MODERN LINGUISTICS VERSUS TRADITIONAL HERMENEUTICS*

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An emerging field of study among evangelicals goes by the name modern linguistics. Its terminology, self-appraisal, approach to language analysis, and relationship to traditional exegesis furnish an introduction to a comparison with grammatical-historical hermeneutics. Indispensable to an analysis of modern linguistics is a grasping of its preunderstanding—its placing of the language of the Bible into the same category as all human languages and its integration with other secular disciplines—and the effect that preunderstanding has on its interpretation of the biblical text. Its conflicts with grammatical-historical principles include a questioning of the uniqueness of the biblical languages, its differing in the handling of lexical and grammatical elements of the text, its differing in regard to the importance of authorial intention, its lessening of precision in interpretation, its elevating of the primacy of discourse, its elevating of the impact of stylistic considerations, and a questioning of the feasibility of understanding the text in a literal way. Such contrasts mark the wide divergence of modern linguistics from traditional grammatical-historical interpretation.

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Introductory Facts about Modern Linguistics[1]

"Modern linguistics" is the chosen title for an emerging field of studies that has potential for radically affecting many long-held principles of biblical interpretation. Though it so recent that it does not yet have widespread-agreed-upon

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terminology, the discipline has adopted some terms that may not be familiar to most. "Phonology" refers to the elementary sounds of language (phonemes), "morphology" to the smallest meaningful units of language (morphemes), "syntax" to the formation of phrases and sentences from these smaller units, and "semantics" to the meanings of morphemes and words and various ways to construct larger units. "Discourse" is a structural portion of language longer than a sentence.

Modern linguists look upon their approach to language as indispensable to an interpretation of Scripture. They profess to trace a thought as it begins in the human mind to physiological abilities in making sounds to how these sounds become words, then sentences, paragraphs, and discourse. Following this sequence leads them to be strongly critical of what have been viewed as standard lexical works for NT study because of those works' neglect of discourse, sentences, and paragraphs. At the present stage in the development of modern linguistics, much uncertainty prevails among its adherents regarding definitions and procedures.

In certain respects this relatively new field agrees partially with traditional principles of biblical interpretation, usually called grammatical-historical hermeneutics. The areas of agreement include matters like divine inspiration, the importance of literary context, the need for careful study of words in their developing usage, and thorough understanding of grammatical relationships and historical-cultural backgrounds. Proponents of modern linguistics recognize the overlap of their studies with traditional exegesis, but feel that their new discipline has additional contributions to make to biblical understanding.

With these brief facts in mind, the remainder of this essay will deal with principles that differentiate modern linguistics from traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics.

THE PREUNDERSTANDING OF MODERN LINGUISTICS

Modern linguistic advocates accept the inevitability of the interpreter's bias affecting his interpretation of Scripture. Silva's words typify the position of others in expressing this:

> I take it as a valid assumption that the interpreter approaches any text with a multitude of experiences ('filed away' with some degree of coherence) that inform his or her understanding of that text. I further assume that it is impossible for the interpreter to evaluate the text without the point of reference provided by those presuppositions. But I believe just as strongly that the interpreter may *transcend*, though not eliminate, that point of reference. This can be done not by assuming that we can set aside our presuppositions in the interest of objectivity, but rather by a conscious *use* of them. The moment we look at a text we contextualize it, but a self-awareness of that fact opens up

the possibility of modifying our point of reference in the light of contradictory data.[2]

He even goes so far as to call a quest for objectivity in interpretation a hindrance to good exegesis: "The (usually implicit) claim that proper exegesis may be done, or even can only be done, if one avoids commitments to broader issues seems to me not only to be a delusion, but to create an obstacle for interpretation."[3]

      Likewise, Cotterell and Turner reject the possibility of objective exegesis when they write, "In fact, the criticism goes, the Cartesian or Baconian ideal of 'objective' exegesis, an exegesis that is unaffected by the world of the analyst, is unattainable. Every attempt to define an author's intended meaning actually only discovers a meaning which is somehow related to 'meaning-for-me'."[4] They later add, "All that we can do is to infer the meaning, and that will in some measure be affected by our present understanding of our world."[5]

      This provision for preunderstanding contrasts distinctly with the grammatical-historical emphasis on maintaining objectivity in approaching the text of Scripture. In representing traditional hermeneutics, Terry has written,

> In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make a discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first readers. . . . Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures ought to teach. . . . All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.[6]

The fact that the goal of complete objectivity may never be reached does not relieve the interpreter of aiming for that goal. If an interpreter accepts his own preunderstanding as a starting point in exegesis, his bias will inevitably find a place in his conclusions about a passage's meaning. If, on the other hand, he seeks to repress any personal expectations regarding what he will find in the passage and uses sound hermeneutical principles, he can make great progress toward attaining that goal of objectivity. That will allow the passage to speak for itself rather than having its meaning colored by the interpreter's bias.

      Two types of preunderstanding have great impact on the hermeneutics of modern linguistics. One is the assumption that the language of the Bible will bear

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[2]Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 148.

[3]Ibid., 158.

[4]P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989) 59.

[5]Ibid., 68.

[6]M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 595.

all the characteristics of human language in general as propounded by modern linguistic study. The other is that the hermeneutics of modern linguistics must be integrated with human discoveries in other secular fields. The following description will illustrate how these two presuppositions work their way into much of modern-linguistic interpretation of Scripture.

