




Semantic Restriction in the Gospel of Matthew

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Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of semantic restriction in selected passages of the Gospel of Matthew from the King James Version (KJV). The research focuses on the evolution of word meanings over time, specifically identifying words that have become narrower in meaning, leading to potential misinterpretations of the biblical text. Employing a qualitative diachronic linguistic approach, the study utilizes tools such as the Interlinear Bible and Strong's Concordance to compare the original Greek meanings of key terms with their contemporary English equivalents. The sampling involved 15 passages from the Gospel of Matthew that were carefully selected based on their linguistic significance and the presence of semantic restriction. Findings reveal that words such as charger, comfort, compass, listed, meat, scrip, and suffer have undergone significant semantic restrictions, impacting the theological understanding of these passages. For instance, the word charger originally referred to a plate or dish, while in modern usage, it signifies a device used for charging batteries. These shifts in meaning highlight the importance of historical and linguistic context in interpreting ancient texts. The study's implications for both religious studies and biblical interpretation are profound, as semantic changes can obscure theological messages and lead to doctrinal misunderstandings. This research calls for greater awareness of semantic shifts among scholars, theologians, and lay readers and recommends the use of modern Bible translations that account for language evolution. Limitations include the focus on a single book of the Bible, and further research could expand the analysis to other biblical texts. The study also invites future exploration into how semantic changes affect religious teachings and practices.

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Introduction

The study of semantic restriction in biblical texts, particularly in the Gospel of Matthew, is gaining increasing scholarly attention. Semantic restriction refers to the narrowing of a word's meaning over time, often affecting its interpretation in modern contexts. This phenomenon is particularly relevant for translations like the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, which contains terms whose meanings have evolved since its publication in 1611. Understanding how these changes impact theological interpretations is essential, as these shifts can influence the comprehension of key biblical passages, doctrines, and theological concepts. This could happen due to several original words of Greek origin, that need to be compared with their contemporary English equivalents. Naudé (2022) argues that revisions and retranslations of the KJV have continued into the 21st century, reflecting contemporary sensibilities and linguistic shifts. These revisions raise questions about the fidelity of older translations and their relevance to modern readers. While the KJV is revered for its literary qualities, it may not always convey the original meanings due to these semantic shifts.

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There are also semantic shifts affecting the theological interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, due to the several words that have undergone semantic restriction. For instance, the term *debts* in Matthew 6:12, translated from the Greek word *ὀφείλημα* (*opheilēma*), refers to both monetary debts and moral transgressions. Nel (2017) notes that contemporary readers may overlook the broader implications of this term without knowledge of its original meaning. As a result, the semantic shift from a more general understanding of *debt* to a restricted moral interpretation can lead to significant theological misunderstandings, especially in discussions about sin and forgiveness. Semantic restriction extends beyond word meanings; it influences the frameworks within which readers understand the text. For instance, the portrayal of Jesus' teachings on forgiveness in Matthew 6:12 is impacted when *debts* are interpreted solely in a financial context, potentially neglecting the moral and spiritual dimensions of the passage. Dami, Alexander, & Manafe (2021) emphasize that understanding the complexity of Jesus' teachings requires critical thinking, which is compromised if semantic changes obscure the text's original meaning.

One of the underlying problems faced in this context is the understanding how language evolves and how this evolution affects scriptural interpretation of the texts belonging to contemporary faith communities. It becomes rather difficult to comprehend many of Jesus' parables relying on specific word choices, and semantic shifts that may alter the understanding of these teachings. For instance, Pilch (2014) analyzes how linguistic choices in the Gospel of Matthew shape perceptions of Jesus' authority and message. It's a challenge to examine such dynamics and provide a more nuanced understanding of the text and deepen engagement with its theological implications. Over time, words that once had broader or more general meanings also narrow down in scope, leading to potential misunderstandings in modern biblical interpretation. It is therefore necessary to identify instances of semantic restriction, compare the original Greek meanings of key terms with their contemporary English meanings, and analyze the implications of these changes on theological understanding.

