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Aspects of the multiplanar verbal system in semitic languages

The Semitic languages are different from any other languages as for the morphology of their respective verbal systems, since verbs in these languages do not merely consist of continuous, subsequent morphemes clearly distinct from one another, but of a set of planes containing various discontinuous morphemes, which converge to a surface level thus creating the actual verb forms.

The first of these planes to be mentioned contains the actual verb root carrying the lexical meaning of the word. These verb roots are sometimes also called 'triliteral', because they always consist of three consonants. Into the gaps between these consonants different types of vowels are inserted to make up the respective verb forms. The quality, for example 'a' or 'u', of those vowels inserted constitutes another morpheme level, on which aspects like tense or agreement can be found and finally a third level is created by the number of vowels of the same quality inserted into the gaps between the consonants of the triliteral root, that is to say, single or double vowels of the same kind. On this level the distinction between finite and infinite, as well as active and passive, verb forms resides.

In order to render these aspects more obvious, consider the following forms of the verb with the root 'd-x-l' meaning 'to enter':

(1) 'daxal' - 'he entered'
(2) 'badxul' – 'I enter'
(3) 'udxul' – 'enter!'
(4) 'daaxil' – 'enterer'
(5) 'madxuul' – 'entered'

The triliteral root 'd-x-l' is extant in any of those verb forms, each bearing a meaning that is, in one way or another, related to the basic meaning of the this root. This basic meaning is modified as follows by certain vowels being inserted into the root's structure:

(6) 'a-a' – 3rd Pers., Past Tense
(7) 'ba-u' - 1st Pers., Present Tense
(8) 'u-u' - 2nd Pers., Imperative
(9) 'aa-i' – Nominalized form containing active voice connotation
(10) 'ma-uu' – Perfective passive participle

Two points need clarification as for the data provided above, first of all, certainly not only vowels are added to the basic form, but as to (7) and (10), there are also the consonants 'b' and 'm' preceding the modified root, but as these are simply 'glued' to the beginning of the respective word forms, they are of minor interest regarding an the multiplanar structure of verbs in Semitic languages.

Secondly, the forms in (4) and (5) not only depict vowels inserted into the root, but also exhibits the third aforementioned plane, namely structures of consonant/vowel sequences distinct from those of the other forms which account for the fact that these forms do not represent finite, but non-finite verb forms or the nominalized form of the verb, the syllable structure 'CVVCVC' standing for a nominalization with a connotation of active voice and the structure 'CVCVVC' carrying the meaning of a participle in passive voice.

Now, one could quite easily argue that the features alleged above are mere idiosyncracies only valid for a certain group of verbs or even only specific verbs, but the structure illustrated above seems to be a recurrent pattern in Semitic languages, which should become obvious when contemplating the following example of a verb belonging to a different group of verbs than the one mentioned above belongs to:

(11) 'katab' - 'he wrote'
(12) 'baktib' – 'I write'
(13) 'iktib' – 'write!'
(14) 'kaatib' – 'writer'
(15) 'maktuub' – 'written'

The verbs contained in this group differ from the ones in group presented afore as for the forms for '1st Pers., Present Tense' and '2nd Pers., Imperative' being realized with a single 'i' in lieu of single 'u's, yet all of the structural features posited above apply to this group of verbs, too, which is a point supporting the general quality of a multiplanar structure of verbs in Semitic languages.

Furthermore, one might dissent from this point of view by saying that this structure need not be as complex as depicted above, but could be as well be described by the traditional morphological approach, which divides words into smaller subsequent parts with disticn boundaries, the so-called morphemes, but Anderson (1992) for instance, points out pretty perspicuously, why one is running into serious trouble when attempting to apply the traditional approach to verb systems like the one portrayed here.

Finally, something that might appear quite awkward to a someone not familiar with Semitic languages, is the questions of which verb form actually is the most basic one, from which all other forms are derived, when there is no such thing like a pronounceable infinitive, but only a sequence of three consonants carrying the basic meaning. The answer to this is that usually, for instance in dictionaries, the structurally most simple form is used for the purpose of presenting a pronounceable basic form. This form quite obviously is the one with the meaning '3rd Pers., Past Tense', since it shows the most regular pattern (CVCVC) with no prefixes or double vowels, from which all other forms can be derived rather easily.