

The Lexicon and Linguistic Genealogical Classification¹

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The classification of the Semitic language family is a topic that has often been dealt with by Semitists, frequently in search of a reconstruction of Proto-Semitic. The volume under review takes up this intent, following the method of the Russian school of linguistics and with the Swadesh wordlist as a basic lexical template. The book is organized in an *Introduction* and eight *Chapters* that check the results of this methodology as applied to the Semitic sub-families and languages that are more significant for this problem: Proto-Semitic, West-Semitic, Central Semitic, North-West Semitic, Ugaritic, Old and Modern Aramaic, Ethiopian Semitic, Modern South-Arabian.

As may easily be imagined, this intent will meet the reticence if not the frontal opposition of many a Semitist and linguist in general who, besides being sceptical about the usefulness of linguistic genetic classification in general, have considered almost as a dogma that the lexicon is the least suitable tool to achieve a reliable classification in contrast to morphological innovation and other structural features such as phonology and syntax. The author is fairly conscious of this state of affairs and in the *Introduction* (1-25) attempts to break a way through this scepticism and enter the small but prestigious group of scholars who have occupied themselves with this topic. In this regard, an overall view of the main problems involved is set out along with an overview of previous work in the field and a criticism of the morphological dogma whose shortcomings are made patent. The confluence of both methods is favoured as the right attitude; that is to say, the morphological perspective “is preferably to be used side by side with other potentially illuminating tools of genealogical classification” (p. 5). Needless to say that one of these tools is diachronic lexicographic evaluation. The objections raised against it are answered: facile borrowing, imprecise subgrouping relevance, chronological gap between languages. In this regard the author concludes, quite reasonably in my opinion: “The importance of the basic vocabulary (Swadesh’ in this case) for the communication process is by no means inferior to that of morphological markers” (p. 9). Precisely the chronological gap is as much a handicap as a warranty of comparative and glotto-chronological studies.

The method based on vocabulary (lexicostatistics/glottochronology) as well as the analysis of isoglosses have actually been used by relevant scholars whose contributions are summarised, among whom Militarev stands out. The author defends their validity, analysing the different degrees of retention/loss/innovation of basic semes, either trivial or not, that are pertinent for classification: shared loss, non-trivial retention, shared innovation and loan, words of unknown origin. The basic vocabulary

1. Review article of Leonid Kogan, *Genealogical Classification of Semitic. The Lexical Isoglosses*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2015, pp. 734 – ISBN 978-1-61451-726-9. An abridged version of this review article has appeared in *Bulletin of SOAS* 2016/3.

appears as “a deeply structured system” (p. 19) of semantic universals; its study, however, does not exhibit any demonstrable relevance in the course of the following chapters.²

*Content summary*³

In *Chapter One* the description and justification of the tool chosen to carry out the genetic classification of Semitic is developed, namely the Swadesh wordlist. The operation implies actually the reconstruction of the basic vocabulary of Proto-Semitic, for which suitable criteria are pointed out. First “the same basic meaning in all major Semitic languages”; second “the basic concept in several geographically distant languages”. “Applying both types of criteria outlined above, one can fill 52 positions of the Proto-Semitic Swadesh’ wordlist, 40 among them with a fairly high degree of reliability” (p. 45), the other 12 selected according to the second criterion. This means that half the basic wordlist is established for the Proto-Semitic vocabulary. Their distribution by semantic field becomes very instructive, the series of body parts assuming an outstanding position. The linguistic situation in the different subgroups and individual languages of all these lexemes is analysed. One has to admit that in doing so, the author is highly objective, avoiding any over-enthusiastic deviation into his own personal conviction. The conclusion is as expected: “the older is a language’s textual attestation, the more trivial retentions are preserved” (45), Hebrew and Syriac showing themselves as the most conservative languages.

Starting from *Chapter Two*, the actual subject of the classification of Semitic branches is taken up, beginning with *West Semitic* that is supposed to include all the Semitic languages, except Akkadian and Eblaite, although⁴ little attention is paid to the latter language in the pages of this book. I believe that a serious evaluation of the kernel position of Eblaite, as the Syrian language of the third millennium, between East and West,⁵ would afford a significant revision of the conclusions. The reason and motive of such an early split are evaluated. In it the interplay of innovation and retention is of major significance, but also particular attention must be given to the chronological gap between the various subgroups and individual languages: East and West Semitic. For this the subdivision into Central Semitic, Ethiopian Semitic and Modern South Arabian is assumed. And also a hint is made to “the pre-written stage”⁶ of Akkadian (p. 49), which in my opinion, should be extended to the rest.

