

Semantic anachronism in the Book of Job: A diachronic linguistic study of Hebrew lexemes in biblical translation

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ABSTRACT

The Book of Job is a cornerstone of biblical wisdom literature, yet its interpretation is shaped by ancient Hebrew lexemes whose meanings have shifted over time and across translations. As the text moved from Biblical Hebrew to Early Modern English in the King James Version (1611) and into contemporary English translations, key terms have undergone semantic reconfiguration. This study investigates semantic anachronism, defined as the retroactive imposition of later lexical senses onto earlier textual contexts, resulting in interpretive distortion. Using a qualitative, diachronic lexical-semantic approach, the study traces the semantic trajectories of seven Hebrew lexemes (tsedeq, ra', she'ol, tam, yir'ah, mashal, and 'etsah) across three interpretive strata: the Hebrew source text, the King James Version, and representative modern English translations. Observed shifts are classified using established typologies of semantic change, including narrowing, broadening, pejoration, and metaphorical extension. Findings reveal a patterned semantic drift with theological consequences, particularly when translation choices shaped by Early Modern doctrinal vocabulary or contemporary translation norms introduce later theological frames that are not transparent in the Hebrew semantic field. The analysis highlights the role of translator ideology and the risk of unconscious doctrinal projection. The study concludes that diachronic lexical-semantic analysis is essential for reducing anachronistic readings in sacred-text translation and contributes to applied linguistics by offering a replicable framework for translation analysis, translator training, and pedagogical instruction in historical semantics.

Keywords: Bible translation; Book of Job; diachronic linguistics; Hebrew lexemes; semantic anachronism

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of Job occupies a central position within biblical wisdom literature, renowned for its poetic artistry, theological depth, and philosophical inquiry into human suffering, divine justice, and the limits of human comprehension. At the heart of its enduring relevance lies the intricate use of ancient Hebrew lexemes—linguistic units that carry rich semantic and cultural connotations (Zhang, 2016). These lexemes are not static; their meanings evolve across temporal, social, and linguistic boundaries, and this evolution profoundly shapes both their translation and interpretive reception (Bai, 2016; Wang, 2014).

The study of semantic change, particularly within sacred texts, has received growing attention in both historical linguistics and biblical hermeneutics. Semantics, as shaped by historical experience, cultural frameworks, and usage patterns, has been conceptualized through various models. Prototype theory, for instance, explains how word meanings cluster around prototypical uses while peripheral senses expand, contract, or disappear over time (Evans & Green, 2018; Geeraerts, 2009). Reichenbachian temporality is relevant to the present study not as a model of tense–aspect systems, but as an interpretive framework highlighting that meaning attribution is time-indexed: later readers and translators often project

contemporary lexical senses onto earlier textual tokens, effectively collapsing historical distance in interpretation. In this sense, semantic anachronism is a form of lexical-level temporal misalignment rather than a grammatical phenomenon. In sacred texts such as the Hebrew Bible, semantic shifts carry amplified significance because they influence theological exegesis, liturgical practice, and doctrinal formation. Historical semantics—the study of how word meanings develop across time—offers a powerful tool for interrogating how sacred meanings become layered, transformed, or obscured across centuries (Traugott & Dasher, 2001; Campbell, 2021). A concrete illustration can be seen in the recurring liturgical use of the phrase “the fear of the Lord” (Job 28:28), where the modern English sense of *fear* as emotional terror is frequently mapped onto the Hebrew *yir’ah*, which originally denotes reverential awe and covenantal obedience. When such lexical narrowing enters sermons, hymns, and catechetical instruction, it can subtly reshape the affective and doctrinal reception of wisdom theology, privileging anxiety-based religiosity over reverential piety. The Book of Job, composed in ancient poetic Hebrew, is especially fertile ground for this inquiry, containing rare and symbolically loaded lexemes that demand historical-linguistic precision.

Translation, as an act of linguistic mediation, further complicates this semantic trajectory. Translators not only transfer words across languages but also carry theological, cultural, and philosophical assumptions that shape meaning. The translation history of the Bible—from the Septuagint (Greek), Vulgate (Latin), Syriac Peshitta, and Targumim to the King James Version (KJV) (1611) and modern English translations—demonstrates the deep entanglement of semantic evolution with theological paradigms and ecclesial traditions (Silva, 1994; Nida & Taber, 1974; Carson, 1998). Modern Bible translation movements, including dynamic equivalence and functional translation approaches, have attempted to bridge gaps between ancient texts and contemporary audiences, but they often risk introducing semantic anachronism—the retroactive imposition of later lexical meanings onto earlier textual contexts (Alter, 2018; Zhang, 2016).

Such anachronism poses considerable risks for interpretation. It can obscure theological nuance, misdirect doctrinal application, and flatten the philosophical complexity embedded in poetic discourse (Hamilton et al., 2016). From an applied linguistics perspective, this problem parallels broader concerns in translation studies and applied semantics about historical lexical misalignment, in which target-language senses dominate interpretation despite weak correspondence with source-language meaning. These challenges are particularly acute in the Book of Job, which is

marked by dense poetic language and theologically charged lexemes such as *tsedeq* (צֶדֶק), *she’ol* (שׂוֹל), and *ra’* (רָע). As these terms traverse translation layers, the interpretive field becomes a site of semantic transformation that can obscure authorial intent and reshape doctrinal inference (Alter, 2018; Tov, 2022).

