Since the end of the 1990’s there is in the making a new Hebrew dictionary, the _Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew_ (SDBH). The remarks here presented arise from a thinking through of its theoretical basis.

A first main installment of this theoretical basis was put forth by Reinier de Blois, its editor, in his dissertation _Towards a new dictionary of Biblical Hebrew based on semantic domains_ (de Blois 2000a), and in two papers (de Blois 2000b; 2002). My aim here is to contribute to the discussion started there, specifically on questions related to the semantics of biblical Hebrew.

De Blois (2000a: 12) starts his remarks on this issue with the following broad comment:

Throughout the last centuries an enormous amount of linguistic research has taken place in the field of Biblical Hebrew in which semantics always played a very minor role. The main reason for this, of course, is that, up till recently, semantics was not really considered to be a scholarly discipline of importance. As a result of this all kinds of claims were made about the biblical texts, including the culture and beliefs behind these texts, without solid linguistic
arguments to support them.

In the sequence, de Blois mentions James Barr’s book *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Barr 1961), observing that “in his book he complains about the haphazard way in which scholars are using linguistic arguments to substantiate their claims concerning the biblical texts and the theological and cultural background of the people who produced them” (de Blois 2000a: 12). It is at this point that I want to enter this conversation, in the present paper.

1 Revisiting James Barr

Barr’s book made history and already has its own Wirkungsgeschichte. One may quote as example the translation of the book to German, by Erhard Gerstenberger (*Bibllexegese und moderne Semantik*, 1965), which has the distinction of being the only modern book on the field quoted twice in the Introduction written by Ernst Jenni to the first volume of the *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (1971). Jenni’s on guard attitude toward Barr’s book is a telling testimony of the impact caused by it in OT scholarship.

Barr’s work still represents an obligatory station for research in this area. Any acritical return to knowledge piled up before it would be a false path, because of the scientific moving forward that it represents. This fact justifies revisiting it here, in order to understand the state of the matter which it crystalizes so well. Any consistent research project in this area will have to deal with it at some point. For my purpose here, it seems important to go directly to it, moving back through the impressive corpus of its Wirkungsgeschichte.

Barr’s theses became famous partly because they demanded in the field of biblical semantics a significant reduction in the quantity of elements felt to be present in the meaning of words within sentences in the biblical texts. Barr’s contention was that theological views tended to overcrowd the contextual meanings of words. His polemics in relation to entries in the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* are all too known to need restatement here. (It remains to be discussed if they apply immediately also
to the OT counterparts of this lexicon, the *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* and the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*. Both dictionaries were aware of Barr’s theses since the beginning of their production. What is important for our purposes here is to keep in mind that the object of this polemics was: what we understand by a semantic dictionary.

In this sense, de Blois’s remark could be somewhat misleading. Semantics has always been present in scientific Biblical interpretation. The main fault has not been its absence, but its methodological inadequacies; in Barr’s phrasing, its not being aware of current specialized work in the field of linguistic semantics.

Now, Barr’s theses certainly represented a welcome moving forward in relation to the tendency to force a speculative universe of ideas (mostly of a theological nature) into each time a word is used in biblical texts, generating excesses of attributed meanings, perhaps not really present in the actual textual instance under analysis. My thesis is that some of the claims about the culture and beliefs behind biblical texts, that Barr criticized, were rightly criticized. As to some others, it would seem that developments in the field of linguistics in the post-Barr era would force us rather to reconsider his own stance.

1.1 Philosophical assumptions running under the surface in modern Biblical interpretation

Barr’s main contentions are basically two. First, there are charges against inadequate philosophical assumptions pervading Biblical interpretation, especially the kind of interpretation done in the “biblical theology school”, which for him had a very broad sweep (including, for instance, most of the systematic theologians working in Germany in the first half of the 20th century). Second, there are charges of the absence of more stable connections of Biblical interpretation and philology to modern linguistics. It is clear that this second contention is related to the first, one being in some ways the cause of the other.

Repeated throughout Barr’s book is a charge against certain assumptions which have their origin in what he sees as a faulty philosophical basis, which generates beliefs that according to him preside subterraneously most of biblical interpretation. Barr labels this philosophical basis variously, but we may identify it as a kind of idealism of the sort that was common in the 19th century, and that also impregnated the field of linguistics. In
his own words, “a philosophy which is the heir to age-old superstitions about language but which in its present form is inherited from the idealism of the period just before modern linguistic science took its rise” (Barr 1961: 291).

