Polysemy and Homonymy

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0. *Introduction*

It is well-known that a linguistic sign always consists of a formal aspect (a „signifiant"), i.e. the form in which the linguistic sign manifests itself, which primarily amounts to a phonemic structure and – sometimes – to a graphemic presentation of that structure, and a semantic aspect (a „signifié") which the linguistic sign denotes. Equally well-known is that the relation between the two aspects is both arbitrary as well as conventional in each language, which makes the phonemes constituting a linguistic sign as efficient as possible. It is one aspect of typically human creativity that we are thus able to form a very large number of morphemes (members of an open system) and ultimately an infinite number of different sentences with a closed list of phonemes.

Another aspect of this typically human creativity is the fact that in natural languages linguistic signs with an identical formal aspect may nevertheless be connected to diverse semantic aspects. Very often, lexical words do not have just one single unvarying semantic aspect. For a very large number of linguistic signs there is in fact no one-to-one relation at all between formal aspect and semantic aspect. This asymmetry in the relation between formal and semantic aspects of linguistic signs, which is inherent in natural languages and expressed by the ambiguity of lexical words both in the diachronic and the synchronic sense, is one of the linguistic universals. This linguistic phenomenon too plays an important role in the optimum functioning of the language as a flexible and efficient semiotic system for communication. It makes the meaning of a word much more flexible than would be possible solely on the basis of the more rigid sphere of sound and form. This characteristic of language, together with the principle of recursiveness, which allows certain patterns to recur within other patterns, to a large extent determines the creativity of language. This too could be considered an „economic" principle of language – in this case: semantic economy – as it enables a language to make do with fewer words because words can always assume new functions.

Such an ambiguity is not limited to the lexical sphere but may also occur in the syntactical sphere in terms of surface structure. This then produces ambiguous sentences of a type which became very well known in linguistics, such as: „They are flying planes,", or „Visiting relatives can be a nuisance," and so on. However, in relation to the objective of this first workshop of the ESF Network, in which a methodological reflection on the lexicon was the central issue, I will restrict myself here to the problem of lexical ambiguity.

This lexical ambiguity consists of two types which – to a certain extent – can be explained by the nature of their origins, and have been given different names in linguistics. Where there is a number of semantic variations within one and the same lexeme, the term *polysemy* is used. Where there are two or more at first entirely

different and unrelated lexemes which acquired an identical form in the course of the history of the language while retaining their own meanings, this ambiguity is referred to as *homonymy*.

These two linguistic concepts make up the title of this paper, and I propose to discuss this topic in the following manner:

1. Further discussion of the two terms, which will also include a discussion of the terms *homophony, homography, monosemy, synoymy,* and *antonymy,*
2. Discussion of the demarcation between polysemy and homonymy, and some conclusions drawn from it,
3. Applying this to the semantics and lexicography of Classical Hebrew. I introduce the latter limitation because of the theme of this workshop, which is concerned with the „Semantics of Classical Hebrew".

1. *Terminology*

1.1 *Polysemy*

This term is newer than the term to be discussed later, and was first used in 1897 by M. Bréal, who also introduced the term „sémantique"[1]. The term is derived from Greek, from the words πολύς (many) and σῆμα (sign). In the nineteenth century there had been major developments in linguistics, not only in the field of comparative and historic linguistics but also in semantics. This had given rise to the conviction that beside the term „homonymy" (to be discussed later), there was room for a special term to denote a different kind of lexical ambiguity. Thus the term „*polysemy*" was created, and since then this term has been increasingly used to denote the kind of lexical ambiguity involving one and the same word, viz. a semantic diverging within the *signifié* of one and the same linguistic sign, which thus acquired more than one meaning. This always concerns one word with several semantic variants, contrary to homonymy which is always a case of two or more words with the same form and/or spelling. Polysemy involves semantic variants that go back to the same root and can be derived from one principal or basic meaning and can also often be predicted according to the rules of semantic change. Such semantic developments of one and the same laxical item occur in all languages, though not always in the same way in the various languages. Examples in English are words such as „*plain*" which can also acquire meanings such as „*clear*", „*unadorned*", or „*obvious*", and „*church*" which can denote both the church as an institution and a church building. And then there are metaphors, e.g. the use of „*tongue*" for „*language*", in which the designation of a speech organ is transferred to its activity. Such variant uses of a lexeme can usually be disambiguated from the context fairly easily.

