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Lexical Meaning in Biblical Hebrew and Cognitive Semantics: a Case Study

In a recent survey of Biblical Hebrew lexica⁽¹⁾, it was pointed out that the theoretical frames of reference underlying both the older classics such as Brown-Driver-Briggs (=BDB)⁽²⁾ and Koehler and Baumgartner (=KB)⁽³⁾, as well as the more recent Dictionary of Classical Hebrew (=DCH)⁽⁴⁾, can be called into question⁽⁵⁾. Two weaknesses were highlighted. Firstly, the layout and structure of these dictionaries reflect very little of the wealth of insights provided by theoretical lexicography (i.e. the theoretical reflection about the practice of dictionary making) and dictionary criticism in recent years⁽⁶⁾. Secondly, the semantic model(s) underlying available Biblical Hebrew dictionaries are either outdated (in the case of BDB and KB), or represent a very narrow and inadequate version of what modern linguistics has to offer for Biblical Hebrew lexicology (in the case of DCH). If one considers, even in very broad terms, recent developments in the field of semantics, in particular cognitive semantics, the shortcomings of bilingual Biblical Hebrew–English dictionaries that provide mere translation glosses (in the case of BDB and KB), or glosses supplemented with lists of the systematic syntagmatic distribution of lexical items (in the case of Clines) soon become evident. For example, if one accepts the insights about the ways in which humans across languages use linguistic terms to categorize their world, and the cultural embedment of languages' lexical stock, a new perspective emerges on the type of information that is indispensable in a bilingual dictionary of which the source and target languages are remote in time and space. However, although cognitive semantics provides promising new perspectives on the notion of "lexical meaning", it does not present — as any other linguistic theory does — a ready-made model that can merely be applied to an ancient language like Biblical Hebrew. Issues that are still debated, for example, are the exact role that syntactic and encyclopedic information should play in the analysis and interpretation of lexical items⁽⁷⁾.

(1) C.H.J. VAN DER MERWE, "Towards a Principled Model for Biblical Hebrew Lexicology", *JSNL* 30/1 (2004) 119-137.

(2) F. BROWN – S.R. DRIVER – C.A. BRIGGS, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford 1909).

(3) L. KOEHLER – W. BAUMGARTNER – M.E.J. RICHARDSON – J.J. STAMM, *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (Volumes 1–4 combined in one electronic edition) (Leiden – New York 2000).

(4) *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (ed. D.J.A. CLINES) (Sheffield 1993).

(5) This survey complemented a similar overview by M. O'CONNOR, "Semitic Lexicography: European Dictionaries of Biblical Hebrew in the Twentieth Century", *IOS* 20 (2002) 173-212.

(6) T.B. IMBAYARWO, "Existing Biblical Hebrew Dictionaries in the Light of Current Trends in Lexicography", Paper read at the Annual Congress of the South African Society for Near Eastern Studies (Bloemfontein 2003).

(7) Cf. C.H.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Biblical Hebrew Lexicology: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective* (Kleine Untersuchungen zur Sprache des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt 6) (in the press 2005).

The aim of this case study is to illustrate some of the insights that can be gained from using a cognitive semantic perspective to describe the meaning potential of a set of lexical items, viz. חזק/חזק, גבורה/גבר, אמיץ/אמץ, כח, חיל, חזקה/חזק, גבורה/גבר, אמיץ/אמץ, עז/עז⁽⁸⁾. It is obvious from the information provided in most available BH lexica (mainly “translation glosses”) that some of these terms can often, and others in particular instances, be translated either as “be(come) strong”, “strong”, “strength” or “power(ful)”. It is also clear from most of the lexica that these terms are not absolute synonyms. However, the lexica (as well as available theological dictionaries) do not help one to fully understand the relationship and/or differences between the lexical items.

The notion “meaning potential” occupies a central position in this paper since I hypothesize that it provides a justifiable theoretical frame of reference for capturing the types of information that should be included in bilingual BH lexica. I will focus in this paper on its contribution, alongside that of the notions “prototypical meaning” and “basic level category”, for better understanding the relationships between אמיץ/אמץ, גבורה/גבר, חזקה/חזק, כח, חיל, חזקה/חזק and עז/עז⁽⁹⁾.

