

## *Emory Resources on the Middle East*

### Arabic and Hebrew

**Arabic** *Sal•m* "peace"  
**Hebrew** *Shalom* "peace"

The words for "peace" in Arabic and Hebrew are not exactly the same, but they look suspiciously similar. Why?

The answer is that Arabic and Hebrew are closely related languages. They have a great number of similarities, not only in basic vocabulary but also in grammar, the forms of words, and sentence structure. They share these features because they belong to the same language family, that of the Semitic languages. In the following unit we will investigate some of these similarities and the background behind them. In the process, we will learn some important linguistic concepts, such as the concepts of language families, sound changes, and regular correspondences of sounds. We will also gain practice in analysis and problem-solving.

#### **Characteristics of Writing Systems in the Semitic Languages:**

Most Semitic languages have had an alphabetic script, with each sign in the script representing one sound, such as *b, d, f, t*, etc. (The number of distinct signs in an alphabetic script is usually between 20 and 40.) Akkadian is an exception to this rule. Akkadian was written in a combinations of cuneiform ("wedge-shaped") signs on clay tablets with a stylus (a long piece of wood or other material, like a pencil or reed pen without lead or ink). Each distinct sign in the Akkadian script represented a syllable, and not just one sound: *ba, bu, ga, gi, gu*, and so on. The number of signs in a syllabic script is far greater than that of an alphabetic script, between, say, 60 and 200. Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, and the other Semitic languages have almost always used alphabetic scripts.

There are some significant differences between the writing of Semitic languages and writing in, say, Greek, English, or Spanish. In general, the scripts of Semitic languages are primarily consonantal. Consonants are always written, but vowels are to a large degree omitted. While long vowels are sometimes written, short vowels are rarely written, except at the beginnings of words or occasionally in very short words. This means that the reader must often guess what the correct pronunciation of a word on the page is. For example, the Arabic word written *k-t-b* could be read *kutub* "books" or *kataba* "he wrote" or *kutiba* "it was written." To get an idea what this looks like, try the following exercise.

**Exercise I:**

Can you read the following text? Write it out in full.

Wht rmns t b sn is whthr we wll b bl t fnsh r prjct bfr th ddln. We hv jst thr wks bfr th frst of Dcmbr, nd we still hvnt cmplt d th scnd nd thrd prts. We wll hv t wrk lng hrs in rdr t cmplt th prjct on tm. Whn we fnsh, we wll gt pd a lrg bns bfr th hldys. Nvrthlss, we cnnt rsh ths jb, or ls th gulty wll sffr nd th cstmrs wll nt b stsfd. Gt to wrk, bt be crfl!

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*

Many of the Semitic languages, including Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and Arabic, have developed extra marks written above or below the consonantal letters to indicate the pronunciation of short vowels. These are only used in texts which are particularly important or sacred, such as the Bible or the Qur'an, or texts for beginners, such as grade school readers. Most ordinary texts do not have these extra marks. Another way of marking short vowels was adopted in the Ethiopic languages. Small additions are added to the shapes of the consonants themselves to represent the various vowels. Thus, different additional lines and hooks attached to the Ehtiopic letter *b*, for example, indicate that it should be read *ba*, *bi*, *bu*, etc.

