Lexical Pragmatics and the Lexicon

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While the number of our lexical resources for exegeting and translating both testaments has grown enormously, our understanding of how words mean remains lodged in a model of communication that has come under challenge in recent years. The way we understand the nature of and relationship between lexemes and concepts will affect how we develop and utilize our lexicons for exegesis. Traditionally, lexical semantics has oriented both these lexicographic endeavors. But recent research in the field of lexical pragmatics, currently discussed among those working on Relevance Theory (RT) and other cognitive approaches to linguistics, gives important new guidance to orient our use of the lexicon and offers valuable insights that can help shape their future design. Lexical pragmatics points to a new, more context-oriented and dynamic approach to understanding the relationship between lexemes and concepts, and the nature of concepts as ad hoc constructions, in the communication of meaning.

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LEXICAL RESOURCES FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

We love lexicons. Whether we are translators of the Bible or commentators, biblical studies students or professors, pastors or lay persons, we find tremendous delight in using and designing lexicons. Words are the building blocks of our interpretive trade, and our lexicons open ancient worlds by reviving words long silent. Every Hebrew student knows BDB (Brown, Driver and Briggs),¹ and the adept learn their way around Koehler and Baumgartner’s four-volume Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.² Jenni and Westermann’s Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament and David Clines’s Dictionary of Classical Hebrew help quench our lexical thirst when we read the Hebrew text.³ The United Bible Societies are producing

another lexical work, The Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, under the editorial supervision of Reinier de Blois along with Enio Mueller (www.sbdh.org). This new semantic-domain dictionary will stand electronically alongside Louw and Nida. Many working in Greek keep BDAG within arm’s reach, while Mouton and Milligan and Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie are never more than a few steps away. We are dismayed to hear that the lexical project of G. H. R. Horsley and John Lee, which attempts to revise Moulton and Milligan, has stalled due to lack of funding. Other major projects appear slowly, fascicle by fascicle, such as the Diccionario Griego-Español (DGE) and the Diccionario Griego-Español del Nuevo Testamento (DGENT). Numerous lexicons have become available on electronic platforms such as the inclusion of LSJ in the Perseus Project and the TLG, and the appearance of BDAG as part of the Logos Bible Software package. Access to our favorite lexicons for Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek is becoming simplified.

We live in an age when we all can become lexicographers with the democratized accessibility of ancient texts on the TLG, PHI7 and other databases. John Lee begins his History of New Testament Lexicography with a note about ἀνακάζω, which appears 9 times in the NT but 284 times in the PHI7 corpus and a staggering 8,000 times in the TLG.
size of the database, however, presents a methodological problem. Do we look up all instances of the word or just do “spot checks and get an impression as quickly as possible of this word’s usage around the time of the New Testament”? The literary resources are available, though the time to analyze all the data is precious and short. Where are the εὐεργέται (“benefactors”)?

While the number of our lexical resources for exegeting and translating both testaments has grown enormously, our understanding of how words mean remains lodged in a model of communication that has come under challenge in recent years. The way we understand the nature of lexemes will affect how we develop and use our lexicons. Traditionally, lexical semantics has oriented both these lexicographic endeavors. But recent research in the field of lexical pragmatics, currently discussed among those working on Relevance Theory (RT) and other cognitive approaches to linguistics, gives significant guidance to orient our use of the lexicon and offers valuable insights that can help shape their future design. While lexical semantics has provided the theoretical underpinnings for most all our lexical work up to the present, lexical pragmatics points to a new, more context-oriented and dynamic approach to understanding the relationship between lexemes and concepts, and the nature of concepts, in the communication of meaning.

LEXICAL SEMANTICS, LEXICAL pragmatics, AND THE LEXICON

Lexical Semantics and Lexicography

Lexical semantics explores how words encode concepts. Commenting on lexical semantics, Michael McCarthy muses that “if the word is an identifiable unit of a language, then it must be possible to isolate a core, stable meaning that enables its consistent use by a vast number of users in many contexts over a long period of time.” We are also told that words have a wide range of meaning, as illustrated in every dictionary we open on the desk or laptop. Discussing semantic theory, Jerrold Katz and Jerry Fodor state that “a dictionary entry is a characterization of every sense that a lexical item can bear in any sentence.” This, they note, presents a problem since “a dictionary usually supplies more senses for a lexical item than it bears in an occurrence in a given sentence.” So a semantic theory must

13. Ibid., 5.
15. In contrast, Deirdre Wilson notes that “the goal of lexical pragmatics is to account for the fact that the concept communicated by use of a word often differs from the concept encoded” (“Relevance and Lexical Pragmatics,” Italian Journal of Linguistics 15 [2003] 273–74).
supply rules that will allow a reader or hearer to disambiguate or select the proper sense of each lexical item in a sentence. 18

