AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE DESCRIPTION OF BIBLICAL HEBREW RELEVANT TO BIBLE TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

Describing the system of an ancient language like Biblical Hebrew is an enormous challenge. Biblical Hebrew scholars through the years concentrated on the formal features of limited data at their disposal. However, a new paradigm in the study of language has provided a fresh perspective on aspects of language that was up till now either not fully appreciated, misunderstood or not even noticed. Improved models of what people do with language, and which include the social, cognitive and cultural aspects of language, now provide explanations for linguistic expressions that translators up till now believed they may or should leave untranslated. These models, among other things, have shown that texts are more than strings of clauses, each with their own propositional content. There are a variety of linguistic signs that have no referential meaning or syntactic function, but act as overt navigation signals for the way in which the information is supposed to be processed. These signals do not only invoke a relationship between the clauses, or clusters of clauses, contained in a text, but may also involve the entire cognitive worlds of all the participants of the communicative situation. These developments may shed new light on the interpretation and translation of the Biblical text.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the ironies in the field of Biblical Studies is that most exegetes fully agree that the source languages should play a pivotal role in the interpretation and translation of the Bible. However, when one scrutinises modern commentaries and other exegetical studies, one finds that many, if not the majority, of Biblical scholars (and in particular Old Testament scholars) still rely mainly on philological arguments (that concentrate on the meaning of words) when treating the linguistic dimensions of the text of the Bible

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and/or fail to observe the finer nuances of the syntax and pragmatics of the source texts.[2]

The aim of this article is to give Bible translators insight into those developments in the field of Biblical Hebrew linguistics that may help them to better interpret and translate the source text of the Bible. For this purpose I want to commence with a broad overview of developments in the field of linguistics. In the light of these developments, trends in Biblical Hebrew will be discussed. Next, I will provide a few examples of some expressions onto which recent work in the field of Biblical Hebrew linguistics sheds new light. In conclusion, I will summarise the most salient implications of this overview for Bible translators.

2. DEVELOPMENTS IN GENERAL LINGUISTICS

In general terms one may describe the development in linguistics of the last two centuries as a movement from the study of words to that of the sentence and eventually to the study of language use, e.g. in texts.

In the 19th century the main concern of most grammarians was the historical dimensions of language. Looking at the forms and sounds of words, the development of a language was traced and compared with that of other languages. The family history of related languages was reconstructed.[3] In line with the 19th century spirit of historicism understanding the *history* of a word implied understanding that word.

There were three paradigm shifts during the course of the 20th century. In the first half of the 20th century the notion of historicism changed drastically with the advent of structuralism. Understanding an expression was no longer associated with understanding its history, but understanding the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships it might enter into — its syntagmatic and pragmatic distribution. It is impossible to go into all the ramifications of this *first* paradigm shift in the study of language, a shift

2 Cf. Van der Merwe (1983:143-156) and Talstra and Van der Merwe (2002). However, the situation is changing, cf. Mundhenk (2000). Talstra (1998:1-41) proposes a model for a more consistent consideration of Biblical Hebrew linguistic data in the process of Biblical exegesis.

3 According to Lyons (1968:22)

> to have established the principles and methods used in setting up these, and other, language families and, what is more important, to have developed a general theory of language change and linguistic relationship was the most important significant achievement of nineteenth-century linguistic scholarship.

that was ironically triggered off by the drive of 19th century scholarship to put linguistics on a scientific footing. Two generally accepted assumptions are relevant for our purposes:

- First, languages do not have the same structure, and the categories of traditional grammar, which are based on Latin, do not represent a universal set of categories that can be used to describe adequately all the languages of the world.
- Second, languages display structure at different levels, e.g. at the level of phonology, morphology and syntax.

The first generation of structural linguists believed that the scientific study of language implies the study of the formal aspects of language, devoid of any meaning. The inability of these approaches, among other things, to explain why a language displays particular formal patterns sparked off the *second* paradigm shift of the 20th century. This shift is associated with two main lines of thought. The first is that of Noam Chomsky, who tried to explain the formal structure of language in terms of hypotheses concerning the innate linguistic mechanism of human beings. The second is that of functional grammarians who try to account for the different formal patterns a language may display in terms of the functions they express.[4]

Despite their fundamental differences, both these lines of thought have contributed in the following ways to the study of language in the second half of the 20th century:

- The study of the clause, i.e. syntax, became the centre of linguistic investigation;
- the necessity of distinguishing between the different levels of linguistic description (e.g. phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics) became entrenched;
- the use of formal distributional criteria to identify and describe categories at all levels of linguistic description became a norm; and
- the fact, that on the one hand, not all formal features of language can be explained in terms of functional categories, and, that on the other hand, syntactic investigation without considering elements of lexical meaning is impossible, became more and more apparent.

