

THE STRUCTURAL INTERPRETATION  
OF  
ARGUMENTATIVE TEXTS<sup>1)</sup>

1 INTRODUCTION

With regard to the structural method of textual analysis in general and the analysis of argumentative texts in particular, it can safely be said that no standard approach has yet been established. It is almost tautological to mention that numerous approaches exist, which up to the present moment have frustrated all attempts by linguists to integrate them into one comprehensive method. We therefore have to make do with partial methods and their restricted applicational possibilities. The uncertain relation between structural approaches and the historical critical method as well as the uncertain place of structural analysis in the hermeneutical process, causes a further complication of the issue.

2 WHICH METHOD? - A SERIOUS QUESTION  
FOR THE STRUCTURAL ANALYST

The problem which confronts a structural analyst when he intends to proceed scientifically, is that there is no generally accepted method on which he can rely:

"... actually from the viewpoint of what constitutes a fully adequate structural analysis, many different approaches are necessary; that is, it is not a matter of choosing among the possibilities, but rather, of utilizing, ideally, several in the (complete) structural description of a text" (Hendricks 1967:51). According to this statement it is an open question whether an exegete

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1) This paper is an adaptation and revision of the introductory part of the author's unpublished doctoral dissertation, *II Korinthiërs 10-13, Struktuuranalyse met die oog op 'n semantiese verkenning van die teks*, Stellenbosch, Nov 1980 pp 1-73.

can or even should try to keep to any uniform language model. Nevertheless the danger of a methodical *pluralism* should be avoided. A mixture of diverging, conflicting approaches can cause the researcher to be naive with regard to his own linguistic presuppositions with the result that his conclusions will in the long run be vague, useless and incommunicable.

To form an idea of this problem, a researcher needs only to take note of the fermentation of ideas in circles where a structural study of the New Testament is conducted. Experimental analyses have been made by means of most of the six structural approaches developed by the French structuralism which Detweiler identified (1978). An impression of these approaches can be formed by consulting the work of C Chabrol and L Marin (1971), E Güttgemanns (1973, and in *Linguistica Biblica*), Patte (1976), B van Iersel (1978) as well as by the Centre pour l'Analyse du Discours Religieux (C A D I R) which publishes the magazine *Semiotique et bible* (editor J Delorme). The articles published in the magazine *Semeia* (editor J Collins) can be regarded as an indication of the various structural studies conducted in the U S A.

Because the method proposed in this paper coincides to some extent with the general approach of the members of the New Testament Society of South Africa, more attention will be given to the fermentation of ideas within this Society. In the annual magazine of the NTSSA, *Neotestamentica* (1977), e g ten studies on Matthew appear, each with a slightly different methodological approach. These studies have been conducted on the basis of a division of the text into colons (sentences) which are then connected in one way or another. These "structures" are determined mainly on the basis of the observation of repetitions and "markers" within the text. In a recent publication J P Louw (1979)

made use also of the syntactical relations between different units in the sentence, but this is altogether a new development and should be seen as an addition to the traditional method.

Although mention has been made of the "South African discourse analysis" as if it is in use as a general method, it should be emphasized that no such uniform model exists.

In spite of this fact, some researchers exercised sharp criticism against what they called the "S A method": The areas of descriptive linguistics, without it being accounted for, and literature theory are mixed in an unreflected manner in the S A discourse analysis. Thus the S A discourse analysis includes the areas of different disciplines. It should be guarded against that one area absorbs another, especially because no indication is given of how the transition is made from a linguistic structure to a textual structure" (free translation, Riekert, et alia 1979:37f). In the above-mentioned study, points of criticism against the "S A discourse analysis" on different levels are mentioned. On a linguistic level objection is made against the easy identification of meaning with the deep structure. On the level of textual linguistics the greatest objection is that semantic equivalence classes play too great a role in the determination of textcohesion. It is, however, important for the exegete to note the factors responsible for textcohesion. "All sound exegetical work must be thoroughly based on language content and it must go out from a given description of the language structure of the text" (own translation, Riekert, et alia 1979:39, cf Hendricks 1967:31). On the level of literary criticism the danger exists that the basic structural elements of a specific genre can be totally looked over if the accent is placed only on semantic equivalence classes.

