SAADIA VS. RASHI: ON THE SHIFT FROM MEANING-MAXIMALISM TO MEANING-MINIMALISM IN MEDIEVAL BIBLICAL LEXICOLOGY

RICHARD C. STEINER, Yeshiva University

ABSTRACT

Saadia Gaon and Rashi held very different views concerning the task of the lexicographer. Saadia believed that the lexicographer must not limit himself to listing the common, well-attested meanings of a word; he has a duty to posit additional meanings as a means of resolving contradictions and producing smooth, coherent readings. Rashi felt that words have only one basic meaning from which all of the contextual meanings are derived, and that the task of the lexicographer is to find that meaning. Saadia's view was shaped by Muslim intellectual traditions. Rashi's view bears some resemblance to that of an anonymous 11th-century French speculative grammarian, but its roots are in rabbinic literature. Other exegetes cited in this article (the Masoretes, David al-Fasi, Menahem ben Saruq, Jonah ibn Janah, Joseph Qara, Abraham ibn Ezra, David Qimhi, Joseph ibn Kaspi) have not been studied systematically, but the evidence gathered up to now suggests that the difference between Saadia Gaon and Rashi is part of a more general shift from meaning-maximalism to meaning-minimalism in medieval biblical lexicology—a shift which occurred independently in Spain and France.
1. Introduction

One of the oldest and most important facets of biblical exegesis is the glossing of words, and it is no exaggeration to say that every exegete is, in some measure, a lexicographer.

Most exegetes limit themselves to supplying the meaning of a given word in a given context, occasionally adding a parallel with the same meaning in a different context. They refrain from discussing occurrences and meanings that are not relevant to the passage at hand, presumably on the grounds that such discussions belong in a dictionary rather than a commentary.

Saadia Gaon and Rashi are exceptions to this rule. Both include semantic analyses in their commentaries that go well beyond what is needed to clarify the meaning of the passage under discussion. What led these two exegetes to provide information that more properly belongs in a dictionary?

In the case of Saadia, the answer may be that there were not yet any dictionaries to speak of. The earliest comprehensive dictionary of Biblical Hebrew known to us, Kitāb Jāmi` al-Alfāz of the Karaite David ben Abraham al-Fāsi, postdates Saadia’s commentaries. If there were earlier biblical lexica, they too were probably composed by Karaites, and Saadia would not have wanted his readers to consult them.

Rashi, on the other hand, did have a dictionary at his disposal, the Mahberet of Menahem ben Saruq, but he was not happy with its theoretical underpinnings. Indeed, several of the semantic analyses in Rashi’s commentaries can be viewed as a critique of Menahem’s lexicological assumptions.²

It is safe to say that Rashi would have been even less happy with the semantic discussions of Saadia Gaon, had he been familiar with them, for the tendencies that he disliked in Menahem’s definitions are even more pronounced in Saadia’s. Rashi’s lexicological approach is very different from that of Saadia Gaon. Saadia believed that words have many meanings, while Rashi held that they often have only one basic meaning. Saadia made the multiplication of meanings a cornerstone of his exegesis, while Rashi pursued a reductionist policy. In short, Saadia was a meaning-maximalist, while Rashi was a meaning-
minimalist. Saadia's approach is adopted from Muslim exegetes, lexicographers, grammarians, and philosophers, who were heirs to a tradition going back to Aristotle, while Rashi's approach is rooted in rabbinic literature.

The contrast between these two giants is part of a much larger picture. It appears from a preliminary examination of a broader range of exegetes that biblical lexicology underwent a shift from meaning-maximalism to meaning-minimalism during the course of the Middle Ages. The evidence examined thus far suggests that the shift away from Saadia's approach was gradual in Spain and Provence, proceeding in small steps from Menahem to Jonah ibn Janāḥ to Abraham ibn Ezra and David Qimḥi to Joseph ibn Kaspi. In France, on the other hand, rabbinic meaning-minimalism reappeared suddenly, incorporated into a brilliant lexicological theory propounded by a single individual.

2. Saadia Gaon: Meaning-Maximalism as a Tool for Resolving Contradictions

One of the first things one notices about Saadia's Torah commentary is that it is full of lists of meanings, usually introduced by statements of the form, "I translated X in this way, because it has

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3 These terms come from Roland Posner; see, for example, his article "Bedeutungsmaximalismus und Bedeutungsminimalismus in der Beschreibung von Satzverknüpfern," in Die Partikeln der deutschen Sprache, ed. H. Weydt (Berlin, 1979) 378–394. For an example of their applicability to Hebrew philology, see G. Vanoni, "Zur Bedeutung der althebraischen Konjunktion w= " in Text, Methode und Grammatik: Wolfgang Richter zum 65 Geburtstag, ed. W. Gross, et al. (St. Ottilien, 1991), p. 569. An extreme form of meaning-minimalism is Formal Determinism, the notion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning; see R. D. Hoberman, The Syntax and Semantics of Verb Morphology in Modern Aramaic (New Haven, 1989) 21–22. It must be stressed that these terms refer to a tendency to maximize/minimize the number of meanings of words in the lexicon. They do not refer to a tendency to maximize/minimize the meaningfulness of words in a text, as described in my "Meaninglessness, Meaningfulness, and Super-meaningfulness in Scripture: An Analysis of the Controversy Surrounding Dan 2:12 in the Middle Ages," JQR 82 (1992) 431–449. The latter tendency might be referred to as significance-maximalism/minimalism. Using both variables, we can classify the medieval exegetes as combining (a) meaning-maximalism with significance-minimalism (Saadia), (b) meaning-minimalism with significance-maximalism (Rashi), (c) meaning-maximalism with significance-maximalism (Joseph Qara?), or (d) meaning-minimalism with significance-minimalism (Ibn Kaspi).
so-and-so many meanings." Many of these meanings seem strange to the modern student of the Bible. What led Saadia to posit such meanings?

Part of the answer can be found in the introduction to the commentary. Saadia's very first principle of exegesis is that, under certain circumstances, it is the duty of the exegete to posit ambiguity:

Since . . . in every utterance there must inevitably occur unambiguous and ambiguous elements (賺מפס האלכיממטות) (4) (for every language is built that way, and the Torah is similar, since it was revealed in one of the languages), it is incumbent upon anyone who interprets [Scrip-

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4 For the Quranic term mutašābih, see L. Kinberg, "Muḥkamāt and Mutashābihāt (Koran 3/7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis," *Arabica* 35 (1988) 143–172. Saadia uses this term in his commentary to Exod 32:5 (MS St. Petersburg, Russian National Library Hebr.-Arab. I/129, f. 38b): "there is no ambiguous utterance in the story except for inن, for Aaron intended to say it ambiguously." He goes on to explain that يه has the same meaning as نا, including "slaughter (of humans)" in addition to "sacrifice (of animals)." And he uses the verbal noun نא in the sense of "ambiguity" (or "uncertainty caused by ambiguity") in his commentary to Prov 25:11, giving three possible interpretations of الن: "so-and-so had a good eye"; *Œuvres completes de Saadia Ben Josep al-Fayyoomi*, ed. J. Derenbourg (Paris, 1894) 6:146; for the use of "eye" as an example of ambiguity by Al-Farabi, Maimonides and Abraham de Balmes, see n. 77, below. 

5 In view of this unequivocal statement about the inevitability of ambiguity, it may seem surprising to find Saadia stating, in his commentary to Prov 25:11 (ed. Derenbourg, 146; ed. Qafih, 200), that one of the rules for the speaker who wishes to compose a ين is that "he should be careful to use language which eliminates لنا from the listener as much as possible." In this context, Saadia is stating rules of rhetoric that go back to Aristotle (*De sophisti-ces elenchis*, 165b–166a). Like Aristotle, Saadia warns against ضم "ambiguity," ضم "[incorrect] joining [of words]" and ضم "[incorrect] separation [of words]." But he tempers his warning to avoid ambiguity with the phrase "as much as possible," and then admits that there is ambiguity in the Bible, even in the formulation of the commandments, e.g., the ambiguity of فين which can have the meaning "the Sabbath" or "the holiday," as in تف in פין המפרשים (see §3, below).
ture] to take that which agrees with knowledge . . . and tradition . . . to be unambiguous and that which contradicts either of them to be ambiguous.6

In other words, multiplication of meanings can serve to reconcile Scripture with reason, on the one hand, and with tradition, on the other. In view of the latter function, it also served as a weapon in Saadia’s polemic with the Karaites, which I shall discuss in the next section.

Saadia’s use of ambiguity to resolve contradictions with reason is illustrated by his treatment of או-נו-ך.7

I translated או-נו-ך as ‘threaten’ [in Gen 6:6 או-נו-ך], because this word occurs with six meanings. One is ‘regret,’ according to common usage . . . ; another is ‘threaten’: Gen 27:42 או-נו-ך; another is ‘console’ . . . ; another is ‘forgive’ as in Ps 106:45 או-נו-ך and another is ‘see, consider’: Jer 18:10 או-נו-ך.

According to Saadia, this root has six meanings. The usual meaning in the nif’al stem is “repent, regret,” but Saadia seems to be at pains to avoid this interpretation in cases where the verb is predicated affirmatively of God.8 For those cases, he gives the meanings “threaten” (Gen 6:6), “forgive” (Ps 106:45), and “see, consider”

6 מלח ותרנש 17 (191): מלח ותרנש 17 (191):

7 מלח ותרנש 17 (191):

8 מלח ותרנש 17 (191):
It is clear that his avoidance of the usual meaning in these cases is dictated by the exegetical principle set forth in his introduction. An interpretation according to the usual meaning would imply that God is susceptible to change, but since our intellect tells us that this cannot be true, we are duty-bound to posit the existence of other, less common meanings. Later we shall see that Rashi insists that two meanings suffice for this verb.

Another example is Saadia's well-known interpretation of יָצָא in the first chapter of Genesis as "(God) willed/wished," an interpretation rightly criticized by Qirqisānī and Ibn Ezra on philosophical grounds, but which Maimonides was later to adopt. Indeed, Saadia's forced use of ambiguity to resolve contradictions with reason should probably be viewed as a forerunner of the philosophical exegesis in Maimonides' Mekhila Tannaim. In his introduction, Saadia explains that the same method should be used when one verse contradicts another, e.g., Deut 6:16 יָצָא "You shall not test the Lord your God" vs. Mal 3:10 יָצָא "Test me through this." The former utterance, with the verb
is unambiguous; the latter, with מַעֲרָכָה, contains “an ambiguous word having an uncommon meaning which may be rendered so that it agrees with the unambiguous utterance in the Torah.”

Another contradiction resolved in this manner is the one between Exod 3:2 וַיֵּלֶדֶת הַנָּחַלֶת מִן הָעַרְבִּים, and 3:3 וַיְצַו יְהוָה אֵלָיו וַיֵּלֶדֶת הַנָּחַלֶת מִן הָעַרְבִּים. Saadia resolved this contradiction by taking the first phrase to mean “the bush was being kindled” and the second to mean “the bush would not burn.”

Here we have an example of a word occurring with different meanings in the same passage, but Saadia does not mention this example in arguing against the Karaite interpretation of פָּקַע, apparently because doing so would have weakened his position in another controversy with the Karaites (see below).

