The Situating Noun in Ancient Hebrew
A New Understanding of אִישׁ

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Language is the unintended byproduct of attempts to communicate effectively.

—Randy LaPolla (2003:123)

Introduction

For readers of the Hebrew Bible, the noun אִישׁ is a familiar word; nearly everybody who knows even a little Hebrew is sure what it means. Yet the following three distinctive and well-accepted facts call for a comprehensive explanation:

- אִישׁ is *used far more frequently* for persons (without regard to their gender) than the other general human nouns: אָדָם, נֶפֶשׁ, גֶּבֶר, and אֱנוֹשׁ;[1]
- אִישׁ is strikingly *incoherent*, semantically speaking, with regard to which qualities are attributed to referents by its wide-ranging use as a label;[2] and
- אִישׁ is employed hundreds of times where it *gives no new information* about its referent's features.[3]

This article explains those distinctive behaviors by taking a communication-oriented approach, asking:

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[1] Masculine forms of אִישׁ (singular and plural) are used for persons and *without specified referential gender* in 1,477 cases, which is 2½ times more often than אָדָם, 10 times more often than נֶפֶשׁ (which indicates a person in only 144 out of its 754 instances, according to Brown et al. [1906:660]), 22 times more often than גֶּבֶר, and 35 times more often than אֱנוֹשׁ. For the underlying analysis, see Stein 2020a, §§1.3.1, 1.6.6.

[2] Prototypical nouns have a coherent semantic or cognitive profile: they evoke a fairly stable image of their referents' qualities (Hopper and Thompson 1984; Hanks 2013:134–36). Hence performing a standard word study on אָדָם, גֶּבֶר, and אֱנוֹשׁ yields a coherent profile for each one. In contrast, that approach fails miserably for אִישׁ (or for נֶפֶשׁ): the result is diffuse and amorphous, with too many internal contradictions to be useful. In other words, אִישׁ is highly mutable on the informational level.

[3] Categories include: (1) cases where the noun phrase הָאִישׁ is used in place of someone's name, or as a label that could just as well refer to another discourse-active participant; e.g., Gen 26:13; 30:43; Exod 2:9, 21; Judg 17:11; 2 Sam 12:5; (2) cases where אִישׁ is used as the head of a referring expression whose modifying term could alone suffice to enable the audience to fix the intended referent (see below).

- When ancient Hebrew speakers employed the noun אִישׁ, how did it evoke meaning in their audience? (and)
- Under what conditions did speakers use this noun?

In other words, this article will address what אִישׁ means by discussing *how* does it mean, and *when* does it mean.[4]

The underlying theory relies upon the two key commitments of cognitive linguistics: the same general principles govern both semantics and pragmatics; and these principles accord with what is known about the workings of the human mind (Evans 2019: 35–38).

The noun אִישׁ displays certain consistent patterns of usage even as it is broadly dispersed across the biblical corpus. I approach these patterns as if they were features of the ancient Hebrew language—and as such, they not only apply uniformly, but also reflect an effort to communicate as language speakers do. I further assume that the masculine form אִישׁ, the feminine form אִשָּׁה,[5] and their respective plurals are internally consistent in their functions whenever a speaker employs one form or the other.[6] Taken together, these forms appear nearly

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[4] This paper thus summarizes and updates my dissertation (Stein 2020a) as it applies to אִישׁ in ancient Hebrew, which in turn updates my earlier articles on the subject (2008a; 2018).

Regarding a word's meaning contribution, the cognitive linguist Benjamin Bergen likewise observes, "Maybe *what does X mean?* is the wrong question, or at best maybe it's only part of the question. Perhaps the real question is *what are the understanding processes that X invokes?*" (2012:150).

As the Bible scholar Paul Noble has explained, the most worthwhile meanings in a text are found through interpreting it "in relation to the milieu of its production" (Noble 1995:197). I.e, why use this word rather than something else? In what follows I am making the same idealizing assumptions about the text's audience that the composers of the text presumably made—e.g., the audience consists of fluent speakers of Hebrew who can hear the presenter perfectly and are paying constant attention.

[5] The feminine noun form אִשָּׁה appears in 782 instances (Even-Shoshan 1982); it is counterposed with אִישׁ hundreds of times.

[6] For frequently used words like אִישׁ, irregular feminine and plural forms are the result of natural forces that shape language so as to make its signals more efficient. The most commonly occurring words are actually the most likely to have irregular inflections (Corbett 2009; Bybee and Beckner 2015:966). For such words, the heightened phonological contrasts are the most useful for ensuring rapid and accurate communication (Ramscar and Port 2016:71). The process of creating irregular inflections—drawing even from distinct stems—is known as *suppletion* (Mel'čuk 1994; Corbett 2009). The language typologist Greville Corbett remarks that "when looking at a new language it is no surprise to find that the translation equivalents of 'man' and 'go' are suppletive" with respect to their plurals (2009:32).

