

REVIEW OF PORTER AND O'DONNELL, *DISCOURSE ANALYSIS  
AND THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article offers a review of Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis and the Greek New Testament*. The review is not merely an overview of the book's contents but offers an application of the methodology that is promoted by Porter and O'Donnell. The article discusses the benefits of the model and method presented in the book while also acknowledging potential difficulties of the approach. (Review Article)

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, Porter, O'Donnell, Systemic Functional Linguistics, linguistics, book review

### 1. *Introduction*

*Discourse Analysis and the Greek New Testament*, co-authored by Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell, is the second volume in the new Library of New Testament Greek (LNTG) series published by T&T Clark, a series in which the volumes are intended to examine New Testament Greek historically and linguistically to show how it functions in specific uses in the diverse texts of the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> The authors articulate a very de-

1. This review was prepared for and presented at the New Testament Greek Exegesis Session at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting in San Diego, November 20–22, 2024.

2. “T&T Clark Library of New Testament Greek.” Although I am not listed by name, I am one of the “many more . . . students at McMaster Divinity College” who read, used, and cited previous drafts of the book (Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, xi). Thus, I am not unfamiliar with the methodology presented in this work, yet my research has focused on the interpersonal re-

tailed—and at times quite dense—model of discourse analysis for New Testament Greek and anchor it in Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) theory. They make clear that their focus in this volume is on the text-generating resources of language, i.e., the textual metafunction in SFL, but they do take care to position their model in relation to both the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions.<sup>3</sup>

The task of critiquing such a thorough book on methodology can be quite challenging. One way forward is to attempt to apply the model to a biblical text to see what it reveals, and this is the tack that I will take. Yet even this is challenging because the book is not (and is not intended to be) a step-by-step how-to manual. Nevertheless, the authors provide examples of the model deployed in analysis. Of course, there is no way for me to offer any sort of full textual discourse analysis and respect the purpose and scope of this paper. Thus, in what follows, I will focus my attention on the portion of the model to do with information structure and flow.<sup>4</sup> For demonstration purposes, I will attempt to apply the model to the Letter of Jude.

## 2. *Modeling Information Structure and Flow*

Discourse analysts often commence discussions of information structure and flow by highlighting the constraint that linearity places on language use.<sup>5</sup> Linearity reflects the human experience of life as a series of social processes that unfold in a culture of countless situations.<sup>6</sup> Just as one does not (and cannot) experience all the goings-on of life in one moment, it is also not possible to communicate at once the whole content of meaning one may wish to share with another.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Porter and O'Donnell point out,

sources of language and not, strictly, the textual resources, as Porter and O'Donnell have done here.

3. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 6–7.
4. See especially Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 96–127.
5. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 97. See the discussions in Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, 125–26 and Dvorak and Walton, “Clause as Message,” 34–35.
6. Martin and Rose, *Working with Discourse*, 1–2.
7. Dvorak and Walton, “Clause as Message,” 34.

texts, either spoken or written, consist of “more than an ordered list of concepts realized in a string of words.”<sup>8</sup> Language users typically structure texts in certain ways, controlling how they unfold in an attempt to increase the probability that their hearers—or in the case of the New Testament, readers—will understand the intended message(s). This sort of arrangement indicates that texts are not merely linear and flat but are hierarchical and have depth and *texture*. This is one reason why discourse analysts are wont to declare that the meaning of a (whole) text lies “beyond the clause” and is always more than the sum of its parts.

Porter and O’Donnell model this sort of structuring based on the notions of “theme” and “rheme” that stem from the Prague Linguistic Circle’s Functional Sentence Perspective, which was further developed by Halliday in SFL. However, it is very important to note that what Porter and O’Donnell offer is not a “shoe-horning” of Greek into models developed primarily for English. Rather, they have carefully contemplated the linguistic theory and have designed the model specifically for Hellenistic Greek.<sup>9</sup> The result is a model that describes information structure and flow across three different levels: clause, clause complex, and paragraph (text).

### 2.1 Clause Level: Prime and Subsequent

The authors reserve the terms Theme and Rheme to describe information structuring at the clause complex level and, instead, introduce the terms Prime and Subsequent to describe the two-part structure of the clause as message.<sup>10</sup> Prime and Subsequent are realized by means of the order of clause components in the clause. Prime refers to “who or what the clause is focused upon” and is realized through the first functional clausal component—i.e., Subject, Predicator, Complement, or Adjunct.<sup>11</sup> Subsequent is “the de-

8. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 97.

9. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 103–4.

10. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 105. See Dvorak and Walton, “Clause as Message,” 42–43.

11. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 105. For definitions of Subject, Predicator, Complement, and Adjunct, see “OpenText.org Annotation Model.”

velopment of the prime” and is realized through the remaining components of the clause.<sup>12</sup> Prime, then, is the “leaping off” point of the clause that orients the reader to its message; Subsequent is the “news” about the Prime that the writer wants the reader to know, to experience, or to remember.<sup>13</sup> A key point to note in Prime and Subsequent analysis is that elements that do not fill a functional slot such as Subject, Predicator, Complement, or Adjunct (e.g., conjunctions, addresses) do not form a group for such analysis and are, thus, excluded.

For the sake of illustration, let us consider clause 5 (v. 3) from the letter.<sup>14</sup>

Cl #	Prime	Subsequent
5 (v. 3)	πᾶσαν σπουδὴν ποιούμενος γράφειν ὑμῖν περὶ τῆς κοινῆς ἡμῶν σωτηρίας [Adjunct]	ἀνάγκην ἔσχον γράψαι ὑμῖν παρακαλῶν ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι τῇ ἄπαξ παραδοθείση τοῖς ἀγίοις πίστει

An analysis of the clausal components using the OpenText model shows that clause 5, a Primary clause, is rather complex in that it comprises an address (ἀγαπητοί) and four functional clause components: an Adjunct that includes rank-shifted (embedded) clauses two levels deep; a Complement that includes a rank-shifted clause; a Predicator; and a final Adjunct that includes rank-shifted clauses three levels deep. The Prime of this clause is the initial Adjunct through which Jude draws attention to the great effort he had mustered to write about the salvation that he and the addressees held in common.<sup>15</sup> The participle *ποιούμενος* is likely concessive, so that the development of the Prime that is provided by the Subsequent

12. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 105.

13. Dvorak and Walton, “Clause as Message,” 43.

14. For convenience, I have provided the Greek text of Jude (NA28).

15. Note that in Prime and Subsequent analysis, elements that do not fill a functional slot (S, P, C, or A) do not form a group for such analysis; thus, in the current clause, the address ἀγαπητοί is not factored into the analysis. Such is also the case for elements that “move between ranks (such as conjunctions)” (Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 106).

is a supplanting of the conceded point.<sup>16</sup> That is, “making great effort to write to you about our common salvation” is replaced with “I have an obligation/compulsion to write to you, urging you to struggle for the faith.”

One final comment on Prime and Subsequent analysis is that the authors comment that while every clause will have a Prime, not every clause will have a Subsequent. This phenomenon occurs in Jude. For example, at clause 33 (v. 9a), the Subject δ . . . Μιχαὴλ δ ἀρχάγγελος is Prime, and there is no Subsequent because δ . . . Μιχαὴλ is an independent nominative.<sup>17</sup> Also at clause 38 (v. 9c), the clause contains only one functional component, the Predicator εἴπεν, which introduces the reported speech that Jude provides in the clause to follow.

## 2.2 Clause Complex Level: Theme and Rheme

Whereas Prime and Subsequent analysis is relatively straightforward, analysis at the level of clause complex becomes somewhat more abstract and challenging. Porter and O’Donnell say that this is due in part to the fact that even though information structuring is a textual function, the process of clause complexing extends the scope of meaning of the clauses being complexed in both structural and *semantic* ways.<sup>18</sup> This problematizes identifying the boundaries of the information unit at this level. After weighing Halliday’s notion of Given and New and finding it inappropriate for use with Greek,<sup>19</sup> Porter and O’Donnell argue that a sensible

16. Concession and countering spills over into Interpersonal semantics. On this, see Dvorak, *Interpersonal Metafunction*, 74–75.

17. See Porter, *Idioms*, 86; Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 8.

18. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 110.

19. First, Halliday’s notion of given and new is based upon English phonology and vocal intonation. This is problematic because access to native Hellenistic Greek speakers is nonexistent, so there is no feasible way to modify the model for Greek. Second, the suggestion of Brown and Yule to use indefiniteness and definiteness to determine given and new, even if it may work for English, could not work for Greek because these features are not indicated in the same way. English may use an article (or lack thereof) to indicate definiteness or indefiniteness, but the article in Greek functions as a specifier. See Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 107–9. See also Halliday, *Halliday’s Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 114–21 and Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*,

way forward is to frame the information unit of clause complexes in relation to participant structure and process chains. They adopt the terms Theme and Rheme to label such structures.

