

Theme: the historical-comparative method, reconstructing family trees

Recommended background reading: Robert Hetzron (1976). Two Principles of Genetic Reconstruction. *Lingua* 38: 89–108.

1. Approaches to phonology (or to linguistics, in general)

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

Language is a system (a) that expresses thought, (b) that changes in time, (c) of socially agreed signs, (d) that reflects social facts, (e) that is implemented in the brain, (f) that encodes information, (g) that is learned/acquired without effort.

		Linguistics is a tool to...	Language belongs to...
Antiquity	<i>“Philosophical” linguistics</i>	understanding reasoning	a thinking human
Middle Ages	<i>“Philological” linguistics</i>	analyzing (holy) texts	a text and its author.
End 18 th , 19 th c.	<i>Historical linguistics</i>	the history of a nation	a nation or people.
1 st half of 20 th c.	<i>Structuralist linguistics</i>	studying human sign systems	a society, population.
2 nd half of 20 th c.	<i>Generative linguistics</i>	studying human brain	a brain or a species.

Linguistics, in general, and phonology, in particular, as a **tool for**: history, sociology, semiotics, biology/psychology/brain sciences, language technology, language teaching, (philosophy), etc.

Or: understanding *language for its own sake*.

Understanding = providing an explanation. Answering *why*'s in linguistics:

Given a (linguistic) observation: why is it so?

- Because it has developed so: historical explanations.
- Because this is how it is encoded in the brain: cognitive explanations.
- Because this is how it can fulfill its (social) function(s): functional explanations.
- Because this is how the child can learn it.
- ...
- By coincidence: quite often the best answer, don't be afraid of it!

Historical linguistics provides historical explanations. Why is it X? Because it has developed so:

1. It had been X already in the ancestor language.
2. Ancestor language had Y, then Y > X, and so now X. Why change?
3. Borrowing and external influences. Why?

2. The primary data for the Semitist: where are isoglosses among Semitic languages?

	<i>Akkadian</i>	<i>Ugaritic</i>	<i>Hebrew</i>	<i>Cl. Arabic</i>	<i>Ge'ez</i>
'king'	šarru(m)	malku	melex	malik	nəgūš
Are there cases?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
'build'	banū	bn̄y	bānā	banā	nadaqa
'you, masc.'	attā	atta	attā	anta	anta
Past tense formed with	prefixes	Suffixes	suffixes	suffixes	suffixes
Dual: is there sg, du & pl?	Yes	Yes	No / not productive	Yes	No
Definite article	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes?
Verbal suffix Sg1c	-ku	-tu	-ti	-tu	-ku
Verbal suffix Sg2m	-ta	-ta	-ta	-ta	-ka

Which **isogloss** to use when drawing a “family tree”? Take into consideration:

- Possible innovations/changes in more recent languages.
- Unrelated languages share archaic features.
- Possible language contacts (with each other, with other languages).

Comparing languages: “Contact or no contact? This is the question.”

Similarity between two languages can be due to:

- Common ancestor (Proto-Semitic **shalaam* > Hebr. *shaloom* ~ Arabic *salaam*)
- Language contact, areal and cultural factors
 borrowings: Hebr. *sak* ~ Engl. *sack*; Hebr. *televiziya* ~ Eng. *television*.
- Language universals: [t] sound in both Hebrew and English.
- Language typology: 2 genders in both Hebrew and French.
- Chance: suffix *-i* to derive adjectives from geographic nouns in both Hebrew and Hungarian (Hebr. *israeli* ~ Hung. *izraeli* ‘Israeli’).

NB: observe conventional notations: [t], ~, *example* ‘meaning’, *, >.

3. Basics of the comparative-historical method (cf. Bennett, part 3)

1. “We assume that patterned similarities between languages are not accidental. We assume three possible explanations, once chance is ruled out: mutual influence, parallel development from a similar base, or a common ancestor”. (Bennett, p. 25) + typological similarity...
2. Cognate words: having a common origin (supposedly...).
 Identity vs. similarity. In form vs. meaning. No borrowing and no onomatopoeia.
 Emphasis on regular sound correspondences (at least traditionally, pace Hetzron)

Can we reconstruct the original form in the **hypothetical proto-language*?

