

On Understanding and Translating ἀμήν ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν in John's Gospel against the Backdrop of English and a Selection of African Languages

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Abstract

While the Hebrew word אָמֵן and its transliterated borrowing into Greek ἀμήν in the New Testament epistles generally signal agreement at the end of a prayer, doxology, or blessing, the “Amen (Amen), I say to you” formula in the gospels (with the repeated “amen” only in John) occurs *clause-initially* and serves to *introduce certain direct quotes* of our Savior. In the first part of this paper, we seek to confirm Clark's 2004 and 2007 observations on the discourse and pragmatic functions of the “amen” formula signaling the beginning, end, and high points of a literary unit. We go on to complement these findings by noting that in the Gospel of John, the formula can also announce a coming theme, mark a climax, conclude a larger discourse unit, and occur in clusters, moving from neutral to more conflictual contexts. In the second part of the paper, we consider translations in a number of versions

in English and a set of African languages, examining translation strategies which include more literal and more dynamic renderings. We ask if it is better to *translate* or *transliterate* the “amen” formula, render it consistently or not, and preserve the repetition of the formula in John's Gospel. In at least some languages, *insistence* on the truth of a statement may indeed raise doubts as to its *credibility*. This study underlines the unending tension in translation between *form* and *meaning*, but also brings to light how John's quotation of this Hebrew and/or Aramaic expression within a Greek text lends *authenticity* to this gospel. Finally, our observations lead us to ask: Is it time for translators to *imitate* the gospel writers' attempts at *preserving the flavor of Jesus's speech* in the gospels by opting for *transliteration* rather than translation?

Keywords

amen [amen], Gospel of John, Bible translation, transliteration

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1. Introduction

There are two things that can be immediately said about the double “Amen, amen I say to you” formula in the New Testament: first, it is unique to the Gospel of John and second, along with the single “Amen, I say to you” in the Synoptics, this expression is only attested in the *reported speech of Jesus*. In this paper, I briefly examine the origins of the ἀμήν ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν formula in the Gospel of John, its context, meaning, tone, and pragmatic or discourse function, followed by a discussion of some selected English and African versions.¹

2. On the Origins of ἀμήν

Linguistically speaking, in the New Testament, ἀμήν qualifies as a *loanword*, coming either directly from Aramaic, the language of Jesus’s day, or indirectly from Hebrew, as exhibited in the Old Testament. From a literary viewpoint, in the gospels, this is a *deliberate borrowing* of a Hebrew word inserted into a Greek text, motivated (it would appear) by the desire to preserve a unique feature of Jesus’s speech. As such, it can be seen as lending a certain *authenticity* to this text, especially to these particular sayings of Jesus. Note, however, that gospel writers assume this loanword is *known to the audience*, as it never comes with an explanation, as do other Hebrew words cited in the gospels.²

¹ I wish to thank David Clark, Drew Maust, and Jonathan van den Broek for their comments on this article, acknowledging all mistakes as mine. Thanks also to all those who have provided helpful data: Pierrette Ayite (Abouré), Janvier Blewoue (Baoule, Anyin Sanvi), Carol Brinneman (Lama), Koudouta Paul (Hdi), Stanislas Nsifu Nzita (several versions of Lingala, Kingongo, and Munu Kutuba), Ouattara Wilson (Toussian), Sena Komi (Ife), Jonathan van den Broek (Saafi-Saafi). Though just a smattering of languages in Western and Central sub-Saharan Africa, these samples represent numerous linguistic families in Niger-Congo: West Atlantic, Gur, Mande, Kru, Kwa, Chadic, Bantu.

² See, for example, John 5:2; 19:13, 17; 20:16.

The Hebrew word אָמֵן is possibly related to the OT root, אָמַן, “truth,” but more likely is derived from אָמַן, “to be firm.” Oddly enough, the form occurs only rarely (fewer than thirty times) in the OT, far fewer times than ἀμήν in the NT. This expression certainly began as an *oral formula* which individuals or groups would pronounce after a statement, wish, prayer, blessing or curse, expressing their adherence to or their agreement with what had just been said. Probably beginning with the meaning “(yes), I/we agree,” it presumably shifted to a performative formula: “so be it.”³

Whatever its origins, in the OT, אָמֵן most often occurs in *reported speech in sacred or ritually-related settings*. In Numbers and Deuteronomy, the word occurs when a curse (of sorts) is pronounced and the people are required to say “amen.”⁴ The word is also used in I Kings 1:32–37, when King David gives instructions concerning Solomon’s enthronement ceremony, and Benaiah *answers*, “Amen! (Yes, I agree!) May the Lord, the God of my lord the king, so ordain.” In I Chronicles 16:36, at the end of a long thanksgiving song, we read “all the people said ‘amen.’” The Prophet Jeremiah also says “amen” upon hearing a prophecy and a word from the LORD (Jer 11:5; 28:6).

Over time, אָמֵן clearly developed into a *liturgical and written discourse device*, marking book divisions in the Psalms (Faro 2016). Books I, II and III of the Psalter end in a doxology, closing with “amen and amen” (Pss 41:13; 72:19; 89:52), while Book IV ends with a single “amen” (Ps 106:48).⁵

³ It seems parallel to the form “let it be done” אָשַׁע (Ezra 10:3).

⁴ Num 5:22; Deut 27:15–26.

⁵ Book V ends more triumphantly with “Hallelujah” (150:6).

