

Linguistic Theory and the Biblical Text

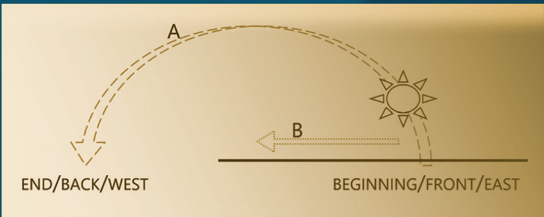
EDITED BY **WILLIAM A. ROSS** AND **ELIZABETH ROBAR**

Cognitive Linguistic Theory

Functional Grammar

Historical Linguistics

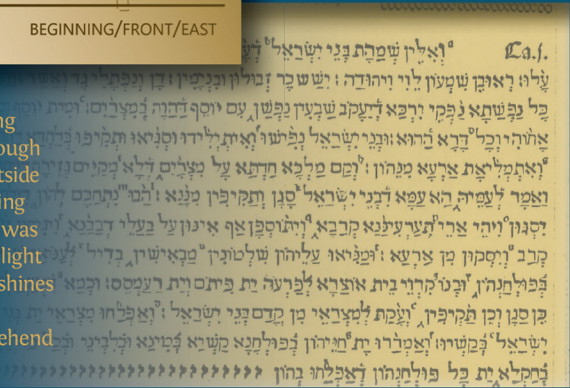
οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν. ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.



Complexity Theory

Generative Linguistics

This was in the beginning with God. All things through him came to be, and outside of him came to be nothing that came to be. In him was life and the life was the light of people, and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it (Jn. 1:2-5)



Pragmatics of Information Structure

Computational Linguistic Analysis



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FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR AND THE PRAGMATICS OF INFORMATION STRUCTURE FOR BIBLICAL LANGUAGES

Randall Buth

The pragmatics of information structure, and Functional Grammar in particular, encourage and provide a framework for students and scholars of the biblical languages to read with increased nuance and precision.

1.0. Historical Development

Functional grammatical approaches include semantic and pragmatic information in a grammatical description. Pragmatics refers to the effects that are made within communication and will be discussed below. This inclusion of pragmatic information within a formal grammatical description can be contrasted to transformational-generative approaches that adopt a policy of autonomous syntax. The Functional Grammar (FG) developed by Simon Dik in particular reflects the confluence of two developments in linguistics: (1) the pragmatics of information structure as extrapolated, for example, from Functional Sentence

Perspective (FSP)¹ and (2) generative-transformational grammars that stem from Noam Chomsky, especially 1957–1980. The primary pragmatic functions that were incorporated in the early sentence grammar of FG were Topic and Focus, discussed below.

Generative and transformational grammar were a major impetus for FG. A generative grammar wants to know the rules that will produce all acceptable, grammatical sentences of a language and restrict the production of unacceptable, ungrammatical sentences. The primary difference between a strictly generative approach and functional approaches can be summarised in the notion ‘autonomous syntax’, which is the restricted domain of formal grammar without including semantic or pragmatic information in the rules. Functional approaches to grammar, on the other hand, reject such a restriction and recognise that pragmatic functions like Topic and Focus exert direct influence on the rules. In addition to including pragmatics in formal grammatical description, FG eschews the idea of transformations and filtering devices in formal grammar as psychologically problematic, as discussed below.

Dik published the basis of this approach in two volumes (1978; 1980). From the beginning, he embraced a principle of

¹ For examples, see Daneš (1974) and Firbas (1992). The roots of FSP precede World War II. FSP broadly analyses communication as comprising known or assumed information as a base that is called the Theme. New or salient information is then added to the Theme as the intended communication. This salient meaning is termed the Rheme. In English, these two perspectives are often called Topic and Comment, respectively.

rigorous formalism in his theory. The various systems of syntax (like predicates, subjects, and objects), semantic roles (like agent, experiencer, and patient), and pragmatics (like Topic and Focus) are assumed to influence the final output of a sentence and should be included within formal grammar. However, as these ideas were applied in studies on various languages, the complexities inherent in these notions have led to increasingly complex notation. Dik (1989) expanded many kinds of Topics and Foci. Some ideas from discourse analysis and greater attention to pragmatics led to positing multiple layers of underlying representation before the surface level sentences would be generated or interpreted within a grammar.

A former student and colleague, Kees Hengeveld, edited and published Dik's work posthumously in 1997. Hengeveld and J. Lachlan McKenzie then went on to include a formal discourse framework within that theory, ideas that developed out of a concern to include syntax, semantics, and pragmatics within formal grammatical theory. Hengeveld and McKenzie forged these into a comprehensive theory with four abstract layers. They published their collaborative effort in 2008, *Functional Discourse Grammar* (FDG; for a brief description of FDG, see Hengeveld and McKenzie 2005, 668–76). Since then, FDG has been considered the successor of FG and current studies tend to use the 2008 volume as a starting point. However, the complex metalanguage of later developments presents a barrier for those primarily interested in biblical languages, while the initial pragmatic functions in FG are more accessible. Concepts from information structure are widely used within other functional grammars (see, e.g.,

Givón 1984, who downplays rigorous formalism, and then Givón 2001, where he reincorporates some formalism; see also Foley and Van Valin 1984). The pragmatic functions of information structure within FG will therefore be the primary focus here.

2.0. Key Theoretical Commitments and Major Concepts

People communicate with language, prototypically with sound, but also in written media and in sign languages. A signal is intended to communicate meaning. In ‘The girl walked to the market’, the speaker wants the hearer to think about a particular girl, a particular market, and communicates that the girl walked there. Grammatical theories attempt to explain how that sentence is produced.

With this in mind, FG aims at several goals.² These include, first, typological adequacy, meaning the theory should be formulated in terms of rules and principles that apply to any natural language. Second, pragmatic adequacy, meaning the theory should explain how linguistic expressions may be used in communication. Third, psychological adequacy, meaning that what the theory says about a language should be compatible with what is known about the psychological mechanisms involved in natural language processing.

To these ends, FG has identified certain functions that affect the output of a predication into sentences. These include:³

² See Dik (1980, 2).

³ See Dik (1980, 3).

SEMANTIC FUNCTIONS (Agent, Patient, Recipient, etc.), which define the roles that participants play in states of affairs, as designated by predications.

SYNTACTIC FUNCTIONS (Subject and Object), which define different perspectives through which states of affairs are presented in linguistic expressions.

PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS (Theme and Tail, Topic and Focus), which define the informational status of constituents of linguistic expressions. These relate to the embedding of the expression in ongoing discourse and are determined by the status of the pragmatic information of Speaker and Addressee as it develops in verbal interaction.

Using these functions, FG posits that an underlying abstract predication frame could produce the following sentences:

- (1) The girl walked to the market in the morning.
- (2) In the morning the girl walked to the market.
- (3) As for the girl, she walked to the market in the morning.

The predication frame comes from the abstract lexicon of a language and would join three arguments (sentence constituents) to that predication, 'to walk': *the girl*, *to the market*, and *in the morning*. These arguments receive different taggings for syntax, semantic roles, and optionally pragmatics. In (1), *the girl* _[Subject, Agent] is a syntactic Subject and semantic Agent, while *to the market* _[Goal] is a semantic Goal and *in the morning* _[Time] is a semantic Time. The semantic taggings are the same for (2), however *in the morning* _[Time, Topic] is both semantic Time and pragmatic Topic. In (3), *as for the girl* _[Theme] is a pragmatic Theme, a framework for

the sentence similar to Topic but outside the sentence syntax. *She* _[Subject, Agent] is a syntactic Subject and semantic Agent, while *to the market* _[Goal] is a semantic Goal. Notice the difference between (1) and (2). The predication frame and the semantics are the same, but the pragmatics differ. In (1) the Time *in the morning* is part of the new, salient, rhemic/comment information, but in (2) *in the morning* has been placed at the beginning according to pragmatic placement rules. There the argument is tagged a Topic to provide a pragmatic setting or situational orientation for the communication that follows.⁴

FG assumes that predications use the functions explained above to generate sentences, a process which occurs with abstract templates specific to a particular language. The template specifies where certain functions may appear, and positions in the templates can be filled by individual words, phrases, and clauses. So discussions about word order are actually about constituents or ‘pieces’ of a sentence that are positioned to fulfil one of the syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic functions. A sentence is able to organise and output the functions as follows:⁵

(4) Theme; Pragmatic positions, Syntactic positions; Tail

Within this template, syntactic positions might involve numerous variations, such as S–O–X; S–V–O–X; V–S–O–X, etc. But

⁴ A Topic is pragmatically marked material that orientates a sentence to its context. It does not have Focus intonation and is not necessarily the broader subject matter of the sentence.

