CHAPTER 1

Ζήλος as a Univocal Lexical Input in Pauline Usage: Gricean Monosemy within a Relevance-Theoretic Framework

The increased attention given to distinct word senses that has accompanied analysis according to semantic domains (‘concept’ rather than ‘word’ studies) is a welcome development in NT scholarship. Whatever quibbles scholars have about the Louw-Nida lexicon (LN) as the basis for such study, it is widely agreed, for instance, that a study of ‘redemption’ in Luke-Acts that focuses only on the λύτρον/λυτρόω word group would be shortsighted, since Luke employs some 26 words that are sometimes used to convey the concept ‘release’ or ‘rescue.’

1 The scholars who have most influenced this shift are James Barr (The Semantics of Biblical Language [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961]) and Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains [New York: United Bible Societies, 1989]; Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament [Atlanta: SBL, 1992]). See also the summary by Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O’Donnell: “Rather than simply studying an individual word in all of its occurrences, or a single word in relation to its semantic field—as necessary as these preliminary stages are—analysing entire semantic domains as they are lexicalized across a corpus, or even corpora, seems to be the way forward in lexical study” (“Semantics and Patterns of Argumentation in the Book of Romans: Definitions, Proposals, Data and Experiments,” in Diglossia and Other Topics in New Testament Linguistics [ed. Stanley E. Porter; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 160).


3 ‘Release’ is conveyed by such terms as ἄφεσις, θεραπεία, ἰάομαι, and καθαρίζω, and ‘rescue’ is conveyed by such terms as διαφυλάσσω, ἐξαιρέω, ῥύομαι, and σῴζω. By my analysis, there are 26 words in 152 occurrences spanning 42 of the 52 chapters (ranging from Luke 1:47 to Acts 28:28) in a number of different literary contexts (e.g., OT quotations, healing stories, sayings of Jesus, Peter, and Paul). This kind of concept analysis draws attention to the centrality of ‘release’ and ‘rescue’ within the narrative in a way that studying the words λύτρον and λυτρόω never could. LN provides an excellent starting point for this kind of study, though it is
Yet most would grant that in certain instances, organizing data by lexeme can be useful, such as when a more ‘general’ usage informs a more particular ‘religious’ usage (as seems to be the case with πίστις in the Synoptics or σῶμα in 1 Corinthians). However, in the effort to avoid the fallacies popularized by James Barr (particularly the misuse of etymology and the practice of ‘illegitimate totality transfer’), interpreters may find it difficult to defend the validity of a given word study. Aside from overt wordplay (e.g., ἄνωθεν as ‘again’ or ‘from above’ in John 3:3 or the various senses of the κρίν- word group ['discern'/'be judged'] in 1 Cor 11:27–34), on what basis does one argue that the various uses of a word (often translated differently) should be viewed together? If a word is widely regarded to have multiple senses (polysemy), is it ever legitimate or even useful to consider the various lexical entries together? Barr is certainly correct that interpreters erroneously assume that words are used according to their etymology, but I argue that there is a converse danger: uncritical application of semantic domains can lead to artificial partitioning of a word into multiple senses.

For instance, one might study the concept of ‘zeal’ in Paul’s letters (LN ζηλόωa and related words such as σπουδή and προθυμία) without considering the occurrences of ζῆλος classified as ‘jealousy’ or ‘envy’ (LN ζῆλοςb and related words such as φθόνος). Or, narrowing things even further, one might study only the occurrences of ζῆλος that are deemed ‘positive’ and ‘Jewish.’ While it is certainly possible that within the same text a writer may use a single lexical form to convey different meanings, it is also possible that the repeated use of the word is part of a significant rhetorical strategy.

By way of illustration, Paul may use ζηλόω with the sense ‘be zealous for’ in 1 Cor 12:31 and 14:1 but with the sense ‘is jealous/envious’ in 13:4. In this case important that scholars make various modifications and adjustments and avoid mechanical assumptions about the accuracy of the categorizations in LN. For instance, Louw and Nida classify σωτήριονa, b; σῶσιμονb; and σωτηρίαb, c as a separate category, ‘Save in a Religious Sense’ (21.25–21.32), which I would prefer to regard as a figurative subdivision of a ‘rescue’ category. Louw and Nida also classify θαράπειαa; θεραπεύωa; ἰαμαίονa; ἴασις; καθαρίζωc; ὁλοκληρία; and ὑγιαίνωa in a ‘Health, Vigor, Strength’ domain (23.129–23.141), but I would include in a ‘release’ category the instances of these words that are used in the sense of ‘release’ or ‘healing’ from literal or figurative oppression.

4 Semantics, 107, 218.

5 Here Paul employs κρίνω (‘judgment’; 11:29, 34), διακρίνω (‘discern’; 11:29, 31), κρίνω (‘judge’; 11:31–32), and κατακρίνω (‘be under a sentence’; 11:32). To speak of ‘overt’ wordplay is obviously a subjective assessment, and it might be argued that the monosemous account of word meaning proposed for the ζηλ- word group might alternatively be viewed as a kind of wordplay between various senses; see further below.