Biblical Words and Their Meaning:  
An Introduction to Lexical Semantics  
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Biography

Born in 1945, Silva studied under James Barr and F. F. Bruce at University of Manchester. Barr’s work has clearly influenced this book. He has taught at Westminster Theological Seminary and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He was one of the translators for the NASB and ESV. (http://www.theopedia.com/moises-silva).

Preface

- Lexical Semantics defined: “Lexical semantics is that branch of modern linguistics that focuses on the meaning of individual words” (p. 10).
- This book assumes “the central importance of linguistics for the proper understanding of meaning” (p. 11).
- His desire is to “synthesize critically the results of scholars in the field of linguistic semantics” (p. 11).

Introduction

Barr’s The Semantics of Biblical Language:

- Theological Lexicography. TDNT: Cremer→Kögel→Kittel: “internal lexicography,” an illegitimate equation of the word and concept.
- Barr’s work was “a trumpet blast against the monstrous regiment of shoddy linguistics” (p. 18).
- The major problem was “the conviction that language and mentality can be easily correlated” (p. 18). “Theologians have been particularly concerned with pointing out the differences between Greek and Hebrew thought. The former, we are told, is static, contemplative, abstract, intellectualized, divisive; the latter is dynamic, active, concrete, imaginative, stressing the totality of man and his religion” (p. 18).
- Barr’s criticisms were leveled primarily at the TDNT. He showed it was a confusion between words and concepts.
Problems: First and foremost, it locates meaning in the Bible’s words, not in its statements. Other dangers (pp. 25–26):

1. Etymologizing
2. Illegitimate totality transfer
3. Overlooking distinct grammatical nuances in a passage
4. Overlooking semantically related terms
5. Confusion between word and thing

The Scope of Biblical Lexicology

- “The present work then seeks to synthesize the results of contemporary lexical semantics insofar as they touch more or less directly on the concerns of biblical scholars” (p. 22).
- “Our goal is not to deduce the theology of New Testament writers straight out of the words they use, nor even to map out semantic fields that in themselves may reflect theological structures. We have the relatively modest goal of determining the most accurate English equivalents to biblical words, of being able to decide, with as much certainty as possible, what specific Greek or Hebrew word in a specific context actually means.” (p. 31).

PART 1: Historical Semantics

1 Etymology

- Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. Distinguishes between:
  1. Diachronic linguistics: studies the development of language
  2. Synchronic linguistics: studies the language at any given state of the language in a particular point in time.
- They are not mutually exclusive, but synchronic is more important than diachronic because “the speakers of a language simply know next to nothing about its development” (p. 38). Rather, language users are “aware only of the present state of the language” (p. 36). Therefore understanding of actual language use can only be obtained by studying synchronic linguistics.

Etymological study: Four levels

1. Identifying component parts of words
2. Determining the “earliest attested meaning” (p. 39)
3. Reconstructing the prehistory behind the earliest attested meaning
4. Reconstructing “the form and meaning of a word in the parent language” by examining cognates (p. 40).

Etymological study: Uses
1. It is the “backbone of comparative linguistics” (p. 41)
2. It can shed light on cultural or historical issues.
3. It can help translate ancient documents. Cognate languages can shed light on word meanings if there are few attested uses of a word in a particular language, or if the usual meaning of a word does not fit a particular context. This is much more prominent in the OT than NT.

Etymology and Exegesis:

- Often abused by scholars and pastors. Diachronic approaches and synchronic approaches can be mutually beneficial to one another, but the problem is when they are “fused” (p. 47). Etymology can be used in exegesis only if it can be shown that the speaker is aware of it. (See fn. 33, in which Silva says it may be true that there can be “overtones” to word meanings.)
- Word “transparency”: transparent words are words in which the form is related to meaning. Opaque words are words in which the relationship between form and meaning is arbitrary.
- Greek is a synthetic language that is relatively transparent. However, we have to be sure that the user was aware of this meaning. Cautions:
  1. A particular part of the word may fall out of use, making it impossible that the speaker has the etymology in mind.
  2. Words can undergo semantic change over time.
  3. A word can acquire new motivation for use because users associate it with other words that are historically unrelated.
  4. Context!

2 Semantic Change and the Role of the Septuagint

- Etymology distinguished from semantic change, “which focuses on attested developments in the meanings of words” (p. 54).
- Semantic change is less a part of the OT because of grammatical updating, questions about sources, and the “small percentage of Hebrew vocabulary preserved in the OT” (p. 56). Most semantic changes in the NT can be traced back to the LXX.

