

Response to J.C. Greenfield

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Professor Greenfield finds it „difficult to add“ anything to Professor Barr's treatment of etymological semantics,¹ and he believes that it „would have been much easier ... to be the respondent.“ In fact my task is more difficult: not only do I agree with Professor Barr, but I also agree in all essentials with Professor Greenfield, who has provided us with a series of learned and useful examples of the different types of etymological studies distinguished by Professor Barr. Thus there seems to be even less left for me to do than there was for Professor Greenfield.

True, I can think of one or two points in his examples where I might perhaps be able to add an observation or query a particular statement. But these are all minor details, and I hesitate to start a discussion of particular examples when our foremost task should be the general problem of methods and principles. My response will be to try instead to go on where Professor Greenfield leaves off. That is, I shall attempt to say something, however briefly and superficially, about different types of etymological studies and about the limitations of etymology as a method to discover the meaning of words. I must confess that as regards linguistic theory I am something of an innocent, and my tools are blunt (and as a reader of English detective novels I realize how much harm a blunt instrument can do).

The typology of etymological study suggested by Professor Barr seems to me sensible and useful. It is not so much a strictly logical classification with an entirely consistent common basis of subdivision as, rather, a pragmatic attempt to list several different operations which have been termed etymological. This means that there is some overlapping: a particular procedure may legitimately belong to more than one type.

Naturally, this typology is not the only possible one. Professor Yakov Malkiel of Berkeley once published a paper which he called „A Tentative Typology of Etymological Studies“.² In this he classified contributions according to three major criteria: (1) by scope; (2) by material; and (3) by degree of complexity. His classification „refers strictly to approaches, not to solutions“.³ It is a highly readable article, full of interesting information, but the examples are as a rule taken from living languages with an almost unlimited corpus, and so it is not as immediately useful to us as Professor Barr's typology, which is directly adapted to biblical Hebrew.

¹ J. Barr, *Etymology and the Old Testament*, Language and Meaning. Studies in Hebrew Language and Biblical Exegesis (OTS 19), Leiden 1974, pp. 1-28.

² Y. Malkiel, *A Tentative Typology of Etymological Studies*, *International Journal of American Linguistics* 23, 1957, 1-17; reprinted in: Y. Malkiel, *Essays on Linguistic Themes*, Oxford 1968, pp. 199-227.

³ *Essays*, p. 200.

Not all the types listed by Professor Barr are equally relevant to our problem, i.e. in what way etymological arguments can be used in attempts to discover the sense of a word in classical Hebrew or other dead languages. Our question in fact coincides with Professor Barr's type E, defined as „Use of a cognate language to discover the sense in Hebrew“.⁴ If we look to etymological studies in general, this particular approach is in fact unusual (it does not figure at all in Professor Malkiel's typology). The point of departure for the etymologist is normally a word with a known meaning, and the task is to establish its family relations to other words and to follow its semantic history as far back as possible. But when we talk of etymological semantics as a method in the study of classical Hebrew, the meaning of a word is not the starting-point but the goal which we hope to reach: the whole enterprise moves in the opposite direction from ordinary etymological research.⁵ By comparing words from the same root in cognate languages such as Arabic or Aramaic or Accadian we hope to establish – at least roughly and approximately – the meaning of a Hebrew word that has hitherto not been fully understood.

This heuristic function is not really the normal application of etymological research, and it is characteristic that all the other types of etymology listed by Professor Barr are of a different kind. These other types are certainly not without interest for the semantics of biblical Hebrew but they do not help to determine meanings not otherwise known.

A possible exception is Professor Barr's type C: „Identification of adoptions from another language“.⁶ This can in certain cases be a sub-division of type E: a difficult word may be explained, not as an indigenous Hebrew derivation from a common Semitic root but as a loan-word from a foreign language, cognate or not. But type C is of course not restricted to words of unknown or disputed meaning: clearly it is a scholarly task to establish also the foreign descent of words the meaning of which is not in doubt, as Professor Barr's example, *hykl* „temple, palace“, from Sumerian É.GAL „great house“, or Professor Greenfield's *srynym*, the „lords“ or „rulers“ of the Philistines, supposed to be related to Greek *τύραννος*. Not least for the lexicographer is it important „to identify the language from which they came, their meaning in that language and, if there is sufficient information, the date of their adoption into Hebrew“.⁷

Professor Barr's types A and B which he calls „Prehistoric reconstruction“⁸ and „Historical tracing within an observable development“⁹ also belong to the traditional kind: both have to do with „the search for word origins“¹⁰ (to quote Professor Malkiel's refreshingly simple definition of etymology), and both are clearly important scientific tasks in themselves. But if we are talking of methods to discover the meanings of words, then they are obviously not immediately relevant.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 15.

⁵ Cf. Barr, op. cit., p. 15.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 9.

⁷ Barr, op. cit., p. 9.

⁸ Op. cit., p. 4.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁰ Y. Malkiel, *Etymology and General Linguistics*, Word 18, 1962, 198-219; reprinted in *Essays* (above note 2), pp. 175-198; the quotation is on p. 177.

