

Where do you draw the line? or, What practical difference can discourse studies make?

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During the many years when Euan Fry and I worked together on the two series of *The Bible Translator*, I cannot remember our having ever disagreed about anything—and that was not only because we lived on opposite sides of the globe. On the contrary, I greatly appreciated Euan’s ability to make unclear writing clear, and technical writing practical. It is therefore a special pleasure to contribute to this issue in his honour

In earlier times, linguists tended to concentrate on grammar, that is, on the structure of sentences and words within them. More recently, linguists have turned their attention to the analysis of discourse, that is, the structure of texts above the level of the sentence. I am not a linguist, but I learned a lot from linguists during my years as a UBS translation consultant. Now, in retirement, I am realising how much more I still have to learn from them.

The purpose of this article is therefore strictly limited. It will not attempt to say anything original about the value of discourse studies for the Bible. It will simply look at some places in Matthew where modern translators disagree about the division of the text into sections, and consider what practical help discourse features might offer in resolving such disagreements. More information on translators’ different solutions to the problem may be found in the Discourse Segmentation Apparatus in the 4th edition of the UBS Greek New Testament.

A few warnings are in order before we begin.

First, as is well known, the oldest NT manuscripts not only had no section headings: they had no punctuation at all. This means that in order to form some idea of the structure of the text, readers and hearers were for a long time entirely dependent on clues within the text itself, as hearers of the Bible still usually are.

Second, the writers and the first readers of the New Testament may not have assumed certain things that modern western readers take for granted. For example, modern western readers tend to expect that a well-written text will move steadily forward in one direction, and that each step forward will be clearly marked at a particular point—like the current paragraphs of this article, beginning “First,” “Second,” and so on. Ancient readers, and modern readers in some cultures, may on the contrary be quite comfortable about texts going round and round (perhaps until the receptors have got the point); transitions between one part and the next may be very gradual.

Third, modern translators may have various reasons for disagreeing about where to place section headings. It is possible, though in most cases unlikely, that they may themselves have carried out a detailed analysis of the text’s structure, and come to different conclusions. It is also possible that they may have assumed, or discovered by audience research, that the people for whom the translation was intended needed, or wanted, section headings to be placed with a certain average frequency. For example, a translation intended for people who do not read easily may need short sections, whereas a translation intended for well-educated readers, such as the Revised English Bible (REB), could have generally long sections. (At one point, the REB committee rejected a scheme of shorter sections, such as had been used in some editions of its predecessor the New English Bible). Again, the placing of section headings may be influenced by the requirements of a church lectionary, though one would hope that discourse considerations would be taken into account in preparing new or revised lectionaries.

One might expect the placing of section headings in Matthew to be rather easy, since Matthew is generally thought to be the best organised of the four NT Gospels. (Some have suggested that it was intended as a teaching manual.) Matthew gathers most of Jesus’ teaching into five groups: chs. 5.3–7.27 (known as the Sermon on the Mount); 10.5–42 (instructions to the twelve apostles); 13.3b–52 (parables about the kingdom of God); 18.3b–35 (personal relations, especially between believers); and 23.2–25.46 (warnings of judgement). Matthew clearly marks the end of each of these blocs of teaching with a formula: “When Jesus had finished saying these things ...” (8.1; 19.1; 26.1), or something similar: “After Jesus had

finished instructing his twelve disciples ..." (11.1); "When Jesus had finished these parables ..." (13.53). What could be clearer? (Quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from Today's New International Version, TNIV).

The problem with these formulas is, as we already indicated, that they are *transitions*; that is, they belong both to what precedes and what follows. It would in principle be possible to split some of them up; e.g., to adapt TNIV's translation of 18.35–19.1, and lay it out as follows:

18.35. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart." 19.1 So Jesus finished saying these things.

[Section heading]

Next, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea ...

We do not know of any published translation which does this. In this case, all the translations we have consulted for this purpose follow the traditional chapter division, and place some kind of section heading (in the case of the New Jerusalem Bible, NJB, a major division) at 19.1. It is more natural to link the introductions and conclusions with the passages of teaching which they frame, so that the five units would be 5.1–7.29; 10.1–11.1; 12.46–13.58; 17.24–19.2; 23.1–26.2. This principle is generally applied by GeCL, which opens new sections, not only at 8.1 (major division) and 14.1, but also at 11.2 and 19.3, though not at 26.3.

Discourse features supporting this option are as follows.

