

Delocutive Nouns in Biblical Hebrew

Jan Joosten

Introduction

Delocutives are words derived from standing expressions. An example from British English is the verb “to tut-tut” as in: “We all spent a lot of time tut-tutting about Angie and her lifestyle.”¹ “To tut-tut” means “to say ‘tut-tut’”—or rather: “to pronounce the peculiar sound which is transcribed as ‘tut-tut’”—in a situation where saying “tut-tut” is meaningful.

The discovery of delocutives is usually attributed to the French linguist Émile Benveniste.² Benveniste showed that Latin *salutare* has the meaning “to greet” because it is derived not from the noun *salus* “wellbeing” but from the greeting *Salus!* “Hail!” He went on to discuss other delocutive verbs in Latin, French and other languages.

When his article was reprinted ten years later in a volume of collected papers, Benveniste added a note saying that Albert Debrunner had discussed the same mechanism, and some of the same verbs, a few years before him, but that he had not known of Debrunner’s work in preparing his own study.³ In fact, already in 1946 Debrunner published a popular article on “audacious word-formations” in Swiss German, where he discussed verbs such as *himmeldonnern* “to say *Himmeldonner!*” and *bigotten* “to say *bi Gott!*”⁴ Debrunner did not come up with a term for this type of formation, however, and Benveniste continues to be regarded as the one who initiated research on

¹ The example is taken from Laurel Brinton, “Interjection-based Delocutive Verbs in the History of English,” in *Developments in English. Expanding Electronic Evidence*, ed. Irma Taavitsainen et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 140–161.

² Émile Benveniste, “Les verbes délocutifs,” in *Studia philologica et litteraria in honorem Leo Spitzer*, ed. Anna G. Hatcher and K. L. Selig (Bern: Francke, 1958), 57–63.

³ Albert Debrunner, “Zur Hypostasierung von Wünschen und dergleichen,” in *Festschrift für Max Vasmer zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Margarete Woltner and Herbert Bräuer (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1956), 113–123.

⁴ Albert Debrunner, “Kühnheiten in Wortbildung und Formengebrauch,” *Sprachspiegel* 2/6 (Bern, 1946): 82–86, 97–106, 121–127, <https://www.e-periodica.ch/digbib/volumes?UID=sps-002>, (particularly 82–86).

delocutive expressions.⁵ At first the idea was discussed mostly by French linguists,⁶ but more recently it has been embraced and developed more widely.⁷

While the designation of a word as delocutive refers to its derivation, the term does have semantic implications. The meaning of delocutive verbs can be construed as “to say X,” but this is not a full definition. A verb derived from a locution evokes the speech situation in which the locution is at home. In terms of speech-act analysis, delocutives connote the felicity conditions of the speech act.⁸

This is particularly the case when the derivation is fresh: the delocutive verb φεύζω “to say *pheu*, to cry woe” is attested just once in Greek literature, in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* 1308. Cassandra bemoans her lot saying φεῦ φεῦ “Alas, alas!” (line 1307) to which the chorus responds saying: “Why do you cry ‘alas’ (τί τοῦτ’ ἔφευξας, literally: why have you ‘alased’).” Without the context it would be impossible to understand the meaning of the verb. Over time, however, a delocutive verb may grow away from its original usage. The Syriac verb ܦܥܠ *paēl* “to appeal” derives from the locution ܦܥܠ/ܦܥܠ “(I call) on the protection (of),” as in ܦܥܠܝܢܝ ܡܫܝܚܐ “I cry out to you, O Christ.” The original import of the verb must have been: “to say ܦܥܠ/ܦܥܠ” i.e. “to appeal for help”—a meaning that is indeed well attested. When the original coinage faded, the verb was used also in other meanings: “to summon, to demand a reward, to

⁵ The term Debrunner uses instead, *Hypostasierung* “hypostasizing,” refers to the transposition of a word from one part of speech to another.

⁶ See Pierre Larcher, “La dérivation délocutive: Histoire d’une notion méconnue,” *Historiographia Linguistica* 30 (2003): 389–406.

⁷ See e.g. Frans Plank, “Delocutive Verbs, Crosslinguistically,” *Linguistic Typology* 9 (2005): 459–491; Brinton, “Delocutive Verbs;” Rosemarie Lühr, “Sprechaktreduktion bei delokutiver Derivation,” *Colloquium: New Philologies* 4/2 (2019): 85–103.

⁸ The term *felicity conditions* refers to the conditions that must be in place and the criteria that must be satisfied for a speech act to achieve its purpose. See John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

complain, to lament.” In the latter nuances, which are equally well attested, the verb has evolved away from its etymology.⁹

The linguistic material from which delocutives may be derived is extremely diverse. *Salutare* “to greet” is derived from a locution based on a noun; φεῦ “woe” and “tut-tut” are interjections. The French verb *tutoyer* “to address by means of the informal *tu* (and not the formal *vous*)” is derived from a pronoun. The basis may also be complex: כִּנֹּחַ/כִּנּוּחַ is a prepositional phrase. In post-biblical Hebrew, the verb בִּרְךָ “to bless” is used in the meaning “to pronounce a blessing starting with the words אֲתָהּ ה' בִּרְךָ” ‘blessed are you Lord’.” All that counts is that the words from which the delocutive is derived form a standing expression.