The concept of polysemy is situated within a double system of opposition:

1) in opposition to *homonymy*, which will be discussed shortly,

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[1] M. Bréal, Essai de sémantique (science des significations), Paris 1897. In 1899 a second edition of this work was published.

2) in opposition to *monosemy* – from Greek μόνος (alone) and σῆμα (sign) – where the *signifiant* of a linguistic sign always has one and the same *signifié*. Such complete monosemy is rare, however, except in scientific terminology.

Most lexemes are in principle polysemous, or they can easily become polysemous. One could also say that one of the semantic distinctions within a particular polysemous lexeme becomes monosemous within a specific terminology. A word such as „operation", for example, will have a different semantic content in the terminology of a surgeon from that which it has in the terminology of a strategist, but ultimately this is a polysemous word, of which a specific use is selected by a specific group.

1.2 *Homonymy*

This term, too, was taken from Greek, from the words ὁμός (the same) and ὄνυμα (name). Homonymy also involves a form with two or more meanings, but contrary to polysemy this does not concern a formal aspect of one linguistic sign which developed various – sometimes very divergent – semantic aspects. Homonymy always involves two or more separate linguistic signs whose formal aspects have become identical through all kinds of causes, such as a converging sound development, or by analogy factors within a paradigm, or the extension of the vocabulary with loan words, while their semantic aspects have been preserved. Thus, homonymy is situated in the sphere of the *signifiant* in the same way as polysemy in the sphere of the *signifié*. Therefore, homonymy does not concern one word with various meanings, but various words with the same form. Homonymy is based on phonemic – mergers! – and graphemic convergences of etymologically different words, (e.g. „*seal*"₁ [animal] and „*seal*"₂ [stamp] in English), morphemes and syntactic constructions. As I have explained before, I will not include the latter two in my discussion. I will restrict myself here to lexical homonymy.

Beside the already mentioned requirement for homonymy to exist, there is something else which determines the content of the term – and in particular: lexical – homonymy. Such a total homonymy should always involve two lexemes belonging to the same word class and having an identical sound and spelling, as in the case of the lexemes „*seal*"₁ and „*seal*"₂ presented above. In the case of different word classes, e.g. the noun „can" and the verb „can", it would be better to use the term „partial homonymy", adding a qualifier which is also used with the terms „homophony" and „homography" (to be discussed shortly), which are nowadays seen as special cases of homonymy.

Homophony – from Greek ὁμός (the same) and φωνή (sound) – concerns homonyms that are phonemically but not graphemically identical. This is the case with, for example, lexemes such as „*peace*" and „*piece*" or „*rite*" and „*right*", but also with two lexemes of a different word class, such as „*meat*" and „*meet*". This is a form of homonymy which exists only at the phonetic/phonological level.

Homography – from Greek ὁμός (the same) and γραφή (writing) – involves homonyms that are graphemically but not phonemically identical, for example lexemes such as „*lead*"₁ (a dog's lead) and „*lead*"₂ (made of lead). This is a form of homonymy which exists only in the graphemic sphere.

Particularly in languages with a conservative orthography, homophones usually illustrate very clearly that they are cases of homonymy and not polysemy, through their different graphemic representations. This is sometimes more difficult to decide in the case of homographs.

From what has been said so far about the terms polysemy and homonymy it will be clear that whereas polysemy as the product of metaphorical and other linguistic creativity is highly essential to the functioning of language as a flexible and efficient semiotic system, homonymy – whether total or partial – does not play a similar creative role.

The homonymy system, too, is situated within a double system of oppositions:

1) opposite *polysemy*. From what has been stated above this has already become somewhat clear, and it will be discussed further in the following section.

2) opposite *synonymy* – from Greek σύν (together) and ὄνυμα (name). Its direct opposite is *antonymy* – from Greek ἀντί (opposite) and ὄνυμα (name). Synonymy involves various linguistic signs, all of which may express the same semantic aspect, thus the exact reverse of the ambiguity of one and the same linguistic sign. Usually, however, there is only partial and approximative similarity. Unlike homonymy, synonymy never exists in its purest form. Subjective nuances will always continue to play a role. Synonymy and homonymy are therefore not such correlate oppositional terms as monosemy and polysemy can be.

