

## MONOSEMY: A THEORETICAL SKETCH FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

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**Abstract:** This paper explores linguistic monosemy and the methodological priorities it suggests. These priorities include a bottom-up modeling of lexical semantics, a corpus-driven discovery procedure, and a sign-based approach to linguistic description. Put simply, monosemy is a methodology for describing the semantic potential of linguistic signs. This methodology is driven by the process of abstraction based on verifiable data, and so it incorporates empirical checks and balances into the tasks of linguistics, especially (though not exclusively) lexical semantics. This paper contrasts lowest common denominator and greatest common factor methodologies within biblical studies, with three examples: (a) Porter and Pitts’s analysis of the semantics of the genitive within the Greek case system in regard to the *πίστις Χριστοῦ* debate; (b) disagreement between Ronald Peters and Dan Wallace regarding the Greek article; and (c) the Porter–Fanning debate on the nature of verbal aspect in Greek. Analysis of the Greek of the New Testament stands to benefit from incorporating the insights of monosemy and the methodological correctives it steers toward. (Article)

**Keywords:** Linguistic modeling, minimalism, traditional grammar, Saussure, Columbia School, semantics.

### 1. *Introduction*

This paper explores linguistic monosemy and the methodological priorities it suggests. These priorities include a bottom-up modeling of lexical semantics, a corpus-driven discovery procedure, and a sign-based approach to linguistic description. Put simply, monosemy is a methodology for describing the semantic potential of linguistic signs. This methodology is driven

by the process of abstraction based on verifiable data, and so it incorporates empirical checks and balances into the tasks of linguistics, especially (though not exclusively) lexical semantics. Specifically, claims about the “meaning” of lexemes are framed in terms of the semantic potential that those lexemes introduce in every instance of their usage. Therefore, monosemy aims, at least in principle, to restrict the role that intuition and assumptions play in describing semantic or conceptual categories. Monosemy suggests a way of modeling language consonant with Saussurian structuralist insights, notably as regards markedness theory, the Columbia minimalist school, the monosemy of Charles Ruhl, and the data-driven approaches of corpus linguistics and computational linguistics.<sup>1</sup> Analysis of the Greek of the New Testament stands to benefit from incorporating the insights of monosemy and the methodological correctives it steers toward. Given the problematic issues that surround analysis of word meaning in Greek (entire volumes have been written to address this and other related issues) it is not unreasonable to state that questions about Greek words have often relied on unprincipled and arbitrary methodological approaches.<sup>2</sup>

In the interest of clarifying the contrast between monosemy and alternative methodological priorities such as polysemy, traditional historical-grammatical analysis, and conceptual or mentalistic approaches, I will borrow from mathematics the idea of lowest common denominator and greatest common factor analysis. Thus, the paper follows this basic outline: First, I will expand on the description of monosemy given above, focusing on (1) monosemy as a methodology, (2) the theoretical underpinnings of monosemy, and (3) the mathematical analogy of lowest common denominator analysis. Second, I will draw a contrast between lowest common denominator approaches—a category that includes monosemy—and greatest common factor

1. As I will demonstrate below, Ruhl’s work has clear affinities with the Columbia School, though he was not a student of William Diver.

2. For example, see Barr, *Semantics*; Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*; Baxter, “Word-Study Fallacies.”

approaches. This distinction, I will argue, is already operative within biblical studies. To support this claim, I will discuss three examples: (a) Porter and Pitts's analysis of the semantics of the genitive within the Greek case system in regard to the *πίστις Χριστοῦ* debate; (b) disagreement between Ronald Peters and Dan Wallace regarding the Greek article; and (c) the Porter–Fanning debate on the nature of verbal aspect in Greek.<sup>3</sup>

Monosemy, I will argue, avoids many traditional assumptions that have proven to be problematic. Lowest common denominator approaches continue to produce compelling results, and this outline of monosemy will serve to spur further reflection on the task of analyzing the Greek of the New Testament in light of modern linguistics.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. *Monosemy as a Linguistic Model*

As introduced above, monosemy is a bottom-up, corpus-driven, and semantic approach to linguistic description of lexico-grammar, but especially of the lexical end of that continuum.<sup>5</sup>

First, to call an approach bottom-up means the approach aims to begin analysis from the formalized features of a particular language.<sup>6</sup> In other words, a bottom-up approach is conservative

3. The chosen examples are somewhat *ad hoc*, in keeping with this paper's goal to provide a sketch of monosemy, as the title indicates. Each discussion cited below therefore exemplifies both the use and methodological benefits of the minimalist priorities of monosemy.

4. Several passages in this article have been adapted from Wishart, "Monosemy and Polysemy in Biblical Studies." There is also some overlap with other forthcoming publications.

5. Halliday, *Computational and Quantitative Studies*, 60–65; Halliday and Matthiessen, *Halliday's Introduction*, 24; McEnery and Wilson, *Corpus Linguistics*, 79–81. For more on the (more traditional and probably widespread) view that lexis and grammar should be sharply distinguished, see the introduction to Contini-Morava and Tobin, eds., *Between Grammar and Lexicon*. See discussion of the Columbia School view and the importance of lexicogrammar more generally in Wishart, "Monosemy and Polysemy in Biblical Studies," 85–88.

6. For example, Thompson (*Introducing Functional Grammar*, §3.1.2) reflects, "In the discussion so far, I have gone from what the speaker wants to

when it comes to proposing categories for linguistic units. Lexical categories should begin with the assumption that a lexeme is a sign–signal pairing capable of being modulated by context. The postulation of polysemous senses, which are subcategorizations of a lexeme’s meaning potential, should be avoided insofar as these senses are often capable of being generalized into a more abstract and general meaning potential that is signaled by the choice of particular lexemes. Syntactic categories should likewise begin with the assumption that the various usages identified for a syntactic unit in different contexts (e.g., the Subjective vs. Objective Genitive constructions) are not necessarily indicative of multiple syntactic structures. Rather, this variety indicates the modulating effect that context has on the highly abstract semantic potential of a syntactic unit. Monosemy is a bottom-up approach, then, because it aims to justify its categories formally (without simply relabeling any one set of formal features). It begins with the assumption that the lexicogrammatical categories of the language provide the most reliable starting place for analyzing meaning, rather than, for example, mental concepts or conceptual schemata.

Second, monosemy is corpus-driven for two basic reasons. One reason is that analysis of an epigraphic language is fundamentally a text-based task. According to Porter, “Whatever else New Testament studies consists of, it is a text—and consequently language—based discipline.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the primary source of data for biblical studies is the texts that we have accumulated that represent Hellenistic Greek. Corpus data are our only source for linguistic data that native speakers would

say to how he says it. However, we can also move in the other direction, starting from the utterance . . . and explaining retrospectively the choices that are embodied—or ‘realized’—in the utterance.” He notes, “This is probably easier to grasp in practice, because we are starting at the concrete end, with an actual wording.” I would contend that beginning from the lexicogrammar is not only an easier place to start, but it is also a more principled approach to semantic lexical analysis in the case of a dead language—though not necessarily more intuitive.

