

The Arabic (Semitic) Lexicon and its words

Convenors:

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Arabic (Semitic) words are in some sense ‘magical’. Written texts consist primarily of consonantal roots, with an occasional derivational or inflectional affix, itself represented orthographically with mainly its consonantal content. Insertion of vowels is left to the reader, to distinguish a noun from a verb *nabata* ‘planted’ and *nabt* ‘plant’, or an adjective from a verb *fariḥ* ‘happy’ and *fariḥa* ‘became happy’, or a comparative/superlative adjective from a causative verb, *ʔaʕḍam* ‘greater, greatest’, *ʔaʕḍama* ‘to make great’, or a passive from an active, *qatala* ‘to kill’, *qutila* ‘to be killed’, etc. Arabic word structure is magical in the sense that it is not linear. What is it that endows the Arabic (Semitic) reader with the ability to make words out of these consonants, to make them pronounceable or interpretable both morphologically (or morphonologically) and semantically?

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 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 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. Even 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, but 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. 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 allophony are dealt with (Marantz 2013, 2022, Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020, Wood 2022). 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.