⁵ The templates in (4) are also simplified and without the algebraic notation of much of FG and FDG.

pragmatic positions appear before syntactic positions, which is fundamentally important for FG and for human communication in general.⁶ Such a pragmatic position allows FG to explain a phenomenon in V–S–O languages, namely the possibility of S–V–O as an/the alternative order (see Dik 1980, 155).

While syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic functions are all necessary for FG as a theory, understanding pragmatic functions may help readers of biblical languages most. Pragmatic functions are part of all natural language and must be internalised to communicate in any given language. Two of the pragmatic functions noted in (4) operate outside sentence syntax and are separated by semicolons in the templates. First, the Tail is an afterthought, prototypically at the end of a sentence, whether as a side comment or reinforcement. Also, a phrase like an appositive or parenthetical comment can be treated as a Tail that may be placed inside a syntactical sentence. Second, the Theme is any introductory, setting, or topical material that is prototypically at the beginning of a sentence, traditionally treated as a *casus pendans* and called left dislocation in linguistics.

The FSP distinction between Topic and Comment has led to a foundational distinction of marked information structure in FG: Topic and Focus. A Topic constituent is specially marked

⁶ As part of typological adequacy, FG theorises that a potential pragmatic position exists at the beginning of a main clause of whatever the basic order may be. FG does not claim that devices like intonation, morphology, or special vocabulary do not also play roles in informational pragmatics. But placement rules and positions before the main syntactic components are stipulated as universal.

information that is presupposed or already established. It is a starting point for the rest of the sentence and potentially linked to the larger context. A sentence constituent that functions as Topic is eligible for placement in a pragmatic position before the main, default sentence order. But a Topic is not necessarily the syntactic Subject, which often creates confusion. In English, the word ‘topic’ is a synonym of ‘subject’. But in FG a marked Topic is specifically a constituent that provides a framework and link to the larger context in which a sentence occurs. It may be a Subject, but it may also be some other constituent. Given this potential confusion, I use the term Topic in this article when trying to relate primarily to FG and broader linguistic literature. But I use the term Contextualising Constituent (CC) when including the multivalent nature of pragmatic Topics that goes beyond marked constituents as subjects and settings.

A Focus constituent is a specially marked part of the Comment, which contains the new or most important information of a sentence. Focus may be marked by word order, particles, and often intonation. It can include many kinds of Comment information, including new, supplemental, reinforced old, contrastive, or contra-expected information.⁷

FG thus helps identify pragmatic placements in word order and the resulting nuances of understanding. But because FG aims at both psychological and pragmatic adequacy, it does not allow unmotivated, *ad hoc* rules to correct mis-predictions of hypothesised rules. This can be stated in four principles:

⁷ Lambrecht (1994) adds ‘sentence focus’ to the Topic and Focus of information structure, as discussed below.

1. Avoid transformations in the sense of structure-changing operations;
2. Avoid empty elements in underlying structure that are unexpressed;
3. Disallow filter devices;
4. Disallow abstract lexical decomposition (instead, account for meaning with definitions).

So if a constituent is pragmatically placed at the beginning of the clause, and the language regularly follows with V–S, then that language shows a basic order of V–S. FG does not unnecessarily multiply rules. FG would not suggest an abstract S–V order, place a pragmatic function in front, and then add a filter to flip the S–V order to match the data. An additional rule that would switch the placement of S and V after a pragmatic placement would be *ad hoc*. Instead, FG asks simple questions: Would such rules be psychologically real? Is there any pragmatic motivation for the rule? Are such rules necessary? If the not, then Occam's Razor and the minimal abstractness principle of FG declare such a rule to be contra-indicated and *ad hoc*.

These principles have been particularly helpful in describing word order patterns in Germanic languages, but may also be applied to the biblical languages.⁸ For illustration, FG can demonstrate a continuum between various V–S languages to the point where one may develop into an S–V language. Four categories of these languages are described:

⁸ Dik (1980, 152–77) devotes a whole chapter to this question.

V1 (verb first), where the statistical majority of sentences show V–S at the beginning of the clause.

There do not appear to be any V–S languages that do not also allow S–V word order. This fact supports the typological adequacy of FG, which assumes a pragmatic position before a main clause of whatever the basic order may be.

V2 (verb second), where the majority of sentences show some non-verb element first in a pragmatic position.

In these languages, a pragmatic position rule is activated fairly commonly.

V2s (verb strongly second), where all sentences, allowing for some pragmatic exceptions, show the verb in a second position.

A V2s language might look like an S–V language at first glance. A pragmatic positioning rule becomes mandatory, thereby diluting the strength of the pragmatic marking. The only choice is whether the Subject or some other constituent fills the pragmatic position. “A V2s language will only have the following constituent orderings: a. SVO, b. XVS(O)” (Dik 1980, 158). In terms of pragmatics, the S–V orders in a V2s language will function similarly to the way that Subjects function in real S–V languages.

V3 (verb third), where the verb comes third whenever a constituent is pragmatically placed at the beginning, before the syntactic S–V.

In V3 languages, the Subject follows the pragmatic position, so that the Verb comes third. Without a pragmatically positioned

constituent, the Verb may appear second, after the Subject. In other words, a V3 language is a true S–V language, as is English.⁹

Not only can FG meaningfully describe the various categories of word order, but FG also predicts historical development with increasing optional use of pragmatic placement rules through time. Eventually, a V2s language can become a V3 language. Dik (1980, 169–75) lists Celtic languages and Welsh as examples of V1. Then, within Germanic languages, Old Icelandic, Old High German, and Middle Dutch are V2; Icelandic, Norse, Danish, and others are V2s; and finally English is V3 (SVO).

The importance of these basic concepts of FG is best appreciated when looking at the data of real languages. The next section shows how an FG approach can aid the reading and understanding of biblical texts.¹⁰

⁹ This does not mean that additional patterns do not exist. For example, English has a vestigial question order ‘When did the girl return?’ The order ‘did the girl’ is V–S and reflects an archaic word order pattern in the history of Germanic languages.

¹⁰ FG also deals with highly presupposed information that is attracted to Verbs in what is called Language Independent Preferred Order of Constituents (LIPOC), as well as secondary clines of post-verbal saliency. These ideas are not discussed in this essay, as they are less important for the general reader of biblical languages.

3.0. Use and Contributions of FG in Biblical Studies

3.1. Application to Hebrew

Some scholars of Biblical Hebrew have claimed that the language is based on S–V order, while a majority counter that it has a V–S order. Even claims that there is *no* basic order must still explain the examples of both S–V and V–S order.¹¹ Recognising constituents in communication that have special pragmatic marking can be a powerful tool for readers and for an audience. Pragmatic signals add information and perspective beyond the basic referential semantics of a communication.

3.1.1. A Test for V–S–O in Hebrew

Dik (1980, 154) provides a simple test that has explanatory power for Biblical Hebrew:

If, whenever some constituent other than the Subject is brought to P1, the Subject itself appears in preverbal position, then the language is a ‘real’ SVO language with basic pattern P1SVO.

¹¹ See Hornkohl (2018), who has provided a review of word order studies and found the arguments for a S–V word order unpersuasive. He also recognises that this means that all S–V orders would need pragmatic explanations, both by those positing a V–S default order and by those who might claim that all orders are pragmatically motivated in BH.

