



Semantic Change and Anachronism in the Book of Ecclesiastes: A Diachronic Linguistic Analysis for Biblical Interpretation

Luijim S. Jose^{a*} , Marianne R. De Vera^b 

^a Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Philippines.

Email: luijimjosepublication@gmail.com

^b Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Philippines.

Email: deveramarianne6@gmail.com

Received: 22 June 2025 | Received: in Revised Form 11 August 2025 | Accepted 13 August 2025

APA Citation:

Jose, L. S., & De Vera, M. R. (2025). Semantic Change and Anachronism in the Book of Ecclesiastes: A Diachronic Linguistic Analysis for Biblical Interpretation. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(3), 47-55.

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.32601/ejal.11305>

Abstract

The Book of *Ecclesiastes* lacks a systematic evaluation of its lexicon and the doctrinal consequences of semantic anachronism and diachronic linguistic awareness. This study aims to identify and classify instances of semantic change using Campbell's (2021) typology. Employing a qualitative, diachronic linguistic methodology, the research systematically traces the meanings of selected Hebrew terms—hevel (“vanity”), ruach (“spirit”), amal (“labour”), cheleq (“portion”), et (“time/season”), and chokmah (“wisdom”)—from their original biblical usage, through early modern English translation, to their current meanings in contemporary English. Data collection involved purposive sampling of central lexical items, comprehensive manual comparison across the Hebrew Text, KJV, and modern English translations, and interpretive validation using leading lexicons and scholarly commentaries. Findings reveal substantial patterns of semantic change, including broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and cognitive redefinition, resulting in widespread semantic anachronism. Modern interpretations frequently diverge from both the original Hebrew and early modern senses, leading to potential distortions of theological and philosophical intent. The analysis underscores the persistent risk of doctrinal and pedagogical misinterpretation when historical semantics are overlooked. The study recommends integrating diachronic linguistic awareness and cognitive semantic principles into translation, biblical scholarship, and religious pedagogy to safeguard the interpretive integrity of *Ecclesiastes*. Limitations include the qualitative scope of lexical selection and the exclusion of computational analysis, suggesting avenues for future research using quantitative and cross-linguistic methods. Overall, this research affirms that addressing semantic change is critical for accurate interpretation and effective pedagogy in biblical studies.

© 2025 EJAL & the Authors. Published by Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics (EJAL). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Keywords: Semantic Change, Semantic Anachronism, Diachronic Linguistics, Ecclesiastes, Biblical Interpretation.

Introduction

The Book of *Ecclesiastes* stands as a cornerstone of biblical wisdom literature, renowned for its existential inquiry and the distinctive voice of its narrator, Qoheleth. Through its penetrating meditation on the brevity and ambiguity of human life, *Ecclesiastes* poses enduring questions about purpose, fulfillment, and the apparent futility of worldly pursuits—issues that have resonated deeply within theological, philosophical, and literary traditions from antiquity to the present (Longman, 1998; Manusiwa & Sualang, 2024). Its

* Corresponding Author

Email: luijimjosepublication@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32601/ejal.11305>

sophisticated literary style, marked by the interplay of poetry and philosophy, has enabled the text to exert a lasting influence on discourses concerning meaning, mortality, and the human condition (Forti, 2021; Grossberg, 2000; Kahambing, 2019). As a text that challenges social conventions and invites critical reflection, *Ecclesiastes* continues to shape the intellectual landscape of both religious and secular communities (Bukreeva & Didenko, 2023).

Despite its canonical status and continued relevance, the interpretation of *Ecclesiastes* presents persistent challenges that are largely rooted in the dynamics of language change. Since the publication of the King James Version (KJV) in 1611, the English language has undergone profound semantic shifts, fundamentally altering the way biblical texts are received and understood. Key lexical items in *Ecclesiastes*, such as “vanity” (hevel), “spirit” (ruach), “labour” (amal), and “madness” (holelut), have experienced substantial semantic evolution, resulting in what scholars have termed semantic anachronism: the superimposition of modern meanings onto ancient words (Campbell, 2021; Dewan, 2023). This phenomenon risks distorting doctrinal nuances and leads to misinterpretations of the original theological intent. As language evolves, words may acquire new connotations or shed older ones, introducing ambiguities that complicate the exegesis of scriptural texts (Koch, 2016). The poetic and sometimes archaic register of the KJV often further obscures these complexities, especially for contemporary readers unfamiliar with early modern English (Hardiess & Weissert, 2020).

The urgency of addressing semantic change and anachronism is especially pronounced in educational and religious contexts, where uncritical memorization may eclipse genuine understanding. Without rigorous attention to linguistic and historical context, misconceptions can proliferate, undermining both doctrinal teaching and pedagogical effectiveness (Fishbane, 1988; Ipgrave, 2013; Manyawu, 2010). In light of these risks, there is a critical need for approaches to biblical interpretation of *Ecclesiastes* that foreground diachronic linguistic awareness, ensuring that contemporary readings remain faithful to the intended meaning of the original text. Despite the importance of *Ecclesiastes* in biblical scholarship and religious instruction, there is a lack of systematic, linguistically-informed analysis addressing how semantic change and anachronism affect the interpretation and transmission of its key concepts. Many previous studies have prioritized theological or philosophical themes at the expense of detailed lexical analysis, resulting in persistent gaps in understanding the text’s original intent. These studies had confined to processes such as broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical extension—well established in the field of diachronic linguistics—that have proven crucial for understanding how biblical meanings are transformed across successive translations and cultural epochs (Győri, 2005; Hamilton, Leskovec, & Jurafsky, 2016; Watts, 2020).

