

RHETORIC AND THE TRANSLATOR: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JOHN 1

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For most people the term “rhetoric” either sounds like the study of Greek and Latin, or suggests an embellishing of the written style that will make it sound old-fashioned, high-flown, or artificial, or else implies insincerity and political oratory. However, as linguists and literary analysts sense the need for a term that includes not merely stylistic flourishes but a highly important level of language structure and significance, they are making more and more use of the term “rhetoric.”

Increasingly those who deal with the problems of language and interpretation are recognizing that the rhetorical level of language is one of the three important levels for the communication of meaning. The first and most obvious level involving meaning is that of words and idioms, often spoken of as “lexical units.” Included in this category are such words as *boy, girl, run, think, good, fast, swift, because, into*, and such idioms as *go jump in the lake, heap coals of fire on his head, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*. This lexical level of meaning may be described as “what people talk about.”

The second level of meaning may be regarded as syntactic and may be described as “what people say about things.” We know, for example, that in the sentence *John hit Bill with a hammer last Saturday* that *John* is the one who does the hitting, *Bill* gets hit, the hammer is the instrument, and last Saturday is the time. But languages not only indicate the relations between an event and the participants (what might be regarded as a “nuclear structure”); they also involve combinations of nuclear structures, as in such sentences as, *If you hit him, you'll be arrested* or *He said he wanted Bill to leave*. This last sentence contains three nuclear structures: *He said X; He wanted X; and Bill to leave*.

The third or rhetorical level of language is really a part of the discourse structure; it is highly meaningful, but in a manner different from the lexical and syntactic levels. The significance of the rhetorical level is in terms of the impact of what is said upon the person who receives the communication. Rhetoric involves a large number of features of language, but these may perhaps be best studied in terms of four principal functions: (1) to arrange the order of the parts of a discourse in such a way as to make the discourse fully comprehensible, (2) to focus attention or to place special emphasis upon certain features of a discourse, (3) to make a discourse aesthetically attractive, and (4) to suggest additional meanings and relations between parts of a discourse in such a way as to excite the imagination and stimulate thoughtful involvement in the mind of a receptor.

The ancient Greeks were the first to undertake extensive and detailed studies of rhetoric and to formulate certain laws and principles to govern the ways in which people should write prose and poetry. They described and analyzed scores of different devices, and their work was not only carried on by the Romans but greatly elaborated by them. It was not strange, therefore, that rhetoric became one of the principal subjects for study during the Middle Ages and right on into the Renaissance.

Early rhetoricians were particularly interested in the relationship of ideas to ideas as expressed in parallelism and chiasm, both positive and negative. Take for instance the parallelism in Psalm 78.36:

A B C D

But they flattered him with their mouths;

A B C D

they lied to him with their tongues.

Note how the principal constituents of the two lines fall into the order A B C D : A B C D. In Psalm 63.8, however, we find a partial inversion:

A B C

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My soul clings to thee;

C B A

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thy right hand upholds me.

The verbs *clings* and *upholds* are in parallel positions, but observe how *my soul* occurs at the beginning of the first line and its parallel *me* appears at the end of the second line. Similarly, *thee* at the end of the first line is parallel to *thy right hand* at the beginning of the second line, so that one may diagram the relationship of principal components as A B C : C B A. This arrangement is known as chiasm, or inversion of order for rhetorical effect.

Many times parallel structures have an opposing positive and negative significance, as in Proverbs 11.23:

A B C D

The desire of the righteous ends only in good;

a b (c) d

the expectation of the wicked in wrath.

Positive and negative statements may also show a chiasmic structure, as in Proverbs 10.6:

A B C D

Blessings are on the head of the righteous,

c d b a

but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.

Here the principal components may be diagrammatically related as A B C D : c d b a. All such rhetorical features of arrangement certainly add emphasis and impact.