The paper is organized as follows: I start with a few general observations on a cognitive semantic approach to meaning. Secondly, I give a brief description of those insights of cognitive linguistics that have played a crucial role (at least consciously) in this investigation. Special reference is made to the concept “folk taxonomy” since it is crucial for understanding the notions “basic level category”, “prototypical meaning” and in particular “meaning potential”. Reasons are also given why the latter notion plays such a central role in this study. Thirdly, I explain why חזקה/חזק and כח may be regarded as the “basic level” items for the conceptual category “strong/strength” in Biblical Hebrew. After describing the meaning potential of כח, I discuss the reasons why the other items in the list are not regarded as “basic level” items. I do not attempt to deal exhaustively with the meaning potential of any of these terms. However, with reference to the description of the meaning potential of כח, and drawing on those of the other items of our set⁽¹⁰⁾, I focus on describing the relationship between אמיץ/אמץ, גבורה/גבר, חזקה/חזק, כח, חיל, חזקה/חזק and עז/עז. In conclusion I summarize the contribution that this application of a few basic concepts from cognitive semantics has made towards a better understanding of a set of related BH lexical items.

⁽⁸⁾ In an initial survey I considered including עצום/עצם. However, on account of its relatively specialized connotation of strength that is associated with multiplicity, I decided to exclude it. As far as its distribution is concerned, the adjective עצום occurs 31× in the OT. In only 5 cases does it not act as an attribute of נוי or עמ. For an excellent description of lexical items with the root עצם, cf. G. LOHFINK, “עצם”, *TDOT*, XI, 289-303.

⁽⁹⁾ Compare H. RECHENMACHER “Kognitive Linguistik und Althebräische Lexikographie”, *JNSL* 30/2 (2004) 43-59. He does not explicitly use the term “meaning potential”, but does illustrate the value of insights from cognitive linguistics for the better understanding of set of BH items, viz. אריה, לביא, שחל, כפיר, גור.

⁽¹⁰⁾ A description of the meaning potential of each of the other items can be obtained at the following website: <http://academic.sun.ac.za/as/dokumente/VanderMerwe/AddendumtoLexicalmeaningandcognitivelinguistics.pdf>

1. *Some Basic Assumptions of Cognitive Semantics and its Implications*⁽¹¹⁾

Cognitive semantics represents an experimental approach to meaning. In some respects it links up with pre-structuralist and romantic approaches to linguistic meaning. It does not believe that the meaning of linguistic expressions can be determined merely by a structural analysis of linguistic signs (e.g. their syntagmatic and paradigmatic distribution) in abstraction from the society that uses them. It also does not regard language and linguistic knowledge as an autonomous human faculty, as is argued in Chomskyeian circles, nor that the lexicon of a language is one of a number of independent modules that make up this special human faculty. Instead, a basic assumption of cognitive semantics (which is backed by substantial empirical evidence) is that “the cognitive processes that govern language use, in particular the construction and communication of meaning by language, are in principle the same as other cognitive abilities”⁽¹²⁾. Furthermore, “common human experience of maturing and interacting in society motivates basic conceptual structures which make understanding and language possible”⁽¹³⁾.

The lexical stock (alongside the grammatical constructions) of a language is regarded as representing a set of conceptual categories that reflect the way in which a society conceptualizes itself and its environment. Geeraerts describes these categories as a “repository of world knowledge, a structured collection of meaningful categories that help us deal with new experiences and store information about old ones”⁽¹⁴⁾. However, this is not a full-scale return to a strong romantic position concerning the relationship between language and thought⁽¹⁵⁾.

Humans tend to categorize the entities of the world in which they live in terms of categories at various levels, e.g. animals>fish>freshwater fish>black bass>large-mouthed bass. Folk taxonomies tend to differ from biological taxonomies, because cultures differ concerning the attributes that they regard as the most salient in the classification process, e.g. a bat’s ability to fly may be more salient than its ability to give birth, so that it would often be classified as a bird rather than as a mammal⁽¹⁶⁾.

However, folk taxonomies also show similarities across cultures⁽¹⁷⁾: (1)

⁽¹¹⁾ Compare also VAN DER MERWE, *Biblical Hebrew Lexicology: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective*.

⁽¹²⁾ W. CROFT – D.A. CRUSE, *Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge 2004) 2. — This means, among other things, that psychological models of cognition and memory shed light on the way linguistic knowledge is organized, in particular how categorization takes place.

⁽¹³⁾ J. I. SAEED, *Semantics* (Oxford 1997) 331.