They may, however, help us to distinguish homonyms which coincide in Hebrew but can be separated by their etymology.¹¹

Professor Barr's type D, „Analysis of words into component morphemes“¹² seems to me to be essentially a question of grammatical derivation, and I would hesitate to regard it as a branch of etymology proper (and Professor Barr himself seems to entertain similar doubts). Of course we need to know from which root a verb is derived to be able to list it correctly in the dictionary and this is not always straightforward, but such cases are quite rare. The verb *hšthwh* is a case in point: it depends on the grammatical analysis (from *šḥh* or from *ḥwh*?) whether you should put it under *š* or *h* in a dictionary.¹³

The only remaining type is the last one in Professor Barr's series, type F, defined as „Simple comparison of institutions with cognate names“.¹⁴ I share Professor Barr's own doubts whether this is a real case at all; it is, as he says, „rather something found in association with etymology“.¹⁵ Professor Greenfield is mildly critical of this and argues that Professor Barr has obscured the matter, but I must confess that I do not fully understand how his own example, which is the term *nḥlh*, shows this. To my mind it remains true that the linguistic affinities of *nḥlh* are one thing, a question that belongs to etymology proper, whereas the degree of similarity between phenomena for which the word *nḥlh* and cognate names are used is a different problem which cannot be decided on linguistic grounds.

I am, on the other hand, a little uncertain about the legitimacy of treating „institutions with cognate names“ as a special case. The reason why Professor Barr has chosen to single out this as a type of its own is clear: it is quite common in biblical studies to compare Israelite institutions with similar phenomena bearing similar names in the neighbouring cultures. But in principle this is, I think, just another case of *signifiant* and *signifié*, and there seems to be no methodological reason why the fact that the *signifié* happens to be a social phenomenon should demand a different treatment from when it is, say, an astronomical object, or a religious concept, or an agricultural implement.

Thus we may perhaps conclude that of Professor Barr's six types taken over by Professor Greenfield, only E, and partly C, are strictly relevant to our main problem, how to discover meanings of words in a dead language. Types A, B, and partly C are not methods of detecting semantic values: rather they are ways of explaining meanings already known on other grounds and of elucidating the semantic history of words. Types D and F, finally, may be disregarded as not belonging to etymology in any strict sense.

¹¹ See, e.g., U. Rüterwörden, Response to J. Barr, above p. 15-20.

¹² Op. cit., p. 11.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the conflicting theories see J. A. Emerton, The Etymology of *hištaḥ^awāh*, Instruction and Interpretation. Studies in Hebrew Language, Palestinian Archaeology and Biblical Exegesis (OTS 20), Leiden 1977, pp. 41-55. Cf. also G. I. Davies, A Note on the Etymology of *hištaḥ^awāh*, VT 29, 1979, 493-495; S. Kreuzer, Zur Bedeutung und Etymologie von *hištaḥ^awāh/yšthwy*, VT 35, 1985, 39-60.

¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 18.

I should like to add, however, that the dividing-line between the first two of these three groups ought perhaps not to be drawn too sharply. There are cases where the meaning of a word may be known on other grounds, for instance with the aid of context and parallelism, but where an etymological argument may corroborate the understanding of the meaning which has been reached by other routes. In Isaiah 28 there occurs in v. 15 the problematic word *hozeh*. It has long been thought that it must mean something like „agreement“ or „contract“, not least on the basis of the parallelism with the word *bryt* „covenant“. ¹⁶ This understanding is found already in several ancient versions: the Septuagint has *συνθήκη* and the Vulgate has *pactum*. But the etymology of the word has created difficulties: attempts to derive it from the well-known verb *hzh* „see“, „behold“ seem rather strained. However, in an article in 1937 G. R. Driver presented comparative evidence which confirms the traditional sense: South Arabic has a noun from the same Semitic root meaning „agreement“. ¹⁷ This appears to be a better explanation than the earlier attempts to derive the meaning from *hzh* „see“ (and it is perhaps a little surprising that this etymology is not even mentioned in HAL – there the emendation *hsd* is suggested, though with a question-mark). This is a case where comparative etymology has helped to support a traditional meaning rather than suggesting a new sense for an obscure word. But the mode of procedure is similar, and whether the meaning defended by an etymological argument is traditional or new, it needs in both cases support from other arguments as well, above all the argument from context.

For it seems to be characteristic of the etymological method that it cannot as a rule achieve certainty by itself: it must be used in combination with other methods, chiefly of course a study of the context or contexts in which an obscure word is used. This uncertainty appears to characterize not only etymology as a way to discover meanings but also etymological studies in general. There is an important difference in precision and certainty between on the one hand the study of sound-changes and on the other the study of changes of meaning. ¹⁸ It has been possible to formulate phonetic laws according to which the sounds in different languages have developed. We are all acquainted with tables showing how for instance the sibilants in different Semitic languages correspond to one another and how they can be seen to have developed from the sounds of a hypothetical proto-Semitic language. But it is not possible to discover a similar regularity in the development of meanings. It may be possible to establish common types of semantic change, but nothing really comparable to the sound laws which were one of the great discoveries of nineteenth-century linguistic scholarship.