The following observation of Levinson (1983:36) explains the *third* paradigm shift of the 20th century:

4 Cf. Lyons (1981:216-235) and Robins (1990).

> … as knowledge of the syntax, phonology and semantics of various languages has increased, it has become clear that there are specific phenomena that can only be naturally described by recourse to contextual concepts.

Mey (1993:20) describes this third shift as follows:

> The "pragmatic turn" in linguistics can thus be described as a paradigm shift by which a number of observations are brought to the same practical denominator. Basically, the shift is from the paradigm of theoretical grammar (in particular, syntax) to the paradigm of the language user.

The number of observations Mey refers to includes the social, cognitive and cultural aspects of language. Verschueren (1999:7) defines pragmatics as a "general cognitive, social and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behaviour." For scholars of written language, a text represents the dominant form of behaviour.

3. TRENDS IN BIBLICAL HEBREW LINGUISTICS

If one considers the field of BH linguistics against this background, it explains why the major publications of the 19th and first half of the 20th century focus on the description of the morphology of the language and explications of the history of the forms of words and their relationship with other Semitic languages. It also explains why the traditional categories, e.g. word classes, are accepted uncritically; the borders between the different levels of linguistic description tend to be very vague, and the syntax of the language received relatively little attention in comparison with the morphology. From the following overview it will be clear that, although often a few steps behind, developments in BH tend to follow trends in general linguistics.[5]

The structuralist paradigm did not have much influence on the description of BH until the 1970s. Pioneers were Andersen (1970 and 1974) and Hoftijzer (1973 and 1985). Richter (1978, 1979 and 1980) proposed an entirely redefined theoretical frame of reference for the description of BH grammar at the level of word, phrase and clause. Richter did not disregard existing insights into the grammar of BH, but argued, very much in the spirit of the structuralist paradigm, that current grammatical categories need to be scrutinised in terms of the distribution of the BH data at hand. The only way to have effective access to this data was to develop a linguistic database, and for this purpose Richter divided the entire BH corpus into clauses.[6]

5 Cf. Van der Merwe (1987, 1990, 1994 and 1997).

6 Cf. Richter (1991-1993).

A key notion in Richter's clause syntax was that of "valency". The valency of a verb determines the number and type of constituents a clause may have, e.g. "sleep" has a valency of 1 since it requires only a subject in order to form a full sentence, "see" has a valency of 2 since it requires a subject and an object. It was this element of meaning that Richter used as the main criterion for the identification of verbal clauses in his database. In this regard, Richter was in step with insights from the field of general linguistics, viz. syntax without information from the lexicon is not possible.[7] Richter's approach was not well-received by scholars in the field of Old Testament studies. Most of the criticism from these scholars was not justified because they did not fully understand what Richter had tried to accomplish. However, there is also justifiable criticism that can be brought against Richter.[8] Nevertheless, apart from providing the impetus for a range of research programmes,[9] he made an important contribution as far as the implementation of insights generated in terms of the structuralist paradigm to the description of BH as a non-spoken language is concerned, e.g.

- He provided a solid foundation for the redefinition of BH word classes and sentence constituents in terms of distributional criteria;
- He paved the way for more clearly defined levels of linguistic description in the field of study;
- He illustrated the importance of considering some of the syntactic features of a verb in the composition of a lexicon.[10]

Walter Gross built on and refined many of Richter's views in his research into the BH verbal clause. Gross shed light on the formal features of BH verbal clauses and the functional value that may be attached to pre- and post-verbal constituent order patterns.[11] However, the inadequacies of some of Gross's results also revealed the limitations of an approach that is mainly syntax-driven.[12] The same can be said of the text linguistic approaches of scholars like Longacre.[13] What became more and more apparent is that if one would like to understand BH, then identifying formal categories on ac-

7 Cf. Richter (1985 and 1986).

8 For a balanced overview, cf. Disse (1998:14-23).

9 Cf. the numerous volumes in the monograph series *Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache im Alten Testament*. St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag.

10 This does not mean that Richter condones the inclusion of irrelevant syntactic information in a lexicon. Cf. the criticism Lübbe (1993) raises in this regard.

