

Systemic Functional Linguistics on Bible Translation

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Abstract:

The Bible, the sacred book of Christianity, has been translated into thousands of languages including over four hundred translated versions in English; some of these English translations have been surveyed and classified according to their “equivalence” to the bible’s original language, as published by the Canadian Bible Society – *Our Bible: How it came to us* – in 1997. The survey categorized twelve English translations of the Bible into three groups: “formal equivalence”, “dynamic equivalence”, and “paraphrases”; this classification coincides with the well-established fact that the so-called “translation equivalence” consensus is not yet achieved. This being the case, this study aims at using Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to investigate, first, the linguistic difference between the three groups of translations through analyzing Bible text John 1:1-14 in three different English translation versions (King James Version, New International Version and the Message); second, the potential problems caused by linguistic differences; and third, a more concrete view of “equivalence” through SFL.

Systemic Functional Linguistics is an “applied” theory which emphasizes on social accountability and it targets to unite theory and practice instead of exploring only theories, and is applicable in many aspects including education, culture problems, translation etc. According to M.A.K. Halliday’s writing about translation, translation and “translation equivalence” happen in all strata of language and that “equivalence at different strata carries differential values” (Halliday, 2001: p.15. See also Steiner & Yallop, 2001). Realizing this, the study spotlights on textual and ideational meaning at the stratum of semantics, i.e., it studies on theme and rheme, the cohesion achieved by thematic progression as well as the text’s process and participants in order to examine on “translation equivalence” and how it becomes observable and achievable in this stratum of linguistics.

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My Family

and God
with love that never gives me up

If linguistics analyze the science of language, and literature preserves the beauty of it,
grammatics do both.

Introduction

The Bible is the sacred book of Christianity, and is also one of the most influential readings in the world. Originally written in Hebrew and Greek, the Bible has been translated into over thousands of languages; and over 400 hundred versions exist in English.

However, when asked the most authorized, or the “best” translation out of the 400s, there is never a certain answer. The answer cannot be certain that although most people understand one of the significant criteria of translation is to “stick” to the source, there is hardly any convincing judgment on this “translation equivalence”.

Also, judgment on a “better” or even the “best” translation often depends on people’s own perception. Noticing these facts, this study aims at studying people’s so-called perception, through the investigation on humans’ unique ability – language.

Language plays a significant role in the process of experience construing. That is, the way people turn their experience into mind and memories. But language differs from one another, and it is a tool interactive that it helps us construe experience and at the same time it affects the way we do. To cite an example, humans’ perception on translation differences is the result of different language use by translators.

Therefore, by studying how language differ, we are able to see how humans’ interpretation on a text, or even, a bible text, is affected.

In this study, it is the Systemic Functional approach used for identifying the translation differences in three selected English translations of the Bible, including the New King James, New International Version and the Message. Through this approach, we will first see how translators of these three versions vary in the way they interpret the bible (John 1:1-14), how they made different choice on language; we will also see how these choices of the translators affect the way readers construe experience from the Bible.

Last but not least, from the huge text of bible translations, it is to investigate how their language affects, in return, the theoretical studies of linguistics. It is respectively M.A.K. Halliday's and Downing's theory of theme, the translation asserts its effect on.

1. History in Brief to the Translations

The Bible, the sacred book of Christianity, has been translated into over 2,300 languages and over 400 different versions along in English. Three English translation versions of the Bible are selected for this study; they are the New King James version (NKJ), the New International Version (NIV) and the Message (MSG). These three translations were respectively written / revised in the 1980s, 1970s, and 1990s. The stories of the translations are briefed and simplified as below:

In 1604, King James 1 of England “appointed certain learned men, to the number of four and fifty, for the translating of the Bible”; the King James Version of the Bible was first published in 1611.¹ After 20 years the New King James Version (NKJ) came up in the 1980s; translators² of this new version, gathered from different places and organizations, aimed to “preserve the KJV’s dignified style and its word and phrase order but replaces some words and expressions that may be no longer easily understood”.³

The New International Version (NIV) was finished in 1978 by the International Bible Society and is the work of over 100 scholars⁴ from over the world. Described by the Cambridge Bibles⁵ the translation “uses simple, everyday language that everyone can understand, translating Hebrew and Greek phrases into modern idioms and expressions...” and it is viewed as one of the most authorized versions in the modern society.⁶

By Eugene Peterson, the New Testament of the Message (MSG) was translated and first published in 1993⁷. Peterson explained his methods of translating were “writing straight from the original text... to attempt to bring into English the rhythms and idioms of the original language”.⁸ No matter if he has been successful in these attempts, it is generally agreed that the MSG is “a free paraphrase of the text⁹”. It is to note that translation equivalence between the two languages would not be the main concern in this study, i.e., whether or which translation is “better” is not concerned; rather, it is to study the effects through the study on the language used in the translations.

The existence of these translations is indispensable that it opens the path for English readers to the “word of God”, the history of Israel etc. But in considering language as the representative of

time, culture, cognitive activities and so forth, these translations are not only the “translations of the Bible”, but also the witnesses of the evolution of English, the traces of human language interpretations and the source of language and translation studies.

The following studies then, by focusing on these distinctive features of language, investigates, compares and contrasts the three selected Bible translations and attempts to identify and analyze the differences in (i) the translators’ interpretation of the original text, (ii) readers’ interpretation brought by the different translated texts, or say, it is to analyze the possible interpretation effects brings about to readers of the different translations; and finally, the studies aims to take part and discuss in theoretical analysis of language and translation.

NOTES

- 1 <http://www.av1611.org/kjv/kjvhist.html>
A Brief History of the King James Bible By Dr. Laurence M. Vance
- 2 <http://www.dtl.org/versions/misc/translators.htm>
List of translators of the New King James Version
- 3 <http://www.cambridge.org/uk/bibles/nkjv/>
Cambridge Bibles. Cambridge University Press 2005.
- 4 <http://www.biblica.com/niv/translators/>
List of translators of the NIV
- 5 <http://www.cambridge.org/uk/bibles/niv/>
Cambridge Bibles. Cambridge University Press 2005.
- 6 Comments by Rev. Dr. Ted Zimmerman, Professor, Director of Liaison Office, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong.
- 7 <http://www.bible-researcher.com/themessage.html>
Publishing information about the Message (to be verified)
- 8 <http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Message-MSG-Bible/>
Publishing information about the Message (to be verified)
- 9 Comments by Rev. Dr. Ted Zimmerman, Professor, Director of Liaison Office, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong.

2. Topics and the Objectives of the Study

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is the major concept the whole study based on to carry out the investigation systematically. SFL is “a theory of language as choice between meanings.” (Fawcett 2008) In other words, a speaker/writer of a language chooses what he/she wants to use in his/her expressions; and the choices lie in a “giant network of meanings... which are related to each other by ‘or’ relationships (and some others).” (Fawcett 2008) Hence, SFL is a theory of language starts at the core of language – meanings and functions.

This paper acts as a demonstration using SFL on biblical texts to conduct translation and language investigations. It takes the following ideas from SFL to achieve its study objectives:

2.1. Thematic progression

While theme is “what the sentence is about” (Halliday, 1985:39); thematic progression is “the way in which lexical strings and reference chains interact with Theme.” (Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998) And by Danes (1974), it is “the choice and ordering of utterance Themes, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy, as well as their relationship to the hyperthemes of the superior text units (such as paragraph, chapter...) to the whole of text, and to the situation.” That is, thematic progression is the way Theme connects, forming a “texture” of a text/situation.

Danes also identified some dominant progression patterns in English which will be discussed in the latter part.

2.2. Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST)

RST is a “theory of text organization” (Taboada & Mann, 2005) and “offers an explanation of the coherence of texts”, as well as proposes “plausible reason for its [a clause’s] presence.” (Mann, 1999)

Here in this study, RST is used to analyze the coherence and logic flow of the translations, as well as to unveil translators' interpretation differences of one same source text.