This philosophical stance, as said, also had its impact on linguistics, especially the Humboldtian type. Here, Barr’s main charge is against “the Humboldtian heritage of belief that a language contains an implicit metaphysics” (p.294). That is, the assumption of a belief he wants to show as completely unjustified from the point of view of what he calls modern linguistics: “the belief in a perfect [!] reflection of thought by language”, as he puts it most concisely in p.42.

1.2 Beliefs about linguistics nurtured by these philosophical assumptions

In discussion, then, is the relation of thought and language. A faulty appreciation of it generated “the idea that differences of thought structure will correspond to differences of language structure”, what for Barr simply “seems to be contradicted by facts” (p.42), facts from the newer perspectives in linguistics. Of the many passages in his book that say so much, one can pick at random the following injunction against Thorleif Boman: “Boman’s kind of interpretation of language (and with it much that is written in biblical theology) depends to a great extent on the logico-grammatical unclarities of the older grammars and evaporates with the stricter method of modern linguistics” (p.67). (It calls one’s attention that throughout his study Barr is never tired of labeling the views he opposes as “beliefs”, “ideas”, while his arguments are mainly represented as deriving from “facts” and “evidences”, the production of which he associates with modern linguistics).

In what pertains to our specific subject here, the semantics of Biblical Hebrew, Barr concentrates mainly on two points: the correlation between thought and language, and the supposed peculiarity of Biblical Hebrew as language. In relation to the first, he invites the readers to consider “as a possibility of research that there may in the end be no such special correlation of Hebrew thought and Hebrew language as a whole school of interpreters has tried to demonstrate” (p.84-85). The second aspect Barr takes issue with, is the claim of a strong peculiarity attached to Hebrew thought and believed to be reflected in Hebrew language, making it special in relation to other languages, a kind of “the right vehicle for
God’s revelation”.

Barr makes his own efforts to balance his harder formulations in paragraphs like this one: “In all this I have no intention of suggesting that there is nothing in the Hebrew construct mechanism different from common Indo-European structures. I do suggest however that the claims for the peculiarity of the construct relation made [...] must be greatly relativized, and that the likelihood of deriving any radically different psychology of the association of objects from the construct relation is a very much thinner one than has been claimed” (p.92).

1.3 Barr’s own philosophical allegiances

It is clear from what has been said so far that Barr is reacting to an inadequate linguistic approach based on inadequate philosophical perspectives. His own philosophical stance is not stated as clearly as he states the positions of those whom he disagrees with, but he gives us enough elements to localize it.

“I have not ventured to suggest an alternative philosophy of language here”, Barr says (p.291). Somewhat earlier in the book he made the following statement: “If it is true that modern philosophy (of which I have only an amateur knowledge) lays much emphasis on the examination of everyday language, it may be that we have here a point at which the isolation of biblical theology from such philosophy within the intra-biblical area is a source of much harm” (281).

This gives as a clue on where Barr’s philosophical allegiances are: in Anglo-American philosophy of language, especially the branch that concentrates on the analysis of everyday language, and that means the philosophical stream normally associated with the late Wittgenstein. Now, this is the exact point where a split began within linguists, not least because of different philosophical pressupositions that affected directly the main tenets of linguistic science.

2 The importance of general linguistics for biblical interpretation
Most important is Barr’s repeated injunction that biblical interpretation, dealing constantly with language, must be intimately connected to professional linguistic studies. For him, linguistics as a science is different from philology as it was practiced in the older historicist school. The difference is a broader conception of what language is, and all sorts of empirical investigations into its concrete manifestations throughout cultures and times. For Barr, the study of the biblical languages has for too long neglected the results of linguistic research. For that reason, he can only see a future for it when “integrated with general linguistics” (p.290). Summarizing: “The further examination of this series of problems requires an approach through general linguistics” (p.291).

The discussion which followed the publication of Barr’s book proved that he was voicing a sentiment of many researchers in the field. And since the times were sympathetic to interdisciplinary studies, research on the relation of Biblical interpretation to contemporary linguistics increased in quantity nearly everywhere.

One of the problems remains the lack of the necessary expertise in at least three separate academic fields: theology, linguistics and philosophy. It would be easier if one could say that theology and philosophy do not matter for responsible linguists, whose task is to attain to linguistic facts. That this has been repeated ever again, only reflects in this particular area a phenomenon common in most academic areas in the last quarter of a century: disciplinary against interdisciplinary perspectives.

In this respect, Barr’s polemics can help us one step further. One of his merits was a double one: to focus on linguistic studies, on the one side, without on the other side forgetting how much theological and philosophical issues are relevant to the whole picture. One could say that for him to have adequate training or at least being minimally aware of issues in theology and philosophy served the purpose of keeping on guard against their (possible) inadequate influence on the study of issues which are mainly linguistic. Barr’s ample scholarship is one of the reasons to go back to his work, which has the merits of, by seeing clearly where the problems are and what are extensions of them, stating clearly which are the matters that need to be discussed.

2.1 New developments in contemporary linguistics
A minimal knowledge of the field of linguistics will show us the diversity of approaches within it, not so different from other academic fields. In the course of our argument, the next question would be to ask to which linguistic “school” or approach Barr is referring to, when he points to modern linguistics or “the newer linguistics” as a must for theology and biblical interpretation.

As one possible approach to that question I shall refer to a working typology within modern linguistics, as presented by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in a challenging book published at the end of the 1990’s. The reason for this selection is that, as we shall see later in more details, SDBH is consciously attached to the same theoretical approach they represent, i.e, cognitive linguistics. In this book the authors comment a “paradigm change” in contemporary linguistics. Lakoff and Johnson start speaking of “two generations” of cognitive science, and of different philosophical assumptions between them, with important consequences to the field of linguistics.

Philosophy is so much an implicit, though not always recognized, part of all intellectual disciplines that it has determined, for many investigators, the conception of what cognitive science is. There are at least two approaches to cognitive science defined by different philosophical commitments: a first-generation cognitive science that assumed most of the fundamental tenets of traditional Anglo-American philosophy and a second-generation that called most os those tenets into question on empirical grounds (Lakoff / Johnson 1999: 75).

Cognitive science, of which cognitive linguistics is a specialization, according to the authors “got its start within a context defined by traditional Anglo-American philosophical assumptions”, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s.

In those years, Anglo-American philosophy fit very well with certain dominant paradigms of that era: early artificial intelligence, information-processing psychology, formal logic, generative linguistics, and early cognitive anthropology, all of which played a role in first-generation cognitive science. This was no accident. Many of the practitioners in these paradigms had been trained using the assumptions of Anglo-American philosophy. Accordingly, it seemed natural to assume that the mind could be studied in terms of its cognitive functions, ignoring any ways in which those functions arise from the body and brain (Lakoff / Johnson 1999: 75).

This brings us back to James Barr. We pointed out that the philosophical assumptions with which he operated when writing his book could be roughly defined as Anglo-American analytic philosophy, especially the one that concentrated on analysis of
In a previous book, George Lakoff (1987: 12-57), working from within the field of linguistics, presented a development line from the late Wittgenstein to Eleanor Rosch, tracing the rise of the view of categorization with which Lakoff himself worked, within the frame of cognitive linguistics working with the assumptions of what he and Johnson will later call “second-generation cognitive science”. This view, he says (Lakoff 1987: 11), has not arisen all at once. It has developed through a number of intermediate stages that lead up to the cognitive model approach. An account of those intermediate steps begins with the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and goes up through the psychological research of Eleanor Rosch and her associates.

From the stage of analytical philosophy marked by the work of the late Wittgenstein to the work of Eleanor Rosch, a significant change of paradigm occurred, according to Lakoff. The work of the late Wittgenstein represents a kind of watershed, having within it both the foundations of the old building and the rudiments of the new one. It is on some implications of this change that we shall now concentrate, in our attempt to anchor semantic research on Biblical Hebrew on the platform of contemporary linguistics, as Barr pleaded for.

2.2 How these new developments affect some of Barr’s assumptions

As we have already seen, one of James Barr’s major assumptions, coherent with his own philosophical and linguistic perspectives, was that there is no correlation between thought and language. Much of biblical interpretation has been working from the presupposition that there is such correlation, according to Barr, and against those who accept this he directs some of his most acute criticisms.

Barr’s criticisms targeted on two expressions of this correlation. On one side there were theological assumptions: theological concepts which modern scholarship reconstructs out of cumulative interpretation and then, according to him, makes the methodological error of reading them back into every occurrence of simple words. On the other side there was a version of idealism together with folk-psychology, with the belief that language reflects in its structure the psychology of a people. Both are instances of the same
correlation Barr wants to prove as false.

