

On the Decoding of Polysemantic Lexemes in Biblical Hebrew

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0.1. Recalling the proverbial difference between the general practitioner and the specialist, one may be inclined to say that lexicography offers scanty information on almost everything while meticulous semantic analysis illuminates all the little details of nothing. Thus, in connection with our subject, one is surprised to notice again and again the assuredness of biblical lexica in differentiating between homonyms and polysemantic words, whereas semantics has yet to suggest a clear criterion for distinguishing between these two categories; the lexicon assigns to what it judges to be two homonyms two separate entries, adducing two divergent etymologies, while modern semantics is apt to lose itself in a minute componential analysis of one abstract word meaning.¹

Any ambiguous lexical form may serve to vindicate our misgivings; the frequent form *bāhūr*, the rare form *māzôr*, for example.² We learn from select dictionaries (GesB 91f.; KBL³ 114f.; BDB 103f.; König WB 37) that the form *bāhūr* represents two homonyms: a) 'a youth', b) 'a chosen one', each with its distinctive etymology. In what follows we are told that a) refers specifically to 'a troop of young soldiers' (König: "Jüngling, besonders Krieger"; GesB "junge Kriegsmannschaft") and b) to 'a troop of choice soldiers' (GesB "Elitemannschaft"; BDB "chosen men, warriors"). Thus we are led to believe that the form under review, whenever its contextual occurrence implies the sense 'soldier', may with equal justification be understood either as lexeme a) or as lexeme b), only the lexicon being in the fortunate position to decide between the two options in each instance. In contradistinction to such a simplified picture Bible versions and commentaries convey the impression of utmost perplexity:³ Thus, e.g., in parallel passages the Latin Vulgate exhibits in the first instance *electi* (2 Sam 10:9) then *fortes* (1 Chr 19:10). Buber – Rosenzweig's

¹ J.H.Hospers, Polysemy and Homonymy, ZAH 6/1, 1993, 114-123. – D.W. Bolinger, The atomization of meaning, Language 41, 1965, 555-573.

² In single inverted commas ('soldier, warrior') the meaning of a word is briefly stated; a word is underlined and a passage is set in double converted commas when quoted verbatim (occasionally translated).

³ The versions continuously compared are: LXX (Septuaginta, ed. A.Rahlf's, Stuttgart 1952), V (Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem, ed. R. Weber, Stuttgart 1983; as to the Psalms, three versions had to be considered: Ps. romanum, Ps. gallicanum and Ps. iuxta Hebraicum), KJ (King James Version: The Holy Bible 1611, rpt. London sine anno), Kn (R. Knox, The Holy Bible, rpt. New York 1954), Lth (D. Martin Luther, Biblia: Das ist die gantze Heilige Schrift, Deudsch, Wittenberg 1545; rpt. München 1974), BR (M. Buber/F. Rosenzweig, Die Schrift verdeutscht, Heidelberg 1976-9). I occasionally quote JPS (Jewish Publication Society Version), NWT (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, New York 1961), HS (V. Hamp *et al.*, Die Heilige Schrift, Aschaffenburg 1957. – The Aramaic Targums and the Jewish commentators (Comm.) are quoted from the Rabbinical Bible.

German translation combines the elements 'fighter' and 'choice' in one rendition: *Streiterlese* (2 S 6:1), and the elements 'youth' and 'choice' in another rendition: *Junglese* (1 Chr 19:10). The Old Latin version offers a similar combination: *iuvenes electi* (Am 8:13), while one modern commentator combines the three elements in his explanation of the word *bāhūr*: "a young man who has been chosen to go to war".⁴ Needless to say that the hierarchical tree of a componential analysis (*bāhūr* = human – male – adult – young, or the like) would not contribute much to a better understanding of biblical texts.

