

The Description of Multiple Meaning in Some Biblical Hebrew Lexicographical Projects

Abstract

In this paper I will compare the classical approach to lexicography of Biblical Hebrew, as reflected in standard bilingual dictionaries, with recent developments in the description of the meaning of Hebrew words. These show a separation of paradigmatical and syntagmatical semantics as well as a renewed interest in a thesaurus of Hebrew or at least in the treatment of near-synonyms. This affects the presentation of multiple meaning or polysemy. One may ask whether users such as Bible translators are likely to benefit from these developments. I will discuss how the respective approaches deal with the lexicography of the Hebrew word *zera'*.

1. *zera'* in traditional dictionaries

1.1 *zera'* in Brown, Driver and Briggs

Of the traditional standard dictionaries, Brown, Driver and Briggs (1906, reprint 1951) still serves as the most widely used dictionary of Biblical Hebrew for English-speaking scholars (Goshen-Gottstein 1991:80). It contains an extensive article on *zera'*, differentiating its respective meanings more carefully than other traditional standard dictionaries (Gesenius 1915; Koehler & Baumgartner 1967), sometimes giving parallel words in the near context. A summary is given in Figure 1.

<i>zera'</i> sowing, seed, offspring	
1 (literally)	a) sowing Genesis 47:24 Leviticus 27:16b (cf. 2c); Numbers 20:5
hence	b) sowing as recurring at its season Leviticus 26:5 (cf. Amos 9:13 below)
2 seed:	
	a) (literally) sown to raise crops
	b) (figuratively) of idolatry Isaiah 17:11; product of seed Deuteronomy 14:22 (cf. d); (fig.) of rapid growth Amos 9:13
	c) seed as product: seed of herbs Genesis 1:11,12,29
esp.	d) seed as corn-product, corn-crop Genesis 47:24 (cf. 1a) Isaiah 23:3

- e) growth Zechariah 8:12
- list of verbs used with *zera'* in these meanings
- 3 seed = semen virile
- 4 seed = offspring:
- a) (rarely) of animals
 - b) of mankind [i.e. of people], coll. = descendants, posterity; seed of (cf. c)
 - c) seed (= posterity) of individuals (cf. b)
 - d) of a particular child Genesis 4:25 1 Samuel 1:11; of children
 - e) = family; = pedigree Daniel 9:1 Ezra 2:59; = one's nation
- list of verbs used with *zera'* in these meanings
- f) as name for people of Israel
 - g) seed of future generations
- 5 seed as marked by moral quality = persons of such a quality Proverbs 11:21

Figure 1. Entry of *zera'* in Brown, Driver and Briggs

Brown, Driver and Briggs (henceforth BDB) state that in Genesis 47:24 *zera'* means 'sowing': "And at the harvests ... four fifths shall be your own, for sowing the field and as food for yourselves...". 'Sowing' might be an adequate translational equivalent to be used in this context, but the Hebrew text literally reads: "as seed of/for the field". The references under 1a are thus better placed under meaning 2a. In fact, BDB mention Genesis 47:24 again under 2d. The meaning 'seedtime / sowing as recurring at its season' can then no longer be derived from 'sowing'. As 'season for sowing seed' it may well be derived from the verb *zára'* 'to sow'.

The differences under meaning 2 in BDB do not always indicate different meanings. a, b, and e are only different usages of the same meaning in different contexts. For instance, Isaiah 17:11 (2b) describes the sowing of seed in the context of some idolatrous ritual, but that does not mean that *zera'* as such is used figuratively here. This also applies to Amos 9:13 where the sower of *zera'* in its season is one of the figures who illustrate rapid growth in the coming time. In Zechariah 8:12 (2e), *zera'* itself does not mean 'growth'; it is the context that describes the growth of this seed in peace: "For the seed will be prosperous: [for instance] the vine will yield its fruit...".

BDB do not clearly indicate that the relationship between meanings 2a and d is one between a basic meaning and a derived meaning (what comes from seed).

Apart from 4e, the distinctions under meaning 4 are also due to differences in usage of the same meaning 'offspring' in different contexts. In 1 Samuel 1:11 (4d) *zera'* indeed refers to an individual child as is the case in Genesis 4:25: "God has appointed for me another *zera'* instead of Abel". In the other

instances, *zera'* is used collectively with the same meaning 'offspring'. One might, however, have expected that BDB would have differentiated the meaning 'descent/pedigree' (4e) from 'offspring' as has been done in Koehler & Baumgartner (1967).

