THE ETERNAL WORD (JOHN 1: 1 – 18) – A LINGUISTIC EXAMINATION

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Abstract: *Many commentaries have spoken highly of this prelude in the Gospel of John – The Eternal Word. Its style and structure have been highly praised. There is no doubt that this text is quite popular and is often quoted by pastors when giving a sermon on the divinity of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in the Roman Catholic liturgy, this is the Gospel passage read during the Christmas day Mass every year. From the literature, therefore, the message of this passage has greatly contributed to its acclaim. However, the point of interest in this study is that, though the relevance of the message may have played a part in the high acclaim the passage has garnered, the organization of the text from New King James English version itself has played an equally important role in ensuring the popularity of the passage. As argued in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), the texture and organization of a text can contribute immensely to the delivery of the message. Accordingly, the main objective of this study was to investigate how the structural organization of the message of John 1: 1 – 18 has contributed to its dissemination. The theory that is applied in the study is aspects of the Textual Metafunction of Halliday's SFL. This is a text-based model for which John 1: 1 – 18 (the New King James version) is taken as a textual artefact for linguistic exploration. In line with the principles of SFL, the clauses of this biblical text were qualitatively examined, focusing on its textual organization and cohesion. It was found that the prevalent thematic choices, thematic progression and cohesive elements have been strategically used to project the Christology of Jesus, consistently referred to as the Word, the Light, the Life and God.*

Keywords: *thematic progression; thematic structure; topical theme; cohesion; systemic functional grammar; textual metafunction*

1. Introduction

This section of the Gospel according to John has been highly praised for several reasons. Indeed, as expressed by Kuhn (2013: 1):

> It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this text in shaping the Christian conception of Jesus' divinity, incarnation and the Trinity.

Gerber (2017) equally observes that the passage is a remarkable and profound text. This is because, as he argues, it is not just a mere introduction to the whole of John's Gospel, but its popularity lies in the fact that it is a summation of the entire book of John's Gospel. To him, this passage introduces the main themes of the whole Gospel of John.

Not surprisingly, the Gospel is considered to be the most carefully organized of the four Gospels because of its artistic unity of ideas (Branick, 1998). It has a structure which aids immensely in understanding the whole Gospel of John. For instance, the theme of Jesus as God runs through this passage which can be viewed as the prologue to the whole Gospel (Kummel, 1975; Cousar, 2006; Gerber, 2017). It announces the incarnation of Jesus Christ and affirms Christ as the true Son of God. In it, John reveals the divine nature of Christ and describes him as the Word of God who was together with God from the beginning (Lake and Lake, 1938). Indeed, throughout the text, John emphasizes two principal themes:

- that Christ is the divine word made flesh (John 1: 14).
- that the people who responded and accepted his message "became children of God" (John 1: 12).

In our view, these ideas and interpretations given to the text have formed the basis for the high praise the text has received.

However, we argue that, in addition to the message, there is the added fact that the text has organizational value such that it is recognized as a well- structured piece. This organization – both in the choice of words and other stylistic elements – has contributed, in no small measure, to its dissemination. Accordingly, it is our goal in the study to unravel the structure of this text using the textual metafunction of Halliday's SFL with a specific focus on thematic structure, thematic progression and cohesion. Thus, the main objective of this study was to ascertain the contribution of the organization of the message of the Eternal Word to its dissemination.

In pursuit of this goal, we attempted to provide answers to the following research questions:

- how has thematic structure enhanced the biblical text?
- How has thematic progression been effectively deployed in the text?
- how have cohesive elements used to achieve coherence in the text?

2. Thematic structure, thematic progression and cohesion

As has been stated earlier, this study uses aspects of the textual metafunction as its theoretical basis. Specifically, it employs the thematic structure, thematic progression and cohesion to unpack John 1: 1 – 18. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) argues that every text has a tripartite meaning potential in the sense that it is able to refer to goings on in the real world, indicate relationships between the speaker/writer and the audience/addressee and to organize linguistic elements in a meaningful manner. These are meanings that have been referred to in SFL as ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The textual metafunction, which is the focus of this paper, draws attention to how the organization of linguistic elements in a text is itself meaningful. This functional organization includes the organization of the thematic structure of clauses, the pattern of thematic progression and the cohesion of linguistic elements (Bloor & Bloor, 2004; Thompson, 2014; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014).