Human Language and the Language of the Bible

Linguistic theory assumes many things regarding human language and through further anachronistic assumptions puts the language of the Bible into the same categories of usage as modern languages that have thus far been analyzed. Nida, for example, states the following:

> The fact that language in discourse is approximately fifty percent redundant, whether on the phonological, syntactic, or semantic levels is important, and this helps one to realize why verbal communication cannot be one hundred percent efficient. Such a measure of redundancy is essential if verbal communication is to overcome physical and psychological 'noise.'[7]

Even if someone accepts Nida's statistic about redundancy as accurate—and this is open to question—how can he be assured that the same was true in ancient times when human memories were more highly developed and other different conditions existed? Even fellow linguist Silva offers a precaution about such an anachronistic assumption.[8] Furthermore, even if the same linguistic principles are applicable to ancient languages, who would dare to say that words written by divine inspiration would show the same redundancy that allegedly characterizes modern communication? To be sure, God used normal human language when He inspired the Bible, but the ultimately divine origin of that language certainly puts it into a unique category.

Yet modern linguistics proceeds under the assumption that biblical interpretation should fully endorse and utilize the newly developed principles delineated by its system. Even Silva, in spite of his word of caution about doing such a thing, seems fully supportive of that anachronistic type of reasoning:

> Moreover, we should keep in mind that, while we have no access to the spoken form of many ancient languages (including of course Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek), *general* linguistics seeks to formulate principles and rules that are characteristics of human language as such, not necessarily those that belong exclusively to specific languages. Therefore, many of the results arising from modern linguistic research are

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[7]E. A. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 91/1 (March 1972):74.

[8]Silva, *Biblical Words* 125.

applicable even to communities in the past for which a spoken form is not extant.[9]

Modern linguistic theories about the relationship of contemporary human language in general to language of the Bible is a significant preunderstanding that noticeably impacts principles of biblical interpretation.

Integration of Modern Linguistics with Other Secular Disciplines

Wrong views of general revelation have distorted biblical hermeneutics through attempts to integrate biblical hermeneutics with human discoveries in various secular fields.[10] The same problem arises in trying to integrate modern linguistics with biblical hermeneutics, because modern linguistics draws upon several secular fields of knowledge in building its own system of analyzing human language. Black has listed some of these: "Linguistics is not, of course, wholly autonomous. It must draw upon such sciences as physiology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology for certain basic concepts and data."[11] He later adds philosophy to the list of integrated fields: "What language is and how it functions are also important philosophical concerns."[12] The integration of these with modern linguistics, which in turn is integrated with biblical hermeneutics, amounts to a formidable preunderstanding that drastically affects biblical interpretation not only in the direction of humanly derived linguistic principles, but also in the direction of various humanly derived principles in the other secular fields of specialization.

Without endorsing a particular psychological theory, Nida writes, "There is no generally recognized psychological theory which is adequate to explain all that is involved in language acquisition, competence, and performance, but it is quite clear that many universal features of language point to a number of what may be called 'predispositions' of mental activity and structure."[13] Through linguistic theory, can linguists actually understand the human mind and its functioning as Nida asserts? And if so, what effect does that have on interpretation of a divinely inspired book whose human authors had minds supernaturally impacted by the Holy Spirit?

Linguistics is closely related to anthropology, as Black notes, "Anthropologists and linguists have long enjoyed close ties with each other, especially in the United States."[14] Do anthropological theories of the present day tell us anything reliable about how man operated in ancient times? And if so, how does that help our understanding of the Bible at the time when God was granting direct revelation to

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[9]Moisés Silva, "God, Language and Scripture," in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. M. Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 223.

[10]See Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 113-40, for further elaboration on this point.

[11]D. A. Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek: A Survey of Basic Concepts and Applications*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 5.

[12]Ibid., 19.

[13]Nida, "Implications" 77.

[14]Black, *Linguistics* 18.

writers of Scripture? Do current anthropologists agree with one another in their writings? Do those writings agree with what God says about man? Answers to those questions raise serious doubts about the practice of integration.

The Effect of Preunderstanding

The doubts of Cotterell and Turner that interpreters can ever reach a point of certainty regarding authorial intentions of biblical writers has already been noted.[15] They later add, "The original meaning is hidden from us, and we have no way of resurrecting it. . . . All that we can do is to infer the meaning, and that will in some measure be affected by our present understanding of our world."[16] Carrying the point a bit further,

> Rather, awareness of the problem should generate the appropriate caution, both in respect of method and in the degree of certainty we attach to our 'conclusions'. We need fully to recognize that *our* reading of the letter to Philemon (or whatever), however certain we may feel it is what Paul meant, *is actually only a hypothesis*—our *hypothesis—about the discourse meaning.*[17]

With the approach of modern linguistics, the best an interpreter can hope for is his own subjectively conceived impression of what the biblical text meant in its original setting. That prospect obliterates the possibility of deriving propositional truth from Scripture. Whatever one comes up with will be distinctly colored by what his preunderstanding has read into the text. It will not be divinely revealed meaning with absolute doctrinal implications. That, of course, is quite the opposite of the results yielded by grammatical-historical interpretation.

Traditional hermeneutics is void of such sweeping statements of uncertainty as those coming from modern linguistics. Terry has written,

> [I]t is of fundamental importance that all formal statements of biblical doctrine, and the exposition, elaboration, or defence of the same, be made in accordance with correct hermeneutical principles. The systematic expounder of Scripture doctrine is expected to set forth, in clear outline and well-defined terms, such teachings as have certain warrant in the word of God. He must not import into the text of Scripture the ideas of later times, or build upon any words or passages a dogma which they do not legitimately teach. . . . [N]o man has a right to foist into his expositions of Scripture his own dogmatic conceptions, or those of others, and then insist that these are an essential part of divine revelation. Only that which is clearly read therein, or legitimately proved thereby, can be properly held as scriptural doctrine.[18]

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[15]See quotation at n. 4 above.

[16]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* 68.

[17] Ibid., 70.

[18]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 583-84.

Incorporation of preunderstanding into the interpretive process directly violates the fundamental tenets of grammatical-historical interpretation and its goal of discerning the meaning of the text as intended by the author and as understood by the original readers.

