

Linguistic Theory and the Biblical Text

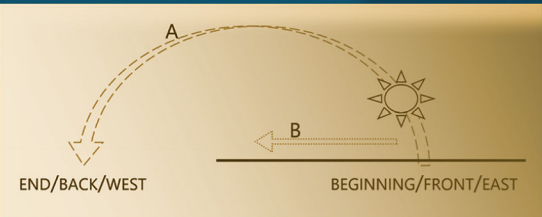
EDITED BY WILLIAM A. ROSS AND ELIZABETH ROBAR

Cognitive Linguistic Theory

Functional Grammar

Historical Linguistics

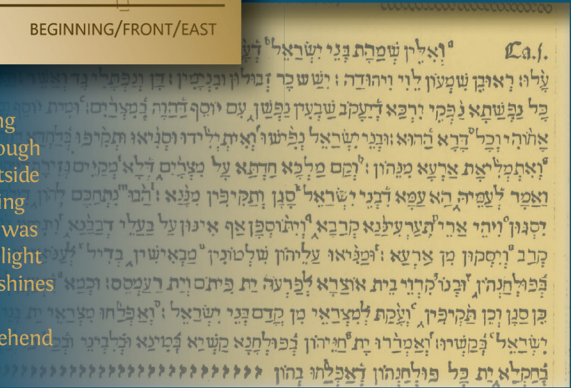
οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν. ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.



Complexity Theory

Generative Linguistics

This was in the beginning with God. All things through him came to be, and outside of him came to be nothing that came to be. In him was life and the life was the light of people, and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it (Jn. 1:2-5)



Pragmatics of Information Structure

Computational Linguistic Analysis



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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cisneros%27_original_complutensian_polyglot_Bible_-2.jpg; additional text and diagrams created by authors.

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Robar

Scholarship on biblical languages is rooted in Classical Philology, but Classical Philology has all but disappeared after birthing the full range of humanities. The linguistics portion of philology has developed several separate schools of linguistic thought, each of which offers a different perspective on how to analyse and explain language. These different perspectives heavily influence how we interpret the biblical text, which places a burden on the student and scholar not to remain ignorant about formative influences behind their own interpretations.

This edited volume presents the most important linguistic theories in use today for interpreting the biblical languages, with the intent of educating the student and scholar about what lies behind many of their favourite language tools and resources. All too often, both student and scholar are unaware of the prior theoretical commitments that drive many of the conclusions in these resources.

All work is, of necessity, done within a theoretical framework of some kind. When that framework remains unexamined and unarticulated, it becomes a liability for interpretations based on it. Ignorance of theoretical frameworks has become pervasive and problematic enough, even in academic circles, that one

response is to require that linguistic proposals submitted for conferences express ‘a well-articulated linguistic method’ in order to even be considered for acceptance (Society of Biblical Literature, Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew section).

This volume is a response to the need for students and scholars first to understand the various theories on offer, in order to be able to decide which theoretical framework is most suitable for their own work. The chapters fall into three *categories*:

1. Distinct linguistic *theories*, each with their own presuppositions, purpose and methods. Scholars with a strong theoretical background will often identify with one of these in particular.
 - a. Generative linguistics (Chapter 2)
 - b. Functional Grammar (Chapter 3)
 - c. Cognitive Linguistics (Chapter 4)
 - d. Historical linguistics (Chapter 5)
2. Practical *implementation* of a theory, which has been applied to each of the above theories.
 - a. Computational linguistic analysis (Chapter 6)
3. *Umbrella theory* that seeks to enable interaction between theories, as a practical form of interdisciplinarity.
 - a. Complexity Theory (Chapter 7)

Significant areas of linguistic theory not covered in this volume include structuralism and typological linguistics. The influence of these theories on biblical studies has either been indirect or very localised. Chapter 3 (Ross) provides an overview of structuralism as it bears on generative linguistics and Cognitive Linguistics. Typological linguistics, in connection to Biblical

Hebrew, is best known from John Cook's application of Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994) in his *Time and the Hebrew Verb* (2012).

It should be noted that Chapter 4 is entitled *Computational Linguistic Analysis* rather than *Computational Linguistics*, because, as van Peursen writes, application of computational linguistics has been largely restricted to syntactic databases of the biblical text, along with a few dissertations on machine learning. The term computational linguistics now tends to refer to Natural Language Processing (NLP) and machine learning, which are only in their infancy within biblical studies.

These linguistic theories differ in specific areas. One such area is how the nature of language itself is understood. Ferdinand de Saussure famously distinguished between *la parole* (spoken language, with all the messiness of everyday interaction) and *la langue* (the abstract system of language, as found in edited writing). Spoken language may be broadened to communication, whether largely linguistic (Functional Grammar) or embodied and extending far beyond language (Cognitive Linguistics). Formal (written) language is understood as grammatical (following the rules) or ungrammatical (generative linguistics).

The nature of grammar flows from the understanding of language: it can be inherently meaningful, a key to interpreting communication; or it can be a formal system explicating the abstract linguistic system. Theories approaching language as an abstract system have different purposes for their grammatical analysis: the diachronic (historical) development of language

(historical linguistics), the synchronic reality (e.g., structuralism), or the delimitation of acceptable ('grammatical') constructions (e.g., generative linguistics).

While not a focus of this volume, the extent of language analysed has also been a significant distinguishing factor between theories: whether a theory addresses grammar of linguistic levels at the sentence and below (e.g., structuralism, generative linguistics), or linguistic levels above the sentence (e.g., discourse analysis), or conceptual representations beyond language itself (e.g., Cognitive Linguistics).

A final distinction between these theories is the priority they accord to various linguistic levels: morphology (e.g., structuralism and historical linguistics), semantics (e.g., Cognitive Linguistics), syntax (e.g., generative linguistics), and pragmatics (e.g., Functional Grammar).

Complexity Theory stands out for not taking an explicit stance on any of these questions, precisely because its purpose is to enable different systems to interact while preserving their own internal composition. For perhaps each of the theories, theoretical clarity, in the form of dogmatic claims, has often come at the cost of explanatory adequacy, when confronted with the complexity of real language and texts. No one theory can explain everything. Complexity Theory aims to create space for each separate theory both to operate on its own and to interact with other theories.

Each chapter follows the same format: history and development of the theory; key theoretical commitments and major concepts; use and contributions in biblical studies to date; and

prospects for further study, application, and collaboration. Each chapter concludes with both a handful of suggestions for next reading (handbooks, introductions, and foundational texts) as well as a full bibliography for fuller research. Each chapter is therefore self-contained and may be read on its own, but the parallel structure should facilitate comparison and contrast between theories, as the reader seeks to evaluate each theory.

The biblical text has come to us as written language, a reduced form of the original communication. The various linguistic theories have done much to illuminate that text and that communication. May this volume be one more step in furthering the pursuit of studying the text for the sake of understanding.

References

- Bybee, Joan, Revere Perkins, and William Pagliuca. 1994. *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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