If on the other hand, the Subject appears in postverbal position in that condition, then the basic pattern must have been P1VSO.

This is so because FG provides no other means for explaining the occurrence of postverbal Subjects than the assumption that the basic position of the Subject is postverbal in such cases. In particular, purported rules of Subject Postposing of Subject Verb Inversion simply cannot be formulated within the framework of FG. Part of the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that this is an advantage rather than a weakness.

According to the criterion formulated above, English is a real P1SVO language. On the other hand, Dutch, German, and in fact all the other living Germanic languages come out as P1VSO languages according to this criterion.

Generally speaking, in BH, when some item other than a conjunction and a Subject is pre-verbal, the remaining order is V–S, which is what FG predicts for a V–S–O language, as in (5a):

- (5) (a) אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ־נֹחַ
 ‘With God Noah walked’ [X_{Focus} –V–S] (Gen. 6.9)
 (b) אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים נֹחַ הִתְהַלֵּךְ* [X_{Focus} –S–V]¹²

An S–V model with the same contextual pragmatics would have incorrectly predicted (5b).¹³ The texts in (6) and (7) provide

¹² In linguistics, an asterisk marks either an incorrect/ungrammatical or an unattested form. Here it signals that this is not the attested form in the passage under discussion. An X–S–V order would have been a poor fit here, but it can occur in a different context with different pragmatics.

¹³ Holmstedt (2009; 2011) invokes a special rule here to switch S–V to V–S to avoid the mis-prediction, but this is unmotivated and *ad hoc* from a FG perspective.

similar examples, in which (6b) and (7b) show what an S–V language would have produced:

- (6) (a) וּבַיּוֹם הַקִּים אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן כֶּסֶה הָעֲנָן אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן
 ‘And on the day of raising the tabernacle the cloud covered the tabernacle’ [X–V–S–O] (Num. 9.15)
- (b) וּבַיּוֹם הַקִּים אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן הָעֲנָן כֶּסֶה אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן* [X–S–V–O]
- (7) (a) וּבְאַרְבַּע עָשָׂר שָׁנָה בָּא כְּדָרְלֶעֱמֹר וְהַמְּלָכִים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ
 ‘And in the 14th year Kadorla‘omer came, and the kings that were with him’ [V–S] (Gen. 14.5)
- (b) וּבְאַרְבַּע עָשָׂר שָׁנָה כְּדָרְלֶעֱמֹר בָּא וְהַמְּלָכִים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ* [S–V]

These examples illustrate that BH is a V–S language, whose basic template can be listed in simple form as

P–V–S–O–X

where P is a pragmatically placed constituent. If this is correct, then every case of some non-verb item preceding the verb is a pragmatic signal to the audience. That is a strong claim and a helpful guideline for readers.

3.1.2. Topic and Focus in a VSO Framework

Several examples in Hebrew can illustrate how Topic and Focus function in a V–S–O framework before looking at greater sentence-level effects.

Looking first at examples of Focus, consider (8):

- (8) בְּתָם־לִבִּי וּבְנִקְיִן כְּפִי עָשִׂיתִי זֹאת
 ‘with an innocent heart and clean hands_[Focus] I did this’
 (Gen. 20.5)

In this example, the pre-verbal material is the main point, part of the Comment and a marked Focus construction. Something similar occurs in (9):

- (9) כִּי־מְרֹב שִׁיחִי וְכַעֲסִי דִּבַּרְתִּי
 ‘because from much thought and anger_[Focus] I was speaking’
 (1 Sam. 1.16)

In the context, Hanna is explaining her own behaviour, so the words ‘much thought and anger’ are the salient, main part of the Comment of the sentence. They are placed in front of the verb as a marked Focus. As a final example, answers to questions frequently use fronting for the most meaningful part of an answer, as in (10):

- (10) וּמֵאֵינָן תָּבֹאוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו מֵאֶרֶץ רְחוֹקָה מְאֹד בָּאוּ עֲבָדֶיךָ
 “...and from where would you be coming?” And they said to him, “From a very far country_[Focus] have come your servants” (Josh. 9.8–9)

Turning now to consider pragmatic Topics, the text in (11) provides a good example:

- (11) בְּגִבְעֹן נִרְאָה יְהוָה אֶל־שְׁלֹמֹה בַּחֲלוֹם הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
 ‘In Gibeon_[Topic] appeared the LORD to Solomon in a night dream, and God said...’ (1 Kgs 3.5)

This is classic syntax of V–S where the MT has a pragmatic Topic (CC) that provides a locational setting to the sentence and the greater context.¹⁴ Something similar occurs in (12):

- (12) (a) וַיֵּצֵא יִשְׂרָאֵל לִקְרַאת פְּלִשְׁתִּים לְמִלְחָמָה
 ‘and Israel went out_[VS] to the Philistines for war’
 (b) וַיַּחֲנוּ עַל־הָאֶבֶן הָעֶזֶר
 ‘and they camped at Even-Ezer_[VX]’

¹⁴ The place Gibeon provides a Setting for the scene rather than a subject of a sentence, which is why the term Topic can be misleading and why I prefer Contextualising Constituent.

(c) וּפְלִשְׁתִּים חָנוּ בְּאַפֶּק

‘and the Philistines_[S, Topic] camped at Afeq’ (1 Sam. 4.1)

In this example, the Philistines are marked as a Topic that provides comparison and contrast with Israel.

3.1.3. Subordinating Clause with Focus

Most subordinating conjunctions in BH introduce a V–S clause. However, pragmatic frontings may occur. The following two examples have subordinating conjunctions, one with a fronted Subject and one with a fronted Object. Both fronted constituents are pragmatically marked as Focus.

(13) וְלֹא־יָדַע יַעֲקֹב כִּי רָחֵל גָּנְבָתָם

‘And Jacob did not know_[V-S] that Rachel_[S, Focus] stole them [the household gods]’ (Gen. 31.32)

The Subject comes before the Verb inside this כִּי-clause. ‘Rachel’ can be read as a Focus and as exclusive and contra-expected information from Jacob’s perspective. He already knew that a theft had occurred. Consider also (14):

(14) כְּגוֹי אֲשֶׁר־צִדְקָה עָשָׂה

‘as a nation that righteousness_[Focus, Obj] it did’ (Isa. 58.2)

Again, placing the Object before the Verb can be explained here as Focus, because צִדְקָה ‘righteousness, justice’ is a contra-expected point for irony: ‘as if they were a nation that did what would be, in fact, right’.

In general, subordinating conjunctions provide a link to a context themselves, so they do not regularly need a pragmatic Topic to link to the context. Thus, if the subordinate clause marks a pragmatic position, it is most often Focus, with the most salient

part of a sentence placed before the Verb. This, too, helps the audience and readers, who would add a Focal intonation to differentiate Focus from Topic.

3.1.4. Template for Participles in Hebrew

The advantage of a rule-based approach to word orders can be illustrated with participles as well. Most grammarians recognise that the Hebrew participle fits a pattern that is more congruent to a Verbless clause than to a clause with a finite verb (for more details, see Buth 1999). In FG, the template for Biblical Hebrew participles is thus

(+/- Topic) (+/- Focus) S–Predicate

where the ‘+/-’ notation makes explicit that the use of either a Topic or a Focus is optional. In the case of participles, the predicate would be Participle + Complements. Consider the following example:

- (15) (a) מָה־אַתָּה רֹאֶה יִרְמְיָהוּ
 ‘What_[O, Focus] do you see, Jeremiah?’
 (b) מִקֵּל שֶׁקֶד אֲנִי רֹאֶה
 ‘An almond stick_[O, Focus] I see.’ [S–V_{Participle}]
 (c) הֵיטֵבָה לְרֹאוֹת
 ‘You’ve done well to see’
 (d) כִּי־שֶׁקֶד אֲנִי עַל־דְּבָרִי לַעֲשׂוֹ
 ‘for diligent_[Focus] am I on my word to do it’
 (Jer. 1.11–12)

In (15), a question word ‘what?’ in (15a) is positioned as Focus and helps us recognise the salient, new information in the following answer. Jeremiah’s answer in (15b), ‘an almond stick’, has

been placed ahead of the Subject–Participle, in the pragmatic position as Focus, as the pragmatically marked new information. The main sentence in (15b), ‘I see’, is known, pre-supposed information and follows the Focal Object. The Subject immediately ahead of the participle is not pragmatically marked.

