

## AN APPROACH TO THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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**Abstract:** The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, also known as the 'synoptic gospels', alongside the Gospel according to John, have been analysed in order to determine the frequency of adverbs exhibited throughout the four gospels. The study attempts to monitor the most frequent characteristics adverbs display and the manner in which these features reveal the cohesion of the text while reinforcing utterances and, at the same time, arranging actions and events or placing emphasis on the modified part of speech. Due to the highly integrated structure of the gospels, however, few involvement features specific to adverbs are expected to be found.

**Key-words:** *Linguistics, adverb, adverb occurrence, gospels*

### 1. Introduction

As Freeborn et al. (1986:182) mention, the books making up the Bible are nowadays read as literature, being acknowledged as the greatest book of all times. The underlying reasons could be as complex as its overwhelming importance to mankind, its magnitude as a literary masterpiece or as trivial as its wide circulation or number of languages into which it has been translated.

The article attempts to take into consideration both the qualitative and quantitative features of adverbs present in the four gospels and analyses the way in which they influence the text. However, as Pop (2016:72) posits, 'due to their highly integrated structure, the Bible books are expected to exhibit rather a lower frequency of adverbs, especially in terms of stance and degree adverbs. These are more habitually encountered in articles in the newspapers, particularly in those pieces of articles specific to tabloids.'<sup>1</sup>

The present paper studies and tries to explain how the frequency of adverbs present in the four gospels in the books of the Bible is based on the formulated hypothesis that the occurrence of adverbs may influence and reflect upon the interpretation of the text. Several researches have been taken into consideration, such as Kramersch (2008), Biber et al. (1999), and

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<sup>1</sup> Pop, Ioan Benjamin. 2016. 'An Analysis of Adverb Occurrence in the Bible Books of Ruth and Judges', in *Buletin Științific, Seria A, fascicula Filologie*, vol. XXV/ 2016, p. 71-77.

others who have conducted studies analyzing the occurrence of adverbs in different registers.

## 2. General presentation of the Gospels

Four faithful men write independent accounts, providing a fourfold witness that Jesus was the Messiah, and giving the details of his life, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection. These accounts are called Gospels, meaning 'good news.' While the four are parallel and often cover the same incidents, they are by no means mere copies of one another. Each one of the four writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—tells his own story of the Christ, having his own particular theme and objective, reflecting his own personality, and keeping in mind his immediate readers.

The first three of these gospels are coined 'synoptic gospels' due to the fact that they apparently have a similar approach to Jesus' ministry in comparison to John's Gospel. Each of the gospels seems to have been written in a totally different place. For instance, Matthew wrote his gospel in Palestine, Mark in Rome, Caesarea is the location where Luke wrote his, whereas John apparently put it down in writing in or near Ephesus.

Scholars take into discussion that only 7 per cent of Mark's Gospel is actually different from the other gospels. However, the fact that this percentage is scattered in such a way throughout his gospel and coupled with the fact that it displays a distinctive theme and style of writing characterized by such features as succinctness, satiation with Latinisms, as well as its impression of fast-forward movement supports the idea that it was the work of an independent writer and witness.

When taking into consideration the fourth Gospel, namely John's, one notices that it is 92 per cent distinctive than the other three since it covers events and situations which the others had not mentioned. On the other hand, nevertheless, despite the overwhelming percentage in its favour, it still pervades the same theme, being remarkably like the other three gospels when it comes to issues such as its spirit and impression created or the type of characters portrayed.

## 3. Overall adverb analysis

As *Insight on the Scriptures* (1988: 1090, vol. 2), one of the numerous studies in the books of the Bible, points out:

'A legal writer once observed: "While romances, legends and false testimony are careful to place events related in some distant place and some indefinite time, thereby violating the first rules we lawyers learn of good pleading, that 'the declaration must give time and place,' the Bible narratives give us the date and place of the things related with the utmost precision." (*A Lawyer Examines the Bible*, 1943, I. H. Linton, page 38).'

This, in turn, justifies the high propensity for locative adverbs which are generously represented into the four Gospels, fluctuating between 44.5per cent as far as Mark is concerned and 52.2per cent in the case of Matthew. The underlying reason for their employment is the necessity to position the action and events in precise, definite geographical locations. At the same time, temporal adverbs are frequently used in order to warrant authenticity when placing the action not only in a verifiable space but also period. The text is, therefore, considered and accepted as believable due to the influence of the adverbs which make frequent reference to existing places and projections in time.

