

Genericity, Tense, and Verbal Patterns in the Sentence Literature of Proverbs

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A perusal of the Hebrew text of the book of Proverbs will quickly uncover a rich variety of verb constellations employed in its maxims. However, this richness is generally lost on commentators and translators, who tend to render the proverbial sayings with present-tense verb forms. This translation practice finds support in numerous cross-linguistic examples of present-tense maxims and linguistic treatments of the present verb form in such gnomic expressions as a “generic (or gnomic) tense.” However, more recent linguist research has abandon the idea of a “generic tense” as mistaken. Although there are discernible cross-linguistic patterns of association between genericity and verbal semantics, no particular tense, aspect, or modality (TAM) is alone sufficient to produce a characterizing (or generic) expression.

Unfortunately, this newer linguistic research has yet to be brought to bear on the question of genericity in Biblical Hebrew.¹ As a result, even the most recent Hebrew grammars continue to employ classical terminology such as “gnomic perfect”² and identify present gnomic or habitual as a central area of semantic overlap among the finite verb forms.³

A review of recent linguistic discussion of genericity suggests that the traditional approach to generic statements in the Hebrew Bible (especially the book of Proverbs) is inadequate both linguistically and exegetically. Semantically, the treatment of all verb forms in proverbial literature as expressing present tense begs the question why different verb forms have been employed.

1. An exception is Max Rogland’s recent work, in which he raises doubts about the traditional understanding of the so-called gnomic perfect (Max Rogland, *Alleged Non-Past Uses of Qatal in Classical Hebrew* [SSN 44; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003] 15–51).

2. For example, Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 146; Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 488.

3. J. C. L. Gibson, *Davidson’s Introductory Hebrew Grammar: Syntax* (4th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 61–62.

Exegetically, discerning the distinct contribution each verb form makes in generic statements leads to a fuller understanding of the meaning and rhetoric of biblical maxims.

Generic(ity) is used by linguists in reference to statements such as *The whale is a mammal*, *Only fools rush in*, and *Robert drinks coffee*. More traditional labels for statements of this sort include gnomic, general/omnitemporal/timeless truth, proverb, and habitual.⁴ With respect to these and similar sentences, genericity refers to two distinct but related phenomena. The noun phrases (NPs) *the whale* and *fools* (but not *Robert*) do not refer to individuals but to kinds. Such NPs are called “kind-referring NPs” or simply “generic NPs.”⁵ The second phenomenon has to do with the propositions themselves. They do not refer to specific episodes or events but to general properties or characteristics. Thus they are called “characterizing” (or simply generic) sentences in contrast to “particular” sentences.⁶

Within the larger category of generic sentences, habituais are distinguished variously by different linguists. Krifka et al. apply the label “habitual” to generic sentences whose predicate is related to a dynamic or “episodic” predication.⁷ On this basis, *Only fools rush in* and *Robert drinks coffee* would be categorized as habituais. Krifka et al. would call the third example, *The whale is a mammal*, a “lexical characterizing sentence” because of its inherently stative predicate. Characteristic of all generics is the neutralization of this dynamic: stative distinction; in other words, whether derived from a dynamic predicate (habitual) or a stative one, all generics are stative.

By contrast, Langacker proposes a distinction between generics and habituais based on whether the subject NP is kind-referring or not.⁸ Thus, *The whale is a mammal* and *Only fools rush in* are generics based on the fact that both *the whale* and *fools* are not individual NPs, but kind-referring NPs. By contrast, the subject NP in *Robert drinks coffee* presumably refers to an individual named *Robert*; hence it is habitual, rather than generic.

This lack of unanimity about how to distinguish habituais within the larger category of generics is characteristic of the challenge linguists face in analyzing

4. See John Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 680–81.

5. Manfred Krifka et al., “Genericity: An Introduction,” in *The Generic Book* (ed. Gregory N. Carlson and Francis Jeffry Pelletier; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 2.

6. Ibid., 3.

7. Ibid., 17.

8. Langacker states this contrast in terms of whether the subject NP is inherently plural or not (Ronald W. Langacker, “Generics and Habituais,” in *On Conditionals Again* [ed. Angeliki Athanasiadou and René Dirven; Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 143; Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1997] 195).

genericity. On the one hand, the way Krifka et al. explain the distinction makes sense on a certain level: “Habitual sentences intuitively generalize over patterns of events as a component of their meaning.”⁹ On the other hand, this understanding breaks down when applied to generics such as *Only fools rush in*, which is intuitively not a habitual. Although the difficulties in distinguishing habituals serves to illustrate some of the characteristics of generic sentences, they do not impinge upon the study here, which is based on the concept of generic statements in the broader sense.