This study addresses the impact of semantic restriction on the interpretation of specific passages in the Gospel of Matthew, as translated in the KJV. Specifically, the primary objective of this study was to identify specific words in the Gospel of Matthew that have undergone semantic restriction. The study also aimed to explore how these semantic shifts affect the theological interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew. The focus of this was on the impact of semantic restriction on the interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, particularly within the KJV. By identifying specific words that have undergone semantic changes, comparing with their original and contemporary meanings, and analyzing the broader implications of these changes, this research aimed to enhance both biblical scholarship and historical linguistics. This study also compared the original Greek meanings of identified words with their contemporary English equivalents. This comparison is crucial as it highlights how language evolution can obscure the intended meaning of biblical texts.

To achieve the objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Which words in the Gospel of Matthew (KJV) have undergone semantic restriction?
2. How do the original Greek meanings of these words differ from their contemporary English meanings?
3. What are the implications of these semantic restrictions for biblical interpretation and theological understanding?
4. How can a diachronic linguistic approach aid in addressing misinterpretations caused by semantic evolution?

The findings of this study will illuminate how language evolution affects the interpretation of sacred texts, contributing to more informed theological discussions. This research will also contribute to ongoing discussions in religious studies about the reliability of older Bible translations in the face of language evolution.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Studies related to semantic change, particularly in religious texts, have garnered significant attention in linguistic and theological research. Scholars have explored how language evolution affects the interpretation of religious documents, especially when older translations, such as the KJV, are used in modern contexts. Naudé (2022) provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical background of the Tyndale-King James Version tradition in English Bible translation. The study illustrates how cultural and linguistic changes over time can lead to limitations in the meanings of words. The KJV, first published in 1611, exemplifies how words that once had broader meanings have become more specific in modern usage. Naudé (2022) also highlights that while the KJV remains an important text, revisions and retranslations have emerged to address some of these changes in meaning. This study supports the argument by examining the influence of meaning limitations in biblical texts.

Bernau (2021) documents the changing language of pastoral care in the 20th century, pairing theories of declining religious authority with historical analyses. This study highlights how evolving language impacts the interpretation of religious practices and teachings, reinforcing the need for awareness of semantic changes when engaging with biblical texts. Gathercole (2018) examines the alleged anonymity of the canonical Gospels, arguing that the attribution of authorship is essential for understanding the texts. His analysis of the historical context surrounding the Gospels provides insights into how semantic shifts can affect the interpretation of authorship and authority in biblical literature. Matricciani & Caro (2019) conduct a deep-language mathematical analysis of the Gospels, revealing interesting differences in readability and structure that can influence comprehension. Their findings suggest that linguistic features play a significant role in how texts are understood, reinforcing the need for awareness of semantic changes in biblical interpretation.

Dami et al. (2021) analyze the questions posed by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, categorizing them according to their degree of difficulty and effectiveness. Their research emphasizes the powerful impact of Jesus' teachings and highlights the necessity of understanding the original meanings of words to fully grasp the intended messages. Shin (2014) investigates the roles of women in the Gospel of Matthew through a feminist lens, focusing on how language shapes the portrayal of female characters. This study emphasizes the importance of semantic awareness in interpreting gender dynamics within biblical texts. Abakuks (2012) addresses the synoptic problem, analyzing the relationships between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. His statistical approach highlights how understanding the linguistic features of these texts can inform interpretations of their similarities and differences. Uzukwu (2023) presents an ecological understanding of parables in the Gospel of Matthew, demonstrating how language can shape interpretations of environmental issues. This study emphasizes the relevance of semantic shifts in contemporary discussions of biblical texts.

These studies suggest that semantic restriction is a critical yet underexplored area of study in biblical linguistics. Hence, the current research will address the gap by identifying and analyzing specific instances of semantic restriction in the Gospel of Matthew, offering insights into how these changes affect both linguistic interpretation and theological understanding. Based on these studies, the theoretical framework for this research can be rooted in diachronic linguistics, with a particular focus on the classification of semantic change as outlined by Campbell (2021). Semantic change refers to the process by which word meanings evolve over time, with semantic restriction representing a narrowing in the scope of a word's meaning. This phenomenon is significant in the context of biblical texts such as the Gospel of Matthew, where the meanings of keywords in the KJV have narrowed, limiting their applicability in modern interpretations. This study utilizes lexical semantics to compare the original Greek meanings of key terms in the Gospel of Matthew with their contemporary English equivalents. Tools such as the Interlinear Bible and Strong's Concordance are employed to trace the evolution of these terms. Evans (2015) emphasizes the importance of diachronic data in understanding language dynamics, and this research adopts a similar approach to explore how these semantic shifts affect biblical interpretation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, diachronic linguistic approach to trace the semantic evolution of specific words in the Gospel of Matthew. Aiming to do a textual analysis of the Gospel of Matthew, the study used resources such as the Interlinear Bible and Strong's Concordance to compare the original Greek terms with their modern English equivalents. By analyzing how these words have undergone semantic restriction, this study highlighted how language evolution altered their meanings and the implications for biblical interpretation.