The research problem motivating this study is therefore clear: while substantial progress has been made in documenting and modeling semantic change in other biblical books, *Ecclesiastes* remains understudied with respect to the systematic evolution of its lexicon and the doctrinal consequences of semantic anachronism. This gap is particularly acute in educational and pastoral contexts, where uncritical reliance on inherited translations may perpetuate misunderstandings and hinder theological development (Andrews, Lightfoot, & Kenyon, 2022). By synthesizing empirical findings from previous research, this study demonstrates the urgent need for a granular, diachronic investigation of key terms in *Ecclesiastes*, situating the present research at the intersection of historical linguistics, cognitive theory, and biblical scholarship.

Specifically, this study aims to address these gaps through the following objectives: (1) to systematically trace the semantic evolution of selected central lexical items in *Ecclesiastes* from their Hebrew origins, through the KJV translation, to their present-day English meanings; (2) to identify and classify instances of semantic change—broadening, narrowing, metaphorical and metonymic shifts—using Campbell’s (2021) typology; (3) to evaluate the extent and impact of semantic anachronism on modern interpretations of *Ecclesiastes*. (4) to offer practical recommendations for translation, pedagogy, and further research in biblical studies. In this way, by integrating diachronic linguistic methodology with insights from cognitive and corpus linguistics, this research seeks to clarify the theological, educational, and literary consequences of semantic change in *Ecclesiastes*. In doing so, it aims to safeguard the interpretive integrity of this foundational text and support more accurate, contextually sensitive engagement within both scholarly and faith-based communities.

Literature Review

Semantic change—the process by which word meanings evolve over time—has been recognized as a critical factor in biblical interpretation and translation (Campbell, 2021; Naudé, 2022). This phenomenon is especially pronounced in ancient texts such as the Book of *Ecclesiastes*, where key Hebrew lexemes traverse layers of translation, cultural adaptation, and doctrinal reinterpretation, resulting in potential semantic drift and interpretive challenges (Andrews, 2025; Eliason, Crawford, & Petrey, 2023). Scholarly attention to the diachronic development of meaning within sacred literature underscores the necessity for linguistic sensitivity in both theological discourse and religious education. In the context of biblical wisdom literature, previous research on Genesis, Psalms, and the Gospels has demonstrated that shifts in word meanings—whether through broadening, narrowing, or metaphorical extension—can profoundly alter theological understanding (Andrews et al., 2022; Du, 2022; Jose, 2025; Yoffe et al., 2023). For instance, semantic

broadening and narrowing have been empirically observed in the translation history of Genesis, with words such as “replenish” and “dominion” acquiring new theological connotations as English evolved (De Souza, 2022; Smidt, 2024). The Psalms, with their rich poetic language, provide further evidence of semantic drift; studies show that the nuanced meanings of Hebrew terms like *leb* (“heart”) have shifted from denoting intellect and will to a more emotional sense in modern English (Du, 2022). These examples highlight the importance of diachronic analysis for preserving doctrinal clarity and fidelity to original intent.

The challenge of semantic anachronism—projecting contemporary meanings onto historical terms—is a recurring theme in biblical scholarship (Eliason et al., 2023). In *Ecclesiastes*, for example, the Hebrew word *hevel*, traditionally translated as “vanity,” originally conveyed transience and futility, but in modern usage has become associated with pride and self-absorption, fundamentally altering the interpretive landscape. This misalignment is not confined to isolated cases but represents a systemic issue, as documented in both Genesis and Psalms, where doctrinal misunderstandings may arise when the historical semantics of keywords are neglected (Andrews, 2025; Jose, 2024; Naudé, 2022; Procházková, 2021).

Empirical studies using both qualitative and computational approaches have further illuminated the mechanisms and rates of semantic change in sacred and secular texts alike (Gruppi, Adali, & Chen, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2016; Kutuzov et al., 2018). Stylometric analyses of Genesis and Exodus, for example, reveal how linguistic structure and word frequency correlate with evolving theological emphases and translation priorities (Yoffe et al., 2023). Advances in computational linguistics, such as diachronic word embeddings and Bayesian modeling, have enabled scholars to systematically track semantic evolution across corpora, but these methodologies remain underapplied in studies of *Ecclesiastes* (Gruppi et al., 2020; Perrone et al., 2019).