Biblical scholars and historical linguists have long emphasized the importance of diachronic analysis in evaluating the semantic trajectories of scriptural terms (Campbell, 2021; Traugott & Dasher, 2001). Despite this, there remains a paucity of systematic research that explicitly examines semantic anachronism in the Book of Job through a rigorously comparative lexical-semantic framework. While existing studies in translation theory and the “translator’s voice” (Jiang, 2012) have highlighted interpretive mediation, fewer studies operationalize diachronic lexical analysis in ways that are transferable to translation training and applied semantic instruction.

Positioned at the intersection of historical semantics, translation studies, and applied linguistics, the present study addresses this gap by treating the Book of Job as a case study in cross-temporal lexical mediation. It employs a qualitative, diachronic linguistic methodology to trace the semantic development of key Hebrew lexemes across three translation stages: original Biblical Hebrew, Early Modern English in the King James Version, and contemporary English usage. Through this framework, the study identifies patterns of semantic change, including broadening, narrowing, pejoration, amelioration, metaphorical shift, and metonymic change (Campbell, 2021)—and examines how these patterns generate semantic anachronism.

The significance of this study extends beyond biblical interpretation. Applied linguistics offers a replicable model for analyzing diachronic lexical shift in translation, with implications for translator education, applied semantic analysis, and interpretive literacy. Specifically, this research aims to (1) trace the semantic evolution of selected Hebrew lexemes in Job across historical translation stages, (2) classify observed changes using established typologies of semantic change, and (3) assess how semantic anachronism affects interpretation, pedagogy, and translation practice. By grounding its analysis in linguistic, hermeneutical, and translation scholarship, this study provides a critical re-examination of the semantic architecture of Job and demonstrates the value of historical-linguistic inquiry for both applied linguistics and textual interpretation.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, diachronic linguistic research design grounded in historical linguistics,

lexical semantics, and translation theory. The primary aim is to investigate how selected Hebrew lexemes in the Book of Job have undergone semantic change across three historical and linguistic stages: (1) their original usage in Biblical Hebrew; (2) their rendering in Early Modern English, particularly in the King James Version (1611); and (3) their interpretation in contemporary English Bible translations. This design facilitates the tracing of semantic trajectories and the identification of semantic anachronism—instances where modern meanings are anachronistically imposed upon ancient terms, potentially distorting exegetical and theological interpretations (Campbell, 2021; Silva, 1994; Beekman & Callow, 1986).

No human participants were involved in this research. The study is exclusively text-based and relies on published biblical texts, translations, and lexicographic sources; therefore, ethical clearance procedures associated with human-subject research were not applicable.

The diachronic and interpretive nature of this research necessitates an interdisciplinary methodology combining tools and insights from Hebrew philology, historical semantics, and translation studies (Geeraerts, 2009; Clines, 1998; Nord, 2005). Although corpus-based lexicography informs the secondary literature consulted, the present study is not corpus-driven. This non-corpus-based approach is a deliberate methodological choice, prioritizing close contextual analysis of high-density lexemes within a bounded poetic text over frequency-based modeling. Such an approach allows greater interpretive control when analyzing rare, theologically loaded lexical items whose meanings are shaped primarily by discourse context rather than distributional frequency.

Sampling

A purposive sampling approach was employed to select Hebrew lexemes from the Book of Job that exhibit high theological density, semantic volatility, and significant translational divergence. The selection criteria included lexical recurrence, exegetical centrality, and documented susceptibility to semantic drift in translation. The following lexemes were chosen:

- צְדָקָה (*tsedeq*) – righteousness/justice
- רָע (*ra'*) – evil/misfortune
- שְׂאוֹל (*she'ol*) – grave/hell
- תָּם (*tam*) – perfect/blameless
- יִרְאָה (*yir'ah*) – fear/reverence
- מָשָׁל (*mashal*) – proverb/parable
- עֲצָה (*'etsah*) – counsel/plan

These lexemes are central to the literary and theological fabric of Job and serve as semantic indicators of deeper doctrinal themes such as divine justice, human suffering, eschatology, and moral character (Alter, 2018; Longman, 1988).

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection followed a triangulated, multi-step process to ensure both lexical accuracy and interpretive depth. First, each lexeme was identified within the Masoretic Text of Job and examined using authoritative lexicographical tools, including Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Brown et al., 1996), *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler & Baumgartner, 1999), and *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* (Strong, 2010). These sources were used to establish the semantic field, root morphology, and syntactic function of each word in its original Hebrew context.

Second, the lexemes were analyzed in the King James Version (1611) to trace their Early Modern English equivalents. Translator footnotes, historical commentaries, and interlinear Bible tools were consulted to uncover the theological and literary rationale behind specific lexical choices (Hill, 2013; Noss, 2007). Special attention was paid to how the 17th-century theological and lexical conventions influenced word selection and semantic transfer.

Third, representative renderings of the lexemes in modern English Bible translations—such as the New International Version (NIV), English Standard Version (ESV), and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)—were examined. These translations were cross-referenced with the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2024) and modern biblical lexicons to assess shifts in semantic scope, connotation, and doctrinal framing.

Fourth, the lexemes were analyzed *in situ* within the poetic and theological context of the Book of Job. This ensured that the analysis extended beyond dictionary definitions to include literary function and discourse-level meaning, consistent with the methodological recommendations of Thiselton (2009) and Nord (2005).

