The meanings of pisteūō in the greek New Testament: A semantic-lexicographical study

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ABSTRACT
Some common lexicographical and semantic problems relating to the meaning of words in the New Testament are discussed. The verb pisteūō is used as an example. A passage from a commentary dealing with the meaning of pisteūō is critically evaluated and the problems are elucidated. The problematic way in which standard dictionaries approach the meaning of pisteūō is also discussed. A section on the nature and modus operandi of dictionaries is followed by a section in which the meanings of pisteūō in the New Testament, is discussed.

INTRODUCTION
This year marks the twenty-sixth anniversary of James Barr's The semantics of Biblical language, which was one of the most exciting and disturbing works on Biblical semantics of its time - as the nearly forty reviews till 1967 indicate. Exciting it was, because it challenged the irresponsible and unscientific conclusions and presuppositions underlying the linguistic arguments of most of the Biblical scholars of the time. "Barr's book, The Semantics of Biblical Language, was a trumpet blast against the monstrous regiment of shoddy linguistics" (Silva 1983:18). This monumental work by Barr was also disturbing, because it indicated that nearly all existing literature dealing with Biblical words and the meaning of Biblical words such as dictionaries, theological dictionaries, word studies, and so on, were in dire need of being brought into line with modern linguistics and semantics.

Most of the reaction to Barr's views was in fact positive. Silva (1983:19) quotes some of the reviewers' lofty figures of speech in assessing Barr: "C F D Moule tells us that Barr flashed 'a red light at the reckless driver who tries to take a short cut across a mine-
field. We must be grateful that some of the explosives have been detonated for us". There have of course also been some negative reaction to Barr (Boman 1962:319-323; Wright 1961:350; Smart 1962:139), but on the whole these reviewers also expressed appreciation for his work (Childs 1961:374-377; Moule 1962:26-27).

But all this happened a long time ago. The question still remains: What influence, if any, did Barr's work exercise on Biblical scholars subsequent to the publication of his book? It cannot be denied that Barr definitely did yield some influence, for the change in theological climate in the 1960's led to "a reduced dependence on word studies" (Silva 1983:20). Furthermore some exegetes have been doing some marvellous work utilizing the areas in modern-linguistics that seem to hold much promise for Biblical interpretation (Sawyer 1972; Poythress 1979; cf. also Silva 1983:137-169 for some of the more important contributors). Also notable is an article on semantics in The interpreter's dictionary of the Bible (1976:800-807), an article by Thistleton (1977:75-104) and a book by Louw (1982) on the Semantics of New Testament Greek which first appeared in Afrikaans in 1976. In the last two decades since 1970 there has also been a renewed and very stimulating debate on methodology in the field of lexicography (for a useful list, cf. Silva 1983:175).

Encouraging as this may seem, much need still to be done in this field. One frequently comes across publications on Biblical words, word studies, exegesis and Biblical semantics that seem to be oblivious to the current discussion. Christian words by Turner (1980) is an example of this. Another disturbing factor is that the majority of Biblical scholars, although they are aware of the issues involved and although they express a desire to handle the material in a responsible manner, is in fact unable to do so due to the fast development of modern linguistics. We can thus agree with Silva (1983:21-22) that "the past two decades have seen considerable progress in the proper use of language for biblical interpretation, but we must not fall under any delusion that linguistics and exegesis have been genuinely integrated in modern scholarship".

The study whose broad outlines this article follows is an attempt to elucidate the situation described above somewhat further by using the verb pisteuo as an example. Firstly an example of literature dealing specifically with pisteuo will be discussed. It will be shown that there is no definite linguistic or semantic theory
underlying this type of work and that the results of these are in a linguistic and semantic way problematic and unacceptable. Secondly some of the standard dictionaries available to theologians and Biblical scholars will be discussed and problematic areas where the meanings of *pisteuō* are being dealt with, be identified. Thirdly some general remarks concerning dictionaries and the use thereof will be made to enable users who are not lexicographical experts to utilize such works responsibly. Fourthly it will be shown how the lexical meanings for which *pisteuō* is used in the New Testament, can be determined.