In short, the entry in BDB differentiates carefully according to the usages of *zera'*. They sometimes mention verbs and parallel words which occur with *zera'*, thus paying some attention to syntagmatic relationships. They show that some meanings are derived from others and thus make their entries more transparent to the user. However, they tend to confuse different meanings with different usages of a meaning in particular contexts.

1.2 *zera'* in Koehler and Baumgartner

Figure 2 gives a short summary of the entry for *zera'* in Koehler and Baumgartner (1967).

- zera'* seed
 1 seed Genesis 47:24, seedtime
 a seed [corresponds to meaning 2c of BDB: seed of herbs]
 b seeds, field of seed, yield of seed
 2 of man and animal: seed, semen, son 1 Samuel 1:11, descendants
 3 offspring
 a (collectively) descendants, children
 b (individual) descendant Genesis 4:25
 4 descent Ezra 2:59

Figure 2. Entry for *zera'* in Koehler and Baumgartner

Koehler and Baumgartner (henceforth KB) do not come up with a revolutionary conception of lexicography. Rather their main concern is with incorporating the increased material in Hebrew and related languages (Barr 1973:110,116). In fact, even though KB is the most recent standard dictionary, the differentiation of meanings in this entry is less developed than in BDB. It is not made clear why 'seedtime' was put before 1a and b. Different meanings have been put together under 1b. *zera'* in 1 Samuel 1:11 has not been mentioned under 3b with Genesis 4:25 as BDB do. It also remains unclear why 'descendants' has been put with 'seed, semen' and not with 'offspring'.

2. Semantic shifts

Synchronic shifts from one meaning to another have been the subject of ongoing discussion. Sawyer (1972:53) says: "When an expression is taken from one sphere and applied in a totally different one because of similarities

of various kinds, this process is described as *metaphorical transference*." "from concrete to abstract" (Sawyer 1972:53–54) and "materia pro producto" (Kedar 1981:170) are two types of such a transfer. This may clarify in which way different meanings are related and thus shed light on the polysemy of the word in question (Lipka 1992:138). The semantic shifts in Figure 3 seem to be between different meanings of *zera*‘, leading to "word metaphors", based on the notion of similarity, or rather to word metonymies, based on contiguity (Lipka 1992:122,163). Some of these transfers are already mentioned in Gesenius (1915).

action → time: 'to sow' → 'seedtime'
 / substance → time: 'seed' → 'seedtime';
 substance → (what comes from) substance
 / material → product: 'seed' → 'grain' (cf. Gesenius);
 substance → place: 'seed' → 'field of seed' (cf. Gesenius);
 substance → human (result of substance): 'semen' →
 'offspring' (cf. Gesenius);
 concrete → abstract: 'offspring' → 'person of a certain
 quality/character'.

Figure 3. Meanings of *zera*‘: semantic shifts

I would suggest that there is sufficient reason to differentiate between meanings when a semantic shift is involved. This is not true of the description of different usages of one particular meaning. Explicit indication of semantic shifts from one meaning to another would contribute to a clearer organisation of the dictionary article for the benefit of the user.

3. Lexical meanings

Renewed attention is being paid to the differentiation of meanings in the *Hebrew–English Lexicon of the Old Testament Based on Semantic Domains* which was launched by the South African Bible Society in 1981 (Lübbe 1990:4). It is currently in its first stage of preparation by an international team under supervision of J.P. Louw and J.C. Lübbe. This stage involves going through the Old Testament concordance and considering each and every occurrence of every word again in order to determine what the lexical meanings of that particular word may be and to which semantic domain/field they may belong. The grouping in domains of different words with closely related meanings will be the second stage. This stage will be described at the end of the present section.

In the first stage then, it is important to determine what comes from the lexical item itself, and what comes from the context. In this new Lexicon, only lexical meanings of a word are distinguished, not contextual meanings (different usages of a lexical meaning in their different contexts). The lexical

meaning of a word is not to be confused with the particular reference which this word has in a specific context. Particular contextual features which define the word more precisely are restricted to particular instances and cannot be regarded as new meanings of a word, while a lexical meaning applies in other contexts as well. What a word contributes on its own to the understanding of the sentence, its lexical meaning, is thus kept separate from contextual features, information derived from the usage of the word with that lexical meaning in a specific context (Louw 1991:133–135,137). This will be illustrated in the next paragraph.