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a multi-phase interpretive framework designed to systematically trace and classify semantic changes while maintaining analytical transparency:

Diachronic Comparison

Each selected lexeme was examined across three stages: Biblical Hebrew usage, Early Modern English rendering in the KJV, and contemporary English interpretation. This diachronic comparison enabled the identification of semantic shifts attributable to historical, cultural, and translational mediation (Crystal, 2018; Geeraerts, 2009).

Typological Classification

Observed semantic changes were categorized using Campbell's (2021) six-part typology: broadening, narrowing, pejoration, amelioration, metaphorical extension, and metonymic shift. Where a lexical item exhibited overlapping mechanisms (e.g.,

narrowing accompanied by pragmatic strengthening), classification prioritized the dominant semantic trajectory rather than forcing exclusive categorization.

Analytical Narrative and Tabular Synthesis

For each lexeme, a narrative analysis traced its semantic evolution across historical and translational contexts, explicitly identifying instances of semantic anachronism—defined as interpretive distortion arising from retrospective imposition of later lexical meanings (Silva, 1994). Each narrative was followed by a summary table presenting the Hebrew form, diachronic equivalents, contextual usage, and typological classification.

Peer Validation

To enhance analytical rigor and minimize individual interpretive bias, preliminary semantic classifications were reviewed by specialists in Hebrew philology, biblical theology, and historical linguistics. In cases of disagreement, discrepancies were resolved through a structured process involving re-examination of the immediate Joban context, consultation of primary lexicographic sources, and reference to the operational definitions of Campbell’s (2021) semantic change categories. Final classifications were determined by consensus where possible; where ambiguity remained, the analysis explicitly acknowledged interpretive overlap rather than imposing a single definitive label.

FINDINGS

This section reports the diachronic semantic trajectories of seven Hebrew lexemes in the Book of Job across three interpretive layers: (1) Biblical Hebrew usage in Job; (2) Early Modern English

renderings in the King James Version (1611); and (3) dominant contemporary English senses as represented in modern translations and modern lexicography. By tracing their original meanings in Biblical Hebrew, their translation in the King James Version (1611), and their interpretations in contemporary English, this study identifies semantic shifts and classifies them by typology. To maintain analytical rigor, each entry distinguishes (a) linguistic description of semantic range and change from (b) probable interpretive uptake, where present-day semantic centers may invite retrospective construals. Each lexical item is contextualized through a representative verse and followed by a table summarizing the semantic trajectory.

רָצוּן (tsedeq) – Righteousness/Justice

The Hebrew term *tsedeq* embodies a theologically dense concept, signifying not merely personal moral uprightness but covenantal fidelity, legal equity, and divine justice (Campbell, 2021). In the Book of Job, Job appeals to *tsedeq* as the foundation of his ethical and legal vindication before God and society (Job 29:14). The term carries implications that exceed individual piety, emphasizing relational and social harmony within a theocratic moral order (see Table 1).

In the King James Version, *tsedeq* is rendered as “righteousness.” Although the Early Modern English understanding of righteousness still included connotations of social justice, the emphasis began to shift toward personal virtue. This shift can be described as a gradual re-centering of meaning, where the target-language equivalent increasingly foregrounds individual moral rectitude over a broader socio-judicial field.

Table 1

Lexical Analysis of רָצוּן (tsedeq)

Aspect	Interpretation
Original Hebrew Usage	רָצוּן (<i>tsedeq</i>) refers to covenantal justice, moral uprightness, and social equity within the Hebrew Bible.
KJV (1611) Rendering	The KJV translates <i>tsedeq</i> as “righteousness,” emphasizing moral rectitude while still retaining legal implications.
Contemporary Meaning	Modern lexicography tends to center “righteousness” on personal moral rightness/religious correctness rather than public-legal equity (OED, 2024).
Type of Semantic Change	Narrowing – meaning has shifted from social and divine justice to individualized moral character.
Key Verse	Job 29:14 – “I put on righteousness, and it clothed me: my judgment was as a robe and a diadem.”

In contemporary English, “righteousness” has become increasingly internalized and spiritualized. It now often refers to an individual's moral or religious standing rather than a societal or covenantal condition. This observation is consistent with modern lexicographic practice, where “righteousness” is commonly defined in terms of personal moral rightness or religious correctness

rather than public-legal equity (OED, 2024). This semantic narrowing risks detaching the text from its legal and social dimensions, potentially altering its theological resonance.

Such lexical evolution is best classified as semantic narrowing, whereby a broad term loses dimensions of its original meaning. At the level of reception, this narrowing may increase the

probability that readers infer private piety as the primary frame for Job 29:14, rather than legal-social justice, even though the Hebrew usage supports both.

עָרָא (ra‘) – Evil/Misfortune

The lexeme *ra‘* (עָרָא) appears in contexts of both physical suffering and metaphysical inquiry in the

Book of Job, as displayed in Table 2. In biblical Hebrew, it broadly refers to harm, misfortune, or adversity, without necessarily implying ethical or moral depravity (Tov, 2022). Job 2:10 contains a paradigmatic use: “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?”—where *ra‘* denotes calamity rather than sin.