2.3. Analysis on Processes

Processes, according to M.A.K. Halliday, are sets under "transitivity" which is "the most powerful impression of experience... that consists of 'goings-on' – happening, doing, sensing, meaning, and being and becoming" (Halliday 1994:106) and they are realized by verbal groups in a clause.

Processes are also furthered classified into different types (see Halliday 1994:109-143), which will not be discussed here.

This study, rather, seeks for the fact that details of Processes affect the way humans construe experience – one of the core values of communication.

2.4. Themes

A very controversial subject. Theme is "a resource for organizing the interpersonal and ideational meanings of each clause in the form of a message", it "sets up a local environment, providing a point of departure by reference to which the listener interprets the message." (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997)

In the analysis of this study, Theme, takes Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo's identification that Theme is "a structural category realized by the clause initial position in English." (Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998:16)

Also, Theme is classified into textual themes, interpersonal themes, ideational themes and displaced themes. (Bloor & Bloor, 1995)

Above is a very brief introduction to the theories and concepts to be used for investigating the translations. And in order to begin the analysis on the translations, it is indispensable to (i) divide the texts into “clause” units; (ii) identify their themes and Processes. See pp. XX for the tables outlining the three translations at clause level, and their themes and Processes. (Table 6.9., pp. 37-41)

Through the above concepts, this study attempts to

- (i) Identify translators’ interpretation differences on the original source text through thematic progression and rhetorical structure theory;
- (ii) Suggest and prove influence on readers’ interpretation of the original text caused by different translation (through the analysis of Processes);
- (iii) Comment on different approaches to Theme through the findings in the three English translations of the Bible.

3. From Systemic Functional Linguistics:

3.1. Analysis on Translators' Interpretation

3.1.1. Through Thematic Progression

Thematic progression ties up themes, forming “texture” of a situation. Danes (1974) classified it into different types. In the translations, two main types are found and discussed:

- (i) linear progression
- (ii) constant progression

3.1.1.1. Linear Progression

As the initial position of a clause in English constitute a Theme, and the rest a Rheme, linear progression is where Rheme of a clause becomes the Theme in clauses follow:

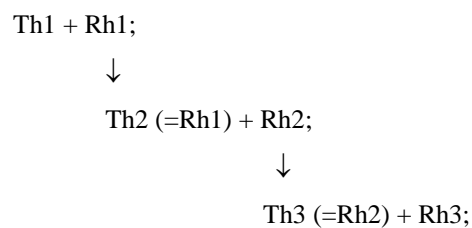


Fig. 3.1.1.
Linear Progression
(Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998:17)

3.1.1.2. Constant Progression

This progression is where the Theme of a clause is also the Theme of clauses follow:

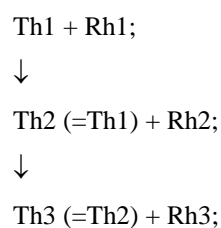


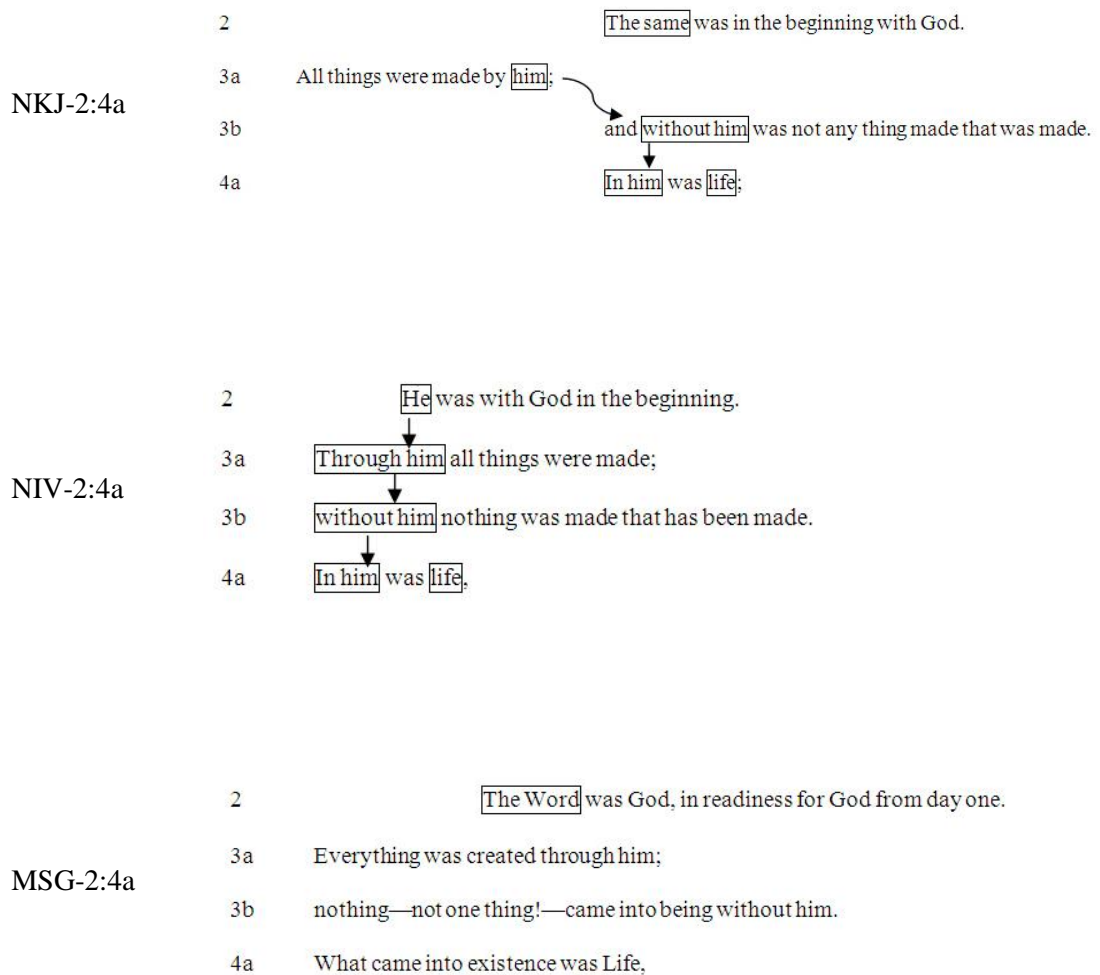


Fig. 3.1.2.
Constant Progression
(Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998:18)

3.1.1.3. Thematic Progression on the Selected Texts

As mentioned above, themes are writer-selected items; themes in translations are expected to be very similar to its source text. However, comparison on thematic progression between the three selected translations suggested that constancy is not the case: the progressions of the text (and therefore the themes) differ from each other.

For instance, consider the following figures indicating the thematic progression in the three translations, from clause 2 to 4a, where as  refers to linear progression while  refers to constant progression:



From the above figures of great differences, the choices of progression types apparently differ, which suggests that the translators (unintentionally) chose their own themes to the clauses.

To cite an example, in the above NIV-2:4a, the themes are in constant progression about “He” (the Word/God/Christ), creating the texture of that the text was all about “Him”.

While in NKJ-2:4a, the translators determined that clause 2 the same was in the beginning with God has no “transitivity” towards 3a all things were made by him, i.e., they are not connected through progression. For clause 3a all things were made by him to 3b without him was not any thing made that was made, linear progression takes place instead of constant progression like in NIV. It indicates that the theme in clause 3a in NKJ (all things) is different from the one in NIV (through him), in other words, the translators of the two versions think differently on what is more “topical” to the clause.

Finally in MSG-2:4a, no linear or constant progression take place throughout clause 2 to 4a. This does not mean that the text has no “texture” or proper connection; it rather implies that the translator of the MSG chose to put all New Information as the themes of these clauses, making the clause unable to connect through thematic progression. It is his choice in making new information marked by putting them at initial position (for in theory, new information is put at “rheme”), sacrificing the thematic ties for texture.

The figures of thematic progressions of the three texts can be found on pp. 32-34.

In all, thematic progression suggests that translators interpret the source text differently, leading to a possibility that it is different from the original text or what the writer wants to originally convey. However, it is not the concern here to justify which is preferred or, generally speaking, “better”.

