1 Introduction

As scholars of Semitic languages we are fortunate to have such a wealth of material from various historical periods and various geographical areas. Indeed, typically doing historical linguistics in Semitic involves looking at and comparing features of “the big five”: Akkadian, Classical Arabic, Classical Hebrew, Classical Ethiopic and Aramaic. This is problematic, as John Huehnergard has noted. He suggested that we should work upward: reconstruct each branch independently and then compare it to others.

For the purpose of reconstruction ... one should first compare not all attested languages, but rather only those that share an immediate common ancestor; then that intermediate ancestral language may be compared with a language or branching with which it shares an immediate ancestor still farther back.

Huehnergard 1996:160

So where do we start when we look at Arabic? Conventionally, we look for clues in Classical Arabic. This dialect is considered conservative, that is preserving archaic features and grammatical structures, primarily on the basis of its consonantal inventory (Blau 1977). In fact, at least in the early days of historical Semitic linguistics, Arabic was assumed to be the closest language to proto Semitic. Some, including many Arabists, still think so today.

But Classical Arabic is a very problematic entity, since it is standardized and great efforts have been invested in order to preserve an idealized form of the language. I am not the first to suggest that Classical Arabic is a normalized and perhaps artificial language, a “construct” (Larcher 2010). Its standardization included adapting an orthography, expanding the lexicon and developing a stylistic standard; these were based on multiple linguistic sources (Versteegh 2001, 53). Classical Arabic is therefore a fusion of dialects. Many other related dialects, however, were spoken over a vast area before the advent of Islam,
but the written records are fairly limited (MacDonald 2006: 464–465). It is unclear when and under which circumstances a standard Classical Arabic has been formulated. Estimations vary from 6th–7th century (Fischer 2006) to 9th–10th century (Owens 2003). Larcher (2010) suggests that as late as the seventh century so-called “Neo-Arabic” (non-standard Arabic heretofore) was still considered appropriate for writing specific genres, “an everyday vehicle of oral and written communication (which is why we find the dialect variation and the trace of the oral in the written)” (p. 109). The standardization had a political motivation, as a language was needed to run the administration of the sprawling empire (Versteegh 2001: 53).1 As with many forms of standardization, prescriptive grammarians decided which dialectal forms they accept as part of the standard language and which they reject. Overall, there was a conscious attempt to formulate regular paradigms and avoid exceptions (Fischer 2006: 399). Thus, although there may have been a favored variety of Arabic at the basis of the standardized language, even if imagined, there was still a careful selection of features to be codified as part of an acceptable standard. The result is an amalgam.

In this paper, I will look at some features in Arabic dialects, which are clearly missing from the Classical variety, and therefore probably from the dialect(s) on which it is based. I will argue, based on comparative evidence, that these features belong to the Semitic inheritance of this branch. Their absence from the Classical language is indicative of the dialect’s relative innovation. I further suggest that other forms of Arabic, i.e. non-standard Arabic, including to a certain extent, Middle Arabic, which are not normalized and do not attempt to imitate a non-native variety, preserve a different set of archaic features at least as well as the Classical Arabic sources. In order to prove that these features are archaic and not a later development I will use comparative evidence. In the following I will discuss and evaluate a series of features and will conclude with some lessons regarding the effects of standardization.

The idea that non-Classical variants preserve archaisms was previously noted by several scholars. For example, both Bloch (1967) and Schub (1974) noted relics of Barth-Ginsberg Law, which are not attested in the Classical language, where the prefix vowel is consistently -a-.2 Kaye (2007) also suggested that archaic features are preserved in the dialects, and concludes that the Clas-

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1 Fischer (2006: 398) suggests also a religious motivation, aiming to preserve the presumed language in which the Qurʾān was delivered and to maintain a uniform linguistic form across the Arab world. Classical Arabic, however, is not based on the language of the Qurʾān, so such a claim is unsatisfactory.
2 For more features, see Huehnergard (this volume).