The word transliterated into Greek occurs in the Deutero-canonicals, for example, in Tobit 8:5–8 at the end of a prayer. It also occurs after doxologies, as in 4 Macc 18:24: *ὣ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων· ἀμήν*. This “so be it” use is widespread and carries over into many NT writings, including those of Paul, Peter, Jude, as well as the author of Hebrews and Revelation.⁶ However, the “amen, amen” formula examined in this paper represents another type of use which differs from the traditional and more common uses described above. This expression occurs, not at the end, but at the *beginning* of a given clause. It does not seem to have the “so be it” meaning found in the OT, the Deutero-canonicals, and the NT epistles. Rather, it appears to concern the text that *follows*. The prefacing formula occurs twenty-five times in John, twenty-four times in Matthew, thirteen times in Mark, and six times in Luke. The double “amen,” a unique feature of the Gospel of John, is in “complementary distribution” with the single ones (Barrett 1978, 186), but surprisingly, there is almost *no overlap* (i.e., parallel passages linking the “amen, amen” passages in John) with those in the Synoptic Gospels. The exceptions are passion-related texts where Jesus announces Judas’s betrayal (13:21, cf. Matt 26:20–25; Mark 14:17–21; Luke 22:21–23) and Peter’s denial.⁷

We have very little data on everyday speech in Jesus’s day, and some claim that initial “amens” are unknown in Jewish literature or that the repetitive “amen, amen” is unattested.⁸ However, we do find a double amen

discourse finally in ancient Israel. In Numbers 5:22, for example, a woman accused of adultery is required to respond “amen, amen” to the priest’s pronouncement of a curse (while other offenders are instructed to use a single “amen”). In Ezra 8:6, as well, after Ezra “blessed the LORD, the great God, all the people answered ‘amen, amen.’”

Outside Scripture, a double amen has recently been found in some fragments of festival prayers in Qumran (caves 1 and 2, dating between 100 BCE and 100 CE). These begin with “remember the Lord” and end with the response, “Amen, amen.” Another more relevant case is noted by Strugnell (1974), offering a possible example of a non-biblical inscription with an *amen preface*: “Amen, I am innocent of any guilt” (cited by Faro 2016).

Nevertheless, within Scripture, the prefacing formula in the gospels is unique. One can only wonder if the expression was used widely in Jesus’s community or region, or if it represents a true feature of Jesus’s *idiolect*.⁹ Whatever the case, its attestation in both the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John—the two being widely divergent in content and literary style—may inform us as to how Jesus *really spoke*, lending to the *historicity* of the Johannine text. As Carson (1991, 162–163) remarks, “The term is so characteristic of Jesus that it appears in transliteration even for the Greek-speaking readers of the Gospels.”

As to the single/double variation in the four gospels, Morris (2000) notes that, although all formulas mark what follows as important, no

⁶ Many of these occur after a praise, “blessed be ... for ever” (Rom 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 15:27; Gal 1:5; Eph 3:21; Phil 4:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 2 Tim 4:18; 1 Pet 4:11; 5:11; Jude 1:25; Heb 13:21; Rev 1:6; 5:4; 7:12; 19:4), as well as prayers for the community, “may the grace...” (Rom 15:33; Gal 6:18). “Amen” in Rev 22:20 seems to mean “so be it,” while Jesus is called the “Amen” in Rev 3:14 (cf. Isa 65:16).

⁷ See also Mark 16:20 which poses textual questions.

⁸ Silva (2014, 161, 265) says it has “no analogy” in Jewish literature of that time. In a similar vein, Doriani (1991, 126) claims the “amen” formula to be a “striking innovation.”

⁹ I argue elsewhere (Zogbo 2000) that Jesus speaking in the third person (e.g., as “Son of Man”) may have been a common speech phenomenon during that time period.

satisfactory explanation has been offered as to why there is this variation. Given the many points of divergence between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel, most scholars doubt whether John depended on or was inspired by the Synoptics.¹⁰ But it is interesting to note that Matthew and John, both considered to be written in a highly Semitic Greek (Kummel 1973; Vermes 1983), together contain the largest numbers of amen formulas.¹¹

3. On the Meaning of the Formula

Almost all commentaries and handbooks point to the amen formula as indicating “a solemn affirmation” by an individual or a group at the *end* of a statement, wish, prayer, blessing, or curse (Faro 2016). At the beginning of statements, Barrett (1978, 186) notes it gives “emphasis to a solemn pronouncement.”¹² Morris (2000) says the pre-clause formula marks these statements by Jesus as true, solemn, and important. Carson (1991, 162) also suggests Jesus uses it before an utterance “to confirm and emphasize its trustworthiness and importance ... to strengthen his own words” (161).

Newman and Nida (1980) bring a slight nuance to this explanation by stating that not only does the formula (i) “emphasize the words of Jesus” (which follow), but it (ii) “confirms the truth of what Jesus says.” From a linguistic point of view, the first refers to a *focusing mechanism or attention-*

¹⁰ Achtemeier et al. (2001) note: “John’s gospel distinguishes itself by presenting not a different Jesus but a Jesus from a distinctly Johannine angle. He is the Word, he comes from the Father, finds his authority there ... so it seems proper to let Jesus speak differently, to respect this literary difference, whatever the historical interweaving relationship between the synoptics and Johannine.”

¹¹ Some claim that the author of Luke, speaking to a primarily Greek audience (with only six amen statements) may have removed many such transliterations from Q (Kummel 1973).