Delocutive verbs have been observed in a variety of languages.¹⁰ Delbert Hillers pointed to possible examples in Biblical Hebrew.¹¹ More delocutives in Biblical and post-Biblical Hebrew, such as בִּרְךָ “to say a blessing” mentioned above, have been added by Tigay and Faur.¹²

Delocutive Nouns

Benveniste discussed only delocutive verbs. But other parts of speech too may be derived from locutions.¹³ If *salutare* “to greet” is delocutive, then *salutatio*

⁹ Linguistic developments of this kind stand to reason but are hard to document. Cf. Brinton, “Delocutive Verbs,” 159: “The low token frequency of interjection-based delocutives makes it impossible to establish the sequence of semantic development.” If this is true for English, it is true all the more so for languages attested in limited corpora.

¹⁰ E.g. in Arabic, see Pierre Larcher, “Dérivation délocutive, grammaire arabe, grammaire arabisante et grammaire de l’arabe,” *Arabica* 30 (1983): 246–266; in classical Greek, see Pär Sandin, “A Greek Delocutive Noun? Some Notes on ποίπυγμα and its Alleged Cognates,” *Glotta* 77 (2002): 110–117.

¹¹ Delbert R. Hillers, “Delocutive Verbs in Biblical Hebrew,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 320–324.

¹² Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Some More Delocutives in Hebrew,” in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Robert Chazan et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 409–412; José Faur, “Delocutive Expressions in the Hebrew Liturgy,” *JANES* 16–17 (1984–85): 41–54.

¹³ In his 1946 article, Debrunner documented the Swiss-German word *wurde* meaning roughly: “a menace starting with the words *ich wurde ech* (‘I would do to you’),” Debrunner, “Kühnheiten in Wortbildung,” 85 (I thank Christoph Mueller for helping me understand the Swiss German); delocutive nouns in ancient Greek are discussed by Sandin, “Greek Delocutive Noun.” As to adjectives and adverbs, Larcher shows that at least in French they

“greeting” is delocutive too. Delocutive nouns may be related to (and derived from) a verb, but they need not be. French *merci* in *mille mercis* “many thanks” is delocutive.

Much of what is true for delocutive verbs applies to delocutive nouns as well: their linguistic material may derive from various parts of speech: “amen” in “Can I have an amen?” is derived from an interjection, and “come-on” in Paul Simon’s song *The Boxer*, from an imperative clause. As these examples illustrate, delocutive nouns may be simple or complex. They connote the speech-situation in which the locution is at home but may grow away from their original meaning. “Veto” started out as a delocutive noun: “his veto” meant as much as “his saying ‘I forbid’.” In current usage, however, the noun more often refers to a right, as in “the royal veto.”

Delocutive verbs are often fitted out with verbal morphology. Similarly, delocutive nouns may be marked morphologically. Pär Sandin has persuasively argued that ποίφρυγμα, an obscure *hapax legomenon* in Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* 280, is derived from the Greek cliché ποῖ φύγω “Where shall I run?”¹⁴ The line does not mean “Pray... not with wild and useless panting,” but “Pray... not with *panicked cries of ‘Where shall I run’.*” If this is correct, the delocutive will be seen to have all the trappings of a Greek noun. It has been given a nominal morpheme -μα, and occurs in the text in the dative plural: ποιφύγμασιν. Other delocutives remain invariable. In “Let your yes be yes,” the first yes is nominalized and delocutive; it could be paraphrased as “your saying ‘Yes’.” But in the Greek version of James 5:12—ἤτω δὲ ὑμῶν τὸ ναὶ ναί—the first ναί, despite having the article, is not given a case ending. Alongside *mille mercis*, which is the official orthography sanctioned by the *Académie française*, many French write *mille merci*, sensing that *merci* is not a noun like other nouns.

may be delocutive: *une sacrée montagne* is a mountain about which one says “sacrebleu” or a similar expletive when seeing it; similarly, *elle est diablement belle*, refers to exclamatory “Diable!” See Larcher, “Dérivation délocutive,” 397.

¹⁴ Sandin, “Greek Delocutive Noun.”

Delocutive nouns have attracted relatively little attention.¹⁵ To my knowledge, no examples have been identified in Biblical Hebrew. In the present article I will try to show that such nouns do occur in the biblical corpus and that recognizing them contributes to a better understanding of the Hebrew language and the biblical texts.

Delocutive Nouns in Biblical Hebrew

Identifying delocutive expressions in an ancient language is not always easy. In the absence of native speakers, the delocutive nature of a Hebrew word can be determined only indirectly. In selecting the following examples, I have tried to observe a few rules of thumb. The locution from which the expression is derived must be well attested, in passages whose import is clear. The formulaic quality of the locution, and the type of situation in which it functions, must be well understood. In addition, an obvious link should exist between the locution and the delocutive.

1. וַיֹּאמֶר “saying: ‘Woe!’”

The interjection וַיֹּאמֶר, “woe,” “an impassioned expression of grief or despair,” is found 24 times in the Hebrew Bible. Its prototypical usage is with a *lamed* designating the object of misfortune.

