

“Tongues Viewed as ‘Languages Understood by the Speaker as He Speaks’ in 1 Cor. 14:1-19”

—can 1 Corinthians Ch. 14 make sense when read
from this perspective?

Introduction

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First an attempt is made to carry out a structural-type analysis of 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 and, alongside this, an attempt is made to see whether it is plausible/possible to “read” 1 Corinthians 14 in a way which sees the gift of tongues as a language which is understood by the speaker as he speaks - rather than the “conventional” charismatic view of tongues as a language which the speaker does not himself understand (and regarding which he is, apparently, “instructed to pray for an interpretation or translation”). I realise that the above proposal will immediately be ruled “out of court” by most readers! After all, regarding the tongues speaker, we read in 1 Corinthians Ch. 14 that “his mind is unfruitful” and “he speaks mysteries”. So how is it possible for me or for anyone else even to entertain the idea that the speaker in tongues can understand what he is saying?! How can the speaker in tongues, or any listeners, understand what is being said unless an interpretation is given—either by him or by someone else!?

I think that my difficulty here is that the interpretation of 1 Cor. 14 has been so “framed” by the very widely-held view (or assumption) that the tongue or language is in fact incomprehensible to the speaker that most readers (and, regrettably, a number of bible translators too!) have probably never tried to read the chapter from a different assumption or perspective! Now it may very well be that, after reading this article, the reader may conclude that 1 Cor. 14 really doesn’t “work” (i.e. be capable of a plausible “reading”) when the assumption is made that the speaker in tongues understands what he is saying. (In this case, however, would suggest that even though *my* attempted explanation may well be wrong and/or unconvincing, this doesn’t however disprove the thesis itself). On the other hand, even if reading this way does produce a reasonably coherent interpretation of 1 Cor. 14 - i.e. one which does not produce any obvious or massive contradictions—this only shows that we then have a possible way of reading the chapter, not that it is therefore the correct way! It is often quite hard to recognise one’s own assumptions in many areas of life, and perhaps even harder (and sometimes unwise!) knowingly to set them aside—even provisionally—to explore other possibilities, so I appreciate, and respect the fact, that many readers will be unwilling to even consider the possibility being put forward in this article, and may not wish to read further.

Another feature of this article, is that it is assumed that the tongues/languages given by the Holy Spirit in Corinthians were human languages (as opposed to various other possibilities such as angelic languages or speech which does not conform to a conventional language structure). The main proposal or suggestion

of this article regarding “the intelligibility to the speaker of what is spoken” does not however depend upon this additional assumption and, with a little re-writing, the article would I think probably be able to accommodate a wider range of views regarding the nature of the language spoken.)

However, one feature of this more restrictive assumption—i.e. that human languages are being discussed - is that it would bring the experience of the Corinthians in 1 Cor. Chs. 12 and 14 more “into line” with the events described in Acts—particularly the events on the Day of Pentecost in Acts Ch. 2 where clearly the languages were human ones.

In this regard, many commentators see the gift of tongues that Paul is describing in Corinthians as substantially different from the gift of tongues in Acts Ch. 2 . For example, Antony Thistleton (in agreement with Gerd Theissen) (see for example A. Thiselton’s NIGTC commentary on 1 Corinthians p. 988) sees the gift of tongues in Corinthians as “the language of the unconscious” and the act of interpretation as “the bringing up of such utterances from the levels of unconscious depths to those of cognitive consciousness” - either by another or by the original speaker: glossolalia therefore, in this view makes “unconscious depth dimensions of life accessible”.

The present article argues that the data of 1 Corinthians can be plausibly understood without requiring recourse to such a proposed (and in the present writer’s view, somewhat unlikely) unconscious/conscious axis within the speaker.

In this investigation, I originally worked from the assumption that the gift of tongues was/is the *supernatural* ability to speak in a language that the speaker had/has not learned but which was nevertheless, as with the speaker’s native language, understood by the speaker as he speaks, and the article is basically written from this perspective. However, I would like to make a brief digression at this point (please feel free to ignore it!!) which looks at the radical possibility that the languages might be, or might include, naturally learned languages! This is just a tentative suggestion however, and this additional possibility does not affect any of the arguments subsequently being put forward.

Brief Digression

Two verses in 1 Corinthians Ch. 12 which might possibly allow an interpretation in this direction are:

i) Verse 7: “the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal” – followed by a list of spiritual gifts, including languages and the translation/interpretation of languages. Thus, it seems to me that the “context” of the language or tongue concerns the speaking of things that are spiritually helpful. Paul amplifies this point in the extensive discussion in 1 Cor. 14. For example, in 1 Cor. 14:5-6 Paul speaks about the church being edified (i.e. built up) when what is spoken in a tongue or language is interpreted or translated.

ii) The above thought can be combined with the important introductory verse, 1 Cor. 12:3, which says that, “. . . no man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost”. Let us assume that the statement, “Jesus is Lord” here stands for a whole range of true and helpful things that glorify God and Christ which Christians say which are the result of the action of the Holy Spirit.

As a result, we can see that, regardless of the language used, saying such things is enabled by the Holy Spirit. I am tentatively suggesting here that the ability to say these things in any particular language may be what constitutes the gift of languages – and correspondingly with the gift of translation: to say “Jesus is Lord” and other good things in, say, Swahili, represents an expansion in the world-wide spread of the Gospel and of biblical truth – indeed that is the purpose of the gift!

This is how the gift was used in Acts 2:11 – it was “the wonderful works of God” that were declared.

Well, whenever a Christian can speak such things in a foreign language, they are spreading spiritual truths, (truths which can only be spoken by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3)) and they are doing so in a language which might well be the only way that speakers of that language will get to hear the message if they, (like most Britons!!) are “mono-lingual”! Whether it is the Christian speaker’s native language, or a “second language” or a miraculously given ability to speak a language they have not learned (as was the case at Pentecost), the speaking is “by the Holy Spirit” and the result is the same.

A final point here concerns “gifts” generally. In Romans 12, Paul gives a list of gifts, including prophecy, which includes “mundane” gifts such as teaching, exhorting and showing mercy. This list then seems to cut across the traditionally-understood “natural/supernatural” divide, and perhaps suggests that any and all good things that Christians do or say are “spiritual”, even “supernatural”, whether or not they are, like for example prophecy, things that are traditionally understood as “supernatural”. This view would fit in with the doctrine of total depravity and with the truth that it is “God who works within us both to will and to do His good pleasure”

End of Brief Digression

In this investigation then, and with the possible addition of the point raised in the digression above, I will be suggesting that the gift of tongues was/is the supernatural ability to speak in a language that the speaker has not learned and which, as with the speaker’s native language, is understood by the speaker as he speaks, and for the purposes of this study, I will be assuming that it is not *specifically* or *necessarily* linked to an “ecstatic” experience whilst the speaker is speaking, nor that the content of the speech necessarily corresponds to other spiritual gifts such as the messages from God associated with e.g. prophecy or revelation etc. Perhaps we could see the gift as operating within the range of Christian experience and emotion from “normal” praying, singing and giving thanks through to usages associated with higher spiritual experiences of God or messages given directly by or inspired by God – i.e. those associated with the other miraculous gifts in particular prophecy. However, in all these cases, according to the viewpoint being proposed in this article, the language

itself would be “operating” *as a normal language* in the same way as the speaker’s native language.

Finally, in connection with the differences between Acts and Corinthians and the details of the *modus operandi* of this gift of the Spirit in both passages, we know that the Holy Spirit “came upon” the assembled believers in Acts Ch. 2 in a very dramatic way, so it’s not clear to me how much “choice” they had about the extent to which they exercised the gift, or the extent to which the Holy Spirit also gave them the content of their declarations regarding the mighty deeds of God, or whether they may have been lifted into a higher ecstatic state.

However, we could equally ask questions about “choice” and “content” and “elevated states” regarding the speeches of many other saints where the gift of tongues is *not* a feature—for example, Mary’s Magnificat, or indeed Peter’s superb sermon immediately after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. (As regards “choice” - it is most unlikely that any of these speakers would have been unwilling to be participants in any of these wonderful spiritual blessings—quite the contrary!)

