

## LEXICAL SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF PSALM 91

**OBIADI, Florence Obianuju**

Department of English,  
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,  
Igbariam Campus, Anambra State  
obiadi\_florence@consamichi.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

Psalm 91 is among the most evocative texts in the Hebrew Bible, often celebrated for its promise of divine protection, comfort, and security in times of adversity. Using qualitative textual analysis, this article demonstrates how the psalm employs lexical contrasts and overlaps to emphasize divine refuge in the face of human vulnerability. The study investigates the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV) of Psalm 91 through the lens of lexical semantics, specifically applying Semantic Field Theory (SFT). Semantic Field Theory posits that lexical items derive meaning not in isolation but through their systematic relationships with other words within the same conceptual domain. By grouping the lexical items of Psalm 91 into the semantic fields of protection, danger, and deliverance, the study reveals how these fields interact to construct a unified theological message. The findings show that meaning in Psalm 91 emerges not from individual terms but from the dynamic interplay of words across fields, thereby offering a deeper understanding of its theological and poetic force. The study further demonstrates the usefulness of Semantic Field Theory in biblical scholarship by showing how groups of related lexical items create textual unity, deepen theological significance, and sustain the psalm's lasting importance across both historical and modern contexts.

**Keywords:** Psalm 91, lexical semantics, semantic field theory, biblical linguistics, theology of protection

### **1.0 Introduction**

Psalm 91, often called the "Psalm of Protection," is one of the most frequently cited texts in Jewish and Christian traditions. Its verses provide assurances of divine safety against diverse threats: pestilence, warfare, disease, and disaster. Beyond its religious significance, Psalm 91 is also a prime example of how biblical poetry employs language to convey abstract theological concepts through concrete imagery.

Murphy (2010) opines that language is a system of conventional symbols whose meaning depends on the relationships between words in the mental lexicon and the ways they are used in context. Ofoegbu (2012) defines language as "the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate. Language is man and man is language. Man uses language for his everyday interaction".

Ofoegbu (2021) posits that the human language is very unique because it has its own structure and its own system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns. This simply means that there are rules governing the organization of sentences in a language. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) opine that it is a means by which humans alone communicate. This means that language is purely a human attribute which, serves primarily as a means of communication. Language is a system and this means that it is an organised human behaviour built on inherent structures.

According to Ofoegbu (2022), language is the general human system of communication. He went further to state that language is a means by which humans alone communicate, it serves among other things as a binding factor for all humans. According to Ofoegbu and Usar (2018), language is essentially a human system of communication that is shaped by both linguistic behaviour and extralinguistic norms across different social groups.

Oviogun & Veerdee (2020) cited in Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) posit that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used by members of a speech community for communication, thought, and social interaction."

Language is a structured, symbolic, and dynamic system of communication made up of arbitrary sounds, signs, or written symbols, governed by rules of grammar, through which humans create, interpret, and share meaning for purposes of thought, expression, and social interaction.

Saeed (2007) defines Semantics as the study of meaning communicated through language. This definition looks at the communicative value of meaning. It establishes the fact that there is meaning behind every word, phrase or sentence.

Crystal (2008) defines semantics as a major branch of linguistics developed to the study of meaning in language. Everything about semantics is meaning. It stands as a major pillar in the study and analysis of language. No two languages have the same structure and because of that meaning vary. His definition points to the fact that meaning is language dependent. He also agrees that meanings vary in language.

According to Ofoegbu and Usar (2018), semantics deals with how meaning is encoded in language, especially in words and lexical forms, and how semantic relations or creativity are realized in communication

Lexical semantic analysis is the study of how words (lexical items) convey meaning, how these meanings are structured in the mental lexicon, and how words relate to one another within a language system. It is a subfield of semantics that focuses exclusively on the word level.

According to Cruse (2011), lexical semantics is concerned with the systematic description of word meaning and the sense relations between lexical items, such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and polysemy. Lexical semantic analysis, therefore, involves examining these relations to uncover how meaning operates in natural language.

Murphy (2010) reiterates that lexical semantics provides tools for analyzing how individual words contribute to the construction of meaning in discourse, including literal and figurative uses. Lyons (1995) also emphasizes that words cannot be studied in isolation; they belong to networks or semantic fields, where their meanings are defined by their relations to other words.