⁽¹⁴⁾ D. GEERAERTS, “Structuring of Word Meaning I: An Overview”, *Lexikologie. Ein internationales Handbuch zur Natur und Struktur von Wörtern und Wortschätzen*. (eds. D.A. CRUSE – F. HUNDSNURSCHER – M. JOB – P.R. LUTZEIER) (Berlin – New York 2002) 112-113.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Cf. the findings of S.C. LEVINSON, *Space in Language and Cognition*. Explorations in Cognitive Diversity (Cambridge 2003)

⁽¹⁶⁾ Cf. the way that animals and plants are classified by speakers of Biblical Hebrew. Cf. A.S. GILBERT, “The Native Fauna of the Ancient Near East”, *A History of the Ancient Animal World in the Ancient Near East* (ed. B.J. COLLINS) (Leiden 2002) 3-47.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Pre-linguistic image schemes which reflect the way in which humans perceive and experience their bodies as containers also across languages motivate linguistic expressions, e.g. someone is filled with emotions (in English) or filled with a spirit (in Biblical Hebrew: Exod 35,31, Jer 31,25). See SAEED, *Semantics*, 311-312, for a succinct explanation of “path” and “force” image schemes.

cultures tend to have not more than five or six levels of categorization of biological domains; (2) the relationships tend to be complex, not always forming logically structured hierarchies; and (3) any folk taxonomy has a core, referred to as its basic level, e.g. in the case of animals it will be things like fish, dog, cat, bird, etc. Geeraerts observes as follows in this regard:

... basic level categories exhibit a number of ... characteristics. From a psychological point of view, they are conceptualized as perceptual and functional gestalts⁽¹⁸⁾. From a developmental point of view, they are early in acquisition, i.e. they are the first terms of the taxonomy learned by the child. From a linguistic point of view, they are named by short morphologically simple items. And from a conceptual point of view, it has been claimed that the basic level constitutes the level where prototype effects are most outspoken, in the sense that they maximize the number of attributes shared by members of the category, and minimize the number of attributes shared with members of other categories⁽¹⁹⁾.

Categories tend to have fuzzy borders⁽²⁰⁾, e.g. they may include items that are regarded as good examples of a category and those that are less typical. In the case of the category fruit, apples and oranges would be regarded by American speakers of English as good examples of the category, while pomegranates, lemons, watermelons and pineapples will be regarded as not such good examples⁽²¹⁾. "Good examples" are regarded as prototypes of a particular category. Definitions of categories are as a rule made in terms of the attributes that apply to its prototypical members, e.g. fruit will be described as "the soft and sweet edible entities that grow on trees and bushes"⁽²²⁾.

Practising lexicographers and lexicologists would be the first to agree that one of the most problematic aspects of describing lexical items is that of their sense relationships. Pertinent questions that often arise are: (1) how many senses should be distinguished? (The same question posed from a different perspective: How does one distinguish what are no longer polysemes, but homonyms?)⁽²³⁾ (2) How should the relationships between the different senses of the same lexical entity be interpreted? (3) Should one distinguish a "basic meaning"? What is the relationship between such a "basic meaning", an "original meaning", a "prototypical meaning", and the different senses of

⁽¹⁸⁾ This means that people can form a mental representation of a fish, a dog, etc., but not of an animal.

⁽¹⁹⁾ GEERAERTS, "An Overview", 312.

⁽²⁰⁾ Cf. CROFT – CRUSE, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 89.

⁽²¹⁾ The notion of "Goodness-of-Example" is not uncontested. Cf. CROFT – CRUSE, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 76-81.

⁽²²⁾ D. Geeraerts refers to this type of definition of the sense of fruit as its "basic reading". For him it is "the center of semantic cohesion in the category; it holds the category together by making the other readings accessible. Three features, in short (psychological salience, relative frequency of use, interpretative advantageousness) may be mentioned as indications for the central position of a particular reading ("An overview", 306)". However, the prototype theory is not without shortcomings. Cf. CROFT – CRUSE, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 87-96.

⁽²³⁾ When one tries to describe the Biblical Hebrew item קִרְיָהּ the crux of this problem is evident.

a polyseme? Should only a basic reading be defined, or should each sense be defined? How inclusive should such a definition be? Should a minimum context be assumed, or should the meaning potential in any context be described?