Clearly in Corinthians however, the use of the gift was sufficiently under the control of the speaker for Paul to issue instructions regarding how many “speaking in tongues” there should be in any one “session” or meeting together of the church - so this implies the possibility of obedience to these instructions! However, within that limitation, there would appear to be, as noted above, a wide range of possibilities for the extent to which the tongues speaker was lifted into a higher spiritual experience, or was given the actual words to say when exercising the gift.

As a final, final point before looking at the passage before us, we note the regrettable tendency of some modern bible translations to mistranslate parts of the text in the furtherance of various presuppositions or theological biases on the part of the translator. For example, the NEB (mis)-translates “languages” (*glossa*) as “ecstatic tongues”. That this particular mistranslation is indeed a mistranslation is, fortunately, widely recognised.

Another mistranslation occurs in 1 Cor. 14:13. The text says, “. . . let him pray that or (in order that) he/one may interpret/translate” (*proseuchestho hina diermeveue*). Unfortunately, the ESV translates this as “. . . let him pray for the power to interpret”. The word “power” is not in the Greek text—the Greek word *hina* simply means “in order that”. I think it is unwise of the translators to force such a very committed and specific understanding of the text in their translation, and I hope to look in more detail at this verse later in the article. It is hardly surprising that many Christians believe that “tongues could not have been/cannot possibly be understood by the speaker whilst he/she speaks” when they are using bible translations such as the one above!

Structure of 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

I’d like to look at 1 Cor. 14:1-5 and 1 Cor. 14:6-19 separately: Verses 1-5 contrast prophecy and tongues (as do verses 20-33), whereas verses 6-19 are primarily about tongues considered on their own.

Here (next page) is a possible structural analysis of verses 1-5:

| | | | |
|--|---|----------------------|----------|
| Transition from Ch. 13 and Introduction to Ch. 14 | | | |
| a) Pursue love (3 words) (v.1) | | | 11 words |
| a`) i) and seek eagerly the spiritual things (4 words) | | | |
| ii) especially that you may prophesy (4 words) | | | |
| ----- | | | |
| A | a) For the one speaking in a tongue (4 words) | tongues | 17 words |
| | b) not to men speaks (3 words) | | |
| | c) but to God (3 words) (v.2) | | |
| | b`) for no-one hears (3 words) | | |
| | a`) in spirit but he speaks mysteries (4 words) | | |
| B | But the one prophesying to men speaks (5 words) | prophecy | 10 words |
| | for building up and encouragement and comfort (v.3) (5 words) | | |
| A/B | the one who speaks in a tongue himself builds up (5 words) | tongues vs. prophecy | 10 words |
| | but the one prophesying a church builds up (v.4) (5 words) | | |
| (A/B) ` | And I desire all you to speak in tongues (5 words) | tongues vs. prophecy | 10 words |
| | Rather but that you may prophesy (5 words) (v.5) | | |
| (A/B) `` | p) Greater for the one prophesying (4 words) | tongues vs. prophecy | 17 words |
| | q) i) than he that speaks in tongues (4 words) | | |
| | ii) unless he/one interprets (4 words) | | |
| | iii) in order that the church building up may receive (v.5) (5 words) | | |
| | | | |

Notes:

1) Verse 1 is serves as a transition section from 1 Cor. 13 (hence the mention of love) and an introduction to the next section on spiritual things (and especially prophecy).

2) Verses 2-5 describe (and contrast) tongues and prophecy. There is a balanced chiasmic arrangement in terms of word counts. Basically, the upper section (A and B) describes tongues and prophecy. Then in the middle (section A/B) they are contrasted, and then in the lower half the two gifts are evaluated.

3) At the start of A, we read, “The one who speaks in a tongue speaks . . . to God . . .”

We note that in this expression “the one who speaks in a tongue” is followed by another speaking verb—“(he) speaks”. Thus there are two verbs—the first (actually an adjectival participle) is included within the expression, “the speaking-in-a-tongue person” and this is followed by the verb “speaks”. Despite this, there is only a *single* “speech event”, and both verbs refer to this same single event. It is not as though the person speaks in a tongue, and *then* speaks to God! We intuitively do not understand the text in that way! (Perhaps also the expression “the speaking-in-a-tongue-one” might, in some instances anyway, refer more to the fact that the person has this gift or ability as a “possession”, and the verb “he speaks” would then refer to their putting that gift to use in practice. This is just a suggestion!) Similarly, in v. 4, we read that “the one who speaks in a tongue builds himself up”. Again, we understand that it is in and through the tongue speaking itself that the person is built up; we do not say to ourselves, “These are two separate events—first he speaks in a tongue and then he goes off and builds himself up as a subsequent event”!

I make this point about a *single* speech event because, an understanding that so natural for us in this verse is unfortunately not generally seen as a possibility in v. 13 (please see later!!) More controversially, I also suggest that the similar grammatical structure in v. 18 is also mistranslated (please see later also!)

4) Let us look in more detail at verse 2. This verse is one of the important verses for various views regarding the gift of tongues and for which I wish to suggest alternative viewpoints.

Verse 2 is preceded by Paul’s wish in v. 1 that the Corinthians prophesy, and in v. 2 and following Paul explains this. Paul connects v. 2 with what precedes by the conjunction “for”: prophecy is desirable *because*, by contrast, tongues on their own are inadequate! Again, v. 3, which praises prophecy, is introduced by the contrastive particle *de* (but): prophecy is again being seen as superior to tongues.

Now v. 2 says that the one speaking in a tongue speaks to God, and later, in v. 4 we read that the one speaking in a tongue builds himself up. On this basis, many conclude that a main *purpose* of the gift is private edification.

I don’t think the text is saying this. The context of these verses is the meeting of the church. Paul’s concern is the welfare of the church, and Paul’s argument is that prophecy benefits the church whereas, by contrast, tongues (without interpretation) only benefits the speaker in this group setting and is of no benefit to the church. This is not therefore an endorsement by Paul for the use of tongues “in private”, although Paul certainly never criticises such usages, and indeed I will be suggesting that in v. 18, Paul is possibly describing his own frequent giving thanks to God in tongues/languages in a private context!

The context of these verses is the meeting of the church. If someone speaks out loud in tongues, Paul points out in v. 2 that, in fact, he *can* only be speaking to

God, and not to anyone else because no-one hears/listens to/heeds/pays attention to/understands/comprehends by hearing him (i.e. because, without a subsequent interpretation, his words cannot be understood). (All these meanings are included within the semantic range of the Greek word *akouo*).

I think we can also infer from verse 2 that the “private” use of tongues is not being described here because of the reason that Paul gives to demonstrate that it is to *God* that the speaker speaks: this reason is not that the speaker is alone and in private, but rather that he is with others who are unable to hear/comprehend and heed his words!

Paul will describe this unfruitful process in more detail in verses 9-17.

This view of the matter is excellently described in Barnes’ notes on the [www. biblehub.com](http://www.biblehub.com) website:

“For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue - This verse is designed to show that the faculty of speaking intelligibly, and to the edification of the church, is of more value than the power of speaking a foreign language. The reason is, that however valuable may be the endowment in itself, and however important the truth which he may utter, yet it is as if he spoke to God only. No one could understand him.

Speaketh not unto men - Does not speak so that people can understand him. His address is really not made to people, that is, to the church. He might have this faculty without being able to speak to the edification of the church. It is possible that the power of speaking foreign languages and of prophesying were sometimes united in the same person; but it is evident that the apostle speaks of them as different endowments, and they probably were found usually in different individuals.

But unto God - It is as if he spoke to God. No one could understand him but God. This must evidently refer to the addresses "in the church," when Christians only were present, or when those only were present who spoke the same language, and who were unacquainted with foreign tongues. Paul says that "there" that faculty would be valueless compared with the power of speaking in a manner that should edify the church. He did not undervalue the power of speaking foreign languages when foreigners were present, or when they went to preach to foreigners; see 1 Cor. 14:22. It was only when it was needless, when all present spoke one language, that he speaks of it as of comparatively little value.