Katz and Fodor argue for the compositional nature of lexemes. A word’s meaning is compositional because we may break it down into its components via componential analysis. 19 So, for example, the components of the word man would be human, adult, and male. 20 A bachelor is a human, who is male, and who has never been married. This type of lexical analysis allows us to distinguish meanings of words and the various senses of a single word. For example, another kind of bachelor is a human who is male and a young knight serving under the standard of another knight. 21 These various components also aid in identifying the fields or domains to which the word belongs. Words often share common components. We recognize father, mother, son, sister, and aunt as lexemes that have the common componental elements human and kinship. 22 Identifying these components allows us to construct dictionaries based on semantic domains, such as the one Louw and Nida produced.

Moving beyond Lexical Semantics:
The Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew

In the Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew (SDBH), Reinier de Blois has taken the discussion a step further beyond lexical semantics. De Blois remarks that, since the time when Louw and Nida relied on componential analysis,

important new insights have appeared on the linguistic horizon. Scholars have started to pay more attention to the cognitive reality behind a language, including the entire communication pattern in which language plays such a crucial role. New approaches such as

in Lexicography and Translation [ed. J. P. Louw; Cape Town: Bible Society of South Africa, 1985] 168) states, “most words have a range of meanings. . . . Aided by the context, native speakers usually pick the right meaning without any trouble. The ideas expressed in the larger message of the literary context usually clarify the intended meaning.”

18. Jerrold J. Katz (“On the General Character of Semantic Theory,” in Concepts: Core Readings [ed. Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence; Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1999] 128) discusses the nature of semantic theory, stating that “It must also explain the semantic competence underlying the speaker’s ability to understand the meaning of new sentences chosen arbitrarily from the infinite range of sentences. This explanation must assume that the speaker possesses, as part of his system of internalized rules, semantic rules that enable him to obtain the meaning of any new sentences as a compositional function of the meanings of its parts and their syntactic organization.” Also see Katz and Fodor “The Structure of Semantic Theory,” 171, 183.

19. “Compositionality is the idea that the meanings of complex expressions (or concepts) are constructed from the meanings of the less-complex expressions (or concepts) that are their constituents” (Jerry A. Fodor and Ernie Lepore The Compositionality Papers [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002] 42). See McCarthy, “Lexis and Lexicography,” 298.


21. Ibid., 189–90.

Relevance Theory and Cognitive Linguistics can be of immense help to us in this process. In our linguistic analyses we should not be merely aiming towards descriptive systems that work, but for systems that are intuitively adequate, that represent as much as possible the ways of thinking of the speaker of the language, and do justice to his/her organization of experience, his/her system of beliefs, experience, and practices. We are not supposed to impose a system on the language. Instead of that we are to try to discover the semantic structure of the language. For that reason the semantic framework underlying SDBH will not be based on componential analysis of meaning but on a number of important insights from Cognitive Linguistics instead.

De Blois and the team working on the SDBH identify two kinds of semantic domains: lexical and contextual. He explains that “Lexical semantic domains correspond to what in cognitive linguistics is described as cognitive categories.” These categories are not universals across cultures and times. “They depend on the system of experiences, beliefs, and practices of a particular social or ethnic group. The way a human being perceives the entities in the world around him/her plays an important role.” With that input, “Human beings make a mental representation, a cognitive reference point . . . for every category.” These categories, according to de Blois, have typical and atypical members. So for the category “bird,” we have the “robin,” which is typical, but “ostrich” and “penguin” which are atypical. The typical and atypical classifications are useful because, as he says:

Categories have attributes that provide information about categories. At first glance an attribute may seem similar to a component of meaning. There is an important difference, however. A component of meaning is a distinctive feature, whereas an attribute is not distinctive in nature. It is a cognitive feature, representing what a speaker of a language considers to be relevant information. The category “bird” may have the following attributes: (1) it has two wings, (2) it has two legs, (3) it can fly, (4) it has a beak, (5) feathers, and (6) it lays eggs. Typical members of a category have more attributes in common than less typical members.

The categories, then, “are not homogeneous. They have fuzzy boundaries.” Therefore, any particular object or thing “may be a typical member of category A, but a less typical member of category B at the same time.” De Blois, however, does not provide a methodology to help us recognize when

24. Ibid., 3.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 4.
28. Ibid.
we have crossed the line from typical to a-typical members of a category. How many attributes are enough? And, how do we tell how many are enough? He does not say.

