

STRUCTURE OF SEMITIC LANGUAGES - LINGUISTICS 430-01

FALL 2012

TUESDAY - THURSDAY 11 AM -12:15 PM / ICC 206B

PROFESSOR:

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GOALS

The Semitic language family is one of the oldest attested language families still spoken today. It includes languages spoken in Africa, the Middle East and Western Asia, languages which figure prominently in the religious, political and cultural issues of our time and of history. This course aims at familiarizing students with the grammatical structure of a number of ancient and modern Semitic languages (e.g., Hebrew, Standard Arabic and dialects, Amharic, Akkadian, Aramaic and others).

Previous study of a Semitic language is encouraged, but not required. However, all students must have taken LING 001 or the equivalent (to be approved by the instructors).

By the end of the class, students will...

- have gained an advanced understanding of the linguistic structure of Semitic languages (that is, their phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics)
- have increased their skills in linguistic analysis via problem sets
- be capable of conducting in-depth independent research on Semitic languages

This course fulfills the following learning goals in the undergraduate curriculum.

- Knowledge of seminal readings and approaches related to the analysis of language
- Knowledge of the complexity and underlying systematicity of language
- Ability to analyze linguistic data at various levels of structure and use
- Ability to analyze, critically evaluate, and integrate classic and current research in linguistics and apply that understanding to contemporary theoretical and practical issues
- Ability to craft clear and coherent linguistic analytic arguments
- Ability to design, carry out, and report a small original research project on a current topic in linguistics

COURSE STRUCTURE AND REQUIREMENTS:

Structure: This course will be structured by topic. We will start with a review of the Semitic language family, and then proceed through three additional units of about 4 weeks each: (i) phonetics, phonology and morphophonology, (ii) syntax and morphosyntax, and (iii) morphosemantics and semantics.

You will be assigned readings before and during each topic. These readings will come from the textbook (Rubin 2010), from other books on Semitic languages, and from scholarly linguistics papers. All readings not from the textbook will be either placed on reserve at the library or posted as PDFs on Blackboard. Two overview books on Semitic languages (Hetzron 1997 and Weninger et al. 2011) have also been placed on reserve for your use throughout the course.

Evaluation: For each unit (= roughly 4 weeks), there will also be 1-2 problem sets. These will normally be assigned on a Thursday and due the following Tuesday and will rely on Semitic data.

We would also like each of you to ‘Adopt a Semitic Language’ for the duration of the course. We have available a list of possible languages (to be distributed shortly). You will become an expert in this language, using existing reference materials (possibly combined with your own fieldwork) to describe and/or analyze the language with respect to the empirical claims and theoretical topics discussed in class.

For each unit, you will write a squib (= small paper) on that topic for your language. For undergraduates, these squibs will be 3-5 pages long (single-spaced). For graduate students, 5 pages is the minimum.

- Squib 1 (due on/around October 4th): the phonetics, phonology and/or morphophonology of your language
- Squib 2 (due on/around October 30th): the morphosyntax and/or syntax of your language
- Squib 3 (due on/around November 20th): the semantics of your language
- Each squib can be either descriptive (discuss the instantiation of, or deviation from, a particular Semitic phenomenon in your language) or analytical (conduct a preliminary investigation of a particular theoretical problem). Graduate students and those with more background in linguistics are encouraged to write analytical squibs.
- More detailed instructions will be given later in the course.

There will be no midterm, but there will be a final paper. This final paper will be longer (6-10 pages for undergraduates, minimum 10 pages for graduates, both single-spaced). It must be on your chosen language **as well as another Semitic language**, and it can be on the topic of your choice.

Finally, participation in class discussion is required and will make the experience more fun (really!).

TEXTBOOK (AND OTHER BOOKS ON RESERVE)

Rubin, Aaron D. 2010. *A Brief Introduction to the Semitic Languages*. Gorgias Handbooks 19. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press. [textbook]

Hetzron, Robert, ed. 1997. *The Semitic Languages*. New York: Routledge. [on reserve]

Weninger, Stefan, ed. 2011. *The Semitic Languages: an International Handbook*. Berlin: Mouton. [on reserve]

GRADING

Class participation: 10%

Problem sets: 25%

Three squibs: 30%

Final paper: 35%

Late Homework Policy: Homework must be turned in at the start of class. Late assignments will only be accepted for full credit if you a) were not in class and b) have a legitimate reason which you **tell us about before the assignment is due and get our permission.**

Group Work Policy: You are strongly encouraged to discuss the problem sets and your papers with other members in the class. Linguistics is often more productive and interesting when you have a few people to bounce ideas off of. That said, **write up your problem sets and papers entirely on your own**, without help, and in accordance with the Georgetown honor code. If you make direct use of someone else's idea, give them explicit credit for it in your write-up.

