

CHAPTER Y: GRAMMAR: FORM CORRELATING WITH MEANING

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Y.1 – Introduction. A previous chapter has put forth the view that

Rashi understood grammar as the interaction between word-form and meaning, that interaction being justifiable not by appeal to current or former authorities but by appeal to lists of that form and the meanings associated to the members of the list.

This chapter uses the habitual present to illustrate the subtleties of form versus meaning.

Y.2 – Simple Present, Habitual Present: Some simple examples from English are reviewed below to illustrate the concept of the various present tenses.

A: I am eating an apple

B: You eat oranges; I eat apples

In sentence A, the verb *eating* is the simple present. It indicates a single activity, *eating*, happening, not in the past or future, but in the present, now. Contrastively, in sentence B, the verb, *eat*, indicates a habitual present.

Sentence B does not mean I am eating an apple right now. It also doesn't mean that a particular point of time, whether in the past or future, an apple was or will be eaten. Rather, sentence B indicates an ongoing activity. It indicates that when I eat fruit, I typically have apples. This can refer both to the past – In the past, I always chose apples for fruit – the present – I might be choosing an apple right now, and - in the future – when given a choice of fruits I would prefer apples to other fruits.

The verb in sentence B, unlike the verb in sentence A, does not indicate an activity that happened or happens once. It indicates an activity that repeats. Furthermore, unlike sentence A, sentence B is not contradicted if I occasionally have oranges or pears. However, sentence A is false if right now I am eating an orange or pear.

This section has introduced the concept of a habitual present, which differs from a simple present. The emphasis here is on the concept. But, for each concept, and each language, there must be a grammatical form to indicate that concept. The next few sections examine Rashi comments focusing on which forms are associated with, or correlate with, the concept of the habitual present.

Y.3 – Example 1 – Ex19-15:16. Preceding this verse, Moses' father-in-law noticed that people congregated on Moses all day. He asked Moses why? Moses responds as follows

Biblical Text: Because people come to me to seek God. When people have an issue, they come to me, and I explain to them the statutes and principles of Torah.

Before presenting the Rashi comments on the underlined words, it should be noted, that the context indicates that these sentences speak about a habitual present (actually a conditional habitual present – if they have an issue, then they come to me). That is, Moses is not explaining a one-time activity of the people but rather an ongoing habit. Whenever an issue arises, they come to Moses.

Rashi: Come to me: A present meaning

Have an issue: Whoever had an issue, comes to me.

To fully appreciate this Rashi, it must be noted that the Hebrew verb form used for come is the future conjugation. Rashi's novelty here is that the future conjugation besides meaning the future can also mean a habitual present. Similarly, the Hebrew verb form used for have is the future conjugation; it has been translated as a habitual present (whoever has an issue); Rashi emphasizes whoever had (past) an issue.

These two Rashi comments together show that Rashi is commenting on the habitual present meaning which can refer to past, present, and future actions and indicating that certain grammatical forms which have other uses, can also mean the habitual present.

Some readers may find it strange that the future conjugation can mean two distinct things: present and future. But actually, this is the case. The determination of meaning is based on context not on the verb conjugation.

Y-4 Example 2 – Ex33-07:09. This passage relates how Moses moved his “office” outside the desert camp, after the horrible golden calf sin in order to achieve some separation from the people who had lost some of their holiness. The translation reflects Rashi comments. The Rashi comments after the citation show how Rashi reinterpreted certain grammatical forms as indicating a habitual present despite the fact that the conjugation could also be interpreted in terms of other tenses.

Biblical text combined with Rashi comments and translations:

And Moses *takes*(1) his tent/office and establishes it far from the camp

He *calls*(2) it, The Tent of Meeting

Whoever seeks God, *goes*(3) to the Tent of Meeting outside the camp

And when Moses *leaves*(4) the camp [to go to his new office]

The entire nation *stands*(5), remaining standing, each person by his tent's door

They look at Moses until he arrives at the Tent

And God *speaks*(6) to Moses face to face as a person speaks to his friend

Rashi comments:

- (1) A present meaning; he *takes* his tent (The original Hebrew means *will take*)
- (2) The original Hebrew means *he will call* but Rashi translates he *calls*
- (3) The original Hebrew means *will go out* but Rashi translates “*like goes*”
- (4) The original Hebrew means *when he will leave* but rather translates *when he leaves*
- (5) The original Hebrew means *will stand* but Rashi translates *stands*
- (6) The original Hebrew means *will speak* but Rashi translates *speaks*

This and the previous example show several points: (i) When dealing with grammar one must always consider and distinguish *form* and a *meaning*; (ii) the same form can have multiple meanings (this is true even in computer languages and is called overloading); (iii) Rashi in his comments does more than translate. He makes explicit that different conjugations can have multiple meanings.

