

A Linguistic Overview of 1 John

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Introduction: A Fresh Approach

When you open up your Bible and start reading a letter in the New Testament, what do you usually look for? Do you read the entire letter in one sitting? Or do you look over only a favorite passage or even just a favorite verse? Like many others, I believe that we need to consider the entire message of a letter to understand properly God's message through the human author both to the original recipients of the letter and to us (as only one group out of a multitude of recipients in subsequent cultures and times).¹

Interpreting a whole letter can seem to be a very daunting task to many people. It is by no means an impossible mission, however. This article will showcase a fresh inductive approach to the interpretation of entire texts by providing a linguistic overview of 1 John. By a linguistic overview, I mean a study that focuses on the text and language of 1 John and that is informed by modern linguistics.² While similar methods can be applied to study the New Testament in the original Greek, I have chosen to present an updated version of methods that I have tested with college students this past year, methods that allow for study using English (or any other language) translations of the Bible.³ It is hoped that, besides shedding light on the overall message of 1 John, this article will arm readers with knowledge on one useful way to begin to interpret whole books of the Bible.

Explaining the Theory

In a written text, the combination of

words and grammar we read give more than just isolated meanings or ideas. The text, in fact, gives a representation of the world (or imaginary world).⁴ For instance, a romance novel will represent not only the process of falling in love, but also the characters who fall in love (as well as other characters involved in their story) and the various situations the characters go through. For a New Testament letter like 1 John, the text likewise represents a world involving participants (i.e., the characters who do and receive actions), processes (i.e., things done or experienced), and circumstances (i.e., the situations the participants find themselves facing while doing or experiencing various actions).⁵ This insight into how language is used to convey meaning leads to another conclusion. There are alternatives to what I would call "linear reading and interpretation" (i.e., to begin with the first word and then to try to understand every word in terms of its grammatical, syntactical, semantic, and logical meaning from start to finish). One alternative is to trace the participants, and processes separately by asking: (1) What is going on? and (2) Who are the participants, and how are they interacting with one another?⁶ Then, the overall meaning of the text can be reconstructed by discerning the patterns and isolating the most prominent things revealed in the investigation of participants and processes.⁷

Another alternative, which can be conducted independently or in conjunction with other alternatives, is to perform a thematic analysis.⁸ For a theme

to qualify for mention, the same lexical word or words of related meaning need to recur. Groups of words or clauses that recur also meet the criteria for consideration.⁹ When compared side-by-side, it turns out that a thematic analysis and an examination of processes overlaps to a significant extent. The difference lies in the other (non-verbal) content words also covered by an exploration of themes.¹⁰ Content words that denote circumstances rarely, if ever, express themes, however. Animate participants (people and other living entities that relate to the world in a sentient way) are also never considered themes. So, themes are usually expressed by processes and non-participant entities. In practical experimentation, I found that the most illuminating results in discourse analysis of the New Testament books are yielded by a two-track approach: (1) tracing participant relations; and (2) exploring processes (including verbs, verbal nouns, etc.) and non-participant entities (typically nominals) separately throughout the individual books.

Explaining the Method

Even if we limit ourselves to the two alternatives discussed above (tracing participant relations and exploring processes and non-participant entities), there are still multiple ways to carry out these investigations. A recommended approach is to go systematically through these analyses unit-by-unit, using some kind of predetermined paragraph divisions as this divides up the task of interpreting a discourse into manageable portions. Most Bible translations give you a head start by breaking the text up into sections, often with section headings indicating the general content of the section. These section breaks are, more often than not, good

starting points for studying the text.

A formalized, step-by-step procedure would look something like the following. First, using the sections supplied by any of the Bible translations as discrete units for analysis, look for words or concepts that are emphasized either by repetition or extended elaboration (Q1). Next, identify the participants (i.e., the doers and recipients of actions) in that text unit and gather everything you know about the participants and the relational interactions they have within the unit (Q2). The next step is to compose a statement of the overall meaning that is as inclusive as possible of the most important words or concepts and the most important participants in the unit (Q3). Repeat the same process for every other text unit until you have analyzed the whole text. In addition, you need to be aware that it is normal (and often necessary) to cycle back and forth between questions as new insights on previous questions emerge from investigating subsequent questions.

Two questions may arise in response to the method explained above. First, how do we know that the sections supplied by the Bible translation we happen to be using are really the best section divisions for the text? The answer is that they do not have to be. They are just starting points. As you systematically go through the unit-by-unit analysis outlined above, be sure to note any crossing over of important words or concepts or of important participants that may indicate that the section breaks you are using need to have their boundaries rearranged. It is a relatively simple matter to reanalyze the units that may need to be divided differently.¹¹ Second, how do we get an overall map of the forest (i.e., the overall text) from the information on the clusters of trees (i.e., the individual text

units)? We do this by tracing connections between individual text units in terms of important words or concepts and in terms of the interactions of important participants. In other words, we reconstruct the overall message of the entire text by comparing the answers to Q1 and Q2 across different units of text (Q4).