Participial clauses and verbless clauses have a default, Subject–Predicate word order, different from finite verbal clauses with V–S order. When a word order of Participle–Subject occurs, then, as in (15d) and (16) below, there is pragmatic marking of the Participle, most often Focus:

(16) וְגַם אֶת־הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דֵּן אֲנִי

‘and in addition, the nation that they serve (as slaves)_[Topic]

I am going to judge_[Focus]’ (Gen. 15.14)

In (16), the long Object ‘the nation that they serve’ is positioned as a Topic to provide the starting point and contextual link for the sentence ‘I am going to judge the nation’. However, contrary to the basic Subject–Participle word order, the participle comes before the Subject so that the participle is a second, pragmatically positioned constituent. The immediate and most natural reading is that the ‘judging’ is Focus, contra-expected, and specially marked.

We should also note the pattern of Topic–Focus order in all of the above examples that have more than one pragmatically positioned constituent. This Topic–Focus order is normal in BH and fits with a universal tendency seen in languages around the world. Consider the text in (17):

(17) (a) דֹּר הַלֵּךְ

‘A generation goes,’

- (b) דֹּר בָּא
 ‘a generation comes,’
 (c) וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמֶדֶת
 ‘and as for the earth_[Topic] it remains forever_[Focus]’
 (Eccl. 1.4)

In (17c), ‘the earth’ is not first because it is a grammatical Subject, but because it is pragmatically marked. In this verse, the rules of pragmatic placement help the reader to interpret the functions of the sentence pieces. The adverbial complement לְעוֹלָם ‘forever’ in (17c) has been pragmatically placed before the main sentence, most transparently as a Focus, since it is specific, new information that also contrasts with the notion of temporality in the previous clauses. Note that the word order is not *וְלְעוֹלָם הָאָרֶץ עֹמֶדֶת ‘and forever the earth remains’, which has only a pragmatically marked Focus. In (17c), the Subject is also placed before the pragmatically marked Focus, such that it, too, is pragmatically marked as a Topic. The earth is marked as a Topic because it is being compared to and contrasted with passing generations. Then the main point is brought out with a Focus structure, לְעוֹלָם ‘(remain) forever’, which is pragmatically marked salient information.

It is this mix of interpreting pragmatically positioned information with the need to account for all of the results through rule identification that makes the recognition of pragmatic functions a powerful tool for practised readers of the biblical text.

3.1.5. Sentence Marking and Discourse Pragmatics

The above examples have illustrated pragmatic functions of Focus and Topic (CC) within a V-S perspective. However,

scholars agree that there are many examples of seemingly insipid Topics.¹⁵ Many sentences have a fronted constituent that is not the most salient point of a sentence and thus is not a candidate for Focus intonation as a Focus function. Likewise, the constituent does not provide a contextual comparison or set up a new Topic chain. Instead, the Topic introduces an isolated sentence on its own with interesting Semantics and discourse Pragmatics. Hornkohl (2018, 44) has summarised the problem:

Frequently in BH, elements are fronted for purposes of marking something special about the entire clause. Though some formulations of information structure include the possibility of whole-clause marking by means of a fronted constituent—for example, Lambrecht’s sentence focus, which may usefully explain certain cases of preverbal positioning in BH—this is inappropriate for the vast majority of XV instances in BH in which X is neither topic nor focus.

We need to define and identify the ‘signal’ and then discuss proposed meanings or function. A fronted constituent is only part of the signal. We can assume that intonation would have distinguished a Focus from a Topic.¹⁶ So we may call a fronted

¹⁵ Moshavi (2010, 119) lists over 43% of her examples in Genesis as not clearly either Topic or Focus. Atkinson (2021, 227–30) lists between 281 and 451 out of 1,029 examples in Samuel–Kings as being not clearly Topic or Focus, which would be 27%–44%. He lists 281 examples as ‘thetic’ and 170 as unclear.

¹⁶ Khan and van der Merwe (2020, 361) point out that it is reasonable to assume that an intonational distinction existed even if we do not have access to it.

constituent for Focus a different signal from a fronted constituent for Topic.

But these signals are not alone. They come with an entailment in BH: placing a constituent in front of the verb means that a *wayyiqtol* verb cannot be used. It means that the functions signalled by a *wayyiqtol* verb are blocked. This consideration is vital in a small, closed system. Bickerton (1981, 90) points out the constraints of meaning in a closed system, and although his comments are about tense, mood, and aspect, they equally apply to any closed system, like *wayyiqtol* V–X order versus X–V orders:

We must note a particular characteristic of TMA [tense-mood-aspect] systems which, though seemingly obvious, has been ignored by virtually all work up to and including Comrie's (1976) influential study of aspect. ... What each marker of modality, tense, or aspect means will be largely determined by how many markers of these things there are in the system and by what each of the others mean.

The restrictions of a closed system affect meaning, not just for the structure itself but against the other structures with which it is in contrast. The functions of fronted constituents in Hebrew are morpho-syntactically restricted to being non-*wayyiqtol* or non-*weqatal*. These X–V sentences become a signal that expands the Topic signal—structurally, a fronted constituent without a Focus intonation—into a sentence-level structural signal, rather than simply being a signal for the fronted constituent. The fronted constituent blocks and breaks any continuation of a *wayyiqtol* or *weqatal*. Although a single constituent, it affects the whole sentence and becomes a signal for discourse functions of various kinds of discontinuities: temporal non-sequentiality,

backgrounding, and discourse discontinuity (see Hornkohl 2018, 45–51, for examples and discussion).

Khan and van der Merwe (2020, 349–50) agree that discourse pragmatics are the primary motivation for these kinds of non-focus, non-topic structures, stating: “We shall argue that subjective choices concerning discourse structure and organization are the ultimate motivations for using *thetic sentences*.¹⁷” They analyse such X–V sentences as ‘thetic’, a concept discussed further in the next section. But they also define *thetic sentences* notionally and not uniquely as a structure, saying that “thetic sentences may be expressed by constructions other than constituent fronting and have different contours” (2020, 361).

3.1.6. Fronting and Thetic Sentences

The discussion of *thetic sentences* is a contribution to Hebrew studies that is congruent to the concept of Background in discourse studies, although it comes from a different analysis of information structure and is broader.¹⁸ A *thetic sentence* ‘posits’ the whole predication without assuming a clear Theme–Rheme structure (also called Topic–Comment, meaning pre-supposed/established versus salient/non-established information). Prototypically, a *thetic sentence* answers a question like ‘What happened?’, where the whole predication that follows is new

¹⁷ Both Khan and van der Merwe (2020) and Atkinson (2021) link fronted non-focal fronted constituents to “thetic sentences.”

¹⁸ The idea of *thetic sentences* was first proposed in Linguistics by Sige-Yuki Kuroda (1972) and Hans-Jürgen Sasse (1987).

information and thus there is little expectation of Theme–Rheme information structure.

One may ask whether thetic sentences are driving the Hebrew word order or if, within Hebrew, the word order is signalling something else that happens to be broadly congruent with what one might call thetic. A point to remember is that the fronted Contextualisation (Topicalisation) breaks any chain of *wayyiqtol* clauses or *weqatal* clauses. In doing that, it is an iconic structure where the fronted constituent provides a discourse-level function of breaking some continuity that would otherwise have been implied by a *wayyiqtol* structure. This function of signalling discontinuity is acknowledged by Atkinson (2021, 119), who says that “the notion *discontinuity* correlates well with theticity, in that a new entity is introduced into the CG [i.e., common ground of shared understanding], or an inaccessible event which closes, transitions, or opens discourse units.”

