

PARALLEL DEVELOPMENTS IN MISHNAIC HEBREW,  
COLLOQUIAL ARABIC,  
AND OTHER VARIETIES OF SPOKEN SEMITIC

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The mark of an accomplished Semitist generally is understood as facility if not mastery in most if not all of the classical Semitic languages. These would include Classical Arabic, Biblical Hebrew (BH), Akkadian, Ancient Aramaic, Geez, etc. There are, of course, many luminaries in the field who meet this criterion.

Much rarer is the Semitist who possesses not only ability in the classical written languages, but proficiency in the colloquials and spoken varieties as well. Such a man is the one whom we honor with this volume, Wolf Leslau. From his earliest work on the modern South Arabian languages to his majestic dictionary of Gurage and beyond, the spoken varieties of Semitic have been central to Leslau's work. Moreover, I hasten to add, this research has extended beyond South Arabian and Ethiopian, the two branches of Semitic with which Leslau is most commonly identified. He has also written several important articles on Judeo-Arabic<sup>1</sup>.

In light of Leslau's life-long interests in spoken dialects of Semitic, I am especially pleased to offer the present article as a small token of my esteem for this singular scholar. As a glance at my bibliography will readily show, this contribution could not have been written without the work of our honoree.

### Introduction

Among the more important advances in the study of the Hebrew language during the last several decades is the recognition of a Hebrew diglossia in ancient times. The catalyst for this finding was the conclusion of M. H. Segal (1927; 1936), E. Y. Kutscher (1963; 1971; 1982:115-47), and others, that Mishnaic Hebrew (MH) repre-

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1 For a complete bibliography of Leslau's works through 1982, see Devens 1982.

sents the natural colloquial Hebrew of post-biblical times and presumably earlier<sup>2</sup>. As such, this spoken idiom can be contrasted with the literary Hebrew reflected in the Bible<sup>3</sup> and in post-biblical literary compositions such as Ben Sira and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Accordingly, scholars such as C. Rabin (1976), E. Ullendorff (1977:11), and A. Bendavid (1967-71) have posited a diglossia with the BH/QH (=Qumran Hebrew) continuum<sup>4</sup> representing the written dialect and MH and its antecedents representing the spoken dialect.

When speaking of diglossia within Semitic, naturally one's attention is turned to Arabic. For it is not only this language which clearly presents the dichotomy between written and spoken varieties, it is also the one which first led C. A. Ferguson (1959) to introduce the term diglossia into the scholarly literature.

Although the differences between spoken and written Hebrew, on the one hand, and spoken and written Arabic, on the other, often have been noted<sup>5</sup>, the similarities between these differences generally have gone unnoticed<sup>6</sup>. I here propose, therefore, that MH departs from BH in ways strikingly similar to the manner in which colloquial Arabic departs from classical Arabic.

Before proceeding to the evidence to substantiate this claim, we should note that other varieties of spoken Semitic are also germane to our discussion, even though we cannot postulate diglossia. I refer to Neo-Aramaic, Modern South Arabian, and the modern Ethiopian languages. We cannot affirm that these spoken languages ever existed side-by-side with their classical, written counterparts, respectively, older forms of Aramaic, Epigraphic South Arabian, and Geez. But as they allow us to see how spoken dialects of Semitic develop in ways different from

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- 2 Segal's material is not totally reliable, because it was based on printed editions of the Mishna and not on manuscripts. But his overall conclusion that MH was a spoken Hebrew was not affected by this methodological problem. The work of Kutscher and other Israeli scholars has been based on manuscripts, the most important of which is the Kaufmann MS.
  - 3 Note the remark by Blau 1976:1, that BH "was always a *literary* language" (italics his).
  - 4 On the grouping of BH, especially LBH (=Late Biblical Hebrew), and QH as one continuum, see Yalon 1967:71; Qimron 1986:116. This position has been challenged recently in an important article by Morag (1988). The data utilized by Morag are undeniable, but in the main it is still true that QH is closer to BH than it is to MH.
  - 5 For Hebrew see now Rendsburg 1990. Arabic diglossia is so well recognized, there is hardly a need here to reproduce bibliographic references. For the uninitiated I cite one convenient summary: Altoma 1969.
  - 6 The only exception I am aware of is Chomsky 1964:164, who noted that both MH and colloquial Arabic are characterized by gender neutralization (see below, Section I).

the standard dialects, the evidence of these languages represents additional support for the process to be outlined below.

