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Word Studies: A Combination of Immediate Context, Current Usage, and Authorial Intention

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Abstract:

Getting to the meaning of a word is no easy task. It may seem like a quick process since the object of the study is the smallest unit of discourse. And it is so in most cases. However, it is at this basic level of meaning that most interpretative fallacies are committed: etymological fallacy, root fallacy, and illegitimate totality transfer, just to name a few. One must guard against such fallacies by considering at least three factors that determine the meaning of a word: immediate context, current usage, and authorial intention.

The word is loaded with potential meaning, but potential meaning becomes real meaning only when the word finds a place in a particular literary structure, within a particular life setting, and in the particular intention of the author who utters the word. In other words, we should be interested in the meaning a word acquires in a certain context, corresponds with its usage in that period and by the same author, and fulfils the function the author intended for the particular passage in which the word occurs.

In order to guard ourselves against fallacies of all kinds and guarantee a certain degree of precision in interpretation, we should look for what an author *does* with the word(s) he uses in a certain context.

Keywords: word studies, meaning, etymological fallacy, root fallacy, illegitimate totality transfer, immediate context, current usage, authorial intention.

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Introduction

Cotterrell and Turner rightly assess that, "Future generations may well call the last hundred years or so the Era of Theological Word Studies."[2] Word studies have always been a major part of biblical exegesis and theological studies, and rightly so.[3] A random reading through any commentary will quickly show that the interpretation of any biblical text depends substantively upon the interpretation of individual words. When we study a passage, we also tend to spend an inordinate amount of time on word studies. This is so because exegesis, at its most basic level, deals with lexeme. Osborne rightly observes that, "Words provide the building blocks of meaning."[4] Words, though the smallest unit in a discourse, are nevertheless carriers of meaning. Indeed, when considered independently of other words, individual words only have potential meaning (i.e., semantic range), but when in connection with other words, they convey meaning. They are not just *signs* but also conveyers of *sense*.[5] Words are the threads from which the tapestry of Scripture is sown together to communicate a meaningful message.

Yet, it is at this most basic level of meaning that the gravest errors are made. One does not have to listen to too many sermons to come across an "exegetical pearl" such as the correlation of the word δύναμις with "dynamite." Though such an argument may stimulate a positive and enthusiastic response from the audience, it overlooks the fact that it is based on a wrong lexical study. We would not be far off to say that Paul might have had in mind something similar when he enjoined Timothy to "rightly divide the Word of truth." Such exegetical errors, however, can be found not only in sermons (that are regarded less scholarly), but also in highly respected reference works. For instance, John Lee points to the

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[2] Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989),106.

[3] The importance of words should not be exaggerated, since meaning (especially theological meaning) is found at the level not of words but of utterances or discourse. See the corrective provided by James Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Languages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), a book which initiated a paradigm shift in biblical studies from a focus on individual words as carrying theological meaning to a focus on discourse analysis.

[4] Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 64. See also Darrell L. Bock, section entitled "Lexical Analysis. Studies in Words," in *Interpreting the New Testament Text. Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), cap.5.

[5] See Bock, "Lexical Analysis" chap. 5 for the three elements of words: sign, sense, and referent.

wrong assessment that συνάγω can mean "to turn everything into cash," according to the much used BDAG lexicon.[6]

When a biblical interpreter works with the text in a context characterized by so many abuses and fallacies in lexical studies, he is bound to ask himself whether the exegetical process can guarantee any level of accuracy and whether it can result in any authoritative statements about the meaning of a text. While such concerns may be justified, it should not lead to pessimism in interpretation when it comes to word studies. Though one must recognize that any conclusions concerning the interpretation of the biblical text are provisional and open to subsequent revisions, one should not despair. Recognizing some of the most common errors in word studies can prevent the interpreter from making them in his effort to get to the meaning of a word. Likewise, the knowledge of some guidelines for doing word studies can assure a higher level of confidence related to the results of a word study. All these elements and other information must be part of the "baggage" that the interpreter brings to his task of biblical exegesis if a reliable and authoritative interpretation is expected.

This article, then, will concern itself mainly with the proper way of doing word studies. We will present three of the most common fallacies to avoid in doing word studies: the etymological fallacy, the root fallacy, and the fallacy of illegitimate totality transfer. Then, we will discuss three factors that determine the meaning of a word: current usage, immediate context, and authorial intention. Lastly, we will present some guidelines for doing word studies in order to warrant some level of accuracy of understanding of this most basic building block of meaning.

Common Exegetical Fallacies[7]

Etymological Fallacy

Etymology is the study of the history of a term and the various meanings that it has acquired in time, from its original meaning to the current meaning.