7. Porter, *Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 51.

have found meaningful.<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, monosemy leverages corpus data to drive its claims about the structure of language and the values of specific signs.

Another reason monosemy is corpus-driven is its goal of describing the semantics of linguistic phenomena on the basis of their use in all contexts. Ruhl describes this as the *comprehensiveness principle*.

THE COMPREHENSIVENESS PRINCIPLE: The measure of a word's semantic contribution is not accuracy (in a single context) but comprehensiveness (in all contexts).<sup>9</sup>

The best way to develop a comprehensive account of a linguistic feature is to leverage both corpora and the rapidly developing tools used to analyze these corpora. Corpus linguistics, I would argue, is well suited to the task of linguistic analysis of Hellenistic Greek, because we cannot defer to the intuitions of native speakers to help us understand the language. Our introspective opinions about the way Greek functioned in the past might in some cases approximate the intuitions of the language users, but the only way we can test such intuitions is in relation to corpus data. As Labov explains, "Good practice in the more advanced sciences distrusts most of all the memory and impressions of the investigator himself. As valuable and insightful as the theorist's intuitions may be, no one can know the extent to which his desire to make things come out right will influence his judgment."<sup>10</sup> Labov's critique is certainly applicable to biblical studies, where theological interests often drive discussions. Continuing on, Labov claims,

We all share a common failing as linguists: we try too hard to prove ourselves right. In this strenuous effort we inevitably overlook the

8. Beavers and Sells, "Constructing and Supporting a Linguistic Analysis," 398–99. This fact, furthermore, motivates Porter et al. (*Fundamentals*, xii–xv) to use extant sentences for translation exercises, rather than the dubious and often bizarre formulations used in some grammars, which are aimed at reviewing the grammar covered in each chapter, not necessarily at making sense. Cf. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 4.

9. Ruhl, "Data, Comprehensiveness, Monosemy," 172.

10. Labov, "Sociolinguistics," 351.

errors concealed in our assumptions, built into our methods, and institutionalized in our formal apparatus . . . A permanent concern with methodology means living with the deep suspicion that we have made a mistake at some crucial point in the investigation.<sup>11</sup>

Labov therefore argues that historical linguistics must have “referenced and available data” that can be examined by colleagues, and must be based on exhaustive use of these data.<sup>12</sup>

Corpus data, therefore, ought to play a crucial role in analysis of epigraphic languages such as Hellenistic Greek. This is all the more important given that, as mentioned above, our only available data are the extant data that reside in corpora: “The basic fact that influences the methods of historical linguistics,” Labov asserts, “is that they have no control over the selection of their data. Their texts are the results of historical accidents, and the art of the linguist is to make the best use of this fragmentary material.”<sup>13</sup>

Third, monosemy is a sign-based approach insofar as the semantics of the language under analysis are assumed to be exclusively realized by the lexicogrammar. Such a definition of *semantics* is necessary for maintaining a principled approach to an epigraphic language like Hellenistic Greek, since we cannot consistently rely on extralinguistic information for formulating descriptions of semantic features.<sup>14</sup> This is an important point: we cannot be sure that we have identified a semantic similarity or difference without a corresponding change in the forms that realize the lexicogrammar (whether lexemes or syntactic constructions). Inversely, lexicogrammatical variation is our only clue to semantic variation when dealing with written, ancient language. Thus, according to monosemy, semantics must be based on signs. The concept of realization is integral to a systemic view of language as outlined in Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). According to Halliday and

11. Labov, “Sociolinguistics,” 368.

12. Labov, “Sociolinguistics,” 340.

13. Labov, “Sociolinguistics,” 340.

14. For more on this definition of *semantic*, see Fawcett, *Theory of Syntax*, 38.

Matthiessen, “Realization derives from the fact that a language is a stratified system.”<sup>15</sup> They explain that the content of language—which is usually the object of analysis of the GNT<sup>16</sup>—is realized in the levels of lexicogrammar and semantics.<sup>17</sup> From the speaker/writer’s perspective, experience and interpersonal relationships are first transformed into meaning, and then further transformed into wording. However, as in Figure 1, from the listener/reader’s perspective the steps are reversed.

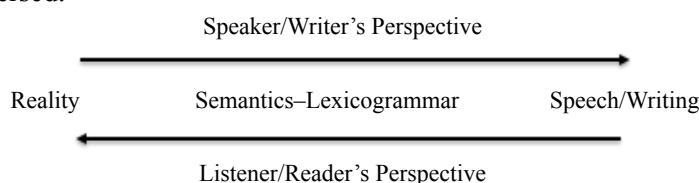


Figure 1. Perspectives on Realization

Monosemy is a model that interfaces with SFL’s stratified view of language. However, while SFL-based analyses tend to proceed from semantics to lexicogrammar (*How can a given meaning be expressed in the lexicogrammar?*), monosemy tends to proceed in the reverse direction (*Why does the lexicogrammar pattern the way it does?*). Nevertheless, these are two perspectives on the phenomenon of language that fundamentally construe that phenomenon in the same way—as a stratified system of choices. “When we say that language is stratified in this way,” explain Halliday and Matthiessen, “we mean that this is how we have to model language if we want to explain it.”<sup>18</sup>

This leads to the fourth point: rather than simply accounting for lexical or syntactical meaning, monosemy addresses all levels of lexicogrammar. Ruhl’s comprehensiveness principle is

15. Halliday and Matthiessen, *Halliday's Introduction*, 24.

16. More broadly, the strata progress from context to content to expression. Thus from our perspective the GNT is first an expression in writing, from which lexicogrammar and then semantics can be discerned, which indicate something about the cultural context within which these texts functioned. More on this below.