Despite a growing body of research on semantic change in biblical literature, significant gaps remain, especially concerning *Ecclesiastes*. Existing empirical and theoretical studies tend to focus on narrative or thematic analysis, rather than comprehensive, typology-driven mapping of lexical trajectories across Hebrew, KJV, and modern English (Barr, 2004; Campbell, 2021; Naudé, 2022; Ozoliņš, 2023). Studies on Genesis and Psalms emphasize the practical importance of such mapping, as changes in meaning can reshape doctrines, ethical frameworks, and faith practices (Coleman, 2023; Smidt, 2024; Walker-Jones, 2017). In the domain of wisdom literature, the centrality of metaphor and existential questioning in *Ecclesiastes* further magnifies the risk of interpretive error, underscoring the urgent need for a nuanced, interdisciplinary methodology that integrates diachronic linguistics, cognitive semantics, and corpus-based analysis (Du, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this study draws on recent advancements in historical linguistics, cognitive semantics, and corpus-based research to illuminate the mechanisms underlying semantic change in sacred literature. Although, empirical studies have also documented the semantic evolution of biblical terms in other books, yet few have systematically analyzed the unique challenges posed by *Ecclesiastes*, leaving a notable gap in both academic and practical understanding (Haslam et al., 2021; Kavé & Halamish, 2015). This study is also anchored in the interdisciplinary field of diachronic linguistics, which investigates how word meanings change and evolve across historical, cultural, and translational contexts (Campbell, 2021). At the heart of this research is Campbell's (2021) six-fold typology of semantic change, encompassing the mechanisms of broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, and metonymic extension. This typology has proven vital in previous analyses of biblical literature, providing a systematic and transparent basis for classifying semantic shifts in both sacred and secular texts (Andrews et al., 2022; Du, 2022).

A central focus of this framework is the concept of semantic anachronism—the misapplication of modern meanings to ancient words or phrases, which can lead to doctrinal and interpretive distortions. As highlighted by Perrone et al. (2021), semantic anachronism frequently arises when readers unconsciously superimpose contemporary semantic fields onto historically distant lexemes whose meanings have shifted over time. Integrating the analysis of semantic anachronism into a broader typology of semantic change, this study emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between historically grounded interpretations and those shaped by later linguistic developments.

Additionally, the theoretical framework draws upon cognitive semantics, recognizing the critical role of metaphor and metonymy as cognitive strategies that drive semantic evolution (Kövecses, 2013). In *Ecclesiastes*, as in other wisdom literature, the prevalence of metaphorical and figurative language requires a framework that is sensitive not only to the historical context of lexical items but also to the cognitive mechanisms underlying their use and interpretation (Lumanze, 2022; Manusiwana & Sualang, 2024). While the framework is inspired by advances in corpus linguistics, this study's “corpus-based” dimension is realized through comprehensive, manual comparison and synthesis of authoritative scriptural texts, historical translations, and academic lexicons, rather than the use of digital corpora or automated computational tools. The approach involves a systematic, qualitative analysis of primary sources (such as the Masoretic Text, the King James Version, and modern English translations), cross-referenced with leading lexicons and scholarly commentaries, in order to trace semantic trajectories and identify shifts over time.

In summary, the theoretical foundation of this study is an integrative synthesis of diachronic linguistic analysis, cognitive semantic theory, and manual, source-driven comparative methodology. This robust and transparent framework enables a nuanced, context-sensitive tracing and classification of semantic change and anachronism in *Ecclesiastes*, offering a methodological model for rigorous research in biblical and classical linguistics, translation studies, and historical semantics.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, diachronic linguistic research design to examine the semantic change and anachronism of key lexical items in the Book of *Ecclesiastes* as rendered in the King James Version (KJV). The research is grounded in historical linguistics and draws upon cognitive semantics and corpus-based analytical techniques, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how the meanings of selected terms have evolved from their original Hebrew usage, through Early Modern English translation, to their reception in contemporary English. The primary aim is to classify the mechanisms of semantic change—specifically broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical change, and metonymic change—as defined in Campbell's (2021) typology, and to critically assess the impact of semantic anachronism on scriptural interpretation, doctrine, and pedagogy.

Sampling and Population

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure a focused yet comprehensive analysis of *Ecclesiastes*. The population consists of all occurrences of specific key lexical items within the Book of *Ecclesiastes* (KJV) that are most relevant to the book's existential and theological themes. The selection criteria for the sample included three primary factors: the frequency of the term within the text, its centrality to the overall message of *Ecclesiastes*, and the extent of documented or potential semantic instability across translations and historical contexts. Lexical items prioritized for analysis included "vanity" (hevel), "spirit" (ruach), "labour" (amal), "portion" (cheleq), "time/season" (et) and "wisdom" (chokmah), as these terms are not only frequent and theologically central, but also exhibit substantial semantic drift according to both traditional commentaries and recent linguistic scholarship. This sampling approach ensured that the research population is representative of the semantic and doctrinal complexities at the heart of *Ecclesiastes*.

