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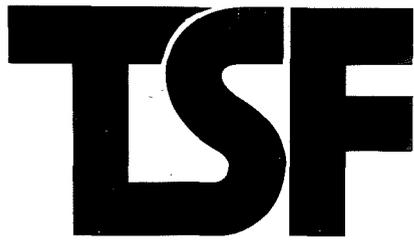
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THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

MARCH-APRIL 1983

Vol. 6, No. 4

\$2.00

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Biblical Studies and Modern Linguistics

by Richard J. Erickson

Theology and biblical exegesis are full of questions about language. There is no avoiding the issue; we are forced to face it by two factors. For one thing, Christian theology deals first and foremost with the *Word of God*, which indeed appeared in the flesh, but has also been handed on to us couched in human language. Second, the languages in which it has been passed down are, to us, *foreign* languages. Seminary students may balk at Greek and Hebrew studies (perhaps with good reason, considering how these have usually been taught), and some schools may relax their language requirements; but the fact remains that somewhere someone must deal with the texts in their original languages if Christian theology is to maintain its biblical footing.

Roughly speaking (very roughly!), the way in which theologians and exegetes have typically handled the language questions that arise in their discussions of theology has been to provide citations of standard lexicons and grammars. This is only reasonable, since the day is long past when a person could master all fields relevant to one's own. We depend on each other.

Our attention is turned then to the grammarians and the lexicographers. We have here perhaps the most impressive history of scholarly industry the world has ever seen. Names like Luther, Calvin, Bengel, Grotius, Cremer, Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius, Kautzsch, Thayer, Moulton, Kittel, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, Robertson, Blass, Debrunner, Funk and many others float immediately to mind, just from the more recent centuries. No one can seriously fault the works represented by these names for lack of thoroughness, acumen, or insight. They have propelled our understanding of God's Word far beyond where it would otherwise have been. One thing they do lack, however (speaking generally again and at the risk of oversimplifying), is a unifying system, an undergirding theory. Thus the monumental NT Greek grammar by Blass and Debrunner has been criticized, rightly, because it offers no consistent theory of syntax, based on linguistic science, but understands itself rather as a compendium of examples of the many particular NT Greek constructions (R. Wonneberger, p. 312). In other words, until quite recently very little attempt has been made to view biblical Greek and Hebrew from the perspective of theoretical linguistics, a science which considers many languages in order to understand language as a human phenomenon and to construct theories which can elucidate and explain all languages in their similarities and dissimilarities.

It is no new thing that theologians and biblical scholars should avail themselves of the fruits of other disciplines and apply them to their own concerns. Philosophy, archaeology, political science, economic and social history, comparative religions, comparative philology and literary science are among the numerous fields whose results have thrown welcome light on biblical studies. And while modern linguistics is a relatively young science (its "father," F. de Saussure, was active even into the second decade of this century), it is not so new that theologians could not have been expected to make

use of it before they actually did. Perhaps their tardiness is to be explained by the very fact of the long and fruitful history of traditional biblical language study.

It is worth recognizing, however, that modern linguistics, including modern semantics, has advanced our knowledge and understanding of human language to an astounding degree. In the past five or six decades there has been a virtual explosion of research and literature in this area. But not until 1961, when James Barr published his iconoclastic *Semantics of Biblical Language*, did the insights of theoretical linguistics begin to be widely considered as having anything really important to say about the exegesis of the Bible. (One notable exception here is the Summer Institute of Linguistics.)

Perhaps a few concrete examples will help to show the relevance of modern linguistics for biblical studies. Take for instance the matter of Bible translation (for which the Summer Institute of Linguistics was established). While some scholars may continue to argue the basic sufficiency of the King James Version, most recognize its inadequacies for our day and, consequently, the real need which more recent English versions have tried to fill. There is here a wide variety of translations in English, however. Among those versions whose proponents consider them generally acceptable, the two extremes with reference to translation theory are probably occupied by the *New American Standard Bible* on the one hand, the *Good News Bible* on the other. The NASB editorial board placed a very high premium on what they apparently understood to be "adhering as closely as possible to the original languages," namely, preserving in the English version as much of the *structure* of the Greek or Hebrew modes of expression as the English would tolerate. So, for example, Romans 3:21-22 is rendered

But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction.

The rendering succeeds admirably in following the structure and vocabulary of the original. But consider now the same passage in *Good News*:

But now God's way of putting people right with himself has been revealed. It has nothing to do with the law, even though the Law of Moses and the prophets gave their witness to it. God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ, because there is no difference at all.

The *Good News* translators have operated on the principle of "dynamic equivalence," striving to make the translation give to American readers the same *message* which the original gave its first readers, and with equal clarity. Thus they made no attempt to adhere to Greek vocabulary and structure. This theory of translation is based solidly on current linguistic theory, which recognizes that every language is a system more or less self-contained, having its own peculiar ways of expressing thought, ways which are purely conventional and which have no intrinsic relationship with whatever message is being expressed. Hence it (almost literally) makes no sense to force upon an English version Greek ways of saying things which may be perfectly clear in Greek but interfere with English clarity. A comparison of the

Richard J. Erickson, who completed his Ph.D. in New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, is pastor of Triumph Lutheran Brethren Church in Moorhead, Minnesota.

two translations above should bear this out. (Nida and Taber argue this very persuasively.)

