

Considering Linguistic Theory in Interpreting Repetition in The Gospel According to John

Of the many idiosyncrasies of John's Gospel, the use of repetition has remained obscure to scholars, leading to a wide variety of interpretations. Approaches to repetition vary across schools of thought in Biblical studies, though one approach that has not yet been considered is to incorporate into Biblical studies the study of repetition more broadly, particularly in psycholinguistics and linguistic anthropology. These two fields, both independently and in tandem, can describe repetition as a general function of language and thereby illuminate the function repetition has in the text of John.

Before making this case, it is necessary to recognise the limits of such an approach. Firstly, the psycholinguistic and linguistic anthropological research on repetition that have informed this study use contemporary data sets (primarily transcripts and recordings) in an attempt to infer universal models of the function of repetition in language, at least in the contexts that their data represent. Their methodology is ordered around this very Modern, scientific aim, and while I argue such an aim is not incompatible with the research aims of Biblical scholars, or at least should not be, it is certainly very different. Secondly, it is not immediately clear that such data share the qualities of the language used in first century religious texts sufficiently that to analyse one is to be informative about the other. This two thousand year-long gulf is not necessarily unbridgeable: attempts were made during the course of this research to incorporate historical accounts of first century reading practices, for example, but such a bridge is well beyond the scope of this study and passes through the heart of some very active and contentious areas of Johannine scholarship. Thirdly, this study is aware that there are disputes regarding the composition of the Gospel that are relevant to its conclusion, but I have chosen to handle the text in its final iteration and in presumption that this iteration represents a consistent creative vision, even if it is a collaborative one. Bearing all this in mind, to place psycholinguistic and linguistic anthropological research in discourse with Biblical scholarship should be understood more as an implication of potential than an assertive furthering within the discipline.

All this acknowledged, what linguistic theory can achieve in Biblical studies is a more present equivalent to the historical and source criticism to which Johannine scholars are accustomed: grounding Biblical interpretation and theology in falsifiable, empirical accounts of the world in which it exists. The potential for linguistics here as an empirical field is different to that of historical criticism in that the ‘world in which it exists’ is considered the present day, and how the present day can tell us about the first century. Linguistic research enables us to model language and its functions on a broad and general level, bringing ancient and often obscure texts and the psychology or culture behind them into the present by drawing comparisons between their fundamentals.

## 1: Repetition in Linguistics

Repetition is a very broad topic of study for linguists for obvious reasons. Repetitive features of language include the repetition of ideas or themes, of metre or phonology, though the repetitive language this paper is concerned with is the repetition of vocabulary within a phrase or short text. This kind of repetition, like metaphor and other devices, has historically been seen as a tool of rhetoric, and therefore a tool of the elite. The linguistics of this claim is not baseless, as I will explore below (pp. 3-4), though the claim of exclusivity is less certain. An increasing number of linguists have begun to describe and evidence rhetorical tools as being far more ubiquitous and diverse than an elitist might believe. Raymond Gibbs has fruitfully explored the poetics of colloquial language,<sup>1</sup> as has Deborah Tannen and others,<sup>2</sup> and Barbara Johnstone notes that repetition plays a vital role not only in religious, artistic and other high cultural contexts but in the language of children,<sup>3</sup> a notion developed further by Penelope Brown in her study of children's first language acquisition (which I will discuss further below (pp. 5-6)).<sup>4</sup> It seems that repetition is not exclusive at all, it is an ordinary, indeed ubiquitous function of language on many levels, even at the earliest stages of development. It is this which makes the current conversation about repetition in linguistics so exciting, and seemingly so relevant to Biblical scholarship and other areas of religious studies: it touches upon an epistemology of all people, even if any complete model of this epistemology remains elusive.