¹² Barrett (1978, 186), among others, uses the term “asseveration,” referring to the emphatic, solemn declaration of a fact.

getter,¹³ and the second, to an expression which attests to the *truth value* of a statement. As Morley (1997) points out, the formula implies that Jesus is acknowledging the truth and authority of his teachings, and statements as well as his correction of religious laws. Indeed, many languages have a *marker of evidentiality*, signaling whether knowledge is first or second hand, witnessed by the speaker or only “hearsay” (i.e., whether a statement is trustworthy or not).

Some link the high number of repetitive “amens” in John’s Gospel as Jesus being *more conscious* of his divine role and mission than in the Synoptics. In this vein, Silva (2014, 161) describes the formula as “an expression of his [Jesus’s] own certainty of the divine saying and authentication of his own words.” Silva sees Jesus standing by his words, making them “binding on himself and his hearers.” Thus, along with thinking about Jesus’s *stance vis-à-vis* his own words, we might also consider how he wanted his words to be heard and interpreted by his audience (of course, it is hard to evaluate the conscious attitude of a speaker in a written text two millennia old).

4. On the Tone of the Formula

Many point to the *solemnness* of the “amen (amen)” preface, with some qualifying it as a “majestic introductory formula” (Hendrickson 1954, 198) or as “majestic revelatory language used by God” (Achtemeier et al. 2001, 187). Others describe the tone of John’s Gospel as more “elevated” literary style.¹⁴ However, it must be noted that the tone of the formula (inaccessible to readers today) depends entirely on the context:

¹³ The latter expression is used by many, including Runge (2010, 88), who only briefly comments on this formula in his Greek discourse grammar.

¹⁴ We would reject the claim that in this gospel, “Jesus speaks in a more elevated, hieratic, even pretentious, style” (Moody Smith 1986, 4), since the last adjective seems unjustified.

- Who is speaking? (always Jesus!)
- Who is being addressed?
- In what context is the speech given?
- What is the primary illocutionary force of the statement?

Indeed, in the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the amen formula to address a wide range of people, all of whom qualify as “Jews,” but who become quickly divided into separate groups:

- his *followers*, i.e., his disciples, such as Nathanael (1:51) and Peter (21:15, 18)
- those we could qualify as *seekers* (Nicodemus, 3:3, 5; the crowd 6:22–25)
- those Jews “believing Jesus” (8:31)
- “the Jews,” who in this gospel designate religious and civil authorities who regularly oppose him (5:18–19; 6:41; 8:48).

As to the context, Jesus’s reaction and tone seem to be dependent on the attitude of those to whom he is speaking. At times, his audience is in awe, at other times, vaguely or keenly interested, slightly or greatly perplexed, openly hostile, or not. Thus, Jesus might be speaking in an excited way (1:51), with sadness (13:21, 38), in a somewhat angry or disappointed (6:26) or defiant tone (8:58). The context might be an intimate meeting (Nathanael, Peter), with or without onlookers, or a rowdy or mixed crowd (chapter 8).¹⁵ Whatever the tone or context, the “amen, amen” marked statements do seem *irrevocable*, whether the statement is accepted or not.

¹⁵ Note that twenty out of twenty-five times in John, Jesus uses a plural “you” (in Greek), and only five times a singular “you.”

Note that in several passages (e.g., 3:1–11; 6:26, 32, 47, 53), there appear to be “clusters” (numerous occurrences) of amen statements. And here, as we will see below, the tone often *shifts*, going from friendly and/or neutral to more and more confrontational. One way to think about the sayings is to determine whether their content is positive (1:51) or negative (21:18), or somewhere in-between. Identifying the *illocutionary force* or the *type of speech act* is a more difficult task. In John’s Gospel, we encounter many *promises* and/or *predictions*—some positive (1:51; 14:12; 16:20, 23) and some negative (13:21; 38; 21:18), as well as speeches meant to teach or inform (e.g., those expressing *general truths*: 3:3, 5; 5:19, 24; 6:32, 47; 8:34, 58; 10:1, 7; 12:24; 13:16, 20). At least one “amen, amen” formula introduces an *accusation* (3:11), and another a *reprimand* (6:26), and as many have pointed out, statements which *correct* false beliefs (6:32; 8:34).

5. Wider Claims

Some scholars ascribe even more semantic content into this introductory formula, describing Jesus’s use of the word “amen” as “sacred,” bringing us back to the issue of how conscious Jesus is of his own identity. Achtemeier et al. (2001, 177) think Jesus’s encounters with people are meant to push them to decide *who he is*, as he “forces the issue by his bold claims to speak God’s word on God’s behalf and by God’s authority.” Morris (2000, 170), among others, seems to go a step further, claiming the “amen, amen” formula has “Christological implications,” marking words following “as uttered before God, who is thus invited to bring them to pass.” Some even propose that the “amen, amen” formula in the NT is equivalent to the ominous OT, “Thus says the LORD” (Ross 1991, 167; Reiling and Swellengrebel 1971), showing

¹⁶ A surer OT parallel would be the “I am” statements of Isaiah (Achtemeier et al. 2001, 187).

Jesus's *conscious role as prophet*. This seems speculative, especially since, though Jesus could have used the name of the LORD in these instances, he did not!¹⁶ Obviously, scholars take various views on these issues. Silva (2014) thinks Jesus is claiming to be *more than* an Old Testament prophet, actually setting himself *alongside* God and his word.

Clearly, in many instances, a hostile audience did consider his words blasphemy, but it may be overstepping to say exactly what Jesus's *motives* were. Though Jesus (or the author of John) meant these words to stand out, there seems to be no justification for thinking the amen-prefaced statements are more *sacred* or *have more theological weight* than Jesus's other teachings in the gospels, for example, "I am the light of the world," "I am the way the truth and the life," "God so loved the world..." and so on. As we will see, in the gospels, and for purposes of this paper, particularly in John's Gospel, the "amen, amen" formula appears rather to play an important literary or discourse role.