Jer 10:19

Woe is me (לִי וַיֹּאמֶר) because of my hurt! My wound is severe.¹⁶

Jer 48:46

Woe to you (לְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר), O Moab! The people of Chemosh have perished, for your sons have been taken captive, and your daughters into captivity.

¹⁵ See Plank, “Delocutive Verbs,” 487: “[D]elocutive adverbs and nouns and noun phrases, as such and in their possible correlations with delocutive verb formations, remain to be surveyed from a crosslinguistic angle.”

¹⁶ Translations of biblical verses follow the NRSV unless a different translation is indicated.

While the word may have emerged as an onomatopoeia, its use in the Hebrew Bible clearly illustrates its formulaic character. It expresses consternation in the face of a catastrophe that has just happened or is about to happen. Because in the Bible catastrophes are often viewed as the consequence of sin, the particle may have moral implications: “Woe to me” connotes a feeling of guilt, “Woe to you” has an undertone of denunciation.

As the dictionaries indicate, in one passage the word is clearly used as a substantive noun:

Prov 23:29

לְמִי אֹי לְמִי אָבוֹי לְמִי מְדִינִים לְמִי שִׂיחַ לְמִי פָצְעִים חֲנָם לְמִי חֲכָלְלוֹת עֵינָיִם:

Who has woe (lit. “to whom [is there] woe”? Who has sorrow?

Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds

without cause? Who has redness of eyes?

As is plain to see, this verse is not an expression of grief, but a question, or rather, a riddle. Moreover, our interjection opens a list in which most of the other items are nouns or nominal phrases.¹⁷ Clearly, אֹי is used as a noun, to wit, a noun derived from an interjection: a delocutive noun. The meaning is not “woe,” but “saying: ‘Woe!’” This has been recognized by all interpreters. Some of the freer translations render explicit the notion of ‘saying’: “Who says, Oh! who says, Ah!” (Bible in Basic English); “Who cries, ‘Woe!’ who, ‘Alas!’” (NJPS 1985).

As was pointed out above, delocutive expressions usually connote the felicity conditions of the locution from which they are derived. What “there is” for the drunkard—who is the butt of the riddle—is not simply “saying: ‘Woe!’” but “saying: ‘Woe!’” in a situation where saying this is meaningful. “Saying: ‘Woe!’” indicates that someone—the speaker, the addressee, or a third

¹⁷ The second item, אָבוֹי, is a *hapax legomenon*; it may be a nonce word designed to rhyme with אֹי.

person—is in a desperate situation, with the possible implication that it is their fault.¹⁸

At this point it is worth asking who does the purported saying. Most commentators submit that the imagined speaker is the drunkard, as the free translations quoted above also imply. “‘Woe’ and ‘alas’ are not nouns but interjections spoken by the drunkard the next morning,” writes Michael Fox.¹⁹ This is possible, of course. But one might query whether the typical hangover corresponds to the kind of situation in which one says “Woe to me.” A few verses on, the drunkard expresses his wish to drink again: “When shall I awake? I will seek another drink.” Another possibility is that the imagined speaker is not the drunkard, but someone who sees what is happening to him. This is the interpretation of *Midrash Mishlei*: “Who has woe? The one who is a drunk (...) Woe to him, woe to his parents (ווי לאבותיו, ווי לזה).”²⁰ Those who know the drunkard realize the desperation of his lot.²¹

Delocutive nouns derived from interjections expressing grief and despair are found also in other well-known texts. A notorious example is Rev 9:12 “The first woe has passed. There are still two woes to come (Ἡ οὐαὶ ἡ μία ἀπῆλθεν· ἰδοὺ ἔρχεται ἔτι δύο οὐαὶ μετὰ ταῦτα).” An example from Jewish Aramaic can be found in *Bereshit Rabba* 26, 4:

R. Gamaliel gave his daughter in marriage. “Father,” she requested, “pray for me.” “May you never return hither,” said he to her. When she gave birth to a son she again begged him, “Father, give me your blessing.” “May ‘woe’ never leave your mouth (לא שלי ווי מן פומיד),” replied he.²²

¹⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 263.

¹⁹ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 741.

²⁰ Burton L. Visotzky, ed., *Midrash Mishle* (New York: Jewish Theology Seminary of America, 2002), 160.

²¹ Waltke, *Proverbs*, 263, refuses to decide between the two possibilities: “hears and perhaps hurls (...) cries of ‘Woe!’”

²² J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba mit kritischem Apparat un Kommentar* (originally 1912; reprint: Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1996), 247.

These examples do not depend on the verse in Proverbs. They show that the delocutive use of words meaning “woe” is one that arises easily.

2. צָרָה “the cry ‘Help!’”

The noun צָרָה “violence, wrong” is a general term that may refer to physical violence or other types of mistreatment. What is presently of interest is that the word also functions as a formulaic expression. In several passages it is “the cry of appeal with which a man whose life was threatened called out for the protection of the community and its laws.”²³ In this meaning it combines with verbs meaning “to cry out”:

Job 19:7

Even when I cry out, ‘Violence!’ I am not answered; I call aloud,
but there is no justice.²⁴

Although the dictionaries do not list it as such, this usage deserves to be recognized as a locution. The word צָרָה is not simply a noun in Job 19:7, Hab 1:2 and Jer 20:8. Like *Salus!* “Hail!” it is a formalized utterance that can only function in a very specific speech situation.²⁵ The NRSV renders the usage correctly. A more idiomatic translation into English would be: “Even when I cry out, ‘Help!’ I am not answered.”

