In 1993 Stanley E. Porter wrote an article suggesting that New Testament Greek word order was an unexplored area of Greek linguistics and sought to make some initiatory suggestions, using Philippians as a case study. Unfortunately, not much progress has been made since then, largely due in my estimation to the inability to search for syntactic patterns across large portions of New Testament text. The studies that have been produced have been limited to particular books, most of which—at least in terms of syntactic analysis—have been investigated manually, without the use of annotated corpora, not least because syntactically annotated corpora have not been available until recently. Porter’s study of word order and clause structure is limited to (mostly) Philippians. Martín-Asensio’s study is restricted to Acts 27. Spencer focuses on three short Pauline passages. Maloney’s work is confined to Mark’s Gospel. Davidson’s morpho-syntactic analysis of word order examines (mostly) Romans, Luke and Epictetus since a lot of the significant syntactic work had to be done by hand. Even the quite recent study by Kwong had to limit its analysis to Luke, in which syntactic patterns were identified and counted by hand. The same scenario prevails in classics. Dover restricted his study to Herodotus and selected documentary inscriptions. Dunn and Dik also focus on Herodotus. The obvious limitation

---


here is that syntactic patterns may very well turn out to be constrained by issues of register and genre variation so that generalizations for an entire corpus or language are difficult to make based upon analysis of a single discourse or small collection of texts. Levisohn attempts to overcome this difficulty by selecting individual passages from various New Testament genres and authors, but this hardly results in a convincing, leveled analysis of constituent structure throughout the New Testament since his criteria for selecting the relevant passages are not evident.4

One might think that we may be able to make progress here by collaborating results of previous work on individual New Testament or classical works so that generalizations regarding syntactic patterning could be made, but the issue is further complicated by the fact that the available studies approach the text from the standpoint of differing methodologies. Traditional grammarians typically begin under the assumption of a “normal” or “basic” word order and speak about variations in light of the preconceived pattern.5 Others start with patterns of statistical frequency.6 There is also the issue of differing methodological frameworks and aims. Some employ linguistic typology in order to assess ancient Greek in light of so-called word order universals, showing the points of contact and divergence with other languages.7 Martín-Asensio explores clause structure in light of Halliday’s transitivity network and the implications for foregrounding. Spencer is concerned with issues of style and follows Robertson’s analysis, for the most part. Maloney uses Semitic syntax criticism to explain word order variation

Dik, Word Order in Ancient Greek: A Pragmatic Account of Word Order Variation in Herodotus (ASCP; Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1995).


5 E.g. BDF, § 472; G.B. Winer, A Treatise on the Grammar of the New Testament (trans. W.F. Moulton; 3rd ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882), 684–685. Levinsohn, Discourse Features, 17, begins with verb-initial structures as the basic pragmatic order. Robertson expresses skepticism toward understanding patterns in Greek clause structure in general. Criticizing Blass’s “normal” VSO order, he says: “Blass even undertakes to suggest a tentative scheme thus: predicator, subject, object, complementary participle, etc. But Winer rightly remarks that he would be an empirical expositor who would insist on any unalterable rule in the Greek sentence save that of spontaneity.” But as Radney observes, Robertson is inconsistent at this point since he says that emphasis is a guiding principle in syntactic organization in the very next paragraph. See Randolph Radney, “Some Factors that Influence Fronting in Koine Clauses,” OPTAT 3 (1988): 4. Dover’s observation that some words almost never begin clauses—like postpositives, for example—also goes against this claim. See Dover, Greek Word Order, 12.

6 Dover, Greek Word Order.