

A RESPONSE TO PORTER AND O'DONNELL, *DISCOURSE  
ANALYSIS AND THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT*

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**Abstract:** This review article examines Porter and O'Donnell's *Discourse Analysis and the Greek New Testament: Text-Generating Resources*, focusing specifically on their treatment of textual-metafunction components: cohesion and coherence; boundaries and units; and information flow and prominence. Porter and O'Donnell discuss all three of these features and demonstrate how SFL can offer a robust analysis of these three features of a discourse. Although their book offers numerous insights into the application of SFL to those features of discourse analysis, a few questions could be raised about some of their observations and examples. For information flow, there is still clarity needed about how the different levels of information flow relate to each other, and how the level of clause relates to default word order. Another important area for analysis with discourse analysis is prominence. There are several issues that could be addressed further with prioritization or ranking of signals of prominence. This is especially important when a single verb contains conflicting signals of prominence, where one feature indicates background, and another indicates foreground or prominence. However, Porter and O'Donnell have modeled a rigorous approach to discourse analysis that will focus attention on exegesis where it should be: on the text itself. (Review Article)

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1. *Introduction*

It is a privilege to be able to respond to Stanley E. Porter and his most recent monograph on discourse analysis that he wrote with colleague Matthew Brook O'Donnell. Porter has been at the forefront of linguistic analysis of the New Testament, and most of his

prodigious literary output has been devoted to both the development of and application of linguistic theory to the Greek New Testament.<sup>1</sup> His influence has been widespread, starting with his ground-breaking work on verbal aspect in the Greek of the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> He has been followed by countless students and colleagues who have taken his insights and applied them fruitfully to specific texts or issues in New Testament interpretation. As one not formally trained in linguistics, my own introduction into linguistics came through Porter's work on verbal aspect and subsequent works such as this one. Porter's chosen linguistic model as the basis for his ongoing work is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as developed by Michael Halliday, which he has demonstrated over and over again to be a productive model for application to the Greek of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Co-author O'Donnell has also contributed to the application of the field of linguistics to the Greek of the New Testament, particularly with an important volume on the application of SFL to corpus linguistics as well as helping to develop the online tool OpenText.org.<sup>4</sup> In this current volume, Porter and O'Donnell develop a rigorous and comprehensive approach to a discourse analysis of the New Testament based on a systemic functional linguistic model specifically adapted for New Testament Greek.<sup>5</sup>

An important justification for a discourse approach to analyzing the Greek of the New Testament is established on the very first page of the first chapter: New Testament study by its very nature is a textually based discipline. The authors write, "Whatever else may be involved in the study of the New Testament . . . to remain a study of the New Testament, it must always remain textually based."<sup>6</sup> We are dealing with texts that make up the collection of works we call the New Testament. As a side note, discourse analysis should be a welcome tool for Evangelical interpreters, in particular, who confess that the Scriptures are inspired, since the

1. Cf. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*.
2. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*.
3. Halliday, *Introduction to Functional Grammar*.
4. O'Donnell, *Corpus Linguistics*.
5. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*.
6. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 3.

place in the New Testament where the term “inspired” is used, 2 Tim 3:16, applies it to the written texts (all Scripture) themselves. Since New Testament interpretation is a textually based discipline, this means that careful attention must be paid to the text and that the discipline of discourse analysis plays a key role in probing the Greek text of the New Testament.

At this point, I want to draw attention to three reasons that New Testament scholars resist discourse analysis, all of which are raised by and responded to by Porter and O’Donnell when it comes to applying discourse analysis to the Greek of the New Testament. First, discourse analysis, or just the application of modern linguistics to New Testament Greek in general, walks a precarious tightrope in New Testament studies between being treated with suspicion if it offers novel interpretations and being seen as lacking payoff for the energy expended if it just reinforces traditional interpretations of biblical texts—a proverbial “damned if I do” and “damned if I don’t” dilemma.<sup>7</sup> However, the issue is not whether we support traditional views or gain new insights, although both might take place. The issue is whether our interpretations are based on sound linguistic principles reflected in our analysis of the Greek text. Any approach that deals directly with the text and language of the New Testament and is able to add more precision to our analysis of Greek as a language should be welcomed.

