

WSWG 28

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Campus Center, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Stylometrics and the Question of Interpolation in Paul



The quantitative description of literary style has long been thought to hold promise for the study of texts. Exercises of this sort have been common in several fields (including those of concern here, classical Sinology and especially New Testament). From the beginning, interest has focused on discriminating different authors in the same corpus (the plays attributed to Shakespeare; the supposed dialogues of Plato). But it is obvious that the style of one author may also vary, from one genre to the next or between differently emphasized parts of a discourse. There is no guarantee that the range of style variation *within* an author will not overlap with the range of variation *between* authors. Calibration is thus required for any proposed stylistic test.

Style and content are different aspects of a communication. Style is the *manner* of a text, as contrasted with its *message*: what you say versus how you say it. Literary style can be examined from many points of view: sentence length, ratio of nouns to verbs, and so on. All work to some extent, though none works perfectly, and different methods may be expected to give at least slightly different results when applied to the same material. All stylometric results must in the end be referred to the judgement of the experienced interpreter. Results which seem to support other evidence, or suggest new but convincing insights, may properly be accepted. Stylometric results are thus not final. As far as they go, they have this advantage: they are independent of the investigator: anyone counting “the” in an essay of Jonathan Swift, or sentence length in 1 Timothy, will arrive at exactly the same result.

At this conference, we will introduce a lexically-based measure, called BIRD, and invite comment on some sample analyses of both Chinese and NT texts, concentrating especially on texts attributed to Paul, which have great importance for the Historical Paul, and for the early history of Christianity. Initial emphasis will be on the Corinthians correspondence, with conferees free to take up any other texts of particular interest to them, or those which seem to offer opportunities for input from stylometrics. The focus throughout will be on Paul, or the original author of any other text to be considered, and not on stylometrics as such. These techniques are of use only as they offer suggestive information to those studying the texts, and the history that lies behind the texts – or, in the case of the editorial interpolations which seem to be a factor with Paul, the history that comes after them.

It was originally intended that the Conference would include specialists in classical Chinese as well as NT. In the event, only NT specialists will be present, but the initial presentation of the BIRD test will still include both Chinese and NT examples, in part to emphasize the universal nature of the test. The Conference itself will be both small and brief. Its penumbra, the *in absentia* participants in Chinese as well as NT who contribute suggestions for analysis or objections to conclusions via an E-mail conversation, or send them in to be posted on the Conference web page for consideration by others, are also very much part of the Conference plan.

We thank them in advance for their assistance.