

An Old Testament Dictionary of Semantic Domains

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Despite the world-wide participation of scholars from many nations in biblically related studies, it is in the traditional countries of Europe, Britain and the United States that the scholarly world still expects to find significant, major projects being undertaken. A major dictionary project of the Old Testament was, however, begun in South Africa twelve years ago, details of which are given below.

1. HISTORY

In 1983, thirty eight seminars were conducted at Bible House, the head office of the South African Bible Society in Cape Town, South Africa. The seminars were conducted by Prof. Jannie Louw (Pretoria University), Dr. Eugene Nida (United Bible Societies, New York) and Prof. Jan de Waard (at that time of Strasbourg University, now at the Free University of Amsterdam). The aim of the seminars was to develop a new understanding of lexicography in the service of Bible translation and exegesis. It was also hoped that a major project in lexicography could be launched with the assistance of Hebrew scholars who had attended the seminars. This project was envisaged as the Old Testament companion to the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, the latter dictionary having been completed by Louw and Nida at the time of their presenting the seminars, but it still required much editing before it would appear in 1988.¹ This New Testament dictionary of Louw and Nida represents a major deviation from traditional New Testament dictionaries. The work has several unique features, two of which are readily noticed by a user. First it is based on a synchronic treatment of the language of the New Testament. Consequently diachronic (etymological) information is excluded. Secondly, the Louw-Nida dictionary is, as the full title indicates, semantically rather than alphabetically arranged. These two features spring from the semantics that Nida had mapped out and which he and Louw elaborated upon in numerous subsequent publications.² It is these semantic and lexicographical insights that have been exploited in order to produce an Old Testament companion to the New Testament dictionary. The present writer, convinced of the value of this approach, has participated in the project, *An Old Testament Dictionary of Semantic Domains*, since its inception. Others have also participated for relatively brief periods and their contributions we gratefully

¹ J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains*, United Bible Societies, New York (1988).

² See for example E.A. Nida, *Componential analysis of meaning*, The Hague, Mouton (1975); *Exploring Semantic Structures*, München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag (1975); E.A. Nida and J.P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament*, SBL Resources for Biblical Study 25, Atlanta, Scholars Press (1992).

acknowledge, but it is the lack of adequately trained participants that continues to hamper the progress of this project.³

2. PURPOSE

An Old Testament Dictionary of Semantic Domains (OTDSD), although financed and directed via the Institute for Interlingual Studies (University of Pretoria), is actually a project of the South African Bible Society. Its primary purpose is to assist translators. It is common knowledge, however, that translation is no simple process of finding a one-for-one equivalence between two languages. Words have meaning in context, not in abstraction and the meanings offered in the OTDSD have and will be determined in the light of the general meaning of the contexts in which the words occur. Having been conceived through the union of semantic principles and an exegetical treatment of the source text, the OTDSD is also intended to be a useful tool for general exegetical purposes. These stated purposes obviously imply dissatisfaction with available lexica. This may seem strange in the light of the recently published *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (HAL) and the even more recent appearance of the initial volumes of *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (DCH) from Sheffield University, since it may be asked whether there is a need for so many new dictionaries to appear within such a (relatively) short space of time. But the OTDSD is methodologically distinct from these dictionaries and from their predecessors. HAL is methodologically an extension of Koehler-Baumgartner. Entries are arranged alphabetically and both internal (i.e. within the source language) and external etymologising (i.e. comparisons with cognates) remain the order of the day. DCH, however, claims to be a synchronic dictionary⁴ in which usage is reflected by the consistent citing of subjects, objects and prepositional phrases that occur with verbs. What has thus far appeared of DCH is a refined concordance. The very mechanical listing of syntactic data – which is an application of field semantics – is left without any interpretative element worth speaking of. This is due both to the nature of the semantic theory used and to the professed design of the editors, who wish to express the spirit of the age of post-modernism, i.e. the constant deferment of meaning. Consequently semantic information is minimal. The OTDSD will, as the name indicates, be arranged in Semantic domains rather than alphabetically (contra HAL and DCH) and although it will be a synchronic dictionary (and so omit etymological information – contra HAL) it will focus upon meaning, not upon form (contra DCH).