In at least one case, Saadia kills two birds with one stone, using one ambiguity to resolve both a contradiction with another verse and a contradiction with reason. According to Ibn Ezra, “the Gaon” held that פָּקַע has two meanings: “thorn-bush” in Exod 3:2 and “heavens” in Deut 33:16. This report is corroborated by a few manuscripts of Saadia Gaon’s Tafsir that have two different renderings of פָּקַע, that is פָּקַע “thorn-bush” in Exod 3:2–4 and פָּקַע “heavens” in Deut 33:16. Ibn Ezra states that the reason for the latter rendering is that the term פָּקַע implies permanent residence.

If that is the case, then פָּקַע contradicts Isa 33:5 פָּקַע וְיִרְאָה, and Saadia’s...
interpretation may be viewed as an attempt to resolve that contradiction. Indeed, he translates both שֶׁהָיוּ תְרוֹם חַשְּבָנִי and שֶׁהָיוּ וּלְהָי֤וּ with the same Arabic phrase: ساكن الأسماء “Inhabitant of Heaven.”

This interpretation also resolves what, for Saadia, would have been a contradiction between Deut 33:16 and reason, viz., the notion that God dwells in a finite place. That contradiction is normally resolved in the Tafsir by rendering בַּטפֶּל “his light dwelled” or בִּשְׁמָהוֹ “he caused his light to dwell.”

It is possible that Saadia’s discussion of אֶנֶּ ה- also belongs here since, in addition to the contradiction with reason discussed above, it involves a contradiction between verses (Num 23:19 לְאֵל אֱלֹהִים לְצֵאת לְיַעֲבֹד יְהוָה and Deut 32:36 מֵאֵל אֱלֹהִים לְצֵאת לְיַעֲבֹד יְהוָה for hitpael; 1 Sam 15:29 לְאֵל אֱלֹהָי לְצֵאת לְיַעֲבֹד יְהוָה vs. Gen 6:6 לְאֵל אֱלֹהִים לְצֵאת לְיַעֲבֹד יְהוָה, etc. for nifcal). However, this is not precisely the kind of contradiction between verses that Saadia describes in his introduction. In this case, the contradictory verses involve one and the same verb, so that there are no objective grounds for claiming that Num 23:19 and 1 Sam 15:29 are less ambiguous than the opposing verses.

If such tactics seem quaint today, it is not because modern Bible scholars refrain from positing new meanings to eliminate anomalies in the biblical text but because they have a different conception of anomalousness.

3. Saadia Gaon: Meaning-Maximalism as a Weapon against the Karaites

Saadia’s use of ambiguity to resolve contradictions with tradition is illustrated by his polemic with the Karaites over the verses in Leviticus which fix the date of the Shavuot holiday. The Karaites ar-

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19 See Tafsir to Exod 25:8, 29:45,46, Num 35:34, and Ps 135:21 (וּלְאֵל אֱלֹהִים לְצֵאת לְיַעֲבֹד יְהוָה, ed. Y. Qafih [Jerusalem, 1966] 270, apparatus, n. 13). See also See also Tafsir to Leviticus, ed. Qafih, 106), where Saadia stresses that verses which refer to God as dwelling in the temple and other (finite) places refer to God’s Shekhina—a light created by Him.

20 One is reminded of the use of ambiguity by modern biblical philologists, as described in J. Barr, Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament (Oxford, 1968) 125–155. The difference is that Saadia posited the existence of uncommon meanings as a means of resolving contradictions between verses, while modern philologists posit such meanings as a means of eliminating anomalies within verses.
gued that the phrase נאוי ניניו must have the same meaning in
Lev 23:15 נאוי ניניו נו ו then that it has in 23:16 נאוי ניניו נו, which is possible only if the phrase refers
to Sunday. According to the rabbinic interpretation, the first occurrence of נאוי ניניו refers to the day after the first day of Passover
(Saadia: נאוי ניניו וגו) and the second one refers to the day after the
seventh week (Saadia: נאוי ניניו וגו). In his commentary, Saadia
relates that he searched through the entire Bible for cases of a word occurring with different meanings in one passage, and he gives a list
of the examples he found. In his commentary to Gen 2:2, he stresses
that נאוי may refer to holy days other than the Sabbath.

4. Saadia Gaon: Meaning-Minimalism as a Weapon against
the Karaites

According to the Karaites, Exod 35:3 נאוי ניניו אנקגנוכם prohibits not only kindling a fire on the Sabbath day but
also allowing a fire which had been kindled before the Sabbath to
remain burning during the Sabbath. Underlying this two-fold inter-
pretation was the claim that the verb נאוי ניניו has the meaning “burn” as
well as the meaning “kindle, ignite.” Yefet, for example, tries to prove
that the verb can refer to the “state of burning” (כ"ג נאוי ניניו); 23
Al-Fasî gives examples of its referring to the “persistence of burn-
ing” (כ"ג נאוי ניניו). 24
To eliminate this interpretation, which contradicts talmudic tra-
dition, Saadia was forced to adopt an uncharacteristic meaning-
minimalist position denying the legitimacy of the meaning “burn.”
However, consistent adherence to this position would have untercut

21 Hirschfeld, “The Arabic Portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge (Third Ar-
ticle),” JQR o.s. 16 (1904) 102: נאוי ניניו נו וגו, See also the discussion in U. Simon, "The Arabic Portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge (Third Article)," JQR o.s. 18 (1906) 614, last line.
22 See §7, below.
23 Commentary to Exod 35:3; see H. Ben-Shammai, אחר אנקגנוכם (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1977), vol. 2, Appendix 3, p. 169, line 12. The passage is repeated verbatim in Yefet’s commentary to Lev 23:3; see H. Hirschfeld, “The Arabic Portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge (Thirteenth Article),” JQR o.s. 18 (1906) 614, last line.
his efforts to resolve a second contradiction—the one in Exod 3:3 discussed above.

In his commentary to Exod 35:3, Saadia managed to extricate himself from this dilemma by means of a rule which recognizes the meaning “burn” but severely limits its frequency:

Any occurrence of \( \text{הנה} \) in association with \( \text{וביא} \) is intended to come under the heading of ‘uniting (flame and fuel)—not the heading of ‘causation of burning.’

According to this rule, collocation with the word \( \text{וביא} \) is the crucial conditioning factor. Exod 35:3 contains the word \( \text{וביא} \) and thus \( \text{הנה} \) must refer to the uniting of flame and fuel. The same goes for Exod 3:2. Exod 3:3, on the other hand, does not contain the word \( \text{וביא} \), and thus \( \text{הנה} \), in this instance, may have the meaning “burn.” This is the only place in Saadia’s extant translations where \( \text{הנה} \) is so rendered. Thus, “burn” is an uncommon meaning which can be invoked in Exod 3:3 in order to resolve the contradiction with Exod 3:2.

5. Saadia Gaon: Meaning-Maximalism, Context, and Coherence

Just as lists of meanings are a hallmark of Saadia’s commentary, freeness is a hallmark of his translation. It exhibits a marked tendency to vary the translation of words to fit the context, resulting in smooth, coherent renderings. In the absence of a concordance, it is dangerous to make generalizations, but we can point to Ratzaby’s

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25 Saadia’s use of the \( \text{p’el verbal noun (rather than ביטויים) and the causative קראות (rather than קד) should probably not be taken as establishing a second distinction between Exod 3:3 and 35:3. Such a distinction would undercut his effort to resolve the contradiction between Exod 3:3 and 3:2.}

26 Not “any occurrence of ביטוי in association with fire” in contradistinction to ביטוי referring to destruction by other means. Saadia intentionally used the \( \text{Hebrew word ביטוי.}

27 \( \text{כלי ישור וקרים יא עליי} \) see Ben-Shammai, ויכל, vol. 2, Appendix 3, p. 169, lines 13–14 and Hirschfeld, “The Arabic Portion (Thirteenth Article),” 615, first two lines.

28 It is to be hoped that students of Saadia’s exegesis will, in the near future, produce a concordance of his translations, similar to those available for the Septuagint and Targum Onqelos.
discovery that 47 different translations of BH *waw* can be found in the *Tafsir*, each one attested at least three times. Since Saadia did not distinguish between the translations of a word and its meanings, the multiplication of translations was equivalent in his eyes to the multiplication of meanings.

It appears that Saadia considered coherence and cohesion to be a hallmark of *pesha't* exegesis, in contrast to *derash*, which was by nature atomistic. In varying translation to fit context, he did not limit himself to the positing of polysemy in individual words. Even phrases could have several meanings, and the meanings did not have to be related; phrases could be homonymous. Thus, Saadia broke with tradition to claim that the phrase *nq V-i-2* means “capture the mountains of” in Amos 1:13, despite the fact that the same phrase occurs


30 In his *m-nn otn o)Y,Wv* and his commentary to Ps 68:26. See N. Allony, *Studies in Medieval Philology and Literature*, vol. 1 (*Sa'adia's Works*) (Jerusalem, 1986) 56: [פผู้น(21)כ]ה לאנאש הרוי יִרְכָּךְ המָוֵה פָּולִיל רֵיסֵהוֹת חֶפָּר קַנְנָאָמִים אַשְׁמָיָא (בֵּין [הוֹנָא] *לִפְדָּה*), “for this noun is put sometimes into the masculine form and sometimes into the feminine form like קָטֵלּ וְשַׁנְבִּית instead of קַטֵלּ [and also] הקַטָּכָּה רָהְמֵת חֶפָּר קַנְנָאָמִים instead of חֶפָּר.” See also [*הלֹוי יִרְכָּךְ המָוֵה פָּולִיל רֵיסֵהוֹת חֶפָּר קַנְנָאָמִים*], “for splitting open the mountains of Jarash ... , i.e., they would split open the mountains and break their rocks and smooth the roughness” (Jami' al-Alfdz, 1:262-263. Samuel b. Hofni Gaon’s formulation of this interpretation adds nothing to that of Saadia’s; see *n'wxmn' lpx) nl' rv 21 'wrro, Appendix 3, p. 449. This content downloaded from 129.98.33.14 on Wed, 30 Jan 2019 23:09:22 UTC All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms
in 2 Kgs 8:12 (cf. also Hos 14:1) with the meaning “split open the pregnant women of.” The reason, as pointed out by many of the later exegetes who adopted his view, is the context: “in order to expand their territory.” Saadia had difficulty seeing a connection between splitting open pregnant women and expanding territory, and he was unhappy with this lack of coherence. In actuality, what we have here is a double entendre, as Gltick\(^\text{31}\) and Rendsburg\(^\text{32}\) have pointed out; Saadia simply discovered the second reading.


Saadia’s meaning-maximalist tendency gave him a decided advantage over other exegetes in the case of 1 Kgs 20:18 im) oj5WOn o)*n w) -n5p5 om on mioWn. The problem in this verse is not a contradiction, but rather, as noted by Abarbanel, the meaningless division of Ben-Hadad’s command into two antithetical contingencies, each having the same outcome.\(^\text{33}\) Saadia’s solution is cited by Abraham b. Solomon:

Saadia said: When he puts the word גויס after “take,” he informs us that what is wished for them is life, and when he puts “take” after the word גויס he informs us that what is wished for them is not life but destruction.\(^\text{34}\)


\(^{33}\) The question cannot be dismissed by citing parallels like Gen 24:49 -ox nn;1nj 920OW- Yix ;29 1 -Y13.0. )) ?6-021 t rt)n)n V-rx-nx n1pxi -rtv 0nV )W oDw) and 2 Kgs 7:4 unni no O3W-oxi ow) iv)nni rY :iwini rwn 2b) nvrix-o2x. In the latter case, the repetition serves an important function: to show how careful weighing of the options led to a calculated risk: o-Ix ;1)n)-z2 . -iD) 1 nij unnw o -0rm u-)n)-ox. In the former case, we are dealing with a carefully crafted speech designed to persuade. The servant lays out a choice between two options, each corresponding to a different option for him: if they do the kindness, he will turn to the right; if not, he must turn to the left. Here too the division seems purposeful.