From this formulaic expression, a new, delocutive, noun was derived with the meaning “crying ‘Help!’”

Isa 60:18

Violence shall no more be heard in your land.

²³ Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology. Volume One* (London: SCM, 1975), 157, note. Hans Jochen Boecker, *Redeformen des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1964), 60–61.

²⁴ See also Hab 1:2; Jer 20:8.

²⁵ Yiddish *gevalt* “violence” is used similarly: “*Gevalt!*”

Luzzatto (Shadal), in his Hebrew commentary, takes the clause to mean: “No one will be heard *crying out* for injustice and violence.”²⁶ The NJPS (1985) is more precise: “The cry ‘Violence!’ shall no more be heard.” In this interpretation, **עָלֶיךָ** is not the noun meaning “violence,” nor the locution meaning “Help!” but a delocutive noun meaning “the cry ‘Help!’”²⁷ This interpretation fits the context well: the second half of the verse also refers to speech acts: “you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.” It nevertheless remains one exegetical option among others. Violence can be noisy and referring to it by means of the verb “to hear” would not be unparalleled.

An additional instance of the delocutive usage may be found in the story on Abram and Sarai. When Hagar, whom Sarai handed over to Abram for purposes of procreation, shows disrespect for her mistress, Sarai addresses her husband as follows:

Gen 16:5

May the wrong done to me be on you (**עָלֶיךָ עָלִי**, lit. “my violence [is] on you”)! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!

The first two words of Sarai’s speech are often interpreted to mean that Sarai wishes the consequences of the wrong done to her (“my violence”) to affect Abram (“on you”).²⁸ The notion of a wrong falling back on its author is indeed a frequent one in the Hebrew Bible. Note particularly:

²⁶ Luzzatto’s commentaries can conveniently be consulted online at <https://mg.alhatorah.org>.

²⁷ Cf. also Jer 51:46.

²⁸ Thus e.g. the KJV “My wrong be upon thee.”

Psalm 7:16–17

They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made. Their mischief returns upon their own heads, and on their own heads their violence (וְחַמְסָה) descends.²⁹

There are nevertheless two problems with this interpretation. A wish for the wrong to fall back on Abram would short-circuit the judgment Sarai says she wants YHWH to pass at the end of the verse. One rather expects her first words to initiate the judicial process, something like: “I accuse you of what happened.”³⁰ A second problem is that Abram is not the immediate source of the wrong Sarai has experienced. There is no doubt as to the wickedness of the wicked in Psalm 7, but Abram’s guilt must first be established.

The uncovering of the delocutive use of חַמְסָה allows a different interpretation. In his commentary on Genesis, Luzzatto refers to the locution “Violence!/Help!” (Job 19:7) and goes on to paraphrase Sarai’s words as: “I have to cry ‘Violence!’ against you.”³¹ Sarai depicts herself as the victim of a violent attack such as would lead one to cry “Help!” in an appeal to the community for protection. But in her case, the cry can only be made against the very head of that community, namely her husband. This analysis does not suffer from the problems of the usual interpretation stated above. In a way, it justifies free translations such as the NIV’s “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering” or the ISV’s “My suffering is your fault!”

Note that, if חַמְסָה in Gen 16:5 is indeed delocutive, its nominalization has progressed further than in the case of אָוִי discussed above. Not only does it occupy a syntactic slot in which one expects a noun, it also has a pronominal suffix.

²⁹ See also Judg 9:24.

³⁰ Boecker, *Redeformen*, 59.

³¹ Heb. יש לי לזעוק עליך חמס.

3. אָמֵן “saying ‘Amen!’”

The word אָמֵן is perhaps originally an adjectival or participial form of the root אָמַן “to be firm,” with the meaning “stable, true.” It is never used as a mere adjective in the Biblical corpus.³² Instead it occurs 23 times as a solemn affirmation pronounced in response to a ritual or judicial statement:

Deut 27:17

(The Levites shall declare) “Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbor’s boundary marker.” All the people shall say, “Amen (אָמֵן)!”

This usage is well known. It continues into post-biblical Hebrew and in other languages until this day.

A different, possibly delocutive, usage is attested twice in a prophetic text:

Isa 65:16a

אֲשֶׁר הִמְתָּבְרָה בְּאֶרֶץ יִתְבָּרַךְ בְּאֱלֹהֵי אָמֵן וְהִנֵּשְׁבַע בְּאֶרֶץ יִשָּׁבַע בְּאֱלֹהֵי אָמֵן

Then whoever invokes a blessing in the land shall bless by the God of faithfulness, and whoever takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of faithfulness.

Here, the word occurs in a syntactic slot where we expect a noun. Many exegetes have concluded that אָמֵן is therefore an otherwise unattested noun meaning “faithfulness” (see NRSV). Others have emended the vocalization to אָמֶן or אָמֵנִי to obtain the same meaning.³³ The Masoretic vowels have been transmitted without variants, however, and they are attested from the second century CE onward, as witnessed by Symmachus’ ἐν τῷ θεῷ ἀμην and Jerome’s *in Deo amen*.