### 1.1: The Psycholinguistics of Repetition

Psycholinguistics is the linguistic field perhaps most closely related to the methods and aims of Biblical exegesis, in that it attempts to describe the relationship between an individual's language and their ideas. The psycholinguistic study of

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<sup>1</sup> Gibbs, Raymond, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> Tannen, Deborah, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Johnstone, Barbara, 'An Introduction' for *Perspectives on Repetition* ed. Johnstone, Barbara for *Text and Talk* vol. 7 no. 3 (Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 1987) pp. 205-214

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Penelope, *Repetition* for *The Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* vol. 9, no. 1/2 (The American Anthropological Association, New Jersey, 1999) pp. 223-226

repetition indicates that repetition serves as a kind of meta-communication, as one would find in rhetoric, allowing the individual to describe qualities of the information they are conveying, and their relationship with it, within the information itself. For example, in her analysis of the connective function of repetition in speech patterns, Tannen suggests that repetition is functional in forming a relationship between the speaker and listener, with the object of the speech as a kind of third party.<sup>5</sup> The example she gives is of a woman listing the number of languages in which a man she knows is fluent:

‘And he knows Spanish and he knows French, and he knows English, and he knows German, and he is a gentleman!’:

1. And he knows Spanish,
2. and he knows French,
3. and he knows English,
4. and he knows German,
5. and HE is a GENTleman.

In this brief transcript, it is notable that the ‘And he knows’ component of each repetition serves no real grammatical purpose, the sentence ‘He knows Spanish, French, English and German, and he is a gentleman’ would be quite adequate, but through repetition (and stressing the syllables ‘HE’ and ‘GEN-’) this speaker is communicating something about herself. Namely, that the list is not exhaustive, it is longer than she can even remember, and that she finds the length of the list impressive. Through stressing the dactyl meter of the final repetition, ‘and HE is a GENTleman’, she invites her listener to be impressed also. There are two layers to her speech here: she is communicating information about the polyglottal man, and she is communicating her own perspective on this information. Her speech functions not only as a way to communicate information, but as a gesture, in this case towards herself and the space between herself and her listener.

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<sup>5</sup> Tannen, Deborah, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007) p. 60

## 1.2: The Linguistic Anthropology of Repetition in the Language of Children

This psycholinguistic account is concerned with repetition as a tool for expression, though another approach is to analyse repetition as unwitting; as a symptom of language failing rather than an everyday linguistic function. In her paper on the matter, Brown describes how limited language, particularly in children, tends to be repetitive. This is simply because children have ideas that they cannot yet put into words, and so repeat words that do not completely describe the idea, yet gesture towards it, to invite expansion from a partner and thereby acquire new expressions. She gives the example of a child and parent: a child might repeatedly say ‘Dog, road.’ for her mother to respond, ‘Yes, there is a dog in the road.’, expanding upon the child’s phrase to complete the full presumed intent, and so educate the child on how to express the idea more completely.<sup>6</sup> This process is demonstrated occurring in Eve Clark’s detailed study on L1 vocabulary acquisition in children. Indeed, Clark finds that this repetitive process (what she terms ‘ratification’, a similar notion to Brown’s ‘expansion’) is central to the acquisition of new vocabulary and extremely common in conversation between children and adults.<sup>7</sup> Similar uses of repetition and expansion have been found in studies of children’s social development in a second language.<sup>8</sup> When one considers Johnstone’s observation that artistic, religious and other high cultural uses of language resemble that of a child’s repetitious speech, this notion of repetitive language indicating beyond the limits of what is expressible, and inviting expansion, is compelling in interpreting the former group. It is also not at all innovative to consider religious language as indicating towards meanings that cannot fully be expressed (this is elegantly articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas in q. 13 of the *Summa Theologiae*).

The psycholinguistic and linguistic anthropological study of repetition show that, wittingly or unwittingly, and perhaps there is less of a difference or separation

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<sup>6</sup> Brown, Penelope, ‘Repetition’ for *The Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* vol. 9, no. 1/2 (The American Anthropological Association, New Jersey, 1999) p. 226

<sup>7</sup> Clark, Eve, ‘Young Children’s Uptake of New Words in Conversation’ for *Language in Society* vol. 36, no. 2 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007) pp. 157-182

<sup>8</sup> Cekaite, Asta and Aronson, Karin, ‘Repetition and Joking in Children’s Second Language Conversations’ for *Discourse Studies* vol. 6, no. 3, (Sage, London, 2004), pp. 373-392

between these categories as one might think, repetition is often characteristic of language that either expresses the identity of the speaker, and their relationship with their language, or invites a response and an expansion from its listener. It is this function of repetition that I will consider in my approach to repetition in John.

## 2: The Case of Δόξα-Language

Now that I have described some linguistic consensus on repetitious language, I will attempt to show how such knowledge can inform Biblical interpretation. Of all the repetitious language in John, the δόξα (glory) motif is particularly frequent and ambiguous, and already the topic of wide debate, and so will be my case study.