17. Halliday and Matthiessen, *Halliday's Introduction*, 25.

18. Halliday and Matthiessen, *Halliday's Introduction*, 25.

applicable to all linguistic phenomena, encompassing a spectrum ranging from those signs that are highly abstract, such as “grammatical” or “function” words—*ὄ*-items, prepositions, tense-forms, etc.—to the more concrete “content” words—*νόμος*, *Ἰησοῦς*, and *εὐαγγέλιον*. All linguistic signs in a language occupy a cline of relative abstraction or concretion. Signs closer to the concrete end of the cline signal more specific meanings than do the relatively abstract ones. The more concrete a sign is, then, the more “content” it signals. Abstraction can also be understood as potential for signalling content, whereas concreteness narrows down the potential by actualizing it in particular ways. However, monosemy also recognizes that, even as words occupy a spectrum of more and more concrete meanings, the lexicogrammar has means of making meaning even more concrete by moving up through the ranks: word groups are more concrete—i.e., have more content—than words; clauses have more content than word groups; clause complexes have more content than clauses; and paragraphs and discourses have more content than clause complexes. When a text is being analyzed, higher-ranking units signal less *potential* meaning and more *actual* meaning.<sup>19</sup>

However, it should be noted that even a discourse represents a relatively abstract unit of meaning. This is apparent when one considers the fact that the same discourse, for example Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” can be differently interpreted in different contexts (high school students do not typically clutch their desks for fear of

19. For example, Ruhl (*On Monosemy*, 183) notes that *black cat* is more concrete than simply *cat*. While intuitively something like *alleged cat* strikes us as being more abstract than *cat*, it is in fact more concrete because “we do not know with *cat* alone whether the cat is real or not,” but *alleged cat* narrows that potential meaning by signaling only one actualization of it and thus closing off other possibilities left open by the more abstract signal. The abstract-concrete cline ranks all of the lexicogrammatical units of a language relative to each other. As Ruhl (*On Monosemy*, 183) puts it, “While all words are abstract, remote from the flux of reality, some words are less remote than others. There should be a cline of words from less remote to more remote.” By analogy, the more specific a syntactic unit is, the more concrete its meaning is.



sliding into hell as the original hearers clutched their pews). Monosemy accounts for this by acknowledging the fact that any unit of language of any size has both a meaning potential—its *value*—and an actual meaning when that unit is employed in a context. In monosemy we are concerned with two things: (a) assessing the meaning potential of lexicogrammatical units, and (b) understanding how that potential is narrowed by interacting with more complex co-textual and contextual factors.

### 3. *Theoretical Underpinnings of Monosemy*

Monosemy, rather than specifying particular tools of analysis, is instead a general approach to the task of linguistics that accommodates various tools. What makes an analysis monosemic is its sign-based, bottom-up direction of analysis that moreover takes the value of a sign as its meaning potential—potential that it brings to all of its contexts. This potential can be distinguished from its contextually modulated meanings by the process of abstraction. According to Ruhl, “Abstracting involves omitting the same properties that, when we concretize, seem to emerge; emergence is the reverse of abstracting.”<sup>20</sup>

There are several key theoretical ideas that underlie monosemy. In order to clarify important points in this discussion, I will utilize the Hallidayan stratificational view introduced above. There are three main strata: expression, content, and context. It is important to keep in mind that both semantics and lexicogrammar comprise the content stratum.<sup>21</sup>

20. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 139.

21. As one reviewer rightly noted, this distinction between the strata of content and expression is in some sense a departure from Saussure, for whom the unity of the sign–signal pairing was fundamental. However, given monosemy’s bottom-up priority, the semantic value of a sign is assessed in terms of what that sign signals in each of its uses, and thus the distinction is not necessarily at odds with Saussurean semiotics.

### 3.1 Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism

First is the Saussurian notion of the arbitrariness of the sign. “Saussure’s central insight was that a language is not a nomenclature,” explains Otheguy. “A language does not simply provide phonological labels for an independently existing set of concepts, but articulates its own conceptual classification as it parses the phonological and semantic continua in its own individual way,” and as a result, “no aspect of language can be analyzed starting from antecedently given, universal categories.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, categories of analysis, whether they be syntactical or semantic, cannot be assumed to apply to a given language, though the linguist may find them to be intuitive or universal in theory. On this basis Saussure diverged from the general tradition of grammatical analysis. According to Otheguy,

Anti-nomenclaturism is at the heart of Saussure’s profound and innovative view of language. From it springs Saussure’s opposition to the tradition. The ‘grammar of the Greeks and the French’ is not for him wrong simply, or primarily, because it is prescriptive, but because it assumes so much about the language before studying it. Syntax is not rejected because it is incorporeal but because it relies on an *a priori* set of constructs. The sentence and the associated categories are set aside not because they are traditional but because they are antecedent to analysis and located in the observations.<sup>23</sup>

Monosemy seeks to implement Saussure’s notion of the arbitrariness of the sign in that the semantic categories, as mentioned above, cannot be assumed, but can only be discovered as they are realized in the lexicogrammar. “Speech,” in a Saussurean perspective, “offers the linguist no cross-linguistic units tangible enough to be inspected, much less recognized as intuitively obvious.”<sup>24</sup> Rather, these units, these categories of both strata of expression and content must be discovered from the bottom up insofar as our intuitions about which semantic

22. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 373. According to Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*, 68), “The principle stated above [i.e., the arbitrariness of the sign] is the organising principle for the whole of linguistics, considered as a science of language structure.”

23. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 398.

24. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 384.

categories are significant in a language can often be misleading. Languages are not merely sets of labels, nomenclatures, for universal semantic categories. As Saussure puts it, “A language as a structured system, on the contrary, is both a self-contained whole and a principle of classification.”<sup>25</sup>

Saussure’s anti-nomenclaturism leads, then, to a second theoretical influence in monosemy, the Columbia School, following the insights of William Diver, as the Columbia School relies explicitly on the notion of language as a self-contained system of meaningful signs.

### 3.2 *Columbia School Minimalism*

Otheguy argues that the notion of universal grammar is diametrically opposed to this Saussurean anti-nomenclaturism and arbitrariness, and that

to be a Saussurean in grammar, to start grammatical analyses from scratch, to shun the traditional categories as ways of shaping the observations, to really believe that the newly encountered language has many unique grammatical aspects—and that since one doesn’t know which ones they are, one has to first treat all of it as unique—this has proven too much for scholars brought up on doctrines of universalism to accept.<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, the Columbia School approach begins with the basic conviction that we know very little about languages ahead of time, that what we think we know we merely guess on the basis of perceived analogy, and that on closer inspection their grammars “may end up looking as unique as their lexicons.”<sup>27</sup> According to Otheguy, Diver’s followers are among the few who actually develop Saussure’s anti-nomenclaturism in the analysis of grammar.<sup>28</sup>

As Otheguy explains, the Columbia School position (which it shares with various other models) is that the categories of traditional grammar cannot be regarded as observational

25. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 10.

26. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 399.

27. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 399.

28. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 374.

categories, and they cannot, then, be “promoted to the status of explanatory constructs in the underlying grammatical system”—at least not in some *a priori* fashion.<sup>29</sup> Rather than treating categories such as “Subject,” “Object,” “Complement,” “Agent,” or “Patient,” etc. as testable hypotheses about the language, traditional grammar treats these categories as the units of observation, facts about all language that are merely given. Otheguy notes, for example, that “Chomsky leaves no doubt that the traditional categories of declarative, interrogative, etc. are part of the observations and constitute the beginning of grammatical analysis.”<sup>30</sup> He disparagingly remarks,

In his familiar ascription of the Western tradition to the universal mind, Chomsky maintained that this classification is ‘intuitively obvious’ and part of the data for which the grammarian is responsible . . . . Chomsky, then, admits that many types of observations are possible. But the only relevant ones are those that can be couched in terms of the categories sanctioned by the grammatical tradition.<sup>31</sup>

The problem, as Columbia School theorists see it, is the blending of linguistic meaning and structure through analysis. This blending takes place in the Greek grammatical tradition, insofar as distinct meanings associated with, for example, various uses of the dative case, are thought to be structurally distinct syntactic structures. Otheguy claims that what is really being observed is not structure or syntax, but “notional aspects of meaning, understood and processed through antecedently given conceptual categories.” He continues, “What the formalist or functionalist who claims to observe aspects of structure is really doing is taking elements of conceptual substance and reifying them into relational or graphic metaphors that are then relabeled as linguistic structure.” And this is supported by the fact that “No one finds structure in utterances they do not understand.”<sup>32</sup>

While Otheguy may be overstating the case, the fundamental distinction between bottom-up and top-down prioritization is

29. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 374.

30. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 376.

31. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 376.

32. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 396.

what is at issue. Grammatical analysis involves both directions, but the priority must be given to the lexicogrammatical categories employed by a particular language. These language-specific categories constitute the theoretical constraints that semantic categories must be accountable to. Insofar as formalists bring an *a priori* set of traditional syntactical structures to the task, and functionalists bring an *a priori* set of semantic categories, thus far do they treat language as a nomenclature, a code for universal meanings or structures. Insofar as they allow the language to circumscribe its own categories, however, in its entire content stratum (i.e. its lexis–grammar–semantics continuum), thus far do they rightly implement Saussure’s claim that language is not a nomenclature.

In summary, the Columbia School is minimalist in orientation, which we have already discussed above as a fundamentally sign-based approach. One of the most relevant characteristics of the Columbia School is its “search for the underlying unity behind the various separate uses of a form.”<sup>33</sup> Within this general approach, however, the most important theorist is Charles Ruhl, who outlines a theory of monosemy that has strong affinities with Columbia School theory.

### 3.3 *Ruhlian Monosemy*

According to Ruhl’s theory of monosemy, the meaning potential of a sign is a generalization of its meaning in all its contexts. Therefore, a sign’s value is not predetermined by rules, or even by concepts, but apprehended only after it has been used in a variety of contexts.<sup>34</sup> According to Ruhl, the value of a sign becomes more abstract the more it is used due to the nuances introduced by more and more contextual factors.

Monosemy proceeds from form to content, tying semantic meaning to observable forms. In order to stave off objections, I will point out that we are likely safe in assuming that the

33. Kirsner, “Future of a Minimalist Linguistics,” 353.

34. Concepts for Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*, 11–12), likewise, are not signals associated with signs but “facts of consciousness” that pass through linguistic patterns in order to be expressed.

question of whether polysemy or monosemy is more correct is unanswerable. As Kirsner points out,

We have no assurances that the sparse, austere, neat systems which the linguist likes to postulate have any bearing on what a speaker (or all the speakers, the possessor of *langue*), are [*sic.*] actually doing. We do not know what units the speaker himself or herself is operating with: whether he or she works at the level of the meaning or the level of the message, at some intermediate level, or at all possible levels at different times . . . How do we know that language users would rather leap to new conclusions from sparse inventories of signs rather than simply remembering more signs, some of which might have the same phonic shape as others?<sup>35</sup>

Rather than trying to determine the relative status of monosemy or polysemy as *positions*, a more appropriate question is how we can proceed in principled analysis of an epigraphic language. I argue for Ruhl's comprehensiveness principle.

A related discussion is the distinction between system and instance, as outlined by Halliday and Matthiessen: "The system is the underlying potential of a language: its potential as a meaning-making resource. This does not mean that it exists as an independent phenomenon . . . rather, system and instance are the same phenomenon seen from different standpoints of the observer."<sup>36</sup> In some ways, monosemy is a system-oriented perspective that examines meaning potential, but that does not preclude analysis of instances and texts, as the goal of describing language as a system is the explanation of the system's meaning in instances.<sup>37</sup> The system is an abstraction from the various instances, but, as mentioned above, we should ultimately aim to identify how the systemic meaning potential is actualized in more specific ways within particular contexts to have more concrete and definable meaning. Context in this way specifies semantic potential.

35. Kirsner, "Future of a Minimalist Linguistics," 351–53.

36. Halliday and Matthiessen, *Halliday's Introduction*, 27. Cf. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 198–99.

37. Halliday and Matthiessen (*Halliday's Introduction*, 29) argue that we need to be able to shift perspectives constantly, but always with the awareness of which perspective is currently operative.

A last influence in monosemy is the data-driven priority of corpus linguistics and computational linguistics.<sup>38</sup> Corpus data, like sound and graphic configuration in actual usage, “can be observed and described without problematic assumptions about the nature of linguistic structure or, more importantly, without assuming in advance the identity of linguistic categories.”<sup>39</sup> According to Reid,

In confronting a language, one does not know in advance what its structural, grammatical, morphological and semantic categories will be; all one has to go on is the expectation of a regular pairing of form and meaning. In practice, this means the analyst must wipe his mental slate clean, setting aside all the familiar categories of the grammatical tradition . . . and look for categories that stand in the most regular relation to form.<sup>40</sup>

Corpus methods make this process of trying to set aside assumptions easier, and thus they are a helpful alternative to mentalistic approaches, since a rigorous application of the former ensures that “All analytical decisions trace back to facts of language use, not guesses about how the mind works.”<sup>41</sup>

In summary, then, monosemy takes the twofold position that the categories of analysis must be accountable to the lexicogrammatical categories employed by the language, and context specifies and actualizes the potential values represented by these categories. Neither of these hypotheses is out of place in modern linguistics, but they are often not pursued in a principled and thoroughgoing manner.

38. The inclusion of computational linguistics at this point reflects the close correlation between corpus methods and computational methods that has developed over the past few decades. For an important example, see Libby, “Pauline Canon.”

39. Reid et al., *Signal, Meaning, and Message*, xiii. Reid et al. are overstating the objectivity of corpus data. The analyst must make choices at every stage in the analysis including the inclusion or exclusion of data. Nevertheless, compared to the introspective methods often employed by linguists, corpus data are relatively presuppositionless.