3.1.2. Through Rhetorical Structure Analysis

Besides thematic progression, RST shows how the text is coherent and how the writer’s logic flows through the text.

RST analysis is significant for comparing translators’ interpretation differences on source texts, which are neither paragraphed, nor verse by verse; the original Greek text is the text without breaking, without punctuation etc. This is to say, the paragraphing and verses were decided by the translators, they are the complete reflection on translators’ interpretations.

RST is a “descriptive framework of a text” (Mann & Thompson 1988). It consists of a list of clearly-defined logical relations which reflects the flow of logic throughout the text.

Here, the most obvious difference among the structures is the paragraphing. One may suggest that without the RST analysis, difference on paragraphing still can be identified because the NIV and MSG are paragraphed differently while NKJ is not paragraphed. However, RST and thematic progression do in fact show the underlying paragraphing of translators more thoroughly. And they are paragraphed briefly as below:

		Clause #
New King James	Paragraph 1	1 – 2
	Paragraph 2	3 – 5
	Paragraph 3	6 – 12
	Paragraph 4	13
New International Version	Paragraph 1	1 – 5
	Paragraph 2	6 – 9
	Paragraph 3	10 – 12
	Paragraph 4	13 – 14
the Message	Paragraph 1	1 – 5
	Paragraph 2	6 – 13
	Paragraph 3	14 – 15

Table 3.1.2.1. Paragraphing of the translation texts

The table unveils the fact that while they are of the same source text, the translations are interpreted in a very different way. For instance, clause 1-2 are separated from 3-5 which indicates that the translators may think that their relations are not close enough to form one paragraph; while for NIV, clause 1-5 forms one paragraph that suggests the translators may comprehend them talking about similar thing (which in thematic progression studies, these clauses took almost one same theme – God, going through constant progression).

What is to highlight here is that, beyond the fact that translators do interpret texts in their own way even when they are striving for translation equivalence, translations and functional linguistics interact in the way (i) translations can be used for linguistics analysis and (ii) linguistics studies can help translations in better understanding translators' own interpretation.

There are still much to be figured out from this RST analysis, and they are to be discussed hopefully in the near future.

The whole RST structure of the three selected translations can be found on pp. 35-36.

After investigating how translators' interpretation of a text can be analyzed through systemic functional linguistics, and how their interpretation affects the crucial translation of the Bible, the following is to investigate exactly how readers are influenced by translators' interpretations.

3.2. Analysis on Readers' Interpretation

When reading, especially on "insightful" texts such as the Bible, readers are always in the procedure of "construing experience". That is, they are converting life encounters into their mind through language. Nevertheless this procedure is not one-way but rather "interactive". Again, take reading as an example, reading is not only that the reader is comprehending the messages in the book through his/her language, but also that writers are affecting readers' comprehension through the language they use. The following is an investigation on how readers' comprehension of the texts is affected by the writers/translators, through the translators' choices of Processes.

3.2.1. Processes

Processes are so powerful that it gets much into concern; they cover mostly the ‘goings-on’ in our experience. Here, the differences in Processes in the translations need to be investigated and considered for since these differences greatly affect the way readers construe their experience to the Bible.

Before getting deep into the matter, it is to distinguish the causes of the differences: they are either of (i) “language evolution”, i.e., as language changes with time, the processes’ forms or other facts about them may change too; or (ii), “synonyms” of Processes; or (iii), writers/translators’ interpretation differences.

First, let’s consider the Process variation caused by language evolution. Consider,

NKJ-5a: And the light *shineth* in darkness

NIV-5a: The light *shines* in the darkness

The Processes are verbs used in different time of the history: English in 1600s and in modern English. I believe there are many references alive to compare Processes in the evolution of English. And it is not the main concern when it is the translations we want to look closer at.

Now, let us consider the following, and pay attention to the italic-underlined Process – *believe*,

NKJ-12: But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that *believe* on his name...

NIV-12: Yet to all who received him, to those who *believed* in his name, he gave the right to become children of God- children born not of natural descent...

MSG-12: But whoever did want him, who *believed* he was who he claimed, and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves...

These three clauses use one same lexical item – believe; but the tenses used in the three translations are different: in the NKJ, present tense; while the other two are using past tense. And the difference gives great variation in interpretation.

In NKJ (present tense), the clause is understood as “whoever believes him, past, now and ever, would get what God has prepared for them”. This reading of the clause is like a message from God talking to you right now when you are reading, that “if you believe now, you get this”. But for NIV and MSG, past tense in the process gives the whole clause a “story-telling effect” – once upon a time, there were people who believed in God, and they got what God has prepared for them. Just one little variation, brings about a great difference.

This difference is significant especially to Christian organizations that it may affect their believers how this “God’s promise” is interpreted: which reading is more “sounding” to make a follower believe? One may suggest that a translation should follow what the source text says; of course this is true, but it’s also true that most readers do not understand the original language so they turn to the translated versions, so it would be strange asking these readers to “search for the original text and see what it says”. No matter what, what it is trying to say is that under the analysis of SFL, the translations differ, and even a tiny little difference has caused huge gap in interpreting.

3.3. sum-up

It is almost a common sense that translators’ comprehension of texts affects how texts are interpreted and how readers are influenced. However, from the above analysis, we are just able to see exactly how their comprehension works to influencing. This analysis is significant to bible translation for the Bible itself is what people trust to be “the words of God”, and understanding how interpretation through words works can help translating more effectively to religious translation. The study of functional linguistics, in fact, does not only help understanding more thoroughly the translations, but that the use of functional linguistics in translation helps translators realize, through their writing, what effects they are going to make on readers.

3.4. Theoretical Study

The Bible is itself a large text; its translations in fact carry a lot about language to be studied on. And very often, we would think that we have know enough about a language; but when we get ourselves into investigation of such a large text, we'd very likely find ourselves innocent, for realizing that we'd always forget how creative, fascinating and flexible a language could be, and we are innocent that there are still so much we do not know even on something we thought we have known enough.

In the following section, Theme and the theories about it are discussed. Through the investigation on the three selected translation texts, the creativity and flexibility of languages stand out and cry for focus.

3.4.1. Themes

In this study, Theme works under the concept of M.A.K. Halliday, who suggests that Theme is “what the sentence [clause] is about”. Halliday has proposed and refined the identification of Theme in English, giving the possibility of the occurring of textual theme – which apparently connects clauses and offer a text/situation the texture, such as connectives, conjunctions etc.; ideational theme – which connects the speaker and involvers, e.g., dear in dear have you got some time?; ideational theme – the idea of the clause, also referred to as “topical theme”, mainly what the clause is about. The translation texts would first undergo analysis through Halliday’s approach to Theme.

The study also compares Halliday’s identification of Theme to Downing (1991), who proposed the “framework” for the studying of Theme. In the following, Downing’s proposal would be commented on through the findings in the translation texts.

3.4.1.1. The Controversy – Topical Themes

Translations differ. And the differences in the 3 translation versions of the Bible prose interesting investigation on Theme.

Before getting more into Theme, one very different translation interpretation is first discussed.

Consider:

- (1) *In the beginning* was the Word (Cl#1a in KJ and NIV. See pp. 29-30)
- (2) *The Word* was first (Cl#1a in the Message. See pp. 31)

These two clauses are translated from the same verse; yet they vary in the former part before *was life* (here, capitalization of all letters is left alone for future discussion) as in *in him* vs. *the word*. What actually differs between these two phrases is that *in him* is an adjunct as subject while *the word is a nominal group* as subject, as usual. This contrast does not only show the distance between translators' interpretations; but also lead us to an investigation of theme, especially its definition controversy.