Because of suppletion, the evident fact that for אִישׁ these forms derived from different stems is irrelevant to their meaning; what matters is how speakers use them. True, corpus linguists have empirically demonstrated that singular and plural forms of the typical human noun have distinct

three thousand times in the Hebrew Bible.[7] When I mention "אִישׁ," I am referring to all four forms—unless otherwise noted.[8]

I have proceeded as recommended by the biblical lexicographer Reinier de Blois, who has written that when investigating the usage of a particular word, "the safest approach is to start with the assumption that there is one single concept behind [it]" (de Blois 2010a:5).[9]

(All of the foregoing assumptions can be considered valid if they turn out to engender cogent results with wide-ranging explanatory power—as you will soon see is the case here.)

So, after stating my hypothesis and giving its conceptual background, I will cite three broad and diverse usage patterns that only my hypothesis can explain. These patterns are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that snap together to make a coherent picture of this noun's meaning contributions. And after discussing and summarizing my conclusions, I will touch upon the implications for meaning-based translation.

Hypothesis

My hypothesis is twofold: in ancient Hebrew, as reflected in the Bible, a speaker prototypically employs the noun אִישׁ when depicting a situation schematically, to signal that its referent is *an essential participant*—that is, essential for grasping that situation. And as an integral part of the language's vocabulary for depicting situations, it communicates that participant's *situated-*

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distributional and collocation patterns, as do the masculine versus feminine forms in certain languages with two or three semantically based grammatical genders (Mahlberg 2005; Schnedecker 2018a; Cappeau and Schnedecker 2018). Nonetheless, those corresponding forms do share many of the same functions with each other, and distinctively so—that is, those functions are not shared by other general human nouns (ibid.). Thus there is good reason to expect the same for אִישׁ.

[7] The exact number of instances is disputed. An Accordance Bible Software search for the common nouns אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה yields 2968 instances (Hebrew Masoretic Text with Strong's number tagging, v. 4.20), while *TLOT* totals 2964 (Kühlewein 1997a:98–99; 1997b:187–88); and *DCHR* totals 2959 (Clines 2018a:309; 2018b:594).

[8] Stated more formally, I treat אִישׁ, אִשָּׁה, אֲנָשִׁים, and נָשִׁים as inflectional forms of the same word that together comprise a single suppletive paradigm. This is standard practice for linguists (Corbett 2009), yet contrary to the standard practice of biblical lexicography, which organizes words by their roots.

[9] Not only is this a parsimonious approach to investigation, but also it appears to emulate humans' cognitive processing of word meaning in actual language use. The psycholinguist Stephen Frisson has argued, based upon his robust experiments on the apprehension of the written word, that encountering a polysemous word initially activates an *underspecified* meaning that encompasses all of that word's established senses (e.g., Frisson 2009, 2015). In other words, processing starts from a single meaning. This is one rendition of the "thin semantics version of the underspecification approach" to polysemy in linguistics; see Blutner 1998; Falkum and Vicente 2015:4–5; Falkum 2015.

ness. Therefore I call אִישׁ the *situating noun* for discussing human participants.[10] It seldom functions in the manner of ordinary nouns, which describe their referent in terms of certain intrinsic features.

Ancient Hebrew is not the only language that has a situating noun for persons.[11] Such nouns enable efficient communication *between the speaker and an audience*. This is the domain of pragmatics, whose operations are largely invisible even to native speakers (Löbner 2013:15, 58; Fauconnier 2004:674). As the late cognitive linguist Gilles Fauconnier wrote, "This invisibility is a general feature of meaning construction" (ibid.). In other words, my hypothesis is far from obvious. So I will devote the next section to unpacking it, starting with some basic tenets of human cognition and of communication.

Theory: Situations and Participants

It appears that in human beings, cognition is largely devoted to *keeping track of elements within situations*. Like the cognitive psychologist Lawrence Barsalou, I hold that the human brain's most basic function is to represent and process situations—that is, to notice the way in which an entity is related to its surroundings and circumstances (Barsalou et al. 2018:1–2, 9).[12] In this article, the situated elements that I am specifically interested in are the human participants.

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[10] The similar term *situational noun* has occasionally been employed in the linguistics literature. It has been used, for example, to classify nouns whose featural profile seems to evoke a "situation" rather than a freestanding "thing"—e.g., in English, *parent*, *author*, *chef*, *boss*, *habit*, *war*, *effort* (Booij and Lieber 2004; similarly Hellan 2016). This class seems equivalent to what are more often known as *relational nouns*. My 2021 paper repurposed that moniker and applied it to אִישׁ; however, upon further reflection, the term *situating noun* is best, for it labels the class in terms of its function.

[11] So also גְּבַר in ancient Aramaic (Stein 2023), *man* in English, and *homme* in French (Stein 2020a). It seems safe to speculate that the cognate terms in languages that are closely related to the foregoing—such as *Mens* in Dutch (a Germanic language like English), *home* in Asturian (a Romance language based in northwest Spain), and *awīlum* in Akkadian—are likewise situating nouns, or at least have functioned in that manner at a certain stage in their evolution.