For no man understandeth him - That is, no man in the church, since they all spoke the same language, and that language was different from what was spoken by him who was endowed with the gift of tongues. As God only could know the import of what he said, it would be lost upon the church, and would be useless.

Howbeit in the Spirit - Although, by the aid of the Spirit, he should, in fact, deliver the most important and sublime truths. This would doubtless be the case, that those who were thus endowed would deliver most important truths, but they would be "lost" upon those who heard them, because they could not understand them. The phrase "in the Spirit," evidently means "by the Holy Spirit," that is, by his aid and influence. Though he should be "really" under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and though the important truth which he delivers should be imparted by his aid, yet all would be valueless unless it were understood by the church.

He speaketh mysteries . . . The word here seems to be synonymous with sublime and elevated truth."

End of Quotation

Another conclusion that is often drawn from v. 2 concerns the expression "in the Spirit he speaks mysteries".

This expression is widely understood to mean that the content of the speech of the speaker in tongues is mysterious in the sense that it is a "higher truth" and that its meaning is hidden from the speaker himself. This view is sometimes also linked with the idea of an ecstatic spiritual or mental state experienced by the speaker, and perhaps also with the idea that the mysteries may be too deep even to be put directly into words..

I believe that these ideas are not supported by the text, and stem, to some extent, from what I suggest is a misunderstanding of the meaning of the word "mysteries" as it is used in the New Testament and in particular by Paul.

Young's analytical concordance defines a mystery as "what is known only to the initiated", and in Matt. 13:11 Jesus tells the disciples, "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries . . .". Paul, who uses "great plainness of speech" (2 Cor. 3:12) is nevertheless also a "steward of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1)!

A particular meaning is found in connection with the New Covenant and the Age of the Spirit. Thus in Ephesians 3:4-6 Paul speaks of

" . . my understanding in the mystery of Christ which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men as now it has been revealed to the holy Apostles of Him and prophets in the Spirit [for] to be the nations joint-heirs and a joint-body and joint-sharers in the promise of Him in Christ through the Gospel . . ."

So, the mystery here is the New Covenant truth of the inclusion of Gentiles in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. This is a mystery into which New Covenant

believers are initiated. Paul points out that the verbal recognition of the basic truth of the New Covenant—that “Jesus is Lord” only comes about through the operation of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

However, many commentators believe that Paul’s usual use of the term mystery, as described above, does not apply in 1 Cor. 14:2. For example, in his leading commentary on 1 Corinthians, Anthony Thiselton notes (pp. 1085-1086) that the view he is proposing requires changing the meaning of “mystery” from Paul’s characteristic usage, and quotes Calvin approvingly to the effect that the term here denotes that which is “unintelligible, baffling, enigmatic . . .”. In this present article, I attempt to show that the more straightforward view—that Paul is using the term in his characteristic way—is entirely reasonable.

Now Paul freely acknowledges that the tongues speaker in 1 Cor. 14:2 is “in Spirit” when he speaks—so we can assume that Paul is glad both for the spiritual language used (the tongue), (after all, he wants them all to speak in tongues (v.5)!) and for what is spoken (mysteries - which would appear to be, as noted above, spiritual truths about the Person of Christ and His work in the New Covenant). In particular, Paul appears to endorse the content of the speaking in tongues (without distinguishing regarding our “modern” question as to the extent to which the speaker may have been “taken over” by the Spirit and given the words to say, or whether he is saying things that he himself wants to say based on his faith and understanding of the Gospel). Paul avers that the person speaks mysteries, which is a good thing, and later that the tongues speaker “does indeed give thanks well”! (1 Cor. 14:17) (Note, not “you may be giving thanks well enough” as the ESV puts it! There’s no “maybe” in the Greek text, and there’s often quite a difference between doing something well enough and doing it well !!)

Paul’s complaint then is not about the language *per se*, nor about the content of the speech. It is only about the inappropriateness of the speaking for the setting—that is in the meeting of the church. It seems to me that Paul, who elsewhere champions liberty and freedom in the Spirit in the New Covenant has no wish to stifle the Spirit and/or the expression of spiritual gifts. On the other hand, he desperately wants the church to be built up. His “solution” then is to allow a certain amount of tongues speaking, provided it is all interpreted/translated for the benefit of the members. For Paul, all the gifts of the Spirit are good, but they need to be exercised in love for the benefit of others. The situation is analogous to Galatians Ch. 5 where Paul, discussing liberty and the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit, says, “your liberty should not become an occasion for the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Gal 5:13). The good gift is given by the good Holy Spirit, but it can nevertheless be used unwisely in a way that fails to build up the body.

Finally in this section of the article, we note that Paul who spends so much time later in the chapter pointing out the superiority of speech which is understood

over speech which is not understood is unlikely to attribute the speaker's edification (building up") in v. 4 to a message that the speaker himself does not understand. I think the edification that Paul refers to here is the encouragement that comes to the speaker from reminding himself of, and speaking out, truths about Christ and His blessings to us. Affirming a truth is evidently a form of edification—for example, Paul very much wants the hearer to be able to say "Amen" after someone has given thanks (v. 16). And we also are built up as we remind each other of, and encourage each other of spiritual truths. Peter "stirs up" his readers "by way of a reminder" (2 Peter 1:13) and David speaks likewise to himself, "Bless the Lord O my soul and forget not all His benefits".

Structure of 1 Corinthians 14:6-19

This section is all about tongues, and is bracketed off by the repeated word "brothers" at the start of v. 6 and again at the start of v. 20.

I have attempted several complementary structural analyses of the passage. The first of these is called Figure 1 and is shown on the next page.

Figure 1 is a basically chiastic analysis of this complicated passage!

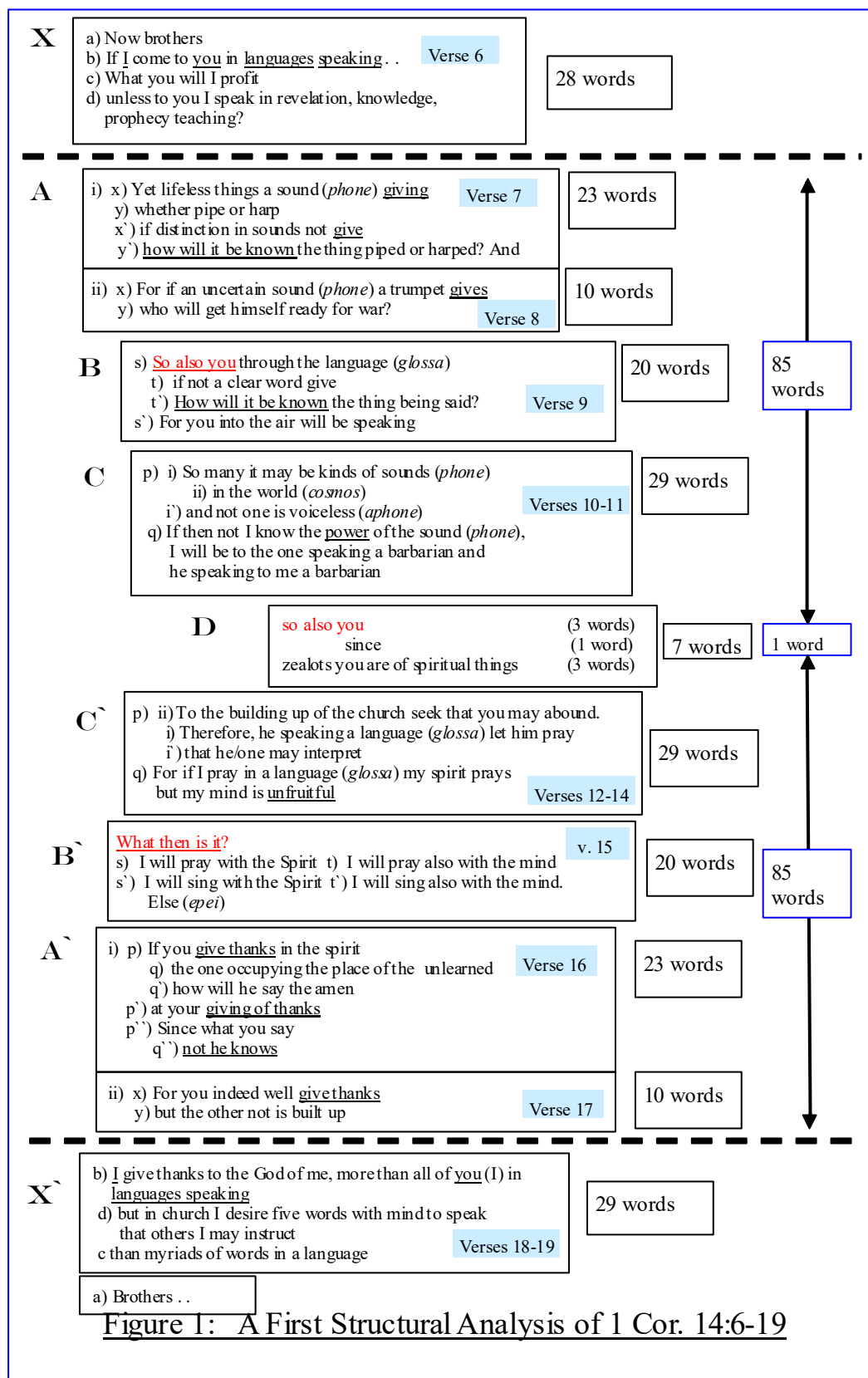
Notes:

1) This analysis relies heavily on the symmetrical word count structure. However, this aspect was relatively straightforward since, as can be clearly seen, the symmetrical word counts conform, in large measure, to the existing verse divisions—so much of the analysis had already been done!

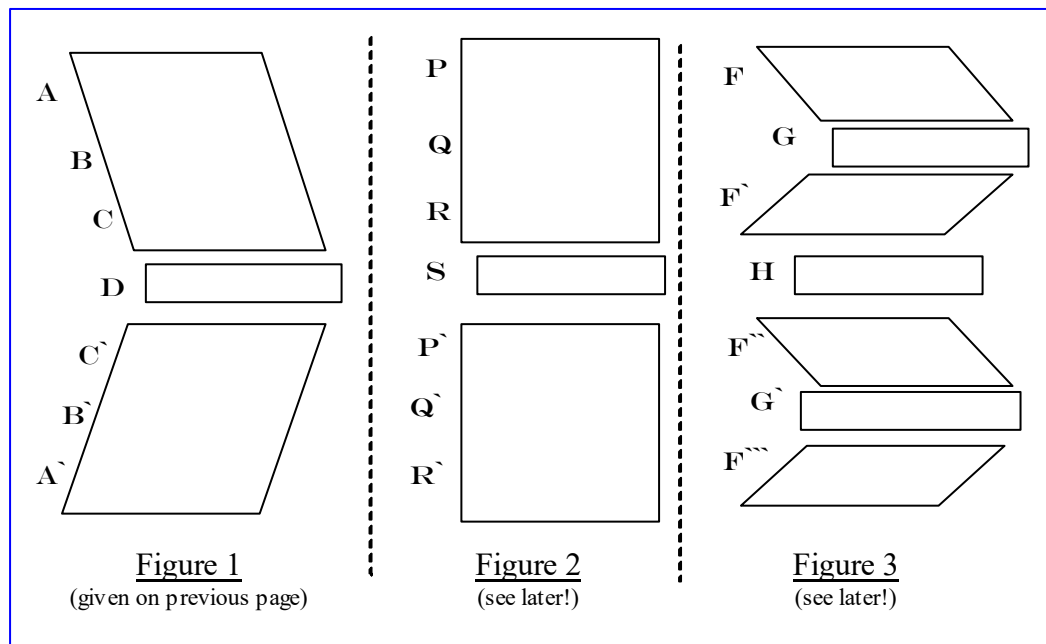
2) X and X' match in a straightforward way. In both X and X' Paul uses himself as an illustration. The repeated word "brothers" frames the entire section of 1 Corinthians Ch. 14 that we are discussing. The expression "I speak in languages" in relation to the Corinthians is repeated, and a contrast is drawn, in both X and X' between speech that profits (in X) and instructs (in X') and speech with tongues. In X', Paul raises the contrast to massive proportions—five words versus myriads of words!! The analysis from now on will look at the structure of the section of text that lies between X and X' - that is 1 Cor. 14:7-17.

3) Before looking in more detail at the chiastic structure of verses 7-17 as shown in Figure 1, here (next page but one) is a diagrammatic summary of the ways that we will be attempting to analyse the structure of these verses.

4) Let us now concentrate on the teaching that lies *between* X and X' using Figure 1. The centre of the structure, labelled D marks the transition from "general" examples of (largely ineffective) communication (A,B,C) to the specific problems of *spiritual* communication or lack of it when tongues are being spoken by the Corinthians (C',B',A'). In D therefore we note Paul's use of the



word *spiritual* to emphasise this transition.



5) Paul asks a lot of questions (rhetorical and otherwise!) in our passage. We will, I hope, look later at the location and nature of these questions.

6) Paul keeps altering the subjects and objects of the verbs in his argumentation! (I think some of this is to avoid speaking too bluntly to the Corinthians when criticism is involved, and to act as an example when encouraging right attitudes and actions. So for example, Paul can, rhetorically, take upon himself the role of a barbarian in verse 11! As already noted the whole section is framed by the friendly word “brothers” - Paul gets his points across whilst resolutely attempting to avoid offence!) We may perhaps investigate later to see if there is a pattern to the varying use of subjects and objects.

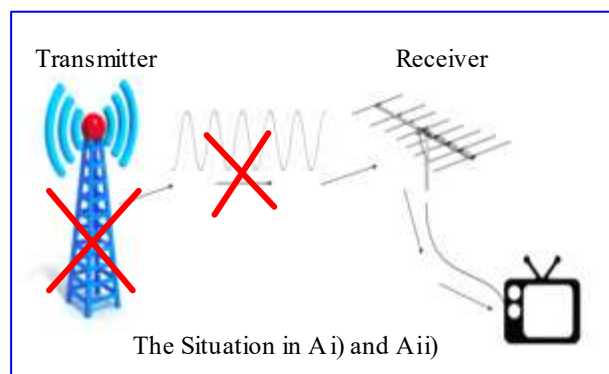
Thus, in Ai) and Aii) the subjects are musical instruments in two different contexts, and Paul carefully avoids stating an object: we are not given an identity for the listeners in either Ai) or Aii). Again, in B, the Corinthians are the subject, but again the listeners are not identified. Why is this? (One answer is that there are no listeners! This is Paul’s point!)

In C, Paul’s meaning is not quite straightforward, and the cosmos seems to be, in general, both the subject and the object of the many (constructive) “voices” and this is the first “positive” example of communication so far. In the second half of C, the subject is an unknown speaker, “he”, and Paul is (as already noted!) the “barbarian” object of the speaking.

Paul continues this rapid transition in the identities of subject and object in the second half, as we will see later.

7) What is going on?! In A and B there were no listeners, but in C there are listeners—even if one of them is a barbarian! Here we come to a key feature of Paul’s argumentation.

In A Paul repeatedly speaks about an “uncertain” sound being given, and in B this is *compared* (by means of the words “and so also you” - given in red in Figure 1) to the failure of the Corinthians to give a “clear word” when speaking in a tongue/language. In Ai) and Aii), the emphasis in Paul’s argument is on the failure of communication at the “transmitter” stage - when the speaker is not delivering a clear message. In this scenario, it doesn’t matter who the putative listener might be, since the communication fails “at source” (Perhaps that is why listeners are not identified in Ai) or Aii).)



However, despite the diagram, if we are to be strictly logical about all of this, Paul’s argument, where he seems to be comparing the Corinthian tongues speakers to badly-functioning pipes, harps and trumpets, is open to an important objection . . .