Theme, besides being 'the starting point of a message' and 'what the sentence is about' (Halliday 1985:39), it is "the point of departure. As in Example (3), *the Life-Light* is what this clause is about; and that *it* 'blazed out of the darkness':

- (3) *The Life-Light* blazed out of the darkness (Cl#5a in the Message. See p. 31)

If Theme acts as "what the sentence is about", or say, what the writer wants to convey as most important in this sentence, it is easy to deduct that Themes in different translations of one same text should be the same; in other words, Themes in the translations should take the Themes in the source text because it has already been decided by the original writer on "what this sentence is about"; however, this is often not the case: Themes of a translation vary from those in the source text; even, Themes in different translations of one same text differ from each other. It is also to note that the

differences in Themes are not only the result of “synonyms” or “paraphrasing”, but also the differences in the selections of the topical theme by the translators themselves. Consider the following cases from the three bible translations:

Case 1: Theme Variations resulted from Paraphrasing

Consider,

(NKJ-12) But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

(NIV-12) Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

(MSG-12:13) But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed, and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.

The italic-underlined parts in each of the clauses above are the ideational/topical themes of their clause. In these ideational themes, the lexical items used are different but yet similar, they convey a similar message from the original text. This kind of differences is what readers would expect: they are telling the same thing by using different “wordings” (in fact, the translations from NKJ to NIV and MSG here are very different; but it does not fall into the concern here). The ideational themes here are what the writer thought important and is still put at the Theme position; readers’ interpretation of the “topic” in this sentence remains similar.

Nevertheless, in Case 2, the Theme variation creates an “interpretation paradox”.

Case 2: Theme Variations – Completely Different in the Choice of “Topic”

Consider,

(NKJ-1a) *In the beginning* was the word.

(MSG-1a) *The word* was first.

These two sentences are from the same clause of the source text, yet their theme is different: translators chose different Themes although they are translating the same clause.

In NKJ, a circumstance *in the beginning* is first created, and it all starts at this circumstance, a space or time, and in this very circumstance there is *the word* (or God).

In MSG, *the word* (God) comes first, it is about and it starts at the God.

The concept here would be a little bit abstract but the difference created by these two clauses to the readers is that, for NKJ, it is at somewhere, or sometime or somehow, God is there; while for MSG, God “appears”, and only God, “exists”, nothing else. The problem occurs is: what comes first is “the beginning” (the circumstance) or God? A Christian would probably answer “God” is where everything begins; but for a non-Christian, it is a paradox: it would be hard to understand God appears in the absence of a time, a place, in the absence of a circumstance; while, without God there would be no concept of time and place etc.

Under the investigation of Theme, these two translations have created two very different situation.

Now let’s consider one more case,

(NIV-4a) *In him* was life.

(MSG-4a) *What came into existence* was life.

Like in Case 1, NIV-4a puts a circumstance as Theme that *in him* is what this clause is about; but for MSG-4a, it carries what's called "thematic equative", sentences like this give distinction to the part after the "equator", i.e., *life*, an interpretation for MSG-4a could then be "there's something that came in to existence, and that thing is and is only life".

"Thematic equative" then puts both its Theme and its Rheme equally important. Therefore, being different from putting *in him*, the circumstance, as theme, MSG:4a (*what came into existence was life*) "equalizes" the importance of both its theme and *life*.

When topical theme is at the initial position of a clause in the language of English, NIV-4a conveys the message that what's important lies *in him* and that is life; while the MSG:4a tells that there's *life* as it has come into existence.

The above have discussed some translation interpretation differences caused by different Themes. Now, let's get into more about Halliday's themes, and Downing's investigation of themes.

Besides the ideational/topical theme, Halliday also allows the existence of multiple themes (Halliday 1985) of textual, interpersonal and displaced themes, example cases in (4) *well then surely that's the end of the affair*; and of displaced theme in (5) *after about three years with the special forces, our hell began*:

(4)	well then	surely	that	's	the end of the affair.
	<i>textual</i>	<i>intrp.</i>	<i>topical</i>		
	THEME			RHEME	

(Halliday 1992:328)

(5)	after about three years with the special forces,	our hell	began.
	<i>circumstantial + ideational</i>	<i>displaced</i>	
	THEME		RHEME

(Forey 2002)

Example (5) covers cases which the preceding elements are circumstances (see Halliday 1994:38-67 for other types of circumstantial themes; here circumstantial adjunct is focused).

In addition, in the concept of ‘multiple themes’, he does not specify which should be ‘the point of departure’, i.e., which one of the themes should be carrying “transitivity” and be considered as ‘what the sentence is about’.

This idea of being unspecified appears to be unsatisfying to Downing. For example, in her 1991 work, Downing argued that circumstantial adjuncts cannot be the topical theme (here she means “what the sentence is truly about” or “what the speaker/writer is trying to convey as most important”). That means, in Downing’s concept, *after about three years with the special forces* is not what example (5) is trying to convey. Instead, she suggested that only the participant Themes should be considered as “topical theme”, and proposed “frameworks of initial elements” for theme classification. That is, classifying themes according to their functions and the ‘frameworks’ they set up for the clause:

- (i) participant Themes, which set up individual frameworks.
- (ii) spatial, temporal and situational Themes, which set up circumstantial frameworks.
- (iii) discourse Themes, which set up subjective and logical frameworks.

(Downing 1991:128)

Moreover, Downing considers other Themes create only a context, or a circumstance, for what is going to take place, i.e., they are not “what the sentence is about”. (Downing 1991:123, 129-135)

Therefore, example (5) is analyzed as below (example (5a)) in Downing’s classification of theme, whereas *our hell* is the topical theme of the sentence:

(5a) after about three years with the special forces,	our hell	began.
<i>spatial Theme</i>	<i>participant Theme</i>	
THEME		RHEME

This “alternative approach to theme” (Downing 1991) makes sense in certain circumstances. However, it seriously excludes clauses such as example (1a), which take ‘spatial, temporal’ and ‘discourse’ Themes as subjects while they are – in my opinion – very marked.

Now, let’s recall the situation in example (1a):

(1a) *In the beginning* was the Word

As mentioned, example (1a) takes a circumstantial adjunct as subject. And it is converted from a *there* clause as in (1b):

(1b) there was the Word in the beginning

And an inversion of circumstantial adjunct occurs as in (1c):

(1c) in the beginning, there was the Word

Finally, the existential, *there*, is deleted, as in (1a).

Comparing (1a) to (1b) and (1c), circumstance adjunct as subject is considered “marked” in English (Sasaki 1991:158).

Also, according to Halliday, he suggested the most marked theme is a potential-subject but non-subject “theme”. That is, a nominal which has the potential to be a subject while it is not a subject, and is made theme. For example, consider:

(6) nature I loved. (Halliday 1994:44)

If a potential-subject but non-subject element made ‘theme’ is marked, then a non-subject, non-potential subject element made “theme” and “subject” should be marked. Therefore, this made-subject circumstantial adjunct should be the topical theme, i.e., it should be “what the sentence is about”.

The markedness (Bloor & Bloor, 1995:82) of this kind of sentences can be furthered established. Consider examples (1a-i) and (6-i) below, which are examples (1a) and (5) analyzed in Halliday’s theme classification:

(1a-i)	In the beginning		was the Word.
	<i>circumstantial + ideational</i>	<i>displaced</i>	
	THEME		RHEME
(6-i)	nature	I	loved.
	<i>circumstantial + ideational</i>	<i>displaced</i>	
	THEME		RHEME

As shown above, example (1a-i) actually comprises one more marked feature comparing to (6-i): absence of a displaced theme, which indicates that the theme in this clause is not an entity, i.e., neither a participant nor a process – but a circumstantial adjunct.

It is to point out from all these above, circumstantial adjuncts as subject is marked, (as in (1a), *in the beginning* is what the writer would like to convey, “it is right at the beginning; it is not any

other time”, i.e., “point of departure” of this clause is “in the beginning”, “right at the beginning is when the Word departed and started its grace”, in Christian concept), and is worth considered for. However, this kind of markedness is excluded in Downing’s analysis of theme. Consider (1a-ii), it is found that no participant Theme exists, i.e., this sentence has no topic or it is about ‘nothing’ (null); while a sentence’s topic is hardly null:

(1a-ii) In the beginning		was the Word.
<i>spatial Theme</i>	<i>participant</i>	
	<i>Theme</i>	
THEME		RHEME

Also, even though Downing has actually hinted (1991:126) that in her studies, “circumstantial prompted to Subject... functions as a participant, rather than a circumstantial”, it would be hard to consider the circumstantial adjunct as one participant in example (1a):

(1a-ii) In the beginning		was the Word.
<i>participant Theme</i>		
THEME		RHEME

In the beginning can hardly be a participant of an act; it should be, under Downing’s classification, a theme at the circumstantial framework.