To round off this general introduction to genericity, let me note two related distinctions that linguists make with respect to the interpretation of generic sentences. The first is between a universal and an existential interpretation.¹⁰ To illustrate, *Jared eats oatmeal* may be interpreted universally to mean that on every occasion that Jared eats, he eats oatmeal. By contrast, an existential interpretation would simply be that *on occasion* Jared eats oatmeal.¹¹

The second interpretive distinction is between “descriptive” and “normative” generics (to use Dahl’s terminology).¹² The former refers to probabilities or tendencies in the actual world, whereas the latter has to do with a state of affairs that is valid across a number of possible worlds but that may never actually be realized.¹³ For instance, a statement such as *My friends drive Volkswagens* may be paraphrased according to either a descriptive or a normative interpretation: *My friends tend to/generally drive Volkswagens* (descriptive interpretation), or *I will only be friends with those who drive Volkswagens* (normative interpretation).

These two distinctions are helpful for understanding generic sentences. First, the commonplace notion that generics are statements that are universally valid is misleading, because a generic may refer to a possibility (existential interpretation) or a tendency (descriptive interpretation) rather than a universal necessity (universal and/or normative interpretation). Second, these related distinctions explain the law-like characteristic of generic sentences that are interpreted as aphorisms or maxims (for example, *A friend in need is a*

9. Krifka et al., “Genericity,” 17.

10. John M. Lawler, “Generic to a Fault,” in *Papers from the Eighth Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society* (Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 1972) 247–58.

11. Dahl relates these categories of universal and existential to the English modal operators “necessity” and “possibility,” respectively: a universal generic is necessarily the case in the possible situations, whereas an existential generic is possibly the case in the possible situations (Östen Dahl, “On Generics,” in *Formal Semantics of Natural Language* [ed. E. Keenan; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975] 105).

12. Ibid., 100–102.

13. The term “possible world” derives from model-theoretical semantics, in which the truth conditions of a statement are the ways in which the “world” must be in order for it to be true.

friend indeed) or those that are employed as directives (such as *There is no smoking in here*). These types of generics are interpreted as both universal and normative. Third, Declerck suggests that semantic indeterminacy of the sort discussed here is characteristic of generics. He claims that generic interpretations arise expressly from the fact that such statements are “unspecified for various distinctions.”¹⁴

Despite the extent to which these distinctions help our understanding of the nature of generic statements, there remain some questions that linguists have been unable to answer satisfactorily. The first of these has to do with analyzing how generic sentences mean. A frequently used example to illustrate this problem is *Birds fly*. While most people interpret this statement as true, most people also know that not all birds fly. Similarly, the generic *Mammals bear live young* is not invalidated by the fact that it does not apply to male or immature mammals. This is in a sense the primary difficulty in understanding generics. Therefore, it is important to survey some approaches to the problem, realizing however, that there is not yet a completely satisfactory answer.

Two types of approaches to analyzing generics are the inductivist approach and the rules-and-regulation approach.¹⁵ The inductivist approach interprets a generic statement as true or valid if and only if there are a sufficient number of instantiations for which the predicated property holds true. So, if Colin walks to school regularly, at some point I can validly state that *Colin walks to school* as a generalization about his behavior. The greatest difficulty for this approach is that some generics apply even if there are no instantiations of the predication. For example, *Kathy does not take cream in her coffee* may be considered valid even if she has never drunk coffee. The statement may perhaps be deduced from the fact that she is lactose intolerant rather than from her observed coffee-drinking habits.

The rules-and-regulations approach sidesteps the difficulty of a lack of instantiations by interpreting generic statements as true or false based on whether they have a corresponding structure (that is, a rule or regulation) in the world. Carlson lists examples of generics that favor this explanation over an inductivist one such as *Bishops move diagonally* and *Tab A fits in slot B*.¹⁶ These

14. Renaat Declerck, “The Manifold Interpretations of Generic Sentences,” *Lingua* 68 (1986) 151.

15. See Gregory N. Carlson, “Truth Conditions of Generic Sentences: Two Contrasting Views,” in *The Generic Book* (ed. Gregory N. Carlson and Francis Jeffry Pelletier; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 224–37; Ariel Cohen, *Think Generic! The Meaning and Use of Generic Sentences* (Dissertations in Linguistics; Stanford, Calif.: CSLI, 1999) 5–29; and Krifka et al., “Genericity,” 45–63.

16. Carlson, “Truth Conditions,” 225.

generics are considered valid even though there may be no instantiations of them, because they correspond with some rule or regulation with respect to the way the world works. Nevertheless, this approach has attracted criticism as well, primarily for the fact that it is “ontologically more extravagant” than the inductivist approach.¹⁷ It places the burden of validity on the existence of rules and regulations in the world structure. This seems particularly problematic when, as Carlson points out, generics appear to be formally based on particular or episodic sentences that clearly refer not to rules and regulations but to individuals.¹⁸ If the nongeneric sentence *Twenty birds fly* refers directly to individual instantiations in the world, on what basis can we argue that the generic statement *Birds fly* refers to some rule or regulation about bird behavior?