Let us proceed, then, to the evidence, concentrating most of all on Hebrew and Arabic, but with occasional asides to Aramaic, South Arabian, and Ethiopian. The examples presented below all come directly from the standard grammar books (Bauer 1910; Grotzfeld 1965; Willms 1972; etc., for colloquial Arabic; Krotkoff 1982 for Neo-Aramaic; Leslau 1941; 1956; 1959; 1967; 1968; Raz 1983, for Ethiopian; Johnstone 1975 for South Arabian). Thus there is no consistency in the transliterations; they have been copied directly from the various authors cited. Please excuse, therefore, for example, that a long vowel is marked sometimes by a macron, sometimes by a circumflex, sometimes by a following colon, and sometimes by being written doubly.

### I. Gender Neutralization

Throughout the standard written Semitic languages, as is well known, gender distinction is upheld in personal pronouns, pronominal suffixes, and verbs. But in the spoken idioms, almost always gender neutralization occurs in the second and third person plural forms. Thus in MH (Segal 1927:71; 1936:123; Kutscher 1963:259-61; 1971:1598-99; 1982:123-7; Haneman 1979-80:35-6, 466-8), almost all forms of colloquial Arabic (Bauer 1910:20, 23, 67-8; Grotzfeld 1965:18-9, 108; Willms 1972:9, 15, 39, 41; etc.)<sup>7</sup>, Neo-Aramaic (Krotkoff 1982:20, 26), and in the following Ethiopian languages: Amharic, Harari, Argobba, Gafat, and the East Gurage group (Leslau 1967:35, 114-5, 151, 212-6, 252, 277-8; Cerulli 1936:79-83, 91, 95; Leslau 1959:255, 261-2; Leslau 1956:53-9, 101-3, 108; Cohen 1931:137-8, 157-8, 163 [see under Walani])<sup>8</sup>.

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7 The only exceptions to the rule of gender neutralization in spoken Arabic are the Bedouin and Yemenite dialects, which are conservative in this regard due to geographical isolation. See Blanc 1970:130, 136; Rossi 1939:19-20, 26, 29.

8 Epicene forms occasionally occur elsewhere in Semitic, but they are not carried through the entire paradigm and thus they are excluded from our discussion. For one such example, see the Soqotri 2pl pronominal forms (Johnstone 1975:25-6).

## II. Merger of III<sup>P</sup> and III<sub>y</sub> verbs

Both MH and colloquial Arabic witness the merger of III<sup>P</sup> and III<sub>y</sub> verbs (Segal 1927:90-1; 1936:150; Kutscher 1982:127; 1971:1599; Haneman 1979-80:422-31; Bauer 1910:33-6; Blau 1961:84; 1966:176-8; Grotzfeld 1965:34; Willms 1972:10, 13, 16, 25; etc.). Thus, for example, Hebrew *ra'ûti* 'I saw' and *qarûti* 'I read'; and Arabic *ramēt* 'I threw' and *badēt* 'I began'.

## III. The Adjectival Clause

Another feature of the colloquials is the omission of one definite article in an adjectival clause. The formal rules call for the two-fold use of the definite article in expressions such as Hebrew *hā'îš haggādōl* 'the big man' and Arabic *al-kalbu l-kabîru* 'the big dog'. But in spoken varieties of Semitic, often the noun lacks the definite article and only the adjective bears it. This construction is attested in all five Semitic speech communities.

From the Mishna can be cited usages such as *kēneset haggēdōlāh* 'the great assembly' (Avot 1:1), *nepeš hayyāpāh* 'the good appetite' (Hullin 4:7), *pûl hallābān* 'the white beans' (Ma'aserot 4:6), and *ša'ar hā'elyôn* 'the upper gate' (Sheqalim 4:1) (Segal 1927:182-3; 1936:55-6).

Examples from Arabic are cited from a variety of colloquials (see, respectively, Grotzfeld 1965:93; Altoma 1969:79 [cf. Blanc 1964:126-8]; Feghali 1926:134-5; Bauer 1910:105-6).

