Word-Study Fallacies

*by*[*Robert Cara*](http://www.ligonier.org/learn/teachers/robert-cara/)

At my seminary, I often teach the introductory Greek course. On the first or second day of class, at least one student and I will have the following typical conversation during one of the breaks:

“Dr. Cara, is it not true that *sin* in the New Testament means ‘miss the mark’?”

“Well, not exactly,” I respond. “In the Bible, *sin* means to violate God’s law. Yes, it is true that the Greek word translated as ‘sin,’ *hamartia*, is a combination of ‘not’ and ‘mark,’ but that is not its meaning in the Bible.”

“I’m confused. I have been told by many people that the real meaning is ‘miss the mark.’”

“Many centuries before the New Testament was written, the word may have been coined based on someone throwing a spear and ‘missing the mark.’ But that is unrelated to the meaning of the word in the New Testament. In fact, emphasizing ‘missing the mark’ as the real meaning may confuse some into thinking that sin is only when one tries his best and fails—he tried to hit the mark but missed. If I may say so, you are confusing the history of a word and its possible original derivation with the meaning current during the New Testament period. You are committing what is called the ‘etymological fallacy,’ which we will cover later in the course.”

“Oh … next question: will predicate nominatives be on the quiz tomorrow?”

**Word Studies**

Before getting to some word-study fallacies, a brief summary of how words “work” is helpful. In general, individual words have a range of meanings or overlapping meanings (a “semantic range”). When a word is used in a context, the speaker/listener usually knows intuitively what part of the range of meaning is being used.

Let us use modern English as an example. *Love* is an English word with quite a broad range of overlapping meanings, but once seen in context, the specific meaning is quite obvious. Hence, most understand the following sentence even though *love* has five slightly different meanings. “I love God, my wife, my daughter, the New York Yankees, and Chicken McNuggets.” Another example: the noun *key* has several fairly defined meanings, one refers to a physical object (*key* in the door), another is a common metaphorical use (the *key* to victory), and another relates to music (the *key* of C). Rarely is one confused by these three options, although the depth of understanding of the more technical musical option would differ significantly between a pianist and me.

Therefore, a good word study will evaluate many contexts to determine the range of meanings and/or overlapping meanings available to the writer/ speaker during a specific time period. This is the function of a dictionary. A good interpreter then takes the available range of meanings for a word and applies this to the context to get the proper specific meaning of the word in that context.

**Etymological Fallacy**

In modern linguistics, etymology is the study of the history of the word with an emphasis on its origin. This study of a word’s history often looks back through multiple languages. This is contrasted with the “meaning(s)” of a word, which is based on current usage. The etymological fallacy is to assume that the origin of a word is its true meaning. No, the true meaning of a word is its current usage. (The etymological fallacy is sometimes called the “root fallacy,” which says that the root [origin] of a word is its true meaning.)

Consider the sentence, “I live in Charlotte, N.C., which is in Mecklenburg County.” Virtually everyone reading this correctly understands the word *county* even though they do not know its etymology. Part of the etymology relates to French nobles or “counts” and the land they owned in feudal Europe. Knowing this is interesting, but it does not help a modern English reader better understand the word *county*. In fact, most speakers and readers of any language can communicate reasonably well even though they rarely know the etymology of any of the words they use.

In Greek, more than English, many words are a combination of two other words, but usually the etymological study of why and when these words were combined is completely lost on the New Testament writer. The Greek word *ekklesia*, which is usually translated as “church,” is a combination of the words *to call* and *out*. However, scholarly Greek dictionaries do not give the definition of “called-out ones” for *ekklesia* because it is not being used that way during the time of the New Testament. Although it is theologically true that Christians have been called out from the sinful world to be the church, that truth is not derived from the word *ekklesia*. Similarly, the modern English word *butterfly* is clearly made up of the words *butter* and *fly*, but that does not help us understand the insect better.

**Reverse Etymological Fallacy**

The reverse etymological fallacy occurs when the later historical usage of a word is considered primary for determining the earlier meaning of that word. Of course, this does not make sense logically, but sometimes the manner in which a pastor explains a Greek word may encourage some in the congregation to fall into this trap.

For example, a pastor may explain that the Greek word for power in the New Testament is *dynamis*, and in the 1860s, Alfred Nobel named his invention “dynamite” based on the Greek word *dynamis*. This is true and interesting. However, this does not give the interpreter of the New Testament more insight into the meaning of *dynamis* in Scripture. In fact, one may wrongly assume that the “power of the Holy Spirit” ([Rom. 15:13](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom.%2015.13)) must be explosive power like dynamite as opposed to constant power like electrical power.

**Occasional Usefulness of Etymologies**

Etymologies are occasionally helpful. Sometimes the combination of two Greek words does directly relate to the current meaning. The Greek word *ekballō*, which is often translated as “to cast out” (for example, [Matt. 9:33](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%209.33)), is a combination of *to throw* and *out*. A parallel English example might be *grasslands*, whose meaning is obvious because of the two words *grass* and *lands*. Please note that although the etymology and current meaning dovetail together and the etymology is useful, the meanings of *ekballō* (“to cast out”) and *grasslands* are ultimately not based on etymology but on current usage.

Etymologies are also useful for the few situations, especially in the Old Testament, where there are not enough occurrences of a word to be sure of its meaning. Scholars look at cognate words in other languages (such as Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Aramaic) during multiple time periods to obtain informed guesses as to the meaning of a Hebrew word. This often is related to obscure plants and animals. For example, the Hebrew word *tahash* in [Exodus 25:5](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exodus%2025.5) is translated as “badger” (KJV), “porpoise” (NASB), and “goat/dolphin/ dugong” (ESV). The technical arguments here relate to (1) the etymology of similar cognate words in Arabic and Akkadian and (2) the ancient Greek translation, the Septuagint, which interprets *tahash* as the color blue.

**Totality Transfer Fallacy**

A common word-study fallacy is to assume that the broad semantic range of a word is being used in every specific instance of that word. That is, the totality of the semantic range is illegitimately transferred. Or to put it in laymen’s terms, the same writer does not always use the same word in the same way. At some level this is obvious, but it is good to be reminded of it.

Paul many times uses the word *flesh* (Greek *sarx*) in a negative, sin-dominated manner (for example, [Gal. 5:17](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gal.%205.17), [Phil. 3:4](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Phil.%203.4)). But at other times, he uses *flesh* with a neutral meaning as in “flesh and blood” ([Gal. 1:16](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gal.%201.16), [1 Cor. 15:50](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor.%2015.50)) or simply to refer to the whole physical body ([2 Cor. 7:5](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Cor.%207.5)). The mistake is to assume that every time Paul uses *flesh* (*sarx*), he is using a negative term.

New Testament writers have a wonderfully developed understanding of Christian *faith* that includes the total trust of the Christian in the person and work of Christ. However, sometimes the Apostles use *faith* in a more truncated way to emphasize the set of doctrines about Christianity, as for example in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” ([Eph. 4:5](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph.%204.5)) and “to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints” ([Jude 3](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jude%203)). This meaning of *faith* well parallels our modern expression “the Christian faith.” Of course, Christian faith is more than a set of Christian doctrines, but knowing some basic doctrine about the Trinity, Christ, salvation, sin, and so on is a required aspect of Christian faith. The totality transfer fallacy is to assume that everything the Bible says about the Christian faith is being equally emphasized every time the word *faith* is being used.

**Conclusion**

With the illumination of the Spirit, most Christians read and interpret the Bible reasonably well. However, Christians can commit word-study fallacies and other errors. Lord willing, all of us will strive to reduce this tendency.