Stylometrics and the Question of Interpolation in Paul

Spencer on 2 Cor 11:16-12:13, Rom 8:9-39, Php 3:2-4:13

Ada Besançon Spencer, Paul's Literary Style (1984), compares these passages (where time and purpose are held constant) and explains their differences in terms of Paul's relation to his audience (unknown in Rom, familiar in Php, contested in 2 Cor). Her analysis is by ten "operations," some involving as many as eight comparisons:

Operation 1 (Sentence Changes, p138). "[Paul's] style is nominal."

Operation 3 (Adverbs and Adverbial Clauses, p153). "adverbs and adverbial clauses . . . in 2 Cor . . .exhibit Paul's primary concern of confronting . . . his adversaries. In Rom, Paul is more impersonal and theoretical and cautious. The pericope in Php has a variety of adverbs and adverbial clauses without any preponderance of any particular type. This variety may be due to the variety of topics he addresses."

Operation 4 (Propositional Reduction, p163). "Since he employs much figurative and abstract language, his sentences are very difficult to reduce to propositions."

Operation 5 (Logical Diagrams, p164). "This percentage of space devoted to restating, defining, or expanding is a constant item in his style . . . Paul employs more personal references and fewer conjunctions with the groups which know him more intimately."

Operation 6 (Abstract and Concrete Nouns, p169). "However, the description of a true apostle is more abstract in Rom and Php than it is in 2 Cor."

Operation 8 (Spitzer's Philological Circle, p175). "That the Php pericope has a high incidence of definite articles is not surprising, since Paul does know his readers well, and they appear very receptive to his guidance. Their receptiveness is confirmed by the high incidence of definite articles. However, Paul's use of more definite articles in Romans indicates that real intimacy is not as important a variable in this instance, as is the need to create a potentially receptive audience."

Operation 2 (Complexity of Writing, p194). "The audience's receptiveness or amiability appears to affect complexity of a style rather than the audience's intimacy with a writer."

Operation 9 (Verb Density, p195). "However, despite the fact that 2 Cor and Rom were written within a year of each other and on the same continent, and . . . would be expected to reflect the same stylistic characteristics, they reveal a greater difference in verb density (22%) than do Rom and Php (11%)."

Operation 10 (Variety of Sentence Length, p196). "Thus, for Paul's writings variety of sentence length decreases as an audience appears more amiable."

Operation 7 (Imagery, p197). "Paul employs more images in Php (35) than in Rom (29) or 2 Cor (26). Paul employs more images for his more amiable audiences than for his more intimate audiences. The type of image Paul employs . . . reflects Paul's perspective toward that audience. The images function differently in each letter."

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All these comparisons are validly part of the study of style in the larger sense, though in several, as the author herself notes, enumeration does not suffice, and literary appreciation is required for interpretation.

To these measures, of which all readers should be aware, the BIRD test adds one based on a single variable: connectivity, as mirrored in the use of common function words. This test too will require literary interpretation. Its function is not to render decision, but to *provide data* for decision.