John 1 and 1C and Colwell and Greek and Grammar by Colin Green

The following is from https://gettingtothetruthofthings.blogspot.com/2024/05/john-11c-colwells-rule-etc.html and is by Colin Green.

Also from C. Green

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Begin:

John 1:1c, Grammar, Colwell, Etc.

For this post, I'll assume that this will be of interest to readers with some of the basics of grammar 'rules.' To avoid this being overly long, I shan't explain everything. If you need more clarification about anything, please leave a note in the comments box. Thanks.

This is about John 1:1c:
καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος
(and God was the Word)

Breakdown

Here is a grammatical breakdown of John 1:1c. In the Greek word order, the words are "God was the Word". Thus:

"God" is a noun and is anarthrous here (no article "the") and is pre-verbal here (before the verb) and is our predicate here (it tells us something about the subject) and is in the nominative case. It's not the subject in the clause.

"was" - our equative verb – I'll explain such verbs below.
"the Word" is our subject – the noun in the nominative case with the article 'the'.

The verb

What is an equative verb?

Daniel B. Wallace, in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI, 1996: Zondervan), on pages 38-45, gives a handy account.

Basically, an equative verb refers to a state of being (I am). Rather than to an action with a direct object (e.g. Caesar took the scroll).

Also, an equative verb needs two things to compare, such as two nouns (e.g. 'a flower is a plant': equating a flower with a plant to a certain degree). So a flower has the state of being a plant. It doesn't have to be an all-encompassing match - 'a flower is a plant' fits within the category sufficiently, even though not all plants are flowers. A similar example would be 'Rome is a city'. The equative verb: 'is.'

(NB: take this as reflective of Koine Greek. I'm not making a claim about the English language, wherein we have more of a distinction between equative clauses and predicative clauses. So, in English writing, we would say that "Rome is a city" is a predicative clause.)

Another example of an equative verb linking nouns, famously joining a subject noun to a predicate nominative (PN) noun - thus: "the Word was God".

So, an equative verb needs at least two things to compare, but it does not require two things to be perfectly numerically identical. It is not an = (equals) sign. The equative "the Word was God" does not mean the two are just numerically identical, but does mean that they are equated with each other in some way. In other words: it doesn't mean that 'one God = one Word.' That would be silly. The Word isn't all there is to God. But it does leave us with the thought that God and the Word are equated in a different way which John wants us to think about. If that is unclear to you, consider that 'God is love' is equative, but is not the same as God = love. Love isn't all there is to God.

There's a lot more to equative verbs in Greek that's just not relevant to John 1:1c, so I'm not going into such joys as genitives and datives of possession here, nor predicate datives and participles. Nor much much more!!! But a little technical note for us grammar geeks. An equative verb won't be a transitive verb (example of a transitive verb: Caesar grabs the scroll - an equative verb won't look like that, nor like this: the scroll is grabbed by Caesar). Nor will an equative verb be an intransitive verb (so it won't have an indirect object - thus, not: Caesar went to the Senate). All the same, an equative verb can be a bit like these other kinds of verbs to a degree. It's not quite black and white.

Subjects and predicates

To set the scene for the 'subject and predicate nominative' thing: a predicate noun tells us something about the subject noun.

But how do we know which noun is the actual subject in these situations? Well, there's more than one way:

 —The subject may be a pronoun such as 'it' ("it is a plant" – here the pronoun takes precedence in order to be the subject);

 —or the subject may have the article such as "the" (the Son of Man is Lord – here the Son of Man takes precedence as the subject);

 —or the subject may be a proper name (Jesus is the saviour – here, either could be the subject though, as in this case one is a proper name and the other has 'the' article).

There's more to this, but you get the drift about this pattern - one noun is the subject and the other noun is the predicate, and both are in the nominative case.

The article "the"

Wallace (1996) on pages 256-63 gives us a handy account of 'special uses and non-uses' of the article 'the' in Greek. This is useful because what we have in John 1:1c is a departure from the general pattern of anarthrous predicate nominatives. It's a departure from the general inasmuch as such predicate nouns usually appear *after* the equative verb. The predicate noun being\ *before* the verb is the departure from the general. I say general because it's not absolute. In John 1:1c, it appears *before* the equative verb. It's one of those departures. So that gives us something to talk about.

