

θαυμάζω IN MARK 6:6 AND LUKE 11:38: A NOTE ON MONOSEMY

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Abstract: The utility of the lexical semantic theory of monosemy is demonstrated. Negative associations with θαυμάζω in Mark 6:6 and Luke 11:38 are due to co-textual features and not inherent to the word itself. (Note)

Keywords: monosemy, polysemy, θαυμάζω, Mark 6:6, Luke 11:38, co-text.

The usual rendering of θαυμάζω in English versions by “marvel” or “be amazed” is adequate in most instances in the Gospels to convey the sense of the word. But in Mark 6:6 and Luke 11:38 the translation “appalled” should be strongly considered. The question that is raised is how this is possible for the single lexeme, or whether the lexeme has one or more than one meaning, that is, whether it is monosemous or polysemous. A brief exploration of these two instances will illustrate the usefulness of monosemy as an operative semantic concept.¹

In the clear majority of instances, θαυμάζω is used in a co-text in which approbation is conveyed or expressed regarding some event or statement. For example, in Matt 8:10 and Luke 7:9 Jesus “marvels” at the faith of the centurion. For these co-texts, the approbative rendering with “marvel” is adequate based upon the situation, response of the participants, and other factors. But

1. See Ruhl, *On Monosemy*. For other studies in relation to New Testament semantics, see Porter, “Greek Linguistics,” 27–37, and “Matthew and Mark,” 105–109; and Fewster, *Creation Language*, esp. 18–48.

in Mark 6:6 and Luke 11:38, the co-texts indicate not positive but negative responses.

In Mark 6:6, Jesus, having been unable to perform healings in his own country, ἐθαύμαζεν (t.v. ἐθαύμασε)² διὰ τὴν ἀπιστίαν αὐτῶν. The co-text notably is the only time recorded in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus is unable to perform healings.³ Jesus can hardly be said to be approbative of the response of his countryfolk, as indicated by their lack of faith. Jesus' negative response to this situation is rendered best with the words "appalled": Jesus "was appalled because of their lack of faith."⁴ Consequently, he is recorded as embarking upon a teaching rather than a healing ministry in the area.

In Luke 11:38, a Pharisee approaches Jesus in order to gain approval. The Pharisee's response to Jesus is recorded (whether he states or merely thinks his response is immaterial here): ὁ δὲ Φαρισαῖος ἰδὼν ἐθαύμασεν ὅτι οὐ πρῶτον ἐβαπτίσθη πρὸ τοῦ ἀρίστου. Rather than giving approval, the Pharisee is shocked by Jesus' (in his eyes) major failure. A rendering with "appalled" is again appropriate in the negative co-text: "the Pharisee was appalled that Jesus was not washed before the meal."

That the negative interpretation of "appalled" is a legitimate interpretation and even preferred rendering of the lexeme θαυμάζω can be demonstrated in four ways, with important consequences. These four arguments also support a monosemous bias toward lexical meaning, to use Ruhl's terminology. First, as I have stated elsewhere with regard to θαυμάζω, if its semantic (meaning) components are analyzed componentially,⁵ the rendering with "amazed" records at least two major semantic components: a primary lexical sense of surprise or wonderment, and a secondary component of positiveness. To render θαυμάζω with "appalled" represents a major shift in componential meaning, as

2. This textual variant is not of concern in this paper. The same point could be made if the aorist form is accepted.

3. See Taylor, *Mark*, 301, who notes this.

4. The Scholars Version of Mark renders the verb with "shocked."

5. On componential analysis, see Nida, *Componential Analysis*; cf. Kempson, *Semantic Theory*, 86–102.

it componentially indicates a primary lexical sense of surprise or wonderment, but a secondary component of negative response. The latter secondary feature is the opposite of the one above, even though the two antonymous senses are used in similar contexts for the same lexeme. This is a difficulty for a polysemous approach to lexical meaning. A monosemous approach mitigates this difficulty. Accepting a monosemous bias, the lexeme θαυμάζω has a broad general sense of surprise or wonderment, which is then modulated either positively or negatively according to co-text. Thus, the rendering with “appalled” still expresses the general semantic feature of surprise but now the modulated feature is a negative response, rather than a positive one. The broad general sense remains the same (consistent with use of the same lexeme), but the modulation due to co-text is different. The co-text constrains the sense and indicates whether in a given instance of usage the negative or positive linguistic features modulate the general sense.⁶

Secondly, the translation “appalled” is not found in the standard lexica, including the UBS semantic domain lexicon, even though the UBS lexicon recognizes that context can dictate favorable or unfavorable reactions in instances of use of θαυμάζω.⁷ This is not only problematic for a polysemous lexical approach, but problematic for the UBS lexicon itself. The reason is that, on the one hand, the lexicon is structured around polysemy (with words having two or more distinct senses) in its distribution of lexemes, but, on the other hand, in this instance it does not differentiate the senses, but includes admittedly antonymous senses under the same meaning differentiated only accord-

6. Porter, “Language of the Apocalypse,” 585. This article was written in response to the proposal by Thompson in *Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*, 12–13, that the translation of θαυμάζω in Rev 17:6 by “appalled” is due to Semitic influence. I have, however, altered my lexical semantic perspective since that article.

7. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 25.213, but which puts these two antithetical meanings within the same semantic domain, an apparent violation of their own semantic principles regarding polysemy (see 1: vi–xx, esp. 1: xviii–xix).

ing to context (which, in some ways, is similar to what the monosemous lexical view does). Monosemy eliminates this lexical and lexicographical difficulty.

Third, the meaning or rendering of “appalled” is also attested in secular usage contemporary with the writing of the New Testament. Chariton, the first-century ‘novelist,’ at 6.3.6 states: θαυμάζω δέ σε πῶς ἐτόλμησας Στάτειραν λέγειν Καλλίστην ἀπασῶν, Καλλιρρόην βλέπων. This might best be rendered, “I am appalled that you would dare to say that Statira is the most beautiful of all, though seeing Callirhoe.”⁸ The usage is similar to that in the New Testament, with the general sense of surprise modulated by a negative co-text, here that of favorably comparing Statira to the heroine Callirhoe. Thus, this usage is not unique to the New Testament but reflects the lexical semantics of the wider Greco-Roman world.

Fourthly, there is an appropriate linguistic elegance to the treatment of “appalled” both as a legitimate rendering of θαυμάζω on the basis of the co-textual features (surprise, disapproval) noted above and as an appropriately illustrative instance of monosemy. The negative co-textual rendering does not rely upon positing antithetical senses for the single lexeme (and certainly not positing this on the basis of supposed Semitic influence),⁹ but finds them as co-textually modulated senses of the singular general lexical meaning.

It cannot be stated with certainty at this point that the rendering “appalled” should be more widely used in translation of θαυμάζω in New Testament or other Greek documents until a more exhaustive study of its usage and appropriate co-texts can be made. It is not beyond possibility, however, that this translation could find acceptance for a number of other examples depending upon the modulating influence of the co-text. Nevertheless, the evidence marshaled here is sufficient in itself to demonstrate the legitimacy of the translation “appalled” in

8. The translation is used in Porter, “Language of the Apocalypse,” 585.

9. See Horsley, *New Documents*, 35, with regard to Thompson (see note 6).

Mark 6:6 and Luke 11:38, which can best be explained as a demonstration of lexical monosemy.

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