

R.S. Hobyane

Prof R.S. Hobyane, Faculty of
Theology, School of Ancient
Languages and Text Studies,
North-West University,
South Africa.
E-mail: Risimati.Hobyane@nwu.
ac.za
ORCID: [https://orcid.org/
0000-0001-6597-8243](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6597-8243)

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The pragmatic function of asides that stage an event in the Fourth Gospel¹

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to investigate how asides that function to stage an event in the Fourth Gospel fulfil their pragmatic/performative role. Despite numerous insightful contributions on this topic, the article contends that scholars have not comprehensively explored this specific literary device in the Fourth Gospel. It therefore seeks to contribute to Johannine research by analysing these specific asides from a speech act interpretive perspective. It aims to demonstrate that these asides are inherently performative, representing a deliberate communicative strategy by the implied author to engage and compel participation from the reader. The article concludes that asides that function to stage an event play a performative role and contribute to enhancing the attainability of the overall purpose of the Gospel (20:30-31).

1. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

This article advances, as Van der Watt (2007:10; Hobyane 2023a:3) has already asserted, that the Fourth Gospel's purpose (20:31) is formulated in performative terms, that is, the text is formulated and



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1 This study makes a unique contribution by delving into a nuanced exploration of specific asides that, to date, have not been studied/explored in this way. The article demonstrates how they are able to engage the reader to act on the propositions in the text. No scholar, to the best of my knowledge, has ever engaged in this kind of literary analysis of the Fourth Gospel.

presented with the aim to bring the implied reader to faith or to strengthen the reader's faith through the words written in this Gospel (Labahn 1999:202-203). The central question is: How does the implied author ensure performativity through the words of the Gospel? The essence of performativity/ pragmatic nature suggested in this article lies in the argument that the implied author of the Gospel uses literary devices such as irony, misunderstanding, forensic dialogue, repetition, and asides to actively engage the reader and elicit a specific response or action (Hobyane 2023a:7-8). This article presents a literary analysis of asides that function to stage an event in the Fourth Gospel, to demonstrate their performativity towards the reader. Thatcher (1994:430) defines asides as "a direct statement that *tells* the reader² something".³ He further posits that

asides are never observable events, but are interpretive commentary on observable events, commentary that reveals information 'below the surface' of the action.

Crucially, Thatcher (1994:430) asserts that,

Because asides are not events, they do not advance the plot of the story. Rather, the author uses them to guide the reader's interpretation of and response to events. Asides thus have a rhetorical function.

Thatcher's assertion holds particular significance for the purpose of this article. The scope of this article extends beyond the exploration of the mere occurrence of this literary device and a basic acknowledgement of its rhetorical nature. Instead, the article seeks to advance this discourse by demonstrating that asides not only possess rhetorical significance, but also serve a pragmatic function. The central quest is to show how asides, serving to stage the event, fulfil their performative role towards the reader. This demonstration highlights their significance to actively engage and persuade the reader to participate in the text by making choices or decisions as the reader reads it.

As indicated earlier, the Fourth Gospel incorporates various types of asides as part of the author's communicative strategy. This article specifically concentrates on the asides that serve to stage an event in the Fourth Gospel.

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- 2 In this article, the term "reader" exclusively refers to the "implied reader". Consequently, the study will refrain from repeating the adjective "implied" each time it alludes to the reader. According to Van der Watt (2009:88; see Jeong 2018:18-19), an implied reader can be defined as the inner-textual (personified) construction that systematically discovers what the implied author presents as the story unfolds to the end.
- 3 Thatcher (1994) lists four types of asides identified in the Fourth Gospel, namely asides that function to stage the event; asides that function to define or specify something; asides that function to explain discourse, and asides that function to explain action.

Through this investigation, the reader and/or interpreter of the Gospel can discern how these asides contribute towards enforcing the achievability of the Gospel's purpose, as outlined in 20:30-31.

2. METHODOLOGY

When discussing the speech act theory, Briggs (2001:3) highlights that

it is the name given to a type of inquiry brought into focus by the work of J.L. Austin in his 1975 William James lectures at Harvard, and later published as *How to do things with words* (see also Tovey 1997:70).

Botha (2009:486) asserts that “[s]peech act theory is a theory of language use and its impact on the reader” (see Adams 2006:18-22). To elaborate further, Botha (2009:486) states,

[S]peech act theory developed and found its niche in the field of pragmatics, and biblical scholars, looking at a variety of literary theories to supplement their exegetical programmes, turned their attention to speech act theory as well. In the arena of pragmatics, speech act theory is a very useful tool to enable interpreters to focus on the performative aspects of a language (see Van der Watt 2010:145).