[12] See also Barsalou 2003; 2016; Yeh and Barsalou 2006; Rehder and Ross 2001. A *situation* consists of elements that are configured in relationship to each other, or more practically speaking, "a setting

In successful communication, whenever speakers depict a situation, their audience forms a mental representation of it. Scholars call that representation a "discourse model" or "situation model" or "stage model" (Webber 1978: 27–29; Lambrecht 1994; Kintsch 1998; Van Hoek 2003:173–75; van Berkum et al. 2007; Aitchison 2012:89). It is populated by participants whom the audience must keep track of. The speaker's mental representation of that depicted situation and its participants (*shown on the left*) is ideally reproduced in the audience's own situation model (*shown on the right*).[13]
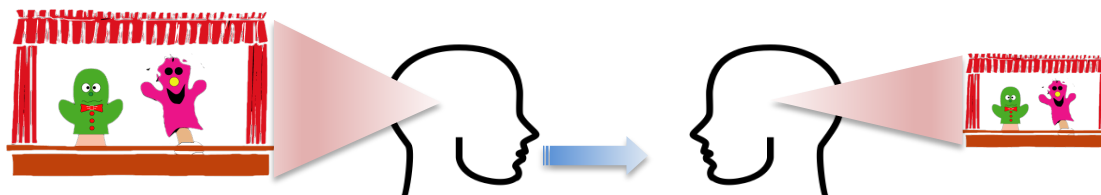
Communication thus requires synchronization between speaker and audience. So how might speakers go about helping their audience to promptly grasp what is being described?

Introducing the Concept of a Situating Noun

Let's try a thought experiment: Imagine that you want to communicate about a certain situation, and that your audience is already familiar with that kind of situation—so that they would grasp that situation if you were to sketch it out with just a few choice words. And imagine that there were a specialized noun whose sole purpose was to signal to your audience, "Hey, use this participant whom I'm mentioning to create a mental picture of this situation."? This noun is semantically empty—it tells you nothing else about its referent; it operates only on the discourse level. It is like a photon in physics: an elementary particle that has no mass and thus reaches its destination instantly and produces an excitation there. The excitation lights up the audience's situation model and prompts it to be updated with the labeled participant. This linguistic photon would thus help to *define* the situation of interest at the same time as it *situated* that participant in it. Now, as a speaker, might you find such a noun useful?

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where agents encounter other agents, objects and events" (Barsalou et al. 2018:2). Similarly, in the philosophical tradition, see Jackson 1998:25.

[13] According to the theory of discourse processing developed by the cognitive psychologists Anthony Sanford and Simon Garrod (e.g., 1998), knowledge is organized in the mind in terms of specific situations, which they call "scenarios." In their view, the most basic operation in understanding an utterance is to *recognize the presupposed situation*, in order to apply what one knows about such situations. Similarly, in the branch of cognitive linguistics known as Cognitive Grammar, "referring expressions designate things that exist in … a *situation* as conceived by a language user" (Taylor 2002:72; emphasis added).

In reality, all nouns have at least a little semantic content; yet some are known for being featherweights—so semantically light that they do not usefully classify their referent as some sort of entity.[14] Because of their conceptual simplicity, the audience's mind processes them quickly. In real languages, situating nouns are of that broad type.

The whole idea might sound abstract and obscure—until we realize how *communicatively efficient* such a noun can be.[15] In general, speakers strive for efficiency in communication (Levshina 2018:126). They look for ways to say more but with less effort.[16] They reach for words that are not only easy to pronounce and easy to understand, but also semantically thin and therefore widely applicable.[17] Remember, situating nouns stimulate the most basic of

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[14] In the linguistics literature, early treatment of such nouns include Ivanič 1991, Cumming and Ono 1996:84–85, Haspelmath 1997:28, and Schmid 2000; see Benitez-Castro 2015 for a more recent review. With respect to human nouns, see Mahlberg 2005; Mihatsch and Schnedecker 2015; Mihatsch 2015a, 2015b, 2017:71–78; Schnedecker 2015, 2018b; Adler and Moline 2018:5–6; Fasciolo 2018; see also Adler 2017, 2018; Benninger 2018. According to numerous psycholinguistic studies, semantically thin terms are handled in the mind *in a different manner* than semantically rich terms (Johns and Long 2019). Thin semantics are known by various names (evoking a variety of metaphors), including *under-specification*, *generality*, *low density*, *low-dimensional*, *empty*, and *low weight*. The nouns studied (mostly in English, French, and German) have been termed *shell nouns*, *pro-heads*, *generic nouns*, *general nouns*, *summit nouns*, and *ground nouns*.

I do not accept the working assumption of some cognitive linguists that no practical distinction can be drawn between word meaning and stored world knowledge. Rather, words as communicated signals evoke a limited, parametric meaning, which in turn accesses larger knowledge structures (Evans 2015, 2019:458–92). The distinction is not only "necessary, important and feasible" (Löbner 2013:293–98; here 294) but also psychologically real (Evans 2015:266–70 and Hanks 2013).

[15] Efficiency can be viewed as an optimal reduction in the audience's uncertainty about the speaker's intended message (Ramscar and Port 2015:92). Alternatively, efficiency is achieved when the speaker spends only the energy that is necessary to invoke the desired intellectual and emotional changes in the hearer (Levshina 2018:5).

[16] Generally speaking, nouns exact a significant processing cost. Regarding only the speaker's effort, psycholinguists have shown a cross-linguistic tendency in speech for a differential treatment of nouns versus verbs (after controlling for word length and morphological complexity): before a noun, speakers retard their articulation and pause more. This slowdown has been attributed to the relatively larger amount of planning that nouns require, given that their usage carries a higher "information load"—it evokes new or unexpected referential information that must be accounted for (Seifart et al. 2018; Lester et al. 2019; see also Strunk et al. 2020).

[17] This is a prediction of information theory. It has been confirmed via various regression analyses on a lexical database (large tagged corpus) in three Germanic languages: English, German, and Dutch (Piantadosi et al. 2012; see also Gibson et al. 2019).

cognitive processes. Human beings naturally think in terms of a situational gestalt.[18] Thus it often suffices to describe a situation of interest in a schematic way, and even in an abbreviated fashion: mentioning just one or two key features of a familiar situation is enough to evoke vastly more information about it in the audience's mind.[19] Hence a situating noun is a shorthand notation—which should make it the default choice for communicating about a situation and its participants.[20]

The Situating Noun for Human Beings in the Hebrew Bible

As you know, אִישׁ (the masculine singular form) is a one-syllable word that is unusually easy to pronounce, and it is famously both semantically thin and highly mutable (Stein 2020a). In all four respects, אִישׁ is distinctive among the human nouns in ancient Hebrew (ibid.). So outwardly, at least, it is a good candidate for the realization of the concept of situating noun.

As a situating noun, אִישׁ would tend to be employed only when the situatedness of its referent is at issue.[21] Prototypically speaking, it would be used when the speaker is *framing a*

More generally, linguists and psycholinguists have found that a speaker will tend to produce utterances that are underspecified because an audience is not only capable of "connecting the dots" via inference but also does so automatically. As the pragmaticist Stephen Levinson has pointed out, when it comes to human communication, "the essential asymmetry is: inference is cheap, articulation expensive, and thus the design requirements are for a system that maximizes inference" (2000:29). As the cognitive scientists Piantadosi et al. have argued, "any effort the speaker makes to express a distinction that could have been inferred is, in effect, wasted effort" (2012:284). The human drive for efficiency likewise favors minimal work by the audience, which tends to interpret an utterance in terms of schemas that have proven (by their frequency) to be the most probable. Conventional meanings are considered before any unconventional ones.

[18] This phenomenon can also be described in terms of another fundamental cognitive operation, namely metonymy—that is, associative thinking (Littlemore 2015; Gibbs 1999).

[19] For psycholinguistic research on the valuable role played by an audience's generalized situation knowledge during language comprehension, see the studies cited in Ferretti et al. 2001:519.

[20] Psycholinguists have found that sparse featural information about participants is optimal for grasping a situation: "Less specified, less concrete, and sparsely detailed schemas direct attention to structure better than richly detailed concrete situations [do]" (Son, Smith, Goldstone 2007:31; see also Son and Goldstone 2009; Son et al. 2012). My surmise also accords with a finding in discourse analysis: "The speaker who chooses to describe an episode in only the sketchiest terms typically uses more general lexemes" (Downing 1980:91).

[21] This surmise is consistent with cross-linguistic observations that (1) referring expressions for participants who are new to the discourse are more elaborate than for discourse-active participants ("the more disruptive, surprising, discontinuous or hard to process a topic is, the more coding material must be

situation of interest—offering a schematic depiction. Conversely, אִישׁ would not be used when that situation is already established, the participant in question is construed as a given, and the speaker's interest is then on depicting some kind of action. In other words, when speakers depict a situation, it is their particular construal of that situation that determines whether to use אִישׁ as a label.[22]

I will now present three kinds of evidence that correlate the usage of אִישׁ with the speaker's concern for the situatedness of its referent. In the footnotes along the way, I will discuss the associated statistics that validate the linguistic nature of these findings by showing that each usage pattern is broadly dispersed in the biblical corpus, and how it is employed by a variety of speakers—including both narrators and speaking characters.[23]

Puzzle Piece #1: Presence versus Absence

One type of supporting evidence was the subject of my 2021 article in the *Journal for Semitics*. I identified 39 instances where אִישׁ is the head of a complex referring expression, and compared them to 90 other cases where the referring expressions are basically the same as in the first group—except without אִישׁ.[24]

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assigned to it"; Givón 1983:18; see also 2018:40–48); and (2) participant reference systems can convey meaning via the presence-versus-absence of a given word ("lexical source"; Frajzyngier 2011:10; see also Frajzyngier and Shay 2003, 247–82; Frajzyngier and Jirsa 2006).

Except for how they have handled אִישׁ, the established findings of discourse analyses and of participant-reference tracking studies—two well-studied analytical modes in Biblical Studies—are in accord with my approach. This includes Bergen (1994); Revell (1996), Heimerdinger (1999), Levin-sohn (2000), Longacre (2003), Grebe (2007); Bandstra (2008), Polak (2013; 2015; 2017), De Regt (1999; 2013; 2019a; 2019b), and Runge (2006; 2007; 2010; and with Westbury: 2012a, 2012b).

[22] On construal as a basic cognitive operation, see Langacker 2015:120; 1991:315.

[23] I.e., in order to demonstrate that the observed patterns are features of the language as a whole (rather than someone's personal style, or a local lectal variant, or a scribal gloss), it is necessary to show that the usage patterns are widely distributed across the corpus and employed by diverse speakers. For the biblical corpus, those distinct voices crucially include the reported speech of narrative characters. (The text's audience would predictably interpret their speech according to its own conventional parlance—while expecting the speaker's audience within the story to do the same; see further Stein 2020a:105.) These results suggest that in ancient Hebrew, the alternative expressions (with and without אִישׁ) were employed by the same speakers, who would choose between them as a matter of convention, according to the needs of the occasion. Consequently, it is valid to ascribe a differential linguistic meaning to the two paired expressions of each type.

[24] Three types of biblical evidence were presented: (1) אִישׁ-headed appositions involving זֹנָה, versus the latter noun as a freestanding substantive; (2) within a verbal complement, relative clauses that

One such matched pair from the book of Jeremiah (3:3; 5:7) involves the noun זוֹנָה:

וּמֵצַח אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה הָיָה לָךְ

You had the [brazen] forehead of a streetwalker

וּבֵית זוֹנָה יִתְגֹּדָדוּ׃

They went trooping off to the prostitute's house

In the first verse, אִשָּׁה seems superfluous, because זוֹנָה alone would tell us that the referent is a woman. So why does the speaker bother to use it? According to my hypothesis, אִשָּׁה signals to the speaker's audience that this participant's involvement defines the depicted situation. Here, the focus of attention is on the typical streetwalker's brazenness, which cannot be evoked in the audience's mind without first picturing *her*. That cognitive need, and the communicative need for the synchronization of situation models, accounts for the speaker's use of אִשָּׁה.

In contrast, in the second instance, the speaker takes as a given the existence of the referent (and her place of operation), while focusing attention on the activity that involves her. According to my hypothesis, the use of אִשָּׁה would indeed not be expected.

Likewise, as predicted, all 39 cases that used אִישׁ in my study were found to be sketching a new or modified situation, in which this noun's referent was profiled as a key participant, whereas all 90 cases *without* אִישׁ treated its referent as a given element. This finding provides the first-ever comprehensive explanation for the presence of אִישׁ in at least 129 referring expressions headed by אִישׁ where it is semantically superfluous.

Puzzle Piece #2: Elaboration

A discourse function that I call *elaboration* is exemplified in the Bible by a statement that Hannah makes about herself, in the temple at Shiloh, in response to the priest Eli's reproach (1 Sam 1:15):

לֹא אֲדֹנִי אִשָּׁה קְשַׁת־רוּחַ אָנֹכִי

"No, my lord! I'm a very unhappy woman!"

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modify אִישׁ versus those that serve in lieu of a substantive; and (3) clauses that introduce an unquantified subset of a known group. In the first group, the 9 instances with אִשָּׁה as the head noun and the 21 instances without it are both employed in narration, in reported speech, in legislation, and in prophetic pronouncements; and both kinds appear in each of four disparate biblical books: Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Proverbs. In the second group, there are 16 instances with אִישׁ as the head noun and 29 instances without it; both kinds appear in Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers, Samuel, Kings, and Malachi. And in the third group, there are 13 instances of a partitive construction preceded immediately by אֲנָשִׁים versus 40 instances without that noun; both kinds appear in Numbers, Kings, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

Elaboration obtains when a speaker opens a predication with אִישׁ—a predication that supplies key information about an already given participant. The situating noun signals that a piece of data will follow, to predicate something situationally essential about that participant. In effect, the speaker holds the depicted situation fixed so that the new information can be taken into account.[25] In most cases, the elaboration function is set up by employing our noun as Hannah did—namely, as the head term of the clausal predicate.[26] So, too, in the introduction of Deborah by the narrator of the book of Judges (4:4):

<div dir="rtl">

וּדְבוֹרָה֙ אִשָּׁ֣ה נְבִיאָ֔ה

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Deborah was a prophet.

In a sample corpus consisting of Genesis through Kings, elaborations account for just under 4% of the instances of אִישׁ. That might not seem like much—but in the biblical corpus, 76 cases is not a small number.[27] Notably, in elaborations, אִישׁ does not itself contribute any new information; the attributes that its use ostensibly predicates—personhood, adulthood, and gender—are apparent without it! Furthermore, the clause is grammatical even when our noun is omitted: וּדְבוֹרָה נְבִיאָה = subject and predicate: 'Deborah was a prophet'. So what does אִשָּׁה contribute to the utterance's meaning?

Viewed in terms of communicative need and audience cognition, leading with this noun presupposes the participant's presence in the situation at hand—and efficiently accesses that presence in the audience's situation model, where it prompts an update. In other words, אִישׁ is used to signal that the immediately following information about this participant is essential for grasping the depicted situation. Thus in the cited examples, Hannah is employing אִשָּׁה to insist that Eli must take into account her deep distress. In Judges, the narrator is telling us that Deborah is reliably a prophet (not merely an occasional one), and that this aspect of her character is definitive for the story.

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[25] In her 2005 monograph *English General Nouns*, the corpus linguist Michaela Mahlberg examined the usage patterns of twenty high-frequency nouns in mainstream British English from 1990–2000. Among them was the set *man*, *woman*, *men*, and *women*. She called attention to a subset of what she labeled the distinctive "characterising function" of those four words. Typical English examples include: "he's a man with a mission" and "she's a woman of many talents." This is the elaboration function in discourse.

[26] The other means of elaboration places an אִישׁ-headed noun phrase in nonrestrictive apposition with some prior description of its referent, such as a name.

[27] Instances of using אִישׁ to signal elaboration in the Pentateuch include: Gen 6:4; 6:9; 9:20; 25:27 (3x); 27:11 (2x); 39:1, 2; 41:38; 46:32, 4; 47:6; Exod 4:10; 15:3; 18:21; 22:30; 32:1, 23; Lev 13:44; 21:18, 19; Num 13:32; 16:2; 27:18; 32:14; Deut 1:15; 24:12. Instances using אִשָּׁה in Genesis through Kings include: Gen 12:11; Judg 4:4 (2x); 1 Sam 1:15; 2 Sam 14:5, 27; 1 Kgs 11:26.

Elaboration is a normal discourse function of אִישׁ, which suggests that it is indeed a situating noun.

Puzzle Piece #3: Referring to a Party with אִישׁ Rather Than a Specific Label

In the Bible, when speakers set out to depict a situation for some audience, they often refer to a third party via the noun phrase הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה—that is, using the label אִישׁ along with the appropriate proximal demonstrative pronoun. This way of making reference in ancient Hebrew is not only conventional but also preferred, as can be seen from the 33 such cases where the speaker clearly or presumably knows that third party's name or has readily available a more specific designation, as used nearby in the text.[28]

The typical setting is a lawsuit in which one of the disputants is testifying about what happened—that is, framing a situation—such as when a prostitute famously addresses King Solomon and uses this expression three times (2 Kgs 3:17–19):

אֲנִי וְהָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת יֹשְׁבֹת בְּבַיִת אֶחָד ...
וַתֵּלֶד גַּם־הָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת ...
וַיָּמָת בֶּן־הָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת לָיְלָה ...

> "*This woman* and I live in one house.… *This woman*
> also gave birth.… *This woman*'s son died overnight.…"

In this example, presumably the speaker knows her housemate's name—why is she so pointedly not using it? Or consider how a disdainful Jeremiah refers to his nation's king, whom he also mentions by name (Jer 22:28),

הַעֶצֶב נִבְזֶה נָפוּץ
הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה כָּנְיָהוּ
אִם־כְּלִי אֵין חֵפֶץ בּוֹ

> "An abandoned, broken jar: is [that] *this man* Coniah—
> a vessel nobody cares about?"

Why doesn't the prophet simply make reference to his target by the name Coniah alone? Moreover, the speaker's audience already knows or can plainly see the referent's gender and adult status. The label אִישׁ is not informative, so why do Hebrew speakers choose it?

The answer is: When what is of paramount interest to speakers is the depicted situation itself, they prefer to portray it schematically, and to label its key participant(s) *in terms of that situation*. To do so, they employ אִישׁ—the situating noun.

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[28] The instances are: Gen 24:58; 26:11; 34:21; Num 16:26, 30; 22:9; Deut 1:35; 22:14, 16; Judg 19:23, 24; 1 Sam 2:20; 25:25; 2 Sam 3:39; 1 Kgs 3:17, 18, 19; 2 Kgs 6:28; Jer 22:28, 30; 26:11, 16; 38:4 (2x); 38:9, 16; Ezek 14:3, 14, 16, 18; Jon 1:14; Neh 1:11; 1 Chr 11:19.

Additional Evidence

Altogether, the three puzzle pieces account for about 10% of all instances of אִישׁ. What about the other 90%? Planned future papers and articles will offer further supporting evidence,[29] while also showing how my hypothesis handily solves more than a dozen longstanding interpretive cruxes.[30] While most instances of אִישׁ are not as boldly situational as the ones discussed above, they are *consistent* with the view of אִישׁ as a situating noun.[31] Consider, for example, the cases where אִישׁ functions like an indefinite pronoun (and thus is rendered into English by *anyone*, *someone*, *no one*, or *everyone*).[32] Such behavior is exactly what is expected from a noun that labels the situation's key-participant slot—when that slot is construed as being occupied by nobody in particular. Indeed, in all of the various pronoun-like usages of אִישׁ, it can be said to function straightforwardly as a situating noun.

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[29] Further pieces of evidence include: preference for אִישׁ over a discourse-active referent's primary referring expression; preference for אִישׁ over role terms (*king*, *father*, *mother*, *son*, *householder*, *agent*); presence and absence when describing gender relations; instances of negation, unique deixis, application to groups, and construct expressions that all presuppose participation in a situation.

[30] E.g., Gen 4:1; 18:2; 30:43; 32:25; Exod 2:14; 10:7; Num 5:31; 1 Sam 1:11; 2:33; 9:9; 26:15; 2 Sam 3:15; 10:6; 14:2, 16; 20:16; 21:20; 1 Kgs 2:2; Isa 66:13; Ezek 23:45; 43:6; Jer 38:7; Zech 3:8; Neh 1:11. In these cases, viewing אִישׁ as a situating noun leads to explanatory parsimony: it makes the fewest (and least-cost) assumptions and involves the fewest propositions, while being consistent with what is known about how human beings use language—namely, that our minds begin with the most conventional construal and look no further if it readily yields a coherent and informative result (Stein 2018:550–52).