This work applies SFT to Psalm 91 in order to show how its vocabulary constructs three interrelated semantic fields—protection, danger, and deliverance—and how these fields interact to communicate the Psalm's overarching theme of divine security.

### 1.1 Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to conduct a lexical semantic analysis of *Psalm 91* through the lens of Semantic Field Theory of Meaning, in order to identify, classify, and interpret the lexical items used to construct the text's central themes of protection, trust, and divine assurance.

- To identify key lexical items in *Psalm 91* that contributes to its thematic structure.
- To classify the lexical items into semantic fields (e.g., protection, danger, divine refuge).
- To analyze the semantic relations (synonymy, hyponymy, metaphorical extensions) within and across these fields.
- To interpret how these semantic fields function together to reinforce the theological and literary message of divine protection.
- To contribute to biblical linguistic studies by demonstrating how Semantic Field Theory provides a systematic framework for analyzing sacred texts.

### 2.0 Literature Review

Lexical semantics has proven to be an invaluable tool in biblical studies, as words in Scripture often carry layers of metaphorical and symbolic meaning (Palmer, 1981; Lyons, 1995).

Cruse (2011) and Murphy (2010) elaborated how senses of lexical items are structured in the mental lexicon and constrained by usage and context. In the study of Ancient Near Eastern texts, lexicographic authorities (e.g., Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1906; Köhler & Baumgartner, 1953–1977) remain essential for establishing semantic ranges and historical usage, which in turn inform field classification.

Alter (2007) emphasized the poetic density of the Psalms, where lexical items frequently operate within metaphorical systems.

Biblical linguists used semantic analysis to uncover how clusters of words work together to create theological motifs (Vangemeren, 1997).

Viau, (2018) reiterated that inner-texture analysis of Psalm 91 itself shows how repetition and lexical clustering contribute to theological emphasis.

Brill, (2020) reported that structural studies in Brill's methodological treatment of Psalm 91 emphasize syntactic and semantic cohesion, which is critical for field-based analysis.

Botha (2012) connected Psalm 91's vocabulary to Wisdom traditions, demonstrating how lexical fields extend intertextually.

The Semantic Field Theory (SFT) developed by Trier (1934) and refined by Lehrer (1974), views language as a system in which vocabulary is organized into conceptual fields. Each word is defined by its relations to other words within the same field, and the loss or gain of a term reshapes the field's structure. Lyons (1995) opines that semantic fields are not arbitrary but reflect cultural and cognitive organization of experience.

In biblical texts, semantic field analysis can reveal how theological concepts are linguistically structured. For example, in Psalm 91, terms of warfare, disease, and shelter interrelate to produce a coherent field of meaning centered on divine protection. Lexical semantics provides the technical categories and analytic tools used to operationalize SFT—sense relations (synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy), polysemy, collocation, and semantic prosody (Palmer, 1981; Cruse, 2011).

When applied to biblical poetry, lexical-semantic methods must attend to poetic devices—parallelism, chiasm, and repetition—that shape how lexical items acquire force and relational meaning in context (Alter, 2007).

Thus, lexical semantics in biblical studies is not purely formal; it is philologically informed and contextually situated.

SFT's emphasis on relational meaning makes it especially apt for literary and religious texts, where clustered vocabularies often serve rhetorical and theological ends. However, critics note that SFT can risk imposing rigid boundaries on meanings that are gradient or usage-dependent; this critique has led scholars to combine SFT with prototype and corpus-based approaches in contemporary lexical semantics.

### 3.0 Theoretical Framework

The present study is anchored in Semantic Field Theory (SFT), a model within lexical semantics that explains meaning in terms of relational networks among words. This framework provides the conceptual and methodological foundation for analyzing the lexicon of Psalm 91, with emphasis on how words form meaning through their membership in fields rather than in isolation.

#### Semantic Field Theory (SFT)

SFT was first systematically articulated by Jost Trier (1931/1934), who argues that the lexicon of a language is organized into structured fields of interrelated terms, each contributing to the delineation of meaning within the field. According to Trier, words "share" meaning space; hence, the meaning of one word is best understood in relation to other words in the same semantic field.

Lehrer (1974) in refining the theory provided methodological criteria for field delimitation and for analyzing overlapping and hierarchical field structures. Lyons (1995) says that semantic fields are not merely linguistic but also conceptual and cultural, reflecting how communities structure experience through language.

