

Overview of the Semitic Language Family

1.1.0 Why Study a Language Family?

The **motives** for studying a particular language, language family, or language area are numerous, and are frequently not what one would term *academic*. For some, the motive relates to family history or nationality: "*My ancestors are from West Africa, so I'll study Niger-Congo.*" "*My father served in the South Pacific during the war, so I'll study Austronesian.*" "*I want to get involved in Australia's Aboriginal heritage, so I'll study Australian languages.*"

Others might find the environment, lifestyle, or culture of its speakers alluring: "*Life in the Amazonian forest fascinates me, so I'll study Amazonian language.*" "*Greek and Roman mythology has always intrigued me, so I'll study classical Indo-European.*"

Sometimes you get involved in a particular language area purely by accident -- "*There was a language requirement and Hindi was the only thing that fit my timetable.*" "*We were doing Tagalog in Field Methods.*" "*There was an opening on the Finno-Ugric project for someone to work on Samoyed.*" Every areal linguist has his/her own story.

1.1.1 Linguistic Approaches to Language Families

The range of **approaches** to the study of language families/areas is more limited. In fact, there appear to be only two: *genetic* and *typological*. One might want to look at the range of languages within a particular family in order to study the range of variations on a particular typological theme exemplified by that family. For instance, the type of *head-marking* phenomenon traditionally termed 'focus' or 'Philippine-type focus' appears to be best represented in Western Austronesian languages. And an interest in *non-concatenative morphology* must at some stage lead to an examination of Semitic languages.

For other arealists, the study of a family *is* the study of the historical relationships holding within that family. Precisely what languages belong to the family? What subgroups of languages can be identified within those? With what other languages or families does this family show 'external' relationships?

One can undertake the study of genetic relationships for at least three reasons:

- i. as an end unto itself
- ii. as a tool for understanding the (pre)history of the area over which the family ranges
- iii. as a source of data for the study of linguistic change in general

Of these three goals, the second is, in my experience, the most popular. Though there are undoubtedly those for whom the determination of genetic relationships is a puzzle worth solving for its own sake, most I think see that goal as just a part of a larger and more general exercise in (pre)history.

Just how many comparative-historical linguists are closet prehistorians, and how many are more concerned with the nature of language change in general is difficult to determine. I am myself more interested in the process and progress of change, and have chosen to play

out that interest within the context of particular language families rather than by picking and choosing data from the whole range of the world's languages. Whether that is a better way to work than the alternative --- collecting comparative data as broadly as possible -- is difficult to determine.

My feeling is that in the domain of phonology, where the basis of change is better understood, one might argue for casting one's net as widely as possible. This might also be true of lexical semantic change, but since we know little more about that than that metaphor is involved, the question is probably moot. In what might be rather vaguely described as the grammatical domain, where I believe (in spite of all the synchronic work undertaken over the past half century) that the engine of change is less well understood, it has always seemed to me best to collect as much information as possible about the grammatical history of particular languages. That goal is best served by keeping one's focus narrow.

1.1.2 Language Data in Time and Space

The development of a language family can be seen to proceed along two dimensions: space and time. The label *space* is rather misleading, because what I have in mind be the term is perhaps better captured by the terms *diversification* or *speciation* than as geographical extension. As a language system changes, it may give rise to a number of distinct, mutually unintelligible language systems that co-exist in time (and even perhaps, under the right conditions) in space as well. It is only by applying the comparative method to these distinct co-occurring systems that one can determine that they arose through a speciation process. For most of the world's languages and language families, this is how historical linguists must proceed, because the temporal dimension itself is largely hidden from us.

Without some means of recording linguistic expressions, language doesn't keep. So it is only for those languages with a reasonably long written record that we have any direct remains of their past. The languages and language families for which we have such records are very few in number. And even when there is such evidence, it is often fragmentary and difficult to interpret. For most Austronesian languages, evidence goes back less than two hundred years. And since the oldest records were not made by native speakers, and were not gathered systematically, they are not particularly trustworthy. The fact that there are texts in one language, Javanese, going back perhaps a thousand years, does little for our understanding of the family in general.

Writing systems are seldom completely transparent. If, at some point in the future, the only information about our English was from some selection of written materials from the 1990's, it would be possible for future linguists to get some feeling for English morpho-syntax perhaps, but the view of late 20th century English phonology that one gleaned from such data would be rather distant from the reality, I think. (If English leaves descendents, then some of the oddities of English orthography might be identifiable by using phonological information about those descendents.) Similarly, if all that future linguists knew about early 21st century Arabic came from newspapers from Algiers, Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, those linguists would get very little sense for the diversity in spoken Arabic. Modern standard Arabic is a rather artificial language, and quite distant from the vernaculars used in the Arabic-speaking world. There is no reason, I think, to

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believe that such situations might not have been the case in the past as well. But it would be difficult to recover the situation unless one were lucky enough to find evidence of 'unlettered' language, and be able to identify it as such.

1.2 Semitic Languages: History and Speciation

1.2.1 Modern Speciation

The degree of diversity (speciation) within the Semitic language family is small, in comparison to language families like Austronesian or Indo-European. Figure 1 presents the extant Semitic languages, according to the classification of Faber (1997).