\(^{34}\) ,;12)rV2 0;0).) l2 0VY<sWof2 Y zn -),:)xt32 xen) ,, ftrtr In-Il 0)X) jxf-,Iux X2'x nw's-nf onx w) vt IN xm'vYx )n - tyof -rvn :iwonv'x 1-i2<x x2n). B. Cohen, “Quotations from Saadia’s Arabic Commentary on the Bible from Two Manuscripts of Abraham ben Solomon,” Saadia Anniversary Volume (New York, 1943) 104. For Saadia’s commentary on 1 Kings, see Hirschfeld, “The Arabic Portion (Thirteenth Article),” 606 and 609, line 13.
According to this, the verse means something like “If they come in peace, take them alive; if in war, take their lives,” and the inversion of the word order serves to signal contrast, like English but or whereas.

Saadia has assigned different meanings to the two neighboring occurrences of the phrase וָאֶתָּבֵא הָעָם הָעָם in this verse, just as he did with the two neighboring occurrences of the phrase שְׁמַעְתָּ הָעָם הָעָם in Lev 23:15–16. The first meaning is well attested both in Hebrew (Josh 8:23, 1 Sam 15:8) and in Ben Hadad’s native Aramaic (Bisitun 11, 17, 23, 27, 34, 44). The second meaning can be supported by Prov 22:23.

It is quite likely that Ben Hadad’s statement is a pun, a pun that was missed by LXX, Peshitta, Targum Jonathan, Ibn Ezra (to Qoh 5:1), David Qimhi, Ibn Kaspi, Gersonides, the Judeo-Arabic translation from 1354, Malbim, Kittel, Gray, Würtwein, NJPS and Sternberg. Only Saadia, Bahye (to Lev 5:15), and

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36 As in Gen 40:13,19, a death sentence issued by a gentile king contains a cruel wordplay, which makes it sound initially like the pardon he issued moments before. The message may be that gentile kings view such decisions as an amusing game of little importance—like the Roman emperors deciding the fate of fallen gladiators. Under oriental despots, life is precarious: the tiniest variation of language, the slightest whim, makes the difference between life and death. This would fit the theme of the next two stories. In vss. 31ff, the ministers of the defeated Ben-Hadad tell him that his Israelite foe might listen to a plea to spare his life, since the kings of Israel have a reputation of being magnanimous—a reputation which turns out to be well-deserved. In 21:7ff, the Phoenician princess, Jezebel, teaches her husband, Ahab, that where she comes from, the taking of innocent life is part of the exercise of royal power (ueling יָמוּם תּוֹלֵדָה כִּי תָּנָא אִשָּׁה אֶל הַיָּהָרָה). 249.
37 סְדֵרָה קְדֻם נַכַּבַּד ראָשֵׁי וּרְשֵׁי הָאָדָם וּלְתֹוֹדְו מֶרֶץ)
38 R. Kittel, Die Bücher der Könige (Gottingen, 1900) 166.
41 M. Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative (Bloomington, 1985), 256–257. 42 It is quite possible that Bahye’s interpretation of our verse comes from Saadia; cf. the introduction to דְּמַעְתִּי וּרְשֵׁי הָאָדָם, ed. C. B. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1966) 12. Bahye’s interest in this interpretation stems from his conviction that word-order variation is meaningful (2:415), which is why we find such frequent use of small words to mark variation in word order. אַן אוֹרְשָׁבָל מְנַבֵּיא אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר הָרֹאשָׁבָל אֲשֶׁר אֲשֶׁר מְדַבֵּר מְדַבֵּר, אֲשֶׁר מְדַבֵּר אֲשֶׁר מְדַבֵּר מְדַבֵּר אֲשֶׁר מְדַבֵּר אֲשֶׁר מְדַבֵּר.
43 This content downloaded from 129.98.33.14 on Wed, 30 Jan 2019 23:09:22 UTC. All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms
Abarbanel recognized it. Saadia was primed to see it, because he was on the lookout for cases of a word occurring with different meanings in the same passage and because he was interested in the ambiguity of the word *in*.

In his discussion of the tree of life, he lists eight meanings for that word, including two which he would presumably apply in our case: earthly life as in "living people" as in and "living people" as in

Another pun noted by Saadia is in Ps 100:3 which Abarbanel recognizes. Ibn Ezra to Exod 21:8 cites him as follows: "The Gaon said that this has two meanings like ; one of them is that we did not make ourselves and the other is that we are his." Here, too, recognition of the pun is probably a by-product of Saadia's search for words occurring twice in the same passage, each
time with a different meaning. In this case, the word occurring twice in the same passage is a homophone, with one occurrence “inside” (in the text) and the other “outside” (in the margin), to paraphrase Ibn Ezra.

Here again Saadia appears to be right. The reading “it was he who made us—not we ourselves”\(^47\) is supported by Job 34:33; both examples express contrastive focus through the use of contrasting independent pronouns. The reading “it was he who made us, and we are his” is selected by the apposition with Imn Inaz “his people and his tended flock,” with repetition of the suffixed pronoun i-; cf. Ps 79:13 and 95:7. Nevertheless, both medievals (e.g., Ibn Ezra)\(^48\) and moderns (e.g., Barr)\(^49\) continue to insist that only one of the two interpretations can be correct. Even the Rabbis seem to adopt an either-or position.\(^50\)

\(^{47}\)For the implied accusative reflexive pronoun, see P. Jouion and T. Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew (Rome, 1991) 545.

\(^{48}\) Ibn Ezra concludes his citation of Saadia with the words: wi zvl nli j3)mfl rm3 nnx-n. This is in line with his general principle, cited by Simon (mniv111 11 13), that in-t Jlin-t wsiTh 1 )om) i T 3n3 p-l 7,11 19 -rnx OYm ,0tin IN mn X)3 ,19 1InV fO. This principle applies primarily to words occurring only once in a passage. With words occurring two or more times, Ibn Ezra sometimes suspends that principle, for he does recognize wordplay as a feature of biblical style (wtiljn p0wn rmn 11at); see Simon, מפרש המחבר (Jerusalem, 1975) 579 on \(mh\) imw nwi)rnn Mim. Indeed, he himself composed puns; cf. the play on the three meanings of iy-in“his bowstring,” “the rest of it,” “Jethro”—in the poem preceding his commentary to Exod 18:1 (personal communication from Simon). It seems likely that Ibn Ezra did not consider the ketiv in the text and the qere in the margin as two distinct occurrences constituting a wordplay.

\(^{49}\) J. Barr, “A New Look at Kethibh-Qere,” Oudtestamentische Studiën 21 (1981) 31: “Worshippers in the Church of England who repeat the familiar phrase ‘it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves’ . . . are perhaps not sufficiently aware that they are reading the Kethibh and that there is a good case to be made for ‘he hath made us and we are his’ with the Q. Linguistically both are possible: the choice between them must depend on exegetical considerations, e.g., which is the more likely sentiment to have been uttered by a poet in Old Testament Israel. This probably decides in favor of the Q, since few in ancient Israel would have imagined that man was his own creator, and therefore it was not very necessary to oppose that notion. . . . Here again it is important not to misinterpret the K: the writer of the basic text may well have meant ‘to him’ when he wrote the K x5; but by the spelling conventions which eventually became established that writing was normal for ‘not’ and inevitably suggested ‘not.’”

\(^{50}\) See GenR 100 (ed. J. Theodor and C. Albeck, 1283): י רוחה רד ספוג אומ אזי לו כריין דהוא (אלכילום האקולים) אל אנקול דהוא את פגנין אל כריך דהוא את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין את פגנין בין מאמר כריין דהוא (אלכילום האקולים) בין מאמר כריין דהוא (אלכילום האקולים) בין מאמר כריין דהוא (אלכילום האקולים) בין מאמר כריין דהוא (אלقيلום האקולים) בין מאמר כריין דהוא (אלقيلום האקולים) בין מאמר כריין דהוא (אלقيلום האקולים) בין מאמר כריין דהוא (אלقيلום האקולים) בין מאמר כריין דהוא (אלقيلום האколо
7. Saadia Gaon: Meaning-Maximalism and the Fallacy of Over-Specification

We have seen that Saadia’s search for ambiguity had its positive side, but at times Saadia went too far. Some of his lists of meanings exhibit what Uriel Weinreich called the “fallacy of overspecification,” i.e., the fallacy of “exaggerating the incidence of polysemy at the expense of vagueness or generality.” The problem arises when the analyst arbitrarily draws a boundary through what is properly a unitary domain of meaning, and thus splits a single relatively general meaning into a number of relatively specific ones. The result is a phenomenon which we may call “pseudo-polysemy.”

Some discussions of pseudo-polysemy deal with cases where a word is alleged to have different meanings in different contexts. Weinreich, for example, speaks of the verb “eat” in “eat bread” and “eat soup.” Quine questions the claim of some philosophers that the word “true” is ambiguous, having a different meaning in “true logical laws” than it has in “true confessions”: “Why not view ‘true’ as unambiguous but very general, and recognize the difference between true logical laws and true confessions as a difference between logical laws and confessions?” We shall refer to this type of pseudo-polysemy as “context-dependent” pseudo-polysemy.

Other discussions of pseudo-polysemy deal with meanings that may occur in the same context. Thus, Lyons notes that French tapis is not ambiguous despite the fact that it corresponds to three non-

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53 Weinreich, “Explorations,” 322. He begins by saying that “eat has a slightly different meaning in each phrase,” but he goes on to argue that they should not be represented in the dictionary entry for this word.

54 W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge Mass., 1960) 131. My brother, Mark J. Steiner, points out that there are many philosophers who would reject this particular example and that in an example like this one it is difficult to disentangle linguistic and philosophical issues.
synonymous English words: rug, carpet, and mat. Kempson illustrates the point using the English pronoun we and its six Fijian equivalents.

Consider Saadia’s claim, in his commentary to Gen 2:2, that סביות combines eight meanings. Four of the meanings pertain to the nouns כמות and כמות: “cessation of all types of work” (Yom Kippur), “cessation of most types of work” (Sabbath), “cessation of profitable types of work” (festivals), “cessation of one type of work” (sabbatical year). This is a classic example of pseudo-polysemy, for all of these meanings can be reduced to one: “cessation of any amount of work.” The pseudo-polysemy here is not context-dependent. Saadia’s promise to present these meanings in detail when the time comes to explain his translation of סביות shows that Saadia’s goal here is to resolve a contradiction with tradition, but it is difficult to see why the general meaning presented above would not have served Saadia’s purpose just as well.