6. On the Discourse Function of ἀμήν ἀμήν

Another way to analyze the "amen, amen" formula is to try to determine its pragmatic and discourse functions within the text as a whole. Though several commentators and biblical scholars mention various discourse features associated with the formula, to my knowledge, the fullest linguistic study is carried out both for the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel by David Clark (2007, 26), a seasoned translation consultant and handbook author who rightly claims, "the familiar formula ... does not occur randomly in discourse." In his study of the single "amen" formula in the Synoptics, Clark (2004, 319–321) reports the "amen" formula marks:

- the end of unit or episode
- the opening of a longer speech
- reversal of expectation.

In a later study, Clark (2007) extends his analyses to the Fourth Gospel, where he confirms the above, though noting in the Gospel of John, the largest group of "amen, amen" sayings *introduce* rather than *end* a discourse unit. This "reversal" (2007, 127) in discourse roles is significant and underlines yet another difference between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel. In John, Clark finds the "amen, amen" formula beginning seventeen units, thus constituting two-thirds of its occurrences, with roughly one third signaling closure (125, 127).

6.1 Discourse openings

According to Clark, introducing a unit is the major discourse role of the ἀμήν ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν formula in John's Gospel. In 13:21, for example, we note the new literary unit is marked as well by several initial verbal clauses and the reintroduction of the full noun phrase *Jesus*.¹⁷ The NRSV presents a subtitle and a new paragraph:¹⁸

Jesus Foretells His Betrayal

21 After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "**Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.**" 22 The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. 23 One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; 24 Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. 25 So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

¹⁷ One can also note the presence of four verbs of saying in Greek: εἶπον (X2), μαρτυρέω, and λέγω.

¹⁸ Unless otherwise noted, examples are from the NRSV.

It is important to note that many of these opening statements in the Fourth Gospel seem disruptive or not quite logical. Often when Jesus uses this formula, he seems to be changing the subject, and quite often does not answer the question being asked!¹⁹ A good example of this is 6:25ff which begins with a clear paragraph break (signaled by a change of scene and time). After the miracle of the loaves and fish, the people following Jesus come to him and ask, “when did you come here?” But instead of answering, Jesus begins a new teaching, which is almost a reprimand:

25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” 26 Jesus answered them, “*Very truly*, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

Indeed, as early as the 1800s, various scholars including Wescott (1880, 76) have noted that “The words by their emphasis generally *presuppose some difficulty or misunderstanding to be overcome*.”²⁰ In the above case, Jesus seeks to supplement the crowd’s limited knowledge (belief in his physical miracles) and to point them to a better understanding of spiritual realities.²¹ While Wescott also suggests the “amen, amen” formula may mark “the introduction of a new thought,” others suggest that there is often some tie back to a previous context. Indeed, these statements often signal “an

¹⁹ This even when the text clearly says, “Jesus answered them.”

²⁰ Italics mine.

²¹ See Achtemeier et al. (2001, 190) for similar views. Significantly they note “the cumulative effect of the various correctives ... [is that] ... with each subsequent misunderstanding, the reader learns that to understand Jesus one must recognize him as the one who comes from God.”

element of surprise” (Clark 2007, 124) or what Carson (1991, 162–163) calls “a reversal of expectation.”

In the Nicodemus episode (3:1–21), though Jesus’s answer picks up on what has been said, at the same time, it does not quite “connect”:

2 [Nicodemus says] “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

3 Jesus answered him (In reply he said, NIV), “*Very truly*, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Clark (2007, 125) says here that Jesus is trying to *change the subject*. Indeed, we think he is shifting the exchange *away* from a discussion about himself *towards* a discussion focusing more on Nicodemus.

At 10:1, Falconer (2010) identifies the “amen, amen” as beginning a closely-knit literary unit (10:1–18) based on the images of the shepherd and the gate, but he also notes that the formula provides *cohesion* with what precedes, serving as a *transition* from dialogue (with the Pharisees which ends at 9:41) into a monologue (even if the Pharisees are still present in the background, as “them” in 10:6). This passage exhibits a feature of many “amen” formulas in John’s Gospel mentioned above, that is, that they tend to occur in “clusters.” For reasons difficult to determine, several texts have a number of amen sayings, while others have none. In these cases, one can often sense a *movement* within a given passage from more general

statements to more specific or pointed ones, moving as well from a more neutral tone to a far more confrontational one.²² Thus, in 10:1ff, Jesus begins with general teaching, but by the time he gets to the next “amen” formula statement in 10:7, an “uneasiness” has crept in, as those listening “do not understand.”²³

1 “*Very truly*, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again, Jesus said to them (v. 7),

“*Very truly*, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

22 This pattern imprints itself over the book as a whole. Achtemeier et al. (2001, 180) see the gospel beginning (chs. 1–4) showing “benign misunderstanding” which eventually gives way to “dangerous misperceptions of Jesus’s purpose ... [and] hostile disputes....”

23 The French Bible *Explicquée* thinks this whole passage is provocative. Of course, already in 10:1, most listeners/readers understand who the thieves are!

Indeed, by the time Jesus gets to the end of his lengthy speech, we find that “the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon and is out of his mind’” (10:19–20).