When all is said and done, we will have arrived at a wide-ranging analysis of both the important themes and the important participants in each of the text units, in larger clusters of units, and in the entire text. From these two elements, much of the overall intent and the historical context of a text (especially the occasion and purpose) may often be reconstructed with considerable confidence.

Applying the Method to 1 John

In the sections that follow, Q1-4 will be answered in turn.¹² For the sake of avoiding excessive repetition and giving a more polished presentation, I will not reproduce every step in full detail. Moreover, in the interest of brevity and clarity, I will not clutter the body of this article with extended justification of my claims. I will support my claims about emphasized words or concepts and about participant relations by noting where they occur and leaving you, the reader, to look up the verse references to adjudicate the legitimacy of my claims.

Q1: Emphasized Words or Concepts (Both Processes and Non-Participant Entities)

Within the unit 1:1-4, the repetition of the word “life” (1:1, 2 [2x]) makes clear what the nature of the author’s proclamation is about.¹³ There is also heavy stress on the eyewitness character of the author’s proclamation about this life. It appeared

(1:2 [2x]) to the author and other eyewitnesses, and they had both seen (1:1 [2x], 2, 3) and heard (1:1, 3) it.¹⁴ By repeating the word “proclaim” (1:2, 3) and linking it closely to eyewitness testimony, the author makes clear that what he tells his recipients reflects his true experience. In so doing, he assures them of the trustworthiness of what he writes. The purpose of the author and other eyewitnesses in sharing the word about life is highlighted by the accent on “fellowship” (1:3 [2x]). They want others to share with them in their relationship with the Father and the Son (1:3).¹⁵

In 1:5-10, there is a prominent contrast between light (1:5, 7 [2x]) and darkness (1:5, 6). This is closely associated with the contrast between truth (1:6, 8) and lies (1:6, 8, 10).¹⁶ By further linking the claim to have no sin with darkness and lies (1:8, 10), the author underscores the need to confess sin (1:9) rather than to deny it. Sin (1:7, 8, 9 [2x], 10), which the author associates with darkness and lies, is very obviously a major concern in this section. The connection to 1:1-4 is maintained in part by the word “fellowship” (1:6, 7). This lexical link develops the concept of what is involved in having a relationship with God a little further (1:6, 7).¹⁷

In 2:1-17, the verb “write” serves multiple functions. First, the author reveals that he wrote 1:5-10 so that his recipients would not sin (2:1). Second, he uses it to point out that his instruction is not a new command, but an old command they have previously received (2:7-8).¹⁸ Third, he uses it to outline the reasons why he wrote them (2:12, 13 [2x], 14 [3x]). The contrast between light (2:8, 9, 10) and darkness (2:8, 9, 11 [3x]) and between truth (2:4, 8) and lies (2:4) is elaborated further. These concepts are now associated with the

contrast between keeping commands (2:3; 2:5) and not keeping commands (2:4) and between love (2:5, 10) and hate (2:9, 11). Sin (2:1 [2x], 2) occurs in heavy concentration in the beginning of this unit as part of the transition between the two sections. Love for the world (2:15 [2x]) and desire for the things in the world (2:16 [2x], 17) stand in opposition to love for God (2:15) and doing God's will (2:17).¹⁹ The concept of knowledge is used in two ways: (1) to discuss by what means one knows something (2:3, 5); and (2) to indicate one's knowledge of God (2:3, 4, 13, 14 [2x]). The latter usage identifies keeping God's commands (2:3, 4) as integral to having a relationship with God.

The repetition of "last hour" (2:18 [2x]) underscores John's belief that he and his readers were in the end period of history, which he identifies with the coming of antichrist(s) (2:18 [2x], 22). The extended elaboration in 2:19 highlights the fact that those who left John's readers' community (most likely the particular antichrists in mind in 2:18) did not really belong to that community. John's readers are clearly distinguished from that group in that they have an anointing from Christ (2:20, 27 [2x]) and know the truth (2:18, 20, 21 [2x], 29 [2x]). Furthermore, the truth (2:21 [2x], 27) is contrasted with lies and liars (2:21, 22, 26, 27). John wants his readers to continue to hold on to the truth by remaining (2:24 [3x], 27 [2x], 28) in what they have heard (2:18, 24 [2x]) and been taught (2:27 [3x]).²⁰ The liars are readily identifiable in any case, they deny (2:22 [2x], 23) that Jesus is the Christ.

John calls attention to one of the distinguishing marks of a child of God versus a child of the devil in 3:1-10 after firmly reminding his readers about the fact that they are God's children (3:1 [2x], 2) and

about God's great love behind that gift (3:1). The difference lies in the contrast between sin (3:4 [2x], 5 [2x], 6 [2x], 8 [2x], 9 [2x]) and righteousness (3:7 [3x], 10).