On the other hand, the SDBH includes contextual semantic domains. To explain, de Blois first presents the lexical semantic domain “rope.” A native speaker “would probably be able to describe what, according to his/her world view, the prototype of a ‘rope’ would look like. That would probably not go much further than a description of what a simple rope looks like, what it is made of, and maybe a few examples of what it is used for.”

But more is needed. Within a cognitive context where we find “rope” interacting with other objects, the “rope” will change into “an item for sale on the market” or “used by a person climbing down a wall” or “used to hang curtains in a palace hall” or “used to tear down a wall during a siege.” These are the “contextual semantic domains. And since cognitive contexts are usually quite complex often more than one semantic domain is needed to describe it adequately.” Consequently, de Blois notes that in the SDBH the lexemes have this double classification, being given two kinds of labels: lexical and contextual. “In other words,” he says, “every (sub)entry may have one or more lexical meanings and will therefore be assigned to one or more lexical semantic domains. For each lexical meaning, in turn, we may find one or more different contexts, each providing its own relevant information that will need to be covered by one or more contextual semantic domains.”

The SDBH presents both the lexical and contextual semantic domains for each entry. The contextual sensitivity, complete with examples from the Hebrew Bible, makes the SDBH a very useful and nuanced tool that offers a distinct methodological improvement over Louw and Nida. We discover that אָב belongs to the lexical semantic domain “Kinship.” The lexical meaning of the subentry in the form of a definition would include “(a) direct male progenitor; → who normally provides protection, care, instruction, and discipline; = is usually regarded with respect and associated with wisdom, security, and comfort—father (Gen.2:24; 1:22; 1:23 . . .).” But אָב also has additional lexical semantic domains, such as “deities.” In this case, the lexical meaning of the subentry in the form of a definition would be “as [a] but extended to deities: = deity; ← compared to a father; → giver of life, protection, wisdom, etc.—father (Deu.32:6; 2Sa.7:14; 1Ch.17:13 . . .).” Moreover, de Blois observes that there are core contextual semantic domains for this lexical meaning: “Kinship > Care.” And these, then, may be broken down even further into addition contextual semantic domains:

29. Ibid., 8.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 9.
33. See www.sdbh.org/vocabula/index.html.
Human > God—(God as one’s) father (Deu.32:6; 2Sa.7:14; 1Ch.17:13 . . .)
Human > God; Royalty—(God as) father (of a king) (2Sa.7:14; 1Ch.17:13; 13:10 . . .)
Human > Idolatry—(an idol as one’s) father (Jer.2:27)

The electronic format and design of the SBDH makes all these lexical and contextual entries easily accessible and readily useful, providing us a more dynamic and fine-grained approach to recognizing both the lexical and contextual semantic domains of a lexeme. The dictionary also allows the user to gather together all the words that belong to a particular domain and, in the end, provides some well-mapped guidance as we move through the complexities of the Hebrew language’s linguistic matrix.

Lexical Pragmatics and Lexicography

The linguistic underpinnings of the SBDH are largely consonant with the recent work on lexical pragmatics under development in RT, which explores the nature of ad hoc concept formation. Words uttered in a particular context provide access to concept schemas but, in any and every particular utterance, the concepts themselves shift and morph to such an extent that we should regard concepts, along with their entities, as ad hoc constructions.34 There may be, on the one hand, a narrowing of the concept in use or, on the other, a broadening of the concept. In the utterance “All doctors drink,” the speaker is using “drink” to lexicalize the concept drink*, which has to do with consuming alcohol. In this case, “drink” does not mean simply “drink liquid,” but the concept has been narrowed to drinking of a particular kind.35 On the other hand, a concept may be broadened, as in the statement “The piece of property was square.” In fact, the corner angles were not precisely but only approximately 90 degrees and each side of the property was nearly, but not exactly, 100 feet. This approximation would be an example of concept broadening.

34. Lawrence W. Barsalou (“Flexibility, Structure, and Linguistic Vagary in Concepts: Manifestations of a Compositional System of Perceptual Symbols,” in Theories of Memory [ed. Alan F. Collins, Susan E. Gathercole, Martin A. Conway, and Peter E. Morris; Hove: Erlbaum, 1993] 48) examines people’s profoundly creative ability for constructing linguistic descriptions that are relevant in the current context. In our protocol studies of planning, we often found people constructing amazingly ad hoc descriptions of attributes. Consider the category companions. One attribute of companions that subjects described frequently was the extent to which a possible companion will want to do the same vacation activities that I will want to do. After describing this attribute, subjects often evaluated possible companions with respect to it. Clearly, such attributes are context-dependent. In the context of a different event, the attributes described for companion ... might well be different.