The classically assumed innovation WS /qatal/ # Akk. /qatil/ and the corresponding different verbal pattern it implies are considered first. Its problematics are summarily sketched, in the long run assuming that both morphs are PS retentions. Other suggested differentiating morphological features are also analysed with no better outcome, lacking unquestionable criteria to decide whether they are a retention or an innovation from PS: 1) the /yiqtal-/ pattern for intransitive (WS) and ‘medial’ (ES) verbs; 2) internal passive; 3) causative prefix; 4) broken plural; 5) external masc. pl. (-m/n); 6) /qatīl/, /qatūl/ adjectival

2. For my own lexicostatistical exercise see G. del Olmo Lete, “The Genetic Historical Classification of the Semitic Languages. A Synthetic Approach”, in L. Kogan, ed., *Studia Semitica* (Orientalia: Papers of the Oriental Institute, III), Moscow 2003, pp. 18-52 (24ff.).

3. The following summary is intended to guide and facilitate the reading of this volume by anyone interested in the subject.

4. But neither the akkadian of Kanish (a foreign colony) nor Eblaite has been proven to be peripheral Akkadian (see the coetaneous Mari [Shakanakku] Akkadian). It is the language of an Empire of Central Syria of the late third millennium, with its own graphemics, phonetics (ww: phonology?), morphology, syntax and vocabulary.

5. See p. 50 n. 125. I think Eblaite to be an independent language, although closer to Akk. than the rest of WS languages, due to the split diachrony. In this connection the lexical coincidence between Ak. and Ebl. against WS supposes a sure WS innovation, while the divergence between Akk. and Ebl. as well as the coincidence between Ebl. and WS do not solve the dilemma innovation/retention.

6. See Del Olmo Lete, “The Genetic Historical Classification”, pp. 38-39.

patterns; 7) 3rd p.p. pl. (/n::n/, /m::n/); 8) quadrilateral reduplicated verbal roots; 9) mV- prefixed nominal pattern; 10) the nominal patterns C₁aC₂C₃- and C₁aC₂aC₃-; 10) the derivational nominal pattern C₁aC₂C₃- and 11) the derivational nominal pattern C₁aC₂aC₃-. On the contrary, the emergence of the middle verb pattern *qatila: yiqталu*, favoured by the PWS innovation derivational pattern C₁C₂C₃-, would oppose WS to Akk. (p. 67).

After the rather unsuccessful search for morphological features that could provide evidence for the specific linguistic character of WS, the work then begins to search for the lexical items that certify that character and which actually is the main concern of the present work. The preceding pages may be considered a simple introduction, defining the state of the art, the Swadesh wordlist being the starting point. That list is first scrutinised to leave out lexemes that can be considered PS retentions, most of them shared to a certain degree by Akk. and sometimes supposing innovation in this language (lexemes for “hand”, “head”, “lever”, “night”, “woman”, the demonstrative elements /du/ and /’VI(l)/, and the bases /qrr/, /’ty/, /whb/, /’gl /-/g’l/). As for the rest, “we can conclude that the Swadesh wordlist provides a rather limited amount of evidence for the historical unity of West Semitic” (p. 71).

To override this limitation, some 66 new lexical items from other strata are analysed (pp. 71-100) to reinforce and clarify the linguistic dichotomy ES/WS. The 34 more significant lexemes/semes of this group are afterwards presented in a tabular form with marginal comments on their possible cognates and borrowings that may be found in both linguistic areas (pp. 100-106). But also here “in most cases [it] is exceedingly difficult to show that in any particular case we are faced with a newly created lexical feature of PWS rather than with a PS lexical archaism lost in Akkadian” (p. 104). In this regard, to resort to Afro-Asiatic could be important to certify the archaic character of any lexeme, while in its turn the Ebla material would be of little help, according to the author. It is from this lexical selection that the innovating character of PWS may be ascertained. And it is in these 35 pages where in his opinion the “most significant positive outcome” of the author’s investigation is to be found. Accordingly it is to these pages to which the following chapter will refer.

The analysis of the internal division of WS is the first topic to which this outcome is applied. The division of WS into three branches (Central Semitic, Ethiopian Semitic and Modern South Arabian – on this topic see later on) is the starting point. Starting from the four possible hypotheses of their mutual relationship/proximity (opposition CS # MSA+EthS; total independence and equidistance among the three; EthS greater proximity to CS; MSA greater proximity to CS) and after analysing the suggested morphological isoglosses defining the close relationship of MSA and EthS, the classic “South Semitic” (pp. 107-109), “we may conclude that sufficiently reliable exclusive morphological features uniting EthS and MSA are practically lacking” (p. 109). The second hypothesis (complete mutual independence) seems very suitable, although difficult to demonstrate (p. 110). This will be, however, the provisional position taken by the author (p. 111). On the other hand, merely two of the morphological interesting features in favour of a close relationship between CS and EthS are clearly insufficient to found their genealogical proximity (pp. 110-111). The same must be said about the relationship between CS and MSA (p. 111).