³² The feminine אָמְנָה (TH אָמְנָה) “dependable” is attested in Sir 7:22.

³³ See BHS.

A minority opinion is that of Torrey who argued that אָמֵן here is the “other name” of God’s servants announced in the preceding verse. Giving the word an adjectival meaning, he renders אָמֵן אֱלֹהֵי as “God of the True.”³⁴

A few relatively recent scholars have argued that אָמֵן in Isa 65:1 is to be connected to the formulaic usage.³⁵ In this view, the composite divine name evokes the fact that Israel’s God confirms true statements: the “God of Amen” is the God who says Amen to his people’s claims. Alternatively, seeing that אָמֵן is everywhere else a human response, the name suggests that God’s servants confirm one another’s solemn statements: the “God of Amen” is the God to whom, and about whom, the people say Amen. In this approach, אָמֵן is viewed as a delocutive noun. It seems apt in a context that multiplies references to speech acts: note “to sing for joy” and “cry out for pain” in v. 14, “to leave one’s name for a curse” and receive a new name” in v. 15, and “to invoke a blessing” and “to take an oath” in v. 16, with the latter two precisely the ones that are most often affirmed with the response: “Amen.”³⁶

This exegetical approach is already adumbrated in Jerome’s commentary. In his explanation of the Hebrew text of Isa 65:16 he writes:

*Quicumque enim juraverit in terra, nequaquam juraverit in
idolis et falsis deis, sed in Deo: quae sententia rursum amen
signaculo comprobatur.*

Whoever shall swear in the land shall no longer swear by idols
and false gods, but by God, and their statement is sanctioned
by the seal of *amen*.³⁷

Although Jerome does not say who confirms the statement, he does clearly read אָמֵן in light of its formulaic usage.

³⁴ Charles C. Torrey, *Second Isaiah* (New York: Scribner, 1928), 470.

³⁵ See Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah: Part III* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 444. Koole refers to Antoon Schoors, Pierre Bonnard and Wim Beuken as having developed this approach before him.

³⁶ See notably Num 5:22.

³⁷ PL 24, 642.

4. הַסּ “saying: ‘Hush!’”

The interjection הַסּ “hush!” occurs six times in the Hebrew Bible. It is used in direct speech to impose silence on others:

Judg 3:19

(Ehud) said, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” So the king said, “Silence (הַסּ)!” and all his attendants went out from his presence.

Amos 6:10

And if a relative, one who burns the dead, shall take up the body to bring it out of the house, and shall say to someone in the innermost parts of the house, “Is anyone else with you?” the answer will come, “No.” Then the relative shall say, “Hush (הַסּ)! We must not mention the name of the LORD.”

It occurs three times in prophetic announcements of theophanies:

Zech 2:17 (13)

Be silent (הַסּ), all people, before the LORD; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.³⁸

Although it is found in various settings, the particle should not be viewed as the transcription of a sound pronounced *ad hoc*: in each context its usage is formulaic. A delocutive verb derived from it is attested once: “Caleb quieted (וַיְהַסּוּ lit. ‘he hushed’) the people” (Num 13:30).

In one passage, the interjection appears to function as the direct object of a transitive verb:

Amos 8:3

וְהִלִּילוּ שִׁירֹתַי הַיָּכֹל בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נֶאֱמַר אֲדֹנָי יְיָהוּהָ רַב הַפֶּגֶר בְּכָל מָקוֹם הַשְּׁלִיךְ
הַסּ.

³⁸ See also Hab 2:20; Zech 1:7.

And the songs of the palace shall be wailings in that day, Saith
the Lord GOD; The dead bodies shall be many; In every place
silence shall be cast (JPS 1917).³⁹

The text of this verse has often been suspected. The Hebrew verb הָשִׁילַךְ “to cast” is often used in combination with words meaning “dead bodies,” and many interpreters have argued that in this passage too, the direct object is the “many corpses” mentioned at the beginning of verse 3b.⁴⁰ The Masoretic accents clearly collocate the verb with the following particle, however, and this reading is confirmed by the Septuagint ἐπιρρίψω σιωπήν “I will throw silence” and the Vulgate *proicietur silentium* “silence will be projected” (both with a slight variation for the verbal form).

If we take the MT at face value, סֵה is to be given a nominal meaning. But this does not imply that the interjection should just be regarded as a noun meaning “silence.” Rather, it is a delocutive: the Lord has thrown “Hush!” in every place; סֵה means “the saying of סֵה ‘Hush!’”

This interpretation can be strengthened if we note the intertextual connection between the present verse and Amos 6:10 quoted above: both passages use the interjection סֵה in the announcement of a plague or massacre that will wipe out God’s people. In Amos 6:10, the survivors say “Hush!” to one another, in 8:3 God throws “cries of ‘Hush!’” in every place.⁴¹

5. שְׁלוֹם “saying: ‘Is it peace?’”

The noun שְׁלוֹם “soundness, wellbeing, peace” is attested over 200 times in the Hebrew Bible in a wide variety of contexts and usages. What is presently of

³⁹ The NRSV adopts several emendations of MT: “‘The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,’ says the Lord GOD; ‘the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!’”

⁴⁰ See BHS.