0.2. *māzôr* occurs four times, once parallel to 'healing' (Jer 30:13), then parallel to 'illness' (Hos 5:13, twice), and finally in a context that suggests 'a pitfall' or the like (Ob 7). This last occurrence is judged by the dictionaries (GesB 411; KBL³ 535; BDB 266f. 561; König WB 88) as a case of homonymy and an etymology different from that of the form in the other two verses (i.e. the other three occurrences) is suggested (the assumed roots being *mzr* and *zwr*, respectively); to the first three instances, however, the lexica assign – despite the opposite contexts – an identical interpretation, either a negative one (GesB 411, KBL² 535 "Eiterwunde"; BDB 267 "wound") or else a positive one (König WB 216 "Wundverband"). Jewish commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Qimhi et al.) assign to the word in Ob 7 the same basic meaning (*ḥōllî*; *makkāh* 'illness, wound') as in the previous two verses. They, however, are aware of the contradictory use, the *Gegensinn*, of the word and attempt to explain the semantic process: from the powdering (*zrh*) and dressing of a wound originated both meanings of *māzôr*, 'a wound' as well as 'a bandage'.

0.3. The point is this: The information offered by the classical dictionaries is necessarily fragmentary, arbitrary and not infrequently unreliable. Thus it rests with each student of the Bible to explore anew the semantics of Hebrew; consequently the task of distinguishing between homonymy and polysemy is thrown back upon us.

0.4. Let us then define polysemy as the recurrent use of the same lexical form with at least two easily definable different meanings which, however, exhibit a clearly discernible conceptual link. This definition aims at excluding not only forms without any conceptual links, namely homonyms, and sporadic metonymic use, such as *kābhôd* 'honour' → 'wealth' (Gen 31:1), but also those instances of extreme semantic divergence which obliterates the original connexion, e.g. *mattæh* 'staff' → 'tribe'. By the exclusion of the latter category we do not want to deny the need and value of a diachronic analysis of the biblical vocabulary from the point of view of cultural and sociological history, but semantic surveys should be synchronically oriented. There is, admittedly, a problem in viewing the variety of Hebrew texts collected in the Old Testament as a unity, and yet the very process of collecting, editing, transmitting and interpreting these texts through centuries has moulded what one may justifiably consider a linguistic corpus. Another objection which could be raised by puristic defenders of synchronic semantics is the lack of "fluent speakers" who one could appeal to whenever lexical items are to be examined in respect of their divergence of meaning or of the discernible link between them. We shall have to rely on our own perception but not exclusively so: we should avail ourselves of the linguistic

⁴ M.H. Segal, *The Books of Samuel* (Hebr.), Jerusalem 1968, p. 65. – Cf. B. Kedar-Kopfstein, *bāhūr* – eine unbeachtete Crux interpretum, *Trumah* 2, Heidelberg 1990, 53-57.

evidence provided by Bible translators and classical commentators. In order to limit their number we have chosen two classical versions (Greek and Latin), the Aramaic Targums and two translations into German and two translations into English; one of the translations into each of the two modern languages represents a classical standard version while the other translation stands in pronounced opposition to that classical work. The Jewish commentators of the Middle Ages who have been consulted have rightly been called "the fathers of comparative Semitic philology and indeed of all comparative philology".⁵

1. By examining three well-known lexical items each of which exhibits to the best of our empirical knowledge two distinct meanings (^ʾ*ap*, *ruʾh*, *malʾāk*) we wish to clarify a number of questions: How do we establish their polysemantic (or rather: bisemantic) character? Do our informants confirm our impression? How does the existence of a dual semantic value attached to one and same word as lexical item affect its decoding when it occurs in context? What happens when both these meanings make sense in a given context? Does ambiguity increase when polysemantic words are syntagmatically connected, e.g. by means of the construct state? Do our informants concur with each other and with our conclusions in specific instances?

It should be clear then that the following observations do not present a thorough semantic analysis of the words under review; it is the phenomenon of polysemy as such, and the practical problem of decoding involved, that is meant to be brought out in full relief.

2.1. ^ʾ*ap* means both a) 'nose' and b) 'anger'. It is easy to adduce texts that testify to this fact: Ps 115:4-7 mocks at the idols that they have eyes but cannot see, that they have ears but cannot hear and that "they have ^ʾ*ap* but cannot smell"; contrariwise, Deut 29:27 speaks of the divine punishment which was inflicted "in ^ʾ*ap* and rage and great indignation". The translators reflect accurately this semantic gap: a) LXX *rhines*; V *nares*; Lth, BR *Nase*; KJ, Kn *noses*, as against b) LXX *thymos*; V *ira*; Lth, BR *Zorn*; KJ, Kn *anger*. Checking more verses of this kind will bring out intralingual variations such as a) Eng. *nostrils* or b) Lat. *furor* which may be disregarded. The renditions 'face' for a) 'nose' (LXX, V in Gen 2:7) and 'vengeance' for b) 'anger' (Kn in Jer 15:14) may again be ignored; it is a matter of a supposed extension of meaning or a stylistic device. Though one may be inclined to deem a) to be the earlier and more frequent use in real life, it does not surprise us that within the biblical universe of discourse the proportion of a) to b) is roughly 1:6. The pl. form ^ʾ*appayim* exhibits a similar semantic dichotomy: a) 'nose, nostrils' (Gen 2:7) with the extended meaning 'face' (2 S 14:4) vs. b) 'anger' (Dan 11:20).