Although the above criticism contains an element of truth by explaining the dilemmas of structural analysis as it has been practised until recently in South Africa, it must be kept in mind that it is criticism only on the first phase in discourse analysis. The *Semantic discourse analysis of Romans I, II* (J P Louw, 1979) has already presented us with a further development on the "traditional method" and has ruled out several points of criticism. Louw however does not reflect consciously on the necessary relation between colons on account of which they constitute a text. He cites only the structural models of J E Jordan (*Using rhetoric*, 1965:121) for distinguishing paragraphs. He further maintains that colons are structured in paragraphs (pericopes), but without explaining exactly how this happens, except mentioning that the structuring takes place with regards to a specific theme.

One thing becomes clear from the above discussion. That is that a ready-made model doesn't exist. In the light of such methodological uncertainty, it must be asked what can be expected from a (Biblical) exegete. To the author's mind, the least he can do is:

- 1) to explain his method and to indicate his sources clearly;
- 2) to attempt at least to base his method on an accepted linguistic model; and
- 3) to make his work as far as possible accessible to other researchers with frames of reference other than his.

The structural exegete (of Biblical materials) should, unlike many of his predecessors, be able to give an explicit account of his methodology.

Another problem, coherent with the above-mentioned, concerns itself with the strategic approach of the text. Even

after a specific approach has been chosen, it would still be impossible for an exegete to apply the full scope of one selected method to a specific text - it would simply be too tedious. Language as a phenomenon is too complicated and intricate to be studied in all respects at once. Therefore the productivity of an encyclopedic coverage of the text would be unsatisfactory. It would have been ideal to approach the text from one definite angle and to analyse the complete text from this angle. This analysis could then be the starting point for further investigations in new directions.

In this paper then, while keeping the above-mentioned in mind, an experimental approach to the analysis and interpretation of structural texts is proposed, which can to some extent be seen as an independent development on work done by E A Nida. Use was also made of several insights prevailing in the ranks of the New Testament Society of South Africa (NTSSA), and amongst others especially those of J P Louw (1979). In certain important aspects however, this method differs from theirs and must be seen as complementary to their method of analysis.

In the proposed analysis the sentences of a text are organized in a binary hierarchical system and the relations between the subdivisions of the hierarchical system are subsequently described in terms of a description apparatus which was proposed by E A Nida. I suggest that the method which is advocated by this study be called the binary hierarchical method of textual analysis (BH method).

### 3 BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE BH METHOD

What follows next is a discussion of the principles on which the BH method of textual analysis has been de-

veloped.

3.1 *The text is the largest unit which should be taken into account.*

It is a basic principle of the structural approach in general to consider the text itself as a unity. All other units in the text are subunits which coordinate to form this unit.

This entails that a text is more than merely the sum of its parts. The text as a whole contributes, in other words, to the meaning of its parts. Therefore smaller units in a text should always be studied with reference to the whole, especially where the meaning of such a text is concerned.

As a discussion of several other methods of analysis will show, this principle is very difficult to implement because language itself is so complex and because no clear-cut model exists which enables one to take all its different aspects into consideration at the same time. It is questionable whether there exists one method which does complete justice to this principle.

3.2 *The text is built up out of a multitude of units which can be isolated. Between these units a multitude of interrelations occurs.*

All structural approaches start with a certain identifiable number of units which all occur in identifiable relations with regard to each other. Of a structuralist like Greimas the following remark could be made *inter alia*: "(his) insistence on the relationship between entities themselves, marks him as a structuralist, and his system of semantic analysis reminds us of what might be thought of as the fundamental structuralist obligation: the 'obligation to articulate any apparently static free-

standing concept or term into that binary opposition which it structurally presupposes and which forms the very basis for its intelligibility'" (Hawkes 1977:9, citation of Jameson).

