Cognitive Linguistics and the Concept of Person in the Western World: From Ancient Hebrew to Modern English

In the Western World: From Ancient Hebrew to Modern English

Paul's semantics of Body and Soul

Paul's uses sarx to speak literally about flesh (“in flesh and blood”), or as a synecdoche for the entire human body (“I want you to know how much I am suffering... for all who have not met me personally”) and all humankind ("no one will be declared righteous"). What is particular to Paul is his usage of sarx to denote the rebel human nature, that is, not wanting to accept Christ ("Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the earthly nature"). Such negative connotation given to sarx is unprecedented in the rest of the Greek Bible and is proper to Paul, who uses it often in the context of "spirit/Soul" as its antithesis. In this respect sarx is much more metaphorical than English "flesh/meat/body" or whatever other lexical item used.

Paul uses the Greek word σῶμα "91 times, and generally it is speak metaphorically about the body of the Christian church, whose followers are all members, certainly influenced by the metaphor THE COSMOS IS A BODY. He often uses σῶμα generally to express the analogy with the parts of the body as a cosmic image of the Christian church, speaking of the parts of the body that seem weakest or the smallest as being equally as important as the rest. This seems like a very positive view of the concept of body, far more metaphorical than previously imagined, in that the individuals in the Christian society are responsible for themselves and for the others.

Paul consciously never uses the word σῶμα in proximity of the word psyche except in one instance where he uses a stock phrase), because he was well aware of the semantic values of these words and what mental images would be prompted in his Greek readers (today we would call this a Stroop effect). The word psyche is used generally to mean “life” (e.g. “to give my life for you”), or “person” or “soul”. He makes careful use as to use it only in a neutral or positive sense, so as to avoid ambiguities with his Greek audience and their knowledge of the word.

A quick word on the notion of the Resurrection of the Dead: in Paul's conception, the psyche would be resurrected when Christ came back for Abdemation. This would mean that the person would be reunited with his or her body. For Paul, man is psyche and soul and body are inseparable. No matter how you look at the linguistic data, his concept of the person would be no other way.

Paul's usage of lexical items concerning personhood in Ancient Hebrew, Ancient Greek and Modern English reveals semantic shifts concerning the relative lexical concepts. Ancient Hebrew presents an essentially holistic idea of personhood, whereas, via Biblical translations and Greek philosophical influences, the Western World has conceptualized humans as being dualistic in nature. I analyse the polysemous and semantic shifts in the lexicon used for "body" and "soul" in Ancient Hebrew and Ancient Greek, which are the two linguistic systems known to us, and then confront them with Paul's usage context, and finally with Modern English, hypothesizing a possible case of linguistic relativity.

Body and Soul in Ancient Hebrew

The Greeks spoke in terms of psyche to reason about the soul. Originally, however, there was no concept of soul, and the word meant "to cool by blowing" and then it became to mean the "breath of life" or the "vital force" which animates man. Slowly in time the notion of psyche meaning the essence of a person, and "soul" came into the Greek way of thinking. Throughout the history of Greek philosophy it has been argued whether its nature is material or immaterial, mortal or immortal, and in any case even the folk belief was very similar, comparable to the modern English concept of "soul".

The Septuagint translation, that is, the canonical Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, used sarx 145 times, σῶμα 23 times, and a handful of other translations for bâdār, which at times poses interpretational problems (cf. Evola, 2005). Bâdār, in any case, also simply meant "person" and the external reality of humanity. This was a quality proper to humanity, and as a matter of fact, notwithstanding the frequent use of anthropomorphisms in the Old Testament, bâdār was never used to describe God, as opposed to nefet, which can roughly be translated as "soul". This suggest the "earthly" dimension of man and of humanity and what distinguishes Adam from God.

Paul's semantics of Body and Soul

When speaking of "body" in Ancient Greece, there were two main words: σῶμα and σαρκί. Roughly translated respectively as "flesh" and "body".

Gr. σῶμα is closer to our translation than the second and originally meant "[human or animal] muscle or meat", and with time it was understood that it was connected with death, but also with emotions which have an effect, especially negative, on the human body. The word became polysemically enhanced, and the connotation which started as neutral, starts to shift negatively. Indeed according to cognitive linguistics (Lakoff 1987) and Taylor (1992) for example) polysemous is a common way in which metonymical concepts are manifested in language.

Gr. σαρκί more or less "body", on the contrary has origins that are not as clear, first attested in Homer in the sense of "cadaver" and in the 5th century BCE onwards. Having the sense of "torso", "body" and then shifting metonymically to be the "person" or even used as a reflexive pronoun. Homer, no concept of soul

The essence of the person

Far more precious than the body itself (transmigration of the soul)

Mortality of the soul

Medicine divides body and soul (Hippocrates)

Plato: moral actions in psyche > responsibility and intelligence

Others: (Im)mortal, (Im)material, part of the cosmos (astrology)

Folk belief: essence of life and of the individual, very similar to modern concept of "soul"

Body and Soul in Ancient Greek

Homer's σωμα, σαρκί, ψυχή

The epic poet Homer uses σωμα (limited to 13 occurrences), σαρκί (48 occurrences), and ψυχή (21 occurrences) to denote the human body as well as the person's soul. Homer's usage of these terms is not entirely consistent, and at times he uses σωμα interchangeably with σαρκί. Homer's concept of personhood is holistic, with the person being defined by the body and the soul functioning as a unit.

σωμα (body)

Homer: "dead (human or animal) body"

σαρκί, σαρκά: (human or animal) muscle or meat, to eat or to be eaten, decays with death

Herodotus: “torso (opposed to the head),” “whole body” > “person”, reflexive pronoun

Orphism: "prison (soma)" or "tomb" of the soul

Plato: concept of "body" in antithesis with the soul

The Cosmos is a Body Governed by the Divine Soul

The PoLeS is a Body Governed by Political/Intellectual Soul

Man is soma and is such as mortal

Aristotle: a fundamental reality only be means of the body, and together they are inseparable

Stoics: strong dualism

Epics: emotions have effect on soma

Marcus Aurelius: triality body-soul-mind

From Neo-Platonism: on contempt of the body

Body and Soul in Ancient Hebrew

bâdār (body)

270 times in Old Testament

(“human or animal) meat or flesh”, “body”, “skin”, “meat”, “mankind”, “all living creatures”

Family relationship

Sexual organs

The totality of a person, indicating the external reality of humanity

Never in relationship with God

nêfet (soul)

754 times in Old Testament

Etimologically "breathe heavily"

Throat, neck

Cadaver or tomb, but only until it is socially identifiable

Sexual instinct, will, desire > Desire for God

Commonly indicates the entire human nature, nêfet is something that man is, not has!

Hebr. bâdār is a case lexical semantic discrepancy of active zone (Langerock, 1991), i.e. that facet which most directly participates in the metonymic relationship between a word and its construed sense. The semantic shifts, caused by highlighting (Kroch, 1993) by figure/ground-effects (Kosch, 2004), historically produced lexical semantic values of bâdār with the sense of "[human or animal] meat" or as a synecdoche for the "entire body," and metonymically or metaphorically for "men" in general, family relationships or euphemistically for both sexual organs. Bâdār also is used in ritual contexts, so that we have to be sacred to be sacrificed, "flesh" to be circumsiced.

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Works Cited


