussions among people to maintain social relationship.

However, this study will focus more on the use of discourse rankscale in analyzing selected conversations from the Bible. Coulthard (1975) proposed a five-unit rankscale for discourse to be: Lesson, Transaction, Exchange, Move, Act.

Discourse to be analyzed is selected from the Old Testament; the book of Genesis chapter 4: 6- 15

**Act:** act is the lowest unit on the discourse rank-scale, and by composition, it is the smallest discourse unit. For the purpose of this analysis, three main types of acts will be selected as they appear to form the core in all discourse situation. These are informative act, elicitation act and directive act.

**Informative act:** they give pieces of information with different responses which can be negative or positive.

**Elicitation Act:** this comes as a question requiring an answer. There is usually a predicted answer which warrants question requiring an answer.

**Directive Act:** this type requests for action.

### **Move**

A move in discourse is the single minimal contribution of a participant in a talk at once. It consists of one or more acts. A move is said to be simple when it contains only one act, or complex when it has more than one act as its constituents. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) identified 5 five types of moves based on classroom discourse. These are called; focusing move, framing move, opening move, answering move and follow-up move.

### **Exchange**

An exchange is formed by a set of moves. When a speaker X initiates a talk and speaker Y responds while speaker X gives a follow-up or feedback, an exchange has been achieved.

### **Transaction and Lesson**

Lessons are made up of transactions. The two have been taken together because they originated from Sinclair and Courtyard's (1975) classroom discourse analysis. A transaction is made up of an exchange or exchanges.

## **2. Review on the Relationship between Language and the Bible**

The relationship between the Bible and Language studies begins with the account of creation. Information about language starts as soon as the words do, and the first information we get about language is about discourse structure, which, in linguistic jargon, means language about events. Typically, although there is sometimes minor variation



when meaning is introduced, the study of linguistics is introduced starting with sounds (phonetics), then sound structure (phonology), then units of meaning (morphology, then semantics), then units of grammar (syntax), then language in communication (socio- linguistics), then whole chunks of language, such as paragraphs or books (discourse analysis). This order is used largely because of an evolutionary approach: Animals make sounds, but people use everything up to and including discourse; and the assumption is that we started out as animals. However, that is not how God created the universe. In creating, God used sound, speech is spoken (as distinguished from written) language - but that is not where the analysis starts. Rather, creation begins with a statement, which includes the required discourse elements: time (“In the beginning”), character (“God”), causality (“created”), and place (“the heavens and the Earth”).

In the words used, there is additional information about time and character. First, the narrator of this text is not directly God (God inspired it, but He did not override the human author’s linguistic perspective). Rather, the narrator refers to God in the third person, which is why he writes “God created” instead of writing “I created,” which would place God as the direct narrator; or “You created,” which would make God the audience for the narrator’s account of creation. In other words, the narrator is an indirect character in Genesis 1. Also, the tense marking on “created” gives the narrator a time different from the event described in the discourse. The narrator is chronologically looking back to the time of creation. Had the narrator been writing from God’s perspective before creation in eternity past, the passage would have said “God will create,” and had the narrator been writing from the perspective of God at the time of creation, he would have written “God creates.” The narrator’s writing is an indirect event; the direct event described in the first chapter of Genesis is the spoken creation that God was doing. Finally, causality is a component of the indirect discourse: The narrator is, from the perspective given by the tense and person information, causing the pen to move on the paper or the chisel to move on the stone, or the stylus to carve in the clay, or however Genesis was written. Thus, in the very first verse, there are two series of events - one reported and one implied - and, therefore, two levels of discourse, which I term the direct (what happened) and the indirect (the writing about what happened).

In linguistic jargon, the direct portion would be studied by syntacticians, semanticists, and morphologists; the indirect portion would be studied by semanticists and discourse analysts. The information given by person and tense is called “deixis” in linguistic jargon; these are words or elements that require a certain perspective in order to mean what they mean. In this case, the perspective gives us information about the narrator. Event structure is straightforward (on the direct level) in Genesis 1, but this should not be understood too narrowly; indirect discourse shows that events can be implied through grammatical and morphological means rather than reported directly as a subject of the text. When God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light, the word (and therefore the idea) chronologically and logically preceded the visible light. God’s idea of light and God’s language about light preceded visible light. Events (discourses in linguistics) are composed of everything required for a context, to use a word that comes up in Biblical exposition. That language precedes creation is an important point: Language was not created and did not evolve from animal grunts or mews. God eternally has language as part of His rationality. Human beings have language because it is part of the image of God. Thus, God’s use of language is an exemplar for human use of language, and it can be used to provide information about human language.