Historical semantics may attempt to explain the differentiation: either the meaning 'anger' developed from that of 'nose', or else both derive from the same root ^ʾ*np* 'to breathe, snort'; for our purpose suffice it to note the conceptual link as evident in the texts themselves: hot breath goes forth from the nose of a furious creature, and thus we find the words for 'heat, fire, smoke' in stereotyped idioms that denote

⁵ J.R. Firth, *The Tongues of Men*, London 1937, 9.

the outburst of anger (Num 25:4; Ps 2,12; Deut 29:19). Yet it is precisely this continued contiguity that occasionally causes ambiguity. Ps 124 speaks metaphorically of Israel's enemies; they are likened to a stream that threatens to wash them away (v.4), and to beasts of prey trying to tear them up with their teeth and swallow them (vv. 3,6); v. 3 says "... their ^ʔap was kindled". If this portion (v. 3b) refers to v. 2b ("men"), then 'the burning anger' of human enemies is described; this is the view of all our informants. Yet v. 3a exhibits the verb *bl^c* 'to swallow up' and this, taken together with v. 6, seems to imply that reference is made to 'the hot snout' of animals, a metaphorical description of those enemies.

In other instances our informants exhibit divergent views. Ps 10:4 describes the godless wicked man, mentioning "the height of his ^ʔap". The word is understood in the sense of 'anger' by LXX (*orge*), V (*furor*), and Lth (*zornig*), but KJ has "(the pride of) his countenance", i.e. ^ʔap metonymically 'face'. BR is fortunate to be able to avail himself of a German idiom that echoes the Hebrew original: "Hochnäsigkeit". Pr 30:33b has ^ʔap in the literal sense and then v.33c carries on in what could be a play on words: "...and the pressing of ^ʔappayim brings out strife". The preferred interpretation is that of 'anger' (LXX, V, T, Lth, KJ, Kn) but BR translates "(Stauchen der) Nüstern"; Rashi explains 'anger', Ibn Ezra 'nostrils' (*nhrym*).

2.2. The situation becomes more complicated when the Divinity is made the subject of a description. All agree that in many verses (e.g. Hab 3:8; Ps 37:8) our word refers to God's 'anger'; the broader context and the use of synonyms in parallelism support it. But there exists a boldly picturesque language which speaks of "fire kindled in his ^ʔap": against all the other versions BR renders "Nase" (Deut 32:22; Jer 15:14; 17:4). This explanation is also given by Rashi (*n^chūray* 'nostrils'; Jer 17:4) and Metsudat David (ib. 15:14). In Is 65:5 where the ever-burning fire is mentioned and the smoke "in my ^ʔap", BR (*Nase*) is supported by KJ *nose*. Yet the inconsistency of these two translators is embarrassingly obvious: an equally picturesque expression in the same prophetic book, "His ^ʔap burning... his lips damning... his tongue a devouring fire", is by them translated *Zorn* and *anger*, respectively. In Ps 18:9, "Smoke went up at his ^ʔap and fire from his mouth kept devouring", only LXX (*orge*), V (gallic.: *ira*, hebr.: *furor*), and T (*rūgzeh*) maintain the meaning 'anger'; Lth, BR *Nase*; KJ, Kn *nostrils*.

3.1. *rū^ah* denotes both a) 'wind' and b) 'spirit'. The link between these two meanings seems to be the idea of breathing, which on the one hand is a physical phenomenon, somewhat like a wind emanating from the nostrils and the mouth, but which on the other hand testifies to the very fact of the creature's being alive, full of thoughts and emotions: *rū^ah hayyim* 'the breath of life' (Gen 6:12). Needless to say, each meaning exhibits semantic ramifications – 'wind' is used metaphorically for 'a void, unsubstantiality, worthlessness' and 'spirit' includes 'mood, courage' and so on – which, however, may be ignored in the present study.