³ Several research assistants have been appointed over the twelve years that the project has been in progress, but of these one deserves special mention, viz Mr. Bernd Schulz. Dr. S. Rieckert (University of the Orange Free State) submitted material for several letters in the early stages of this project and Dr. L.J. de Regt (Free University of Amsterdam) submitted material for the letter zayin.

⁴ The stereotypical translation equivalents supplied in this dictionary betray a (subconscious?) adherence to the notion of an original *Grundbedeutung*. This issue was treated very briefly in a paper that was read by the present author at the SBL International Meeting in Budapest, 1995.

3. METHODOLOGY

De Saussure's dichotomy of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic tensions within a language are fundamental to the semantic analysis that is applied in the OTDSD project. Thus careful note is taken of syntactic relationships when the contexts are examined. A synchronic semantic dictionary is not concerned with simply identifying syntagmatic relations, however. Its quest is to determine what contribution each particular word makes to the meaning of the sentence and therefore what are the semotactic relationships between the words constituting the sentence. Relationships between words are thus the key to their meaning rather than the possible history of the word. Syntactic relations will assist in determining the difference between „he threw a *stone*” and „the crowd wanted to *stone* them”, but semotactic relations would distinguish between „*water down* a drink” and „*water down* a story”.

The paradigmatic tension refers to that area of semantic agreement that permits the interchange of terms. Semantic agreement is here not to be confused with vague notions of synonymy, especially not with suggestions of synonymy based simply on the occurrence of words in parallel members of Hebrew poetry.⁵ In the OTDSD only words that share a common focal component can be grouped together within the same domain and their semantic relationships should be describable in terms of generic, specific, overlapping, contiguous and polar semantic relationships.⁶ By means of a focal component words are grouped together within a domain and by means of diagnostic components their meanings are distinguished from each other.⁷ It is not necessary to measure the semantic space (i.e. determine all the possible semantic relationships) between words of the same domain, but taxonomic terms could be useful in defining the meanings of certain terms, e.g. that a word in the source text is highly generic would be useful information to translators and exegetes, for it may permit, under certain circumstances, a more specific translation equivalent. Conversely, very specific terms in the source text usually require special attention by translators and exegetes, since suitable equivalents are not easily found in the receptor language.

If it is accepted that no precise one-for-one correlation exists between the meanings of the lexical items of a source and receptor language, then it seems that the mere citing of translation equivalents is a wholly unsatisfactory means of reflecting meaning. It therefore seems to be a far wiser practice to explain (define) the meaning

⁵ The loose synonymy that arises as a result of the application of field semantics is evident in the semantically remote synonyms cited in DCH, with which sort of synonymy we strongly disagree.

⁶ The tabulated analysis of groups of words in terms of minuses and pluses for features that each lacks or possesses is not an aspect of our analysis, nor would information in this form be very useful to translators.

⁷ For example, the words of most lexicons could be classified into Events, Objects, Abstracts and Relationals. Then more specifically under Events, it is probable that a group of words could be identified with a focal component of verbal communication. Similarly under Objects, it is most likely that words will be found that could be grouped more specifically with a focal component of artefact, or natural substance and so on.

of a word in terms of its components and then to offer several rather than a single translation equivalent. Such equivalents should be semantically proximate so as not to suggest different meanings under one definition.

In keeping with the synchronic nature of the dictionary, cases of possible homonymy are not suggested since homonymy is essentially a diachronic consideration that has no effect upon translation. The polysemic nature of a lexeme, whilst obviously implying a process that takes place over a period of time, is an unavoidable and indeed an essential consideration in a semantic analysis. Usually the different meanings conveyed by the same sign are semantically remote from each other. Hence a polysemic lexeme will appear in numerous domains, depending on the number of different focal components that are identified in relation to that lexeme.

Although lexemes are to be grouped and explained within semantic domains, they will also be listed alphabetically in a special section or second volume (as in the case of the New Testament dictionary), in order to facilitate tracing a lexeme and its various meanings. The alphabetical listing of items in this project will therefore be for purely reference purposes and distinct from the arrangement of the items in semantic domains.

4. SOURCES

The primary source of the project is obviously the Old Testament, but non Biblical sources are also consulted. For the Hebrew section, the inscriptions and the Dead Sea scrolls are pertinent. The inclusion of Mishnaic sources would not be helpful due to the lateness of this phase of Hebrew. For the Aramaic section, the Elephantine and Qumran sources are included as they provide a broader and relevant comparative basis on which to evaluate the very limited vocabulary of the Aramaic sections of the Old Testament. The text of B19A serves as the primary text, but all Hebrew and Aramaic words cited from Hebrew and Aramaic sources in the critical apparatus are also to be treated.