Now, contemporary cognitive linguistics operates with assumptions that differ significantly from Barr’s assumptions. In this sense, the years that followed his book evidenced not so much, or not only, the errors of those whom he criticized, but also the problems with some pressupositions of his own approach. Having said that, though, one has immediately to assert that if we stop here this would be a superficial comment, not alert to changes from the pre-Barr to the post-Barr era.

As we stated above, Barr’s work represented a major development in modern Biblical interpretation, one from which nobody can safely turn back. His criticisms were in order. An inflation of theological and folk-psychological perceptions threatened to submerge sound biblical interpretation under blocks and blocks of unwarranted assumptions, from the stricter point of view of linguistics.

Nevertheless, the main tenet of Barr’s view, the absence of correlation between thought and language, has itself proved inadequate, though the reasons why it is put in question today are not the same as the reasons most of Barr’s opponents of previous generations would present.

A growing number of linguists and philosophers start to agree that “our cognitive capacities seem closely correlated with our linguistic capacities” (Devitt / Sterelny 1987: 117). According to George Lakoff (1987: 58), one of the fundamental claims of cognitive linguistics is “that language makes use of our general cognitive apparatus”. If this claim is correct, he says, two things follow. First, “linguistic categories should be of the same type as other categories of our conceptual system”. Second, “evidence about the nature of linguistic categories should contribute to a general understanding of cognitive categories in general”.

Lakoff himself grants that

... the issue is a profound one, because it is by no means obvious that the language makes use of our general cognitive apparatus. In fact, the most widely accepted views of language within both linguistics and the philosophy of language make the opposite assumption: that language is a separate “modular” system independent of the rest of cognition.

Barr does not say so much, but a close reading of this book will show that it is indeed the case that for him language operates mostly independently of the rest of
cognition, and that this is the main theoretical presupposition from which he works his critique.

In Lakoff and Johnson’s typology above mentioned, that means that Barr’s theoretical allegiances go along with that of the “first-generation cognitive science”, if one could say that, at least in an implicit way. For Lakoff and Johnson, the major difference between first- and second-generation cognitive science is crystallized in the word *embodiment*. To put it in a nutshell: first-generation cognitive science was based on assumptions of a “philosophy without flesh” (Lakoff / Johnson 1999: 76). This means: “there was no body in this conception of mind”, which “assumed a strict dualism in which the mind was characterized in terms of its formal functions”. Mind was embodied in the brain in mostly the same sense in which softwares need a hardware to run them. “Functionally, mind was disembodied. Moreover, thought was seen as literal; imaginative capacities did not enter the picture at all. This was a modern version of the Cartesian view that reason is transcendental, universal, disembodied and literal”.

This may be a somewhat rhetorical overstatement, and certainly these features do not need to apply to Barr as a whole and in their full sense. Nevertheless, it has the virtue of showing what some of his pressupositions seemed to be.

The traditional account claims that the capacity for meaningful thought and for reason is abstract and not necessarily embodied in any organism. Thus, meaningful concepts and rationality are *transcendental*, in the sense that they transcend, or go beyond, the physical limitations of any organism. Meaningful concepts and abstract reason may happen to be embodied in human beings, or in machines, or in other organisms – but they exist abstractly, independent of any particular embodiment. In the new view, meaning is a matter of what is meaningful to thinking, functioning beings. The nature of the thinking organism and the way it functions in its environment are of central concern to the study of reason (Lakoff 1987: xi).

Second-generation cognitive science began to rise by the mid- to late 1970s, the “post-Barr era”, piling up an impressive body of empirical research that called into question the fundamental tenets of the early approach to cognition and to language. Two kinds of evidence were gathered that “directly contradicted the assumptions of Anglo-American philosophy”. The first set of evidences was that of “a strong dependence of concepts and reason upon the body”. The second was that of “centrality to conceptualization and reason of imaginative processes, especially metaphor, imagery, metonymy, prototypes, frames, mental spaces, and radial categories” (Lakoff / Johnson
In short, the findings of second-generation cognitivists reveal the central role of our embodied understanding in all aspects of meaning and in the structure and content of our thought. Meaning has to do with the ways in which we function meaningfully in the world and make sense of it via bodily and imaginative structures. This stands in contrast with the first-generation view that meaning is only an abstract relation among symbols (in one view) or between symbols and states of affairs in the world (in another view), having nothing to do with how our understanding is tied to the body (Lakoff / Johnson 1999: 78).