We can start to answer our questions from §3.1.5 about what is driving X–V sentence orders and what the structure is signalling by looking at a few of the prototypical situations that would produce a fully salient thetic information structure. Consider (18) and (19):

- (18) (a) מֶה־נִּהְיָתָה
 ‘What happened?’
 (b) הַבֵּישׁ מוֹאָב
 ‘Moab is in shame’ [V–S] (Jer. 48.19–20)
- (19) (a) וַיֹּאמֶר מָה־הָיָה הַדָּבָר בְּנִי
 ‘And he said, “What happened, my son?”’
 (b) וַיַּעַן הַמְּבַשֵּׁר וַיֹּאמֶר
 ‘And the herald answered and said,’

- (c) נִס יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי פִלִּשְׁתִּים
 “‘Israel fled from the Philistines;’ [V–S]
- (d) וְגַם מַגֵּפָה גְדוֹלָה הָיְתָה בָּעָם
 ‘additionally, there was a great blow upon the people;’ [S–V]¹⁹
- (e) וְגַם-שְׁנֵי בְנֵיָךְ מָתוּ חֹפְנִי וּפִינְחָס
 ‘additionally, your two sons died, Hophni and Phineas,’ [S–V]
- (f) וְאַרְוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים נִלְקָחָה
 ‘and the ark of the Lord was taken.’” [S–V] (1 Sam. 4.16–17)

In the two examples above, an answer is given to a ‘What happened?’ question. Both answers could be called *thetic* from an information structure perspective, but structurally they use a V–S order.

These answers could also be called ‘event-central *thetic* sentences’ (Khan and van der Merwe 2020, 361; Sasse 1987, 554) as opposed to ‘entity-central’. Khan and van der Merwe (2020, 361) propose such an example after הִנֵּה in (20), but the context is problematic:

- (20) (a) מָה עָשִׂיתָה
 ‘What did you do?’
- (b) הִנֵּה-בָא אַבְנֵר אֵלַיךְ
 ‘Look, Abner came to you.’ [V–S]

¹⁹ The first clause answered ‘what happened’ with V–S order. The following three clauses all avoid thematic (‘sequential’) verbs by using X–V order. This becomes a list of unordered events rather than a BH narrative. See below for discussion on potential rhetorical effects.

- (c) לְמַה־זֶּה שִׁלַּחְתּוּ וַיֵּלֶךְ הַלּוֹדִי
‘Why is this that you sent him away and he went off?’
- (d) יָדַעְתָּ אֶת־אַבְנֵר בֶּן־נֵר
‘You [well] know_[qatal] Abner, son of Ner,’
- (e) כִּי לִפְתָּחַךְ בָּא
‘that to deceive you_[Goal,Focus] he came!’ (2 Sam. 3.24–25)

The context in (20) revolves around Abner. More importantly, the time of the הָנָה clause is past and we are seeing the most unmarked word order for a past/*qatal* reading, just like examples (18) and (19). An S–V order בא אבנר* in (20b) would have been normal for a participle and a present tense, but the morphologically ambiguous בא is clearly past *qatal*. In other words, it is likely the time of *qatal* versus *qotel* that is affecting the word order in (20b), and not the kind of theticity.

It appears that, elsewhere, fronted constituents are doing something other than, or in addition to, marking theticity.²⁰ If theticity were semantically defined according to information structure, then it would already be the signal. Consider (21):

- (21) (a) וַיֵּלְכוּ אֶל־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים
‘And they went to the city where the man of God was’
- (b) הָמָּה עֹלִים בְּמַעְלֵה הָעִיר
‘and they were going up to the city’ [S–V_{Participle}]
- (c) וְהָמָּה מְצָאוּ נְעָרוֹת יֹצְאוֹת לְשָׂאֵב מַיִם
‘and they_[S,Topic] found girls going out to draw water,’

²⁰ Despite the notional definition, Khan and van der Merwe (2020) focus on X–V structures, so that they are in broad agreement with this essay. Their thetic sentences + Topic sentences would equal sentences with a Contextualisation (Topicalisation) structure in my discussion.

(d) וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם

‘and they said to them,’

(e) הֲיֵשׁ בַּזֶּה הָרֹאֶה

“‘Is there a seer in this place?’” (1 Sam. 9.10–11)

The description in (21b) and (21c) is normal BH for marking simultaneity.²¹ Two ‘unnecessary’ pronouns were generated, apparently in order to block a *wayyiqtol* clause. Throughout the context, the same subject is being followed (Saul and his helper) without change or Focal saliency. As a follow-up sentence to what the participants were doing, it would normally be called a categorical sentence within thethetic/categorical dichotomy. But what is the ‘artificial Topic’ doing in (21b) and (21c)? It is not part of a sentence with equally presentative information structure. It actually has a fairly clear Topic and Comment differentiation that is associated with ‘categorical sentences’, so it is not athetic sentence in that sense. One might argue that it is a specialthetic by presenting a Background sentence that serves as a new setting for the following events. Khan and van der Merwe (2020, 379) call the sentence והמה מצאו ‘and they found’ in (21c) a “resultative situation.”

But it is simpler to recognise the simultaneity in time signalled by the discontinuity of the CC and lack of *wayyiqtol*.²² This

²¹ Fassberg (2019, 85): נושא פועל + נושא פועל ‘with a structure “subject–verb” + “subject–verb”’. For additional examples, see Gen. 29.9; 38.25; Judg. 15.14; 1 Sam. 7.10; 1 Kgs 1.14; Isa. 25.24; Job 1.16.

²² Contrast the participle + *wayyiqtol* in 1 Sam. 6.13: וּבֵית שָׁמֶשׁ קִצְרִים וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרוֹן ‘and BetShemesh [were] harvesting wheat in the valley and they lifted their eyes and saw the ark’. The participle presents the setting and the *wayyiqtol* advances the

is true whether in a past narrative or future description, as in the following example.

- (22) (a) הָנָה עוֹדֶיךָ מְדַבֶּרֶת שָׁם עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ
 ‘And then, you will be speaking there with the king’
 (b) וְאֲנִי אָבוֹא אַחֲרֶיךָ
 ‘and I will come after you’
 (c) וּמֵלֵאתִי אֶת־דְּבָרֶיךָ
 ‘and will confirm your words’ (1 Kgs 1.14)

It would not be helpful to talk about the simultaneous entrance of the prophet as a resultative situation. The relationship between the participle clause and the finite verb clause is the same in (22) and (21). In (22), the participle is describing an ongoing progressive imperfective situation in the future, then the prophet will enter at that moment and complete the discussion with the king. The simultaneity is signalled by the CC, which prevents the use of the foregrounding *weqatal*.²³

story with a foregrounded event. However, the *wayyiqtol* does not have the effect of ‘just then’ that comes with the discontinuity of the CC + *qatal*.

²³ This is described concisely by Fassberg (2019, 84, translation mine): “The storyline in the Bible advances through continuities of verbs that are connected by conversive-*waw*. The biblical story teller deviates from the continuity (*qatal*...) *wayyiqtol*... *wayyiqtol* and from the continuity (*yiqtol*...) *weqatal*... *weqatal* when he wishes to signal to the reader that this does not deal with a direct development in the story line. The sign for stopping the continuity is placing a word before the verb and the presentation of the verb without conversive-*waw*.”

3.1.7. Pragmatic Effects of Contextualising Constituents

Practically, the processing for communication follows a simple order. If a constituent is placed before a finite Verb, the author has provided a signal for pragmatic effects.²⁴ The audience is led to recognise and interpret a special signal. If there is a Focus intonation, it is interpreted as specially marked salient information. Without Focus intonation, the fronted constituent is a Topic/Contextualisation structure that simultaneously breaks any *wayyiqtol* chain. The signal would be easy to perceive, although its application would be multivalent.