A similarity between polysemy and homonymy is that the lexical ambiguity that may be created by these linguistic phenomena is usually easily disambiguated in the communication, as language users activate the specific meaning which is suitable at a given time in a given situation almost as a matter of course. The fact is that within semantics the context has always been the decisive factor for the synchronic meaning. This always entails a specific final interpretation. S. Ullmann has justifiably described the context theory as „vielleicht der wichtigste Einzelfaktor in der Entwicklung der Semantik im 20. Jahrhundert"[2]. This goes for all ambiguity, both of a polysemous and of a homonymous nature. It is however of the highest importance to lexicography to determine as well as possible whether something is a case of polysemy or of homonymy, in view of the classification of lexemes according to headword. The following section will therefore present a survey of the current insights in linguistics concerning this topic. In doing so, I will have to restrict myself to a selection of some views I consider significant.

2. *Precise demarcation of polysemy and homonymy*

J. Lyons quite justifiably begins his section on the difference between the two kinds of lexical ambiguity, homonymy and polysemy, with the remark: „the difference between homonymy and polysemy is easier to explain in general terms than it is to define in terms of objective and operationally satisfactory criteria"[3]. Other semanticists, too, have made similar remarks. In this context, G. Leech mentions „a

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[2] S. Ullmann, Grundzüge der Semantik, Berlin 1967, 60.

[3] J. Lyons, Semantics, 2, Cambridge 1977, 550-569. In my opinion, the problems surrounding polysemy and homonymy are brilliantly dealt with here.

problem which has been a longstanding matter of concern for students of semantics: how does one draw the line between *homonymy* (roughly, two or more words having the same pronunciation and/or spelling') and *polysemy* (,one word having two or more senses')?"[4]. D. Crystal states: „The theoretical problem for the *linguist* is how to distinguish ,polysemy' ... from ,homonymy'"[5].

In the literature one also often finds the remark that the boundaries between polysemy and homonymy are often so vague and fuzzy that lexicographers confine themselves to using certain rules of thumb to classify their data. T. Todorov and O. Ducrot even state: „Es gibt eine Unzahl von Grenzfällen"[6].

At first sight it seems fairly easy to make such a distinction: all one has to do is examine whether various meanings belonging to the same linguistic sign are more or less mutually related and can be traced back to one and the same *etymon* (polysemy) or that two or more totally unrelated linguistic signs are involved (homonymy).

This etymological criterion has its drawbacks, however. In the first place, etymological, i.e. diachronic, information should always be irrelevant in a synchronic analysis of language, as genetic relationships in the language are not part of the competence of the native speaker. In the second place, the historic origin of lexemes has not been traced with the same degree of scientific accuracy. And in those cases where it has been established, most native speakers of a language are hardly aware of it. The etymological criterion cannot therefore be decisive synchronically. It should not be used as an aid for creating a strict demarcation between polysemy and homonymy, and is indeed no longer so applied.

The criterion of meaning being more or less related within what etymologically speaking is one linguistic sign can itself be regarded as a synchronically relevant consideration. However, in this area too the native speaker is usually not capable of accurate judgments. For example, he will sometimes see a relationship that used not to exist, which means that what is intuitively[7] regarded as polysemy is in fact no more than a psychological reinterpretation of a case of homonymy as polysemy. The example that is often quoted for English is the homonymous lexemes „*ear*"$_1$ (auditory organ; < Old English „éare", related to Latin „auris") and „*ear*"$_2$ (of corn; < Old English „éar", related to Latin „acus/aceris"). The native speaker would usually intuit this as a case of what is commonly known as metaphoric polysemy, while in fact it is a clear case of homonymy.

The reverse is also possible. Then the mutual relation is no longer seen and an example of polysemy is reinterpreted as homonymy. A case in point is „*crane*" (hoisting-crane), derived through a visual metaphor form „*crane*" (bird). Something similar may even lead to a reinterpretation taking on a graphemic form, as with „*flour*" and „*flower*", two lexemes that are also based on a polysemous development.

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[4] G. Leech, Semantics, Harmondsworth 1974, 228-230, 228.

[5] D. Crystal, A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics, London 1980, 174-175.

[6] T. Todorov & O. Ducrot, Enzyklopädisches Wörterbuch der Sprachwissenschaften, Frankfurt am Main 1975, 269 [translation of „Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage", Paris 1972].

[7] Cf. H.-M. Gauger, Wort und Sprache, Tübingen 1970.

This is a case where for once the lexicographer does not need to make up his mind, as he is bound by the alphabetical order of the entries.