For the sake of simplicity, this analysis and application of the speech act theory will only examine utterances and their possible effects on the reader on two distinct levels. First, the study will centre on the analysis of illocutionary acts, which include informatives, directives, expressives, assertives, commissives, and so forth. On this level, the primary focus is on scrutinising the fundamental intention behind the narrator's utterance (speech act). Secondly, the article will delve into the perlocutionary acts of a speech act, namely the potential effects an illocutionary act may have on the reader (Botha 2009:487-488; Pratt 1977:80-81; Thiselton 1992:298; Tovey 1997:72; Hobyane 2023b:2). It is believed that the outlined approach will effectively achieve the goal of this article, which is to demonstrate the pragmatic/performative function of the asides that serve to stage a specific event.

This article recognises the presence of numerous occurrences of asides in the Fourth Gospel. However, for practical purposes, the exploration of the performative function of the above-mentioned aside will be demonstrated, focusing on 2:13 and 23 (time – in reference to the Jewish festival), 18:5 (spatial note), and 19:14 (depicting Pilate's condemnation of Jesus at the sixth hour of the day of preparation of the Passover, the hour of sacrifice).

3. ANALYSIS OF ASIDES THAT FUNCTION TO STAGE THE EVENT IN 2:13 AND 23

According to Thatcher (1994:431), asides in this category may include references to space (Sp), time (Ti), objects (O) available for use, or climate (C). He further asserts that

the Fourth Gospel is remarkable for qualitative notations of space, time, and climate. Qualitative markers situate events in symbolic contexts that define their significance.

The first example of asides to be analysed in this category involves references to time.⁴

In the broader structure of the Fourth Gospel (2:13-22), this section falls within the context of Jesus' public ministry (Brown 1966:cxxxviii-cxxxix). Lincoln (2000:15) emphasises that this section is called the "book of signs", setting the tone for subsequent events in the remainder of this book. Its setting in this narrative shows Jesus confronting the Jewish authority at the heart of their religious system. The ensuing dialogue and the narrator's comments clearly convey that the resurrected Christ is indeed intended to supplant the old religious order represented by the temple. Thatcher (1994:431) observes that 12 of these asides situate Jesus' activity in reference to a Jewish festival, particularly the Passover. The aside in question comes after the narration of Jesus' first sign in Cana of Galilee (2:1-12). The narrator reports this as follows:

Καὶ ἐγγύς ἦν τὸ πάσχα τῶν Ἰουδαίων, καὶ ἀνέβη εἰς Ἱερουσόλυμα ὁ Ἰησοῦς (Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand and Jesus went up to Jerusalem).

Notably, the aside in this instance serves as a speech act (report) by the narrator, conveying information to the reader about the time in the broader yearly calendar or season ("ἐγγύς ἦν τὸ πάσχα τῶν Ἰουδαίων" [the Passover of the Jews was near]), rather than specifying a particular hour of the day. It is reported that Jesus went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, a customary practice for the Jewish people (Ex. 12:14-20, 43-49; Deut. 16:1-8). The Fourth Gospel mentions two other Passover feasts, namely one in John 6:4 and another in John 11:55, 12:1, and 13:1 (Schnackenburg 1968:345; Hakola 2005:88-89). This particular instance marks the first Passover mentioned in the Gospel of John (Brown 1975:114; Barrett 1978:197; Bruce 1983:73). The observance of this celebration served as a poignant reminder to the Jewish people of God's grace in delivering them from the bondage in Egypt (Blum 1985:279). The speech act in this context constitutes an illocutionary act belonging to informatives. It is observed that, through this

4 For more of these asides, see 6:4, 11:55, 12:1, and 13:1.

speech act, the narrator aims to inform the reader about the time or occasion when Jesus ascended to Jerusalem. This information holds significance, as it serves to position the reader well, enabling a better understanding of the context in which the subsequent events and developments in the story of Jesus unfold.

In this instance, the study notes the clarity with which the narrator informs the reader about the occasion, specifically, “τὸ πάσχα τῶν Ἰουδαίων” (the Passover of the Jews). The narrator wants this message to be clear to the reader: this is a Jewish festival. This article views this specification as the narrator’s deliberate effort to ensure that the reader grasps the message about the occasion. The article suggests that the purpose of the speech act extends beyond a mere informative exercise. Evidently, the narrator intends to impact the reader in a meaningful way with this report, going beyond a mere description of the event, as suggested by Bruce (1983:73; Brown 1975:114-115).