Now, if John wanted to say "the word was a god," then the most natural thing (though not obligatory) would be for the Greek words to be in the order 'the word was [a] god' ('was' before 'god'). John isn't using that completely natural Greek word order, because instead he puts 'god' before 'was'. So, we should suspect John is lending it a specially meaningful emphasis, rather than merely saying "the word was a god." He's put the words into a different order to capture something more. He has put the anarthrous PN before the verb.

In addition, if John wanted to say something with ultimate definiteness like 'one Word = one God' he would probably write "the word was the god" or "the god was the word". He's not saying that. It would exclude the Father from being God or make the Word the Father, and most of us are sure that John is not saying that. John is not formulating the numerical equation 'one Word = one God'. (Which is a relief to me as a Trinitarian, nailing my colours to the mast for disclosure. There's much else to God, with the Word, such as the Fatherhood of God, and the Holy Spirit. And that's why is as important for Trinitarians, as much as anyone else, that the PN is John 1:1c

is qualitative (or adjectival if you prefer), the quality of which is closer to definiteness, rather than actually strictly definite. More about that when we get to Wallace below.)

Now, it needs to be said that the way theologians contrast these word is a bit odd. A thing always has the qualities of that thing. Any philosopher can tell you that three has the property of threeness (note the 'ness' on the end). 'Definite' has the quality of definiteness, and otherwise it wouldn't be definite. 'Indefinite' has the quality of indefiniteness, and otherwise it wouldn't be indefinite. And so on. So you have to look at what theologians are really saying when they contrast qualitative with in/definite.

The predicate noun: theos (God)

This is a bit of an excursus. We can't let the subject pass us by without paying a visit to the subject of Colwell. He had a famous role in this discussion:

Journal Of Biblical Literature, 52 (1933): A Definite Rule For The Use Of The Article In The Greek New Testament E. C. Colwell https://www.areopage.net/ColwellRule.pdf

His 1933 paper offered a modest proposition that in Greek, where there is a noun that appears to be a *definite* predicate nominative (PN) and it appears *before* the verb, the trend is that such definite ones *'usually'* drop the article 'the'. That's all he really proposed for further discussion. Although the word 'rule' is bandied about, he calls it a theory on page 15. It's quite modest indeed. It needed testing and refinement in the years that followed, as he would have expected. Unfortunately, it got hijacked by those who thought Colwell had discovered an absolute 'rule' in Greek grammar, His 1933 paper hadn't claimed that at all. Building on the work of Robinson and Torrey, he used the term 'rule,' but when it comes down to it, he doesn't claim an absolutely reliable rule, and rather he frames it as a 'theory', a 'usually', and a 'tentatively'. The word 'rule' in the title of his paper is a bit misleading!

To have arrived at his modest conclusion, Colwell had needed an evidence basis to begin with, which means he had a list of texts with pre-verbal PNs that he had already decided were *definite*. He candidly says on page 17 that there are "bound to be mistakes" in his list of which ones are definite. He similarly says on page 19 that for examples outside the New Testament, he only made a 'hurried sampling' with only variable confirmation of his theory.

He says he has tried to omit qualitative ones. Subsequent reviewers determined a far large proportion are qualitative, and so Colwell did his test with a larger sample that he should have. The test has to be re-done on a smaller sample to see if pre-verbal definite PNs do tend to drop the article.

He did his test on his over-large sample and made his conclusion that there is a trend of them dropping the article 'usually'. His paper seemed to say that such a list is made in the first place by looking at 'context'. He indicates on page 16 that he did not make an exhaustive search of the New Testament, and clearly was working on samples.

Having done his test, he says on page 20, "The following rules may be *tentatively* formulated..." [emphasis added]. And this is where he says "usually." Yet some commentators have gone completely over the top about this. There is a bit of untangling to do there, to see what subsequent reviewers needed to do. Colwell could firstly be challenged as to his evidence basis: should any of his suite of 'definite' PN verses be excluded from the test on the basis that they are possibly not definite in the first place? Rightly, there has been challenge that some of his verses should be excluded from the test.

Philip B. Harner (JBL vol. 92, no.1, 1973, 75-87) and Paul Stephen Dixon (1975 https://www.foranswer.org/Top_JW/dixon.pdf) play a role in refining this - see below - refining the evidence base. Their reviewing the evidence base found that a good deal of the pre-verbal PN nouns are more likely qualitative than strictly definite. Therefore they would have to be excluded from any re-testing of Colwell's specific test (i.e. "do the pre-verbal definite PNs tend to drop the article/"). Although I am slightly suspicious of the very large numbers of qualitative PNs they find, and this needs to be re-run in my opinion.