In this way, polysemy may originate from homonymy, when the native speaker sees a relationship that is not actually there, and conversely, homonymy may originate from polysemy when secondary meanings of a polysemous word grow apart too far and are no longer related in a synchronic description of the language.

Thus, the distinction between polysemy and homonymy cannot always be clearly determined by a purely structural method.

To overcome this problem other criteria have been investigated. Efforts were made, for example, to look for core meanings to determine the existence of at least polysemy better. Another attempt was to search for the synonyms and antonyms corresponding with the various meanings found with cases of ambiguity. Differences between the antonyms would then be a sign of homonymy. F.R. Palmer has paid considerable attention to these methods, but concludes – and rightly so, I believe – that neither of these holds good[8].

Attempts to make the notion of semantic relations within polysemy more explicit in terms of componential analysis of the meanings of lexemes must also be considered unsuccessful. And within the framework of transformational-generative theory the opposition between polysemy and homonymy has never been explicitly discussed.

None of the proposed criteria or approaches to come to a precise demarcation between polysemy and homonymy appear satisfactory. As early as 1968, J. Lyons calles this distinciton: „in the last resort, indeterminate and arbitrary"[9]. In 1974 W. Abraham and R. Elema discussed it as follows: „Genau genommen ist die Trennung zwischen Homonymie und Polysemie willkürlich und läßt sich nicht festlegen"[10]. In 1976 H.G. Schogt was also of the opinion that there are no formal and objective criteria for making a genuine distinction between homonymy and polysemy, to which he added: „on en est donc réduit à faire appel à l'intuition des locuteurs"[11]. And in 1980 D. Crystal – whom I have quoted before – wrote: „But all such criteria involve analytic problems, and the distinction between polysemy and homonymy thus remains a source of theoretical discussion in linguistics"[12], and then referred to the extremely well-wrought discussion of this topic by J. Lyons in the second volume of his „Semantics" published in 1977. He in his turn had – under certain conditions – already come to the conclusion that „the linguist might well decide that it is preferably to leave the theoretical status of the distinction between homonymy and polysemy unresolved"[13].

I wholeheartedly agree with these conclusions. However, in the words of H.G. Schogt: „Pourtant la distinction entre homonymie et polysémie a des conséquences

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[8] F.R. Palmer, Semantics, a New Outline, Cambridge 1976, 65-71. This author therefore states: „I do not, of course, claim that we can always distinguish polysemy and homonymy in our present-day language" (p. 69).

[9] J. Lyons, Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics, Cambridge 1969, 406.

[10] W. Abraham (ed.), Terminologie zur neueren Linguistik, Tübingen 1974, 338.

[11] H.G. Schogt, Sémantique synchronique: synonymie, homonymie, polysémie, Toronto and Buffalo 1976, 56.

[12] D. Crystal, op.cit., 275.

[13] J. Lyons, op.cit. (1977), 552.

pratiques dans la lexicographie"[14]. This is a lasting problem which must be solved ad hoc every time it occurs. In those cases, it is impossible to do without a certain – albeit approximate – demarcation between polysemy and homonymy: one or more entries. It is usually not possible to determine this on the basis of the existing dictionaries, as their editors have often made very arbitrary decisions in this area, which is reflected by the discrepancies between the classifications in the various dictionaries.

My final section, dealing with polysemy and homonymy in Classical Hebrew, will mainly address these, more practical, problems in greater depth.

3. *Polysemy and homonymy in languages with a limited corpus: Classical Hebrew*

The ESF Network has the „Semantics of Classical Hebrew" as its research subject and therefore this first workshop is devoted to „Semantics of Dead Languages with a Limited Corpus". The remarks following in this section will therefore specifically concentrate on Classical Hebrew.

However, prior to this discussion it should be noted that the qualification „dead" might lead to a misunderstanding as Classical Hebrew has never wholly become a „dead"[15] language in the true sense of the word, as for example happened with Akkadian and Phoenician and a host of other languages that once existed.

Classical Hebrew can be characterized, however, as a language phase from the past with a limited corpus. In my opinion, this corpus not only consists of the Hebrew of the Old Testament, but also the old Palestinian epigraphic material written in that same language, and the Hebrew Qumran texts. The Hebrew of the Old Testament is however the best known of all Semitic languages of that period and may in its turn be subclassified further according to periods[16].