In any case, both these approaches have difficulty dealing with exceptions to certain generic sentences such as those mentioned above (*Birds fly*, *Mammals bear live young*). In an attempt to overcome the problem of exceptions, linguists have proposed limiting the quantification or application of generics to “normal,” “prototypical,” “stereotypical,” or “relevant” subjects, or else constraining the situations to which they apply.¹⁹ According to Cohen’s recent “alternative-based” theory, the truth of a generic statement must be evaluated with respect to a set of possible alternatives. Thus, *Birds fly* must be evaluated with respect to a set of alternative means of locomotion {*fly*, *walk*, *swim*}.²⁰ Cohen calls such readings “absolute,” in contrast to “relative” readings in which the set of alternatives is related not to the predicated property, but to the NP. Thus, *The Frenchman eats horsemeat* is not evaluated on the basis of an alternative set of foods but relatively, that is, on the basis of an alternative set of nationalities {*Frenchman*, *American*, *Russian*}. In this case, the statement is valid if the Frenchman is more likely to eat horsemeat relative to the alternative nationalities in the set.²¹ In either case, Cohen argues, generic statements must be understood as probability statements;²² hence, exceptions to generics are always possible.

The above discussion forms a relevant background to the issue of genericity and verbal semantics because TAM distinctions may reasonably be expected to contribute at some level to the interpretation of a generic statements. Unfortunately, here we encounter a further difficulty in that languages rarely have

17. Cohen, *Think Generic*, 14.

18. Carlson, “Truth Conditions,” 227–28.

19. See Krifka et al., “Genericity,” 43–63.

20. Cohen, *Think Generic*, 34. Following set theory convention, I am using curly brackets { } to enclose members of the relevant set of alternatives.

21. Ibid., 52–56.

22. Ibid., 35–36.

distinct structures to signal generic readings.²³ Rather, various verbal predicates may permit a generic interpretation. For example, although English generics predominantly occur in the Simple Present, they may also be expressed by Past or Future tense forms:²⁴ *Bill plays golf* / *Bill played golf (every chance he had)* / *Bill will play golf (all week if he can)*.

Nevertheless, English sentences with Perfect and Progressive show a strong tendency toward a particular rather than generic interpretation. However, certain adverbs serve to enforce a generic reading even with a Progressive construction: *Bill is usually playing golf*. An explanation for this tendency toward particular readings may be found in the aspectual value of Perfects and Progressives: both create distinct temporal bounds on a situation and hence lead to a particular reading. By contrast, the simple tense forms in English allow for an unbounded characteristic reading.²⁵

Despite the fact that most languages, like English, have no distinctively “generic tense,” a pattern can be discerned cross-linguistically with respect to which TAM values are most commonly associated with genericity. Dahl makes two main observations about generics and TAM marking based on his extensive cross-linguistic database.²⁶ First, there is a “minimal marking tendency” among generic statements cross-linguistically. In other words, languages tend to employ the less-marked verb form in generics, such as the English Simple Present versus the Progressive Present: *Bill drinks* versus *Bill is drinking*.²⁷

Second, Dahl finds three exceptions to the minimal-marking tendency among languages. One is that imperfective verbs, which might not be the least-marked forms, predominate in generic sentences in some languages. A second, related exception is that “receding non-progressives” (that is, forms that have developed beyond a progressive meaning on the universal grammaticalization path of progressive → present / imperfective) are predominantly used in generic expressions in many languages. For instance, Dahl cites the example of Tamil, in which the verb form labeled “Future” commonly appears in generic sentences.²⁸ He hypothesizes that this form was earlier a general non-past

23. Krifka et al. cite an example from Swahili in which the verbal prefix *hu-* marks habitual genericity, but they also note that markings of this sort are only a sufficient and not a necessary marker of genericity (“Genericity,” 8).

24. I have followed the common convention here of capitalizing the names of language-specific verbal forms.

25. Langacker, “Generics and Habituals,” 192–94.

26. The database is discussed as the basis of his earlier work, Östen Dahl, *Tense and Aspect Systems* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

27. Östen Dahl, “The Marking of the Episodic/Generic Distinction in Tense-Aspect Systems,” in *The Generic Book* (ed. Gregory N. Carlson and Francis Jeffry Pelletier; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 415.

28. *Ibid.*, 418.

(present / imperfective) form that has been superseded in this role by the development of a progressive form now labeled “Present.” Finally, a few languages actually employ an overt generic marker, as in Cebuno where the progressive *ga-suwat* ‘he is writing’ is distinct from the generic *mu-suwat* ‘he (usually) writes’ through a “real durative” marking on the former (the prefix *ga-*) and an “unreal” marking on the latter (the prefix *mu-*).²⁹

Let me summarize the main conclusions from this discussion of generic statements before moving on to a discussion of the statements in Proverbs. First, generics are characterizing probability statements. That is, they do not refer to particular episodes or events but characterize properties of certain states of affairs, and as probability statements their characterizations are not without exceptions. Second, generic statements are unspecified with respect to several distinctions, so they may be interpreted in a number of ways depending on their pragmatic context. Third, although most languages have no particular marking of generic sentences and no specifically “generic tense,” there are some discernable cross-linguistic patterns with respect to TAM and generics. Among these are (1) a “minimal-marking tendency,” meaning that languages tend to use the less-marked or unmarked verb forms in generic statements, and (2) a preference for progressive → present / imperfective verb forms in generic statements.

The book of Proverbs offers an extensive collection of generic statements containing a variety of verb forms. However, not all of the material in Proverbs qualifies as generic. In particular, it has been customary among biblical scholars to distinguish between two main literary types in the book: instructional material and sentence literature. Although the instructional material is interspersed with some generic sentences, it is dominated by directive (command) statements with modal verb forms (mostly imperatives and negated jussives). The collections in chaps. 1–9 as well as the “Words of the Wise” (22:17–24:35), and the “Words of Lemuel” (31:1–9) are usually characterized as instructional material.³⁰ By contrast, the sentence literature, predominantly found in the two “Solomonic” collections (10:1–22:16 and 25:1–29:27), consists mostly of generic sentences interspersed with some directive statements. Thus I have made these two “Solomonic” collections the basis of my investigation.³¹ I have tabulated the proverbs from these two collections in table 1, according to which verb form constitutes the main predication in the first line (vertical axis) and second line (horizontal axis). Examples in which the verb is

29. Ibid., 418–19.

30. Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1998) xxii, 240.

31. I have also excluded from consideration the “Words of Agur” and the numerical sayings in chap. 30 as well as the poem in 31:10–31.

Table 1. Verbal Patterns in Proverbs 10:1–22:16 and 25:1–29:27

<i>Verb form in line 2</i>		Yiqtol	Verbless	Ptcp.	Qatal	Wayy.	Modal	Gapped	Nothing	TOTAL
<i>Verb form in line 1</i>	Yiqtol	103	31	8	7	0	1	11	18	180
	Verbless	49	68	14	4	2	1	0	64 ^a	202
	Ptc.	16	16	13	1	0	0	0	2	48
	Qatal	11	6	3	6	4	0	6	2	38
	Wayy.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Modal	16	2	0	1	1	9	1	1	31
	TOTAL	195	123	38	19	7	11	18	87	499 ^b

- a. This number includes 26 examples (27 verses) of the sort “(Like) X, (so is) Y” (10:26; 11:22; 25:11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 25, 26, 28; 26:1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18–19, 23; 27:8, 19; 28:3, 15) and 15 examples of the sort “Better (is) X (than) Y” (12:9; 15:16, 17; 16:8, 19, 32; 17:1; 19:1; 21:9, 19; 25:7, 24; 27:5, 10b; 28:6).
- b. I have left out of this tabulation 14 examples whose textual reading is uncertain: 12:12, 26; 13:8, 23; 14:9; 18:3, 17; 19:19, 26; 20:4, 9; 25:1, 27; 27:17.

gapped in the second line are tabulated in the “gapped” column; those with only one main predication are listed as having “nothing” in the second line.

Let me begin my analysis by noting that the data are in keeping with Dahl’s cross-linguistic observations. The most frequently employed verb forms are associated with the progressive → present / imperfective grammaticalization path, namely, the participle and *yiqtol*. Although the progressive participle is beginning to encroach upon imperfective *yiqtol* in the sphere of the present, *yiqtol* appears more frequently in the generic statements of Proverbs than the participle. Between these two forms, in terms of frequency, are verbless predications, which illustrate the “minimally marked tendency” of generics discussed above. Together, minimally marked verbless predications, progressive participles, or imperfective *yiqtols* occur in some combination to the exclusion of any other verb forms in over 80 percent of the examples in the data.

Although one may protest (as Rogland has done with regard to *qatal*)³² that TAM distinctions are preserved even in generic statements, how can such protestations be substantiated? I think an answer lies in the analogy between generics and direct speech. In both the generic statements in Proverbs and direct speech in Biblical Hebrew narrative, the TAM value of the verb form is uninfluenced by the surrounding context—both are “deictically” indepen-

32. Rogland, *Uses of Qatal*, 46.

dent of the surrounding discourse.³³ As a result, discourse-determined TAM values, such as past perfect for *qatal* (for example, Gen 5:24) and future in the past (the equivalent of English Past Conditional) for *yiqtol* (for example, Gen 43:25), are rare in short stretches of direct speech and are likewise expected to be rare in the short generic statements in Proverbs. This correlation would conform to the “minimal-marking tendency” observed in generic statements cross-linguistically.