- (1) 19.1 begins *Kai egeneto* (Authorized Version, KJV: "And it came to pass"). *Kai* alone, at the beginning of a sentence, is so frequent in Matthew that it normally means only that the discourse is continuing; but *Kai egeneto* usually marks a fresh beginning.
- (2) At this point there is also a clear change from speech to narrative. This is linked to
- (3) a change of verb tense, from the future "will do" in 18.35 to the aorist "finished" in 19.1;
- (4) a change of location, from Galilee to Judea; and
- (5) a change in the subject of the main verb, from "my heavenly Father" to "Jesus"—so that the name "Jesus" is expressed in the text. It is, however, probable that the formula *kai egeneto hote etelesen ho Iesus (tous logous toutous* or an equivalent: literally "And it came to pass that when Jesus finished these words") always belongs with the preceding teaching. If so, it would follow that "And it came to pass that when Jesus finished *all* these words" (26.1) forms a general conclusion to the five blocs of teaching.

This example gives us a preliminary list of features that might generally indicate a break in the text, and thus justify the placing of a section heading, namely:

- (1) Sentence conjunction, or the absence of one (technically called asyndeton);
- (2) change from speech to narrative or vice versa;
- (3) change of verb tense (and/or mood);
- (4) change of location;
- (5) change of grammatical subject (of the main verb).

Other features might be added, e.g., (6) change of time ("real time," as opposed to grammatical tense) with use of some expression such as "After many days ..." Such expressions are however less frequent in Matthew than in some other books of the New Testament, such as Acts. But as we indicated, other features, such as a "Therefore," might point to continuity in the text, and weaken the argument for a section heading at that point.

It is tempting to think that these and similar features could simply be added up on a score card, with a score of (say) four or more points justifying a section heading. This could however be quite misleading, for various reasons. First, there is no reason to assume that all discourse features have equal weight. Second, within occurrences of each feature, the context may alter its weight. A change from speech to narrative is likely to be more significant at the end of a long speech, such as at 19.1, than in a rapid dialogue in which such changes are constantly made. Third, sentence conjunctions themselves normally

have different weights, with for example *alla* being equivalent to a strong “but,” and *de* at the beginning of a sentence sometimes meaning “but” and sometimes “or,” but most often indicating “low- to mid-level discontinuity” (Stephanie L. Black, *Sentence Conjunctions in the Gospel of Matthew*. London and N. Y.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, ch. 5).

Following Black’s lead, we shall take most of the following examples from narrative sections of Matthew, since speeches tend to follow different patterns. (For example, of the 37 occurrences of *alla*, the strong “but,” in Matthew, all but two, 16.12 and 27.24, are in speech.) But it is worth mentioning in passing that several translations open sections in the Sermon on the Mount at places where there are changes in person from singular to plural “you” (GeCL at 6.2; NJB at 6.7; and GeCL, TOB, and NJB at 7.6).

As in 18.35/19.1, translations differ about where to place a section heading at **13.53/54**:

⁵³When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there.

⁵⁴Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue ...

The Greek NT, followed by the Good News Translation (GNT), the *Bible en français courant* (FC), the *Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible* (TOB), the *Nouvelle Bible Segond* (NBS), and the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), places the heading before 13.53. On the one hand, this choice is supported by a change from speech to narrative, and by the backward-looking *ekeithen* “from there,” referring to the lakeside scene set in 13.1-2. On the other hand, v. 53a forms part of a concluding formula. The *Gute Nachricht Bibel* (GeCL) merely begins a paragraph at 13.53, and places a major section heading at 13.54, as does TOB. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) does not even open a new paragraph at 13.53, but starts a new section at 13.54. That verse merely begins with an unemphatic *kai*, but the change of location to Jesus’ “hometown” corresponds to a change of audience, from the generally neutral or friendly “crowd” in v. 36 to the more challenging “people in *their* synagogue” (our emphasis). On balance, it seems best to understand v. 53, like corresponding passages, as a conclusion to the preceding speech, and to place the section heading before v. 54.

Several translations (GeCL, NBS, TOB, NJB, and NRSV) begin a new section at **16.24**, where the Greek NT (followed by GNT and FC) does not mark even a new paragraph. (The Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*, NA27, which does not use section headings, does begin a new paragraph here.) In favour of the Greek NT’s decision is the fact that the verse forms part of a series of dialogues, either indirect (vv. 5-11) or direct (vv. 13-19, 22-28) between Jesus and his disciples, each of which ends with a relatively long speech by Jesus (vv. 8-11, 17-19, 24-28). None of the translations consulted divides the passage by placing a section heading before Jesus’ replies in vv. 8 or 17. Nor is there any change of location or participants. In favour of a division before v. 24 is the fact that the verse begins with the word *Tote*, often translated “then,” which according to Black, “may function ... on the level of discourse structure, for example, marking paragraphs within an episode” (253). It should be noted, however, that Matthew uses *tote* much more frequently than the other Gospels (91 times, compared with 6 in Mark, 15 in Luke, and 10 in John), thereby tending to reduce its impact. There does not appear sufficient evidence in the text to warrant placing a section heading at this point.

A similar pattern of disagreement arises, not in a narrative passage, but at **18.23** within a speech by Jesus:

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.”