There are forty-two instances of δόξα-language in John, spread fairly evenly throughout the Gospel. Nineteen of the instances are nouns (δόξα, ‘glory’) and twenty-three are verbs (δόξαζεν, ‘to glorify’).<sup>9</sup> The instances of δόξα are broadly typical, in three groups of the accusative, nominative and dative singular (δόξαν, eleven instances, δόξα, seven instances and δόξη, one instance). Δόξαζεν, however, is far more diverse, totalling the majority of instances of δόξα-language in John. Δόξαζεν is extraordinarily passive in John’s Gospel, indeed of the sixty-two occurrences of δόξαζεν in the entire New Testament, only ten are passive, nine of which are in John.<sup>10</sup> these nine instances consist of only two forms: ἐδοξάσθη and δοξασθῆ, both of which are third person singular.

This strange chunk of passive, third person singular δόξαζεν verbs represent the numerous descriptions, either from the narrator (7:39; 12:16) or, more frequently, from Jesus himself (11:4; 12:23; 13:31a, 31b; 13:32; 14:13; 15:8, though the line between these voices is blurred, as I will discuss below (pp. 7-8)) regarding the glorification of God the Father and the Son of Man. While glorification does not exclusively refer to this relationship, this motif is my core example of an idea that John is gesturing towards but cannot completely describe with much of his δόξα-language. It is not entirely clear why, through the passive voice, the agent of glorification, the implied glorifier, is so obscured in this motif. A more detailed account of this obscurity is provided below in my analysis of 13:31-

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<sup>9</sup> Schmoller, Alfred, *Handkonkordanz zum Griechischen Neuen Testament* (Württembergische Bibelanstalt, Stuttgart, 1938) pp. 128-131

<sup>10</sup> This number discounts ambiguous middle/passive participles, though it is worth noting that the only such participle in John, δεδόξασμαι, takes on a distinctly passive meaning in translation (see. pp. 10-11)

32 (pp. 8-9), though it is important to note now that the motif is not limited to this particularly fruitful and compact pericope.

### 2.1: The Triumphal Entry and The Narrator's Voices: John 12:12-24

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem is described in John as fulfilling the words of Zechariah 9:9, as it is also described in Matthew 21:1-11. Where Matthew merely states the fulfilment and moves on, John's narrator briefly detracts from the timeline of events to describe the disciples' immediate incomprehension and eventual understanding of the fulfilment after the 'glorifi[cation]' of Jesus (John 12:16):

Text:

[16] Ταῦτα οὐκ ἔγνωσαν αὐτοῦ οἱ μαθηταὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἀλλ' ὅτε ἐδοξάσθη Ἰησοῦς τότε ἐμνήσθησαν ὅτι ταῦτα ἦν ἐπ' αὐτῷ γεγραμμένα καὶ ταῦτα ἐποίησαν αὐτῷ.

Translation:

[16] The disciples did not immediately<sup>11</sup> understand these things about him, but, when Jesus was glorified, they remembered that these things had been written of him and done to him.<sup>12</sup>

(John 12:12-24)

The significance of this passive ἐδοξάσθη in narration is that it indicates a future condition, that of Jesus' 'glorification'. The exact nature of this future state is developed in vv. 23-24, where Jesus implies through an analogy of fallen grain that 'the hour that the Son of Man might be glorified' (ἡ ὥρα ἵνα δοξασθῇ ὁ υἱὸς

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<sup>11</sup> 'τὸ πρῶτον', literally 'the first', implying a primary state before the secondary state described from 'ἀλλ' ὅτε ἐδοξάσθη Ἰησοῦς [...]'. I have translated it here as '[not] immediately', an alternative translation could be 'not at first'.

<sup>12</sup> In the Greek, ταῦτα (demonstrative plural, 'these things') is repeated three times in this verse, which is quite cumbersome in English. I have elided the third ταῦτα to create a sylleptic phrase where both ἐπ' αὐτῷ γεγραμμένα ('written of him') and ἐποίησαν αὐτῷ ('done to him') are sharing the second ταῦτα as a subject.