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 89), every clause has a thematic structure which is made up of a Theme – "that which locates and orients the clause within its context" or "the point of departure of the message" – and a Rheme – "all the rest of the clause" after the Theme is taken (Thompson, 2014: 147). "The thematic structure is significant in signalling the way ideas have been organized in

a clause. In a communicative situation, participants position given information in the Theme unit and a new information in the Rheme.

Closely related to the Thematic structure and also relevant for organization of ideas is Thematic progression which has to do with how the ideas in the text have been developed. Speakers have a choice of focusing on a preceding Theme or Rheme in developing their message. Similarly, they may introduce a completely new Theme. Depending on the Thematic progression method adopted by a speaker, we can have a linear, constant, derived and ruptured progression, or a hyper-Theme. Whereas a hyper-Theme is an overriding Theme, subsuming other themes (Danes, 1974), a constant Theme is formed from a preceding one. However, a Thematic progression is linear if it is developed from a preceding Rheme. A derived Theme is generated from a hyper-Theme, whereas a raptured Theme breaks away from previous Themes and Rhemes to introduce an entirely new Theme (Thompson, 2014).

The last element of textual organization examined in this paper is cohesion which engenders coherence in texts. Martin (2015: 61) defines cohesion as the process whereby meaning is channelled into a digestible current of discourse instead of spilling out formlessly in every possible direction". The two major aspects of cohesion are structural and lexical subtypes both of which are explored below.

3. Methodology

The biblical version used for this study is the New King James English version of the Bible. Of the myriads of English versions of the Bible, we settled on the New King James due mainly to its popularity and acceptability (Britannica, 2024). Admittedly, for a proper exegetical study, both the Greek and English versions of the Bible are required (Dvorak & Walton, 2015). However, since this study is framed within systemic functional linguistics which espouses that language use for all manner of purposes, including translations, involves constant engagement of choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This makes the user of language an active agent every step of the way. Thus, though the Greek version of a biblical passage may have a special charm to it, depending on the quality of the translation, one version may be more popular.

On the basis of the above, we deemed purposeful sampling (Stratton, 2024) suitable for the study. Thus, it must be admitted that any other popular English version could have been chosen for this study. The findings of this study, therefore, cannot be conclusively taken to reflect the reality for all the English versions of John 1: 1 – 18.

Additionally, SFL is clause-based. That is, its metafunctions are analyzed based on the clause structure. Accordingly, the clauses of John 1: 1 – 18 were sorted and analyzed for their thematic structure, progression and cohesion.

4. Analysis

The assumption in textual metafunction is that language in a well-written text is structured to ensure the proper organization of ideas. Accordingly, in analyzing John 1: 1 – 18, the interest lies in unravelling its:

- thematic structure.
- thematic progression.

- cohesive elements.

4.1 The thematic structure

According to Bloor & Bloor (2004), the identification of **Theme** in a clause is based on word order. Thus, based on our definition of Theme and Rheme above it is possible to divide the text into the following thematic components:

Table 1: *Theme and Rheme structure of John 1: 1 – 18*

THEME	RHEME
In the beginning	was the Word
and // the Word	was with God
and // the Word	was God.
He	was in the beginning with God.
All things	were made through Him,
and // without Him	nothing was made
that	was made.
In **H**im	was life,
and // the life	was the light of men.
And // the light	shines in the darkness,
and // the darkness	did not comprehend it.
There	was a man sent from God,
whose name	was John.
This man	came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light,
That // all	through him might believe.
He	was not that Light,
but // (he)	was sent to bear witness of that Light.
That	was the true Light
which	gives light to every man coming into the world.
He	was in the world,
and // the world	was made through Him,
and // the world	did not know Him.
He	came to his own,
and // His own	did not receive him.
But // as many as	received Him,
to them	He gave the right to become children of God,
To those	who believe in His name:
Who	were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.
And // the Word	became flesh
and // (the Word)	dwelt among us,
and // we	beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.
John	bore witness of him
and (John)	cried out, saying,
"This	was He of whom I said,
'He who comes after me	is preferred before me
for He	was before me.'"

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And // of His fullness	we have all received, and grace for grace
For // the law	was given through Moses,
but // grace and truth	came through Jesus Christ.
No one	has seen God at any time.
The only begotten Son,	who is in the bosom of the Father,
He	has declared Him.