3. *Neogrammarians*: no unconditioned sound split.
4. *Skewed reflexes* of the proto-form: irregular correspondences in form, morphology, semantics...
5. “Voting”: take many languages, and the most probable reconstruction is the one that fits the majority.

Robert Hetzron adds to principles:

6. Archaic heterogeneity: “when cognate systems (i.e. paradigms) in related languages are compared, the system that exhibits the most inner heterogeneity is likely to be the closest to the ancestor-system”. (cf. “*Lectio difficilior potior*” in textual criticism)
Original system simple or complex? Change toward simplicity, or developing irregularities?
7. Focus on shared morpholexical innovations, because “the phonetic shape of morphological items is the least likely to be borrowed” (true?).

Hetzron’s (surprising) conclusion:

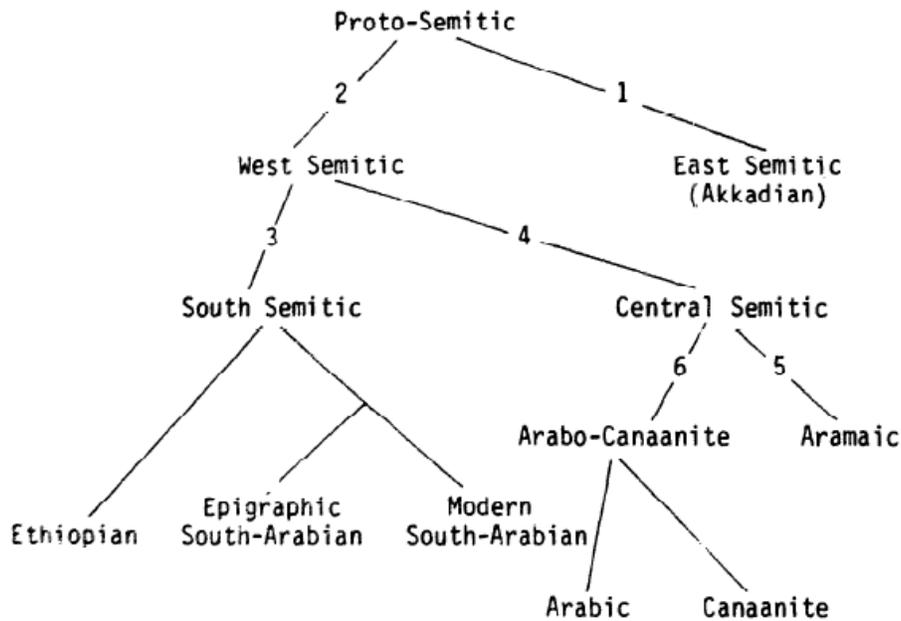


Fig. 2. The genealogical tree of Semitic. 1: Akkadian – archaic in many respects. 2: West-Semitic – innovation: adoption of a suffix-conjugation for the past tense (4.2.2). 3: South-Semitic – innovation: Generalization of *-k-* in the past tense (2.1), generalization of a closed vowel in verbal prefixes (2.2). 4: Central Semitic – innovation: adoption of Jussive *+u* for the nonpast (4.2.3), generalization of *-t-* in the past tense (2.1), generalization of the same vowel for verbal prefixes in one verb (2.2). 5: Aramaic – archaic feminine plural (4.1). 6: Arabo-Canaanite – innovation: adoption of *-na* as a feminine plural ending in verbs (4.1).

4. North-West Semitic languages: is Ugaritic a Canaanite language?

Reminder:

Reading: Bennett, Parts 4-5 (and eventually re-read Part 3).

Homework: Bennett, p. 30 and 33, *exercises 2 and 3*. Focus on a single language pair (either Ar-Eg, or Eg-Su, etc., as explained in ex. 2). It will be appreciated, however, if you also kept an eye on the rest of the languages, which may give you hints. You will submit an approximately 1-page-long report, 2/3 of which will answer exercise 2, and some additional remarks will reflect upon exercise 3.