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word-study Fallacies

What amazing things words are! They can convey information and express or elicit emotion. They are the vehicles that enable us to think. With words of command we can cause things to be accomplished; with words of adoration we praise God; and in another context the same words blaspheme him.

Words are among the preacher's primary tools-both the words he studies and the words with which he explains his studies. Mercifully, there now exist several excellent volumes to introduce the student to the general field of lexical semantics and to warn against particular abuses;¹ and this

1. See especially the works to which repeated reference will be made: James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theology and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Stephen Ullmann, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972); G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980); Arthur Gibson, *Biblical Semantic Logic: A Preliminary Analysis* (New York: St. Martin, 1981); J. P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Philadelphia: Fortress; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982); and especially Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

is all to the good, for Nathan Söderblom was right when he said, “Philology is the eye of the needle through which every theological camel must enter the heaven of theology.”*

My own pretensions are modest. I propose merely to list and describe a collection of common fallacies that repeatedly crop up when preachers and others attempt word studies of biblical terms, and to provide some examples. The entries may serve as useful warning flags.

Common Fallacies in Semantics

1. The root fallacy

One of the most enduring of errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its components. In this view, meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word. How many times have we been told that because the verbal cognate of ἀπόστολος (apostle) is ἀποστέλλω (I send), the root meaning of “apostle” is “one who is sent”? In the preface of the New King James Bible, we are told that the “literal” meaning of μονογενής is “only begotten.” Is that true? How often do preachers refer to the verb ἀγαπάω (to love), contrast it with φιλέω (to love), and deduce that the text is saying something about a special kind of loving, for no other reason than that ἀγαπάω is used?

All of this is linguistic nonsense. We might have guessed as much if we were more acquainted with the etymology of English words. Anthony C. Thiselton offers by way of example our word nice, which comes from the Latin *nes-*

2. “Die Philologie ist das Nadelöhr, durch des jedes theologische Kamel in den Himmel der Gottesgelehrtheit eingehen muss.” Cited by J. M. van Veen, *Nathan Söderblom* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1940), 59 n. 4; cited also by A. J. Malherbe, “Through the Eye of the Needle: Simplicity or Singleness,” *RestQ* 56 (1971): 119.

3. The New King James Bible (Nashville: Nelson, 1982) or the Revised Authorised Version (London: Bagster, 1982), iv.

cius, meaning “ignorant.”⁴ Our “good-by” is a contraction for Anglo-Saxon “God be with you.” Now it may be possible to trace out diachronically just how *nescius* generated “nice”; it is certainly easy to imagine how “God be with you” came to be contracted to “good-by.” But I know of no one today who in saying such and such a person is “nice” believes that he or she has in some measure labeled that person ignorant because the “root meaning” or “hidden meaning” or “literal meaning” of “nice” is “ignorant.”

J. P. Louw provides a fascinating example.⁵ In 1 Corinthians 4:1, Paul writes of himself, Cephas, Apollos, and other leaders in these terms: “So then, men ought to regard us as servants (ὑπηρέτας) of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God” (μυστ). More than a century ago, R. C. Trench popularized the view that ὑπηρέτης derives from the verb ἑρέσσω, “to row.”⁶ The basic meaning of ὑπηρέτης, then, is “rower.” Trench quite explicitly says a ὑπηρέτης “was originally the rower (from ἑρέσσω.” A. T. Robertson and J. B. Hofmann went further and said ὑπηρέτης derives morphologically from ὑπό and ἑρέτης.⁷ Now ἑρέτης means “rower” in Homer (eighth century B.C.!) ; and Hofmann draws the explicit connection with the morphology, concluding a ὑπηρέτης was basically an “under rower” or “assistant rower” or “subordinate rower.” Trench had not gone so far: he did not detect in ὑπό any notion of subordination. Nevertheless Leon Morris concluded that a ὑπηρέτης was “a servant of a lowly kind”;* and William

4. Anthony C. Thiselton, “Semantics and New Testament Interpretation,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 80–81.

5. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 26–27.