Concepts may also go through some form of category extension. An example would be the use of metaphors. Sue, for example, is known for her firm resolve, especially after having examined issues thoroughly. When someone challenges her position, we may observe her studied resolve based on extensive and carefully nuanced research. We then remark, “Sue is a rock.” But in a certain instance when an opponent mounts a particularly devastating, evidenced-based case against Sue’s position, Sue may not be able to respond and becomes obstinate. Then the remark, “Sue is a rock” may not be about her thoroughness and resolve but about her frustrating obstinacy. In this case, the concept rock* is constructed on the fly, and the only way that one may understand the utterance “Sue is a rock” is by knowing the attendant contextual information that is essential for interpretation of the utterance (which may include Sue’s general approach to issues, the uniqueness of the challenge presented her, and the revelation that her resolve can sometimes be based on something other than a thorough examination of the evidence). This particular metaphorical extension of “rock” will not be found in any dictionary. Concept extension, however, is not the unique domain of metaphor. The utterance “All doctors drink” could, in a given context, communicate an extended concept that concerns doctors’ character or their workload or both. Concept narrowing and extension are not mutually exclusive.

Lexical pragmatics studies “the relation between words and the mentally represented concepts they encode.”36 Those who embrace lexical pragmatics have observed that if we are to understand the meaning of words, we cannot limit ourselves to examining their “literal” sense because words are only a piece of evidence pointing to what a speaker or writer intends to communicate. The communicator is not merely using words that encode concepts that the interpreter must then decode. Rather, lexical pragmatics examines the way that “word meanings are modified in use.”37 If lexical semantics occupies itself with the way lexemes encode concepts, then lexical pragmatics explores how the concepts communicated when using a word end up being different from the concept that has been encoded by the word.38 There exists a prodigious gap between the encoded meaning and the meaning in use. In communicating utterances, we bridge the gap between the meaning of the lexical item and the meaning of the utterance, or the ad hoc concept, by an inferential process.

resulting in concept narrowing, concept broadening, or category extension. This, however, does not move us fully to the heart of the dynamics of ad hoc concept formation.

Concepts do not go through this sort of modification only occasionally. Ad hoc concept formation is characteristic of communication at its core. Lexical pragmatics seeks to show how ad hoc concepts “are constructed pragmatically by a hearer in the process of utterance comprehension,” and this occurs in all instances. While we may speak about schemas that are the essence of the encyclopedic entries of concepts, these are hardly stable and static entities which are in turn loaded into or encoded into the sign system. Given the plasticity of the human psyche, the mind has the ability to “construct and use new concepts at a moment’s notice.” Our lexical choices in communication only provide pieces of evidence about the concept that we want to communicate to another. Given these dynamics, pragmatic processes are in full swing when we interpret words. Carston remarks that, “while sentences encode thought/proposition templates, words encode concept templates; it’s linguistic underdeterminancy all the way down.” The radical observation Carston makes is that all concepts are ad hoc, “that is, temporary constructs arising for specific purposes at particular times.” This holds for contemporary communication as well as biblical literature, which is true human-to-human, as well as divine-to-human, communication. Ad hoc concept formation occurs on every page of the biblical text, and this fact places before us critical challenges as we attempt to trace the meaning of a biblical author’s utterances. The dynamic and determinative nature of context on word meaning is significantly greater than we have recognized. Given this, the task lexicographers face is daunting, if not impossible. No dictionary is capable of embracing all the possible concepts that a lexeme’s template may suggest.


40. Carston, Thoughts and Utterances, 322.


42. Carston, Thoughts and Utterances, 360.

43. Ibid., 362, 367 n. 1. She asks, “Could it be that the word ‘happy’ does not encode a concept, but rather ‘points’ to a conceptual region, or maps to an address (or node, or gateway, or whatever) in memory?” (ibid., 360). Coming at the issue from the side of cognitive psychology, Barsalou similarly states that “a perceptual view of concepts explains the daunting problems surrounding linguistic vagary. . . . linguistic vagary simply reflects the fact that perceptual symbols—not linguistic symbols—constitute the cores of concepts” (“Flexibility, Structure, and Linguistic Vagary in Concept,” 50).
This understanding of ad hoc concept formation brings us straight to the question of how words mean. Are the meanings of words something we can neatly classify into a few “lexical semantic domains” which we only need to disambiguate? This is hardly the case, as the SDBH illustrates. But does the addition of “contextual semantic domains” in the SDBH fully reflect the cognitive processes in play when seeking to comprehend the meaning of words? In his study of lexicography, Patrick Hanks makes a remarkably bold statement:

In everyday use of language, meanings are events, not entities. Do meanings also exist outside the transactional contexts in which they are used? It is a convenient shorthand to talk about “the meanings of words in a dictionary,” but strictly speaking these are not meanings at all. Rather, they are “meaning potentials”—potential contributions to the meanings of texts and conversations in which the words are used, and activated by the speaker who uses them.44

Although Hanks is not working within the domain of lexical pragmatics, he touches on a key question raised by Relevance Theorists regarding pervasiveness of ad hoc concept formation.