Second, as often lamented by New Testament scholars who are hesitant to adopt discourse analysis, there is no agreed-upon *method* of doing discourse analysis.<sup>8</sup> So, scholars often advocate a “wait and see” approach, or worse, they pass over it since there is lack of agreement. As Porter and O’Donnell recognize, however, if this criticism were taken seriously, no discipline would ever develop. The variety of approaches to discourse analysis also indicates that discourse analysis can mean different things to different practitioners. One result is that many things seem to fall under the broader rubric of discourse analysis. I have read several so-called discourse analytical approaches to biblical texts that were nothing more than just showing the broad structure of a book, paying atten-

7. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 27.

8. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 27–28.

tion to the broader context, and tracing its argument, the kinds of questions I was taught to ask in my first Greek exegesis course in college in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes doing a sentence diagram or a sentence flow suffices for discourse analysis for some grammars and commentaries.<sup>10</sup> However, this lacks an important feature of discourse analysis, that is, the *application of a linguistic model* to analyzing the text of the Greek New Testament. I think an appropriate and necessary starting point might be to restrict discourse analytical approaches, as stated by Porter and O'Donnell, to "the conscious and intentional application of a recognized linguistic model to meaningful textual units above (but including) the clause level."<sup>11</sup> From the limited reading I have done (in comparison to Porter and O'Donnell!), it appears to me that all discourse analytical approaches, in addition to focused attention on the textual unit above the clause level, to one degree or another, share in common the further components of analyzing the following features: (1) cohesion/coherence; (2) boundaries and units; and (3) information flow and thematization, including the analysis of highlighting and prominence. These three form the concern of the remaining chapters of Porter and O'Donnell's book.

This raises a third issue: There are a variety of linguistic models and resultant approaches to discourse analysis that could be and have been applied to the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> Especially for the linguistic non-specialist, this can seem daunting. Porter and O'Donnell bring some order to the discipline by helpfully identifying and summarizing the five major schools of discourse analysis: SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics), European Continental, South African, Eclectic, and SFL developed by Halliday.<sup>13</sup> The preferred linguistic model for Porter and O'Donnell is SFL. In

9. Some of this is found in Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek*, 172–96. Black's analysis is of the book of Philippians. At times he does pay attention to discourse markers for boundaries and units, but without a comprehensive linguistic model.

10. Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper*, 435–63. They do discuss discourse boundaries, prominence, and cohesion, but in less than 2½ pages. Most of their discussion is devoted to grammatical layout and sentence diagramming.

11. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 25.

12. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 28–30.

13. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 31–47.

reading their description of the different models, I did not find a detailed argumentation and justification, at least gathered in one place, for choosing SFL as the preferred linguistic model, but perhaps this is justified since the rest of the book will show that “the proof is in the pudding.” Not only is SFL a rigorous linguistic model, but also it demonstrates its own value in a fruitful application to actual texts of the New Testament. But what makes SFL such an important and useful approach for interpreting the New Testament is, it seems to me, its attention to the text as a social semiotic realized in some cultural context, which seems to be consistent with what is going on with New Testament texts. SFL’s attention to the three metafunctions of language—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—offers a comprehensive approach to analyzing texts, including the Greek New Testament.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, SFL is a comprehensive linguistic model that analyses the different ways a text means and is therefore a fruitful model for discourse analysis.

## *2. Context and Co-Text of New Testament Texts*

New Testament students have always been interested in the contexts of texts, both literary contexts and historical-cultural-social contexts. However, I have found that many approaches to studying and discussing the contexts of New Testament texts are undisciplined and lacking sophistication and a clear methodology. Porter and O’Donnell address issues related to the contexts of the New Testament in ch. 3 of their work. I found that their treatment of context offered a more sophisticated and comprehensive way of dealing with notions of context, integrating, in a more linguistically rigorous fashion, traditional background issues. They helpfully distinguish between *context of culture* (issues of setting, behavioral environment, language as context, and extra-situational context) and *context of situation* (issues of field, tenor, and mode, and corresponding metafunctions, ideational, interpersonal, and textual). The former makes room for traditional background issues in the study of New Testament texts (author, readers, setting, circum-

14. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 43.

stances, etc.).<sup>15</sup> This should be welcome to New Testament scholars for whom contextual issues are essential for dealing with ancient biblical texts.

One of the issues with approaching the co-text of a discourse is reflected in the starting point of discourse analysis, that is, whether to employ a bottom-up or a top-down approach to textual analysis. The question is where one starts in one's analysis, though ultimately the interpreter must work up and down through all the textual levels. Porter and O'Donnell recommend starting with the clause, which is consistent with SFL since Halliday calls it the "primary channel of grammatical energy." In the end, it seems as if the interpreter could start at any level. But he or she will necessarily have to work through all levels, perhaps several times. Therefore, analysis must work through the levels of morpheme, word, word group, clause, paragraph, and text.<sup>16</sup> The rest of Porter and O'Donnell's work focuses primarily on the textual metafunction of language (of the three metafunctions of language in SFL) since these various features of the context of situation are realized in the text itself.<sup>17</sup> That is, it is the text that is the primary object of discourse analysis.

