

## BIBLE BASICS SESSION 8

### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

#### Semantic Range

There's one particular piece of theory that matters a whole lot when it comes to word studies, and that's the idea of semantic range. Many words are polyvalent: they carry more than one meaning. That's the case for English, and it was also the case for biblical Hebrew and Greek. Another way to say this is that words have semantic range.

Think about the English word, "hand." I'm willing to bet a lot of someone else's money that at some point in your life someone has said, "Hey, can you give me a hand here?" and you've responded by clapping.

That "joke" only works because "hand" is polyvalent. In addition to assistance and applause, it can mean:

1. The end of a person's arm below the wrist.
2. A pointer on a watch or a clock.
3. The power to direct something (taking the law into your own hands).
4. A person's workmanship (the artist's hand)
5. A person who engages in manual labour.
6. A set of cards dealt to a player in a game.
7. A unit of measurement of a horse's height.
8. A bunch of bananas.

You know which of those meanings a speaker or author intends in English by taking cues from the context, and you do it without thinking about it because you understand English. When it comes to the biblical languages, you have to work harder because you don't live in the world in which the texts were written, so the context is more opaque.

We talked about how to study words in this session, but I wanted to give you this background information on semantic range to supplement our discussion. There are several things to keep in mind when it comes to semantic range.

#### *Ranges Differ*

First, semantic ranges differ across languages. The semantic range of a word in English in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may bear no resemblance to the semantic range of a word in Greek or Hebrew thousands of years ago.

And we can get even deeper here because the semantic range of a given word might have been different between the Hebrew of the OT and the Greek of the NT.

A good example is the word "peace." When you see that word in the OT, it translates the Hebrew word, "shalom," which you might have heard before.

That word had three possible meanings:

1. A sense of wellbeing based on the absence of strife.
2. A state of fulfillment that comes from the presence of God.
3. The eternal peace of death.

In the NT, “peace” translates a Greek word that also had three possible meanings:

1. The absence of hostility.
2. A sense of wellbeing derived from the absence of hostility.
3. A sense of internal tranquility.

In English, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word also has three possible meanings:

1. Freedom from disturbance; tranquility (can describe mental or emotional calm).
2. The absence of hostility.
3. A ceremonial handshake or kiss exchanged during the Eucharist symbolizing Christian love and unity.

So, when you see the word, “peace,” in the OT, can it mean the absence of conflict? No. That’s not one of the meanings that fits into the semantic range of the Hebrew word.

Can it mean the absence of conflict in the NT? Yes, just like it can mean the absence of conflict in modern English.

When you see the word, “peace,” in the NT, can it mean the eternal peace of death? No. That’s not one of the meanings that fits into the semantic range of the Greek word.

Can it mean that in the OT? Yes. Can it mean that in modern English? I’ll let you decide.

### *Ranges Overlap*

Another thing to think about when it comes to semantic ranges is that ranges sometimes overlap. Think about the English word, “pleasure.” It conveys a feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment, according to the OED, that could be:

1. Enjoyment and entertainment, as opposed to necessity;
2. An activity or event from which one derives pleasure;
3. Sensual gratification.

Each of those meanings overlaps with the semantic ranges of other words, but they don’t all overlap with the same words. For example, the first meaning of “pleasure” could share semantic range with the word, “leisure.” But you wouldn’t use “leisure” as a synonym for the third meaning.

In our reference passage—Philippians 2:12-13—Paul uses the words “fear” and “trembling.” In English, the semantic ranges of those two words can overlap, and you

might assume, as an English speaker, that he's using synonyms. But you can't assume that: you have to check it.

### *Ranges Are Literal and Metaphorical*

Yet another thing to consider with semantic range is that words can have both literal and metaphorical meanings, and bad things can happen when you mistake one for the other.

The metaphorical meanings of words tend to change faster than the literal ones, and they're sometimes specific to certain cultures or even certain moments in history. Sometimes, the metaphorical meaning completely consumes the literal meaning. That's the case for the word "queer." It used to have a literal meaning of strange, then it was applied metaphorically to the homosexual community, and that's now become its literal meaning.

Here's a fairly silly example from the NT. In Philippians 3:2, Paul says, "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh." The context makes it pretty obvious that Paul is using "dogs" metaphorically, unless, of course, Paul was an ardent cat person.

This may not seem like an important point, but the reality is that many exegetical arguments are based on the difference between literal and metaphorical meanings. Probably the safest example I can use is the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. When he instituted the Lord's Supper, Jesus took bread and said, "This is my body," and then took a cup of wine and said, "This is my blood." Okay, he actually said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," but that just illustrates the point.

As Protestants, we believe that Jesus was using "body" and "blood" metaphorically. Catholics believe that he wasn't. The argument obviously isn't as simple as that, but you get the idea. Literal versus metaphorical matters.

### *Ranges Change Over Time*

There's one final thing to be mindful of when it comes to semantic range. Languages are alive, and because that's true, semantic ranges change over time. When you're studying words, it matters to know the semantic range of the word at the time it was being written.

I'd give you a biblical example, but they're too complicated, so let me illustrate with an example from English—and this is something we touched on briefly a few weeks back. The KJV was originally translated in 1611, and the meanings of various English words have changed a lot in that time.

For example, Philippians 1:27 in the KJV reads, “Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ.” In the ESV, it reads, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

When the KJV was translated, the semantic range of the word, “conversation,” included the pattern of one’s life. It doesn’t mean that now. If you were reading the KJV and came across that verse today, you might think it’s referring to how you speak.

To be clear, there is instruction in the Bible about how we should speak; it’s just not there. That verse is about how you live.

The big-picture point I want you to come away with is this: words have semantic range, and we are not free, as interpreters, to assign a meaning to a word that is outside of the semantic range as it existed at the time the document was written.