The first of the eight meanings listed for סביות by Saadia is “cessation of creation—a meaning which he says is required by philosophical speculation, i.e., designed to resolve a contradiction with reason. This meaning is needed in Gen 2:2 תָּה תִּשְׁבַּית שֶׁנֶּחֱטָה מִיֶּנֶּבֶּר כַּמָּל to eliminate any suggestion that God had previously been engaged in a physical activity involving motion and exertion. Here the pseudo-polysemy is context dependent; part of Saadia’s definition (“of creation”) more properly belongs to the modifier כְּכַל מִיֶּנֶּבֶּר “from all his work.”

57 As pointed out by B. Septimus, I am assuming that Saadia here is using the word סביות to mean “meanings,” as elsewhere in his commentary, rather than “varieties of application.” It must be admitted, however, that Saadia may have used the term in two different senses.
58 See §3, above.
Another example of context-dependent pseudo-polysemy is Saadia’s claim that in Deut 28:47–48 the first occurrence of יְָדִּים has a different meaning than the second occurrence. To paraphrase Quine: Why not view יְָדִּים “serve” as unambiguous but general, and recognize the difference between serving the Lord and serving one’s enemies as a difference between the Lord and the enemies? An even clearer example of this type is found in Saadia’s commentary to Gen 4:4, where he discusses the biliteral root י-ש. I translated יְָסָר as “accept” because these two letters when adjacent have [seven] meanings . . . then “accept”: Gen 4:4:6; then “desist” and “leave”: Job 14:6:6; then “head for” and “go towards”: Isa 17:7:6; then ‘occupy oneself’: Exod 5:6:6. Saadia claims that this root has the meaning יְָסָר “head for” in Isa 17:7:6 and the opposite meaning, יְָסָר “leave,” in Job 14:6:6. He makes no attempt to attribute the difference in meaning to the difference in prepositions—to say simply that יְָסָר and יְָסָר are opposites because יְָסָר and יְָסָר are opposites. Later we shall look at Rashi’s discussion of this verb and see how different it is.

8. The Fallacy of Over-Specification in Saadia’s Time and Before

Saadia was not the only one in his time to fall prey to the fallacy of over-specification. Other 10th-century authors, David al-Fasî and Menahem ben Saruq, also assign different meanings to יְָסָר preceding יְָסָר, and יְָסָר preceding יְָסָר. Similarly dubious distinct-
tions were made by Saadia's predecessors, the Masoretes. Dotan\(^67\) has pointed out that among the words which appear in Masoretic lists with the rubric "two occurrences with different meanings" are words like נַחֲּלָן (Judg 15:15, Isa 1:6) and פְּרֹבָּה (2 Sam 18:8, Lam 2:5), which, according to both modern scholars and medievals, have only one meaning.\(^68\)

Saadia's Muslim predecessors and contemporaries—exegesists, lexicographers, grammarians, and philosophers—were no different. Thus, when the 9th-century Quranic exegete, Ibn Qutayba, tries to present examples of الْفَظُّ الْوَاحِدُ لِلْمَعْنَى الْمُتَلَفِّ "one expression for varied meanings" in his تَّوْيِلُ المُشْكِّلِ الْقُرْآنِ,\(^69\) he stumbles into a mine-field of pseudo-polysemy. For kitāb "writing" he gives the meanings qadā "decreed," faraḍa "imposed," ʿaʾala "placed," ʿamara "commanded,"\(^69a\) for ʾal-ʿamr "command" he has al-qadā\(^2\) "decree," ad-din "religion,"\(^70\) al-qawl "remark," al-ʿadāb "punishment," al-qiyāmah "resurrection," al-wahy "revelation," and ad-danb "sin."\(^70a\) In both cases, Ibn Qutayba is careful to add that there is an ʿasl "root-meaning" from which the various meanings branch out, but this hardly suffices to rectify the situation.


\(^{68}\) Many exegetes point out that נַחֲּלָן means "moist" in Isa 1:6 as well as in Jud 15:15. Saadia translates מְסֹלֵל "purulent, full of pus" at Isa 1:6, a translation which, of course, does not fit Jud 15:15. Unfortunately, his commentary to Isa 1:6 is not extant, and it is therefore impossible to say whether he believes that the two occurrences represent two meanings or one.

\(^{69}\) I am indebted to Naphtali Kinberg for calling this chapter to my attention.

\(^{69a}\) ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muslim ibn Qutayba, Tawīl muṣkīl al-qurʾān (Cairo, 1973) 462–463.

\(^{70}\) The meaning "religion" is also listed under ʿal-ʿummah "nation," ʿal-ṣalāḥ "prayer," and ʿal-ḥālq "creation"; Ibid., 446, 461, 507.

\(^{70a}\) Ibid., 514–515.
al-mamarr “the passageway.” Al-Tirmidhī does attempt to show that every one of these meanings can be derived from the meaning al-mayl “inclination,” but the result is nothing more than a thin veneer which cannot hide the error in the underlying assumptions.

The 9th-century grammarian, Abū ʿAli Qūṭrub, includes the verb rāğa in his book on words with two opposite meanings, Kitāb al-ʿAddād. His analysis of this verb parallels Saadia’s analysis of ḥaww: rāğa ʿalayhim warāğa ʿanhum dahaba ʿanhum, “rāğa to them—he came to them; rāğa from them—he went from them.” Cohen, following Nöleke, cites this as an example of “false ʿaddād”:  

D’autres formes auxquelles on ne peut accorder le statut d’ʿaddād sont celles qui n’opposent des significations que dans des constructions différentes. Par exemple lorsqu’il s’agit de verbes qui dénotent un procès dont les directions opposées sont exprimées au moyen de prépositions.

Even the great 9th-century philosopher, Al-Fārābī, was not immune. In his short treatise on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione, he gives examples of various types of ambiguity. The examples for one type are (a) “military” (ḥarbī), as in “military man” (rajul), “military horse/weapon” (faras/silāḥ), “military speech” (kalām), and “military ledger” (daftar) (4 meanings); (b) “medical” (tibbī), as in “medical ledger” (daftar), “medical remedy” (ʿilāj), “medical instrument” (ʿālah) (3 meanings); (c) “wine (adj.)” (ḥamri), as in “wine-grape(s)” (ʿinab) and “wine-color” (lawn) (2 meanings). Modern linguists would
define these adjectives as “relating to war/medicine/wine,” ignoring the nuances of the various possible relationships, but Fārābī held the view that each of these relationships corresponds to a different meaning. 77

Fārābī’s view is an integral part of the Aristotelian tradition, as one can see by tracing the roots of his medical example. Three meanings of “medical” (ιατρικός)—one in the phrase “medical book” (βιβλίον), another in “medical remedy” (φάρμακον), a third in “medical scalpel” (σμίλιον)—are listed already in the commentaries of Porphyry (3rd century CE) and Simplicius (6th century CE) to Aristotle’s Categories. 78

Porphyry’s analysis, in turn, is based on a discussion by Aristotle himself (Metaphysics 11.3.2, 1060b37 ff.), 79 according to which the word “medical” (ιατρικός) is used of both an utterance (λόγος) and a knife (μαχαίριον), i.e., a diagnosis and a scalpel. The phrase used by Aristotle here, “said in several ways” (πολλαχώς λέγεται), was interpreted by Porphyry as a reference to ambiguity rather than mere variety of application, and modern scholars generally agree with this

77 In addition to these examples of pseudo-polysemy, Al-Fārābī has an example of pseudo-homonymy. According to him, an eye and a spring have nothing in common; thus, the use of Arabic āy to refer to both is pure coincidence; Küvel [-Türker], “Fārābīnin Peri Hermeneias Muhtasari,” 49; El-Ajam, Al-Mantiq, 1:141. Maimonides, whose treatise on logic is based on Fārābī’s, accepts his analysis of this example while skipping his examples of pseudo-polysemy; I. Efros, “Maimonides’ Treatise on Logic,” PAAJR 8 (1937–1938) 1; cf. oDinO) miv, 1.44. Abraham de Balme, (Venice, 1523) pp. 67, 68 agrees, as do modern scholars. BDB has separate entries for I. r’v “eye” and II. pY “spring” and a note that the “connexion [of II. pY] with I. r’v [is] dubious.” F. R. Palmer, Semantics (Cambridge, 1976) 66–67, states that “in English, eye is used with a variety of other meanings, e.g., the center of a hurricane or a spring of water, which are not so obviously related semantically to the organ of sight.” In fact, we are dealing with a dead metaphor comparing water flowing from a spring with tears flowing from an eye. The metaphor is frequently revived, e.g., Jer 8:23 ἔρευνα ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀόρατος κατὰ τῆς θάλασσας. The fact that karst springs, such as the Siloam spring, do not flow continuously makes the metaphor even more apt.


interpretation. In a related passage (Metaphysics 7.4.15, 1030a34 ff.), Aristotle states that the word "medical," applied to a patient's body and a procedure and an instrument, is not used "in one sense" (καθ' ἕν). What emerges from reading both passages together is that "medical" is used "in (several senses having) something in common" (κατά τι κοινόν), i.e., "in relation to one end" (πρὸς ἕν).

Ironically, it was this same Aristotle who developed the conceptual tools—definitions and even diagnostic tests—for distinguishing ambiguity (equivocation) from generality (univocation). It is even more ironic that Aristotle's pseudo-polysemous treatment of "medical" was juxtaposed with his distinction between equivocation and univocation in the writings of Porphyry, Simplicius, Al-Fārābī, et al.

It should not be assumed, however, that Aristotle stumbled blindly into this trap. His discussion in Physics (7.4, 249a23 ff.) suggests that he was well aware that some of his examples of ambiguity were less than obvious:

When a term is equivocal, the senses covered by it may be widely removed, or they may have some resemblance, or they may, in fact or by the closeness of their analogies, draw so near to each other that the ambiguity of the term that includes them all, though very real, easily escapes our notice.

Moreover, an examination of the many tests presented in Topics (1.15) for distinguishing ambiguity from generality reveals that most are designed to establish that a word is not merely general. Indeed, the bias in this discussion is revealed clearly by the fact that it contains only one occurrence of the word for generality but two dozen occurrences of expressions for ambiguity.

80 It may be objected that "Aristotle uses the phrase πολλαχῶς λέγεται . . . in many passages where he is not concerned with ambiguity of a term at all in the modern sense of the word"; K. J. J. Hintikka, "Aristotle on the Ambiguity of Ambiguity," Inquiry 2 (1959) 143. However, that does not seem to be the case here; see the translation given on 138.

81 See especially the beginning of the Categories, cited in the Appendix, below. Note, however, that Aristotle's example of univocation and the case in which he fails to recognize univocation are rather different. The former involves a noun ("animal") and is not context-dependent; the latter involves an adjective ("medical") and is context-dependent.

It appears, then, that Saadia was heir to several intellectual traditions in which semantic distinctions which today appear unnecessary were both commonplace and respectable. The principle, later to be enunciated by William of Ockham, that “entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity” did not play much of a role in discussions of meaning in those traditions. Parsimony and generality were not an important goal in lexicology in Saadia’s time. To be sure, Saadia was well acquainted with the meaning-minimalism of the Rabbis, but he avoided it, probably because he associated it with derash.