In the area of word meanings, modern semantic theory has a great deal to offer. James Barr approaches the question of the meanings of the "image" and "likeness" of God (Genesis 1:26 etc.) from the point of view of "semantic field" theory. This theory teaches that the meanings of semantically related words impinge upon and limit one another, and that shifts in the meanings of one word will affect the meanings of other words within the "field" in question. Thus Barr is able to argue that from several Hebrew words available, the author of Genesis 1:26 selected *dēmūt*, "likeness," because the others were unsuitable for one reason or another to refer to an aspect of God. And yet "likeness" was itself too closely associated with theophanies to fit a context describing what *man* was made like. Thus the more general term *selem*, "image," is used also, and the effect is that the two terms mutually restrict each other in the context. What is meant then is not that the image of God and the likeness of God are two *separate* things which man was made in, but that man was given something which is described by the *overlapping* Hebrew meanings of the "image" and "likeness" of God.

Or take the one hundred year debate about the two most common NT Greek words for "to know," *oida* and *ginōskō*; are they synonyms or do they represent two different kinds of knowledge: *oida* intuitive, complete knowledge, *ginōskō* knowledge gained through experience? New light can be shed on this question by employing a tool of modern semantic theory, the concept of relations of implication between sentences (Erickson). By a careful examination of verb tenses and aspects and of the relations between statements using the verbs of "knowing," it can be seen that *oida* and *ginōskō* are indeed synonymous but that *ginōskō* in the aorist aspect can be used to refer to the process of acquiring knowledge, something which *oida* cannot be used for simply because it does not have the aspectual equipment *ginōskō* does, not because it refers to a different *kind* of knowledge.

The application of linguistic and semantic theory to the language problems facing Christian theology today is a "wide open" field.

We may wonder what other information might be discovered about verb meanings in this way.

One of the most exciting advances in linguistics in recent decades has been the development of "generative" grammar theories, especially so-called transformational grammar (TG). Rather than simply catalogue the seemingly infinite details of a language's grammar, TG attempts to account for the fact that a speaker can "generate" an infinite variety of meaningful sentences from a finite number of grammatical and lexical resources. TG organizes into a coherent system the ways in which a very simple "sentence" like *God loves John* can be "transformed" into other shapes like *God's love (for John), John is loved by God, the love of God*, and so on, and even how these new "sentences" can be made parts of other sentences: *God's love is deep and wide*.

TG is much more complex than it appears here, of course, and it can be applied very fruitfully to the study of the Scriptures. For example, in the case of *oida* and *ginōskō* mentioned above, the "sentences" which were examined were "discovered" by a reverse appli-

cation of TG. TG also explains why a concordance cannot be exhaustive if it lists only the visible, ostensive occurrences of a word in a text; there are many "functional" occurrences of words, which while not appearing in a text, are nevertheless operating there. G. Henry Waterman has demonstrated how TG untangles the confusing ways in which the genitive case in Greek can be used to transform a simple sentence into at least seven different constructions for various purposes. R. Wonneberger applies TG to exegesis and clarifies the very difficult reading at 2 Corinthians 5:2,3. Instead of Paul's saying "we groan in this present body, yearning to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, inasmuch as having put it on, we shall not be found naked . . ." Wonneberger shows how generative syntax permits, or rather demands, that the rendering be: "for this reason we are anxiously groaning (we who long to be dressed in our heavenly dwelling), lest we be found naked in spite of our (earthly) clothing (i.e. body)." In other words, it is not our earthly body that makes us anxiously groan, but the fear of being found naked because of the inadequacy of our earthly body, and this fear also explains our longing for our heavenly body.

These few examples could be multiplied many times to document what has been and is being done with modern linguistics in biblical studies. But viewed against what could be accomplished here, given the expertise and manpower, the little distance we have come since James Barr first called for our attention in 1961 seems almost microscopic. Readers of the *Bulletin* who hope to pursue a scholarly career and are in a position to make some choices, even if they are at present "linguistically" uninformed, would do well to consider this "wide open" field of the application of linguistic and semantic theory to the language problems facing Christian theology today.

Everything needs attention, from isolated points of exegesis to full-scaled theories of "text grammar"; from questions on the meaning of "flesh" at 1 Corinthians 5:5 to entire lexicons completely reworked according to the principles of semantic fields; from questions on the aspectual structure of *ginōskō* to a theory of verbal tense and aspect; from individual word counts to concordances based on both ostensive and functional occurrences of individual words, as well as concordances of syntactical patterns and constructions; from individual questions of syntax to full-blown generative grammars of the biblical languages, especially ones which can be used for teaching. People like James Barr, Anthony Thiselton, John Sawyer, Eugene Nida, Kenneth Burres, Moisés Silva, Erhardt Gütgemanns, René Kieffer, J. P. Louw, F. I. Andersen, Robert Funk, David Kiefer and numerous others have made an exciting beginning in exegesis, lexicography, stylistics, hermeneutics, grammar, translation, and the like, from this point of view of modern linguistics. Moreover, much of the tedious legwork can now be done by computer. A door of opportunity stands open; with some determination and personal initiative on our parts, a great deal can be done to enhance our understanding of God's Word by our being good stewards of what linguistics is offering us today.

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