

# Identifying, Understanding and Translating the Metaphors of a Dead Language: How to Move Beyond the Denotation of the Words to the Connotation of the Words.

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“When I use a word,”  
Humpty Dumpty said, “it  
means just what I choose it to  
mean — neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Al-  
lice, “whether you can make  
words mean so many different  
things”

“The question is,” said  
Humpty Dumpty, “which is to  
be master — that is all.”

(Lewis Carol)

## 1 Background Assumptions

- (1) Dead languages are qualitatively the same as living ones.
- (2) The best way to test a method of inquiry is when the conclusions can be checked by independent means.

## 2 Conclusions

- (3) Etymology and cognate languages are only tangentially rele-

vant to meaning.

- (4) Word-level literal meaning contributes unevenly to sentence-level literal meaning.
- (5) (Sometimes the “meaning” isn’t the most important part of a text; some texts have no “meaning.”)

### 3 On Meaning

- (6) At least three types of meaning (or three points on a spectrum) can be discerned:
  - (a) Literal.
    - i. The disease attacked his *heart*.
    - ii. The car is *blue*.
  - (b) Metaphoric.
    - i. His *heart* isn’t in it (=he doesn’t care about it).
    - ii. He’s feeling *blue* (=he’s feeling sad).
  - (c) Idiomatic.
    - i. To learn by *heart* (=to memorize).
    - ii. Once in a *blue* moon (=seldom).
- (7) Idioms differ from metaphors is that the former are arbitrary.
- (8) A word can simultaneously have literal, metaphoric and idiomatic uses (as above).
- (9) Generally, only literal meanings translate successfully word-for-word. Metaphors and idioms do not.
  - (a) French
    - i. La voiture est *bleue* (literal)
    - ii. N’y voir que du *bleue* [to see only blue] (=not to understand, “to be left in the dark”)
    - iii. Avoir une peur *bleue* [to have a blue fear] (=to fear “to be scared stiff”)

iv. Être dans une colère *bleue* [to be in a blue anger]  
(=to be angry, “to be in a blind rage.”)

(b) German

i. Das automobil ist blau (literal)

ii. *Blau* Flecken [blue spots] (=bruises, “black and blue”)

iii. *Blau* machen [to make blue] (=to skip school, “play hookey”)

iv. *Blau* sein [to be blue] (=to be drunk)

v. *Blauer* Brief [blue letter] (=warning letter sent to parents of school children)

(10) Literal meaning is non-concatitive.

(a) “Burn up” = “burn down” (“up” ≠ “down”)

(b) “Pick,” “pick up,” (=improve) “pick on,” (=annoy) “pick up on” (=discern) have little to do with “up” or “on.”

(c) “By and large” (=usually)

(d) “Please be advised”

(e) “. . . at your earliest convenience”

(f) “aid and abet” / “jointly and severally” / “will and testament” etc.

(11) Literal meaning is often irrelevant.

(a) “Sincerely” closing a business letter has nothing to do with sincerity. (Likewise *mit freundlichen Grüßen* ‘with friendly greetings’ in German, *b’khavod rav* ‘with great honor’ in Modern Hebrew, etc.)

(b) “It seems to me” in Russian is the usual way of saying “I think.”

(c) “How are you?” in English often means “hi.”

(d) “Thank you” has little to do with thanks.

(e) *Hineini* in Biblical texts?

- (f) *Vayidabeir Adonai el Moshe leimor...* in Biblical texts?  
 (“God spoke unto Moses saying” isn’t English.)
- (12) Meaning is sometimes irrelevant.
- (a) Song of Songs: *Shir hashirim asher lishlomo* ‘a song of songs which is Solomon’s:’ A song of songs sung for Solomon.
  - (b) Word plays on place names in Genesis.

## 4 Methods of Inquiry

Of four methods of inquiry, **Etymology**, **cognates**, **language-internal usage patterns** and **language-independent usage patterns** the final two are the most reliable, even disregarding metaphors and idioms:

### 4.1 Etymology

- (13) English
- (a) host/hostile
  - (b) stationary/stationery
  - (c) office/officer/official
  - (d) patent/patently
  - (e) ship/shipping
  - (f) view/re-view/review
  - (g) intern/internal
- (14) Modern Hebrew
- (a) l’hitabed [“to get lost”] = to commit suicide
  - (b) l’hakriv [“to move further away”] = to sacrifice
  - (c) m’sukan [“endangered”] = dangerous
  - (d) nizkarti [“I was remembered”] = I remembered

## 4.2 Cognate Languages / Borrowing

(15) Cognates.

- (a) English “demand” and French *demander* (=to ask)
- (b) English “medicine” and French *médecin* (=doctor)
- (c) English “he will” and German *er will* (=he wants)
- (d) English “star” and German *Star* (=cataract)

(16) Borrowing.

- (a) English “farmer” and Hungarian *farmer* (=bluejeans)
- (b) English “express” bus and Modern Hebrew *ekspres* (=local)

## 4.3 Language-internal usage patterns

(17) Lakoff etc.

(18) “Blue” in Modern Hebrew = perversion:

- (a) Blue movie (=X-rated movie)
- (b) Blue head (=pervert)

(19) “Blue” in English = sorrow:

- (a) Feel/look blue (=sad)
- (b) The blues (=sorrow)

(20) “Red” in Russian = beauty

(21) “Heart” in English.