1 PROBLEMS CONCERNING THE MEANING(S) OF *PISTEUŌ*

1.0 Brown on *pisteuō*

In the appendix to volume I of Brown’s commentary on *John* (1982:512-514) we find quite a number of typical semantic fallacies. Typical in the sense that this is the type of errors that we find in almost all of the exegetical works dealing with words and their meaning. Brown (1982:497) states, "Rather we have selected a few of the more crucial words whose peculiar Johannine import must be understood if one is to understand John, and we have discussed them very briefly to acquaint the reader with the problems involved".

One of these words is *pisteuō*. It becomes clear immediately that Brown considers words such as *pisteuō* to have special meaning(s) in John, distinguishing it from other usages. This of course, is wrong. Brown confused the lexical meaning of *pisteuō* with the theology of John, which is something different. The lexical meaning of *pisteuō* in John is the same as in other books of the New Testament, but the theology of John is unique. This type of error is very common, especially in theological works. The lexical meaning of words and theological concepts are grossly confused. Brown did it here, although he stated, "... here we are concerned primarily with the use and meaning of pisteeuin" (Brown 1982: 512).

Another factor which complicates the matter further is the rather vague approach to meaning, especially where abstracts such as *pisteuō* are concerned. Brown does not clearly distinguish between the different meanings for which *pisteuō* can be used. He just gives us the meaning "believe" which is very vague and ap-
parently supposes that it is the real meaning or central meaning, with meanings such as "trust" and "have faith" only nuances of one basic meaning. This view-point is also incorrect because πίστευο can be used for different meanings in John and the rest of the New Testament and to use it as general term which also includes other meanings is not correct. Here we have the traditional view of Grundbedeutung which is unacceptable (cf. Louw 1982:23-31 on inherent property; Botha 1985:146-147).

Yet another traditional stance against which Barr wrote in strong terms (1975:8-45) is the alleged contrast between Greek and Hebrew thought, based on the use of words. Here we find that Brown (1982:512) makes a similar distinction between John and the rest of the New Testament, "That John prefers the verb πίστευειν to the noun shows that the evangelist is not thinking of faith as an internal disposition, but as an active commitment" (Brown 1982:512).

This is simply not true. Both the verb πίστευειν and the noun πίστις can be classified as events and the one does not focus more or less than the other on the aspect of activity. In any case πίστευο in John does not always focus on an "active commitment" either. In John 9:18 for instance the Jews would not believe the man born blind. Even if they accepted his words it could not have implied an active commitment.

Brown (1982:512) also remarks, "The particular nuance of the Johannine concept of believing is seen in the predilection for the preposition εἰς after πίστευειν, 'believe in(to)' (36 times in John; 3 in I John; 8 elsewhere in the NT). There is no real parallel for this usage in LXX or in secular Greek". Here we are informed that the Johannine "concept of believing" is about to be discussed. That seems strange as Brown explicitly stated that he is interested in the meaning of the word πίστευο - thus semantics and not theology should be discussed. It is a very common phenomenon among exegetes and theologians that a single word is confused with the theological concept and that no real distinction exists between word (meaning) and theological concept. Furthermore Brown refers to the unique use of πίστευο plus εἰς. That is also problematic. Πίστευο plus εἰς indeed occurs in secular Greek (cf. Botha 1985:5 for a full discussion).

Barr (1975:233-234) referred to this long ago: "Theological thought of the type found in the NT has its characteristic linguis-
tic expression not in the word individually but in the word-
combination or sentence. The degree to which the individual word
 can be related directly to the theological thought depends consid-
erably on the degree to which the word becomes a technical term...
[Since] important elements in the NT vocabulary were not tech-
nical ... the attempt to relate the individual word directly to the
theological thought leads to the distortion of the semantic contri-
bution made by words in contexts; the value of the context comes
to be seen as something contributed by the word, and then it is
read into the word as its contribution where the context is in fact
different. Thus the word becomes overloaded with interpretative
suggestion ...

What is also significant is the typical misconception that a
certain construction in Greek bears a certain meaning. The fact
that pisteūō eis is used often in John is meaningful only in that it
reflects his personal style and preference. There is no real dif-
ference between pisteūō eis and other constructions wherein
pisteūō can also occur - it is only convention of the language and
nothing more.