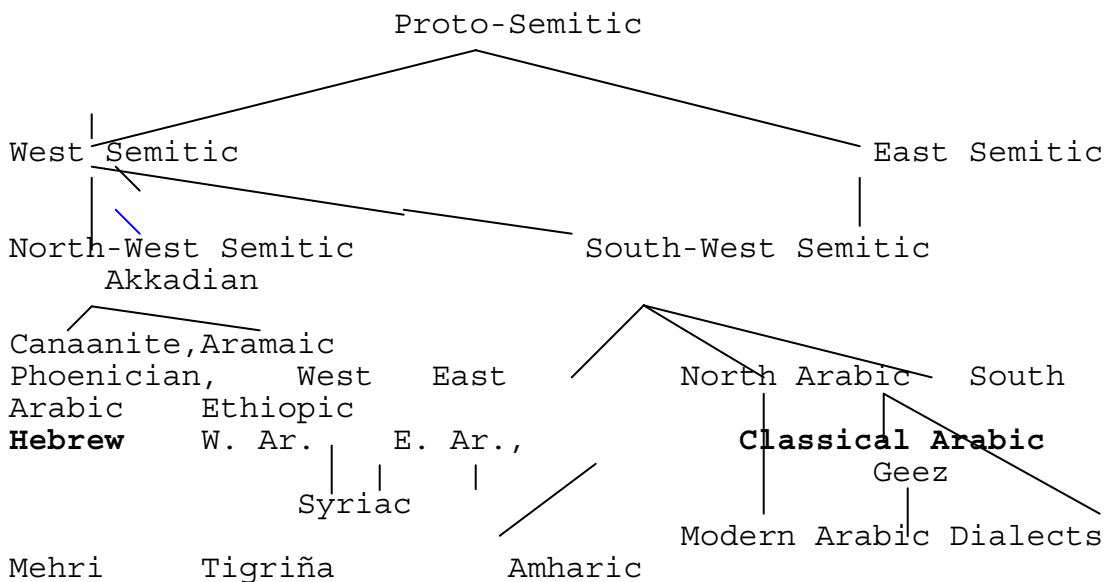
**I. The Semitic Language Family**

In general, there are two ways in which languages come to have similar elements. One way is borrowing. For example, English has borrowed many words from other languages, like *transfer*, *republic*, *tolerate* (Latin), *metaphor*, *oxygen*, *hydrogen* (Greek), and *valise*, *carte blanche*, *de riguer* (French), and *macho* (Spanish). The American phrase O.K. has been borrowed into nearly every language on the globe, and hundreds of English words are similarly widespread. This most often occurs with specific vocabulary items, especially nouns for new, imported, or unfamiliar items such as *computer*, *internet*, (*satellite*) *dish*, which are used frequently in both Arabic and Hebrew, not to mention many other languages.

Other similarities between languages occur because both languages derive from a common ancestral language. Because German and English derive from a common source language, and because French, Spanish, and Italian derive from Latin, they share many features, including similar vocabulary. In some cases, we have direct evidence about the ancestral language. For example, we have many books and documents written in Latin, the ancestor of Italian, Spanish, French, and Romanian, and the other Romance languages. In other cases, we have no direct information about the ancestral language. Whatever we know is reconstructed or extrapolated from the evidence available from recorded languages. For example,

linguists realized over two centuries ago that Greek and Sanskrit (and Persian, Latin, German, most of the other European languages as well) belong to the same language family. It was postulated that all these languages derived from a common ancestor, called Proto-Indo-European. Proto-Indo-European, however, is not a recorded language, it is an imaginary language reconstructed from the evidence of its descendants. Its words and forms are hypothetical; they are guesses about what must have existed at an earlier point in history in order for the similar words in Greek and Sanskrit to take the exact forms that they did.

It is this type of family relationship that is responsible for the similarities between Arabic and Hebrew. A chart of the Semitic language family is given below.



This chart shows that Arabic and Hebrew both belong to the West Semitic group of languages. Within that category, Hebrew belongs to the group of North-West Semitic languages, and Arabic belongs to the South-West Semitic languages. Aramaic is closer to Hebrew than Arabic is, and South Arabic (e.g., Himyarite) is closer to classical Arabic than Hebrew

is. Nevertheless, Hebrew and Arabic are not so distantly related that the similarities are difficult to see.

Scholars believe that the Semitic languages probably originate from the Arabian peninsula. Successive waves of migration of Semitic peoples out of Arabia and into neighboring regions of the Middle East and Africa spread the Semitic languages and caused them to branch off from each other. The earliest wave of migration we can deduce from the historical record is that of the Akkadians, who moved from Arabia into Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) nearly six thousand years ago. Other migration sbrought the Aramaeans into Syria and Iraq ca. 2500 B.C.E., the Hebrews to the Levant (modern Israel, Lebanon, Palestine) ca. 1400 B.C.. Another migration from Yemen across the Red Sea to Africa is responsible for the establishment of Semitic languages in Ethiopia ca. 300 B.C.E.. The most recent migration is that which occurred with the spread of the Islamic Empire in the seventh century C.E. This migration spread the modern Arabic dialects throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

## II. Sound Changes/Changes in Meaning.

Many of the words that derive from a common source in an ancestral proto-language do not look exactly the same in the descendant languages. For example, the word *door* in English is related to German *Tur*. The English *-r* resembles German *-r*, but the English vowel *oo* differs from the German vowel *u*, just as English *d* differs from German *t*. The important thing to realize is that the correspondence English *d* > German *t* is regular. When a pair of English and German words derive from a common source in the ancestral language, English *d* will usually occur whenever German has a *t*, at least at the beginning of a word.

English	German
d... >>>	t...
<i>do</i>	<i>tun</i>
<i>drink</i>	<i>trinken</i>
<i>door</i>	<i>Tur</i>
<i>dive</i>	<i>tauben</i>
<i>drag</i>	<i>tragen</i>
<i>dry</i>	<i>trocken</i>
<i>dell</i>	<i>Tal</i>
<i>drive</i>	<i>treiben</i>

th...	>>>	d...
<i>this</i>		<i>dies</i>
<i>that</i>		<i>dass</i>
<i>then</i>		<i>denn</i>
<i>thief</i>		<i>Dieb</i>
<i>thick</i>		<i>dick</i>
<i>thin</i>	<i>dünn</i>	
<i>three</i>		<i>drei</i>

t... >>>	z...
----------	------

two	zwei
to	zu
toll	Zoll
tow	ziehen
timber	Zimmer "room"
ten	zehn
toe	Zeh

These regular differences are the result of **Sound Change**, a historical process whereby certain sounds in certain positions of words tend to change regularly. Look for these types of regular correspondences when you examine the Arabic and Hebrew words below.

In addition, there are cases where two words of similar form derive from the same source in the ancestral proto-language, but do not have the same meaning. For example, English *timber* is related to German *Zimmer*; they derive from a common source. But German *Zimmer* means "a room". This is the result of a **Semantic Change, or a change in meaning**. We can guess that the original word had to do with wood, and that *Zimmer* used to mean a room built out of wood specifically. You will see examples of semantic change in the Arabic and Hebrew words presented below.