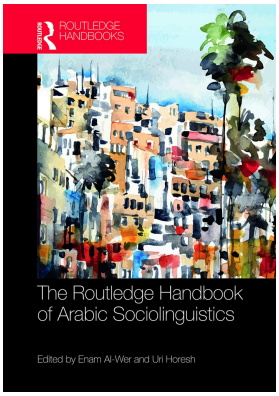

The Routledge Handbook of Arabic Sociolinguistics

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Publication details
https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315722450-2
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Published online on: 25 Jun 2019

2

THE CLASSIFICATION OF ARABIC AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

Ahmad Al-Jallad

Introduction

The history of Arabic stretches back at least a millennium before the rise of Islam. The language was written in a variety of scripts and was in close contact with many other Semitic languages. This chapter will discuss the classification of Arabic as a Semitic language, and then turn to the varieties of Arabic attested in the pre-Islamic period, collectively referred to as Old Arabic, with a focus on its geographic distribution, its status as a written language, and contact with other languages.[1] The chapter will conclude with some remarks on the matter of pre-Islamic diglossia and sociolinguistic differences in the attested varieties of Old Arabic.

Arabic as a Semitic language

The first classifications of the Semitic languages date to the 19th century with the modern comparative study of the language family. Both geography and linguistic similarities factored into the initial subgrouping, which produced two main branches: East and West Semitic. Akkadian was the sole representative of the "East" branch, while all of the other Semitic languages known at the time fell into the "West" category. Scholars further subdivided West Semitic into a Northwest category, which included the Canaanite languages (such as Hebrew and Phoenician) and Aramaic, and a South Semitic, which included Arabic, the epigraphic languages of ancient Yemen (known today as Ancient South Arabian)[2] and the Semitic languages of Ethiopia. In addition to a perceived geographic proximity, three linguistic features supposedly supported the classification of Arabic with Ethiopic, Modern South Arabian and Ancient South Arabian: the sound change of Proto-Semitic *p to f, broken (or nonconcatenative) plurals, and the L- and tL-stems (form III and VI, respectively) of the verb. Naturally, languages that are in close geographic proximity will tend to share linguistic features, so the presence of linguistic similarities in the languages of the Arabian Peninsula and Ethiopia is not surprising. However, as methods of linguistic classification advanced, two methodological problems with earlier classifications became clear: geography is not a deciding factor in *genetic* linguistic classification, and not all linguistic similarities can be considered equal.

Perhaps the most influential papers for the methodology of classification among Semiticists belong to Hetzron (1974, 1975, 1976). His work represents a sort of methodological intervention: Hetzron shifted the focus of classification to *shared morphological innovations*; He argued that developments in morphological items and paradigms are less likely to be borrowed or spread through language contact than lexical items or phonological changes. To illustrate this concept consider one of the features used to classify Arabic with Ethiopic as South Semitic: the *p > f change. Proto-Semitic had a voiceless bilabial plosive [p] that shifted to a voiceless labio-dental fricative [f] in the Ethio-Semitic languages and in Modern South Arabian. The evidence in Ancient South Arabian is difficult to interpret, but it seems from Latin transcriptions that the same shift operated.[3] Proto-Semitic *p is also realized as [f] in Classical and Modern Arabic, while in the Northwest Semitic languages and East Semitic, *p remains [p]. On first impression, this change could suggest a closer genetic relationship between Ethiopic and Arabic. However, if we look at a complex morphological feature, such as the verbal system, the situation is reversed. The imperfect indicative in Arabic is signified by a prefix conjugated verb with a suffix following the verb stem and gender/number markers, as in *yasmaʿu* "he hears", *yasmaʿūna* "they hear", conventionally labelled the yaqtulu form. In Ugaritic, where final vowels obtained, the imperfect indicative has an identical form. And while the other Northwest Semitic languages have lost final vowels, their verbal systems can be traced back to such an ancestor. Now, Ethiopic exhibits a different form, one with gemination of the second radical: *yəsabbər*. This form is cognate with the Akkadian *iparras* and, indeed, the Modern South Arabian *yəṯōber*. Scholars label this stem of the imperfect, the yaqattal form. Since the geminated yaqattal form is found in both East and West Semitic, it must reflect the original Proto-Semitic imperfect. The yaqtulu form of Arabic and Northwest Semitic must therefore be considered a *shared innovation* of those two branches. And since it is an innovation that involves a complex change to the verbal system, it very likely points towards a common ancestor for Arabic and the Northwest Semitic languages. Hetzron named this new grouping of West Semitic "Central Semitic."