CONFLICTS WITH GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL PRINCIPLES

Aside from the conflict with traditional interpretation at its starting point—i.e., the foundational level of preunderstanding—modern linguistics alters other longstanding principles in specific areas.

Questions about the Uniqueness of the Biblical Languages

The Traditional View. Granting that the Bible results from a combination of divine and human elements, traditional grammatical-historical principles have given due consideration to the divine side of inspiration. Terry has expressed that consideration thus:

> [W]e conceive that the language and style of a writer may be mightily affected by divine influences brought to bear upon his soul. Such influences would produce important effects in his thoughts and his words. To affirm, with some, that God supplied the thoughts or ideas of Scripture, but left the writers perfectly free in their choice of words, tends to confuse the subject, for it appears that the inspired penmen were as free and independent in searching for facts and arranging them in orderly narrative as they were in the choice of words. (Luke i, 3.) It seems better, therefore to understand that, by the inspiring impulse from God, all the faculties of the human agent were mightily quickened, and, as a consequence, his thoughts, his emotions, his style, and even his words, were affected. In this sense only we affirm the doctrine of verbal inspiration. We have seen above, that *form* and *style* are often essential elements of an organic whole, and to attempt to give the sentiment, without the form, of some compositions, is to rob them of their very substance and life.[19]

Terry observes that inspiration impacted the form, style, and words of Scripture so that the result is not just another form of human communication. He sees the biblical use of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek not as an "accident of history, but a particular providence, grounded in highest wisdom."[20] He also notes the special suitability of the biblical languages for conveying divine revelation to the human race.[21] By contrast, modern-linguistic advocates see nothing special about the languages of the

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[19]Ibid., 144.

[20]Ibid., 128.

[21]Ibid., 105-6, 127.

Bible and proceed to analyze biblical writings the same way they analyze an exclusively human communication.

The Modern Linguistic View. Silva represents the linguists in writing, "At the most fundamental level, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic share all the features that constitute them, quite simply, as human languages."[22] Elsewhere he is critical of those who grant special consideration to divine inspiration: "One common way of overemphasizing the biblical languages is by romanticizing them, by giving the impression that Greek and Hebrew have a unique (and almost divine?) status."[23] Black joins Silva in this perspective:

> Linguists reject the notion that any one language can be more expressive than all other languages, an opinion incorrectly held by many teachers of New Testament Greek. God has undoubtedly conferred special honor upon Greek as the language chosen for the inscripturation of the New Testament, but Greek is not inherently superior to the other languages of the world. At present, both linguists and Bible translators agree that any language can express whatever ideas its speakers are capable of having, and that a language can and does expand and change to fit new needs or ideas those speakers may have.[24]

This normalization of the biblical languages brings the proposal that biblical languages be studied in the same way as foreign languages are studied in modern times: "By concentrated approaches to the total structure of a language and with emphasis upon the distinctive features of language rather than on the subordinate mass of details, students have gained remarkable facility in modern languages. There is absolutely no reason why the biblical languages cannot be equally well taught, but in so many instances they are not."[25] Yet anyone who learns to speak a foreign language by the method thus prescribed realizes that he/she has no depth of understanding of vocabulary and grammar that would permit a close scrutiny of that language. Such a superficial knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic renders fruitless efforts to probe the meaning intended by the author and understood by the first readers.

The Effect on Bible Translation. Modern linguists' view of the biblical languages directly impacts their translation philosophy. It directs their attention away from divine inspiration of the thoughts and words to the contemporary readers of the translation: "[A]ny legitimate analysis of the adequacy of a translation must

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[22]Silva, "God, Language" 232.

[23]Moisés Silva, "Let's Be Logical," in *An Introduction to Hermeneutics*, eds. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 52.

[24]Black, *Linguistics* 17-18.

[25]Nida, "Implications" 87.

accept as a *primary* criterion of correctness the manner in which such a translation is understood by the majority of persons for whom it is designed."[26] It directs attention away from verbal inspiration, as Black reflects in these words: "One of the benefits of semantic classification is that the translator is liberated from the burden of always having to find nouns to translate nouns, verbs for verbs, and so on. He recognizes that while the semantic classes are universal, the parts of speech each language uses for surface expression are variable."[27]

Silva speaks of two types of translations: "The most fundamental difference, however, is that which pertains to philosophy of translation. We often speak of translations as being 'literal' or 'free.' More precisely some translations aim at representing the *form* of the original as closely as possible (without, however, doing violence to English grammar) while others, especially those influenced by linguistics, do not."[28] He then acknowledges the preference of linguists: "The principle of dynamic equivalence is widely favored by professional linguists, and so it has become common to denounce versions such as the NASB as linguistically naive and inadequate. From the other side, it is just as common to hear complaints that the dynamic-equivalence [i.e., free-translation] approach reflects a low view of the authority of Scripture."[29]

Modern linguists have no interest in approximating the original languages of Scripture as closely as possible when they translate to a different language. Though this may not reflect directly their stated view of inspiration, it does reflect their view that the languages of the Bible are no different from any other language that has ever been spoken or written. It reflects their persuasion that regular linguistic rules can apply to interpreting the Bible, with no special consideration being given to the divine input in the inspiration process.

Lexicography

The de-emphasis of diachronics. A pronounced tendency of modern linguistics is to downplay the importance of diachronics. Cotterell and Turner exemplify this tendency:

> The history of a word (a *diachronic* study of its use) may explain *how* a word came to be used with some particular sense at a specified time, but in order to find out *what* a lexeme means at that particular time we have only to look at the contemporary *usage*. The state of a language, and of its lexical stock, can be understood entirely by direct observation of usage at the time in question (synchronous study). We no more need to know the *history* of the language, or of its lexical stock, to understand the sense of utterances today,

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[26]Ibid., 88 [emphasis added].

[27]Black, *Linguistics* 129.

[28]Silva, "God, Language" 274.