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[6] John A. L. Lee, *A History of New Testament Lexicography* (Studies in Biblical Greek 8. New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 317-19. One of Lee's well-taken points is that lexicons build upon previous lexicons and therefore tend to perpetuate lexical errors, since it is impossible for one or several authors of a lexicon to do an exhaustive study of each word.

[7]For lack of space, we will not be able to list and discuss all such fallacies, neither will we be able to go into may details with those that will be presented here. For a thorough presentation of the most common exegetical fallacies upon which our study depends, see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984). See also Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral,* esp. 66–76.

Etymology, therefore, is by definition a diachronic study of a word.[8] The etymological fallacy, then, is the belief that the current meaning of a word is somehow connected to its original meaning. In other words, there is the belief that in each word there is a "basic" and "stable" meaning that is always present, no matter the context in which it appears.[9]

An appeal to the "original" meaning of a word or to the evolution of a term as authoritative or normative for the current meaning, however, involves fundamental misunderstandings concerning language.

First, the etymological fallacy assumes that language is static rather than dynamic. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner correctly observe that, "Word-formation is *often* a fair guide to the original meaning of a Greek word but certainly *not always*. All languages change gradually with time and words come to have new meanings, older meaning often becoming obsolete."[10] The most frequent example in English used to show the dynamic nature of language is the word "nice" which is derived from the Latin *nescius* meaning "ignorant." To claim that the meaning of "nice" today is the same as its original meaning is clearly absurd.[11]

Secondly, the etymological fallacy fails to take into consideration the fact that language is the means of communication between the members of a linguistic group. It is within this socio-historical and literary context that words come to mean something. Language performs the function that a particular community intends it to perform.[12] It would then be an elemental mistake to assume that a word has maintained a core meaning over time, or even across distinct but

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[8]Cf. James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 107. Barr wrote his entire book as a critique to the methodology of constructing theology derived from word studies, dependent in turn on etymology.

[9]J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, The Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 23, points out that the problem can be traced back to the Greeks who believed that the meaning of a word stemmed from its nature rather than from convention.

[10]Cotterrell & Turner, *Linguistics*, 131 (emphasis by author). Likewise, Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral,* 71, states that, "In studying the history of a word we must consider the strong possibility of semantic change, when a word alters its meaning over the course of years."

[11] In Romanian, e.g., the word "a alunga" comes from the Latin "allongare" sau "elongare" meaning "a se lungi, a se alungi." Clearly the two meanings have nothing in common. See Mihai Vinereanu, *Dicționar Etimologic al Limbii Române pe baza cercetărilor de into-europenistică* (București: Alcor Edimpex, 2008), 75.

[12]For different functions that language can perform see E. A. Nida and J. P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament: A Supplement to the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Society of Biblical Literature 25 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 13–16.

contemporary linguistic communities. What determines the meaning of a word is the community that uses it, for meaning is conventions-bound.

These arguments and others point to Barr's conclusion that, "The etymology of a word is not a statement about its meaning but about its history."[13] Therefore, the current meaning of a word is not necessarily dependent upon previous meanings. Words have meaning only because of the context in which they are used, the linguistic community that uses them, and the time at which they are used. A proper understanding of language, then, makes a clear distinction between the synchronic and diachronic study of words.[14]

The synchronic study (how a word is used now) and not the diachronic study (how a word has evolved in meaning over time) is important in determining the current meaning of a word.[15] Etymology, therefore, is in the largest part useless in determining the lexical meaning.[16] Cotterrell and Turner explain: "The history of a word may explain *how* a word came to be used with some particular sense at a specified time but in order to find out *what* a lexeme means at that particular time we have only to look at the contemporary *usage*."[17] De Saussure used the analogy of a chess game in order to prove the uselessness of etymology in discovering the current meaning of a word:

In a game of chess any particular position has the unique characteristic of being freed from all antecedent positions; the route used in arriving there makes absolutely no difference; one who has followed the entire match has no advantage over the curious party who comes up at a critical moment to inspect the state of the game; to describe this arrangement, it is perfectly useless to recall

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[13]Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 109.

[14]There is, however, a proper place for etymological study. Cotterrell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 132, explain: "The history of a word may explain *how* a word came to be used with some particular sense at a specified time but in order to find out *what* a lexeme means at that particular time we have only to look at the contemporary *usage*."

[15] Diachronic word studies are characteristic of dictionaries such as *TDNT* and *NIDNTT*. "Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964-76), abbrev. TDNT; and The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, ed. Colin Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1975-85), abbrev. NIDNTT." For a critique of *TDNT*, see Barr, *Semantics*, 21-45, 206-62, mentioned by Darrell Bock, in his chap. "Lexical Analysis."