Table 2
Lexical Analysis of עָרָא (ra‘)

Aspect	Interpretation
Original Hebrew Usage	עָרָא (<i>ra‘</i>) denotes misfortune or calamity, often unrelated to moral evil.
KJV (1611) Rendering	Translated as “evil”; historically broader but increasingly moralized.
Contemporary Meaning	“Evil” is commonly centered on moral wickedness rather than misfortune in contemporary lexicography (OED, 2024).
Type of Semantic Change	Pejoration and Narrowing – the term gained strong moral negativity absent in its original usage.
Key Verse	Job 2:10 – “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?”

The KJV translates *ra‘* as “evil,” a term that retained some breadth in 1611, though it already bore moral overtones. The translators’ decision reflects both a theological presupposition about divine sovereignty and a lexical limitation in English at the time.

In contemporary English, “evil” is narrowly defined, often equated with deliberate moral wickedness. Modern dictionary usage frequently prioritizes moral corruption as the default sense of “evil,” thereby reducing the availability of the calamity-centered reading that is prominent in Job’s Hebrew context (OED, 2024). This narrowed usage imposes a binary moral framework on Job’s theology, implying that God might cause or allow moral evil, which is doctrinally problematic for many readers.

This development reflects both semantic narrowing and pejoration—a shift from a neutral or circumstantial term to one that carries strong negative moral connotations. Analytically, the key point is not doctrinal attribution but semantic re-centering: a calamity-oriented lexeme is

increasingly interpreted through a moralized target-language default.

Contemporary usage of “hell” is shaped predominantly by Christian eschatology, wherein it signifies a place of post-mortem judgment and eternal punishment. This interpretation represents a dramatic departure from the original semantic range of *sheol*.

The transformation of *sheol* illustrates metaphorical extension and anachronistic reinterpretation. From a historical-semantic standpoint, the mechanism can be described as target-language semantic enrichment: later doctrinal associations attached to “hell” become available as interpretive inferences, even when the source lexeme encodes a non-punitive domain of the dead.

שְׁאוֹל (sheol) – The Grave/Underworld

Table 3 shows that the Hebrew term *sheol* (שְׁאוֹל) functions as a cosmological placeholder for death in ancient Israelite thought. It is a morally neutral, undifferentiated realm where all the dead reside. In Job 14:13, Job pleads, “O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave...” expressing a desire for retreat from divine wrath, not punishment.

Table 3
Lexical Analysis of שְׁאוֹל (sheol)

Aspect	Interpretation
Original Hebrew Usage	שְׁאוֹל (<i>sheol</i>) refers to the neutral abode of the dead, devoid of judgment or reward.
KJV (1611) Rendering	Rendered as “grave,” “hell,” or “pit”; inconsistency introduces interpretive variability.
Contemporary Meaning	“Hell” now implies damnation, misaligned with the Hebrew concept.
Type of Semantic Change	Metaphorical Extension (with heightened risk of reception-level anachronistic reinterpretation).
Key Verse	Job 14:13 – “O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave...”

The KJV renders *sheol* inconsistently, using “grave,” “hell,” or “pit.” These variations reflect both translation challenges and theological

assumptions. Of particular concern is the rendering as “hell,” which introduces connotations of eternal torment that are alien to the Hebrew conception.

Contemporary usage of “hell” is shaped predominantly by Christian eschatology, wherein it signifies a place of post-mortem judgment and eternal punishment. This interpretation represents a dramatic departure from the original semantic range of *sheol*.

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interpretive inferences, even when the source lexeme encodes a non-punitive domain of the dead.

טָם (tam) – Blameless/Complete

The Hebrew term *tam* signifies moral wholeness, integrity, and completeness (see Table 4). Unlike the contemporary notion of flawlessness, *tam* characterizes someone who is upright and spiritually coherent within the covenantal structure of the ancient Israelite faith. It is used to describe Job at the very outset of the book, establishing his moral status not as sinless perfection but as covenantal integrity (Job 1:1).

Table 4
Lexical Analysis of טָם (tam)

Aspect	Interpretation
Original Hebrew Usage	טָם (<i>tam</i>) connotes wholeness, completeness, and moral integrity.
KJV (1611) Rendering	Translated as “perfect,” implying moral soundness, not flawlessness.
Contemporary Meaning	“Perfect” commonly implies flawlessness or error-free existence (OED, 2024).
Type of Semantic Change	Narrowing (Campbell, 2021), “misapplication” is treated as a reception effect of contemporary semantic centering.
Key Verse	Job 1:1 – “...that man was perfect and upright...”

The KJV renders *tam* as “perfect,” a term that in 1611 conveyed the idea of moral soundness and completeness. However, in contemporary English, “perfect” has become almost exclusively associated with absolute flawlessness—an unattainable state implying sinlessness or error-free living. This shift is best treated as semantic narrowing (Campbell, 2021): the English equivalent has progressively specialized toward an “errorless” sense, which can overshadow the integrity/wholeness profile encoded by *tam* in Job.

This shift introduces a theological problem: modern readers may interpret Job as unnaturally idealized or even as a Christ-like figure, which deviates from the author’s original intent. To align

with the study’s typology, this potential “misapplication” is treated here as an interpretive outcome of narrowing rather than as a separate category of semantic change. Recognizing *tam* as moral integrity, rather than perfectionism, is crucial for theological clarity and textual fidelity.