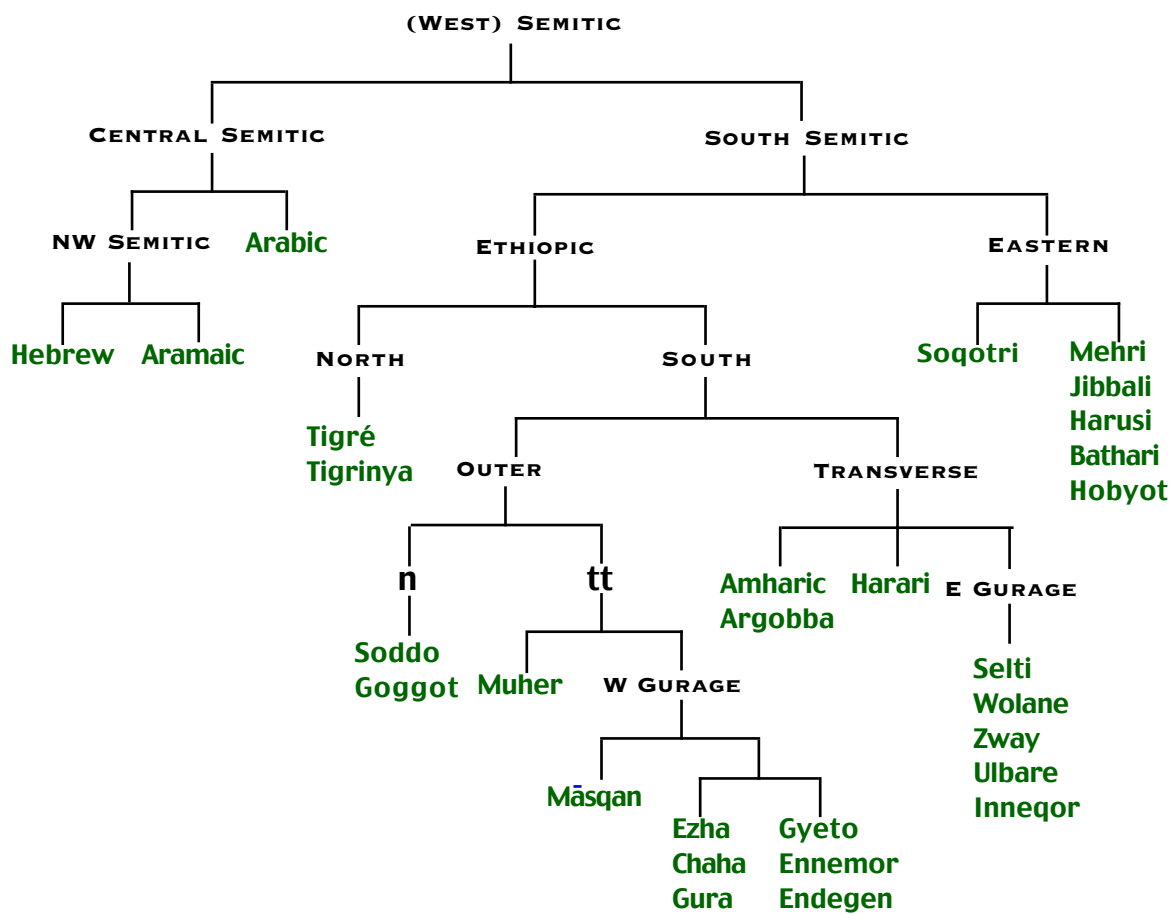
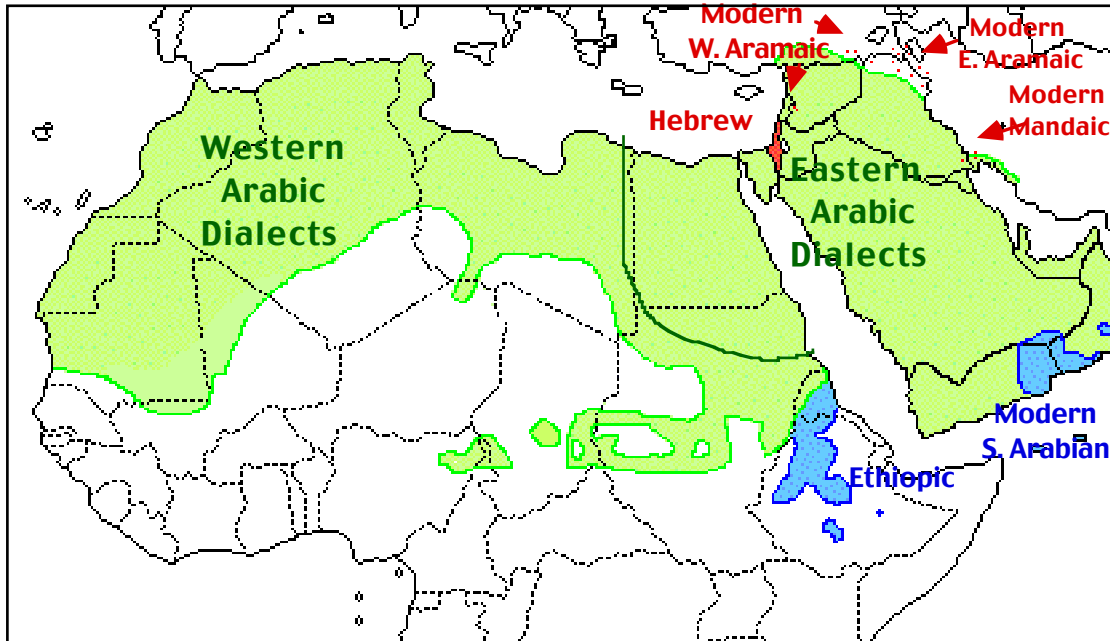


Figure 1
 Modern Semitic Languages

Figure 1 omits an entire branch, East Semitic, for which no materials exist after c. 100 CE and which had probably had no native speakers for some centuries before that. A second branch, Central Semitic, is represented by only three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. Of these, **Modern Hebrew** is a rather unusual case, since it is a late 19th century revival of a language that has had no native speakers for again perhaps two millennia. Though historically rather anomalous, it is nonetheless a Northwest Semitic language. It currently has some 4 million native speakers. **Modern Aramaic** is a set of dialects, not all of

which are mutually intelligible, with perhaps 300,000 speakers. So far as I am aware, most Modern Aramaic dialects are endangered.