Following the same pattern as earlier, the lexical isoglosses are taken into account, first the Swadesh wordlist and afterwards other lexical strata. A good deal of positions in the Swadesh list clearly speak in favour of the third hypothesis, namely the special genealogical link between CS and EthS (pp. 111-113), while suggested data linking EthS and MSA are only very few and rather problematic (pp. 113-115). Also there is not a single lexical item from the quoted list linking CS and MSA in this regard. Only a certain diachronic unity can be accepted for CS and EthS, which is verified on the broader following base (p. 115). In fact from other lexical strata outside the Swadesh wordlist, some 38 lexemes certified such a unity, while for the relationship EthS-MSA no reliable case can be put forward, confirming in this way the absence of

genealogical proximity between them found formerly, once more certifying the death of such a “narrow South Semitic” group or family (p. 124). As for the relationship between CS and MSA, some 16 lexical items suggest a definite proximity between them, against the result provided by the Swadesh word list (pp. 124-128). This discrepancy is explained because of the steady influence of Arabic on MSA.

In *Chapter Three*, attention is focused on the CS whose suggested defining features are submitted to a thorough scrutiny. After a brief summary of current research (pp. 129-130), the first recognised feature (the “New Imperfect”) that shapes the group (Arabic and NWS: Aramaic and Canaanite) is complemented with a detailed analysis of the other four main morphological features that according to Huehnergard support the hypothesis of a CS group: the subjunctive /yVC₁C₂VC₃-a/ (pp. 132-136) and the energetic /yVC₁C₂VC₃-V (n) na/ (pp. 136-143). A thorough scrutiny of the functions and realizations of these morphological features in each of the languages in question and in others of the Semitic family, taking into account the contributions of the different authorities on the subject, leads the author to these conclusions: a) “the very existence of *-a as a PCS morpheme is far from evident, and its innovative nature, even less so” (p. 136); b) the formal and functional similarity between the *n*-suffixes in Canaanite, Arabic and, probably, Sabaic are sufficient to postulate the existence of the energetic (*sic*) as a relatively uniform grammatical category in PCS. What is more difficult to demonstrate is the innovative background of this form” (p. 141). The third feature common to the three branches of CS would be the morphological shape of the tens (143-146). But taking into account the parallel formation process in Akk. and EthS (in ESA the evidence is ambiguous), “the subgrouping value of the CS picture can easily be put in doubt” (p. 144); nevertheless “the identification of the form of the tens as a shared CS innovation seems promising” (p. 146). The fourth morphological innovation that distinguishes CS according to Huehnergard would be Barth’s Law (146-152), but “one’s final evaluation of Barth’s law as a PCS innovation is deemed to be ambiguous” (151).

In an attempt to widen the perspective, additional morphological features proposed by other scholars as potential shared innovation of PCS are also analysed: a) the /-C₁C₂āC₃/ pattern in the infinitive of derived verbal stems (“a weak point in this isogloss is that ... it in some cases may also go back to /u/ rather than /ā/”) (pp. 152-153); b) the conjugation pattern of the quadri-radical verbs similar to the paradigm of the tri-radical (“it must be considered either a PWS phenomenon or a feature extremely prone to emerge via independent analogical shifts”) (pp. 153-155); c) the adjectival pattern /^ʔaC₁C₂aC₃-/ (outside Arabic “its presence elsewhere in CS is marginal, but probably still broad enough to reconstruct it as a PCS feature” (pp. 155-156); d) the order, form and gender in the pattern of digit-teen (“the apparent uniqueness of the CS picture does not necessarily imply its innovative nature” (pp. 156-157); e) “many deverbal substantives produced from the same roots according to the same morphological patterns” ... “we may be entitled to believe that many of such derivations did take place in the common ancestor of the CS languages” (p. 158).

But opposite to this search for the features supporting the reality of a genealogically confirmed CS group in opposition to ES and MSA or better said in componential distribution with them, there is also the attitude that aims at the rejection of such a grouping. This rejection is carried out through refuting the validity of such supposed shared features and proclaiming at the same time the shared innovations that confirm Arabic, MSA and EthS as classic “South Semitic” (see above). The author reviews the ongoing debate on the first feature proposed as shared innovation of the CS, the new imperfect /yVC₁C₂VC₃-u vs. /yVC₁aC₂(C₂)VC₃/ (pp. 158-166), as well as the proposed innovative features shared by Arabic, EthS and MSA, the broken or internal plural being the most relevant topic in this regard (pp. 166-171), put forward as the principal innovation in favour of the “South Semitic” hypothesis. His criticism of the various proposals in both cases is thorough and unyielding, showing the worth and weakness of each proposal. As could be expected, the advocates of the CS hypothesis counter-attacked by trying to demonstrate that the suggested “South Semitic” innovations were in fact PS archaisms or the product of borrowing. Other topics

analysed were the thematic vowel of the intensive/causative verbal patterns, the /yat(a)qattal/ form, the linguistic classification of the L-stem and the /C₁āC₂iC₃-/ pattern of the ordinal numbers (pp. 171-173).

After this long discussion, the strength of the CS hypothesis in relation to Arabic seems to depend on its originally belonging either to a PSWS (Proto-SW Semitic) got in contact with CS, or to a PNWS (Proto-NW Semitic) group of speakers (p. 173), later split from it and got in contact with the SW Semitic group. As was the case earlier, honestly we have to conclude that the morphological arguments put forward from both sides are not strong enough to take a clearcut decision in this issue.