How do we reconcile this conflicting evidence? The importance of morphological innovations is clear, but what significance can the *p > f sound change have for genetic classification? The answer is nothing. This sound chang e, as every student of historical linguistics knows well, is very common and could have easily taken place independently in two language groups. Indeed, in later Aramaic and Hebrew, *p > f operates as well, but in post-vocalic contexts. What is more is that there is some evidence that in the earliest stages of Arabic, the *p to f change did not yet take place (2017a, §3.4). While the *p > f change cannot signify a close genetic relationship, it could point towards language contact. It is possible that some dialects of Old Arabic acquired this change through contact with the languages of the southern periphery of Semitic, and it spread areally from there, but considering how common the change is, it can very well be considered a parallel development

The other isoglosses used to support the South Semitic classification fall into the category of *shared retentions*. These are the L- and Lt-stems *fāʿala* and *tafāʿala*, respectively, and the presence of broken plurals. Scholars have widely differing opinions on the antiquity of broken plurals. Recently, Weninger (2011: 165) doubted that they should be reconstructed for Proto-Semitic since they do not occur in Akkadian. This would go too far: the absence of a feature in Akkadian does not mean that it was absent in Proto-Semitic, as it could have simply been lost in Proto-East Semitic (the reconstructed ancestor of Akkadian). Given that broken plurals occur in West Semitic, lost only in the Northwest Semitic branch, but with identifiable relics, historical linguistic methodology would make it a toss-up as to whether they are a Proto-Semitic feature or an innovation of West Semitic. Other Afro-Asiaitic languages, however, can play an arbitrating role. Broken plurals are attested in Berber and Cushitic, with many apparently cognate patterns.

This strongly suggests that broken plurals were a feature of Proto-Semitic,[4] and therefore their presence in any Semitic language cannot be used to argue for a new subgrouping.

As pointed out by Huehnergard & Rubin (2011), the L-stem is more difficult to treat. Perhaps in this category one should also consider stems with diphthongs between C^1 and C^2 as well, the *faw'ala* and *fay'ala* stems. Since relics of this form can be found in Northwest Semitic, along with its presence in Modern South Arabian and Ethiopic, would suggest that it was a Proto-West Semitic innovation that was, like the broken plurals, part of the package of features lost in Northwest Semitic (Goldenberg 1977: 475). The use of this single feature, which is arguably a lexical item, as it is only in Arabic that this stem took on specific semantics, cannot justify a South Semitic against all of the features discussed above.

Most scholars today have accepted the Central Semitic category, and Arabic's membership in it, although a few tend to hold to older models or advance entirely new schema of classification. The older model of classification is most often encountered in the works of non-specialists, perhaps owning to its geographic, rather than linguistic, nature. The present classification of the Semitic languages goes as follows, with a suggested sub-classification of Old Arabic.

While the term "South Semitic" has been largely abandoned as a linguistic label, it does survive as a term for a family of alphabets used mainly in the Arabian Peninsula and the southern Levant in the pre-Islamic era. The so-called South Semitic script will be discussed further in this chapter.