Within direct speech, just one or two TAM values are consistently associated with each finite verb form: (1) *qatal* expresses past tense (perfective aspect), or perfect aspect; (2) *yiqtol* expresses present (imperfective aspect) or future tense; (3) the participle expresses (present) progressive aspect; and (4) the narrative verb *wayyiqtol* is rare in direct speech, as it also is in generic statements (see table 1). These “default” TAM values, which are illustrated by the examples in (1), provide a baseline or a starting point for analyzing the TAM values in generic statements.³⁴

- | | | |
|--------|---|--------------------------|
| (1) a. | 2 Sam 3:24 | |
| | What <u>did</u> you <u>do</u> / <u>have</u> you <u>done</u> ? | מה עשיתָה |
| b. | Deut 1:30 | |
| | He [Yhwh] <u>will fight</u> for you. | הוא ילחֶם לָכֶם |
| c. | Gen 37:15 | |
| | What <u>are you seeking</u> ? | מה־תִּבְקֹשׁ |
| d. | Gen 37:16 | |
| | I <u>am seeking</u> my brothers. | אֶת־אֶחָי אֲנִי מִבְקֹשׁ |

The validity of the above analogy between generics and direct speech seems evident in the fact that these “default” TAM values can account for the respective verb forms throughout the generic statements in Proverbs. However, this is only a starting point. It remains to explain the significance of the various verb choices in Proverbs. Although not every example can be analyzed in this space, and semantics alone cannot account for every verb choice, some distinct differences can be seen among the major predicate patterns in the data.

33. On direct speech as deictically independent, see Cynthia L. Miller, *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Linguistic Analysis* (HSM 55; 2nd printing; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003) 74. With respect to the generic sentences in Proverbs, Declerck’s characterization of generics as “underspecified” may perhaps be applied to the issue of context as well (Declerck, “Generic Sentences,” 151).

34. Direct speech examples also provide an excellent context in which to evaluate the basic TAM values of the various verb forms, as illustrated in my “Hebrew Verb: A Grammaticalization Approach,” *ZAH* 14/2 (2001) 127–35.

Verbless predications are the most basic (“minimally marked”) type of predication and are analyzed as present tense or “tenseless.”³⁵ The types of proverbial statements that utilize verbless predication are, not surprisingly, quite varied but fall into two broad categories: those that express identity between two entities (nouns or noun phrases), often in the sense of providing a definition, as illustrated by (2a–b); and those that make a descriptive statement using a predicate adjective or some other predicate than a noun, as illustrated by (2c–d).

- | | | |
|--------|--|--------------------|
| (2) a. | Prov 10:5 | |
| | Whoever stores up at harvest (is) a wise son; | אגר בקיץ בן משכיל |
| | whoever sleeps at harvest (is) a shameful son. | נרדם בקציר בן מביש |
| b. | Prov 10:15 | |
| | The wealth of the rich (is) their strong city; | הון עשיר קרית עזו |
| | the ruin of the poor (is) their poverty. | מחתת דלים רישם |
| c. | Prov 14:4 | |
| | Without oxen the crib (is) empty, | באין אלפים אבוס בר |
| | but in the strength of an ox (is) much | ורב־תבואות בכח שור |
| | produce. | |
| d. | Prov 10:16 | |
| | The wage of the just (is) for life; | פעלת צדיק לחיים |
| | the income of the wicked (is) for sin. | תבואת רשע לחטאת |

The progressive participle occurs third-most frequently in the data. As in other languages (for example, Swedish), the Hebrew participle may express either a general present or present progressive predication. However, because of the bounded, particular reading (versus unbounded, generic) associated with

35. Two explanations have been offered for verbless predications in Hebrew and other languages. The first is that the copula verb is absent, and the predicate is unmarked for TAM; in this case, the copula when present is analyzed as a “dummy” verb necessary only for the placement of TAM marking (see John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968] 323; for criticism of this view, see Leon Stassen, *Intransitive Predication* [Oxford Studies in Typology and Linguistic Theory; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997] 65–76). The second explanation posits that in verbless predications a copula is syntactically present but only *phonologically* null; the lack of a “present” copula form in Hebrew merely makes the language “defective morphologically” according to Shlonsky, a proponent of this view (Ur Shlonsky, *Clause Structure and Word Order in Hebrew and Arabic: An Essay in Comparative Semitic Syntax* [Oxford Studies in Comparative Syntax; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997] 39. For a treatment of verbless clauses in Biblical Hebrew see Cynthia L. Miller (ed.), *The Verbless Clause in Biblical Hebrew: Linguistic Approaches* (LSAWS 1; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

progressives, the participle in generic statements is best understood as a general present. In contrast to verbless predications that equate or describe states of affairs, participial generics present actions that are typical or characteristic, as illustrated in (3).