Applied to Psalm 91, SFT enables the identification of clusters of words that revolve around central thematic domains—such as *protection*, *danger*, and *deliverance*. Rather than treating lexemes such as "refuge," "fortress," "pestilence," or "arrow" as isolated items, this framework situates them within broader relational sets that generate layered meaning. For instance, the protection field (e.g., refuge, fortress, shadow, wings, shield) gains coherence by being opposed to the danger field (e.g., snare, pestilence, terror, arrow).

#### Integration into Biblical Studies

In biblical linguistics and exegesis, scholars increasingly note the significance of lexical clusters and semantic domains in understanding theological motifs (Alter, 2007; VanGemeren, 1997). However, systematic applications of SFT to individual psalms remain limited. By applying SFT to Psalm 91, the present study provides a structured account of how the Psalm's lexicon forms an interdependent system of meaning. The framework enables us to see the Psalm's language of security and threat not as a string of isolated metaphors, but as an integrated semantic network that conveys the central theological theme of divine protection.

### 4.0 Methodology

The primary text for analysis is *Psalm 91*, with reference to the Biblical Hebrew Masoretic Text (Hebrew version of the Jewish Bible) as the base. To ensure accessibility and theological relevance, two English translations, the New International Version (NIV) and the King James Version (KJV), were also consulted for comparative purposes.

For lexical meanings and semantic ranges, standard biblical lexicons and concordances were used, including:

- *Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1906),
- *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Köhler & Baumgartner, 1953–1977), and
- *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*.

The data collection followed these steps:

1. **Textual Identification:** The Hebrew and English texts of Psalm 91 were carefully read and segmented into lexical units (nouns, verbs, and key metaphors) relevant for semantic analysis.
2. **Lexical Selection:** Key terms central to the Psalm's themes of protection, danger, and deliverance were extracted. Terms with strong semantic or metaphorical value (e.g., "refuge," "fortress," "snare," "pestilence," "shadow") were prioritized.
3. **Lexicographic Verification:** Each selected term was cross-checked in biblical lexicons (BDB, HALOT) to determine its semantic range, etymology, and usage in other biblical contexts.

Some terms carry polyvalent meanings that resist strict categorization. To mitigate this, the study integrates both lexicographic and cognitive-semantic insights.

### 5.0 Lexical Semantic Analysis of Psalm 91

#### i. The Semantic Field of Protection

This field includes terms such as *refuge*, *fortress*, *shelter*, *shadow*, *shield*, *dwelling*, *wings*.

- *Refuge* (v. 2) and *fortress* (v. 2) evoke imagery of safety and military defense, portraying God as a protective stronghold.
- *Shadow of the Almighty* (v. 1) conveys closeness and covering, where *shadow* symbolizes protection from harm.
- *Shield and buckler* (v. 4) highlight God's role as a defender in battle.
- *Wings* (v. 4) draw from natural imagery, where a bird shelters its young, adding tenderness to the semantic field of protection.

Together, these terms create a layered image of God as protector—both strong like a fortress and tender like a bird.

#### ii. The Semantic Field of Danger

This field includes *snare, fowler, pestilence, terror, arrow, plague, destruction, lion, serpent*.

- *Snare of the fowler* (v. 3) depicts entrapment, likening human vulnerability to prey.
- *Pestilence* and *plague* (vv. 3, 6) represent deadly diseases, expanding the field of danger into the realm of natural threats.
- *Arrow that flies by day* (v. 5) and *terror of the night* (v. 5) express threats both visible and invisible, symbolizing round-the-clock danger.
- *Lion and serpent* (v. 13) represent chaotic and destructive forces, familiar in Ancient Near Eastern symbolism of evil.

This field portrays danger as multifaceted: physical, spiritual, natural, and existential.

#### iii. The Semantic Field of Deliverance and Assurance

This field includes *deliver, rescue, protect, save, cover, honor, satisfy, long life*.

- *He will deliver you* (v. 3) positions God as rescuer from entrapment.
- *Cover you with His pinions* (v. 4) portrays protective intimacy.
- *Protect and save* (vv. 14–15) emphasize God's intervention in times of crisis.
- *Satisfy with long life* (v. 16) provides assurance of ultimate well-being, contrasting with the threats in the danger field.

This semantic field counterbalances danger, highlighting divine action that ensures safety and longevity.