Another distinguishing mark, love, is the focus of 3:11-24. Love (3:11, 14, 16, 17, 23) is contrasted with the absence of love (3:14), murder (3:12 [2x], 15), lack of loving action (3:17), and empty love rhetoric (3:18). Death (3:14 [2x]) is juxtaposed to life (3:14, 15) to further characterize those who love as God's children and those who do not as the devil's children. The mental process of knowing is used to develop the notions that confirmation of one's possession of eternal life is shown by the presence of loving action (3:14) and that love's content is exemplified by Jesus' death for them (3:16).²¹ At the same time, love and faith in Jesus are prominently affirmed as commands (3:22, 23 [2x], 24).

The spotlight switches onto how to recognize (4:2, 6) the spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood in 4:1-6: the former confesses Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh while the latter does not. In fact, we know that John's readers (4:4) and John and the other eyewitnesses (4:6) are associated with God because they line up with the confession of the Spirit of truth while those who deny this confession are associated with the spirit of the antichrist (4:3) and with the world (4:5).

Love dominates the landscape in 4:7-21 (4:7 [3x], 8 [2x], 9, 10 [3x], 11 [2x], 12 [2x], 16 [3x], 17, 18 [3x], 19 [2x], 20 [3x], 21 [2x]). God is identified as the source of love (4:7). Love is one of God's character attributes (4:8). God showed his love by sending his Son to take away sin (4:10) and give life to them (4:9). One has to love to know, i.e., have a relationship with, God (4:7, 8). For these reasons, God's children are marked by their love (4:7). In fact, God's love

reaches its goal (4:12, 17, 18) when John and his readers love their brothers and sisters in Christ.²² This perfected love (4:18), understood as a sure sign of being one of God's children (4:7, 12), takes away any reason to fear (4:18 [3x]) punishment.

In 5:1-12, faith in Jesus (5:1, 4, 5, 10 [3x]), loving God's children (5:1 [2x], 2 [2x], 3), and keeping God's command (5:2, 3 [2x]) are brought into close association.²³ John reiterates that those who are characterized by these qualities are God's children (5:1 [3x], 4) and have overcome the world (5:4 [2x], 5).²⁴ This unit also accentuates the testimony to Jesus (5:6, 7, 9 [4x], 10 [3x], 11), though the exact nature of the testimony, i.e., Jesus came through water and blood (5:6 [water 3x, blood 2x], 8), is uncertain.²⁵ The content of the testimony is clear—that God has given John and his readers eternal life (5:11 [2x], 12 [2x]) in his Son (5:11).²⁶

As elsewhere, the mental process of knowing receives heavy attention as John closes his letter with an emphasis on what his readers already know (5:18, 19, 20 [2x]). Two of the things they already know echoes what John reminded them about earlier in the letter: (1) God's children not sinning (5:18; cf. 3:9); and (2) John and his readers belonging to God (5:19; cf. 4:4, 6). There is no exact match for the third thing, i.e., that the Son of God has come and given them understanding (5:20) and that in Jesus they have the truth (5:20 [3x]). Nevertheless, it fits with the overall picture constructed in the letter about what Jesus had done.²⁷ The mental process of knowing is also employed: (1) to reveal the purpose of what John just wrote,²⁸ i.e., that his readers may know that they have eternal life (5:13); and (2) to expose an inescapable conclusion about their prayers (5:14 [2x]). This latter

use forms part of the link between their making requests to God (5:14, 15 [3x], 16 [2x]) and God hearing them (5:14, 15) and responding (5:15, 16), which emphasizes the efficacy of their prayers. Discussion of the scenario of sin (5:16 [4x], 17 [2x], 18)²⁹ serves to underscore the effectiveness of their prayers,³⁰ aside from addressing likely practical concerns.³¹ Finally, what is true (identified with Jesus as the true God and eternal life) is underlined in the closing verse (5:20 [3x]).

Q2: Important Participants and Their Relational Interactions

Of the many participants that play a part in 1 John as a discourse, the following play a significant role in multiple sections: John, John's readers, God, Jesus, plural eyewitnesses, an indefinite third person foil (translated variously as "anyone who," "whoever," etc.), antichrist(s), the devil, Spirit of truth from God, spirit(s) of falsehood from the antichrist, and the world. John and John's readers, the author and the addressees, are obviously the most important participants, but the others deserve attention as well.

John has fellowship together with the plural eyewitnesses and his readers in God and Jesus (1:2-3). He considers his readers "dear children" (2:1, 18; 3:7) and "dear friends" (more accurately "beloved," 2:7; 3:2; 4:1, 7, 11) and includes himself with them as God's children (3:1, 2) and as belonging to God (4:4, 6; 5:19).

