Percorsi in Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa I

Quaderni di studi dottorali alla Sapienza

a cura di
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PARTE III − TEORIE DELLA NARRAZIONE

11. Triradicalism Is a Secondary Development of Historical Semitic

Alessandra Serpone

11.1. Preliminary remarks

The Semitic lexicon is traditionally described as built on the 'root-and-pattern morphology', where the root corresponds to a discontinuous consonantal sequence associated with a certain semantic domain, and the pattern (or scheme) is the insertion of vowels (or else of vowels and consonants) providing the abstract root with the necessary grammatical information. Therefore, inflectional and derivational processes occur through 'interdigitating' vowels (Buccellati 1996)[1] and external affixes upon a triconsonantal base. However, this is a merely synchronic description: it unsatisfactorily explains how morphological forms, such as nominals and verbs, came into being and developed over time.

This paper offers some diachronic observations I have made before on the canonical notion of triradicalism, in the framework of the morphological make-up of the Semitic verb. In my doctoral work on the formative phases of the Akkadian verb, it has come to light that the early Semitic verbal structure is largely reminiscent of an agglutinative phase which most likely precedes the 'triradicalization' process attested in historical Semitic. Diachronically, the morphological processes underlying the 'making' of verbal forms mostly concern external elements affixed on a consonants-and-vowels root. It results that the dichotomic roles of consonants and vowels turns out to be a secondary morpho-phonological reassessment.

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[1]   So already Cantineau 1950a: 123 "Les racines et les schèmes constituent deux grands systèmes *croisés* [emphasis added], enveloppant dans leur réseau toute la masse du vocabulaire sémitique".

11.2. Word formation from a general linguistic point of view

In all languages, a word is created by combining a lexical root with grammatical elements through morphological processes (among others, compounding, reduplication, affixation, and internal change). Generally, each of the involved components is called a morpheme. The specific realizations and 'interactions' of the grammatical elements with the root determine which morphological type(s) (such for example isolating, agglutinating, and fusional) a language fits more.

A word of warning is in order now. The identification of a root form – that is, where a boundary between root and grammatical morphemes comes – is simply an interpretive solution. A contributing factor towards this indeterminacy may be the kinds of pursuits (either synchronic or diachronic) one can prefer over the other when analysing the structural features of a language.

A particular case is Semitic, where the assignment of morpheme boundaries shows a further degree of fluctuation, as 'triradicalism' overtly shows. In fact, the nature of the Semitic root is still a pending issue within literature[2].

11.3. The word structure and the Semitic peculiarity

The linguistic tradition fixed the representation of the Semitic word structure by clearly distinguishing consonants from vowels. Under this approach, the Semitic lexical root prototypically consists of a minimum of three consonants (although only rarely are there more) called 'radicals', to which internal vowels (called 'pattern', or 'scheme') and external affixes are inserted as realizations of inflectional and derivational processes. It follows that both root and pattern constitute a sequence of discontinuous morphemes.

The Semitic peculiarity with respect to word structure is commonly called 'triradicalism'[3]. In essence, it is built on: 1) the tripartite con-

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[2]   Recent and detailed surveys include: del Olmo Lete (2003), Goldenberg (2005), and Rubio (2005).

[3]   Standard literature on the topic includes among others: Brockelmann (1908: 286-287), who already admitted roots and scheme being an artificial aid, Bergsträsser

figuration of the lexical root, 2) the consonantal nature of the root constituents[4], 3) the discontinuous realizations of root and grammatical elements alike, 4) the secondary role assigned to vowels, in that they exclusively serve as grammatical morphemes.

The Akkadian verbal morphology offers a generous array of inflectional and derivational forms. Take for example the verb *išriqū* 'they stole'. Under the analysis just described, we would segment off the root as *š - r - q* and the grammatical elements as *i - i - ū.* In this case, the discontinuous consonantal sequence refers to the semantic area of 'stealing', and the vocalic scheme applied makes the abstract lexical root a third-person plural perfective form (Akkadian preterite).

Figure 11.1 provides a graphic representation of the above account:
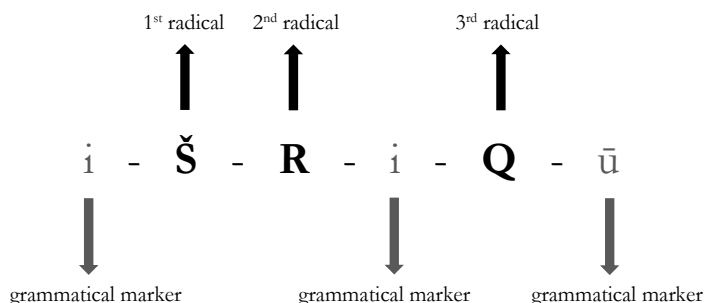
Fig. 11.1. A standard segmentation of the Akkadian verbal form 'išriqū'. In lower-case are shown the grammatical morphemes, whereas in capitals are shown the three radicals forming the lexical root.