Map 1
Distribution of Modern Semitic Languages

It may not be quite fair to present **spoken Arabic** as a single language since, again, not all its numerous dialects are mutually intelligible. By far, the majority of native speakers of contemporary Semitic languages are speakers of Arabic (some 130 million speakers in an area covering North Africa, the Arabian peninsula, the Levant, Mesopotamia, the north coast of the Persian Gulf, and some islands in the Indian Ocean). All other modern Semitic languages combined have perhaps one fifth the number of speakers of modern Arabic.

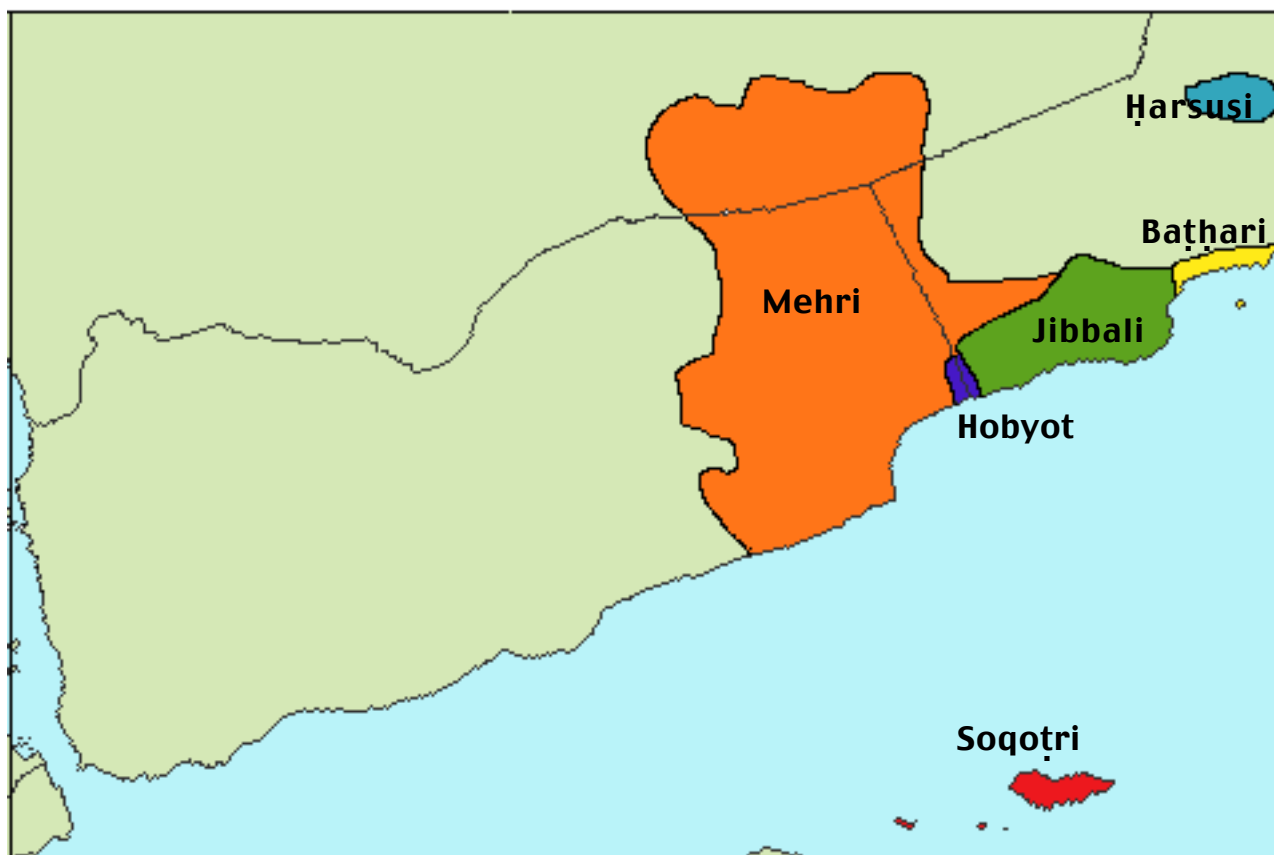
Language	Speakers
Arabic	130 million
Amharic	15 million
Modern Hebrew	4 million
Tigrinya	4 million
Tigre	800 thousand
Gurage	650 thousand
Modern Aramaic	300 thousand
Modern South Arabian	200 thousand
Harari	30 thousand
Argobba	nearly extinct

Table 1
Modern Semitic Languages

Modern South Semitic has two branches. The eastern branch are the **modern South**

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Arabian languages, of which Simeone-Senelle distinguishes six. Five are spoken in mainland Yemen and Oman and the sixth, Soqotri, on the island of Soqatra and adjacent small islands. *Mehri* and *Soqotri* have substantial numbers of speakers (100 thousand and 50 thousand, respectively). *Jibbali* has several thousand speakers. Speakers of the remaining languages probably number in the hundreds.