She has as well given that (in her example she used a ‘locative Subject’) circumstantial such as locative Subjects “represent the clause topic and, by extension, that of a larger stretch of discourse” (Downing 1991:134). Downing has not elaborate very much of this idea; and this idea, although retains circumstantial adjuncts as theme, does not help analyze the markedness of this kind of clauses. In other words, Downing’s analysis of Theme does not give the same effect as Halliday’s displaced theme does:

(1a-i)	In the beginning	was the Word.
	<i>circumstantial + ideational</i>	<i>displaced</i>
	THEME	RHEME

The absence of displaced theme is marked, as proven above, and can be identified in Halliday’s studies.

In all, it is to emphasize that Downing’s approach to theme is systematic and clear in the understanding of theme. Nevertheless, the approach ignores too much a language’s flexibility and specialty, such as placing circumstantial adjunct as theme and subject of the clause; while Halliday’s approach has tried to allow possibilities of creativity of language. Although it is undeniable that Hallidayan approach to Theme does not cover all but just most of the possible cases in English, the uncovered cases are believed to be solved with refinement to the topic of “thematic equative”, which is waiting to be explored.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the whole study in fact suggests an interactional relationship between functional linguistics and biblical translation.

In the first part of the studies, we have identified through the study on thematic progression and rhetorical structure theory, how translators’ interpretations are different even when they are translating the same text; we have also see by investigating Processes in the texts, how readers’ comprehension is affected by translators’ own interpretations. These are suggesting that systemic functional linguistics helps concretize people’s perception that translations do vary; and it concretizes systematically in exactly what way translations differ from each other, such as the use of Themes, logic flow etc.

This part of the study has also suggested the use of Systemic Functional Linguistics on huge texts of religious readings – like the bible – can help easily integrate and compare different large piece of translations’ semantic selections that which version might be better understood.

The latter part of the study on Downing’s alternative approach to theme indicates the great value of the huge bible translation text towards functional linguistics. It is from the texts that we have identified the importance and flexibility of English language. It also concludes for us that circumstantial adjuncts as theme is marked and should be put as ideational theme when interpreting a text, it is what a clause can be about, it can also be “the point of departure” taking us to another relevant point in our process of construing experience.

In all, the study aims to highlight the effect of translations on readers especially in an influential reading like the Bible, to suggest possible investigation on translation through systemic functional linguistics, and to link closely functional linguistics to bible translation, for authorizing translation of the Bible is not only on how close it is to the original text, but also to explain in what way they are close.

5. References

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6. Appendices

Figure 6.1. Clause Division of New King James Version

John 1 (King James Version)

John 1

1a [1In the beginning was the Word,) 1b [and the Word was with God,) 1c [and the Word was God.]

2 [2The same was in the beginning with God.]

3a [3All things were made by him;) 3b [and without him was not any thing made that was made.]

4a [4In him was life;) 4b [and the life was the light of men.]

5a [5And the light shineth in darkness;) 5b [and the darkness comprehended it not.]

6a [6There was a man sent from God, 6b [whose name was John.]

7a [7The same came for a witness,) 7b [to bear witness of the Light,) 7c [that all men through him might believe.]

8a [8He was not that Light, 8b [but was sent to bear witness of that Light.]

9a [9That was the true Light, 9b [which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.]

10a [10He was in the world,) 10b [and the world was made by him,) 10c [and the world knew him not.]

11a [11He came unto his own,) 11b [and his own received him not.]

12 [12But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

13Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.]

13a [14And the Word was made flesh,) 13b [and dwelt among us, 13c [(and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,)] 13b [full of grace and truth.]

Figure 6.2. Clause Division of New International Version

John 1 (New International Version)

John 1

The Word Became Flesh

[1a] [¹In the beginning was the Word,] [1b] [and the Word was with God,] [1c] [and the Word was God.] [2] [²He was with God in the beginning.]

[3a] [³Through him all things were made;] [3b] [without him nothing was made that has been made.] [4a] [⁴In him was life,] [4b] [and that life was the light of men.] [5a] [⁵The light shines in the darkness,] [5b] [but the darkness has not understood^[a] it.]

[6a] [⁶There came a man who was sent from God;] [6b] [his name was John.] [7a] [⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light,] [7b] [so that through him all men might believe.] [8a] [⁸He himself was not the light;] [8b] [he came only as a witness to the light.] [9] [⁹The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.]^[b]

[10] [¹⁰He was in the world,] [10a] [and though the world was made through him,] [10b] [the world did not recognize him.]] [11a] [¹¹He came to that which was his own,] [11b] [but his own did not receive him.] [12] [¹²Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent,^[c] nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.]

[13a] [¹⁴The Word became flesh] [13b] [and made his dwelling among us.] [14a] [We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,^[d] [14b] [who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.]]

Figure 6.3. Clause Division of the Message

John 1 (The Message)

John 1

The Life-Light

1a [¹⁻² The Word was first,]

1b [the Word present to God,]

1c [God present to the Word.]

2a [The Word was God,
in readiness for God from day one.]

3a [³⁻⁵ Everything was created through him;]

3b [nothing—not one thing!—
came into being without him.]

4a [What came into existence was Life,]

4b [and the Life was Light to live by.]

5a [The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;]

5b [the darkness couldn't put it out.]

6a [⁶⁻⁸ There once was a man, his name John,] 6b [sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light.] 7 He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in.] 8a [John was not himself the Light;] 8b [he was there to show the way to the Light.]

9 [⁹⁻¹³ The Life-Light was the real thing:

9a Every person entering Life
he brings into Light.]

10a [He was in the world,]

10b [the world was there through him,]

10c [and yet the world didn't even notice.]

11a [He came to his own people,]

11b [but they didn't want him.]

12 [But whoever did want him,
who believed he was who he claimed
and would do what he said,

He made to be their true selves,
their child-of-God selves.]

13 [These are the God-begotten,
not blood-begotten,
not flesh-begotten,
not sex-begotten.]

14a [¹⁴ The Word became flesh and blood,]

14b [and moved into the neighborhood.]