The French linguist Michel Bréal asked just over a hundred years ago: „Est-il possible de formuler les lois selon lesquelles le sens des mots se transforme?“ – and

¹⁶ See J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament*, Oxford 1968, pp. 230, 326 (no. 123).

¹⁷ G. R. Driver, *Linguistic and Textual Problems: Isaiah I-XXXIX*, JTS 38, 1937, 44.

¹⁸ See J. Trier, *Wege der Etymologie* (Philologische Studien und Quellen, 101), Berlin 1981, p. 16. The sound-laws, of course, are generalizations which are not universally applicable: exceptions do exist. Cf. V. Pisani, *Die Etymologie. Geschichte – Fragen – Methode*, München 1975 (German translation of the second, revised Italian edition, 1967), pp. 165 f.

his answer was: „nous sommes disposés à répondre que non. La complexité des faits est telle, qu'elle échappe à toute règle certaine“.¹⁹

This is of course especially obvious in Professor Barr's type E. In his other types, as we saw, the result of the semantic development is known, and the task of the etymological investigation is to retrace this development as far back as possible. Even if there is no lack of difficulties and uncertainties, it is perhaps slightly less precarious to follow the track backwards than to start from a root, found only in a cognate language, and to guess which of many possible routes the semantic development has taken. The possibilities of going astray are alarmingly numerous.

It can be quite instructive to apply the etymological method to modern cases where we do know the answer. Suppose for example that English were a dead language with a limited corpus and that we were confronted with a *hapax legomenon* „queen“, occurring only in the plural in the name „Queens' College“, which, to judge from the context, seems to be an institution in a university city called Cambridge, known also from other texts in classical English. Now if there is no other occurrence of this word, we must look to cognate languages for a solution. And indeed there exists in the Scandinavian languages a word of the same root as „queen“: it is the common word for „woman“ – Swedish „kvinna“, Danish „kvinde“, Norwegian „kvinne“. It would seem a reasonable hypothesis that the word did in fact have the same meaning in the closely related English language, and the designation „Queens' College“ would then indicate that this was a college for women – which fits perfectly with the plural form of this obscure *hapax legomenon*. This conclusion can be supported by a historical argument: there is some evidence in the limited corpus of classical English that the first colleges were reserved for men, so that it would be quite natural for a college for women, especially if it was the first one, to have its revolutionary character indicated in its very name, „Queens' College“, meaning „women's college“.

Well, there is nothing wrong with this etymological argument – except that it is completely mistaken. The English word „queen“ is etymologically the same as the word for „woman“ in the Scandinavian languages,²⁰ but the English word has followed a semantic development of its own, which has resulted in the highly specialized meaning of „female sovereign“ or „king's wife“. This is how words tend to behave – and Hebrew words are no exception. That is why the etymological method of discovering the meaning of obscure words is frequently so unreliable. Vittore Pisani, in his book on etymology, rightly concludes that „in questions of meaning the developments move in such a way that one cannot as a matter of fact draw any line between the possible and the impossible“.²¹

The study of etymology is a fascinating branch of learning and a valuable activity in its own right. But its applicability in our particular case, its possible value for the study of the semantics of biblical Hebrew, is restricted. It is a route that we must sometimes take, but then we should be aware of the many snares and pitfalls that await us. Etymology is, to borrow once more a phrase from Professor Malkiel, „the

¹⁹ M. Bréal, *L'histoire des mots*, Paris 1887, quoted by Pisani, op. cit., p. 159.

²⁰ See, e.g., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, Oxford 1966, s.v. queen; E. Wessén, *Våra ord, deras uttal och ursprung*, Stockholm 1960, s.v. kvinna.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 128.

domain of individuality in language history²² Each case of semantic change may possibly be unique. That is why etymological arguments and results do not lend themselves easily to abstraction and formalization.

Abstract:

Prof. Greenfield's contribution is a series of detailed examples; in the response more general problems of methods and principles are discussed. It is established that of the six types of etymological studies listed by J. Barr and adopted by Greenfield only type E, and partly C, are relevant to the problem of discovering meanings of words in a dead language. Types A, B, and partly C, are not methods of detecting semantic values: rather they are ways of explaining meanings already known and of elucidating the semantic history of words. Types D and F may be disregarded as not belonging to etymology in any strict sense.

The etymological method cannot as a rule achieve certainty by itself: it must be used in combination with other methods. In most types of etymological study the known end product of a semantic development is the starting-point, and the task is to retrace this development as far back as possible. Already this involves uncertainties; it is even more difficult to move in the opposite direction, with the previously unknown meaning of a word as the goal. That the risk of going astray is great is shown by an instructive example. The conclusion is that the value of the etymological method for the study of the semantics of biblical Hebrew is limited.

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²² Essays, p. 221.