
Although words are the building blocks of languages, the foundation of our ability to communicate in writing, and the medium through which God speaks to His people, they are somewhat unfashionable to study. Large books on theology or biblical history tend to get more attention, but when readers have an incorrect view of language and how it functions, the result is that readers “mishandle and distort the linguistic evidence of the Hebrew and Greek languages as they are used in the Bible” (iii). This statement lies at the heart of James Barr’s reason for writing The Semantics of Biblical Language. Although recognizing that the Scriptures are interpreted by all levels of education, and proper interpretation is the goal of all who read the Bible, Barr nonetheless must narrow his audience in this work, and he identifies them as the “instructed theological public” (iii).

Summary

In the opening chapter, Barr presents a two part thesis. The first goal is a “survey of the way in which the meaning of biblical language is understood” (1).\(^1\) The second goal is a “criticism of certain methods, which I hold to be erroneous, of using linguistic evidence from the Bible” (1). The opening chapter also communicates his reason for centering on biblical language. He clarifies that it is not because biblical language belongs to a different kind (2), rather he has chosen it because religious tradition naturally has special semantic developments, it shows a greater concern for and gives more significant reference to datum of the past (3), and it

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\(^1\)It should be noted that due to assignment requirements, I have only surveyed chapters 1-6 in this work. Chapters 7-10 contain much helpful information, however, particularly Barr’s critique of Kittel, though it is perhaps at times too uncharitable.
transcends various languages and cultures. It is this last point for Barr that provides much of the impetus for the study, for her argues “it is doubtful whether any other sphere of life than the theological has common people without special training so continually attempting a semantic transference across such [cultural and linguistic] gaps” (4).

In chapter two, Barr discusses the common contrast between Greek and Hebrew though. He identifies three common areas of contrast: static (Greek) vs. dynamic (Hebrew); abstract (Greek) vs. concrete (Hebrew); dualistic (Greek) vs. holistic (Hebrew) conception of man (10-13). Barr suggests these contrasts are often boiled down to the Greek’s preference for analytical though versus the Hebrew preference for the totality (13). Barr’s concern for these distinctions is only to the extent which these common contrasts have influenced and affected the examination of linguistic evidence (14). Barr goes on to argue that the issue, particularly for the study of the Old Testament, is not the extent to which Hebrew thought differed with Greek, but rather how its ideas differ from the Canaanites, Arabs, and Babylonians (20).

Barr identifies some methodological problems in chapter three, particularly those that grow out of the discussion in chapter two. One problem is the failure to incorporate study of Hebrew linguistics into linguistics as a whole, likely a problem derived from seeing Hebrew (and Greek) as special languages in isolation from others (33). A second problem is the idea that grammatical structure must reflect thought structure, particularly when Barr has already noted certain problems with identifying the thought structure in the first place (39).

Chapters four and five then deal more particularly on specific issues. Barr opposes Boman’s view of verbs and their dynamic function in chapter four, providing numerous examples against Boman. The most lengthy of these examples is the discussion on the verb “to be” in which Barr provides three linguistic phenomena relevant to the discussion (58-60),
discusses the Hebrew word yes (60-63), and shows a disconnect between the Hebrew and Greek use of the nominal sentence (68). Then in chapter five, Barr moves on to discuss other morphological issues, spending most of his time on the construct state, numerals, and verb roots.

Chapter six then serves as the heart of Barr’s work where he discusses the issues of etymological research on semantics. He argues that usage in context, rather than etymology, is the primary determiner of semantics (113). He uses several case studies to demonstrate how etymology can be problematic and misleading in determining the meaning of a word. Despite his harsh critique of etymological studies, he does identify three positive contributions of etymology, each of which emphasizes its aid in helping, though not definitively determining, the meaning of words that have infrequent use, have gone out of usage, or were replaced by homonyms (158).

**Critical Evaluation**

Barr’s work on semantics has remained a staple in the discipline since its publication over fifty years ago, and for good reason. Barr provides a necessary caution against certain theological methods that fail to take into account a proper view of semantics. It seems obvious that a failure to understand the meaning of words in their proper context would adversely affect the theological task, but Barr demonstrates with clarity that this is not always the case. For example, Barr discusses the meaning of the word holy, and how some have been led to use etymology to say it means whole or healthy. He provides examples such as the Holy Spirit, the devotion of objects as holy to the LORD, and the holy of holies as increasingly absurd examples of regarding holy as whole or healthy (113). However much it may make someone uncomfortable to consider their unholliness before a holy God, it is simply not semantically responsible to conclude that individuals are called to be whole and healthy on account of the shared etymology with holy.
Another example of Barr’s careful analysis is with respect to verbs. He routinely provides examples, such as the English word *stand*, that refute positions he is critiquing. With respect to the verb *stand*, Barr argues that *stand* in English can be either a movement or a state. He does likewise with *to lie* (50-51), thereby demonstrating that Boman’s position regarding the dynamic relationship between Hebrew thought and verb is flawed. More significantly, Barr proceeds to give an example of Egypt. Although recognized as having thought characterized as “rigid unmoving being,” Egypt also had flexibility with respect to the verb *hmsi* in a way similar to the Hebrew *to sit* or *to lie down* (53). Barr here provides a counterexample to Boman’s claim by showing exactly the opposite of what Boman wants to prove—that Egypt’s thought is not determinative of Egypt’s verb form. Throughout the work, Barr consistently provides examples that demonstrate with clarity and precision why these opposing approaches are problematic.

The main weakness of Barr book is in some ways related to his strength. Barr’s greatest strength, his ability to tear down opposing positions, for the most part leaves his work without a positive proposal for what is properly to be done. Although mentioning that the meaning of words must be based on their usage in context, Barr provides little other advice, nor does he provide much help on how properly to determine the meaning in context. It would be a much appreciated addition to include a proposal for how to do the task rightly rather than merely, although importantly, demonstrating how not to do it.

**Conclusion**

The strength of Barr’s work lies in his numerous examples that illuminate his critiques. Although such detail may be tedious and unfashionable to some, Barr’s work is a must-read for serious biblical scholars and theologians. Finally, since Barr has not given his own proposal for the task, it is up to the reader to take the next step, which is perhaps not such a weakness after all.