- (3) a. Prov 11:13
 A slanderer reveals confidences,
 and a trustworthy spirit conceals a word.
- b. Prov 11:17
 A kind person benefits him/herself,
 but a cruel (one) harms him/herself.
- c. Prov 15:20
 A wise son delights/will delight his father,
 but a foolish man despises his mother.
- הולך רכיל מגלה־סוד
 ונאמן־רוח מכסה־דבר
 גמל נפשו איש חסד
 ועבר שארו אכזרי
 בן חכם ישמח־אב
 וכסיל אדם בווה־אמו

Yiqtol is the most common verb in the data; it is also the most varied semantically. Three distinct nuances may be expressed by *yiqtol*. The first of these is a general generic statement to which an adverb like “typically” or “usually” may be added without changing the meaning, as illustrated by the English aphorisms *Boys will (typically) be boys*, and *Birds of a feather (typically) flock together*. In such examples the TAM value of *yiqtol* may be interpreted as general (imperfective) present tense or future tense; I have chosen to translate all the examples in (4) with English Future tense forms.³⁶

- (4) a. Prov 11:16
 A graceful woman will (typically) grasp
 honor,
 but strong men will (typically) grasp riches.
- b. Prov 12:8
 A man will (typically) be praised according to
 his intelligence,
 but the twisted of heart will (typically) be
 despised.
- c. Prov 29:3
 A man who loves wisdom will (typically)
make his father rejoice;
 but a friend of harlots will (typically) squander
 wealth.
- אשת־חן תתמן־כבוד
 ועריצים יתמכר־עשר
 לפי־שכלו יהלל־איש
 ונעוה־לב יהיה לבוז
 כל־רוחו יוציא־כסיל
 וחכם באחר ישבחנה

36. Other examples of “typical” *yiqtol* generics include 10:1; 11:6; 12:25; 13:16; 14:17; 15:1, 2; 16:23; 18:1; 26:24; 29:2, 8.

The second category of examples demands a future-tense interpretation of *yiqtol*. Rather than expressing typical states of affairs, these proverbs feature inevitable states of affairs, similar to English maxims such as *What will be will be* and *Accidents will happen*. Such examples, illustrated in (5), are distinct from the first category in that they allow adverbs such as “inevitably,” “eventually,” or “ultimately” to be added to them without a change in meaning, whereas they yield a quite different sense with the adverbs “typically” or “usually.”³⁷

- (5) a. Prov 11:4
Wealth will (ultimately/?usually) not avail on the day of wrath,
but righteousness will (ultimately/?usually) deliver from death. לא-יועיל הון ביום עברה
וצדקה תציל ממות
- b. Prov 13:20
Whoever walks (*Qere*) with the wise will (inevitably) become wise,
and whoever consorts with fools will (inevitably) suffer harm. הולך את-חכמים יחכם
ורעה כסילים ירוע
- c. Prov 12:24
The hand of the diligent will (eventually) rule,
but the slacker will (eventually) become forced labor. יד-חרוצים תמשול
ורמיה תהיה למס
- d. Prov 22:8
Whoever sows iniquity will (inevitably) reap trouble,
and the rod of his wrath will (ultimately) come to naught. זורע עולה קצור-און
ושבט עברתו יכלה

Deciding to which of these first two categories an example belongs is an issue of interpretation. Although some statements, such as (5a) above, quite clearly demand an inevitable interpretation, others, such as (5b) might be interpreted as either typical or inevitable. It is an interesting question to what degree the choice between these interpretations is dependent on the view of reward and punishment in the book of Proverbs.

The third category consists of examples in which *yiqtol* has some variety of modal meaning.³⁸ There is only one case of *yiqtol* with a clear directive (command) modal meaning, given in (6a); but several examples in the data seem

37. Other examples of “inevitable” *yiqtol* generics include 11:11, 31; 13:13; 14:11; 17:2, 20; 19:5, 9; 21:11; 27:18; 28:18; 29:23.

38. Modal in the sense of nonindicative. For a discussion of the various types of nonindicative modality discussed here, see Frank R. Palmer, *Mood and Modality* (2nd ed.; Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For discussions

ambiguous between an indicative and directive modal interpretation, as illustrated in (6b).³⁹

- (6) a. Prov 20:19
A slanderer reveals confidences;
you should not associate with a big-mouth. גולה־סוד הולך רכיל
ולפתה שפתיו לא תתערב
- b. Prov 22:5
Thorns (and) snares (are) in the way of the
perverse,
whoever guards his life will/should keep far
from them. צנים פחים בדרך עקש
שומר נפשו ירחק מהם

There are several examples in which *yiqtol* is employed to express epistemic (probability) modality, as in (7a),⁴⁰ and quite a few others that may be understood as expressing dynamic (ability) modality, as in (7b).⁴¹

- (7) a. Prov 14:13
Even in laughter a heart may be hurt,
and the end of rejoicing (is) grief. גם־בשחוק יכאב־לב
ואחריתה שמחה תוגה
- b. Prov 28:5
Wicked men cannot understand justice,
but those who seek Yhwh can understand
everything. אנש־רע לא־יבינו משפט
ומבקשי יהוה יבינו כל

Finally, there are a some examples of *yiqtol* expressing contingent modality within temporal clauses, as illustrated in (8).⁴²

- (8) Prov 28:28
When the wicked arise, people hide,
but when they perish, the just
become many. קום רשעים יסתר אדם
ובאבדם ירבו צדיקים

of these modalities in Biblical Hebrew, see my *Biblical Hebrew Verbal System: A Grammaticalization Approach* (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2002); and Andy Warren, *Modality, Reference and Speech Acts in the Psalms* (Ph.D., University of Cambridge, 1998).