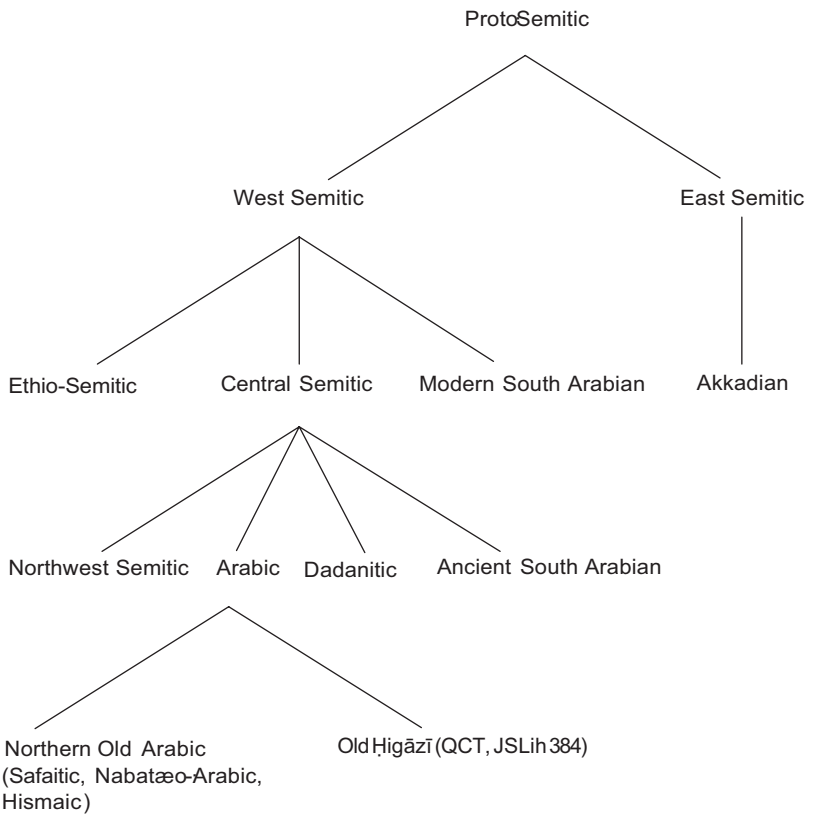

Figure 2.1 Classification of Arabic (Al-Jallad 2017b)

Definitions

Recently, Retsö (2013) produced an article entitled "What is Arabic," where he problematized the definition of the language and the varieties that have historically been referred to by this term. Based on a survey of the evidence of references to Arabic, most by outside peoples, Retsö comes to the conclusion that the term referred to a medium of divine communication rather than a vernacular. Retsö then covers a list of features to show how relatively few if any can be considered characteristic of "Arabic." Huehnergard (2017) approached the same question from a comparative angle. He considers primarily the Modern Arabic dialects and Classical Arabic and asks which features can properly be considered innovations of the common ancestor of these two groups, which he labels Proto-Arabic. This does not mean that a given feature must be attested in every single variety of these groups, as it could have been lost where it is absent. As cultural definitions, such as "what speakers call their language," do not factor into linguistic diagnosis (Maltese is case in point), the kind of sources Retsö appeals to are not necessarily relevant for the question at hand. Huehnergard identifies a series of features that can be reconstructed to the common ancestor of Modern and Classical Arabic. Al-Jallad (2017b) subsequently added to this list, and identified many of these innovations in the Safaitic and Hismaic inscriptions, which naturally requires us to include them as varieties of Arabic, that is, descendants of Proto-Arabic. The most salient of these are: the unique system of negation involving different negative adverbs, combined with different moods of the verb depending on the tense (i.e.: *lam, lā, lan*); the use of *mā* to negate the suffix conjugation (*mā kataba*); nunation (both classical and dialectal); the use of *ʾan(na)* as a complementizer and subordinator; the *mafʿūl* passive participle for the G-stem (form I); the use of *ʃ* to introduce modal clauses; the comitative wāw (*wāw al-māʿiyyah*); and so on.[5] Thus, the linguistic definition of Arabic encompasses all languages, past and present, that descend from an ancestor exhibiting these innovations.

What was Arabic called by its pre-Islamic speakers?

