

Building character based on cognitive skills: The chiastic structure of Proverbs 31:26

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Abstract: Proverbs 31:26 is part of the acrostic poem describing the 'ēšet ḥayil (woman of noble character) and employs a chiastic pattern (A-B-B'-A'). Although this verse has been widely studied from the perspectives of the wise woman, gender, and character formation, limited attention has been given to the rhetorical function of its chiastic structure as a basis for interpretation. This study analyzes the chiastic structure of Proverbs 31:26 and places it in dialogue with the psychological concept of cognitive ability. This qualitative research uses a wisdom-literature hermeneutical approach and employs literal, lexical, and structural analyses of the text. The findings demonstrate that the chiastic structure positions *ḥokmā* (wisdom) and *tôrath-ḥesed* (instruction grounded in steadfast love) as the semantic center of the verse. Three principal implications emerge from this analysis: (1) wisdom reflects the reasoning process that precedes speech; (2) the integration of *ḥokmā* and *ḥesed* indicates that effective communication combines sound reasoning with ethical orientation; and (3) wise communication serves a pedagogical function by transmitting moral values within the community. This study argues that cognitive ability should not be understood as equivalent to biblical wisdom but rather as a dialogical framework for explaining how wisdom is expressed through reasoning and communication within the wisdom tradition.

Keywords: character building, cognitive, kindness, Proverbs, wisdom

Introduction

Proverbs 31:26 is an important part of the acrostic poem about the 'ēšet ḥayil (woman of noble character), which has often been understood as an ideal portrayal of women's wisdom, character, and integrity within the Israelite wisdom tradition. Among the various characteristics presented, this verse stands out for its concise yet highly meaningful chiastic structure. In Hebrew wisdom literature, literary form functions not merely as an aesthetic ornament but also as a rhetorical device that directs readers toward a text's theological focus. One commonly used form is chiasm, a symmetrical pattern that places certain elements at the center of meaning and emphasis. Sualang explains that the chiastic pattern is a rhetorical device commonly found in wisdom literature for highlighting major themes through the

arrangement A-B-B'-A'. Therefore, understanding the literary structure of Proverbs 31:26 is an important step towards a more comprehensive understanding of the text.¹

Nevertheless, previous studies of Proverbs 31:26 have generally focused more on thematic aspects than on textual structure. Kalvari and Sasirais interpret the woman in Proverbs as an alpha woman who possesses authority and wisdom.² Silaen et al. emphasize the wise woman's role in family and community life,³ while Sproule connects the woman's speech to the moral virtues she possesses.⁴ Davidson views the woman in Proverbs 31 as a reflection of God's image through her noble character,⁵ while Puspasari examines the verse through the lens of gender stereotypes and the woman's role as a teacher.⁶ Mensah, meanwhile, interprets the passage through womanist hermeneutics in the context of women's liberation in Ghana.⁷ Collectively, these studies contribute to the thematic understanding of the wise woman; however, attention to the rhetorical function of the chiasmic structure in shaping the meaning of Proverbs 31:26 remains relatively limited.

This limitation raises an interpretive problem. If the chiasmic structure in wisdom literature highlights a text's central idea, then neglecting that structure may lead to interpretations that focus more on applicational themes than on the literary logic the author of Proverbs constructed. In other words, the relationship between "wisdom" (*hokmâ*) and "instruction of kindness" (*tôrath hesed*) has generally been understood as a characteristic of the wise woman rather than as two elements deliberately positioned within a rhetorical structure to construct the verse's central message. This issue has not received sufficient attention in previous studies.

Against this background, this study focuses on the function of the chiasmic structure of Proverbs 31:26 as a basis for understanding the relationship between wisdom and the instruction of kindness. Lichtenstein explains that chiasmic structure directs readers' attention to the elements that constitute a text's center of meaning. In this study, the chiasmic structure is understood not merely as a symmetrical literary pattern but as a rhetorical strategy that determines the semantic relationship between the verse's opening and closing elements, thereby enabling the central emphasis of meaning to be identified more accurately. Therefore, this study argues that an analysis of the literary structure of Proverbs 31:26 should precede any theological or ethical implications drawn from the verse.

This study does not stop at literary analysis but brings the text's interpretation into dialogue with the concept of cognitive ability in psychology. This dialogue is not intended to equate biblical wisdom with modern cognitive ability, but to employ a cognitive perspective as an interdisciplinary framework for explaining how wisdom is expressed through mental

¹ Farel Yosua Sualang, "Prinsip-Prinsip Hermeneutika Genre Hikmat Dalam Kitab Amsal: Suatu Pedoman Eksegesis," *Pistis: Jurnal Teologi Terapan* 1, no. 1 (May 9, 2019): 93–112, <https://osf.io/10.31227/osf.io/xmk6h>.

² Bimbing Kalvari and Idrus Sasirais, "Examining the Representation of Women as Wise Authorities and Alpha Women in the Book of Proverb," *DUNAMIS: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 7, no. 2 (2023): 785–801.

³ Riste Tioma Silaen et al., "Proverbs 31:10–31: The Significance of A Qualified Wife As A Noble Woman," *European Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2024): 11–18.

⁴ Jo Ann Davidson, "Women Bear God's Image: Considerations From a Neglected Perspective," *Theologia Studies Journal* 54, no. 1 (2016): 31–49.

⁵ Rosetta Puspasari, "What Gender Stereotypes Are Shown In The Responses of Four Members of Gereja Utusan Pantekosta di Indonesia Towards Proverbs 31:26?" (Satya Wacana Christian University, 2012), 35–36.

⁶ David Sproule, "Hearts Filled with Kindness: Pearls from Proverbs," *Old Testament Essays* 118, no. 2 (2022): 135–154.

⁷ Paul Nyarko-Mensah, "Proverbs 31 : 10-31 from a Ghanaian and (Akan) Womanist Perspectives - Inculturation and Liberation Hermeneutics Approach" (University of Pretoria, 2023), 112–115.

processes such as reasoning, language, decision-making, and responsible communication. This approach aligns with Magezi and Madimutsa's view that the biblical wisdom tradition aims to cultivate life skills that integrate moral integrity and intellectual acuity.⁸ In Proverbs 31:26, the expression “the instruction of kindness is on her tongue” indicates that wise communication is characterized not only by accuracy of content but also by an ethical orientation toward others. The structure of the text shows that wisdom (*ḥokmâ*) and *tôrath ḥesed* form an integrated whole that brings together wisdom and kindness in the act of communication. From the perspective of modern psychology, this relational dimension may be brought into dialogue with the concept of emotional intelligence, which, according to Goleman, complements cognitive functions in decision-making and interpersonal behavior.⁹ Similarly, Bland and Brown emphasize that the wisdom tradition provides a foundation for character formation by integrating wisdom and virtue. At the same time, Bland shows that moral education in Proverbs rests on integrating wisdom, empathy, and virtue formation.¹⁰ Thus, the dialogue between Proverbs 31:26 and psychological studies is not intended to reduce biblical wisdom to a psychological concept but to demonstrate how the literary structure of wisdom literature opens space for an interdisciplinary reading of the relationship between cognitive ability, communication, and character formation.

Building on the discussion above, this study identifies a research gap in the analysis of the literary structure of Proverbs 31:26. Unlike previous studies that have emphasized the wise woman, gender, or character formation in general, this study seeks to demonstrate that the chiasmic structure is a hermeneutical key to understanding the verse's central message. Using a qualitative research method and a wisdom-literature hermeneutical approach, this study analyses the chiasmic structure of Proverbs 31:26 to explain how the relationship between “wisdom” (*ḥokmâ*) and “instruction of kindness” (*tôrath ḥesed*) shapes the text's meaning. It then brings this interpretation into dialogue with the concept of cognitive ability to derive more comprehensive implications for character formation. Thus, this study's novelty lies in its analysis of the chiasmic structure's rhetorical function as a hermeneutical key for explaining the relationship between wisdom (*ḥokmâ*) and *tôrath ḥesed*, and in its implications for character formation. This analysis is then brought into dialogue with the concept of cognitive ability, producing an interdisciplinary reading of Proverbs 31:26.

Cognitive Ability

Proverbs 31:26 is part of the well-known section of Proverbs 31, often praised for its portrayal of a virtuous woman. It also provides a basis for bringing the concept of wisdom in Proverbs into dialogue with psychological studies of cognitive ability. A closer examination of its chiasmic structure reveals deeper layers of meaning that underscore the importance of wisdom and kindness as foundational elements of character formation. This study investigates how the chiasm of Proverbs 31:26 functions as a tool for analyzing cognitive ability and contributes significantly to the development of good character. The literary device of chiasm,

⁸ Vhumani Magezi and Walter Madimutsa, “Theological Education and Character Formation: Perceptions of Theological Leaders and Students,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (August 25, 2023), 1-10 <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8543>.

⁹ Daniel Goleman, “What Makes a Leader?,” *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 6 (2021): 1–12.

¹⁰ Dave Bland, “Proverbs and the Formation of Character by Dave Bland,” *Restoration Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2015): 222-241.

characterized by a symmetrical structure in which ideas are mirrored around a central point, is commonly used in biblical texts. This structure not only enhances Scripture's poetic beauty but also emphasizes key concepts. In Proverbs 31:26, the chiasm places “wisdom” and “kindness” at the core of the verse, indicating that these attributes are central to good character. According to Garrett, chiasm in Hebrew poetry often highlights the main theme or central message. Thus, the chiasmic structure in this verse plays an important role in emphasizing wisdom and kindness as essential virtues.¹¹

According to Honeck, cognitive ability encompasses various mental processes involved in knowledge acquisition, reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving.¹² In this study, the concept is not used to define wisdom but as a dialogical framework for explaining how the wisdom portrayed in Proverbs 31:26 is expressed through thought and communication. Thus, the relationship between wisdom and cognitive ability is dialogical rather than identical. As Longman explains, wisdom in Proverbs refers to a skill for living, namely, the ability to apply knowledge appropriately in life, based on moral orientation and the fear of the LORD.¹³ Therefore, wisdom transcends intellectual ability alone, even though it is expressed through cognitive processes such as reasoning, deliberation, and decision-making.

In cognitive psychology, cognitive processes generally include attention, memory, reasoning, language ability, decision-making, and problem-solving.¹⁴ These processes explain how individuals acquire, process, and use information in action.¹⁵ This framework is employed in this study as a dialogical perspective for understanding how wisdom in Proverbs 31:26 is expressed through wise speech and instruction.

From the perspective of cognitive psychology, speaking wisely can be understood as a manifestation of processes such as reasoning, language ability, and decision-making. Nevertheless, this study does not equate wisdom (ḥokmâ) with cognitive ability. Rather, cognitive theory is used as an interdisciplinary framework for explaining how biblical wisdom is expressed through purposeful and responsible communication. This perspective aligns with previous research on the Solomon Paradox, drawing on Proverbs 18:14, which shows that wisdom in wisdom literature cannot be reduced to intellectual ability alone but involves integrating reasoning, affective regulation, and inner resilience.¹⁶ Therefore, cognitive ability

¹¹ Duane A. Garrett, *NIV The New American Commentary - An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Song)* Vol. 14, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, Kenneth A. Mathews, and Davis S. Dockery (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2013), 245.

¹² Richard P. Honeck, *A Proverb in Mind The Cognitive Science of Proverbial Wit and Wisdom* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publisher, 1997), 122-173.

¹³ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs - Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms*, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing Group, 2017), 529. www.bakeracademic.com.

¹⁴ Robert E. Slavin, *Educational Psychology: Theory and Practice*, ed. John Hopkins University, 12th ed. (New York: Pearson Publishing, 2018), 22-43.

¹⁵ Jonathan E. Larson, *Educational Psychology: Cognition and Learning, Individual Differences and Motivation*, ed. Jonathan E. Larson (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009), 243-258; Dawn M. McBride and J. Cooper Cutting, *Cognitive Psychology Theory, Process, and Methodology*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019), 29-42; David E. Irwin and Brian H. Ross, *Cognitive Vision*, ed. David E. Irwin and Brian H. Ross (Pennsylvania: AP Publisher, 2017), 41-75; Robert E. Haskell, *Transfer of Learning (Cognition, Instruction and Reasoning) - A Volume in the Educational Psychology Series* (San Francisco, California: Academic Press, 2018), 212-240; Margaret W. Matlin, *KOGNITIF*, ed. Maisuri, 3rd ed. (Bandar Lampung: Harakindo Publishing, 2017), 204-211.

¹⁶ Aska Aprilano Pattinaja and Farel Yosua Sualang, “The Solomon Paradox: Cognitive Solutions from the Perspective of Proverbs 18:14,” *Pastoral Psychology* (March 26, 2026), <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11089-026-01321-y>.

is understood as one dimension through which wisdom is expressed, not as a definition of wisdom itself.

In addition to the cognitive dimension, the phrase “instruction of kindness” indicates that wise communication also has affective and relational dimensions. In psychology, this dimension can be discussed alongside emotional intelligence, which plays a role in managing emotions and building interpersonal relationships.¹⁷ Thus, the structure of Proverbs 31:26 shows that wisdom is expressed not only through the quality of reasoning but also through the quality of the relationships accompanying communication. Accordingly, the analysis of Proverbs 31:26 shows that the chiasmic structure positions wisdom and *hesed* as two elements that shape the wise woman's communication. Dialogue with cognitive psychology helps explain how this wisdom is expressed through reasoning, language, and decision-making, without reducing the theological meaning of wisdom to intellectual ability alone.¹⁸ Therefore, cognitive ability in this study is understood as an analytical lens for explaining the expression of wisdom, rather than as a conceptual equivalent of biblical wisdom.

Literal analysis

Literal analysis aims to identify the text's basic meaning by comparing several translations and Hebrew lexical forms. This step matters because translation variations often reflect interpretive choices about key terms in the text. As Stuart points out, lexical ambiguity affects the translation process; analyzing the original text is necessary for a more accurate understanding of a verse's meaning. Therefore, this section compares several Bible versions to identify consistencies and variations in the translation of the key terms in Proverbs 31:26.

Translation variations

Translation variations show that all versions retain two principal elements, namely *hokmâ* and *hesed*, although they differ in their target-language equivalents. The term *hokmâ* is translated as wisdom, while *hesed* is rendered as kindness, loving instruction, faithful instruction, or the law of kindness. These differences do not indicate different theological meanings but reflect the semantic breadth of the Hebrew term *hesed*, which encompasses steadfast love, kindness, loyalty, and compassion. Thus, translation variations reflect attempts to capture nuances of meaning rather than differences in the text's substance. Table 1 below presents a detailed analysis of these translations, highlighting nuances and variations that contribute to a more precise understanding of Proverbs 31:26.

Table 1: Literal Analysis of Proverbs 31:26

Version	Proverbs 31:26	Transliteration	Translation
BHS	פִּיהָ פִּתְחָה בְּחָכְמָה וְתוֹרַת־חֶסֶד עַל־לְשׁוֹנָהּ	pî·hā pā·tə·hāh bə·hā·kə·māh; wə·tō·w·rat- ḥe·sed, ‘al- lə·šō·w·nāh.	Her mouth speaks wisdom, and the instruction of kindness is on her tongue.
KJV	She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.		She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness.

¹⁷ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence - Why It Can Matter More than IQ* (Grand Rapid Michigan: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 34.

¹⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*, ed. R. K. Harrison and Jr Robert L Hubbard (Grand Rapid Michigan / Cambridge U.K: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 510. www.eerdmans.com.

NAS	She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.		She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
NET	She opens her mouth with wisdom, and loving instruction is on her tongue.		She opens her mouth with wisdom, and loving instruction is on her tongue.
NIV	She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.		She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
RSV	She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.		She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

Based on a literal analysis of the various translations, three main findings emerge.

First, all Bible versions retain two principal elements in Proverbs 31:26, namely *ḥokmâ* (חֵכֶם) and *ḥesed* (חֶסֶד), although their translation equivalents vary. The term *ḥokmâ* is consistently translated as wisdom (BHS, KJV, NAS, NET, NIV, RSV), whereas *ḥesed* is variously translated as “kindness,” “loving instruction,” “the law of kindness,” or “faithful instruction.” These variations do not indicate different theological meanings but rather reflect the breadth of the two terms’ semantic fields in Hebrew.

Lexically, *ḥokmâ* refers to skill, practical wisdom, and the ability to make correct decisions in life.¹⁹ In the Septuagint, the term is translated as σοφία (*sophia*), while the Vulgate uses *sapientia*; both preserve the idea of wisdom as a life skill grounded in moral judgment.²⁰ Likewise, *ḥesed* has a broad semantic range, encompassing steadfast love, kindness, loyalty, and compassion.²¹ The Septuagint translates it as ἔλεος (*eleos*), while the Vulgate uses *misericordia*; both emphasize compassion and generosity.²² Thus, variations in translation across versions reflect attempts to capture the nuances of *ḥesed*’s meaning rather than differences in the Hebrew text’s conceptual content. This literal analysis shows that the central focus of Proverbs 31:26 remains consistent across the translation tradition: the portrayal of a wise woman who speaks from *ḥokmâ* and *ḥesed*. Therefore, differences in wording among Bible versions do not alter the verse’s main message; rather, they reveal the semantic richness of these two terms as the foundation for wise and loving communication.

Second, the literal analysis shows that the main focus of Proverbs 31:26 is the wise woman’s communicative character. The text not only states that she “opens her mouth with wisdom” but also emphasizes that *tôrath-ḥesed* (“instruction of kindness”) accompanies her words. These two expressions show that the quality of communication is the primary means by which the woman’s character is portrayed in the poem. Thus, the author of Proverbs is not concerned merely with the ability to speak but with the content and ethical orientation of every word she utters.

¹⁹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix Containing The Biblical Aramaic*, ed. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A Briggs, 5th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), 314; Köhler Baumgartner and Stamm Richardson., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapid Michigan: Brill Academic Publisher, 2018), 312.

²⁰ Holy See St. Jerome, Pope John Paul II, *Nova Vulgata: Biblorum Sacrorum Editio [New Vulgate Edition of the Holy Bible]*, ed. Holy See St. Jerome, Pope John Paul II, 2nd ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 2016), 337.

²¹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix Containing The Biblical Aramaic*, 338; Baumgartner and Richardson., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 335.

²² St. Jerome, Pope John Paul II, *Nova Vulgata: Biblorum Sacrorum Editio [New Vulgate Edition of the Holy Bible]*, 476.

This interpretation aligns with Waltke, who explains that the words of the wise woman express formed moral integrity, so wisdom is understood not merely as knowledge but as character embodied in communication.²³ Similarly, Kidner emphasizes that wisdom in Proverbs always has a practical dimension, namely the ability to apply wisdom in everyday actions and speech.²⁴ Nielson also shows that the expression *tôrath-ḥesed* emphasizes that the woman's instruction is not only correct in content but is also characterized by love and generosity in its delivery.²⁵ Thus, a literal analysis of Proverbs 31:26 shows that the relationship between *ḥokmâ* and *ḥesed* shapes the wise woman's communicative character. Wisdom describes the quality of her judgment, while *ḥesed* indicates the ethical orientation that directs how she communicates that wisdom. This finding also provides a basis for the subsequent analysis of the chiasmic structure, as these two terms are the principal elements that constitute the rhetorical meaning of the verse.

Third, the literal analysis shows that the portrayal of the woman in Proverbs 31:26 emphasizes not only speaking but also a character consistently expressed through her communicative pattern. The expressions "opens her mouth with wisdom" and "the instruction of kindness is on her tongue" indicate that wisdom and *ḥesed* are not merely qualities she possesses but values expressed through the act of speaking. Thus, communication in this verse functions as a manifestation of formed character.

Nielson explains that the portrayal of the woman in Proverbs 31 presents a way of life built upon wisdom, reflected in her choice of words and manner of communication.²⁶ This perspective aligns with previous research showing that, in the wisdom tradition, character is not an abstract quality but is embodied in concrete actions, including patterns of speech and everyday behavior.²⁷ Murphy likewise emphasizes that wisdom literature integrates wisdom with ethical life so that a person's character is recognized through the practical expression of the wisdom they possess.²⁸ Therefore, a literal analysis of Proverbs 31:26 shows that the verse presents a portrait of a wise woman through the unity of *ḥokmâ* and *ḥesed*. These two terms not only describe the quality of her words but also shape the moral identity of the figure portrayed in the text. This finding provides the basis for the subsequent analysis of the chiasmic

²³ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*, 524.

²⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job Ecclesiastes - An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Griver, Illinois, USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 207.

²⁵ Kathleen Nielson, *Proverbs: The Ways of Wisdom (Living Word Bible Studies)* (New York: P&R Publishing, 2019), 178.

²⁶ Kathleen Nielson, *Proverbs For You* (Carol Stream Illinois: The Goodbook Company, 2020), 132.

²⁷ Aska Aprilano Pattinaja and Farel Yosua Sualang, "Rotan Dan Pembentukan Karakter: Sebuah Kajian Teologis Kata מִסָּר (Muṣār) Dalam Amsal 23:13," *THRONOS Jurnal Teolog Kristen* 5, no. 1 (2023): 61-76; Aska Aprilano Pattinaja and Wakinus Suhun, "Antitesis Orang Jujur Dan Orang Fasik Dalam Pembentukan Karakter Pemimpin: Studi Eksegesis Amsal 11:11," *VIEWS: Jurnal Teologi & Biblika* 2, no. 1 (2024): 80-99, https://penerbitviekawahanasemesta.com/index.php/views/article/view/aska_2024; Aska Pattinaja, Zefanya Puryana, and Farel Yosua Sualang, "Antitesis Pola Perkataan Karakter-Konsekuensi Pada Amsal 28:20 Sebagai Kualitas Hidup Orang Percaya Dalam Mengatasi Judi Online," *SANCTUM DOMINE: JURNAL TEOLOGI* 13, no. 1 (December 28, 2023): 113-153, <https://doi.org/10.46495/sdjt.v13i1.212>.

²⁸ Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther," in *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature Volume XIII*, ed. Rolf Knierim and Gene M. Tucker, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapid Michigan: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 248.

structure, which explains how these two elements are positioned at the rhetorical center of Proverbs 31:26.

Lexical analysis

The term *ḥokmâ* (חִכְמָה) derives from the root חכמ (hkm), which generally refers to wisdom, skill, or competence in action. According to Brown–Driver–Briggs (BDB), the term has a broad range of meanings, from practical skill and administrative competence to wisdom in ethical and religious matters.²⁹ HALOT adds that *ḥokmâ* refers to the ability to make sound judgments so that a person can act appropriately in concrete situations.³⁰ In wisdom literature, *ḥokmâ* is not understood merely as intellectual knowledge but as a skill for living, that is, the ability to live according to the fear of the LORD and sound moral judgment. Longman explains that wisdom in Proverbs is the ability to make correct decisions in everyday life,³¹ while Waltke emphasizes that *ḥokmâ* integrates intellectual, moral, and practical dimensions into a unified ethical whole.³² In Proverbs 31:26, *ḥokmâ* occupies a central position in the chiasmic structure and thus provides the basis for the speech of the wise woman. This placement indicates that communication is not presented as a spontaneous act but as reasoning shaped by wisdom. Thus, the function of *ḥokmâ* in this verse not only describes the content of speech but also indicates the moral quality underlying the communication process.

The term *tôrath* (תּוֹרָה) is the construct state of *tôrâ* (תּוֹרָה), derived from the root ירה (yrh), meaning “to teach,” “to point the way,” or “to give guidance.” Lexically, BDB and HALOT explain that *tôrâ* does not always mean “law” in the legal sense but can also refer to instruction, teaching, or guidance that directs a person toward a right way of life.³³ In Proverbs, the term *tôrâ* is more often used in a pedagogical than a juridical sense (cf. Prov. 1:8; 6:20). Therefore, *tôrath* in Proverbs 31:26 is better understood as “instruction” or “teaching” rather than merely “law.” Fox’s discussion also indicates that the phrase *tôrath-ḥesed* should be understood as “loving instruction” or “teaching with kindness,” because *tôrâ* here refers to the process of teaching within the wisdom tradition rather than to Mosaic law.³⁴ In the context of this verse, *tôrath* indicates that the wisdom of the wise woman is expressed through the act of teaching. Thus, communication in Proverbs 31:26 has a pedagogical dimension: it conveys wisdom to others through guiding instruction.

The term *ḥesed* (חֶסֶד) is one of the most important theological concepts in the Old Testament. According to BDB, the word encompasses steadfast love, kindness, generosity, and

²⁹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix Containing The Biblical Aramaic* (Based on The Lexicon of William Gesenius as Translated by Edward Robinson), 315–316.

³⁰ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT) (Translated and Edited Under The Supervision Of M.E.J.), ed. Richardson (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden The Netherlands: Brill, 2000), 298–300.

³¹ Longman III, *Proverbs - Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms*, 95–98.

³² Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament), 515–517.

³³ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix Containing The Biblical Aramaic* (Based on The Lexicon of William Gesenius as Translated by Edward Robinson), 435–436; Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT) (Translated and Edited Under The Supervision Of M.E.J.), 1712–1715.

³⁴ Michael V. Fox, *The Anchor Bible Proverbs 10-31 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor. (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2009), 900–902.

loyalty,³⁵ while HALOT emphasizes its relational dimension grounded in commitment and faithfulness.³⁶ Because of its broad semantic range, *hesed* is variously translated as kindness, steadfast love, lovingkindness, mercy, and faithfulness. In Proverbs 31:26, *hesed* forms the construction *tôrath-hesed*. Harris, Archer, and Waltke indicate that the phrase is best understood as “loving instruction” or “teaching with kindness,” that is, instruction characterized by love and loyalty rather than merely the transmission of information.³⁷ Therefore, *hesed* in this verse does not stand alone as an abstract moral quality but functions to characterize *tôrath*. The wise woman’s instruction is not only substantively correct but is also expressed in a manner that reflects love, generosity, and faithfulness. This relationship between *hokmâ* and *hesed* constitutes the semantic center of the chiasmic structure of Proverbs 31:26.

Lexical analysis of *hokmâ* (חֵכְמָה), *tôrath* (תּוֹרָה), and *hesed* (חֶסֶד) shows that these three terms form a semantic unity that cannot be understood separately. *Hokmâ* indicates the source or foundation of communication, arising from the ability to exercise sound judgment. In contrast, *tôrath* describes the concrete form of that wisdom as instruction or teaching communicated to others. Meanwhile, *hesed* gives the instruction its ethical quality, so that the resulting communication is not only substantively correct but is also expressed through love, generosity, and faithfulness. Thus, the construction *tôrath-hesed* shows that instruction derives its character from the value of *hesed* inherent within it.

Implications for the literal meaning

The literal and lexical analyses show that variations in the translation of Proverbs 31:26 across different Bible versions do not alter the verse’s core meaning. Differences in equivalents such as wisdom and understanding, as well as kindness, steadfast love, loving instruction, and faithful instruction, reflect the breadth of the Hebrew terms’ semantic range without altering the text’s central message. Consistently, the entire translation tradition retains two principal elements: *hokmâ* as the foundation of communication and *tôrath-hesed* as the character of the instruction conveyed.

The semantic synthesis of *hokmâ*, *tôrath*, and *hesed* shows that these three terms form a unified meaning. *Hokmâ* represents the source of wisdom underlying communication, *tôrath* indicates the concrete form of wisdom as instruction, while *hesed* provides the ethical orientation that colors the instruction. Therefore, the interpretive focus of Proverbs 31:26 does not lie in the act of speaking itself but in the moral quality that shapes the communication of the wise woman.

This finding provides the basis for the subsequent analysis of the chiasmic structure. The placement of *hokmâ* and *tôrath-hesed* within the A–B–B’–A’ arrangement indicates that these two concepts form the verse’s semantic center, necessitating literary-structural analysis to explain how the chiasmic form strengthens the relationship among wisdom, instruction, and *hesed* as the central message of Proverbs 31:26.

³⁵ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix Containing The Biblical Aramaic* (Based on The Lexicon of William Gesenius as Translated by Edward Robinson), 338–339.

³⁶ Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT) (Translated and Edited Under The Supervision Of M.E.J.), 336–338.

³⁷ R. Laird Harris, Jr Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT) Vol 1, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 305–307.

The chiastic structure of Proverbs 31:26

In Proverbs 31:26, the poetic structure forms a chiasm (inverted parallelism), a symmetrical arrangement that connects the opening and closing elements (A–A') with the central elements (B–B'). Unlike synonymous parallelism, which repeats ideas in parallel form, chiasm creates a crosswise relationship so that certain elements receive stronger rhetorical emphasis. In wisdom literature, this pattern often directs readers' attention to the central meaning of a poetic unit.³⁸ Keil and Delitzsch provide an in-depth analysis of this verse, highlighting its chiastic structure and emphasizing its balanced, reflective poetic form, in which the first and last parts correspond to create a cohesive, harmonious message.³⁹

Table 2: Chiastic Structure of Proverbs 31:26

Chiastic Pattern A, B, B', A' — Proverbs 31:26		
Stitch A	She opens her mouth	(Phrase A)
	with wisdom,	(Phrase B)
Stitch B	the instruction of kindness	(Phrase B')
	is on her tongue.	(Phrase A')

Based on Table 2 above, Proverbs 31:26 exhibits a chiastic structure (A–B–B'–A') that establishes a symmetrical relationship between the opening and closing elements and the verse's middle elements. In this structure, the A–A' pair, namely “opens her mouth” (פִּיהָ, *pîhā*) and “on her tongue” (לְשׁוֹנָהּ, *lašônāh*), forms a communicative frame that marks speech as the main theme of the verse. By contrast, the B–B' pair, namely “wisdom” (חֲכָמָה, *hokmâ*) and “instruction of kindness” (תּוֹרַת-חֶסֶד, *tôrath-ḥesed*), occupies the central position as the content or quality of that communication.

This arrangement indicates that the primary concern of the author of Proverbs is not the act of speaking itself but the moral quality that fills every word. The placement of *hokmâ* and *tôrath-ḥesed* in the middle of the chiastic structure shows that these two terms constitute the semantic center of the verse. Wisdom describes the ability to exercise sound judgment, while *ḥesed* indicates that the instruction is delivered within a framework of love, kindness, and loyalty. Thus, the chiastic structure not only produces poetic balance but also establishes an inseparable relationship between wisdom and *ḥesed* as the defining character of the wise woman's communication.

Therefore, the rhetorical function of the chiastic structure in Proverbs 31:26 is to construct communication as a manifestation of moral character. The “mouth–tongue” frame establishes the domain of communication, while the “wisdom–instruction of kindness” pair explains its quality. This analysis shows that the verse's primary meaning lies not merely in the act of speaking but in the integration of *hokmâ* and *ḥesed* that forms the woman's moral identity in the wisdom-literature tradition.

The chiastic structure of Proverbs 31:26 reveals a balance between speaking and the substance of communication. The “mouth–tongue” frame (A–A') establishes the domain of communication, while the “wisdom–instruction of kindness” pair (B–B') determines the quality of communication that constitutes the focus of the verse. This arrangement shows that,

³⁸ R. N. Whybray, *The Composition of The Book of Proverbs*, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2018), 46–50.

³⁹ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on “Proverbs,” Notes and Queries* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 852–853.

from the perspective of wisdom literature, speaking cannot be separated from the moral character underlying it. This relationship is also consistent with the broader theme of Proverbs, in which a person's words are viewed as a manifestation of the speaker's inner condition and character (cf. Prov. 18:20; 21:23).

Keefer explains that the literary structure of Proverbs functions not only as an aesthetic element but also as a rhetorical device that shapes the text's ethical argument. In Proverbs 31:26, the chiasmic structure directs readers' attention to the close relationship between *ḥokmâ* and *tôrath-ḥesed* as complementary elements.⁴⁰ Wisdom provides the basis for sound judgment, while *ḥesed* directs how that wisdom is expressed through communication. Therefore, the balance between these two elements constitutes the rhetorical center of meaning in the verse.

The analysis of the chiasmic structure shows that communication in Proverbs 31:26 is constructed as an expression of moral character. Thus, the quality of speech is not presented merely as a rhetorical ability but as a manifestation of the integration of wisdom and *ḥesed*. This finding confirms that the chiasmic structure not only produces poetic balance but also serves as a hermeneutical device, revealing the relationship between literary form and theological meaning in the wisdom tradition.

Implications of cognitive ability for character formation

Analysis of the chiasmic structure of Proverbs 31:26 shows that *ḥokmâ* (wisdom) and *tôrath-ḥesed* (instruction grounded in kindness) are the two elements that form the verse's central meaning. The relationship between these two elements shows that the wise woman's communication is constructed by integrating reasoning quality and ethical orientation. In this study, these findings are brought into dialogue with the concept of cognitive ability as an interdisciplinary framework for explaining how wisdom is expressed through thinking, decision-making, and communication. Based on the textual analysis, three principal implications emerge.

First, the expression "she opens her mouth with wisdom" indicates that speaking in Proverbs 31:26 is preceded by a mature process of reasoning. In the chiasmic structure, *ḥokmâ* is positioned as the central element determining the quality of communication, so that speech is understood as the result of deliberation shaped by wisdom. From a cognitive perspective, this finding relates to reasoning and decision-making, namely the ability to evaluate information before expressing it. Thus, the textual structure shows that the quality of speech is closely related to the quality of the thinking process that precedes it.

Second, the phrase "the instruction of kindness is on her tongue" shows that wisdom in Proverbs is not presented as an intellectual ability standing alone but is always expressed through *ḥesed*. The placement of these two elements within the chiasmic structure indicates that the quality of communication is determined not only by the accuracy of its content but also by the ethical orientation accompanying it. In dialogue with cognitive psychology, this relationship demonstrates the connection between reasoning processes and affective and relational dimensions, so that communication is not only rationally sound but also attentive to the relationship with those receiving the instruction.

⁴⁰ Arthur Jan Keefer, *The Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics - Integrating the Biblical and Philosophical Traditions*, ed. Eton College, *The Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics*, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 67-70.

Third, the chiastic structure presents communication as a medium for transmitting wisdom with a social dimension. The presence of the phrase “instruction of kindness” shows that the wise woman’s words do not remain merely an expression of personal character but function in the formation of others through teaching. From the perspective of wisdom literature, this pedagogical function demonstrates that wisdom is not merely individual but also communal in orientation. Therefore, dialogue with the concept of cognitive ability shows that wise communication is not merely a manifestation of thinking ability but also a means of transmitting moral values that shape communal life.

Conclusion

This study shows that the chiastic structure of Proverbs 31:26 functions not only as an aesthetic device in Hebrew poetry but also as a rhetorical device that directs readers toward the verse's central meaning, namely, the relationship between *hokmâ* (wisdom) and *tôrath-ḥesed* (instruction grounded in kindness). Analysis of the A–B–B'–A' structure shows that the “mouth–tongue” frame establishes the domain of communication, while the “wisdom–instruction of kindness” pair constitutes the semantic core that explains the moral quality of the wise woman’s communication. Thus, the primary meaning of Proverbs 31:26 lies not merely in the act of speaking but in the integration of wisdom and *ḥesed* that shapes the character of communication in the wisdom-literature tradition. Based on these findings, the study identifies three principal implications. First, the wisdom in Proverbs 31:26 concerns the process of reasoning and deliberation that precedes speaking. Second, the integration of *hokmâ* and *ḥesed* shows that wise communication consistently combines sound reasoning with an ethical orientation in its delivery. Third, the chiastic structure demonstrates that communication serves a pedagogical function within the wisdom tradition by transmitting moral values to the community.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its interpretation of Proverbs 31:26, through chiastic-structure analysis, as a hermeneutical key to understanding the relationship among wisdom, communication, and character formation. Within this framework, cognitive ability is not treated as equivalent to biblical wisdom but as a dialogical perspective that helps explain how wisdom is expressed through reasoning, decision-making, and communication. This finding expands the reading of Proverbs 31:26 by showing that literary structure not only serves an aesthetic function but also shapes the text's theological and ethical argument.

Future research can develop this approach by examining the role of literary structure in other wisdom texts and engaging it in dialogue with studies of cognitive psychology, moral reasoning, and ethical communication. Such an approach could enrich interdisciplinary studies at the intersection of Old Testament wisdom literature, biblical theology, and the cognitive sciences.

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Credit authorship contribution

Aska Aprilano Pattinaja: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing original draft. Victor Pattianakotta: Writing-review and editing, translation. Farel Yosua Sualang: Formal analysis, supervision. All authors contributed to the final review and approval of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for the content of the work.

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