Consequently, as before, the author now turns his attention to the lexical isoglosses to try to solve the riddle. The starting point is once again the Swadesh wordlist. To begin with, a group of 6 lexemes/concepts (from a series of 47/44 which Arabic and Hebrew/Syriac share) is studied (pp. 173-179). Outside the Swadesh list, a total of 71 lexemes present in the three CS languages, but absent from Akk. and MSA, are discussed (pp. 179-205); some Ugaritic/ESA parallels are also considered in detail. Also 33 more CS lexemes borrowed by MSA and EthS via Arabic are studied separately, due to the unusual case they represent, instead of taking them automatically as PWS (pp. 205-220). “In the present chapter, 110 lexical isoglosses shared by Arabic with Canaanite and Aramaic and separating Arabic from Akkadian, EthS and MSA have been collected and analyzed”. Such a large number of shared lexemes supports the hypothesis of the CS hypothesis, against the scepticism of scholars with regard to the value of the lexical factor. Nevertheless, there remains “the impossibility of tracing back the semantic evolution of the majority of the hypothetical CS lexical innovations” (p. 224). At this point the resort to archaism may be the only answer, to be complemented with the unavoidable formal and semantic shifts that long distance linguistic evolution imposes. The special position that Ugaritic occupies in this regard will be discussed later on.

With *Chapter Four* we enter the discussion of different subgroups as genealogical units, beginning with NWS (Ugaritic/Canaanite and Aramaic), to see to what extent the morphological and lexical features support its unity. As for the mentioned subgroup (NWS), only the shift of the word-initial /w-/ to /y-/ seems to be a determinant. The lexical evidence is discussed, as before, starting from the Swadesh wordlist. And at first sight the outcome is impressive. The total amount of agreements (61) is distributed according to its original lexical layer (PS, PWS, PCS, indeterminate). Of this number of agreements, nevertheless, only 6 are “lexical isoglosses potentially indicative of a narrower genealogical relationship between these languages” (pp. 235f.), which is indeed rather weak support. From other lexical strata outside the Swadesh wordlist some 14 isoglosses are adduced. The conclusion is consequently: “the amount of exclusive lexical features shared by these two minor subdivisions of Semitic (Ug./Can., Aram.) is surprisingly small ... and scarcely supports the traditional concept of North-West Semitic as a relative recent and tightly-knit genealogical unity” (p. 240).

A longer discussion (pp. 243-375) is devoted in *Chapter Five* to the “Lexical isoglosses and genealogical position of Ugaritic”. After summarising the grammatical features (11 + 2) that will prompt the classification of Ugaritic as Canaanite, against one or two that would suggest the opposite, the author assumes that “a promising reconciliatory hypothesis would be to consider Ugaritic as representative of a special branch of Canaanite which underwent some of the specific changes typical of this subgroup, but separated from it too early to take part in a few other innovations” (p. 245).⁷ But a more definite criterion is sought in the lexical field. This is scrutinized extensively from various aspects, starting with the test of the Ugaritic lexicon using the Swadesh wordlist (pp. 247-261). The result of this test, mainly based on DUL, second edition (2004), is that “fully reliable basic terms can be revealed for 62 positions of the

7. On the peculiar linguistic character of Ugaritic see Del Olmo Lete, “The Genetic Historical Classification of the Semitic Languages: A Synthetic Approach”, pp. 18-52; id., “Ugarítico”, in J.P. Monferrer Sala, M. Marcos Aldón, eds., *Lenguas y escrituras en la Antigüedad*, Córdoba 2012, pp. 169-221.

Ugaritic wordlist. For 21 positions, likely or probable candidates have been found. Only 20 positions are vacant, a surprisingly small number for such a limited-corpus of an ancient language as Ugaritic” (p. 261). Perhaps the author’s persistence in looking for the “basic” lexis among possible synonyms turns out to be excessively conditioned by the lexicostatistic method.

The next step brings the author first to omit the trivial retentions (44 out of the 83 confirmed positions in the Ugaritic vocabulary), and then to subdivide the remaining lexemes (39) into various categories. The group of 13 “less specific” almost trivial concept-lexemes with cognates in various languages of the family (13), with no cognates in any (12), or only in one of them, is set out, prompting in this connection, particular contrasts between Ugaritic-Hebrew (5), Ugaritic-Akkadian (6), Ugaritic-Syriac (2) and Ugaritic-Mehri (1) (pp. 262-270). In conclusion, all this means that only “26 lexemes have relevance for the subgrouping procedure”. To visualize better this linguistic situation, an overall comparison of the vocabulary shared with the other relevant Semitic languages is laid out (see the quoted pairs) according to the categories “trivial retentions”, “less specific” and “exclusive” (pp. 270-274). The most significant outcome of this detailed comparison is the 70% lexical coincidence of Ugaritic and Hebrew and 60% between Ugaritic and Akkadian “without precedence in WS” (p. 274).⁸