Brown (1982:513) also states: "Thus, pisteuein eis may be
defined in terms of an active commitment to a person and, in par-
ticular, to Jesus. It involves much more than trust in Jesus or con-
ﬁdence in him; it is an acceptance of Jesus and of what he claims
to be and a dedication of one’s life to him. The commitment is not
emotional but involves a willingness to respond to God’s demands
as they are presented in and by Jesus ....".

What he supposedly means is that pisteūō eis is used for the
meaning "believe in a Christian way", but all these things, al-
though it may be true in a certain context, are deﬁnitely not true
in all contexts where pisteūō eis used (Jn. 11:25; 6:29; 6:35). This
careless statement where "illegitimate totality transfer" (Barr
1975:218, 222; Silva 1983:25-26) is also involved could inﬂuence
the casual reader to conclude that in all instances where pisteūō
eis is used all these factors which Brown mentions, are involved.
That would be a wrong conclusion and could lead to faulty exege-
sis.

Another problem in this traditional approach of Brown is that
the concentration on one word excludes the examining of semanti-
cally related terms and thus leads to a poorer understanding of the
issues involved (Silva 1983:27).
This type of error and misunderstanding of meaning is still very common. It seems rather discouraging that works such as this excellent commentary on John made no real effort to include the more recent linguistic developments and results in their later editions. The same holds true for theological dictionaries and other word studies. Examples such as these can be multiplied. (For a full discussion of further examples and a discussion on the methodology of theological dictionaries, cf. Botha 1985:10-73). All this serves to show that the influence of Barr's work is limited and the results of recent developments in the field of linguistics and semantics are very poorly implemented or perhaps not known at all. This situation must change before real progress in the field of Biblical linguistics and exegesis based on sound semantics can be made.

1.1 Standard dictionaries and πίστευο
Perhaps one of the reasons for this unsatisfactory condition today is that the standard works dealing with the meanings of words available to theologians and exegetes are still representative of linguistic and lexicographical theories current at the turn of the century. New editions are just reprints and there is no real change in the basic presuppositions underlying the compilation of such works. A further factor is that traditionally dictionaries are viewed as the only and best sources for meaning and are considered infallible. The user of dictionaries is not aware of the problems in these works and without reserve implements what was found there in exegesis and word studies. This is of course unsatisfactory, because dictionaries can indeed contain serious mistakes.

Dictionaries dealing with πίστευο do not present a unified picture as to the meaning(s) of this word. For a detailed discussion on the way certain standard dictionaries deal with πίστευο, see Botha (1985:74-112). Here only a few general remarks can be made on mainly the dictionaries of Thayer, Liddel and Scott, Bauer and Muller.

The first three are standard works, used widely by New Testament scholars. The Muller dictionary is a school dictionary.

1.1.0 In their discussion of πίστευο these dictionaries differ quite substantially in their approach and in the number of meanings πίστευο is supposed to have. Thayer (1961:511-512) gives perhaps
eight or nine meanings, Liddell and Scott (1973:1407-1408) perhaps six, Bauer (1979:660-662) perhaps four or eleven, and Muller (1933:633) four; but this can not be determined conclusively as it is never clear whether meaning or reference or translational equivalent is involved, because of the haphazard use of commas and semi-colons. The following is rather significant:

1.1.1 All these entries are very complicated and difficult to read.
1.1.2 All these entries contain lots of grammatical remarks which only serve to confuse further and definitely do not make the meaning(s) clearer.
1.1.3 Contexts are allowed to influence assumed "meanings".
1.1.4 It is clear that, although the results differ somewhat, the basic methodology and semantic errors are the same.
1.1.5 The entries and divisions were not made on semantic grounds but rather because of grammatical and syntactical reasoning.
1.1.6 In the end it seems that through all the mumble-jumble all these dictionaries in some way or other touched upon the four meanings for which pistelü can be used, but only a trained lexicographer cum semanticist would have reached that conclusion.

It thus seems necessary to provide some guidelines as to how dictionaries need to be approached in order to obtain sound information. This is done in the following section, and for the sake of clarity other words and not only pistelü are used as examples. This is necessary, for what happens at present is that a user of a dictionary just opens it, scans the entry and chooses on intuition the "best" or "most relevant" meaning. Often this assumed "meaning" is not the meaning but the usage or implication of the word in a certain context only. In this way wrong conclusions are often made and incorporated in exegetical works, commentaries, and the like.

