

*An unexpected Semitic templatic morphology:
the Mehri case (Modern South Arabic, South Semitic)*

1. The Mehri (Modern South Arabic, South Semitic) verb system displays a set of peculiarities that sets it apart in the Semitic family (1b, c, d, g, h, i). Our aim is to show that all these peculiarities derive from the following two properties of the Mehri grammar:

(i) a verb template that differs from the one established for other Semitic languages (e.g. (Guerssel and Lowenstamm 1990)). More specifically, we will argue that the Mehri verb template does not have the “derivational syllable” (DS) usually taken to be the key signature of Semitic languages.

(ii) the systematic use in the morphology of both the skeletal and the segmental level of phonological representations.

The peculiarities of the Mehri verb system may be divided into two coherent clusters of properties, A and B in (1) on the data sheet below. We examine them successively. We adopt the CV framework ((Lowenstamm 1996), (Scheer 2004)). The relevant data are taken from (Johnstone 1975, 1987) and given in (2).

2. Cluster A: the Mehri verb does not have a derivational syllable.

2.1. A central property of the Classical Arabic verb template is the presence of a special templatic position, the “derivational syllable”, located between R₁ and R₂ (Guerssel and Lowenstamm 1990), as shown in (3). The assumption of such a position makes it possible to unify the forms with medial gemination, the ones with vowel lengthening, that are pervasive in Semitic, and the ones with consonantal infixation. In all cases, the DS is identified (by R₂ in geminated forms, by V₁ in lengthened forms and by a C-morpheme in infixed forms). We argue that the peculiarities of Mehri listed in A all derive from a simple assumption: the Mehri verb template does not have a DS (4).

2.2. A salient peculiarity of Mehri within the Semitic family is the absence of verb forms with a geminated second root consonant (*vs* Class. Ar. *kattaba*, *takattaba*; Akk. *uparris*; Bibl. Hebr. *qibber*, *qubbar*, *hitqabber*; Class. Eth. *qābbārā*, *?āqābbārā*, *tāqābbārā*, *?āstāqābbārā*, Syr. *qabber*, *?etqabber*). This fact cannot be ascribed to a general constraint against consonant gemination in Mehri, since geminates do exist in the language. The absence of medial gemination in Mehri can only be due to the absence of a CV site between R₁ and R₂ in the template of the Mehri verb.

This is confirmed by the analysis of the opposition *fāruuk* (va) ~ *fōorək* (vc). At first sight, this opposition seems to parallel the one observed e.g. in Class. Ar. *kataba* (form I) ~ *kaataba* (form III), Class. Eth. *qātālā* (I,1) ~ *qatālā* (I,3), *?āqtālā* (II,1) ~ *?āqatālā* (II,3), etc. It has indeed the 2 following properties: a) opposition short ~ long vowel between R₁ and R₂, and b) opposition between a simple form and an intensive form. However, as we show, there is no phonological vocalic length in Mehri: the length in *fōorək* is an automatic consequence of the presence of stress on the vowel between R₁ and R₂. More specifically, we argue that Mehri is a language with (a) Tonic Lengthening, and (b) Closed Syllable Vowel Shortening, where (c) the final syllable counts as an open syllable. Long vowels thus do not result from morphologically significant lengthening processes. In Mehri there is no more internal lengthening than medial gemination.

Finally, Mehri has apparently 2 forms with a -t- infix: *fāttrək* (vt₁) and *əttəruuk* (vt₂). We adopt the analysis suggested by (Lonnet 2006) according to which these forms are actually prefixed forms with a metathesis of the prefix and the first root consonant.

The template of the Mehri verb thus does not require an internal site hosting medial gemination, vowel lengthening and infixation. It has (a) the positions necessary for the realization of the root material, and (b) an additional (initial) position hosting the consonantal preformants. This template is given in (4a).

2.3. This said, the opposition *fāruuk* ~ *fōorək* raises an interesting question: if vocalic length does not mark the intensive-conative stem *fōorək* as derived, then what is the mark of derivation? We propose that it is the association of A to V₁ that marks the form as derived.

This is confirmed by the examination of prefixed forms like *šəfēerək* (**vš₂**), where V_1 is also identified by *A*.

This means that CV_1 is a morphological site in Mehri. Accordingly, we propose the verb template in (4b). To sum up: the Mehri verb template includes two morphological sites, the prefix and CV_1 .

3. Cluster B: the interplay of the 2 levels of phonological representations.

Property (1g) corresponds to the fact that Mehri derives the passive by apophony on the vowel between R_2 and R_3 (i.e. the thematic vowel, V_{th}) and not on V_1 (*fəruuk va* → *fəreek pass*, vs Class. Ar. *kataba* → *kutiba*, Bibl. Hebr. *kitteb* → *kuttab*). We claim that this fact blocks the possibility of using apophony on V_{th} to derive different verb classes, and *all va* verbs in Mehri have *uu* as V_{th} (vs Class. Arabic *labisa / kataba / kabura*, Class. Eth. *läbsä / qätälä*, Bibl. Hebr. *labeš / qabar / qaton*, Syr. *läbeš / qəṭal / qəpuḍ*, Akk. *ipqid / ilmad / iprus*, property (1h)).