Sampling

A qualitative research design was adopted, centering on a textual analysis of the Gospel of Matthew. The study sampled passages identified in the Gospel of Matthew viz., 14:8, 14:11, 9:22, 23:15, 17:12, 3:4, 6:25, 10:10, 24:45, 3:15, 8:21, 8:31, 19:8, 19:14, and 23:13. These passages contain words such as *charger*, *comfort*, *compass*, *listed*, *meat*, *scrip*, and *suffer*, which have undergone semantic restriction over time. These words are traced from their original Greek meanings to their present-day interpretations.

Data Collection

The original Greek words were extracted using the Interlinear Bible and Strong's Concordance. These words were then compared to modern English meanings derived from contemporary dictionaries and scholarly analyses. Each identified word was examined to determine how its meaning has changed, focusing specifically on how its scope has been narrowed.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a diachronic linguistic approach, which tracked how the meanings of words change over time. By analyzing how these words have undergone semantic restriction, this study highlighted how language evolution altered their meanings and the implications for biblical interpretation. This method allows for a comparison between the original Greek meanings of the words and their modern English equivalents in the KJV. The analysis also draws on semantic theories, such as those outlined by [Campbell \(2021\)](#), to classify these changes as instances of semantic restriction. The data was presented in a tabular format to highlight the differences between the original and contemporary meanings of the identified words.

Results

This section presents the findings from the diachronic analysis of selected passages in the Gospel of Matthew, identifying and discussing instances where words in the KJV have undergone semantic restriction. For each passage, the original Greek word, its meaning, and its current English equivalent are compared to reveal how the scope of meaning has narrowed over time. The analysis provides insights into how these changes affect the interpretation of the text, with theological and practical implications for contemporary readers.

Matthew 14:8 and Matthew 14:11 – Charger

In the KJV, the word *charger* appears in the following passages:

- *Matthew 14:8: "And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger."*
- *Matthew 14:11: "And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to her mother."*

The Greek word translated as *charger* is *pinax*, which means a plate or platter. In the context of these passages, *charger* refers to a dish used to carry John the Baptist's head. However, the modern meaning of *charger* has undergone significant semantic restriction. Today, *charger* primarily refers to a device used to charge electronic equipment, such as mobile phones or laptops. The narrowing of the meaning of *charger* from a broad reference to a plate or platter to a specific electronic device highlights how semantic restriction can lead to misunderstandings. Modern readers unfamiliar with older uses of the word may misinterpret the passage, focusing on the modern meaning rather than the historical context. This comparison is illustrated in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Comparison of the Meaning of Charger in 1611 and 2024.

Meaning in 1611	Meaning in 2024
A plate or platter	A device for charging electronic devices

The restriction of *charger* illustrates how language change can obscure the original intent of the text, leading to confusion or misinterpretation by contemporary readers.

Matthew 9:22 – Comfort

The word *comfort* appears in Matthew 9:22 as follows:

- *Matthew 9:22: "But Jesus turned him about, and when he saw her, he said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole."*

In the original Greek, the word translated as *comfort* is *tharseo*, which means to be of good courage or to have confidence. In the KJV, *comfort* conveyed a broader sense of encouragement and empowerment. However, the modern meaning of *comfort* has been restricted to a more specific connotation: to console someone who is in distress or to make someone feel better. This semantic narrowing has significant implications for interpreting this passage. In contemporary English, the concept of *comfort* is limited to soothing emotional pain, whereas the original Greek carried a broader sense of encouragement, including boldness and confidence in the face of difficulty. Modern readers may miss the empowering nature of Jesus' message if they interpret *comfort* solely in its contemporary sense. This comparison is illustrated in [Table 2](#).