Coming back to the Nicodemus episode, the same movement can be seen, as the second “amen, amen” parallels and gives more detail to the first, while the third, linked by a somewhat fuzzy border, shifts from a friendly exchange into a harsh accusation (as the addressees also widen to a plural “you”).²⁴

3 Jesus answered him (In reply he said, NIV), “*Very truly*, I tell you (singular), no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “*Very truly*, I tell you (singular), no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished.... 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things? 11 *Very truly*, I tell you (singular), we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you (plural) do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you (plural) about earthly things and you do not believe....”

24 The literary links in this passage are also quite remarkable with “God” in v. 2 being picked up in v. 3, “born” in v. 3 being picked up in v. 4, etc. Through its repetition, this exchange is quite poetic.

6.2 Discourse closure

By Clark's (2007, 127) count, there are eight cases of discourse final "amen" formulas in the Gospel of John. Two of these involve private exchanges with Peter (NRSV):

Jesus Foretells Peter's Denial

36 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." 37 Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." 38 Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? *Very truly, I tell you*, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times." (13:36–38; See also 21:15–19)

From our study, it would appear that the "amen, amen" formula not only closes short speeches, but long ones as well. Thus, John 1:51 not only closes a short unit (1:43–51), marked in some Bibles with a subtitle "Philip and Nathanael," but a much longer one as well. The "amen, amen" formula seems to also bring to a close the larger unit, 1:35–51, which might be called, "The first disciples."

Likewise, in what seems to be a very long discourse in chapter 8, with a few changes in location (8:12, 31), there are several "amen, amen" statements or "clusters" (8:31, 34, 51, 58). But the last "amen" formula seems to put "the cherry on the cake," as hostility increases and, immediately after, the unbelieving Jews pick up stones to kill Jesus (8:57–59):

57 Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" 58 Jesus said to them, "**Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.**" 59 So they picked up stones

to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. This is clearly more than episode closure. Plot-wise, it looks like the "final blow," a speech which will have enormous consequences throughout the rest of the gospel. In some languages, such pertinent events are marked by what is called, "current relevance markers" (see Marchese 1978. See also 13:1–20, where numerous "amen" statements occur, with 13:20 adding a strong conclusion.)

6.3 Opening and closure?

Clark (2007, 125) claims that the "amen, amen" formula can open and close the same literary unit, as in 5:19–24 below. One might posit the following paragraph divisions based on the formula and the introduction of new ideas (see also the way words or themes are introduced in one paragraph and then picked up in what follows):²⁵

18 For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

The Authority of the Son

19 Jesus said to them, "*Very truly, I tell you*, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. 20 The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. 21 Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. 22 The Father judges

²⁵ The transition from 5:18 to 5:19 looks very much like the one at John 10:1.

no one but has given all judgment to the Son, 23 so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. *Anyone* who does not honor *the Son* does not honor the Father *who sent him*. 24 *Very truly, I tell you*, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

25 “*Very truly, I tell you*, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; 27 and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.” 28 “Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

Here the unit opens (5:19) and closes (5:24) with “amen, amen.” 5:25 seems to begin a new unit, based on a change in theme, “the hour is coming,” which, nevertheless, ties back to 5:24.

6.4 Paragraph marker

Many examples cited and those following show that as a discourse opener, the “amen, amen” formula can be used as an indicator of paragraph division. Though often disputable, *paragraph divisions* are extremely important, since these enable readers/hearers to grasp and digest the meaning and even the

²⁶ Whether or not narrative texts are written, they contain discourse markers which signal these primary discourse units.

logic of a text.²⁶ While the NRSV casts 13:12–20 into one paragraph, we may propose a better division by taking the “amen” formula at 13:16 as a closure, confirmed by the subordinate conditional clause at 13:17 as an opener. 13:20 then also serves as a closer, confirmed by the temporal clause breaker in 13:21 beginning a new paragraph:²⁷

12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 *Very truly, I tell you*, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.”

17 “*If you know these things*, you are blessed if you do them. 18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, ‘The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’ 19 I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. 20 *Very truly, I tell you*, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

Jesus Foretells His Betrayal

21 *After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared*, “*Very truly, I tell you*, one of you will betray me.” 22 The disciples looked

²⁷ Many languages use dependent temporal or conditional clauses in this way (Marchese 1977, 1987).

at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. 23 One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; 24 Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

As in the Synoptics, *reversal of expectation* characterizes many of the amen statements in John. Jesus uses the formula to signal some surprising information which is contrary to popular belief. Clark (2007, 124) notes, however, that this nuance is more likely to be associated with introductory amen statements, rather than closing ones.

6.5 Climax

We might add to Clark's "surprise" or "reversal of expectation" the notion of *climax*, that is points in the narrative where the "amen, amen" formula marks a high or pivotal point in a text (be it narrative, poem, dialogue, and so on). A good example occurs as 21:18 signals, not just the end, but the climax of the unit 21:15–19. But again, there is a "disconnect," as Jesus moves from somehow calling out Peter with his repetitive questions ("do you love me?") and imperatives ("feed my sheep"), into a very hard climactic word concerning Peter's shocking death.

Note that many *closing* amen statements tend to exhibit this feature of climax, as we have already seen:

"You will see greater things than these. *Very truly, I tell you*, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." (1:50–51)

In fact, many cluster presentations *lead up to a high point*, as the discourse on the loaves and fish moves from a gentle reprimand first, to astonishing information:

Jesus answered them, "*Very truly, I tell you*, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

32 Then Jesus said to them, "*Very truly, I tell you*, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of heaven is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

And from there, we are led to the climax statement:

34 They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." 35 Jesus said to them, "*I am the bread of life*. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Another outstanding example was seen above in 8:58, where Jesus marks as climactic, "Before Abraham was, I am."