That leaves a much smaller sample of pre-verbal definite PNs. Is it even worth re-running Colwell's test? Trends can be seen in the remaining sample, so Dixon argues, but it's not all one way. Sometimes the article is there, and sometimes it is dropped, which is what attracted Colwell's attention and his 'usually'. So, it's not absolute, but there are trends for discussion about the evidence base and the testing.

However, a finding that qualitative PNs also often drop the article is highly interesting too. Colwell didn't test that. So Colwell had started a rabbit hole for scholars to follow down. For some scholars, these qualitative PNs have become more interesting than the definite PNs. Colwell's information is handy, but has to be handled with caution because of misunderstandings over the years, usually by those who treat Colwell's findings as an absolutely reliable 'rule' which is far stronger than he claimed himself. That is: in Greek, it's perfectly standard - but not uniform - that definite PN nouns drop the article 'the'. So when you see one, the thought may well run through your mind: is this one of those definite nouns?

But what is missed by those at fault with misuses/misunderstandings is this: Colwell was pointing out that they have a tendency to be anarthrous before a verb, not that they have a tendency to be definite. To establish definiteness requires additional work. Colwell says his

method for establishing definiteness is context. So context must be how he decided which PNs were eligible to be included in his test.

Now, definite nouns don't have to have the article 'the' in the first place, which somewhat reduces the force of Colwell's evidence base (so Dixon argues). But that doesn't mean there's no significance in a trend to drop the article. It just gets harder to be sure that the reason for the absence of an article is the reason of being before the verb.

And to repeat another note of caution, although Colwell basically said a definite PN before the verb tends to drop the article, that's not to say that it's *usually definite* when it looks like this before the verb. If you've grasped that so far, then you've grasped what you need to know about Colwell here.

Just keep in the back of your mind that: there are definite pre-verbal PNs don't always drop the article; and anarthrous pre-verbal PNs aren't always a definite with a dropped article. Colwell's findings simply place the possibility of an anarthrous definite PN in open view. Seeing an anarthrous nominative PN shouldn't be taken as a proof that it is definite, and Colwell didn't claim as much anyway (his research openly included examples where it's not the case) even though he has been misused/misunderstood that way. It just alerts us to a wide range of possibilities.

But, problem: how then – in such a construction where the article is absent - do you identify which nouns are actually definite, given that you can have both article-less *definite* and also article-less *indefinite* nouns?

In his solution, Colwell wrote, "*if the context suggests* that the predicate is definite, it should be translated as a definite noun in spite of the absence of the article." (Colwell, 'A Definite Rule,' 21.) So, if we are reading it as a definite noun, it should be because the context suggests it. Colwell doesn't say much more than that to flesh out his method of using context, but he does at least posit such as the appropriate kind of method.

Otherwise, the alternatives are: a certain degree of qualitative; or indefinite. Qualitative is of particular interest here. We shouldn't think of 'qualitative' standing on its own. There isn't necessarily a hard distinction between indefinite and qualitative, nor between definite and qualitative. If something is qualitative, we should be asking *what quality*? It will be leaning in one direction or another, towards a quality having definiteness, or a quality having indefiniteness about it. It's curious that when people think about what quality John means, they often limit quality to one thing - divinity - but Wallace is right to treat the quality of something as wider than just one thing. We shouldn't be so narrowly focussed on ideas of divinity that we neglect qualities of definiteness and indefiniteness. Wallace corrects the balance.

And remember, if not qualitative, it could still be simply definite (or indefinite – less likely given the word order as explained). Harner, following Colwell, found that where his famous construction is found, 20% of the time it is indeed definite, and 80% of the time it is qualitative (leaning towards one quality or another). I think that needs to be re-tested again as that seems a very high number.

What can we take from Colwell now, if anything? Well, he's right about one thing: an anarthrous noun can be definite, but everyone knew that already. And therefore his point that an anarthrous PN before a verb can be definite isn't at all controversial, and doesn't carry much force. For example:

> John 1:49: you are **the king** (σὺ Βασιλεὺς εἶ)
> 3:29: is **the bridegroom** (νυμφίος ἐστίν)
> 5:27: is **the Son of Man** (Υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου ἐστίν)
> 8:33 & 37: are **the seed** of Abraham (Σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ ἐσμεν / σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ ἐστε)
> 8:54: is our **God** (Θεὸς ἡμῶν ἐστιν)
> 10:2: is **the shepherd** (ποιμήν ἐστιν)
> 10:36: I am **the Son** of God (Υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ εἰμι)
> 19:21: I am **King** of the Jews (Βασιλεύς εἰμι τῶν Ἰουδαίων).