Two verses out of many may serve to illustrate the semantic gap. In Ps 18:43, "... like dust before *rū^ah*", the meaning 'wind' is self-evident and indeed our informants agree on it: LXX *anemos*; V (gallic., hebr.) *ventus*; Lth, BR *Wind*; KJ, Kn *wind*. (The use of the German stock equivalent made by BR deserves to be noted in view

of the unconventional renditions of $rû^a h$ in this version adduced below). – As to the alternative meaning: Ps 51:19 states that the best sacrifice to God is "a broken $rû^a h$ ", i.e. a humble 'spirit'. Our informants render accordingly: LXX *pneuma*; V (gallic., hebr.) *spiritus*; Lth, BR *Geist*; KJ, Kn *spirit*.⁶

In another Psalm two verses accentuate the two distinct meanings within one composition: 104:3 pictures YHWH "walking upon the wings of $rû^a h$ " while v. 30 describes his "sending out his $rû^a h$ " to create all creatures. The latter is generally translated in the sense of 'spirit', the only exception being Lth *Odem*; while the first instance is generally taken as 'wind', but NWT has "(the wings of a) spirit". (BR has *Wind*, but in the almost identical verse Ps 18:11 BR exhibits *Sturm*, for no evident reason).

Ps 147:18 describes God: "he causes his $rû^a h$ to blow, the waters flow". Here Lth like all the others has 'wind', but Kn has *breath*. In Ps 107:25 and 148:8 $rû^a h$ is mentioned among natural phenomena; V gallic., wrongly interpreting Greek *pneuma*, translates *spiritus*, but this is corrected in Ps hebr. *ventus*. Ps 55 is the prayer of a persecuted person who is in urgent need of a refuge "from the rushing $rû^a h$ " (v.9). Most translations leave intact the metaphorical description of the enemies as 'stormy wind'; LXX, however, refers $rû^a h$ to the 'spirit' of the suppliant who prays for salvation from *oligopsychia*, 'faint-heartedness' (thus Augustine: *a pusillanimitate*; Ps roman. *a pusillo animo*; V Ps hebr. *ab spiritu*).

Now some remarks on BR's translational peculiarity are in place. 2 K 3:17 reports the prophet's threat: "You will not see $rû^a h$ and you will not see rain". The context makes clear the meaning 'wind' confirmed by all our informants, the only exception being BR who has produced the awkward neologism *Windbraus* by affixing an extinct noun to the common lexeme. This same affix occurs likewise when $rû^a h$ denotes 'spirit': *Geistbraus*, e.g. in Num 11:17 where YHWH takes some of the $rû^a h$ 'spirit' that was upon Moses and places it upon the elders. Thus the reason for introducing the obsolete ...*braus* becomes clear:⁷ the inimitable polysemy of the Hebrew word was meant to be blunted by suggesting a similar situation to exist within the German vocabulary. The price paid for such linguistic acrobatics is high: the translation becomes stilted, if not incomprehensible. Contrast Is 31:3 $bāšār w^c lō^c rû^a h$ BR *Fleisch, nicht Geistbraus* with Lth *Fleisch und nicht Geist*.

When the word under review denotes a person's momentary mood some translators introduce variation: "I am putting a $rû^a h$ in him...and he shall return to his own land" (2 K 19:7); KJ *a blast*; Kn (*put him in such*) *a mind*; BR *Widergeist*. Here the commentators explain the word as 'a will' (Qimhi, Metzudat Zion; cf. below).

3.2. Right at the beginning of the creation story the meaning of the word under review poses a well known problem: "The earth was waste and void ... the $rû^a h$ of

⁶ Greek *anemos* denotes 'wind' while its synonym *pneuma* – much more frequently used in the LXX, the proportion being c. 5:1 – displays an ambiguity not dissimilar to that of the Hebr. word: 'wind' and 'spirit'. Latin translators from the LXX were apt to be misled. – In New Testament Greek *anemos* stands for 'wind' and, metaphorically, for 'vanity' while *pneuma* is widely but exclusively used in the sense of 'spirit'; cf. W. Grimm, *Lexicon Graeco-Latinum in Libros Novi Testamenti*, Leipzig 1879.