In terms of his actions, John characterizes himself (along with plural eyewitnesses) as eyewitnesses who proclaim to his readers a message about what they had witnessed firsthand (1:1-3, 5). In fact, only those who know God listen to him and the plural witnesses (4:6).³² John interacts with his readers in distinct ways as the

letter progresses. He starts off using inclusive “we” forms of projection of possible courses of action they could take together to contrast what is consonant with the truth and having a relationship with God against what is not (1:6-10). In 2:3-11, he switches to different types of indefinite third person “whoever” forms.³³ It is quite striking that he rarely uses commanding forms with his readers (the imperative is used only in 2:15, 24, 27, 28; 3:1, 7, 13; 4:1; 5:21 and the hortatory first person plural subjunctive only in 3:18 and 4:7).³⁴ John, in fact, uses two alternative forms predominantly: (1) inclusive first person descriptions; and (2) indefinite third person “whoever” forms.³⁵

While definite conclusions cannot be drawn until extensive comparative research has been done on other comparable Hellenistic Greek writings, the distribution of forms used for instruction suggests that John wanted to stress common participation with his addressees and that he wanted to discuss certain actions as possibly implicating himself and his readers without saying that they are definitely involved. A reasonable hypothesis is that these two types of instruction involve more maintenance and reminder than overhaul and correction. This hypothesis would fit with how John reveals that his perception of his readers is very positive—essentially those who really have a relationship with God (2:12-14). It harmonizes with the characterization of the readers as those who already know the truth (2:20-21) and with the frequent appeal to things the readers know (2:29; 3:2, 5, 14, 15; 4:16; 5:15, 18, 19, 20).

Most of the relational interactions of John’s readers are evident from the discussion of John’s interactions and

so will not be repeated here.³⁶ One set of characterizations that have not been mentioned is that John also calls his readers (whether as a whole or different subgroups) “fathers” (2:13, 14) and “young men” (2:13, 14).³⁷ The readers (whether as a whole or different subgroups) know God (2:13, 14) and have overcome the evil one (2:14). Another description is that they are those who believe in the name of the Son of God (5:13).

The readers are the beneficiaries of various advantages from their relationship with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. They have received an anointing from the Holy One (most likely Jesus rather than God the Father), from which they know the truth (2:20-21, 27).³⁸ Moreover, Jesus is one who speaks to God the Father on their defense (2:1). Furthermore, they are related to the whole world through Jesus in that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice not only for their sins, but also for the sins of the whole world (2:2). By virtue of Jesus’ loving sacrifice in dying for them, they ought to lay down their lives for their brothers and sisters in Christ (3:16). In addition, they are the recipients of God’s love (3:1; 4:9-11, 16, 19), resulting in them becoming God’s children (3:1, 2) and belonging to God (4:4, 6; 5:19). They have also received the Holy Spirit from God, by whom they know that they live in God (3:24; 4:13).

On the other hand, the readers are set in an adversarial relationship with several other participants. John warns that many antichrists have come (2:18). Moreover, certain people, who were once a part of their community, had left and their departure demonstrates that they did not really belong to the community (2:19). Furthermore, there are those who are trying to lead them astray (2:26). While

it is possible that these are three distinct groups of people, more likely they are one and the same—the antichrists used to be part of the community, but have left, having denied that Jesus is the Christ, and were trying to lead the remaining members of the community (John’s readers) astray.³⁹ The readers are also warned against believing all spirits because not all spirits are from God and there are many false prophets in the world (4:1-6). The way to discern is through their interaction with Jesus and through the reaction of the world and of those who know God to them. The spirits that confess that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh are from God (those that deny Jesus are from the antichrist). The world listens to the spirits of falsehood (speaking through the false prophets), whereas those who know God listen to the Spirit of truth (speaking through John and the other eyewitnesses).⁴⁰ An adversary that should not be forgotten is the evil one, whom the readers are said to have overcome (2:13, 14). This evil one, also called the devil, has sinned from the beginning and is thus the father of those who practice sin (3:8, 10).⁴¹ Jesus came into the world to destroy the evil one’s work (3:8) and for this reason God’s children (including John’s readers) are the diametrical opposite of the devil’s children when it comes to righteousness and love (3:10). Jesus (the most likely interpretation of “the one begotten of God”), in fact, keeps the other children God begot (including John’s readers) safe and the evil one cannot harm them (5:18). On the other hand, the rest of the world is under the evil one’s control (5:19; they are, after all, the evil one’s children).

Q3: Overall Meaning for Each Text Unit

While I started out using the section divisions in the Nestle-Aland Greek text, my discussion in Q1 actually deviated from those divisions. Answering Q1 actually helped me come up with my own proposed paragraph units: 1:1-4; 1:5-10; 2:1-17; 2:18-29; 3:1-10; 3:11-24; 4:1-6; 4:7-21; 5:1-12; and 5:13-21. In light of the previous explorations on Q1 and Q2, the overall meaning of each text unit may be summarized as follows:

1 John 1:1-4: The author is writing about the eternal life that he and other eyewitnesses had experienced first-hand. They bear witness so that their readers might have fellowship with God and Jesus together with them.