⁴¹ The precise meaning of this expression in the context of mass burials is debated. See commentaries.

interest is its use in formulas of politeness. “Is it peace (הַשְׁלוֹם)” is a standard form of greeting:

2 Sam 20:9

Joab said to Amasa, “Is it well with you (הַשְׁלוֹם אִתָּה), my brother?”⁴²

Note the Vulgate rendering: *dixit itaque ioab ad Amasa salve mi frater*, “Then Joab said to Amasa: ‘Greetings (lit. ‘be well’), my brother!’”

From this usage, the idiomatic expression שָׁאַל לְפָלְגֵי הַשְׁלוֹם, literally “to inquire about the peace of so and so,” was derived, with the meaning “to greet.”⁴³ This phrase is delocutive, but the noun שְׁלוֹם is just one of its components. However, in one passage the noun refers to greetings in an *ad hoc* formulation:

2 Kgs 10:13

וַיְהִי וְאֵת מִצָּא אֶת־אֶחָי אֶחְזִיָּהּ מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר מִי אַתֶּם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶחָי אֶחְזִיָּהּ
אֲנַחְנוּ וַנֵּרֵד לְשָׁלוֹם בְּנֵי־הַמֶּלֶךְ וּבְנֵי הַגְּבִירָה:

Jehu met with the brethren of Ahaziah king of Judah, and said, Who are ye? And they answered, We are the brethren of Ahaziah; and we go down to salute (lit. “we go down for the peace of”) the children of the king and the children of the queen (KJV).⁴⁴

Here שְׁלוֹם itself refers to the greeting. The notion of “wellbeing” recedes into the background.⁴⁵

Additional attestations of delocutive שְׁלוֹם “saying ‘Is it peace?’ (i.e. “greeting”) may perhaps be found in the expression “man/men of my/your peace”:

⁴² See also 2 Kgs 5:21; 9:31 and Kuntillet Ajrud Inscription 19:4 [Johannes Renz, *Die althebräische Inschriften*, Band I (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 4].

⁴³ See e.g. Judg 18:15; 1 Sam 10:4; 17:22.

⁴⁴ Instead of “to salute,” the NRSV renders “to visit.”

⁴⁵ In a Hebrew inscription of the biblical period, Arad 16:1, we find the analogous שלח לשלום “to send greetings” (Renz, *Inschriften*, 28).

Ps 41:9

גַּם־אִישׁ שְׁלוֹמִי אֲשֶׁר־בָּטַחְתִּי בּוֹ אֹכֵל לֶחֶמִי הִגְדִּיל עָלַי עָקֵב

Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread,
has lifted the heel against me.⁴⁶

The precise meaning of the expression is debated: instead of the NRSV's "bosom friend" (KJV "familiar friend"), the NJPS translation has "my ally." The Targum renders "the one who seeks my peace." A post-biblical attestation may be noted at this point:

Sir 6:6

אנשי שלומך יהיו רבים ובעל סודך אחד מאלף

Let the men of your peace be many and your confidant, one out
of a thousand.

The saying suggests that the "man of one's peace" is less than a bosom friend or an ally.

The Peshitta diverges from all other ancient versions and translates אִישׁ שְׁלוֹמִי in Psalm 41:9 as **ܠܚܝܬܐ ܥܠܡܐ** "the man who greets me (lit. 'who asks [about] my peace')." ⁴⁷ The Hebrew noun is treated as a delocutive: שְׁלוֹם does not mean "peace" but: "inquiring about peace" or, in plain English: "greeting."

Indubitable examples of this usage are found in Syriac. In the Peshitta translation of Luke 1:28–29, Gabriel appears to Mary and greets her saying: "Peace be to you (**ܥܠܡܐ ܠܚܝܬܐ**; Greek: χαῖρε 'rejoice'), you who are full of grace, the Lord is with you." Mary is much perplexed by his words and wonders "what is this 'peace' (**ܥܠܡܐ**; Greek: ἀσπασμός 'greeting'))?" ⁴⁸ The first occurrence of **ܥܠܡܐ** occurs in a formulaic expression, the second is a delocutive noun.

⁴⁶ See also Jer 20:10; 38:22; Ps 41:10; Obad 7.

⁴⁷ The Peshitta translates similarly in Jer 20:10; 38:22; Sir 6:6.

⁴⁸ See also the Peshitta of Luke 1:41, 44; Matt 23:7; 1 Cor 16:21.

Nouns Derived from Delocutive Verbs

As was pointed out in the introduction, delocutive verbs may in turn produce new nouns: *salutare* “to greet” generates *salutatio* “greeting.” Sandin shows that in ancient Greek most delocutive nouns derive from delocutive verbs: οἰμωγή “lamentation” derives from οἰμῶζω “to lament” and not directly from οἶμοι “Alas!”⁴⁹

Nouns derived from delocutive verbs are like delocutive nouns in that they refer to a speech act and connote, at least originally, its felicity conditions. At the same time, they are like other deverbal nouns in that they simply transpose the meaning of a verb into a nominal form.

In Biblical Hebrew, only two nouns of this type could be identified.