Just to fully clarify: The future conjugation refers to the conjugation that could mean the future. So, for example, the form *yiquax* is a grammatical form that could mean *he will take*, that is, a *future* meaning. Hence, it is called the *future conjugation*. It differs from a past conjugation such as *laquax* which could mean *he took*, a *past* meaning. But, and this is the novelty of Rashi, the future conjugation doesn't *always* mean the future. It could mean the future and it could also mean the habitual present. The same conjugation *yiquax* can either mean, *he will take* or *he takes*. The meaning is inferred from context.

Y.5 – A Final Example of Verb Form Overload – Gn06-09d. The following verse and Rashi discuss Noah's righteousness

Biblical text. Noah had been a righteous person in his generation; he had walked with God

Rashi: Walked is past tense.

This [form] serves both past and coming with one form. [The following are examples]

A. Gn13-07 Arise, walk the land [God spoke this to Abraham]; **Rashi:** Refers to what is to come

B. Gn06-09 Noah walked with God, **Rashi:** Refers to the past

C. 1Sm12-13 Pray for your servants [The nation requested this of Samuel], **Rashi:** Refers to what is to come

D. 1Kn08-42 [The person in need] Will come and will pray in This House [The Temple]; **Rashi:** The underlined verb uses a past conjugation but the prefix *vav* it has converts the past to future (conversive *vav*).

Just to clarify Rashi uses the following terms to describe the tenses

Past

Coming

Future

If one examines closely one finds that only Example D is future. Examples A and C are not future but rather commands. Commands of course can be described by the term *coming*. In light of this, it seems reasonable to explain Rashi's comment on Gn06-09 as referring to the past perfect habitual. Indeed, the statement *Noah had walked with God* is not a statement that he did this one time but a statement of habit, a habit in the relative past, in other words a past-perfect habitual.

Of special interest to this chapter is Rashi's explicit identification of the form *hithalech* – *chirik*, *patach*, *tzaray*, as an overloaded grammatical form, that is a grammatical form that can mean two things. Indeed, all modern grammar books list this form both to indicate the 3rd person singular

past as well as the singular command. This supports the contention of this chapter that a study of grammar is a study of the association of form and meaning with overloading allowed.

Y.6 – Modern treatment of overloaded forms and habitual present: The great biblical grammarian, Gesenius, is given credit for freeing biblical philology and grammar from the biases of theological and religious prepossession. This is similar to the arguments presented in this chapter describing Rashi's approach as relating form and meaning without preconceived notions of theology and miracles. We therefore cite Gesenius' treatment of the habitual tenses. Like Rashi, Gesenius emphasizes lists of examples. Chapter 3 of his grammar is devoted to the verb. It presents much more richness and many more examples than is typically done in modern grammar books. Paragraph 126 of Chapter 3 deals with the "perfect" (another name for what I have called "the past conjugation"). In the 3rd sub-paragraph of paragraph 126, Gesenius discusses use of the past conjugation to indicate the habitual (He discusses it other places also, but we suffice with this one citation). [Brackets indicate inserted explanatory comments]

126#3 For the abstract present of our languages, this denotes

- a) a condition or property long continued and existing [as in the following verses where the past conjugation is used to indicate an ongoing long continued property]: Job 9:2, 10:13 I know; Gen. 4:9 I do not know, Ps. 31:7 I hate; Job 34:5 I am righteous; Ps. 104:1 You[God] are great; Gen. 32:11, I am unworthy
- b) an already existing, but still recurring (habitual) action or state (frequent in expressing general truths); as Job 7:13, Ps 31:15 I say, I think; Ps 1:1 Happy the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; (Ps 10:3, 119:30,40)

Here in the sphere of our Present, the Perfect [past conjugation] and imperfect [future conjugation] meet. The one or the other is used, according as the speaker regards the action or state expressed by the verb as one that before existed, but still subsisting, or perhaps just then completed; or, as then about coming to pass, continuing, perhaps happening at the moment. We accordingly find, in about the same sense, Ps 40:13, I can't [past conjugation] and Gen 19:19, 31:35 I can't [future conjugation]. Often in such cases Perfects [past conjugation] and imperfects [present conjugation] are intermingled e.g. Is 5:12. Prov 1;22, Job 3: 17,18