

Response to P. Swiggers

Ernst Jenni (Basel)

I agree with Prof. Swiggers almost entirely, notably in that I am also of the opinion that paradigmatical semantics affects not only words, but also grammatical categories of all kinds. This is, by the way, what was meant twenty-five years ago by the terminology in the subtitle „syntaktisch-semasiologische Untersuchung“ of my book on the Pi^cel, borrowed at that time from Ullmann.¹

I am less sure that I would say that paradigmatical semantics should always be based on linguistic form (as opposed to content) to be linguistically relevant. However it is perhaps only a matter of terminology, and especially so when I fail to find mention of the correlative term to paradigmatical semantics, viz. syntagmatical semantics. Presumably the two terms are related to what Prof. Swiggers calls centripetal synthesis and centrifugal analysis. At any rate my contribution as a respondent is not so much a theoretical one on terminology, but should concern itself with practical problems of working according to the methods of paradigmatical (and syntagmatical) semantics.

Practical work in the field of paradigmatical semantics (restricted for the moment and for the sake of simplicity to word-semantics/lexicography) has two main objectives. First, how can two apparently synonymous lexemes be differentiated in a convincing manner? Equally important is the second question (which comes generally much less to the fore): How is it to be explained that two apparently different meanings are expressed by one and the same Hebrew word?

I shall try to exemplify this by two case studies: 1) What is the difference between *nūs* „to flee“ and *brḥ* „to flee“, both verbs belonging to the same paradigmatical field? 2) How is it that the temporal abstract noun ^ʔ*ahʾrīt* signifies „future“ as well as „end“, the two meanings being in relative opposition?

1. Differentiation of Synonyms (Paronyms)

a) Reason for investigation.

The main reason which prompts any investigation of this kind does not generally consist in intralingual curiosity (How is the lexical field of „flight“ or „escape“ organized in classical Hebrew?). Nor is the formulation of the question an onomasiological one (What means are available in Hebrew for expressing the fact, that somebody „goes away from a dangerous situation“?). As a rule the inquiry practically always arises out of an interlingual comparison of meanings. In our case: both verbs are normally translated in Greek by φεύγειν, in Latin by „fugere“, in German by „fliehen“, in English by „to flee“, only occasionally by a more general hyperonym „to run away“ / „davonlaufen“ / ἀποδιδράσκειν and so on. It belongs to

¹ S. Ullmann, *The Principles of Semantics*, Oxford 1951, 1963, 34-36; idem, *Semantics. An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*, Oxford 1967, 32-35.

the inter- (not intra-)lingual comparative observations too, when it is ascertained, that (Old)Aramaic also possesses only one dominant term ($^{\text{c}}rq$), and also, paradoxically, that modern Hebrew uses only one verb, namely *brḥ*. Incidentally, it would have been different, if a contemporary Accadian scribe had been asked to translate the Old Testament. He would have instinctively translated *nūs* by *na-paršudu* and *brḥ* by *nābutu*, because with him the lexical field in question was divided into two parts as in Hebrew. (At the time of Muhammad there is also a great difference between *haraba* „to flee“ and the *Hidjra* of the prophet and his *muhāğirūn*).

To sum up: In a dead language with a restricted corpus of text the reason for paradigmatic semantic investigation is practically always given by interlingual comparison of the vocabulary with all the advantages and dangers that are entailed by this fact. The practical work is always determined and even biased to some degree by the metalanguage employed by the investigator (English, French, German, modern Hebrew), and it is not wholly indifferent whether a data-base is set up in English or in French or in Latin.

b) Procedure of investigation.

Every differentiation of meanings concerning two (or more) quasi-synonyms has to analyse all instances of the use of the lexemes involved and to compare the two sets of occurrences in their context (syntagmatic semantics) in order to find out what is common to both and what is consistently different in both. Logically the result of this distributional analysis will be all the more plausible if the distinguishing semantical feature is relatively plain and simple and at the same time consistent in all the occurrences of the words involved. The heuristic presupposition is that normally two different forms should differ in at least one feature of content, and that instances, where the differences in content have been blurred, should be explained by the special semantic conditions that are prevailing. It is not sufficient to conclude that the meanings of two verbs have been partially assimilated or that they show an overlap without indicating where and under what conditions they intersect. In my experience many of these coincidences of originally distinguishable meanings are due to figurative use, that is words used in a generalized sense through loss of relevant semantic characteristics. To give an example: In German „sitzen“ and „liegen“ are evidently in semantic opposition. But in a figurative expression like „der Schaden sitzt tiefer“ the verb can be exchanged: „der Schaden liegt tiefer“, because abstract nouns do not sit and lie like human beings.