Explicit protests against pseudo-polysemy in the Islamic world came long after Saadia’s time. One of the most interesting is that of Ibn al-Jawzi, who, like Al-Tirmiḏi, wrote a glossary of ambiguous terms in the Quran. In his introduction, he criticizes previous contributors to this genre, known as al-wujūh wa-n-nāzāʾir:

Those who wrote them [i.e., books of al-wujūh wa-n-nāzāʾir] have gone too far and cited words whose meaning is the same in all places—such as balad “country,” qaryah “village,” madinah “city,” rajul “man,” ‘ɪnsān “human being,” and the like—except that that which is denoted by “country” in one verse is not the country in another verse.

In his conclusion he returns to this theme:

If a careful observer were to argue with those who said them [i.e., cited those examples of ambiguity], he would have to combine many of the meanings into one meaning. And if we were to do that, most of the meanings would be invalidated. . . . Let not the plethora of meanings and entries you see in this kind of book delude you, for they are like a mirage.

9. Spanish Meaning-Minimalism before Rashi

Menahem b. Saruq and Jonah ibn Janāḥ seem to be less eager to multiply meanings than Saadia, although in the absence of a comprehensive study we cannot say anything definite. In the case of ָ-n-ג,
both Menahem and Ibn Janāḥ have dramatically distanced themselves from Saadia, replacing his six meanings with two.  

In the case of -v-v, the movement of Menahem and Ibn Janāḥ away from Saadia is less dramatic. Nevertheless, Ibn Janāḥ’s treatment of one of Saadia’s translations of the verb is strikingly similar to Rashi’s treatment of the Targum:

Even though the meaning of לֹא שָׁמָה אֶל־ה ‘he did not accept,’ the pure sense of the word is ‘he did not turn his attention, he did not look attentively’ as in אֶל־ה הַפְּסֵקָה רָאָה. And it is as if it said מְנַח הַפְּסֵקָה.  

In the case of תּוֹרֵת הַרְשָׁע בּו-כ, Menahem follows Saadia in assigning different meanings to different occurrences of the phrase. In the Mahberet, Amos 1:13 appears in the first המְנַח הַפְּסֵקָה s.v. המְנַח, while 2 Kgs 8:12 appears in the second. Dunash and Ibn Janāḥ, on the other hand, assign the same meaning to both occurrences.

10. French Meaning-Maximalism in Rashi’s Time

It has often been noted that R. Joseph Qara considered discourse cohesion (חיבור הפסוקאות) to be a central concern of peshat exegesis. Thus, it is not surprising that, like Saadia, he occasionally gives radically different interpretations to a single phrase in different contexts.

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88 See §11, below.

89 This interpretation is from Saadia, who apparently had לֹא יָבֵל in the first form; ultimately, it is from Targum Onqelos.

90 This interpretation is from Saadia, who apparently had לֹא יָבֵל in the first form; ultimately, it is from Targum Onqelos.

91 Mahberet, 142*.


Some of these interpretations are rather forced. Thus, he takes Gen 37:26 \( \text{וכותיו או תָּמָּן} \) to mean “let’s pocket his sale price,” relating the verb to כיס "pocket" and the noun to mishnaic כיס "sale price":

כיסינו מדמי ממכרה. כיסינו לשוין כיס, כٲשו לשוין דורוף.

By contrast, in Job 16:18 his interpretation of \( \text{אל תלקסת תפּכַּי} \) is the conventional “do not cover up my blood,” judging from his comment to the second half of that verse: \( \text{אל תלקסת תפּכַּי...} \). It is only in Gen 37:26 that the concealing of blood seems to be irrelevant to the context (a discussion of profit). It is ironic that an interpretation arising out of such unmidrashic concerns should have such a midrashic flavor.

Another example is his claim that the stereotyped phrase \( \text{ינָא יִדִּישׁ} \), which in Ps 9:14 and 25:18 means “see my affliction,” has the meaning “find answering me appealing” in Job 10:15:

ינָא יִדִּישׁ: או מעזר הראה יש ידיעי שלמה. הראה כמי ה Yellowstone

This interpretation is designed to establish a connection with 9:15–16, where Job complains that God never answers him. That Qara had no interest in applying it to the dozen or so other occurrences of יִדִּישׁ in the Bible can be seen in his comment to Lam 1:9:

אבר גורא אתי המทาน יוכל לדמות Ethereum שם אמרו שלושシェקולה נמחה...

94 The interpretation of יִדִּישׁ as a denominative from יִדִּי derives the two words from a single biliteral root, יָד–יִדִּי, with no regard for the morphological difference between them. As such, it is reminiscent of R. Jose Ha-Galili’s interpretation of יִדִּי in Gen 22:1 as a denominative from יִדִּי “mast (of ship)”: GenR 55 (ed. Theodor–Albeck, 588). The interpretation of יִדִּי based on postbiblical usage is also typical of midrash.

95 The variant reading in the critical apparatus.

On the other hand, Qara does not follow Saadia and Menahem in taking נียน as a homonymous phrase. It seems that he saw no need to resort to this solution because he was convinced by Dunash’s clarification of the connection between splitting open pregnant women and expanding territory in Amos 1:13.99

11. Rashi: Meaning-Minimalism through Gemeinbedeutung and Grundbedeutung

The dominant figure in the shift towards meaning-minimalism was Rashi.100 Rashi was constantly on the lookout for core meanings (common denominators), such as:

101

Rashi has a fondness for definitions of the form “every occurrence of term X, whether pertaining to +Y or to -Y, has the meaning

99 Teșubot de Dunas' ben Labrat, 54*-55*.
100 All citations from Rashi’s commentary to the Torah have been corrected in accordance with MSS Leipzig 1, Vienna 23 and 24. The folio numbers are given for the two Vienna manuscripts but not for Leipzig 1, since they are not visible in the microfilm available to me. Citations from the commentary to Samuel are from 5xnwv "Wvi vvl oY, ed. M. L. Katznellenbogen (Jerusalem, 1995); citations from the commentaries to Minor Prophets, Isaiah, and Psalms are from I. Maarsen, Parschandatha: The Commentary of Raschi on the Prophets and Hagiographs (Amsterdam, 1930–36). For other books, Vienna 24 has been consulted. Only a few key passages are translated below.

101 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 35a; Vienna 24, 27a.
102 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 40b; Vienna 24, 35a. See also the commentary to Hab 2:16.
103 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 61b; Vienna 24, 66a.
Some of these definitions may have been designed to challenge Menahem's claim, borrowed from the Muslim lexicographers, that a word can have two diametrically opposed meanings.\footnote{Mahberet, s.v. i\textsuperscript{55}innv, 66*-67*} For cases where no common denominator could be found, Rashi developed a theory of primary meanings.\footnote{Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 84b Vienna 24, 95b.} As we have seen, Muslim exegetes like Ibn Qutayba had a theory of this type as well, but it did nothing to stem the proliferation of meanings in their work. Indeed, it may have had the opposite effect, giving license to pseudo-polysemy by serving as a kind of disclaimer: “Naturally, I realize that all of these meanings derive from a single, primary meaning.” For Rashi, the theory of primary meanings was an integral part of his meaning-minimalist program. This is clearest in his treatment of

\footnote{Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 106a; Vienna 24, 121a. For the reading יִפְקָד instead of MT יָפָקֵד, see Berliner’s note ad loc. Rashi to Isa 65:5 also has יָפָקֵד, as does Qara (see הָפָקַד הָפָקַד הָפָקַד), but, surprisingly, only the latter interprets חָפָקֶס in a way that fits the comment to Deut 22:9. This does not mean that the comment is really Qara’s. It is possible that Qara added just the reference to Isa 65:5 or that Rashi simply changed his mind. Vienna 24, 225b.}

\footnote{I am indebted to David Tene for the suggestion that Rashi’s use of Hebrew, rather than French, to define Hebrew words may have encouraged him to view one of them as primary. This makes a good deal of sense in the case of a word like יָד; instead of striving to find some way of explaining the meaning “hand,” it was simpler for Rashi to refer to יָד.}
the meaning of ר. Of Rashi’s many comments on this subject, the one at Exod 14:31 is the fullest:

The great hand—the great mighty deed which God’s hand has performed. Many meanings fit the word ר, but they are all the same as the meaning of an actual hand, which the interpreter adjusts according to the context.

Here Rashi is speaking from the viewpoint of the exegete: the interpreter has to adjust the basic, literal meaning of the word to fit the context. His grandson, R. Jacob Tam, makes what seems to be the same point from the viewpoint of the linguist: מֵעֵט לְמָשֵׁר נִפְשָׁתָן פֶלֶטְרֵס פֶל עָשָׁה נֶשָׁתָן מְדִינָת. Here it is the context which pulls and stretches the basic meaning, not the exegete.

Rashi’s view that there is really only one meaning, which “the interpreter adjusts according to the context,” marks him as a true meaning-minimalist. Indeed, it foreshadows the very definition of the term given by the linguist who coined it: “Meaning-minimalists attribute more importance to pragmatic rules of reinterpretation.
according to the context and tend to accept only minimal meanings and unambiguous words.\textsuperscript{113}

Rashi applies this principle frequently, especially in dealing with the meanings of the word ו ("hand," "might," and "place"), for which no common denominator can be found.\textsuperscript{114} At Exod 2:5, he again uses the phrase ו ו to refer to the basic, literal meaning of the word:

עלピン קינא: אתל חגור בפוני עזא קינא עלピン קינא ו לא ידע במוש שיר

Rashi’s formulation shows that he was thinking of the principle discussed in bBM 56b: "לכל היכן כתיבי ו ו ו וה מוש שיר, "wherever ו is written, it means his actual hand."\textsuperscript{116} This discussion deals with only two of the meanings of ו: "hand" and "possession." In his Bible commentary, Rashi reinterprets this talmudic principle, applying it to the full range of meanings of ו.

It is mainly in Genesis and Exodus that Rashi uses the term מוש.\textsuperscript{117} At Num 2:17, he uses a different formulation:

עלピン: על מוקם ו אנוי לושד ו י מוש שיר. וה משקים לקרי על יד סמוכה ו

What Rashi means by this last comment can best be understood by examining the dictionary he used, Menahem ben Saruq’s Mahberet:

\textsuperscript{113} Posner, “Bedeutungsmaximalismus,” 378.
\textsuperscript{114} For the attestations of these and other meanings according to Rashi, see C. S. Segal, מונחינו רשבתי (Jerusalem, 1989), s.v. I shall cite only those comments of Rashi which invoke his semantic principle. It is probably just an accident that he does not mention the principle in connection with the meaning "possession" in his commentary to Gen 24:10, Exod 22:3, Num 21:26. The comment על היכן כתיבי ו ומוש שיר, found in Berliner’s edition of Rashi and in Vienna 23, 84a, may not be original. The comments in Vienna 24, 94b–95a and in Leipzig 1 (at the beginning of a section of the commentary which was initially omitted and subsequently inserted) are very different from the above text and from each other.
\textsuperscript{116} Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 39a; Vienna 24, 32a.
\textsuperscript{117} Cf. Rashi to Exod 7:4 ו ו ו ו, Num 45:2 ו ו ו ו, 45:16 ו ו ו ו (referring, apparently, to the toponym rather than the body part), and Num 24:8 ו ו ו ו.
\textsuperscript{118} Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 78a; 24, 87b.
The examples in the first category are labeled ovvn ovvn. Menahem's use of this term has engendered much controversy, beginning in his own time, but his intention appears to be "[these examples are used] according to their basic, literal meaning." The examples in the second category have a non-basic, non-literal meaning: "place." Thus, when Rashi asserts that the word ד, even when it means "place," does not depart from conveying, it would seem that he is saying that Menahem's second category is derived from the first.

