

2.2 A Comparative Historical Overview

Today the prevailing view is that Semitic is only a branch of a much larger group of languages, comprising hundreds of languages in North Africa. This group, once known as Hamito-Semitic is nowadays called Afroasiatic. Nevertheless, Semitic languages are set apart as a special linguistic grouping because they possess a remarkable degree of unity in their phonology, morphology, vocabulary and syntax. It is clear that Semitic languages influenced each other a great deal more than the Indo-European languages, although the process responsible for these mutual influences remains a matter of speculation and debate.

The divisions of Semitic is based upon geographic distribution: East Semitic—Mesopotamia, with various dialects of Akkadian; Northwest Semitic—Syria-Palestine, with Hebrew, Canaanite dialects, Aramaic; and Southwest Semitic—Arabia and Ethiopia, with Arabic and Ethiopic. The specific positioning of languages within this classification scheme has been questioned especially with the discovery of Ugaritic, Amorite and Eblaic. Nevertheless, all of the languages within the Semitic family possess a large number of common elements.

2.2.1 Proto-Semitic

The term *Proto-Semitic is used to describe a reconstructed hypothetical language whose features are abstracted out of individual Semitic languages and are inferred to have temporally preceded the emergence of the known Semitic languages. Within the realm of phonology, *PS phonemes are reconstructed from attested phonemes of all the Semitic languages.

Based on the hypotheses that language tends to simplify over time and that new elements are not usually introduced unless they result from internal need or external influence, scholars assume that within the development of the Akkadian language a coalescence of some of the Proto-Semitic phonemes took place. In other words, certain Akkadian phonemes go back to more than one original phoneme. This phenomenon may be established by comparing Akkadian phonemes with phonemes in other Semitic languages.

Akkadian	Hebrew	Aramaic	Arabic	*PS
zēru	zera' זרע	z'ra' זרע	zar' زرع	z
aḥāzu	'aḥoz אהז	'aḥed אהד	'aḥada أخذ	ḏ
ṣayyādu	ṣayyād ציד	sayyād ציד	sayyad صياد	ṣ
eršetu	'ereṣ ארץ	'ara' ארע	'arḡ أرض	ṣ, ḏ, t
ṣillu	ṣel צל	t'lal ללל	ḡill ظل	t
šuru	šōr שור	tōr תור	tawr ثور	t
ešer	'ešer עשר	'šar עשר	'ašr عشر	š
ḥameš	ḥameš חמֵשׁ	ḥ'meš חמֵשׁ	ḥams خمس	š
kusītu	k'sūt כִּסּוּת	k'sūt כִּסּוּת	kuswat كسوة	s

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