(1i) directly follows from (1h). We show that the verbs of the type *fīrək* are the Mehri equivalents of the Classical Arabic verbs with thematic vowel *u* (i.e. the statives of the type *kabura*). We propose that the argument structure properties are expressed in Mehri by shifting V_{th} between R_1 and R_2 , i.e. to the CV_1 site defined in (4b).

The cluster of properties in B thus (a) constitutes an additional argument in favor of the analysis of CV_1 as a morphological site in Mehri, (b) shows that i. both V_{th} and *A* may be associated to CV_1 , and ii. V_{th} may attach to two sites: V_1 and the *V* position located between R_2 and R_3 . Depending on the skeletal position they are linked to, the segments *A* and V_{th} are the exponents of different morphosyntactic features. Take for example the forms **vc** and **vš₁** of the root *frk*. In *fōrək*, *A* is associated to CV_1 and it marks the form as *derived* (intensive conative); in *yə-šəfīrək*, the same *A*, associated to CV_{pref} , is a marker of *aspect/mood* (subjunctive).

The full set of attested combinations and the respective interpretations are given below :

segment	site	value	verb forms
<i>A</i>	CV_{pref} CV_1	aspect/mood derivation	vh , vš₁ . subj vc , vš₂
<i>h, š, t</i>	CV_{pref}	derivation	vh , vš₁ , vš₂ , vt₁ , vt₂
V_{th}	CV_1 V_2	argument structure <i>input of apophony</i> (→ <i>pass./subj</i>)	vb va etc

The variation of the values of segmental markers in function of their docking site counterbalances the lack of an internal derivational site (DS) in the Mehri verbal template. In cognate languages (all other Semitic ones, in fact) whose verbal template does display a DS, each segmental morpheme is associated to a single templatic site only, with a single morphosyntactic value.

4. Conclusion

To summarize, our analysis shows that the major characteristic of the Mehri verb template is the absence of an internal derivational site (Derivational Syllable).

The assumption that DS is a defining property of Semitic languages can therefore not be maintained. This result is in line with the classification of languages by the features of UG they instantiate, rather than their historical affiliation: on the one hand, DS is not a necessary property of Semitic languages; on the other hand, some non-Semitic languages have a verb template with DS, like the Creek language Muskogee ((5a), (Haas 1940, Ségéral 2005), and others do not, like Standard German ((5b), (Bendjaballah and Haiden 2002)).

Data and references

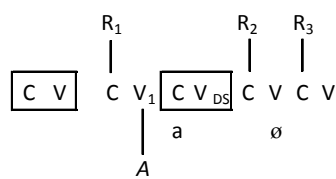
- (1) Abbreviations: Akk = Akkadian, Hbr = Biblical Hebrew, Syr = Syriac, Ar = Classical Arabic, Eth = Classical Ethiopian

		Semitic						
		N-East		N-West		South		
		Akk	Hbr	Syr	Ar	Eth	Mehri	
a.	Templates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	A
b.	R ₂ -Gemination	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	NO	
c.	V ₁ -Lengthening	NO	NO	NO	✓	✓	NO	
d.	Infixation	✓	NO	NO	✓	NO	NO	
e.	Apophony	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
f.	(C) Preformants	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	B
g.	Apophony between R ₁ & R ₂ in the passive derivation	NO	✓	NO	✓	NO	NO	
h.	Verb classes defined by V ₂	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	NO	
i.	V _{th} between R ₁ & R ₂	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	✓	

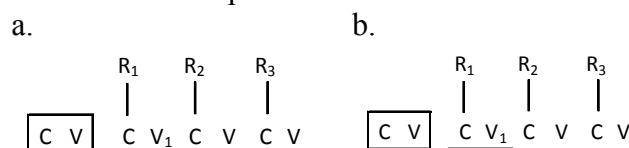
- (2) Mehri verbal forms [$\sqrt{\text{frk}}$ "to polish" ; tonic vowel underscored]

Johnstone (1987)		pf	sbj		pf	sbj	
simple v. type a, active	va	fəruuk	yə-freek	reflexive v. type a	vt ₁	fatrək	yə-ftiirək
simple v. type a, passive	pass.	fəreek	yə-frook	reflexive v. type b	vt ₂	əftəruuk	yə-ftəruuk
simple v. type b	vb	fiirək	yə-frook	caus. reflex. v. type a	vš ₁	šəfruuk	yə-šəfrək
intensive conative v.	vc	foorək	yə-foorək	caus. reflex. v. type b	vš ₂	šəfeerək	yə-šfeerək
causative v.	vh	fruuk	yə-həfrək				

(3) Classical Arabic Verb Template



(4) Mehri Verb Template

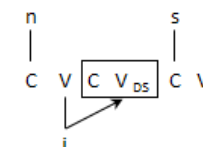
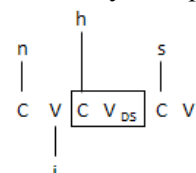
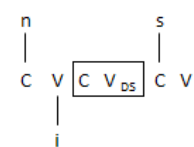


(5) a. Muskogee Verb Template:

nis "buy, compl. tenseless"

nîhs "buy, compl. immed. past"

nî:s "buy, incompl. all tenses"



b. Standard German Strong Verb Template:

(CV) (CV) CV₁CV₂CV₃

no DS

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