

An Etymological and Comparative Semitic Dictionary Phonology versus Semantics: Questions of Method

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There are two ways of compiling an etymological-comparative dictionary, above all of an ancient language or language family: the semantic method and the phonological method, both arranged either alphabetically (Greek order) or alephatically (Hebrew order).¹ The great etymological dictionaries currently available (Indo-European, Semitic, Sanskrit, Hittite, Nostratic, Afro-Asiatic, leaving aside the classic Greek and Latin etymological dictionaries) follow the phonological order of the constituents of the lemes/lexemes, which is also the order found in the 'explicative' dictionaries, both monolingual and bilingual, of modern and ancient single languages.² This arrangement has the advantage of allowing easy access to a particular lexeme, the alphabetical ordering being a general pattern used in any language whose script system derives from the old Semitic/Canaanite alphabet.³

Nevertheless, the semantic ordering of the Semitic comparative-etymological lexicon has a long tradition⁴ and is now generally considered to be a better method.⁵ Indeed, it is highly recommended for many reasons. Ordered by 'semantic fields', from the very beginning a dictionary of this kind can bring together many apparently unrelated items but in fact takes on the role of a basic and introductory historical-anthropological approach which facilitates the study of the cultural and sociological evolution of the societies in question. But in the long run this arrangement according to semantic fields –allowances made for the possible subgrouping divisions– has to use alphabetic indexing, according to either the

1. We leave aside for the moment the possible Arabic and Ethiopic sequential orderings.

2. Modern Arabic dictionaries have abandoned the ancient ordering by 'root' consonants. A new edition of the *Lisān* is now available, according to the tri-consonantal sequential arrangement.

3. Among the IE languages those that use the Cyrillic alphabet constitute a major exception.

4. Special mention should be made of P. Fronzaroli's "Studi sull lessico commune semitico I-VII": "Oggetto e metodo della ricerca", "Anatomia e fisiologia", "I fenomeni naturali", "La religione", "La natura selvatica", "La natura domestica", "L'alimentazione", plus "Il mare e i corsi d'acqua nel lessico commune semitico", published in *Boletino dell'Atlante Linguistico Mediterraneo* (1968). The outstanding example today is the *Semitic Etymological Dictionary*, by A. Militarev and L. Kogan, whose first volume (2000) deals with "Anatomy of Man and Animals" (2000), to be followed by seven others, organized thematically.

5. Cf. G. del Olmo Lete, *Questions de linguistique sémitique. Racine et lexème. Histoire de la recherche (1940-2000)* (Antiquités Sémitiques V), Paris 2003, p. 170, on Segert's point of view; cf. also G.J. Dimmendaal, "Studying lexico-semantic fields in language; nature versus nurture, or where does culture come from in these days?", *Frankfurter Afrikanische Blätter* 7, 1995, 1-29; F.A. Dombrowski, "Materials and methods for the use of a comparative Wurzelwörterbuch", in *Proceedings of the Fifth Hamito-Semitic Congress*, pp. 209-233.

'source' or the 'target' language, a 'General Alphabetic Index' being necessary for the user to move around among the vast amount of lexical information.

Leaving aside these practical issues, semantic ordering is better designed for a comparison of the members of a linguistic family, though to a certain extent it also permits the etymological study of the lexemes. However, semantics is the linguistic constituent that 'shifts' the most, not only syntagmatically, at the 'horizontal' synchronic level between languages, but above all paradigmatically, in the 'vertical' diachronic or historical evolution of any language. The syntagmatic comparative ordering by semantic fields may hide a long but nevertheless traceable process in the shaping of the 'final' meaning of the lexeme in question. This is evident above all in case of 'denominative' lexemes which have acquired their meaning as a result of a process of semantic shift by either metaphoric or metonymic transfer. The specific denominative lexemes of each language –those shaping the particular 'significant' or referential world of each group– are rarely primary or original; behind them there is normally a long process of semantic shift ('at the beginning was the metaphor'),⁶ going back to a primary lexical unit, the so-called 'original base/root'. Consequently, although comparison is necessary and can be very illustrative in this regard, if we separate denominative lexemes from their lexical matrix we are likely to miss the very sense of the semantic process involved in its genesis as a specific sememe. In this connection only the paradigmatic phonological treatment of the lexicon can help to trace this process.