[16] This does not deny the fact that there is a proper place for etymological study. Barr points for instance to the use of etymology in getting to the meaning of a difficult to understand and rare Hebrew word by looking at cognates of a known Arabic or Acadian word. But etymology cannot authoritatively impose a sense upon the word; it only gives a good semantic indication. It is the context that determines meaning; the actual usage. *Semantics*, 158.

[17] Cotterrell and Turneer, *Linguistics*, 132.

what had just happened ten seconds previously. All this is equally applicable to language and sharpens the radical distinction between diachrony and synchrony. Speaking operates only on a language-state and the changes that intervene between states have no place in either state.[18]

Emphasizing the current usage of the word in order to determine its meaning affects the way one goes about doing word studies. Negatively, it warns us against referring to the use of a term in Homer or Aristotle, for instance, in order to show what the meaning of the same term is in the New Testament times. While the meaning may be the same, the diachronic study is no sure way of determining what Paul, for instance, meant when he used the term. Positively, it motivates us to pay a closer attention to the immediate context as determinative of meaning.

Root Fallacy

The etymological fallacy lies at the basis of other fallacies such as the root fallacy. The root fallacy is based on the assumption that the meaning of a word lies somewhere in the "root" or the "basic" form of the word. In other words, those guilty of the root fallacy assume that the root of a word carries the basic meaning that is reflected in every subordinate use of the word.[19]

The root fallacy clearly confuses semantics with morphology—meaning with form. Louw is right to argue that "One of the basic principles of semantics is that the relation between the form of a word and its meaning is an arbitrary one."[20] The meaning of a word cannot be determined by or derived from its root form. A common example of the root fallacy is the explanation that the Greek word ἀπόστολος means "one sent out" based on its morphology ἀπό+ στέλλω. But such an explanation, according to Louw, ignores the fact that "It is a basic principle of modern semantic theory that we cannot progress from the form of a word to its meaning. Form and meaning are not directly correlated."[21]

The root fallacy is particularly seen in the explanation of compound words. It is a common practice among commentators and preachers to explain the meaning of a word from a combination of the meanings of its constituent parts. But such practice can lead to serious misunderstandings for it completely neglects the immediate context.

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[18] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 89.
[19]Cf. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 66.
[20]Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 25.
[21]Ibid., 29.

Several principles must guide us in determining the meaning of compound words. First, it is generally erroneous to infer the meaning of a compound word from the summation of the meanings of its constituent parts. This cannot usually be done while at the same time claiming to do proper lexical exegesis. Cotterell and Turner state that, "The meaning of the whole compound usually has a semantic content different from a mere summation of the meaning of the constituent words."[22] We say "generally" and "usually" because some terms are more "transparent" while others more "opaque." That is to say that the meanings of some compound words are more closely related to their root meaning than others.[23] Some even maintain their root meaning.[24] Cotterell and Turner explain: "The meanings of many words can be understood from knowledge of some basic form and appropriate rules of word-formation and inflection."[25] However, the general principle that the meaning of a compound word usually has a semantic content different from a mere summation of the meaning of the constituent words still stands, even if in some cases the difference is minimal.[26]

Secondly, prefixes added to verbs affect the meaning of the verb in different ways.[27] It is reductionistic to assume that the root meaning of the verb with a prefix dictates its meaning. It is true that in many cases the root meaning is closer to the semantic range of the term, but there are also cases where the meaning is completely new. Therefore, it is more accurate to state with J. W. Wenham that the prepositional prefix can affect a stem in three ways: the force of both preposition and verb continues (e.g., εἰσέρχομαι); the preposition intensifies the thrust of the verb (e.g., μεταμορφόω); and the preposition changes the meaning

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[22]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 130.

[23]See Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 28, for different examples.

[24] E.g., "covetousness," gr. πλεονεξία, is a compound word: πλείων (eng. "more") + ἔχω (eng. "to have") = "to have more." Thus, the coveting person is the one who wants more and lust for more. E.g., "gospel," gr. εὐαγγέλιον is a compound word meaning "good news." E.g., "to confess," gr. ὁμολογέω, is a compound word: ὁμοῦ (eng. "together") + λέγω (eng. "to speak") = "to speak the same, to agree." Thus, to confess in 1Jn.1:9 means to say the same thing about sin as God says. That is why John says that whoever says that he does not have sin makes God a liar.

[25]Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 130.