Rhetoric deals not only with relationship of ideas to ideas in the arrangement of words and phrases; it deals also with the relationship of ideas to reality, including, for example, exaggeration, understatement, and irony. It is interesting that many people seem to resist the idea of literary exaggeration, especially in the words of Jesus. They somehow feel uneasy about some statements Jesus made, such as those concerning a speck and a beam in the eye, a camel passing through a needle's eye, and straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Some contend that Jesus was really talking about putting a rope, rather than a camel, through a needle's eye; or they insist that the reference was to a small gate in the wall of Jerusalem called "Needle's-Eye Gate,"

through which a camel could pass but only with great difficulty. But Jesus was simply using typical hyperboles of his day—rhetorical expressions which certainly carried a great deal of impact, and the forced “explanations” which are offered are as unnecessary as they are untrue. They really tend to bleed our Lord’s statements of their impact.

Rhetoric also deals with the relations of sounds to ideas. For example, the use of onomatopoeic expressions, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and rhythm are some of the ways in which the sounds may enhance the significance of an utterance.

Shakespeare was one author who used fascinating rhetorical devices to communicate in a particularly effective manner. One passage from his play *As You Like It* is often cited. In speaking of life in relationship to nature, Shakespeare wrote “Our life . . . finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.” Note the alliteration and assonance in *tongues* and *trees*, in *books* and *brooks*, in *sermons* and *stones*. Note also the progression of thought in which *tongues in trees* suggests oral communication, *books in the running brooks* refers to written communication, and *sermons in stones* involve certain aspects of moralizing. The conclusion *good in everything* is the capstone of the philosophical point of view Shakespeare expresses in these lines, and is all the more striking in its very lack of alliteration following the alliterative series. The parallelism is evident, but what is rhetorically unique about this quotation is the unexpected relation of *books* to *brooks* and of *sermons* to *stones*, for one would normally expect to find *stones* in *brooks* and *sermons* in *books*.

Elaborate rhetorical devices are not, however, restricted to formal poetry. The first part of the Gospel of John illustrates a number of very complex rhetorical features. Consider, for example, the following four lines consisting of John 1.1-2 translated into English in a literal form so as to preserve the order of the Greek:

A B C

1. In (the) beginning was the Word

C B D

2. and the Word was with God

D B C

3. and God was the Word.

C B A D

4. This one was in (the) beginning with God.

It should first be observed that the third line “and God was the Word” does not mean that “God” is the subject and “the Word” is predicate, for the arrangement of the particular constructions in Greek indicates clearly that the meaning is “the Word was God.” The Greek word order is preserved in these four lines in order to indicate something of the structural relationships of constituent parts. The principal elements in these four lines can be diagrammed as follows:

1. A B C
2. C B D
3. D B C
4. C B A D

In these arrangements there is both parallelism and chiasm. For example, lines 2 and 3 are completely chiastic in the order C B D : D B C. There is also a type of chiasm in the syntactic structure of the first and second lines, since the first element in line 1 consists of a prepositional phrase while the last element in line 2 is also a prepositional phrase. Note also how in lines 1 and 2 the subject and the corresponding verb are in a chiastic relationship of B C : C B. Then the fourth line contains all of the elements A B C D, but in a completely new order C B A D. Note, finally, that the four lines constitute a chain in which each succeeding link begins with the same element that ended the preceding one.

Rhetoric, moreover, is not confined to short phrases, clauses, or even complete sentences. Rhetorical features may involve entire discourses, especially in the logical arrangement of various episodes of a narrative, in the description of some object or event, or in the reasoned exposition of some great truth. However, one must not expect that logical relations will always progress neatly in a series of well-defined and neatly separated units.

The Gospel of John actually reflects a very complex interweaving of numerous themes in what might be described as a kind of tangential technique of spiraling off on some theme only to return to it again on a higher level of relevance. This pattern appears throughout the Gospel, and may be noted especially in the first chapter. One cannot help but marvel at the way in which John 1.1-42 interweaves so many significant themes including creation, light and revelation, incarnation, witness, baptism, and Christ as the Messiah. The theme of creation is treated in the opening verse with an obvious allusion to Genesis 1, where God spoke and the world was created, and the theme is further specified in verse 3. The same creative act reappears in verse 10, but this time in relation to the world that did not recognize who the Word really was. The theme of light as the revelation of truth begins in verses 4 and 5, and is further amplified in verse 7, in which John comes "to tell people about the light." There may also be an indirect reference to light in the theme of "truth" and "glory" in verse 14.

