Traces of South Arabian Causative-Reflexive Verbal Stem in Arabic Lexicon?

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1 Introduction

There exists an obvious semantic relationship between some Classical Arabic quadriliteral roots which have ʿšīn or ʿṣīn as first radical and their twin triliteral roots. This paper is a preliminary survey on these roots in order to explore the possible linguistic phenomena that underlie this correspondence. The working hypothesis is that some of these quadriradical roots may derive from triradical ones, by adding a ʿs- (or ʿš-) element, to produce a new root. This process may have worked in Arabic in two ways: 1) denominative derivation, when we deal with possible loanwords; 2) verbal derivation, supposing that a ʿs- (or ʿš-) verbal prefix was active and productive in some ancient stage of the Arabic language, or in some of the ancient dialects which contributed to the formation of Classical Arabic.

First, I have compiled a comprehensive list—given here in the appendix—of quadriliteral Arabic roots beginning with ʿšīn (list 1) and ʿṣīn (list 2) recorded in Lisān al-ʿArab by Ibn Manẓūr (d.1311/711h) which have a twin triliteral root. In these lists the corresponding triliteral roots of both Ancient South Arabian (ASA) and Modern South Arabian (MSA) languages, if existing, have been added for comparison. The choice to compare these Classical Arabic roots with the same roots in ASA and MSA languages is suggested by the following: a) at least since the 2nd century AD Arabic speakers are attested in South Arabia, in those areas where ASA languages were consistently written. It is also reasonable to assume that ancestors of MSA languages speakers used to live in the same general area. This long term geographic contiguity could have given rise to foci of language contact; b) many of both ASA

1 This type of process is not uncommon in Arabic throughout is long history, for example: ʿSKR, from Persian laškar, that gives the verb ʿaskara and the substantive muʿaskar, until recent TLFZ, from (French?) television, that gives the substantive tilfaz.

2 This choice of Lisān is partly casual, partly due to the need of putting a limit to this survey.
and MSA languages have a productive $s^l$- prefix verbal stem (though with different phonological realizations).

As is known, in Classical Arabic the so-called causative stem of the verb (IV stem) is characterized by prefix morpheme $‘a$- and $sukûn$ (zero-vowel) on the first radical, while in Ancient South Arabian languages the very same stem is characterized by the prefix $s^l$- (all ASA languages except Sabaic which has $h$-). In MSA, we find a causative-reflexive stem with a $š$- prefix morpheme, eventually with different syllabic patterns $šeCCùC$ (mainly with a passive meaning) and $šeCèCeC$ (reflexive, reciprocal), that is opposite to a causative $h$- stem in Mehri and $‘$- in Jibbali.

This situation is the result of supposed morphological and phonetic evolutions inside the different language families. A phonetic passage $s > h > ‘$ is commonly reconstructed for Arabic morphemes, as well as a passage $s^l > h$ in Sabaic. In MSA languages these verbal morphemes coexist, each one with its own specialization, though it is hazardous to draw conclusions from this, at the moment.

Traces of $s$- (and also $h$-) verbal prefix have already been recognized in some Arabic roots, either as a morphological productive element or possibly in loans. By introducing the concept of $zawâ’id$ or $ḥurūf zā’ida$ ($ziyâda$) in reconstructing the root of a word, Arab grammarians recognized the possibility that a consonant in a quadriliteral root may be an "extension" of a tri-

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3 A similar comparison with repertoires of other languages, such as Ethiopian or Akkadian, may lead to relevant results as well, but at the moment such languages are not taken into account.

4 In this paper, transcription of MSA languages is simplified and adapted to Arabic transcription system, even though the real pronunciation of phonemes is quite different. For example: instead of marking the long and short vowels, I just noted the accented ones; I used $q$ for $k$, $š$ for $š/ç$, and so on.

5 See Johnstone $ML$ p. XXXVII, LIIX, and Johnstone $JL$ p. XXI, XXV.

6 Such type of diachronic reconstructions presume an evolutionary scheme that takes Proto-Semitic as starting point from which different languages moved in one or more direction and then differentiated between themselves. Being the drawing of that scheme still disputed, I prefer not to discuss this topic. Here I prefer to avoid the issue and just juxtapose data.

7 The recent literature I found on this subject—for example A. Măcelaru in $EALL$, s.v. "Causative"; Lipiński (1997: 389), stating that this prefix is not productive in Arabic; Fleisch (1979: vol. II, pp. 280–282) always quotes examples taken from Brockelmann 1908 (vol. I, p. 522) and Mez (1906: 250–251). Note that all the examples given only concern roots beginning with $sîn$, and are mainly focused on three consonantal roots resultant from two consonantal ones (e.g. $sabaqa$, $sakana$, $saḥata$, etc.).