Recent Developments in Linguistic Semantics and Their Application to Biblical Hebrew[*]

Pierre Swiggers (Belgian National Science Foundation)

1. As Professor Lyons has shown, semantics is a *field of continuity*, extending between linguistic form and knowledge about the world (or acting in the world). Whether one wants to call this „linguistic semantics" is a matter of debate: insofar as one can say that language is a *system of / for representation of reality*, the term seems justified[1].

Of crucial importance in semantics is the following issue: given a reality-configuration Rc and given a language L, what can we say about the probability that Rc will be expressed in L by a sequence S and not by another sequence S' and S''? Related to this question is another one: if, in a given situation, it is possible to substitute S' (S'') for S, is there any ground in Rc itself why this is so? If not, what can speakers of L say about the relationship between sequences S, S' and S''?

Surveying the history of linguistic semantics, one can partition it in terms of major „fertilizations":

(1) a first one, by different forms of *conceptualist* philosophy, such as Platonist, Aristotelian, Thomist, Scotist, Occamist, Cartesian and Lockean trends;

(2) a second one, by diachronic investigations of shifts of meaning: this is the „semasiological" approach which flourished in the 19th century (Reisig, Darmesteter, Bréal), and which had a specific impact on dialectology;

(3) a third one, by philosophy of logic and mathematics: here we have to mention the foundation-laying work of Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Carnap, and, later, of Austin, Searle, and Davidson. This type of work brought about two major shifts in linguistic semantics:

    (a) talk about meaning was abruptly severed from its rhetorical ties, and was straightened out by the introduction of a specific metalanguage;

    (b) interest shifted from a semantics based on word-meaning to a semantics of *utterances*, and with the development of speech act theory, to a semantics/pragmatics of *uttering*: this brought into the center of attention notions such as

    - reference/denotation (designation)

1 For a comprehensive theory of semantics, see J. Larochette, Le langage et la réalité, volumes I-II, München 1974-1980.

- truth (analytic/synthetic)/verification
- knowledge (a priori/a posteriori)
- context (context-dependence/context-independence)
- implication/presupposition

(4) finally, a fourth one, which is tied up with reflection on lexicographical practice, and which concerns the relationships of terms within one field, or the relationship between features attributed to terms. This type of work, which had a successful impact on the analysis of text structure[2], has introduced, apart from the notion of „semantic field" a number of useful terms:

- terms for relationships such as *hyponymy, hyperonymy* and *paronymy*
- terms for decomposition such as *seme, sememe, classeme*
- the term *isotopy*

Apart from these fertilizations, one should mention the attempts to extend semantics well beyond its linguistic implementation: here, horizons have loomed large, first through semiotics, a vast project to study whatever type of significant phenomena (with the more neutral notion of „sign" replacing the content-oriented concept of „meaning" as axiomatical prime), and more recently, through the wave of „cognitive (or cognitivist) linguistics", which in the long run may bring about new insights in semantic structures.

2. We cannot, of course, avoid the practical question: „What can scholars – linguists or theologians – of Biblical Hebrew do with semantics?" It may be good to recall that in the first place we deal with *texts*, and more particularly with texts for which we (normally) do not raise philosophical problems concerning verifiability, rigid designation of proper names, context-dependency or context-independency, etc. It also seems that as readers of the Bible we automatically accept the „discursive universe" as given within the text(s). Another fact we know is that in the Hebrew Bible we have *various* text *types*: we do not read with the same expectations, or with the same receptive attitude, the book of Genesis, the two books of Samuel, the book of Proverbs, or those of the prophets.

Dealing with concrete texts such as the Old Testament entails that, in the specific case of semantic investigations, we do not have to fashion in our heads the semantics of Biblical Hebrew; rather, we should look at the texts and see what is at work.

3. For this purpose, I have selected as a specimen 2 *Sm* XII, 1-13, given here in the Hebrew text.

וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת־נָתָן אֶל־דָּוִד וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ שְׁנֵי אֲנָשִׁים הָיוּ בְּעִיר
אֶחָת אֶחָד עָשִׁיר וְאֶחָד רָאשׁ:
לְעָשִׁיר הָיָה צֹאן וּבָקָר הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד:
וְלָרָשׁ אֵין־כֹּל כִּי אִם־כִּבְשָׂה אַחַת קְטַנָּה אֲשֶׁר קָנָה וַיְחַיֶּהָ וַתִּגְדַּל עִמּוֹ וְעִם־בָּנָיו
יַחְדָּו מִפִּתּוֹ תֹאכַל וּמִכֹּסוֹ תִשְׁתֶּה וּבְחֵיקוֹ תִשְׁכָּב וַתְּהִי־לוֹ כְּבַת:

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[2] See especially A.J. Greimas, Sémantique structurale, Paris 1966; id., Du sens, Paris 1970.