This new situation in linguistic research will not mean, of course, a restatement of old metaphysic conceptions based on idealist assumptions, like those rightly criticized by Barr. It may mean, though, a reassessment of older research which was abandoned all too soon in the wake of Barr’s criticisms. Some of it may yet prove fruitful under the new circumstances of the renewed perception of a correlation between language and cognition.

3 The semantics of Biblical Hebrew in the light of cognitive linguistics

A revisitation of Barr’s theses about the semantics of biblical Hebrew must be accompanied by an analysis of its philosophical pressupositions, as we tried above. It is at this level that late linguistic research, as represented especially by cognitive linguistics, has had its main impact. Barr’s demands for a closer interaction between biblical exegesis and modern linguistics may mean some important revisions of his own tenets, that were based on a type of modern linguistics that now seems, for some linguists at least, dated in some of its most important pressupositions.

A new station in research was reached in the 1990s, and was summarized by Reinier de Blois in the doctoral thesis and papers already mentioned. In them, de Blois also summarizes and develops a research stream that reached a first provisional station in the researches conducted by Eugene Nida and Johannes Louw, which lead to a major publication, Louw and Nida’s *A Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (1989-1991).
3.1 The new focus on semantic domains

What had been in discussion since Barr’s important book were basic semantic issues, like what is meaning, is meaning conveyed by words, what is the relation between words and concepts, and so on. Barr had the merit of reopening these questions. This situation characterizes an epoch of paradigm changes, in terms of kuhnian philosophy of science.

The “Louw and Nida approach” left its print in modern research especially by taking seriously the issues of semantic domains, something that Barr himself had already been requesting. By bringing this question from general linguistics to the interpretation of biblical languages, Louw and Nida gave an important step in connecting these fields in a way that is responsible to both sides, as Barr also pleaded for.

According to Eugene Nida (1975, apud. de Blois 2000a: 4), words “have meaning only in terms of systematic contrasts with other words which share certain features with them but contrast with them in respect to other features”. That means recognizing that “each particular word is a member of a larger group of words that have certain aspects of meaning in common. Such a group can be called a semantic field or a semantic domain. The meaning of a word can only then be fully understood when we study it in combination with other words that belong to the same semantic domain (de Blois 2000a: 4).

As Nida (de Blois 2000a: 5) observes, “the meaning of a word relates to a concept or a set of concepts that people have about an entity or a set of entities in the world around them. And these concepts may vary from one language or culture to another”.

Three elements are here put in relation, whose exact relation can be said to be one of the most basic semantic issues. We have “words”; we have “concepts”; and we have “entities in the world”. Now, the whole structure of human language and thought supposes that there is a relation between them, and that it is this relation that allows us to know something. We have seen how Lakoff and Johnson summarized the philosophical assumptions on language that characterized “first-generation cognitive linguistics” as “the view that meaning is only an abstract relation among symbols (in one view) or between symbols and states of affairs in the world (in another view)” (Lakoff / Johnson 1999: 78). Taking concepts together with words as abstract entities, as then is defined the relation
between them, characterized “in the old school” one main alternative to understanding what “meaning” is. The other saw meaning as a relation between symbols (words, concepts) and objective states of affairs in the external world.

Where the new approaches left their print, the understanding of the relation of these three elements underwent significant changes. According to Fillmore and Atkins (1992, apud de Blois 2000a: 5), “a word’s meaning can be understood only with reference to a structured background of experience, beliefs, or practices, constituting a kind of conceptual prerequisite for understanding the meaning”.

Here these elements appear in different relation. “Meaning” is something a human being “understands”. That takes meaning into our bodily existence, or at least into our (embodied) minds. In order to be able to make this experience, this human being needs what the authors label “a kind of conceptual prerequisite”. This conceptual construct that makes possible to understand the meaning of a word is a compound of “experience, beliefs, or practices”, a definition that puts together in a significant way elements that more classical epistemologies, like the one we find in Barr’s thought, would tend to put in different compartments.

3.2 Semantic Domains and Biblical Hebrew

De Blois (2000a: 19-22) gives us a summary of the discussion about the applicability of Louw and Nida’s work on Biblical Greek to Biblical Hebrew. His own conclusions, in a first person summary (de Blois 2000a: 1), were

that the framework that had been used for the New Testament lexicon did not work very well with data from the Old Testament Hebrew. Distinctions had to be made that, from the perspective of the language and its underlying world view, were not to be distinguished at all. I also had to conclude, after some time, that a mere adaptation of Louw and Nida’s list of domains would not be sufficient to take care of this problem.