Thus, jumping off from Clark's detailed analyses, the role of the "amen, amen" formula can be expanded. Indeed, beyond signaling discourse structure and openings and closings which show surprises and climaxes, the "amen, amen" formula can also be seen to be *announcing important themes or marking significant points in the literary development*. This is particularly true concerning the two amen endings occurring early on in the gospel. The ends of two units, 1:51 and 3:11, *point forward* to what is to come. Verse 1:51 ends a long section, but also announces that the *glory of Jesus* will be revealed. Thus, after Nathanael declares, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus says not only to him, but to all the disciples he has just chosen:

50 “You (singular) will see greater things than these. 51 *Very truly, I tell you* (plural), you (plural) will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

This somewhat surprising and even disjunctive declaration seems to *clearly prefigure* what is to come in the gospel—namely, the glory of Jesus will be revealed. In the Nicodemus episode, there is a very similar *pointing*, but the third and final “amen” formula presents a theme almost counter to 1:51, as it underlines people’s refusal to believe Jesus,²⁸ which also very concretely prefigures the crucifixion. Interestingly, however, it reiterates the ascending-descending motif of 1:50:

11 “*Very truly, I tell you* (singular), we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you (plural) do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you (plural) about earthly things and you (plural) do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you (plural) about heavenly things?”

13 “No one has *ascended* into heaven except the one who *descended* from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Interestingly, both of these “amen, amen” episodes at the beginning of the book of John make an intertextual link to the OT “ascending and descending” and “lifting up” movements, in reference to the patriarchs Jacob and Moses. It is also quite striking to note that both of these episodes involve *opening up the audience from singular to plural*, as can be seen in the examples above.

²⁸ Two other amen-marked statements express the rejection theme, predicting or prefiguring the denial of Peter and the betrayal of Judas.

6.6 *Amen, amen in highly marked contexts*

John includes much figurative and poetic language, including a great deal of repetition. One interesting phenomenon involving the “amen, amen” formula is that it often occurs in *highly marked* linguistic environments, many of which do not “show through” in translation. The most outstanding of these is the *quote formula* which is consistently *under-rendered* in most versions. Below are literal renderings of several “amen, amen” statements showing multiple cases of verbs of saying:

- 50 Jesus *answered* and *said* (εἶπον) to him, “Do you believe because I *told* (εἶπον) you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” 51 And he *said* (λέγω) to him, “Amen, amen, I *tell* (λέγω) you, you will see heaven opened...” (1:50–51)
- Jesus *answered* him and *said* (εἶπον), “Amen, amen, I *tell* (λέγω) you, no one...” (3:3)
- *Continued* therefore and Jesus *said* (λέγω) to them “Amen, amen, I *tell* (λέγω) you, the Son can do nothing on his own...” (5:19)
- *Responded* to them and Jesus *said* (εἶπεν), “Amen, amen, I *tell* (λέγω) you, you are looking for me...” (6:26)
- *Said* (εἶπον) therefore Jesus, “Amen, amen I tell you (λέγω)...” (6:32)

These phrases are certainly a product of Semitic-influenced Greek, coming from the Hebrew or Aramaic “he said” saying. But despite their origin, these quote formulas add quite a bit of prominence to these passages. The high

²⁹ See van den Broek (2020) for a discussion of how sound effects play a role in one text in John’s gospel.

number of verbs of saying, along with the repetitive “amen” creates what Longacre (1983, xvii) calls a “zone of turbulence,” which demands hearer/reader attention.²⁹ Another “attention-getter” in Greek is the long form ὁ Ἰησοῦς (“the Jesus”) which often “weighs down” the text (5:19; 6:26, 32, 53; 8:34; 10:7; 13:21),³⁰ as well as the οὖν conjunction, “therefore,” not rendered in many versions.³¹

One can also note that the “amen, amen” statements are often introduced directly *after* an unsettling rhetorical question:

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “*Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?* 11 “*Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?*”

In 14:12, the “amen, amen” statement comes after a chiasm, repeating the words “believe,” “Father,” and “works”:

11 “...Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me (*chiasm*); or else believe me for the sake of the *works* themselves. 12 *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the*

30 This feature is outside the scope of this paper, but I refer the reader to Colwell (1933).

31 See also 13:38; 16:19, 20. The odd imperative “Feed my sheep” preceding the “amen” formula may also be part of “disconnected” speech at 21:17–18.

works that I do; and greater *works* than these will he do, because I go to the Father.”

Indeed, the frequent “disconnects,” repetition, and special stylistic devices within the context of the “amen” statements all combine to make the reader/hearer “sit up” and pay attention.

7. Translation issues

In everyday life, oral translation often takes place spontaneously, without much time for on-the-spot reflection. But translation of sacred texts such as the Bible differs in that a text usually needs to be *exegeted* before it can be rendered, thus our search for context, meaning, and tone in the above discussion. Nevertheless, despite this research, how to render the formula “amen (amen), I say to you,” both in the Synoptics and in John’s Gospel, remains a challenge for translators worldwide.