LXX and NT

- Edwin Hatch and Semitic Greek:
  - “The attitude of such men towards human life, towards nature, and towards God was so different that though Greek words were used they were the symbols of quite other than Greek ideas. For every race has its own mass and combinations of ideas; and when one race adopts the language of another, it cannot, from the very nature of the human mind, adopt with it the ideas of which that language is the expression. It takes the words but it cannot take their connotation: and it has ideas of its own for which it only finds in foreign phrases a rough and a partial
covering. Biblical Greek is thus a language which stands by itself. What we have to find out in studying it is what meaning certain Greek words conveyed to a Semitic mind.” (Essays in Biblical Greek, p. 11; quoted in Silva, 57–58).

- Hatch’s essays were “demolished” by T. K. Abbott (p. 60).
- H. A. Kennedy studied vocabulary found only in the NT and LXX based on classes of words and not the language as a whole (Silva, p. 62):
  1. theological and religious terms
  2. actual Hebrew and Aramaic loan words
  3. technical terms for Jewish customs and ideas
  4. everyday words
  5. Alexandrian words
  6. new compounds
- Theodor Nägele: concluded Paul’s language was neither literary nor vulgar. He said that many of Paul’s “Hebraisms” should be considered “Septuagintalisms.”
- Three issues:
  1. Hebrew-Greek lexical equivalences: Adolf Deissmann (determines meaning by reference to the papyri) vs. Richard Ottley (considers the intention of the original). NB: This continues to be debated in terms of translation of the LXX: should we consider it literature in its own right, as a Greek reader would have read it who had no knowledge of the Hebrew (La Bible d’Alexandrie), or should we consider it with reference to the translation (an interlinear model, such as NETS).
  2. The character of NT Greek: Deissmann has shown that NT Greek is colloquial Greek.
  3. LXX influence on NT vocab: The influence of the NT is more literary and stylistic than affecting the basic structures of the language itself.

Conclusion: The influence of the LXX on the NT (p. 68):

1. Theological terms and special vocabulary
2. Issues of style
3. One of the most important witnesses to Koine language

Using the LXX:

1. Establish the text.
2. Interpret the text:
   a. Take into account the meaning of the Hebrew term, but don’t equate it with the “meaning” of the word.
   b. Exegete the entire passage in which the word is found.
   c. Interpret the passages in light of the translator’s characteristics, theological emphases, and principles of translation.

3 Semantic change in the NT

Classifying semantic change (within a language):
1. Logical classification:
   a. Expansion: the word becomes more general, the content less specific, and the appropriate contexts more frequent (bread → food)
   b. Reduction: the words become more specialized and more precise so that context plays less of a role in determining meaning (gospel, good news → the gospel, the good news)
   c. Alteration: changes in the contexts in which words can be used, including metaphors and metonymy

2. Ullmann’s distinction: semantic conservatism vs. Semantic innovation
   a. Conservatism: preservation of old words for objects that have changed “considerably.” These include specialization of vocabulary that occurs when theological reflection on a topic increases the speaker’s understanding of an object. These words are less fruitful for lexicographic investigation, because the meaning is narrow. At this point, research becomes a matter of historical and conceptual investigation, not word study.
   b. Innovation:
      i. Ellipsis: when used repeatedly in the same context, parts of a phrase can be omitted because they are “understood”
      ii. Metonymy: changes based on “contiguity,” but not in the sense of similarity (which would indicate metaphor). There is some close relationship between terms other than similarity (part/whole, whole/part, abstract/concrete, case/effect)
      iii. Metaphor: transfer of meaning based on similarity (unintentional vs intentional metaphors)
      iv. Composite changes: more than one factor involved

Semantic borrowing (between languages):

1. Three types
   a. Loan words: a foreign word is taken completely into a new language
   b. Loan translations: The parts of a phrase or idiom are translated into another language rather than translating the phrase or idiom as a whole
   c. Semantic loans: the meaning of a foreign word is transferred to a word from another language

2. Phonetic resemblance: semantic borrowing is more likely when the word sounds similar

3. Semantic similarity: If word A, native meaning x, borrowed meaning y
   a. Polysemy = Axy (the speaker perceives one word with two meanings)
   b. Homonymy = A₁x + A₂y (the speaker perceives two distinct words)
   c. No cases of homonymy are found in the NT. All examples are polysemy, with multiple examples probably unidentified.