### 3. *The Textual Metafunction of New Testament Discourse*

Most of my comments in the rest of this article are focused on chs. 4–6 of Porter and O'Donnell's work, which address features usually associated with discourse analysis and in SFL focused on the textual metafunction of language. This logically follows, since discourse analysis is concerned with the text itself as a communicative social semiotic. Chapters 4–6 deal with the topics of information structure and thematization (ch. 4), linguistic highlighting (prominence) (ch. 5), and cohesion and coherence (ch. 6). Most of the following comments are not necessarily criticisms but areas for further clarification and genuine queries. Regarding the

15. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 57–78. For an approach to studying the historical-cultural background of biblical texts, see Klein et al., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 312–24.

16. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 82–84.

17. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 95.

issue of information structure and thematization, Porter and O'Donnell recognize the need to adapt SFL's notions of theme/rheme and given/new to New Testament Greek, since SFL's discussion of them was originally developed for the English language. Thus, Porter and O'Donnell propose that thematization and information structure operate at least at three different levels in the New Testament text: the clause level, the clause-complex level, and the level beyond the paragraph.<sup>18</sup> For the clause level, they propose the labels "prime" and "subsequent," indicated by word order. The prime is indicated by its position at the front of the clause (excluding conjunctions).<sup>19</sup> At the clause-complex level, the theme is the "*fully grammaticalized participant as the actor in a process chain*,"<sup>20</sup> and everything else is the rheme. The theme is usually expressed by a substantive in the nominative case form. For the level above the paragraph, the topic establishes "*a new semantic environment for the text*."<sup>21</sup> Theme is determined by the components from the lower ranks of the clause and clause complex.

With regard to Porter and O'Donnell's chapter on information structure and thematization, I want to raise two questions and an issue of clarification. First, as for theme and rheme at the clause-complex level, they suggest that theme is indicated when there is a grammatical subject, a nominal element in the nominative case, for example. However, I wonder how that would handle instances in narrative where there is a switch in actor but no grammatical subject to signal it. Apparently, this would not be a shift in theme. For example, in Matt 4, there are examples where the agent of a verb shifts to Jesus (e.g., vv. 21, 23 [cf. 5:1]), but he is not grammaticalized with a nominal element. How do we understand that in terms of theme and rheme in the clause complex? In their discussion of prime and subsequent for clauses, Porter and O'Donnell suggest that placing certain words in the prime position brings them into focus, such as the verb *διεπορεύετο* in Luke 13:22. My question concerns how the prime position of a word relates to

18. See the helpful chart in Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 94.

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

20. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 110 (italics original).

21. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 116 (italics original).

word order. If a word is in the “prime” position because it is the default word order, is it still being brought into focus? Or is it that the default word order is an example of a default word being the prime? To indicate another prime word, the author deviates from the default prime word.

Offering an observation for clarity, there are usages of “theme” words that could be confused. First, theme is the grammaticalized element in the theme/rheme structure. But second, in a footnote, Porter and O’Donnell note that sometimes theme can be used more generally to refer to what a text is about.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it could be like “topic.” In this case, thematization seems to be the overall term that subsumes prime, theme, and topic. However, Porter and O’Donnell’s chapter moves the discussion forward by identifying how thematization functions at different levels in the discourse, and they offer ways of describing them that helpfully distinguish the different levels from each other. Perhaps more work can be done to show how the three levels—clause (prime/subsequent), clause complex (theme/rheme), and above the paragraph (topic/comment)—relate to one another, and how the lower levels contribute to the higher levels of thematic development.

An important way that a discourse is structured and an important feature for cohesion in a text is through the conjunctive system of New Testament Greek (e.g., *δέ*, *γάρ*, or *οὖν*). Porter and O’Donnell propose two ways of classifying conjunctive discourse markers: according to their logico-semantics and their discontinuity and continuity.<sup>23</sup> In addition, a system network for the conjunctive system in New Testament Greek asks the question of the level of word, word group, clause, clause complex, and paragraph. I wonder if it would be helpful along with the two charts on p. 125 to provide a chart that demonstrates the rank of elements that could be linked by the various conjunctions: from the word level up to the paragraph level.