Table 2: Comparison of the Meaning of Comfort in 1611 and 2024.

Meaning in 1611	Meaning in 2024
To be of good courage	To console or make someone feel better

This shift demonstrates how semantic restriction can alter theological interpretations, particularly in the case of Jesus' teachings, where the original message may have been more empowering than modern interpretations suggest.

Matthew 23:15 – Compass

The word *compass* is used in Matthew 23:15:

- *Matthew 23:15: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves."*

In this passage, *compass* translates from the Greek word *periago*, meaning to go around or to travel. However, the modern English meaning of *compass* refers almost exclusively to a navigational instrument. The semantic restriction has narrowed the meaning, causing modern readers to associate the term with direction-finding tools rather than understanding it as a description of movement or travel. This comparison is illustrated in [Table 3](#).

Table 3: Comparison of the Meaning of Compass in 1611 and 2024.

Meaning in 1611	Meaning in 2024
To go around or travel	A navigational instrument

This shift highlights the importance of recognizing semantic restriction in biblical interpretation. Misinterpreting *compass* as a literal tool rather than a metaphor for extensive travel could lead to theological misinterpretations regarding the Pharisees' efforts to make converts.

Matthew 17:12 – Listed

In Matthew 17:12, the word *listed* is used in a different sense than it is today:

- *Matthew 17:12: "But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise, shall also the son of man suffer of them."*

The Greek word translated as *listed* is *thelo*, meaning to will or to wish. In 1611, *listed* referred to the act of desiring or intending something. Today, *listed* is understood almost exclusively in terms of creating an ordered sequence of items. This comparison is illustrated in [Table 4](#).

Table 4: Comparison of the Meaning of Listed in 1611 and 2024.

Meaning in 1611	Meaning in 2024
To will or wish	To make a list

This narrowing of meaning can lead modern readers to misunderstand the passage, interpreting it as referring to enumeration rather than will or intent.

Matthew 3:4, 6:25, 10:10, and 24:45 – Meat

The word *meat* is used multiple times in the Gospel of Matthew:

- *Matthew 3:4: "And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey."*
- *Matthew 6:25: "Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?"*
- *Matthew 10:10: "Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat."*
- *Matthew 24:45: "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?"*

The Greek word translated as *meat* is *trophe*, which refers to food or nourishment. However, in modern English, *meat* specifically refers to the flesh of animals. This semantic restriction limits the original broader meaning of *meat* as general nourishment. This comparison is illustrated in [Table 5](#).

Table 5: Comparison of the Meaning of Meat in 1611 and 2024.

Meaning in 1611	Meaning in 2024
Food or nourishment	Flesh of animals

This shift narrows the understanding of certain passages, potentially distorting their spiritual meaning. For example, *meat* in Matthew 10:10 could be interpreted as referring to spiritual sustenance rather than merely physical food.

Matthew 10:10 – Scrip

The word *scrip* appears in Matthew 10:10:

- *Matthew 10:10: "Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat."*

The Greek word *péra* refers to a leather pouch used for carrying provisions, commonly used by travelers. However, the modern English meaning of *scrip* has been narrowed to refer to a provisional certificate of money, typically related to shares or dividends. This comparison is illustrated in [Table 6](#).

Table 6: Comparison of the Meaning of *Scrip* in 1611 and 2024.

Meaning in 1611	Meaning in 2024
A leather pouch for provisions	A provisional certificate of money

This restriction of meaning could lead modern readers to misunderstand the practical instructions Jesus gave to His disciples about traveling lightly.

Matthew 3:15, 8:21, 8:31, 19:8, 19:14, and 23:13 – Suffer

The word *suffer* appears in multiple passages:

- *Matthew 3:15: "And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him."*
- *Matthew 8:21: "And another of his disciples said unto him, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father."*
- *Matthew 19:14: "But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."*

The Greek words *aphiémi* and *epitrepó* translate to *suffer*, meaning to permit or allow. In modern English, *suffer* is associated almost exclusively with experiencing pain or hardship. This semantic restriction distorts the intended meaning in these passages. This comparison is illustrated in [Table 7](#).

Table 7: Comparison of the Meaning of *Suffer* in 1611 and 2024.