In cognitive semantic circles it has been established that the relationships between polysemes tend to display similarities across cultures, e.g. “thought mapping” is based on similarity from the concrete to more abstract in the case of metaphorical extensions (the fruit of my work, the foot of the mountain), based on a relation of contiguity in the case of metonymy (he drank the whole bottle) as well as specialization (corn = maize (USA) / wheat (England) / oats (Scotland)) and generalization (fruit as the seed-bearing part of a plant) of the sense of a basic reading.

These insights make the definitions of the prototypical or basic reading of a lexical item attractive, since sense distinctions can then be made on the basis of the above-mentioned extensions. However, Allwood rightly points out some of the pitfalls of such an approach⁽²⁴⁾. In my view the most problematic aspect of such an approach is that tracking the mappings, which can be complicated in the case of multiple mappings and extensions, does not necessarily shed light on the way a particular mapping has become conventionalized. Allwood suggests that “the basic unit of word meaning is the ‘meaning potential’ of the word”⁽²⁵⁾. In other words, this is the unit that needs to be defined. “The meaning potential is all the information that a word has been used to convey either by a single individual or, on the social level, by the language community”⁽²⁶⁾. The content of the meaning potential of a word does not distinguish between linguistic and encyclopaedic information. When a word is used, one or more aspect of its meaning potential are activated and the activation takes place “in a context which creates certain conditions for its activation, with these conditions determining the way in which the potential is activated. The result of an activation is normally a structured partial activation of the potential”⁽²⁷⁾. An example in Biblical Hebrew is the generic word for saying, viz. אָמַר. In contexts where the content of saying is a question, its potential as a word of asking is activated⁽²⁸⁾. The same can be said of דָּבַר. In a context of promising, that part of its meaning potential may be activated⁽²⁹⁾. The process in which a “structured partial activation” of a

⁽²⁴⁾ J. ALLWOOD, “Meaning Potential and Context: Some Consequences for the Analysis of Variation in Meaning”, *Cognitive Approaches to Lexical Semantics* (H. CUYCKENS – R. DIRVEN – J.R. TAYLOR) (Berlin 2003) 39-41.

⁽²⁵⁾ ALLWOOD, *Meaning Potential and Context*, 43. — According to W. Cruse and D.A. Croft, “Each lexical item (word form) is associated with a body of conceptual content”. They refer to it as “purport”. Purport “is part of the raw material contributed by the word to processes of construal of an interpretation” (*Cognitive Linguistics*, 100).

⁽²⁶⁾ J. Allwood remarks: “Meaning potentials are thus a result of conventionalizations of semantic operations meeting contextual requirements” (*Meaning Potential and Context*, 50). For Croft and Cruse “purport is some function of previous experience of (construed) occurrences of the word in specific situations (*Cognitive Linguistics*, 101)”.

⁽²⁷⁾ ALLWOOD, *Meaning Potential and Context*, 43. — Cruse and Croft describe such an instance of activation (i.e. word meaning) as “a perspective of our knowledge of the world, as seen through the concept profiled by the word” (*Cognitive Linguistics*, 30).

⁽²⁸⁾ Cf. Gen 3,11; 33,5 and Exod 3,13.

⁽²⁹⁾ 1 Kgs 9,5; Jos 1,3; 14,10; 22,4. In contrast, cf. Deut 19,8.

meaning potential takes place is referred to by Croft and Cruse⁽³⁰⁾ as a “dynamic construal of meaning”.

For the purposes of this paper I now hypothesize that (a) an analysis and a systematic description of all the occurrences of the lexical items in our set in the Hebrew Bible will make the identification of the meaning potential of each item possible, (b) each lexical item will display a prototypical reading, (c) the notion “basic level category” will point to the most prototypical lexical items for the concepts “strong/strength” in BH and (d) the notion “basic level category” is pivotal for understanding the relationship between a set of semantically related lexical items.

2. *Lexical Items with the Label “Strong/Strength”*

I had compiled all the BH words that are normally translated into English — this is of course a solely heuristic procedure — as “strong, powerful, strength, mighty, etc”. I ended up with the following list, viz. אַמִּיץ/אָמִץ, אָזֵז/עָזָז, כָּח, חֵיל, חֻזְקָה/חֻזֵק, גְּבוּרָה/גִּבּוֹר, גְּבוּרָה/גִּבּוֹר. The first question is, of course: does one use roots or word forms as point of departure? I opted for the first position, primarily as a heuristic procedure.