[26]One example is the meaning of idioms. An idiom has traditionally been defined as a combination of words who give meaning to the whole phrase not by contributing their individual meanings but by the socio-cultural context in which they are used. Nida and Louw, *Lexical Semantics*, 24, argue that, "Idioms constitute the most semantically complex lexemes since they are so intimately and integrally related to the cultural contexts out of which they have developed." As such, "Idioms function very much like single words. […] Accordingly, idioms must also be regarded as 'lexemes' and their semantic analysis involves essentially the same procedures as in the case of individual words" (p. 7).

[27]Cf. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 67.

of the verb (e.g., ἐπιγινώσκω).[28] Thus, according to Osborne, "The student can never assume that a prepositional prefix affects a compound in any one of the three ways. Only the context and word usage can decide."[29]

Thirdly, one must not equate the "general" or "universal" meaning with the root meaning. It is true that usually one meaning is used a lot more than other possible meanings, and therefore it can be called the "general" meaning (occasionally also called "central" or "normal" or even "natural" meaning). This "general" meaning can thus be understood as the most common in frequency of occurrence and therefore the meaning that usually first comes to mind when hearing or reading a word with a limited context. In this sense, Louw argues that the "general" meaning is close to what linguistics would call the "unmarked" meaning. "Unmarked" is understood as "that meaning which would be readily applied in a minimum context where there is little or nothing to help the receptor in determining the meaning."[30]

Nevertheless, the general meaning is just that: general. One cannot assume that just because a word is used with one meaning more than with other meanings, the general meaning is always part of the meaning of the word in every context as a root meaning. The general meaning is helpful in limiting the semantic range of a word, but only the immediate context is determinative of meaning.

It is helpful here to point to Nida's categories of "central" and "peripheral" meanings. One may be right that when a word has a central meaning as well as peripheral meanings it is best to assume that the central meaning is intended unless the context points to a peripheral meaning. "This is not to say," however, states Nida:

that the central meaning is somehow always incorporated into the extended meanings, as a kind of generic semantic base to be found in all occurrences of a lexeme—what in German is called a *Grundbedeutung* and in English is sometimes referred to as "basic meaning." Being a central or a peripheral meaning is simply a matter of so-called "markedness" the extent to which various degrees of peripheral meanings need to be specially marked by more and more specific features of the context.[31]

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[28]J. W. Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965; 2d ed. 2001), 55.
[29]Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 67.
[30]Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 34.
[31]Nida and Louw, *Lexical Semantics*, 12.

Understanding the proper place of general meaning in semantics, then, helps us avoid the root fallacy. The term "general" is useful, Louw argues, "only as long as it is never raised to the status of implying that it is the root or basis of meaning." But he further argues, "to maintain a common kernel as the general meaning among all the possible meanings that may serve as a factor behind all the other meanings and which serves as a type of 'inner' meaning, is absurd."[32]

Illegitimate totality transfer

Related somewhat to the root fallacy is what Barr termed the fallacy of "illegitimate totality transfer." By this he means "the error that arises, when the 'meaning' of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) is read into a particular case as its sense and implication there."[33] This procedure illegitimately overloads the semantic value of words. Anthony Thiselton concludes: "Words do not carry with them all the meanings which they have in other sets of co-occurrences."[34]

It is important here, therefore, to make a distinction between meaning and usage in order to avoid imposing more meaning upon a word than the context allows. Nida, for instance, correctly points to the inadequacy of most dictionaries in the way they present the "meanings" of Greek words. A source of confusion comes from the assumption that each possible translation of a Greek word is in fact one of the meanings of the Greek word. It is thus important to remember that when a dictionary such as BDAG places a passage behind a certain meaning, this indicates an opinion and not an established fact, and represents a judgment based on usage rather than meaning.[35] Nida argues that, "One of the principal reasons for the inadequacy of most dictionaries is the failure to distinguish between the meaning of a word and the various specific contexts in which a word may be used."[36] Usage, therefore, is not to be confused with meaning.

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[32]Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 34 and 35 respectively.
[33]Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 218. Anthony C. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 84, explains the fallacy in this way: "This occurs when the semantic value of a word as it occurs in *one context* is *added* to its semantic value in *another context*; and the process is continued until the *sum* of these semantic values is then *read into a particular case*" (emphasis by author).
[34]Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," 84. He follows here E. A. Nida, "The Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *Journal for the Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 86.
[35]Cf. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 82. See Lee, *A History of New Testament Lexicography*.
[36]Nida & Louw, *Lexical Semantics*, 3.