Word Meaning and Ad Hoc Concept Formation

This approach to understanding meaning finds support from within the field of cognitive psychology. James McClelland of Carnegie Mellon University, along with others, broke on the scene with a new models of human information processing called “parallel distributed processing” (PDP).45 PDP models understand mental conceptual schemas as very flexible objects. They are structures within our cognitive architecture, but, at the same time, they are “sufficiently malleable to fit around most everything.”46 This shifts our understanding about the nature of concept schemas. McClelland and his associates conclude that

there is no representational object which is a schema. Rather, schemata emerge the moment they are needed from the interaction of large numbers of much simpler elements all working in concert with one another. Schemata are not explicit entities, but rather are implicit in our knowledge and are created by the very environment that they are trying to interpret—as it is interpreting them.47

47. Ibid.; emphasis added.
According to these PDP models of cognition, “whenever we use knowledge, we change our representation of it. Thus, knowledge representation is not really a final product. Rather, it is a process or even a potential process.” 48

The PDP model of cognition suggests that, at best, our dictionary definitions can do no more than give what Hanks calls “traces of meaning events; the dictionary contains lists of meaning potentials.” 49 Hanks notes that while the components of meaning are simple, how they combine is a complex problem. PDP modeling likewise focuses on the “microfeatures” of schemas such as parties, schools, restaurants, or SBL or IBR meetings, which will combine and merge in the moment they are accessed. 50 They are the product of a creative process from the time they pull out of our mental pit and onto the linguistic racetrack.

Ad Hoc Concept Formation and the Constraints of “Relevance”

Relevance Theory provides a model for understanding the processes that help constrain this creative process. Linguistic underdeterminancy does not imply that there is no stable meaning in communication and that we end up with nothing more than linguistic freeplay. 51 There is a gap between the meaning of sentences and the utterance meaning, that is, the meaning a speaker or writer wants to communicate. As we bridge the gap between sentence meaning and utterance meaning, and also between concept schemas and the ad hoc concepts that emerge in communication, the rich inferential processes in play are constrained by the principle of relevance. 52 When we communicate, we create in the hearer or reader the

48. Sternberg, *Cognitive Psychology*, 301. He goes on,

What is stored is not a particular pattern of connections. It is a pattern of potential excitatory or inhibitory connection strengths. The brain uses this pattern to re-create other patterns when stimulated to do so. Whenever we receive new information, the activation from that information either strengthens or weakens the connections between units. The new information may come from environmental stimuli, from memory, or from cognitive processes. The ability to create new information by drawing inferences and making generalizations allows for almost infinite versatility in knowledge representation and manipulation. (pp. 301–02)


51. “The fact that any sentence, if thought of as an authorless string of material signifiers, taken out of context—or rather, transposed into a variety of contexts—can have a wide range of potential meanings, does not entail that language is unstable or that all understanding is necessarily aberrant, because every instance of language use and understanding takes place within a particular context. We focus our attention on what seems to be the most relevant information, and construct a context that seems to maximize relevance, which enables us to disregard the plainly irrelevant linguistic possibilities that, in the abstract, could destabilize any particular spoken utterance or written sentence” (Ian MacKenzie, *Paradigms of Reading: Relevance Theory and Deconstruction* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002] 196).

expectation of relevance. “Relevance” in RT is not the same as the notion of “being relevant” in popular usage but has a more technical meaning. When a person communicates, the addressee expects that the linguistic input ostensibly or intentionally communicated will be worth processing and that some cognitive benefit will be realized when we invest a degree of processing effort. We may look at this as a form of linguistic “cost/benefit” analysis. Wilson remarks that communicators assess their addressee(s) and attempt to “predict, at least to some extent, what stimuli an addressee is likely to attend to, and what contextual assumptions he is likely to use in processing it, and what conclusions he is likely to draw.” This is why, for example, the communication with our spouse or close friend is shaped so differently from communication with someone we do not know. On the other side, “The addressee takes the linguistically decoded meaning: following the path of least effort, he enriches it at the explicit level and complements it at the implicit level until the resulting interpretation meets his expectations of relevance; at which point he stops.”