1 John 1:5-10: The author instructs the readers that fellowship with God involves walking in the light by confessing sin (which is consonant with the truth) rather than denying sin (which is lying).

1 John 2:1-17: The author concludes the discussion of walking in the light by confessing sin by reminding that Christ is their advocate and the atoning sacrifice for the sins of all. Then he turns to walking in the light involving loving one’s brothers and sisters in Christ (which is God’s command) and not loving the world and the things in it.

1 John 2:18-29: The author reminds the readers about those trying to deceive them and calls them to hold on to the truth they already know, namely that Jesus is the Christ.

1 John 3:1-10: The author reminds the readers about God’s great love for them in making them his children. Then he points out that one distinguishing mark between God’s children and the devil’s children lies in the former’s practice of righteousness and the latter’s practice of sin.

1 John 3:11-24: The author identifies loving one’s brothers and sisters in Christ as a second distinguishing mark between God’s children and the evil one’s children. He calls the readers to love one another truly

in practice. He points out that both loving one's brothers and sisters in Christ and faith in Jesus are God's commands.

1 John 4:1-6: The author instructs the readers on how to distinguish between the Spirit from God and spirits that are not from God—it is all bound up in confessing or denying that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh.

1 John 4:7-21: The author instructs the readers that God's love is made complete in them when they love one another and this perfected love gives them confidence that no punishment is forthcoming.

1 John 5:1-12: The author instructs the readers that those who believe in Jesus are begotten of God and also love God's children. This faith, this love, and keeping God's commands are inseparably characteristic of God's children. He also points out that God testifies to Jesus through the water, the blood, and the Spirit and that the Spirit is the truth and thus his testimony is true.

1 John 5:13-21: The author assures the readers that they have eternal life because they believe in Jesus, that God grants their requests, and that they have the ability to intercede for others. He closes the letter by reminding of the truths they already know and instructing them to keep themselves from idols.

Q4: Overall Message of 1 John

Even though the section summaries for Q3 do not reflect it, the process of "writing" plays a very important role in the letter. Its most obvious function is to refer to specific instructions the author was giving the recipients in the letter (2:1, 7, 8, 26; 5:13). Aside from that, it also reveals the reasons (2:12, 13 [2x], 14 [3x], 21) and purposes (1:4; 2:1; 5:13) of the author in writing. In addition, it reminds that the author's instructions (or at least some of them) are not new, but really take the form of reminders of what the recipients already knew (2:7, 8, 21). As previously noted above, there is repeated emphasis

on what the recipients already know (2:20, 21; 3:5, 15; 4:16; 5:18, 19, 20). Moreover, the recipients are called to acknowledge further knowledge by reasoning from what they already know (2:29; 3:2; 5:15). The author even appeals to what the recipients know to be true in their own lives, i.e., that they do love their brothers and sisters in Christ, to assure them that they do know that they have been transferred out of death into life (3:14). In fact, the instructions that the author gives to assure his recipients that they have eternal life (5:13) all take this very form—they will know when their lives reflect the instructions.⁴²

All the characteristics seen in the descriptive analyses so far lead me to conclude that 1 John is written as a gentle reminder of things already known, as from a father to his well-taught children. Both in content and in style, John seeks to reaffirm and reassure. In the first instance, the testimony about eternal life in Jesus is based on first-hand experience and is entirely trustworthy. Moreover, what the readers already know is true, over against the lies propagated by those trying to lead them astray. Furthermore, the Spirit God has given them testifies to these truths. In addition, discerning between what is true and what is false often can be done by reasoning from the knowledge they already have.

A central truth that cannot be denied is that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh. If you deny that, you do not have a relationship with Jesus or with God the Father. Moreover, there is an unbreakable link between loving God, loving God's children, doing God's commands, and believing in Jesus. God commands that we love our brothers and sisters in Christ and believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

Those who do not keep these commands do not have a relationship with God. On the other hand, those who do observe these directives can be assured that they have eternal life (which comes from having a relationship with God).

Conclusion: Future Prospects

As was emphasized earlier, there are multiple ways to interpret individual books of the Bible as a whole and even to investigate participants and explore processes and non-participant entities for an entire biblical book. It is hoped that this article has stirred up your interest in trying non-linear approaches to reading and interpretation. The best way to learn this skill is to try it. You will find that, with practice, your proficiency will increase. For those of you who know Greek, I would encourage you to apply the methods to the study of the Greek New Testament. For the more adventurous among you, I would also issue a call to experiment and pioneer new non-linear techniques and tools for biblical interpretation. While richly annotated computerized corpuses of the Bible in its original languages are beginning to appear,⁴³ more work needs to be done to better facilitate non-linear methods of interpretation such as what was presented here. As long as we maintain a spirit of humility, an openness to newness and creativity, and a hunger for learning and advancement, the future is bright for developing new methods and tools for the study of the Bible that are simultaneously more easily learned and more comprehensively illuminating.