Since linguistic phenomena such as polysemy and homonymy belong to the linguistic universals, they can also be found in languages with a limited corpus. This is also the case with phenomena such as homophony and homography, but here things are often somewhat more difficult than with present-day languages. On the one hand, it is impossible to call on native speakers of such a language to obtain information about the pronunciation; on the other hand, the graphemic

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[14] H.G. Schogt, op.cit., 56.

[15] Cf. W. Dressler & R. Wodak-Leodolter (eds.), Language Death, International Journal of the Sociology of Language 12, 1877, 5-32 [also published in: Linguistics 191, 1977 (Contributions on Various Sociolinguistic Aspects of Language Death)].

[16] For the periodization of Hebrew as a whole and the subclassification of Classical Hebrew cf.:

Ch. Rabin, Hebrew, in: Th. A. Sebeok (ed.), Current Trends in Linguistics, Vol. 6: „Linguistics in South West Asia and North Africa", The Hague – Paris 1970, 304-346,

J. Blau, The Historical Periods of the Hebrew Language, in: H.H. Paper (ed.), Jewish Languages. Theme and Varations, Cambridge, Mass. 1978, 1-13 [with responses by Y. Hayon and S.J. Lieberman, 15-28],

M. Hadas-Lebel, Histoire de la langue hébraïque des origines à l'epoque de la Mishna, Paris 1981,

E.Y. Kutscher, A History of the Hebrew Language, Jerusalem – Leiden 1982 (edited by R. Kutscher).

representations are often even more approximate than is the case with our present-day languages, and it is equally impossible to make inquiries about the written texts. Apart from that, the same rules apply. When ambiguities arise through polysemy and homonymy, these will have to be contextually disambiguated for such languages with a limited corpus too, in which case the synchronic description of language takes priority. However, if for the purpose of distinguishing between polysemy and homonymy one would like to appeal to the intuitions of native speakers concerning semantic relationships, which can sometimes be relevant in this context, this appeal will got unheeded too.

Classical Hebrew is such a language which is only known to us from a corpus of texts which is relatively limited. It has come down to us only in a graphemic representation and is not homogeneous either. Various questions posed to this material cannot be easily answered. On top of that the graphemic representation mentioned is rather incomplete, as it hardly represents the vocalic phonemes, except those of the Hebrew of the Old Testament, but these were added only in a much later period by the Masoretes. Particularly the semantic interpretation of the epigraphical material, especially when it concerns letters, can pose additional problems as their wider context is sometimes totally obscure. This is not very surprising, as such letters were obviously not written to satisfy the historical and linguistic curiosity of people living many centuries in the future.

All these things together have the result that in languages with a limited corpus locked in the past not only a semantic interpretation, but also the problems surrounding the demarcation between polysemy and homonymy will in general be slightly more complicated than in the case of modern languages.

With regard to the special polysemy-homonymy problems in Classical Hebrew little has been published in the literature in recent years. Of course these linguistic phenomena have been incorporated in B. Kedar's book on the semantics of the Old Testament published in 1981[17], but that was only to be expected within the scope of such a work of reference. Some articles were published in the mid-eighties dealing solely with certain aspects of polysemy, for example the 1986 Orientalia article by H.-P. Müller on the (limited) polysemy in the Semitic and Hebrew system of conjugation[18]. But these only discussed certain cases of grammatical polysemy – for which I, following Waltke and O'Connor, would rather reserve the term „multifunctionality" – and not specific polysemy which in my opinion is primarily of a lexical nature[19]. In 1988 the present author investigated a very special case of polysemy, viz. „enantiosis" – the so-called ʾaḍḍād („Wörter mit Gegensinn") of the Arabic grammarians – which emerge when the ambiguity of a polysemous lexeme has become so strong that opposite meanings have come into being[20].

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[17] B. Kedar, Biblische Semantik, Stuttgart 1981.

[18] H.-P. Müller, Polysemie im semitischen und hebräischen Konjugationssystem, Or 55, 4, 1986, 365-389.

[19] B.K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax, Winona Lake, Indiana 1990, 344.

[20] J.H. Hospers, Das Problem der sogenannten semantischen Polarität im Althebräischen, ZAH 1/1, 1988, 32-39.