That is the “Ah-ha!” moment. In this analysis of benefit obtained for processing effort expended, what is “relevant” becomes the information that produces cognitive effects or benefits by strengthening, modifying or contradicting existing assumptions, and this for the lowest processing effort.

As secondary readers of the biblical text, we then ask questions about what kind of assumptions both the author and readers could have supplied. In these cases, there will be more processing effort expended in the search for cognitive benefit.

When communicating, a speaker or writer will use the linguistic sign system, or the “code,” and will assess what kind of contextual information is accessible to the addressee from the person’s physical environment, the discourse itself, and the addressee’s encyclopedic memory. The addressees will need to make inferences in order to do reference assignment (“She is late” where “she” refers to Jane and not Jill), enrichment (“You’re too late,” that is, to catch the train to London as opposed to being too late to


54. Wilson and Sperber (“Relevance Theory,” 607) explain this notion simply:

When is an input relevant? Intuitively, an input (a sight, a sound, an utterance, a memory) is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him: say, by answering a question he had in mind, improving his knowledge on a certain topic, settling a doubt, confirming a suspicion, or correcting a mistaken impression. In relevance-theoretic terms, an input is relevant to an individual when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect.

snatch the last piece of cake), and a certain level of disambiguation (“She sat by the bank,” where “bank” is the edge of a river and not a financial institution).

But there is considerably more inferential work that occurs in communication. The concept bank* is also an ad hoc construction. The bank* may be the place where Jane normally goes to think about things of great importance, such as her relationship with Sam. Ad hoc concept formation occurs in the utterance “She sat by the bank” because we must not only disambiguate between the river bank or Barclays Bank or a snow bank but we also realize that Jill’s sitting by the bank* means she is contemplating something of importance, in this case, her relationship with Sam. The dynamic processes in play are deep and consistent, to the extent that in any given sentence we may only know the ad hoc concept bank* and never the decomposed concept bank. According to RT, we are observing something called the “explicatures,” which consists of the code and all the information related to it that is pragmatically inferred. The “explicit” information communicated is not simply what is encoded but includes ad hoc concepts such as bank*, which are constructed on the fly. In communication, we constantly make decisions with regard to who “she” is, what she is “late” for, which “bank” is contemplated by the speaker/writer, and what the ad hoc concept bank* means. All this information is inferred on the basis of the available input from the code and the context. The “relevant” contextual information, which is accessed by an inferential process, produces the greatest cognitive benefit for the least processing effort invested. Communication is wild and, at the same time, wonderfully successful given the level of inference that occurs. We manage to make ourselves understood, and we manage to understand others.

According to RT, the “context” is not all the information in the world that might be available to a person. Rather, it is a cognitive notion. “Context” is all the information relevant for the interpretation of an utterance. Instead of being all the information available from our physical environment, the discourse we are in, or our encyclopedic memory, it is instead a subset of our cognitive environment. It is all the information we need to process an utterance. Therefore, the process of interpretation is vastly more complex than simply examining the possible meanings of a word and working to disambiguate a term by selecting what seems to be the “best” meaning in the passage we are exegeting. During communication, new senses are always being constructed in this process of ad hoc concept

56. The hearer or reader may also recover implicatures that are not tied to the linguistic code. A speaker may say, “It’s three o’clock,” by which she means, “It is too late to catch the train” in the context of the implicated premise that the train pulls out of the station at 2:45. Again, the implicated assumptions and conclusions are part of what is communicated, but not just any assumptions will do. The search for relevance constrains this process. Understanding an utterance includes the recovery of both the explicatures and the implicatures, a process in which pragmatic forces are in full play.
formation. Even though words are a public good, we cannot assume that the concepts they communicate are the same for all users and in every circumstance and, even so, communication is successful because of the constraints imposed by the search for relevance. The success of communication is truly a wonder.

**Lexical Pragmatics and Using the Lexicon**

Understanding the dynamic processes at work in ad hoc concept formation will help us and our students to avoid perennial lexicographic missteps such as what Barr tagged as “illegitimate totality transfer.” When biblical authors wrote, ad hoc concept construction occurred at every turn, something at which the SDBH hints with the way it has made accessible the “contextual meanings” of the various lexemes. Also, recognizing the ad hoc concept formation that occurs in Scripture will steer us far from etymological or root studies of words because we understand that words only provide evidence of concepts that are being modified and constructed in use. Barr’s critiques find strong support from within the field of lexical pragmatics.