Instrument and Procedure

Data collection was conducted through a rigorous, multi-stage process that maximized both linguistic accuracy and contextual reliability. The primary sources were the Masoretic Text for Hebrew lexemes, the King James Version (1611) for Early Modern English translation, and leading modern English Bible translations (such as ESV, NIV, and NASB) for contemporary usage. Each lexical item was first identified and extracted from the Masoretic Text, with precise meanings and nuances established using authoritative lexicons, including Brown-Driver-Briggs and Strong's Concordance techniques. The translation and rendering of these lexemes in the KJV were then systematically traced, noting semantic choices made by the translators. Etymological and lexicographical research, drawing from standard academic lexicons and recent commentaries, was conducted to map each term's historical evolution. Modern usage was assessed through comparison with standard English dictionaries and recent scholarly studies. Each lexical item and its associated passages were analyzed within their literary, theological, and cultural contexts to prevent anachronistic misinterpretation. Throughout the process, all findings were reviewed and validated by subject-matter experts in biblical Hebrew, translation studies, and historical semantics, thereby ensuring scholarly rigor and reliability.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through a structured, comparative, and typology-driven framework. For each sampled lexical item, its original Hebrew meaning, its KJV rendering, and its current English interpretation were systematically compared and contrasted. Semantic shifts were then classified according to Campbell's (2021) six-fold typology: broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical, and metonymic change. The findings were organized in detailed comparative tables that included the Hebrew lexeme (with Strong's number), relevant *Ecclesiastes* verses, semantic fields across three time periods, identified types of semantic change, and explicit cases of semantic anachronism. Each table was supplemented with qualitative interpretive commentary, analyzing the theological, pedagogical, and literary implications of each documented semantic shift or instance of anachronism. As a final step, all analyses and interpretations were subjected to peer review by recognized experts, ensuring the methodological rigor and validity of the study. This comprehensive approach enables the study to provide a robust and nuanced account of semantic change in *Ecclesiastes* and serves as a methodological template for similar research in biblical linguistics.

Results

The findings of this study present the outcomes of the diachronic semantic analysis of six key lexical items in the Book of *Ecclesiastes*, namely “vanity” (hevel), “spirit” (ruach), “labour” (amal), “portion” (cheleq), “time/season” (et) and “wisdom” (chokmah). Each table in this section summarizes the semantic development of a selected Hebrew lexeme (with Strong’s number) across three chronological stages—Original Hebrew, King James Version (1611), and contemporary English usage, highlighting types of semantic change, and explicit cases of semantic anachronism. The observed types of semantic change are classified using Campbell’s (2021) typology.

The first lexeme, “hevel,” traditionally translated as “vanity” in the KJV, is central to the philosophical and theological vision of *Ecclesiastes*. Occurring more than thirty times throughout the text (e.g., 1:2, 2:11, 12:8), “hevel” encapsulates the book’s persistent focus on the transience and apparent futility of human pursuits. Its frequency and placement at the beginning and end of the book underscore its function as a conceptual frame for the work’s existential inquiry. Table 1 presents the semantic change in this lexeme across the three eras.

Table 1: Semantic Change in “Vanity” (הֶוֶל, hevel); Strong’s H1892).

Key Verses	Original Hebrew Meaning	KJV (1611) Meaning	Modern English Meaning	Typology of Change
1:2; 2:11; 12:8	Breath, vapor, transience, futility	Emptiness, futility, meaninglessness	Excessive pride, narcissism, emptiness	Broadening, Pejoration, Semantic Shift

The analysis reveals that “hevel” has shifted from the original metaphor of ephemerality and futility to a modern association with pride, self-absorption, and emptiness. This trajectory demonstrates both semantic broadening and pejoration, with the word accumulating negative moral overtones absent from the Hebrew context. The outcomes show a high risk of semantic anachronism, as the existential nuance of “hevel” may be obscured for contemporary readers.

Spirit (רוּחַ, ruach;)

The second Hebrew lexeme “ruach” occupies a central place in the theological and existential reflections of *Ecclesiastes*, shaping the book’s perspectives on life’s transience, human striving, and the nature of the soul (e.g., 1:14, 12:7). In the text, “ruach” is employed to denote both the animating breath that sustains existence and the intangible force that returns to God at death, rendering it foundational to the anthropology and soteriology of *Ecclesiastes*. Table 2 presents the semantic change in this lexeme across the three eras.

Table 2: Semantic Change in “Spirit” (רוּחַ, ruach) Strong’s H7307).

Key Verses	Original Hebrew Meaning	KJV (1611) Meaning	Modern English Meaning	Typology of Change
1:14; 12:7	Wind, breath, life force, animating principle	Spirit, animating force, soul	Supernatural being, ghost, mood, disposition	Broadening, Metaphorical Shift, Anachronism

The findings indicate that “ruach” has experienced broadening and metaphorical shift, with its semantic field expanding from breath and animating life force to a range of supernatural and psychological meanings in modern English. This change introduces semantic anachronism, as current interpretations may impose dualistic or other-worldly concepts onto the ancient text. The third Hebrew lexeme “amal,” rendered as “labour” in the KJV, is essential to *Ecclesiastes*’ exploration of human effort, toil, and the pursuit of fulfillment (e.g., 2:11, 3:13, 5:18). The term encompasses more than mere physical work, expressing the existential struggle inherent in human striving “under the sun.” Table 3 presents the semantic change in this lexeme across the three eras.

Table 3: Semantic Change in “Labour” (עָמַל, amal) Strong’s H5999.