11 Cf. Gross (1987, 1996 and 1997).

12 Van der Merwe (1999a and 1999b) and Van der Merwe and Talstra (forthcoming).

13 Cf. Den Exter Blokland (1995: 26-90) and Heimerdinger (1999:52-100).

count of distribution criteria and assigning to them functional labels is not going far enough.[14]

First, it is important to determine which phenomena can be explained in terms of the structure of BH. These are phenomena that do not express semantic or pragmatic functions. In such cases insights from generative grammar are needed, as Naudé (2002) illustrated well.[15] Second, in cases where semantic and pragmatic considerations are involved more adequate semantic and pragmatic notional frames of reference are needed. Jenni (1992, 1994 and 2000) illustrated the value of an exhaustive semantic framework for the description of Biblical Hebrew prepositions. Van der Merwe, Naudé and Kroeze (1999) demonstrated the value of abandoning vague functional labels like "emphasis" that were traditionally regarded as the function of marked word order, the infinitive absolute and a range of particles.[16] Recently Van der Merwe (1999b) showed the necessity of integrating functional labels like focus and topic that are used to explain marked word order in BH into a more comprehensive model on the way in which information is structured in BH.[17]

The moment when the notion "information structure" comes into play, it, of course, implies that we are boots and all into the study of the way in which people process information.[18] As far as BH is concerned, it means the way in which BH texts, as modes of secondary communication, are constructed. This in turn requires models on human communication and the way in which people process information; in other words, the cognitive dimension of language use.[19] As far as the cultural dimension is concerned, it requires insight into cultural conventions that govern text organisation and illocutionary acts in BH,[20] as well as the sociolinguistic conventions that governed communication in the world of the Bible.[21]

The problem with the above-mentioned models is that none of them have been subjected to the test of time, and that many of them are tenta-

14 Cf. Talstra & Van der Merwe (2002).
15 Cf. also Holmstedt (2001).
16 Cf. also Van der Merwe (1989:118-132).
17 Cf. also Heimerdinger (1999:101-220).
18 For the notion "information structure", cf. Lambrecht (1994).
19 Cf. Wilson (1999:99-161).
20 Cf. Meister (1996) and Wagner (1995).
21 Cf. Jenni (1999:17-33), Fassberg (1999:6-13) and Wilt (1996:237-255) for some expressions in Biblical Hebrew that have to be interpreted from a sociolinguistics perspective.

tive. Nevertheless, they have provided new solutions to a number of constructions in BH, that up until now were labelled as expressing "emphasis" and either translated with an apparent equivalent in the target language without considering the pragmatic function of the construction, or simply ignored by BH grammarians, exegetes and translators. I will give some examples in this regard below.

Before giving some examples, I have to point out the implications of this "pragmatic turn" in the study of language for BH lexicography. The inadequacies of current BH lexica have been illustrated by various scholars, e.g. De Blois (2000) and Lübbe (1990, 1993, 1994). Most of the criticism concerns the way in which the meanings of lexical items were determined and presented. Little reflection has yet been done on the way in which cultural information needs to be treated in BH lexica as bilingual dictionaries of cultures remote both in time and space. Studies in the fields of cognitive semantics and ethnosemantics have shown that lexical items are not merely part of logically defined "universal" semantic domains, but carry with them the entire cognitive environment of speakers and their respective cultures (Van Steenbergen 2002).

4. EXAMPLES

Muraoka (1985) critically examined the so-called "emphatic" words and structures in Biblical Hebrew, e.g. word order, personal pronouns with finite verbs, the infinite absolute, the *casus pendens* construction, and a range of particles. Although he, unfortunately, uses an inadequate psychologically-based definition of the notion "emphasis", he has drawn attention to the wide range of constructions that are labelled "emphatic" in most grammars. This prompted the question, but why are so many constructions used to do the same thing? Are there not finer nuances involved?

This led to research that addressed the following questions:

- When the subject, object, or any other constituent of a verbal clause in BH precedes the verb of the clause, the function of the fronting is described as "emphasising" that constituent. What does this "emphasis" mean?
- Why can some cases of fronting not be regarded as expressing "emphasis"?
- Why is a constituent in one context fronted and in the other right-dislocated (the so-called *casus pendens* construction)? Do both these constructions fulfil the same function?

- Why are temporal adjuncts sometimes fronted and in other cases separated from a clause by means of the conjunction *waw*?
- Why does the independent personal pronoun sometimes appear to be used "superfluously" both in verbal and nominal clauses?
- What is the difference between the "emphasis" that each of the following particles, viz. הִנֵּה, גַּם, רַק, אַף, אַךְ and כִּי express?