But we do not intend now to develop a theory of etymology, or to try to defend the etymological process in itself. Many issues are involved, such as the classification of the Semitic languages and the consequent degree of inter-relationship between them, as well as the 'depth' involved in the attempt to fix an etymon and the bearing of the 'proto-language' sketched in this way. Even if one renounces any genetic relationship between the Semitic languages and any attempt to go back to a 'proto-language', the mere synchronic comparison of their grammatical structure and lexicon will reveal a basic unity, diversified as it may have been from the very beginning. The divergences are all possibilities of the one and same linguistic system.⁷

In fact etymology is merely an attempt to impose order on the evolution of semantics in a linguistic family. In this regard the current linguistic chaos, in its more elementary sense, is the culmination of a long process of historical, phonological and above all semantic development.⁸ This "chaos" in fact turns out to be a super-developed and complicated system of languages that challenges the chaotic tendency towards thermo- dynamic entropy.

So the phonological ordering of the lexemes is the most suitable approach in the case of a lexical unit of dubious etymological significance. But this ordering is not self-evident; it presents a series of problems. In the first place, it is to some extent a process of 'reconstruction', in as much as the 'base' is linked to the patterns of meaning offered by language: verbs, nouns, adjectives and other derivative lexical phenotypes. This reconstructing analysis possesses difficulties of its own and has to define clearly, and in advance, the

6. Cf. in this regard U. Rapallo, "La parte alta del corpo nella preistoria delle lingue", in *Semitic and Assyriological Studies Presented to Pelio Fronzaroli ...*, Wiesbaden 2003, p. 579ff. ('La motivazione del segno e il futuro della 'scienza' etimologica').

7. Cf. A.S. Kaye, "Etymology, etymological method, phonological evolution, and comparative Semitics: Ge^cez (Classical Ethiopic) 'egr and colloquial Syro-Palestinian Arabic 'ežr 'foot' one last time", in A.S. Kaye, ed., *Semitic Studies in Honor of Wolf Leslau 1991*, pp. 826-849; Y. Malkiel, *Etymology*, Cambridge 1993; P. Dasgupta, A. Ford, R. Singh, *After Etymology: Towards a Substantivist Linguistics* (LINCOM Studies in Theoretical Linguistics 18), München 2000.

8. Cf. L. Edzard, *Polygenesis, Convergence, and Entropy: An Alternative Model of Linguistic Evolution Applied to Semitic Linguistics*, Wiesbaden 1998; though there are many exceptions to his main contention, his conclusions on the problem of bi-radicalism and root expansion (p. 169f.) are fully coincidental with the point of view maintained here.

level or depth it aims to reach.⁹ In Semitic lexicography this may be the reconstructed base –acquired through empirical lexical attestation/comparison– which in its turn may be the result of a process of internal expansion that can be traced back to a simpler constituent, lexical as well as morphemic. Again, only the paradigmatic phonological perspective at a more profound level can help to trace this expansive process.

All this means that to organise the Semitic lexicon –or, for that matter, the lexicon of any language– we should begin by analysing the simplest phonological constituent of its lexemes, the binary unit or open syllable, in order to identify its possible semantic power (if in fact it has any). The syllable is the minimal phonological unit, while its constituents, consonant/sonant (vowel), belong to the phonetic level.

This minimal phonological unit corresponds to what is usually known as the 'mono-consonantal lexeme'. As independent lexical units they are very scarce, and may in fact be non-existent, out of a possible maximum of 29 lexemes (in this case there are no incompatibilities), leaving aside the different vocalic realization as a flexional function. In this connection we can conclude that the Semitic proto-language or the ancient unified dialectal bundle has no mono-consonantal patterns as far as the structure of its original base/root is concerned; the mono-consonantal structure is prevalent in agglutinant languages or similar (Chinese, Sumerian ...). This must be borne in mind at all times; the reconstruction of proto-Semitic has to make allowance for its inflected character. This means that the reconstruction of the proto-Semitic lexicon includes the reconstruction of a proto-grammar which in its turn will have decisive bearing on the lexicon itself.¹⁰ Some authors have suggested that this mono-consonantal structure is also the original Semitic, going back eventually to the symbolic phonemic glottogenic level.¹¹ In fact, mono-consonantal lexical items are also abundant in Semitic, but they are restricted to the functorial and deictic series, the personal-demonstrative pronominal series being derived from the functorial series. These series are in principle the only ones that are non-inflected and may go back to a pre-Semitic level traceable only from a remote comparative perspective. We will not use this perspective of analysis, but will assume the absence of mono-consonantal bases in Semitic denominative lexicography as a consequence of the original presupposition that it is a flexional language. This implies that the Semitic languages have chosen to organize their lexical bases by means of phonological 'syntagms' of at least two syllables/consonants as the minimal lexical unit.