The linguistic units which linguists have used in the past as bases for a structural analysis, show great diversity. They vary from units inside the sentence (semes, sememes, morphemes, words, syntagmas, kernel sentences) to sentences (which also include colons) and even paragraphs (which include "clusters" and pericopes). V Propp even identifies units (i e functions) which operate within the narrative as a whole. The identification of these units causes considerable problems because of the uncertain relation between the form and contents of language as a phenomenon. It is with regard to this problem that our next principle is formulated.

3.3 *In the textual analysis form and contents should be studied throughout with regard to their mutual dependence on each other*

This has also been the approach of A J Greimas (*Strukturelle Semantik* 1971, French edition 1966), the pioneer of the French structuralists.

Like De Saussure he operates with the concepts "signifiant" and "signifié". He intends - according to Hjelmslev - to study both these aspects of language with regard to their mutual dependence on each other. This total involvement of the signifiant with the signifié he calls the "ensemble signifiant" ("Bedeutungsganze") (1971:5f). In accordance with this view, Greimas presupposes that language is a closed, integrated unity. From this presupposition he goes further and draws an important conclusion: "Die Erkenntnis, dass das Universum der Semantik geschlossen ist, impliziert ihrerseits die Ablehnung

von sprachwissenschaftlichen Konzeptionen, die die Bedeutung als die Relation zwischen den *Zeichen* und den *Sachen* ('choses') definieren, und insbesondere die Weigerung, die zusätzliche Dimension des *Referenten* zu akzeptieren, die die 'Realisten' unter den Semantikern (Ullman) in der Art eines Kompromisses in die Saussure'sche Zeichentheorie einführen, und die selbst Anlass zur Vorsicht gibt: sie stellt nur eine der möglichen Interpretationen des Saussure'schen Strukturalismus dar. Denn bezieht man sich für die Erklärung der *Zeichen* auf die *Sachen*, heisst das nichts mehr und nichts weniger als eine undurchführbare Transposition der in den natürlichen Sprachen enthaltene Bedeutungen in nichtsprachliche Bedeutungsganze zu versuchen: Wie man sieht, ein Unterfangen mit Traumcharakter" (1971:9). The following citation illustrates his viewpoint more clearly:: "Die Form ist genauso bedeutungsvoll wie die Substanz .... Was auf der eine Ebene Substanz genannt werden wird, wird auf einer anderen Eben als Form analysiert werden können" (1971:20f).

With this standpoint as reservation, he nevertheless proceeds to identify "semes" as the smallest units of meaning. His study of the structural relations between semes is one of the most informative parts of his work (Wotjak 1971:144). He takes more or less the same point of view as Nida when it comes to the semantic constituent structure of the sememes (sememe = bundle of semes in a lexicalized unit). Especially his contribution to the insights in the hierarchical relations of semes within structures has been of great value (Wotjak 1971:144).

In spite of his linguistic premises he nevertheless attempts to identify pure semantic units which he calls *semes*. By trying constantly in his methodology to keep account of the fact that these semantic units can only be described as language units which themselves also display a



formal aspect, Greimas finds himself trapped in an intricate hermeneutical circular argumentation which complicates his work unnecessarily.

Researchers like Z Harris on the other hand have neglected semantics as a linguistic discipline and have not made provision for this aspect in their research work. Therefore they soon find themselves in a position where their analyses become unproductive and useless. It is just as little possible to isolate a pure semantic unit, as it is to isolate a pure formal unit by means of which language can be studied. Therefore the point of departure for such a study should be that contents and form in language are aspects of each other and should be constantly studied in their mutual dependence on each other. At all times it must be guarded against to stress either form or contents to the disadvantage of the other.