Syrian Arabic	<i>bāb aš-šar'i</i>	'the east gate'
Iraqi Arabic	<i>yom il-imbārak</i>	'the blessed day'
Lebanese Arabic	<i>sûq et-twîle</i>	'the long road'
Palestinian Arabic	<i>'ēn il-bēḏa</i>	'the white spring'

The same phenomenon is attested in Neo-Aramaic<sup>9</sup>, e.g., *qalpa aw xwa:ra* 'the white hull', *katta ay lē:Ova* 'the upper millstone', and *guda:ne an bara:ye* 'the exterior walls' (Krotkoff 1982:51).

<sup>9</sup> Note the declined definite article: msg *aw*, fsg *ay*, cpl *an* (Krotkoff 1982:20).

From the material collected by T. M. Johnstone (1970:297) on the definite article in the modern South Arabian languages, we may note the following instance of this usage from Mehri: *askiin haydānōot* 'the new knives'.

The Ethiopian languages present us with a somewhat different situation, but here too this phenomenon may be witnessed. The syntax is slightly changed because, contrary to the Semitic norm, the adjective precedes the noun it modifies<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, the phrase is still composed of an anarthrous noun and an adjective bearing the definite article<sup>11</sup>. Examples follow (see, respectively, Leslau 1941:39; Raz 1983:35; Leslau 1968:48; Leslau 1956:47; Leslau 1968:8).

Tigrinya	<i>ʾəta šəbbəqti gʷal</i>	'the beautiful girl'
Tigre	<i>lagəndāb ʾənās</i>	'the old man'
Amharic	<i>təlləqu bet</i>	'the big house'
Gafat	<i>wäyə-š gägǧä</i>	'the new house'
Soddo	<i>maläq-i ge</i>	'the big house'

The opposite situation, where the noun has the definite article but the attribute is lacking it, also is attested in spoken dialects of Semitic, albeit more rarely<sup>12</sup>.

Examples from MH are *hattannūr tāmē* 'the unclean oven' (Kelim 8:10), *hamma ʾārākāh gəḏōlāh* 'the great pile' (Tamid 2:4) (Segal 1927:183-4; 1936:53).

From colloquial Arabic I am able to cite but one example, namely, Judeo-Arabic *ʾlmwḏʿ ḥyq* 'the worthy place' (Blau 1961:161 [cf. Blau 1965:107 n. 3]).

The language where this construction seems to occur most commonly is Mehri. The following examples again are taken from the data collected by Johnstone (1970:297, 303): *ḥəmyúh mātʿkʿ* 'the sweet water', *ḥəmyúh xawr* 'the brackish water', *aʿəgéen sóox* 'the big lad'.

In sum, the standard idioms in Semitic affix the definite article to both the noun and its attribute. In the spoken dialects, one of the two definite articles may be deleted.

10 This is due to Cushitic influence. See Leslau 1945:75-6.

11 In most cases the article is postpositive; occasionally it precedes the word defined. Consult the examples which follow.

12 The explanation for the less frequent usage of this construction has been put forward by Blau 1965:107; 1966:359. Deletion of the article from the adjective creates an ambiguity since, to use a Hebrew example, *hayyeled ṭōb* means 'the boy is good' as well as 'the good boy'. But deletion of the article from the noun does not affect our understanding since *yeled hattōb* can only mean 'the good boy'.

#### IV. Independent Possessive Pronoun

A further example is the development of an independent possessive pronoun. In classical languages--BH, classical Arabic, Geez, etc.--express possession in a number of ways, the most common of which is the construct phrase. One method which is not employed is an independent possessive pronoun. Yet when we compare the colloquial languages, we note how MH, spoken Arabic, and so Ethiopian languages do develop such a form.

In MH the form is *šel* (Segal 1927:43-4; 1936:46, 48, 198-200; Kutschera 1971:1596-7; 1982:124, 129-30). In colloquial Arabic, a variety of forms is used depending on the geographic dialect, e.g., Moroccan *dyāl*, Egyptian *bitāa*<sup>c</sup>, Palestinian *taba*<sup>c</sup>, Iraqi *māl*, Yemenite *hagg* (see, respectively, Willms 1972:38; Mitchell 1956:18; Kapliwatzky 1968:63; Altoma 1969:83; Rossi 1939:19). In the Northern Ethiopian languages of Tigre and Tigrinya an independent possessive pronoun *nāy/nay* is used (Raz 1983:42; Leslau 1941:52).