τοῦ ἀνθρώπου), entails his death and that it will lead to a new, greater form of life in the resurrection. As I have already established (see. p. 6), passive glorification statements such as these in 12:16 and 12:23-24 are reserved for only two speakers: the Gospel's narrator and Jesus himself. There is a clear thought process in this pericope from the narration into Jesus' own words, from the narrator identifying Jesus' future glorious state to Jesus elaborating on what this hour of glory entails, and this gives a sense that the narrator is speaking through Jesus, or at least that Jesus and the narrator share a special, omniscient status in the Gospel. This is worth considering in my analysis of 13:31-32.

Aside from the repetition of vocabulary which this research has focussed on, within the description from the narrator in 12:16 there is an implied repetition, that the story of Jesus' triumphal entry is at first merely a notable event (as in Mark 11:1-11 and Luke 19:28-44) and is later repeated, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and takes on new meaning to the disciples as the fulfilment of Zechariah 9:9. Repetition not only plays an important role in this pericope as developing a thought process from the narrator to Jesus regarding the glory of the hour, but has played an active role in the formation of the Gospel.

## 2.2: The Reciprocal Glory of God and the Son of Man: John 13:31-32

These two verses from John 13 are the most condensed example of repetition in in the Gospel, with five δόξαζεν verbs appearing in quick succession. Jesus' statement regarding the mutual glorification of God and the Son of Man (13:31b-32, discounting the introductory clause from the narrator in 13:31a) is so repetitious it becomes difficult to precisely understand what he is saying. Despite being twenty-nine words long, the statement only actually contains eleven unique lexemes, conjunctions, prepositions or adverbs, five of which (νῦν, υἱός, ἄνθρωπος, εἰ and εὐθὺς) only appear once, with the remaining six (ὁ, καί, θεός, ἐν, αὐτός and δόξαζεν) being repeated an average of four times each in various orders, cases, voices and tenses. The δόξαζεν verbs are repeated the most frequently in the pericope (jointly with αὐτός), a total of five times, with five direct objects and three indirect objects, though it is sometimes unclear exactly how the verbs and objects align, as I will discuss below (p. 10).

Text:

[31] [...] Νῦν ἐδοξάσθη ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ ὁ Θεὸς ἐδοξάσθη ἐν αὐτῷ [32] εἰ ὁ Θεὸς ἐδοξάσθη ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ὁ Θεὸς δοξάσει αὐτὸν ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ εὐθὺς δοξάσει αὐτόν.

Translation:

[31] [...] Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. [32] If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in him<sup>13</sup> and will at once glorify him.

(John 13:31-32)

In her analysis of δόξα-language in John, Nicole Chibici-Revneanu draws particular attention to the ambiguity of the pronouns in these verses.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the description of God glorifying ‘him in him’ has multiple possible meanings: is God glorifying the Son of Man in Godself? Or the Son of Man in the Son of Man’s own self? While some witnesses use a more concrete reflexive ἐαυτῷ in place of αὐτῷ, Chibici-Revneanu notes that the edition of an ἐ is just as likely to have been a revision to clarify John’s ambiguous language than the original word itself that has since been corrupted. This ambiguity confuses the identity of God and the Son of Man, a theologically poignant effect of grammar. This ambiguity can also be seen in the hidden agents of the passive δόξαζεiv statements that I have established are a staple of the Gospel more widely (p. 7). Repetition here, alongside John’s idiosyncratic grammar, appear as devices of John’s narrator (speaking as himself,

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<sup>13</sup> I have translated αὐτὸν ἐν αὐτῷ as ‘him in him’, which is accurate, though English’s lack of cases makes the statement even more ambiguous than the original (it would be far more comprehensible in German, for example, ‘Gott wird auch *ihn in ihm* verherrlichen’...). The NRSV avoids this problem by translating αὐτῷ as ‘himself’, presuming that the pronoun refers to God, an interpretation corroborated by some witnesses (Ⲙ, A, D, K, L and others) substituting αὐτῷ for the reflexive ἐαυτῷ. I have opted for the non-reflexive, ambiguous ‘him’ for reasons that are made clear in my analysis.

<sup>14</sup> Chibici-Revneanu, Nicole, *Variations on Glorification for Repetitions and Variations in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation* edit. Van Belle, G., Labahn, M., Maritz, P. (Uitgeverij Peeters, Leuven, 2009) pp. 512-514

through Jesus or both (see. my analysis of 12:12-24)) to communicate a proto-Trinitarian theology.

