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), nakhur (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 phonemes 2. The words anzar and anf also contrast with respect to the sound /r/. The word anzar has morphological cognates in Semitic (Biblical Hebrew nakhur ‘nose’ and Arabic ḡinzir ‘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, Frązyngier 2002; Militarev 2003 and Ehret 2008) among many others.

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1 Also English ‘nose’ and French ‘nez’.
3 This suggests that ḡinzir originally meant ‘pig’s snout’ before it was extended to ‘pig’ by metonymy. Likewise, the Semitic word anf also has a cognate in Amazigh (ḥinfīs ‘hedgehog’), which suggests that ḡinfīs also originally meant ‘hedgehog’s snout’, extended to the animal by metonymy. Accordingly, the roots NF and NZR/NHHR existed in both Semitic and Amazigh but specialized and used differently.
References