6. אֶשֶׁר “being called happy”

The verb אֶשֶׁר where it means “to pronounce happy” is perhaps the most convincing example of a delocutive verb in Biblical Hebrew.⁵⁰ Semantically, this verb differs markedly from other occurrences of אֶשֶׁר where it means “to go straight,” “to lead” or “to set straight.” It is clearly connected to exclamatory אֶשֶׁרִי “Happy is so and so,” which is attested over forty times in the Hebrew Bible.

Deut 33:29

Happy are you (אֶשֶׁרִיךָ), O Israel! Who is like you, a people

saved by the LORD?

Aaron Rubin has argued persuasively that אֶשֶׁרִי originated as an “elative” form on the same pattern as אֵיתָן “perennial” and אֶכְזֹב “deceptive”; the *aleph* is a

⁴⁹ Sandin, “A Greek Delocutive,” 116. Sandin seems to be slightly embarrassed that his ποίψυγμα does not fall into this category and is at pains to show it is not a unique case.

⁵⁰ See Hillers, “Delocutive Verbs” and Tigay, “More Delocutives.” The delocutive nature of the verb was recognized by the early versions. Note that Jerome translates it as *beatum dicere* “to call happy” in several passages (e.g. Gen 30:13; Mal 3:12). In Prov 3:18, Peshitta and Targum render it with the Aramaic locution that is equivalent to אֶשֶׁרִי טוֹבִיהוֹן “Happy are they!”

prefix. It derives from a third-weak root not otherwise attested in Hebrew, but well known from Arabic: *saruwa/sariya* is “to be magnanimous, to be brave.”⁵¹ This etymology ties in well with the fact that the “happiness” referred to is more a matter of praise and public approval than inner contentedness or joy.⁵²

Because this morphological pattern was not productive in early Hebrew, and because the root שרי was not otherwise well represented, אָשַׁרִי was reinterpreted as a form of the root אָשַׁר. Consequently, the delocutive verb “to say ‘אָשַׁרִי’” was derived from this root:

Prov 31:28

Her children rise up and call her happy (וַיֹּאשְׁרוּהָ); her husband too, and he praises her.

As this example shows, אָשַׁר implies speech. It means “to say ‘Happy (אָשַׁרִי) is so and so’” with the object of the pronunciation indicated by the personal suffix on the verb. The verb is also attested in the *pual* with the meaning “to be called happy.”⁵³ As with the exclamatory particle, the underlying notion is not so much one of happiness in the modern sense of the word but rather one of approval and admiration.

⁵¹ Aaron D. Rubin, “The Form and Meaning of Hebrew *’ašrê*,” *VT* 60 (2010): 366–372.

⁵² A Punic noun *’šr* “happiness” is recorded in the dictionaries, see e.g. Charles R. Krahmalkov, *Phoenician-Punic Dictionary* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 85. It is to be noted, however, that the word is attested only once, and that the meaning “happiness” is not self-evident. Moreover, the reading of the second consonant is uncertain. The first editor of the Maktar inscription could not read the second letter at all, though he conjectures (as a possibility alongside a reading with *daleth*) a reading with *shin* in the meaning “droit” or “heureux”; see Philippe Berger, “Mémoire sur la grande inscription dédicatoire et sur plusieurs autres inscriptions néo-puniques du temple d’Hathor-Miskar à Maktar,” *Mémoires de l’Institut national de France* 36/2 (1901): 135–178, in particular 159 and 162. After Berger, the *shin* is noted as uncertain by Mark Lidzbarski, *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik. Erster Band* (Gießen: Töpelmann, 1902), 45–52, in particular 46. Lidzbarski is followed by KAI 145. See also the discussion in Karel Jongeling, *Handbook of Neo-Punic Inscriptions* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2008), 121. Any connection between the Hebrew word and Arabic *’ašira* “to exult,” but also “to behave insolently” etc., is doubtful because the sibilants do not correspond.

⁵³ See Ps 41:3; Prov 3:18.

The noun אֲשֶׁר is a segolate noun derived from this same root אֲשֶׁר.⁵⁴ It is attested only once:

Gen 30:13

And Leah said, “Happy am I (בְּאֲשֶׁרִי)! For the women will call me happy”; so she named him Asher.

The only path toward a meaning that fits the context is to connect the noun to exclamatory אֲשֶׁרִי “Happy is X” and delocutive אֲשֶׁר “to pronounce happy.” “In my happiness” means “in the pronunciation of my happiness” or “in the saying: ‘Happy/Blessed is Leah!’”

In all likelihood, the noun derives from the delocutive verb אֲשֶׁר, not from the exclamation directly. As we saw in the case of אִי and הֵס, and perhaps אֶמֶן, delocutive nouns derived from interjections simply treat the interjection itself as a noun. If בְּאֲשֶׁרִי were derived from אֲשֶׁרִי we would expect בְּאֲשֶׁרִי or בְּאֲשֶׁרִי.⁵⁵ In contrast, segolate nouns deriving from (or connected to) verbs are common.

The delocutive meaning of בְּאֲשֶׁרִי was correctly perceived by some of the ancient versions. Targum Onkelos translates the phrase as תּוֹשֶׁבֶתָא הָוָה לִי “praise was to me,” focusing on the speech act, and the other targums as well as the Peshitta render similarly. The Septuagint renders μακαρία ἐγώ “I am blessed” turning the prepositional phrase into a macarism, just as, in Deut. 33:29, אֲשֶׁרִיךָ is rendered μακάριος σύ “blessed are you.” Modern-day commentaries appear to have lost sight of the delocutive aspect.