What could be the effects of this report on the reader? Before delving into the possible effects of this utterance, a few aspects need to be put into perspective. The reader is already aware of who Jesus is (his identity, origin, and the values he represents), that is, his divine nature, the “ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν” (the Word [which] was with God) (1:1). Van der Watt (2007:46) also highlights that Jesus is explicitly called God at the beginning and end of the Gospel (see Thomas’ confession in 20:28). Concerning his human nature, the values he represents are equated with those of Moses, and Jesus’ values fulfil those of Moses (1:17).

The implied reader is already acquainted with the reception Jesus received from his own people, as recounted in 1:6-13, particularly highlighted in verse 11: “εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον” (he came to his own and his own [people] did not receive him). Furthermore, the text has already revealed the attitude of the Jewish opponents (identified as Pharisees) against him when they approached John the Baptist to inquire about Jesus in 1:20-28.

The above illustration underscores the cognitive level of the implied reader regarding Jesus and the surrounding circumstances. It would be a superficial approach to the text to assume that the reader will read the aside in 2:13 without this contextual knowledge in mind. Interpreting the aside with this context in mind sparks tension and anticipation of dramatic events in the reader’s mind. With Jesus in attendance, the aside functions as a stage-setting element for the potentially dramatic events expected during the Passover Feast of the Jews. In this instance, the aside introduces tension to the reader and carries some degree of performativity. Anticipation and tension sensitise the reader

toward the story of Jesus, bringing him/her to the edge of his/her seat with the expectation of something unusual or dramatic unfolding.

In this instance, it can be argued that the aside does not leave the reader in the same position as previously; it prompts the reader to continue reading the story with increased eagerness and anticipation.

With regard to 2:23, the narrator reports as follows:

Ὡς δὲ ἦν ἐν τοῖς Ἱεροσολύμοις ἐν τῷ πάσχα ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ, πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ θεωροῦντες αὐτοῦ τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίει (Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did).

Once more, this utterance serves as an update on the outcome of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem during the Passover Feast, as initially announced to the reader in 2:13. From 2:13 onwards, textual space is dedicated to reporting the dramatic events of the cleansing of the temple and the exchange between Jesus and the Jewish opponents (Thomaskutty 2014:108; Beasley-Murray 1987:47; Harris 2015:62). The narrator's comment/aside in 2:23 appears to bridge the gap, furnishing additional information not previously disclosed during the proceedings of the Feast.

The aside, therefore, is an informative speech act executed with the intention of once again informing and/or updating the reader about some of the actions undertaken by Jesus during the Passover Feast and their outcomes. The narrator specifies that, during the Feast, Jesus performed signs not detailed in 2:13-22. In addition, the narrator adds that, during the Feast, many people believed ("πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν") in the name of Jesus when they saw the signs he performed (Schnackenburg 1968:358; Barrett 1978:196; Morris 1971:205-206).

Regardless of the dramatic events witnessed by the reader during the Feast, this aside holds the power to resolve the tension created in 2:13 and the subsequent dramatic events in 2:14-22. The aside is thus performative, acting as a positive and encouraging report to the believing reader. For the unbelieving reader, the aside appeals to his/her conscience, urging him/her to make the right decision – to believe in Jesus Christ like many other people, as reported in 2:23. Therefore, this aside can be viewed as an invitation to the unbelieving reader to have faith in Jesus, while it serves to fortify the believing reader's existing faith in Jesus. In either case (believing or unbelieving), the performative function of the aside is to persuade the reader to participate in the text by either rejecting or accepting Jesus in his/her lives.

3.1 Aside in 18:5

The analysis centres on the spatial note regarding Judas' presence during Jesus' betrayal and arrest. It reads as follows:

Ἀπεκρίθησαν αὐτῷ Ἰησοῦν τὸν Ναζωραῖον. λέγει αὐτοῖς· ἐγώ εἰμι. εἰστήκει δὲ καὶ Ἰούδας ὁ παραδιδούς αὐτὸν μετ' αὐτῶν (They answered him, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus said to them, 'I am he.' And Judas, who betrayed him, also stood with them).

The aside is given during the arrest of Jesus in the garden of the Brook of Kidron. The broader section (18:1-20:32), in which this aside is found, deals with the departure of Jesus Christ from this world, unfolding as the storyline culminates in the passion and resurrection (Lincoln 2000:14; Lindars 1972:533). In 18:1, the reader is informed that this location is a customary meeting place for Jesus and his disciples. Hence, as one of the disciples, Judas would be familiar with this place.