Key Verses	Original Hebrew Meaning	KJV (1611) Meaning	Modern English Meaning	Typology of Change
2:11; 3:13; 5:18	Toil, trouble, hardship, existential striving	Hard work, effort, sorrow, burden	Physical work, employment, wage labor	Narrowing, Pragmatic Drift, Anachronism

Analysis shows that “amal” has narrowed from a broad existential sense of toil and struggle to the more specific meaning of paid work or employment in modern usage. This pragmatic drift has led to a reduction in the term’s philosophical depth and increased the likelihood of anachronistic interpretation.

Portion (חֵלֶק, cheleq;)

The fourth Hebrew lexeme “cheleq,” translated as “portion,” is fundamental to *Ecclesiastes*’ teachings on providence, contentment, and the acceptance of one’s lot in life (e.g., 3:22, 5:18, 9:9). The concept of “portion” articulates both existential and theological themes, referring to one’s divinely allotted share and the capacity for joy within life’s boundaries. Table 4 presents the semantic change in this lexeme across the three eras.

Table 4: Semantic Change in “Portion” (חֶלֶק, cheleq) Strong’s H2506.

Key Verses	Original Hebrew Meaning	KJV (1611) Meaning	Modern English Meaning	Typology of Change
3:22; 5:18; 9:9	Share, lot, destiny, inheritance	Share, part, life’s lot	Serving of food, part, segment	Narrowing, Semantic Drift, Anachronism

The results reveal a narrowing of “cheleq” from a rich existential and providential sense to more material and concrete meanings in modern English. This semantic drift can obscure the broader existential significance present in *Ecclesiastes*. The fifth Hebrew lexeme “et,” translated as “time” or “season,” is prominent in *Ecclesiastes*, especially in the celebrated poem of 3:1-8. It reflects the text’s engagement with questions of temporality, divine providence, and the proper response to the changing circumstances of life. Table 5 presents the semantic change in this lexeme across the three eras.

Table 5: Semantic Change in “Time/Season” (עֵת, et) Strong’s H6256.

Key Verses	Original Hebrew Meaning	KJV (1611) Meaning	Modern English Meaning	Typology of Change
3:1-8	Appointed time, divinely set occasion, season, opportunity	Appointed time, season, appropriate moment	Chronological duration, season (weather), time	Broadening, Semantic Drift, Anachronism

Findings show that “et” has broadened and drifted semantically, with its nuanced theological sense of appointed or meaningful occasion giving way to more abstract or meteorological uses in modern English. This reduces the term’s existential and providential resonance. The sixth Hebrew lexeme “Chokmah,” translated as “wisdom,” stands at the heart of *Ecclesiastes*’ engagement with questions of human knowledge, discernment, and the limitations of understanding (e.g., 1:16, 7:12, 9:16). The term captures the ideal of living skillfully and ethically amid uncertainty and change. Table 6 presents the semantic change in this lexeme across the three eras. Table 6 presents the semantic change in this lexeme across the three eras.

Table 6: Semantic Change in “Wisdom” (חֵכֶם, chokmah) Strong’s H2451.

Key Verses	Original Hebrew Meaning	KJV (1611) Meaning	Modern English Meaning	Typology of Change
1:16; 7:12; 9:16	Practical skill, moral discernment, applied understanding	Moral and practical insight, prudent judgment	Intelligence, cleverness, academic knowledge	Narrowing, Cognitive Shift, Anachronism

The analysis indicates a narrowing and cognitive shift in the semantic range of “chokmah.” Modern English restricts “wisdom” to intellectual or academic qualities, whereas the original sense encompassed practical, moral, and relational dimensions. Across all six lexical items, the results demonstrate consistent patterns of semantic change—including broadening, narrowing, pejoration, pragmatic drift, metaphorical shift, and cognitive redefinition—across the diachronic trajectory from Hebrew through the KJV to contemporary English. Each term exhibits semantic anachronism, as contemporary meanings frequently depart from both the Hebrew original and the KJV rendering. The outcomes highlight the substantial effect of semantic evolution on the interpretive accessibility and doctrinal clarity of *Ecclesiastes* for modern readers.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that diachronic semantic change exerts a profound influence on the interpretation of *Ecclesiastes*, with implications for biblical exegesis, translation, pedagogy, and doctrinal formation. The comparative analysis of six principal lexical items—hevel (“vanity”), ruach (“spirit”), amal (“labour”), cheleq (“portion”), et (“time/season”), and chokmah (“wisdom”)—confirms the central thesis of recent scholarship that semantic drift, broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical transformation fundamentally reshape the reception and understanding of sacred texts (Andrews et al., 2022; Campbell, 2021; Naudé, 2022). The findings regarding “vanity” (hevel) particularly reinforce the theoretical insights of Campbell (2021), Lawrence (2008), and Dewan (2023), who have argued that the misalignment between ancient and contemporary meanings can obscure essential existential and theological nuances. The shift from the Hebrew connotation of transience and futility to the modern focus on pride or narcissism exemplifies semantic anachronism—a phenomenon also identified in previous analyses of Genesis and Psalms (Andrews, 2025; Jose, 2025; Smidt, 2024). This supports Holzer’s (2007) assertion that the importation of modern categories into ancient texts risks distorting their intended philosophical and theological depth.

