

SLE 2026 Workshop

The New Arabic (Semitic) Lexicon (SLE Workshop II): Old and New Themes and Perspectives

Convenors: Abdelkader Fassi Fehri (Mohammed V U. & Linguistic Society of Morocco)
Peter Hallman (Austrian Research Institute for Artificial Intelligence)

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Workshop Description

The second SLE Workshop on the Arabic (Semitic) Lexicon is dedicated to refining and further exploring the work begun at the first Workshop held at the 57th SLE meeting in Helsinki, 2024, and incorporating important new themes and issues relevant to the lexicon of Arabic and other Semitic languages. The workshop aims to provide a venue for descriptive, typological, and comparative studies with a theoretical orientation, on the role of roots and templates in word structure, as well as studies in acquisition, psycholinguistics or loan word incorporation that speak to these issues. These themes are elucidated below in greater detail.

The first theme concerns the contents and roles of *roots*, the basic building blocks in Arabic/Semitic word formation. The notion of root that emerged originally from Semitic studies (Al-Faraahidii, 8th c.; Greenberg 1950) has become common currency in contemporary morphosyntax as an (uncategorized) derivational ‘point of entry’ in word structure even in non-Semitic languages (Halle & Marantz 1993; Chomsky 1995, 2019; Marantz 1995; Embick 2004; Harley 2012), albeit as a contiguous phoneme sequence. Semitic roots, on the other hand, consist only of consonants that appear in various prosodic templates with a common broad meaning. Hence the root *ħrq* builds the verb *ħaraq* ‘burn’, the event noun *ħarq* ‘burning’, the entity noun *ħariiḳ* ‘fire’, the adjective *ħarraaq* ‘ablaze’, etc. The root then contributes a conceptual domain that the template semantically particularizes, and syntactically categorizes. While the view that the root is a common base to related words has been extensively put to use in the analysis of English and other non-Semitic languages, the Semitic languages themselves have not been thoroughly studied from this perspective, notwithstanding several influential ground breaking studies (Borer 2005; Arad 2005; Doron 2003; Lowenstamm 2014; Fassi Fehri 2018).

The workshop aims to rectify this ironic state of affairs, by bringing together scholars interested in sharing research results on the structure of words in languages whose root and category structure is not a theoretical extrapolation, but is a tangible, easily observable generative system fundamental to the structure of these languages' lexicon, in order to address the following questions: Do roots have event/argument structures (as in Levinson 2014), or not (Borer 2014)? If they do, is there a limit on how complex that argument structure can be (intransitive, transitive, ditransitive)? What is the ontology available to root denotations? Are they uniform in denotation, denoting individual or state descriptions, or can they denote complex event descriptions? Can roots have a degree argument if they derive gradable words, or have an inherent aspectual type, or is aspect encoded in other components of the word? Can roots show homophony, having different meanings in different templates, or exhibit polysemy or allosemy in Marantz's (2013) sense?

A second important theme is that of templates, and the roles they play with respect to phonological form, morphology, syntax, or logical form. The role of templates is not limited to derivational morphology, but extends to inflectional morphology. Number is 'internal' in broken plurals (*kaatib* 'writer' → *kuttaab* 'writers'), although it can be an external suffix (*muslim* 'moslem' → *muslim-uun* 'moslems'). Voice/aspect can also be 'internal' (as in *katab* 'wrote' vs. *yaktub* 'writes'), or a prefix (*sa-yaktub* 'will write'), etc.

Further, how tightly are morphological templates and syntactic categories correlated? Templates tend to fix a word's syntactic category, but often they are ambiguous. For example, the noun *hariiq* 'fire' shares its template CaCiiC with many adjectives, such as *θamiin* 'valuable' and *baliid* 'stupid', etc. Is this a case of templatic homophony, or is it only a single template which appears in more than one category (as a sort of allosemy)? Some recent research has claimed that Arabic words are categorized only after they associate with a morphological template, which suggests that templates themselves are not categorizing (Fassi Fehri, *in press*), while other work explicitly eschews null categorizers (Borer 2014). If there are null categorizers independent of the templates, it raises the question of how complex uncategorized structure can be, and what structural mechanisms operate at the root level before categorization (Fassi Fehri, *ibid*, Hallman 2024).

Another important theme, often not thoroughly investigated, typically in the case of Standard Arabic, and the context of diglossia (Ferguson 1959) is the language acquisition of Arabic. Most acquisition, psycholinguistic, and neurolinguistic studies have converged on the assumption that the root is a real mental object in the mind of Arabic speakers (Badry 1982, Abdo & Hilu 1991, Prunet, Béland & Idrissi 2000, Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson, 2013, among

others) or Hebrew speakers (Feldman, Frost and Penini 1995, Armon-Lotem & Berman 2003, Berman 2003, Ravid 2003, etc.). But templates, as correlates of roots, must exist independently in the mind, although less is known about their mental representation and properties, including their categorizing effect.

A big gap in the literature is the quasi-absence of significant acquisition studies of Standard Arabic, a language that is first acquired through acquisition of the local colloquial variety and the increasing early exposition to the standard variety, and which becomes the language of instruction at school in a diglossic context. It is to be noted that most acquisition studies focalize on dialectal Arabic, and they rarely address the acquisition through stages of the standard variety by native Arabic speakers (See e.g. Omar 1973; Aljenaie 2010; Saiegh-Haddad et al. 2012, Albirini 2017, Khamis-Dakwar 2021). It is also of importance from a comparative perspective to see whether some notion of root and template morphology is relevant for the acquisition of non-Semitic languages; see Vihman (2014) and Vihman & Wauquier (2017) for discussion of this issue.

A further important topic is that of loanwords. It has long been observed that loanwords can be incorporated into the root and template system (Broselow 1976, McCarthy & Prince 1990, Cohen 2019). But what mechanisms are involved in the postulation of a new root? Is analogy a fundamental component of the root and template system within the language?

This workshop is intended to bring together researchers interested in Arabic/Semitic morphophonology, syntax, semantics, acquisition, and other relevant subfields, to refine our understanding of the themes and issues elucidated above, but also those investigating ways of extending the Arabic/Semitic model to the analysis of non-Semitic languages.

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