

Report on SBL 2009 Annual Meeting: International Syriac Language Project sessions.

The International Syriac Language Project (ISLP) met for three sessions during the SBL 2009 Annual Meeting. As usual the sessions were characterized by diversity of presenters, languages and topics. The presenters ranged from unknown PhD students to world renowned scholars and lexicographers, the languages discussed included Syriac, Hebrew, Aramaic, Phoenician, Ugaritic, and Greek, while the topics ranged across historical linguistics and every kind of modern linguistics, verbal valency, semantic structure, the problems of content and structure in lexical entries, text critical issues, and translation. The only aspect of the ISLP sessions that provided no variety was that every session took place immediately after lunch. The variety, however, staved off the inclination to sleep.

For any readers who missed sessions, the papers presented will be peer reviewed and published in *Foundations for Syriac Lexicography V* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press) in the series ‘Perspectives on Syriac Linguistics.’ In the meantime, however, a small preview of each paper will remind those who attended the session what they heard and whet the appetites of those who are awaiting the book.

The first ISLP session took place after lunch on Saturday and attracted a respectable crowd. The session was presided over by Richard A. Taylor of Dallas Theological Seminary with Anne Thompson of the University of Cambridge as the first speaker. Thompson’s paper, *Simpler for Lexicographer and Reader: The Making of Entries for Verbs in Greek Lexica*, was a very practical paper which proposed some solutions to the problems lexicographers face when attempting to write ‘user-friendly’ entries for Greek verbs. Although she used Greek verbs as her sample, the principles were transferable to other languages.

The second speaker in the first session was a PhD student from St. Mark’s College, Charles Sturt University, Canberra. Craig’s paper, *Pioneers and No Through Roads: The Story of Early Hebrew-English Lexicons*, was an historical exploration of Hebrew-English lexicography from 1593 to 1800, showing the pioneering and inventive spirit of these works and presenting possible reasons for the failure of these lexicons to have any lasting influence.

Another PhD student, Marjetta Liljeström from the University of Helsinki, gave the third paper of this session. Liljeström grappled with textual issues facing Syriac lexicographers in her paper entitled, *The Syrohexapla of 1 Samuel as a Translation*. She argued that “the Syrohexapla has to be studied in its own right before it can be used properly for lexicographical, text-critical, and other interrelated purposes.” This meant dealing with its translational features, which required the scholar to compare it with Greek versions and other Syriac translations.

The last speaker for the day was Terry Falla from Whitley College, University of Melbourne, whose paper, *Metaphor, Lexicography and Modern Linguistics: Should Figurative Speech Figure in Future Ancient-Language Lexica?*, surveyed literature on cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, philosophical linguistics, psycholinguistics, media ecology, neurolinguistics, biological-evolutionary linguistics, and cognitive neurology to find the answer to the question presented in the title of his paper. Falla concluded, “Non-cognitive-linguists present no obstacle to registering and analyzing figurative speech in a lexicon. For their part, cognitive linguists embrace a diversity of positions from the uncompromising that disallows figurative speech to approaches that actually utilize their discipline... to identify and lexicalize metaphor and other forms of figurative speech.”

The Sunday session was presided over by Peter Williams of Tyndale House. The first speaker was one of Terry Falla’s PhD students from Whitley College, University of Melbourne, Steven Shaw. Shaw’s paper *Verbal Valence in the Early Syriac Translations of the New Testament with Special Attention to the Peshitta Version* focused on the prepositional phrases that attach to verbs and shift their meaning. Shaw pointed out that this aspect of verbs is neglected in Syriac lexica. He demonstrated the need for a methodology to aid the lexicographer in the task of properly and fully determining the meaning of verbs that co-occur with prepositions.

In true ISLP style, the next paper was something completely different. Regine Hunziker-Rodewald from the University of Strasbourg presented *Celebrating the Full Moon: Northwest Semitic Terminology for Concepts of Time*. Hunziker-Rodewald showed that the lexical evidence of Ugaritic texts exhibit a linguistic structure of time that has a distinct orientation towards the moon, while the evidence of Hebrew texts exhibits a linguistic structure of time that

is predominantly aligned toward the sun. Within the Old Testament texts, however, there is some evidence of lunar concepts of time which raise questions of heritage and influence and their deposits in language. The paper also looked briefly at the Aramaic and Phoenician terminology of time as well as the iconographical evidence from Israel/Palestine.

The third speaker was Michael Sokoloff of Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel, who has recently published an English translation of Brockelmann's Syriac lexicon. In his paper, *Lexical Archaeology: The Case of Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum*, Sokoloff shared what he had discovered of Brockelmann's lexicographical methods as he prepared the English translation. The following list was taken from his abstract:

1. The references and citations were collected in nearly all cases by the author himself and were not gleaned from the works of his predecessors.
2. For a few books with detailed indices (e.g. Moberg's edition of Barhebraeus' grammar), the citations were taken directly from them.
3. The material from the first edition (1895) was included in the second edition but was not rechecked for errors.
4. The many English glosses in the first edition were deleted in the second edition and were replaced by a small number of German ones.
5. While the publication date is given as 1928, the dictionary was actually prepared years earlier and published in fascicles. As a result, there are nearly no references to works published after 1912.
6. New references from the many re-editions of Syriac texts published after the first edition of the dictionary are cited from the older ones without any updating of the references.

This fascinating glimpse into the history of a lexicon was followed by an equally fascinating glimpse into the developing methods of a contemporary Hebrew lexicographer, Reinier de Blois from the United Bible Societies. De Blois's paper, *The Semantic Structure of Biblical Hebrew*, provided his audience with insight into what his work on the semantic structure of Biblical Hebrew can contribute to the ever present problems presented by a limited corpus and the hapax legomena that such a corpus

generates. De Blois demonstrated “ how a thorough semantic analysis of Biblical Hebrew from a cognitive linguistic perspective can help to reconstruct a kind of ‘semantic grid’ for this language, and how this grid provides the lexicographer with more certainty in his/her efforts to determine the meaning of ‘difficult’ words.”

The final session took place on Monday and was presided over by Michael Sokoloff. Unlike the other sessions only two papers were presented in this session, with the remaining time being used for the ISLP business meeting. The first speaker for this session was Janet W. Dyk of Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. Her paper, *The Peshitta rendering of Psalm 25: Spelling, Synonyms, and Syntax*, looked at what happens to a text, in which form plays a significant part in the communication of its message, when it undergoes translation. She asked, “Does the message of the source language remain intact when, of necessity, the form is transformed into that of the target language? What types of compromises are made and what are their effects?” Using Psalm 25 as her sample, she categorized all the observed differences and evaluated how faithfully the Peshitta text conveyed the Masoretic text of the psalm.

The last speaker for the conference was George Kiraz of Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute. His paper, *The Historical Development of the Vocalization System in Syriac*, outlined the historical development of the Syriac vocalization system, which developed over a long period of time and went through a number of stages with each new stage incorporating its predecessors. He showed that a multi-teared system developed which is still in current use and he shed some light on its modern reception following Segal’s treatment of the subject.