[29]Ibid., 275.

than we need to know precisely what moves have been made in a game of chess in order to understand the state of the game and its potentialities now.[30]

Nida echoes the same opinion: "Etymologies, whether arrived at by historical documentation or by comparative analysis, are all very interesting and may provide significant clues to meaning, but they are no guarantee whatsoever that the historical influence is a factor in the people's actual use of such linguistic units."[31] Silva supports this opinion: "This whole discussion is of the greatest relevance for biblical studies. We must accept the obvious fact that the speakers of a language simply know next to nothing about its development; and this certainly was the case with the writers and immediate readers of Scripture two millennia ago."[32] Cotterell and Turner even speak of the danger of diachronic study: "Appeal to etymology, and to word formation, is therefore always dangerous. Even if a word did originally mean what etymology and word formation suggest, there is *no guarantee whatever* that the word has not changed meaning by the time a particular biblical writer comes to use it."[33]

Silva quotes Sausure with apparent favor toward the latter's endorsement of the exclusive use of synchronics: "[T]he linguist who wishes to understand a state must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony. He can enter the mind of speakers only by completely suppressing the past. The intervention of history can only falsify his judgment."[34]

Modern linguists have little if any interest in the historical backgrounds of words. They argue that such history is absent from the immediate consciousness of speakers and writers and therefore has little or no contribution to understanding meaning. Traditional grammatical-historical interpretation, however, sees such etymological input as of great value. Terry writes, "To understand . . . the language of a speaker or writer, it is necessary, first of all to know the meaning of his words. The interpreter especially, needs to keep in mind the difference, so frequently apparent, between the primitive signification of a word and that which it subsequently obtains. We first naturally inquire after the original meaning of a word, or what is commonly called etymology."[35]

The modern linguist admits that such a history is interesting, but insists that the history was not a part of the direct consciousness of the biblical writer. To this, grammatical-historical hermeneutics would respond that it did not need to be part of

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[30]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 132.

[31]Nida, "Implications" 85.

[32]Silva, *Biblical Words* 38.

[33]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 132.

[34]Saussure, cited by Silva, *Biblical Words* 36.

[35]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 175.

his direct awareness to be relevant. The writer belonged to a culture in which this kind of awareness was intuitive, an intuition that the modern interpreter lacks. To atone for that missing intuition, an interpreter must reconstruct the history in order to appreciate what was subconsciously available for an ancient culture and therefore an implied element in his usage of a given word. This is the only way modern man has to "get into the minds" of the ancients and so better understand their intentions in the choice of words. Without knowing how word meanings have developed, the understanding of an exegete is impoverished.

An illustration of the difference in approaches to diachronics relates to the Greek noun *ekklēsia*. Terry devotes over a page to discussing the historical background and make-up of the word along with its usage in various NT contexts—in other words both diachronics and synchronics.[36] Cotterell and Turner, on the other hand, spend almost two pages telling why Barr disallowed the relevance of diachronics in determining what *ekklēsia* means in any given context.[37] Their final paragraph closes with their approval of the way "Barr mercilessly elucidates the etymologizing and related errors of a panoply of scholars."[38]

The traditional method is, of course, just as interested in synchronics as is the modern linguist, but not in the exclusive or near-exclusive use of synchronics. Leaving diachronics out of the interpretive process can lead only to an incomplete understanding of what is written.

Words versus concepts.   Another pronounced tendency of modern-linguistic lexicography is to emphasize that a word cannot denote a concept. Only sentences and larger units of literature can specify concepts. In speaking of the *TDNT* article on *agapaō* and its failure to limit itself to the *lexical* concept of love instead of including the broader notion of the concept of love, Cotterell and Turner observe, "One suspects that the reason for this lack is the failure adequately to distinguish between words and concepts, and a resultant tendency to use the terms interchangeably."[39]

The area of words/concepts is where modern linguists are critical of most established reference works dealing with lexical matters for this reason: those tools fail to distinguish between words and concepts. Cotterell and Turner broaden their criticism to include the whole of *TDNT* when they say, "It cannot be said there is much consensus as to the precise nature of the relations between words, senses, concepts and *things-in-the-world*. But that does not excuse Kittel's repeated failure

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[36]Ibid., 176-77.

[37]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 114-15.

[38]Ibid., 115.

[39]Ibid., 119.

to distinguish them. . . ."[40] Silva joins this line of critcism in naming *TDNT*,[41] Cremer's *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*,[42] and Bauer's *Lexicon* (BAGD).[43] Black extends the criticism to include other lexical tools that "arrange their material alphabetically according to individual words."[44]

Such a negative appraisal of standard lexical tools differs substantially from the perspective of traditional hermeneutics, which values such tools very highly. Speaking of similar works coming from the nineteenth century, Terry calls parts of Cremer's work "a very excellent treatment" and says Wilson's *Syntax and Synonymes of the Greek Testament* (London, 1864) "is well worthy of consultation."[45] Traditional approaches recognize that through extensive usage in various contexts, some words do equate to concepts and so would dispute the claims of modern linguistics that words and concepts must be distinct from each other.

Synonyms. Representing traditional grammatical-historical principles, Terry offers the following in introducing a section on synonyms:

> The biblical interpreter needs discernment and skill to determine the nice distinctions and shades of meaning attaching to Hebrew and Greek synonymes. Often the exact point and pith of a passage will be missed by failing to make the proper discrimination between synonymous expressions. There are, for instance, eleven different Hebrew words used in the Old Testament for *kindling a fire*, or *setting on fire*, and seven Greek words used in the New Testament for *prayer*; and yet a careful study of these several terms will show that they all vary somewhat in signification, and serve to set forth so many different shades of thought and meaning.[46]

The importance of studying synonyms and allowing for their shades of meaning has long been a part of conservative evangelical interpretation.