Alongside *understanding the source text*, which involves exegetical and linguistic analyses, translators need to find solutions to render its message in a meaningful way in their own languages. What type of translation and what level of language used will of course depend on the *skopos* (goals) of the translation project, usually written down in a *translation brief* drawn up by the translation team in consultation with the host community and the project sponsors.³²

It is also important to remember that translation is not an automatic exercise and there is never one, and only one, “correct” rendering. Rather,

32 Dominated in the past by external partners, today it is expected that this choice, for a literary, a liturgical, or common language translation—one leaning toward a more literal rendering and the other, toward a freer one—is determined at the grassroots level.

translation is an exercise in *identifying and choosing between multiple adequate and acceptable* (traditionally called “faithful”) *renderings*. The “amen (amen)” formula poses a particular translation problem since the word “amen” is already present in the Greek source text as a *transliterated borrowing*. In this specific case, the translator has two basic options:

- (i) maintaining the borrowing (the transliteration) as is, or
- (ii) translating the term(s).

Below two charts presenting a sampling of renderings for John 1:51 in a set of English versions and in a selected set of African languages show that in this data set, option (ii) far outweighs (i), in frequency and practice. Indeed, in all our databases, only one version (NAB) opts for transliteration here:

7.1 Amen, amen in Selected English Versions (John 1:51):³³

KJV	Verily, verily, I say unto you
RSV, ESV	Truly, truly I say to you
NEB	In truth, in very truth I tell you
NAB	Amen amen I say to you/I solemnly assure you
NRSV, NIV ³⁴	Very truly I tell you
REB	In very truth I tell you all
JB	I tell you most solemnly

³³ In French, out of seven very popular versions, only one (*Nouvelle Bible Segond*) opts for “Amen, Amen, je te le dis.”

³⁴ The NIV renders a double amen in Num 5:22 as “Amen, so be it.”

NJB	In all truth I tell you
GNB	I am telling you the truth
NET	I tell all of you the solemn truth
CEV	I tell you for certain
Hendrickson (1954)	I most solemnly assure you
Eugene Peterson	I’m telling you the most solemn and sober truth now

7.2 Amen, amen in a Selection of African Languages (John 1:51)

Language	Rendering	Meaning
Saafi-saafi (Senegal)	Ñam na woyee ðu wa, te ambaat ne wa keeh	I (it’s me who) tell it to you (and) know that it’s true
Lyélé (BF)	Zhèn zhènà, à n’â wəl (re) ába	Truth truth, I say (it) to you
Lama (Togo)	Mə siru-mi tɔfələm kən	I tell-you truth EMPHASIS
Ife (Togo)	̀N wà wí òtító́ fú ɲé ní fee	I say you the truth that EMPH
Glaro (Côte d’Ivoire)	Bô zurà wà ùn gǎà dhì í dhèè` plɔ-ń.	Let me tell you all the real truth
Baoule (CI)	Nanwle kpa, n ‘kan kle amun,	Truth true, I say to you

Anyin Sanvi (CI)	Mun kan yi' ananhole mun kele emo ke,	I say in truth to you that
Abure (CI)	Anvhale, anvhale 'klo,	In truth, in truth
Hdi (Cameroon, Nigeria)	Kahwathwata ka yu ta mnaghunata	True-true say I am saying to you
Lingala CL- BS Democratic Republic of Congo	Ya solo	It's true
Lingala Makanza- BS	Solo solo	True, true
Lingala Courant/Biblica	Ya solo/ Ya solo penza	It's true/It's really/ truly true
Catholic Lingala	Ya sôló sôló	It's true true
Kikongo	Kedika	It's true
Munu Kutuba Congo-BS	Ya tsyelika	It's true

Though the word “amen” has penetrated most societies worldwide and is used in various ways, especially as an answer to a prayer or to a simple “God bless you,”³⁵ the particular use in the gospels, *introducing* statements in the way Jesus does, is far less common. Not surprisingly, then, in the case of

³⁵ Where I live in Côte d'Ivoire, Muslims, practitioners of Traditional African Religion, as well as Christians all respond to “God bless you” in any language with an “amen.” Another phenomenon has developed in church settings: a pastor yells “amen?” and the congregation answers “amen.” This may even begin a speech or sermon. See Agana-Nsiire Agana (2019) for this use in a Ghanaian congregation.

John's double formula, the translation strategy which has dominated both in English and our select set of African languages (as seen above) is *dynamic* or *functional equivalence*, an approach on the scene for the past sixty or seventy years. Thus, almost all translators have attempted to render the *perceived meaning*, sometimes with great, and other times with less, success. Note that while some have retained the repetitive form (“truly, truly,” *Ya sôló sôló*), others have proposed more natural renderings (“I tell you the truth”). Most of these concentrate on the *truth value* of what is to follow. How successful these forms are in *drawing attention* to the statement (in terms of surprise or emphasis) or as a paragraph introducer or closing is hard to determine. Only once in our data sample has the “amen, amen” formula been transliterated (NAB above).

Considering our discussion of meaning, tone, discourse use, and authenticity, it is a surprising that more versions do not opt to maintain the *transliterated* form of “amen, amen,” which offers some advantages. Notably this solution might be attractive because:

- it uses a word that is at the very least familiar in most cultures
- it renders and maintains the flavor of Jesus's speech
- it preserves ties to the OT
- it lends authenticity to the document (respecting historicity)
- it preserves the uniqueness of Jesus's speech
- it may even affirm Jesus's Jewishness (suggesting Jesus might have been speaking Aramaic and not Greek, as some maintain).

As noted, such a choice will be determined by the *skopos* and translation approach chosen by the host community (i.e., whether the translation will show more *domestication* or *foreignization*.) But given our study, maintaining “amen, amen” (as the gospel writers evidently did) should certainly not be

excluded from options offered to translators in the twenty-first century, where *authenticity* is seen as pertinent.

