

Facets of Hebrew and Semitic linguistics

(Preliminary) syllabus for LING 214/614, JDST 215/675

Fall 2013

Details

Meeting: Tuesday and Thursday 11.35–12.50, DOW 112
Instructor: Tamás Biró
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Websites: Classes*v2, and backup: <http://www.biro.hu/courses/2013-HB/>

Description

Hebrew is a language with a fascinating history and many phenomena that are “exotic” to the native speaker of an Indo-European tongue. It is also one of the few languages that shaped linguistics for many centuries, and is still intriguing contemporary linguists. The family that it belongs to, Semitic languages, have also triggered the emergence of many concepts within the discipline, from the notion of a “language family”, representing the commencement of the historical-comparative method in the 18th century, to the idea of a “CV-tier” in late 20th century autosegmental phonology.

The course will offer an overview of various aspects of Hebrew, deploying a multitude of linguistic methodologies. The historical-comparative method will be discussed to locate Hebrew among the Semitic languages. Biblical Hebrew can be approached by traditional philology as much as by generative linguistics. Understanding rabbinical and medieval Hebrew requires the perspective of the sociolinguist. Modern Hebrew has been posing constant challenges to contemporary linguistic theories since the MA thesis of Noam Chomsky to the problem of opacity in Optimality Theory.

The course requires a basic familiarity with linguistics, but no knowledge of Hebrew. It is, however, expected that the students have at least some familiarity (1) either with some linguistic theories, (2) or with Hebrew (or another Semitic language); as well as a keen interest in learning more about the other. The course does not teach Hebrew, but provides a familiarity with interesting phenomena in Semitic languages. The course does not teach a specific linguistic framework, but explain why we should keep our minds open to a plethora of methodologies.

Requirements

Weekly homework, reading and discussion (30%): Each week, there will be an assignment due by the Tuesday class, and subsequently discussed during the Thursday class. Unless a good reason is provided, the homework must be handed in on paper in class. Very often, the homework will be based on the readings. For maximum points, a student must submit and actively participate in the discussion of ten out of the twelve assignments (3% each).

Midterm take-home exam (30%): A take-home exam due after the October recess. Graduate students will have to append a short essay (5 pages) about any topic related to the course, to be discussed in advance with the instructor.

Final examination (40%): An open-book final test in December, testing whether the student knows what and where to look up, and whether the student has acquired familiarity with the methods and phenomena discussed. A subset of the exam will be related to the weekly assignments. Graduate students will receive one additional question.

NB: If both students of linguistics and students of Jewish studies/Hebrew studies/Semitic studies/Oriental studies decide to follow the course, then the assignments and exam questions will take into account the heterogeneous background of the audience.

In weeks 2-4, Bennett's *Comparative Semitic Linguistics* will be used as a semi-textbook. Beyond that, however, the course is not based on a single textbook, but on a selection of articles and book chapters.

Academic honesty

Yale does not tolerate plagiarism, and Yale policy will be fully enforced. For more information, refer to <http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/cheating-plagiarism-and-documentation>. For more help on citing sources, you may also want to check out <http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/using-sources>. Please feel free to consult the lecturer in case of doubts.

Tentative course outline

Week 1	08/28:	Introduction: “welcome to the language-phenomenon-theory triangle”.
Week 2	09/03:	Semitic languages and the historical-comparative method.
	09/05*:	[Bennett, <i>Comparative Semitic linguistics</i> , Parts 1-3.]
Week 3	09/10:	North-Western Semitic languages; family tree vs. wave models.
	09/12:	Bennett, <i>Comparative Semitic linguistics</i> , Parts 4-7.
Week 4	09/17:	Biblical Hebrew and “philological linguistics”.
	09/19:	Rabin, <i>A Short History of the Hebrew Language</i> , Chapters I-IV.
Week 5	09/24:	Biblical Hebrew and inscriptions.
	09/26:	Naveh, <i>Early History of the Alphabet</i> , esp. chapters 1,2 and 4.
Week 6	10/01:	From Biblical Hebrew to Rabbinic Hebrew; functional diglossia.
	10/03:	Rabin, <i>A Short History of the Hebrew Language</i> , Chapters V-IX.
Week 7	10/08:	Medieval Hebrew and the “Jewish languages”; contact linguistics.
	10/10:	Harshav, <i>Essay on Multilingualism</i> .
Week 8	10/15:	The revival of Hebrew: various narratives; language and identity.
	10/17:	Rabin, <i>A Short History of the Hebrew Language</i> , Chapters X-XI.
Week 9	10/22:	Biblical Hebrew grammar, as perceived by old and modern grammarians.
	10/24:	OCTOBER RECESS

Midterm take-home exam due: *October 24, 9 a.m.*

Week 10	10/29:	Non-concatenative morphology.
	10/31:	Autosegmental approaches to Hebrew phonology.
Week 11	11/05:	Denominal verbs.
	11/07:	The psycholinguistic reality of the “root”.
Week 12	11/12:	Problems of opacity in Optimality Theory.
	11/14:	Contemporary phonological theories on Biblical and Modern Hebrew stress.
Week 13	11/19:	The syntax of modern Hebrew in contemporary frameworks (e.g., HPSG).
	11/21:	Issues in computational linguistics and Hebrew.
		NOVEMBER RECESS
Week 14	12/03:	Is Hebrew a Semitic language?
	12/05:	Summary.

Final examination: 12/15/2013, Sunday 2.00 (TBC).

* Please note: There will be no class on Thursday, September 5 (Rosh Hashanah). We may have a make-up class during the Reading Week.

Preliminary bibliography

- Bennett, Patrick R. *Comparative Semitic linguistics: A manual*. Eisenbrauns, 1998.
- Benor, Sarah Bunin. Towards a New Understanding of Jewish Language in the Twenty-First Century. *Religion Compass* 2.6 (2008): 1062-1080.
- Coffin, Edna Amir, and Shmuel Bolozky. *A Reference Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. (NB: for those capable of reading the examples and paradigms in Hebrew letters!)
- Dekel, Nurit. The šif'el binyan in Israeli Hebrew: fiction or reality? *Leeds Working Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics* 14 (2009): 1-15.
- Dresher, BE. The prosodic basis of the Tiberian Hebrew system of accents. *Language* (1994): 1-52.
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- Hetzron, Robert. Two principles of genetic reconstruction. *Lingua* 38.2 (1976): 89-108.
- Robert Hetzron, Alan S. Kaye, Paul Newman (and others). In: Bernard Comrie (ed.). *The Major Languages of South Asia, The Middle East and Africa*. Routledge: London, 1987.
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- Shimron, Joseph: 'Semitic languages: Are they really root-based?'. In: Idem (ed.): *Language Processing and Acquisition in Languages of Semitic, Root-based, Morphology*. J. Benjamins: Amsterdam 2002.
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- Zuckermann, Ghil'ad. "Abba, Why Was Professor Higgins Trying to Teach Eliza to Speak Like Our Cleaning Lady?": Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, Prescriptivism and the Real Sounds of the Israeli Language'. *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 19.
- Zuckermann, Ghil'ad. 'A New Vision for "Israeli Hebrew": Theoretical and Practical Implications of Analysing Israel's Main Language as a Semi-Engineered Semito-European Hybrid Language'. *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5.1: 57-71.