Colwell's paper also singles out some examples that have merit, but the overall picture is that it doesn't add up to much because the evidence base is rather small, in light of Dixon's work. So yes, it's confirmed that they can drop the article, and there are patterns, but it's pretty inconclusive as a way of determining how to read John 1:1c. Colwell himself said that it's context that tells you if something is definite anyway, so it's almost a redundant point.
So let's leave Colwell there.

Harner and Dixon would argue that they have expanded the evidence base for qualitative pre-verbal PNs, but simply calling them 'qualitative' doesn't really tell us anything about them. What quality? That's the question they pose. Let's come to Wallace.

Wallace

Daniel Wallace has surveyed all this. He notes this trend in the data: that where the anarthrous PN appears before the verb, it's meaning is closer to definiteness, and where it's *after* the verb, then it's meaning is usually indefinite or qualitative. This confirms what I said earlier – in John 1:1c, the text fails to follow the obvious 'indefinite' route of putting the PN after the verb. So what's the emphasis?

In John 1:1c, the PN is before the equative verb, is qualitative, and and it is qualitatively closer to definiteness, as the above trends might lead us to expect. The operative word here is 'closer' because there is still this sense of qualitative. In other words, that takes us to translating it with a quality of definiteness, even as "and the Word was God". But we can tease out the sense in which it is adjacent to definiteness. There is the REB the translation "what God was the Word was." And better still the NET Bible translation: "and the Word was fully God." (https://netbible.org/bible/John+1) Qualitative leaning towards definiteness, beautifully captured.

Context

As I'm always saying, context and function should inform our understanding of a text. I've written so much about the context of John 1:1 elsewhere. But briefly, there are obvious contextual problems with saying "the Word was a god". John 1 is telling us that all creation was made through the Word (Jesus). That he was pre-existent before the creation of the cosmos. That he is a pre-existent divine heavenly being, unlike ordinary men or anything else. In other words, when they claim it reads "with God ... was a god" that's two gods. More than that, both of them would be unique pre-existent divine heavenly beings with supernatural power on the cosmic universe-creating level. Believers would be singing songs to both of two heavenly beings. They would be believing in two gods. John 1:12 thus becomes a problem. No-one and nothing else would be placed in that complex category. It is ticking so many boxes on the 'god-like characteristics indicator' that this is clearly a two-god system. Saying "with God... was a god" with all these characteristics makes a two-god religion.

I've seen some, including Jehovah's Witnesses, trying to deflect from that huge problem by putting the Word as 'a god' under a broader banner of 'gods' such as the world of men and angels called 'gods'. That doesn't work. The significance of Jesus being called theos in John 1:1 is of a totally different kind of order from anyone else being called "a god". An incomparably different meaning from the other categories of 'gods', so trying to explain away that there are two gods in their version of John 1:1 doesn't work

Regardless how many contrasting categories of gods there be, their John 1:1 is evidently a two god beginning, a two god creation, etc. Two unique pre-existent divine heavenly beings, with all those characteristics. Two heavenly gods at the beginning, two gods at creation. Two contrasting gods of whatever kinds who are the two unique pre-existent divine heavenly beings, both supernaturally able on a cosmic universe-creating level, unlike other so-called 'gods.'

The problem should be obvious. I'd love to see how a secular anthropologist could be persuaded that such is not a two god religion. That is, if these are split into two separate heavenly beings.

This problem is avoided by not saying anything like "with God... was a god."

Appendix: contrary examples

Scholar Jason BeDuhn (in *Truth in Translation*) takes to task misuses and misunderstandings of Colwell's 1933 paper, and credits Harner with improving analysis of the data. He also turns his guns against Colwell with some passion. Colwell had made modest claims, such as that context can be used to make an evidence base of pre-verbal PNs to test. However, BeDuhn's tirade completely misses this, as if Colwell had no method other than rigging the test (through unconscious bias?) to pre-determine his findings.

BeDuhn also writes as if this analysis should be have been impeccable from day on. This doesn't work in other fields. Humanity would never have got to the Moon if everything to be tested had to be impeccable from day one. Progress needs a hypothesis, trial and error, review, refinement, revised data, revised models and propositions. Eventually, you get to the Moon. BeDuhn writes as if Colwell should have got to the Moon in scholarship's first stab at the matter. So review is important. BeDuhn had an opportunity to contribute substantially to this.