Map 2
Modern South Arabian Languages

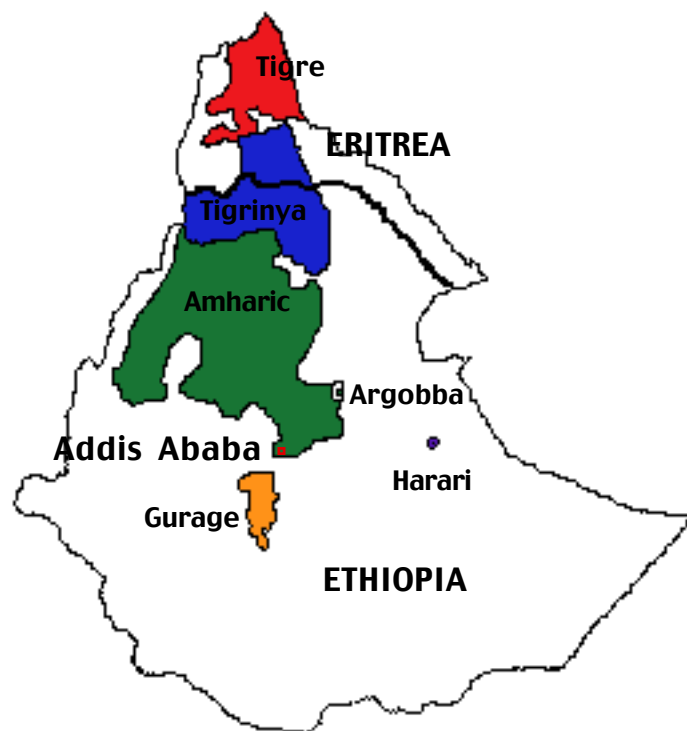
after Simeone-Senelle 1997

The most diverse branch of modern Semitic is **Ethiopic**, with some twenty languages (two thirds of all Semitic languages, depending on how one counts languages). The largest, *Amharic*, is the national language of Ethiopia and has some fifteen million speakers. *Tigrinya* has about 4 million, *Tigre* about 1 million, and the remainder perhaps one million in total. *Argobba* is probably near dead.

1.2.2 Time Depth: Ancient Semitic Languages

Whatever interest it may lack in terms of modern speciation, the Semitic language family makes up for in history. No extant language family has a longer history, For **East Semitic** records exist for some two and a half thousand years, until the branch dies out c. 100 CE. The written record for **Northwest Semitic** extends some three and a half thousand years, from c. 1500 BCE to the present. The quantity of evidence is not consistent throughout the period, however. (In particular, the quantity of original material in Aramaic declines after

the start of the second millennium CE. Material in Hebrew material for at least the past two millennia (the past century excepted) is not the work of native speakers. Apart from short inscriptions and glosses, there is little material in **Arabic** before 300 CE. Although there is an almost continuous record in Arabic from that time, the changes undergone by the Arabic vernacular are not particularly well represented for most of the period, given that most written Arabic has been heavily influenced by the language of the Qur'an (c. 650 CE). **South Arabian** material, inscriptions and some texts, span 1500 years from c. 1000 BCE. There is little information about these languages from c. 500 CE until modern times. Ethiopic materials begin around 500 BCE, but increase in number after 400 CE. Most pre-modern texts, since the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia, are religious, and, as for Arabic, do not reflect the changes the languages have undergone.



Map 3
Modern Ethiopic Languages

after ling.ucsd.edu/~rose/Ethiopia.htm

1.2.3 Texts and Media

Ancient texts can be classified along at least two parameters:

- i. the physical material used to record the text
- ii. the text genre (purpose, subject matter)

One classification in terms of the material on which the text is written distinguishes:

- i. paleographic texts, written on perishable materials like papyrus or vellum
- ii. argillographic texts, incised into damp clay that is then allowed to dry
- iii. epigraphic texts or inscriptions, written on or incised into durable materials

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like rock, precious stones, ceramics, or metal

Within each category, subcategories can be distinguished. A *scroll* is usually a number of sheets of paper or vellum attached so that the document can be rolled up for storage. A *codex* is some number of sheets bound one atop the other, in the fashion of a modern book. A *bullae* is the impression of a seal, typically in clay. A *stela* (or *stela*) is a smoothed vertical stone surface onto which a text is inscribed. An *ostrakon* is a potsherd on which a short note is inscribed or written in ink, the notepaper of antiquity.

More argillographic material survives than paleographic, for obvious reasons. Of the large archives and libraries noted below, the only ones containing paleographic materials are the Qumran library and the Elephantine papyri, both found in *very* dry climates (the Judean desert and Upper Egypt, respectively). But even clay crumbles and deteriorates over time. The Ebla archive, from the last 3rd millennium BCE, survived in excellent condition because its clay tablets were fortuitously baked in the fire accompanying the destruction of the city.

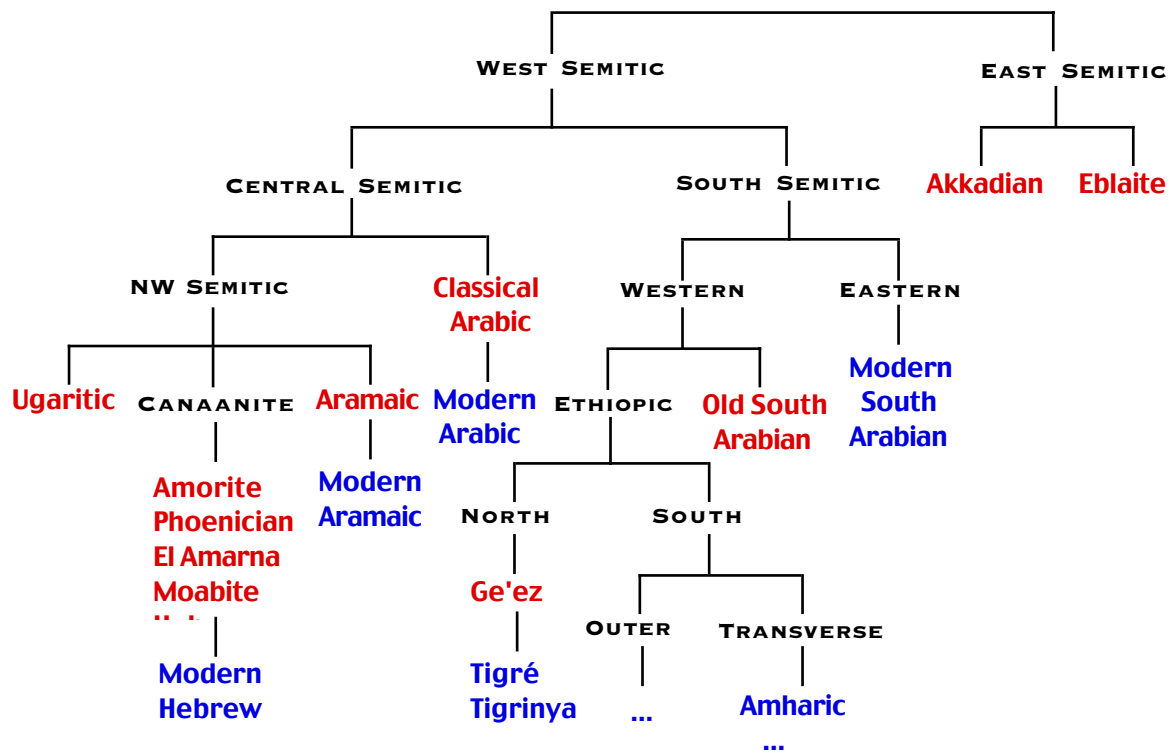


Figure 2
Ancient Semitic Languages and Some Descendents

We might initially distinguish three broad genre of text:

- i. documentary
- ii. literary
- iii. personal

though the boundaries between them are not always clear. In the ancient Near East,

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documentary texts are the product of a professional class of scribes, bureaucrats whose job it was to produce, maintain, and access the records deemed necessary for the proper functioning of the state, and to train their own successors. There is clear evidence of such bureaucracies in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Egypt from early dates. There is no reason to doubt that there was a scribal class, on an appropriate scale, in the smaller kingdoms and city states of Syria-Palestine beginning in the Iron Age (after c. 1000 BCE)¹.

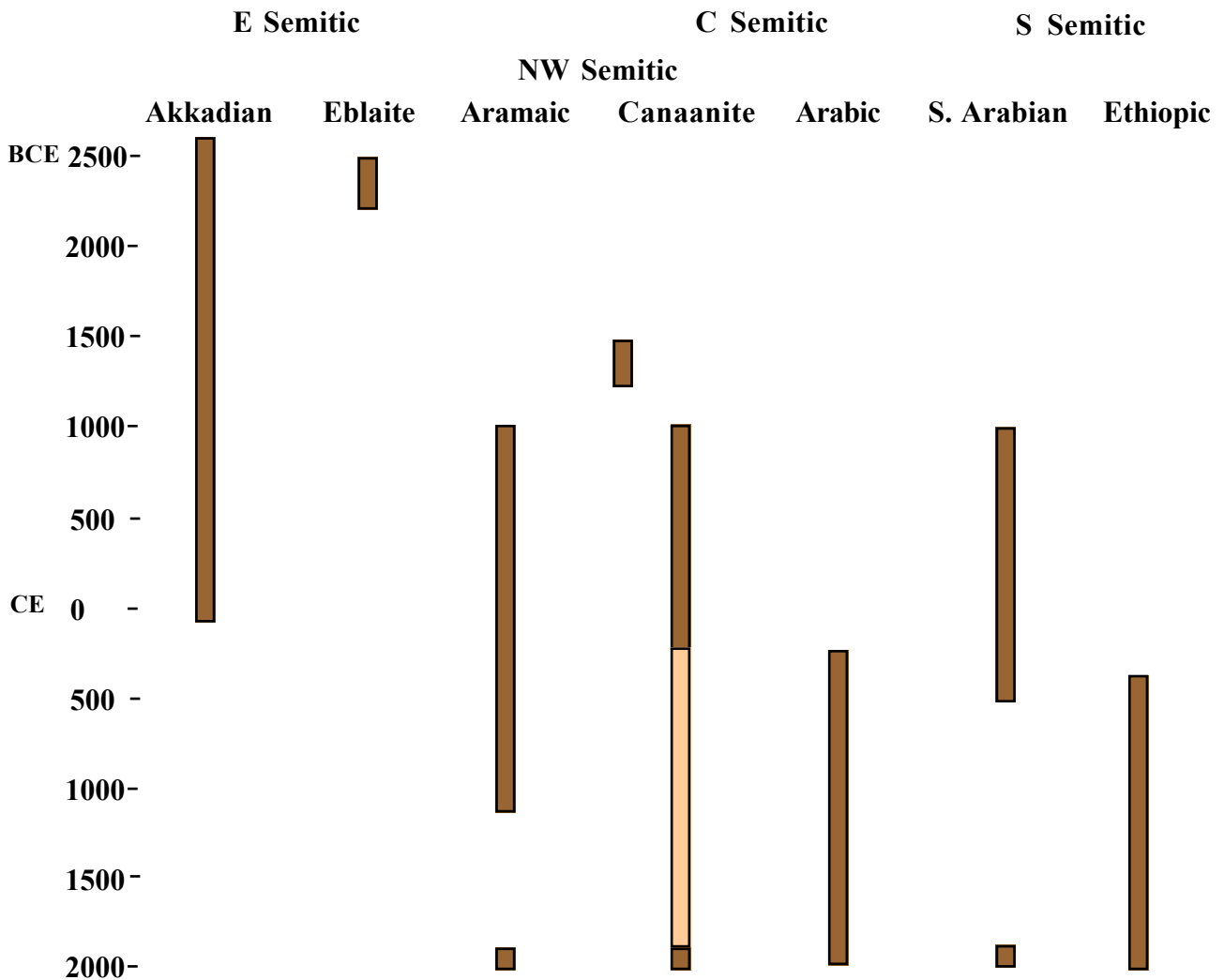


Figure 3
Time Lines for Linguistic Data on Semitic Languages

The scribes prepared financial and taxation records, treaties, annals of the reigns of kings, law codes, and monumental inscriptions. There is also evidence that they recorded astronomical observations and wrote medical and mathematical texts and, in Mesopotamia, compiled bilingual dictionaries. The 'scientific' activity of Mesopotamian and Egyptian scribes was largely limited to *onomastica*, lists of names for individual or class

¹There is little evidence for a scribal class in Greece in the classical or pre-classical periods, but a professional scribal bureaucracy was certainly a feature of the Hellenistic period (after c. 300 BCE).

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members of some category: king lists, profession lists, lists of plants, animals, and astronomical terms.