As at 16.24, the Greek NT, followed by GNT and FC, does not mark a new paragraph (though NA27 does), whereas GeCL, NBS, TOB, NJB, and NRSV mark a new section. The sentence begins *Dia touto*, often translated “therefore,” which appears to link it with what precedes. Davies and Allison, however, in their commentary *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991, 736), correctly describe *dia touto* as “a Matthaean favourite” (11 times, compared with 3 times in Mark and 4 in Luke, but 15 in John). They suggest that here, as in 6.25 and 12.31, the words function “as the introduction to a new paragraph,” and that “as in 13.52 ... the words have a weakened sense: ‘so then, well’.” In any case, both the content and the structure of 18.21-35 appear to be well integrated, with Peter’s question about forgiveness in v. 21 being answered by Jesus’ final statement in v. 35. As in 16.24, the evidence for beginning a new section at 18.23 does not appear convincing. Indeed, such a division weakens the connection between the parable of the unmerciful servant and its setting.

The structure of the account of Jesus’ Passover with the disciples (**26.17-25**) is assessed differently

by the translations consulted. The Greek NT, followed as usual by GNT and FC, treats the passage as a single section, entitled “The Passover with the Disciples,” followed by vv. 26-30 under the title “The Institution of the Lord’s Supper.” GeCL makes a division between “Preparations for the Passover Meal” (vv. 17-19) and “Jesus Celebrates the Last Supper with the Twelve” (vv. 20-30). (These headings probably indicate awareness of the complex and much discussed relationship between the Passover, the Last Supper, and the Christian eucharist; but these matters lie beyond the scope of this article.) TOB and NJB place section headings at vv. 17, 20, and 26; NBS at vv. 17, 21, and 26.

Discourse features in vv. 17-25 include the following. The passage begins with a clear marker of time: “On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread,” and the introduction of new participants: the disciples and Jesus, replacing Judas and the chief priests in vv. 14-16. There follows a brief dialogue (vv. 17b-18). Verse 19, introduced by the unemphatic *kai*, takes up the narrative, but is closely linked to what precedes by the repetition of “disciples,” “do/make,” and “the Passover.” Some translations, following NA27, begin a new paragraph (but not a new section) to mark the transition from dialogue to narrative. Verse 20 begins with an expression of time: “When evening came,” which leads some translations to begin a new section. This tendency may in fact be reinforced by a factor which has nothing directly to do with the discourse structure of the original text: namely, the liturgical use of the story of the Last Supper itself, but not of the preparations for it. The following verses, 21-25, consist of rapid dialogue between Jesus and the disciples, ending with Jesus’ words to Judas: “You have said so.”

In many translations, as in TNIV, the beginning of v. 26, “While they were eating,” strongly recalls the beginning of v. 21, “And while they were eating.” Both expressions have parallels in Mark (14.18, 22), though the similarity between them is not so close as in Matthew. Matthew uses *Kai* “and” in v. 21, and *de* (untranslated in TNIV) in v. 26, *de* indicating, as Black says, “low- to mid-level discontinuity.” In other words, Matthew appears to be picking up the story again, at the beginning of a passage in which dialogue gives place to statements by Jesus (vv. 26b, 27b-29), introduced by brief narrative statements (vv. 26a, 27a). This structure appears to justify beginning a new section at v. 26.

Different views of the structure of the text reappear in **26.30-31**:

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.
Then Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me ...”

The Greek NT, followed as usual by GNT and FC, and here also by GeCL, begins a new section at v. 31; NBS, TOB, and NJB do so at v. 30. As in 19.1, the question involves the status of a transitional verse: “When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” The sentence begins with a simple *Kai*, but marks not only a change of location, but a transition from Jesus’ speech to narrative. Verse 31, however, immediately begins a fresh passage of dialogue, introduced as in 16.24 by *Tote*, which may indicate, though perhaps weakly, a change in time or sequence (“Next”). The connection between vv. 30 and 31 does not seem close. Davies and Allison comment: “It is unclear whether the following conversation takes place on the Mount of Olives or on the way there” (3.484). The Greek NT section heading appears justified.

We have considered only a few of the many places where translators appear to hold different views, or perhaps different unexpressed assumptions, about the structure of Matthew’s text. We have only touched on one aspect of the relevance of discourse studies to translation. In the limited number of examples chosen, we have however noted various discourse features in the text which may influence a decision on the placing of section headings. We have not claimed that such features should be the only ones to be considered by translators. The search for functional equivalence, and in particular for translations which can stand on their own feet as contributions to the literature of the target language, may justify or even require changes in the structure of the translation, by comparison with that of the original text (see Ernst Wendland, “A Literary Approach to Biblical Text Analysis,” in T. Wilt [ed.], *Bible Translation. Frames of Reference*. Manchester, U.K. and Northampton, Mass.: St. Jerome Publishing, 2003, 179-230). Our concern in this article has been to encourage translators to identify and evaluate discourse features in the texts they translate.

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