

Internal Structure of Root Meaning in Afroasiatic Languages

Bohas & Dat (2007, B&D henceforth) propose an organization of the lexicon based on a *feature matrix* and an *etymon*. The etymon is composed of two unordered phonemes expressing the feature matrix and its related *notional invariant* (NI henceforth). In the present study, adopting B&D's NI, we investigate the internal structure of root meaning in Afroasiatic and propose that the root structure parallels the standard syntactic tree with a head, a specifier and a complement (see also Lahrouchi 2010). Unlike B&D, we take NIs to match discrete features borne by discrete phonemes, rather than scattered along a matrix of features borne by two distinct phonemes (etymon).

We adopt a comparative and constructional approach of Afroasiatic investigating a lists of words referring to body parts. For each root, we isolate the NIs associated with the phonemes and their phonological features. For instance, words indicating 'nose' such as *anzar* (Amazigh), *anf* (Semitic), *naḥūr* (Biblical Hebrew) and *hanci* (Hausa) share the [nasal] feature and the phoneme [n] which express the NI 'nasality'¹, but the rest of the phonemes are different. For instance, are the words *anzar* and *anf* etymologically related or were the phonemes /z/ and /f/ chosen because they express the same NIs? The Amazigh noun *anzar* 'nose' contrasts with *ansar* 'blowing one's nose'. Many roots in Semitic and Amazigh show that the phonemes [f] and [s], respectively, are associated with 'blowing/exhaling/flowing'. Accordingly, 'blowing' is the NI associated with the feature [strident] within these phonemes². The words *anzar* and *anf* also contrast with respect to the sound /r/. The word *anzar* has morphological cognates in Semitic (Biblical Hebrew *naḥūr* 'nose' and Arabic *ḥinzir* 'pig')³. The segment /r/ is found in words indicating 'river', which also contains or specifies the idea of 'flowing/blowing'. We conclude that in words such *anzar* the segment /n/ indicates a locus, /z/ an event and /r/ a manner. Moreover, the syntactic tree proposed for the root involves segment hierarchy, i.e. which segment is the head and which ones are satellites. The positions order in the tree suggests that /s/ is the head, /r/ its complement and /n/ its specifier. These facts lend support to the hypothesis that /s/, as events, is a heads; /n/, indicating locus, is a specifier, while /r/, a manner component is a complement. Finally, the structure proposed offers a new way to look at the root extension theory suggested in the literature (Jagger 1988, Frajzyngier 2002; Militarev 2003 and Ehret 2008) among many others.

¹ Also English 'nose' and French 'nez'.

² B&D (2007:116-117) attribute this NI to the segment /f/ in Semitic.

³ This suggests that *ḥinzir* originally meant 'pig's snout' before it was extended to 'pig' by metonymy. Likewise, the Semitic word *anf* also has a cognate in Amazigh (*ḥinfis* 'hedgehog'), which suggests that *ḥinfis* also originally meant 'hedgehog's snout', extended to the animal by metonymy. Accordingly, the roots NF and NZR/NḤR existed in both Semitic and Amazigh but specialized and used differently.

References

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