

The Phonemic System of Semitic from the Advantage Point of Arabic and its Dialectology

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Every scholar even distantly concerned with Comparative Semitic Linguistics is cognizant of the central role played by Arabic data in the development of this discipline from its very inception up to these days. On account of its extremely conservative evolution and the absence of clearly assignable substrata since its earliest records, as well as of the great number and variety of these for an uninterrupted period of over one millennium and a half down to present times, in ways unparalleled, when put together, by any other member of the Semitic family, there was a time, back in the 19th century, as is well known, when Classical Arabic was nearly identified with Proto-Semitic. This conception, however, underwent some important strictures as an expectable consequence of successive advances in other Semitic areas, such as Akkadian, Ugaritic and, rather recently, Eblaitic, although it cannot be denied that it continues to work more or less consciously in the back of the minds of most of us.

Perhaps the most conspicuous attempt at downplaying and criticizing that traditionally acknowledged close similarity between Arabic and Proto-Semitic is embedded in some proposals made in the second half of the past century, by scholars like Garbini (1972), Hetzron (1997) and Lipiński (1997), aimed at detaching Arabic from the South Semitic group, and emphasizing its links to some members of the North Semitic group, like Amoritic or Aramaic, and reaching as far as to the point of introducing the label of Central Semitic as a classifying device appropriate to describe that allegedly intermediate position of Arabic amidst the Semitic languages. In this way, linguistic analysis would run along the lines of geography and history, in support of the presumption that the rather elusive, from a historical viewpoint, inhabitants of the Arabian deserts would have always been closer to their Northern kin than to Southerners, in open disagreement with their own lore.

Without denying or even minimizing the strong historical, cultural and even linguistic ties between Arabs and Northern Semites, we have recently taken exception to such a hypothesis,¹ by demonstrating its lack of solid linguistic grounds. In the meantime, however, the very fact that it could be launched and enjoyed some credibility among many of our most qualified colleagues has puzzled us first, and then led us to inquire the reasons beyond the weaknesses exhibited by the arguments advanced by those scholars and its unquestioned acceptance in some quarters. Soon enough it became apparent that, unlike the case of the older generations of Semitic scholars between Brockelmann and Cantineau, these younger colleagues of ours have used Classical Arabic evidence almost to the total exclusion of dialectal features, some of

1. In Corriente 2003: 187-194.

which are by no means less ancient than those canonized by Abbasid grammarians, famous for their flair for detecting archaic features and their subsequent determination to prefer them. Under such widely attested circumstances, one must say that any Comparative Semitic survey based on merely or predominantly Classical Arabic evidence would be comparable, in a comparative study of Greek, to excluding from consideration every other dialect but the mostly Attic *koinè dialektós*.

The negative consequences of that methodological expedience are evident, e.g., in Faber 1997: 9, who lists, as features in support of closer links between Arabic and North Semitic, pharyngealization vs. glottalization (although the latter is found in contemporary dialects of Higher Egypt for /t/),² non-geminate imperfectives (but many II measure verbs, synonymous with I, point to a rather recent defunctionalization),³ and within-paradigm generalization of vowels in the prefixes of imperfective (characteristically Classical but alien to most Old Arabic and Neo-Arabic dialects, where /i/ vocalization of every imperfective prefix,⁴ i.e., *taltalah* is standard, unless inhibited by certain phonemes). Conversely, she undervalues the existence in Arabic, South Arabian and Ethiopic of parallel systems of verb stems with a long first vowel and of the so-called broken, i.e., inner plurals, as strong arguments in favour of the traditional classification, while conceding some weight to the unconditioned change of /p/ into /f/ in South Semitic, a mere phonetic shift caused by spirantization, also present and even characteristic in the Northern and Eastern branches of Semitic, and apparently not completed in all kinds of Old Arabic, when /f/ still transcribed foreign /p/.

In Corriente 2003 we have already pointed to the ultimate reason for such misapprehensions, namely, the lack or neglect of more and most relevant intermediate information. It cannot be coincidental, as we said there, that most Comparative Semitic scholars who are established Arabists, like Diem and Blau, have not subscribed the Central Semitic hypothesis, while those who come from other Semitic realms have been more easily tempted into disregarding the dialectal evidence and accept rather limited descriptions of Classical Arabic as the whole and true diachronic, diatopic and diastratic complex reality of this language. Had they given due consideration to works like Fischer & Jastrow 1980, they might have avoided at least some of the most serious inaccuracies upon dealing with the classification of Arabic within the Semitic family.

It is therefore obvious that we need more area studies at different levels of kinship, in addition to those already extant, before we can produce more accurate comparative studies of Semitic. Sure enough, we have some excellent treatises of that kind for Ethiopic, Arabic, Modern South Arabian, Aramaic and even Hebrew dialects, but practically no comparative grammars of Northwest and South Semitic, which would be a necessary, preliminary and intermediate step in that direction. Instead, we have perhaps too many studies, some of them bordering on glottogonism, about the Semitic root, the number and quality of its constituents, or its eventual semantic and lexematic connotations which in most cases add few convincing novelties to what was being said a century ago.⁵

2. In fact, that substitution appears to be a mere evolutive phonetic trend which has acted independently, within the Afrasian *phylum*, upon Berber dialects, without any Arabic interference, it being questionable, on the other hand, whether pharyngealization in the traditional pronunciation of Hebrew and Syriac, if not the whole Aramaic subgroup, is unrelated to late generalized bilingualism in Arabic and Aramaic as a consequence of the Islamic conquest.