ENDNOTES

¹Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, for example, stress the “need to develop the habit of reading the whole letter through

in one sitting” (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* [3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003], 59).

²Modern linguistics involves the study of languages and how they work. The techniques introduced in this study can be more efficiently and thoroughly applied if tools are developed for computational analysis. Such tools do not yet exist for Bible study using the English translations. Some rudimentary tools have become recently available for Bible study using the original Greek through the work of the OpenText.org project. For an introduction to this new type of computer-aided research, see Matthew Brook O'Donnell, *Corpus Linguistics and the Greek of the New Testament* (New Testament Monographs, 6; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005). For some preliminary applications, see Randall K. J. Tan, “Color outside the Lines: Rethinking How to Interpret Paul's Letters,” in *Paul and His Theology* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), 153-87.

³I actually studied 1 John in the original Greek, but kept an eye on the New International Version (NIV) to ensure that users of that English translation (and others like it) can reproduce the bulk of the results I found in Greek. In these endnotes, I have noted the places where the NIV translation does not allow the reader to see particular phenomena that are observable in the Greek.

⁴On the use of language to construe experience, see M. A. K. Halliday, “Introduction: On the ‘Architecture’ of Human Language,” in *The Collected Works of M. A. K. Halliday* (vol. 3, *On Language and Linguistics*; ed. J. Webster; New York: Continuum, 2003), 15-16 and M. A. K. Halliday, “Language Structure and Lan-

guage Function," in *New Horizons in Linguistics* (ed. J. Lyons; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 143.

⁵On this tripartite structure to the grammar of the clause, see M. A. K. Halliday and Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 106-107. In Halliday and Matthiessen, participants cover both animate and inanimate (even abstract) entities. I propose that it is more helpful to designate as participants only animate entities that actually relate to other animate entities. This coincides also with my suggestion that we need to examine not only the relational interaction between the author and the addressees, but also that between all the other participants (meaning all animate entities that interact) in the text.

⁶The reader might notice that circumstances were not included. Circumstances is the least constant of the three components that represent the world and so is not as good a starting point for investigation as participants and processes.

⁷This is a simplified expression of what to look for in interpreting the three functions of language—ideational, interpersonal, and textual. See Halliday, "Introduction: On the 'Architecture' of Human Language," 16-17.

⁸The examination of themes, however, has traditionally been a somewhat haphazard enterprise, with few expressed boundaries and controls. In other words, interpreters often failed to demonstrate how they find their themes and how

others can verify or disprove their claims. The kind of thematic analysis I propose here is anchored to demonstrable elements of the text.

⁹The idea for this type of analysis comes from a synthesis of two lines of previous research—Michael Hoey's thesis about lexical repetitions (see *Patterns of Lexis in Text* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991]) and Jeffrey Reed's theory about semantic chains (see *A Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary Integrity* [Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 136; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997]). I came to realize that the lexical and semantic repetitions posited separately by Hoey and Reed can be systematically traced both in localized units of text and in larger stretches of text by an interpreter that is on the conscious look-out for all the different forms that meaning links can take. Practically speaking, the interpreter needs to look out for the same lexical word, words sharing the same morpheme, cognates, and words sharing the same field of meaning (including antonyms, hypernyms, hyponyms, meronyms, holonyms, etc.) as well as groups of words, clauses, or larger combinations that convey similar meaning. Groups of words, clauses, and larger combinations are used especially frequently in elaborating a theme. In those cases, even if a word does not show other signs of semantic repetition, it should be considered a theme by virtue of the semantic weight of the elaborating groups of

words, clauses, or larger combinations.

¹⁰When you examine the meaning of words, you will quickly find two general categories—function words like articles, conjunctions, and prepositions (which have little semantic content on their own, but chiefly indicate grammatical relationships) and content words (which express lexical meaning rather than grammatical relationships).

¹¹The process recommended above has at least three advantages. First, it explicitly recognizes the helpfulness of prior outlines given by competent Bible translators and takes advantage of their work. Second, it deliberately avoids the possible pitfall of paralyzing perfectionism in trying to come up with a fully accurate outline prior to detailed analysis of the letter. Third, the tentative nature of the initial outline is clear and the process of constant revision and improvement is built into the method itself. In many ways, this is a more systematically developed method to the guidelines Fee and Stuart suggested on reading and rereading and taking notes on a letter's natural, logical divisions (*How to Read the Bible*, 60-62).