As a rule therefore one has to start the comparison of two lexemes with the primary, non-figurative attestations and seek for semantic features that make a difference. In my prime example, *nūs* vs. *brḥ* „to flee“, the difference is quite clear (at least to me). Practically all occurrences of *nūs* (about 150) are concerned with the flight of individuals or collectives out of a dangerous situation (battle, wild animals, catastrophes) into more security, whereas *brḥ* (about 60 times) implies leaving an insupportable socio-political situation and passing into a new different state of dominion. In Ex 4,3 Moses flees from a serpent (*nūs*), in Ex 2,15 he leaves the dominion of Pharaoh and settles down in Midian (*brḥ*). In 2Sam 13,29 the sons of David flee in all directions on their mules after the assassination of Amnon

(*nūs*), in 2Sam 13,37 it is reported that Absalom has emigrated to the king of Geshur (*brḥ*). Of course I shall not go into the details of the argument (cf. *Orientalia* 47, 1978, 351-359).

I would just point out some methodological problems. The required distinguishing feature belongs to semantics and not merely to stylistics or to the domain of connotations. It is not provable and rather irrelevant, when *brḥ* is declared to be more elegant and solemn („gewählter und feierlicher“, Gamberoni, *ThWAT* I, 1972, 780). *brḥ* is not a Sunday word in contrast to everyday *nūs*. It is also not decisive that *nūs* can have rather negative connotations, as Reindl remarks (*ThWAT* V, 1985, 313: „dass *nūs* ... der Beigeschmack des Schimpflichen anhaftet“).

How the distinctive semantic feature can effectively be discovered is not easy to say. It seems to me that it is not merely a matter of intuition, but on the other hand there is no compelling logical procedure in sight. It is self-evident, that there is no room for logical deduction (in the words of Eco²: all beans in this bag are white / these beans here come from that bag / accordingly they must be white). Nor is it a classical form of logical induction (these beans here are white / they come from that bag / it is likely that the bag contains white beans). Rather it is that which Eco according to Peirce calls abduction (the beans in this bag are white / these beans here are white / perhaps they come out of that bag). That means that the evidential value of our reasoning is not very strong and that the hypothesis cannot be a hundred percent proved and verified.

c) Presentation of results.

Supposing that a semantic differentiation in a paradigmatic field has been carried out successfully, and that it can be plausibly shown why there are some 150 occurrences of *nūs* and nearly 60 of *brḥ*, and why and under what conditions the partial opposition of the paronyms has been neutralized, for instance in figurative use (Cant 4,6 „until the shadows flee“ with *nūs*; Job 9,25 „my days ... flee away“ with *brḥ*) or by diachronic change in Late Hebrew (in Dan 10,7 „a great trembling fell on them and they fled to hide themselves“, with non-specific *brḥ*, the classical Hebrew two-place paradigm seems to be superseded by the Aramaic and Greek one-place structure of the semantic field, using *brḥ* indiscriminately in the sense of classical *nūs* and contemporary Aram. ^ʿ*rq*) – there is still a problem for the practising semanticist: How are the results to be presented to the scholarly world?

It is practically impossible to take into account all previous statements and contributions to the problem dispersed in dictionaries and commentaries and in the whole philologico-exegetical literature (as long as there exists no reliable data-base). It is also not always feasible to exhibit and discuss all the material under scrutiny even with a restricted corpus of text (concordances and data-bases are not easily read by the average consumer). It remains generally possible only to give an abbreviated and condensed account in a periodical (or to bury an article in a *Festschrift*), with the hope that not only the bibliographical reference but also the substance of the result of semantic work will eventually find its way into the

² U. Eco, *Zeichen. Einführung in einen Begriff und seine Geschichte*, Frankfurt/M. 1977, 132-134.

standard handbooks (and data-bases) during the next few decades, as a contribution to progress in the elucidation of the texts. When we choose this way of representing of our findings, we are faced with new practical problems. For instance, how much space must be devoted to the justification of our linguistic method every time an investigation is carried out? How often are we to repeat that our semantic reconstruction is a gross simplification and has to be used with the greatest caution? As to the aim of the paradigmatic semantic investigation: We should refrain from propagating or inculcating a new and/or better translation in the target language. The verb *brḥ* can carry on being translated by „fliehen“, because we cannot change the existing semantic code in normal standard High German. What we can do is to circumscribe in a free way the special shade of sense in a given passage, either by a kind of catchword-synonym in our metalanguage or by a circumlocution or an analogous approximation taken from any language. The best thing will always be to give two sentences with the different verbs in juxtaposition, i.e. to work with contrast parallels (if available, cf. Ex 4,3 vs. 2,15). It is a lucky chance when both verbs occur in one and the same passage as in Jdg 9,21 (after the massacre by Abimelech Jotham flees (out of the immediate danger = *nūs*) and emigrates to Be'er (under a new dominion = *brḥ*), with the same sequence of verbs as in Assyrian royal inscriptions (*ipparšid-ma innabit ana rūqēti*, CAD N, 1, p. 284).