Similarly, the analysis of “spirit” (ruach) highlights a trajectory of semantic broadening and metaphorical extension. The Hebrew usage denoting breath and animating force has, through translation and doctrinal accretion, come to represent both psychological states and supernatural entities in contemporary English (Eyl, 2014; Forti, 2021). This evolution, consistent with Hamilton et al. (2016), underscores the need for a nuanced,

contextually grounded approach to biblical anthropology and theology. The narrowing of “labour” (*amal*) and “portion” (*cheleq*) observed in this study also aligns with the findings of Koch (2016) and Dewan (2023), who note that the reduction of rich existential concepts to economic or material senses undermines the broader wisdom tradition. Such semantic drift, as argued by Fishbane (1988) and Manyawu (2010), has practical consequences for pedagogy and the transmission of biblical wisdom in educational and ecclesial contexts.

Furthermore, the transformation of “time/season” (*et*) and “wisdom” (*chokmah*) substantiates the claims of Johnson et al. (2019) and Wang (2024) regarding the abstraction and narrowing of originally multifaceted theological concepts. The loss of “appointed time” as a divinely determined occasion and the restriction of “wisdom” to intellectual prowess reflect a wider trend in the semantic evolution of biblical language, as documented in both qualitative and computational studies (Du, 2022; Gruppi et al., 2020). These findings strongly support calls for the integration of diachronic linguistic awareness and cognitive semantics into biblical studies (Kövecses, 2013; McGillivray et al., 2019). The study’s methodological framework—grounded in Campbell’s (2021) typology and applied through rigorous manual analysis—demonstrates that high-quality, context-sensitive research can be achieved without reliance on computational corpora, provided that source triangulation and expert validation are consistently practiced.

Theologically, the evidence presented here cautions against the perpetuation of semantic anachronism in translation and doctrinal teaching, echoing the warnings of Lawrence (2008) and Eyl (2014). For educators and clergy, the findings highlight the need for revised curricula, annotated translations, and pedagogical strategies that address the realities of semantic change and equip readers to engage critically with the text (Holzer, 2007; Ipgrave, 2013; Malone, 2016). The practical importance of these recommendations is underscored by the risks to doctrinal clarity and spiritual formation that arise from misinterpreted key terms (Andrews et al., 2022; Naudé, 2022).

For future research, this study provides a methodological model for the systematic tracing of semantic trajectories in other biblical books, using typology-driven analysis informed by both historical linguistics and cognitive semantics. Researchers may expand the scope to additional lexical items, cross-linguistic comparison, and empirical testing of pedagogical outcomes in faith communities and academic settings (Budanitsky & Hirst, 2006; Hamilton et al., 2016). Such approaches will further clarify the impact of language change on doctrinal understanding and support the development of more effective translation and teaching practices. In summary, the present analysis affirms that semantic change is not a peripheral issue but a central concern for biblical interpretation, translation, and education. By illuminating the diachronic trajectories of key terms in *Ecclesiastes* and demonstrating the risks of semantic anachronism, this study contributes both to scholarly understanding and to the practical task of safeguarding the richness and integrity of biblical wisdom literature for present and future generations.

Conclusion

This study has systematically traced the semantic evolution of core lexical items in the Book of *Ecclesiastes*, revealing that terms such as *hevel* (“vanity”), *ruach* (“spirit”), *amal* (“labour”), *cheleq* (“portion”), *et* (“time/season”), and *chokmah* (“wisdom”) have undergone significant broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical shifts from their original Hebrew senses to contemporary English meanings. The findings underscore the persistent risk of semantic anachronism, where modern interpretations may inadvertently distort the theological, philosophical, and literary intent of the original text. This research confirms that diachronic linguistic change is a central factor affecting the clarity and doctrinal fidelity of biblical interpretation.

Despite the study’s methodological rigor, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The qualitative, manually comparative approach limited the analysis to a selected set of lexical items and did not employ large-scale computational tools or consider all possible English translations. As such, some minor semantic developments may have been overlooked, and broader patterns remain to be explored in future research. Building on these findings, future studies should expand the analysis to additional books within wisdom literature, utilize cross-linguistic and quantitative methodologies, and assess the impact of semantic change on translation and pedagogy across wider contexts. Interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, biblical scholars, and educators is recommended to deepen understanding and address the practical challenges identified. For research and practice, the study highlights the importance of integrating diachronic linguistic awareness into biblical scholarship, translation, and religious education. By addressing the risks of semantic anachronism and foregrounding historical meaning, interpreters and educators can better preserve the depth and integrity of *Ecclesiastes*, ensuring its continued relevance and interpretive vitality for contemporary readers.