The first writer in the order in which the Gospels appear in the Bible, namely Matthew, was a tax collector, thus naturally being more explicit in his mention of money, figures, and values, as well as strictly placing the action and events as faithfully as possible, accounting for a percentage of locative adverbs as high as 52.5per cent, as evident in the following diagram (Figure 1. Matthew)

**Figure 1. The Gospel according to Matthew**

	No. of instances	Percentage
Words	5.497	
Adverbs	211	3.84
<b>Frequency of adverbs according to semantic categories</b>		
Circumstance	124	59
Stance	8	3.5
Linking	79	37.5
<b>Semantic realisation for Circumstance adverbs</b>		
Time	15	12
Place	65	52.5
Addition/restriction	20	16
Manner	14	11.5
degree	10	8
<b>Position</b>		
Initial	96	45.5
Medial	29	14
end	86	40.5
<b>Form</b>		
Simple and compound	174	82.5
-ly adverbs	28	13
Other suffix	8	4
Adv phr	1	0.5
<b>Semantic realisation for Linking adverbs</b>		
Listing	40	50
Listing - equative	1	0.5
Listing – Reinforcing	15	12
Listing – Enumerative	24	11
Result	14	11
Transitive	5	6.5
Transitive – discourse	5	6.5
Transitive – temporal		
Inferential	5	6.5
Appositive		
Summative		
Contrast	15	12
Contrast -Concessive	14	12

Contrast - Reformulatory	1	0.5
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Mark spent a long time with Peter, a man of deep feelings, which influenced his style of writing. Consequently, Mark frequently records the feelings and emotions of Jesus, how he felt and reacted, often employing amplifiers to intensify these emotions. For example:

And after looking around upon them with indignation, being *thoroughly* grieved at the insensibility of their hearts.

And with a look up into heaven he sighed *deeply*.

So he groaned *deeply* with his spirit, and said ...

Some of Peter's characteristics are seen in Mark's style, which is impulsive, living, vigorous, vital, and descriptive. It seems as though he tried to relate events as fast as possible. To exemplify, the adverb *immediately* occurs again and again, carrying the story along in dramatic style.

And *immediately* on coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being parted (1:10)

And *immediately* the spirit impelled him to go into the wilderness (1:12)

So the report about him spread out *immediately* in all directions through all the country round about in Gal'i-lee. And *immediately* they went out of the synagogue and went into the home of Simon and Andrew (1:28,29)

And *immediately* the leprosy vanished from him, and he became clean.(1:42)

All the instances cited are part of the first chapter, which reiterates the adverb 5 times. Mark makes use of the same adverb 23 times throughout his Gospel, accounting for 9per cent of all adverb realizations, as evident in the following figure:

**Figure2. The Gospel according to Mark**

	No. of instances	Percentage
Words	5.398	
Adverbs	253	4.7
<b>Frequency of adverbs according to semantic categories</b>		
Circumstance	162	64
Stance	1	0.5
Linking	90	35.5
<b>Semantic realisation for Circumstance adverbs</b>		
Time	41	25
Place	72	44.5
Addition/restriction	15	9.5
Manner	20	12.5
degree	14	8.5
<b>Position</b>		
Initial	123	48.5
Medial	37	14.5
end	93	37
<b>Form</b>		
Simple and compound	201	79.5

-ly adverbs	42	16.5
Other suffix	7	3
Adv phrases	3	1
<b>Semantic realisation for Linking adverbs</b>		
Listing	22	24.5
Listing - equative	1	0.5
Listing – Reinforcing	12	4.7
Listing – Enumerative	9	3.5
Result	30	33
Transitive	21	23.5
Transitive – discourse	21	23.5
Contrast	17	19
Contrast - Concessive	16	18
Contrast- Reformulatory	1	0.5

Although Mark had access to the Gospel of Matthew, it would be a mistake to believe that Mark simply condensed Matthew's Gospel and added a few special details. Whereas Matthew had portrayed Jesus as the promised Messiah and King, Mark puts stress on the activities of Christ rather than on his sermons and teachings, which explains his 0.5per cent frequency of stance adverbs. Matthew portrays Jesus as the miracle-working Son of God, the conquering Savior, qualifying his utterances and deeds by means of a relatively high occurrence of stance adverbs in comparison with Mark's Gospel, namely 3.5per cent.

The Gospel of Luke was written by a man with a keen mind and a kind heart, and this fine blend of qualities has resulted in an account that is both accurate and full of warmth and feeling. In the opening verses, he says,

I resolved also, because I have traced all things from the start with accuracy, to write them in logical order to you.

His detailed, meticulous presentation fully bears out this claim. 47per cent of circumstance adverbs semantically denote place, while 14per cent denote the time of action or event as seen in the following figure.