4. The causes of semantic borrowing
   a. A speaker may seek to imitate the foreign usage for stylistic reasons
b. A speaker may be unaware that they are changing the way that the word is used
c. Cultural reasons: positive or negative associations with the foreign language.

The structural perspective: looking at how the semantic fields change can be one way to link the synchronic and diachronic approaches responsibly.

PART 2: Descriptive Semantics

4 Some Basic Concepts

Ogden-Richards’s triangle: symbol—sense—referent. Three approaches to study are the relation of:

1. Symbol—referent
2. Symbol—sense (in individual words)
3. Symbol—senses (of different words)

Denotation:

- There is a “more or less stable semantic core” of a word.
- However this is does not mean it is the word’s “inherent” meaning (since most elements of a language are a matter of convention)
- A “denotation” (or “reference”) view posits a direct relationship between the symbol and referent.
- It is wrong to adopt this view for all words. Often, it is true that “words do not have meanings, they have uses.” Words are functional.
- However, this can be overemphasized, as some words do refer directly to things. “Insofar as a word can be brought into a one-to-one correspondence with an extralinguistic object or entity, to that extent the word may be subjected to the concordance-based, word-and-thing, historico-conceptual method typified by TDNT” (p. 107). For example, names of individuals fall under this category.
- Most words do not function this way, and must be studied according to the structural approach.

Structure: the language functions based on the relationship of the various entities to each other

1. Phonology: the values of the particular phonemes of a language depend on their place in the language relative to each other.
2. Vocabulary: while most words depend on their relationship to other words in a language for their meaning, words that denote have a “low relational value” (p. 112) and can occasionally have meaning without reference to the language system.
However, most words have at least some meaning because of their place in the language system.

3. Further distinctions:
   a. Synonymy: one sense with several symbols. Note that it is rare to have exactly the same sense called up by several symbols.
   b. Polysemy: one symbol with several senses
   c. Main interest from a structural perspective is in the relationship between the senses of different symbols

Style: studies the characteristic variation within language by the individual users of it.

- *Langue* vs. *parole*
- “...we may draw a rough distinction between the patterns given by a language—that is, those rules, violations of which are regarded as “unacceptable” by the linguistic community—and the variability allowed by language, with *style* covering the latter of these” (p. 116).
- It is important to consider whether the use of a particular word is motivated by semantic or stylistic reasons.

5 Sense Relations (“potential meanings”)

Paradigmatic vs syntagmatic relations:

- “The man is walking slowly.”
- “man” is in paradigmatic relations with “woman,” “boy,” etc.
- “man” is in syntagmatic relations with the other words in the sentence.
- “To put it differently, we may say that words are in paradigmatic relation insofar as they can occupy the same slot in a particular context (or syntagm); they are in syntagmatic relation if they can enter into combinations that form a context (or syntagm). We should note that paradigmatic sense relations exploit the opposition or contrast existing between words and thus may be referred to as *contrasting relations*, while syntagmatic sense relations may be called *combinatory relations*.” (p. 119).
- Paradigmatic relations indicate potential meanings, while syntagmatic relations has to do with meanings that are “actualized” by the syntagmatic relationship. Therefore the syntagmatic relation is determinative.

Relations based on similarity

1. Overlapping Relations (proper synonymy): “words that may be interchanged in some contexts” (p. 126)
   a. True synonymy occurs when words have identical sense. However, most of the time the term is used, it is used for words with similar senses that overlap, but can be distinguished. Therefore the study of synonyms often is a matter of trying to understand what distinguishes the terms.
b. Note that synonymy has to do with relations between the senses, not words. Any two words may have certain senses that are synonymous, along with other senses that are totally unrelated.

c. Also, synonymy is not referring to when two words refer to the same referent, but when they have the same sense.

2. Contiguous relations (improper synonymy): similar but not interchangeable
3. Inconclusive relations (hyponymy): one word includes the other.
   a. These can be interchanged in some contexts but not others.
   b. Cohyponyms can be overlapping, contiguous, or opposites

Relations based on oppositeness:

1. Binary relations (antonymy): comes in pairs:
   a. Graded: always indicates comparison
   b. Nongraded: cannot be compared
      i. Complimentary: the assertion of one implies the negation of the other, and vice versa (married/single)
      ii. Noncomplimentary: the assertion of one may imply the negation of the other, but not necessarily (give/take)

2. Multiple relations (incompatibility): applies to more than two words (blue, yellow, red, black).

Componential analysis

- The study of the “sense components” of words
- Focuses on distinctive features and markedness
- Controversial because it often notes distinctive features of the referents, rather than linguistic features. Nevertheless, Sylva says it can be profitable.