Theme is “the [explicit,] fully grammaticalized participant as the actor in a process chain,” and Rheme is the “additional process information for the current actor; that is . . . the extension of the current process chain, including secondary clauses, until that unit terminates.”<sup>20</sup> From a functional perspective, “Theme is an explicit subject of a clause complex . . . , most often indicated by a nominal group as subject,” and this subject, to be the theme of a complex, “must occur in an independent or primary clause.”<sup>21</sup> Not every clause or complex contributes to a Theme; those that do not still participate in the information structure through their Prime and Subsequent, but do not contribute to Theme or Rheme at the clause complex level.<sup>22</sup> Finally, although Theme and Rheme may occasionally correspond to Prime and Subsequent, the Theme need not be the Prime of the clause in which it appears.<sup>23</sup> However, when Theme and Prime do correspond, the Theme is considered to be more heavily marked because of the concentration of information at both levels on the same element.<sup>24</sup>

According to my Theme and Rheme analysis, there are twelve thematic units in the Letter of Jude: unit 1 (vv. 1–2); unit 2 (vv. 3–8); unit 3 (v. 9); unit 4 (vv. 10–11); unit 5 (vv. 12–13); unit 6 (vv. 14–15); unit 7 (v. 16a); unit 8 (v. 16b); unit 9 (vv. 17–18); unit 10 (v. 19); unit 11 (vv. 20–23); unit 12 (vv. 25–25). Consider as an example thematic unit 2, which runs from v. 3 to v. 8 (clauses 5–32 [inclusive of down-ranked secondary clauses]). There are several interesting features to note about this Thematic unit. First, note that I have not included the address ἀγαπητοί in my analysis as a thematic element; this is because neither the readers, whom Jude addresses with the adjective, nor Jude, the first-person sub-

169. On the function of the article in Greek, see Porter, *Idioms*, 103–14; Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 72–88.

20. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 110. See Dvorak and Walton, “Clause as Message,” 45–51.

21. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 110–11.

22. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 111.

23. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 110.

24. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 110.

ject of *ἐσχον* in clause 5, is the thematic actor in the information structure.<sup>25</sup> Rather, *τινες ἄνθρωποι* (and definers) is the Thematic actor, although not marked. This means, second, that all of clause 5 is rhematic material as is everything contained in clauses 16–32. This is worth highlighting as it shows that rhematic material can precede the thematic element and then continue after it. Third, note that even though other fully grammaticalized elements, such as *ὁ κύριος* (v. 6 [clause 19]), do appear in this stretch of text, they are not thematic for various reasons. In this case, *ὁ κύριος* appears in a Secondary clause and is, thus, disqualified to be thematic.

### 2.3 Paragraph and Text Level: Topic and Comment

In the model that Porter and O'Donnell present, the terms Topic and Comment refer to information structure at the level of paragraph and (whole) text. Topic is defined as the “establishment of a new semantic environment for the text,” and Comment is the “supporting information for the current topic.”<sup>26</sup> One unique feature of their proposal is that Topic and Comment are “not based upon being able to identify a specific statement of theme [in the paragraph or text] but are instead a means of identifying semantically relevant units.”<sup>27</sup> Just as complexity in the methodology increased with the abstractness of the clause complex, so it increases even more with the further abstractness of the paragraph and text and the fact that the information structure is tied more closely to semantic units.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Porter and O'Donnell provide seven general characteristic features by which the boundaries of the information structure at this level may be identified.<sup>29</sup> It will usually be the case that more than one of these features will be at play to signal the major topical units in a given text. The seven features are as follows:

25. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 114, do note that there are occasions when a vocative element “may be thematic within the information structure.” See also Porter and O'Donnell, “Vocative Case in Greek.”

26. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 116.

27. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 117.

28. The authors do discuss how the status and validity of the paragraph is disputed in the literature on discourse analysis. See Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 83–84.

29. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 117.

1. Discourse markers that mark the beginnings and endings of sections,  
such as certain particles (e.g., conjunctions)
2. Cohesion and segmentation
3. Participant chains (as discussed as part of Theme and Rheme)
4. “Word order” and referential distance
5. Topic and topic shifts
6. Thematization and thematic focus
7. Literary text types

In Jude, there appear to be only four topical units. The first comprises clauses 1–4 (vv. 1–2), which is the letter opening. This is identifiable because it follows the common structure of a letter opening (A to B <sup>^</sup> wish-prayer) and grammatical features to be expected in a letter opening (e.g., third- and second-person). Further, clause 5 (v. 3) begins with a plural nominative of address and the thematic elements change. The Topic, then, is Jude writing a letter to fellow Jesus followers and offering a wish-prayer on their behalf at the outset of the letter.