15 We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.

Figure 6.4. Thematic Progression of New King James Version

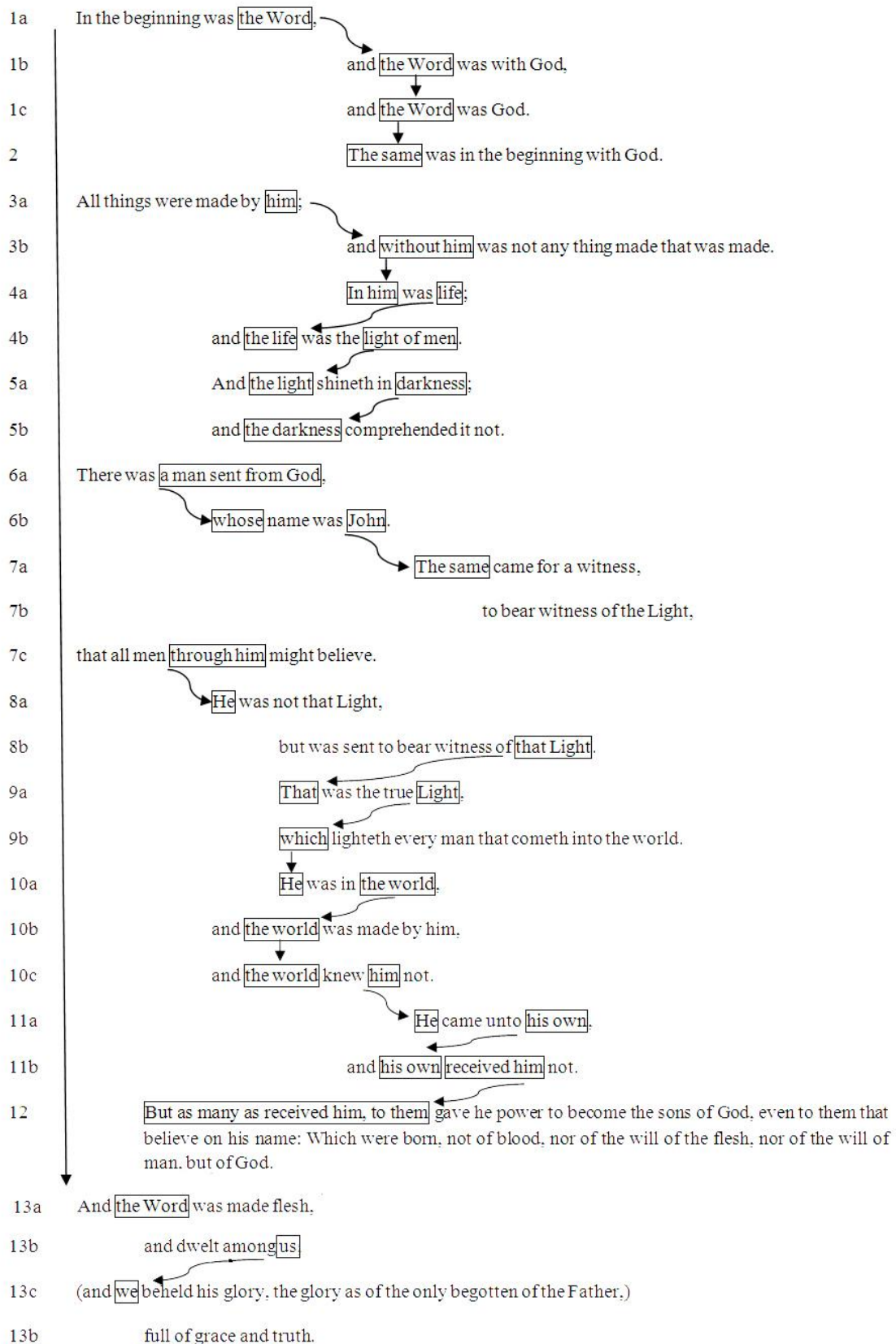


Figure 6.5. Thematic Progression of New International Version

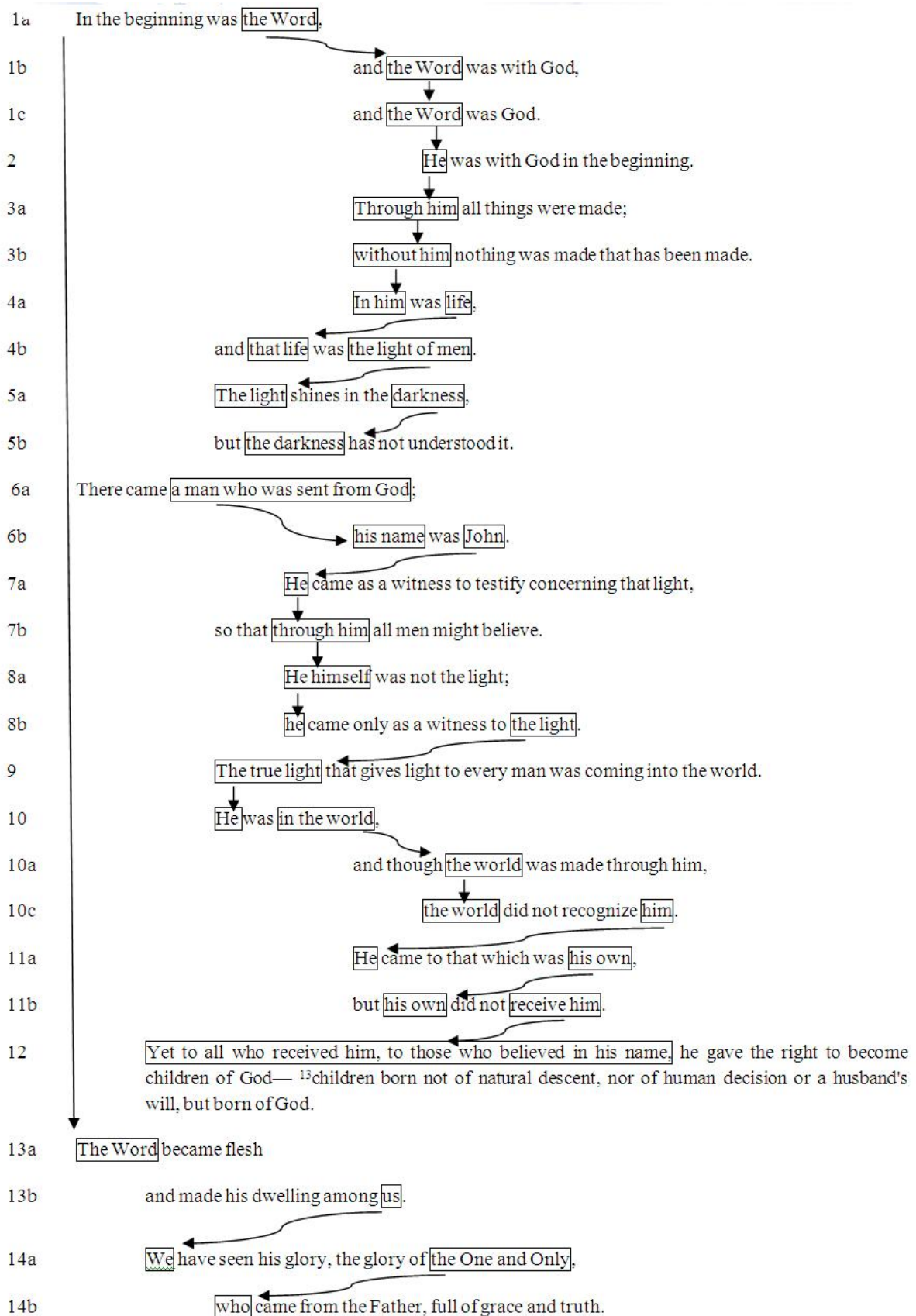


Figure 6.6. Thematic Progression of the Message

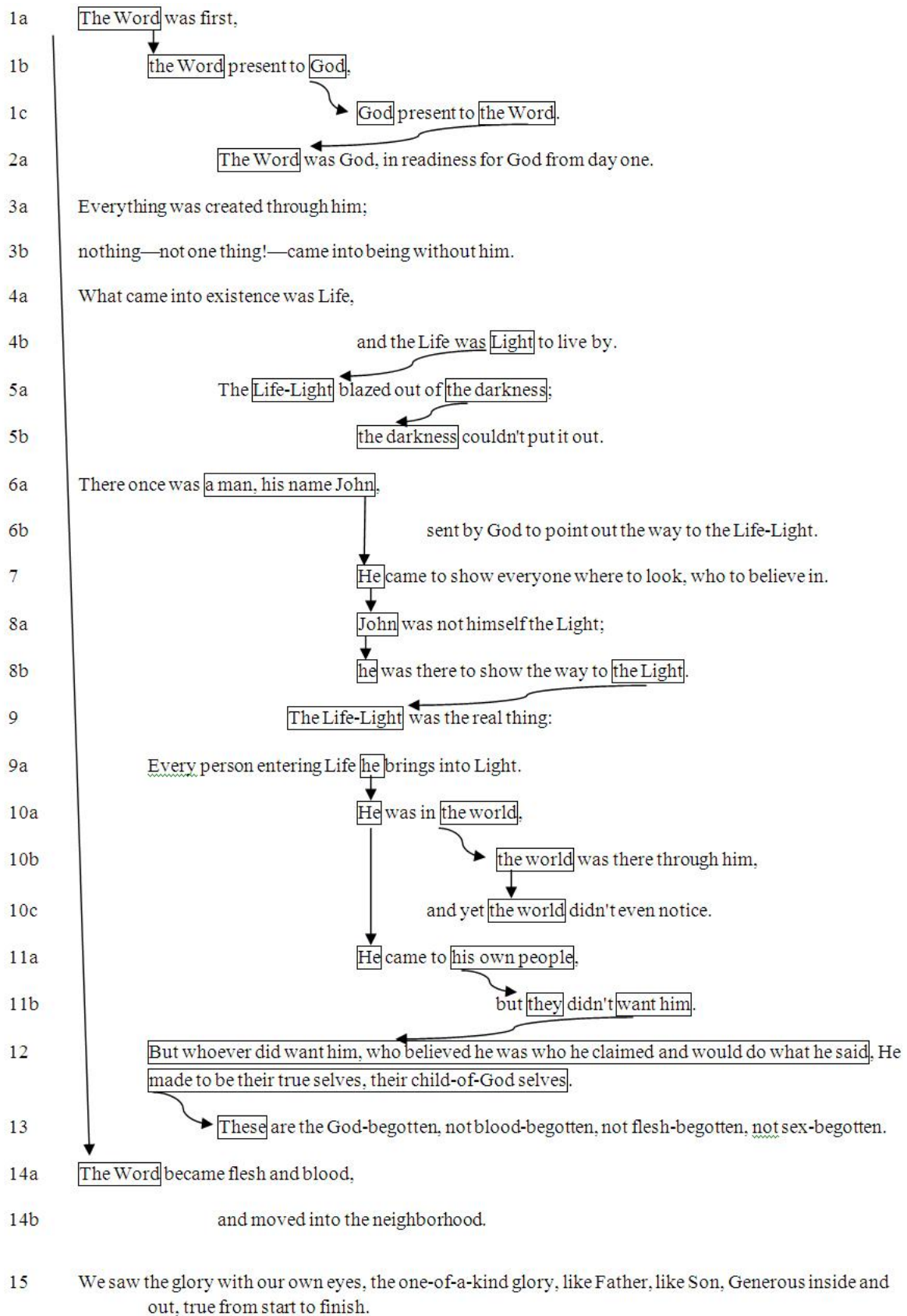


Figure 6.7. Rhetorical Structure of New King James Version

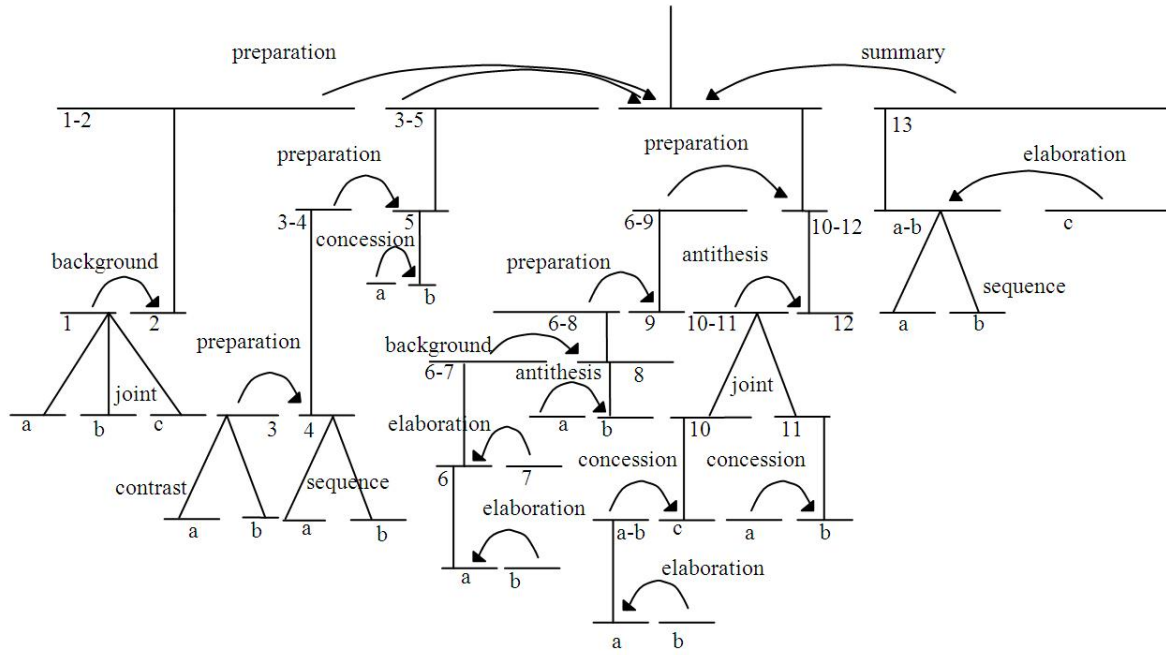


Figure 6.8. Rhetorical Structure of New International Version

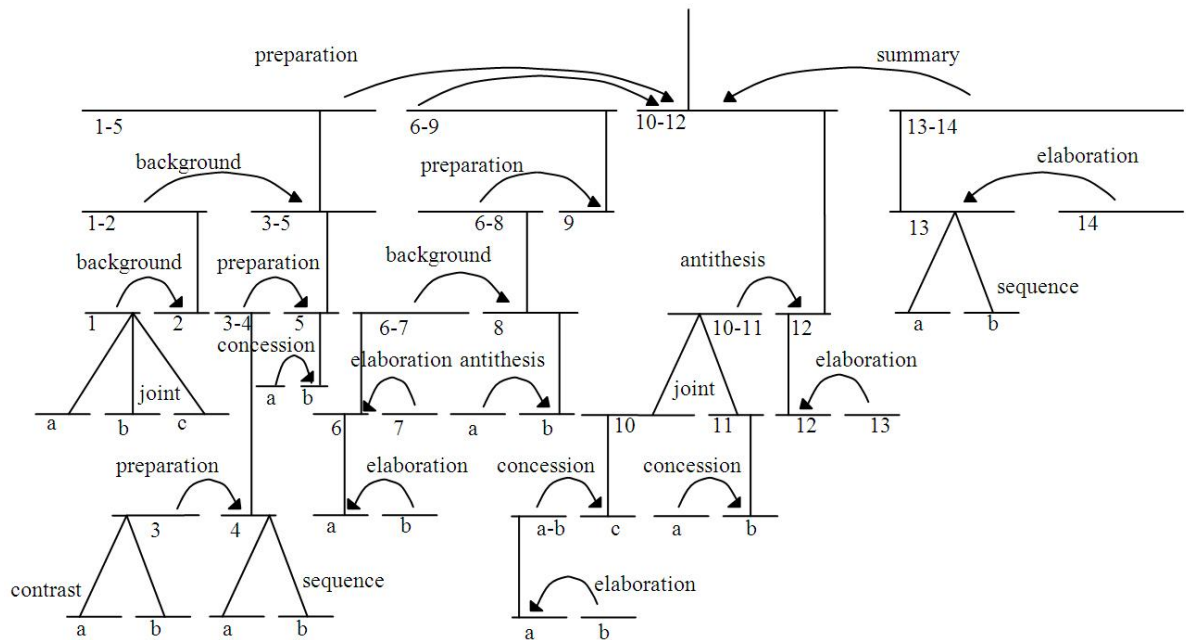


Figure 6.9. Rhetorical Structure of the Message

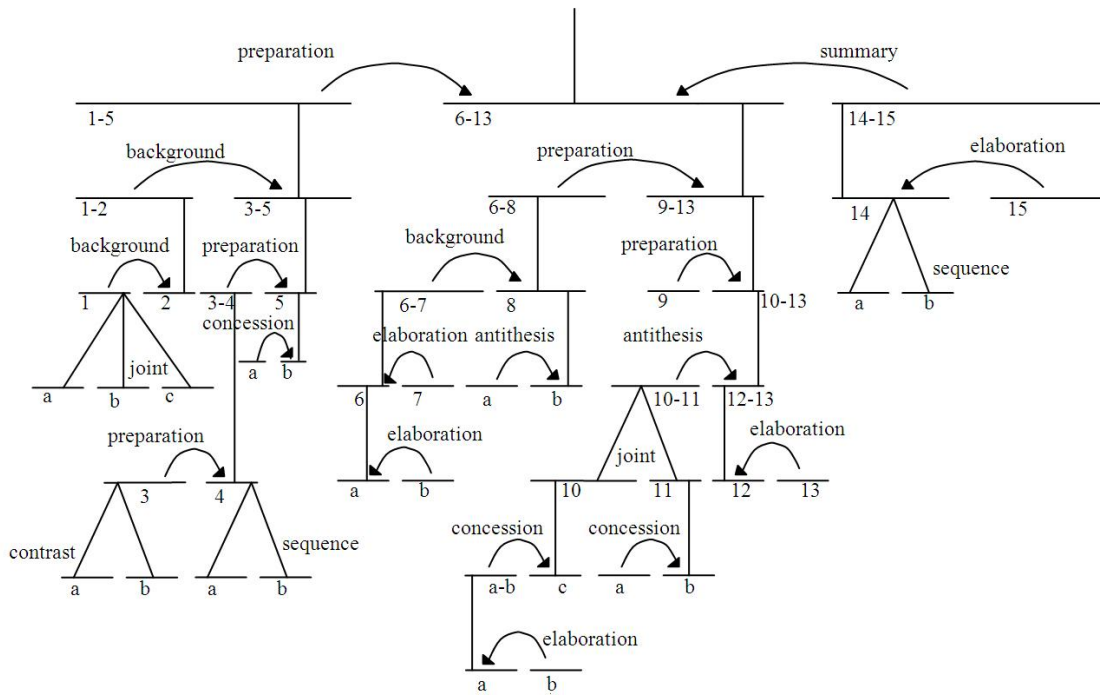


Table 6.10. Integrated Theme-Rheme-Process Table for the Three Versions

Table x.1 NKJ:1; NIV:1, MSG:1

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
1a			In the beginning		was	the Word	In the beginning was the Word,
1b	and		the Word		was	with God	and the Word was with God,
1c	and		the Word		was	God	and the Word was God.
1a			In the beginning		was	the Word	In the beginning was the Word,
1b	and		the Word		was	with God	and the Word was with God,
1c	and		the Word		was	God	and the Word was God.
1a			The Word		was	first	The Word was first,
1b			the Word		present	to God	the Word present to God,
1c			God		present	to the Word	God present to the Word.

Table x.2 NKJ:2; NIV:2; MSG:2

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
2			The same		was	in the beginning with God	The same was in the beginning with God.
2			He		was	with God in the beginning	He was with God in the beginning.
2			The Word		was	God, in readiness for God from day one	The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one.

Table x.3 NKJ:3; NIV:3; MSG:3

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
3a			All things		were made	by him	All things were made by him;
3b	and		without him		was not	any thing made that was made	and without him was not any thing made that was made.
3a			Through him	all things	were made		Through him all things were made;
3b			without him	nothing	was made	that has been made	without him nothing was made that has been made.
3a			Everything		was created	through him	Everything was created through him;
3b			nothing— not one thing		came	into being without him	nothing—not one thing!— came into being without him.

Table x.4 NKJ:4; NIV:4; MSG:4

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
4a			In him		was	life	In him was life;
4b	and		the life		was	the light of men	and the life was the light of men.
4a			In him		was	life	In him was life,
4b	and		that life		was	the light of men	and that life was the light of men.
4a			What came into existence		was	Life	What came into existence was Life,
4b	and		the Life		was	Light to live by	and the Life was Light to live by.

Table x.5 NKJ:5; NIV:5; MSG:5

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