Map 4
Some Important Inscription and Archive Sites

Evidence suggests that the religious and secular bureaucracies were not separate in the ancient Near East, since it was generally through the temples that taxes were collected, and through the gods that kings ruled. Scribes working in temple and government bureaucracies were thus probably the same individuals, though one is tempted to associate their *literary* output largely with their religious function. Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Syrio-Palestinian scribes recorded myths, legends, liturgical and cultic texts, and 'wisdom'

literature (designed to set moral and ethical standards). This literature was not devoid of entertainment value; novellas, typically with some moral, were a feature of Egyptian literature in particular.

Some substantial archives and libraries from the ancient Semitic world for fortuitously survived. The best known is the Qumran library (the Dead Sea scrolls), from c. 200 BCE - 100 CE, and preserved in jars in the dry climate of the Judean desert. A number of rediscovered archives and libraries are much older:

- i. the Ebla archive from the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE, some 15000 cuneiform tablets excavated at Tell Mardikh (Syria) in 1974-75
- ii. the Mari archive (1820-1761 BCE), 24000 tablets written largely in Old Babylonian and excavated at Tell Hariri between 1933 and 1956
- iii. the Kanesh documents, a twenty thousand tablet archive in Old Assyrian from 1950-1850 BCE, from an Assyrian commercial colony (Kültepe, Turkey)
- iv. the archive of the Hittite royal capital (1750 - 1180 BCE), Hattusha (Bogasköy, Turkey), excavated through most of the 20th century.
- v. the library of Ugarit, a large archive in numerous languages, excavated at Ras Sharma, Syria (from 1929), and dating from c. 1400 - 1190 BCE
- vi. the el-Amarna letters, 400 tablets of diplomatic correspondence in the royal archive of Pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1350), discovered in 1887
- vii. the library of Assurbanipal (c. 650 BCE), excavated at the Assyrian royal capital of Nineveh
- viii. the Elephantine papyri, a set of mostly Aramaic texts from a 5th century CE Judean mercenary colony in Egypt

Personal texts are relatively rare, since literacy was far from widespread, though it probably did extend beyond the scribal class at least from the Persian period (after c. 540 BCE). Many individuals may have been able to write their names, and mark property in that way. Some may have known the alphabet, and left abecedaries. Some may have known how to write short votive texts, for use on amulets or bowls. Those engaged in commerce would have kept financial records, contracts, and bills of sale.

1.2.4 Dating

The absolute date at which a document was created is not necessarily a clear indication of the relative date of the *language* of that document, in terms of the history of a particular linguistic tradition. Documents can be copied and recopied with little if any change in linguistic form. For example, prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, our earliest copies of parts of the Hebrew Bible dated from c. 900 CE. Even the Qumran fragments, from c. 200 BCE, may postdate the composition of those documents by some centuries. (Errors made by poor scribes give an indication that the language of a document is poorly understood by the individual copying it.)

Archaic linguistic forms and models were often used for literary purposes in the ancient, as well as the modern Semitic world. The cardinal example is, of course, Modern Standard Arabic. But as early as the first half of the first millennium BCE, Assyrian court circles employed what Huenergard (1997) terms Standard Babylonian, modelled on Old Babylonian, as a literary language. Some scholars have speculated that Biblical Hebrew

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may not have been the vernacular for those who wrote (sections of) the Hebrew Bible.

Palaeographic evidence, evidence from the form of the glyphs employed in a text, can be used to provide a relative date for written material, provided that the text is sufficiently long and varied to provide evidence for typological comparison. But it is always possible that a particular text has been deliberately written in an archaic style (for example, the use of Gothic lettering for modern invitations, or the use of Palaeo-Hebrew script on some coins of the Hasmonean period.) In theory, palaeography can also give rough absolute dates, *if* some absolute date can be given for a base text of the same type. The result, of course, is only as reliable as the base date.

For materials like ostraca or clay tablets, their position in the stratigraphic sequence of an excavation is a standard dating technique, useful provided that there *is* a reasonably undisturbed stratigraphic sequence. (It is, for example, relatively common for materials originally from an earlier period to be used as building material by later inhabitants of the same site.)

1.3.0 Language Names

The correspondence between the language names that appear in Semiticist literature and what linguists might want to term distinct languages or distinct linguistic traditions is not always close. A well-known example is again that of **Arabic**, a language name generally used to refer to all varieties and periods in the Arabic linguistic tradition, even though many of the modern vernaculars subsumed under the name are not mutually intelligible. The diglossia that persists in the Arabic-speaking world may contribute to this naming tradition.

Some language names refer to the archaeological site primarily associated with materials in that language. **Eblaite**, for example, is the East Semitic language of the Ebla² archive. **Ugaritic** is the NW Semitic language of the Ugarit³ archive (1400 - 1200 BCE). It is the earliest non-fragmentary attestation of NW Semitic,⁴ antedating most early NW Semitic inscriptions by some 300 years. What is not entirely clear is how Ugaritic relates to these later linguistic forms. Is it a distinct NW Semitic tradition that left no descendent? Does it reflect a period before the split between Canaanite and Aramaic NW Semitic dialect areas developed, or is it a direct antecedent of Phoenician?

1.3.1 NW Semitic Texts and Language Names

The earliest NW Semitic materials have already been noted, Ugaritic and Amorite. Apart from Ugarit, there are no large archives or libraries of NW Semitic texts, apart from the Biblical and Qumran corpora. The term **Amorite** comes from the gentilic *Amurru* used in

²The city of Ebla flourished in the second half of the 3rd millennium BCE, and was destroyed by Naram-Sin of Akkad, c. 2200 BCE.

³Ugarit was destroyed c 1190 BCE in the upheavals of the early 12th century eastern Mediterranean. The archive contains material in Hittite, Akkadian, Egyptian, and Hurrian, as well as Ugaritic.

⁴The Amorite names and formulae in the Mari archive and the Canaanite glosses in the el-Amarna letters are earlier, but fragmentary in comparison to the Ugaritic materials.