I will not try to fully explain to you the above-mentioned constructions. Those explanations can be found elsewhere. Van der Merwe, Naudé and Kroeze (1999) may be a good point of departure. But what are the implications of these studies for translation of the Hebrew text? Here are some of the explanations that we have for the above-mentioned type of questions:

- We know now that those *pendens* constructions in Biblical Hebrew that correlate with what is referred to as left-dislocation constructions in English as a rule have a very specific function, viz. a speaker or author uses it to revive an identifiable entity or entities in the discourse in order to say something about it in a context where something else has been talked about.[22]

  הַמְּגִלָּה אֲשֶׁר קָרָאתָ בָּהּ בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם
  קְחֶנָּה בְיָדְךָ וָלֵךְ

  That scroll from which you read to the people,

  take it in your hand and come

  (Jer. 36:14)

- When the subject of a clause is fronted, and that subject is not yet identifiable for the addressee, the entire clause represents "an out of the blue clause".

  וַיֵּאָמַר לְמֶלֶךְ יְרִיחוֹ לֵאמֹר
  הִנֵּה אֲנָשִׁים בָּאוּ הֵנָּה הַלַּיְלָה
  מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַחְפֹּר אֶת־הָאָרֶץ׃

  It is said to the king of Jericho:

  "Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." (Jos. 2:2)

- When an identifiable or discourse active subject or any other constituent is fronted, the identity of that constituent is the most salient piece of information in that clause, e.g.

22 Gross (1987) identifies different types of *pendens* constructions. Whether the different syntactic features of these constructions signal different pragmatic functions needs still to be determined. Cf. Holmstedt (2000).

אֹתִי שָׁלַח יְהוָה לִמְשָׁחֲךָ לְמֶלֶךְ
עַל־עַמּוֹ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל

I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over His people Israel (1 Sam. 15:1)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְנֹחַ
בֹּא־אַתָּה וְכָל־בֵּיתְךָ אֶל־הַתֵּבָה
כִּי־אֹתְךָ רָאִיתִי צַדִּיק
לְפָנַי בַּדּוֹר הַזֶּה׃

Then the LORD said to Noah, "Go into the ark, with all your household, for *you alone* have I found righteous before Me in this generation (Gen. 7:1)

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד חַי־יְהוָה
כִּי אִם־יְהוָה יִנְּפֶנּוּ

As surely as the LORD lives," David said, "the LORD *himself* will strike him (1 Sam. 26:10)

- When one or two identifiable or discourse entities are fronted, it is done in order to compare different entities. Often a contrast is involved.

וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בֶּן־אוֹנִי
וְאָבִיו קָרָא־לוֹ בִנְיָמִין׃

She named her son Ben-Oni. *But his father* named him Benjamin (Gen. 35:18)

- There is a distinction between fronted temporal adjuncts and temporal adjuncts that are separated from the clause by means of a *waw*. The first may or may not fulfil the same function as other fronted constituents. The latter construction, however, is a marker of the reference time of an event.[23] Compare the difference between 2 Sam. 15:10 and Jos. 9:19.

וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְשָׁלוֹם מְרַגְּלִים
בְּכָל־שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר
כְּשָׁמְעֲכֶם אֶת־קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר
וַאֲמַרְתֶּם מָלַךְ אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּחֶבְרוֹן׃

Then Absalom sent secret messengers throughout the tribes of Israel to say, "*As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpets*, then say, 'Absalom is king in Hebron.'" (2 Sam. 15:10)

וַיָּרוּצוּ כִּנְטוֹת יָדוֹ

They ran *as soon as he raised his hand* (Jos. 8:19)

23 For an explanation of the notion "reference time" in contrast to "event time" and "speech time", cf. Van der Merwe (1997 and 1999a:94-98).

- When a personal pronoun appears superfluously in a verbal clause it can as a rule be interpreted in the same way as when the subject of a clause is fronted.
- When a personal pronoun appears superfluously in a nominal clause it may have a syntactic, and not a pragmatic function.[24]

בָּתֵּי עָרֵי הַלְוִיִּם הִוא אֲחֻזָּתָם
בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

The houses in the towns of the Levites are their property among the Israelites (Lev. 25:33)

If one considers the above-mentioned particles (הִנֵּה, גַּם, רַק, אַף, אַךְ and כִּי), it appears that most of them have a semantic core, and the discourse function, or so-called emphasising function, they have is related to their respective semantic cores.[25] Many of them can be interpreted as linguistic items that play an important role in the structuring of the information conveyed during a communicative situation. For instance, הִנֵּה has been translated in older translations with "behold". In more recent translations it is often left untranslated. However, it marks an event that was surprising to the characters of a narrative and it requires an appropriate equivalent in the target language.[26]

וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכָל־לָחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם
וַיִּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אֹרְחַת יִשְׁמְעֵאלִים
בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up, they saw *there* (*to their surprise*) a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead (Gen. 37:25)

The conjunction כִּי was traditionally translated as "for". More recently it has often been left "untranslated".[27] In some cases it is interpreted as an emphasising particle that can by translated as "yea" or "yes". We now realise that in the latter cases כִּי still has a causal function. In most cases it introduces a statement or statements that provide evidence for a preceding statement or a range of statements,[28] e.g.

כִּי טוֹב־יוֹם בַּחֲצֵרֶיךָ מֵאָלֶף

Yes, (or the fact of the matter is) one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere (Ps. 84:11)

24 Cf. Naudé also (2001).
25 Cf. Van der Merwe (1993:27-44).
26 Cf. Follingstadt (1995:1-24).
27 Cf. Meyer (1998).
28 Cf. Benigni (1999:126-145) and Meyer (2001).

The KJV translated וַיְהִי as "and it came to pass". We now have a much better insight into the use of וַיְהִי plus temporal adjuncts and the way in which these constructions may be used to structure a discourse.[29] Compare the difference between the following cases:

וְכַלָּתוֹ אֵשֶׁת־פִּינְחָס הָרָה לָלֶת
וַתִּשְׁמַע אֶת־הַשְּׁמֻעָה אֶל־הִלָּקַח
אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים וּמֵת חָמִיהָ
וְאִישָׁהּ וַתִּכְרַע וַתֵּלֶד

Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. *And when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead*, she bowed and gave birth (1 Sam. 4:19)

(So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death.[14] Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.")

וַיְהִי כִּשְׁמֹעַ אִיזֶבֶל כִּי־סֻקַּל נָבוֹת וַיָּמֹת
וַתֹּאמֶר אִיזֶבֶל אֶל־אַחְאָב

[15] *As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead*, Jezebel said to Ahab, ("Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.") (1 Kgs. 21:15)

These are then a few examples to illustrate that developments in the field of Biblical Hebrew linguistics confirm what scholars in general linguistics had observed; if I may quote Levinson again:

> … as knowledge of the syntax, phonology and semantics of various languages has increased, it has become clear that there are specific phenomena that can only be naturally described by recourse to contextual concepts.[30]

29 Cf. Van der Merwe (1999a:83-114) and Groppe (1995).

30 Miller (1999a:165-191) is another good example of how pragmatics can be used to explain an expression in Biblical Hebrew that could not be accounted for in terms of syntactic or semantic considerations.

5. IMPLICATIONS OF THIS OVERVIEW FOR BIBLE TRANSLATORS

Describing the system of an ancient language like Biblical Hebrew, of which we have only a very limited corpus at our disposal, is an enormous challenge. It is therefore understandable that Biblical Hebrew scholars through the years concentrated on the formal features of the limited data at their disposal. Even today, using the formal aspects of the data at various levels of linguistic description is certainly a justifiable point of departure. Models for the description of Biblical Hebrew using categories based on the use of distributional criteria certainly have more to offer than those which still rely uncritically on outdated traditional frames of reference. Furthermore, studies of the structural dimensions of language have pointed out the importance of being careful to assign meaning to expressions that should rather be attributed to the structure of a particular language or family of languages.

However, a new paradigm in the study of language has provided a fresh perspective on aspects of language that up until now were misunderstood, not fully appreciated, or not even noticed. Improved models of what people do with language, and which include the social, cognitive and cultural aspects of language, now provide explanations for linguistic expressions that translators up until now believed they could or should leave untranslated. These models, among other things, have shown that texts are more than strings of clauses, each with their own propositional content. There are a variety of linguistic signs that have no referential meaning or syntactic function, but act as overt navigation signals for the way in which the information is supposed to be processed.[31] These signals do not only invoke a relationship between the clauses, or clusters of clauses, contained in a text, but may also involve the entire cognitive world of all the participants of the communicative situation.

31 Cornish (1999:33) remarked:

> the function of text in a given instance of communication is to act as a reservoir of cues serving as instructions to the addressee to construct a conceptual model of the situation being evoked by the speaker.

Cf. also Costermans & Fayol (1997) and Werth (1999).

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