What was needed, and then became the ambition, was “to come up with a modified framework, that will do full justice to a language like Biblical Hebrew and its underlying culture and world view, without discarding the important insights with which Louw and Nida’s work have provided us” (de Blois 2000a: 19).
But the different language and text setting was not the only issue. A major achievement of Louw and Nida’s semantic researches was the coming up with a theoretical basis which represented an important step forward in relation to previous biblical lexicography. This theoretical basis was now in need of some revision itself, in the light of new developments in linguistics. De Blois (2002: 2) sums up:

Louw and Nida, however, based their semantic framework on a theoretical model that is often referred to as *componential analysis of meaning*, which describes the meanings of words in terms of binary distinctive features. This theory got a lot of attention in the seventies and eighties of the previous century. Since that time, however, important new insights have appeared on the linguistic horizon. Scholars have started to pay more attention to the cognitive reality behind a language, including the entire communication pattern in which language plays such a crucial role. New approaches such as Relevance Theory and Cognitive Linguistics can be of immense help to us in this process. In our linguistic analyses we should not be merely aiming towards descriptive systems that work, but for systems that are intuitively adequate, that represent as much as possible the ways of thinking of the speaker of the language, and do justice to his/her organization of experience, his/her system of beliefs, experience, and practices. We are not supposed to impose a system on a language. Instead of that we are to try to discover the semantic structure of the language. For that reason the semantic framework underlying SDBH will not be based on componential analysis of meaning but on a number of important insights from Cognitive Linguistics instead (de Blois 2002: 1-2).

4. The *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (SDBH) project

What was needed, then, was “a Hebrew lexicon that is based on a linguistically adequate semantic foundation that does full justice to biblical Hebrew and the world view behind it” (de Blois 2000a: 15), or, as is said later, “to Biblical Hebrew and its underlying system of experience, beliefs, and practices” (de Blois 2000a: 20). This linguistically adequate semantic foundation was to be laid not by “imposing a system on a language”, but by “discovering the semantic structure of the language”. And for this, as may be clear by now, the best tool is thought to be cognitive linguistics, the adoption of which marks the major development between the researches of Louw and Nida and the researches of de Blois.

This is made evident in many ways. I quote only an example, in relation to the important issue of categorization. The example makes clear this departing from the Louw
and Nida’s tradition and embracing cognitive semantics. At a certain point in his argument, de Blois (2002: 4) makes the following observation: “categories have attributes that provide information about categories. At first glance an attribute may seem similar to a component of meaning”, a notion with which Louw and Nida were working, and that was already discussed above. “There is an important difference, however”, says de Blois. “A component of meaning is a distinctive feature, whereas an attribute is not distinctive in nature. It is a cognitive feature, representing what a speaker of a language considers to be relevant information”.

The example makes clear also that the Louw and Nida tradition was still, in certain aspects, working with objectivist assumptions that are abandoned by cognitive linguistics, not having moved, in this respect, from the main tradition represented by James Barr. That the new Hebrew dictionary should be a step forward in this respect, is made clear by de Blois’s phrasing. It should “do justice” to two elements imaged as in spatial relations. The one is “Biblical Hebrew”, the language. The other is described the first time as “and the world view behind it”, and the second time as “and its underlying system of experience, beliefs, and practices”. That means, behind and/or underlying language there is a world view (a system of experience, beliefs and practices). What is most important is that both elements, in the unity they form, are the object of the dictionary, which purposes to do justice to both (in the unity they form).

4.1. A semantic dictionary

In the beginning of the 1960s, James Barr seems to have had his own ideas of what a dictionary should be. A Hebrew dictionary, for him, should apparently be much like “an adequate guide to a reading knowledge of Hebrew”, which for him is not the same thing as “a guide to the assessment of linguistic structure in their relation to thought” (Barr 1961: 96). For what may be scientifically legitimate in this ample purpose, according to him, a lexicon “is not a good instrument” (p.233).

In other passages, Barr relates this kind of more ample approaches to the field of stylistics. “Linguistically”, he says, “the main result of the suggestions I have made about biblical language would seem to be that investigation should proceed to a much greater
degree in the realm roughly of stylistics, and that too much has been attempted by lexicographical methods” (p.272). “It seems to me that there is a recognizable biblical style, or series of biblical styles, and that research into them is a rewarding field”. “The relation between the meaning of sentences and larger units on the one hand and the mode of their expression on the other is a stylistic matter and cannot be fully handled by the lexical methods discussed above”. For him, it is in stylistics in particular “that the questions of ethno-psychology, implied in so much that we have discussed, can perhaps best be handled” (p.272).