5a	And		the light		shineth	in darkness	And the light shineth in darkness;
5b	and		the darkness		comprehended	it not	and the darkness comprehended it not.
5a			The light		shines	in the darkness	The light shines in the darkness,
5b	but		the darkness		has not understood	It	but the darkness has not understood it.
5a			The Life-Light		blazed	out of the darkness	The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
5b			the darkness		couldn't put	it out	the darkness couldn't put it out.

Table x.6 NKJ:6; NIV:6; MSG:6

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
6a			There		was	a man sent from God	There was a man sent from God
6b			whose name		was	John	whose name was John.
6a			There		came	a man who was sent from God	There came a man who was sent from God;
6b			his name		was	John	his name was John.
6a			There		was	once was a man, his name John,	There once was a man, his name John,
6b			(ellipsis 'John')		sent	by God to point out the way...	sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light.

Table x.7 NKJ:7; NIV:7; MSG:7

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
7a			The same		came	for a witness	The same came for a witness,
7b	Clause complex (clause 7a theme as theme)						to bear witness of the Light,
7c	that		all men		might	through him might believe	that all men through him might believe.
7a			He		came	as a witness to testify concerning that light	He came as a witness to testify concerning that light,
7b	so that		through him	all men	might believe		so that through him all men might believe.
7			He		came	to show everyone where to...	He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in.

Table x.8 NKJ:8; NIV:8; MSG:8

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
8a			He		was not	that Light	8He was not that Light,
8b	but		(ellipsis 'He' in 8a)		was sent	to bear witness of that Light	but was sent to bear witness of that Light.
8a			He himself		was not	the light	He himself was not the light;
8b			he		came	only as a witness to the light	he came only as a witness to the light.
8a			John		was not	himself the Light;	John was not himself the Light;
8b			he		was	there to show the way to the Light.	he was there to show the way to the Light.

Table x.9 NKJ:9; NIV:9; MSG:9

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
9a			That		was	the true light	That was the true light,
9b			which		lighteth	every man that cometh...	which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.
9			The true light that gives light to every man		was coming	into the world	The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.
9			The Life-Light		was	the real thing	The Life-Light was the real thing:
9a			Every person entering Life	he	brings	into Light	Every person entering Life he brings into Light.

Table x.10 NKJ:10; NIV:10; MSG:10

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
