CHAPTER 1

A Foundation in Cognitive Linguistics

1.1 Introduction

When Christo van der Merwe and Eep Talstra (2002) applied the cognitive theory of Information Structure to biblical Hebrew word order, they seem to have begun solving several long-standing problems in our understanding of Hebrew grammar. To do so required careful attention to the relationship between data and theory. Distributional criteria, or pure data, are foundational to structuralist and functional approaches, but the question whether they are able to “render significant insight to linguistic phenomena beyond the level of the clause” has not yet been convincingly demonstrated (van der Merwe and Talstra, 2002, 68). But data must be the foundation for any theory that truly seeks to explain the data, leading them to argue for a “cognitive-oriented weak functional model”: far from eschewing distributional criteria as inadequate for a large-scale framework, they fit their empirical, distributional criteria within a coherent cognitive frame of reference, thus marrying both ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ approaches.

This combination of the empirical (data-based) and cognitive (theory-based) will characterize my methodology as well, as I seek to describe and explain the various combinations of form and function found in biblical Hebrew verbs, as they relate to the structure of linguistic units (e.g. paragraphs). Although the data of the Hebrew Bible are fairly well known, a comprehensive cognitive frame of reference for their interpretation is not, and consequently I devote my first chapter to developing just such an overarching framework, describing the grammar of languages (not only biblical Hebrew) as a vehicle for communicating human thought (cognition). Many of the grammatical structures within biblical Hebrew that have been until now considered enigmas or anomalies are, I contend, relatively straightforward reflections of the ways in which (speakers and) authors communicate language and the ways in which (listeners and) readers process that language.

Grammar, or the structure and the encoding of a language, has as its purpose the easiest possible processing of communication, without sacrificing informational adequacy. ‘Ease’ is defined differently by different languages, as they select different aspects of thought to encode, but they all select from the same source: human thought, or cognition. An understanding of our cognitive functions, both in constructing thought and encoding it linguistically for
a given audience, will lay the foundation for elucidating the cognitive basis of many heretofore misunderstood features of the biblical Hebrew verbal system.

I thus begin with an overview of those aspects of cognition I consider most important for understanding biblical Hebrew. I move from cognitive organization to how cognition is mapped onto language, followed by linguistic organization itself (discourse). Then, I address linguistic (grammatical) encoding: how it develops, what it does, and how it changes. Finally, I attempt to define the phenomenon of prominence cognitively, concluding with the relationship between cognitive prominence, linguistic prominence, and the goal of easing the processing effort required to understand common discourse.

Because I draw on such varied literature for this overview, I cite fairly extensively from the sources, in an attempt to retain something of the context and flavor of the original research while also demonstrating how it fits into the picture I am painting, of a framework comprehensive enough to explain what we find in biblical Hebrew.

1.2 Cognitive Organization: Coherence and Prominence

1.2.1 The Search for Coherence: Gestalt Psychology

1.2.1.1 Gestalt Effect

To understand cognition we must dabble in various disciplines: psychology, sociology, sometimes even neurology. A suitable starting point is with Gestalt psychology and its insights regarding the innate human search for coherence.

Gestalt psychology began with the phi phenomenon, discovered by Max Wertheimer while playing with a toy stroboscope. In the laboratory, he demonstrated that when static lights were shone successively at short intervals, they were perceived as being on continuously; and at long intervals, they were perceived as being on successively; but at an optimum interval, they were perceived as moving, though no motion was actually present. As with ‘flip-books’ and hand-drawn animation cartoons, the right frequency of perception of discrete events is experienced by the human as fluid motion.

The phi phenomenon is thus a psychological experience that is not reducible to its elements. It must be studied holistically as it cannot be understood by studying its elements. According to the oft-repeated maxim associated with Gestalt psychology—the whole is different from the sum of its parts. (Hothersall, 1984, 218)