From Table 1 above, there are 42 clauses with 42 Themes and 42 Rhemes. Observably, this text has an attractive opening with a marked Theme "*In the beginning*". It is marked because it is not a typical Thematic element – a nominal. Its markedness draws attention to the main topic of the text 'the Word' which is captured in the Rheme. As the main topic, it is given thematic prominence in the subsequent clauses.

4.2 Theme types

Martin et al. (1997: 21) argue that "the reiteration of theme choices expresses the textual meaning..." In other words, textual meanings are signaled through theme patterns. Based on Table 1 above, we can represent the types of themes in the text in Table 2 below.

Table 2: *Distribution of Theme types in the text*

Theme Type	Frequency	Percentage
Topical theme	42	67.7
Textual theme	20	32.3
Interpersonal theme	0	0
Total	**62**	**100%**

4.2.1 Topical Theme

This sub-class of themes which was dominant in the biblical text involves experiential elements functioning as Theme. These elements can refer to the participants, the processes or the circumstance in the clause (Thompson, 2014). The topical theme has a potential of being used only once in a thematic unit. The following are examples of Topical Themes in the text.

In the beginning	all	the word	he
the world	all things	his own	without him

In terms of the experiential information they give, it is possible to sub-classify these themes into the following:

- ▪ Themes that have direct references to Jesus Christ:

the word	*the light*	*he*
his own	*without him*	*the word*

- ▪ Themes that do not refer directly to Jesus Christ, even though they have a bearing on the fact that Christ has always been part of God's plan for mankind:

in the beginning	*nothing*	*the darkness*
who	*we*	*whose name*
John	*this man*	*the law*

An interpretation of the above analysis of the topical theme structure reveals the following:

- The lexical choices in the two categories above reinforce the idea of the Christological message in the text – the divine nature of Christ and the fact of Christ's symbiotic relationship with God. They are echoes of what is stated in Colossians 1:15:

  The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over
  all creation. For in him all things were created…

- Christ is part of the creation story in Genesis. This view is echoed in Colossians 1:16 – 17:

  For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on
  earth, visible and invisible…

Observably, the Theme types are distributed in such a manner that every clause in the text bears reference to Christ (the Word, the Light, the Son). This, we believe, is aimed at keeping the image of Christ before the reader throughout the passage. This is not surprising, given the fact that the main character of interest in the passage is Christ. Therefore, Huntsman (2019) would note about the Gospel of John that its central purpose is to proclaim that Christ is divine – the Son of God, present with God at the beginning of creation. And this text captures it more forcefully in that even though the second category of the themes above does not make direct reference to Christ, there are oblique references to him, lodged in the Rheme of the clauses. This supports Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) observation that the theme is the point of emphasis in a clause.

4.2.2 Textual Theme

The following occurrences of textual themes were found in the text:

and (14)	*that (1)*
but (3)	*for (2)*

In very relative terms, they are few compared to the topical themes. In our view, the reason is simple. The message is delivered straight – in simple sentences, mainly. But the most noticeable point about the textual themes is the predominance of the connective – *and.* It is striking that this is the most preferred connective in the passage. This use of *and* as a connective is meant to perform continuative, additive and contrastive functions. These functions are distributed in the text as follows:

Table 3: *Distribution of Textual Themes*

	Frequency	Percentage
Continuative	8	57.14
Additive	3	21.43
Contrastive	3	21.43
Total	**14**	**100**

As a continuative connective, *and* is used in 8 clauses (57.14%) as in the following:

- In the beginning was the word
  and the word was with God
  and the word was God

- **And** the life was the light of men

     and the light shines in the darkness

     and the darkness did not comprehend it.

From the extract above, it is obvious that the continuative ***and,*** in all these cases, serves as extension and stylistic marker. That is, the message expressed in the preceding clause is extended in the following clause. Thus, the information in the first clause is given further expansion. This ensures that the main idea remains unchanged in the subsequent clauses. Besides, and more importantly, the continuative performs a reiterative function typical of narratives. It occurs in paratactic relations whose function, essentially, is to ease the flow of the story. These are characteristic of the "mnemonic devices" of biblical texts which were written "in a primarily oral culture" (Bloomberg and Markley, 2010: 99).

4.2.3 Interpersonal Theme

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), interpersonal Theme involves the use of vocatives, mood, and mood-making elements. These elements are used in a text to indicate a writer's attitude or comment on the message of the text. It represents a writer's presence in a text. It is clear from the analysis that interpersonal themes are completely absent in this text. That is, the message is presented as a series of *facts*.