יִרְאָה (yir’ah) – Fear/Reverence

The Hebrew lexeme *yir’ah* refers to a composite emotional and cognitive response to God, encompassing awe, reverence, and obedience. As depicted in Table 5, it plays a key role in biblical wisdom literature, including Job 28:28, where it is equated with true wisdom: “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom.”

Table 5
Lexical Analysis of יִרְאָה (yir’ah)

Aspect	Interpretation
Original Hebrew Usage	יִרְאָה (<i>yir’ah</i>) denotes awe, reverence, and obedient fear directed toward God.
KJV (1611) Rendering	Rendered as “fear,” historically compatible with reverence and piety.
Contemporary Meaning	“Fear” primarily suggests terror or anxiety as a default sense (OED, 2024).
Type of Semantic Change	Narrowing (dominant) with associated semantic shift in evaluative tone.
Key Verse	Job 28:28 – “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom...”

The KJV translates *yir’ah* as “fear,” consistent with Early Modern English, where “fear” retained nuances of reverence and awe. However, the modern interpretation of “fear” largely connotes anxiety or terror, especially in non-religious contexts. Contemporary lexicography tends to privilege affective threat-based senses of “fear,” which can reduce the salience of reverential-awe readings unless explicitly contextualized (OED,

2024). This evolution leads to an interpretive misalignment: the reverential posture toward God becomes colored with dread, obscuring the positive ethical and spiritual dynamics of *yir’ah*.

This transformation constitutes semantic narrowing and a semantic shift. Within Campbell’s (2021) typology, the dominant mechanism is narrowing, where a composite reverential orientation is increasingly interpreted through a

dominant affective-negative sense in contemporary English.

מָשָׁל (*mashal*) – Parable/Saying

The Hebrew *mashal* is a literary device that includes proverbs, parables, and analogical sayings. It represents an integral feature of Hebrew wisdom literature, conveying moral or theological truths through indirect speech or poetic structure. In Job

27:1, Job introduces his discourse as a *mashal*, signaling his turn to philosophical and poetic reasoning (see Table 6). The KJV translates *mashal* variously as “parable” or “proverb.” These translations were appropriate for their time, but in modern usage, “parable” is closely tied to New Testament Christological teaching, while “proverb” has been secularized to denote general truisms.

Table 6

*Lexical Analysis of מָשָׁל (*mashal*)*

Aspect	Interpretation
Original Hebrew Usage	מָשָׁל (<i>mashal</i>) refers to a proverb, parable, or analogical didactic speech.
KJV (1611) Rendering	“Parable” or “proverb” in contextually appropriate ways.
Contemporary Meaning	“Parable” is strongly NT-associated; “proverb” often secularized (OED, 2024).
Type of Semantic Change	Narrowing (contextual/genre-driven).
Key Verse	Job 27:1 – “Moreover Job continued his parable...”

This lexical shift represents contextual narrowing, where *mashal* loses its broader rhetorical and theological function. In typological terms, contextual narrowing is treated as a form of narrowing (Campbell, 2021) driven by genre-association and discourse expectations in the target language. The result is a diminished appreciation of Job’s literary sophistication and a reduced capacity to interpret his speeches within the prophetic-wisdom tradition.

עֵצָה (*etsah*) – Counsel / Guidance

The final term, *etsah*, denotes divine or strategic counsel—both in the military and theological sense. It often implies authoritative wisdom, as can be seen

in Table 7, particularly when attributed to God. In Job 12:13, the term occurs in a doxological context: “With him is wisdom and strength, he hath counsel and understanding.”

The KJV uses “counsel” for *etsah*, a term that, in the 17th century, retained both advisory and divine connotations. However, in modern English, “counsel” is generally understood in professional psychological or informal interpersonal terms, reducing its theological weight. This is best treated as narrowing via domain specialization: the English term’s dominant contemporary usage can foreground therapeutic/advisory domains over the authoritative governance sense relevant to Job’s doxological register (OED, 2024).

Table 7

*Lexical Analysis of עֵצָה (*etsah*)*

Aspect	Interpretation
Original Hebrew Usage	עֵצָה (<i>etsah</i>) denotes divine counsel, authoritative guidance, or strategic insight.
KJV (1611) Rendering	“Counsel,” implying spiritual and advisory weight.
Contemporary Meaning	“Counsel” often denotes therapeutic help or informal advice (OED, 2024).
Type of Semantic Change	Narrowing (domain specialization).
Key Verse	Job 12:13 – “With him is wisdom and strength, he hath counsel and understanding.”

This constitutes a semantic drift, whereby divine guidance is interpreted as mere suggestion or therapeutic advice. Consistent with the typology, the relevant semantic-change label is narrowing; the perceived “drift” is the interpretive outcome of contemporary domain centering.

Summary of Findings

This study examined seven pivotal Hebrew lexemes—*tsedeq* (צֶדֶק), *ra'* (רָע), *sheol* (שְׁאוֹל), *tam* (תָּם), *yir'ah* (יְרֵאָה), *mashal* (מָשָׁל), and *etsah* (עֵצָה)—as they appear in the Book of Job, tracing their semantic trajectories from their original usage in Biblical Hebrew through their Early Modern

English renderings in the King James Version (1611), to their contemporary interpretations. The analysis revealed that each term has undergone notable semantic shifts that have, in many cases, led to theological and interpretive distortions—phenomena collectively identified as semantic anachronism.