TENTATIVE OUTLINE OF TOPICS TO BE COVERED:

The Semitic Language Family

- Myths and facts
- Classification and the structure of the family
- Roll call: the individual languages

Phonetics, Phonology and Morphophonology

- Phonetics and phonology: inventories, unusual sounds, phonological processes
- Root and pattern morphology
 - The facts and the issues
 - The psycholinguistic reality of roots
 - Case study: plurals

Morphosyntax/Syntax

- The Semitic DP and the construct state
- The structure of the Semitic clause (word order, functional projections, etc.)
- Movement (DP movement, wh-movement, etc.)
- Case study: agreement in Neo-Aramaic dialects

Semantics

- The Semitic verbal templates
- The semantics of temporality in Semitic languages (aspect, tense)
- Mood and modality
- Case study: copular sentences in Hebrew

Writing Systems

- Cuneiform (e.g., Akkadian)
- Syllabaries/abugidas (e.g., Amharic)
- Abjads (e.g., Canaanite languages)
- Roman vs. non-roman alphabets (e.g., Maltese)

FURTHER READING:

For descriptive and philological work on Semitic languages, Rubin (2010) has a through annotated bibliography.

Handbooks/Overviews

- Bennett, Patrick R. 1998. *Comparative Semitic Linguistics*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
[contains many cross-Semitic paradigms of e.g., pronouns, verbs, etc.; see Ruth if you are interested in looking at this]
- Bergsträsser, Gotthelf. 1928. *Einführung in die semitischen Sprachen*. Munich: Max Hueber.
[available in a translated version by Peter T. Daniels; a classic with lots of text specimens, albeit outdated; see Ruth if you are interested in looking at this]
- Hetzron, Robert, ed. 1997. *The Semitic Languages*. New York: Routledge.
[A bit older, but still useful; available on reserve at the library]
- Weninger, Stefan, ed. 2011. *The Semitic Languages: an International Handbook*. Berlin: Mouton.
[Large, comprehensive and new; available on reserve at the library]

For generative work on Semitic languages, here are some of the major linguists whose work you could investigate, arranged by topic.

Phonology and Morphophonology

- John McCarthy (UMass Amherst) is the grandfather of Semitic generative morphophonology. See his dissertation and numerous papers from 1979 until about 2000, many written with Alan Prince.
- Other major players here include Outi Bat-El (Tel Aviv University), Adam Ussishkin (University of Arizona) and Robert Ratcliffe (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).
- The above linguists mostly focus on Hebrew and Arabic. See the work of Sharon Rose (UC San Diego) for extensive investigations of Ethiosemitic phonology and morphophonology. The other languages/branches of the family (most Aramaic dialects, Modern South Arabian, etc.) remain understudied in terms of generative phonology.

Syntax and Morphosyntax: Arabic and Hebrew (mostly)

- There is a long tradition of work on Arabic and Hebrew within the generative tradition (starting with Noam Chomsky's master's thesis on Hebrew!).
- Major linguists whose work you could investigate include...
 - Joseph Aoun (USC, Arabic)
 - Elabbas Benmamoun (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Arabic)
 - Hagit Borer (USC, Hebrew)
 - Lina Choueiri (American University of Beirut, Arabic)
 - Edit Doron (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Hebrew and Aramaic)
 - Ur Shlonsky (Geneva University, Hebrew and Arabic)
 - Abdelkader Fassi Fehri (Mohammed V University Rabat, Arabic)

Semantics: Arabic and Hebrew (mostly)

- Formal work on the semantics of Semitic languages is heavily biased toward Hebrew and Arabic.
- Linguists to follow include...
 - Norah Boneh (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Hebrew and Arabic)
 - Gabi Danon (Bar Ilan University, Hebrew)
 - Edit Doron (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Hebrew)
 - Abdelkader Fassi Fehri (Mohammed V University Rabat, Arabic)
 - Yael Greenberg (Bar Ilan University, Hebrew)
 - Galia Hataf (University of Florida, Biblical Hebrew)
 - Yaron McNabb (Konstanz University, Hebrew and Arabic)
 - Mustafa Mughazy (Western Michigan University, Arabic)

Akkadian and East Semitic

- There is not a lot of generative work on these languages since they are no longer spoken. Consult Rubin for philological sources, but see also...
- Guy Deutscher (University of Manchester; philologist turned media darling, but he wrote an interesting book on Akkadian syntactic structure first)
- Eran Cohen (Hebrew University of Jerusalem; 2005 monograph on modality in Old Babylonian)

Other Understudied Semitic Languages

- There are burgeoning areas of research in some of the lesser-studied Semitic languages including...
- Amharic and other Ethiosemitic languages: Girma Demeke (Institute of Semitic Studies), Ronny Meyer (University of Addis Abeba), Mark Baker (Rutgers), and Ruth Kramer (me!)
- Neo-Aramaic dialects: Geoffrey Khan (NENA; Cambridge), Charles Häberl (Mandaic; Rutgers), Eleanor Coghill (NENA; Konstanz)
- Modern South Arabian: Aaron Rubin (Pennsylvania State University), Janet Watson (Salford University)
- Maltese: Ray Fabri (University of Malta), Adam Ussishkin (University of Arizona)