BeDuhn writes as if to turn review of progress after Colwell into a total debunking of Colwell. However, where BeDuhn conjures examples in which English translations ought to add an indefinite article ('a' / 'an'), he chooses some examples where English doesn't actually require that. For example, he unthinkingly takes John 8:48 as it's commonly translated: "you are a Samaritan" whereas an English speaker would be more likely to say "you're Samaritan" (just as an English person in an informal setting would say "you're American," not "you are an American"). BeDuhn is not differing from contemporary translations, but he ought to if he is taking it to a fine point to debunk someone else.

BeDuhn also picks John 4:19 where he, like the typical NRSV, has the woman at the well saying "you are a prophet." This has always struck me as odd. Was the woman aware of a class of people with second sight that she called 'prophets' into which she was now inducting Jesus? Why would she call a person with second sight specifically 'prophet'? Rather, could the Samaritan woman not be taking Jesus to be 'the prophet,' the expected one of Deuteronomy 18:15-22? (Jesus had competitors for this special title.) The unthinking assumption that she is putting Jesus into a class rather than proclaiming him to be unique doesn't look right to me. I think John is depicting the latter, especially given the ensuing conversation. BeDuhn's examples are better taken in John 9:24 and 12:6. However, Colwell's proposition was a modest 'usually,' and he never made an absolute rule in the first place, so BeDuhn is in principle in accord with Colwell in a sense. (Although he writes as if he protests otherwise.)

But something else about BeDuhn's selection here needs to be said. If the focal point he will return to is John 1:1c, where the order is PN-verb-subject ('god was the word'), then it is of less force for BeDuhn to argue with examples that are just noun-verb (12:6 'thief was'); and subject-PN-verb (9:24 'this the man sinner is').

Meanwhile, PN-verb-pronoun as subject (4:19 'prophet are you'); and again PN-verb-pronoun as subject (8:48 'Samaritan are you') - these latter two are obviously closer to the PN-verb-subject structure of 1:1c than the former two, but interestingly neither of them need assume an indefinite article in English as I've explained above. (It's a less important difference that the subjects in these two cases are pronouns.) If BeDuhn is just pointing out that Colwell found something that was not absolute, well, Colwell openly presented such evidence and didn't claim otherwise, offering just a modest 'usually' which doesn't merit nailing Colwell to the wall as if to attack an 'always' or a 'nearly always.' This is almost straw-manning by BeDuhn.

But basically, while there are clear grounds for criticising other's misuses and misunderstandings of Colwell, it doesn't mean that Colwell wasn't on to *something*. It just means Colwell is out of date but was right in his 1933 paper about his proposition not being absolute. His work should be handled with caution and as mediated by more recent scholars such as Wallace, just as Moon missions couldn't be based in initial rocket tests.

Ironically, Colwell may have arrived at some correct findings by faulty method. This happens in science too! BeDuhn is aghast at the ides of arriving at a destination by the wrong method and wants to throw out the baby with the bathwater, which isn't a great method for progressing scholarship.

I'm not sure why BeDuhn is so keen to completely discredit Colwell's work. If Colwell hadn't developed the enterprise, and Robinson and Torrey before him, using *context* to determine that some pre-verbal PNs are definite, and then testing the idea that such nouns tend to *drop the article*, well, had he not done so, then Harner and Dixon wouldn't have done their refinements and a good deal of useful scholarship wouldn't exist, looking at how pre-verbal definite and qualitative PNs are shaped. Someone has to start off, or develop, an enterprise and then be reviewed and refined and correctd [Seeking the Truth Of Things: Why "eternal generation of the Son"? (gettingtothetruthofthings.blogspot.com)](http://gettingtothetruthofthings.blogspot.com). Colwell was a link in that chain. But we are a long way down the road of refinement since then. BeDuhn is harsh towards Metzger (1953) for publishing a mere 20 years after Colwell's paper his views that had got caught up in the mistaken assumption of an absolutely reliable 'rule.' But Metzger did not have the advantage of another half century's work on the matter, whereas BeDuhn did have that advantage. Scholarship needs to be more collegiate and generous.

To re-test this, the critic needs to start with a fresh list, however small, a list of which pre-verbal PNs are definite, determined on context if that method is followed, and say how many on that small(er) list drop the article. That's all that needs to be done to validate or invalidate Colwell's 'usually.' Has BeDuhn run this test?

End.

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