3. According to Corriente 1977: 35, fn. 2, 1989: 101, 1992: 99 y 1996: 55, where we suggested that *mubālaġah* ("exaggeration") is not always overtly marked by II vs. I measures of the Arabic verb, against the native grammarians' contention.

4. According to the famous Abbasid grammarian Alfarrā', this feature was practiced by all Arabs, except the tribes of Qurayš and Asad (see Corriente 1976: 74, fn. 1); as for Neo-Arabic, Durand 1995: 109, attributes it rather conservatively to "many Eastern dialects".

5. About this, see Del Olmo's excellent survey (Del Olmo 2004). Such recurrent topics as biconsonantism, root determinatives and inclusion of vowels in the root, with or without consideration of extra-Semitic materials, retain a fascinating

Needless to say, this is not to deny the usefulness of some insights provided by such works or the merit and skill of those who exerted themselves in their production, but let us remind on methodological premises that any Pan-Semitic research, as a chain of alternative data and analyses thereof, will be as weak as its weakest link. In our view, that weakest link is the comparative study of grammars and lexica of Semitic subgroups; therefore, and out of that belief, which made us preach with example, after having devoted some years to bringing forth something of the kind for Andalusī Arabic⁶ and surveying its position within the remaining Arabic dialects, we authored a grammatical sketch of Comparative South Semitic (Corriente 1996) which, of course, only meant a first step towards introducing the subject among our students and encouraging further research and production along this line.

Given the paramount importance of Arabic data, from both the qualitative and the quantitative viewpoints, for an improved knowledge of the inner works of the whole Semitic family and, consequently, for the entire Afrasian *phylum* as well, Semitic scholars cannot afford to do without any information related to the history and prehistory of the Arabic language and its dialects, since not only its comprehensive survey, but even isolated items of that origin have demonstrated, when neglected, their considerable capacity to ruin seemingly best-laid attractive schemes. It is true that we do not know but bits of the linguistic situation in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam,⁷ but the native authors of later epochs have preserved for us precious data about the phonemics, morphology, syntax and lexicon of some dialects spoken by the diverse tribes of Northern and Southern origins, which can be checked against kindred sources, inscriptions and writings, even oral records, in order to produce scientifically acceptable evidence about certain aspects of the Arabic tongue, which go far beyond the rather narrow limits of the transactional register labelled by us as Classic and by the Arabs as *fuṣḥā*, i.e., "the most eloquent (style)". It is therefore evident that Semitic scholars cannot operate for comparative purposes as if the received pronunciation of Classical Arabic (*tajwīd*) was equal to the phonemic and phonetic basis of Old Arabic, and the same applies to morphological paradigms, syntactical structures and lexical items, where Classical rules and usage are not necessarily the oldest and diachronically most conservative solutions in the rich inventory of the Arabic varieties.

This much said in the way of criticism on how Arabic data have been sometimes under-used, rather than misused, by contemporary Semitic scholars for comparative purposes, it would be in place to put forward practical and feasible suggestions that might help to correct those defaults. Here are some:

A) At the lowest level of Arabic dialects:

1) As most of the extant dialect grammars are descriptive and synchronic, not comparative nor diachronic, we feel that area studies, such as comparative grammars of Western Arabic, Levantine Arabic, Qāltu Arabic, etc., should be carried out in order to gain insights into the history and evolution of the diverse bundles and subgroups of Arabic dialects. This kind of survey will detect shared innovations and preservation of Old Arabic dialectal features, sometimes absent from the Classical standards, and help to gauge the impact of dialect splits and language contacts, some totally non-cognate, some Semitic or Afrasian.

2) As the day when a comprehensive historical and etymological dictionary of the Arabic language and its dialects materializes is still far off, the production of new comparative lexical studies of dialect bundles and subgroups would partially make up for that absence, improve our knowledge of their affinities and allow us to map their interrelations and ties with other Semitic tongues, such as Aramaic, South

attraction for some first-rate scholars who are not deterred by the perils of linguistic archaeology in areas whether either the methods or the data are utterly insufficient.

6. In Corriente 1977, 1992 and 1997.

7. See on this Kofler 1940-42, Corriente 1976, Rabin 1984, Belova 1996 and 1999.

Arabian, etc. Ideally, these comparisons should go beyond the limits of Semitic, and even Afrasian, but always keeping a watchful eye on regular correspondence rules and borrowings.

B) At the level of Semitic subgroups:

1) Comparative and diachronic grammatical studies of Epigraphic South Arabian, Modern South Arabian and of the Northern and Southern branches of Ethiopic can cast further light on the degree of kinship between their members and sub-members, which might clarify their relations among themselves and with the other Semitic branches. One can perfectly understand that synchronic studies have been the first priority of our courageous and patient colleagues who do admirable field work in order to retrieve information from remote and isolated Arabic dialects and Ethiopic and Modern South Arabian tongues in some cases on the verge of extinction, but it is nonetheless true that those items must be compared at diverse kinship levels before they can be used with full validity for comparison at the highest level of Semitic or Afrasian.

2) The same approach would bear excellent fruit in the field of lexicon. Without entering into an evaluation of the different Pan-Semitic dictionaries under elaboration, it must be acknowledged that such huge long-term projects should perhaps have been preceded by previous comparative Pan-Aramaic, Pan-Cananean, Pan-Ethiopic and Pan-South Arabian dictionaries, which would do the same job as the existing Akkadian dictionaries do for the attested dialectal varieties of East Semitic.

Needless to say, Arabic data will continue to play a significant role in any future survey of Semitic linguistics as a source of almost inexhaustible information about this family, but they must be retrieved and used according to certain methods and techniques in order to make them yield their entire and true value.

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