⁷ The German noun *Braus*, from *brausen* 'to roar', may denote the 'roaring of the waves' (*der Braus des Meeres*) but in modern speech it occurs only in the idiom "in Saus und Braus leben".

God was brooding over the waters" (Gen 1:2). The majority of our translators have opted for 'spirit' (LXX *pneuma*, V *spiritus*, Lth *Geist*, KJ *spirit*), but Kn has *the breath (of God)*. Baffling his reader again BR has *Braus*, a word which denotes neither 'spirit' nor 'wind'. The latter interpretation is indeed possible: "(an awesome) wind (sweeping over the water)" (E.A. Speiser, Genesis, AB 1964). This is the sense favoured by Jewish tradition: T "a wind blowing forth from before YHWH" ; Rashi "The heavenly throne was made to float above the waters by the breath of his mouth"; Ibn Ezra: "The wind acted as God's messenger and by his wish dried up the waters".

Occasionally, our word is used in a context that deals with the transience of human life. Ps 103:15-16 compares mortal man to green grass; when a *ru^ah* passes over it, it is no more. Ps 78:39 states men to be "flesh, *ru^ah* (that) passes away and does not return". With a few exceptions our informants treat the two occurrences alike, assuming the meaning 'wind' for both (the Latin rendition is *spiritus* throughout). However, this interpretation seems applicable only in the first passage (though Rashi and Metzudat David, separating the word from the metaphor on grass and flowers, explain it rather as a state of body or mind), while the latter passage more probably refers to man's 'spirit' passing away at his death. That is how Jewish tradition has it: T *rw^h* ² (vs. *z^cp²* above); Ibn Ezra: "After a short life they die... the union of spirit and flesh is not of long duration"; Rashi: "It means the Evil Impulse in their heart; this is the spirit that passes away and does not come back when they enter the world-to-come. ... One must not interpret it to mean 'the spirit of life' because that would amount to a denial of the resurrection of the dead".

The Wisdom writer teaches that "there is no control over the day of death" (Qoh 8:8), as "there is no man who has any power over the *ru^ah* that he could confine the *ru^ah*" (ib.). The latter may be understood as a parallel reference to death which is inevitable since no one can force 'the spirit' of life to stay on (T *rw^h nšmt* ²; Lth *Geist*; KJ *spirit*; Kn *breath of life*), or else as a picturesque comparison: You have as little power over your final destiny as you have the power to imprison the 'wind'; thus BR and JPS.⁸

Concerning the semantic ambiguity, either 'wind' or 'spirit', we again have opportunity to notice the over-hasty semantic classification carried out by dictionaries. The lament "*ru^ah* is my life" (Job 7:7) obviously means: '[like] wind'... (V *ventus est vita mea*; Metzudat David "the days of my life fly by like a wind"), and yet a new concordance adduces this occurrence of the word under the heading 'spirit', a blunder caused by the contiguous word 'life', the combination being mistaken for a construct state by a hurried reader.⁹

In the mysteriously confusing visions of Ezekiel we find instances of the word's ambivalence. A violent *ru^ah* comes out of the north (Ez 1:4); this, of course, is a 'wind' (e.g. V *ventus*); in the subsequent description of the four-faced living

⁸ And many modern commentators: Plumptre (CB 1881), Wildboer (KHC 1898), Barton (ICC 1908), Hertzberg (KAT 1932). D. Michel, Qohelet, Darmstadt 1988, p. 154, points out correctly: "Die Wendung ist doppeldeutig, da das Wort für Wind auch 'Geist', 'Gemütsbewegung' bedeuten kann. Vermutlich hat Qohelet hier bewußt doppeldeutig formuliert, was im Deutschen nicht nachahmbar ist."

⁹ A. Even-Shoshan, A New Bible Concordance (Hebr.), Jerusalem 1977, p. 1063.

creatures it is said that they went "whithersoever the $rū^āḥ$ was to go" (v. 12). Is this the 'wind' (Lth) mentioned before or '[their] will' (T, Rashi, Qimhi), or a 'spirit' (V, KJ)? Kn renders paraphrastically *divine impulse*, BR *Geistbraus*. The wheels of the Divine Chariot are said to possess $rū^āḥ$ 'of an animated being' (v. 21): here Lth *Wind* contrasts with KJ *spirit*.