First, the aside, as observed in 2:13 and 23, serves as information provided to the reader by the narrator. The narrator is not making suggestions or posing questions; he is merely stating the presence of Judas among those who came to arrest Jesus. Therefore, the speech act, in this instance, is described as an illocutionary act within the category of informatives (informative speech act) uttered with the intention to inform and emphasise to the reader that Judas was part of the mob that came to arrest Jesus. The intention again is for the reader to take note that “εἰστήκει δὲ καὶ Ἰούδας” (Judas stood with them) during Jesus' arrest (Thatcher 1994:431; Barrett 1978:516). The utterance functions to emphasise Judas' treacherous act (“ὁ παραδιδούς” [the one who betrays or the betrayer]) against Jesus. The aside makes sense to the reader who has already read 6:64 and 6:70.

Regarding the perlocutionary acts of the utterance, the informatives within the text play a crucial role in shaping the reader's perspective. They hold significant effects, empowering and elevating the reader to a certain cognitive level envisioned by the narrator in alignment with the implied author. These informatives enhance the reader's cognitive awareness regarding the unfolding events around Jesus' arrest. They serve to remind and update the reader about the current state of affairs. In this instance, the reader is prompted to recall Jesus' prophecy or prediction, as mentioned in 6:64: “but there are some of you who do not believe” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray him), and in 6:71: “Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?” Upon hearing the aside (18:5), the reader is invited to witness the fulfilment of Jesus' prediction about one of his disciples, Judas.

The aside, in this instance, is performative in the sense that it has the power to draw the reader closer to Jesus, particularly when this is read with 18:4 in mind: “Ἰησοῦς οὖν εἰδὼς πάντα τὰ ἐρχόμενα ἐπ’ αὐτὸν” (Jesus, therefore knowing all things that will come upon him). With this assurance to the reader, the aside, uttered in 18:5, does not present any threat or shock/surprise to the reader. In fact, the essence of its performative power lies in its ability to persuade the reader to gain more confidence in the person/character of Jesus. The reader is invited or persuaded to partake in Jesus’ confidence. Jesus is in control of the situation and is not afraid of the mob. Furthermore, the aside has the potential to discourage the possible conduct of treacherousness/deceitfulness in the life of the reader. It leaves the reader with no possible choice but to cognitively disassociate him-/herself from Judas (“ὁ παραδιδούς” [the one who betrays or the betrayer]) in the text and associate him-/herself with Jesus who is in control. In this instance, through the performative power of an aside, the implied author’s communicative strategy to enforce the achievability of the purpose of the Gospel in the life of the reader is realised.

3.2 Aside in 19:14

Another noteworthy aside is found in 19:14, thus setting the stage for the time of Pilate’s condemnation of Jesus during the trial. The text presents the aside as follows:

ἦν δὲ παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα, ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη. καὶ λέγει τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις Ἴδε ὁ βασιλεὺς ὑμῶν (Now it was the preparation of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, ‘Behold your King’).

The utterance is the narrator’s report of the climax during Jesus’ trial before Pilate to the reader. On the one hand, the utterance signals the end of the trial before Pilate and Jesus’ route to be crucified. The utterance itself is a piece of information conveyed to the reader about the specific time when Jesus was handed over to the Jewish opponents to be crucified.

Since the utterance only conveys information to the reader, the reader may view the utterance in 19:14 as an informative speech act. The reader can also infer that this utterance intends to inform him/her about the time when Jesus was handed over to be crucified. The reader should pay attention to this information.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the emphasis on the time (“ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη” [about the sixth hour]) and the occasion (“παρασκευὴ τοῦ πάσχα” [the preparation of the Passover]) creates an ironic situation for the reader. According to Keener (2003:1129), the “day of Preparation” was the day when the Passover Lamb would be slaughtered to be eaten that night (see also Bruce 1983:364; Tasker 1999:209). The mention of the “sixth hour” has

sparked various scholarly interpretations. On this point, Keener (1993:311-312; Keener 2003:1129-1130; Lindars 1972:571) acknowledges diverse viewpoints but suggests that,

Jewish people reckoned days from sunset to sunset, so what we would call Friday night they considered the beginning of the Sabbath, or Saturday. Later rabbis estimated that offerings began earlier on Passover eve, but the slaughter of Passover lambs probably had to continue all day and was finally completed about the time the evening offering was slaughtered, roughly when Jesus died (about 3 p.m.). The “sixth hour” should mean noon but by a different reckoning could mean 6 a.m., close to dawn. Or John could use it for a symbolic connection with 4:6 or a symbolic connection with Passover (many scholars argue here that the slaughter of Passover lambs began about noon). (John’s other large work, Revelation, also uses time symbolically.)