¹²As will become clear below, the discourse of 1 John does not advance in a straight logical line. Instead, similar concerns recur in what has been called a "spiral," i.e., points already made earlier in the letter are brought up again later from a slightly different angle. Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (Moffatt New Testament Commentaries; London: Hodder and Stoughton,

1953), xxi.

¹³Since the method in this article is meant to help non-Greek users as well as Greek users, I have chosen not to point out the underlying Greek. In so doing, I am trying to emphasize that this method can be used with an English (or any other language) translation with almost as much success as with the Greek New Testament. For those interested in the underlying Greek, it is safe to assume that the same Greek word is behind the English when I use the term “word.” Otherwise, I am often referring to a general concept that can be conveniently represented by an English word even if I do not use the term “concept.”

¹⁴Their hands have even touched it (1:1)! Akin observes that “the sequence of verbs leading up to v. 3 places emphasis on concrete seeing: ‘What we have *seen with our eyes*, what we have *beheld*, ... the life was *revealed*, and we have *seen*, and *borne witness*, ... the eternal life which was with the Father and was *revealed* to us’” (Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John* [New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001], 56).

¹⁵In what follows in 1:4, whether the text should say “our joy” or “your joy” is uncertain because of conflicting textual witnesses. On the whole, the reading “our joy” (that is the author and the other eyewitnesses’ joy) is to be preferred. For reasons why “our” is the better reading, see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 639. The implica-

tion of “our joy” is that John and the other eyewitnesses derived joy from others receiving a share in the blessings of fellowship with God and Christ.

¹⁶I have grouped under the concept “lies” the following: 1:6 “we lie”; 1:8 “we deceive ourselves”; 1:10 “we make him out to be a liar.”

¹⁷Many commentators observe that 1:5-10 is connected to the prologue precisely in outlining the conditions of the fellowship mentioned in 1:3. In effect, the author affirms that God is light and has no darkness in him at all in order to rule out claims to fellowship with him by those walking in the darkness. See e.g., I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 108; and B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 14.

¹⁸The emphasis on this theme is shown by the extended elaboration rather than repetition in the strict sense.

¹⁹Under the concept “desire for the things in the world,” I have included the following: 2:16 “cravings” and “lust”; 2:17 “desires.”

²⁰The NIV omits translating the second occurrence involving hearing in 2:24 by substituting “if it does.”

²¹The “this” in 3:19-20a, “This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us,” is best taken to refer back. The line of thought is that by the fact that we love in action and in truth we know that we belong to the truth (cf. C. Haas, et

al., *A Handbook on the Letters of John* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1972], 103).

²²The NIV translates the two instances of the same verb as “made complete” in 4:12 and 4:17, but the third instance as “made perfect” in 4:18. The related adjectival form in 4:18 is translated as “perfect.”

²³John highlights the need to keep God’s command throughout 1 John (2:3, 4, 7 [3x], 8, 22, 23 [2x], 24; 4:21; 5:2, 3 [2x]). As the unit-by-unit analysis shows, these commands essentially consist of loving one’s brothers and sisters in Christ and believing that Jesus is the Christ. The contrast between righteousness and sin in 3:1-10 may also indicate a more generalized content of not sinning and doing righteousness to keeping God’s commands. In any case, command keeping remains a vital aspect of Christian living and should not be neglected out of fear of legalism.

²⁴I derive the concept of being God’s children from what the NIV translates variously as “born of” (5:1), “the father” (5:1), “his child” (5:1), and “born of” (5:4).

²⁵Perhaps the most likely interpretation is that the water refers to Jesus’ baptism and the blood refers to Jesus’ death. On the other two main interpretations, see Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 195.

²⁶The suggestion that the “that” clause does not refer to the content of the testimony, but to its effect (e.g., Haas, *Handbook*, 143), is grammatically unlikely. Note also the semantic link to 1:2 and 4:14, where the testimony is associated

with life.

²⁷See e.g., 1:5; 2:20, 27; 4:2, 9, 14; 5:6, 11.

²⁸Commentators disagree on whether “these things” in 5:13 refer specifically to the teachings in 5:1-12 or to the entire epistle. Actually, there is little reason to restrict these things to only 5:1-12. If a restriction is to be made, it should be to between 2:28-5:12 as the last “I wrote you these things” occurs in 2:26 (2:27 is transitional). If the combination of “these things” and “write” is taken as indicative of section divisions, then we would have discrete units from 1:1-4; 1:5-2:2; 2:3-27; and 2:28-5:13. As it turns out, a detailed look at the content of 5:1-12 shows that the central themes of believing that Jesus is the Christ, of loving God’s children, of keeping God’s commands, and of witness to Jesus are summarized there. So even if “these things” really refer particularly to 5:1-12, they still indirectly refer to the whole letter.

²⁹Of the four occurrences counted in 5:16, the NIV omits one occurrence (probably because of stylistic reasons—it would sound strange to say in English, “sinning a sin”) and translates the Greek participle and noun (both of which mean sin) as “commit a sin.”