It is true that a particular usage can become so widespread or "general" that it eventually becomes part of the lexical meaning of the word.[37] But as we have already argued earlier, a "general" meaning is not the same as the "root" meaning. To equate the two is to commit the error of assuming that the way a word is used in all contexts affects the meaning of the word in a particular context. Thus, one must be careful to distinguish between the way a word is being used and the meaning of the word. The practical implication of this principle is that one should not immediately assume that the way a word is used in extra-biblical literature is necessarily parallel to the meaning in a biblical text, be it even contemporary to it. It is important to select that meaning which is used in a context similar to the passage which we are studying.[38]

Factors in Determining Word Meaning

We hope that it is clear from the presentation so far that at least two factors play a significant role in the meaning of a word: current usage and immediate context. More often than not, exegetical fallacies are committed as a result of neglecting both these factors. For instance, the etymological fallacy is the result of stressing the "original" or "basic" meaning of a word at the neglect of the current usage which is dictated by context (both socio-historical and literary). The root fallacy focuses too much on morphology and word formation, particularly when it comes to compound words, and too little on how the word functions in the context. The fallacy of illegitimate totality transfer invests too much meaning in a word due to the confusion of meaning and usage that are closely related to the context in which the word appears. The context and current usage, in all cases, determine what meaning a word acquires in a specific text and how it is used there. Therefore, we will say a few more things about these two factors, adding to them a related third one: authorial intention.

Immediate Context

According to Osborne, most modern linguists recognize the centrality of the linguistic and extra-linguistic dimensions to the issue of meaning, namely the centrality of the context.[39] However, in practice, many spend an inordinate time on analyzing the extra-biblical occurrences of a word and little time on doing a thorough exegesis of the immediate context in order to find clues that would help them in determining the meaning of the word. The danger in such an unbalanced

[37]Cf. Cotterrell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 140.
[38]Cf. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 91.
[39]Ibid., 64.

emphasis on non-context issues is of course obvious from the exegetical fallacies discussed above.

One must, therefore, keep in mind one of the fundamental principles in semantics, according to Barr, that "there is no question about the meaning of *words*, as distinct from texts. Words can only be intelligibly interpreted by what they meant at the time of their usage, within the language system used by the speaker or writer."[40] The meaning of a word depends not on what it is in itself, but on its relation to other words. Osborne essentially follows Barr when he states that:

Terms really do not carry meaning by themselves… There is no inherent meaning in a word. Words are arbitrary symbols that have meaning only in a context. They function on the basis of convention and practical use in any language system, and they must be studied descriptively (how they are actually employed) rather than prescriptively (according to preconceived rules). A word has no single meaning, only meaning potential, a symbol waiting for a context.[41]

The last phrase in the above quotation is fundamental for a proper semantic analysis of any word. The semantic range of a word can be determined by an analysis of other occurrences of the term, but it is only the immediate context that can specify with a certain authority what the term means and how it is used in the context in which it appears. In other words, one must be aware of polysemy that states that a "particular form of a word can belong to different fields of meaning."[42] But whereas a word can have more than one meaning, this should not be taken to mean that the word is normally capable of a full range of meanings in a given utterance. A word can usually mean more than one thing, that is a word has potential meanings, but which one of the meanings is found in a particular context is determined only by that context.[43] Thus, the correct meaning of a word within any context is the meaning which fits the context best. Cotterell concurs

[40]Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 139–40.

[41]Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 75–76. Though he does not mention this, this is again one of Ferdinand de Saussure's major points in his *Course in General Linguistics*. It was he who first argued the "structurally *arbitrary* and so purely *conventional* nature of the word-to-meaning relationship." See a good presentation of the fundamental principles of linguistics as stated by de Saussure in Max Turner, "Modern Linguistics and the New Testament," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 148–53.

[42]Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 37.

[43]We are not denying that one word can have two meanings in one context, as is the case with the *double entendre* in the Gospel of John. But even in such cases where the author intends the reader to see two meanings, the context is still determinative in deciding which meaning(s) is used. Cf. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 35.

that, "The context of the utterance usually singles out the *one* sense which is intended from amongst the various senses of which the word is potentially capable."[44]

This emphasis on the meaning of words being context-conditioned should not be misconstrued as a denial of the fact that individual words "refer" to certain things and not others. That is, as Thiselton argues, "Words do indeed possess a stable core of meaning without which lexicography would be impossible…"[45] E. D. Hirsch states the case along similar lines: "… all meaning communicated by texts is to some extent language-bound, that no textual meaning can transcend the meaning possibilities and the control of the language in which it is expressed."[46]

The context is therefore determinative of meaning, not in the sense that it creates an entirely new meaning unrelated at all to other meanings as used in other contexts, but that the context tells us which of the possible meanings that the word can have is used in that particular context. Moisés Silva states boldly that "The context does not merely help us understand meaning; it virtually *makes* meaning."[47] While such a statement may seem too bold, his point is well taken, in that language can be understood only when interpreted within the limits of its specific use. Meaning, in other words, is both determined by the context in which language is used and shaped by the community that uses it. Thus, in any lexical study one must interpret the part—the word—in light of the whole—the context.