Meaning in 1611	Meaning in 2024
To permit or allow	To experience pain or hardship

Misinterpreting *suffer* as pain rather than permission could significantly alter the reader's understanding of key biblical messages, such as Jesus' command to allow the children to come to Him.

Discussion

This study sought to identify and analyze instances of semantic restriction in selected passages from the Gospel of Matthew in the KJV of the Bible. By conducting a diachronic analysis of the original Greek words, as presented in the Interlinear Bible and Strong's Concordance, and comparing them with their contemporary English meanings, the study revealed significant semantic shifts. The findings demonstrate that words such as *charger*, *comfort*, *compass*, *listed*, *meat*, *scrip*, and *suffer* have undergone semantic restriction, where their meanings have become narrower or more specific over time. These shifts often result in a loss of their broader or more abstract original meanings.

The total number of identified passages from the Gospel of Matthew exhibiting semantic restriction was 15, which might appear insignificant compared to the 1,071 verses in the text. However, the theological implications of these restricted meanings are substantial. For instance, the modern meaning of *suffer* as "to endure pain" can distort the original intention of the passages where *suffer* actually means "to permit" or "to allow." Similarly, the word *meat* has narrowed from its original meaning of general "nourishment" to specifically "animal flesh," potentially altering interpretations of spiritual sustenance.

The findings of this study highlight the critical need for awareness of semantic changes when interpreting historical religious texts. As language evolves, modern readers may misunderstand or misinterpret the original meanings of words, leading to altered theological understandings. This is especially true in the case of the KJV, which remains a widely used and highly regarded translation despite the significant linguistic changes that have occurred since its publication in 1611. The semantic restrictions identified in this study underscore the importance of using modern Bible translations that account for contemporary language while remaining faithful to the original intent of the text. Many modern translations have replaced outdated or restricted terms with words that better reflect the original Greek meanings, helping readers grasp the intended theological messages without

the barriers imposed by language evolution. For instance, modern translations replace words like *suffer* with *permit*, *meat* with *food*, and *charger* with *platter*, making the text more accessible to contemporary audiences.

This research contributes to both biblical scholarship and diachronic linguistics by illustrating how semantic restriction can affect the interpretation of sacred texts. The study offers insights into the evolution of language within the KJV Bible, emphasizing the necessity for continuous linguistic analysis to maintain the accuracy of scriptural interpretation. Furthermore, this research invites interdisciplinary collaboration, where scholars of linguistics and theology can work together to ensure that the richness of historical religious texts is preserved and made accessible to modern readers. The study also provides a foundation for future research on semantic changes in other books of the Bible, as well as in different versions and translations. By broadening the scope to include various types of semantic change, such as broadening, pejoration, or amelioration, researchers can further explore how language evolution influences religious texts across different faith traditions.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of this study demonstrate the impact of semantic restriction on the interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew in the KJV of the Bible. Words that once had broader or more flexible meanings have become restricted in their modern usage, leading to potential misunderstandings for contemporary readers. Recognizing and addressing these changes is essential for preserving the integrity of biblical interpretation and ensuring that the original meanings of sacred texts are accessible to modern audiences. By examining the semantic shifts in key passages of the Gospel of Matthew, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of both biblical interpretation and historical linguistics. As language continues to evolve, so too must our approach to interpreting ancient texts, ensuring that their messages remain relevant and clear for future generations.

This study faced a few limitations. First, it was limited to the Gospel of Matthew in the KJV Bible, focusing only on semantic restriction. While the analysis provided valuable insights, a broader study that includes other books of the Bible or additional forms of semantic change would offer a more complete picture of the linguistic evolution in biblical texts. Second, this study relied only on authoritative but dated linguistic tools like Strong's Concordance. Future research could incorporate newer linguistic resources or advanced digital tools that track semantic changes across various languages and historical periods. Additionally, future research could also examine how modern technology, such as digital Bible tools and concordances, can aid in tracing the diachronic development of specific terms and improve readers' understanding of ancient texts. While this study focused on semantic restriction in the Gospel of Matthew, expanding the research to other books of the Bible would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how language change affects biblical interpretation. Last, but not the least, there is potential for exploring how these semantic changes affect religious practices, particularly in preaching, teaching, and personal Bible study. Misunderstandings due to language change may shape theological doctrines or influence the way religious communities engage with sacred texts, highlighting the importance of continued awareness and education on this issue.

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