39. See also 11:12, 16:10, 22:5.

40. See also 14:20, 17:28.

41. See also 10:12b, 30a; 14:10, 15b; 16:14b; 17:21; 18:14b; 20:5, 6b, 18, 30, 24; 25:15; 27:4, 20; 28:11; 29:7, 19a.

42. See also 29:24b; 18:10b; 21:1b, 13, 27; 28:12. I use the term “contingent modality” to encompass (semantically, though not always syntactically) subordinate constructions such

The use of perfective *qatal* and past *wayyiqtol* forms in Proverbs is less frequent and is of particular interest because these forms are less expected in light of the dominance of progressive → present / imperfective forms in generic statements cross-linguistically. Most often translations and commentaries follow the traditional approach of identifying such occurrences as “gnomic perfects” (and by analogy applying it to *wayyiqtol* as well) and translating them as present tense.⁴³ However, this treatment is not self-evidently correct because in many instances the usual translation of the verb is perfectly acceptable, as illustrated by (9).⁴⁴

(9) Prov 21:22

A wise man goes/went up to a city of
strong men,
and brings/brought down its strong
fortification.

עיר גברים עלה חכם

וירד עז מבטחה

In addition, there are enough examples of past and perfective verb forms in generic statements from the world’s languages to raise doubts with respect to this analysis of *qatal* and *wayyiqtol* in Proverbs.⁴⁵

Beyond this negative assessment of the traditional understanding, I believe a positive explanation for the use of *qatal* and *wayyiqtol* in Proverbs is possible through understanding examples such as the one in (9) to be anecdotal.⁴⁶ Anecdotes are closely related to moral generic statements, as explained by Frykenberg:

A maxim states some general principle which serves as a guide or rule. An anecdote narrates facts and circumstances, giving details in sequence. An anecdote,

as purpose, result, and conditional/temporal clauses (see my *Biblical Hebrew Verbal System*, 70). Palmer grouped such constructions under “oblique” in his first edition (Frank R. Palmer, *Mood and Modality* [Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986] 172–207).

43. Although Driver does not employ the term “gnomic,” he cites examples of *qatal* expressing general truths, about which he states that “the idiomatic rendering in English is by means of the present” (S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions* [3rd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1892; repr. with an introductory essay by W. Randall Garr, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans / Livonia, Mich.: Dove, 1998] 17).

44. Thus, Murphy (*Proverbs*, 157), the REB, and the NAB translate this verse with English Present tense verbs, whereas Scott (R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* [AB 18; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965] 124), the NRSV, and the NJPS use Past tense verb forms.

45. This is the basic argument made by Rogland for *qatal* (*Uses of Qatal*, 46).

46. Other possible anecdotal proverbs are 11:8 and 22:12.

even if and when it points to some conclusion or some general observation, will not do so explicitly. . . . It is the audience (or reader) who draws the inferences and connects the particular to the general. In any case, whether anecdote or maxim, the form of one is the other form inside out, back-to-front, or upside down: one gives a general conclusion or theory without supplying evidence; and the other does just the reverse, narrating details and providing evidence without drawing general conclusions or principles. The empirical and the theoretical, by nature, work in opposite ways.⁴⁷

An example such as the one above in (9) should be translated in its most straightforward manner—as a past tense anecdote whose moral message is left for the reader to discern: “A wise man went up (against) a city of strong men, and brought down its strong fortification.”

This anecdotal explanation does not hold for all the examples, however. In particular, some examples have a stative predicate and thus are properly rendered as presents, as in (10a).⁴⁸ Others should be understood as expressing some variety of perfect aspect based on the context, which signifies that some present state of affairs holds true based on some previous event, as illustrated by (10b).⁴⁹ Finally, I identify some examples as instances of modal *qatal* in proverbs.⁵⁰ These examples may have a generic habitual sense, as illustrated in (10c); the habitual sense is found frequently in prose narrative (for example, Gen 29:3).⁵¹ In other examples the form appears in some type of contingent modal clause, such as a purpose, conditional, or temporal clause.⁵² This is illustrated by the examples in (10d–e).⁵³

(10) a. Prov 12:21

No harm will befall the righteous,
but the wicked are full of evil.

לא־יֵאָנֶה לְצַדִּיק כָּל־אֹוֶן
וְרָשָׁעִים מְלֵאן רָע

47. Robert Eric Frykenberg, *History and Belief: The Foundations of Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans with The Institute for Advanced Christian Studies, 1996) 98–99.

48. See also 12:21; 14:6b; 15:22; 17:7; 19:7a, 10; 19:29; 21:10, 26; 27:15.

49. See also 11:7 (future perfect); 13:24 (future perfect?); 14:7; 16:30; 20:16; 21:7, 25; 22:9; 27:13.

50. On modal *qatal*, see my “Hebrew Verb,” 134–35. The identification of modal *qatal* in the examples here is buttressed by their Verb-Subject word order, which is indicative of modality in Biblical Hebrew (see Holmstedt, in this volume, pp. 135–154).