As a next step I used the theoretical frame of reference of De Blois⁽³¹⁾, and the electronic template *Vocabula 3.3* to record, where relevant, the morphological features, the syntagmatic distribution, semantic features, near-synonyms and antonyms. Particular attention was paid to the recording of the contextual frame of each occurrence of the above-mentioned lexical items. On the basis of these data, I then described the meaning potential of each of the lexemes, paying special attention to (1) the major distinctions that warrant different definitions as far as their meaning potential is concerned, and (2) prototypical use(s) of each of these distinctions. This was, however, easier said than done.

After this semasiological analysis of a list of lexical items, the crucial question from an onomasiological point of view was: are there any specific word form(s) that can unequivocally be regarded as the basic level reading(s) of the category “strong/strength” in Biblical Hebrew? Since we have no mother-tongue speakers of Biblical Hebrew to consult, frequency of use and the widest possible combinational properties that may be an indication of its generic quality were used as criteria. I also considered the observation by Geerarts that basic level items tend to be named by “short morphologically simple terms⁽³²⁾”. If the latter would be the point of departure, אָזֵז would be our first candidate and, depending on how one understands “short morphologically simple terms”, אָזֵז may also be a candidate. However, on the basis of an interplay of all three criteria, I found אָזֵז and the verbal forms and adjectives

⁽³⁰⁾ CROFT – CRUSE, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 97-98.

⁽³¹⁾ R. DE BLOIS, *Towards a New Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew Based on Semantic Domains. Doctoral dissertation* (Amsterdam 2000); ID., “A Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew”, *Current Trends in Scripture Translation* (ed. P.A. Noss) (Reading 2002) 275-295; ID., “Lexicography and Cognitive Linguistics: Hebrew Metaphors from a Cognitive Perspective”, *unpublished article. United Bible Societies, Triannual Translation Workshop, Iguassu Falls* (Brazil 2003) 1-17.

⁽³²⁾ GEERAERTS, “An Overview”, 312.

with the root חזק to be the most basic level terms. חזק has by far the widest distribution. As a verb חזק occurs 370 times and as an adjective 58 times⁽³³⁾. The two basic level terms חזק and כח display similarities respectively with their English counterparts “strength” and “strong, to be strong, to strengthen”.

I will not further deal with חזק here. An example from Amos 2,14 will have to suffice. It reflects well the relationship between כח and חזק, viz. וְחִזַּק לֹא-יִצְמָח כְּחוֹ.

The meaning potential of כח, which occurs (only as a noun) 127 times in the Hebrew Bible, can be described as follows:

1a. כח is often an attribute of humans, God or animals (or parts of them, typically their hand(s), arm(s) and legs). Sometimes כח is an attribute of their voices⁽³⁴⁾ or emotions. It prototypically denotes the ability to perform actions, prevail in, or endure situations that require the exertion or mustering of an effort/force⁽³⁵⁾, e.g. manual work⁽³⁶⁾, fighting opposing forces⁽³⁷⁾, ruling a kingdom⁽³⁸⁾, oppressing other people⁽³⁹⁾, acquiring wealth⁽⁴⁰⁾, or giving birth⁽⁴¹⁾. It often refers to the ability/energy humans need to face the challenges or hardships of life⁽⁴²⁾, express emotions (e.g. cry)⁽⁴³⁾ or the ability to do specialized work⁽⁴⁴⁾.

Living entities may typically have various measures of this ability. Abundant measures of the ability are associated with young healthy beings⁽⁴⁵⁾, soldiers⁽⁴⁶⁾, large numbers of people⁽⁴⁷⁾, big armies⁽⁴⁸⁾ big animals⁽⁴⁹⁾ and God. In the case of people it is an ability that may be absent⁽⁵⁰⁾, drained⁽⁵¹⁾ or used up⁽⁵²⁾. God, however, has huge measures of this ability⁽⁵³⁾. He can give the ability to humans⁽⁵⁴⁾ (and big animals)⁽⁵⁵⁾, or take

⁽³³⁾ It is significant that the lexical item occurs frequently in Chronicles (98x, in other words, more or less 20% of all occurrences).

⁽³⁴⁾ Ps 29,4; Isa 40,9.

⁽³⁵⁾ Judg 16,6.9.15.17.19.

⁽³⁶⁾ Also Gen 31,6; Qoh 9,10; Neh 4,4 and Isa 44,12. Possibly also Job 30,2.

⁽³⁷⁾ Isa 10,13.

⁽³⁸⁾ 2 Chr 22,9 and Dan 11,6.