וַיָּבֹא הֵלֶךְ לְאִישׁ הֶעָשִׁיר וַיַּחְמֹל לָקַחַת מִצֹּאנוֹ וּמִבְּקָרוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת לָאֹרֵחַ הַבָּא־לוֹ
וַיִּקַּח אֶת־כִּבְשַׂת הָאִישׁ הָרָאשׁ וַיַּעֲשֶׂהָ לָאִישׁ הַבָּא אֵלָיו:
וַיִּחַר־אַף דָּוִד בָּאִישׁ מְאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־נָתָן חַי־יְהוָה כִּי בֶן־מָוֶת הָאִישׁ הָעֹשֶׂה זֹאת:
וְאֶת־הַכִּבְשָׂה יְשַׁלֵּם אַרְבַּעְתָּיִם עֵקֶב אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְעַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־חָמָל:
וַיֹּאמֶר נָתָן אֶל־דָּוִד אַתָּה הָאִישׁ כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָנֹכִי מְשַׁחְתִּיךָ לְמֶלֶךְ
עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָנֹכִי הִצַּלְתִּיךָ מִיַּד שָׁאוּל:
וָאֶתְּנָה לְךָ אֶת־בֵּית אֲדֹנֶיךָ וְאֶת־נְשֵׁי אֲדֹנֶיךָ בְּחֵיקֶךָ וָאֶתְּנָה לְךָ אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
וִיהוּדָה וְאִם־מְעָט וְאֹסִפָה לְּךָ כָּהֵנָּה וְכָהֵנָּה:
מַדּוּעַ בָּזִיתָ אֶת־דְּבַר יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת הָרַע בְּעֵינַו אֵת אוּרִיָּה הַחִתִּי הִכִּיתָ בַחֶרֶב וְאֶת־
אִשְׁתּוֹ לָקַחְתָּ לְּךָ לְאִשָּׁה וְאֹתוֹ הָרַגְתָּ בְּחֶרֶב בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן:
וְעַתָּה לֹא־תָסוּר חֶרֶב מִבֵּיתְךָ עַד־עוֹלָם עֵקֶב כִּי בְזִתָנִי וַתִּקַּח אֶת־אֵשֶׁת אוּרִיָּה הַחִתִּי
לִהְיוֹת לְךָ לְאִשָּׁה:
כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה הִנְנִי מֵקִים עָלֶיךָ רָעָה מִבֵּיתֶךָ וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶת־נָשֶׁיךָ לְעֵינֶיךָ וְנָתַתִּי
לְרֵעֶיךָ וְשָׁכַב עִם־נָשֶׁיךָ לְעֵינֵי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ הַזֹּאת:
כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ בַסָּתֶר וַאֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה נֶגֶד כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנֶגֶד הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:
וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־נָתָן חָטָאתִי לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר נָתָן אֶל־דָּוִד גַּם־יְהוָה הֶעֱבִיר חַטָּאתְךָ
לֹא תָמוּת:

What type of text is this? The fragment concerns a particular situation, brought about by Nathan's story: Nathan acts on David, with the result that David recognizes his mischief. In other words: we have here a *commitment*-situation (A brings B to a certain commitment), which is „instaured" through the narration of a story. It should be noted that Nathan could have acted directly on David, by accusing him straightforwardly of having taken Uriah's wife: but, interestingly, the direct accusation follows only in verses 7-9. Nathan's story operates *indirectly*: Nathan brings David to recognize that a person Y who perpetrates a crime is guilty, and should be punished, and then he states that David is in fact the specific instance of the general case of Y represented in the story.

Taking a closer look at Nathan's story, we find that the macro-components correspond to a sequence of events, and mirror, in a certain sense, the deeds of David. But the representation involves a major transposition: whereas the story is about a nonhuman victim (viz. the poor man's little lamb) and about a man to whom damage is caused, the mischief of David involves the death of Uriah, killed by the Ammonites, and David's laying hands on Uriah's wife.

This transposition is „redressed" in verses 9-10. Another transposition involved is that, in the case of the story, the rich man seems to owe his wealth to himself; David on the contrary, owes his strength and wealth to God, and he is therefore *a fortiori* guilty.

Turning from the „textual structure" of the story to its semantic structure, we note the major opposition between the *rich* man and the *poor* man (verse 1: ʾeḥad ʿāšīr wᵉʾeḥad rāš). The former owns much („very many flocks and herds"), the latter almost nothing (ʾeyn kol kī ʾim kibśāh ʾaḥat „nothing except a little lamb"). But