2. Structural non-differentiation of meanings.

What I have in mind here is not the normal phenomenon of polysemy, as for instance in the word *ba^cal* „possessor“ (as shown in the centrifugal analysis by the speaker). There we are concerned with relatively simple syntagmatical semantics, with a core meaning („possessor“) fanning out in different realizations of special meanings according to the semantic classes of what is possessed (things, animals, persons, second order entities [qualities, activities]). If the *ba^cal* is owner of movable property / landed property (houses) / a horse / a wife, he is accordingly „Besitzer“ / „Bürger“ / „Reiter“ / „Ehemann“. If he is *ba^cal b^crīt / mišpāt / ḥ^alōm / ²af*, if he „owns“ a contract / juridical process / dream / rage or any abstract quality or activity, the word *ba^cal* serves as Formwort to introduce a quality or activity connected with a person.

Much more serious are the cases where Hebrew words are systematically lacking an opposition of two senses that are necessarily distinct in our languages. One of the most conspicuous examples is *²ah^arīt*:

a) future, later time, a later time span / Folgezeit, Zukunft (Deut 4,30 *b^c²ah^arīt hayyāmīm* „(irgendwann) in der Zukunft“, contrasted with v.32 „former days, that have been before you“;

b) end, last time / Ende, Endzeitpunkt (Deut 11,12 „from the beginning to the end of the year“).

When we look more closely, we find that all the related nouns and adverbial expressions suffer from the same ambiguity, as for instance *bā²ah^arōnā*, which is either „afterwards“ (Deut 13,10) or „in the end“ (2Sam 2,26), in German „hernach“ : „zuletzt“. The same ambiguity obtains in the opposite meanings *rē²šīt / i^chillā* „beginning“ and *rī²šōn* „earlier / first“ (cf. ZAH 2, 1989, 121-123). The observation holds good for all terms of the semantic field of the relative determination of time

(beginning, middle, end) as well as for local relative terms (border, edge, front, back, upper side, down side etc.). There is no differentiation between posterior and postremus, prior and primus, exterior and extremus etc. The ambiguity is structurally inherent in the whole paradigmatical field of graded local and temporal terms. It reminds us of course immediately of the lack of morphologically distinct forms for the comparative, elative and superlative in Hebrew adjectives and it is part of a thoroughgoing structural difference in the semantics of Semitic and Indo-European languages. In our languages we are compelled, unavoidably to make a paradigmatical choice between „future“ and „end“ or, for instance, with *g^cbūl* between „Grenzgebiet“ and „Grenzlinie“. The consequences for Hebrew lexicography are considerable and are still to be explored.

Another structural difference between Hebrew and our languages which is of still more serious import can only be briefly mentioned. It is the non-differentiation of *mlk* „to be king“ and „to become king“, *gdl* „to be great“ and „to become great“, *yšb* „to sit / être assis“ and „to sit down / s'asseoir“, *‘md* „stehen“ and „sich hinstellen“, and last but not least *hyh* „to be“ and „to become“. The ambivalence obtains in a few hundred verbs and is connected with a thoroughgoing non-distinction of static and dynamic usages of prepositions, whereas Latin has to choose obligatorily between ablative and accusative, German between dative and accusative, e.g. *yšb ‘al-kissē³* „to sit down on a throne“ vs. „to sit on a throne“, „sich setzen auf *den* Thron“ (dynamic) vs. „sitzen auf *dem* Thron“ (static).

There is no room to dwell any longer on this subject. Suffice it to say that paradigmatical semantics should not only busy itself with splitting of meanings, but also with the distinctions that do not exist at all in the Hebrew lexicon.

Abstract:

Practical problems of work in the field of paradigmatical semantics are exemplified by two case studies, one dealing with 1) the differentiation of seemingly synonymous meanings: Hebrew *nūs* „to flee [out of a dangerous situation into more security]“ and *brh* „to flee [out of an insupportable socio-political situation into a better state of dominion]“ (e.g. Ex 2,15; 4,3; Jdg 9,21; 2Sam 13,29.37), the second concerned with 2) the paradigmatical field of graded local and temporal terms, where the Hebrew words are systematically lacking our Indo-European differentiation between comparative and superlative senses (e.g. *‘ah^arū* „future, last time“ vs. „end, last time“, cf. Dtn 4,30; 11,12).

Address of the author:

Prof. Dr. E. Jenni, Oberalpstrasse 42, CH-4054 Basel, Switzerland