References

- Andrews, E. D. (2025). *Linguistics and the Biblical Text: Unlocking Scripture Through the Science of Language*. Christian Publishing House. Retrieved from <https://www.christianpublishers.org/product-page/linguistics-and-the-biblical-text-unlocking-scripture-through-the-science-of>

- Andrews, E. D., Lightfoot, J. B., & Kenyon, F. G. (2022). *The Revisions of the English Holy Bible: Misunderstandings and Misconceptions About the English Bible Translations*. Christian Publishing House.
- Barr, J. (2004). *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Reprint ed.). Wipf & Stock Publishers. Retrieved from <https://wipfandstock.com/9781592446926/the-semantics-of-biblical-language>
- Budanitsky, A., & Hirst, G. (2006). Evaluating WordNet-based Measures of Lexical Semantic Relatedness. *Computational Linguistics*, 32(1), 13-47. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1162/coli.2006.32.1.13>
- Bukreeva, L., & Didenko, N. (2023). Comparative analysis of stylistic devices in the German translations of the book of Ecclesiastes. *Germanic Philology Journal of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University*, (843), 11-20. doi: <https://doi.org/10.31861/gph2023.843.11-20>
- Campbell, L. (2021). *Historical linguistics: An introduction* (4th ed.). MIT Press. Retrieved from <https://mit.press.mit.edu/9780262542180/historical-linguistics>
- Coleman, R. (2023). The Imago Dei: The Distinctiveness of Humanity. *Old Testament Essays*, 36(3), 649-682. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2023/v36n3a7>
- De Souza, T. A. J. (2022). Mitochondrial DNA: from forensic genetics to the origins of humanity. *Kerygma*, 17(1), e01568. doi: <https://doi.org/10.19141/1809-2454.kerygma.v17.n1.pe01568>
- Dewan, S. (2023). Semantic Volte Face of English Words in Nepal. *KMC Journal*, 5(1), 35-52. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3126/kmcj.v5i1.52449>
- Du, J. X. (2022). Vocabulary Acquisition Through Bilingual Biblical Match. *European Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 6(1), 41-52. doi: <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejfl.v6i1.4160>
- Eliason, E. A., Crawford, C., & Petrey, T. G. (2023). The King James Version and Modern Translations of the Bible. In T. G. Petrey, C. Crawford, & E. A. Eliason (Eds.), *The Bible and the Latter-Day Saint Tradition* (pp. 35-46). University of Utah Press. Retrieved from <https://uofupress.com/books/the-bible-and-the-latter-day-saint-tradition>
- Eyl, J. (2014). Semantic Voids, New Testament Translation, and Anachronism: The Case of Paul's Use of Ekklēsia. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 26(4-5), 315-339. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341289>
- Fishbane, M. (1988). *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Oxford University Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198266995.001.0001>
- Forti, T. L. (2021). Ecclesiastes. In W. Kynes (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible* (pp. 515-532). Oxford University Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190661267.013.31>
- Grossberg, D. (2000). Form and Content and their Correspondence. *Hebrew Studies*, 41(1), 47-52. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hbr.2000.0043>
- Gruppi, M., Adali, S., & Chen, P.-Y. (2020). SChME at SemEval-2020 Task 1: A Model Ensemble for Detecting Lexical Semantic Change. In A. Herbelot, X. Zhu, A. Palmer, N. Schneider, J. May, & E. Shutova (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Workshop on Semantic Evaluation* (pp. 105-111). International Committee for Computational Linguistics. doi: <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2020.semeval-1.11>
- Győri, G. (2005). The Adaptive Nature of "Meaning as Understanding". *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*, 52(2-3), 199-220. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1556/aling.52.2005.2-3.4>
- Hamilton, W. L., Leskovec, J., & Jurafsky, D. (2016). Diachronic Word Embeddings Reveal Statistical Laws of Semantic Change. In K. Erk & N. A. Smith (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 54th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics (Volume 1: Long Papers)* (pp. 1489-1501). Association for Computational Linguistics. doi: <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/p16-1141>
- Hardiess, G., & Weissert, C. (2020). Interaction Between Image and Text During the Process of Biblical Art Reception. *Journal of Eye Movement Research*, 13(2), 14. doi: <https://doi.org/10.16910/jemr.13.2.14>
- Haslam, N., Vylomova, E., Zyphur, M., & Kashima, Y. (2021). The Cultural Dynamics of Concept Creep. *American Psychologist*, 76(6), 1013-1026. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000847>
- Holzer, E. (2007). Allowing the Biblical Text to Do Its Pedagogical Work: Connecting Interpretative Activity and Moral Education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 36(4), 497-514. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240701688044>
- Iprgrave, J. (2013). From Storybooks to Bullet Points: Books and the Bible in Primary and Secondary Religious Education. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 35(3), 264-281. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2012.750597>
- Johnson, C. A., Kerkhof, P. A., Kulikov, L., Le Mair, E., & Barðdal, J. (2019). Argument Structure, Conceptual Metaphor and Semantic Change: How to Succeed in Indo-European Without Really Trying. *Diachronica*, 36(4), 463-508. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1075/dia.00014.bar>
- Jose, L. (2025). Semantic Change in the King James Version of Genesis: A Diachronic Linguistic Analysis of Theological Terms. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 135-146. Retrieved from <https://ejal.info/menuscrypt/index.php/ejal/article/view/1060>
- Jose, L. S. (2024). Semantic Evolution in the Psalms: A Diachronic Analysis of Linguistic Transformations. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(3), 206-215. Retrieved from <https://ejal.info/menuscrypt/index.php/ejal/article/view/908>
- Kahambing, J. G. (2019). De-Paganizing Existential Wisdom in Catholic Wisdom Literature. *Journal of International Social Research*, 12(68), 177-182. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17719/jisr.2019.3817>
- Kavé, G., & Halamish, V. (2015). Doubly Blessed: Older Adults Know More Vocabulary and Know Better What They Know. *Psychology and Aging*, 30(1), 68-73. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038669>
- Koch, P. (2016). Meaning Change and Semantic Shifts. In P. Juvonen & M. Koptjevskaja-Tamm (Eds.), *The*