In order to complement the rather weak support provided by the Swadesh wordlist, “the whole body of the extant Ugaritic vocabulary is submitted to a systematic diachronic analysis, in an attempt to detect exclusive lexical features shared by Ugaritic with both Canaanite and non-Canaanite Semitic languages” (pp. 275-343). 78 exclusive isoglosses shared by Ugaritic and Canaanite are found, while with other languages the shared isoglosses are significantly less: Ugaritic-Arabic: 18 probable + 21 dubious; Ugaritic and Aramaic: 5; Ugaritic and Akkadian: 32. Contrasting the evidence resulting from these rather heterogeneous data, it is not easy to arrive at a clear answer on the position of Ugaritic. The author is fully aware of this situation and in a long paragraph of conclusions (pp. 343-349) discusses all the caveats that must be taken into account to evaluate the evidence adequately. Particular attention must be paid to the varying importance of the information arising from the use of the Swadesh wordlist, both semantic and functional, and from the overall lexicon as starting point of comparison and contrast. In sum, we can assert that a high number of isoglosses argue in favour of the classification of Ugaritic as Canaanite (pp. 345-346), more specifically as North-Canaanite, along with Phoenician, even as “Canaanite *par excellence*” (p. 348),⁹ leaving aside the question of the difference between the lexica for poetry and prose in Ugaritic, which is not easy to assess (p. 349).

As a complement, two brief assessments are added to this long chapter on the lexical isoglosses and their bearing on the genealogical position of Ugaritic. The first: an evaluation of the exclusive isoglosses between Ugaritic and Arabic (p. 350), that might have been expected to come at the end of the treatment of the topic on pp. 316-330. The conclusion is lapidary: “as long as basic vocabulary is considered to be of some relevance for linguistic subgrouping, the probability of a special genealogical relationship between Ugaritic and Arabic, still advocated in some recent studies on the topic, is close to zero”. The second: on the nature of the lexical relationship between Ugaritic and Akkadian: shared lexical archaisms or early loanwords would also have had their place after the analysis carried out in pp. 331-343. Evidently between such clearcut different languages, the common lexical features cannot be shared innovations. They must be either PS retentions, in the case of basic semantic strata, or borrowings from Akkadian into Ugaritic. In this

8. See in this connection n. 6.

9. Halayqa’s thesis (“Ugaritic cannot be identified or classified as a Canaanite”) surely would have deserved a serious criticism by the author; his work is not mentioned in “References”; see n. 17. In this regard see also my own opinion put forward in the papers quoted in n.7.

regard, Watson's first study on the topic (2004), as assessed by the author, is now superseded by his later "Excursus" on "Akkadian loanwords in Ugaritic" (*Lexical Studies in Ugaritic* [AuOrSup 19], 2007, 65-118). According to note 1038, this study reached the author too late to be taken into account in the already definitively closed text. In general, a distinction should be presumed between late loanwords of *realia* and that of more ancient and broad semantic notions. In both cases a wide contact between these two languages is supposed, going back to very ancient times. A critical analysis of Watson's 2004 contribution is then laid out in four categories of lexemes: a) with reliable Common Semitic prototypes, consequently impossible or unlikely borrowings (25); b) semantically reliable lexemes of uncertain origin (12); c) lexemes of uncertain meaning and etymology, unlikely borrowings from Akkadian (102); d) others (14). This amounts to a serious reduction of the list proposed by Watson. "Any cultural-historical conclusions made on such a shaky basis are to be treated with utmost skepticism" (p. 369). Finally a "Postscript: On J.A. Hackett and N. Pat-El's (2010) criticism of Rainey's 'Transjordanian' hypothesis" (2007) closes this chapter (pp. 369-375). In it some statements of these scholars are dismissed as unfitting interpretations of Rainey's opinions as well as their denial of the classificatory value of lexical features, which the author defends in a summary way. In his opinion, their criticisms "betray a serious misunderstanding of what the core vocabulary of a (Semitic) language and its historical development is all about" (p. 373), and even show "a scarcely dissimulated scholarly censorship" (p. 374).

In *Chapter Six*, the analysis of the basic vocabulary is now applied to "defend the historical unity of the Aramaic language" from the earliest documentation on (p. 377). Two kinds of lexical elements are distinguished: "exclusive" (pp. 378-388) and "non-exclusive", although with special significance in Aramaic (pp. 391-398); also morpho-lexical features are taken into consideration (pp. 388-391, 398-400, 403-404). Each of these groups is, in turn, provided with textual references and diachronic lexicographical information (p. 378). In all, "47 lexical features have been detected which are shared by Old Aramaic inscriptions with later dialects, but missing from all (or most) other Semitic languages" (pp. 400-404), a fact that seriously works in favour of the unity this linguistic family as innovations. Finally, a specific inquiry is devoted to the lexical isoglosses of the Old Aramaic inscriptions, including those most disputed of Samal and Deir 'Allā (pp. 404-424). Taking into account the many undisputed conflicting isoglosses, the author concludes: "it would be premature to adhere to any of the Aramaic-like subgrouping models suggested in recent studies on the topic" (p. 404). In this connection, a final study focuses on the lexical discontinuity between Old Aramaic and later Aramaic dialects (pp. 424-432), in order to avoid a biased and aprioristic image of the linguistic facts. Various suggestions are offered to explain this discontinuity (p. 432).

Chapter 7 is devoted to research, this time on the lexical isoglosses and historical unity of Ethiopian Semitic. Apparently, this is a well-isolated subgroup, but in fact collecting the isoglosses shared by the different languages of it is by no means easy, being under a strong and unequal Cushitic influence. The author proposes five morphological features (pp. 433-436), related to the patterns of different stems of verbal conjugation, none of them shared by all the languages: "the foregoing evaluation makes it clear that there is hardly any morphological feature can be considered to be of crucial value for determining the linguistic specificity of EthS" (p. 436), Tigre being the most difficult case to deal with. However, the proven fundamental unity of the basic vocabulary can save the otherwise impossible situation. Once more the Swadesh wordlist is used as the starting point of the lexicographical inquiry aimed at establishing the lexical stock shared by all the branches of the supposed EthS subgroup. "All together, no less than 68 positions can be qualified as Proto-EthS, more than 80% of them in a highly reliable way", distributed in three groups (46, whole shared; 12, by the main three northern languages and at least two Southern subdivisions; 10, by other various combinations of languages. The stock of 68 items is divided into the following categories:

“trivial retentions”, “non-trivial retentions”, “semantic innovations”, “proto-Ethiopian terms of uncertain origin” and “certain or likely Cushitisms”, either borrowed independently by each language or belonging to the Proto-EthS (pp. 436-449). This amounts to a serious argument in favour of a genealogical relationship of the subgroup, although it is rather heterogeneous in nature and each category has a different weight. At the same time, some shared “losses”, although differently replaced in each language, have notable significance in this regard (pp. 449-453). From other lexical fields outside the Swadesh wordlist, some 17 etymologically certain innovations and 25 more terms of uncertain origin, seem to go back to Proto-EthS (pp. 453-464). Consequently the author trustingly concludes: “there is a fairly large amount of linguistic evidence in favor of a ‘Common Ethiopian stage’, the bulk of this evidence coming from the basic vocabulary and not from the inflectional morphology” (p. 464), “In our view, such an intricate network of innovation, replacement and loss is unlikely to be explained in terms of borrowing and wave spread. Rather it suggests the existence of one relatively homogeneous Proto-EthS language whose lexical peculiarities have been faithfully inherited by its daughter tongues” (p. 465), also bearing in mind “that the languages preserving the archaic lexical traits tend to be geographically peripheral” (p. 466), in accordance with a well-known principle of general linguistics.

At the close, *Chapter Eight*, with its 130 pages, offers, perhaps, the most significant contribution of this volume, based on the author’s original field research on MSA (Mehri, Jibbali, Soqotri). A first inquiry into the common morphological features is achieved, in order to investigate this genealogical subgroup and the criteria on which it is based. The task proves, nevertheless, very difficult and rather disappointing (pp. 467-479). The four features, three inflectional plus the use of negative circumfix, usually brought in as evidence, turn out to be rather common Proto-Semitic retentions and sometimes not shared by all the dialects of the subgroup. The author looks for some other more reliable isoglosses as distinctive features: *-n* as a marker of the imperfect of the intensive stem; the conditional *-n*; the sibilant prefix of the causative-reflexive stem; external plural markers; the *a*-replacement in the broken plural; two types of diminutive formations; the specific definitive article; the second and third person dual pronoun. All these morphological features are considered shared innovations with genealogical significance for this subgroup. But above all, the lexical evidence was examined, beginning as usual with the Swadesh wordlist of basic vocabulary applied to each of the three main MSA dialects. In the case of Soqotri, the information comes from personal fieldwork, checked against previous records, while in the other two cases, the information is from earlier textual and lexicographic sources, Jibbali being the weakest represented dialect. The 100 positions of the Swadesh wordlist are checked first in a comparative table and afterwards in an individual summary comment on each seme/lexeme, any accuracy dependent on the available sources (pp. 479-527).¹⁰ Two excursuses deal with the dialectal variety of Mehri lexicon, certified for 17 terms, and with the “losses” either by partial (11) or full replacement (6) of the basic term. Besides that, the number of shared retentions of the Swadesh wordlist by the main MSA languages (57), as appears in the table just mentioned, is distributed, as in earlier chapters, into the following categories: a) trivial retentions (2); b) non-trivial retentions (5+7, according to their basic semantic status in other Semitic language outside MSA); c) semantic innovations (6); d) etymologically uncertain terms (16). “A comparative assessment of these data affords an interesting but altogether small contribution to our understanding of MSA as a diachronic unity” (p. 546). In this regard, the resort to lexical evidence from outside the Swadesh list (pp. 546-581) is determinative, as in the earlier chapters, “in search of shared lexemes which can be considered exclusive (or highly specific) features of this group” (p. 547). The inquiry finds: 136 Proto-MSA lexical isoglosses, plus 14 Proto-MSA morpho-lexical features. The general impression one gets from this inquiry, like from

10. It is a pity that there is no clear explanation of the meaning attributed to the different shadow printing used in the table.

the former focused on the Swadesh wordlist, is that of “lexical oddness” (p. 581). “Such a high number of basic concepts expressed by shared exclusive isoglosses is unlikely to be explained by borrowing or secondary convergence. Rather, it makes feasible –perhaps even compelling– the hypothesis postulating a common genealogical source for Mehri, Jibbali and Soqotri” (p. 582). A final paragraph is devoted to the issue of the internal division of MSA. The few pertinent morphological features are of no value in this regard; consequently attention is turned once more to the lexical sources. Starting from the Swadesh list, a comparison between Mehri-Jibbali, Jibbali-Soqotri and Mehri-Soqotri is provided (pp. 583-591). No sufficient data can be obtained from these contrasts to decide which internal subdivision (Mehri-Jibbali # Soqotri, Mehri # Jibbali-Soqotri) is the most suitable. Seen from other lexical strata (pp. 591-597) the comparison between Jibbali-Soqotri and Mehri-Soqotri makes it clear “that the number of exclusive isoglosses uniting Soqotri with Jibbali is almost three times higher than that between Soqotri and Mehri ... but one cannot exclude, alternatively, that these two languages (Soqotri and Jibbali) simply preserve some inherited Proto-MSA features which have been lost in Mehri (as we are inclined to believe). At present, there is hardly any weighty argument in favor or against either of the two possibilities” (p. 397).

A couple of pages summarise in nine points or theses the conclusions the author draws from his previous long discussion (pp. 599-602):

- 1) Assumed dichotomy ES/WS, but not proven unity of WS;
- 2) Three independent branches of WS (CS, EThS, MSA); CS closer to EthS;
- 3) Affirmation of the CS hypothesis (Arab. + ESA + Aram. + Can.) and refusal of the SS theory;
- 4) Internal division of CS uncertain; unproven existence of a NWS subdivision;
- 5) Canaanite affiliation of Ugaritic, linked to Phoenician;
- 6) A basic Aramoid stem with three subgroups: classical Aramaic + Samal and Deir ‘Allā dialects;
- 7) ESA as CS, particularly Sabaic, but uncertain for the other subgroups as a diachronic unity;
- 8) Unity of EthS, leaving aside the internal subdivision;
- 9) Specificity of MSA group, with recognized proximity between Soqotri and Jibbali.

A final remark asserts the usefulness of research of lexical evidence, but always in combination with the analysis of morphological features: “that the two methods can fruitfully be combined is, in our view, not in doubt ...” (p. 602).

A rich bibliography (pp. 603-632) and a very useful multilingual Lexical Index (pp. 635-734: 100 pages for 600 pages of text!) close the volume. Search of this index should be seriously considered by Semitists, taking into account the formidable comparative analysis carried out in this volume, above all of the basic Semitic lexicon.

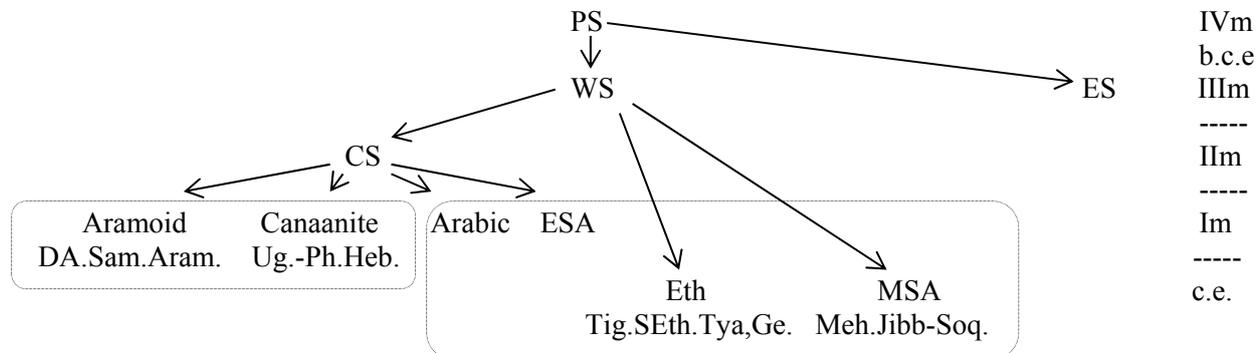
Overall assessment

As a general assessment I agree with the author’s emphasis on the bearing of lexical analysis for genetic linguistic classification. In fact, the functional (morphological or grammatical) dimension of language is built upon the denominative function, the word/lexeme, as its modification (morphology) and coordination (syntax). But it is also evident that once this primary stage is attained, words go their own way in each language (phonology / semantics). Therefore a sound methodology cannot disregard either of these two aspects: lexicon and morphology must go “side by side”, as the author points out (p. 373). In this case, lexical significance was the main interest of his research, after verifying the inadequacy of morphological isoglosses. But without disregarding either, I will add to them the phonological framework of each linguistic

branch,¹¹ so appropriately developed in the beginnings of language science (neo-grammarians):¹² lexicon, phonology and morphology-syntax must be taken into account in any attempt to lay out the genetic relationship of the different branches of a linguistic family.