When God speaks to him, a $rū^āḥ$ enters into the prophet and sets him upon his feet (2:2; 3:24). Leaving the standard rendition of the classical versions aside (LXX *pneuma*, V *spiritus*), we find that KJ (*spirit*) and Kn (*a divine force*) explain the word as an external influence while Lth (*ward ich wieder erquicket*) takes it as a change in the prophet's mood. Later the prophet is lifted up by a $rū^āḥ$: KJ *spirit*, Lth *Wind*. BR *Geistbraus* in all of the above instances (except 1:21 *Braus*).

4.1. $mal^āḥ$ signifies 'messenger' and 'angel', the latter meaning evidently resulting from ellipsis: $mal^āḥ$ YHWH 'messenger of the Lord' → $mal^āḥ$. The polysemantic character of the word becomes obvious through the sharp contrast between two divergent types of context: a) the $mal^āḥ$ is an ordinary human being sent on a mission by another human being: "Jezebel sent a $mal^āḥ$ to Elijah" (1 K 19:2; V *nuntius*; T $izgādā^$; Lth *Bote*; KJ, Kn *messenger*), b) the $mal^āḥ$ is a supernatural, all-powerful heavenly emissary: "The $mal^āḥ$ stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it" (2 Sam 24:16; V *angelus*; T $mal^āḥā^$; Lth *Engel*; KJ, Kn *angel*). It is a safe assumption that the ancient Hebrew speaker, making use of the word $mal^āḥ$, not only had in his mind a clear idea on each occasion of either the one or the other meaning, but also expected his listener to interpret his utterance correctly, i.e. in accordance with the contextual expectation. The consistently applied lexical differentiation originates, as is well known, with the Old Latin version which distinguishes between *nuntius* 'human messenger' and the loan-word *angelus* 'angel', reflecting a shift of application: in postbiblical Hebrew the word $mal^āḥ$ and in ecclesiastical Greek the word *angelos* had increasingly assumed the specialized meaning of 'heavenly messenger'; the ordinary use of these words in the Bible became an archaism. Consequently the Aramaic Targum, the work of Jews, and the classic translations into modern European languages, the work of Christians, adopted this method of dual rendition which amounts to an explicit recognition of the polysemy. This point is of interest since two of our informants do not reflect this polysemy: for $mal^āḥ$, whether denoting 'human messenger' or 'angel', LXX has (almost uniformly) *angelos*, BR (always) *Bote*.

As regards the Greek translators there is no difficulty in explaining their procedure: In innumerable other instances they also tend to stick to an established lexical equation, expecting their readers to grope for the correct understanding. We should note, however, that as regards the translation of the word $mal^āḥ$ there are a few modest attempts in the Greek version to denote the earthly character of certain messengers by withholding the ambiguous standard rendition *angelos* from them: $malā^kîm$ who found shelter with Rahab the prostitute are called *kataskopeusantes* 'spies' (Jos 6:25); those who accompany David are called *paides* 'servants' (1 Sam 25:42); and those whom Moses delegates are called *presbeis* 'ambassadors' (Num

21:21; 22:5; Deut 2:26). The inflexibility of the BR translation, maintaining *mal'āk* → 'Bote' throughout may easily mislead the modern reader, e.g. 1 K 19:5 following v. 2.

Granted the polysemantic character of the word under review and given the necessity to decode it, we may expect occasional perplexities, namely whenever both of the two meanings make sense in the same verse; a disagreement between our informants may result. However, language being an efficient means of communication after all, such occasional ambiguities are rare, and when an informant diverges from the accepted interpretation he is motivated, more often than not, by exegetical zeal.