(1928: 6), M. Cohen (1936), Cantineau (1950a: 73-83 and 1950b: 119-124), Gelb (1955: 105), Greenberg (1950: 162), von Soden (GAG §50), Fleisch (1961: 247-251). See also Petráček 1960: 547-606, Kuryłowicz 1962, and D'jakonov 1970: 453-480.

[4]   Furthermore, there exist phonological incompatibilities regarding the root: for example, the first and the second radicals cannot be either identical or homorganic. Among the main incompatibilities within Akkadian: *g* and *z* never occur in third position, nor can all three radicals be voiced, and nor can more than one consonant be emphatic, the second (if any) being reduced to non-emphatic consonant. Such phonological restraints were firstly investigated by Landsberger (1938: 450-452). A standard reference is Greenberg (1950: 162-181).

There can be, as would be expected, a gamut of deviations from this prototypical accommodation, such as: 1) biconsonantal nouns, with an unmotivated vowel, that is, not belonging to any predictable pattern[5] (e.g. ʾ*ab* 'father', *yad* 'hand'), 2) biradical verbs[6] (e.g. Akkadian *banûm* 'to build'), 3) certain imperfective (for action verbs) and perfective (for state verbs) verbal themes with an unmotivated root vowel. Further fluctuations are also caused by a widely attested phenomenon across Semitic concerning the semantic concurrence occurring between triradical roots with two radicals in common (see Voigt 1988).

All the foregoing facts seem to constitute cogent arguments in favour of the biradical thesis[7], thus casting doubt about the historical 'authenticity' of triradicalism. This issue requires some comments. I will not take part within the debate as to whether the Semitic lexicon is originally biconsonantal or triconsonantal: it is not the major concern here. At any rate, the optimum analysis may be to admit the existence of both biradical and triradical structures, and therefore to reconsider the alleged univocal nature of the root.

With this in mind, the very point does not lie in questioning the number of the root constituents. The point may lie in the root structure as such. That is to say, why taking for granted that the Semitic root components consist of a discontinuous consonantal sequence[8]?

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[5]   A noun is labeled 'primary' or 'unmotivated' when its pattern does not reveal a grammatical function. Instead, the so-called 'deverbal' noun is clearly connected to verbal roots. A detailed work is still Barth 1894.

[6]   Within Semitic grammars, the habit has settled of assuming these forms (called 'weak' verbs) as having 'dropped' the glides *w/y* – which originally would have behaved as strong radicals.

[7]   Some early Semitists already referred to many triliteral roots as extensions of original biliterals (e.g. Bergsträsser 1928: 7), and then Moscati 1947: 113-135; 1964: 71-75. More recently, an innovative contribution to the biradical claim has come from Bohas (e.g. Bohas 1997; Bohas, Mihai 2007), who has developed the 'matrices, etymons and radicals' theory, according to which the Semitic lexicon is built on: a combination of two phonetic features (e.g. {[labial], [+continuant]}) endowed with a general semantic domain (e.g. 'pertaining to lips'), generating a combination of two phonemes (e.g.{š, f}) to which a third consonant is added to further delineate the semantic value (e.g. *šafaha*, 'to hit someone on the lip').

[8]   Previous attempts toward a reanalysis of the traditional concept of the Semitic root are notable within literature. Already Von Soden (GAG §51-52) regarded the vowels as part of the root structure. For the opposite stance, see Fleisch 1961: 247-

11.4. Root, radicals, and the historical reality

Let's take a step back. We have emphasized in §2 that the recognition of the root boundaries is basically a deduction by the linguist, and that different analyses may be suitable for different purposes. Following on from this, a historical approach gives a higher priority to the diachronic factors responsible for the blurring of preexisting situations. In our case, this results in reconstructing the original lexical root, and explaining the morphological processes – plus any further phonological changes that may have been followed – applied to generate the surface forms. Simply put, the fundamental question to be addressed is: what did a given structure develop from (and/or what did it develop into)[9]?

If applied to Semitic, we are allowed to be sceptical about referring to triradicalism as the original structure of nominal and verbal formations. No diachronic investigations would point to a group of discontinuous morphemes, as the root is, being the historical and natural setting on which morphological processes occur[10].