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[44]Cotterrell and Turner, *Linguistics*, 175.

[45]Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," 79. In this essay, Thiselton rightly argues against an "atomizing exegesis" which pays too much attention to words and insufficient attention to context. However, he strikes a correct balance when it comes to word-studies and words as units of meaning. He quotes two linguists on p. 83 to offer a warning against those who take words as carrying no meaning. "There is no getting away from the fact that single words have more or less permanent meanings that they actually do refer to certain referents and not to others, and that this characteristic is the indispensable basis of all communication." And "There is usually in each word a hard core of meaning which is relatively stable and can only be modified by the context within certain limits."

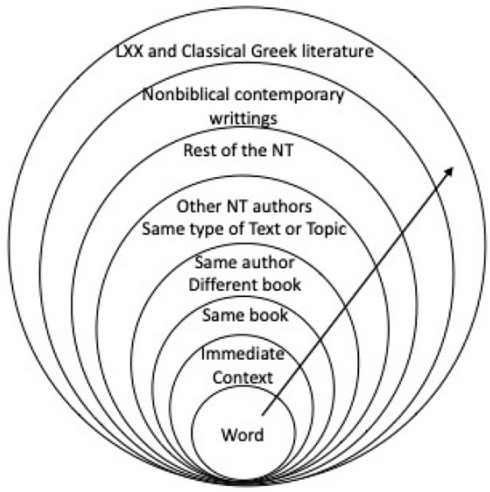
[46]E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 23. He later adds: "A part is frequently autonomous in the sense that some aspect of it is the same no matter what whole it belongs to," 77.

[47]Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 139. When Silva uses the word "context" he is referring not only to the literary context but also to the context of situation (pp. 144–47). A similar argument is brought forth by the ordinary language philosophers who are united in their belief that "language can only be understood in the situation and circumstances of its *use*." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 208. In the same location, Vanhoozer states that their motto might well have been: "There is nothing outside a context."

Current Usage

As we have already seen, the meaning of a word must also be determined synchronically (i.e., "with time") and not diachronically (i.e., "through time"), from how a word *is used* and not from how it *was used*. As fruitful as a diachronic study of a word can be, such as the study of how Septuagintal and classical Greek literature use a word,[48] ultimately the meaning of a word must be sought in the synchronic study of the word. That is, we must look at the NT use of the word as well as the contemporary nonbiblical Greek usage of that word.

Most exegesis books speak of concentrical circles of meaning that can be represented as follows:[49]



In this representation, one must always start in doing word studies from the inner circle working his way towards the outward circle, the most important ones for determining meaning being the ones closest to the word. This means that emphasis is always given to the current usage in the Bible, as the author uses it both in the immediate literary context as well as in the same book or other books

[48] See Darrell Bock, *Interpreting,* chap. 5, and Craig L. Blomberg with Jennifer Foutz Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), chap.5.
[49] See, e.g., J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word. A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), chap.9.

written by him. All the other outer circles are mined in order to enrich, deepen, and strengthen the findings of the previous steps.

But even when respecting the direction in which one must proceed when doing word studies—from the inner circle to the outer circles—there are cases when the meaning of a word can be decided exclusively from the immediate context, the outer circles being of no help. Take for example the words καθεύδω and γρηγορέω in 1 Thessalonians 5:6-10.[50] These words have three different meanings in the same immediate context:

1 Thessalonians 5:6-7,10 the verb καθεύδω has 3 different meanings:

Literal = to sleep (v.7);

Figurative = to be dead (v.10) and thus synonym with κοιμάομαι in 4:13,14,15;

Spiritual = indifferent (v.6).

1 Thessalonians 5:6,10 the verb γρηγορέω has 2 (or 3) different meanings:

Literal = to stay awake as opposed to sleeping;

Figurative = to be alive (v.10) as opposed to being dead;

Figurative = to watch (v.6) as opposed to being indifferent.

These examples show us that immediate context and current usage are not enough to determine the meaning of the words. One other factor must be brought into discussion: authorial intention—how the author uses the words or what the author is doing with the words.

Authorial Intention[51]

Ultimately meaning is not an inherent characteristic of words, but is grounded in the author's intention, in other words, in what he *does* with the words he *uses*. Context can be similar, words can be similar, but intention in usage can be different, as illustrated above.

