# Submorphemes in Hebrew

An innovative **general theory of “submorphemes” in** Hebrew

(and beyond) is here proposed, to account for phonesthemes etc.

## Words to Submorphemes.

The “morpheme” (now universally accepted) was itself Bloomfield’s 1926 innovation, preserving the Arbitrariness that de Saussure claimed for words, by focusing in on this smaller unit. Later, others posited even smaller units, submorphemes (e.g. phonesthemes). And nanosyntax (see Michal Starke’s on-line “Primer”) would imply the existence of submorphemes by claiming that simplex lexical items like *Die* can be (nano-syntactically) complex, occupying whole subtrees.

Phonesthemes are le**xical clusters,** like *GL* in *GListen, GLeam*, etc. Articles on them[[1]](#footnote-1) have broken through into mainstream linguistics journals, but without answering basic questions:

1. Are phonesthemes always initial two-consonant clusters, or can they have other constituents?
2. Are they onomatopoetic, or even meaningful? Assigning individual meanings to phonesthemes is extremely challenging.
3. Are they universal, with or without meanings?

Although consonant clusters arise in Hebrew as a result of vowel-drop (how can they be lexical clusters?), , Hebrew will be our principal language of investigation, because: 1. bi-consonantal root theory is a heterodox subfield of Hebrew linguistics, parallel to phonesthemes. 2. Hebrew does exhibit the striking phonesthemes like *DV* in *DVorah* ‘bee’ and *DVash* ‘honey’ (obviously lexical, and onomatopoetically, *Dv*- is a good imitation of bees buzzing.).

## Our claims will include:

1. Observation of contrasting functionality distinguishing consonants from vowels, in Hebrew and beyond;
2. Observation of vowel motility even beyond Semitic. Among the other insights crossing the divide of language families is the linguistic explanation of “why Gold is expected to Glisten,” noting a linguistic parallel between *GoLd* and *GListen*.

On the universality of submorphemes, we will exemplify many **lexical** parallels, “hiding in plain sight” within and between languages.

## Universal Meanings.

On the most ambitious question of universal meanings, our most challenging example will be *GL*, broadly recognized by researchers as meaning ‘bright light.’ Obviously this meaning does not fit Hebrew examples like *GLidah* ‘ice-cream,’ *GLol* ‘roll’), but Arabic *aGaL* ‘quick. exemplifies the pervasive semantic communalities found.

The proposed theory of submorphemes “modifies” de Saussure’s “axioms” little more than various branches of post-Chomskyan and even pre-Chomskyan linguistics. Its innovations like vowel motility lead to new implications in typology and lexical semantics. One indirect example of the way in which Semitic and non-Semitic language structures are brought together is seen in the stenographic system called “Speedwriting,” (*spdwrtng*) in which vowels are omitted as in Semitic spelling. The comprehensibility of speedwriting in non-Semitic languages supports using Hebrew as starting point for new insights that apply to Hebrew and beyond. For Saussure, He. *even* could have meant ‘tree.’ Is this really so?

1. \*\*\*\*Gutierrez, E.D., Roger Levy, & Benjamin Bergen. (2016). Finding Non-Arbitrary Form-Meaning Systematicity Using String-Metric Learning for Kernel Regression. Proceedings of the Association for Computational Linguistics.

   Bergen, Benjamin. (2004). The psychological reality of phonaesthemes. Language, 80(2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)