Ex 23:20, 33:16 and Num 20:16 speak of the guidance the Lord had provided for the people of Israel, sending a *mal'āk* ahead of them. The versions are in agreement as to the actualized meaning 'angel'. Among the Jewish commentators there is dissension: Ibn Ezra reports (on Ex 23:20) that some take this 'messenger' to be the Thora-book, others the Holy Ark or (on Num 20:16) Moses; rejecting these interpretations he maintains the sense 'angel'. Yet Rashi comments on Num: "*mal'āk*. This is Moses" and deduces from this verse that prophets may be called *mal'ākîm*. Indeed, such is the case in Hag 1:13 where the prophet Haggai is called *mal'āk YHWH*: T *n'biya* 'prophet'; V *nuntius*; KJ, Kn *messenger*, and yet Lth *Engel*. The apparent name Malachi (Mal 1:1) is transliterated by most translators, as is usually done in the case of a proper name, but LXX has *angelos*. T adds a remark reflecting the old Jewish tradition that this epithet (my messenger) refers to Ezra the scribe (also quoted by Hieronymus, comment. ad loc.). – Qoh 5:5 reads "Do not say before the *mal'āk* that it [your sin] was a mistake". It is Rashi's view that the word here means the 'messenger' who collects the promised alms, our translators, however, prefer 'angel', and LXX has *theos* 'God'. – The *mal'āk* who should intercede on behalf of a man at death's door (Job 33:23) is generally taken to be an 'angel' but KJ has *messenger*; on the other hand, the *mal'ākîm* sent to negotiate peace (Is 33:7) are in the view of most translators ambassadors (messengers) but V has *angeli* (a rendition justified by Jerome in his commentary ad loc.: *Hebraei significare Angelos arbitrantur... flebunt Angeli*).

4.2. When two polysemantic words are joined in one syntagma the problem of decoding may become more complicated; though in the following instances not all of the four mathematically possible combinations find their way into the translations, the wide variance manifests itself in the diagrams below.

	Ps 104:4		
His a)	'messengers'/b) 'angels' he makes a) 'winds'/b) 'spirits'		
a + a	T; BR; Rashi; HS		
a + b	0		
b + a	Lth; Kn		
b + b	V (gallic.; hebr.); KJ		
	Ex 15:8	Ps 18:6	Job 4:9
The a)	'wind'/b) 'spirit' of a) 'nostrils'/b) 'anger'		
a + a	Lth; BR; KJ; Comm.	Lth; BR; KJ; Comm.	T; KJ
a + b	Kn	Kn	Kn

b + a	0	0	0
b + b	LXX; V	LXX; V; T	LXX; V; Lth; BR

5.0. In conclusion: The semantic phenomenon of polysemy, distinguishable from mere shifts in meaning on the one hand and from homonymy on the other hand, can be ascertained in Biblical Hebrew. There exist words with two or more meanings so distinct that synonyms for the one meaning are absolutely unsuitable to substitute for the other meanings; this manifests itself in the translation process which constitutes a kind of substitution test. The translator in general makes use of a glossary, if not in a codified written form then at least in a mentally fixed one; in the case of Bible translation this indebtedness to lexical standard equations makes itself especially notable. And yet such is the force of polysemy that the translator is compelled to find a different equivalent in the target language for each of the meanings of the lexeme in the source language.

In the history of biblical versions there have been attempts to disregard the polysemy of a Hebrew word, strictly equating it in all its occurrences with one and the same lexical item of the target language; these attempts – from Aquila to Buber – Rosenzweig – are most instructive insofar as they inevitably ended in failure.

Polysemy leaves room for ambiguity. In some cases the latter may be intended by the speaker as a device of style; generally, however, a person wishes to be understood accurately and relies, rightly so, on the situational context to clarify the meaning he had in mind. If there remains a doubt in the listener's mind he may verify his interpretation of the message. When dealing with a written document of ancient times one cannot avail oneself of such safeguards. Thus we should content ourselves with recognizing the existence of polysemy, define the ramifications of meaning that are obvious and readily admit the existence of doubtful instances; these doubts should be recorded in our lexica. Due consideration should also be given to the interpretative efforts of ancient times.

Abstract:

The definition of polysemy as "the recurrent use of the same lexical form with at least two easily definable different meanings which, however, exhibit a clearly discernible conceptual link" is meant to set off this semantic category against homonymy on the one hand and occasional metonymy on the other hand; biblical lexica can be shown not to be reliable regarding this distinction. The detailed examination of three well-known bisemantic items of biblical Hebrew (^ʿ*ap* 'noise' or 'anger', *rū^h* 'wind' or 'spirit', *mal ʿāk* 'messenger' or 'angel') demonstrates that classical versions as well as modern translators admit the existence of polysemy by introducing a consistently applied lexical differentiation between the two meanings. In those few cases where the context allows of both meanings, the versions are at variance. A translation that attempts to negate the category under review (Buber – Rosenzweig) increasingly entangles itself in lingual absurdities.

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