2 LEXICOGRAPHY AND DICTIONARIES
To be able to use a dictionary responsibly, it is necessary to know something of the modus operandi and limitations of the lexicon. What follows is a very short description of the methodology of the traditional type of dictionary and could be helpful to interested scholars when utilizing a dictionary for some or other purpose.
(For a further and fuller discussion on dictionaries and what they are like, cf. Botha 1985:114-162; Louw 1985:53-81, 97-117).

2.0 Lexica have the confusing custom of using commas and semicolons to mark different and "related" meanings, without ever explaining the use thereof. For instance the entry under δυνατός in the dictionary compiled by Newman (1971:49) contains eight different meanings for δυνατός when one takes the semi-colons into consideration, which is perhaps the logical conclusion. When the commas are considered, perhaps ten "meanings" are given. In a small dictionary such as Newman's it is already somewhat difficult to determine the intent of the compiler, not to mention the problems involved when one considers one of the "big" lexica such as Bauer's.

2.1 Another problem which users of lexica have to be aware of is that the different lists of words given under each entry do not necessarily correspond to meaning.

Often lexical meaning is confused with the following four aspects, which although very much related to meaning, must be clearly distinguished from meaning (Botha 1985:124-127; Louw 1983:12-15).

2.1.0 Meaning and reference: These two aspects must be clearly distinguished. Dictionaries often give the reference of words, but this is not equivalent to the linguistic meaning of the words concerned. By mistaking reference for linguistic meaning, an exegete could assume that he is dealing with meaning while reference is actually at stake. This could lead to problematic exegesis. In John 14:16 παρακλήτος means someone who helps, but the reference is to the Holy Spirit, while in 1 John 2:1 the reference is to Christ. Thus παρακλήτος does not mean either "Christ" or "Holy Spirit" but only "helper". Reference and meaning are thus not equivalent, as reference involves extra-linguistic matters. Often dictionaries give these extra-linguistic matters as part of the meanings of words.

2.1.1 Meaning and usage: This is closely related to the above-mentioned. If ἀποστίθημι in Matthew 14:3 should be explained as "arrest" it would be a usage and not a meaning that is described, because the text reads ἐν φυλάκῳ ἀπειθεῖο. Ἀποστίθημι only means
"to let something be in a certain location". But because *apotithēmi* can be used for "arrest" we cannot say *apotithēmi* means arrest. It is only a usage.

2.1.2 Meaning and translational equivalent: This is also closely related to both the above mentioned. A single meaning can usually be described by quite a number of words in a language, which we call translational equivalents. Often these different renderings of the same meaning are given as different meanings. This is incorrect. One can translate *kōlūō* as "forbid, hinder, withhold" as Newman (1971:105) does. The only problem is that he presents it as different meanings instead of translational equivalents used to render the single meaning "to let some action cease".

2.1.3 Meaning and implication: Implication is closely related to the context in which the word occurs. In Galatians 1:6 Paul writes to the Galatians that he is surprised that they became unfaithful so quickly. *Thaumázō* means "to be surprised". The implication, which we can infer from the context, is that Paul is very angry, disappointed and amazed, and *thaumázō* may be translated thus. However, the implication may not be confused with the lexical meaning of *thaumázō*. Thus *thaumázō* can not be considered to mean "be angry" although it could be the implication in a certain context.

When these four aspects are kept in mind it is a bit easier to make some sense of dictionary entries, because it is often quite clear where one of these four aspects was confused with meaning.

2.2 Illegitimate totality transfer: We have already referred to it above. This is also something which a user of dictionaries must be aware of, for it occurs rather frequently in dictionaries, theological dictionaries, exegesis, and so on. A word is considered to carry more than one meaning in the same context, or to have part of one meaning and part of another simultaneously. Baur's dictionary (1979:661) gives for *pisteūō* "faith ... that lays special emphasis on trust ...". Obviously the focus here is on "trust", which is one of the meanings for which *pisteūō* can be used. But then he continues and, as part of this meaning, gives "... in addition to being convinced that he exists and that his revelations or disclosures are true". Here another meaning of *pisteūō* is correlated with the first,
namely the meaning "to accept something as true". Pisteuo cannot mean both these things at the same time. Illegitimate totality transfer had taken place.