4.3 Thematic Progression

The text exhibits very fascinating thematic progression patterns. As can be observed in Table 4 below, these Thematic progression patterns project the focus of the message and set the text for ease of memorization.

Table 4: *Thematic progression patterns*

Clause	*Progression*
In the beginning was the Word	**Hyper-Theme**
and **the Word** was with God,	Linear
and **the Word** was God.	Constant
He was in the beginning with God.	Constant
All things were made through Him,	Derived
and **without Him** nothing was made	Linear
that was made.	Constant
In Him was life,	Ruptured
and **the life** was the light of men.	Linear
And **the light** shines in the darkness	Linear
and **the darkness** did not comprehend it.	Linear
There was a man sent from God	Ruptured
whose name was John.	Linear
This man came for a witness……	Linear
that **all** through him might believe.	Derived
He was not that Light	Constant
but (**he**) was sent to bear witness of that Light.	Constant
That was the true Light	Linear
which gives light to every man coming into the world.	Linear

He was in the world	Derived
and **the world** was made through Him,	Linear
and **the world** did not know Him.	Constant
He came to His own	Linear
and **His own** did not receive Him.	Linear
But **as many** as received Him,	Constant
to them He gave the right to become children of God,	Constant
to those who believe in His name:	Constant
who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh…	Constant
And **the Word** became flesh	Derived
and (**the Word**) dwelt among us,	Constant
and **we** beheld His glory, the glory as of the only….	Linear
John bore witness of Him	Derived
and (**John**) cried out.	Constant
And **of His fullness / we** have all received…….	Linear/Derived
For **the law** was given through Moses,	Ruptured
but **grace and truth** came through Jesus Christ.	Derived
No one has seen God at any time.	Ruptured
The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father	Derived
He has declared Him.	Linear

Based on the definition of hyper-Theme above, the first clause of the text, ***In the beginning** was the Word,* is a hyper-Theme. Before this, there is no preceding theme. This theme is overriding in the sense that it echoes the core message in the text that Christ (the Word) was part of the creation story. After this, there are several instances of Linear progression patterns involving situations where the Rheme of the first clause is also selected as the Theme of the subsequent clause. The following are examples of Linear progression:

>*In the beginning was **the Word***
>*and **the Word** was with God*
>
>*And the life was **the light** of men*
>*And **the light** shines in the darkness*

In addition, there are several instances of the use of the constant Theme pattern, with the Theme of a preceding clause functioning as the Theme of the following clause as in the following:

>*And **the word** was with God*
>*and **the word** was God*
>
>*And **the world** was made through him*
>*And **the world** did not receive him*

There is equally the use of the derived progression patterns which are indirectly inferred from a hyper-Theme. The following are some examples from the text:

Theme	Source of derivation
All things were made through him.	*In the beginning was the Word*
	And the Word was with God

That all through him might believe	*this man came…..to bear witness of the light*
He was in the world	*he was in the beginning with God*
	He came into his own

The point of this derived pattern is that an element becomes highlighted as theme because there is some related idea somewhere in the text, which has given prominence to the element selected as Theme in the current clause. Thus, the derived Theme picks up an underdeveloped idea in preceding clauses or from a hyper-Theme and gives it a focus (Thompson, 2014) thereby ensuring that its import is not lost on the audience. This strategy enables the message presented to be adequately developed.

Lastly, there are ruptured Themes which break away from ideas already introduced or developed. As defined earlier, these are themes which shift from the idea being discussed to introduce a new one. For instance, "*In Him was life"* is a ruptured Theme which shifts the discussion from the *Word* as part of creation to introduce a new dimension about the Word as "*the life and light of mankind*". The following is another ruptured Theme:

- and **the darkness** did not comprehend it.
  There was a man sent from God – the shift is from Christ as light in the midst of darkness to **John** as a messenger.

Thus, the ruptured theme may be used as a kind of a boundary, as is the case in the text of this study, to mark the subsections of texts and for that matter the messages/meanings within texts.

The choices of Thematic progression patterns in this biblical text indicate a strategic arrangement of ideas. Constant Themes are employed to drum home the same message whereas linear Themes are used to give prominence to ideas backgrounded in Rhemes. These are complemented by the strands of derived and ruptured Themes to project and solidify the core message of the text.