The second topical unit spans clauses 5–66 (vv. 3–16) and may be summarized as follows: some/certain people have stealthily infiltrated the group, but you (addressees) should have recognized them as the deviants they are based on your (addressees) knowledge of scripture and tradition. The boundaries of this topical unit may be identified by, at the beginning, the introduction of a new third person participant into the text (*τινες ἀνθρώποι*) along with significant modification, and at the end changing the focus to the addressees (*ὑμεῖς δέ*) as well as a shift away from the mythopoetic use of intertexts from scripture and tradition.

The third topical unit spans clauses 67–86 (vv. 17–23) and may be summarized as follows: You beloved ones (addressees) are to keep yourselves within the boundaries in which God has stationed you so as not to become deviants like the infiltrators. What marks the beginning of this topical unit is a change in person from 3rd person descriptions of the infiltrators to second-person address of the readers. In addition, the address *ἀγαπητοί* appears again, and there is a change in verbal mood/attitude from assertion (indicative) to direction (imperative). This carries forward to clause 86 (v. 23) where the topical unit ends.

The final topical unit comprises the letter closing. The unit spans clauses 87–90 (vv. 24–25). This unit is markedly different than the preceding unit in that it is, formally, a doxology.<sup>30</sup> The topic may be summarized as follows: All who are Jesus followers are to ascribe to God only honor, majesty, power, and authority through the Lord Jesus the Messiah. In some ways, the closing doxology may be thought of as a description of proper activity of those who are true believers in God and followers of Jesus. Whereas those who had snuck into the group were changing the grace of God into licentiousness and denying the Master and Lord Jesus (v. 4), true believers will offer praise to God for his grace/patronage through the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

In summarizing the topic of the entire text, one should consider the topics of each paragraph and the flow of information through them. One may summarize the Topic of Jude to be something like the following: Those who are part the group of believers ought to attend to one another carefully, to recognize conduct that is *out of bounds* as determined in view of the scriptures and tradition, and to provide correction where needed while also protecting themselves so as not to fall prey to unorthodox teachings.

### *3. Benefits of the Model*

It would be an overstatement to say that the analysis of information structure and flow across the clauses, complexes, and paragraphs of Jude has revealed groundbreaking results. However, the model sometimes reveals details that stand at odds with some traditional commentaries, while at other times confirming or even adding support to what is found in the traditional commentaries.

30. Bauckham, *Jude–2 Peter*, 121: “The peculiarity of Jude’s letter-ending is the lack of any personal greetings or specifically epistolary conclusion. He ends as he might have ended a spoken homily, with a liturgical doxology.” Neyrey (*2 Peter, Jude*, 94) comments, “In place of the typical benediction, however, Jude pronounces a doxology. In Christian letters doxologies tend to occur at irregular points within a document (Rom 11:36; Gal 1:5; Phil 4:20; Eph 3:20–21; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16; 2 Tim 4:18). Jude 24–25, Rom 16:25–27, and 2 Peter 3:18 are the only extant examples of doxologies which close New Testament letters (yet see 1 Clem. 65.2; Mart. Pol. 22.3; Diogn. 12.9). Nevertheless, Jude employs a traditional form, even if used in a nontraditional way.”

In either case, at the very least, the findings of the model suggest that even well-established interpretations are never fully complete or completely closed canons but are always in need of continued investigation. This is, in my opinion, a strong benefit. In the interest of time, I will point out two such examples here. The first shows how Porter and O'Donnell's model might call into question an established way of thinking about the structure of Jude, and the second demonstrates how it might support another.

In his well-known commentary on Jude in the WBC series, Bauckham says that the “theme” of the letter is found in Jude’s appeal to the readers “to carry on the fight for the faith”<sup>31</sup> and that vv. 5–19 is Jude’s explanation of the situation which requires the appeal. Thus, vv. 5–19 comprise the “background” of the petition and the content of the appeal is not revealed to the readers until vv. 20–23.<sup>32</sup> One issue here is that Bauckham does not appear to define explicitly what he means by “theme,” and it appears that he operates not from a linguistically-informed definition but from an intuited “literary” assumption that “theme” simply refers to “what the text is about.” Following Porter and O'Donnell's model of discourse analysis, we may note that, in terms of Theme and Rheme analysis, Jude's appeal is Rhematic material along with the content in vv. 5–8, while the “some people,” who are said to have snuck in, is Thematic (although not a marked Theme). Additionally, Michael the Archangel is Theme at v. 9 (a marked theme, at that), and Enoch is Theme (not marked) at v. 14. This at least raises the question of how Bauckham thinks about the structure of the letter and if there might be another more linguistically principled means of formulating the information flow of the text.