Across the dataset, the predominant diachronic pattern is narrowing—often realized through semantic re-centering in contemporary English, where default senses prioritize individualized morality, affective threat, genre association, or domain specialization. Three principal patterns of semantic change were observed: (1) narrowing,

wherein terms such as *tsedeq* and *yir'ah* lost significant dimensions of their original moral, legal, or reverential scope; (2) pejoration and misapplication, as in the case of *ra'* and *tam*, which have been reshaped by modern doctrinal assumptions and cultural associations; and (3) contextual drift and metaphorical extension, most clearly exemplified in the transformation of *sheol*, *mashal*, and *etsah* into forms unrecognizable from their original semantic fields.

To maintain typological coherence, “misapplication” and “drift” are treated as reception-level outcomes of narrowing or metaphorical extension rather than as independent semantic-change categories. Each of these shifts demonstrates how lexemes once embedded in covenantal, communal, and theological contexts have been subtly redefined through translation, doctrinal evolution, and cultural reinterpretation. Such changes have significant implications for biblical hermeneutics, particularly when interpreting poetic and wisdom literature like Job, where lexical precision is essential for theological accuracy. The study underscores the urgency of diachronic lexical analysis as a methodological tool to uncover semantic anachronism and restore fidelity to the original text.

DISCUSSION

Theological and Linguistic Implications

The findings of this study reaffirm that the semantic shifts observed in the Book of Job's key Hebrew lexemes are not merely linguistic artifacts but reflect deep theological implications. Lexical changes—such as the narrowing of *tsedeq* (צֶדֶק) from covenantal justice to individualized righteousness—affect theological interpretation by fragmenting the holistic socio-ethical vision of the ancient Hebrew worldview (Alter, 2018; Silva, 1994). In biblical wisdom literature, where meaning is embedded in poetic and theological subtleties, the collapse of lexical breadth risks reducing divine justice to modern ethical categories detached from communal accountability. Importantly, the present analysis construes these as shifts in interpretive affordances: changes in target-language semantic centers make certain readings more probable, rather than establishing doctrinal conclusions as linguistic necessities.

Similarly, the pejorative rendering of *ra'* (רָע) as “evil” obscures its semantic function as calamity or adversity in Job. The theological implications here are non-trivial: equating *ra'* with moral evil implicates the divine actor in ethical malfeasance—a conclusion foreign to the Hebrew context, yet common in contemporary debates on theodicy (Hamilton et al., 2016; Tov, 2022). From a linguistic standpoint, this effect follows from the moralized default sense of “evil” in contemporary English

(OED, 2024), which can displace the calamity-centered reading without explicit contextual guidance.

The case of *sheol* (שְׁאוֹל), traditionally a morally neutral realm of the dead, exemplifies the intrusion of eschatological reinterpretation. Its conflation with “hell” in later translations imports Christian categories of eternal judgment into a Hebrew conceptual space devoid of such binaries. This misalignment distorts not only Job's anthropology but also its theology of suffering and divine justice (Donges et al., 2015). Analytically, the mechanism is best described as metaphorical extension and doctrinal semantic enrichment at the level of the English equivalent, which increases the availability of later eschatological inferences in reception.

Beyond individual terms, the broader patterns of metaphorization and semantic attrition affect *tam* (תָּם), *yir'ah* (יִרְאָה), and *mashal* (מָשַׁל), all of which play central roles in Job's rhetorical and theological texture. The reduction of *tam* to sinless perfection introduces soteriological overtones absent in the original moral framework. Likewise, *yir'ah* as emotional fear weakens its covenantal and wisdom-linked resonance. Such shifts, though subtle, cumulatively erode the theological structure embedded in the Hebrew poetic frame (Bai, 2016; Traugott & Dasher, 2001; Campbell, 2021; Alter, 2018). Consistent with Campbell's (2021) typology, these effects are primarily modeled as narrowing, with interpretive distortions emerging when contemporary default senses are retrojected onto earlier lexical systems.

Comparative Analysis with Contemporary Scholarship

Recent scholarship underscores the importance of tracking semantic trajectories within sacred texts. Geeraerts (2009) and Evans & Green (2018) argue that prototype theory offers a useful lens for understanding how central senses dominate and peripheral meanings are forgotten. This is evident in the lexical simplification of *mashal*—a form once rich in poetic, analogical, and dialogical uses, now largely associated with aphorisms or New Testament-style parables.

More recent advances in diachronic linguistics further validate these findings. For instance, Qin and Li (2024) have demonstrated how lexical systems evolve under socio-cultural pressure, showing how semantic centers can shift over time as communities renegotiate meaning. While their dataset concerns a modern English variety, the methodological implication is directly relevant: semantic change is often observable as re-centering of default senses, which provides a useful comparative analogue for explaining how target-language meanings may drift away from source-language semantic ranges in long translation histories. Similarly, Winedt (2021)

stresses the importance of metalinguistic awareness in theological translation, warning against lexical ossification and doctrinal overcoding.

The findings of this study confirm these theoretical frameworks and extend them by providing concrete biblical case studies. Notably, the alignment of lexical typologies—broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, and metaphorization—with theological reconfiguration illustrates the complex interdependence of language, meaning, and doctrine. The present study contributes by operationalizing these mechanisms at the lexeme level and by triangulating translation layers with modern lexicographic evidence (OED, 2024).