3.4 *The colon is an important language unit which is a rounded-off syntactical unit as well as a semantic unit. Therefore it can serve as a basis for the analysis of a text*

The word "colon" is but another name in use for a scientifically defined sentence in order to distinguish it from half-formed sentences in normal usage which are also indicated by an initial capital letter and a full stop. Because of the many connotations attached to the word "sentence", it is preferable to speak of a "colon". The most elementary definition of a colon is that it is a matrix sentence which consists of a nominal and a verbal part (NP, VP), with nil or more embedded sentences. The colon itself can however not be embedded syntactically in a higher unit (cf Louw 1979:8ff). In this regard the research work of the NTSSA was most helpful to this study.

The use of colons as basic units for text analysis is an improvement on the analysis of Nida, who appears to work with pure semantic units. In 3.3 it has already been argued why it is to be preferred to work with units which are both syntactical and semantically rounded-off. It is true that Nida does not use the concept "kernel sentence" in his recent publications (1975a, 1975b), but under that which he terms a "clause", we can generally understand a kernel sentence consisting out of a matrix sentence with or without any extensions. The problem with these clauses is that, should a larger text be subdivided in clauses, an exegete would scarcely be able to get a synopsis of the whole. The fact that "clauses" are regarded as semantic units without any syntactical importance entails that a considerable amount of the meaning of a text would be lost if the text should merely be represented by such "clauses", because of the innumerable formal aspects of the text which are also relevant for a semantic study. The whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Nida concedes that it may be useful for study purposes to extend the clauses "to those structures which are transformationally equivalent to complete clauses" (1975:60). These "complete clauses" closely resemble that which is understood under a colon. As has been mentioned already, the colon is not to be seen as the sum of its clauses. In this regard it may be useful to keep in mind what Greimas said when he stated that one cannot pay attention to the meaning without also at the same time paying attention to the manifested structure - one can only find meanings expressed in terms of the manifested structure. Even "clauses" have, in other words, a formal aspect and not only meaning. Therefore it would be an illusion to pay attention to meaning only, without also taking into account the formal structure. One cannot even start with the one aspect - say e.g. the immanent structure -

and end with the other - namely the manifested structure. Both should be constantly studied in their mutual dependence on each other.

In this connection notice should be taken of a problem which occurs in the work of the NTSSA. The usual approach has been to divide a text in colons. Afterwards the colons are organized in groups on the ground of the observation of certain "markers". These "markers" are also used to trace the sequence of thought of the original writer. Later on we shall say more on this topic, but we can now make the preliminary remark that a major problem with these "markers" is that it appears that they are sometimes regarded as either formal or substantial. The danger thus exists that either the semantic aspect or the formal aspect of the text may be neglected (cf Louw 1979:1). In the light of the above-mentioned principle a two-way study should be undertaken; from the formal to the semantic aspect and vice versa.

However, since it has not been established how someone can come to semantic conclusions on formal grounds, or vice versa, much methodological groundwork still needs to be done. Between form and meaning there does not exist a mechanical, 1:1, relation. In the practical work of the NTSSA these dangers are considerably reduced by working with colons as basic units which also display a semantic completeness (Louw 1979:16).

Because of its linguistic convenience the colon proves to be an apt point of departure for the study of the text. The same reasons as those which Nida put forward for the analysis of the text by means of "clauses", apply to the use of colons:

(a) it is a meaningful level of organization in the

text;

- (b) in the initial stages of investigation it can be easier recognized than any other level of the text;
- (c) it is a convenient point of departure for the analysis of smaller or larger units in the text (1975: 56).

Each colon further develops a specific semantic structure with a focus (or foci) and presuppositions by means of which the colon relates as a unit to other colons. This provides us with the strategic departure point for an investigation, as was envisaged in the previous paragraph.

Subsequently we pay attention to the nature of the relations between the specific units in the text.

### 3.5 *The relations between units in the text (colons) can be organized in a binary hierarchy.*

Meaning is closely connected with the relation between two language units. This is an axiom for almost all structural linguists (Hawkes 1977:9). In this respect A J Greimas argues as follows: People perceive contrasts and by virtue of this perception the world takes on "form" for them. In order to perceive differences it means that we must conceive at least two "termes-objets" as simultaneously present. To perceive contrasts, is to understand the *relation* between these terms, to bring them into relation with each other in one way or another. From this the deduction can be made that

- (a) the term-object alone possesses no meaning and
- (b) that the presence of the relation between the terms is a necessary pre-condition for meaning.

