Greek Syntax & the Trinity

Mike Aubrey

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Over the past months, I have been, off and on, studying and writing about discontinuous syntax in Hellenistic/Koine Greek, blogging through A. M. Devine and Laurence D. Stephens' *Discontinuous Syntax: Hyperbaton in Greek*. One of the challenges in such study involves knowing how regular, continuous noun phrases function. One cannot make claims about the meaning and function of discontinuous NPs when one does not understand the continuous ones. Luckily, DS provides an extremely helpful summary of such phrases in Classical Greek. Thus, it was only a matter of determining whether their claims would hold for 1st century Greek.

So what does this have to do with the Trinity? Basically, there are a number places where knowing how Greek Noun Phrase word order functions sheds light upon how we should view the development of Christian's believe in the Trinity in the New Testament. What follows, then, is an overview of Greek continuous noun phrases based on the work of DS. And then we will examine the implications of noun phrase word order on the Holy Spirit's relationship to the Father and the Son and his status from the perspective of the Gospel of Matthew and likely even Jesus, himself.

Adjective Usage and their Relation to the Noun

DS makes a distinction between two uses of the adjective: Descriptive versus Restrictive. For the most part, these two terms are self explanatory. Restrictive adjectives are those with limit the reference of a given noun with the implication that there is another similar noun with a different quality or trait. Descriptive adjectives merely express a property of the noun with no suggestion as to whether there was another possible reference. Restrictive adjective usage suggests a choice. In the sentence, "Jane had dinner with John's best brother," the adjective "younger" could be either restrictive or descriptive depending on how many brothers John had. If John has only one, it is descriptive, but if he has more than one, then the context restricts the meaning of the adjective to refer to one brother over against the other. If we were to say, "Jane had dinner with John's best friend." The adjective "best" necessitates a restrictive reading because it implies that John does indeed have other friends.

The claim DS makes for Classical Greek is that restrictive adjectives tend to neutrally occur in the postnominal position while descriptive adjectives tend to occur in the prenominal position. They confirm their analysis of the Classical Greek data on the basis of similar phenomena in other languages that allow both prenominal and postnominal adjectives, such as French, Italian, and Modern Greek where we find the same structures.

To test whether these conclusions were viable for the New Testament, I have performed two searches across the New Testament for modifiers from a single semantic domain from Louw and Nida, one for prenominal modifiers and one for postnominal modifiers. The goal was to chose a semantic domain that would lend itself to a restrictive usage rather than descriptive. To that end,

Domain 11, "Groups and Classes of Persons and Members of Such Groups and Classes," was chosen.[1]

The results are rather astounding.[2] A total of 115 instances of modifiers from Domain 11 are found and only 9 of these appear in a prenominal position. Of these, one of them is descriptive rather than restrictive. There are also four that, while they have possible meanings in Domain 11, the particular occurrences does not have them functioning in Domain 11.[3] These are seen in example (3) below. The first two, joined by καὶ, modify the same noun.

(1)   ἐπιλαβόμενοί τε αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸν **Ἄρειον** *Πάγον* ἤγαγον

      And they brought him to the Areopagus [lit. **Ares'** *Hill*] Acts 17.19

This sort of modifier usage with Πάγον (hill) would normally be restrictive, but in this case, usage had become so stereo typed that the modifier is only descriptive, the proper name of a particular location.

The other eight instances are restrictive in nature. A few representative examples are below.

(2)   τινὲς δὲ καὶ τῶν **Ἐπικουρείων** καὶ **Στοϊκῶν** *φιλοσόφων* συνέβαλλον αὐτῷ

      Some of the **Epicurean** and **Stoic** *Philosophers* engaged in discussion with him. Acts 17:18.

(3)   ψυχὴν δικαίαν **ἀνόμοις** *ἔργοις* ἐβασάνιζεν

      He was tormented in his righteous soul by their **lawless** *deeds*. 2 Pet 2:8

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[1] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition; New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989), 1:119-135. The reasoning behind this choice was the claim, "[T]he neutral position for restrictive adjectives is postnominal. This is particularly so for intersective adjectives; these are prototypically simple properties denoting an extensional class determined for the most part independently of the noun they modify; for instance, adjectives of … nationality" (DS, 20). This claim seems intuitionally accurate. If one is described as being a member of a particular class, more likely than not there will be another class that is then implicitly rejected.