6 Determining meaning (“actualized meanings”)

The role of lexicographers:

1. “How did Bauer then come up with his meanings? We fool ourselves if we do not admit that, by and large, he got them from previous dictionaries. The earliest lexicographer in turn got their meanings from existing “implicit dictionaries”—information stored in grammar books and literal translations or simply preserved as a part of bilingual oral tradition. I wish to emphasize this somewhat obvious point to disabuse any readers of the tacit belief (possibly shared by some lexicographers) that dictionary makers approach their work completely from scratch, that is, without assuming knowledge of the meaning of any words.” (pp. 137–8)

2. Most of the words lexicographers define are already identified. Very few words are totally unknown with regard to their meanings. Mostly it is a matter of refining what is already known.
3. Most of the lexicographer’s task is defining word meanings based on the observation of word usages in various contexts.

Context:

1. “. . . the context does not merely help us understand meaning—it virtually makes meaning” (p. 139).
2. When words are used in context, intended meanings are “called up” or “activated” by the speaker and hearer based on the context. Speakers and hearers are generally unaware of other meanings at the time.
3. Syntagmatic sense relations: certain words are characteristically placed in syntagmatic relations with other words. These are its “collocations.” Example: Strong and powerful are paradigmatically related, but tea is said to be strong while cars are said to be powerful, and arguments can be said to be strong or powerful.
4. Literary context: this is usually what is meant by context. The paragraph or even whole communication is simply levels of context beyond the syntactical context. Even the genre is part of the literary context.
5. Context of situation: life situation is an additional level of context. In biblical literature, this sometimes mean we derive clues from the writings themselves as to the situational context. This is part of the hermeneutical circle. With narratives, there is sometimes a tension between the context of the event and the context of the writing of the narrative.
6. Other levels of context: subsequent contexts provide other contextualizations of the text.

Ambiguity

1. Deliberate: in “imaginative literature, particularly poetry . . . an author will deliberately choose equivocal terms and constructions for a variety of purposes” (p. 149). This is not frequent in Hebrew poetry, but the Gospel of John uses it frequently. On the other hand, do not use this as an excuse for not making an interpretive decision. “. . . we should assume one meaning unless there are strong exegetical (literary, contextual) grounds to the contrary” (p. 151).
2. Unintended: when there is unintended ambiguity, assume maximal redundancy. “The best meaning is the least meaning” (though this is not absolute, but a rule of thumb). There are many sources of distortion, and the message is encoded with redundancy so that it can overcome disruption in the communication. Many of our difficulties in understanding are due to lack of situational context.
3. Contextual circles: this deals with the relative weight to be assigned to different contexts. Generally speaking, closer context ought to weigh more heavily:
   a. Immediate context (paragraph)
   b. Broader literary context (section)
   c. Complete literary context (book)
   d. Canonical literary context (NT)
e. Historical religious environment (historical background)

Synonymy:

1. Lexical choice: here is where style and a word’s normal collocations must be taken into account
2. Lexical fields: Based on the work of Saussure he meaning is a particular “field” is divided up by the words belonging to that field. Part of their specific meaning lies in their relationship to one another.
3. Style: some variations are not based purely on word meanings, but based on an author’s style. One must pay attention to semantic neutralization, that is, whether the distinctions between words might be overridden because of other factors, so that words that are not exactly identical in sense can come to be used interchangeably.

Conclusions

Suggested steps for doing word studies:

1. Determine to what extent the word is referential. For more referential words, conceptual study may be more profitable than lexical study. If lexical study is appropriate:
2. Using standard lexicons, look at the range of translational options.
3. Consider the paradigmatic relations, looking for the semantic field. Try to classify the various other options that are paradigmatically related to the term.
4. Consider the syntagmatic relations, including the levels of context. Compare with paradigmatically related terms.
5. Consider whether the diachronic dimension is significant. Is the etymology known? How transparent is the term? Has the meaning changed? Have foreign influences interfered with the meaning?
6. Focus on the particular user of the word. Consider if one of the historical factors would have influenced the author, whether semantic neutralization has occurred, or whether the author has a tendency toward deliberate ambiguity.

Annotated Bibliography (from 1983, so somewhat dated)

Recent Developments in Semantics (from 1994, so less dated, but still 20 years old)

- The main highlight is Louw and Nida’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (1988).
- He deals with problems still remaining, such as the lack of attention to the effect of collocation on word meaning, and the amount of meaning that context contributes to a word versus the word itself.