the latter treats his property with a sense of overall-investment and attachment: his property is part and parcel of his family („it grew up with him and with his sons together [yaḥdāw], it ate of his own food, and it was as a daughter to him"). The rich man does not treat his property in the same way; we can readily assume that he considers it to be alienable, and has therefore no scruples about taking somebody else's property[3]. Nathan's story involves a „delayed" referent: the „rich man" of the story is a *type* of malefactor. David does not hesitate to condemn „the man who does such a thing" (hā ʾīš hā ʿośeh zōt: the participle hā ʿośeh „who does" also has a virtual meaning here). What we have here is an *attributive* use (in K. Donnellan's terminology)[4] of a definite description (as when we say „the murderer of Smith must be crazy", without knowing the identity of the murderer, but judging from Smith's heavily mutilated corpse). At that moment David is unaware that the definite expression also has a *referential* use (as in „the murderer of Smith must be crazy", when we know that the police have arrested a certain Jones, who confessed the murder). It is Nathan who establishes the connection between the „delayed" referent and the situation-referent: „You are THE man" (ʾattāh hā ʾīš, verse 7). At that moment, David has to accept the implications of his verdict (verses 5+6) on the man in the story, and this he does, after Nathan's explication (verses 7-12), in verse 13: „I have sinned against Yahweh". The explication involves the fitting in of the „transposed" referents: David's mischief is not that of taking a lamb from a poor man, but of conceiving the plan to put Uriah in the frontline of the battle against the Ammonites, and of taking Uriah's widow as his wife (verse 9: wᵉ ʾet ʾištō lāqaḥtā lekā lᵉ ʾiššāh; see also v. 10). His punishment will be in contrastive symmetry with his camouflaged mischief: David's wives will all be given to his neighbour, who „shall lie with them in the sight of the sun"[5].

The passage also shows some interesting features of *intratextual* and *intertextual* structure. As to the intratextual aspect, I would mention the use of the verb ḥml in verse 4 and verse 6: in verse 4 the sequence wayyaḥmol lāqaḥat miṣṣoʾnō umibbᵉqārō is usually translated as „he spared to take of his flock, and of his herd", and in verse 6 lō ḥāmāl is translated as „he had no pity". There is clearly an intratextual connection between the two verb forms, and I would prefer to translate in both cases ḥml as „to find it heavy/to find it a burden (to...)"[6].

As to intertextuality, it seems to me that Nathan's story should be read in connection with 1 Sm 25,2-42, the story of Nabal and Abigail: Nabal refuses to treat David's servants as his guests, and his wife Abigail has to make amends for the offence of her foolish (nābāl) husband. Yahweh punishes Nabal for having committed this offence, and after Nabal's death Abigail becomes David's wife. In

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[3] What characterizes the rich man's mischief is that it is both an offence against his guest (not considered worthy of being offered one of his own lambs) and a crime with respect to the poor man.

[4] See K. Donnellan, „Reference and Definite Descriptions", The Philosophical Review 75, 1966, 281-304.

[5] David's crime is also in contrastive symmetry with that of the rich man of the story: whereas the rich man commits an offence against his guest, David has despised his benefactor.

[6] Cf. Akkadian ḥamālu „to carry away"; Arab. ḥamala „to bear"; compare the semantic range of *pesare, pesar, peser* in Italian, Spanish and French.

the light of these „real events", we can understand that David pronounces a harsh verdict on the rich man of Nathan's story, and in fact we can assume that Nathan *expected* this reaction from David, so that he could lead him, by his own words, into a commitment-situation.

Nathan's story is a beautiful example of discursive relevance. The story is to the point (it concerns a mischief to be punished), it has a deeper („metaphorical") symbolization, and it is economical: the story is confined to the „essential" *deep fact*, viz. the crime of taking someone else's property. Putting this into the framework of speech act theory, we could say that the story, taken by itself, constitutes the *locutionary* level of the discursive event in 2 *Sm* 12,1-13. The story by itself narrates a general type of mischief. The *illocutionary* level comes into play with verse 7: „You are the man!". Nathan makes David realize that the story is about him, David, and that he is guilty of a crime which should be punished. The illocutionary level, then, constitutes the *re*transposition of what had been transposed, through generalization and modification, in the story of the rich man and the poor man. And finally, there is the *perlocutionary* level: David realizes that he has sinned against Yahweh (verse 13). As we know, the perlocutionary effect is something beyond the control of the initiator of the speech act: we do not know how the receiver will respond (to a question, to a warning, to a command, etc.). In the case of David, the perlocutionary effect is a positive one, in that he confesses his crime, and marks his submission to Yahweh.

This brief example may have shown that interesting work can be done on the semantics of Biblical Hebrew, involving the cooperation of linguists and Biblical scholars.

Abstract:

Language is the subject matter of linguistic semantics from a particular vintage point of view: that of its status as a system of/for representation of reality. The paper opens with a survey of linguistic semantics in terms of fertilizations affecting it throughout its history. The remainder of the paper is concerned with the practical relevance of linguistic semantics for the study of the Hebrew Bible. A sample text, viz. *2 Samuel 12, 1-13*, is used to provide an illustration of the results that can be obtained through semantic analysis, on both the intratextual and intertextual level. The analysis combines semantic and pragmatic aspects given the fact that the story told by Nathan leads David into a commitment-situation.

Address of the author:
Prof. Dr. P. Swiggers, Blijde-Inkomstraat 21, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium