The Comparative Method in Semitic Linguistics∗

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"The comparative method is a set of techniques, developed over more than a century and a half, that permits us to recover linguistic constructs of earlier, usually unattested, stages in a family of related languages." It begins with vocabulary, usually basic vocabulary, and the recognition of cognates across the languages compared. It then proceeds to isolate systematic yet essentially nonmotivated correspondences that recur among the compared languages and to present these correspondences in an economical yet linguistically natural formula. The comparison may focus on practically any linguistic level, though it is perhaps most familiar as a tool for phonological and morphological analysis. The comparative method is a proven set of linguistic techniques that linguists and Semitists jointly apply with great success.

The goals of the comparative method are as familiar as the method itself. Stated simply, comparative linguists seek

i to identify instances of genetic relatedness amongst languages;
ii to explore the history of individual languages;
iii to develop a theory of linguistic change.2

Identifying genetic relationships is of course fundamental to the comparative task and underlies such basic projects as linguistic classification.3 Exploring the history of individual languages, especially the changes that occur across related languages, often involves the abstractive and retrospective method of reconstruction.4 Developing a theory of linguistic change, however, is not a priority of ours. Since Semitists tend to be adverse to theory, we have yielded the more theoretical tasks to others. Our persistent interest in subgrouping, though, shows that we have not ignored this goal altogether.

∗ I thank Marianne Mithun for bibliographic suggestions.
The comparative method has been very successful at producing a stable inventory of proto-Semitic phonemes. There are three vocalic phonemes: an open back vowel, a close front vowel, and a close rounded back vowel. There are also twenty-nine consonantal proto-phonemes whose place and manner of articulation can now be charted on the standard IPA table. For example, the so-called emphatics are now finding their home as ejective counterparts of simple unvoiced segments. At the same time, current opinion favors a characterization of the alveolar sibilants as proto-affricates. The comparative method has also been successful at eliminating a putative proto-consonant. Thus the "rare phoneme" *s₂, once thought to underlie distal demonstratives, third-person pronouns, and the causative prefix, now seems to behave according to phonological rules that in turn refute the justification for reconstructing a separate proto-phoneme. For the moment, the number and identity of proto-Semitic phonemes is secure.

The comparative method has had another success in demonstrating the existence of word-initial consonant clusters in the proto-language. This notion is not new, but it has gained momentum since 1985, when Testen showed that a uniquely Aramaic sound change is governed by this very condition, in the form of word-boundary, consonant, and *n: e.g., *bn- > bērā 'son' vs. *ban- > bānayā 'sons'. Furthermore, the plural stem itself corroborates the cluster-initial derivation of the base form; it participates in the central Semitic morphophonological rule which inserts an *a-vowel between two contiguous consonants that precede a plural suffix: e.g., Hebrew ben 'son' < *bn- vs. bānim 'sons' < *bānimī; see also set 'rump' (Is 20:4) vs. šētōt 'foundations' (Ps 11:3). These nominals therefore confirm a pattern that otherwise seemed to occur only in the proto-Semitic G imperative. However unstable, *#CC, is permissible in proto-Semitic.

In the arena of morphology, the dust may be settling over the antiquity of the *yaqattVl verb form. It occurs in Akkadian as a productive imperfective form. It also occurs in Ethiopian with the same characteristics. The logic of the comparative method, then, suggests only one conclusion.


It is the very fact that [these] two Semitic languages, geographically the most remote from each other, and otherwise with very little in common that is not demonstrably Semitic Gemeingut, share this particular formation that adds cogency to the thesis that it [sc., *yaqattVl] is proto-Semitic.  

But problems remain. First, there are discrepancies between the Akkadian and Ethiopic forms that still require explanation. Second, the gemination in these forms may well be iconic—a grammaticalized representation of durativity or a related imperfective category. In which case, this imperfective inflection could have arisen independently in these two distantly related languages.  

Historical origin notwithstanding, *yaqattVl is one of the two attested prefixed finite verb forms in the Semitic languages. The other is *yaqtVl and, unlike *yaqattVl, is a solidly proto-Semitic form. Together, they comprise a compatible and complementary pair. Huehnergard characterizes them as "two basic indicative forms" which are distinguished according to aspect (perfective vs. imperfective). Yet are they truly "indicative?" Unfortunately, the term is equivocal. Trask defines it as a declarative: "The mood category associated with the uttering of a statement which the speaker believes to be true." Palmer prefers to subsume this grammatical category under the semantic heading "realis." Either way, it is not likely that the prefixed verbs are indicative. The proof lies in the shorter, *yaqtVl form. For as all scholars recognize, proto-Semitic *yaqtVl has two discrete semantic values. One is a preterite, and the other is an optative (jussive). Biblical Hebrew provides a typical illustration.

\[\text{yæxem} \text{ He reduced the storm to a whisper, and the waves went silent. (Ps 107:29)} \]
\[\text{So shall Yahweh do. yæxem May Yahweh fulfill your words. (Jer 28:6; see also 1 Sam 1:23)} \]

The two meanings share common ground, however. They share the notion of temporal remoteness or distance from the speaker's present, albeit in different ways. One form, *yaqtVl preterite, is a declarative that refers to the simple past, devoid of implication for the present state of affairs. The other form, *yaqtVl

18. For the situation in modern south Arabian dialects, see David Cohen, \textit{La phrase nominale et l'évolution du système verbal en sémitique. Études de syntaxe historique} (Collection linguistique de la Société de Linguistique de Paris 72; Louvain/Paris: Peeters, 1984) 68-75, esp. 75 with n. 37 (reference courtesy of Antoine Lonnet).
23. For the translation and reading adopted here, see Arnold B. Ehrlich, \textit{Die Psalmen} (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1905) 269.
optative, is a desiderative expression that is oriented toward the future behavior of an addressee other than the speaker.  

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25. For the relation between future tense and desiderative mood, see E. Adelaide Hahn, *Subjunctive and Optative: Their Origin as Futures* (Philological Monographs of the American Philological Association 16; New York: American Philological Association, 1953) 75-76.


30. The same distribution may be attributed to *t*- in the proto-Semitic prefixed verb form: in third-person forms, it marks the feminine singular; elsewhere, it marks the second person.
dahabatu 'gold piece' < dahabu 'gold' (Arab.).
But it can also transform a basic property concept
(adjective) into an abstract mass noun: e.g., kinnu 'true, just' (Akk.); gdl 'greatness' < gdl 'large' (Ug.); wasqāḥatu 'insolence' < waṣqāhu 'insolent' (Arab.); and šannāy 'beauty' < šannāy 'beautiful' (Eth.).
In each of these examples, *t serves the same function:
marks the inverse of the
basic grammatical or semantic category to which it is attached. In masculine/feminine singular pairs, it
marks the nonbasic member. In a conversational situation, it marks the nonspeaker. In the case of natural
mass nouns, it marks the nonmass counterpart. With adjectives, it marks a timeless nominal derivative.
In a binary nominal system, then, *t is the "other." On such an analysis, this (pro-)nominal marker even has
an echo in the proto-Semitic verb system. For if Dombrowski is correct in his interpretation of the Semitic
stem, this derivational affix performs a series of predictable semantic shifts or reorientations, whether in
the aspect of the underlying verb or in the direction of its dynamic activity.
If so, the affix t is a very
deep inverse marker in Semitic. Clearly, we still have much to learn from the time-honored comparative
method.

31. E.g., Brockelmann, Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen (2 vols.; Berlin: Reuther &
Reichard, 1908-1913) 1 §227Ac (noting that Eth. lacks this construction); and Burkhart Kienast, Historische Semitische
Sprachwissenschaft (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001) §124.3a.
32. E.g., Brockelmann, Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik 1 §227Aa; and Kienast, Historische Semitische
Sprachwissenschaft §124.3c.
Collected Writings of E. A. Speiser, ed. J. J. Finkelstein and Moshe Greenberg [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press:
427 n. 10.