Yet this is an area where modern linguistics differs from traditional interpretation more than any other. Silva, for instance, observes,

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[40]Ibid., 118.

[41]Silva, *Biblical Words* 24-25.

[42]Ibid., 27.

[43]Ibid., 172-77. Walter Bauer's *Lexicon* is best known to modern students as *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. by Frederick William Danker, previous English editions by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000).

[44]Black, *Linguistics* 123.

[45]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 202 n. 1.

[46]Ibid., 191-92. Silva acknowledges that Terry was "the standard hermeneutical manual" at the turn of the twentieth century (Silva, *Biblical Words* 123).

In Philippians 1:3-4, for example, Paul appears to include the giving of thanks (not only the petitions) under *deēsis*; that is, in this particular context *proseuchē* could have been substituted without any loss of meaning. Similarly, we could argue that in Philippians 4:6, where both of these terms are used, no special distinction is intended; rather, Paul is probably exploiting their similarity to strengthen the stylistic force of his exhortation.[47]

Such an observation is shocking to those who hold to verbal inspiration of Scripture. To substitute one word for another is to tamper with the words God used in inspiring the author. It is true that one may not press for distinctions in meaning of synonyms when synonyms occur in widely separated contexts, but to say that a substitution can be made "without any loss of meaning" veers off in the direction of dynamic inspiration rather than verbal inspiration. To go further and say the author intended no special distinction when synonyms are used side by side as in Phil 4:6 in the same context, contradicts traditional principles. Once that course is taken, no limit to other possible substitutions and verbal equations is in sight.

Black's position is essentially the same as Silva's. He writes, "In each instance [i.e., of the use of synonyms], the principle of *semantic neutralization* informs us that any of the terms in these pairs may be used interchangeably without any significant difference in meaning, depending upon the purpose of the biblical author."[48] Among such synonyms he includes pairs such as *agapaō* and *phileō* ("I love") and *oida* and *ginōskō* ("I know"). By contrast, Terry makes a major point of distinguishing the meanings of each of these two pairs.[49]

Silva supports the modern-linguistic equating of the meanings of such synonyms as these:

One question that arises generally in the Pauline corpus, but pointedly in Philippians, is whether the apostle intends clear semantic distinctions when similar terms are grouped together. Many commentators, persuaded that Paul could not be guilty of redundancy, look for these distinctions and emphasize them. . . . Linguists, drawing on the work of communication engineers, have long recognized that redundancy is a built-in feature of every language and that it aids, rather than hinders the process of communication.[50]

He departs from a traditional approach to the text in light of "communication engineers" who side with the recognized tendency of human speech and writing toward redundancy. In other words, inspired Scripture has no more precision than everyday human communication. Here preunderstanding reads into biblical interpretation what is known about other forms of communication. In other words,

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[47]Silva, "God, Language" 249.

[48]Black, *Linguistics* 126.

[49]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 200-201.

[50]Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 12.

when God inspired the Word, He did so through incorporating human imprecision that requires the repetition of the same generalized thought two or more times. This is one of the qualifications he makes in reference to the time-honored works of Trench and Terry in their discussions of synonyms.[51]

This philosophy of substituting one word for another without changing the meaning of a sentence in the least bit lies behind the strong endorsement of Louw's and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2d ed., 2 vols. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1989]). Here is a work that modern linguists see as offering alternatives to various words that Scripture does not distinguish from one another even when used together in the same context.

Grammar

For modern linguists, the theory of substitution without change of meaning carries over into the area of grammar. Nida typifies the approach:

> One of the severe handicaps to objective analysis of grammatical structures has been the mistaken concept that there is something so uniquely individual about the grammatical structure of each language and so intimately connected with the entire thought processes of the speakers of such a language, that one cannot really comprehend the meaning of a message without being immersed in the syntactic formulations.[52]

He adds, "The requirement that language provide for novelty means that conceptual determinism based on syntactic forms is basically false."[53] In other words, the biblical languages have nothing unique to say, based on their syntactical relationships. Divine inspiration did nothing for the Bible's message that cannot be done by human imitation. Ultimately, that is the position of modern linguistics.

Black exemplifies the same posture as Nida: "The use of transformations, for example, permits us to change the overt grammatical structure of an expression in a variety of ways without materially altering the meaning."[54] Silva does the same: "One specific syntactical question that requires comment is that of tense (or better, *aspectual*) distinctions. The viewpoint adopted in this commentary is that the significance of such distinctions for biblical interpretation has been greatly overestimated by most commentators, particularly conservative writers."[55] As Silva's statements imply, that represents a substantial departure from traditional hermeneutics.

He shows a bit more caution elsewhere:

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[51]Silva, *Biblical Words* 123.

[52]Nida, "Implications" 83.

[53]Ibid., 84.

[54]Black, *Linguistics* 140.

[55]Silva, *Philippians* 13.

We would go too far if we were to argue that a writer's decision between, say, an aorist and a present subjunctive never reflects a stylistic decision that may be of some interest to the interpreter. But we can feel confident that no reasonable writer would seek to express a major point by leaning on a subtle grammatical distinction—especially if it is a point not otherwise clear from the whole context (and if it *is* clear from the context, then the grammatical subtlety plays at best a secondary role in exegesis).[56]

Yet even here, he reflects the unimportance placed upon grammatical relationships found in inspired Scripture. He places himself at the opposite pole from Terry, a foremost spokesman for traditional grammatical-historical interpretation. Terry has written,

The significance of the presence or the absence of the article has often much to do with the meaning of a passage. . . . The position of words and clauses, and peculiarities of grammatical structure, may often serve to emphasize important thoughts and statements. The special usage of the genitive, the dative, or the accusative case, or of the active, middle, or passive voice, often conveys a notable significance. The same is also true of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositions. These serve to indicate peculiar shades of meaning and delicate and suggestive relations of words and sentences, without a nice apprehension of which the real sense of a passage may be lost to the reader.[57]

That is grammatical-historical interpretation in the traditional sense.

