

STAGGERED MATURITIES: DESCRIPTIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR IN THE TEACHING OF BIBLICAL HEBREW (H)

Esther Raizen
The University of Texas at Austin

The distinction between prescriptive and descriptive grammars is based on the understanding that prescriptive grammars lay down the rules for language use, and consequently the foundation for claims to correctness or incorrectness in the way people use a language, while descriptive grammars synthesize rules from the language that people actually use, accounting for varied linguistic realities of particular times, places, language communities, and the like.

While the prescriptive/descriptive dichotomy is primarily addressed in the context of analyzing spoken languages, it is well mirrored in approaches to the instruction of Biblical Hebrew, where it manifests itself as a pedagogical rather than theoretical issue. In their preface to *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Eisenbrauns 1990), for example, Waltke and O'Connor state that they "have attempted to present both a body of knowledge (providing, as it were, the 'right answers') and a sample of analytical and descriptive approaches (suggesting the 'right questions')". Similar attempts to carefully negotiate these two approaches can be found in everyday choices that teachers of Biblical Hebrew make, often without giving the methodology involved the careful thought that it merits.

In the presentation I will use the concept of staggered maturities as an illustration for a discussion of three grammatical topics: the conjunction "and" in paired-word constructions (e.g., *toḅ vara*), the variants of *bgdkpt*, and subject-verb agreement. I will suggest that a staggered method of introducing such topics maximizes the benefits the curriculum in that it creates appropriate expectations among students and directs the instructor to address the fundamentals of Biblical Hebrew in a flexible yet systematic manner. I will discuss a strategy of communicating information that begins with the descriptive, expands into the prescriptive, and in concluding revisits the descriptive, while building on the developing maturity of the learners. Such a strategy allows the instructor to proceed in concentric circles that sustain an active class dynamic for the full course of instruction, far beyond a single lesson, a single topic, or a single semester. I will address the strategy in the context of two curricular traditions—one in which Biblical Hebrew is an independent track, and the other in which the study of Biblical Hebrew assumes previous study of the modern language.