There are many examples where a Focus interpretation is ruled out and yet an analysis as a prototypical Topic may not be readily apparent:

- (23) (a) וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת־חַוָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ
 ‘And the man knew Eve his wife_[S-V]’
 (b) וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד אֶת־קַיִן
 ‘and she conceived and gave birth to Cain’
 (c) וַתֹּאמֶר קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת־יְהוָה
 ‘and said, “I have acquired a man with the Lord.”’
 (Gen. 4.1)

The Subject הָאָדָם ‘the man’ is not an extended topic of this verse or the following verses, nor does this Subject provide any natural framework for these immediate verses. In terms of information structure, the whole sentence posits a new situation.²⁵ The

²⁴ Conjunctions are not included in this statement, as they precede the clause in their own special position.

²⁵ It would probably rightly be classed as *thetic* by Khan and van der Merwe (2020) and Atkinson (2021).

Subject and Object are equally re-established in this sentence, which serves as a setting or starting point for the story that follows. The Subject is not marked, salient information, so it is not a Focus in FG terms. But in what sense should האדם be called Topic? Why didn't the author use אֶת הָאָדָם אֶת הַיָּם אֶשְׂתּוֹ*, which would be more of a default for Hebrew narrative?

This appears to be an example where a Topic/CC is used to set off the whole clause, and where the pre-verbal Topic/CC prevents the thematic verb structure (*wayyiqtol*). Within BH, the marked constituent simultaneously breaks the continuity of the thematic verb system (sometimes called sequential or consecutive verbs).²⁶ The Topic/CC sets off the whole sentence with pragmatic marking, and iconically signals some sense of a break in continuity. Consider (24):

- (24) (a) וַיְהִי הַטֵּיל רוּחַ-גָּדוֹל אֶל-הַיָּם
 ‘And the Lord threw down_[S-V] a big wind to the sea’
 (b) וַיְהִי סֶעַר-גָּדוֹל בַּיָּם
 ‘and there was a big storm in the sea’
 (c) וְהָאֲנִיָּה חֲשָׁבָה לְהִשָּׁבֵר
 ‘and the boat planned_[S-V] to break apart’ (Jon. 1.4)

The text in (24) shows a similar problem to (23). The Subject comes before the Verb, but it does not make a transparent Topic for the following verses. It is not a Focus, either, since ‘throwing

²⁶ These verb categories of *wayyiqtol* in the past/realis/perfective and *weqatal* in the future/irrealis/imperfective are often called sequential verbs. However, they do not uniquely entail strict temporal sequentiality, nor do they induce their Tense-Mood-Aspect from a previous verb, so a more abstract term like *thematic* may be preferable as providing a term for unit structure and for foregrounding.

down a wind' is really the newest and most salient information in the story at this point. The sentence is not answering an implied question ('who threw down a wind?'), but is presenting the wind as a new development, a new setting or scene, but without using the normal *wayyiqtol* syntax (... וַיִּטֵּל יְהוָה *).

These examples, as well as hundreds more, lead to a recognition that a non-Focal pragmatic positioning can also mark the whole clause as a pragmatic signal for the larger discourse and not just for the constituent itself. For example, Rashi, one of the outstanding medieval commentators, suggested that the word order at Gen. 4.1 was used to mark a break in the timeline of the story and the conception (and maybe the birth) took place while the couple was still in Eden (see Rashi 1986, 68). Such a suggestion is possible because choosing a pragmatic function that uses fronting prevents the use of the most common narrative structure, *wayyiqtol* (the thematic past-tense verb). Thus, the pragmatic positioning of pieces of a Hebrew clause is directly linked to the verb system.

Hebrew is a language with an interesting information packaging strategy. For over 1,000 years, the language used two binary, finite verb systems: *qaṭal* (past-realis-perfective) versus *yiqtol* (future-irrealis-habitual) on the one hand and *wayyiqtol* (past-realis-perfective) versus *weqaṭal* (future-irrealis-imperfective) on the other hand, the latter being a 'thematic finite verb' system. The *wayyiqtol* thematic verb system provided a packaging structure in narrative and past contexts, and the *weqaṭal* provided a similar structural packaging in future contexts, volitional contexts,

and as continuing habitual sentences in the past.²⁷ The thematic verb system requires a V–S order. By contrast, the non-thematic system has an X–V order. This means that if an author wants to use a non-thematic verb and break a thematic sequence, he must use a pragmatic constituent between a conjunction and the verb. In other words, a Topic (CC) may be used to create a non-thematic sentence, as well as to mark a Topic constituent.

Such sentences may be used in multiple ways. In their most basic sense, they break the flow of the thematic sentences (*wayyiqtol* and *weqatal*). This structure is chosen to signal a break, and the break may be (a) a break in time (whether simultaneously or as a flashback); or (b) a break in structure (whether a unit boundary with a transitional setting or a parenthetical comment); or simply (c) a break for rhetorical-literary effect. Both (23) and (24) can be interpreted as unit boundaries in the discourse, as the story time advanced forward in each. Similar situations occur in the following examples.

- (25) (a) וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם
 ‘And it happened after these events and God tested Abraham_[S-V]’ (Gen. 22.1)

- (b) וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּנָּס הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־אַבְרָהָם*

The word order in (25a) is S–V, where the Subject does not appear to be a Focus as the most salient information, nor is it

²⁷ With a binary verbal system, it should be assumed that the description here is necessarily simplified. A binary tense-mood-aspect finite verb system must describe most of the distinctions in the world of communication, including time, modality, and aspect, with only two verb forms.

readily explained as a Topic. Rather, the whole sentence is set apart, and here it appears to be like a section heading that summarises the following story in 22:2–16. The V–S word order in (25b) would make use of the thematic verb system and would imply that this is the first foregrounded event that develops the story proper after the time setting ‘and it happened after these events’. But by using S–V order with a Topic/CC, the author was able to signal a discontinuity, setting the whole first sentence apart and presenting a summary of the whole story.

Such a summary sentence can be understood as one of many kinds of literary settings before the development of the story, as in (26):

- (26) (a) וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ
 ‘And the earth was empty chaos’
 (b) וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם
 ‘and darkness [was] on the surface of the deep water’
 (c) וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם
 ‘and God’s spirit was hovering over the water surface’
 (d) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר
 ‘and God said “Let there be light,”’
 (e) וַיְהִי־אוֹר
 ‘and there was light.’ (Gen. 1.2–3)

In (26), lines (a) through (c) set the stage for the main event in (d) and (e). The S–V order in (26a) avoids a thematic verb and avoids implying that this is the first main event of the narrative. The whole sentence becomes a setting for the story that follows. Likewise, the verbless clause and the participial clause in (b) and (c) continue a description of the background setting. They do not advance the events of the story, so they do not use the *wayyiqtol*

structure. We thus find a satisfying reading of the authorial choice of S–V order in (26a).

The example in (27) provides a similar case:

(27) וַיֹּסֶף הוֹרֵד מִצְרָיִם

‘And Joseph had been taken_[S–V] to Egypt’ (Gen. 39.1)

This verse returns the story in Genesis to Joseph and Egypt after a long, multi-generational hiatus in chapter 38. The S–V order might be called a Topic in order to return to discussing Joseph. However, it also blocks the thematic, *wayyiqtol* verb system and repeats the action that had already been narrated at Gen. 37.28 and 36. Therefore, the sentence as a whole marks a chronological reordering in the story, conveying a pluperfect sense to the audience.

In (28), we might try to explain the S–V word order as a Topic/CC in order to compare the sailors’ action and Jonah’s action.

(28) וַיֵּרֶד יוֹנָה אֶל-יַרְכָתִי הַסְפִּינָה וַיִּשְׁכַּב וַיֵּרָדֻם

‘And Jonah went down_[S–V] to the back of the ship and lay down and went into a deep sleep’ (Jon. 1.5b)

However, one should consider that Jonah went below and went to sleep before the storm and the actions of the sailors. The choice of Topic/CC structure, instead of *וַיֵּרֶד יוֹנָה** forces a non-thematic, non-*wayyiqtol* sentence structure and the whole sentence becomes a potential break in the timeline of the story. Here, the time most probably goes back to an earlier point in the story.