#### V. Anticipatory Pronominal Suffix

The next example is the anticipatory pronominal suffix. This is a very common syntactic device in MH, with the result that both noun and pronoun are used to refer to the same item. Sample usages follow (Segal 1927:191-2; 1936:200-1)<sup>13</sup>:

<i>yādô šel ʿānî</i>	‘the hand of (him) the poor man’ (Shabbat 102b)
<i>ʿên mēqārēbîn lô lēʿādām</i>	‘they do not draw (him) a man near’ (Avot 2:1)
<i>ʿāmērû ʿālāw ʿal rabbî ḥānînāʿ</i>	‘they said (of him) of Rabbi Hanina’ (Berakhot 5:5)

This usage also appears in colloquial Arabic. For example (see, respectively, Erwin 1961:171-2; Erwin 1963:332-4 [cf. Blanc 1964:128-32]; Feghali 1928:298, 362):

13 In the English translations of these Hebrew passages and of the Arabic and South Arabic material below, the anticipatory pronominal suffix appears in parentheses to highlight its syntax.

Judeo-Arabic	<i>wq<sup>2</sup>lw lh llh<sup>2</sup>rm</i>	'they spoke (to him) to the watchman'
Iraqi Arabic	<i>fallšuha lil-madrasa</i>	'they demolished (it) the school'
Lebanese Arabic	<i>qāl-lu lel-ḥkîm</i>	'he spoke to (him) the doctor'

A third spoken Semitic language which employs this feature is the modern South Arabian group. For example (Brockelmann 1908-13:2.226):

Jibbali	<i>hes le-<sup>2</sup>emî</i>	'for (her) my mother'
Soqotri	<i>ré<sup>2</sup>iš dse bîoh</i>	'ask (her) her mother'

### VI. Passive of the Simple Stem

Another instance where MH and spoken Arabic correlate in contrast to BH and written Arabic is the expression of the passive of the simple stem (Hebrew Qal, Arabic I Stem). In the classical languages this is accomplished through the internal change of the first vowel to *u*. This is well known in Arabic (Fischer 1965:106) and it has been recovered in BH (Williams 1970). But in MH and in colloquial Arabic the internal passive disappears. It is replaced in both languages by the N-Stem (Hebrew Niph<sup>c</sup>al, Arabic VII Stem), which in the standard idioms is utilized for the reflexive.

### VII. The Tense System

My final example is the tense system of MH and spoken Arabic, especially when contrasted with BH and written Arabic. This is not the proper place for a detailed discussion of the problem of the tenses in Semitic, especially in BH. But most would concur that the so-called tenses in BH and classical Arabic are not tenses at all, for different temporal concepts converge in both the perfect and the imperfect. But if we turn to the spoken dialects, then the term tenses is perfectly descriptive. In MH, the perfect is used solely for the past and the participle expresses the present and the future (the imperfect is reserved for modal usage) (Sharvit 1980). In colloquial Arabic, there is also "a clear tendency to assign tenses according to the division of time" (Blau 1977:4); the perfect is reserved for the past and the

imperfect is used for the present and the future (Willms 1972:18-9; Mitchell 1956:31, 36; Kapliwatzky 1968:18, 37; Grotzfeld 1965:80-4).

### Conclusions

These seven characteristics of spoken Semitic dialects collectively serve to contrast the colloquial varieties with the classical languages. It is true that occasionally one finds parallels to the above usages even among the written dialects. For example, the merger of IIP and IIIy verbs, the existence of an independent possessive pronoun, and the anticipatory pronominal suffix occur in Aramaic (Rosenthal 1974:20, 25, 50-1)<sup>14</sup>; the last of these three is common in Geez too (Dillmann and Bezold 1907:426-7); and already in Ugaritic there are signs of the N-Stem used for the passive (Gordon 1967:81-2). Also, alternative explanations may sometimes be possible. Thus, gender neutralization in most of the South Ethiopian languages may be the result of Cushitic influence (see, in general, Leslau 1945), and the same feature in Neo-Aramaic may have arisen due to Kurdish interference (Krotkoff 1982:64).