40. Reid et al., *Signal, Meaning, and Message*, xiv.

41. Reid et al., *Signal, Meaning, and Message*, xx.

#### 4. *Lowest Common Denominator Semantics*

Monosemy represents a set of values that fundamentally diverges from alternatives such as polysemy, traditional historical-grammatical analysis, and conceptual or mentalistic approaches. These latter approaches tend to assume semantic and syntactic categories of meaning, sometimes in the form of metalinguistic “concepts,” and sometimes by merely assuming that traditional syntactic categories are observable in the data, rather than being potential impositions upon the data.<sup>42</sup> In order to describe these two approaches in a general sense, I will use the metaphor of lowest common denominator and greatest common factor analysis.

The Columbia School strictly distinguishes intralinguistic meaning and communicated message—semantics and pragmatics: “Messages are not part of language. They are the product of language when language is deployed in context.”<sup>43</sup> For the sake of clarity I will stick to the Columbia School definition of semantics as a minimal value attached to a form, whereas pragmatics is a richer notion of meaning that can only take place within a context of use. Meanings are semantic, and messages are pragmatic.

Greatest common factor analysis, I propose, is an approach to linguistic analysis that, when analyzing the semantics of a linguistic unit, attempts to approximate the semantics of the form as closely as possible to the pragmatics of the actual uses of that form. On this approach, the phrase *the shooting of the hunters* would have at least two semantic meanings, because the context of use could vary. If we attempt to approximate the semantics of the word group to the context of use, we could say that the word group semantically encodes *the hunters shot* in one context and *the hunters were shot* in another.

Lowest common denominator semantics, by contrast, is an approach to linguistic analysis that identifies the semantics of a linguistic form as the common denominator that can be

42. See my critique of Wallace’s review below.

43. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 400.



identified in all of its contexts.<sup>44</sup> On this approach, *the shooting of the hunters* has a minimal semantic value based on what it could mean in any context of use. It does not specify whether the hunters were the agent or patient in the shooting process. Thus we do not need to postulate two semantic values for the phrase, but rather one, more general value. On this approach, which of the two (or more) pragmatic interpretations we choose for the phrase must be explained as contextual modulations on the more generalized semantic value.

In practice, greatest common factor approaches, I would argue, are both unprincipled and arbitrary in their attempt to maintain proximity between the semantics of forms and the pragmatic outcomes of contextualized communication events. Why stop at only two contexts for *the shooting of the hunters*? Why not add more specification? For example, *hunters* can also be taken in multiple ways as well (are they a basketball team whose free-throw stats are being examined?), compounding the number of pragmatic meanings that would need to be approximated in the semantics.

Lowest common denominator approaches, by contrast, are able to make a principled analysis by considering all contexts within a corpus, always seeking the semantic value being brought to all contexts by a given form. Whatever meaning is common to all of the messages in which a form occurs is semantic, in keeping with Ruhl's comprehensiveness principle described above. This distinction, I would argue, is simply a helpful way of characterizing tendencies that are already operative in biblical studies. In order to exemplify this distinction, I will discuss three examples: Porter and Pitts's description of the semantics of the genitive in the *πίστις Χριστοῦ* debate, Peters's approach to the Greek article in contrast to

44. Because context, or more specifically cotext, can in principle vary infinitely, analysis is limited to all of a form's uses within a specified corpus. This corpus can benefit from being representative and balanced for a language variety, although a high enough volume of data can outweigh these benefits for certain applications (see O'Donnell, *Corpus Linguistics*, 164–65).

Wallace's, and lastly the Porter–Fanning debate regarding verbal aspect.

#### 4.1 *Porter and Pitts on the Πίστις Χριστοῦ Debate*

With the aim of addressing the *πίστις Χριστοῦ* debate on a linguistic level, Porter and Pitts discuss: (1) the role of lexical semantics in disambiguating senses; (2) the Greek case system; (3) the relevance of lexis and case for the debate; and (4) the results of this linguistic approach. They claim, first, that the case system does not determine the meaning of the inflected term, but rather restricts or narrows the nominal idea expressed by it. Second, they argue the case system encodes the following meanings, which function to specify the meaning of a given lexeme such as *πίστις*:

- restriction (nominative/vocative)
- +restriction +extension (accusative)
- +restriction –extension +specification (genitive)
- +restriction –extension –specification (dative)

Third, they argue that the categories of the debate—objective and subjective genitive—are inadequate for relating the semantics of the genitive. Last, they conclude that, since anarthrous instances of *πίστις* are always used to indicate ‘faith’ and not ‘faithfulness’ as in some articular cases, and since the article and use of a genitive pronoun accompany instances describing a specified individual’s faith, the phrase in context likely refers to faith with Christ as its object, unspecified for a source of faith (a conclusion now supported by Peters’s monograph on the Greek article).<sup>45</sup> Porter and Pitts argue that these linguistic considerations should take precedence over exegetical and theological ones. While it is nevertheless possible to debate their specific conclusions, their clear distinction between lexical meaning and the modulating effect of contextual factors (including morphosyntactic properties such as case) clarifies their argumentation in ways that advance the debate and open up the possibility of testing their claims.

45. See Peters, *Greek Article*, and the next section below.

Regarding monosemy, Porter and Pitts note that “in order to disambiguate lexemes along these lines, it is necessary to observe how co-textual features realize particular meanings in unambiguous cases in order to develop criteria for assessing cases that are ambiguous.”<sup>46</sup> Before asking how the genitive—whether a subjective or objective genitive—restricts the meaning of πίστις, it is necessary to first analyze the sense of πίστις through collocation analysis. In their analysis of case they note that, as the least marked case, the nominative is “unmarked cognitively in that its meaning is the most conceptually basic of the cases . . . The nominative also exhibits morphological simplicity and regularity,” and this morphological simplicity “accounts for its potential to be used in a variety of contexts.”<sup>47</sup> They note that the genitive is the most heavily marked case—most concrete, in this paper’s terms—and thus it is “more rich (i.e., determinate) in meaning than the accusative or dative.”<sup>48</sup> It is also the most heavily marked morphologically, due to irregularities in its paradigm, and distributionally—in comparison to the unbounded nominative it is the most restricted or bound. As for the dative, they note that it “often limits a relation (e.g., it grammaticalizes, at times, a local relation), but this is gained through various implicatures [i.e., contextual factors] and is not inherent in the meaning of the case form. When the dative specifies or extends, this feature is gained solely from context and therefore is not part of its semantic meaning.”<sup>49</sup>

Regarding traditional grammars and their treatments of case, Porter and Pitts note, “A systematic distinction between semantics and pragmatics, or the meaning of the form and what is meant when the form is used . . . is not maintained or elucidated.”<sup>50</sup> They continue, “Traditional approaches often

46. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 37.

47. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 43. That the nominative is “cognitively unmarked” is open to disagreement, and their argument about morphological simplicity requires further substantiation.

48. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 44.

49. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 44–45.

50. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 38–39.

begin their analyses with lists of usage or, in other words, at the pragmatic level of text rather than at the semantic level of linguistic code.” In their estimation, “This model of analysis seems to blur the line between semantics and pragmatics instead of letting the semantic level of code govern the usage of the form. This procedure results in the imposition of entire contexts onto the meaning of individual case forms.”<sup>51</sup> Just as I have been arguing, they likewise point out that the attempt to reproduce the full import of a form’s usage in context (what the Columbia School calls a “message”) as internal to the form’s semantics (its “meaning”) results in the kind of stalemate represented by this particular debate. Furthermore, they continue by noting the issue of imposed syntactic categories, saying,

Such an approach also fails to respect authorial status, with regard to what Paul may have been contemplating when he used the genitive. It is highly unlikely that he was working with notions of subjective or objective genitive, or corresponding categories, as he made linguistic choices.<sup>52</sup>

Referring to Halliday’s work, they note, “Grammatical categories are ineffable—unless language is viewed as a system in which each choice implies a distinct meaning.”<sup>53</sup>

Even though Porter and Pitts argue that case should be treated not as an inflectional paradigm with meanings attached to it, but rather as a semantic paradigm with forms that realize it, which might imply a top-down methodology, their claim is simply that semantics are realized by lexicogrammar. Their approach is not incompatible with the bottom-up approach of monosemy—as long as the semantic categories are initially derived from analysis of Greek lexicogrammar as it is expressed in forms. The way they structure the case system of Greek is a matter for negotiation, but the outputs of that system are formally constrained, which allows for clear parameters for debating which case is the most abstract or most concrete. This formal constraint is implied in their negative evaluation of the terms of

51. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 39.

52. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 39.

53. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 40.

the debate, saying, “There seems to be an attempt to describe the semantic relations (‘faithfulness of Christ’ or ‘faith in Christ’) through syntactic categories (subjective or objective), which distorts the issue—quite apart from the fact that the syntactic categories being used are inaccurate.”<sup>54</sup> The question of whether Paul intended a subjective or objective genitive, they point out, is misguided: “the reality is that this question—or a corresponding first-century version of it—probably never crossed Paul’s mind.”<sup>55</sup>

As will be discussed in the next section, Peters argues that the article indicates that its head term (whether that be a single nominal, a nominal group, or some other larger unit) is to be understood as more concrete rather than less concrete. The lexeme πίστις signals for its part the ambiguous notion of fidelity, whether inherent to or directed to an individual (and thus there is debate about its sense in the relevant passages). Ruhl’s theory of monosemy indicates that these parameters interact in order to bring about contextual modulation of highly abstract and minimal semantic signals. In the end, Porter and Pitts argue for the traditional understanding of πίστις Χριστοῦ due to the patterns of contextual modulation that accompany identical syntactic constructions with πίστις in other contexts—specifically article–πίστις–genitive. While more data may eventually clarify the nature of this contextual modulation, their overall approach is clearer and more helpful than the clear-cut choice between two different senses of the genitive modifier (i.e., subjective or objective) that usually governs the terms of the debate.

#### 4.2 *Peters and Wallace on the Greek Article*

A second example of the difference between lowest common denominator and greatest common factor analyses is the difference between the approaches to the Greek article taken by Ronald Peters and Daniel Wallace.

54. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 48.

55. Porter and Pitts, “Πίστις with a Preposition,” 48.

Peters shows that some unstated assumptions about Greek make a unifying hypothesis of the Greek article impossible. For example, it has been assumed, on the one hand, that Greek nouns are automatically “substantives.” At the same time, it has also been generally recognized that the article has a substantivizing function. For example, the article substantivizes adjectives and participles. However, the article also modifies nouns, and the difference between an articular and an anarthrous *noun* comprises something of a puzzle—does it indicate genericity, uniqueness, etc.?<sup>56</sup> What becomes of the article’s substantivizing function when it modifies something that is already observed to be a substantive on its own? According to Peters, this “observation” merely assumes that nouns are “of course” substantive already.<sup>57</sup> In this and in other cases, Peters has ably demonstrated that the operative categories of traditional grammar at times constitute unfounded assumptions and serve primarily to convolute the grammar of the article. The article itself should be understood as a “unit” with semantic value or content that corresponds to its lexicogrammatical function. This value and function is realized in the single inflectional paradigm of the article. There is only one way to say  $\delta$  in Greek,<sup>58</sup> and this means, in other words, that the article signals the same semantic content every time it is used. The function of the article, according to Peters, is to construe its head term as relatively concrete rather than abstract. The semantic content of the article thus corresponds to its functional potential,<sup>59</sup> and so it is employed

56. See, for one example, the discussion in Blass, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 145–54.

57. According to Peters (*Greek Article*, 179), “To say that the article can turn almost any part of speech into a noun provides no insight into how it functions in the majority of instances when it occurs,” i.e., with nouns.

58.  $\delta$  itself is an abstraction from the entire inflectional paradigm of the article, which constitutes a single recognizable pattern for a single lexeme. Cf. Stump, *Inflectional Paradigms*.

59. Regarding what has been traditionally called the independent or demonstrative use of the article, Peters (*Greek Article*, 152) argues, “Its function is not that of a demonstrative or personal pronoun, as believed by previous grammarians. Instead, it either functions like the relative pronoun, or

structurally to modify (and even delimit) word groups. He explains,

While the article functions primarily as a modifier within a nominal group, when so employed it may also be used as an element for creating extended and elaborate group structures. In certain instances, this may be motivated by a desire to delimit the boundaries of the group structure, which may in turn be used to produce prominence or indicate salience. It must be emphasized the article's role as a modifier takes precedence. It cannot be employed as a structural element if it is not first present as a modifier.<sup>60</sup>

Without explicitly making a case for it, Peters has demonstrated the effectiveness of monosemy. Peters's monograph has confirmed a point made by the Columbia School, that "Experience has shown that the universal categories of the grammatical tradition, far from representing theory-independent data that the linguist has to explain, constitute artificially created obstacles that make an explanation [i.e., a unified or monosemic explanation] of the real data difficult, and often impossible."<sup>61</sup>

Wallace's estimation of Peters's theory is decidedly negative. Not only does he attempt to edge out Peters's volume on the basis of some bibliographic "lacunae"—although it is unclear what specifically in the arguments of these volumes he finds indispensable to the discussion—he also maintains, in his own words, a firm stance *against* Peters's lowest common denominator approach. He claims a unifying semantic hypothesis for the article is unwarranted, saying,

Indeed, some linguists have explicitly seen the article's functions to have increased in their complexity due to the long history of usage in Greek; so Steven Runge, de Mulder and Carlier, Greenberg; in other words, they recognize that grammatical forms, like lexemes, do not necessarily maintain a unifying idea.<sup>62</sup>

in certain circumstances, due to ellipsis of its head term, the article itself is elevated to the role of head."