- Lexical Typology of Semantic Shifts* (pp. 21-66). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110377675-002>
- Kövecses, Z. (2013). The Metaphor–Metonymy Relationship: Correlation Metaphors Are Based on Metonymy. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 28(2), 75-88. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2013.768498>
- Kutuzov, A., Øvrelid, L., Szymanski, T., & Velldal, E. (2018). Diachronic Word Embeddings and Semantic Shifts: A Survey. In E. M. Bender, L. Derczynski, & P. Isabelle (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 27th International Conference on Computational Linguistics* (pp. 1384-1397). Association for Computational Linguistics. Retrieved from <https://aclanthology.org/C18-1117>
- Lawrence, P. J. N. (2008). "Oh No, He's Still Wearing His Watch!": Avoiding Anachronism in Old Testament Translation. *The Bible Translator*, 59(1), 14-17. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/026009350805900102>
- Longman, T. (1998). *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. Wm. B. Eerdmans. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5040/bci-009t>
- Lumanze, O. M. (2022). Is life vanity? Reinterpreting the Qoheleth's elusive use of Hevel in Ecclesiastes. *UNIZIK Journal of Religion and Human Relations*, 14(1), 37-55. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4314/jrhr.v14i1.3>
- Malone, A. S. (2016). Acceptable Anachronism in Biblical Studies. *The Bible Translator*, 67(3), 351-364. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2051677016671992>
- Manusiwa, J. H. M., & Sualang, F. Y. (2024). Negasi dan Harmoni Pesimisme: Studi Eksposisi Pengkhotbah 1:12-18 dan Manfaat Hikmat Amsal. *Jurnal Teologi dan Pelayanan Kerusso*, 9(2), 209-223. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33856/kerusso.v9i2.411>
- Manyawu, A. (2010). Southern African Pentecostal Discourse and the Construction of a New Spiritual Order: The Case of a Shift in the "World of Life International Ministries Discourse" about God. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 7(2), 300-326. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4314/lwati.v7i2.57558>
- McGillivray, B., Hengchen, S., Lähteenoja, V., Palma, M., & Vatri, A. (2019). A Computational Approach to Lexical Polysemy in Ancient Greek. *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 34(4), 893-907. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dlcfqz036>
- Naudé, J. A. (2022). Emergence of the Tyndale–King James Version tradition in English Bible translation. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 78(1), a7649. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7649>
- Ozoliņš, K. (2023). Historical Linguistics and the Biblical Languages. In W. A. Ross & E. Robar (Eds.), *Linguistic Theory and the Biblical Text* (pp. 172-222). Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers. doi: <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0358.04>
- Perrone, V., Hengchen, S., Palma, M., Vatri, A., Smith, J. Q., & McGillivray, B. (2021). Lexical Semantic Change for Ancient Greek and Latin: Computational Approaches to Semantic Change. In *Computational Approaches to Semantic Change (Volume 6)*. Language Science Press. Retrieved from <https://langsci-press.org/catalog/view/303/3035/2382-1>
- Perrone, V., Palma, M., Hengchen, S., Vatri, A., Smith, J. Q., & McGillivray, B. (2019). GASC: Genre-Aware Semantic Change for Ancient Greek. In N. Tahmasebi, L. Borin, A. Jatowt, & Y. Xu (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 1st International Workshop on Computational Approaches to Historical Language Change* (pp. 56-66). Association for Computational Linguistics. doi: <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/W19-4707>
- Procházková, I. (2021). *The Torah/Law is a Journey: Using Cognitive and Culturally Oriented Linguistics to Interpret and Translate Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible*. Charles University in Prague, Karolinum Press. Retrieved from <https://karolinum.cz/en/books/prochazkova-the-torah-law-is-a-journey-25096>
- Smidt, C. E. (2024). Dominion, Stewardship, and Perceptions of the Problem of Climate Change. *Review of Religious Research*, 66(4), 437-461. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X241254556>
- Walker-Jones, A. (2017). Naming the Human Animal: Genesis 1–3 and Other Animals in Human Becoming. *Zygon*, 52(4), 1005-1028. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12375>
- Wang, Y. (2024). The Role of Religious Metaphors in Cognition Based on the Bible. *Dean&Francis*, 1(5), 1-4. doi: <https://doi.org/10.61173/17em4117>
- Watts, J. W. (2020). Ritualizing Iconic Jewish Texts. In S. E. Balentine (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ritual and Worship in the Hebrew Bible* (pp. 240-255). Oxford University Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190222116.013.16>
- Yoffe, G., Bühler, A., Dershowitz, N., Romer, T., Piasetzky, E., Finkelstein, I., et al. (2023). A Statistical Exploration of Text Partition Into Constituents: The Case of the Priestly Source in the Books of Genesis and Exodus. In *Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics: ACL 2023* (pp. 1918-1940). Association for Computational Linguistics. doi: <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2023.findings-acl.121>