Authorial Intention

Much that was said above under the heading "The Preunderstanding of Modern Linguistics" applies to the discussion of "Authorial Intention." Barr observes, "Today it is increasingly realized that a written document does not necessarily give access to the intentions of the author and, correspondingly, cannot necessarily be interpreted on the basis of these intentions. A document takes on a sort of life of its own and has its own meaning, created and expressed by its own wording and its own shape."[58] He argues that readers must take into account not only what is written, but also what is only implied. That, he says, opens the door for a wide variety of understandings which may or may not represent authorial intention. From this uncertainty he reasons that a quest for authorial intention is fruitless and that literal interpretation leads to different interpretations for different people.

From a slightly different perspective, Cotterell and Turner see merit in seeking authorial intention up to a certain point, but beyond that point concede that an interpreter is never able to divorce his own circumstances from the authorial

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[56]Silva, "God, Language" 261.

[57]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 208. Regarding *en huiō* in Heb 1:2, Silva has written, "In fact, the presence or absence of the article here does not alter the meaning of the clause" (Silva, "Let's Be Logical" 62). That statement is the opposite of Terry's points about grammatical precision.

[58]James Barr, "Literality," *Faith and Philosophy* 6/4 (October 1989):423.

intention he is seeking. They write,

> However, when we come to the study of language as it is actually used, we find a second category of meaning intruding itself: connotative meaning. Here we move away from objectivity to subjectivity, away from cold grammar to flesh-and-blood utterances. Words are not, in fact, the neutral entities we might intuitively assume them to be. . . . We know the word 'father' and we know also our own experience of 'father': a kindly figure, a bullying figure, an absent figure, a suffering figure or whatever. We also have some experience of other people's fathers, and we have our attempt to formalize this diverse experience. Inevitably then the word 'father' carries for each individual a connotation.[59]

That "connotative meaning" for Cotterell and Turner is the obstacle that hides a pure understanding of authorial intention. They observe that getting back to the author's intended meaning "is not only practically impossible: it is also theoretically impossible, as modern hermeneutical philosophers from Schleiermacher and Gadamer onwards have insisted."[60] This is where subjectivity intervenes with the interpreter unable to separate a text's significance for himself from what the author intended. Note the definition of interpretation offered by Cotterell and Turner: "the bringing to expression of the interpreter's understanding of the significance for his own world of the discourse meaning of the text."[61] They include "the interpreter's understanding of the significance for his own world" as a part of interpretation, which clearly confuses application with interpretation.[62]

Earlier discussion has cited Terry's caution against allowing any contemporary considerations, whether doctrinal or practical, to infringe on the meaning intended by the author and comprehended by the original readers.[63]

Precision

Modern linguistics is more pessimistic about success in the interpretive task than traditional hermeneutics. In writings of its proponents, one finds repeated statements about uncertainty in grasping the intention of the communicator. In a chapter entitled "Determining Meaning," Silva writes about his approach creating greater uncertainty: "The title of this chapter . . . is . . . likely to raise unrealistic expectations, as though mastery of the contents of this book meant the end of uncertainty in the study of words. The truth of the matter is that, at least in some

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[59]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 46.

[60]Ibid., 58.

[61]Ibid., 72.

[62]Brian A. Shealy shows the importance of distinguishing application from interpretation in Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 165-94.

[63]See quotation cited by n. 18 above.

cases, our discussion will lead to *greater* uncertainty. . . *"*[64] God's purpose in granting biblical revelation to the human race was to make His will known, not to create uncertainty among the recipients of His revelation.

The tone of uncertainty is a far cry from the optimism of traditional hermeneutics about man's ability to receive communication accurately. Years ago Stuart penned these words:

> I venture . . . to aver that all men are, and ever have been, in reality, good and true interpreters of each other's language. Has any part of our race, in full possession of human faculties, ever failed to understand what others said to them, and to understand it truly? Or to make themselves understood by others, when they have in their communications kept within the circle of their own knowledge? Surely none. Interpretation, then, in its basis or fundamental principles is a native art, if I may so speak. It is coeval with the power of uttering words. It is, of course, a universal art; it is common to all nations, barbarous as well as civilized.[65]

In continuing, Stuart indicates that the ability to communicate and to receive communication is not dependent on acquired skill for discovering and developing principles of communication. In the case of modern linguistics, attempts to discover and develop principles of communication have clouded human understanding of God's Word rather than increasing it.

Plagued with uncertainties about meaning, modern linguistics has the related problem of assuming imprecision in biblical communication, as indicated in the following words:

> It is, perhaps, a danger of exegesis that we tend to demand a precision in the use of words which our everyday experience should tell us is not to be expected, and to find differences in meaning where none is demonstrably intended. A case in point is John 21 and the alternation between two Greek words for 'love' in Jesus' questioning of Peter. It is probable that we are right in seeing significance in the three-fold question in vv. 15-17, less probable, however, that the change in *word* is significant.[66]

Terry's discussion of John 21 contrasts sharply with this opinion. He goes to great lengths to discuss distinctions in meaning not only between the two words for "love," but also three other pairs of synonyms that appear in the three verses—i.e., two words for "know," three words for "sheep," and two words for "feed."[67]

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[64]Silva, *Biblical Words* 137.

[65]M. Stuart, cited by Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 174.

[66]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 159. See also their words, "Of course it is arguable that every human communication is only more-or-less competent and might have been made more effectively, more precisely, less ambiguously" (ibid., 60).

[67]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 200-201.

By assuming that the Bible has no more precision than everyday human speech, modern linguistics reduces exegesis to a "ballpark" estimate of what were the intentions of the human author and, ultimately, of God who inspired the Bible. In other words, God's revelation to man furnishes only the "gist" of what God wanted man to know. Such an assumption, if implemented, results in a great loss of propositional truth for the church.

