Facets of Hebrew and Semitic linguistics   **Handout 1 (Aug. 29)**
LING 214/614, JDST 215/675, Fall 2013
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Theme: Introduction and course overview

1. Doing linguistics – or rather linguisticses

I am interested in…   *language(s) X*   E.g., English / French / Slavic / Semitic linguistics
                          phenomenon Y   E.g., phonology of stress, syntax, code switching
                          theory Z   E.g., Minimalist Program, Optimality Theory

Main message of this course: do not restrict yourself to a single approach (a single language, a single phenomenon or a single theory), but stay open-minded! Different phenomena are best approached with different methodologies. A good understanding of language requires all of them.

2. Hebrew in a nutshell

2.1 Hebrew is a Semitic language

Ethnologue (http://www.ethnologue.com/)

Afro-Asiatic: Semitic, Egyptian, Berber, Cushitic, Chadic, Omotic

Semitic: East-Semitic (Akkadian), West-Semitic

West-Semitic: South-Semitic (South-Arabian and Ethiopic Semitic languages), Arabic, NW-Semitic

North-West Semitic: Ugaritic, Old Canaanite, Aramaic, Canaanite

Canaanite languages: Hebrew, Phoenician, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, etc.

2.2 Four periods in the history of the Hebrew language

1. Biblical Hebrew (approx. 1000 BCE – 200 BCE)
2. Rabbinical Hebrew / Mishnaic Hebrew (approx. 100 CE – 500 CE)
3. Medieval Hebrew (approx. 1000 – 1800)
4. Modern Hebrew / Israeli Hebrew (since late 19th century)

2.3 Typological characteristics of Hebrew, and miscellanea

Phonology: five vowels; various guttural consonants.

Morphology: non-concatenative morphology (roots and patterns).

Morpho-syntax: two genders (masc, fem.), two numbers (+ remnants of dual).

Syntax: VSO in Biblical Hebrew, V2 in Modern Hebrew. Adjective follows noun.

3. A final take-home message for the course

At all times, keep in mind the truth about comparative linguistics, indeed about all of linguistics. Nothing is real except the raw facts of the language, the words people say, the scratching on the rock. All linguistic analysis is fiction or educated guess; all linguistic description is a more-or-less simplified and distorted mapping of the complexities of speech on a sheet of paper. When drawing a conclusion that is elegant and innovative, one should not fall in love with it. Remember, with honesty and humility, that one new fact can reshuffle the cards and force a totally different (but equally elegant) analysis.

Patrick. R. Bennett: *Comparative Semitic Linguistics: A Manual.* Eisenbrauns, 1998, p. 67.

Reading for next week: Bennett, Parts 1-3.

Homework: *Maltese* is the only Semitic language written with the Latin alphabet. It is a dialect of Arabic, with strong English and Italian influences. Find a text in Maltese on the web that has an English translation. (Hint: Wikipedia has entries that seem to contain the same information in both languages.) Try to decipher as many features of the language as you can. Summarize in a report what you have found.

If you speak another Semitic language, feel free to compare it to Maltese.

You can work in pairs. But even in this case, you have to write up your observations independently, using different texts (or distinct subsections of the same text) as the sources of your observations. Please also specify with whom you have worked together.