One of most important chapters in the book, and one that reflects a common concern among discourse analysis approaches, is ch. 5 on linguistic highlighting, or prominence, sometimes also called “foregrounding.” Porter and O’Donnell helpfully distin-

22. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 115n68.

23. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 123–26.

guish mainline from supporting information in the text, or horizontal from vertical in narrative and discursive literature, explaining how prominence and grounding function at those levels. For example, one important way that levels of grounding and prominence are indicated is through verbal aspect of the Greek verb system. In Porter's scheme, the perfective (aorist) indicates background information, the imperfective (present) foreground, and the stative (perfect, pluperfect) frontground information. This raises a question for further clarification. When we find the aorist used of the mainline background in narrative, are we saying that it is background due to its function and the aorist is used in this kind of context or that the aorist itself makes it background? The same is the case with the present in non-narrative texts (so-called "historical present"). Does the present tense itself mean "foreground" and "prominence," or is it used in contexts that are prominent? Are grounding and prominence the semantics of the aspects, or only a way that they can function in the discourse?

Another question related to prominence is as follows: Does a given aspectual choice (present, perfect) make the *word* prominent, or does it point to something else as prominent? To give some examples, in Rev 5:1, the scroll (βιβλίον) that John describes has two stative participles, γεγραμμένον and κατεσφραγισμένον, clustered around it. Are the qualities of "written" and "sealed" being made prominent, or do they point to the prominence of what they modify, the scroll? In Rev 5:7, the perfect tense-form of the verb "took" (εἶληφεν) in the context of narrative aorist does seem to highlight the act of taking as the climax of the section and resolution to the dilemma ("Who is worthy to take the scroll?"). But could it also point forward to the angelic praise of heaven shown by the cohesive lexical chain of "take" (vv. 9, 12)?<sup>24</sup> The present tense ᾄδουσιν is used to introduce the song of the four living beings and twenty-four elders (v. 9). Does the present tense-form in narrative foreground the act of singing, or does it point forward and foreground the content of what is sung? The same could be said about the verb λέγω used in general in the present tense-form throughout the New Testament to introduce speech. Is it the act of speaking that is being highlighted, or does it point ahead to the

24. See Mathewson, *Revelation*, 75–76.

content of what is said? Turning to the case system, Porter and O'Donnell suggest that the nominative case is the least marked, or least prominent of the cases, with the accusative case more marked than the nominative.<sup>25</sup> However, one could make a case that the accusative case-form is the least marked and least prominent and the nominative case is more prominent than the accusative, since it indicates the theme in a theme/rheme structure in a clause complex. Furthermore, as a vocative, it functions as direct address, marking units and prominent segments. This might suggest a more marked meaning for the nominative than the accusative.

One very important issue that Porter and O'Donnell raise with regard to prominence is that there are so many ways that Greek indicates discourse prominence that a way is needed to organize them. This I think is related to another question that the book raises: "How does the linguist judge between various, and potentially competing, indicators of prominence?"<sup>26</sup> Is there a scalar way of dealing with this? It seems to me that this issue could have been addressed a little more clearly in ch. 5 on linguistic highlighting. Therefore, in John 3:16, Porter and O'Donnell note that the verse consists of a secondary clause "in order that whoever believes on him . . ." (ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλὰ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον) that is dependent on another secondary clause. The fact that "in order that whoever believes on him . . ." is doubly embedded in the discourse, dependent on another secondary clause, would suggest a lower level of prominence. But the subjunctive mood and a present tense-form (ἔχη) would suggest prominence while the primary clause has the "background" indicative verb forms. How do we decide between these factors? Or is this only signaling prominence within the secondary clause? More work could also be done in domains of prominence, such as how we determine when something signals prominence at only the clause level, as opposed to the clause complex or the paragraph level, and up to larger units of discourse. And prominence operates differently at the level of primary clause than it does in secondary (modifying) clauses.

25. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 150.

26. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 130.

