1 Introduction

Hierarchy in language is a well-known and widely recognized phenomenon. As Longacre states, like all valid notions in linguistics, hierarchy is a ‘traditional notion. People have talked about words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and discourses for a long time’ (Longacre 1976, 257). All of these notions may have been discussed in linguistics, but various schools of thought have chosen to emphasize different levels of the hierarchy. As a result, just because a notion has longstanding recognition does not mean that its meaning or function is transparent or obvious. This applies to virtually every level or rank of the linguistic hierarchy noted above, from the word, to the clause or sentence, and to levels beyond, such as the paragraph or discourse. The ancients were perceptive enough to recognize smaller units, such as words, but did not move much beyond this in their theorizing or analysis (see Robins 1979, 10ff.). Consequently, linguistics on the whole has had a complex relationship with units larger than the sentence, in part because of the ambiguous roles of meaning and structure in language (see Longacre 1976, 108). Because recognition of smaller units seems intuitively self-evident, modern study has concentrated upon these units, in some instances to the point of either dismissing or outright rejecting discussion beyond the sentence, rather than exploring units larger than the sentence, such as paragraphs.

This paper recognizes that, despite the lack of attention given to larger-level units, the notion of the paragraph merits study in terms of both ancient practice and modern theory. As will be shown below, despite conflicting notions regarding the paragraph in linguistic thought, there are a number of common features that can be identified. Furthermore, there is abundant evidence of an intuitive notion of the paragraph being used in ancient documents, and with
some close scrutiny, one can perceive at least some of the motivating theoretical nature of paragraph differentiation. This paper will summarize what has been said in recent linguistic thought regarding the paragraph, and then scrutinize a representative ancient manuscript in terms of its paragraph structure. To anticipate what I will say below, the notion of the paragraph is problematic, but I believe that examination of ancient practice may help us to gain insight into the continuing contentious nature of the paragraph.

2 Definition of the Paragraph

In recent linguistic thought the paragraph is neither clearly defined nor structurally well-analyzed. For the most part, the paragraph has been bracketed out of discussion in recent linguistic exploration. For example, the entire four volumes of the Cambridge linguistics survey does not have a single entry in any of the four indexes for ‘paragraph’ (e.g. Newmeyer 1988). R.L. Trask’s (1993) dictionary of grammatical terms also does not include an entry for paragraph. This situation is in large part because the paragraph is seen to be a phenomenon – if it has phenomenological status at all, which is part of the debate – that is beyond or outside the sentence (or, clause complex), and the sentence is the largest unit of analysis or structure in most linguistic discussion (e.g. Harland 1993, 43-4). Kenneth Pike (1967, 147; cf. 485) in his unified theory notes that linguists such as Noam Chomsky and Zellig Harris limit language and syntax to the sentence – a view with which he (in clearly what has amounted to a minority opinion) disagrees.¹ In fact, Pike goes further and states that the sentence ‘is a totally inadequate starting or ending point. Sentences themselves cannot be analyzed without reference to higher-level relationships’ (Pike 1967, 147).² Pike, however, only later attempted to define the paragraph in syntactical-like terms (Pike & Pike 1977). Recent thought in the Chomskyan framework continues to endorse such a restrictive analysis. For example, James McCawley’s recent syntax disputes claims that the paragraph exists as a syntactical

¹Even some discourse analysts take this position. See, e.g., Coulthard & Montgomery 1981, 1-13, esp. 8; Coulthard & Brazil 1981, 82-106, esp. 87.

²Note that Pike 1967, 147, 485, comments that Harris, despite his statements to the contrary, also endorsed the discourse as the largest unit for distributional analysis.