Discourse

Modern linguistics emphasizes the dominance of discourse considerations in determining meaning. Black writes, "Moreover, because macrostructures dominate the composition and structure of texts, discourse is analyzed from the top down."[68] In another place he indicates, "A spoken or written word in isolation may have many different possible meanings, but a discourse, which is the environment in which words exist, imposes limitations on the choice of possible meanings and tends to shape and define the meaning of each word."[69] Silva holds the same perspective: "[I]n recent decades linguists have given increasing attention to the paragraph as a basic unit of language. This new approach, usually referred to as *discourse analysis*, has led to a renewed concern for the textual coherence of biblical writings."[70]

Discourse analysis is the ultimate court of appeal for modern linguistics. The advocates refrain from deciding meaning based on the details of a text and even speak somewhat disparagingly of those who do emphasize those details. In speaking of traditional exegetical approaches, Cotterell and Turner have this to say: "English exegesis in the past has excelled in the study of the meaning of words, lexical semantics, rather than in the study of chunks of text, because of the *assumed* precision of such studies."[71]

Yet among modern linguists disagreement and confusion reigns regarding how to use discourse analysis, as noted by Cotterell and Turner: "[A]t the present there are no firm conclusions, no generally accepted formulae, no fixed methodology, not even an agreed terminology.[72] If so much is unsettled regarding discourse analysis, a field looked upon as the determining factor in interpretation, it is no wonder that so much uncertainty prevails among modern linguists.

The subjectivity of discourse analysis should be obvious. In taking a larger section of material to analyze before probing the details within that section, a person can come up with a goodly number of different understandings of what an author

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[68]Black, *Linguistics* 171.

[69]Black, *Linguistics* 138.

[70]Silva, *Philippians* 13; cf. also Silva, "God, Language" 221.

[71]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 18 [emphasis added].

[72]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 233.

meant. A comparison of utilizations of discourse analysis in Paul's Epistle to the Philippians furnishes an instructive example of the method's subjectivity. Two proponents of discourse analysis applied the method to the epistle and came up with drastically different understandings of Paul's intent in the letter. They agree that 1:27–2:18 is the heart of the epistle, but in analyzing that section they disagree regarding its meaning. Silva concludes, "The pervasive theme in this section [i.e., 1:27–2:18] is Christian sanctification, as reflected in the commands to behave in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27), to obey (2:12), to become blameless (2:25)."[73] Black differs: "Paul's purpose in Philippians is to persuade his readers to undertake a united course of action in the future on the grounds that it is the most advantageous course."[74] So what does the section and the epistle as a whole teach, Christian sanctification or united action? The subjective inclinations of the interpreters, not the text itself, determine the answer. Far more agreement exists among practitioners of traditional exegesis regarding the theme of the epistle because they have analyzed the details within the epistle before moving on to the overall emphasis. Traditional exegetes may differ regarding some interpretive matters within the text, but there will be a consensus among them that the purpose of the epistle is not found in 1:27–2:18, but in the expression of Paul's gratefulness to the Philippian church for its generous gift.[75]

Stylistic Considerations

Three stylistic matters that frequently arise in modern-linguistic discussions are redundancy, ambiguity, and vagueness.

Redundancy. Modern linguists make much of the human tendency to repeat the same idea using different vocabulary without a difference in meaning. They call this "redundancy." The following briefly describes this tendency:

> We can never forget, however, that writers often use a diverse vocabulary for simple reasons of style, such as a desire to avoid repetition. In these cases, we may say that the differences among the words are 'neutralized' by the context. Even when an author makes a lexical choice for semantic (rather than stylistic) reasons, it does not follow that our interpretation stands or falls on our ability to determine precisely why one word was chosen rather than another. After all, people normally communicate not by uttering isolated words but by speaking whole sentences.[76]

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[73]Silva, *Philippians* 20.

[74]Black, *Linguistics* 193.

[75]E.g., Homer A. Kent, Jr., "Philippians," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 99.

[76]Silva, "Let's Be Logical" 60.

For that reason they feel that synonyms in proximity to each other have at best only secondary contributions to make.

Yet the burden of proof rests on those who would explain away distinctions in meaning. NT writers in general did not concern themselves with stylistic matters such as avoiding repetition. Their language was the language of the man on the street, not of the classical poet or author who sought to entertain his readers with clever stylistic maneuvers.[77]

Ambiguity. Silva insists that ambiguity is for practical reasons a characteristic of all languages: "But even that consideration misses the important point that ambiguity is a valuable and even necessary aspect of all languages, since otherwise the number of words in everyone's active vocabulary would grow to unmanageable proportions."[78] He illustrates from Scripture:

> For literary effect, however, authors sometimes tease their readers with double meanings, as when the Gospel of John 1:5 tells us that the darkness did not understand the light; since the Greek verb (*katalambanō*) can also mean "overcome," quite possibly John has deliberately used an ambiguous word. Before drawing such a conclusion, however, one should have fairly strong contextual reasons. In the case of the Gospel of John, the character of the book as a whole and other likely instances of ambiguity support the conclusion.[79]

Yet the verdict is not decisive in favor of ambiguity in John 1:5 or in the Gospel of John as a whole. Traditional hermeneutics has limited each passage one meaning and one meaning only, unless a contextual feature indicates an exception.[80] No such indicator exists in John 1:5 or, for the most part, in the rest of the Gospel of John in examples usually cited by those embracing modern hermeneutical trends.

Rather than viewing such instances as ambiguous, the interpreter should apply various exegetical considerations in determining which of the possible meanings the writer and/or speaker intended. Defending an interpreter who cannot decide between two possibilities on the ground of ambiguity[81] directly violates the time-honored principle of single meaning.