However, texts that teach exegesis commonly refer to the semantic range of words because it is assumed that biblical authors selected from an established menu of concepts. In turn, the interpreter must have at hand the same menu and identify from it which meaning the biblical author had in mind when writing. But when interpreting lexemes, whether in real-time communication or in reading ancient texts, we are engaged in something more than disambiguation. Moisés Silva advises, for example, that the student should start with the lexicon: “Using the standard lexicons, determine the attested semantic range of the term.” But then he adds that one must “consider the paradigmatic relations of the term,” and so also the syntactic and contextual relations, doing diachronic study of a term, and focusing on the intention of the biblical writer. While this list of procedures does not address the ad hoc nature of concept formation, at least Silva raises awareness that disambiguating between dictionary entries is not the end of the story. So, too, Darrell Bock advises that “to establish the precise meaning of a word, one must recognize its possible range of meanings.” While he warns that a word will not have the same meaning in all contexts, he implies that the job is mainly one of disambiguation. Words “have a range of meanings,” he says, “which yields a specific sense in a specific context.” But he recognizes that more is occurring and adds that “Words operate in a context

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57. Sperber and Wilson, “The Mapping between the Mental and the Public Lexicon,” 18.
and receive meaning from that context.” But Bock only views this contextual information as useful for the process of disambiguation. The assumption on which this approach rests is that there exists a stable set of concepts that are encoded and that may be neatly categorized. If I tell someone to “open the bottle,” ad hoc concept formation is going on with such vigor that the lexicon cannot help the hearer understand if I want them to uncork, unscrew, or even knock the neck off the bottle. Carston discusses this example and points up that “when we try to think about the general concept open and to have a thought in which such a general concept features opposed to any of the more specific concepts that we grasp in understanding ‘open one’s mouth’, ‘open the window’, ‘open a can’, ‘open a discussion’, etc., the experience is an odd one, as we seem to have no definite thought at all.”

For successful communication, the addressee must recover the meaning of the ad hoc concept \( \text{open}^* \) within the speaker’s utterance. And the same holds true for any biblical term, starting with \( \aleph \) and all the way through the alphabetical list of lexemes.

**Lexical Pragmatics and Designing the Lexicon**

What this means for lexical design is trickier business than for lexical use. Hanks has placed lexicographers into two camps, the “lumpers” and the “splitters”: “those who prefer—or rather, who are constrained by marketing considerations—to lump uses together in a single sense, and those who isolate fine distinctions.” The *SDBH* both lumps and splits, a distinct advantage of the electronic format, and it presents the reader with the opportunity to discover the meaning of terms in a limited number of contexts. The reader can show or hide the various “contextual meanings” of the words and can access the examples from the Hebrew texts. However, the fact that users may show or hide various “contextual meanings” implies that these meanings are secondary or additional features of words. If we understand that concepts are always ad hoc constructions, we may well argue that the option to show or hide these contextual meanings should be eliminated. We hope that Louw and Nida will undergo revision following this philosophy and format and thus become a more useful tool for NT study. But the revision would also need to consider the influences of the wider linguistic environment in which the NT was born. There is no such thing as “biblical Greek” that is isolated from its cultural and linguistic milieu in the Mediterranean basin. In this regard, *BDAG* remains

62. RT understands that the goal of interpretation is to work out the interpretation to the best possible explanation.
the more useful lexical tool given its multiple references to both biblical and extrabiblical literature. But both dictionaries still allow the reader to access only a very limited amount of material from the wider corpus. The integration of the *TLG* with *LSJ* is a move in the right direction if, in the end, the interpreter recognizes the nature of the relationship between the corpus and the lexicon.

Moreover, English, French, and Portuguese translations of the biblical texts would assist users of *SDBH* who are not fluent in Hebrew. Indeed, because usage is a primary consideration, greater encouragement to read the lexemes in their multiple contexts should be facilitated. We all have had the experience of reading a dictionary definition of a word and still not fully comprehending its meaning in a particular text until we have read the word over and again in a variety of texts. In this process, the meaning potentials of the word become evident and take on some organization in our mind as loose concept schemas, and we then pull elements from this information that are relevant for the construction of the concept in a particular sentence under consideration. In other words, the lexicon should help the reader understand that meanings are events and not static entities.\(^{65}\) And to do that, multiple examples are necessary and not merely a series of translation glosses.

Hanks moves in this direction as he reflects on the relationship between the corpus and the lexicon:

> We cannot study word meanings directly through a corpus any more satisfactorily than we can study them through a dictionary. Both are tools, which may have a lot to contribute, but they get us only so far. Corpora consist of texts, which consist of traces of linguistic behaviour. What a corpus gives us is the opportunity to study traces and patterns of linguistic behaviour. There is no direct route from corpus to meaning. Corpus linguists sometimes speak as if interpretations spring fully fledged, untouched by human hand, from the corpus. They don’t. The corpus contains traces of meaning events; the dictionary contains lists of meaning potentials. Mapping the one onto the other is a complex task, for which adequate tools and procedures remain to be devised.\(^{66}\)

The *SDBH* comes very close to being a useful tool in this regard given its attention to the corpus as part of the on-line dictionary. But the problem of mapping between the corpus and the dictionary may never be fully worked out by mechanics. However, this complex process is precisely what the human mind is adept at accomplishing with aplomb. Given the right access to both the corpus and a dictionary’s meaning potentials, it can manage the task nicely. We do it every time we listen and read. We excel at this by divine design.