10a			He		was	in the world	He was in the world,
10b	and		the world		was made	by him,	and the world was made by him,
10c	and		the world		knew	him not.	and the world knew him not.
10			He		was	in the world	He was in the world.
10a	and though		the world		was made	through him	and though the world was made through him
10b			the world		did not recognize	him	the world did not recognize him.
10a			He		was	in the world	He was in the world,
10b			the world		was	there through him,	the world was there through him,
10c	and yet		the world		didn't notice	didn't even notice	and yet the world didn't even notice

Table x.11 NKJ:11; NIV:11; MSG:11

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
11a			He		came unto	his own,	He came unto his own
11b	and		his own		received	him not.	and his own received him not.
11a			He		came	to that which was his own	He came to that which was his own
11b	but		his own		did not receive	him	but his own did not receive him.
11a			He		came	to his own people	He came to his own people,
11b	but		they		didn't want	him	but they didn't want him.

Table x.12 NKJ:12; NIV:12; MSG:12-13

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
*12	but		as many as received him, to them		gave	he power to become the sons of God...	But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.
12			Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name	he	gave	the right to become children of God- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision..	Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.
12	But		whoever did want him, who... said...	he	made	to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves	But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed, and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.
13			These		are	the God-begotten...	These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.

Table x.13 NKJ:13; NIV:13; MSG:14

CL #	Theme				Rheme		Clause
	Textual	Interpersonal	Ideational	Displaced	Process		
*13a	And		the Word		was made	flesh,	And the Word was made flesh,
*13b	and		(ellipsis 'the Word')		dwelt	among us,	and dwelt among us, (13c), full of grace and truth
13c	and		we		beheld	his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,	and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father
13a			The Word		became	flesh	The Word became flesh,
13b	and		(ellipsis 'the Word')		made	his dwelling among us.	and made his dwelling among us.
14a			We		have seen	his glory, the glory of the One and Only	We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,
14b			who		came	from the Father...	who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
14a			The Word		became	flesh and blood	The Word became flesh and blood,
14b	and		(ellipsis 'the Word')		moved		
15			We		saw	the glory with...	We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

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