5. PROGRESS

It is hoped that this project will be finished within the next six years. To date the following letters have been treated: daleth, heh, waw, zayin, heth, kaph, pe, quph, resh and taw. The treatment of several other letter is in progress, viz. aleph, beth and ayin.

Alphabetically arranged dictionaries are easily broken down into smaller units and a volume may be devoted to one or more letters. In this way the dictionary soon begins to appear and the labours of the composers are soon made useful to the scholarly world. But a dictionary of semantic domains is an interpretative exercise from start to finish. Whilst highly generic and some more specific domains can be assumed to exist in most languages, the majority of domains can and should only be determined once the entire lexical stock has been treated. For Classical Hebrew this means that it would be dangerously myopic to publish initial findings, since these may change considerably once the fuller picture is seen. It should be realized, however, that domains are established on the basis of the areas of meaning that are sug-

gested by the lexical items themselves. Yet once these areas are established, the focal components of certain words may appear much less certain and words may even have to be re-evaluated. Therefore, although certain letters have been completed, nothing of the dictionary itself is publishable at this stage. Apart from this report, numerous other small glimpses of aspects of the future dictionary have been offered through several articles that have been published since 1983.

First a monograph on various aspects of the New Testament and Old Testament dictionary projects appeared in 1985. The monograph covers amongst other subjects, lexicography and Bible translating (Wendland and Nida), the present state of Old Testament lexicography (van Wyk) and Old Testament sample studies (Lübbe). Since this initial publication the present writer has discussed the following issues that have required attention during the research for this dictionary.

1. Initially it was necessary to explain and justify (to a very limited degree) our deviation from a thousand year old tradition of Hebrew lexicography, in which the cognate relationship between Hebrew and other Semitic languages dominated the lexicographical methodology, from Saadya Gaon down to the most recent revisions of Old Testament lexica. These revisions have been due largely to the discoveries of additional comparative material.⁸
2. The phenomenon of polyseme in existing lexica is problematic because of the interplay of two guidelines that appear to be followed in these dictionaries. One inhibiting influence upon the recognition of new meanings is the imposition of an imagined *Grundbedeutung*, from which subsequently identified meanings are never detached. The other influence derives from the recognition of the limited scope of the Old Testament corpus, which recognition encourages the proliferation of meanings assigned to a single lexeme.⁹
3. Although dictionaries are commonly thought to be repositories of meaning, the format and content of entries in Old Testament dictionaries are dominated by grammatical data. Whilst this appears to be very erudite (but admittedly also helpful when unusual forms are clarified), the relevance of such information in a dictionary should be tested.¹⁰
4. The exegete and translator usually turn to a dictionary in order to be guided regarding the meanings of particular words in specific contexts. No matching concern for meaning is detectable in the introductions to commonly used Old Testament lexica, nor in the content of their lemmas. What sorts of dictionaries have the concerns of the traditional lexica produced and what sort of dictionary would be more helpful to the translator and exegete, who must convert the information they

⁸ See J. Lübbe, Hebrew lexicography: A new approach, *Journal for Semitics*, 2.1: 1-14 (1990).

⁹ See J. Lübbe, Problems of polyseme in dictionaries of the Old Testament, *Hypomnema: feesbundel opgedra aan Prof. J.P. Louw*, eds. J.H. Barkhuizen, H.F. Stander, G.G. Swart, Department of Greek, University of Pretoria (1992).

¹⁰ See J. Lübbe, The use of syntactic data in dictionaries of Classical Hebrew, *Journal for Semitics*, 5.1: 89-96 (1993).

find in a dictionary into translation equivalents that are suitable to various contexts?¹¹

Not all the arguments of the articles listed below are necessarily subscribed to in detail by others who have been or are presently engaged in the project. But it can be safely stated that the conclusions reached in these articles do reflect the general thinking within the project and will have a formative influence upon the final publication of the dictionary itself.

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¹¹ See J. Lübbe, Old Testament translation and lexicographical practice. *Journal for Semitics*, 6.2: 180-191 (1994).