The other predecessor to whom Rashi is reacting is Onqelos. That Rashi associated the interpretation of ד as "place" with the Targum can be seen in his comment to Deut 23:13:

"It appears that Rashi is attempting to modify or clarify Menahem's interpretation of the Targum.

The same can be said of Rashi's comment to Gen 41:47:

119 _Mahberet_, 204*.
121 This is the meaning of the term in the commentaries of Rashi; see E. M. Lip-schuetz, _riyj_ (Jerusalem, 1966) 167 (Targum Onqelos); N. Leibowitz and M. M. Ahrend, _rvrnn_ 470 (Targum Onqelos). Thus, Rashi to Gen 18:2 asks: "What is ar ar? The first is used according to its basic, literal meaning, and the second is a reference to understanding." Similarly, Ibn Ezra writes that the meaning of ar in Gen 1:3 is not, pace Saadia Gaon, "desired" but, i.e., "said." David Qimḥi uses the expression ar ar to refer to figurative language; M. Z. Cohen, "Radak's Contribution to the Tradition of Figurative Biblical Exegesis" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University 1994) 63–83. The term comes from rabbinic literature; cf. Rashi to Exod 21:6, Lev 18:7, Deut 15:17, etc. It is clear from all of this that little can be learned about the meaning of ar ar from Rashi's comment to Prov 30:15. Rashi is merely agreeing with Dunash that Menahem's failure to explain this hapax suggests that it was known to Arabic-speaking Jews.
122 Although it is also found in Sifre Deut 257 (ed. L. Finkelstein, 281): וַאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂאוּ לָךְ, וַיֶּאֶרֶץ לִפְלֵיכָם, וַיֵּשֶׁב בָּאָרֶץ לִפְלֵיכָם.
123 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 106b; Vienna 24, 121b.
124 Moreover, the interpretation of ר as "might" is found in the Targum but not in Menahem.
125 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 33b; Vienna 24, 25a.
Here again, Menahem seems to interpret the Targum as assigning a second meaning to the word, distinct from the basic, literal one—an interpretation that Rashi rejects. Two other comments of this type can be viewed as reactions to the Targum (Gen 41:41) or Menahem (Prov 3:29) alone:

The terminology that Rashi uses in his Grundbedeutung exegesis is of great interest. In one example, Gen 18:19, he uses the word יָכָר, the Hebrew equivalent of Arabic "asyl:

This use recalls the use of the root ה-כ-ר in the phrase "it does not budge from its basic meaning," which appears nine times in varying forms in Rashi’s commentaries. In addition to Num 2:17, Gen 41:47, and Prov 3:29 already cited, we have:

We should also look more closely at the formula “it does not budge from its basic meaning,” which appears nine times in varying forms in Rashi’s commentaries. In addition to Num 2:17, Gen 41:47, and Prov 3:29 already cited, we have:

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An interesting perspective on this formula is provided by a similar formula which Rashi uses in connection with the phrase פָּרָיֶנָה יַבֵּסָם (Exod 19:24), vocalized with games qatan, in contrast to פָּרָיֶנָה יַבֵּסָם (Exod 19:22) with the expected holam:

פָּרָיֶנָה יַבֵּסָם: פָּרָיֶנָה יַבֵּסָם רְבֵּצֵם. אָכָל עִדְּמָהּ נִקְדָּה חַס קְפִים וֶאֱכָל עִדְּמָהּ נִקְדָּה חַס קְפִים.

“Lest he break out against them”—even though it (yn) is pointed with a hataf qames, it does not budge from its basic form (‘niz). So it is with every word pointed with a holam—when it is attached with a maqaf, the pointing changes to hataf qames.

What the formula mn io i x conveys is that the form in question is not an independent by-form; it is a variant of the Grundform (hr) conditioning by the phonological context. Similarly, the formula makes the point that targumic renderings like "place" for at and "gather" for nvv are not independent meanings but variants of the Grundbedeutung (mn) conditioned by the semantic context (pv). It is based on the conception that pvv is called a pvv.

Thus, Rashi employs both Grundbedeutung exegesis and Gemeinbedeutung exegesis in the cause of meaning-minimalism. It is not

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131 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 48a; Vienna 24, 45b.
132 For the uses of the term hr in Rashi's commentary, see H. Englander, "Grammatical Elements and Terminology in Rashi," HUCA 14 (1939) 405–406. The use in our passage is paralleled by its use at Gen 7:23 וֶאָכָל עִדְּמָהּ נִקְדָּה חַס קְפִים; Deut 32:35 וָאָכָל עִדְּמָהּ נִקְדָּה חַס קְפִים, and Est 3:13 וָאָכָל עִדְּמָהּ נִקְדָּה חַס קְפִים.
133 According to Leibowitz and Ahrend, פָּרָיֶנָה יַבֵּסָם, 471, a meaning of this type is called a פָּרָיֶנָה יַבֵּסָם.
easy to ascertain where Rashi drew the line between these two tech-
niques. Why, for example, does he treat ר as a case of Grundbedeu-
tung but ר כ as a case of Gemeinbedeutung—to the extent that he
places the concrete sense of “foreskin” (รวנה בשר) in the middle of
his list of uses? 134

To make matters more difficult, we occasionally find a discussion
of Gemeinbedeutung containing phraseology typical of Grundbedeu-
tung exegesis, such as asכנפ וברק:

This may indicate that Rashi did not make a sharp distinction
between the two categories, which for him served the same goal. 136
Indeed, it is possible that, in his eyes, a core meaning was simply a
special kind of primary meaning.

According to Rashi, then, many words which his predecessors seem
to treat as ambiguous actually have a single underlying meaning. In
some cases, the latter is a Grundbedeutung, a primary meaning; in
others, it is a Gemeinbedeutung, a core meaning. In addition to the
primary meaning or the core meaning, there is also a set of deriva-
tive, contextual meanings—variants of the underlying meaning con-
tioned by the context.

12. Rashi vs. Saadia

The difference between Rashi and Saadia Gaon is striking: Saadia
is a meaning-maximalist while Rashi is a meaning-minimalist. Where
the constant refrain of Saadia is “X has so-and-so many meanings,”
the refrains of Rashi are “every X means Y” and “X does not budge
from its basic meaning.”

Saadia makes no distinction between translation and lexicology; if
a Hebrew word has a dozen Arabic translations, it has a dozen mean-
ings. Rashi sees exegesis and lexicology as very different activities.

134 See above.
135 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 66b; Vienna 24, 73a.
136 This possibility was suggested to me by Yeshayahu Maori.
The lexicographer records the basic meaning of each word; the exegete makes verses more intelligible by adjusting the basic meaning to fit its context within each verse.

In other words, Saadia seems to recognize only contextual meanings; if he accepted the existence of an underlying meaning in some instances, he does not bother to tell us. What he tells us is that some meanings are more common than others—not that they are more basic. Rashi does not deny the existence of contextual meanings, but he gives them less weight than the underlying meaning.

The difference between these two great scholars can also be seen in their contrasting treatments of four individual examples: ד-מ, ו-ש, ב-ד, and י-ו. We saw above that Saadia lists six meanings for ד-מ in his commentary to Gen 6:6 and Exod 32:14. Rashi’s position is strikingly different. In an impressive demonstration of Ockham’s razor, he shows that one meaning, “to reconsider, have a change of heart” suffices for all of the occurrences that do not deal with consolation:

\[
\text{וז-מ, כ. ל. ניקטס: לים על נאהת לקושב מביתא אברהם לותנכי כ. }
\]

Similarly, for the biliteral root ו-ש Saadia lists seven meanings in his commentary to Gen 4:4, of which four correspond to the triliteral root ו-ש-ו. Here again, Rashi is very different. He believes that three of the four occurrences have the same meaning: “to turn”:

\[
\text{ו-ש-ו, כ. ל. ניקטס: הנותשת להמ מהשבת אחרים לוחטיב על החיה אשר השבת }
\]

\[
\text{ורמ. כ. ל. ניקטס: והשבתיו מהשבת אחור. }
\]

\[
\text{ויאל ב. כ. ל. ניקטס: למעלה נפש מהשבת אחור. }
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\]

\[
\text{ויאל ב. כ. ל. ניקטס: למעלה נפש מהשבת אחור. }
\]

137 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 3; Vienna 24, 4a.
138 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 22; Vienna 24, 16b.
139 Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 60a; Vienna 24, 63a.
140 ln) vx 동 tv :n Wrr, 85 (Heb. transl., 307). Maḥberet, 365*-366* has eleven entries. With this lexeme we have not only pseudo-polysemy but also pseudo-homonymy created by the biliteral root theory (or rather, the failure to distinguish different types of biliteral roots).
Furthermore, Saadia takes the two occurrences of נֵּפֶן in Deut 32:14 as having two different meanings, which he renders "fat" and בַּצַּל "best part" in the Tafsir, unlike Rashi who, in his commentary to Gen 45:18, gives the latter as a core meaning.

Finally, Rashi gives בַּצַּל כְּרִים in Amos 1:13 the same meaning that it has in 2 Kgs 8:12 and Hos 14:1, viz., "split open the pregnant women of," unlike Saadia who takes it to mean "capture the mountains of" in Amos 1:13, a meaning which does not fit the other occurrences of the phrase.

13. The Origins of Rashi's Theory

Rashi is not known as a linguist and it is, therefore, natural to assume that his remarkable semantic theory was borrowed—but from whom? Menahem b. Ḥelbo is not likely to have been the source, judging from the meaning-maximalist exegesis of his nephew, Joseph Qara.

We are certainly not dealing with a borrowing from the Christian exegetes of France, whose approach to biblical lexicology has far more in common with the approach of Saadia than that of Rashi. The dictionaries of biblical terms composed by the French scholastics beginning in the 12th century were known as distinctiones, apparently because of their tendency to make fine distinctions, resulting in lists of up to ten or fifteen literal and figurative senses. Exegetes, too, were fond of such lists. One 12th-century English copy of Luke has a marginal note distinguishing five senses of maledictum 'cursed': 'cursed in anger,' 'cursed by reason,' 'cursed by blame,' 'cursed by punishment,' 'cursed in being shamed.' This type of exegesis began at least six centuries earlier:

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141 Leipzig 1; Vienna 24, 3a (Vienna 23 is missing the page with this comment). Berliner's version of this comment has additional parallels, but Leipzig 1 and the Rome and Guadalajara editions have only the parallel from Job 14.

142 Hirschfeld, "The Arabic Portion (Third Article)," 102.

143 See §10, above.

144 G. R. Evans, The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1984) 80. I am indebted to Haym Soloveitchik for this reference.