Examining the data, other important translation issues arise as well:

- How important is it to differentiate John's *double use* of the formula from the synoptic *single* one?
- Should any attempt be made to render the "amen, amen" formula contextually? That is, when there are nuances of surprise or reprimand, should particles be added, as suggested by Clark (2007)? In other words, should "amen, amen" be the same everywhere or should renderings adapt to each context?
- How is repetition interpreted and handled? Should it be preserved?

Regarding the first issue, most versions do reflect the form of the Greek text by proposing *different renderings* for the single and double expressions,³⁶ though the majority adopt similar expressions to show the two are related. Thus, the NIV uses "Truly I tell you" in the Synoptics and "Very truly I tell you" in the Gospel of John. The NET distinguishes "I tell you the truth" (Luke 4:24) from "I tell you *the solemn truth*" (John 3:3). Some African languages have harmonized the single and double formulas, perhaps to preserve naturalness, but most would agree it is important to *let the Gospels maintain and reflect their distinctiveness*.

This leads into the second question, that of *consistency*. Is it better to keep the expression stable so that it can be recognized for what it is, or is it better to render the expression according to context? In the Gospel of Matthew, the GNB makes a serious attempt at rendering the single

form *naturally*, according to context, but this results in over ten different renderings for the one Greek expression.³⁷

- "Remember that as long as heaven and earth last..." (Matt 5:18; 24:34)
- "I tell you" (5:26; 8:10; 18:13; 21:31; 26:21, 34), with other variants: "And so I tell all of you" (18:18), "I tell you indeed" (23:26), "this" (24:2), "Indeed I tell..." (24:47)
- "I assure you" (6:2, 5, 16; 10:15; 11:11; 13:17; 16:28; 17:20; 18:3; 19:23; 21:21; 26:13)
- "I promise you" (10:23)
- "You can be sure ... (certainly)" (10:42; 19:28).

These expressions provide smooth and natural renderings but have the clear disadvantage of removing a recognizable expression associated with Jesus. Indeed, no reader would be able to go back and identify the "amen, amen" sayings in this book without referring to the Greek or another version.

In most English and African language versions consulted, the formula in John is rendered consistently with an identical formula (the singular and plural "you" only being distinguished in languages where this is an issue). This consistency helps establish the expression as a feature of John's Gospel and a unique feature of Jesus's speech, but it does lead to some unnatural collocations, as well as some odd and, at times, illogical links between clauses. Thus, common language French *Parole de Vie* varies between a strong *Oui, je vous le dis, c'est la vérité* ("Yes, I tell you, it's the truth," at 1:51 and following) to an almost hedging *Eh bien* ("Well, I tell you, it's the

³⁶ Clark (2007, 128) likewise advises to "maintain the sight difference if at all possible."

³⁷ Excluding the uses in parables: 25:12, 40, 45.

truth” at 16:20). One version of Lingala (Courant de Biblica) also tends to show variation within the Gospel of John, at times using “It’s true” (*Ya solo*) and a more emphatic “It’s true true” (*Ya solo penza*) elsewhere (5:19). While consistency is preferred, perhaps minor changes such as those in PDV above can help readers to better understand the intention behind the “amen, amen” statement. Note that in the French rendering, the last part of the expression is left intact.

Finally, we come to the question of repetition, asking should the repetition of “amen, amen” be preserved or changed? Some versions keep the repetition, while others remove it. It is clear that repetition can have a number of functions within a single language: emphasizing, structuring, and even mocking. In some contexts, especially in Africa, truth-asserting particles, words, or expressions may have a positive effect, but repeating them may have the opposite effect (i.e., *calling into doubt* the validity of a claim). Such instances can be seen in Scripture, as in Jer 23:25:

I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy falsely in My name: “*I had a dream. I had a dream.*” How long will there be in the minds of the prophets who prophesy falsehood—the prophets of their own deceitful minds?

A Senegalese merchant comes to mind, who says *wallah* (*wAllah*) “by God” over and over. The more the man insists, the less you believe him! Thus, there is a potential conflict between the *repetitive form* and the *communicative goal of assurance*. Clearly, translators must decide if repetition *lends truth value or hinders it*. Sena Komi, a Togolese translation consultant (SIL) says in his language, Ife, it is better to use a particle *fee* which marks insistence and inspires confidence, than to repeat the same expression twice. However, another consultant, Nzita Nsafu Stanislas, from DRC, notes that in Lingala,

while repetitive verbs give a derogative meaning (*kolialia* means “to eat in disorder”), repeating a noun or adjective like “truth” or “true” *reinforces* the truth of a statement. Thus, part of the translators’ job is to correctly understand the nuances of the source text and the import of words in their own mother tongue. Only then can they carry out the delicate balancing act of juggling various options and making the best choice.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to acknowledge that no one can predict when “amen, amen” statements will surface in the Gospel of John. But we can identify the role of this expression in discourse as it opens or closes a literary unit. We can see that “amens” may come in clusters, going from general to specific, from friendly to pointed and even confrontational. We can recognize that some prefigure and announce important themes, while others seem to signal climactic conclusions. Our best advice would be for translators to keep the formula constant or use a close variant, with a special particle, for example, if this would help the reader understand special nuances in a given text.

Today’s translator might also choose to break the pattern of the last half century and transliterate the “amen, amen” formula, to preserve, if only slightly, the *flavor of the original*. We might even decide to highlight or explain this unique feature of Jesus’s speech in an introduction to the gospels or in a glossary. In the meantime, we can let this formula continue to prod our thinking as we reflect on the authenticity of the Gospel of John.

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