#### iv. Interrelations of Semantic Fields

The Psalm constructs meaning through binary oppositions:

- **Protection vs. Danger:** *Fortress* (v. 2) opposes *arrow* (v. 5).
- **Fear vs. Trust:** *Terror* (v. 5) is contrasted with the assurance of *dwelling in the shelter of the Most High* (v. 1).
- **Death vs. Life:** *Plague* (v. 6) contrasts with *long life* (v. 16).

Thus, meaning in Psalm 91 arises not from isolated terms but from the relational dynamics of these fields.

#### v. Discussion

The analysis confirms that Psalm 91's theological power lies in its semantic structuring. The protective field reassures the believer of divine security, while the danger field acknowledges the reality of human vulnerability. The deliverance field bridges the two, presenting God as the mediator who transforms peril into safety.

Semantic field theory underscores that words like *refuge* or *pestilence* cannot be fully understood alone; their significance emerges from their place within a network of terms. For instance, *refuge* is strengthened in meaning because it stands against *snare* and *pestilence*, while *deliverance* gains force as the resolution of these dangers.

### 6.0 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Semantic Field Theory provides an effective framework for analyzing Psalm 91. By categorizing its vocabulary into the semantic fields of protection, danger, and deliverance, the analysis shows that meaning emerges from the interaction and contrast of terms within and across these fields. Psalm 91's theological message of assurance is thus constructed lexically: divine protection is magnified in relation to the dangers it overcomes.

Semantic field analysis affirms that the psalm's enduring resonance lies not merely in its individual words but in their collective semantic structuring, which evokes the universal human experience of fear and trust in divine refuge.

### References

- Alter, R. (2007). *The book of Psalms: A translation with commentary*. W. W. Norton.
- Botha, P. J. (2012). Psalm 91 and its Wisdom connections. *Old Testament Essays*, 25(2), 260–276.
- Brill. (2020). Text and structure of Psalm 91 (methodological chapter). In [Book title]. Brill.
- Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1906). *A Hebrew and English lexicon of the Old Testament*. Clarendon Press.

- Cruse, D. A. (2011). *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Geeraerts, D. (2010). *Theories of lexical semantics*. Oxford University Press.
- Jose, L. S. (2024). Semantic evolution in the Psalms: A diachronic analysis of linguistic transformations. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(3), 206–215.
- Köhler, L., & Baumgartner, W. (1953–1977). *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*. E. J. Brill.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lehrer, A. (1974). *Semantic fields and lexical structure*. North-Holland.
- Lyons, J. (1995). *Linguistic semantics: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, M. L. (2010). *Lexical meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ofoegbu, C. O. (2012). *Discourse Techniques in Asika Emmanuel Ikechukwu's Omeile*. Journal of Arts and Contemporary Society.
- Ofoegbu, C., & Usar, I. (2018). A morpho-semantic analysis of lexical creativity of political speech of Nigeria's Independence Anniversary 2015. *Journal of Linguistics, Language and Igbo Studies*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://www.nigerianjournalonline.com/index.php/jollis/article/view/94>
- Ofoegbu, C., & Usar, I. (2018). A Morpho-Semantic Analysis of Lexical Creativity of Political Speech of Nigeria's Independence Anniversary 2015. *Journal of Linguistics, Language and Igbo Studies*, 2(1).
- Ofoegbu, C.O. (2021). *Issues in Language and National Development in Nigeria*. Onitsha: Ralph Mustard Limited.
- Ofoegbu, C. (2022). *Syntax: An introductory text*. Ralph Mustard Ltd.
- Ofoegbu C.O & Ishima, J.L J. ( 2024) Negation and Marking Strategies in the Ozubulu Dialect of Igbo. *USEM Journal of Languages, Linguistics & Literature*. (12). pp 15 – 27.
- Oviogun, P. V., & Veerdee, R. (2020). Definition of language and linguistics: Basic competence. *International Journal of Language and Literature*.
- Palmer, F. R. (1981). *Semantics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Trier, J. (1934). *Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes: Die Geschichte eines sprachlichen Feldes*. Winter.
- VanGemeren, W. A. (1997). The Psalms. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *Expositor's Bible commentary* (Vol. 5, pp. 1–880). Zondervan.
- Viau, M. F. (2018). Inner texture analysis of Psalm 91. *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, 8(1), 99–113.