Distributional analysis can help to reduce a large number of contextual meanings of a word to a smaller number of lexical meanings (Louw 1991:139), each lexical meaning having a specific semantic value corresponding to its systematic contribution to the interpretation of all the sentences in which the word with that lexical meaning occurs. In the standard dictionaries however, lexical and contextual meanings are indiscriminately mixed up. For instance, I have already shown that the contextual meanings 2a,b,e and 4a–d,f–g in BDB do not indicate different meanings but different usages of the same meaning in different contexts. They can be reduced to one lexical meaning ‘seed’ and ‘offspring’, respectively. Different lexical meanings of a word usually belong to different semantic domains (Barr 1992:144). Polysemy implies that a word with different lexical meanings belongs to different fields of meaning.

The entry for *zera*‘ is part of my contribution to the first stage of this Lexicon. For the differentiation of meanings, the above semantic shifts from one semantic domain to the other are taken into account. The entry is structured as in Figure 4.

zera‘

1. seed (vegetation, agriculture)
Genesis 1:11,12,29, Genesis 47:24, Jeremiah 31:27,
Isaiah 17:11, Amos 9:13
2. seedtime, season for sowing seed (season, agriculture)
Genesis 8:22, Leviticus 26:5 (no other occurrences)
3. grain (products, agriculture)
Leviticus 27:30, Numbers 20:5, 1 Samuel 8:15, Job 39:12
4. semen, sperm (human body product)
Leviticus 15:16, 19:20
5. offspring, descendant(s) (procreation)
Genesis 4:25, 1 Samuel 1:11, 2 Kings 17:20, Ezechiel
43:19, Maleachi 2:3
6. descent (ancestry)
Daniel 9:1, Ezra 2:59, Nehemiah 7:61 (no other
occurrences)
7. race, stock, family (ancestry, kinship terminology)

- Genesis 17:12, 1 Kings 11:14, 2 Kings 11:1, 2 Kings
25:25/Jeremiah 41:1, Ezechiel 44:22, Esther 6:13,
Esther 10:3, Daniel 1:3, Ezra 9:2, Nehemiah 9:2, 2
Chronicles 22:10 (no other occurrences)
8. kind of people sharing a certain quality/character
Proverbs 11:21 (no other occurrences)

Figure 4. Entry of *zera'* for the Lexicon of the Old Testament Based on Semantic Domains

For most lexical meanings, a semantic domain is tentatively suggested between brackets. Usages of the same meaning in different contexts are mentioned together under one meaning. Thus individual and collective usages of *zera'* 'offspring' are mentioned together under meaning 5. Some references are given under 6 as well as 7 in order to inform the user of possible meanings of *zera'* in those instances.

Eventually semantic domains and subdomains will be presented with semantically related lexical meanings of different words. Meanings of words are thus expressed paradigmatically, that is, it should become apparent what difference it makes to choose a particular word rather than some other word from the same domain. An index of Hebrew words will help one to find under which domain(s) a particular word is discussed. The order of meanings as given above will eventually be irrelevant in the Lexicon when each lexical meaning of *zera'* will be mentioned under its appropriate semantic domain. As the Lexicon concentrates on lexical meanings and not on contextual usages, syntagmatic relationships are not dealt with.

The result is expected to be very useful for Bible translators. It would be rather similar to the dictionary of near synonyms Snell–Hornby hopes for: "the traditional alphabetical arrangement ... supplemented by a presentation in contrastive semantic fields, to which the main body of the dictionary would act as index" (Snell–Hornby 1988:107–108). It should be remembered that we still do not always know which substitutions are possible and whether a particular substitution changes the meaning of the collocation (Swiggers 1993:53). This Lexicon, however, should bring a full-grown paradigmatical semantics of Biblical Hebrew closer.

4. Syntagmatic relationships

In the dictionary entries discussed above, basic meanings normally precede derived ones. In the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* however, a project led by D.J.A. Clines, "the senses of a word are generally arranged in order of frequency of attestation" (Clines 1993:15; cf. also Clines 1990). Such frequencies may be interesting pieces of information, as is illustrated in Figure 5. I would, however, consider the lack of information on semantic shifts a loss.

Each entry in this dictionary is intended to answer two questions: "1. How is this word used and in what kind of sentences and connections? 2. How is it related in meaning and use to other similar or opposite words?" (Clines 1993:20). Thus, like BDB it sometimes presents different usages of the same meaning as different meanings but it does aim to make usages of a word much more explicit than BDB. It is primarily the Hebrew scholar who will thus benefit from this dictionary and gain insight into the collocation types of a word. These aims are different from those of the Lexicon based on semantic domains which does not deal with syntagmatic relationships but with lexical meanings and their paradigmatic relationships, and with the translator in mind.