⁽³⁹⁾ Eccl 4,1.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ 1 Chr 29,2. Deut 8,17.18. Perhaps also Gen 49,3.

⁽⁴¹⁾ 2 Kgs 19,3.

⁽⁴²⁾ 1 Sam 28,28.22; Job 3,17; Ps 31,11; 38,11; 71,9; 102,24; Prov 24,10; Isa 40,29.31; 41,1; 44,12; 49,4; Jer 48,45; Lam 1,6.14; Dan 10,8; 10,16 and 17. In Ezra 10,13 a specific task is involved, viz. standing in the rain for days. In Job 6,11 and 12 God is implied as the cause of the hardship.

⁽⁴³⁾ 1 Sam 30,4.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ 1 Chr 26,8 and Dan 1,4.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Prov 20,29.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Josh 14,11.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Josh 17,17.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Dan 11,25.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Job 39,11; 39,21; Prov 14,4. In Dan 8,6 a feature of a big animal's rage is denoted.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ 2 Chr 14,10; 20,12, Dan 11,15. The construction used is חָזַק אִין. Cf. also Job 26,2 and Dan 8,7.

⁽⁵¹⁾ 1 Sam 28,20.

⁽⁵²⁾ Ps 31,11; 71,9. Isa 40,29.

⁽⁵³⁾ Job 9,19; 36,22 and 37,23 and Isa 40,26.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ Ps 33,16 and Zech 4,6 (as a near-synonym of חָזַק, as second item of the pair). Implied in Judg 6,14.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ In Job 40,16 חָזַק is a near-synonym of אִין.

it away from them⁽⁵⁶⁾. This attribute of God is associated with what “belongs” to Him⁽⁵⁷⁾ and sometimes with His great wisdom⁽⁵⁸⁾. It makes Him dangerous to confront⁽⁵⁹⁾, but also the one who can do great deeds in creation⁽⁶⁰⁾ and for His people⁽⁶¹⁾. This even includes His ability to forgive⁽⁶²⁾.

Someone who has כֹּחַ is described as חֲזָק (63) or אֲמִיץ (65)]. It appears to be unmarked in most contexts as far as the quantity that is involved is concerned. This is in contrast to גְּבוּרָה, which always implies a huge measure of “strength”. כֹּחַ can be modified as far as quantity is concerned⁽⁶⁶⁾, e.g. חֲזָקָה וְיָד גְּדוּלָה בְכֹחַ (“with great strength and a strong hand”)⁽⁶⁷⁾, אֲמִיץ כֹּחַ (68) (“force of strength” = great power”), כֹּחַ בְּרַב (69) (greatness/ abundance of strength”) or עָצָם כֹּחַ (“His strength will be extremely great”)⁽⁷⁰⁾. In other contexts, it appears to be marked as far as quantity is concerned⁽⁷¹⁾ and then is regarded as a near-synonym of גְּבוּרָה⁽⁷²⁾. A relationship similar to that which is displayed in the hierarchy: “dog” and “dog – bitch” may be involved⁽⁷³⁾.

1b. כֹּחַ refers to the accumulative effect of humans’ ability to perform actions that require effort⁽⁷⁴⁾. It can be the resources or ability they have to give back to the Lord as a tithe⁽⁷⁵⁾, the wealth they have acquired⁽⁷⁶⁾, or the produce of the land they cultivate⁽⁷⁷⁾.

If one now considers the other terms in our list, the follow picture emerges:

עוֹ is a near-synonym of כֹּחַ, but is the only term in our list that never co-occurs with כֹּחַ. עוֹ has a more specialized distribution than כֹּחַ. In 76% of the cases of its use, it denotes an attribute of God to do powerful deeds in order to provide a safe refuge for His people. The cultural model “God is a safe

⁽⁵⁶⁾ 1 Chr 29,12 and Ps 102,24. Cf. also Judg 16,6.9.15.17.19.

⁽⁵⁷⁾ E.g. His messengers (Ps 103,20). When He or His messenger gives food to someone, it appears to give them extraordinary abilities. Cf. 1 Kgs 19,8.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ Jer 32,17. Cf. also Job 26,2.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ Job 9,19; 36,22.

⁽⁶⁰⁾ Ps 65,7; 111,6; 147,5; Isa 50,2; Jer 10,12; 27,5; 32,17; 51,15.