[50] For other examples see Turner, "Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics for the New Testament," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematics Theology*, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 46, and Vanhoozer, *Meaning,* 210.

[51] For a more elaborate argument for authorial intention, see my article "The Importance of Background Studies in Uncovering the Meaning of a Text. An Argument from Linguistics" *Jurnal Teologic* vol.21, nr. 1 (2022): 41-64, esp. 46-49.

The difference is between information and intention in a text.[52] In linguistics, the distinction is between semantics and pragmatics.[53] Abraham Kuruvilla, applying this linguistic distinction to biblical hermeneutics, speaks of what the author *is doing* (i.e., pragmatics) with what the author *is saying* (i.e., semantics).[54]

Hirsch is the strongest advocate of the author as determiner of meaning. He states: "Almost any word sequence can under the conventions of language legitimately represent more than one complex of meaning. A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside human consciousness."[55] Therefore, Hirsch argues that meaning is connected not to words but to people who intent to perform something by them. Words are properties of people, who use them to mean something. In other words, people

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[52] Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology. God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 179 speaks of intention in a text as "the performative quality of Scripture: *words on a mission*." Jeannine K. Brown, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics. Scripture as Communication* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2007), 16, distinguishes between cognitive content (i.e., propositional truth) and noncognitive purposes. More specifically, the author, in his communication through his text, seeks to engage the reader and not just inform her. This distinction is characteristic of the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin, who contends that utterances not only say things, but also do things. The distinction is between *locution* (i.e., what we say), *illocution* (i.e., what we intend to accomplish with what we say), and *perlocution* (i.e., how the reader responds). A communication is accomplished when the first two aspects are fulfilled. See Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). For a summary see Brown, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 32-35.

[53] For a general discussion from linguistics, see "Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber, *Meaning and Relevance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robyn Carston, "Linguistic Communication and the Semantics / Pragmatics Distinction," *Synthese* 165 (2008): 322, mentioned by Abraham Kuruvilla in "What Is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*? Pragmatics and Preaching—An Appeal!" *JETS* 60/3 (2017): 557-80. For an application to biblical hermeneutics, see Gene L. Green, "Relevance Theory and Biblical Interpretation," in *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (NT Monographs 11; ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell; Sheffield: Phoenix, 2009), 219–20; Abraham Kuruvilla, "Pericopal Theology: An Intermediary between Text and Application," *TrinJ* 31 NS (2010) 265–83; idem, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (LNTS 393; London: T&T Clark, 2009) 142–90; "The Aqedah (Genesis 22). What is the author doing with what he is saying" JETS 55.3 (2012): 495-6; and idem, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013). "Christiconic View" în *Homiletics and Hermeneutics. Four Views on Preaching Today*, eds. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

[54] See, e.g., Abraham Kuruvilla, "'What Is the Author *Doing* with what He Is *Saying*?' Pragmatics and Preaching—An Appeal!" *JETS* 60/3 (2017): 557-80. For an application to homiletics beginning from this distinction, see my forthcoming essay, "Raportul dintre text, predicator și ascultător. Implicații hermeneutice și homiletice" (The Relation between text, preacher, and listener. Hermeneutical and Homiletical Implications).

[55] Hirsch, *Validity*, 5.

mean something by words while words do not mean anything disconnected from those who use them;[56] they only have potential meanings. Thus, one must discover the meaning of the text from the intention of the author as expressed through the text. Vanhoozer argues that, "Texts without authors count neither as historical nor as communicative action. Texts without historical authors are texts without meaning."[57] Turner agrees that, when we ask concerning authorial intention, "we are inquiring about what intentional acts he has indeed performed in and through what he has actually said, understood within the linguistic/cultural world in which he uttered/inscribed the words of the letter."[58]

Thus, we may say that the text provides only *the information* or *the saying* but both *the intention* or *the doing* is a function of the author. This is not to say that we must get into the psychology of the author to determine his intention, but that the author is an important factor in determining the meaning, besides considering current usage and immediate context.[59] As Jeffrey Reed states: "Words as physical objects do not 'possess' meaning, they are 'attributed' meaning by speakers and listeners in a context."[60]

Meaning, then, is the result of the combination of three factors: current usage, immediate context, and authorial intention. A neglect of either of the three leads to any one or more of the exegetical fallacies discussed above.