The theme of incarnation is, of course, the dominant element in the above passage. It begins in verses 1 and 3, is hinted at again in verse 9, and is further developed in verses 10 and 11. Then the incarnation of Jesus is symbolically anticipated in believers becoming God's children (verses 12-13). Finally the stage is set for the full declaration of the incarnation in verse 14, and in verse 15 the witness of John returns to the preexistence of Jesus, a theme which was first mentioned briefly in verses 1 and 2. The incarnation is then treated again on a significantly higher level in verse 18. The theme of verse 15 is repeated again in verse 30, and the declaration of Christ as the Son of God culminates in verse 34. The theme of the incarnate Christ as the Lamb of God is first touched upon in verse 29 and repeated in verse 36, and finally Jesus is boldly declared to be the Messiah in verse 41.

The theme of witness or testimony begins in a statement about John the Baptist in verse 7. John's witness is again taken up in verse 15, is further amplified in verses 19-26, and further still in verses 29-34. Each time it is on a more expanded and significant level, for in the climax of verse 34 John is essentially repeating a witness which God has already given to him concerning

Jesus. This theme of witness continues, so that in verses 40-41 it is Andrew who witnesses to Jesus as the Messiah.

Likewise, the theme of baptism is also interwoven with these other themes. It is intimated first in the appearance of John as one sent by God, but does not become explicit until verse 25, when the Pharisees ask John why he is baptizing. A brief explanation follows in verse 26. The same theme is taken up again in verse 31 in a somewhat more significant way, but finally in verse 33 the full implication of baptism by the Holy Spirit concludes this ever-expanding and interwoven series of references to the theme of baptism.

This passage in the Gospel of John is perhaps one of the most intricately organized discourses to be found in the entire Bible. It is certainly not a hodge-podge of unrelated themes but a remarkable tapestry of increasingly complex and semantically expansive statements which anticipate the dominant themes of the entire Gospel. Observe how the characteristic Johannine theme of "rejection and glorification" is alluded to in verses 10-11, and again in verse 14, where John speaks of the glory which Christ received as the Father's only Son. Verses 11-13 have even been described as a preview of the two main sections of John; verse 11 prefigures chapters 1-11, in which Jesus "came to his own home, and his own people received him not," while verses 12-13 prefigures chapters 13-20, which tell of his ministry toward those of "his own" (Jn 13.1) who did receive him and to whom, through his passion and triumph, "he gave power to become children of God."

Some translators have found this first part of the Gospel of John so complexly structured that they have attempted to rearrange the material in a supposedly logical fashion. They have wanted to start with a direct reference to Christ in the very first verse, then pick up the role of Christ in creation, later put together all of what John said in witnessing about Jesus, and finally deal with the baptism of Jesus. Such an approach, however, does an injustice to the significant interrelationships of ideas presented by this discourse. Furthermore, such an attempt to extract the various strands of thought in order to make them "intelligible to natives" greatly underestimates the intellectual capacity of other peoples, and can only result ultimately in an accusation of paternalism.

Nevertheless, translators readily recognize that they are unable to fully reflect all of the subtle interrelationships which do exist in such a complex discourse. Almost inevitably their translations will suffer some loss in rhetorical effect, and the loss will nearly always be in direct proportion to the extent to which the rhetorical devices in the source language reflect the particular genius of that language, and consequently fail to match those which are readily available in the receptor language. If, however, there is at some points a loss in rhetorical impact, a translator should always be alert to the possibility of introducing in other passages certain compensating rhetorical devices present in the potential of the receptor language. In this way, at least some measure of the relevance and impact of a particular book, section, or discourse may be reflected.