In Ai), the pipe and the harp are giving sounds that are so “off key” that the tune cannot be recognised! These sounds are presumably pretty awful in any context! The Greek word used seems (according to A. Thiselton in his commentary) to imply that the instrument is, actually, not even capable of producing distinct pitches—never mind a recognised tune!) In our transmitter analogy, the transmitter is damaged, and emitting chaotic signals. Now the speakers in tongues—many, and perhaps most, of whom have hitherto been using their gift un-interpreted in the church at Corinth - will already have been alerted in v. 5 to the fact that Paul does not approve of this practice, and they will be listening *very* carefully to what comes next! When Paul starts speaking about broken down tuneless instruments, they will not be best pleased, though other members—longsuffering listeners to incomprehensible speech - may perhaps have had a quiet (or not so quiet!) chuckle to themselves at Paul’s comparison. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians would have been read out by a speaker who had previously “rehearsed” the words, and who could convey all the humour etc. of Paul’s lively style appropriately, and I think Paul would have written with this “live” audience in mind! Is Paul being deliberately provocative here! Yes, but he’s getting the attention the subject needs! We also note that Paul has not actually *said*

in v. 7 that “these speakers are like broken down pipes or harps who are “giving out no message at all to anyone”—it’s called an *innuendo*!! (What Paul will later say in v. 9 is that the case or situation of the tongues speakers at Corinth is like the case of the pipe, harp and trumpet as to effect.) Nevertheless, he is inviting the aforementioned comparison!!

Jumping even further ahead if we look at the end of A’, the “chiastic counterpart” to section A, we see that Paul will later fully acknowledge (v. 17) that the speaker in tongues actually “gives thanks well” - he is speaking forth meaningful content, and that he is therefore not actually a “broken down pipe or harp”! But that comes later! For now, let us continue looking at section A . . .

Having got his audience, both tongues speakers and “tongues listeners” well and truly fired up, Paul now presents what I think may be a somewhat ambiguous case for their consideration. The case of the trumpet (Aii), in v. 8, is slightly different from the pipe and the harp in two respects. First, the “message” is an important one - not just recognising a tune, but preparing for war! Second, the Greek word for the “uncertain” (voice) is a different word from the word for “indistinct” in verse 7, and (again according to A. Thiselton) has more the meaning of being uncertain as a signal—rather than being “intrinsically indistinct”. This perhaps allows for the possibility that the trumpet is giving off a sound that is quite meaningful and even tuneful in some (musical?) contexts—a sort of “trumpet voluntary” - but, in Paul’s example, it is not giving out the loud urgent and insistent blast needed to warn people and get them to prepare for battle! Thus, here, Paul presents the possibility (by implication) that the tongues are intrinsically “meaningful”, but that the message is the wrong one— it is not a needed, urgent, helpful message to the listeners. (I should point out that A. Thiselton has a very different view of the gift of tongues/languages from the one presented here, and I’m freely borrowing from his commentary without suggesting that he would agree with anything I’m putting forward!)

The competition between speakers and listeners is getting a very slightly closer now! What will Paul say next?!

When we come on to Paul’s application in B, (introduced by “So also you . . .”) , the word for “clear” in the expression “if a clear word you do not give” means (again according to A. Thiselton) “readily intelligible”. Here, Paul has very craftily avoided giving a “cause” for the lack of intelligibility. The point of Paul’s comparison is that what the Corinthians tongues speakers have in common with the pipe, the harp and the trumpet is lack of intelligibility with respect to the hearers, without necessarily implying that the reason for the Corinthian speakers’ lack of intelligibility is the same, or analogous to, that of the pipe, harp and/or trumpet (despite provocatively giving that *impression* earlier!)

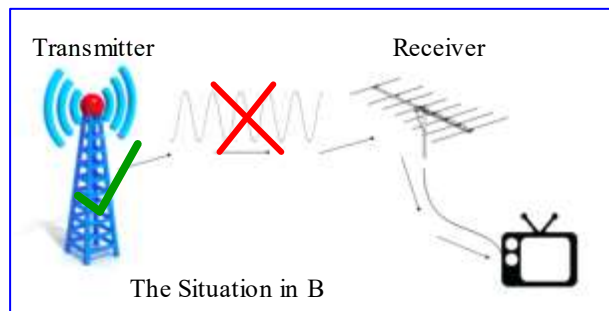
In fact, it seems to me that there may be a sort of “sub-text here: Paul may be suggesting that, if, as a speaker, you are unintelligible to the listeners, whatever

the cause, you might just as well be that broken pipe or harp or the trumpet which fails to give a danger signal——since you are, as far as the listeners are concerned, like these instruments, simply “speaking into the air”.

Paul has now, I suggest, gone some way to evening up the score between the speakers and the listeners at Corinth, but we are not back to square one—everybody is now involved in the arguments, and looking forward to what Paul will say next! Paul has given two ways in which, in the natural world, communication can “go wrong” - both being “transmitter” errors,. He has not claimed that the lack of a clear word by the Corinthian speakers might be something analogous—i.e. that the speakers might be incoherent (pipe and harp) or that, like the trumpet, they are trying, but failing, to say something intrinsically meaningful and important. Nevertheless, the similarity as regards meaningful results for the listeners will be seen as a (hopefully humorous) rebuke for “tongues without interpretation”.

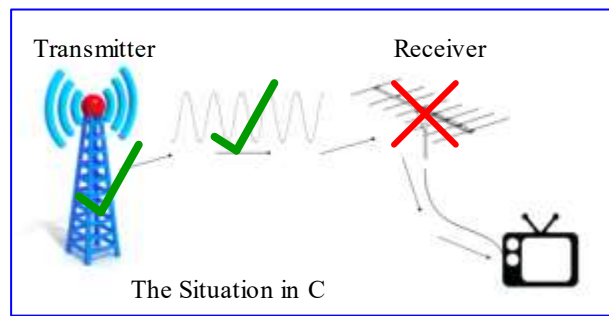
But now, in B, Paul has directly raised the question, not of intrinsic failure in the speaker (the transmitter) but on the more general question of the lack of intelligibility of the word given—without yet specifying a cause.

If we tried to present the situation of the Corinthians as described by Paul in section B using the transmitter-receiver analogy, it might be something like the diagram below.



In terms of our diagram, the tick over the antenna corresponds to an intrinsically meaningful signal being emitted by the tongues speaker, and the red cross over the wavy line (signal) would indicate that the meaningful signal is being sent out on the wrong frequency (i.e. wrong language!) for the receiver (the Corinthian congregation) .

Paul nevertheless feels the need to look further at the reason for the communications breakdown in the Corinthians’ case, and he does this, again with an analogy, in C. Now this time, instead of looking at the “transmitter”, he focuses on the receiver.



Paul's analogy is very interesting. He uses the same Greek word for sounds or voices as he did in section A, and he talks about all the voices in the cosmos. He acknowledges (apparently with some diffidence—perhaps in acknowledgement that his earlier, simpler, examples, although effective, don't analyse the problem at Corinth as fully as he feels necessary, or perhaps that he is now, somewhat unwillingly, required to offer some comfort to the beleaguered "tongues" faction at Corinth, a group he wishes to correct!!) - that the voices in the cosmos are actually meaningful (as he punningly puts it, "no voice is without a 'voice'" - trading on the superficial and deeper meanings of the word "voice"—a distinction which we also make in English, for example when we speak of a writer finding his or her "voice" - meaning that they have found a personal, authentic style and subject matter). The word cosmos here is also very interesting—its classical use at this time referred to the orderly system of things, and so Paul is presenting the voices in the cosmos in a positive light. These rather mysterious voices—of which Paul tells us there are "many kinds" - certainly include human speech as we know from the context).

Anyway, the voices are meaningful, and Paul traces failure of communication in this setting to a weakness not in the speaker, but rather in the listener: he doesn't know the "power" of the voice. Again, this is a rather general way of putting things, but as regards human languages, Paul means that the listener's weakness is that he doesn't understand the language: he's "tuned to the wrong frequency" (language) and the good signal (as indicated in the previous diagram) just sounds like "white noise" to him!