We do not know for sure what ancient speakers of Arabic called their language. Macdonald (2009b) very reasonably suggests that some group of people must have called themselves *Arabs* and referred to their language as Arabic, given its widespread use by outside peoples. Nevertheless, no pre-Islamic Arabic texts provide the indigenous name of the language, and only one text, the Namārah Inscription (Syria, 328 CE), possibly makes use of the ethnicon *Arab*, more accurately *ʿ-r-b*. The earliest reference to a group of people called *Arabs* is found in the Kurkh monolith inscription of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (852 BCE). This text mentions a man named Gindibu (Classical Arabic *ǧundubun*) of the land of Arbāya. The Assyrians spoke of a *māt Aribi* "Land of the Arabs", but the only information one can glean from such references was that it was "far off." The Bible,[6] too, uses the term *ʿarāb* and *ʿarābî* to refer to far-off nomads, but these give no indication of their language or terms of self-designation. Works dealing with the Arabs in antiquity include Eph'al (1982), but the reader must keep in mind that what is being studied here is groups of people termed Arabs by outsiders and not necessarily speakers of the Arabic languages or people who would have identified themselves as such. Retsö (2003) has compiled a large number of sources on the history of any people called Arabs, and is a great resource for the study of the history of this term, but not necessarily the language.

The use of the adjective *Arab* by outsiders for languages that are not Arabic, in genetic rather than geographic terms, is made clear by several examples Retsö provides (2013: 436–439).

Examples of outsiders identifying instances of the "Arabic" language must therefore be treated with scrutiny. It is not always clear if they intended the term "Arabian" (there is no distinction between Arabian and Arabic in these languages as in English) as a geographic designation or simply some type of exotic label. On the other hand, the words Rabbi Levi (300 CE) described as Arabic are in fact what we would regard as Arabic (Rabin 1951: 117). The great complications in dealing with the term *Arab* as it was used in antiquity are masterfully treated in two articles by M.C.A. Macdonald (Macdonald 2009a, 2009b), where he correctly challenges the connection of the term with *nomads*, and problematizes the methods used to compose a history of Arabic based on the use of this term by outsiders.

Traditionally, the corpus of Arabic inscriptions before Islam was considered rather small. The seemingly inseparable connection with the Arabic script, or its Nabataean forebear, and the "Arabiyyah," the language of Classical Islamic civilization, limited the corpus to some five texts: three pre-Islamic inscriptions composed in the Arabic script proper, all from Syria and the 6th century CE, and two in the Nabataean script.[7] This impression led to the conclusion that Arabic remained, until the century before the rise of Islam, a purely spoken language. This is especially surprising because the deserts of Arabia are filled with inscriptions, tens of thousands of them. The language of these texts, however, has been considered by most in the past as *Ancient North Arabian*, a closely related "dialect bundle," but distinct from Arabic. Its proximity to Arabic has been hypothesized from unintelligible (Knauf 2010) to mutually intelligible (Macdonald 2000), but the arguments for both positions are weak. As I have argued in several places (e.g. Al-Jallad 2015:10–14; 2017b; 2018a), there is no scientific reason to exclude the Ancient North Arabian epigraphy of Syria and Jordan, the so-called Safaitic and Hismaic inscriptions, from the category of Arabic, as the characteristic linguistic innovations of Arabic are attested in these corpora. While it is true that these texts differ grammatically from Classical Arabic and the modern dialects, it would be anachronistic to expect otherwise. These inscriptions predate the Qur'an and the Arabic grammatical tradition by many centuries and come from different geographic areas. Utilizing a linguistic defintion of Arabic, the Safaitic and Hismaic inscriptions constitute a precious source for the study of pre-Islamic Arabic, and transform the language's pre-history into history proper. Moreover, this perspective rids us of the seemingly inexplicable situation where speakers of "Arabic" simply did not write their language, while everyone else in the Arabian Peninsula seems to have done so. In its place, however, another question emerges: if pre-Islamic Arabic was so distinct from the ʿArabiyyah, then whence the ʿArabiyyah? An answer to this question has recently been attempted by Retsö (2003), but has failed to convince most scholars. An evidence-based response must await further epigraphic discoveries, but a speculative possibility is that the ʿArabiyyah, which we must keep distinct from the consonantal skeleton of the Qur'an, is based on the southern-most peripheral dialects of Arabic. As peripheral areas tend to preserve archaic features, this may explain why nunation (*tanwīn*) survived in its original form in those varieties while apparently lost in all of the epigraphic material, except for some possible vestiges in Safaitic (Al-Jallad 2015: 69).