From the context around (29), we know that Jacob left with the livestock, along with Rachel, at a time while Laban was already away (Gen. 31.17, 20).

- (29) (a) וַיְנַהֵג אֶת־כָּל־מִקְנֵהוּ ... לְבֹא אֶל־יִצְחָק אָבִיו אֶרֶצָה כְּנָעַן
 ‘And he [Jacob] led all his livestock ... to Isaac his father in Canaan.’
 (b) וּלְבָן הָלַךְ לִגְזֹז אֶת־צֹאֲנוֹ
 ‘And Laban had gone_[S-V] to shear his sheep’
 (c) וַתִּגְנֹב רָחֵל אֶת־הַתְּרָפִים
 ‘and Rachel stole_[V-S] the house-gods.’ (Gen. 31.18–19)

It appears, then, that the Subject–Verb order וּלְבָן הָלַךְ in (29b) is not used as a Focus or Topic for ‘Laban’, but to avoid the implications of וַיֵּלֶךְ לְבָן* ‘and Laban went’. That thematic verb would normally have sounded as if Laban’s visit to his sheep was after Jacob and Rachel started their journey. But then Rachel could not have stolen the idols afterwards (וַתִּגְנֹב), because she had already left the homestead with Jacob. The S–V order וּלְבָן הָלַךְ provides a signal to the reader that a break occurred and the reader can immediately apply this to a prior time for Laban’s business trip.

3.1.8. Dramatic Pause as a Literary Effect

A remarkable string of S–V clauses appears in (30):

- (30) (a) הַבֹּקֶר אִוֵּר
 ‘The morning turned light_[S-V]’
 (b) וְהָאֲנָשִׁים שְׁלָחוּ הֵמָּה וְחֲמֹרֵיהֶם
 ‘and the men were sent off_[S-V], they²⁸ and their donkeys.’

²⁸ In FG, such an afterthought is called a Tail function.

- (c) הֵם יָצְאוּ אֶת־הָעִיר
 ‘They left the city_[S-V],’
- (d) לֹא הָרַחֵיקוּ
 ‘they didn’t go far,’
- (e) וַיֹּסֶף אָמַר לְאִשְׁרָאֵל עַל־בֵּיתוֹ
 ‘and Joseph said to his house-manager_[S-V]’ (Gen. 44.3–4)

The clause in (30a) has no conjunction and the pragmatically marked S–V sentence might be taken as a setting and a unit boundary. However, the second clause in (30b) is also S–V, a seemingly unnecessary word order since וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים ‘and the men were sent off’ would have fit normal thematic verbs and would have been expected. The next clause in (30c) is also S–V, also without conjunction, and with the S–V order created by what might be seen as an unnecessary pronoun, since הֵם יָצְאוּ אֶת־הָעִיר* would have worked fine. The next clause in (30d) is a negative, ineligible for a thematic *wayyiqṭol* verb, and without a conjunction. Finally, Joseph’s speech is introduced in (30e) with S–V instead of the usual וַיֹּאמֶר*. The lack of conjunction in (30a) and (30c) gives a sense of a double beginning, while the negative clause becomes a parenthetical comment. In parallel with this, the avoidance of thematic verbs, despite an appropriate context for them, does not allow the story to progress normally. All of the verb forms here ‘break’ the obvious forward implications of the real-time events. The literary scene appears to have stalled in literary time with all of the actions piled on top of each other. If that is the intended effect of the author, we may call this a rhetorical use of the pragmatically marked sentences. The story has paused with a break extended literarily and syntactically, even

though the real time has moved forward.²⁹ In literary terms, we could call this a kind of dramatic pause, perhaps leading to some kind of climax. If so, the suspense is held for considerable time, since it is thirty-two verses later, at Gen. 45.3, that Joseph dramatically reveals himself to his brothers.

The idea of a literary and syntactic pause can explain the example above in (24c). One would have expected the thematic form *וַיִּתְחַשֵּׁב הָאֲנִיָּה לְהִשָּׁבֵר* ‘and the boat planned to break apart’. However, the S–V order and the seemingly unnecessary CC (Topic) present a pragmatically marked sentence that breaks the forward movement of the unit and story, despite the real world advance in time. It rhetorically and syntactically pauses the story at a point of dramatic tension—a dramatic pause. The content, as well, leaves the outcome open-ended and on the verge of disaster.

3.1.9. Multiple Pragmatic Constituents in Hebrew

With multiple pragmatic constituents before the Verb, there is typically a scale from the more presupposed constituent(s), i.e., Topic/CC, to the most salient Focus. Consider (31).

(31) *כִּי־פָשַׁעִי אָנִי אָדָּע*

‘because my sins_[O,Topic] I myself_[S,Focus] would recognise’ (Ps. 51.5 [7])

The syntactic Object of the sentence is *פָּשַׁעִי* ‘my rebellious sins’. Its position in the sentence can be explained as linking to the sins mentioned in other verses, that is, as a Topic function that uses

²⁹ See, for example, Esth. 7.6–8 for a similar long string of non-thematic S–V sentences at a climax. Also, Gen. 19.23–25 in the description of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

established information to lead into the Comment and newer information of the sentence. Then, the explicit Subject ‘I’ is recognised as pragmatically fronted and as reinforced Focal information that is contra-expected by human nature.

To have both constituents before the Verb demands an explanation in an FG approach to a V–S language. In the example in (31), the first is a Topic/CC and the second a Focus.

(32) יהוה עז לעמו יתן

‘the Lord_[CC1] will give strength_[CC2] TO HIS PEOPLE_[Focus]’

(Ps. 29.11)³⁰

An FG approach provides for insightful reading. FG lets the audience know that there are three pragmatically marked constituents in (32), culminating in ‘to his people’. The Psalmist wrote this text to exhort the audience to remain with the people of the covenant, since that is where the blessings of their incomparable God rest. That purpose is reflected in the word order choices.

3.2. Application to Greek

In Greek there are structural, frequency, and complexity differences from Hebrew. Nevertheless, the principles of FG and marked information structure pay dividends for those reading Greek texts. We can illustrate how pragmatics in FG are helpful for Greek in similar ways, although many of the issues go beyond the scope of a simple article.

³⁰ עז ‘strength’ is also a word of praise from v. 1. There is a crescendo of saliency, leading from the less salient to the more salient. The final, most salient item would receive Focus intonation.

Several obvious differences from Hebrew can be stated at the start. While Hebrew builds texts with finite verb sentences, Greek uses much more subordination. Participial phrases hang on finite-verb sentences seemingly everywhere. Greek has a more granular connective system and uses many more particles in shaping and presenting a text. The verbal system in Greek is highly aspectual, requiring users to encode aspect in imperatives, subjunctives, optatives, infinitives, and participles, as well as with finite indicatives in the past.³¹ In word order, Greek has more flexibility, with words attracted phonologically to phrasal Heads (*enclitics*), phrases split and positioned differently (*hyperbaton*), flexible orders with Noun + Adjective, and more usage of pragmatic functions. However, those pragmatic functions of Topic and Focus provide much information to the practised audience.

3.2.1. Greek is V–S–O

Greek, like Hebrew, was a V–S language, as linguists working both within and outside of FG have concluded.³² Here is a summary from Runge (2010, 189–90) in support:

³¹ The binary verbal system in Hebrew was more time-mood orientated and had difficulty expressing aspect in comparison with Greek. See Hornkohl (2018); Buth (2019).

³² Helma Dik (1995, 12) uses a template P1–PØ–V–X. The P1 is pragmatic Topic, the PØ is Focus, followed by the syntactic template V–X. Note that the numbers on the P position are different from those used by Runge (2010), although they are referring to the same concepts.