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\(^{65}\) Hanks, “Do Word Meanings Exist?” 130.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.
Moreover, the SDBH classifies lexical and contextual domains. Lexical domains include objects, events and relationals whereas the contextual domains are more fine-grained. We may wonder, however, whether these classifications are, in the end, all that useful given the dynamic nature of concept formation. The presupposition underlying the classification of words into domains is that the concepts they represent may be decomposed into their various components, which then can be sorted neatly into several domains. The categories listed, as de Blois notes, “are not homogeneous. They have fuzzy boundaries. As a result of this, a certain object may be a typical member of category A, but a less typical member of category B at the same time.”

However, what is a typical “bird” or a typical “bicycle”? This “typical” language is at variance with the notion that words have “meaning potential” and that in communication ad hoc processes are operating dynamically. A “bird” may or may not have wings, may or may not fly, could be a cartoon character with neither apparent legs nor beak, and surely need not have feathers. Penguins and ostriches are considered birds because small elements or microfeatures have gathered around the concept bird* that will be accessed in the process of communication. There is a critical mass of microfeatures gathered that allows us to classify both as birds. These microfeatures are more akin to de Blois’s attributes than components of meaning: “A component of meaning is a distinctive feature, whereas an attribute is not distinctive in nature.” Our attention, in the end, is on attributes. For example, when we say “game” or “bank,” just what do we classify as a “distinctive feature” or component? We do not start with “prototypes” of a “game” or “bank” or “bird” or “rope” but rather with a somewhat variable set of microfeatures gathered in a schema that changes with each use. Also, in any given utterance the concept bird* may dynamically change, for example, if I envision a “bird race” with contestants mounted on ostriches running around a track toward a finish line. Meanings are created in communication and words do not decompose neatly into their various constituents. Words give access to “a vast array of encyclopaedic assumptions” that we will selectively access in the process of communication.

69. Take this example from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations: The English Text of the Third Edition (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; 3rd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1973) 31–32: Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but look and see whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look! Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games,
CONCLUSION

Developments within the field of lexical pragmatics hold great potential for helping us use well the lexicons and the literary corpus that underlies them. By understanding the relationship between lexemes and concepts, and recognizing the dynamic forces in play in communication which yield ad hoc concepts in any and every communication event, we will take a further step forward in the process of utterance interpretation. Maintaining faithfulness to the biblical author’s meaning entails recognizing that words do not encode concepts and that concepts themselves are schemas that are then modified or constructed in use. These processes are in play in all human communication, whether contemporary or ancient. Many of our exegetical commentaries trace these modifications, often without a clear recognition of what is occurring linguistically. A more pragmatically oriented approach, and I would suggest one based on the current discussions within RT, will help us revise our understanding of how to use lexicons and the corpus and will assist us in orienting our students to the dynamics of communication. Relevance Theory provides rich understanding of the role of authors, contexts, and readers in the process of communication and points up both the nature of ad hoc concept formation and the constraints on inference that keep the communicative enterprise from ending in interpretive nihilism.

At the same time, lexical pragmatics has implications for the way lexicons are designed. The issues that lexical pragmatics raise regarding the relationship between lexemes and concepts, and the dynamic nature of concept schemes, are consonant with current discussions on lexicography as well as cognitive psychology. Studies on PDP processing and the discussion among lexicographers about “meaning events” in relationship to the lexicon both point in the same direction as RT. While lexical semantics has oriented most of our lexical and exegetical work up to this point, it has not been capable of describing the dynamics of concept formation. Our handbooks on interpretation show awareness of the “something more” that is going on when we seek to interpret lexemes, and perhaps it is time to revise our understanding of lexicography and exegetical methodology in

much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all “amusing”? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball-games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear. And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

What, then, is a “typical” game, or bird, or rope? See the comments in Hanks, “Do Word Meanings Exist?” 128.
light of these findings from various quarters. Very few students of biblical studies have engaged the field of linguistics, and those who do have often not taken advantage of texts, courses, and programs based on pragmatics. This field of linguistics, and especially RT, is a domain ripe for rich new research and teaching.