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Old Akkadian documents to refer to apparently West Semitic speakers. Materials deemed Amorite consist of names and short phrases embedded in otherwise Akkadian documents.

Later NW Semitic materials are classified as belonging to either **Canaanite** or **Aramaic** dialect areas. The term *Canaanite* is perhaps particularly unfortunate since it has ethnic and geographic connotations grounded in Biblical literature. It is not at all clear who should be termed Canaanites or what area should be included within the bounds of Canaan, on other than linguistic grounds. (The NW Semitic names and glosses appearing in the otherwise Akkadian el-Amarna documents are termed Canaanite, because those documents originate in or refer to places in what the Bible terms Canaan.)

The Canaanite dialect area subsumes materials termed Phoenician, Punic, Hebrew, Ammonite, Moabite, and Edomite. Most of these designations are geographic and, in cases in which the amount of material is particularly scant, might be taken to refer to a particular set of texts.

Early **Phoenician** materials like the 10th century BCE Ahiiram inscription from Byblos are those from coastal sites, and sites in Cyprus or Egypt. For later materials, palaeographic and linguistic criteria are used to distinguish Phoenician from other Canaanite material. **Punic** refers to texts from Carthage (800 - 146 BCE) or its colonies. Punic texts and inscriptions are more numerous than Phoenician. Some 200 Neo-Punic inscriptions (c. 200 BCE - 100 CE) have been identified in North Africa, Sicily, and Sardinia.

Other Canaanite texts are variously labelled Ammonite, Moabite, or Hebrew. These designations are largely geographic and political. Materials like the Amman Citadel inscription (c. 900 BCE), the Heshbon Ostrakon and the Tell Siran bottle inscription (c. 600 BCE), and the Deir 'Alla texts (c. 800 BCE) are termed **Ammonite**. (The Deir 'Alla material is a matter of some controversy; some consider it Aramaic, and others classify it as a distinct NW Semitic language.) **Moabite** is attested only in the Mesha Stele (c. 840 BCE), the el-Kerak ostrakon, and a few seals⁵. The language of these texts, particularly the Moabite, differs little from that of contemporary Palestinian materials like Gezer calendar (c. 925 BCE), Siloam tunnel inscription (c. 700 BCE), and the Lachish ostraca (c. 590 BCE), that are termed **Hebrew**.

Biblical and Rabbinic materials comprise the bulk of the pre-modern Hebrew corpus, of course. Though itself not linguistically uniform, most of the language of the Hebrew Bible is probably relatively late (5th century BCE). Hebrew continued to be used as a Jewish literary language long after it had ceased to a vernacular (in the Roman period at the very latest), under its spoken revival in the late 19th century CE.

Aramaic dialect names are typical of Semiticist naming conventions. The primary division is roughly chronological. **Early** (Old or Ancient) **Aramaic** (up to the consolidation of the Neo-Assyrian Empire under Sargon II 745-705) includes inscriptions like the Tel Dan inscription (with its reference to the House of David, c. 900 BCE), the Tell Fekheriye Akkadian-Aramaic bilingual (c. 850), the Sam'al and the Hamath inscriptions (c. 780). **Official Aramaic** (750 - 300 BCE) was the bureaucratic and diplomatic language of

⁵Some doubts regarding the mid-19th century dates for the Moabite material are raised by Lemche 1998:45.

the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Achaemenid empires. It is widely attested and includes the Elephantine papyri and the Aramaic portions of the Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. **Middle** (Hellenistic and Roman periods) **Aramaic** was the principal language of the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (300 BCE -200 CE). **Late Aramaic** is the period up to Islamicisation c. 1000 CE. Texts in Middle and Late Aramaic are voluminous. **Modern Aramaic** (or Neo-Aramaic) refers to the Aramaic vernaculars described in the 19th and 20th centuries, and still spoken in some areas.

Within those periods, dialect naming is textual, sectarian, or geographic. Textual and geographic names are often difficult to distinguish; for example, **Deir 'Alla** is the language of two Old Aramaic texts found in Jordan in 1967 (one, the controversial Balaam text). **Biblical Aramaic** is the Official Aramaic used in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The term *Syriac* is frequently applied to the language of any Christian Late Aramaic materials, though it is more appropriately applied only to Christian *Eastern* Late Aramaic. Jewish Eastern Late Aramaic is termed **Babylonian**, because its principal attestation is in the Babylonian Talmud. It *may* be the case that the major difference between Syriac, Babylonian, and Classical **Mandaic** is orthographic.

1.3.2 Arabic and South Semitic

Pre-Islamic Arabic data is mostly in the form of coins and short inscriptions in a variety of scripts. Those in early forms of the Arabic script, similar to that used for Nabatean Aramaic, are numerous but quite recent, from perhaps 300 CE. Older Arabic language inscriptions in northern parts of what is now Saudi Arabia are classified as Thamudic (Taymanite), Dedanite, Lihyanite, and Safaitic. Thamudic and Dedanite are named for locales in northwestern Saudi Arabia. Lihyanite and Safaitic are tribal names.

Inscriptions termed Thamudic are found throughout the northern Arabia (including Jordan and the Negev), some dating to 1500 BCE. But it is not clear to me that all inscriptions termed Thamudic represent the same tradition, either linguistic or orthographic. Some of the later inscriptions are in a script derived from NW Semitic, and in a form of Arabic. Others, from both earlier and later periods, are in a script apparently related to South Arabian (Sabean), and may or may not be in a language ancestral to Arabic. These have been found in the Negev at Elath (c. 700 BCE) and in Mesopotamia at Ur (7th century BCE). Arabic language inscriptions in a South Semitic alphabet are also found in the south of the Arabian peninsula.

The Lihyanite (c 600 - 300 BCE) and Safaitic (c. 300 - 100 BCE) inscriptions are Arabic language and, in the inscriptions I have seen, in scripts derived from NW Semitic.

Old South Arabian (**Sayhadic**) inscriptions, in languages called Sabean, Qatabanian, Hadramitic, and Minean (Sayhadic) are found in the highlands and adjacent deserts of southern Arabia. Short inscriptions appear around 1200 BCE, and longer texts from 800 BCE - 500 CE. and appear to cover a period between 1000 BCE - 500 CE. Sabean monumental inscriptions from c. 500 BCE are also found in Ethiopia. Inscriptions in a form of Old Ethiopic (**Ge'ez**) proper are found in the kingdom of Aksum from c. 400 CE. Texts in Ge'ez, mostly Christian in nature, increase in number through the second half of the first millennium CE.

1.3.3 The Akkadian Linguistic Tradition

As already noted, Akkadian is a linguistic tradition lasting some two and a half millennia. Its history is conventionally viewed in terms of the history of Akkadian speaking peoples. Akkadian speakers had encountered the Sumerians of Southern Mesopotamia by the third millennium BCE, and adopted much of Sumerian culture. Sumerian became their cultural and literary language, and they used Sumerian cuneiform in writing Akkadian. The **Old Akkadian** period is that of the earliest materials, Akkadian names and glosses in Sumerian documents from c. 2600 BCE and in tablets of the Akkadian Imperial (2400-2100 BCE) and the Ur III (2100-2000) periods. From the beginning of the second millennium BCE, two dialects of Akkadian are recognised; a southern (**Babylonian**) and a northern (**Assyrian**). The Babylonian dialect remained the prestige one, even through the lengthy period of Assyrian political dominance in Mesopotamia.

Old Babylonian is the language of the post-Akkadian period and of the Old Babylonian Empire (1800-1500). Its record includes myth and epic texts like Gilgamesh, law codes (like the Hammurabi Stele), religious texts, scholarly works (including Akkadian-Sumerian lexica), royal inscriptions, a variety of administrative and business documents, contracts and letters, and omen texts. Much of the material of the Mari archive is in Old Babylonian. **Old Assyrian**, the language of the Assyrian kingdom that dominated northern Mesopotamia from c. 2000-1700 BCE, is attested largely in the Kanesh documents.

Middle Babylonian is the language from the period of the Kassite dynasty in Babylonia (1475 - 1155 BCE), up to Elamite invasion that ended the dynasty. Middle Babylonian linguistic materials from Babylonia proper are not extensive, but there are numerous documents from outside Mesopotamia; from Ugarit, Amarna, and Hattusha. Huenergard (1997) terms this extra-Mesopotamian lingua franca **Peripheral Akkadian**.

Middle Assyrian is the language of the Assyrian kingdom founded by Asshur-uballit I (1365-1328) and is attested in a small but varied corpus, the best known being 14 legal tablets from Asshur. **Neo-Assyrian** is the vernacular of the Neo-Assyrian Empire⁶ (934 - 612), but is attested mostly in letters and commercial documents. During the Neo-Assyrian period, an artificial language modelled on Old Babylonian (and termed **Standard Babylonian** by Huenergard) was used for literary purposes. Amongst the most important Standard Babylonian literary works are an expanded version of Gilgamesh and the Babylonian creation myth, Enuma Elish, in which the god Marduk battles Tiamat to save the world. The library of Assurbanipal is the large selection of Standard Babylonian material.

Aramaic speakers appear to have begun to move into Mesopotamia in the 12th century BCE, the period that saw the collapse of the Hittite Empire in Anatolia, Egypt weakened by the invasions of the so-called Sea Peoples, and many important coastal cities (like Ugarit) destroyed. By the beginning of the 9th century, **Aramaic** was becoming an important spoken language in the region. Literary material was still largely in **Standard Babylonian**, but diplomatic correspondence was increasingly in Aramaic. Akkadian

⁶The Neo-Assyrian Empire dominated the entire Middle East until internal rivalries and incursions from the east weakened it early in the 6th century BCE. Nineveh, the imperial capital from the time of Sennacherib (701-681), was sacked by a Babylonian-led coalition in 612 BCE.

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Chapter 1: An Overview of the Semitic Language Family

BCE	Assyria		Babylonia
3500			Sumerian city states
2400	Ebla		Akkad
2334-2279		Akkadian Empire	Sargon the Great
2200			Naram-Sin destroys Ebla Invasions weaken empire
2100		Ur III period	fall of Akkad Sumerian resurgence
2000			Elamites sack Ur
		Isin-Larsa period	Sumerian city states in southern Mesopotamia
1800	Amorite dynasty		Amorite dynasty
1813-1781	Shamshi-Adad I Mari annexed		
1792-1750			Hammurabi
1761			Babylonians sack Mari Kassite incursions
1595	Mitanni dynasty		Hittites sack Babylon
1475			Kassite dynasty established
1365-1328	Ashur-uballit I ends Mitanni control		
1200	Aramean incursions	weakening of western states	Aramean incursions
1114-1076	Tiglath-pileser I		
934-912	Ashur-dan II	Neo-Assyrian Empire	
745-727	Tiglath-pileser III		
701-681	Sennacherib Nineveh as imperial capital		
652	Assurbanipal		
625		Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) Empire	Nabopolassar
612	fall of Nineveh		
604-562	Nebuchadnezzar II		
539	Babylon falls to Cyrus II		

Table 2: Outline of Mesopotamian History

non-literary materials from southern Mesopotamia during the Neo-Assyrian period are in **Neo-Babylonian**.

In 625 BCE, Nabopolassar founded the Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) dynasty in Babylon, which toppled the Assyrian Empire. The Neo-Babylonian Empire was consolidated under Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562). Its diplomatic, and increasingly, literary output was in Aramaic. The Neo-Babylonian Empire ended in 539, when Cyrus II captured Babylon without a battle. A form of Akkadian termed **Late Babylonian** was used decreasingly from the Chaldean period through to the 1st century CE.

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