2.3 Grundbedeutung: This view holds that in the midst of a whole set of variations of meaning which a word can have, there must be some sort of central motive or meaning which holds all these different meanings together. Where pisteuo was discussed, this was usually the case. Pisteuo is thought to mean believe, with all other "meanings" mere nuances of this one central meaning. (Cf. also the discussion on Brown above).

2.4 Often dictionaries do not only include contextual usage but also grammatical usage. These grammatical remarks are then considered to be so important that the whole entry is structured on the grounds of grammatical considerations, as if the different syntactical and grammatical variations would influence meaning (for a discussion of this in Hebrew lexicography, cf. Van Wyk 1985:301).

2.5 That dictionaries contain a wealth of information, cannot be denied. The rather sad fact about this is that all this information is not necessary, in order to understand the meaning of a word better. If we agree with Nida (1975) and Louw (1983:12) that meaning can be defined as a set of componential features expressed by means of a definition, then the componential features that linguistically distinguish a particular word from other words in the same semantic field, should be given by dictionaries which allude to be dealing with meaning. But because traditional dictionaries do not employ the concept of semantic fields, it is virtually impossible for them to determine what these crucial components are that need to be given. What then happens is that a mass of unnecessary, although interesting, information are found in dictionaries. This we can call encyclopedic material (Botha 1985:151; Louw 1983:11-12).

2.6 Also confusing is the tendency of dictionaries not to structure the entries properly. "Semantic, syntactic, contextual, translational and historical considerations are mixed and the user of the dictionary is presented with a "semantic" structure ... which is misleading" (Vorster 1985:140).
2.7 Idioms are mostly ignored or not dealt with properly in dictionaries. The traditional approach seems to regard meaning as something that has to do with words and words only. Meaning, however, is more than just the total of a certain set of words - a certain group of words in combination does not necessarily mean what the sum of the parts would mean. In Matthew 27:50 we read, *aphēken to pneuma*, which only means that "he died". In English it is rather clear that we have an idiom here (presumably on account of familiarity with the Bible), but usually dictionaries ignore idioms completely or ascribe the meaning of idioms to a single word that forms part of the idiom.

2.8 Especially in theological dictionaries we often find that theological concepts and dogmatic theories are based on single words. This is incorrect as theological themes and concepts are usually described by sentences and paragraphs rather than by single words. Louw (1985:108) remarks on *sōzō*, "One of the lexical meanings for which *sōzō* occurs in the Greek New Testament is 'to save in a religious sense.' The theological concept of salvation, however, is much wider in reference and includes what is said by the passages dealing with salvation. To understand these passages the Old Testament background is indeed important, but the Greek word *sōzō* does not carry all that information as part of its lexical meaning. Once it is used in a context referring to salvation it serves only in a restricted lexical role as a partial contribution to the total understanding of the concept of salvation".

We can conclude from the above that it is not totally impossible to utilize dictionaries responsibly, but at the same time it should be clear that it is a risky business - especially for one not trained in semantics and lexicography. A possible alternative which would alleviate the situation somewhat is the proposed semantic dictionary by the American Bible Society, which already is quite a few years in the making (for the theory and practice of this dictionary cf. Louw 1985:157-197; Nida 1975a:151-267; Van Wyk 1985:303-305). This dictionary should be very valuable as it would exclude a lot of the traditional problems mentioned above. From the above should be clear that dictionaries are not infallible, and this ac-
counts for the problems we experienced in consulting dictionaries and exegesis based on dictionaries for the meaning(s) of *pisteūo*.