Between the terms-objects there exists simultaneously a relation of *conjunction* and *disjunction*.

In other words: Greimas says: "... fundamental concepts of meaning present themselves to us through the opposition we feel to exist between basic semes of semantic units" (Hawkes 1977:88). His predecessors also had this conception of the "signifying role of binary oppositions" (Hawkes).

The idea that this relation is oppositional (binary) by nature, has been generally accepted. This is more or less also what C Levi-Strauss means by speaking of "the sociologic of the human mind which structures nature in its own image" (according to Hawkes 1977:89).

E A Nida makes the same observation with regards to the meaning of verbal units, but he could have applied it to the meaning of a group of "clauses": "Meaning is ... thus not some inherent possession of a form, but a set of oppositions for which the verbal symbol is a conventional sign. These distinctive features are called semantic components ...." (1975:15).

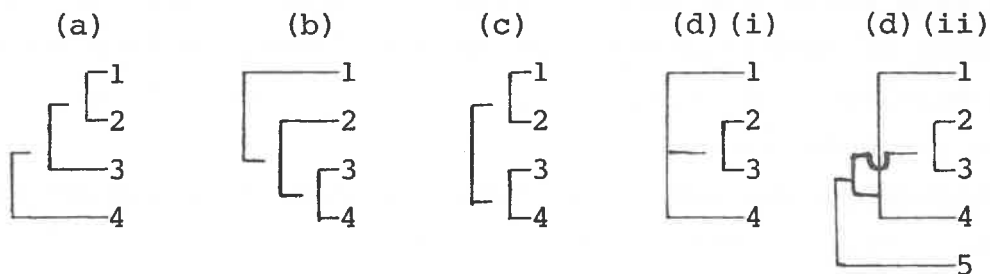
In connection with a discussion on referential meaning Nida remarks further that language is both "digital and analogic", but "in a sense it can be strictly digital only when some of the semantic potentialities of meanings and borders between meanings are temporarily overlooked" (1975a:205). On the ground of the binarity (which should however not be absolutized) we can accept that diagnostic differences play an important role in a relational description of the structure.

Together with the analogic character of language, we must also accept that there is a *hierarchical* relation between language units - in the sense that certain units exhibit structural dominancy with regard to others (cf Louw 1979: 6).

It must be noted that linguists will in general agree that language has a binary structure and that language phenomena appear to be in a hierarchical order. There will however be objections by linguists against the principle stated, namely that colons are structured in a binary hierarchical system. Therefore we shall now proceed to explain this statement more completely.

In order to illustrate exactly what is meant by a binary hierarchical scheme, let us first observe the following examples by which all the possible binary hierarchical bindings for any four colons are demonstrated:

Example:



(Example (d) (ii) only demonstrates how (d) (i) would fit into a higher unit. This is however only possible with the highest exception, because grammatical chiasms are extremely rare.)

From the examples it becomes clear that one colon always goes into opposition with *one* other colon or grouping of colons. The question may be put: On what grounds can one determine that two colons or larger units form a primary combination?

Most of the researchers in this field make use of formal markers to discern colon groupings. Either they use phenomena such as repetition, focus and presupposition, or they use psychological observations. The aim of this

study is to demonstrate that there is however *one* important phenomenon which up to now has not been considered. This phenomenon is due to the principle by means of which the BH structure can be discovered, viz the *combinatory transformational possibilities* of colons. By this exactly the opposite is meant of what Nida calls "back-transformations". By the latter he implies that larger linguistic units can be broken up into smaller units, kernel sentences or clauses, by the process of back-transformation. From this the logical deduction can be made that this process can be *reversed*; with the result that kernel sentences or clauses can, in turn, be combined and transformed into larger linguistic units. In the same manner two colons can undergo a combinatory transformation into one more complex sentence which consists of one NP and one VP with an indefinite number of embedded sentences.