Vagueness. Silva specifies two kinds of vagueness: "We must carefully distinguish between, on the one hand, vagueness in the sense of sloppiness (that is,

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[77]A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 49-75.

[78]Silva, "God, Language" 249.

[79]Ibid., 250-51.

[80]Cf. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* 141-64.

[81]Cf. Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 175.

in contexts where some precision is appropriate and expected) and, on the other, vagueness that contributes to effective communication (that is, in contexts where greater precision may mislead the reader or hearer to draw an invalid inference)."[82] Only deliberate vagueness falls into the category of stylistic considerations.

He offers a lengthy discussion of one example of vagueness:

> The classic example here is *to euangelion tou Christou*, "the gospel of Christ" (e.g., Phil. 1:27). What precisely is the relationship between the two nouns in this phrase? The gospel that belongs to Christ (genitive of possession)? The gospel that comes from Christ (genitive of source)? The gospel that Christ proclaimed (subjective genitive)? The gospel that proclaims Christ (objective genitive)? Perhaps the very asking of the question throws us off track. Countless readers of Paul's letters, without asking the question, have understood the apostle perfectly well. It would not be quite right to say that Paul meant *all* of these things at once—a suggestion that aims at stressing the richness of the apostle's idiom, but at the expense of misunderstanding the way that language normally works. The point is that Paul was not thinking about any one of these possibilities in particular: he was using a general ('vague') expression that served simply to identify his message.[83]

Vagueness offers another alternative for violating the principle of single meaning. Grammatical-historical principles dictate that "the gospel of Christ" in Phil 1:27 has only one meaning. Since it is a gospel about Christ, the usual explanation is that "of Christ" is an objective genitive. To posit that the apostle did not distinguish between four different meanings does injustice to his precision of language and beyond that to the Holy Spirit who inspired the apostle to write what he did. God does not intend for His people to grasp only a vague idea with several possible facets. He wants them to know specifically what is in His mind.

Literality

Modern linguistics opposes the categorization of literature as either literal or figurative: "We would not wish to support the notion of a simple dichotomy between literal and figurative language."[84] Cotterell and Turner contend that no utterance is without its figurative aspects: "Just as there can be no music other than mood music, so there can be no utterance which is not emotive, and to that extent non-literal."[85] Since all language affects the emotions, they contend that no clearcut line divides literal from figurative.

Barr builds a similar case against literality. He concludes that literality "can be salutory but also damaging, progressive and creative but also dulling and

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[82]Silva, "God, Language" 258.

[83]Ibid.; cf. Silva, *Biblical Words*, 150-51, for other examples.

[84]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* 294.

[85]Ibid., 295.

restrictive."[86] He says it can make a sharp distinction between physical and spiritual, but finds it difficult to handle in a category that is somewhere between, "such as legend, or imprecise narration, or events such as the resurrection where the Bible is as firm on its non-physical as on its physical character."[87]

By viewing biblical interpretation without the philosophical lens used by modern linguists, traditional principles define literal as follows:

> The grammatico-historical sense of a writer is such an interpretation of his language as is required by the laws of grammar and the facts of history. Sometimes we speak of the literal sense, by which we mean the most simple, direct, and ordinary meaning of phrases and sentences. By this term we usually denote a meaning opposed to the figurative or metaphorical. The grammatical sense is essentially the same as the literal, the one expression being derived from the Greek, the other from the Latin.[88]

Philosophical preunderstanding has created the confusion that hinders modern linguistics from making a clear distinction between literal and nonliteral language. By eliminating that preunderstanding, traditional hermeneutics does make a clear distinction between the two, with no middle ground.

FINAL APPRAISAL

Modern linguistics has usefulness in analyzing an unwritten language, in devising an alphabet for that language, in teaching the users of that language to read and write literature composed in their language. It also has positive features in relation to hermeneutics when it coincides with principles of traditional grammatical-historical principles. But in an overall appraisal of the value of the field, it stands opposed to that traditional method in so many crucial areas that it can only detract from interpretive analyses of the meaning of the biblical text.

The system's use of the interpreter's preunderstanding as the starting point in exegesis forces the interpretive procedure into a subjective mold that inevitably steers his conclusions away from an objective understanding of the author's meaning. Based upon this beginning, other fallacious principles such as underestimating the divine role in inspiration, mishandling various lexical and grammatical issues, its mixing of application into the interpretive step, its assumption of imprecision in the text, its demeaning of the importance of details, its assumption of stylistic guidelines, and its muddying of the difference between literal and figurative language combine to constitute modern-linguistic hermeneutics as a system distinct from traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics, and therefore as a hindrance

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[86]Barr, "Literality" 425.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 203.

to accurate interpretation of the biblical text.

Summary of Modern Linguistics Versus Traditional Hermeneutics

	Modern Linguistics	*Grammatical-Historical*
Agreement	• divine inspiration • importance of context • lexicography (partial agreement) • grammatical analysis (partial agreement) • historical-cultural background • possible supplement to g.-h.	• divine inspiration • importance of context • lexicography (partial agreement) • grammatical analysis (partial agreement) • historical-cultural background
Disagreement	preunderstanding, starting point: • biblical languages not unique • integration with general revelation • impossibility of absolute certainty	objectivism, starting point: • uniqueness of Bible languages • prefer special revelation • yields propositional truth
Conflicts	• inspiration does not matter • diachronics minimized • words cannot denote concepts • substitution of synonyms permissible • grammatical relationships not unique • authorial intention evasive • uncertainty and imprecision • subjective meaning from discourse • redundancy, ambiguity, and vagueness • literal and figurative not distinguished	• inspiration does matter • diachronics equal to synchronics • words can denote concepts • substitution of synonyms not permissible • grammatical relationships unique • authorial intention available • certainty and precision • objective meaning from details • single meaning and clarity • literal and figurative distinct