QUADRILITERAL VERBS IN THE ARABIC DIALECTS OF EASTERN ARABIA

Clive Holes
University of Oxford

1. Introduction

This paper presents some reflections on the morphology and semantics of quadriliteral verbs in the eastern Arabian (EA) dialects. The data cited were mostly gathered in Bahrain in the 1970s,1 but there is also some comparative material which I collected in Oman some ten years later. The EA quadriliteral verb is a particularly interesting subject for lexicology, as its morpho-semantic possibilities seem to have been extended and exploited in ways different from CLA/MSA. The result is that the quadriliteral verbs are among the most expressive, colourful and idiomatic elements in these dialects. They are particularly well represented in descriptions of bodily states, moods and actions, and there is a fairly systematic correlation between various form-types and meaning-types, as we shall see.

Perhaps the most striking fact about quadriliteral verbs in the EA dialects is how common they are. Along with the structurally similar Theme II of the triliteral verb, the quadriliteral is the most productive verb type in these dialects (in the sense of ‘still producing new verbs’). This is illustrated by the considerable number of denominate examples which have been assimilated into the morphology and phonology of the dialects, yet which are clearly derived from relatively recent foreign borrowings, e.g. kansk ‘to cancel, annul’ (< English ‘cancel’), tbcnc ‘to have a puncture’ (< English ‘puncture’), tarbal ‘to cover or line with plastic sheeting’2 (<tibr ‘[plastic] sheeting, covering’ ultimately < English ‘tarpaulin’). In a data base of around 400,000 words of natural conversation gathered from one

1 A glossary of the vocabulary of a large cross-section of uneducated speakers was published as Holes (2001).
2 As in the example hafit ghibal mtarbalin ‘children’s plastic-covered underpants’. haf (< English ‘half’) is used to refer to any kind of shorts or short-pants.
hundred uneducated Baḥraynī speakers, 141 different quadriliteral verbs occurred. Most of these verbs fell into one of several clear formal categories described below.

The evidence suggests that, as in many other Arabic dialects, there were historically probably a limited number of processes—chiefly reduplication and affixation—by which the quadriliteral verb developed from the triliteral verb system (in some cases, arguably, from biliteral elements). In many cases, however, it is implausible to trace quadriliterals to verbal roots. Many must originally have been denominatives formed in a similar way to the recent English ones exemplified above. This is obvious in cases like *sandag* ‘to cover over, roof over’ (< *sandūg* ‘box, chest’), *tsarwal* ‘to put on, wear trousers’ (< *sirwāl* ‘trousers’, ultimately < Persian/Urdu *ṣalwar* ‘trousers’), *ṭsēmax* ‘to feign deafness, pretend not to hear’ (< *ażmax* ‘deaf’) where the source dialectal noun or adjective is still in common use. But in other cases the verb was derived from Classical Arabic or dialectal words and concepts now lost, or at least no longer common knowledge to the ordinary speaker. A good example of a dialectal denominative with pure Classical roots is the verb *ṭgharham* ‘to attack, assail ferociously’ which ultimately goes back to the CLA terms *ghirham* ‘epithet of a lion’ and/or *ḥirhum* ‘boldness in war’, though neither of these words is known to the illiterate speakers who use dialectal *ṭgharham*. An example of a now obscure dialectal derivation is the verb *ṭdēram* or *ṭḏīram*, which means ‘to apply lipstick [to oneself]’. This verb appears to be derived from *daram* (or *dīram*), a name for the bark of a type of tree (the walnut?) used by Gulf women until the 1930s and 40s as a cosmetic to redden lips, especially when preparing a bride for her wedding. In other cases of dialectal derivation, such as *ṭfalbah* ‘to dandify oneself, spruce oneself up’, the verb was possibly borrowed as it is from a neighbouring Arabic dialect, in this case Iraqi: *ṭfalbah* seems to be derived from the adjective *ṭalabi*, Iraqi Arabic for ‘dignatory, merchant’, a word ultimately of Turkish origin not used in Baḥraynī Arabic.

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3 These are the meanings given in the *Lisān al-‘Arab*.

4 Noted by both al-Ḥanafī (1964:141) and Dickson (1949:157) for Kuwayt. Hava’s dictionary notes *ḍarmā* for CLA as ‘a red-leaved plant’ but this does not seem to be the same thing as *daram/dīram*.

5 *ṭsalbah* is not, however, noted in this sense by Woodhead & Beene (1967) for Baghdad, who give the meaning ‘to climb’. The same Turkish input word gave rise