**Figure 3. The Gospel according to Luke**

	No. of instances	Percentage
Words	4.969	
Adverbs	173	3.5
<b>Frequency of adverbs according to semantic categories</b>		
Circumstance	108	62.5
Stance	2	1
Linking	63	36.5
<b>Semantic realisation for Circumstance adverbs</b>		
Time	15	14
Place	51	47
Addition/restriction	12	11
Manner	14	13
degree	16	15
Position		
<b>Initial</b>	78	45
Medial	23	13.5
end	72	41.5

Form		
Simple and compound	136	78.5
-ly adverbs	32	18.5
Other suffix	5	3
Adv phr	-	
<b>Semantic realisation for Linking adverbs</b>		
Listing	19	30
Listing - equative	-	
Listing – Reinforcing	11	17
Listing – Enumerative	8	13
Result	18	29
Transitive	19	30
Transitive – discourse	18	29
Transitive – temporal	1	1.5
Inferential	-	
Appositive	-	
Summative	-	
Contrast	7	11
Contrast - Concessive	7	11
Contrast- Reformulatory	-	

His care in recording the exact time and location is obvious in the attempt of pinpointing Jesus' birth as precisely as possible. There is nothing of the sort 'Once upon a time', or 'There was once'. Even though expressed by adverbials rather than adverbs, the temporal specifications alongside the spatial ones are carefully documented. He actually gives two pointers for fixing the time of Jesus' birth when he says:

Now in those days a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus for all the inhabited earth to be registered; <sup>2</sup> (this first registration took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria;) (2:1,2)

This was when Joseph and Mary went up to Bethlehem to be registered, and Jesus was born while they were there. Apparently, it is one of the most searching tests of Luke's historical sense that he always manages to achieve perfect accuracy.

His work is of the scholarly order one would expect from a well-educated man, such as a doctor. His fine choice of language and his extensive vocabulary make possible a most careful and comprehensive treatment of his vital subject.

It becomes clear on examining the four Gospel accounts that the writers do not simply repeat one another's narratives, nor do they write solely to provide several witnesses for this most vital Bible record.

Interestingly, it is only Matthew that makes use of the stance adverb *certainly*, frequently employed in the Hebrew Scriptures:

You will *certainly* not come out from there until you have paid over the last coin of very little value. (Mat. 5:26)

John employs the nominal form, however, instead of the adverbial one:

This is for a *certainty* the prophet that was to come into the world (6:14)

The other Gospels, including Matthew, make use of rather different stance epistemic adverbs, such as *really* (Luke, Mark), *perhaps* (Luke, John, Mathew), *actually* (John, Mark, Matthew), or the iterated *truly* (in all four Gospels). John uses the amplified value of *most truly* 5 times, in the exact combination having illocutionary force:

*Most truly* I say to you (John 1:51)

Whereas their employment is not out of the ordinary, the Gospels make frequent use of manner and degree adverbs, thus compensating for the rare occurrences of stance adverbs. This, apparently, shifts the weight in establishing stance adverbs as the markers of involvement features in the discourse, projecting it upon other occurrences of adverbs, especially in for intensification purposes or, by means of also involving manner adverbs, establishing a positive or negative orientation of actions, events, and emotions.

YOU for a short time were willing to rejoice *greatly* in his light. (John 1:35)

They both were righteous before God because of walking *blamelessly* in accord with all the commandments (Luke 1:6)

Good day, *highly* favored one; But she was *deeply* disturbed at the saying. (John 1:28, 29)

On seeing the star they rejoiced *very much indeed*. (Mat. 2:10)

And they brought him all those faring *badly*, distressed with various diseases and torments (Mat. 4:24)

Sir, my manservant is laid up in the house with paralysis, being *terribly* tormented (Mat 8:5)

Two demon-possessed men coming out from among the memorial tombs, *unusually* fierce (Mat 8:28)

Finally, the ones that were sown on the fine soil are those who listen to the word and *favorably* receive it (Mark 4:20)

At this they began to laugh *scornfully* at him. (Mark 5:40)

Mark and especially John appear to fare worst in qualifying actions or events and ascribing them specific orientation. In fact, John makes use of 2.5 per cent manner adverbs, by far the lowest in all the books analysed in the Bible, as evident in the figure below:

**Figure 4. The Gospel according to John**

	No. of instances	Percentage
words	5.211	
adverbs	204	3.91
<b>Frequency of adverbs according to semantic categories</b>		
Circumstance	121	59.5
Stance	8	4
Linking	75	36.5
<b>Semantic realisation for Circumstance adverbs</b>		
Time	23	19

