

The Arabic (Semitic) Lexicon and its words

Call for Papers

We invite abstracts for a workshop on “The Arabic (Semitic) Lexicon and its words” (organized by Abdelkader Fassi Fehri and Peter Hallman), to be held as part of the 57th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea, hosted by the University of Helsinki, 21–24 August 2024. Preliminary abstracts of (no more than) 300 words (including references, name, and affiliation) must be received by November 10 2023, to be included in the workshop proposal; see more submission instructions below).

Workshop description

Arabic (Semitic) words are in some sense ‘magical’. Written texts consist primarily of consonantal sequences, with represent basically consonantal roots of words, plus some occasional affixes or clitics, also represented orthographically with consonantal content. Insertion of vowel sequences (which basically represent templates) is left to the reader, to distinguish a noun from a verb, *nabt* ‘a plant’ and *nabit* ‘to plant’, or an adjective from a noun *fariḥ* ‘glad’ and *farāḥ* ‘gladness’, or a comparative/superlative adjective from a causative verb, *ʔaʕḏam(u)* ‘greater, greatest’, *ʔaʕdḏam(a)* ‘to make great’, or a passive from an active, *qatal* ‘to kill’, *qutil* ‘to be killed’, etc. The magic stems from the fact that the unreadable and uninterpretable non-linear Arabic word sequence of the text becomes pronounceable and readable. What is it then that endows the Arabic (Semitic) reader with the ability to make (morphologically and semantically) interpretable words out of these non-vocalized consonant sequences?

Although prosodic or templatic morphology has provided clues for building words out of a number of tiers or skeletons, including a consonantal tier, a vocalic tier, and a syllabic tier (see e.g. McCarthy 1981, 2011, Kastner & Tucker 2020), there is still a lot to understand about how the Arabic word is concretely structured in word syntax, because its root is not syllabic or phonologically contiguous like that of the English word, but rather consonantal, in the sense that vocalization is generally not part of the derivational base, be it abstract or concrete (Fassi Fehri 1986, 2000, Arad 2005, Borer 2005, Lowenstamm 2014, among others).

There is also a lot to understand about how these words are lexically related and organized in the lexicon and the grammar (Doron 2003, Hallman 2006, 2023, Kastner 2020, Fassi Fehri 1986, Fassi Fehri et al 2021). In English, you get words that are specified for a ‘lexical’ category, noun, verb, adjective, and derivational relationships between these categories can be established (Baker 2003, Lieber 2006, 2016). In Arabic, however, it looks as if there is no such thing as a ‘lexical category’, as far as we understand it. There is no verb, no noun, no adjective, etc. Thus, unlike English cases like *red*, in which a verb is formed from an adjective *red* by adding the causative suffix *-en* (hence a deadjectival verb), or even *(to) saddle* or *(to) milk*, which can be thought of as denominal verbs (Hale & Keyser 2002; for a different view, see Borer 2014), etc., in Arabic there are no verbs that are morphologically derived from adjectives or from nouns, etc. (Fassi Fehri et al 2021, 2023). The core lexical derivation is built from the root (simple or complex) and the template, hence the templatic nature of the morphology. Generally, lexical relations between words are not categorial derivations, but rather established primarily on acategorial (consonantal) roots, while the template specifies categorial (vocalic) information, among other properties. Moreover, Arabic

dictionaries (see also Hebrew dictionaries or Arabic colloquial dictionaries) are generally characterized by the use of roots rather than stems as basic entries for organizing the dictionary, suggesting that the root is an independent component of the words it derives.

Frameworks like Distributed Morphology (= DM; Halle & Marantz 1993, Marantz 1995, 1991, 2001, 2022, Harley 2014, Harley & Noyer 1999, etc.) or Neo-constructivist grammars (Borer 2003, 2005, 2013) have provided ways and tools to deal with some aspects of these magical properties by separating at least the root from the (vocalic) template at some level of derivation, and also by bridging distinctions between the Arabic Semitic word and the non-Semitic Germanic or Romance word, since in all cases the root and the template are assumed to be morpho-syntactic and abstract (Harley 2014, Borer 2014, Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020). In DM, one can distinguish between the root as an abstract object in morphosyntax, or a LI in the lexicon, and the root as a concrete object in morphonology or a vocabulary item (VI). There is also a debate about how semantics can get into the picture in this model in terms of the semantics of the root, and that of the template, and how these combine to get the compositional semantics of the stem or the word, and also importantly how allomorphy and allosemy are dealt with (Marantz 2013, 2022, Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020, Wood 2022, Levinson 2014). Likewise, computational modelling of the Semitic lexical competence, as well as psycholinguistic evidence for the root as a prime (Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson 2004, Prunet 2006), or for the stem, will help in clarifying design and processing issues of the Semitic word.

The workshop will cover comparative, descriptive, or empirical issues surrounding the grammatical status of roots and their meanings, the nature of templatic derivation, as illustrated by e.g. causatives, anti-causatives, psychological, perception or motion eventualities, classification of events, derived nominals or nominalizations (Chomsky 1970), argument selection issues (Grimshaw 1990), including preposition selection, the role of phases and locality constraints in word syntax (Chomsky 1995, 2020; Embick 2010), and distributed morphology architecture.

Submission instructions

We invite submissions for 20-minute talks that contribute to the description, discussion, and analysis of core issues in the Arabic or Semitic lexicon from a comparative perspective, including its organization and design, theories of word formation, mental reality of (pieces of) words, and implementations in computation and lexicography. Preliminary abstracts (300 words; Word file; including affiliation) should be sent to the workshop conveners by November 10, 2023. Please send abstracts to both addresses: abdelkaderfassifehri@gmail.com and peter.hallman@ofai.at. If the workshop proposal is successful, prospective presenters will be asked to submit a 500 word abstract directly to SLE by 15 January 2024.