60. Peters, *Greek Article*, 270.

61. Otheguy, "Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism," 382.

62. Wallace, "Review of Peters," 4.

In effect, not only does Wallace argue that Peters's account of the article is wrong, but actually grammatical forms and lexemes in general should not be seen as maintaining "a unifying idea." He further argues that, in highlighting the morphological similarity between the relative pronoun and the article, Peters is actually engaging in the "root fallacy" identified by James Barr. (Wallace makes this point, despite having noted earlier in the paper that most studies of the article identify the article's etymological genesis in the demonstrative pronoun—his own study included.) Wallace digs in further, however, arguing,

My point is not a mere quibbling over words. Peters seems to strongly link morphology to meaning for more than just the article. For example, on more than one occasion he enlists Porter's definition of the semantics of the genitive as essentially that of *restriction* (213 and passim). Yet this definition of the genitive's semantics is adequate only for the eight-case system. The five-case system (which Porter embraces; Peters does not tell us which approach he takes) involves the idea of separation as well. Regarding the article, Peters links morphology to semantics in such a way that he assumes the necessity of a unifying notion for the article's meaning.<sup>63</sup>

Something is being missed here. As we have seen, Porter and Pitts's account of the genitive is certainly not operating with an eight-case system, something Wallace even notes. Why then is Porter's account of the genitive "adequate only for the eight-case system"?<sup>64</sup> Wallace moreover denounces Peters for seeming "to strongly link morphology to meaning for more than just the article." Indeed, this is precisely what Peters does, but, as this paper argues, that is not a stroke against his work. Wallace claims, "Yet on numerous occasions [Peters's arguments are] demonstrably false (as in cases of anaphora as well as par excellence and monadic articles)."<sup>65</sup> In other words, the semantic categories "par excellence" and "monadic"—which are merely a given in Wallace's view—are part of the linguistic data itself, despite the fact that there is nothing in the lexicogrammar to

63. Wallace, "Review of Peters," 4.

64. Peters refers to Porter's description in Porter, *Idioms*, 92, which is essentially the same as the description in the article mentioned above.

65. Wallace, "Review of Peters," 5.



distinguish these semantic categories.<sup>66</sup> Wallace, in his turn, demonstrates not only that traditional categories continue to be merely assumed, but also that these categories have been reified as actual, observable data in the text. As Otheguy puts it,

The red Kool Aid of the traditional observations is frozen hard in linguistic analysis, but we learn nothing about ice by finding it to be red, because the redness had already been introduced long before it was ice. It is as part of linguistic analyses that the traditional categories must ultimately be evaluated. Yet these analytical units that should derive their legitimacy from rigorous examination in fact escape scrutiny by getting into the analysis, at the earlier stage, as unexamined units of observation.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, Wallace sees the categories of traditional grammar in the text because they have been assumed before he actually examines the texts themselves—texts which do not distinguish morphologically between “par excellence” and “monadic” articles. In a statement that leaves me scratching my head as to what “prescriptive” means, Wallace concludes, “His [Peters’s] overarching prescriptive approach prevented him from truly observing the text.”<sup>68</sup> The unfortunate irony is that the reverse is apparently the case.

Peters’s analysis is a lowest common denominator analysis because, as Wallace perceptively noted, Peters seeks at every point to correlate form and function. Wallace’s own position, by contrast, can only be a greatest common factor analysis, given that he wants to assert more about the semantics of the article than its formal realization would indicate.<sup>69</sup>

66. That is, there is no formal, systemic realization of these semantic differences in the inflectional patterns of Greek. “Monadic” and “par excellence” are thus semantic categories that are not explicitly realized in the lexicogrammar. They are, I would argue, first assumed and then imposed. The proper conception of such categories should be on the level of interpreted message, not the lexicogrammatical or semantic meaning of the article itself.

67. Otheguy, “Saussurean Anti-Nomenclaturism,” 381.

68. Wallace, “Review of Peters,” 9. For Peters’s own response to Wallace, see Peters, “Response to Dan Wallace.”

69. See Peters’s evaluation of Wallace’s flow chart of possible functions for the article (Peters, *Greek Article*, 182; cf. Peters, “Response to Dan

### 4.3 *Porter and Fanning on Verbal Aspect*

In his analysis of verbal aspect in Hellenistic Greek, Porter advocates clear grammatical category names based on the morphological realization of those categories that actually occur in the language.<sup>70</sup> Despite debate among systemic linguistics “whether formal categories convey meaning,” Porter claims that in the case of Greek “it is all the more important to stress the relationship between the two [form and function].”<sup>71</sup> “To identify a form is not to delimit its function,” Porter explains, but at the same time, “to differentiate semantic categories without formal realizations undermines not only the principle of form/functional relation but principled means for differentiation.”<sup>72</sup> That is, it is problematic to differentiate between diverse meanings for a form if there are no formal features that actually realize those meanings. While contextual factors provide the kind of disambiguation required to interpret the nuanced uses of a form, context exhibits a level of variation that renders it difficult to operate on the level of broad generalizations without obscuring the extent of the variation in an effort to render the generalizations useful. In order to make his analysis more principled, then, Porter distinguishes semantics—or code meaning—from pragmatics, which he describes using the term *implicature*.<sup>73</sup>

It is at this point that Porter and Fanning—whose dissertation on verbal aspect appeared the year after Porter’s—part ways. As Carson explains, “The issue between them can be simply put. Porter argues that aspect and only aspect is grammaticalized in the tense-forms of Greek, in all moods,” except for the morphologically distinguished future and aspectually vague verbs.<sup>74</sup> Fanning, on the other hand, argues that the semantics of

Wallace”). It is worth noting that one can debate the finer points of Peters’s approach and conclusions without diminishing its vast improvement over traditional, intuition-driven approaches.

70. Porter, *Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 44–48.

71. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 11.

72. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 12–13.

73. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 15.