⁵⁴ An alternative analysis is defended by David Qimḥi, who parses the form as a construct infinitive *qal*.

⁵⁵ Repointing the word in this way is proposed in Joüon §89 l, note, with a reference to Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel. Erster Band: Genesis und Exodus* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908), 146.

7. בִּרְכָה “words of thanks”

The Hebrew verb בִּרַךְ “to bless” properly expresses the transmission of a force of life: God blesses Abraham, and fathers bless their children. The verb figures frequently in diverse formulas of greeting, congratulation and homage. As has been recognized, these formulas have given rise to delocutive usages in which the verb בִּרַךְ means “to say ‘Blessed is (so and so)’” in greeting, congratulation or homage.⁵⁶

In the framework of the present article, expressions of thanks are particularly relevant. “You are blessed” is used as conventional way of saying thanks. Thus, when the Ziphites come to Saul to tell him where David is hiding, Saul responds:

1 Sam 23:21

May you be blessed by the LORD (בְּרוּכִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה) for showing me compassion!

Saul uses the formula “May you be blessed by the Lord” to express his gratitude to the Ziphites.⁵⁷

On the basis of this usage, the verb בִּרַךְ develops a delocutive meaning “to say, ‘May you be blessed’” i.e. “to say ‘Thank you,’ to thank:”

2 Sam 14:22

Joab prostrated himself with his face to the ground and did obeisance, and blessed (וַיְבָרֶךְ) the king; and Joab said, “Today your servant knows that I have found favor in your sight, my lord the king, in that the king has granted the request of his servant.”⁵⁸

“Joab... blessed the king” here means as much as “Joab... thanked the king.”

From the delocutive verb, finally, a noun is derived meaning “saying thanks, saying ‘Thank you:’”

⁵⁶ E.g. 2 Kgs 4:29. See Tigay, “More Delocutives.”

⁵⁷ See also Ruth 3:10; 2 Sam 2:5, and several passages in the Psalms, e.g. 28:6; 31:22.

⁵⁸ See also Job 31:20.

Job 29:13

בְּרַכַּת אֲבִד עָלַי תָּבֵא וְלִב אֵלְמִנָּה אֶרְנֶן:

The blessing of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.⁵⁹

The noun בְּרַכָּה here doesn't express its usual meaning of "blessing" but "saying 'Blessed be you (= thank you).'" Both halves of the verse are about speech acts.

Whether the delocutive noun derives from the delocutive verb or directly from the locution is in this case hard to say.

Concluding Remarks

In living languages, delocutives do not raise problems of understanding. When a preacher says: "Can I have an Amen?" the faithful know that they should respond *by saying*: "Amen!" But in an ancient language, represented by a relatively small corpus whose transmission may not have been entirely secure, defining the meaning and usage of words is difficult. The exploration of the notion of delocutivity in Biblical Hebrew is first and foremost a philological endeavor. It allows to bring clarity to distinct nuances of usage. On the face of it, אֵין in Prov 23:29 is the same word as in Jer 10:19. But sensitive analysis shows that אֵין first functions as a noun. Two usages, and two meanings, need to be distinguished:

- 1) the particle אֵין, expressing grief or despair
- 2) a noun meaning "saying אֵין."

In some cases, three distinct usages must be recognized. Consider the case of עֲזָרָה, which occurs in three different modes:

- 1) as a noun meaning "violence"
- 2) as a formulaic exclamation by a victim of violence: "Help!"
- 3) as a delocutive noun meaning "a cry for help."

⁵⁹ See also perhaps Prov 11:26.

Such distinctions are not imaginary or negligible. They correspond to the complexities of human language. It is useful to have a theoretical framework within which they can be more clearly understood.

Initially, delocutive usages would be heavily dependent on the context. The delocutivity would arise in speech (Saussure's *parole*) without being part of the lexical meaning of the word (Saussure's *langue*). In time, however, delocutive meanings would be added to the semantic potential of the word in question. At this point, they merit being recorded in dictionaries.

As lexical references to speech acts, delocutives are, in Jakobsonian terms, metalingual.⁶⁰ Certain interjections function as standing expressions, and certain nouns acquire a formulaic usage in particular contexts. Delocutives stand at one remove from such formulaic elements: they evoke the formulaic expression with the setting in which it is designed to function, and transpose them into a different context. In 2 Kgs 10:13, שָׁלוֹם does not express its primary meaning, "peace," nor does it function in a formal greeting as it often does. Instead, it makes a statement about a greeting: it was planned, but could not be carried out.

Good philology is the basis of responsible exegesis. A better understanding of the linguistic processes involved makes for a better interpretation of the biblical text. The delocutive analysis, often linking up with renderings in the ancient versions or comments of biblical scholars through the ages, opens up new insights for exegesis.

In addition, this article may perhaps contribute something to general linguistics. Delocutive nouns have not been thoroughly investigated and every case study, be it one based on such a peculiar corpus as the Hebrew Bible, adds worthwhile material.

⁶⁰ Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, edited by T. A. Sebeok (New York: Wiley: 1960), 350–377, in particular 356–357.