Now it is the turn of the "tongues" party to start cheering! "We're doing fine, they say—the problem is not with us, it's with those listeners who don't have the ability or power to understand us!"

Indeed, Paul plays up to this! Rhetorically, he puts himself in the role of the Corinthian listeners, and says, "I don't have the ability to understand the speaker's speech—I must be, to him, a barbarian!" Thus Paul describes himself rhetorically as an individual who is rather "out of kilter" with the cosmos since he lacks the power to discern the meaning and at this point Paul could perhaps concur with Shakespeare, *"the fault lies, not in our stars, but in ourselves . . ."*

Oh dear, the whole argument seems to have turned through 180 degrees. The

people who a minute ago were being heckled as broken pipes and harps are now seen to be the “civilised” ones, and the ignorant listeners, the barbarians! What is Paul trying to do here?!

A moment later, we find out! Just as the “tongues” speakers are congratulating themselves, Paul brings back the full force of his earlier argument:

“ . . and he (the speaker) will be a barbarian to me!!”

Uproar in the audience! So, Paul has cleverly reached the desired outcome of the first half of the chiasm! Un-interpreted tongues result in a total breakdown of communication with each “side”, speaker and listener alike, accusing the other of being the barbarian! Paul has re-created in his speech the unhappy result that has been previously played out on a number of occasions in the Corinthian assembly—a total lack of edification and mutual recriminations!

Paul is now ready to appeal to the tongues speakers for a more constructive approach to the use of their gift! In the centre of the chiasm, D, Paul cleverly appeals to the Corinthians’ desire for spiritual things: they really do have this desire, even if it is often with mixed motives (e.g. self-aggrandisement etc.)

In C’, Paul now puts forward the irrefutable argument that the task of building up the church will provide just the opportunity for “abounding” that the tongues speakers, (from whatever motive!) desire! Some of the translations I think fail to convey what I tentatively suggest is the subtle irony of Paul’s argument here. The literal translation is “seek for the building up of the church in order that you may abound”; Paul gives the “abounding” of members as regards spiritual things as the motive for seeking to build up the church. This can be “read” in two ways—either the abounding in spiritual things is the building up of the whole church (or is a consequence of it), or since the tongues speakers are particularly in Paul’s sights here (as we know from the “therefore” that immediately follows), Paul may be somewhat ironically hinting that their personal desire to “abound” (for whatever motives!) would be better achieved through the building up of the church and when others stop thinking of them as barbarians!

Paul now gives the practical advice regarding the need for interpretation in connection with the spiritual gift of tongues. In sections A, B and C Paul has been “preparing the ground” and has avoided using the word “spiritual”. It is only now at the central transition point of his argument that the word is introduced, and he uses the word repeatedly in what follows.

In the second half of the chiasm, C’, B’ and A’ Paul gives spiritual instruction, but, I suggest, he does so in a way which in a number of respects “matches” and builds upon the corresponding sections, A, B, C in the first half of the chiasm.

Let us look at the arguments advanced in C’, B’ and A’ themselves, noting in

passing how these sections “match” the corresponding sections in the upper half of the chiasm:

8) First, let us consider C`:

This section, like section C, is divided into two parallel sub-sections. Paul starts off section C` as already noted by speaking of the edification or building up of the church. I suggests this corresponds to his reference to the cosmos in C. According to *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words*, “the Greek noun *kosmos* in its classical meaning referred to building and construction but more especially order . . . e.g. the regulation of life in human society.” It then came to mean the (orderly) universe—both in its physical and societal aspects. It is thus an appropriate “analogue” for the building up of the church in C`. Paul’s point presumably then is that the “voices” in the cosmos are meaningfully employed in the orderly structure of the world and the Corinthians should learn from this!

Corresponding to Paul’s point about “cosmic” voices having a “voice” is Paul’s statement in v. 13, about the need for interpretation of tongues. This verse has been so widely understood in the modern charismatic sense that I suggest we take a step back and see what the verse *actually says* in the Greek, and then how the verse “reads” according to the present thesis—namely that the speaker in tongues understands what he is saying as he speaks.

First of all, I suggest we need to recognise that many bible translators mistranslate this verse. A classic example of this is the ESV’s unfortunate translation of the verse which is actually an interpretation, not a translation,

“Therefore one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret”

This translation/interpretation describes a three-stage process. The first is the speaking out of a message in a language that the speaker himself does not understand. Then he prays (presumably silently) to be given the translation/interpretation of the passage, and then, when God has answered this prayer, the speaker speaks the translation/interpretation to the assembly for their edification.

It is the contention of this article that verse 13 describes a two-stage, not a three-stage process, and that the speaking and the praying are one and the same.

To see how this may be so, let us look at what the Greek actually says, and start by pointing out the fact that the word power does not occur in the Greek. That really is an interpretation/interpolation!

The sentence is actually a “third person imperative” (an example of this is Marie Antoinette’s “Let them eat cake!”)

Here in 1 Cor. 14:13 Paul says,

“Therefore let the speaking-in-a-tongue-person pray in order that he may translate!”

In the next two sentences Paul makes it abundantly clear that he is describing the situation of a person who is praying in tongues but who then needs to translate. With the view being put forward in this article, an “additional” prayer is neither described nor needed since the speaker already understands what he has just prayed in the foreign language—he now just needs to translate it for the benefit of the congregation—or let someone else do so! (Paul is not against tongues—indeed, in v. 13 he has issued an imperative for the tongues speaker to pray, the purpose of the praying being the accompanying translation that will build up the congregation.)

In the expression “the speaking-in-a-tongue-one” (*ho lalon glosse* in Greek) the word “speaking” (*lalon*) is a participle. Now participles are verbs that function either adverbially or adjectivally and here it seems clear (for various reasons) that the *lalon* in verse 13 is telling us more about the *person* who prays (i.e. an adjectival use). Thus, a literal translation would be:

“Therefore, the speaking-in-a-tongue-person, let him pray in order that he may translate”.

Word order in Greek can be quite flexible. Here Paul puts the tongues speaker first in the sentence thereby, I suggest, emphasising that his earlier words in v. 12, which are of general application to the church, are now being applied specifically to the tongues speakers.

One thing, discussed earlier, that is not clear to me is whether the expression “the speaking-in-a-tongue person” refers to their speaking in a tongue at that very moment, or to their characteristic ability to speak in tongues. Thus, does *ho lalon glosse* refer to the ability - “the tongues-speaking person”- or to the actual speaking -“one who-is-at-that-moment-actually-speaking-in-a-tongue”?

My best guess here is that Paul envisages all tongues speaking in church as basically prayer (thus in this lower half of the chiasm he speaks of praying, singing and giving thanks in the Spirit). The context of verses 13-15 is praying in the Spirit, and so the two alternatives discussed above amount to the same thing, and it may be that Paul understands (either intuitively or explicitly) “speaking in a tongue” to refer both to the ability and to the act equally.

Let us jump ahead, consider one or two other occurrences of the combination of the verb to speak, *laleo* and the word for languages or tongues, *glossa*. In 1 Corinthians 14:18, the expression “*glossais lalon*” occurs (in the Received Text that is.). Here, tongues is plural, rather than singular as in v. 13, and the definite

article/pronoun *ho* is missing in v. 18. I think the lack of *ho* here is significant as it allows for the possibility that *lalon* is functioning as an adverbial participle rather than as an adjectival participle. If this is so, then “in tongues speaking” tells us about the manner of Paul’s giving of thanks: Paul says, “I give thanks to my God, more than all of you in-tongues-speaking”. Paul is telling the Corinthians of his own (?private) giving thanks in tongues, (pointing out, in passing, that he excels all the Corinthians in this respect: “He therefore knows what he is talking about” is the sub-text here!!)

The translation given above (which is not found in any of the major versions) follows on very naturally from verse 17—where Paul has just acknowledged the “giving thanks well” of the tongues speakers at Corinth. Now in verse 18, he tells them of his own giving thanks in tongues, and in both cases, he draws attention to the lack of edification for others. (This translation is in contrast with the rather awkward change of subject as we go from verse 17 to v. 18 in the usual translations where Paul having talked about people giving thanks *in* tongues in v. 17 now apparently talks about his personal giving thanks *for* tongues in v. 18.)