The author is fully aware of the “unpopular” character among linguists of this method of genetic analysis and consistently exhibits a stance that could be labelled as a “minimalist” weighing of the results of his analysis, without concessions as to what could be regarded as *parti pris*. But he is right, I think, in insisting that to neglect the lexicon as a significant factor in genetic comparison would amount to disregarding the materials altogether in the evaluation of an archaeological find in favour of its shape. Nevertheless the conclusions drawn in this connection from the Swadesh wordlist as a first approach to the shared lexical input of the various pairs of languages studied is almost generally judged rather deceptive even by the author himself. One wonders whether this list could not have been left out altogether, simply adding its items to the larger word score, the analysis of which forms the basis of the author’s conclusions.

As a summary visualisation of his research, a chart is provided at the end of the book. In it the genetic classification is structured as a classic tree chart and in it also the areal phenomena relating to the languages of the so-called West and South Semitic group are enhanced by a dotted encompassing orbit as well. This chart is quite clear and it is certain to be the most visited page of this book, since it provides a rapid idea of the author’s opinion as developed at large in a rather prolix volume. I have nevertheless some objections regarding its design. First, ES (East Semitic) would be expected to be positioned to the reader’s right. On the other hand, a division must be carried out according a single division principle with its components completely excluding each other. In this way, the geographical division principle is clearly set out and the diachronic stage of the areal subgroups historically can be visualized: from remote PS and archaic Akk. to modern spoken languages (Eth/MSA), with CS in the intermediate classical language period (Ep.-Aram., Ug.-Ph., ESA, Ar.). Needless to say, the modern and dialectal development of this subgroup could easily be supplemented, but obviously such developments turn out to be irrelevant as far as genetic classification goes.¹³



11. See in this regard the almost complete confluence of Ugaritic, ESA and Arabic in terms of phonology, actually a feature shared with Akk., it is true, and so a shared PS retention, a fact that could be taken nevertheless as a significant argument of their belonging to the same original linguistic subgroup. Aramoid and late Canaanite subgroups would suppose a late innovation in this connection. See G. del Olmo Lete, the papers quoted *supra* n.

12. See in this regard G. del Olmo Lete, “The Fundamental Problems of Comparative Linguistics. A forgotten Spanish contribution from the early 20th Century”, *Aula Orientalis* 25/1-2, 2005, 233-273 (249ff.).

13. Nevertheless the subgroup CS in distribution with Eth and MSA escapes the geographical division principle (see above): “centre” of which area? See in this regard Del Olmo Lete, “The Genetic Historical Classification”, p. 19, and my own genetic Semitic classification as laid out at the end of that paper.

Among the shortcomings,¹⁴ unavoidable in an ambitious work like this, I will point out: a) as already mentioned, the insufficient attention paid to Eblaite, as far as both grammar and lexicon are concerned; b) the almost complete omission of Amorite lexical and morphological data;¹⁵ c) the also rather weak treatment of the Aramaic linguistic family, focused on the old epigraphic stage; e.g. evidence from Syriac is rarely mentioned, not to speak of the Targumic layer; d) the Ugaritic contribution should be updated according to DUL³, not accessible to the author at the time (see above); e) the absence of some significant bibliographical items.¹⁶

But leaving aside debatable points like these, our final assessment on this volume is quite positive. Any serious study on comparative Semitics should have to take it into account. My warmest congratulations to its hardworking and open-minded author.

14. On the other hand, errors, mostly of a typographic character, are few as far as I have been able to identify: to / too (p. 11); Ugaritic / Ugaritic (p. 22); Hb. / Ug. (p. 207); *ytmr* / *y[]tmr* (331); twice 'concrete' (p. 355); filed / field (p. 1075).

15. See G. del Olmo Lete, *A Bibliography of Semitic Linguistics* (1940-2012), on line: 2. Akkadian. 2.3.2.7. Mari; 4. (North-) West Semitic Dialectology. 4.3.1. Amorite.

16. E.g. J.-M. Solà-Solé, *L'infinitif sémitique. Contribution à l'étude des formes et des fonctions des noms d'action et des infinitifs sémitiques* (*Bibliothèque de l'École pratique des Hautes Études, IVe section, sciences historiques et philologiques, fascicule 316*), Paris 1961; I.K.H. Halayqa, *A Comparative Lexicon of Ugaritic and Canaanite* (*Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, 340), Münster 2008; A. Catagnoli, *La grammatica della lingua di Ebla* (*Quaderni di Semitistica* 29), Florence, 2012; etc., etc.