A subfield within discourse analysis is pragmatics, which is the study of information that is not stated but that is expected to be understood. If a window were open, and I were to say, “It’s cold in here,” and the person to whom I was speaking had closed the window, that person would have understood and acted on the pragmatics of what I had said; for nothing in what I said mentioned the window. Similarly, it can be understood from Genesis 1:1-3 that what God says happens. That does not have to be stated directly (although it is). Understanding from the discourse that what God says happens lays the foundation for understanding the later sentence, “Thus says the Lord.” It also



provides an example of how people ought to use language: God's abhorrence of lying makes sense because when God speaks, He describes or creates reality, and when people speak, God commands that human language should express the truth. God did not capriciously decide that human beings should not lie; He objects to lying because He is Truth itself, and His own use of language is truthful. If anyone fails to understand the pragmatics of first words in Genesis 1, the significance of "Thus says the Lord" and God's abhorrence of lying might also be missed.

The indirect aspect of the discourse, the writing about the creation, assumes that there is an audience who will read the discourse. This is another function of language: communication. The study of language as communication is called sociolinguistics. As noted above, a lot more information can be conveyed in language than is explicitly stated. Judges 12 is another example of this: The pronunciation of shibboleth/sibboleth identified people as Gileadite or Ephraimite, and that information, communicated via pronunciation, was used to discriminate. Language-based discrimination is a popular subject in sociolinguistics. God's command to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply gives pragmatic information about God's relationship to them: He is entitled to tell them what to do: He outranks them. Sociolinguists also study what language reveals about hierarchies among people. Human beings possess language as part of the image of God; animals, like the serpent in Genesis 3 and Balaam's donkey in Numbers 22, possess language only for special occasions. It is interesting to note, on the topic of hierarchies revealed by language, that when animals speak, they win the argument (Genesis 3:1-6; Numbers 22:28-38).

The meaning of words or components of words, such as prefixes, suffixes, roots, etc. (semantics), can usually be understood from surrounding discourse. The meaning of words assumes (a point of pragmatics) that people understand the discourse (if there is any question about what a word means, there is a question about what the discourse means; but pragmatics usually clarifies what is meant by a word in a discourse). Stating at the outset what words mean is helpful, but it is not always necessary if people are willing to do discourse analysis on their own: God does not define most terms explicitly at the outset in Genesis 1: The word "day" is a notable exception. The Oxford English Dictionary uses quotations to track the changing semantics of words through the history of the English language, which is a Biblical approach, but it would not work for people who speak only Guniyandi - Guniyandi speakers would need Guniyandi discourses in order to use Guniyandi pragmatics to figure out Guniyandi semantics. In Genesis 1, we can understand that evening and morning compose a day; "day" means an evening and a morning in Genesis 1. This is why Jewish holidays start at sundown on the day prior to the morning of the holiday. In English, a morning and an evening compose a day, which is why we have to do some verbal gymnastics in English to describe Jewish holidays. As another example of understanding semantics from discourse, it is possible to understand the meaning of the term "created" from the discourse. It means making something that was not in existence previously. Light did not exist except as an idea in God's mind until God created it.

Grammar is called syntax in linguistics. The different term is necessary in order to distinguish description from prescription. Linguists study language, even when language is not working as well as it could or according to rules that were invented for it by grammarians. This study is called descriptive linguistics - the study of what actually happens in language. Prescriptive linguistics is what some people think ought to be done with language. In order to be useful, language has to follow rules and be orderly, but the rules that exist in the minds of speakers do not always need to line up with the rules that prescriptive grammarians say should be used. Infinitives are defined as the most basic form of a verb, expressed in English, for example, "to be," "to sit," "to think." In English, it is said that one should not split infinitives, but English speakers can and regularly do split infinitives, English works that way. The prescriptive prohibition against splitting infinitives in English is a holdover from Latin; in Latin, infinitives are single words, for example, "illucere" (to shine on); and Latin is not a language that does much infixing (an infix is like a prefix or suffix, but inside a word rather than on the beginning or end).



In English, infinitives are two words, so more words can be inserted if the speaker or writer wishes. Splitting infinitives in English is sometimes the most linguistically natural way to express an idea; when not splitting an infinitive is unnatural, a hearer's or reader's attention may be distracted from the idea to be conveyed. God does not speak to people in languages they do not understand (in Daniel 5, the writing on the wall had to be explained, but Daniel was there to explain it, thereby establishing himself as a spokesman for God [a pragmatics point]: God did not leave the king stranded with incomprehensible language). Even when there were prescriptively better languages available, God used common language, Koiné Greek, not the more prestigious classical Greek, to write the New Testament; Christ Himself spoke Aramaic outside the synagogue and read Hebrew in the synagogue. God used Hebrew to write for the ancient Jews. Given God's example of understandability, it is undesirable to distract people from clearly understanding an idea by using language that is not easily understandable. In fact, God says that speaking words that cannot be understood is pointless, and He issues a command against it: I Corinthians 14:9 indicates that unless one is speaking words that are easily understood, the speaking is as good as addressing the air; and in I Corinthians 14:28 He issues the command to be quiet unless it is possible to be understood. God says that speaking words that cannot be understood is pointless, and He issues a command against it.