But generally, especially with Hebrew and Arabic where diglossia can be demonstrated, we can establish a dichotomy between the written and spoken varieties. The seven features presented above are peculiar to the spoken dialects but are absent from the literary idioms<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, in a more general sense, both

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14 Some scholars have argued that the presence of these three features in MH is due to Aramaic influence. In Rendsburg 1990 I present detailed arguments why this approach is unwarranted. In short, note that in each case there are sufficient anticipations of these MH usages in the Bible, even in early biblical texts. Accordingly, these grammatical features were present in Hebrew, at least in spoken Hebrew, before there was widespread contact with Aramaic. On the issue of the independent possessive pronoun see also Landes 1982:153\*. Other scholars (Feghali 1928:362; Blanc 1964:130) have suggested that Aramaic also is responsible for the anticipatory pronominal suffix in Arabic. Given the greater use of this construction in Syro-Palestinian and Mesopotamian dialects and its rarer use in other areas where Arabic is spoken, this conclusion is sound. But it does not effect our finding that this usage is characteristic of spoken Arabic and not written Arabic.

15 Actually, they are not totally absent from the written dialects, for the spoken dialects sometimes influence literary compositions. Thus most of the seven features discussed above appear in BH/QH also, but as deviations from the classical norm; see Rendsburg 1990. Similarly, concerning the merger of IIP and IIIy verbs in Arabic, Fischer 1965:113 noted that "Nichtklass. Formern dringen zuweilen in klass. Texte ein." Also, Brockelmann 1908-13.2.225 noted the occasional appearance of the anticipatory pronominal suffix in classical Arabic, "obwohl die Schulregel der Grammatiker es verbietet."



MH and spoken Arabic are analytical languages, whereas both BH and written Arabic are synthetic languages<sup>16</sup>. This typological distinction is borne out by some of the grammatical points raised in this article, e.g., the use of an independent possessive pronoun in the spoken dialects vs. other means of expressing the genitive in the written languages.

It remains to explain why MH and colloquial Arabic especially, and Neo-Aramaic, Modern South Arabian, and Ethiopian languages occasionally, witness the same developments. Clearly one would not argue for influence from one language to the other. Borrowing is out of the question in almost all the cases discussed. One would have to stretch the historical data available to assume, let us say, mutual contact between MH and colloquial Arabic. And while it is possible that spoken Arabic could have influenced the other three languages discussed (Neo-Aramaic, Modern South Arabian, and the Ethiopian group), it is highly unlikely that this is the proper explanation for shared features. Arabic influence in these languages generally has been in the area of vocabulary, less so in other grammatical categories (morphology, syntax, etc.) (see, e.g., Krotkoff 1982:64).

Accordingly, I would invoke the doctrine of parallel development, a linguistic phenomenon described by Antoine Meillet (1921:1.36-43). His main thesis was that dialects of a language incline to develop in the same direction, even without mutual contact. Meillet applied this finding to problems in comparative Indo-European grammar, and it has been introduced into Semitics by Joshua Blau in several of his studies (1969; 1980).

The spoken languages discussed herein, with large gaps of time and space between them, force us to apply the rule of parallel development to explain their shared features. I conclude, therefore, that MH and colloquial Arabic have independently developed similar characteristics, diverging respectively from their classical counterparts in similar manners. To a lesser extent this can be seen in Neo-Aramaic, Modern South Arabian, and the modern Ethiopian languages. I suspect that further investigation, especially if conducted jointly by specialists in the individual languages, would turn up other shared features. Regardless, the seven elements presented above are, I trust, sufficient evidence by which to recognize a certain drift in spoken Semitic, to be explained by the phenomenon of parallel development.

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16 On Arabic see Kaye 1972:41. I am unaware of any statement in the scholarly literature regarding Hebrew, though this contrast certainly is recognized by Hebraists.

## ADDENDUM

After this paper was submitted for publication, the Haim Blanc Memorial Volume (*Jerusalem Studies in Arabics and Islam* 12 [1989]) appeared with two articles of extreme interest to the present essay. They are Shelomo Morag, "Biblical Hebrew and Modern Arabic Dialects: Some Parallel Lines of Development" (pp. 94-117), and Olga Kapeliuk, "Some Common Traits in the Evolution of Neo-Syriac and Neo-Ethiopian" (pp. 294-320). Morag discusses points IV, VI, and VII above, and Kapeliuk treat points I, IV, and V above. In addition, both scholars answer to my concluding statement that "further investigation ... would turn up other shared features" among the spoken Semitic dialects.

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# SEMITIC STUDIES

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