145 Evans, Language and Logic, 81.
Studies of individual words, designed to separate their meanings or significations had been a commonplace in exegesis for many centuries. In his Moralia in Job, Gregory the Great says that the word "man" is used in three ways in the Bible: to refer to man's nature . . . ; in reference to man's frailty . . . ; to refer to man's sinfulness. . . . 146

As with Saadia, the purpose of these sense distinctions was often to resolve contradictions. Thus, in the 12th century, Hugh of St. Victor reconciled two contradictory statements in the gospel of John by distinguishing different senses of iudicium: "judgment in this world" and "judgment in the next world." 147 Like Saadia, he is not content to give only the two meanings necessary for the problem at hand; for the sake of completeness he records his list of four senses. With Saadia, such lists of irrelevant facts are a manifestation of the encyclopedic style of gaonic exegesis which drove Ibn Ezra to distraction. 148

When we turn to the medieval French speculative grammarians, we find that they are much closer to Rashi. Like Rashi, they distinguish the basic meaning of words from their meanings in context. Already in the second half of the 11th century, the anonymous author of the Glosule to Priscian's Institutiones Grammaticae wrote:

For active (verbs) frequently govern inanimate (nouns), as "I love the book," but even so, in such a construction, "I love" does not lose its force of governing, by nature, men. For words are not to be judged according to their (contextual) construction, but rather according to the intrinsic nature of their meaning. 149

The phrase sed tamen . . . non perdit potentiam reminds one of Rashi's phrase ivnvn ii im ID pD ' v 'ix in his gloss to Exod 28:38. And the phrase secundum actum constructionis may be compared to the phrase אָּרָּחֵּ֣ן הָּבְרַ֣ר in Rashi's gloss to Exod 14:30. 150

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146 Ibid.
147 Ibid., 82.
148 See the beginning of Ibn Ezra's introduction to his Torah commentary.
150 See n. 111, above.

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Despite these parallels between Rashi and the Glosule and the apparent agreement in time and place, it is unclear to what extent one may speak of influence. Rashi's theory is clearly a product of his experience as an exegete, and the problems with which he grapples are genuine lexicological problems—unlike the ones in the Glosule. Rashi deals with polysemy, while the Glosule deals with variety of application.

Rashi's distinction between basic meaning and contextual meaning does not necessarily owe anything to the work of the French speculative grammarians. We have already seen that Rashi's formulation and favorite example of this distinction owe much to bBM 56b: לשח הכנים יד רד ממע המ. As for the distinction itself, Rashi may have hit upon it independently, in striving to reconcile the conflicting lexicological tendencies of targumic literature and ancient rabbinic literature. The former, like all translations in varying degrees, is forced to vary its renderings of individual words according to the requirements of context. The latter tends to assume a single meaning in all contexts, often with fanciful results. 151 This is particularly true of amoraic midrash aggadah, 152 but meaning-minimalist

151 I am indebted to Yeshayahu Maori for pointing out to me this influence on Rashi's lexicology. He points to the many midrashim cited by Rashi which assume the literal meaning of idiomatic expressions in the Torah, e.g., Gen 24:10 הָיִינוּ לְמֹשֶׁלּוֹ, “with all the bounty of his master in his hand” (referring to a deed held in his hand; Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 18; Vienna 24, 14) and Exod 8:2 יָּנָּשׁ (referring to a single frog; Leipzig 1; Vienna 23, 41a; Vienna 24, 35b). In the latter case, Onqelos translates יָּנָּשׁ as a plural. Rashi apparently viewed this as closer to the peshat, but as merely a contextual rendering. His own suggestion combines the literalism of the Midrash with the contextualism of the Targum: the singular noun יָּנָּשׁ can refer to a single swarm of frogs. As for Gen 24:10, both the Mekhilta (ed. H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin, p. 267) and Sifre Num 157 (ed. H. S. Horovitz 210) cite this verse to prove that יִרְבַּעית elsewhere in the Torah means “in his possession.” There is no reason to assume that Rashi understood the amoraic midrash, which he cites, as contradicting the tannaic interpretation. It seems more likely that, in Rashi's view, the amoraic midrash merely explains how the contextual meaning of רבעית in Gen 24:10 derives from its basic meaning. Rashi's comment is thus equivalent to something like: יִרְבַּעית, וַאֲנֵה יִרְבַּעית שֶׁבֶּי יְהוָה. לַמֵּצַע יָּנָּשׁ, שֶׁרְבִּיוּת לְמַעַרְשֵׁהוּ שֶׁכְּכַשׁ בְּרַשֵּׁת מִכָּנָא דְּבִּרֵי

152 See the preceding footnote. However, meaning maximalism can also be found in, e.g., R. Osha'ya's derasha on Prov 8:30 at the very beginning of GenR. תַּקְּרָא לְמָשְׁלָה כֶּלֶת וַעֲנָא—קְרָא מַרְאֶה מַמְלֵקֶת אֱלֹהִים כְּכַשׁ בְּרַשֵּׁת מִכָּנָא דְּבִּרֵי. The last two meanings are difficult to distinguish and the occurrences of יָּנָּשׁ cited as proof texts for the three meanings (Num 11:12, Lam 4:5, Est 2:7) were viewed as having one and the same meaning by Saadia (who renders them all with Arabic hadana “bring up”) and most other exegetes. For further discussion of this derasha, see J. Fraenkel, הָאֵרָבָא (Tel-Aviv, 1996) 93–94.
treatments of legal terms can also be found in the Talmud\textsuperscript{153} and in tannaitic midrash halakhah.

Tannaitic definitions are usually of the form ... x)x ... p), \textsuperscript{154} but in a few places, we find an expanded formula which exhibits a quest for generality: . .. .xx mrip 5n . .. p.. Thus, in Sifre Numbers, we have definitions like:

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
Ne1IN1 oI)O 'NI ;rI a'VO3 pNV-X Nfl 23 . 1OO ni3-)I IlOINI lOh O fl V)3 )M V ' l
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

Although Rashi never cites the first definition, \textsuperscript{157} he cites the second no less than seven times in his commentaries. \textsuperscript{158} It seems to have made a profound impression on him, and he cannot but have noticed that it contradicted the Aramaic renderings of Onqelos and Jonathan: 

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
ונע = \textit{יורש} (Lev 22:2), שבדק = \textit{ינינו} (Lev 25:5), חסנ = \textit{יינינו} (Hos 9:10), הממש יגש ממצוקד = \textit{קנור} (Zech 7:3).
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

Each of the four occurrences of the root cited by Sifre has a different translation; only the rendering at Lev 22:2 agrees with the Midrash. This tension between targumic and rabbinic exegesis must have bothered Rashi. In attempting to account for it, Rashi built a sophisticated theory which is a true milestone in the history of biblical philology, although it has not been recognized as such. \textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{153} In bYev 102b, the Talmud attempts to defend the position that the verb נMatrixMode means “remove” everywhere in the Bible. In the end, it is forced to concede that in some places it means “gird.”

\textsuperscript{154} S. Lieberman, \textit{הַלַּחֹקִיָּה בּוֹאֵר אֲבָרֵי מֶסֶךְ} (Jerusalem, 1962) 186–188 = \textit{Hellenism in Jewish Palestine} (New York, 1950) 49–51; Melamed, מֶסֶךְ, 109ff. Lieberman (p. 51) believes that the definitions of this form “which are incorporated in the Halakhic Midrashim have their origin in a very ancient commentary.”

\textsuperscript{155} Sifre Num 2 and 7 (pp. 5 and 11).

\textsuperscript{156} Sifre Num 23 (p. 28), cited by Melamed, מֶסֶכְ, 112.

\textsuperscript{157} He cites only the parallel definition from the Sifra, in his commentary to Lev 5:15.

\textsuperscript{158} Avinery, \textit{דַּרְשִׁיָּה רֵיתָי}, vol. 2, part 2, col. 741.

\textsuperscript{159} It is not even mentioned in recent studies of Rashi’s lexicological method: N. Netzer, \textit{נִקְרָאָת אֵלֶּיהָ לְבִי רַבִּי אָבְרָהָם מֶסֶכְ, Proceedings of the
14. Spanish Meaning-Minimalism after Rashi

The reaction against the excesses of Saadia’s meaning-maximalism which began with Menahem and Ibn Janāḥ became much more pronounced among the later Sephardi exegetes. This can already be discerned in the writings of Abraham ibn Ezra.

Ibn Ezra, in arguing against the existence of addād, gives a core meaning for a word that seems to have two opposite meanings: "any X, whether good or bad." Although this resembles Rashi’s definitions of the form “any X, whether good or bad,” it is unlikely that Ibn Ezra was influenced by them.

Simon, in describing Ibn Ezra’s exegetical method, writes of “his marked tendency to minimize, to the extent possible, his recourse to the exegetical strategy of ‘this word has to be interpreted in two senses.’” Thus, in a passage on אוביגואים, Ibn Ezra writes: "An example may be given of the word אוביגואים, which can be interpreted in two ways: one meaning is the opposite of the other, whether that meaning is for the good or for the bad" (Commentary on the Mishnah, Avot 5.6; cf. Guide 3.53). Uriel Simon suggests that this may be an example of Ibn Ezra’s influence on Maimonides, to be added to I. Twersky, "The Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath," in Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath, ed. I. Twersky and J. M. Harris (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), Hebrew Section, 21–48.

In his article, Simon shows that Ibn Ezra’s view of the meaning of addād was shaped by his belief that the existence of addād would undermine the communicative function of language. In a personal communication, he adds that Ibn Ezra’s halachic errors and infrequent references to Rashi (only thirteen in his Torah commentary, twelve of them in the long commentary to Exodus) show that he did not have constant access to Rashi’s commentaries.

Simon, ידיעות, 117. Simon informs me that the passage that he cites there from a work attributed to Ibn Ezra, is not his (personal communication).
In that same work, Ibn Ezra rejects the view of his predecessors that the prefix -ן is a homonym. Dunash held that in -ן הַנִּכְפֶּשׁ the first occurrence of -ן has the meaning אָזָה while the second occurrence has the meaning הבית אָזָה. Ibn Ezra held that such a distinction could not be drawn: בְּךָ אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹמְרֵי קָדָם עֲצֵמוֹנֵי בָּטַחִים כָּלַת וְכָלַת נַחַלֵי. This is a fine example of meaning-minimalism.

There is also evidence of a meaning-minimalist tendency in David Qimhi's writings. His comment to Ps 17:1 לקָרֶה looks like an imitation of Rashi's style: רָאָה מִצְפֵּי יֶדֶם וְלָבָבָם וְלָכָבָם לְכָלַת וְכָלַת נַחַלֵי וְכָלַת נַחַלֵי. Compare this with Rashi's comment to Hab 1:10, and note how many words are shared: . . . , וְכָלַת נַחַלֵי לְכָלַת נַחַלֵי וְלָכָבָם לְכָלַת נַחַלֵי וְלָכָבָם לְכָלַת נַחַלֵי . . . . . . .

Qimhi's treatment of the particle -ן is an impressive display of meaning-minimalism. His starting point is the treatment of Ibn Janāḥ: הֲכֲלַת וְכָלַת נַחַלֵי. In fact, Ibn Janāḥ had given sixteen meanings for -ן and eight for -ן; Qimhi was able to make do with three meanings for -ן and two for -ן. In some cases, the reduction is achieved through reinterpretation of verses. Thus, Qimhi argues at length that all of Ibn Janāḥ's examples of -ן . . .