- (a) Broken-hearted (=distraught)
- (b) Have a heart (=kind/generous)
- (c) His heart isn't in it (=he doesn't care about it)
- (d) With heavy heart (=unwillingly)
- (e) To one's heart's content (=as much as one wants)
- (f) tender/warm/etc. hearted
- (g) cold hearted

#### 4.4 Language-independent usage patterns

### 5 A Case Study: Levav & Nefesh in Biblical Hebrew

#### 5.1 Levav

(22) Song of Songs 4:9:

You have *levav*'d me, my partner, my bride. You have *levav*'d me with [but] one of your eyes.

לבבתני אחתי כלה. לבבתני  
באחד מעיניך.

(23) Lev 19:17:

You shall not hate your brother in/with your *levav*.

לא-תשנא את-אחיך בלבבך.

(24) Deut 28:28:

Adonai will strike you with madness, blindness and confusion of the *levav*.

יככה יי בשגעון ובעורון ובתמנון  
לבב.

(25) Deut 20:8:

Who is the man who is fearful and weak of *levav*? Let him return home and not melt the *levav* of his brother as his [own] *levav*.

מי האיש הירא ורך הלבב ילך  
וישב לביתו ולא ימס את-לבב  
אחיו כלבבו.

(26) Ex 14:5:

[When the king was told that the people had fled] the *levav* of Pharaoh and his servants changed regarding the people.

ויהפך לבב פרעה ועבדיו אל-העם.

(27) Deut 7:17:

You say in/with your *levav*  
[these nations are more numer-  
ous than I...]

כי תאמר בלבבך

(28) I Sam 9:19:

[I am the seer... ] I will tell you  
all that is in your *levav*.

וכל אשר בלבבך אגיד לך.

(29) Deut 30:14:

[the matter is very near to you]  
in your mouth and in your  
*levav* you can do it.

בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו.

(30) Is 6:9:

Lest [this people] see with its  
eyes, hear with its ears, and  
its *levav* understand and re-  
turn and heal it.

פן-יראה בעיניו ובאזניו ישמע  
ולבבו יבין ושב ורפא לו.

(31) Is 10:7:

His *levav* does not think this  
way.

ולבבו לא-כן יחשב.

## 5.2 Nefesh

(32) Gen 1:30:

[To every beast of the earth, to  
every bird of the sky, and to  
everything that moves on the  
earth] within which is a living  
*nefesh*.

אשר-בו נפש חיה.

(33) Lev 17:11:

For the *nefesh* of meat/flesh is in the blood and I have put it upon the altar to atone for your *nefesh*'s for it is the blood that atones for the *nefesh*.

כי-נפש הבשר בדם הוא ואני נתתיו לכם אל-המזבח לכפר על-נפשותיכם כי-הדם הוא בנפש יכפר.

(34) I Kings 17:21:

Please let this boy's *nefesh* come back within him!

תשב-נא נפש-הילד הזה על-קרבו.

(35) I Kings 17:22:

And the *nefesh* of the boy came back within him, and he lived.

ותשב נפש-הילד על-קרבו ויחי.

(36) Gen 35:18:

When/as her *nefesh* left she died.

ויהי בצאת נפשה כי מתה.

(37) Gen 46:18:

[Zilpah] bore these [children] to Jacob: 16 *nefesh*'s.

ותלד את-אלה ליעקב שש עשרה נפש.

(38) Ex 23:9:

[Do not oppress the stranger for] you know/knew the *nefesh* of the stranger.

וגר לא תלחץ ואתם ידעתם את-נפש הגר.

(39) Lev 4:2:

A *nefesh* that sins unintentionally.

נפש כי-תחטא בשגגה.



(40) Lev 7:27:  
Any *nefesh* that eats any blood. כל-נפש אשר-תאכל כל-דם.

(41) Lev 17:15:  
Any *nefesh* that eats what has died or been torn by beasts. כל-נפש אשר תאכל נבלה וטרפה.

(42) Lev 24:17:  
A man who wounds [mortally?] the *nefesh* of any person shall be put to death. ואיש כי יכה כל-נפש אדם מות יומת.

(43) Lev 24:18:  
And the wounder [mortally?] of the *nefesh* of an animal shall pay for it: a *nefesh* for a *nefesh*. ומכה נפש-בהמה ישלמנה נפש תחת נפש.

(44) Num 6:6:  
[A Nazirite] shall not approach the *nefesh* of a dead person. על-נפש מת לא יבא.

(45) Deut 24:7:  
A man who steals a *nefesh* from [among] his brothers, from [among] the children of Israel. איש גנב נפש מאחיו מבני-ישראל.

### 5.3 Levav and Nefesh

(46) Deut 6:5:

You shall love Adonai with all your *levav* and all your *nefesh*...

ואהבת את ״ אלהיך בכל-לבבך  
ובכל-נפשך

(47) Deut 4:29:

If you search for [God] with all your *levav* and all your *nefesh*.

כי תדרשנו בכל-לבבך ובכל נפשך.

(48) Deut 10:12:

And to serve Adonai your God with all your *levav* and all your *nefesh*.

ולעבד את-״י בכל-לבבך ובכל-  
נפשך.

(49) Deut 26:16:

You shall keep and do them with all your *levav* and all your *nefesh*.

ושמרת ועשית אותם בכל-לבבך  
ובכל-נפשך.

(50) Josh 22:5:

To serve [God] with all your *levav* and all your *nefesh*.

ולעבדו בכל-לבבכם וכבל-נפשכם.

(51) Josh 23:14:

You know with all your *levav* and all your *nefesh*.

וידעתם בכל-לבבכם  
וכבל-נפשכם.

## Suggested Reading

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