In Rom 5, there are two perfect tense-forms (stative aspect) in v. 2, which are foreground aspects for Porter and O’Donnell, yet they both occur in secondary clauses, not primary ones.<sup>27</sup> Once more, there are competing signals of prominence: background (secondary clause) and foreground (stative aspect verbs). On the other hand, Rom 5:1–11 illustrates how a number of grammatical features can coalesce to indicate prominence: present tense-form, first-person plural, subjunctive mood (ἔχωμεν, καυχώμεθα, σωθησόμεθα).<sup>28</sup> This is in contrast to aorist indicative third-person verbs that dominate in the sections preceding and following vv. 1–11. This indicates a discourse peak and prominent section in Romans. Another interesting grammatical construction for consideration is the well-known Pauline expression μὴ γένοιτο (e.g., Rom 6:2). This is usually seen as an emphatic way of expressing denial of something (“May it never be!” or “God forbid!”). Yet the construction comes with potentially competing signals of prominence. On the one hand, the form is in the background aorist tense; on the other, the mood is optative, a more heavily marked mood-form according to Porter and O’Donnell.<sup>29</sup> How do we analyze this in terms of prominence? Does one feature take priority over the other?

In their analysis of Mark 1:9–11, Porter and O’Donnell note that the aorist middle ἐγένετο in v. 9 marks the verb with “internal agency foregrounding the action occurring.”<sup>30</sup> However, the verb occurs in the background aorist tense-form, once more raising the issue of prioritization of grammatical elements for indicating prominence, though I realize Porter and O’Donnell are not necessarily saying it is the most prominent element in the clause but only stating that internal agency is being foregrounded at some level. Furthermore, regarding the voice system, is prominence to be attached to middle-only verbs (often incorrectly labeled “deponent”) since the author had no choice in the voice used?<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the aorist passive verb ἐβαπτίσθη (“was baptized”) combines

27. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 249.

28. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 166–68.

29. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 164.

30. Porter and O’Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 172.

31. Mathewson, *Voice and Mood*, 70–72.

two competing grammatical features when it comes to grounding and prominence: the background aorist tense-form and the foreground passive voice.<sup>32</sup> These examples and observations are not meant to call into question the method of determining prominence with grammatical marking but provided to raise the question of how we prioritize indicators of prominence, especially when they are competing (e.g., aorist tense-form with middle voice) and at what level these elements are being highlighted.

#### 4. *Cohesion and Coherence*

Chapter 6 on cohesion and coherence provides a helpful corrective to approaches to analyzing cohesion that rely almost exclusively on lexical repetition as a means of establishing coherence. Although lexical repetition is an important way of establishing cohesion and coherence, it is only one way of indicating this feature in a discourse. Porter and O'Donnell demonstrate other ways that cohesion and coherence can be established in a discourse. For example, what Porter and O'Donnell refer to as "participant chains" is an extremely important means of analyzing cohesion within a text. Participant chains refer to "how participant chains interact with lexical chains."<sup>33</sup> That is, this occurs when two or more distinct chains interact in a text. It happens when participants are actors or the recipients of processes within the discourse.<sup>34</sup> This is a more sophisticated way of analyzing and demonstrating cohesion within a discourse.

#### 5. *Concluding Thoughts on Linguistics, Interpretation, and Theology*

I have always taught students that grammar and linguistics are essential to doing interpretation and theology. But this is unfortunately taken without clarification to mean that we can read theology off of grammatical minutiae, such as reading theology off of

32. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 172

33. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 219.

34. Porter and O'Donnell, *Discourse Analysis*, 219.

prepositions,<sup>35</sup> or attaching theological significance to the present-tense verb form, for example.<sup>36</sup> At least, grammar allows for and is part of the raw textual data that forms the basis for our theologizing. It forms the language system which contributes to our theological conclusions. But linguistics helps us think sensibly about language and *how* it contributes to our theology. To look at it another way and to give a specific example, one cannot determine the discourse significance or prominence of something in the text based on its perceived theological or historical significance. Students are sometimes taken aback when I say God or Jesus plays a background role in a specific text. This is not a judgment on the importance of the person or their theological significance but simply a comment on the linguistic role that they play in the text. Discourse analysis in particular should aid interpreters in providing a firmer foundation for their interpretive conclusions. Rather than basing them on the minutiae of the text (the so-called “golden nuggets in the Greek NT” approach), the interpreter will pay more attention to the communicative nature of language and to broader discourse concerns. Discourse analysis is here to stay, and the interpreter ignores it and its insights at their own peril. Porter and O’Donnell’s monograph goes a long way in providing a workable model for doing discourse analysis, in distilling in one place the essential components of discourse analysis and providing numerous illustrations of the “payoff” of discourse analysis for interpreting the Greek of the New Testament.

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35. See Harris, *Prepositions*.

36. For caution against and over- and misinterpretation of the present tense form in Greek, see Mathewson, “Abused Present.”

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