As part of a very concise commentary on the Letter of Jude, John H. Elliott discusses Jude's social and rhetorical strategy for addressing the problem that is apparent in the group that Jude addresses. Essentially, says Elliott, Jude's strategy “involves a combination of recollection and repudiation” and that Jude “engages not in debate but in denunciation.”<sup>33</sup> He goes on to provide an out-

31. Bauckham, *Jude–2 Peter*, 29, 31–32, 111–12. See also Davids, *Letters*, 41–42.

32. Bauckham, *Jude–2 Peter*, 29.

33. Elliott, “Jude,” 165.

line of the Letter of Jude in terms very similar to what was elucidated in the Topic and Comment analysis above. Elliott's summary is as follows:

- vv. 1–2: Jude, slave of Jesus Christ and brother of James to the Beloved: Greeting!
- vv. 3–4: Beloved, contend for the faith, mindful of devious intruders in your midst
- vv. 5–16: By way of reminder, compare these ungodly persons with those of the past who were also objects of God's judgment
- vv. 17–23: Beloved, in contrast to these ungodly people, remember the apostles' warnings and be firm in your faith
- vv. 24–25: Praise be to God who will keep you spotless and secure

My analysis above led me to structure the text slightly differently (I combined vv. 3–16 into one topical unit, whereas Elliott separated them into two), but it is interesting that the resulting topical statements from my analysis are similar, especially with regard to recognizing the infiltrators by their fruit and comparing and contrasting them on the basis of the Scriptures and tradition, and to avoid falling in line with them in their deviance by adhering to the word of God through the apostles. So then, here is an example where, essentially, Topic and Comment analysis following Porter and O'Donnell supports much of Elliott's claims, although varying slightly.

#### 4. *Concluding Remarks about Porter and O'Donnell's Discourse Analysis*

Undoubtedly some will claim that the model promoted in this volume is too technical and impenetrable and that it demands too much mental investment to be worth putting to work. On the one hand, such a claim would be valid; the model is abstract, complex, and does demand significant mental effort to understand and to deploy. On the other hand, I find such critiques to be unfairly dismissive and, to put it frankly, reflective of a work-avoidant attitude.<sup>34</sup> Many of us who are professors abhor this sort of attitude in our students: driven by a desire to finish work as quickly as possi-

34. See Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works*, 72–73.

ble with as little effort as possible, showing little interest in learning anything new, especially if it might require changing current habits. I once had a graduate student in my advanced exegesis course (which involved learning the kinds of linguistic analyses promoted by Porter and O'Donnell), and I happened to hear this student say to their classroom compatriots (not knowing that I had entered the room) that they were just trying to do enough to pass the class and that they would never use anything being taught in the class because they just wanted to preach. That, of course, prompted an interesting (and awkward, especially for that student) discussion.

Such an attitude toward Porter and O'Donnell's monograph will result in missing what this work really has to offer, because in my opinion, much of the value that this book has to offer is closely tied to the technical and even dense content within its pages. For starters, it is to my knowledge, the first and perhaps only book that endeavors to bring linguistic theory to bear on the Greek language of the New Testament. There are many volumes that eclectically borrow some theory (but mostly methodology) from the field of linguistics, but often these simply apply what was typically modeled for English directly to Greek without much if any consideration of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of doing so. Porter and O'Donnell actually attempt to create a theoretically based and thus principled model of discourse analysis that is designed to work with the Greek language.

I would also add that, again to my knowledge, Porter and O'Donnell offer one of the very few models of discourse analysis that truly endeavors to do what discourse analysts have always claimed was an advantage of the methodology: analyzing meaning above and beyond the clause. Most linguistically oriented methodologies in biblical studies that I have seen are stuck at the clause. This is part of what makes this volume challenging. Taking information structure and flow as an example, the model begins with the relatively straightforward Prime and Subsequent analysis at clause level but then expands to Theme–Rheme at clause complex level (which, since it is more abstract, it is more complex) and then to Topic and Comment (which is even more abstract and thus more complex).

So, my encouragement is to embrace one of my mother-in-law's famous sayings (famous in our family, anyway): "Nothing hard is ever easy," which is typically followed immediately with, "Things that are worth doing are often difficult."

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