Guidelines for Word Studies

In light of these conclusions, we are now ready to put forth several guidelines for doing lexical analysis, that can ensure legitimate results. It is, of course, impossible to give an exhaustive list of guidelines for doing word studies and to go into great details, but we will seek to highlight the ones that build upon what

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[56] Vanhoozer puts it this way: "We can then say of meaning what has been said of guns: words don't kill; *people* do." *Meaning,* 202.
[57] Ibid., 233.
[58] Turner, "Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics," 47.
[59] See Vanhoozer's emphasis on speech-act theory to get to the authorial intention, *Meaning*, chap.5. See also Stephen E. Fowl, "The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," in *Between Two Horizons. Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology,* eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 71-87; Nicholas Wolterstorff "Resuscitating the Author," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 35-50.
[60]Jeffrey T. Reed, "Modern Linguistics and the New Testament: A Basic Guide to Theory, Terminology, and Literature," in *Approaches to New Testament Study*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 120, eds. Stanley E. Porter and David Tombs (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 232.

has been presented so far.[61] The reader must be aware that these guidelines appear in no particular order of importance, though the immediate context must always be in the mind of the reader as he follows each guideline.

One must pay close attention to the theme and details of the immediate context (i.e., the paragraphs and chapters) in which the word occurs, because meaning is closely tight and undoubtedly determined by the literary context that uses the word.

One must look at other usages of the word in texts from the same author, in other texts in the Bible,[62] and in extra-biblical material. One must focus however primarily on the *current* usage of the word. Therefore, one must analyze the occurrences of the word in the same period unless it can be shown that the word has not changed in its semantic value over time.[63] In this sense, the parallels distant in time must be used with caution, though at times they may prove to be valuable to the study. For instance, an appeal to the Church Fathers may be legitimate, even if they are quite remote in time, especially if they interpret the text studied.

One must be careful not to impose the meanings of the same word from a different context on the word in the context in case, even if the parallel context is contemporary with the time of the writing. The reason is that a language does not use words in an absolutely consistent way; neither does the same person. For this reason, one should select only that meaning to be relevant which is used in a context similar to the passage studied.

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[61] For different guidelines for word studies, see, e.g., Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), chap.8; Craig Blomberg, *Handbook*, section entitled "What Does It All Mean? Steps in Word Study" in chap. 5; Darrell Bock, *Interpreting*, section 5.2 entitled "Diachronic and Synchronic Word Analysis."

[62] Here, the use of lexicons such as Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988) and dictionaries such as Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990-93), and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), 3d ed., ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), are useful. For more tools in word studies, see Gordon D. Fee *New Testament Exegesis. A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 79-95.

[63] For an examination of words used in nonbiblical sources, see Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and aug. Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940; revised supplement, 1996)" and the computer based program *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (*TLG*) and online resource *Perseus* at www.perseus.tufts.edu.

One must seek to be thorough in gathering the semantic range, since even a rare meaning of a term is a possibility for the use of that term in the biblical context. One must demonstrate discernment in this matter also, for although the gathering of all relevant parallels is a good indication of what a word can mean, the literature available should not be believed to exhaust all the possible meanings. The ancient literature available to us today is simply limited.

When dealing with a compound word, one should seek to avoid the root fallacy. In the case of a verb with a prepositional prefix one should seek to discern in which way (of the three) the prefix affects the meaning of the word.

In using dictionaries and lexicons, one must keep in mind that they are interpretative to a large degree. In other words, they offer the opinion of the author(s) concerning the category of meaning and usage under which a word should fit. Their categories are not established facts. Moreover, all the lexicons and dictionaries build upon previous ones and therefore are bound to contain errors.

Conclusion

Words are the building blocks of meaning in any discourse. Unless one knows the meaning of the words employed one cannot discern the meaning of what is being communicated. Thus, one of the most elemental steps in biblical exegesis is word studies. At this most basic level of meaning, there are fallacies that must be avoided, factors that must be taken into consideration, and guidelines that must be followed in doing word studies. This article has sought to explain these issues in order to ensure a certain level of accuracy of understanding when one reads the Bible.

We have seen that words communicate meaning only in so far as they are employed by human authors to function (i.e., authorial intention) within a certain literary context (i.e., immediate context). It is human authors who use words in ways specific to their time and setting (i.e., current usage) in order to convey a meaningful message.

The Bible is God's communication to us through human words inscribed in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, if we want to understand and appropriate his message, we have no choice but to seek to understand the words. It is only through his Word come to us in human words (i.e., Bible) and human flesh (i.e., Jesus) that we can be saved and grow in understanding and holiness. That is why, when we come to the Bible, we need not only read it, but read it carefully. So, let

us be mindful of how we apply ourselves to God's Word(s) if we want to apply correctly God's Word(s) to ourselves.

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