We do not know for sure that Paul is here referring to his “private” giving thanks in tongues/languages. It is possible that he is referring to his giving thanks in distant places/churches where other languages are spoken, and in in which a language different from the Greek of the Corinthians would be the “mother tongue”. Paul could then use such languages appropriately in a church context. Also, although it is usually assumed that Paul himself has received the spiritual gift of languages, I don’t think the text actually *requires* this: he might simply be a naturally gifted linguist.

(Nestle-Aland has *lalo* rather than the Received Text’s *lalon* in v. 18. NA.’s failure to read *lalon* at this point upsets the careful pattern of participial usages in connection with this verb (and other verbs) that Paul has carefully built up over the preceding verses.)

We now come to verse 14, which again has been so “worked over” by modern charismatic understandings that I strongly suggest that we go back to the Greek.

An example of a really blatant (mis-)interpretation, as opposed to a translation, is provided by the New Living Translation:

“ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit is praying but I don’t understand what I am saying.”

This is just not what the text says, and it is regrettably true that there is at least one other translation that is even more misleading than this!

Well, let’s look at the Greek. A literal translation would be something like,

“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.”

In passing, we note that the structure of this sentence corresponds to the previous one: the praying in a tongue and the spirit praying are the same event—not two separate events.

| | | | |
|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| Therefore | the speaking in tongues one | let him pray | in order that he may interpret |
| ↕ | ↕ | ↕ | ↕ |
| For | if I pray in a tongue | my spirit prays | but my mind is unfruitful |

Now let us note that the text says that the speaker’s mind unfruitful—it is not bearing fruit. It does not say that his mind is dormant!!

Well, the obvious meaning of “his mind not bearing fruit” is nothing to do with the internal workings (or not) of his mind, it has to do with the passing on of the benefits and insights of his prayer to others! We can see that this is clearly the case from a comparison of the above sentences: without an interpretation, the mind is unfruitful!

As further evidence of this, let us jump ahead to section B` and let us look at the next sentence—the third in a sequence of sentences on “praying in tongues/praying in the Spirit”:

“I will pray with the Spirit; I will pray also with my mind”. Let’s line this up with the previous two:

| | | | |
|------------|-----------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Therefore | the speaking in tongues one | let him pray | in order that he may interpret |
| ↕ | ↕ | ↕ | ↕ |
| For | if I pray in a tongue | my spirit prays | but my mind is unfruitful |
| ↕ | ↕ | ↕ | ↕ |
| What then? | I will pray | with the Spirit; | I will pray also with the mind |

Clearly, the “praying with the mind” corresponds to the translating/interpreting of the original prayer in tongues and it is this translating/interpreting which converts an unfruitful mind into a fruitful, productive mind!

9) Let us now look “properly” at section B`:

In section B, the upper section corresponding to B`, Paul asked the Corinthians a question, “*If you do not give a clear word, how will what is bring said become known?*” In B` he gives the answer using himself as a rhetorical example, “*I will*

pray with the Spirit and I will pray with my mind; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind". Paul's answer is that what is being prayed and sung "with the Spirit/spirit" (i.e. using the spiritual gift of tongues) becomes known through praying and singing with the mind—i.e. through the interpretation/translation which conveys the content to others of the original prayer/song in terms that can be understood. "Mind" in B' corresponds to "known" in B.

Similarly, the tongue/language (*glossa*) in B corresponds to the singing and praying in the Spirit in B', but perhaps also the "speaking into the air" in B contrasts with the praying/singing with the Spirit (*pneuma*, breath) in B'.

9) Now looking at A' in relation to A, we see that the three "giving thanks" in the Spirit in A' correspond to the three "giving forth" of sounds in A (the verbs, although related in English are nevertheless different in the Greek). The two A's, A and A' correspond since they both present their actions in a negative light. Thus "How will it be known?" in A corresponds to "He knows not" and "the unlearned" in A'. The fault with the trumpet was that the signal it provided was not the necessary signal for battle preparations. If this is correct, then that would perhaps correspond specifically to the final "giving thanks" sentence in A' - namely that the speaker, (corresponding to a trumpeter who intends the right signal but fails to produce it?!) is in fact, "making sense" but not getting the message across—resulting in a lack of edification for the church.

A minor point to note concerns the translation of the expression "*You indeed give thanks well*" in verse 17. some translations "tone down" the straightforward meaning of this expression. For example, the ESV says,

"For you may be giving thanks well enough but the other person is not being built up".

Presumably the ESV is finding it hard that Paul could be so clear and certain that the giving of thanks is done well when, according to the standard "charismatic" view, the person giving thanks does not understand what he himself is saying. Neither the use of the subjunctive (*you may be giving thanks . . .*) nor the replacing of well with "well enough" can be supported linguistically—the Greek text is very clear that Paul recognises the person as giving thanks well!

(As an interesting aside, one of the meanings of the verb *kosmeo* (corresponding to the noun *kosmos*) refers specifically to "the marshalling of an army", to "arrange in battle formation" etc. There is thus an underlying military aspect in some of Paul's examples and analogies here, (as well as musical ones—perhaps corresponding to the singing with the Spirit). Paul often uses military language, and here he seems to use it in connection with the building up of the church (for spiritual battle?). We can compare this with the battle formation of the children of Israel when they marched out of Egypt in military

formation ("five in a rank" - Ex. 13:18 KJV margin) and the military formation of the tribes camped around the tabernacle.)

I hope I have done enough here to show that the view that the tongues speaker understands what he is saying as he says it is tenable, and at the least, not inconsistent with Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians Ch. 14.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this article with a very brief look at the two alternative analyses of the structure of 1 Cor. 14:7-17 presented earlier.

Let us look first at the "panel" structure which we labelled Figure 2 and which is shown in detail on the next page:

Very Brief Notes on Figure 2:

1) I've changed the A's B's and C's etc. to P's Q's and R's etc. in order to show the "parallel" structure of the upper and lower halves of the chiasm.