³⁰Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, 192.

³¹Certainty about the meaning of sin that leads to death (5:16) and sin that does not (5:16 [2x], 17) may be impossible. Nevertheless, it is clear that John’s concern is to encourage his readers to intercede for those who commit sin that does not lead to death. This concern gains further

prominence if a fresh proposal about the interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17 is adopted. See Randall K. J. Tan, “Should We Pray for Straying Brethren?: John’s Confidence in 1 John 5:16-17,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002): 599-609.

³²Interpreters are divided over whether the “we” in v. 6 includes the addressees or not. See Akin, 1, 2, 3 *John*, 175, for a convenient listing of where various interpreters stand. In any case, John and the other plural eyewitnesses are definitely included and so my statement stands regardless of which view you take.

³³The use of person and number in the Greek of the New Testament is best understood in terms of the participation of the author and the addressees (see e.g., Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* [2nd ed.; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994], 76-77). The first person is used when the author participates in the process. First person singular usually refers to the author (potentially rhetorical uses like in Romans 7:7-25 possibly excluded). First person plural may refer to many authors, the author and those he wishes to include with himself (but who are not co-authors), or the author and his addressee(s) (portrayed as united in some way). Second person is used by the author to refer to the addressee (or addressees), though the addressee(s) involved could be real or imagined for the sake of discussion (as perhaps in the diatribe sections of Romans). Third person is used by the author to refer to persons or things other than the author

and hearer. Indefinite “whoever” type third person allows for anyone, including the author and any of his addressees, to participate if they fit the description (of actions or state). When the indefinite third person is used in juxtaposition with first and second person (where the author and his addressees are portrayed as participating), the effect is often to distance the author and his addressees from the actions described (whether positive, neutral, or negative) and yet to keep the door open that anyone of them could fall into that category of people if they adopted those actions.

³⁴In 3:1 the NIV omits the imperative form that is often translated “behold” in other translations. Some believe that it has become more of a particle used to draw attention and no longer has its commanding force.

³⁵I will leave it to you, the reader, to look up the instances. The fastest way to find all occurrences is to run a search in a Greek Bible software program. For first person plural descriptions, look up all first person plural indicative verbs in 1 John (double checking also all first person plural pronouns). There is no easy way to isolate the third person indefinite references from other third person references.

³⁶Relational interactions by definition involve more than one party. So the relational interactions of one participant can only be understood in relation to other participants. A lot of repetition would be involved if the interactions for each participant are spelt out in full.

³⁷There are three basic positions about the use of “children,” “fathers,” and “young men” in 2:12-14. The one-group position sees John using the terms rhetorically to refer to all the addressees (see e.g., Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 138). The two-group advocates attribute “dear children” as inclusive of all the addressees while “fathers” and “young men” refer to the more mature and less mature (whether in age or spiritual growth) (see, e.g., Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* [Word Biblical Commentary 51; Waco: Word, 1984], 70-71). Some believe that John is addressing three groups of differing maturity (whether in age or spiritual growth) (see e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 58).

³⁸On why most scholars interpret the Holy One as referring to Jesus rather than to God the Father, see Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 118.

³⁹Cf. Haas, *Handbook*, 60-76. Note that in the emphasized words and concepts section, we found that the links stretch through the entire unit of 2:18-29. If the adversaries are described the same way, it is at least slightly more likely that they are one and the same than that there are three groups so similar to each other. Moreover, 2:26 (“I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray”) attributes one common purpose to the group(s) between 2:18-26, which again favors one group over three groups.

⁴⁰It is unclear if John means human spirits (as Haas, *Handbook*, 110 suggests) or spirit beings (like demons

and the Holy Spirit as more commonly thought) by “spirits” here. I have deliberately left things ambiguous. The main point is clear, and I have restricted myself to it.

⁴¹I take it that the evil one and the devil are one and the same from the essentially similar characterizations given Cain and the devil’s children in 3:7-12.

⁴²Two other recurrent notions used in 1 John—possession and remaining in a place, state, or person—are not easily traced using English (or other language) translations because of different translations used for the various occurrences. The notion of possession is used for a variety of things, including eternal life and even for having God the Father and God the Son. Likewise, the notion of remaining covers a diversity of things, including remaining in the Father and the Son. Both concepts, when applied to the Father and the Son, appear to be metaphorical portraits of aspects of what is involved in having a relationship with the Father and the Son.

⁴³Recently, Logos Bible Software has emerged as the leading commercial backer of syntactically-tagged databases of both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament and its efforts are to be commended. There are also some ongoing non-commercial, open-source collaborative projects that are working to provide various new texts and tools relevant to biblical studies. For instance, the OpenText.org project is working to provide richer and more versatile computerized texts and tools for the study of

the Greek New Testament as well as other Hellenistic Greek texts.