In short, it seems safe to say that triradicalism works well as a conventional device for representing the Semitic word structure: it satisfies the needs of descriptive models, which demand a clarifying ordering of the entire lexicon. This is helpful in synchronic accounts, but deficient in the diachronic ones. In fact, squeezing all the linguistic material into the root-and-pattern system can be an impediment to reconstructing formative phases, as it makes the historical develop-

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251 and Zaborski 1991. More recently, Schramm 1991 has described the Semitic morphology in terms of apophony on a linear base, that is, with the vowel as an inherent component of the root. Larcher (e.g. Larcher 2006) clearly distinguishes the abstract consonantal root, which acts as an instrument of classification within Arabic lexicography, from the root as the base of word derivation and formation. In fact, Arab grammarians and then the 19th century Arabist used to call 'root' (translating the Arabic ʾaṣl) a vocalized base, and not an abstract consonantal skeleton (i.e. *kataba,* and not *k-t-b*).

9   The diachronic aspect of the Semitic morphological arrangement is discussed in Edzard 2011.

10   On the other side, the morphemic status of the consonantal root is claimed in D. Cohen 1964, also by mentioning the case of loanwords formations (e.g. *nikl* 'nickel' produce the verb *nakkala* 'to nickel'); Idrissi, Prunet, and Béland 2008 support the same stance through empirical investigations of aphasic errors (e.g. case of glide resurfacing).

ment appear 'suspiciously' neat and tidy.

It is again the Akkadian verbal system that may help, in that it shows how predication is arranged in early Semitic. Here more than in other Semitic languages, the morphological structure of the verb remains readily segmentable into lexical root and grammatical elements. What is more, each grammatical morpheme is enough recognizable on formal and semantic levels alike. On diachronic grounds, certain morpho-phonological developments attested in the Akkadian verb (and extended to Semitic in general) point to the theme *ccvc*[11] being the pivot from which the verbal paradigm emerged through affixation of inflectional (and derivational) elements.

Take again the verb *išriqū*. This time, the above considerations cause the form to be segmented into *i - šriq - ū*, where the second element is the (morpho-)semantic nucleus, it conveying the vague core meaning of 'stealing'; *i- and -ū* are instead the inflectional elements, which occur in a fixed position with respect to their functions: the person-marker *i-* via prefixes, whereas the gender-number marker *-ū* via suffixes.

The chart below shows the facts just summarised:
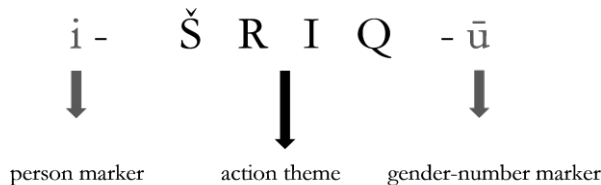
Fig. 11.2. A diachronic segmentation of the Akkadian verbal form 'išriqū'. In lowercase are shown the grammatical elements, whereas in capitals is shown the verbal (action) theme.

Now, the question raised in §3 may find an answer: inflectional and derivational processes occur on the level of words, real words. That is the crux of the matter. From a historical perspective, it can be argued that the Semitic verbal and nominal forms results from the 'augmentation' of a basic theme through affixation – and not through

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11   Further details on the verb formation belong to the issue about the Semitic verb formation, which is beyond the scope of the present survey. Here, I will only discuss some general points affecting the recognition of the root structure.

'interdigitation' – of external elements undergoing morphologisation. In particular, this base corresponds to a sequence of consonants and vowels, whose specific accommodation acquires relevance on the (morpho-)semantic level.

Such for example in Akkadian, we can distinguish two basic morpho-semantic themes: 1) nominal themes accommodated along the scheme *pVrs*[12] (where *V* is a short or long vowel), to which morphological processes occurs via suffixes only, and 2) verbal themes accommodated along the scheme *prvs* (where *v* is a short). Here, morphological changes take place by means of affixes, such as prefix, infix, and also reduplication of the second consonant.

11.5. The agglutinating background

One crucial point which has been mentioned before but deserves repetition is the significance of the morphological processes in suggesting which morphological type(s) a language mostly fits.

Turning to the Akkadian verb, its structure reveals that each of the inflectional and derivational functions is expressed by one single morpheme, which is therefore 'agglutinated' to the lexical theme. Turn for a moment to Figure 11.2. Each grammatical item: a) has a fixed position, b) occurs *via* affixes, c) provides one single value. In this regard, it may be argued that the Akkadian (and Semitic) verbal morphology shows pre-fusional vestiges more closely recalling agglutinating features (Durand 1990: 250; 1991: 88; Garbini, Durand 1994: 98). In the course of history, the typological nature of Semitic came to be affected by systematization processes, the latter determining a gradual shift from agglutinative to fusional by means of phonological modifications[13].

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[12]   They generally convey the fundamental elements of the human experience, (such as parts of the body, kin relationships, animals and the like). Also, a great number of them presents a biradical form.

[13]   An illustrative example may be the metathesis occurring in the so-called Akkadian perfect (*iptaras*): it is generally agreed that the morpheme *-t-* was originally infixed to themes with a sibilant as first radical only, and therefore prefixed in all other cases. Similar phenomena applied to some derived verbal themes in Arabic.