3 THE MEANINGS OF **PISTEUO** IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

To conclude this article a few remarks will be made on the meanings for which *pisteūo* is used in the New Testament. The methodology for determining the meaning of words in the New Testament cannot be discussed fully here (cf. Botha 1985:166-196). In short we can mention that a whole range of dictionary entries on *pisteūo* must be examined in detail and, by utilizing some of the basic concepts of lexicography, be "cleared" of obvious semantic errors such as the confusion between meaning and reference, and so on. Then the results of each entry must be correlated with all the others, keeping in mind that often only translational equivalents are at stake and not a real difference in lexical meaning. Based on these findings a synthesis in the form of a list of possible meanings must be drawn up and subsequently validated against the New Testament. The meanings for which *pisteūo* can possibly be used, were fairly clear in all of the dictionaries, namely to "accept something as correct and truthful", "to entrust somebody with something" and "to place trust on something or somebody". Some of the dictionaries also identified the meanings "to be a Christian" and "to obey". The next step is to validate these five "meanings" against the New Testament. Each and every passage in the New Testament where *pisteūo* is used must be determined and compared with the results yielded by an examination of the dictionaries. (Lexical meaning refers to that which *pisteūo* and *pisteūo* alone contributes to the understanding of the passage.)

It was found that four of the meanings abstracted from the dictionaries indeed are valid meanings for *pisteūo*. However, a fifth one, "to obey", could not be validated in the New Testament. A careful examination of the dictionaries showed where this notion originated. It was alluded by Van den Es (1883:1070) and Bartelink (1958:197) on the grounds of the assumed meaning of *pisteūo* in some of the Sophocles tragedies. An examination of these passages revealed that the implication of *pisteūo* in those contexts was mistaken for the meaning of *pisteūo*. (The passages under discussion are OedT. 625, OedC. 174 and Trach. 1228f. For a full discussion, cf. Botha 1985:20-22). This fifth "meaning" of *pisteūo* is thus not an acceptable meaning of *pisteūo* although
pisteúō could have the implication of obedience in some contexts. The other four meanings which as the result of the dictionary examination seemed possible are indeed meanings for which pisteúō can be used. We will discuss one example of each meaning where the meaning is fairly clear. The four meanings of pisteúō in the New Testament are:

3.0 To accept something as true, to believe something to be true. In John 9:18 we read about the man born blind explaining to the Jews that he really was born blind. They did not believe him. They could not accept his words as the truth.

3.1 To trust, to rely on somebody or something. To have confidence in someone or something. In Mark 11:24 Jesus says to his disciples: "pánta hósa proseïgesthe kai atriteishe, pisteúete hóti elábešte, kai éstai humín". Here the focus is on the element of trust. They should pray and place their trust in God.

3.2 To be a believer, a Christian, to accept the Christian faith. Paul writes to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1:7 about their faith and their example to other believers. Paul uses pisteúō for this. But these other believers are not only believers in anything or any religion - they are Christians. "... hóste genésthai humás tûpon pásin tois pisteúoun sin en tê Makedonia kai en tê Achaia ...". Here pisteúō is used for the meaning "to be a Christian believer".

3.3 To entrust something to the care of somebody. In Galatians 2:7 Paul mentions that the gospel was entrusted to his care (cf. also 1 Th. 2:4, Tt. 1:3).

It must be kept in mind, however, that in some instances it was not clear that the lexical meaning was only one of these four. In some instances pisteúō could be used for either one of these four meanings, or for possibly two or three of these four. But it must be stressed that only one of the four meanings given above can function in a single context. For instance in Luke 1:45 either pisteúō (3.0) or pisteúō (3.1) can be applicable. "Kai makaria hê pisteúsasa hóti éstai teleiōsis tois lelalêmēños autê para kuriou". The meaning of pisteúō here could be that Mary is considered makaria because she believed the words of God (to accept as
true). On the other hand *πιστεύω* could mean "to place trust/confi­
dence in/on", that is *πιστεύω* (3.1). The focus would then be on the
element of trust. Mary trusted that God would do what he had
promised. Either of these two meanings could be applicable here -
which one is for the exegete to decide. (They cannot, however,
both be applicable at the same time, as that would indicate il­
legitimate totality transfer).

Determining the lexical meanings of *pistello* in the New Testa­
ment is, however, only a starting-point from where studies on
semantically related words and meanings can be done, and from
where any discussion on the meaning of *pistelo* should commence.
From the lexical meaning we can move responsibly to contextual,
referential and related meanings.

It can only be hoped that the results of studies such as the
present and others similar to this, would also find some place in
exegesis and the discussions of Biblical words. Hopefully the pres­
ent study will also make some contribution to the elucidation of
*pistelo* and that in future there will be a more clear and verified
view of the meanings of this Greek verb.

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