Consider the following example:

- John hits Peter by accident. (i)  
 "You fool!" exclaims Peter. (ii)

These sentences can be transformed as follows:

When John hit Peter by accident, the latter  
 exclaimed by calling him a fool.

The following is also possible:

Peter called John a fool because he unwittingly  
 hit him.

Both these transformations have the same TG structure,  
 viz:

Peter (...) exclaimed/called (...)

Take note what happened here. Both sentences (i) and (ii) each had its own independent NP-VP relation. By means of the transformation however, a fusion took place and both sentences were integrated into one sentence with one NP-VP relation. The NP-VP binarity of independent sentences has, in other words, been dissolved into a new comprehensive binarity.

Also note that it did not happen that the one pole in sentence (i) (e g NP<sup>1</sup>) combined with another pole in sentence (ii) (e g VP<sup>2</sup>). In the new transformation, sentence (i) as a whole was subordinated to sentence (ii), as a subordinate sentence of cause. Within one context various colons can be grouped into ever larger groups by this process of combinatory transformation. It is remarkable that in a close-knit context this process of transformation will always develop in the same direction. In other words independent interpreters who interpret the text in the same way will always be able to produce the same structure for a specific text. *It is thus an effective way to demonstrate how individual colons can be understood as a text.*

This can be further elucidated by means of an example. Suppose we have the following sentences in a text:

- |                              |       |
|------------------------------|-------|
| John hits Peter by accident. | (i)   |
| "You fool!" exclaims Peter.  | (ii)  |
| "I'm sorry", says John.      | (iii) |

On closer investigation it becomes clear that (ii) and (iii) do not combine with each other directly, but that (i) and (ii) first combine with each other and they then jointly combine with (iii). *The control test for this combination is the question whether sentences (ii) and (iii) would have made any sense together without consideration of (i), which in this case is impossible.*



The transformations for the text above are as follows:

Sentences (i) and (ii) transform into the following:

Peter (who was accidentally hit by John) exclaimed (by calling him a fool). (iv)

Sentences (iv) and (iii) in turn transform as follows:

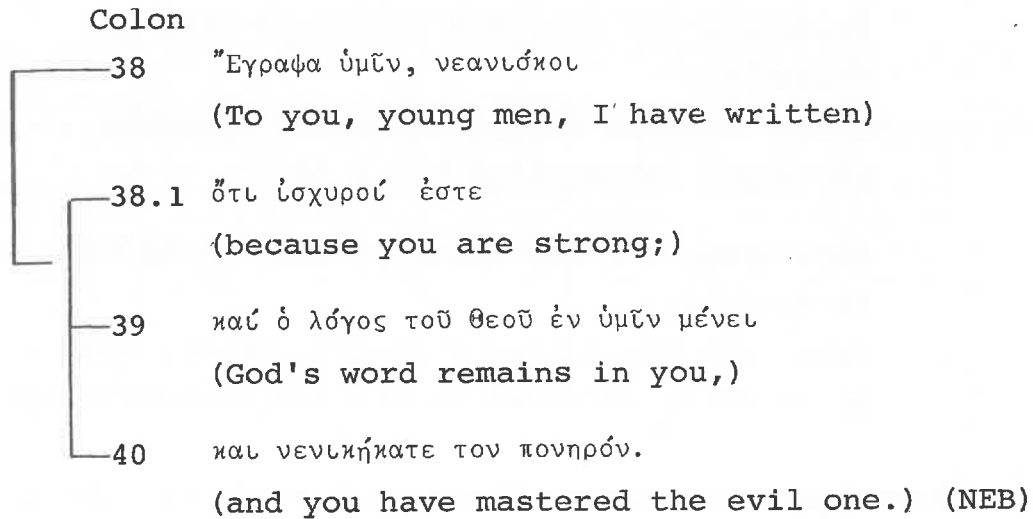
John (who was called a fool by Peter) said he is sorry (because he hit him accidentally). (v)

These combinatory transformations normally take place intuitively in the communication process. *It is part of the decodification process of the receiver of linguistic utterances.* As could be expected, the (main) verb plays a major part in this process (Nida 1975b:16 - "...grammatical meaning is primarily a description of relations between verbal units").