74. Carson, “Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate,” 22.

the tense form itself depend on lexis and context. As Carson puts it, “He is not saying merely that the sentence or the discourse carries this additional meaning, but that the verbal form itself takes it on board.”<sup>75</sup>

The focus on semantic value as it is realized in lexicogrammar defines the debate, claims Carson: “All the points of dispute between Porter and Fanning turn on these fundamentally different perceptions as to what meaning is conveyed by the verbal forms themselves.”<sup>76</sup> Porter does discuss the contribution of lexis, context, and deixis to the meaning of verbs as they appear in particular instances, “but,” notes Carson, “the entire focus of his work is on the semantics of the morphology of the Greek verb, not on pragmatics.” By contrast, Fanning blurs this line in his analysis, instead of specifying one perspective—*langue/system*—or the other—*parole/instance*. “From the vantage point of Porter, then,” Carson explains,

Fanning so seriously confuses semantics and pragmatics that his work is fatally flawed. Without any consistent, undergirding theory of the semantic contributions made by the morphology of the Greek verbal system Fanning’s approach, in Porter’s view, is methodologically arbitrary and linguistically without rigor.<sup>77</sup>

Though maintaining a neutral stance in his essay, Carson comments regarding Fanning’s approach that, “On the long haul . . . if his theory is to prevail he must make explicit how morphology is tied to aspect (and other semantic elements?). More broadly, his future work on this topic will have to demonstrate a greater grasp on the fundamental distinction between semantics and pragmatics.”<sup>78</sup> Porter sums up his own approach, saying, “I believe that—especially for ancient languages—one must begin from the dictum that where there is a difference of form there is a difference in meaning or function.”<sup>79</sup> This point by Porter illustrates why his study takes a lowest

75. Carson, “Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate,” 23.

76. Carson, “Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate,” 23.

77. Carson, “Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate,” 24.

78. Carson, “Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate,” 25.

79. Porter, “Defence of Verbal Aspect,” 34.

common denominator approach: first, form and function must be correlated. Second, semantic hypotheses must aim to cover all uses of a form. “Many grammatical models can adequately treat a reasonably large number of common instances in a given language,” notes Porter, “but the difficult instances prove which is the most effective model and go the furthest to making the best grammatical rules.”<sup>80</sup>

For his part, Fanning claims that analysis of aspect is incomplete without analysis of *Aktionsart*, noting, “I think one of the weaknesses of Porter’s treatment is that he does not pursue the meaning of aspect much beyond the most general or primary level.”<sup>81</sup> Probably, what he means is that Porter focuses on semantics without delimiting the scope of pragmatic deixis/implicature. Fanning says, “The point to be stressed is that a competent grasp of verbal aspect requires an interpreter or linguist to work on both levels of meaning [i.e., the semantic and the pragmatic] but at the same time to be aware of the distinction between the two.”<sup>82</sup> Fanning claims that Porter’s merely outlining the semantics of the tense-forms is inadequate. In fact, “Attention to this sort of thing [i.e., *Aktionsart*] is *essential* for giving an adequate account of aspectual function.”<sup>83</sup> He says this, despite the fact that he claims, “I think Porter has not been rigorous enough in grasping the difference between aspect and *Aktionsart* and in pursuing that all the way through his analysis.”<sup>84</sup> Fanning’s reasoning here is opaque to say the least. He maintains, on the one hand, that aspect and *Aktionsart* must be understood as fundamentally different systems within the language, one semantic and one pragmatic, but he claims, on the other hand, that it is useful (exegetically?) to inquire into the pragmatics of an utterance that may have motivated the choice of an aspect, so that, finally, one can at last grasp the pragmatics (or “function”) of aspect.

80. Porter, “Defence of Verbal Aspect,” 34.

81. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect,” 52.

82. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect,” 52–53.

83. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect,” 54, emphasis added.

84. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect,” 49–50.

Fanning's values are evidently not aligned with Porter's: "I think," he says, "that in several important areas he [Porter] has stopped short of a truly helpful or complete analysis of aspectual usage along this line."<sup>85</sup> In other words, Fanning's analysis is a greatest common factor approach: he begins with a formal feature, tense-forms, and attempts to attribute as much semantic meaning as possible in order to be "truly helpful." In practice, he attempts to approximate the semantics of the tense-forms as closely as possible to actual instances of use. This is a greatest common factor approach, because in effect he asks, What does the meaning of the tense form in this instance have in common with the actual process it denotes or even refers to in an instance? He attempts, then to find the greatest common factor of meaning between the form and its use in context. The result is that he ends up specifying certain pragmatic conditions that allegedly determine the semantics of the forms. For example, he claims, "the linguistic evidence is overwhelming that in the indicative forms the tenses carry a double sense of time and aspect together."<sup>86</sup> From the perspective of monosemy, Carson's critique brings out the most salient point, that the distinction between semantics and pragmatics must be strictly distinguished.<sup>87</sup>

In summary, the shape of the debate is this: for Porter, form and function correlate—thus there are three aspects, which can be assigned systemically discrete and oppositional semantic values. For Fanning, there are two aspects, and function (in effect) is not correlated with form but is always complicated by context; the discrete semantic value is not useful enough to the interpreter, from Fanning's perspective, and thus discussions of meaning should include both semantic and pragmatic information. Porter's is a lowest common denominator approach

85. Fanning, "Approaches to Verbal Aspect," 59.

86. Fanning, "Approaches to Verbal Aspect," 58.

87. A primary focus of disagreement is the understanding of the perfect tense form. Fanning (*Verbal Aspect*, 112) seems to blur several categories, saying, "the perfect is a category in which three elements of meaning combine: it consists of *tense*, *Aktionsart*, and *aspect* features working together."

that asks what a form always brings to its context (i.e., What is the lowest common denominator of semantic meaning in every instance of this form?). Fanning's is a greatest common factor approach that aims to explain particular instances and attempts to correlate the semantics of the form as closely as possible with its instances (i.e., What is the greatest common factor of a mixture of semantic and pragmatic meaning shared by the form and its use?).

To summarize this section, lowest common denominator and greatest common factor approaches to semantics differ in that the former maintain a principled correlation between semantic content and lexicogrammatical realization. Lowest common denominator approaches in New Testament studies have generated data and conclusions of long-term value that not only move beyond the shortcomings of traditional grammar, but also push the conversation forward into new territory. Monosemy, then, is a lowest common denominator model that views lexicogrammar and semantics as part of a single continuum where lexicogrammar realizes semantics, indicating that the two notions are actually one when encountered in language,<sup>88</sup> and the semantics of forms are instantiated simultaneously in every instance of the forms they correlate with.

### *5. Conclusion*

Biblical scholarship is fundamentally a linguistic enterprise at its heart. The assumptions of traditional grammar, however, provide inadequate means of assessing and modeling the language. Monosemy provides a way forward in the data gathering and linguistic modeling process, one which avoids traditional assumptions that have proven problematic. Monosemy follows the trajectory set by other important works in linguistic analysis of the New Testament by adopting a principled, lowest common denominator approach, a trajectory that has and will continue to generate useful and valuable studies. In closing, I will add that

88. Ruhl (*On Monosemy*, 183) says, "Syntax and semantics are (I am arguing) a linguistic continuum, but pragmatics is extralinguistic."

approaches to the New Testament that utilize monosemy as a theoretical basis should not aim to be revolutionary, nor be expected to produce revolutionary results—though this is always a possibility; rather, the task is evolutionary in nature, both pushing current conversations forward and unearthing questions that have not yet been considered.

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