Barr´s sympathetic allusions to stylistic studies seem, from his descriptions of what he means, to come closer to what today is called discourse analysis, both as an expansion of grammar from its classical limits in the sentence to encompassing broader units, like paragraphs and even whole texts, and as the kind of literary analyses done exemplarily, for instance, by Alter and Fokkelman.

Discussing Barr´s book, de Blois concurs with him about the need of structural semantic analysis:

Un fortunately, however, a structural semantic analysis is often lacking. This is a detailed study of the way different concepts in the world behind a language are perceived by the speakers of that language and how these concepts are transferred into semantic forms. Such a study gives us a lot of insight in the meaning of words and the ways different meanings interrelate. As Barr (1992:143) observes, however, “the semantic analysis of the older dictionaries seems often to be defective and needs to be rethought.” (de Blois 2000b: 2).

Now, it seems that what Barr had in mind in the passage quoted by de Blois is not the same thing as de Blois seems to be assuming it is, and that this was perhaps not altogether clear for de Blois himself. From Barr´s perspective, as we have seen, semantic analysis should be done on the pressuposition that there is no correlation between thought and language. De Blois, on his turn, affirms this correlation most forcibly. He starts with a given: the existence of a world behind a language, different concepts coexisting there, their perception by speakers of that language (and inhabitants of that world). From this he goes directly to the point, the very task of semantic analysis: to study how these concepts are transferred into semantic forms.

4.2. A semantic dictionary
The question within the temporal arch formed by the researches of Barr and de Blois seems to be what responsible semantics is, and, more specifically for us, how it affects the production of a dictionary. Working from his own presuppositions, Barr defended that a linguistically responsible semantic approach should detach questions of language from questions of thought and ethnopsychoology. The excessive and inapt correlation between the two has lead to faulty semantics and inadequate biblical interpretation.

As we have seen, Barr´s theoretical basis for that claim was that of a generation of linguists closely attached to philosophical insights coming from Anglo-American analytic philosophy, and that operated on the assumption of the autonomy of language. It might be sensible at this point to give the word back to Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 512):

... cognitive linguistics, since it is consistent with and extends second-generation cognitive science, is not in accord with analytic philosophy, in either the formalist or ordinary language versions. Nor is it in accord with poststructuralist philosophy or with Chomsky´s mix of Cartesian and formalist philosophy. Cognitive linguistics sees this as an advantage, a freeing of their science from a priori philosophy that restricts and distorts the study of language, while allowing their science to fit important results in cognitive science that other theories cannot fit – results about spatial relations, metaphor, metonymy, framing, blending, classifiers, aspectual systems, polysemy, radial categories, mental-space phenomena, grammaticalization, iconicity, and so on. [...] Linguistics is the arena in which one can most clearly see the constraining effects of a priori philosophical worldviews.

From this perspective, what Barr would call responsible semantics would be seen as an inadequate linguistic approach, based on not totally adequate philosophical assumptions. Concretely that means that the correlation between language and thought is now being reestablished by a more adequate linguistic approach. This does not mean, of course, that old stuff might only be warmed up and served as the last word in science.

A responsible semantic approach means to discuss these basic issues carefully, not with a pretension of doing science with no presuppositions, but trying to state carefully with which assumptions one is working, and, with proper modesty, so to present one´s researches to the academic community.

In our case, and I hereby associate myself to de Blois, with whom I am closely connected by our work together in the SDBH, this means concretely to rethink thoroughly
Barr’s propositions. This should be done in two directions. First, in the light of previous research that perhaps also needs to be revisited, in order to see what it still offers us in the new situation we live in. Simply to declare it a dead dog would represent poor science and a tragic impoverishment. Perhaps I am not the only one that is constantly surprised by the amazing penetration in the texts and by the solid humanistic scholarship that previous generations display, even when punctual questions appear as dated and some general pressuppositions are not defensible any more.

In the other direction, Barr’s acute criticisms should be rethought in the light of newer linguistic findings, like those of contemporary cognitive linguistics. The fact is that these new approaches appear to give new life to some of Barr’s dead dogs.

REFERENCES