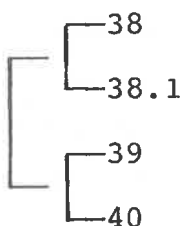
We shall now proceed to consider some problems with regard to the BH structure.

Should that which we have maintained be correct, then it means that colon segments cannot *primarily* bind with the colon segments or with the matrix of another sentence. Colon segments act via the *whole* of the colon in which they occur over against other colons and their segments. In the work of the NTSSA it happened in the past that segments of one colon were primarily combined with other colons or segments of other colons before they were coordinated with the matrix sentences to which they belonged in the first place.

Example: Structural analysis of 1 Jn 2:14, NTSSA Congress 1979):



Should this analysis be correct, then it would be clear evidence against the use of the colon as the basic structural unit, with the result that one would have to fall back on kernel sentences for semantic research. It is however probable that the words ἔγραφα ὑμῶν ὅτι is elliptical in 39 as well as 40. It can thus be established that 38.1 binds primarily with 38. The structure ought rather to have looked like this:



(The transformations would be as follows: Colons 39 and 40 combine to read: You have conquered evil through the word within you. Colon 38 then combines with 39-40 to read as follows: I have written to you young men because you are strong, for you have conquered evil through the word within you. In a superficial sense it seems as if the colons are placed in a coordinate relationship by the repetition of the word καὶ. On closer

inspection it becomes evident that the relations are logical rather.) By this insight, which is an adaptation of the work of Nida, we come considerably closer to "the structure" of a text than e g Z Harris (1964) in that the formal and substantial aspects can both be studied simultaneously in one unit, viz the colon.

There now only remain two questions concerning the validity of the BH method, viz

- (1) how such an hierarchical analysis would work in practice (whether it would not perhaps suppress the multi-dimensionality of the text) and finally,
- (2) about the nature of the binarity and its schematic representation when it comes to sentences that appear to be coordinating.

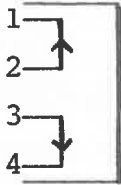
(1) Is it not possible that the multi-dimensionality of relations between clauses and sentences would be lost in a BH structure? Nida mentions that more than one relation often exists between the kernel sentences and other units (1975b:65). The multi-dimensionality can be explained as follows with reference to an analysis by Nida (1975b) of an article in *Time*:

- 1 Florida's newest menace is an improbable creature.
- 2 It is the Asian walking catfish.
- 3 It is equipped with auxiliary breathing organs.
- 4 And can live out of the water for hours.

Nida describes the grammatical relations as follows (1975b:57 - the above is a summary of the original):

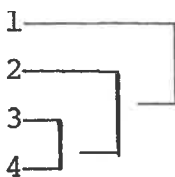
- 2 is additive equivalent with 1
- 3 is means with 4 as result.
- 4 is cause with 1 as effect.

Schematically it can be represented like this:



The problem with this analysis is that it doesn't order or evaluate the bindings. Colon 4 e.g functions ambivalent.

On the one hand it can be observed that colon 4 is involved in a cause-effect relation with 3. The problem becomes evident by the fact that - as the above scheme shows - there is an apparent hiatus between 2 and 3. The analysis thus leaves the (false) impression that sentence 2 plays only an indirect role via 1 with regard to sentences 3 and 4. And further, it shows that sentence 3 apparently only has a function with regard to sentences 1 and 2 via 4. If the same discourse unit is analysed hierarchically it can be described by the following scheme:



*Description:*

- 1 is result with 2-4 as reason;
- 2 is characterized by 3-4;
- 3 is means with 4 as result.

This is a hierarchical scheme (because it orders colons in degrees of importance). In this hierarchical scheme no direct binding between sentences 1 and 4 is foreseen.