Also in 1988 B. Kedar-Kopfstein published two articles on „synaesthesia", in which he gave various examples of a connection in the language between sensory perceptions and states of mind, e.g. when Hebrew *mar* comes to mean „sad" in addition to „bitter". This then involved various developments in the meaning of polysemous lexemes[21]. However, in 1990 the same author published an article in which he – albeit briefly – did discuss the position of polysemy as distinct from homonymy[22]. There the author reaches the same conclusions as I have already mentioned after my discussion of the current ideas about the demarcation between polysemy and homonymy in general linguistics. As far as the linguistic material of Biblical Hebrew is concerned, the author points to the many obscure etymologies and the lack of clarity caused by intuitive reinterpretations which may turn polysemy into homonymy and vice versa. Finally he points to the support that may somethimes be got from the classic Bible interpreters (the old translations and the ancient and medieval philologists).

Indeed one will have to admit that also for Old Testament Hebrew it is not always possible to precisely demarcate polysemy and homonymy. For translation purposes this is not so important, as the context must be the decisive semantic factor, whether the ambiguity is of a polysemous or homonymous nature. Only for the lexicographer does such a demarcation remain important, as he must decide whether – in the case of homonymy – one form should get two or more entries, or – in the case of polysemy – only one. In times such as present, when various groups have drawn up detailed plans for a new Hebrew dictionary, we are all faced with such choices.

In many practical cases this will not be too difficult. Nobody will be of the opinion that the various meanings – belonging to the same semantic field or metaphorically evolving from one another – of such words as *lāšōn* (tongue, language, etc.) and *rōš* (head, beginning, etc.) have a homonymous origin and thus should be listed under more than one entry with the same form. Conversely, any lexicographer will appreciate that the root *ḥrš* (to plough *and* to be deaf) requires two or more entries. Here both the nature of these meanings and the knowledge derived from comparative-historical Semitic philology point in the direction of homonymy, as this concerns two or more completely different roots assuming an identical form through the merging of /ṯ/ and /š/ into /š/, while the /ḥ/ can also be a product of merging.

However, as I have stated before, it will not always be possible to be completely certain. In my opinion, it would be best to maximize the polysemy and limit oneself to one entry. „Actual homonyms are rare in Hebrew," Waltke and O'Connor state, and I believe they are right[23]. Only when a thorough comparative and historical study of the Semitic languages makes it plausible that it is better to regard the ambiguity in a particular case as homonymous rather than polysemous, two entries should be used.

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[21] B. Kedar-Kopfstein, Synästhesien im biblischen Althebräisch in Übersetzung und Auslegung, ZAH 1/1, 1988, 47-60, and ZAH 1/2, 1988, 147-158.

[22] B. Kedar-Kopfstein, Glossen zur traditionellen biblischen Philologie (2), ZAH 3/2, 1990, 207-211.

[23] B.K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, op.cit., 48.

To conclude I will give an example of such a decision. The Hebrew lexeme ʿayin, which primarily means „eye", but also „well" (developed from the primary meaning), in a few places also means „appearance" or „colour". Formerly all these meanings were regarded as instances of polysemy of the lexeme ʿayin. In a recent article in *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik*, V. Hurowitz presented the interesting proposal to relate the meaning „appearance" – via the Akkadian parallel šiknu – to a Hebrew root which has the meaning „reside, be present", just like the Akkadian šakānu. As a matter of course one then arrives at the verb ʿWN (in Classical Hebrew only attested by the derivative māʿōn, meaning „dwelling"). In my opinion, this is a felicitous idea of the author[24]. I will pursue it further, however, and propose to include two entries for the homonymous lexeme ʿayin, viz.: ʿayin I (eye, will) and ʿayin II (appearance).

Abstract:

This article treats in the first place two well-known types of lexical ambiguity which, to a certain extent, can be explained by the nature of their origins: 1) *polysemy* when there is a number of semantic variations within one and the same lexeme and 2) *homonymy* when there are two or more at first entirely different and unrelated lexemes which required an identical form in the course of the history of the language while retaining their own meanings. One can, however, not always draw a clear line between *p*. and *h*. Not only should the etymological criterion always be irrelevant in a synchronic analysis of language, but neither has every historic origin of lexemes been traced with the same degree of scientific accuracy. Such a demarcation remains, however, important for the lexicographer. For he has to decide whether one form should get two or more entries (homonymy) or only one (polysemy). This presents a special difficulty in the case of languages with a limited corpus – „dead" languages – as for instance Classical Hebrew. For it is no longer possible to obtain information from the native speakers if one is in doubt. And the graphemic representations are often even more approximate than in our modern languages.

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[24] V. Hurowitz, The Etymology of Biblical Hebrew ʿayin „appearance in Light of Akkadian šiknu, ZAH 3/1, 1990, 90-94.