Another interpretation, which the linguistic theory on which I have elaborated makes possible, is that this is not a kind of literary device, as Chibici-Revneanu presumes, but rather an unwitting failure of John's language to express an idea in which he believes. The Gospel more widely is deeply concerned with Christology, and it is clear to John that this Christology must include an equivalence or even a conflation between God the Father and God the Son's identities. However, just like the Greek of these verses, this idea does not clearly make propositional sense, and so cannot simply be communicated in language. Because of this, like a child who sees a dog in the road but does not have the language to express this relationship other than listing the objects, John's language takes on a repetitive and cryptic quality, and invites us to expand on it. In this sense, John's Gospel is a source of Christology more in how it invites us to create a theology to explain its account and what it gestures toward beyond language, rather than simply containing some encoded Christology that must be parsed.

### 2.3: The Glorious Succession of the Farewell Discourse: John 17:1-24

The Farewell Discourse of John's Gospel features a long prayer from Jesus directly to God the Father, in stark contrast of tone to the abstract third person repetitions of 13:31-32. The beginning and end of this prayer (vv. 1-6, 22-24) make specific reference to the same mysterious glorifying relationship of Father and Son as 13:31-32, though in a very different manner. Where 13:31-32 invites expansion by its obscurity, as I have demonstrated, 17:1-6, 22-24 are much more concrete. Chibici-Revneanu sees this as a 'revelation' of the true, mutual nature of glorification as first described in ch. 13, the repetition in 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your son so that the son may glorify you' (Πάτερ ἐλήλυθεν ἡ ὥρα, δόξασόν σου τὸν υἱὸν ἵνα ὁ υἱὸς δοξάσῃ σέ.) having clearly defined agents and objects, with no ambiguous third person pronouns.<sup>15</sup> The mutual glorification of God the Father

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<sup>15</sup> Chibici-Revneanu, Nicole, *Variations on Glorification for Repetitions and Variations in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation* edit. Van Belle, G., Labahn, M., Maritz, P. (Uitgeverij Peeters, Leuven, 2009) p. 514

and God the Son (the Son of Man) has, up until this point, been described with vague, passive voiced verbs. The Farewell Discourse, while still repetitive, has an unusual clarity.

Further to this newfound clarity, the Farewell Discourse describes a glorious succession from before time, through Jesus' mission to the disciples. What begins as a fairly exclusive description of mutual glorification between God the Father and God the Son opens up to describe glorification 'in [the disciples]', (καὶ δεδόξασμαι ἐν αὐτοῖς) (17:10), and finally 'for those who believe in me through [the disciples] word.' (περὶ τῶν πιστευόντων διὰ τοῦ λόγου αὐτῶν εἰς ἐμέ) (17:20). The mutual glory of vv. 1-6 is given to the disciples and all believers from God the Father, through God the Son, 'And I have given the glory you have given me to them, so that they may be one, as we are one.' (καγὼ τὴν δόξαν ἣν δέδωκάς μοι δέδωκα αὐτοῖς ἵνα ᾧσιν ἐν καθὼς ἡμεῖς ἐν) (17:22).

Here, the psycholinguistic account of repetition as a knowing meta-communication is more appropriate than the linguistic anthropological account above (pp. 3-4; 5). Here, while John maintains a sense of glorification as mysterious, he expresses how this mystery enters the world through Jesus, and spreads to all the Christian faithful. I concur with Chibici-Revneanu that this is a kind of release, though not a release of tension as I suspect she believes, but rather a release of clarity. Whatever the relationship between the Father and Son is, and it is up to us to try and expand on that, John can see that it has come to him and everyone else with certainty, and, like the woman listing her polyglottal friend's languages in Tannen's example, uses repetition to stress this as both non-exhaustive and worthy of emphasis.

### 3: Linguistics and Scripture

As I have made clear (p. 1), using linguistic theory in this interpretive manner is not without its limits, and is inevitably at arms-length with the ongoing debates in Johannine scholarship. However, I maintain that insofar as linguistics can claim universal truths about ideas and language and their relationship, and insofar as such universal truths exist, about which there is surely more debate to be had, it can illuminate the very human thoughts that lead to this text's qualities in a manner that contemporary Biblical scholarship has not yet appreciated. What this research shows is that when one considers the Biblical authors to be as human as contemporary Biblical readers, albeit with a very different context, and thereby bound by the same facts of language as we are, it is possible to engage with the text in a refreshing and grounded way.

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