6. R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (1854; Marshalltown: NFCE, n.d.), 32.

7. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 4:102; J. B. Hofmann, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Griechischen* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1950), s.v.

8. Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 74.

Barclay plunged further and designated ὑπηρέτης as “a rower on the lower bank of a **trireme**.”⁹ Yet the fact remains that with only one possible exception—and it is merely possible, not certain¹⁰—**ὑπηρέτης** is never used for “rower” in classical literature, and it is certainly not used that way in the New Testament. The ὑπηρέτης in the New Testament is a servant, and often there is little if anything to distinguish him from a **διάκονος**. As Louw remarks, to derive the meaning of ὑπηρέτης from **ὑπό** and **ἑρέτης** is no more intrinsically realistic than deriving the meaning of “butterfly” from “butter” and “fly,” or the meaning of “pineapple” from “pine” and “apple.”¹¹ Even those of us who have never been to Hawaii recognize that pineapples are not a special kind of apple that grows on pines.

The search for hidden meanings bound up with etymologies becomes even more ludicrous when two words with entirely different meanings share the same etymology. James Barr draws attention to the pair **לֶחֶם** (*lehem*) and **מִלְחָמָה** (*millamah*), which mean “bread” and “war” respectively:

It must be regarded as doubtful whether the influence of their common root is of any importance semantically in classical Hebrew in the normal usage of the words. And it would be utterly fanciful to connect the two as mutually suggestive or evocative, as if battles were normally for the sake of bread or bread a necessary provision for battles. Words containing similar sound sequences may of course be deliberately juxtaposed for assonance, but this is a special case and separately recognizable.¹²

9. William Barclay, *New Testament Words* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), s.v.

10. The inscription in question reads τοὶ ὑπηρέται τῶν μακρῶν ναῶν (“the attendants [rowers?] on the large vessels”). According to LSJ, 1872, the meaning rowers is dubious.

11. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, 27.

12. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 102.

Perhaps I should return for a moment to my first three **apostelos** examples. It is arguable that although **ἀπόστολος** (apostle) is cognate with **ἀποστέλλω** (I send), New Testament use of the noun does not center on the meaning *the one sent* but on “messenger.” Now a messenger is usually sent; but the word *messenger* also calls to mind the message the person carries, and suggests he represents the one who sent him. In other words, actual usage in the New Testament suggests that **ἀπόστολος** commonly bears the meaning *a special representative* or *a special messenger* rather than “someone sent out.”

monogenas The word **μονογενής** is often thought to spring from **monos...gennao** **μόνος** (only) plus **γεννάω** (to beget); and hence its meaning is “only begotten.” Even at the etymological level, the **γεν-**root is tricky: **μονογενής** could as easily spring from **μόνος** (only) plus **γένος** (kind or race) to mean “only one of its kind,” “unique,” or the like. If we press on to consider usage, we discover that the Septuagint renders **יְהִידִי** (*yahid*) as “alone” or “only” (e.g., Ps. 22:20[21:21, LXX, “my precious life” (NIV) or “my only soul”]; Ps. 25:16[24:16, LXX, “for I am lonely and poor”]), without even a hint of “begetting.” True, in the New Testament the word often refers to the relationship of child to parent; but even here, care must be taken. In Hebrews 11:17, Isaac is said to be Abraham’s **μονογενής**—which clearly cannot mean “only-begotten son,” since Abraham also sired Ishmael and a fresh packet of progeny by Keturah (Gen. 25:1–2). Isaac is, however, Abraham’s *unique* son, his special and well-beloved son.¹³ The

13. For further discussion, see Dale Moody, “The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version,” *JBL* 72 (1953): 213–19. Attempts to overturn Moody’s work have not been convincing. The most recent of these is by John V. Dahms, “The Johannine Use of *Monogenēs* Reconsidered,” *NTS* 29 (1983): 222–32. This is not the place to enter into a point-by-point refutation of his article; but in my judgment his weighing of the evidence is not always even-handed. For instance, when he comments on the use of **μονογενής** in Ps. 22:20, he stresses that things, not persons, are in view; yet when he comes to Ps. 25:16 (24:16, LXX)—“Look upon me and have mercy upon me for I am **μονογενής** and poor”—he concedes the meaning lonely is possible but adds: “We think it not

long and short of the matter is that renderings such as “for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16, *NIV*) are prompted by neither an inordinate love of paraphrasis, nor a perverse desire to deny some cardinal truth, but by linguistics.