Place	59	49
Addition/restriction	20	16.5
Manner	3	2.5
degree	16	13
<b>Position</b>		
Initial	100	49
Medial	18	9
end	86	42
<b>Form</b>		
Simple and compound	182	89
-ly adverbs	18	9
Other suffix	4	2
Adv phr	-	
<b>Semantic realisation for Linking adverbs</b>		
Listing	11	14.5
Listing - equative	1	1.3
Listing – Reinforcing	5	6.5
Listing – Enumerative	5	6.5
Result	34	45.5
Transitive	19	25.5
Transitive – discourse	18	24
Transitive – temporal	1	1.3
Inferential	-	
Appositive	-	
Summative	-	
Contrast	11	14.5
Contrast - Concessive	11	14.5
Contrast- Reformulatory	-	

This low figure is compensated for by means of employing additive or restrictive adverbs, used to lay emphasis on the modified item.

*Even* I did not know him (John 1:31)

Luke, on the other hand, lives up to his reputation in magnificently employing linguistic devices to render the text not only precise and accurate, but also elegant and eloquent. He excels even in the way he makes use of adverbs, projecting upon them and therefore upon the whole sentence, in the vast majority of situations, a positive orientation. It suffices only to list some of them, such as *mightily*, *fearlessly*, *prosperously*, *divinely*, or even *fully*.

He has performed *mightily* with his arm (1:51)

(...) the privilege of *fearlessly* rendering sacred service to him (1:74)

(...)to direct our feet *prosperously* in the way of peace (1:79)

(...) that you may know *fully* the certainty of the things that you have been taught orally. (1:4)

Furthermore, it had been *divinely* revealed to him (2:26)

Note that the first four instances are all included in the first chapter. Even when negative implication is rendered by means of adverbs, such as *falsely*, the writer makes sure it is negated in the sentence so that the meaning as a whole is positive.

Do not harass anybody or accuse anybody *falsely*, but be satisfied with YOUR provisions (3:14)

Matthew appears to alternate the positive and the negative implications brought about by means of adverb forms. Some are rendered only as inferentially positive or negative, leaving upon the reader to assign them a more overt value by means of reinterpretation. It is the case of *secretly*, *eagerly*, or even *carefully*.

However, Joseph her husband, because he was righteous and did not want to make her a public spectacle, intended to divorce her *secretly* (1:19)

Then Herod secretly summoned the astrologers and *carefully* ascertained from them the time of the star's appearing; (2:17)

So never be anxious and say, 'What are we to eat?' or, 'What are we to drink?' or, 'What are we to put on?' <sup>32</sup> For all these are the things the nations are *eagerly* pursuing (6:1, 32)

Mark exhibits high tendency towards employing temporal adverbs, with John in the immediate vicinity. 25per cent of all circumstance adverbs denote time, more than double the percentage in Matthew (12per cent), whereas John follows suit with 19per cent. Besides *immediately*, he makes use of *oftentimes*, *again and again*, *repeatedly*, *no longer*, *no sooner* (with additional stylistic inversion), *right away*, etc.

As far as the hypothesis that elegance of style (as far as adverbs are concerned) can be ascribed to texts displaying propensity towards *-ly* adverbs, it can be safely predicted that John (exhibiting 9per cent occurrences) is the least elegant, while Luke epitomizes the most stylish of the four (displaying 18.5per cent). Statistically, however, *-ly* adverbs include also linking conjuncts, which, although capable of bestowing a tinge of elegance on the text, by constant reiteration no longer mark the discourse as elegant but rather emphatic. Hard evidence, nonetheless, ascribes, indeed, upon Luke, and also Matthew, a note of elegance of style due to high frequency of adverbs supporting or even emphasizing negative or positive implications or orientations.

### Conclusions

The four Gospels exhibit a high propensity for linking conjuncts and spatial adverbs, the percentage varying between 35.5 and 40per cent. Taking into consideration that they are mainly narratives, the vivid presentation of events taking place in Jesus' life serving the purpose of not only integrating the actions in the narrative but also, at times, forcefully emphasizing results, inferences, or contrasting events or reinforcing them. A surprisingly low percentage of stance adverbs is revealed in the Gospels. This might be justifiable when taking into consideration that the writer's involvement in the text and his attitude towards what is being said are constantly kept under control.

The relatively high percentage of linking conjuncts employed especially in initial position in the sentence, coupled with the occasional fronting of temporal and locative adverbs (see Pop (2016:351)), alongside additive or restrictive adverbs when modifying the subject or the initial item in the sentence, lead to the unusually high percentage of initial positions in the sentence. Stance and degree adverbs are frequently employed in medial position. As they display significantly lower percentages in the Gospels, the relatively poor score appears to be functionally rather than spectacularly motivated.

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