These bi-consonantal bases represent in principle phonetic clusters of two consonants and two sonants/vowels, with four phonetic positions in all, the last being that of the flexional morpho-phonemes. With this series we now enter a widely accepted dimension of the Semitic lexicon.¹² If we are able to delimit it, we will be able to use a very important etymological access to the third and most significant root corpus of the Semitic lexicon, the tri-consonantal root, many of whose items are expansions of the previously defined bi-consonantal bases. The organization of the general Semitic lexicon can thus proceed in a more logical and systematic way: from the minimal to the more complex phonetic/phonemic constituents. It will help then to determine the semantic function of the expansive morphemes and that of the resulting expansive patterns. In any case, we have to bear in mind the indissoluble relationship of phonology and semantics and also remain inside the limits of a controlled level of an articulated language

9. Cf. In this regard C. Renfrew, A. MacMahon, L. Trask, eds., *Time Depth in Historical Linguistics*, Vol. 1-2 (Papers on the Prehistory of Languages), Cambridge 2000.

10. Cf. Del Olmo Lete, *Questions*, p. 31

11. Cf. Rapallo, *art. cit.*, p. 579ff.; G. Bohas, *Matrice et étymos. Développement de la théorie. Séminaire de Santes 1999* (Instruments pour l'étude des langues de l'Orient Ancien), Lausanne 2000, pp. 59ff., 155ff.; Del Olmo Lete, *Questions*, p. 126ff.

12. Cf. Del Olmo Lete, *Questions*, p. 91ff.; An. Zaborski, "Biconsonantal Roots and Tri-consonantal Root Variation in Semitic: Solutions and prospects", in A.S. Kaye, ed., *Semitic Studies in Honor of Wolf Leslau ...*, Wiesbaden 1991, vol. II, p. 1681; L. Edzard, *Polygenesis*, p.174.

in the framework of a defined phonetic table. We will thus avoid remote comparison, which would take us to glottogony or expressive phonetics. If sometimes we adduce comparisons from Afro-Asiatic or even from 'Nostratic', this will be only to corroborate an etymology at an illustrative level, rather than to establish it. The Semitic subfamily is in this regard a late linguistic system whose phonological and morpho-syntactic constituents are perfectly organized.

The normal 'intensified' realization of the biconsonantal bases implies that the 'simple' base is very often not actually witnessed. In this case the biconsonantal base is also 'abstract' as a 'root'. We are dealing then with hypothetical lexical units which take us somewhat beyond the Semitic horizon to a deeper and more remote level of comparison. So pure Semitic etymology will always be a 'penultimate' inquiry, but nevertheless valid in itself and critically indispensable in order to guarantee the realization of such a wide-ranging etymological endeavour, and, more importantly: phonologically and semantically under control.

Another problem that has to be faced is the determination of the functional nature of the etymological items. Are they 'originally' either nouns or verbs, designative or predicative? Leaving aside the question of which comes first and also the clear-cut and restricted category of the 'primary names', a category accepted here without much criticism,¹³ we take it for granted that the functions of noun and verb are simultaneous from the view point of historical linguistics. Both functions represent the morphosyntactic articulation of the original flexional character assumed historically by this linguistic branch; a further horizon is beyond the scope of our present inquiry. This articulation corresponds to the fourth position of the biconsonantal unit, which consequently will be left undetermined.¹⁴ Historically, each language will develop its own random system of lexical realization starting from the broad set of possibilities offered by the structure of the general or common Semitic system. This affects not only the morphological use of the base, but also its mere presence in the lexicon of each language. Our purpose is to compile all the biconsonantal bases attested in any Semitic language, presupposing that all of them are or may be original Semitic lexemes.¹⁵