Simon Dik has proposed that there are two different preverbal positions that may or may not be filled in any given clause, which he calls Position 1 (P1) and Position 2 (P2). ... The meaningful distinction between P1 and P2 is based largely upon whether the fronted information is presupposed or newly asserted, respectively.

One or more established (i.e., topical) elements of the clause may be placed in position P1. These P1 elements establish a new *frame of reference*,³³ creating an explicit mental grounding point for the clause that follows. Position P2, on the other hand, is where newly asserted or focal information is placed.

Dik's preverbal template is given by Runge (2010, 191) as "(P1) (P2) Verb X." To this we may add another comment from Runge (2010, 207):

Koiné Greek is a verb-prominent language, where the least-marked and most basic order of clause components is for the verb to be placed in the initial position. When other elements are placed in the initial position, such placement is motivated by some pragmatic reason.

3.2.2. Application to Greek Texts

The example in (33) provides a simple example to reinforce the claim that FG can help readers to recognise pragmatic signals and, thus, to enhance interpretation skills.

³³ Here Runge footnotes and acknowledges other terminology that covers the same kind of pragmatic function: 'topicalisation' (Lambrecht), 'point of departure' (Levinsohn), 'contextualising constituent' (Buth).

- (33) Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

‘In beginning_[Topic,X] was the Word, and the Word_[Topic,Sub] was with God, and the Word was God_[Focus,Comp].’ (John 1.1)

The whole sentence is technically new because it starts the book. However, the phrase ἐν ἀρχῇ ‘in beginning’ is clearly fronted before the Verb as a non-Focal constituent, and therefore as a Topic/CC. It turns out to be the most presupposed information in its clause and provides a framework for the rest of the sentence, even though it is not the larger topic of the sentence. The clause is a Setting, Background, and Thetic. That is why a name like ‘Contextualising Constituent’ for the fronted constituent is more transparent in English than ‘Topic’ (cf. Runge’s ‘Frame of reference’ above). Syntactically, ἐν ἀρχῇ ‘in beginning’ is an adverbial complement to the Verb, something labelled ‘X’ in many of the templates above. This X has been chosen to function as a broadly defined Topic or CC. In addition, the Subject, ὁ λόγος ‘the word’, follows the Verb and suggests that Greek is a real Verb–Subject–Object language. (Obviously, a sample of three clauses can only be an illustration, not a substantive argument.)

In the second clause, the phrase ὁ λόγος ‘the word’ can be interpreted as a Topic/CC that marks and establishes the Subject as the primary topical link of the clause to the sentence. The ‘word’ is not the new or most salient information of the clause and it is not to be read as Focus or with Focal intonation.

Finally, the phrase θεός ‘God’ is the new, salient information of the clause and it comes before the default V–S order, so it is clearly marked as Focus. Again, the order of the Subject supports the idea that this is a V–S–O language and not S–V–O. We can try

to paraphrase the pragmatic signals of the three clauses in English: ‘In the beginning the Word existed. (Let’s establish ‘the Word’ as our wider Topic): it was with God, and it was, in fact, God.’ Presumably, the intonation of the Greek sentence would reinforce this reading and make the differences between the CC and the Focus transparent. All of this can be processed rapidly and subliminally by an accomplished reader or audience.

These verses in John are uncharacteristically simple for Greek, but that makes them good for illustrating how FG allows a speaker to encode word order and for an audience to interpret the text with the clues of the word order. The next example in (34) illustrates both the application of these functions and potential ambiguities.

- (34) οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν. ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

‘This_[Topic,Sub] was in the beginning with God. All things_[Topic,Sub] through him_[Focus,X] came to be, and outside of him_[Topic,X] came to be nothing that came to be. In him_[Topic,X] was life_[Focus,Sub/Comp], and the life_[Topic,Sub] was the light of people, and the light_[Topic,Sub] shines in the darkness_[Focus,X] and the darkness_[Topic,Sub] did not comprehend it_[Focus?,Obj].’
(John 1.2–5)

Every clause makes use of pragmatic functions to help the audience follow the thoughts and grasp the points.

The first clause has a Topic οὗτος ‘this’ that restates items from the first verse, and the sentence re-establishes the starting base for the points that follow. The second clause may be read in

two ways. As a Topic, *πάντα* ‘all things’ would introduce items that are assumed to be part of the beginning. The salient, important point in the clause would be that they came into being through the Word.³⁴ That salient point ‘through him, the Word’ was placed before the Verb and given prominence as Focus as being contra-expected. A reader/listener could distinguish these Topic and Focus placements through the use of a Focus intonation. On the other hand, *πάντα* ‘all things’ is technically newer information than the pronoun ‘through it/him’ and it could have been intended for Focus intonation with ‘through it/him’ remaining as a Topic. Such an order of Focus–Topic is rare.³⁵ In the next clause, the phrase ‘outside of him’ serves as a Topic that reiterates the idea of the previous clause with default word order.

The Word continues to serve as a pragmatic Topic ‘in him’, and the clause introduces marked (i.e., fronted), salient information, ‘life’, as Focus before the Verb. This begins a chain of

³⁴ I have translated the pronoun as ‘him’, even though it refers to an abstract noun. That noun isn’t fully personalised until vv. 10–18.

³⁵ A fairly unambiguous example of Focus before marked Topic occurs at Gal. 3.2, ἐξ ἔργων νόμου τὸ πνεῦμα ἐλάβετε ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως; ‘Did you receive the spirit from works of law or from hearing of faith?’ The phrases ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ‘from works’ and ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως ‘from hearing of faith’ are the Focal question constituents. However, ‘from works_[Focus]’ comes before the Topical Object τὸ πνεῦμα ‘Spirit_[Object,Topic]’. See also John 5.46, εἰ γὰρ ἐπιστεύετε Μωϋσεῖ, ἐπιστεύετε ἂν ἐμοί· περὶ γὰρ ἐμοῦ ἐκεῖνος ἔγραψεν ‘for if you believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he_[Sub,Topic] wrote about me_[X,Focus]’. So *πάντα* is functionally ambiguous and could have been read with two intonations.

clauses in which any salient information becomes a marked Topic in the following clause.

One tricky point of reading comes in the last clause. There may be two marked Topics in the clause ‘and the darkness, it, did not comprehend’. Both ‘darkness’ and ‘it [the light]’ appear to be pre-supposed, established, topical constituents and may not receive any special reinforcement, therefore without focal intonation, leaving the negated Verb as most salient. So, although there are two pragmatic constituents before the Verb, there is no Focus constituent marked by word order. Alternatively, ‘it’ may be read with Focal intonation for a coming contrast with ‘him’ in verse 10.

4.0. Prospects for Further Application

Functional Grammar helps identify pragmatic markings in a language. Learning to identify pragmatic material in texts is a gateway to a wider world, whether in linguistic, literary, or biblical studies in particular.

Some researchers may want to work directly in the field of formalising grammar and knowledge about human language and the iterations that are found in Biblical Hebrew and ancient Greek. Many questions remain for formalising syntax. This is true for linguistics in general and for FG. Areas like the linguistic side of FG, word order, or discourse analysis and pragmatics in either Hebrew or Greek continue to develop. There is a continuum from studying how stories are constructed all the way down to the nuts and bolts of a language. Functional linguistics is poised to address that challenge. At the end of the day, these are tools that are used

for describing and understanding messages in both their structure and their meaning. Research and understanding in both Hebrew and Greek literatures are enhanced as one develops a sensitivity to the pragmatic signals and language choices that are woven into every sentence in a text.

5.0. Further Reading

5.1. General Introductions

1. Dik (1980, 1–24)
2. Anstey (2004)
3. Kees and MacKenzie (2015)
4. Kees and MacKenzie (2008)

5.2. Foundational Texts (Greek-Orientated)

1. Dik (1995)
2. Runge (2010)

5.3. Foundational Texts (Hebrew-Orientated)

1. Moshavi (2010)
2. Hornkohl (2018)
3. Atkinson (2021)

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