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165 See סְפִּר יִבְנֵי יְשׁוּעַ, 59; cf. also 39–40.
166 See also Ibn Janāḥ, Le livre des parterres fleuris, ed. J. Derenbourg (Paris, 1886) 84 = סְפִּר יִבְנֵי יְשׁוּעַ, ed. M. Wilensky (Jerusalem, 1964) 101. For a modern defense of this view, see H. S. Nyberg, Hebreisk Grammatik (Uppsala, 1952) 235. Nyberg believes that, in such cases, the -ן represents an interjection which has fallen together with the definite article.
167 For a different evaluation, see A. Maman, Am va-Sefer 7 (1992) 28–31.
“although” really mean “because.” In other cases, Qimhi provides a core meaning. Thus, his statement that ox sometimes serves to exclude (לצמך) is equivalent to four of Ibn Janāh’s meanings: “but rather,” “except,” “though,” and “but.”

Despite this, Qimhi was not enough of a meaning-minimalist to satisfy the ever-carping Joseph ibn Kaspi, from whose partially published dictionary Rosenberg cites the following entry (s.v. אומר):

cpm שamarinuv McM पुमय Mc हेतो सदरिनी अन्वर श्रेष्ठ देख आिर बे रसुक आहेत

15. Meaning-Maximalism Today

In modern Bible scholarship, meaning-maximalism has enjoyed something of a revival. There are remarkable parallels between Saadia’s translation and commentary to Genesis and certain modern works, such as Speiser’s translation and commentary to Genesis and the new JPS translation of the Torah. Like Saadia’s Tafsir, they represent a break with an earlier tradition of translation. And like Saadia’s Tafsir, they contain introductions stressing the obligation of the translator/exegete to note the ambiguity of Hebrew lexical items. Thus, Speiser’s Introduction makes the following claim:

The Hebrew term אומר coincides by and large with the English verb “to say.” But the Hebrew verb in question carries many other nuances: to tell, promise, threaten, express fear, reflect (speak to oneself), and the like. A uniform translation would result not only in monotony but also in under-representation.

The parallel with Saadia extends even to details: a similar list of meanings for אומר is found in an abridgment of Saadia’s commentary.

The passage cited above goes beyond the rejection of slavish, purely mechanical translations. For Speiser, varying the translation of אומר is not merely a device to help the modern reader understand

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172 Genesis, p. lxvii.

173 ל, p. ה. פִּינְחָס בְּרָשָׁיָהוּ לְכָלָּאשָׁת פִּינוֹחַ.
and enjoy the Bible, it is necessary to avoid "under-representation." Like Saadia, Speiser believes that each of his translations represents a distinct meaning.

It appears that, in attempting to avoid under-representation, Speiser has gone too far in the other direction. If \( \text{\textit{vov}} \) means "express fear" in some contexts, does it not also mean "express anger," "express joy," "express surprise," etc., etc. in others? There is no limit to the number of contexts in which a word may occur, and there is no limit to the number of meanings that zealous meaning-maximalists may discover. Meaning-minimalists can also be over-enthusiastic, but, since the number of meanings of a word cannot be less than zero, there is a limit to how far they can go.

16. Appendix: Terms for Ambiguity and Generality through the Ages

According to the curriculum established in late antiquity, the first topic in the study of philosophy was the distinction between ambiguity and generality at the beginning of the Categories:

Things which have only a name in common, the definition [lit., statement of essence] corresponding with the name being different, are said to be equivocally named (\( \delta \mu \omega \nu \mu \alpha \)). For instance, while a man and a portrait can properly both be called "animals," these are equivocally named. . . . Things which have the name in common are said to be univocally named (\( \sigma \nu \nu \alpha \nu \nu \mu \alpha \)) when the definition [lit., statement of essence] corresponding with the name is the same in both cases. Thus a man and an ox are called "animals."\(^{175}\)

Aristotle does not have a consistent terminology. In the passage cited above, he uses the term \( \delta \mu \omega \nu \nu \mu \alpha \) (contrasted with \( \sigma \nu \nu \alpha \nu \nu \mu \alpha \))

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\(^{174}\) The merits of that have been debated in the past, as when Franz Rosenzweig attacked E. Kautzsch for his misguided attempt to relieve the "monotony" of the Tabernacle pericope by varying his translation of the recurring verb \( \gamma \nu \gamma \nu \gamma \); see N. Leibowitz, Studies in Shemot (Jerusalem, 1976) 485–486. Uriel Simon points out (personal communication) that a similar critique of modern scholarly translations, including that of Speiser, is to be found in R. Alter, Genesis: Translation and Commentary (New York, 1996) ix–xxxix.

to refer to things. However, in his long excursus on ambiguity in Topics 1.15, he uses it to refer to words, and he switches back and forth between it and the terms πολλαχος/πλέοναχος λεγόμενα “used (lit., said) in several ways” (contrasted with μοναχος λεγόμενα “used [lit., said] in a single way”). One can also find places where ομώνυμα is restricted to one type of ambiguity as well as places where πολλαχος λεγόμενα refers to uses which are not distinct meanings.

As for the term συνώνυμα, in Topics 8.13, 162b38 and Rhetoric 3.2.7, Aristotle uses it in our modern sense of “synonyms.”

Aristotle’s συνώνυμα is rendered ʾmazlay šān “intertwined in name” in the Syriac translation of the Categories by George, Bishop of the Arabs; al-mutawāṭatu smāʾihā “agreeing in their names” in Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn’s Arabic translation; univoca in Boethius’ Latin translation, and (with reference to names rather than things) al-ʾasmāʾu l-lattu ṭaqālu bi-tawāṭu “names used (lit., said) in agreement” by Al-Fārābī, and al-ʾasmāʾu l-mutawāṭah “agreeing names” by Maimonides. Hebrew treatises usually have ʾamōt ha-metsēmō “agreed/agreeing names” or nĕvmn “names used (lit., said) in agreement,” but one also finds ʾamōt ha-metsēmō “agreed/agreeing names” or nĕvmn “names used (lit., said) in agreement.”

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178 The two uses of the term are discussed by Sh. Rosenberg, “ʾamōt ha-siqam,” in Language, Thought, Society: In Memoriam Yeḥoshua Bar-Hillel, ed. Y. Melzer (Jerusalem, 1978) 110. Apparently unaware that the medieval and modern sense is attested already in Aristotle, Rosenberg treats this as a case of diachronic semantic change. He argues that the term shifted its meaning as a result of the shift in its application from things to names. His diagrams are presumably intended to show that the two uses have a common denominator. (The diagram representing the use of συνώνυμα in the Categories needs to be corrected; as it stands, without any representation of meaning, it represents ομώνυμα as well.) If this is correct, the term συνώνυμα itself is not ambiguous but merely general.

179 These two renderings are cited by K. Georr, Les catégories d’Aristote dans leurs versions syro-arabes (Beirut, 1948) 249. A third rendering by Jacob of Edessa is too slavish to be of any interest.

180 Boethius, In Categorias Aristotelis (Patrologia Latina, 64) 167.

181 Küvel [-Türker], “Fārābī’nin Peri Hermeneias Muhtasari,” 49; El-Ajam, Al-Mantiq, 1:140. See also Ilai Alon, Al-Fārābī’s Philosophical Lexicon (forthcoming).

182 Efros, “Maimonides’ Treatise,” p. n s.
“centered words,” “matching/twinned names” and “name used in congruence.”

Following Boethius, the term *univocation* is used in Aristotelian studies to this day. Modern philosophers and linguists use a wide variety of terms: generality, vagueness, variety of application, indefiniteness of reference, semantic indeterminacy, non-determination, indifference, unspecificity, lack of specificity, lack of specification, neutrality, and unmarkedness.

Aristotle’s οὐσία is rendered ʾsway ʾšmā “equal in name” by George, Bishop of the Arabs; al-muttafiqatu ʾsmāʾ İḥā “coinciding in their names” by İshāq ibn Hunayn, ʾæquivoca by Boethius, and (with reference to names rather than things) al-ʾasmaʾu l-muštarikah

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183 See the comparative chart in Rosenberg, ʿḥırğr ʿḥsār, 142, and the texts in the appendices.
194 A. Zwicky and J. Sadock, 2. Most of the terms and references given here are also listed there.
195 These two renderings are cited by Georr, *Versions syro-arabes*, 249. Again, a third rendering by Jacob of Edessa is too slavish to be of any interest.
196 *In Categorías Aristotelis*, 163.
“shared names” by Al-Fārābī\(^{197}\) and Maimonides.\(^{198}\) Hebrew treatises usually have “shared names” but one also finds “coinciding names.”\(^{199}\)

The meaning of ḥalālāt in Aristotle’s Categories (but not in the *Metaphysics*)!\(^{200}\) is broader than the meaning of our modern term *homonym*. For the phenomenon described in the *Categories*, we use the term *ambiguity*, and we distinguish two types: *homonomy* (two entries in the dictionary) and *polysemy* (one entry with two meanings).\(^{201}\)

Aristotle (*Physics*, 7.4 249a23–4) makes a similar distinction between ḥalālāt which are widely removed (πολλὰ ἀπὰ ἀπὸ ἑκατέρας) and those which have some resemblance (ἐσχατικὴ τινα ὁμοιότητα).\(^{202}\) The ḥalālāt of the former type are probably the same as those described as bearing the same name by chance (ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐλεύθερου) in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.4, 1096b26–28.\(^{203}\) Al-Fārābī’s equivalent of ḥalālāt is ʿittifaqan “coincidentally.”\(^{204}\) Maimonides’ term is *al-muṣṭārikatu l-maḥḍatu l-ʾiṣṭirāk* “names shared in the pure sense.”\(^{205}\)

The term for “ambiguous” used by the Masoretes is ḥelāl (with two meanings). It appears in the titles of various lists of ambiguous forms—one compiled by Aaron b. Asher in the 9th-century, another in the 10th.\(^{206}\) In his *Eskaf ha-Kofa*, the Karaite Yehudah

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\(^{198}\) Efros, “Maimonides’ Treatise,” p. 117.

\(^{199}\) See the comparative chart in Rosenberg, “nmov n-nf,” 142, and the texts in the appendices.

\(^{200}\) See Hintikka, “Aristotle on the Ambiguity of Ambiguity,” 138–139. Hintikka’s examples show that our modern, narrow use of the term “homonymy” goes back to Aristotle. He argues that that use is the norm in Aristotle’s works.

\(^{201}\) A similar method of displaying the distinction visually is found already in Ibn Bāl’am’s *Kitāb al-tajnis*. Although there is only one entry for each set of homonyms, there are two or more lemmas at the beginning of the entry, e.g., ḥalālāt which are widely removed (πολλὰ ἀπὰ ἀπὸ ἑκατέρας) and those which have some resemblance (ἐσχατικὴ τινα ὁμοιότητα).\(^{202}\) Hadot, *Simplicius* 3:83.

\(^{202}\) Ibid.


\(^{204}\) Efros, “Maimonides’ Treatise,” p. 117.

Hadassi describes a supplementary list which he compiled: 207 That the term “yoked together” used by Hadassi in this description is a technical term meaning “homonymous” is shown by the Hebrew title of Ibn Bal’am’s collection of homonyms: ספ יזימוד (Arabic كتاب الهائيمود). Hadassi’s use of this Hebrew term suggests that it had a broader meaning than tajnis, which refers to paronomasia, i.e., the literary use of homonymy.

207 Dotan, ספ תגניק סעפסים, 17; Dotan, “Homonymous Hapax Doublets,” 139.