[2] It must be acknowledge that statistics must be used with caution, particularly by those who have not been trained in statistical analysis, such as myself.

[3] Specifically, they were all instances of the word ἀλλότριος, with typically means "other" or "another," but can carry the Domain 11 meaning, "stranger" in some contexts. The Lexham Greek-English Interlinear tags only three instances of this word as having the meaning "stranger" in John 10:5 (2); Heb 11:9. In each case, the word is used as a substantive rather than a modifier.

(4)   ἀλλ’ ἡ **τελεία** *ἀγάπη* ἔξω βάλλει τὸν φόβον

　　But **perfect** *love* casts out fear. 1 John 4:18

It is examples like this and their relation to hyperbaton that is the focus of the rest of the chapter for DS. If restrictive adjectives by default appear postnominally, why is it that they are placed before the noun here?

　　The answer from DS is that it's a question of pragmatic focus. When there is no focus on the adjective or when there is only a broad focus on the entire phrase ("A BLACK CAT walked into the room;" as opposed to a brown dog, with focus on the entire NP), the restrictive adjective will appear after the noun. When there is a narrow focus on the adjective (A BLACK cat walked into the room;" as opposed to a white cat, with focus placed narrowly in the adjective), the restrictive adjective will precede the noun.[4]

　　But how does this fit with our previously examples; repeated below as example 14-16?

(5)   τινὲς δὲ καὶ τῶν **Ἐπικουρείων** καὶ **Στοϊκῶν** *φιλοσόφων* συνέβαλλον αὐτῷ

　　Some of the **Epicurean** and **Stoic** *Philosophers* engaged in discussion with him. Acts 17:18.

(6)   ψυχὴν δικαίαν **ἀνόμοις** *ἔργοις* ἐβασάνιζεν

　　He was tormented in his righteous soul by their **lawless** *deeds*. 2 Pet 2:8

(7)   ἀλλ’ ἡ **τελεία** *ἀγάπη* ἔξω βάλλει τὸν φόβον

　　But **perfect** *love* casts out fear. 1 John 4:18

In example (14), it is clear that we have a restrictive, narrow focus on the words "Epicurean and Stoic". Luke is intentionally highlighting these specific philosophical schools. This understanding is confirmed in commentaries. "The mention of these schools is not incidental. Paul would take up

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[4] This fits with what I have written previously about Adjective word orderings, HERE. But it also does not mean that all prenominal adjectives are restrictive with a narrow focus. As noted previously, descriptive adjectives will appear pronominally as well. This fact fits well with the comment by Dr. Rich Rhodes HERE.

some of their thought in his Areopagus speech, particularly that of the Stoics, and thoroughly redirect it in line with the Creator God of the Old Testament."[5] Likewise in example (15), ἀνόμοις explicitly has a narrow focus, contrasting it with the adjective δικαίαν. This same explicitness is seen in (16). The entire verse is says,

(8) φόβος οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἀλλ᾽ ἡ **τελεία** ἀγάπη ἔξω βάλλει τὸν φόβον

There is no fear in *love*, but **perfect** *love* casts out fear.

The first half makes a claim about love in general, while the second puts the focus specifically on God's love, which is perfect or complete. B. R. Westcott, intuitively recognized the distinctiveness of the construction in his commentary on John's Epistles, "The arrangement ἡ τελ. ἀγ., which is common, for example, in 2 Pet., is unique in the Epistle…. It expresses a shade of meaning, as distinct from ἡ ἀγ. ἡ τελ., which is evidently appropriate here."[6]

There is one other similar construction in the New Testament that can be explained by means of the thesis formulated by DS, shown in example (18)

(9) τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην

"Righteousness of God" Rom 10:3

This particular construction is not discussed specifically by DS, but deserves discussion here, since its rather frequent in Koine Greek.[7] The genitive modifier Noun Phrases normally occur postnominally. This is a rather undisputable fact and easily documented. But what is interesting, in light of DS's description of postnominal adjectives as typically restrictive rather than descriptive, Stanley Porter's discussion of the genitive case in his grammar. "*[T]he essential semantic feature of the*