51. See also 14:6, 19; 22:13; 26:7.

52. Langacker notes the similarity between generic statements and conditional clauses (“Generics and Habituals,” 191).

53. See also 19:24 (temporal); 20:28 (purpose); 22:3 (temporal); 21:29 (concessive); 27:12 (temporal), 25 (temporal).

- b. Prov 20:12
An ear that listens and an eye that sees—
Yhwh has made both of them. אֶזֶן שְׁמַעַת וְעֵין רָאָה
יְהוָה עָשָׂה גַם־שְׁנֵיהֶם
- c. Prov 26:13
The lazy man says, “A lion (is) in the street,
a lion (is) in the middle of the square.” אָמַר עֶצֶל שַׁחַל בְּדֶרֶךְ
אִרִּי בֵּין הָרְחֹבוֹת
- d. Prov 16:29
A violent man will seduce his neighbor,
in order to lead him in a way that is not
good. אִישׁ חָמָס יִפְתֶּה רֵעֵהוּ
וְהוֹלִיכֵהוּ בְּדֶרֶךְ לֹא־טוֹב
- e. Prov 18:22
If one has found a wife, he has found a good
thing, מָצָא אִשָּׁה מִצָּא טוֹב
and received favor from Yhwh.⁵⁴ וַיִּפֶּק רִצּוֹן מִיְהוָה

Something further may be said with regard to *wayyiqtol*. First, the number of examples is extremely small: only seven verses have *wayyiqtol* as the main predicate, in addition to one verse where it occurs following a leading *qatal*.⁵⁵ Second, although most of these examples are plainly past tense, there remain some problematic examples, such as those following a verbless clause in (11).

- (11) a. Prov 12:13
In the sin of the lips (is) a bad trap,
but the righteous escaped(?) from the
difficulty. בִּפְשַׁע שִׁפְתִּים מוֹקֵשׁ רַע
וַיִּצָּא מִצָּרָה צָדִיק
- b. Prov 20:26
A winnower of the wicked (is) a wise king;
he rolled(?) a wheel over them. מִזְרֵה רָשָׁעִים מֶלֶךְ חָכָם
וַיִּשָּׁב עֲלֵיהֶם אוֹפֶן

Intriguingly, examples of *qatal* following a verbless clause are likewise sometimes awkward whether translated with a past or perfect, as illustrated in (12).

54. Although modal *qatal* regularly expresses non-past tense, the fact that the second half of this verse begins with a *wayyiqtol* (past tense) argues for a Perfect rendering of the *qatal*s in English instead of a Simple Present tense.

55. As main predicate in 11:8, 12:13, 18:22, 20:26, 21:22, 22:12, 25:4; following *qatal* in 11:2.

- (12) a. Prov 13:1⁵⁶
 A wise son (is) the (result of the) discipline of a father, בן חכם מוסר אב
 but a scoffer has not heeded(?) rebuke. ולץ לא-שמע גערה
- b. Prov 18:8 = 26:22
 The words of a gossip (are) like dainty morsels, דברי נרגן כמתלהמים
 and they have descended(?) into the inner stomach. והם ירדו חדרי-בטן

These puzzlements admitted, the past-tense reading (or perhaps a modal reading for *qatal*) is not completely ruled out for these examples, and thus they do not detract from the overall observation that TAM distinctions do exist in Proverbs.

Despite the voluminous research on the Hebrew verb, the role of the verb forms in generic statements in the book of Proverbs have largely been left unaddressed. This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, since most models of the Hebrew verb recognize that all the finite indicative forms appear with varying frequencies in generic sentences, determining the semantic distinctiveness of each of these forms in such sentences contributes to our understanding of the Hebrew verbal system overall. In particular, what this study has shown is that the TAM values for the finite verb forms in generic sentences are consistent with the values these forms have in direct speech. The degree of overlap among these forms in the present sphere may not be as great as is sometimes portrayed.

Second, the distinction among the verb forms in generic statements has interpretive import. The examination of genericity in this study, as tentative as it is, provides a basis for investigating the interpretive significance of different verb forms in generic statements. In particular, the participle usually expresses typical actions that are indicative of particular characters. Generics with *yiqtol* may be interpreted as either an expression of “typical” truths or future “inevitable” truths, in addition to the various modal nuances *yiqtol* may have. Finally, *qatal* along with the few examples of *wayyiqtol* in Proverbs may portray past tense anecdotes from which the reader is left to extract a general maxim.

56. See the discussion of this verse with respect to ellipsis in Cynthia L. Miller, “A Linguistic Approach to Ellipsis in Biblical Poetry (Or, What to Do When Exegesis of What Is There Depends on What Isn’t),” *BBR* 13 (2003) 258, 267–68.