In a similar vein, although it is doubtless true that the entire range of **agapao** ἀγαπάω (to love) and the entire range of **phileo** φιλέω (to love) are not exactly the same, nevertheless they enjoy substantial overlap; and where they overlap, appeal to a “root meaning” in order to discern a difference is fallacious. In 2 Samuel 13 (LXX), both ἀγαπάω (to love) and **agapae** the cognate ἀγάπη (love) can refer to Amnon’s incestuous rape of his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:15, LXX). When we read that Demas forsook Paul because he loved this present, evil world, there is no linguistic reason to be surprised that the verb is ἀγαπάω (2 Tim. 4:10). John 3:35 records that the Father loves the Son and uses the verb ἀγαπάω; John 5:20 repeats the thought, but uses φιλέω—without any discernible shift in meaning. The false assumptions surrounding this pair of words are ubiquitous; and, so I shall return to them again. My only point here is that there is nothing intrinsic to the verb ἀγαπάω or the noun ἀγάπη to prove its real meaning or hidden meaning refers to some special kind of love.

I hasten to add three caveats to this discussion. First, I am not saying that any word can mean anything. Normally we observe that any individual word has a certain limited

impossible that the meaning ‘only child’, i.e. one who has no sibling to provide help, is (also?) intended” (p. 224). Dahms argues this despite the fact that David wrote the psalm, and David had many siblings. But at least Dahms recognizes that “meaning is determined by usage, not etymology” (p. 223); and that is my main point here. Moody argues that it was the Arian controversy that prompted translators (in particular Jerome) to render μονογενής by *unigenitus* (only begotten), not *unicus* (only); and even here, Jerome was inconsistent, for he still preferred the latter in passages like Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38 where the reference is not to Christ, and therefore no christological issue is involved. This rather forcefully suggests that it was not linguistic study that prompted Jerome’s changes, but the pressure of contemporary theological debate.

semantic range, and the context may therefore modify or shape the meaning of a word only within certain boundaries. The total semantic range is not permanently fixed, of course; with time and novel usage, it may shift considerably. Even so, I am not suggesting that words are infinitely plastic. I am simply saying that the meaning of a word cannot be reliably determined by etymology, or that a root, once discovered, always projects a certain semantic load onto any word that incorporates that root. Linguistically, meaning is not an intrinsic possession of a word; rather, “it is a set of relations for which a verbal symbol is a sign.”¹⁴ In one sense, of course, it is legitimate to say “this word means such and such,” where we are either providing the lexical range inductively observed or specifying the meaning of a word in a particular context; but we must not freight such talk with too much etymological baggage.

The second caveat is that the meaning of a word may reflect the meanings of its component parts. For example, **ekballo** the verb ἐκβάλλω, from ἐκ and βάλλω, does in fact mean “I cast out,” “I throw out,” or “I put out.” The meaning of a word may reflect its etymology; and it must be admitted that this is more common in synthetic languages like Greek or German, with their relatively high percentages of transparent words (words that have some kind of natural relation to their meaning) than in a language like English, where words are opaque (i.e., without any natural relation to their meaning).¹⁵ Even so, my point is that we cannot responsibly *assume* that etymology is related to meaning. We can only test the point by discovering the meaning of a word inductively.