In addition, references that may appear distant from Hebrew philology (e.g., Das & Mishra, 2022) are conceptually mobilized here not as language-specific evidence but as an analogue for anachronistic projection: the study illustrates how contemporary frames can be inadvertently imposed on historically situated practices, paralleling the interpretive risk of mapping present-day semantic centers onto ancient lexical systems. This comparative move situates semantic anachronism within broader scholarship on historical situatedness and interpretive retrojection without claiming direct linguistic evidence from non-linguistic domains.

Translator Impact, Applied Relevance, and Hermeneutic Risks

Translation, particularly of sacred texts, is not a neutral linguistic activity but a profoundly hermeneutic act. Every act of rendering the biblical text into another language involves not only lexical choices but also theological frameworks, cultural ideologies, and historical contexts. Translators bring with them implicit doctrinal stances, denominational perspectives, and interpretive traditions, all of which shape how meanings are constructed and transmitted. As Jiang (2012) and Munday et al. (2022) argue, the "translator's voice" is not an accidental artifact of translation but an embedded ideological function that influences the target text's theological tone.

This phenomenon is clearly observable in the enduring influence of the King James Version (KJV), where translation decisions—though often philologically informed—nonetheless reflect the theological assumptions of early 17th-century Anglican Christianity. For example, the rendering of *sheol* as "hell" introduces a doctrinal connotation foreign to the original Hebrew cosmology. While *sheol* refers to a morally neutral abode of the dead, the English term "hell" evokes post-biblical notions of eternal punishment, judgment, and moral finality. This semantic shift results not merely from linguistic approximation but from intentional theological alignment (Changyong, 2017; Wang, 2014).

The applied linguistics relevance of these findings is especially clear for translation pedagogy and professional translator training. A replicable instructional sequence can be derived from the present method: (1) establish the source-language semantic field via philological lexica; (2) document translation equivalents across historical layers; (3) consult contemporary lexicography to identify default semantic centers (e.g., OED, 2024); and (4) evaluate where narrowing or metaphorical extension may increase the likelihood of anachronistic inference.

Recent scholarship further nuances this view. Wang (2014) emphasizes that translation is often guided by "lexico-semantic preference," a process through which translators unconsciously or deliberately favor theological interpretations over historical or philological accuracy. Changyong (2017) critiques self-translation practices that privilege faithfulness to doctrinal outcomes over fidelity to the source language. Such practices are not isolated. Zhang (2016) and Bai (2016) both document how corpus-based translation studies reveal systemic shifts in meaning when sacred texts are aligned with dominant theological discourses.

These renderings, even when historically rooted, have a cumulative effect. As Munday et al. (2022) explain, repeated liturgical use and canonical familiarity naturalize these choices, making them resistant to critique and nearly invisible to casual readers. In effect, doctrinal innovations born of semantic drift become embedded within religious orthodoxy through translational repetition.

From an applied discourse-analytic perspective, the same process can be understood in terms of lexical triggers and frame activation: highly salient English items (e.g., "evil," "perfect," "hell") activate culturally entrenched interpretive frames that may not be licensed by the Hebrew semantic field, thereby shaping uptake in preaching, teaching, and catechesis. The danger here is not merely academic. When modern readers engage sacred texts mediated through translations that have undergone significant semantic shifts, there is a risk of interpreting those texts through categories that the original authors would not have recognized. Hamilton et al. (2016) describe this process as "linguistic drift," wherein cultural and temporal shifts produce new semantic centers that diverge significantly from historical meanings. Accordingly, the present study frames the risk in probabilistic terms: semantic change alters the interpretive availability of readings, rather than deterministically producing doctrinal outcomes.

Thus, this study reinforces the urgent need for linguistic vigilance in biblical hermeneutics. Translators, theologians, and interpreters must approach the text with a critical awareness of the historical semantics of key lexemes. Failure to do so risks producing interpretations that are theologically

compelling but lexically inaccurate—introducing distortions that obscure the theological and ethical framework of the original text. In comparative translation studies, the three-layer design used here also enables systematic comparison of how different English translations manage lexical risk (e.g., the relative tendency to preserve source-language breadth or to adopt target-language defaults), providing a practical basis for evaluating equivalence strategies.

Limitations of the Study

While this study addresses important semantic developments, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis was confined to seven key lexemes. A more exhaustive lexical mapping could yield broader generalizations and thematic insights. Second, although diachronic in nature, the study did not incorporate digital corpora (e.g., Dead Sea Scrolls Hebrew, Septuagint Greek concordances) that may offer finer semantic resolution across intertestamental periods.

Additionally, while the research engaged the KJV and contemporary English translations, it excluded multilingual semantic comparisons (e.g., Luther's German Bible, the Douay-Rheims Latin-English tradition), which could enrich future studies in cross-linguistic influence. Finally, this study focused primarily on semantic shifts; pragmatic, syntactic, and phonological dimensions were beyond its scope but could enhance future integrative studies in historical biblical linguistics.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the diachronic semantic trajectories of seven Hebrew lexemes in the Book of Job—*tsedeq*, *sheol*, *ra'*, *tam*, *yir'ah*, *mashal*, and *etsah*—by comparing their Biblical Hebrew semantic fields with their Early Modern English realizations in the King James Version (1611) and their dominant senses in contemporary English translations and lexicographic usage. The analysis reveals significant instances of semantic change and anachronism that impact not only lexical accuracy but also theological interpretation and doctrinal application.