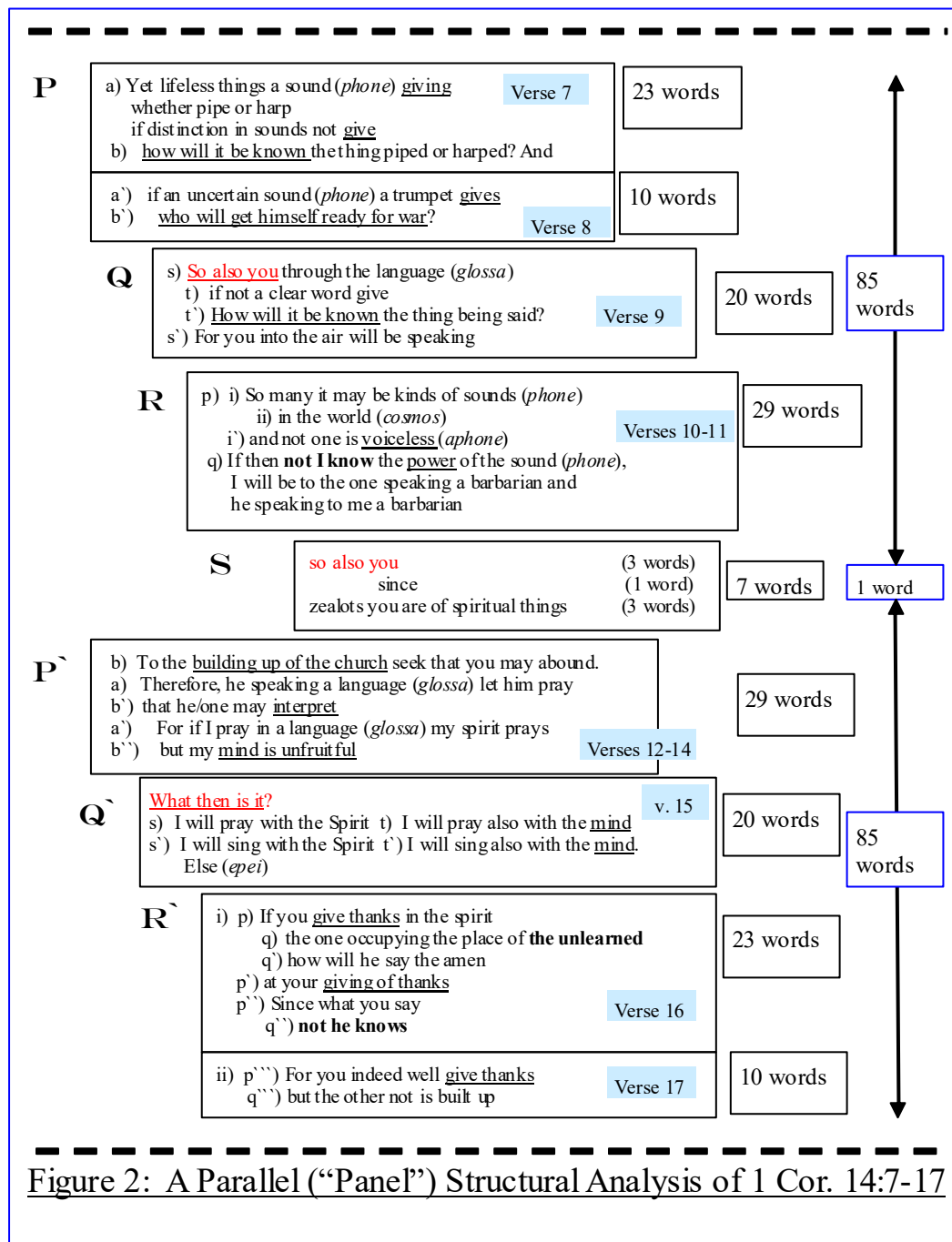
2) The rationale for the broad outline of this structure is that in both the upper and lower halves of the chiasm, the order of Paul's argumentation is the same: first the "problem" with the speaker—the "transmitter" problem, (P, Q and P', Q') - and then the "problem" with the listeners—the "receiver" problem (R and R'). Thus, in P and Q, the repeated question "how will it be known?" corresponds to, or contrast with, the words interpret, unfruitful and mind in P' and Q'. Similarly in R, the words voiceless, "I know not" and barbarian correspond to, or contrast with, the words "giving thanks", "he knows not" and "unlearned" in R'.

3) In P the question "how will it be known?" is repeatedly asked (albeit in terms of pipes, harps and trumpets). In P', the question is answered in terms of the building up of the church—by providing an additional step—an interpretation of the original message—so that the meaning *can* be known by all. The lifeless pipe and harp and the uncertain sounds of pipe, harp and trumpet are contrasted with the fruitful building up of the church, and the abounding of the speakers—provided an interpretation is provided.

4) In P, no listeners are identified. In P', the listeners are the church.

Finally, I would like to put forward an analysis in which the passage is again chiastic but in which, additionally, the upper and lower halves of the passage are *themselves* chiastically structured. I have called this structure "doubly chiastic" and it is shown in Figure 3 on the next page but one:

Very Brief Notes on Figure 3:

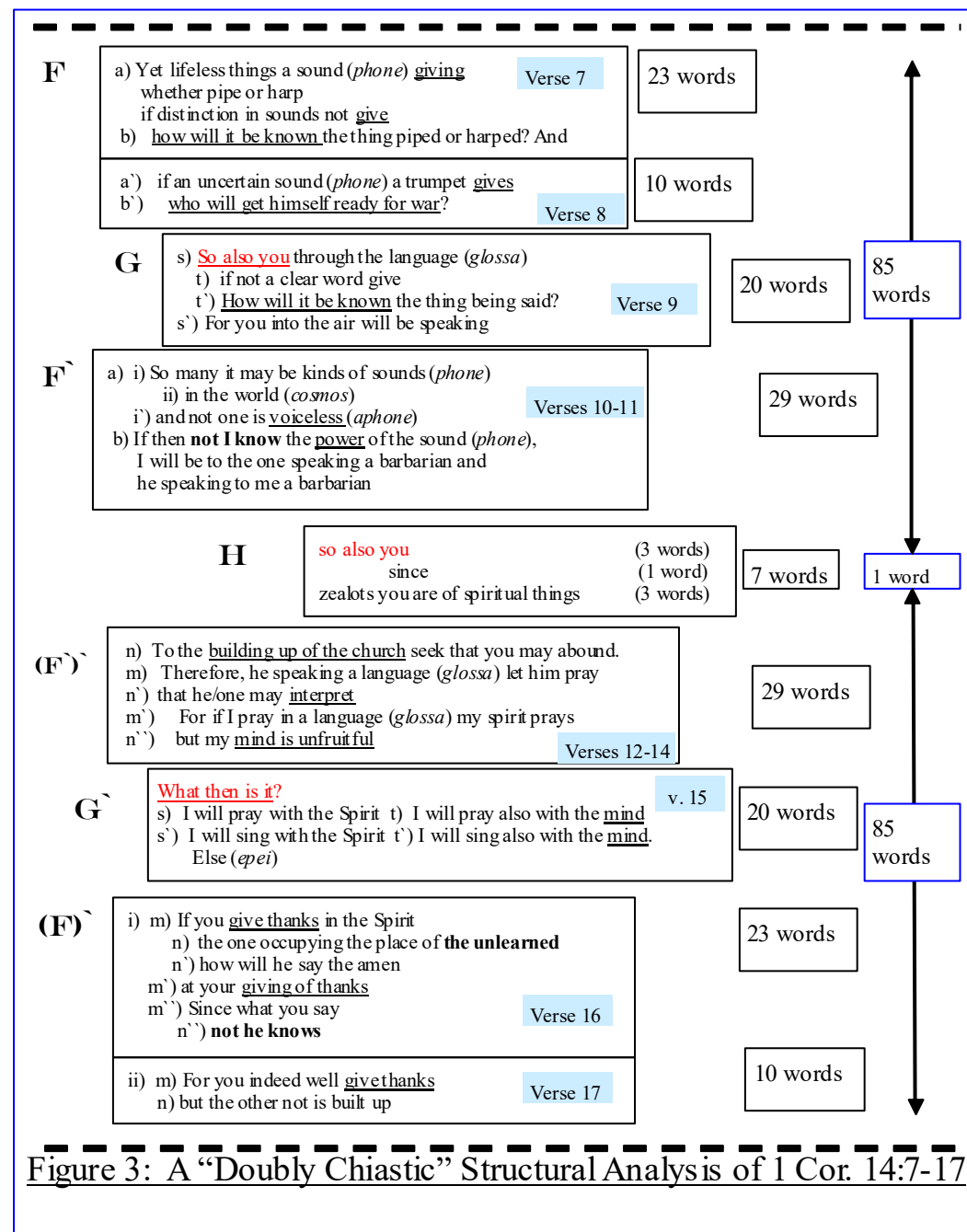


1) F and F' in the upper chiasm are linked by the repeated use of the word for sound or voice, *phone*. This contrasts with the word *glossa* (language) in G.

2) The examples in F, (Fa) and Fa')), are all "negative", but the cosmos in F' (F'a) in figure 3) presents a positive example. Similarly, in the lower half of the chiasm, (F')' has the positive building up of the church (F')'n) and this contrasts with the "other person" not being built up in (F')'ii)m). (My apologies for the confusing notation!) The lower half of the chiasm is more positive than the

upper half however, since the “F”’s in the lower half refer positively to “the Spirit/spirit praying” and “giving of thanks well”, and there is nothing equivalent in the upper half.

3) It is possible to give a slightly different chiastic analysis for the lower half. This is summarised on the next page.



A To the building up of the church seek that you may abound.

B Three “prayings” in the spirit/in a language

C I will sing with the Spirit; I will sing with the mind

B` Three “blessings” (giving thanks) in the Spirit

A` The other is not built up

X Much (?private) blessing/giving thanks in languages by Paul (v. 18)

Summary of Alternative Chiastic Analysis of Lower Half of Chiasm