Syntax is the study of how meaning-bearing elements combine to form words and sentences. Linguists call meaning-bearing elements "morphemes." These are different from words. The "ed" in the verb "created" conveys the meaning of pastness. The morpheme "-ed" cannot occur independently of a verb in English, so it is not a word, but it still has meaning. "Create" is a morpheme; and because it can occur independently, it is also a word. "Created" is one word composed of two morphemes. Syntacticians will tell us that the past "-ed" is always a verbal suffix: It attaches to the ends of verbs. Syntacticians will also tell us that English is an SVO language, meaning that most declarative sentences in English have a subject element, a verbal element, and an object element, in that order. For emphasis, the O can be placed first: "That (O) I (S) like (V)," as compared to the more customary "I like that." Note that word order contributes to the pragmatics of emphasis. In order to know how the morphemes of "In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth" compose a sentence and how to understand what the elements mean in relation to one another; we have to know the syntax. Speakers of English know that prepositional phrases often convey temporal or spatial information.

The ability to speak and write is assumed from Genesis 1, but information about the analysis of sound occurs explicitly in Scripture; Judges 12 is an example of this. It is clearly indicated that "s" and "sh" indicate different sounds; if they did not, there would be no basis for the discrimination that clearly follows from the difference. The study of different sounds is called "phonetics." The difference between "s" and "sh" lies in where the tongue is placed in proximity to the roof of the mouth to make the sounds - toward the alveolar ridge for "s" and just throat ward of the alveolar ridge for "sh." The Ephraimites could have been taught to pull their tongues back a short way in their mouths - the place of articulation is the only difference between the sounds. They are both sibilants (hissing sounds) and both unvoiced (without vibration in the vocal cords). This text also leads into phonology, which is the study of how languages treat the sounds that they have. "Shibboleth" and "sibboleth" are the same word. The narrator in this text says that the Ephraimites were pronouncing "Shibboleth" incorrectly, not that they were saying a different word; in linguistic terms, the "s" and "sh" are allophonic, not phonemic, for the Gileadites and Ephraimites. In English, "s" and "sh" alone are enough to make different words: "Sip" and "ship," for example - they are phonemic sounds in English. In the language of Gilead/Ephraim, the sounds were recognizably different but did not make different words. An example of non-phonemic sound difference in English is the various sounds that we spell with "t." The sounds indicated by "t" in the words "tack," "stop," "liter," and "cat" are all different sounds.

However, these linguistic aspects seen in the bible proves the relationship between Language studies and the Bible.

### 3. Analysis

Focusing on the select bible passage, Genesis 4 verses 6-16 reveals that there are two participants which are; **The Lord** and **Cain**. This is a discourse between The Lord and Cain on the killing of Abel. This selected discourse is a TRANSACTIONAL discourse.

**The Lord to Cain:** Why art thou wroth? And why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou do not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. (Act = Sentence) - **Elicitation and Directive Act - Complex move, opening move. (Gen: 4 vs 6-7)**

- The statement, “if thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?” this is a rhetoric statement without response.

**The LORD to Cain:** where is Abel thy brother? (Act = Sentence) - **Elicitation Act - Simple move, initiative move (Gen: 4 vs 9)**

**Cain:**I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper? (Act = Sentence) - **Elicitation Act (immediate, negative response) - Simple move, answering move (Exchange 1) (Gen: 4vs9)**

**The Lord:** what hast thou done? (Elicitation act) the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand; When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.(Act = Sentence) - **Informative Act. - Complex move (Gen: 4vs10-12)**

**Cain:** My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.(Act = Sentence) - **Informative Act - Complex move (Exchange 2) (Gen: 4vs13-14)**

**The Lord:** therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. (Act =Sentence)- **Directive Act - Simple move (Gen:4vs15)**

#### Discussion

There are fourteen (14) Acts present whereby the acts are performing different functions such as some provides information, some responding, and some requesting for information. There are six (6) moves in the discourse which are subdivided into three (3) simple moves and (3) complex moves.

### 4. Conclusion

The discourse presented above, which was generated from Gen 4 is a complex combination of different grammatical units that deals with how meaning is being built up into larger communicative units. Hence, organization of language above the sentence or clause, focuses on the larger linguistic units in the conversational exchange.

However, using the familiar hierarchical grammatical structure in conveniently looking at what happens in discourse analysis, it has been observed that conversation or discourse in the Bible has rank-scale manifestation in looking at the elements that the discourses constitute.

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