4.4 Cohesion

Cohesion is that aspect of the textual metafunction which focuses on the function of language to create coherence in texts. This is a principal mark of a text – its texture (Halliday & Hassan, 1976). It is mostly through cohesive elements that coherence is achieved in texts. In this specific analysis, we are concerned with coherence achieved through lexical and grammatical/structural cohesive processes in John 1: 1 – 18.

4.4.1 Lexical cohesion

Lexical cohesion is achieved through the use of the following repetition, metaphors and oppositeness (Thompson, 2014).

Repetition appears to be the most common process used to keep the core message of the text – the divinity of Christ – alive in the mind of the reader. Examples of the repeated lexical items found in the text are captured in Table 5 below.

Table 5: *Cohesion through repetition*

Word	Freq	Word	Freq
Word	5	World	4

God	7	Received	2
Light	7	Grace	3
Life	2	Father	2
John	4	Glory	1
Darkness	2	Witness	3
Man	3	flesh	2

In addition to these repeated words, there is also the repetition of the 3rd person pronouns and determiners, as shown in the following structures:

He was in the beginning with God In **him** was life
All things were made through **him** **He** was in the world
And without **him**, nothing was made The world was made through **him**
He came to **his** own The world did not know **him**

The use of lexical and structural repetition creates a great deal of unity and connectedness. As Berlin (1989: 35) puts it, repetition unifies distinct elements of discourse and strengthens the force of argument, leading to a logical progression. So doing, one does not miss the central message presented in a text. In this passage, as we have seen, the emphasis has been on the nature of Christ (the Word). Not surprisingly, the repeated lexical items reinforce this idea in the minds of the audience.

Metaphor is one of the cohesive devices in the text. There are instances such as the following where Christ is referred to in metaphoric terms.

    Word   *Light*
    life   *Son*

The words – *life, Word, Light* – are direct references to Jesus Christ, while the words - *darkness, flesh, world* – represent the forces which rejected Christ. These metaphorical choices reinforce the contrastive information highlighted in the text:

    And the world did not know Him. He came to His
    own and His own did not receive Him. But as many
    as received Him, to them /He gave the right to become
    children of God,

Oppositeness is another cohesive element. According to Huntsman (2019), the message of Christ's divine nature is presented in dualistic, opposite terms in John 1: 1 – 18. We note this in the following contrasts:

Structure	**Opposite item**
through him	without him
light	darkness
blood and flesh	will of God
the law	grace and truth
through Moses	through Jesus Christ
born of flesh	born of God
spirit	flesh
the world was made through him	the world did not know him

These contrasts leave such a lasting impression on the reader that they are easily attracted to the text. Besides, they facilitate memorization.

4.4.2 Structural cohesion

Structural/grammatical cohesion is achieved through repeated structures (Thompson, 2014). In the biblical text of this study, the structural repetitions are as follows:

In the beginning (2 times)
Through him (5 times)
His own (2 times)
Was (were) made (4 times)

These repeated structures continue to reinforce the message. This is because each repeated structure entrenches more and more the message of the text. As argued above, memorability is enhanced through this process of information dissemination.

5. Conclusion

This study used aspects of the textual metafunction of systemic functional linguistics to analyze the structural organization of the New King James version of John 1: 1 – 18. Specifically, it adopted thematic structure, thematic progression and cohesive elements as linguistic tools to explore how the organizational structure of this biblical text contributes to its acclaim. The analysis conducted in this study reveals that Thematic structure of John 1: 1 – 18 is carefully organized to highlight the central message of the text. This is emphasized by the choices of patterns of Thematic progression. Accordingly, though constant and linear patterns of progression predominate, these are complemented by derived and ruptured patterns. This shows that the ideas of the text are adequately developed. Through the dominance of constant and linear Themes, the central message of the pre-eminence and divine nature of Christ is adequately presented. Finally, it was found that the text is rich in cohesive elements of repetition, oppositeness and metaphors. The blend of these elements makes John 1: 1 – 18 not only interesting to read but also memorable. The value of this study has been underscored by Dongell (2014) who notes that it is a worthwhile effort in biblical studies to show a direct and unassisted commitment to the text itself through a structural analysis. It is clear from this analysis that the deliberate structural choices have created a tight cohesive and easy to memorize unit. It has been argued in this study that the cohesive strategies of this text may have contributed enormously to the popularity of this biblical text.

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