⁽⁶¹⁾ Exod 15,6; 1 Chr 29,12; 2 Chr 20,6; 25,8; Job 24,22; 26,12; Isa 50,2; 63,1; Mic 3,8; Nah 1,3. Probably implied in 1 Sam 2,9. Cf. 1 Sam 2,10. Also Exod 9,16; 32,11, Num 14,13.17; Deut 4,37; 9,29; 2 Kgs 17,36; Neh 1,10.

⁽⁶²⁾ Num 14,17.

⁽⁶³⁾ Josh 14,11 and Amos 2,14.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ 1 Chr 29,14; 2 Chr 2,5; 13,20; 22,9 and Dan 11,6.

⁽⁶⁵⁾ Amos 2,14; Nah 2,2; Prov 24,5. Cf. also Dan 11,25 where כֹּחַ is “stirred up”.

⁽⁶⁶⁾ In 2 Chr 26,13 כֹּחַ is modified by חֲזָק.

⁽⁶⁷⁾ Cf. also Josh 17,17; Judg 16,6; Jer 27,5; 32,17; Nah 1,3.

⁽⁶⁸⁾ Cf. Job 9,4; Isa 40,26. Cf. also Job 36,19 and Prov 24,5.

⁽⁶⁹⁾ Ps 33,16; Isa 63,1.

⁽⁷⁰⁾ Dan 8,24.

⁽⁷¹⁾ Exod 15,6; 1 Sam 2,9; Job 26,12; Hab 1,11; Dan 8,22.

⁽⁷²⁾ 1 Chr 29,12; 2 Chr 20,6; Mic 3,8.

⁽⁷³⁾ Dog as a rule is unmarked for gender (e.g. She prefers to have a dog rather than a cat.). However, when dog used as the opposite of bitch, it is marked for masculine gender (e.g. We have two brown labradors, a dog and a bitch).

⁽⁷⁴⁾ Cases with this sense are near-synonyms of a similar sense that חֲזָק may have.

⁽⁷⁵⁾ Ezr 2,69.

⁽⁷⁶⁾ Job 6,22 and Prov 5,10.

⁽⁷⁷⁾ Gen 4,12; Hos 7,9; Job 31,39.

refuge” appears often to be present. Jer 16,19 testifies explicitly in this regard *יְהוָה עִי וּמְנוּסֵי בְיָוִם עָרָה*. Like *כַּח* it is an ability that sometimes needs to be mustered or invoked. In Ps 93,1 it is said that God “clothed” himself with *עו*, while in Isa 51,9 he is asked to clothe Himself with *עו*. When *עו* is used to describe an attribute of humans or animals, it refers to specially endowed humans (trained warriors, kings, and Lady Wisdom) or big animals.

In contrast *עו*, which is evenly distributed through the entire Hebrew Bible, is never an attribute of God, but an attribute of people (a nation, king, an enemy), big animals and natural forces. A frame of aggression, fierceness or destructiveness is nearly always present. It is significant that the verbal root *עו* tends to share the distribution and meaning potential of *עו* and not *עו*.

A feature of the pair *גבורה/גבר*, which it shares with *כַּח* and *חֹזֶק*, is that the pair is relatively evenly distributed in the Hebrew Bible. Unlike *גבורה*, *כַּח* is never modified and prototypically describes the ability to perform actions that require a huge measure of force or an extreme effort — more or less in the same way as the English expression “very powerful”. In other words, unlike *כַּח*, it is always marked for a huge measure. A significant feature of *גבורה* as a near-synonym of *כַּח* ⁽⁷⁸⁾ or *עו* ⁽⁷⁹⁾ is that in all the cases that they are used in the same context (mainly in semantic parallelisms) *גבורה* is mentioned second. I regard this feature of *גבורה* as a confirmation of my hypothesis that it is the more specialized or marked item of *כַּח* or *עו* ⁽⁸⁰⁾.

The pair *אמץ/אמץ* is also evenly distributed throughout the Hebrew Bible. It often co-occurs with *חֹזֶק*. It is significant that it is always the second member of the pair, which may suggest that *אמץ/אמץ* are the more specialized terms. This possibility is underlined by the fact that *אמץ/אמץ* has a more focused distribution than *חֹזֶק* in the sense that it occurs primarily in contextual frames of conflict.