All those phonological requirements of the original bases shape the iconic features of their referential contents: the original semantics of any of these bases. In this regard, if we speak of 'basic seme' we do so from a more or less exact 'componential analysis' or search for 'semantic indicators'. We do not intend to reproduce the 'original meaning', which is very often unattainable and must always have been 'specific', against the frequently-held opinion, but rather to uncover the functional significance of such a meaning. This function lies beneath its concrete meaning and explains the shifts or 'radical metaphors' in the various semantic systems, deriving from the different environmental situations of the speakers. In this regard, the 'basic seme' (BS) is the semantic correlate of the 'root': an abstraction or metalinguistic element, not an item of the 'original' lexicon as such.¹⁶ Taking this into account the semantic field (SF) is to be indicated for the original base only; the derived ones are believed to be self-manifested in the semantic development.

Semantics, above all analytical semantics of a dead language with no speakers,¹⁷ will always be 'subjective', that is to say, it will always start from our fixed socio-cultural system of understanding reality, distant and different in many aspects from that of the language under study. To bridge this gap we must follow a path whose development is not always clear. The semantic shift that presides over this evolution

13. PrimW are considered those semantical universals which are non-productive as predicative 'roots', aside from their denominative use.

14. There are of course some other morphemic positions (prefixed and infix) to carry out the flexional articulation and we will not discuss priorities in this connexion.

15. In this regard, the many onomatopoeic bases, above all SS, may be considered late lexical innovations.

16. Cf. In this connection see Del Olmo Lete, *Questions*, p.189ff.

17. Cf. G. del Olmo Lete, "Problemas de la traducción de lenguas sin hablantes (Desde la perspectiva del Semítico Occidental)", *AnFil* 26, E, 2004, 9-23.

and becomes the normal and 'economic' way of language development has no fixed rules and depends heavily on the psychological situation and perception of the group which generates it. This perception is to a large extent situation-conditioned and unpredictable. The fragmentation, analysis or breakdown of the meaning is the only 'objective' instrument we have to trace this development. In this way the origin of such a meaning (causality) and its fragmentation (aspectuality) can be ascertained. These are the two basic forms of metonymy. In addition, there may have been a transposition of meaning, in global structure or in its functionality (levels of comparison) to semantic fields considered as parallel. This is the function of metaphor in its multiple forms. With it we come to the even more 'subjective' and almost free mechanism of semantic shift for which there are no fixed rules either and which adds to the basic 'subjective' nature of the language as a coordinated perception of reality. More than any other figure of speech, metaphor, which in the long run becomes 'lexicalized', is the first mechanism in the development and 'enrichment' of the language. Its 'economic' character, dispensing with the creation of new lexis, combines with its creative nature that makes the linguistic evolution of any language not only a functional and practical process, but a creative and poetic one as well. Denomination or reference turns into connotation and intelligibility. Through the interplay of multiple level references or comparisons, meanings acquire sense.¹⁸

This is our starting-point as we begin searching and ordering the primitive Semitic lexicon. First, to ascertain to what extent the mono- and bi-consonantal series are constitutive levels of the lexicon, and second to establish their extension into triconsonantal bases (bi- and tri-syllabic) by way of internal intensification and external expansion.¹⁹ The implicit faith in a proto-language, which etymology to a certain extent implies, has to be understood as an approach to an almost abstract, referential sound pattern, a reduction to the simplest phonological constituents from which to explain the empirical complex phenotypes and their semantic development. Its actual existence is not always documented or demonstrable. In any case, a proto-language is a meta-linguistic *constructum*, not an empirical language. We send back to our studies on Semitic lexemes, bases and series of bases, quoted in the bibliography, for a testing of our approach.

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18. Cf. G. del Olmo Lete, "The Biconsonantal Semitic Lexicon. I. The Series /'-X-/", *AuOr* 22, 2004, 33-88.

19. Cf. Del Olmo Lete, *Questions*, p. 126ff.

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