Finally, I am far from suggesting that etymological study is useless. It is important, for instance, in the diachronic study of words (the study of words as they occur across long periods of time), in the attempt to specify the earliest

14. Eugene A. Nida, *Exploring Semantic Structures* (Munich: Fink, 1975), 14.

15. See especially the discussion in Ullmann, *Semantics*, 80 – 115.

attested meaning, in the study of cognate languages, and especially in attempts to understand the meanings of *hapax legomena* (words that appear only once). In the last case, although etymology is a clumsy tool for discerning meaning, the lack of comparative material means we sometimes have no other choice. That is why, as Moises Silva points out in his excellent discussion of these matters, etymology plays a much more important role in the determination of meaning in the Hebrew Old Testament than in the Greek New Testament: the Hebrew contains proportionately far more *hapax legomena*.¹⁶ “The relative value of this use of etymology varies inversely with the quantity of material available for the language.” And in any case, the specification of the meaning of a word on the sole basis of etymology can never be more than an educated guess.

2. Semantic anachronism

This fallacy occurs when a late use of a word is read back into earlier literature. At the simplest level, it occurs within the same language, as when the Greek early church fathers use a word in a manner not demonstrably envisaged by the New Testament writers. It is not obvious, for instance, that their use of ἐπίσκοπος (bishop) to designate a church leader who has oversight over several local churches has any New Testament warrant.

But the problem has a second face when we also add a change of language. Our word dynamite is etymologically derived from δύναμις (power, or even miracle). I do not know how many times I have heard preachers offer some such rendering of Romans 1:16 as this: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the *dynamite* of God unto salvation for everyone who believes”-often with a knowing tilt of the head as if something profound or even esoteric has been uttered. This is not just the old root fallacy revisited.

16. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*, 38 – 51.

17. *Ibid.*, 42.

It is worse: it is an appeal to a kind of reverse etymology, the root fallacy compounded by anachronism. Did Paul think of dynamite when he penned this word? And in any case, even to mention dynamite as a kind of analogy is singularly inappropriate. Dynamite blows things up, tears things down, rips out rock, gouges holes, destroys things. The power of God concerning which Paul speaks he often identifies with the power that raised Jesus from the dead (e.g., Eph. 1:18 – 20); and as it operates in us, its goal is εἰς σωτηρίαν (sotarian σωτηρίαν “unto salvation,” Rom. 1:16, κτλ), aiming for the wholeness and perfection implicit in the consummation of our salvation. Quite apart from the semantic anachronism, therefore, dynamite appears inadequate as a means of raising Jesus from the dead or as a means of conforming us to the likeness of Christ. Of course, what preachers are trying to do when they talk about dynamite is give some indication of the greatness of the power involved. Even so, Paul’s measure is not dynamite, but the empty tomb. In exactly the same way, it is sheer semantic anachronism to note that in the text “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7) the Greek word behind “cheerful” is ἠλαρόν (*hilaron*) and conclude that what God really loves is a hilarious giver. Perhaps we should play a laugh-track record while the offering plate is being circulated.

A third level of the same problem was painfully exemplified in three recent articles about blood in *Christianity Today*¹⁸ The authors did an admirable job of explaining the wonderful things science has discovered that blood can do-in particular its cleansing role as it flushes out cellular impurities and transports nourishment to every part of the body. What a wonderful picture (we were told) of how the blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from every sin (1 John 1:7). In fact, it is nothing of the kind. Worse, it is irresponsibly mystical and theologically misleading. The phrase *the*

18. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, “Blood: The Miracle of Cleansing,” *CT* 27/4 (Feb. 18, 1983): 12 – 15; “Blood: The Miracle of Life,” *CT* 27/5 (Mar. 4, 1983): 38-42; “Life in the Blood,” *CT* 27/6 (Mar. 18, 1983): 18-21.

blood of Jesus refers to Jesus' violent, sacrificial **death**.¹⁹ In general, the blessings that the Scriptures show to be accomplished or achieved by the blood of Jesus are equally said to be accomplished or achieved by the death of Jesus (e.g., justification, Rom. 3:21 – 26; 5:6 – 9; redemption, Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; Rev. 5:9). If John tells us that the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ purifies us from every sin, he is informing us that our hope for continued cleansing and forgiveness rests not on protestations of our goodness while our life is a sham (1 John 1:6, probably directed against proto-Gnostics) but on continual walking in the light and on continued reliance on Christ's finished work on the cross.