Semantic typologies such as narrowing, broadening, pejoration, amelioration, metaphorization, and metonymy were observed, each contributing to interpretive distortions when modern readers unknowingly impose present-day meanings onto ancient concepts. Across the dataset, the most recurrent mechanism was semantic narrowing, frequently realized through target-language semantic re-centering that privileges contemporary default senses over the broader or differently structured source-language ranges (Campbell, 2021). These semantic shifts, while linguistically predictable, become theologically

problematic when left unacknowledged, especially in texts like Job that are densely poetic and philosophically complex.

The study also highlighted the translator's role as a theological mediator, demonstrating how the "translator's voice" can institutionalize specific doctrinal interpretations through translation choices. The rendering of *sheol* as "hell," for example, or *ra'* as "evil," reveals how theological assumptions embedded in translations persist across centuries, shaping the doctrinal imaginations of communities and educators alike. However, the central claim advanced here is linguistic rather than confessional: when target-language equivalents carry historically accumulated doctrinal associations or narrowed default senses, they can increase the likelihood of reception-level retrojection onto the source text.

Thus, the research concludes that diachronic linguistic awareness is essential for biblical interpretation. Attending to historical semantics allows interpreters to recover the conceptual frameworks of the biblical world, thereby reducing the risk of theological distortion through semantic anachronism. The findings affirm that faithful biblical interpretation must be rooted not only in theological commitment but also in historical-linguistic precision. In applied terms, the study demonstrates how historical lexical analysis can function as a control mechanism in translation and interpretation by differentiating (a) source-language semantic range, (b) translation-equivalent selection, and (c) contemporary semantic defaults that shape reader inference.

Recommendations and Implications

The findings of this study carry substantial implications for biblical scholarship, theological education, and translation practices. First, biblical scholars and theologians are encouraged to adopt a diachronic approach to lexical analysis, particularly when working with ancient wisdom literature. The nuanced semantic trajectories traced in this study underscore the need for careful attention to historical usage, not only within the biblical text itself but across its translation history.

Second, translators and translation committees should critically revisit inherited renderings, especially in legacy translations such as the KJV. While such versions hold immense literary and ecclesial value, their lexical choices often reflect theological contexts that diverge significantly from the semantic intentions of the Hebrew text. A linguistically updated yet theologically restrained translation philosophy is recommended.

The recommendation for "theologically restrained" translation is grounded in established translation scholarship that emphasizes disciplined control of ideological and doctrinal intrusion into lexical choice (e.g., Nida & Taber, 1974; Nord, 2005; Munday et al., 2022), and it is here advanced

as an applied guideline rather than a novel theory. Operationally, “restrained” entails (1) prioritizing source-language semantic range over inherited doctrinal glosses when selecting lexical equivalents; (2) avoiding target-language items whose dominant contemporary senses introduce non-source semantic entailments (e.g., punitive eschatology for *sheol*); (3) using paratextual supports (footnotes, glossaries, translator notes) when no single equivalent preserves semantic breadth; and (4) making translation decisions transparent by documenting whether an equivalence choice is primarily formal-correspondence driven or functionally motivated. In this sense, restraint does not require theological neutrality; rather, it requires that theology not be smuggled into the lexical level as an unmarked semantic “default.”

Third, seminary educators and biblical instructors should integrate historical semantics into hermeneutics curricula. Understanding how semantic shift occurs—whether through broadening, narrowing, or metaphorization—can provide students with tools for more accurate and contextually grounded interpretation, avoiding the common pitfalls of doctrinal projection and anachronism. Pedagogically, the three-layer comparison used in this study can be converted into a teachable analytic routine in translator training and exegetical instruction: identify the Hebrew semantic field, track historical translation equivalents, and test contemporary default senses for potential narrowing or doctrinal enrichment that may trigger anachronistic inference.

Fourth, further interdisciplinary research is needed to explore semantic change in other biblical genres and corpora, such as the Psalms, prophetic literature, or New Testament epistles. This study provides a methodological blueprint that can be expanded to evaluate the theological implications of lexical evolution across the canon. Future work may strengthen generalizability by integrating corpus-informed diachronic evidence and extending comparative analysis across additional target languages to examine whether similar semantic re-centering patterns recur cross-linguistically.

Finally, faith communities and church leaders are encouraged to engage with Scripture in ways that respect the historical and linguistic distance between the modern reader and the biblical text. Awareness of semantic anachronism is not a threat to doctrinal orthodoxy but a means of enriching theological fidelity and interpretive humility. From an applied discourse perspective, such awareness also supports responsible public teaching by reducing the likelihood that contemporary lexical triggers (“evil,” “perfect,” “hell”) activate interpretive frames that exceed the semantic licensing of the source text.

In summary, this study affirms that linguistic integrity is not a peripheral scholarly concern but a

theological necessity. Only by acknowledging the historical development of language can interpreters offer readings of Scripture that are both faithful to its original context and meaningful for contemporary faith communities. Crucially, the study’s contribution extends beyond biblical studies to applied linguistics by providing (1) a model of applied historical lexical analysis for long translation chains, (2) a typology-consistent procedure for identifying semantic-change mechanisms relevant to translation quality, and (3) a pedagogically actionable framework for training translators and educators to detect and mitigate semantic anachronism in interpretive practice.

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