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[5] John B. Polhill, *Acts* (NAC 26; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 367.
[6] Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text With Notes and Essays* (4th ed.; London: Macmillan, 1902), 159.
[7] Occurring 1322 times in the New Testament, LXX, Apostolic Fathers, Philo, and Josephus.

genitive case is restriction.[8] On the assumption that this claim is correct, the logical result is that in the numerous places where a genitive NP occurs between an article and its noun, the genitive NP has narrow focus. And example (19) shows this to be explicitly true with Rom 10:3 quoted in full.

(10) ἀγνοοῦντες γὰρ τὴν **τοῦ θεοῦ** δικαιοσύνην καὶ τὴν **ἰδίαν** [δικαιοσύνην] ζητοῦντες στῆσαι, τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ὑπετάγησαν

Since they did not know **God's** *righteousness* and they sought to establish **their own** *righteousness*, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Rom 10:3.

Whether the variant in brackets is accepted as original or not, there is an explicit contrast between righteousness that is God's and righteous that is not God's.[9] Thus, Paul places the genitive NP, τοῦ θεοῦ, in the narrow focused position.

Exegetical Implications of Continuous Noun Phrase Focus

So then, what does all of this have to do with the Holy Spirit and the Trinity? The answer to that question is rather simple. The ordering of adjectives and nouns described above has significant implications for how we are to understand the orderings of πνεῦμα and ἅγιος the New Testament.

Now for review, the three basic claims made by DS describe above are:

- Descriptive adjectives (i.e. predictable adjectives: green grass, tall tower, etc.) occur prenominally (= 1st attributive position) when unmarked.

- Restrictive adjectives (adjectives that restrict the referent: black cat; fat man, etc.) occur postnominally (=2nd attributive position) when unmarked.

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[8]Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1999), 92 (italics his).
[9] The case actually grows stronger if the bracketed reading is accepted because then we have two focussed position modifiers: the τοῦ θεοῦ and then ἰδίαν.

- Marked restrictive adjectives either occur prenominally directly in front of the noun or even more marked in front of the preceding word creating a discontinuous Noun Phrase.

What do these conclusions mean for the Holy Spirit? Of the 84 occurrences πνεῦμα being modified by ἅγιος in the NT, 69 of them occurred with ἅγιος in the postnominal/2nd attributive position.

This suggests that the majority of occurrences of Holy Spirit are restrictive. The authors are using ἅγιος to refer to a specific Spirit - the Holy one. The implication for the discussion of whether to capitalize "holy spirit" would be to dig through those 69 occurrences. But probably more interesting are the other 15 instances.

In 12 of the occurrences, ἅγιος appear prenominally/1st attributive and one in particular jumps out rather quickly:

(11) πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit… Matthew 28:19

The first example at Matthew 28:19 is interesting. Contextually, there's no reason to conclude that the adjective ἅγιος is both restrictive and focused. For one, if it is focused, typically there would be a contrast drawn between this holy spirit and another less than holy spirit or something similar. There is none. It cannot be restrictive without focus because the adjective is prenominal. Thus, a descriptive understanding of it is best here.

The implication of this is that the Holy Spirit is a well known entity in the early Church by the time the Gospel of Matthew was written. Descriptive adjectives express known information that is relevant

So if ἅγιος is descriptive here, then the holiness of the spirit is something that everyone knows and recognizes. So then, the holiness of the Spirit is a well known trait and that it's a trait that Matthew considers important in the context. The adjective's importance makes sense in light of the other nouns in the clause: the Father and the Son.

Perhaps a Trinitarian understanding of God was in the works at the time of, if not before Matthew was written. And if this particular saying of Jesus is authentic - and I think it is - we have a Trinity being described by Jesus himself.

Mike Aubrey is the author of the blog ΕΝ ΕΦΕΣΩ. He holds a degree in Biblical languages from Moody Bible Institute and is currently pursuing graduate studies in linguistics & exegesis. His primary interests include linguistics, particularly formal syntax and morphology with their application to Hellenistic Greek, but also hermeneutics and translation theory.