11.6. How then to deal with *i-Š-R-i-Q-û* and *i-šriq-ū*?

It now makes a lot of sense maintaining that (tri)radicalism is a secondary rearrangement within Semitic (Kouwenberg 2010: 40-44, Garbini, Durand 1994: 91-92, Fronzaroli 1963: 122-123). In the course of history, it is without doubt that the growing predominance of the triconsonantal themes has been the trigger of the adjustment on a tri-literal base of the entire Semitic lexicon. As standard evidence, 'weak verbs' can be mentioned: albeit etymologically biliteral, they take a triconsonantal guise by analogical mechanisms[14].

Further analysing, the Semitic root arguably comes from pre-existing forms, not yet grouped in fixed schemes, they instead being 'flexible' in terms of their components, and also 'expandable' through affixation of external elements. With reference to the verbal structure, it has been shown that the morphological morphemes appear to be 'agglutinated' to the core theme, as these each occurs in a fixed position and conveys one single function (which is then added to the others'). It now sounds fitting to conclude by claiming that:

> the internal inflexion of Semitic can be thought of as the result of the interaction between a system of affixed morphemes, of an agglutinating nature, and a process of generalized triradicalisation pushed to the extreme: what today appears as an infix was initially just a prefix or suffix [la flessione interna del semitico si configura come il risultato dell'interazione tra un sistema di morfemi affissi, di tipo agglutinante, ed un processo di triradicalizzazione generalizzato all'estremo: quello che oggi appare come infisso altro non era inizialmente se non prefisso o suffisso] (Garbini, Durand 1994: 93).

In comparative terms, it thus emerges that older Semitic languages are affected to a lesser extent by this phenomenon of systematization. As sketched out earlier, the Akkadian verbal morphology

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[14]   One might also wonder about the original status of the Semitic vowels. This falls beyond the scope of the present contribution. Further investigations on this issue are certainly needed. The most it can be said is that according to linguistics facts, both inside and outside Akkadian (including Egyptian and Berber), it cannot be ruled out that in origin the vowels had a phonemic distinction. If that is the case, they originally participated in the lexical distribution alongside with consonants and then they underwent morphologisation under the pressure of triradicalism.

can be viewed – on both historical and structural levels – as originally built on an agglutinating arrangement. Further research in this field sounds appropriate. Finally, brief mention should be made of the role of medieval grammarians in standardizing further the Arabic language (and the Hebrew one as well)[15].

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[15]   As Rubio (2005: 48) reported, from the very beginning of the Arabic grammatical tradition (8th century) it has been usual to arrange words by their consonantal roots. The latter were remarkably listed according to anagrammatic occurrences, the so-called 'root permutation' (*ktb* along with *kbt*, *tbk* and so on), without semantics links between stems of the same root. Further in the Medieval lexicography, a new trend was established, the so-called 'rhyme order', consisting of arranging roots by final consonant (instead of the first one). The introduction of the alphabetical arrangement is credited to the Persian grammar Ibn Fāris (?-1004 AD). Later on, it was adopted almost everywhere. Therefore, it is likely that the root-based approach came to be used specifically as a mere working device since the formative ages of lexicography, and then it was re-analysed by Semiticists and Arabists as involved in the derivation of words (cfr. Larcher 2006).

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Il presente volume inaugura un'iniziativa editoriale volta a diffondere, analogamente a un progetto precedente cui si ricollega, i risultati delle ricerche di giovani studiosi formatisi nell'ambito del Dottorato in Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa, presso l'Università di Roma Sapienza. I saggi di questa miscellanea, i cui autori appartengono ai cicli 32°-33°-34°, spaziano dalla letteratura araba, hindi e giapponese alla linguistica araba e cinese, fino alla contemporaneità della RPC. Le tematiche trattate sono espressione di alcune delle principali specializzazioni del Dottorato in questione, relativamente alle diverse epoche storiche e alle varie aree linguistiche e culturali del Maghreb, del Medio Oriente, del Subcontinente indiano e dell'Asia Orientale. Basandosi su materiali in lingua originale, per i campi d'indagine prescelti i contributi offrono analisi accurate e nuovi spunti interpretativi.

Federica Casalin insegna letteratura cinese classica presso l'Università di Roma Sapienza; dal 2021 è Coordinatrice del Dottorato di ricerca in Civiltà dell'Asia e dell'Africa. In campo letterario lavora sulla poesia classica, la letteratura femminile, la traduzione della letteratura cinese in Europa nel XIX secolo, la storiografia letteraria in Cina. Ha pubblicato numerosi saggi sui rapporti transculturali sino-occidentali lavorando in prospettiva imagologica sulla diaristica e sulle fonti geografiche di epoca Qing (1644-1911).

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