However, the irony created is well within the cognitive reach of the reader and can potentially have a pragmatic effect on the reader. The reader is prompted to interpret Jesus’ death in light of the slaughter of the Passover lambs, which occurred at the same time. In 1:29, Jesus is introduced as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (“ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου”) (see also 1:39). Jesus is condemned and handed over to be crucified on the Day of Preparation of the Passover, like a Passover Lamb that must be slaughtered for the occasion (Duke 1985:128; Jamieson *et al.* 1997:165; Wallace 2004:286-287).

The aside in 19:14 clearly creates this ironic situation, enabling the reader to witness how Jesus becomes the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The reader brings forth certain knowledge (1:29 and 39) about Jesus (as the Lamb of God), sharing it with the implied author. Pilate utters this statement, unaware of the profound meaning this entails in handing over Jesus to be crucified. While hidden to Pilate, the significance is not lost to the implied author and the reader. In this instance, a silent communication transpires between the implied author and the reader, as suggested by Culpepper (1983:166). The implied author scatters the puzzle pieces on the table, expecting the reader to pick them up and complete the narrative picture of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

In this sense, the aside is performative in that it compels the reader to draw conclusions about the story of Jesus as the Passover Lamb. The aside stages an event where the fulfilment of Jesus’ purpose of coming into the world can be easily realised: he came to die for the sins of people, and whoever believes in his name will not perish but may have eternal life (3:16). Cognitively, the aside encourages the believing reader to continue having faith in Jesus and realise that the unfolding of the trial and passion story is, in fact,

the fulfilment of God's salvation plan for the world. It is also an invitation to the unbelieving reader (upon realising the irony) to reconsider his/her ways in terms of believing in the name of Jesus. Thatcher (1994:431-432) presents an invaluable summary regarding the nature of other asides that serve to stage events focusing on elements such as time and climate.⁵

This section of the study focused on analysing and illustrating how asides, which function to stage events, invite/persuade the reader to participate in the text, highlighting their performative nature. It was established that, while asides primarily deliver information to the reader, they can also create tension in the text (2:13). The reader is likely to experience this on the cognitive level when s/he reads the text. In addition, it was revealed that an aside can function to resolve the tension initially generated in the text by an earlier aside, namely, 2:13. The study also established that asides have the capacity to create an ironic situation in the text, serving as a silent communication between the implied author and the reader. Consequently, the reader is left to discern the broader picture of the unfolding drama in the text.

The study acknowledges that it did not cover all the asides falling into this category. The intentionally chosen few were analysed to showcase their performative nature, thereby encouraging readers of the Fourth Gospel to adopt this interpretive approach.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This article aimed to analyse the asides that function to stage events in the Fourth Gospel, specifically focusing on demonstrating the performative nature of these asides – how they engage the reader to actively participate in the text as s/he reads it. The study concentrated on a particular group of asides, namely those that function to stage an event. The initial analysis delved into the aside in 2:13 and 23. It was proposed that this aside can potentially generate tension in the reader's mind. Furthermore, it was observed that an aside can serve to resolve the tension previously created in the text, by updating or offering new information to the reader about developments in the story (2:23).

5 It is asserted that "[n]otations of climate specify light (day or night), season (e.g., winter), and temperature (cold or warmth). "Night" and "cold" are not good places to be in John's Gospel: Nicodemus went to Jesus at night, apparently symbolizing his inability to grasp the truth (3:2); Judas went from the Upper Room into the night to betray Jesus (13:30); just before denying Jesus, Peter sought the dim light and warmth of a charcoal fire in the "cold" courtyard (18:18). Thus, in the Gospel of John a wide variety of content types may function to stage an action by situating it in a particular, often symbolic, context" (Thatcher 1994:431-432).

Regarding the analysis of the aside in 18:5, it was observed that asides can carry a robust didactic function for the reader. In this instance, the aside serves to strongly discourage the reader from emulating bad characters in the narrative, exemplified by the treacherous conduct of Judas. Consequently, the aside compels the reader to cognitively disassociate him-/herself from such characters (Judas), on the one hand, and persuades the reader to emulate or associate him-/herself with positive characters in the story, such as Jesus Christ, on the other. This aligns with the implied author's intention of influencing the reader's life through the narrative.

In conclusion, within this category of asides, the study noted their capacity to create an ironic situation in the text. Specifically, asides can function as a silent communication between the implied author and the reader (19:14). Consequently, the reader is left to realise the bigger picture of the staged unfolding drama in the story, and this is performative in nature. Regarding this aside in 19:14, the reader gains insight into the larger identity of Jesus: He is the sacrificial Lamb of God and indeed the King of not only the Jews, but also of the whole world.

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