More extensively than BDB, Clines' dictionary gives near-synonyms and antonyms of the word under consideration, but still only in so far as they occur near that word at a particular point in the text (Clines 1993:17). Such synonyms and antonyms give some indirect information about paradigmatic relationships of the word and its place within a semantic field of words but they are presented as part of the syntagmatic analysis.

The project has not yet proceeded to the entry of *zera'* but this entry would be structured as follows. With each meaning, the verbs would be mentioned of which *zera'* is the subject and those of which it is the object, as well as nouns connected to it in nominal phrase constructions and adjectives used to modify this noun (Clines 1993:16). Bible references are included. Frequencies would not be mentioned for each meaning. A summary is given in Figure 5, using the meanings of the Lexicon in Figure 4 and restricted to Bible references given earlier.

zera' 229x noun: seed, offspring

1. offspring, descendant(s) [158x]

<Subject> *hayah* be Psalm 112:2

<Nominal clause> *rab* shall be many Job 5:25

<Object> *shat* appoint Gen. 4:25, *natan* give Gen. 15:3 1Sa. 1:11

1Sa. 2:20, *niqra'* be named Gen. 21:12, *ga'ar* rebuke Mal. 2:3

<Construct> *yisra'el* of Israel 2Ki. 17:20, *'abraham* of Abraham Psalm 105:6

<Adjective> *'acher* other Gen. 4:25, *'anashim* male 1Sa. 1:11

<Synonyms> *bney ya'aqov* sons of Jacob Psalm 105:6, *dor*

generation Psalm 112:2, *tse'etsa'eykha* your descendants Job 5:25

2. seed [40x]

<Object> *hizria'* yield Gen. 1:11,12, *hiphriach* make to flourish Isa. 17:11

<Construct> *hassadeh* of the field Gen. 47:24, *'adam* of man Jer.

31:27, *behemah* of beast Jer. 31:27, *moshekh* sower of Amos 9:13

3. race, stock, family [11x]

<Preposition, Construct> *min...* *hammelukhah* of the royal family 2Ki. 25:25/Jer. 41:1 Dan. 1:3

- <Synonym> *mibney yisra'el* of the *people* of Israel Dan. 1:3
- 4. semen [8x]
- <Construct> *shikhvat* emission of Lev. 15:16, Lev. 19:20
- 5. grain [6x]
- <Object> *heshiv* bring in Jb 39:12
- <Construct> *meqóm* place of Num. 20:5
- 6. descent [3x]
- <Object> *higgid* prove Ezra 2:59 Neh. 7:61
- <Preposition> *min* by birth Dan. 9:1
- <Synonym> *beyt-avotam* their fathers' *house* Ezra 2:59 Neh. 7:61
- 7. seedtime [2x]
- <Subject> *shavat* cease Gen. 8:22
- <Object> *hissig* reach Lev. 26:5
- 8. kind of people sharing a certain quality/character [1x]
- <Subject> *nimlat* be delivered Prov. 11:21
- <Construct> *tsaddiqim* of the righteous Prov. 11:21

Figure 5. Possible entry of *zera'* for the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew

One cannot expect an alphabetical dictionary to serve at the same time as a dictionary ordered according to meanings (Goshen-Gottstein 1991:90). Not surprisingly, one of Lübke's criticisms is that in Clines' alphabetical dictionary words of related meaning are not grouped together for comparison, as in the second stage of the *Lexicon* discussed earlier, while apparent synonyms are only mentioned, but without any comparison (Lübke 1991:137). This will not be of much help to exegetes and translators.

5. Concluding remarks

There is sufficient reason to differentiate between lexical meanings when a semantic shift is involved. Different lexical meanings of a word usually belong to different semantic domains. A lexical meaning is to be kept separate from the usage of the word with that lexical meaning in a specific context.

In Clines' alphabetical dictionary words of related meaning are not grouped together for comparison but near synonyms and antonyms are only mentioned in so far as they occur near that word at a particular point in the text. This will not be of much help to exegetes and translators. On the other hand, it aims to make usages of a word much more explicit than in BDB. The Hebrew scholar will thus gain insight into the collocation types of a word.

These aims are different from those of the *Lexicon* based on semantic domains which deals with lexical meanings and their paradigmatic relationships. It thus shows what difference it makes to choose a particular word rather than some other word from the same domain. This will make it very useful for Bible translators.

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