[31] My main methodological assumption—of a single basic concept behind the use of אִישׁ—thus proves to be surprisingly potent. The posited prototypical concept ('essential or situation-defining participant') accounts for 567 of the 570 instances of masculine אִישׁ (singular and plural) in the Pentateuch, or 99% in that sample corpus (Stein 2020b), and 739 of the 781 instances of אִשָּׁה (singular and plural) in the Bible, or 95% (Stein 2020c).

[32] Out of the 570 instances of masculine אִישׁ (singular and plural) in the Pentateuch, 45, or 8%, function like an indefinite pronoun (Stein 2020b), and likewise 6 of the 781 instances of אִשָּׁה (singular and plural) in the Bible, or 1% (Stein 2020c).

Some biblical scholars (Van der Merwe et al. 2017:309; Moshavi 2018:43n5) have pointed out that indefinite pronouns might be more accurately termed *quantifiers* (in analogy with that term's denotation in logical semantics), for they signal that the referent is less accessible within the audience's situation model than true pronouns do. Nonetheless, I speak in terms of indefinite pronouns because that is standard in biblical scholarship (based on grammatical tradition), and in analogy to how such usages of אִישׁ are usually rendered into English. On how certain nouns can function as indefinite pronouns, see Haspelmath 1997:182; cf. 10, 27–29, 53. On the continuum between nouns and pronouns, see Fasciolo 2012; Sugamoto 1989.

Deriving the Other Meanings of אִישׁ

By virtue of the normal cognitive processes of association, the participants in a depicted situation are conceptually linked to all other aspects of that situation. The implications of this fact for the evolution of אִישׁ as a polysemous word can be seen by considering Lawrence Barsalou's well-regarded model of cognitive frames, as adapted by Reinier de Blois for use in biblical lexicography.[33] When expressed as a Barsalou frame, the basic conceptual structure of the situating noun for persons—setting aside gender issues for a moment—consists of these four attributes.

Attribute	Value
Description:	An essential participant in a situation
Source:	Ontological domain of <human being>[34]
Function:	To communicate efficiently about participants in situations
Connotation:	Associated with being situationally essential/definitive

According to cognitive linguistic theory, the meaning extensions of אִישׁ can be understood as motivated by a conceptual shift in focus from this overall initial frame toward one of its attributes.[35] Thus:

1. Whenever the referent of אִישׁ is contrasted with a deity or with an animal, such that אִישׁ classifies the referent as a 'human being', this reflects the speaker's focus on the Source attribute—its ontological domain.

2. Whenever אִישׁ is applied to a group of persons (which is thus regarded as a single participant) or applied even to a non-human referent, this reflects the speaker's focus on

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[33] See, e.g., Barsalou (1992) 2009; de Blois 2010a:4–5; 2010b; Löbner 2013:301–24. Barsalou summarizes the model as follows: "At their core, frames contain attribute-value sets. *Attributes* are concepts that represent aspects of a category's members, and *values* are subordinate concepts of attributes" ([1992] 2009:43; emphasis added).

[34] Developmental psychologists and psycholinguists have observed that the human mind naturally classifies experience into certain basic ontological categories (e.g., Soja, Kerry, and Spelke 1991; Imaia and Gentner 1997). Some linguists have taken note of how this phenomenon affects word formation and usage. For example, in English, several series of indefinite pronouns correspond to the major ontological categories of <person>, <thing>, <place>, <time>, and <manner>, such as *somebody*, *something*, *somewhere*, *sometime*, and *somehow* (Haspelmath 1997:28; see also, e.g., Fasciolo 2018).

[35] De Blois 2010a:6; 2004:110–11. This posited semantic structure for אִישׁ accords with the cognitive linguist David Tuggy's assertion that a word can have a schematic meaning that exists alongside specific conventionalized "elaborations" that count as distinct senses ([1993] 2006)—a view recently endorsed by Evans (2019:433–34, 455). It is the opposite of what linguists call grammaticalization.

the Function attribute. The speaker is deploying אִישׁ to attend to the referent's situated-ness succinctly.

3. Whenever the speaker uses אִישׁ to profile a situation's participants in terms of social categories, such as "women versus men" and "wife versus husband," this reflects a focus on the Connotation attribute. Such social categories are essential for construing the participant properly in that particular setting.[36]

What about Gender?

Unlike the other general human nouns in Hebrew, אִישׁ is the only one with gendered forms. The concept of a situating noun explains why this is the case.[37] After all, אִישׁ is prototypically used to situate individual participants in the audience's mind; and according to the morpho-syntactic referential gender rules for Hebrew, whenever a speaker uses a noun to refer to an individual person specifically, that noun's form must match the social gender of its referent.[38]

Meanwhile, Israelite society's social gender roles do constrain the interpretation of אִישׁ to some extent. For example, a man's אִשָּׁה is understood to be his wife, whereas a man's אִישׁ is either his subordinate, lineage successor, or opponent. Each form of the noun evokes a distinct conventional situation in the mind of the audience, who infers the applicable situation based upon salience.