חַיִל is a frequently occurring item (245×), but it has a more specialized connotation than *כַּח* and *חֹזֶק*. If one leaves out of consideration the substantial number of cases that it refers to (1) a specialized skill ⁽⁸¹⁾, (2) (in a few cases) the ability to act with courage in a morally and ethically correct way, i.e. a “worthy” person, (3) the objects that people possess and that are greatly valued, “wealth” or an attribute of people who possess these objects, the following is clear: it is predominantly an attribute of able-bodied men, in particular soldiers. It refers to their ability to fight well, in other words, they are skilled warriors, and this ability often accompanies a degree of inner strength, i.e. bravery. *חַיִל* also often refers to people who provide (political) strength, a large group of people, often armed for fighting. In a few cases no contextual frame of warfare is directly involved. This lexical item is seldom

⁽⁷⁸⁾ Ps 65,7; 1 Chr 29,12; 2 Chr 20,6; Job 26,12; Mic 3,8.

⁽⁷⁹⁾ Ps 21,14.

⁽⁸⁰⁾ Van Steenberghe provides convincing arguments and evidence in support of such an interpretation of near-synonyms in semantic parallelisms. [G.J. VAN STEENBERGHE, “Semantics, World View and Bible Translation: An integrated analysis of a selection of Hebrew lexical items referring to negative moral behaviour in the book of Isaiah” (unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of Stellenbosch) (Stellenbosch 2002)].

⁽⁸¹⁾ 1 Chr 26,8 reads *אִישׁ-חַיִל בַּכַּח לְעִבְרָה*.

used to denote an attribute of God. When this does happen, it provides a frame of God as warrior or One who enables His people to face hostile forces.

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The notion “semantic potential” was used in this study to capture the activation potential for all the information (linguistic and encyclopaedic) connected with each of a set of semantically related lexical items in the Hebrew Bible, viz. אָמִיץ/אָמַץ, גְּבוּרָה/גִּבּוֹר, חֹזֵק/חֹזֵק, חֵיל, כַּח, עָזָה. Commencing with the “basic level items” of the set, describing the distribution, the prototypical use and accompanying contextual frames of each term, the following picture emerged:

חֹזֵק/חֹזֵק and כַּח are the basic level terms for the conceptual category “strong/strength” in Biblical Hebrew.

The prototypical reading of כַּח appears to be: כַּח denotes the ability — typically unmarked for quantity — which living beings may have various quantities of, and which they need to muster, to perform actions, prevail in, or endure situations that require the exertion or mustering of an effort/force.

The term עָזָה does not co-occur with כַּח. It occurs primarily in poetic sections and very often denotes an attribute of God, viz. to do powerful deeds in order to care for His people. It also often invokes the contextual frame: “God is a safe refuge”.

The term עָזָה nearly always has the connotation of fierceness and/or destructiveness. It never denotes an attribute of God.

גְּבוּרָה/גִּבּוֹר is always marked for an abundant measure of strength, viz. “(very) powerful”.

חֵיל has various senses. The connotation with strength is mainly that of the ability of able-bodied men to fight well (with skill) and often accompanies a degree of inner strength, i.e. bravery.

אָמִיץ/אָמַץ often co-occurs with חֹזֵק and appear to be the more specialized of the two. It occurs predominantly in contextual frames of conflict.

This is certainly not the last word on the meaning of the above-mentioned set of lexical items. I have not paid any systematic attention to the distribution of the lexical items in the diachronic layers of BH, nor to the contribution that comparative philological evidence can make towards a better understanding of any of these lexical items. More insights into the way(s) the speakers of BH conceptualized their world in general may also contribute to a refinement of the above-mentioned results. Questions that arose in the course of this investigation, and which I have not addressed are: Can a lexical item have more than one prototypical reading (e.g. כַּח in 1a and 1b above), do prototypical readings always correlate with frequency of use, and what status should be assigned to a “prototypical” reading in a particular corpus (e.g. the books of Chronicles)?

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SUMMARY

This paper examines the contribution that a cognitive linguistic model of meaning can make towards the semantic analysis and description of Biblical Hebrew. It commences with a brief description of some of the basic insights provided by cognitive semantics. The notion “semantic potential” is used to capture the activation potential for all the information (linguistic and encyclopaedic) connected with each of a set of semantically related lexical items in the Hebrew Bible, viz. עֵזוּ/עָזוּ, כַּח, חֵיל, חֹזֶק/חֹזֵק, גְּבוּרָה/גִּבּוֹר, אִמּוּץ/אִמּוּץ. Commencing with the “basic level items” of the set, describing the distribution, the prototypical use and accompanying contextual frames of each term, the prototypical reading of and relationship between these terms are then identified.