
The current book contains ten articles plus an introduction to the volume dealing with a long-researched topic, word formation in Semitic languages. The articles are divided into four thematic components: the concept and status of “root”, the interplay between the notions of “root” and “scheme” (French “schème”), issues of historical linguistics, and issues relating to nouns.

Philippe Cassuto, “Base, roi et serviteur”, presents an interesting overview of the role of the consonantal root in the Hebrew grammatical tradition. He shows that it is only in the eleventh century that the idea of a tri-consonantal root became a part of the tradition. The earliest Hebrew tradition in the ninth century distinguished between “king” and “servant” consonants, a distinction recalling and probably based on the Arabic grammarians’ recognition of 10 consonants, the zaʾida (al-yawm tansā-hā, ʾl, y, w, m, t, n, s, ā, h, “you’ll forget them today”) which are employed in derivational processes (analogous to the “servant” consonants). These could be added to mono- bi- or tri-consonantal roots. Even a commonly-used concordance by Mandelkern written at the end of the nineteenth century still ordered words alphabetically, without explicitly ordering them by root. The entry for /bt/, for instance, contains tokens from three different consonantal roots.

Viktor Porkhomovsky “La structure de la racine et la formation des mots dans la tradition sémitologique russe” offers a short, informative history of approaches to the root in the Russian Semiticist tradition, which, as in other traditions, has its share of reductionist explanations to the “meaning” and development of the root in Semitic. Porkhomovsky appropriately distances himself from these approaches.

Jean-François Prunet “La racine sémitique dans les sciences cognitives” presents a very comprehensive overview of the issues relating to the psycholinguistic treatment of the root in Arabic. An ongoing area of research involves the question of the extent to which speakers process lexemes on the basis of root consonants vs. fully-voweled stems. As Prunet nicely clarifies, a key question is whether the consonantal root has morphemic value. From a linguistic perspective, this question has been answered negatively in a number of well-argued papers: the consonantal root alone is too simple to account for semantic distinctions attested in voweled stems, for instance, and derivational processes need to refer to a voweled stem, not a root (a key point among the Arabic grammarians as well). On the other hand, psycholinguistic experiments consistently lend support to the role of the consonantal root in facilitating word recognition (inferred from reaction time studies). Furthermore, comparison of the types of errors made by bilingual speakers shows, for instance, that an aphasic bilingual will metathesize consonants in Arabic at a far higher rate than he does in French. A number of word games (ludlings) have been described in Arabic, based merely on the transposition of consonants. All of these observations suggest a prominent role for the consonantal root in Arabic.

Though clearly sympathetic to the special role of the consonantal root, Prunet presents con’s as carefully as he does pro’s. This will help facilitate new studies working
within the framework of the two perspectives which he summarizes. A brief example may be offered here.

While it is true, as Prunet notes, that simple consonant transposition does define some Arabic ludlings, there are in fact many of these documented in the literature (recently described by Wolfer), and the great majority of them involve the insertion of syllabic material. One strategy is to insert an entirely new syllable into a word. In ʿasfūri, a ludling in Damascus, ẓV is inserted after every syllable onset + rhyme, so that ʾbiddi “I want”, becomes bi-ẓid-dizi (V takes the value of the stem vowel). Another common strategy is to form a new syllable through insertion of a rhyme and coda. In a Meccan ludling called misf for instance, Bakalla, V˘Vrb is inserted after the first consonant of the stem. Al-ʾilm “knowledge”, becomes al-iirbilm. Ludlings are very interesting for insights they can provide into interpretations of phonological and morphophonemic processing. A broad look at them in Arabic certainly highlights the role of the syllable, i.e. the vocalic rhyme, in lexical processing, as much if not more than the role of the consonant.

Christian Touratier “Racines et analyse en morphèmes dans les languages sémitiques” provides interesting analogies between Arabic verbal stems and those in French. Using argumentation and comparisons from the structuralist tradition of the 1950’s, and indeed, recalling a short discussion in the twelfth century grammarian al-Astarābādī, Touratier succeeds in making the point that the consonantal root in Arabic cannot be considered to have morphemic value, yet does appear to have a role to play in the morphology of the language. This converges on the discussion in Prunet’s article. In the light of his discussion, Touratier’s conclusion, that the consonantal roots “…sont des projections abusives de l’écrit sur l’oral” comes as a headline-stealing non sequitur, raising an issue not even adumbrated in the article.

Pierre Larcher’s “Racine et schème, signification lexicale et grammaticale : quelques exemples de non-bijection en arabe classique” provides a good illustration of the complex semantics which can be encoded within a stem. A simple mapping of consonantal root to meaning, or of “schème” (= wazn or binâ of the grammarians) to meaning fails to explain the precise semantics of individual forms. Larcher illustrates this in five case studies. In one, the word qasāma, very roughly, “sermon for a murder victim conducted at the site of and in presence of his relatives with the purpose of sanctioning retribution” is discussed. While this is related to the root qsm, which Larcher does not even attempt to gloss, and the stems qasam “oath, sermon”, aqsam “swear”, the meaning, according to Larcher, following the Arabic lexicographers, further entails and is explained by association with stems of the wazn f̣āala like ɡarāma “fine, punishment” (suggesting, “retribution”) and saḥāba “group” (suggesting “conducted in presence of murdered person’s relatives”).

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1 Claudia Wolfer, Arabische Geheimsprachen, Magisterarbeit, Bayreuth University, 2007.