As for the limited degree to which אִישׁ displays lexical gender in the biblical corpus, I have addressed this issue in previous work.[39]

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[36] The number of biblical instances of אִישׁ that cannot be derived via this Barsalou frame is negligable. Essentially all of its attested usages can be accounted for by either the posited basic meaning or one of its predictable extensions.

[37] Conventionally, the gendered counterpart terms are attributed to the fact that men and women are biologically and socially distinct. But as just noted, when אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה indicate a referent mainly in terms of their intrinsic features (adult male and adult female persons, respectively), that is a derivative usage rather than a prototypical one.

[38] Stein 2008b; 2013. From an information-theoretic perspective, a grammatical gender cue is more informative—and thus more useful for discriminating referents. Meanwhile, linguists have proposed that speakers aim to keep relatively constant their audience's uncertainty about the intended message (Dye et al. 2017). If so, then speakers should mean less (on the informational level) by their use of a gender-marked label than they do by their use of a non-marked general human noun. Conversely, to keep the uncertainty constant, the situating noun's added information about its referent's gender offsets the paucity of other featural information that a situating noun evokes.

[39] See Stein 2019. On the diachronic deterioration (post-biblically) of the situating functions of אִישׁ in favor of increased lexical gender, see §9.3.3 in Stein 2020a.

Conclusions

Three types of evidence have been presented, giving robust support to the hypothesis that in ancient Hebrew, a speaker prototypically employs the noun אִישׁ when depicting a situation schematically, to signal that its referent is an essential participant—that is, essential for grasping that situation. Appealing to the human mind's aptitude for situations, אִישׁ instructs the audience to view its referent in terms of situatedness.

We can now explain the three distinctive facts about אִישׁ with which this article began. (1) Why is it used so much more frequently than other general human nouns in the Hebrew of the biblical corpus? Because as a situating noun, it is both cognitively basic and communicatively advantageous. (2) Why does it appear to be semantically incoherent? Because it functions mostly on the discourse level of communication. On the information level, it is normally quiet—such that it can be applied to an enormous range of referents. (3) Why is it often employed even where it gives no new featural information? Because its contribution to meaning lies elsewhere: it regulates the audience's mental model of the depicted situation.[40]

This single concept of a situating noun accounts for more instances of אִישׁ than does the conventional wisdom, which views it as an ordinary noun.[41] Indeed, this concept consistently accounts for not only the presence of אִישׁ in the text but also its absence.

This investigation has confirmed one of its working assumptions, namely, that the masculine noun אִישׁ, the feminine noun אִשָּׁה, and their respective plurals share certain discourse functions (functions that are rarely if ever shared by other general human nouns). In effect, they are the same word.

Finally, the view of אִישׁ as a situating noun not only is more comprehensive and parsimonious than any previous account of biblical usage, but also it more consistently yields a text that is coherent and informative.

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[40] This view also explains why אִישׁ is the standard label for participants in so many conventional, everyday roles—such as sexual partners, spouses, leaders, householders, agents, and adversaries. Our recognizing the situating function of אִישׁ casts its other distinctive behaviors as perfectly natural: its dominant usage for introducing new participants; its pronoun-like usages; its role as a counting unit; and its application to various non-human entities.

[41] See above, n. 31. Meanwhile, it is to be expected that lectal, diachronic, and even meaningless variation exists across the biblical corpus (e.g., Naudé 2003; Holmstedt 2006:14–18; Geeraerts 2016). My claim is that the degree of such variation is negligible for the purpose of establishing the distinctive prototypical discourse functions of אִישׁ. The issue of variation in usage can be properly explored only *after* recognizing those functions. Then one must ask whether and when they are manifested instead by this noun's synonyms, or by circumlocutions.

Excursus: Implications for Meaning-Based Translation

When rendering אִישׁ, translators would do well to consider the following five points.[42]

• Reproduce its discourse functions is more important than its semantic content.[43]

• If the target language has a situating noun for persons, it is likely to work as an equivalent term, in most instances.

• Because languages with a situating noun differ with regard to how they apply it, the target language's term will not work for all instances of אִישׁ.[44]

• When a situating noun is not available as an equivalent, the next best option is often a relational noun.[45]

• In some cases, the situatedness that אִישׁ evokes in Hebrew may be inferable in the target language from syntax or punctuation alone.[46]

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[42] See further Stein 2022.

[43] Discourse functions include: framing (sketching) a situation; situating a new participant; elaborating about a participant; and re-situating a participant.

[44] For example, although in English the situational noun for persons is *man* (with its alternate forms *woman*, *men*, and *women*), even those who are committed to word-for-word translation will often render אִישׁ with other terms, such as *each*, *anyone*, and *husband/wife*.

[45] A relational noun prompts the audience to *relate its referent to something else*. This category of noun includes role terms such as *messenger*, whose use presupposes a principal and a message. Although relational nouns operate on the informational level (rather than the discourse level), they indirectly evoke situations. This explains why in English the relational nouns *husband* and *wife* have been commonly used to render אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה, respectively, within the context of marriage.

[46] Compare Schökel's dictionary entry on אִישׁ (1993:57), which broadly observes for Spanish: *A veces no se traduce explícitamente, o porque va sobreentendido o por formar parte de un predicado* "Sometimes it is not translated explicitly, because either it is understood or it is part of a predicate."

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