Earliest attestations and geographic distribution

The earliest possible attestation of the Arabic language occurs in a short text written in an undetermined Ancient North Arabian alphabet from Bāyir, near the Wādī Sirḥān, in Jordan (Hayajneh et al. 2015). While it cannot be dated in absolute terms, the contents and the accompanying Canaanite inscription, which is illegible, suggest that it was produced in the early part

of the first millennium BCE. The same region, southern Jordan, is filled with inscriptions in the Safaitic, Hismaic, and occasionally the Thamudic B script, three northern variants of the South Semitic script. Most of these texts do not bear an absolute date; the few inscriptions that do contain chronological information may date from the second c. BCE to the second c. CE, but there is no reason to limit the entire corpus to this period. It is equally possible that these texts represent a continuous tradition from the early first millennium.

In the third c. BCE, the Nabataeans establish their kingdom on the eastern bank of the Jordan, with their capital at Petra, ancient *rqmw* /raqmo/. While the Nabataeans conducted their business in a form of Achaemenid Aramaic, their personal names and peculiarities of their use of Aramaic suggest that they were speakers of Arabic. The Nabataean inscriptions, therefore, provide an important glimpse into their dialect of Arabic. Among its interesting features are *wawation* (a final *wāw* on personal names and some nouns, preserved in the Arabic spelling of the name ʿAmr عمرو), probably a vestigial nominative case written *w* on triptotic personal names, and the use of the *al*-definite article. While Arabic terms and expressions are scattered about the Nabataean inscriptions, two Arabic texts are written in the Nabataean script proper. The first is a short poetic text, perhaps a liturgy (Macdonald 2010: 20), discovered near ʿEn ʿAvdat in the Negev (Bellamy 1990), the dating of which is unclear, but was possibly produced between the late first c. BCE and the mid second c. CE; the second is the Namārah inscription, a royal epitaph dated to 328 CE (for the latest treatment of this text, see Macdonald's contribution in Fiema et al. (2015: 405–409).

The locus of Arabic therefore seems to be in the northwestern corner of Arabia and the southern Levant, in contrast to Yemen, where several indigenous languages, quite distinct from Arabic, were in use, called by scholars Ancient South Arabian. The scant inscriptional material from Oman suggests a similar situation, which is indeed supported by the continued existence of non-Arabic languages there today. Indeed, as Retsö (2013) has pointed out, the majority of references to the "Arabic" language, with all due caution about these sources in mind, point towards northwest Arabia (and the southern Levant). The deserts of central Arabia reveal a complex situation. Inscriptions are usually short, bearing mostly personal names and introductory formulae. The occasional longer inscription, however, points towards considerable linguistic diversity, including languages quite distinct from Arabic. Many of these texts resist interpretation; for example:

> Thamudic C inscription from the vicinity of Taymāʾ, undeciphered (Eskoubi 1999: #204):
>
> *wdd f s*^{1}
> *w* | *t*ʾ*l*ʿ*s*^{1}*s*^{1}*w*ʾ | *wdd*

Taymāʾ and Dadān

The great North Arabian oasis towns of Taymāʾ and Dadān also yield distinct languages, with isoglosses separating them from Arabic proper. In the case of Taymāʾ, the language bears several important similarities to Northwest Semitic (e.g. Hebrew and Aramaic) (Kootstra 2016). The language expressed in the Dadanitic script is in many ways distinct from Arabic: for example, it employs the third-person pronoun *h*ʾ as a distal demonstrative and makes occasional use of the *h*-causative (hafʿala); see Al-Jallad (2017b; 2018) for a list of these features.

The following map represents the distribution of the various epigraphic corpora of Arabia.

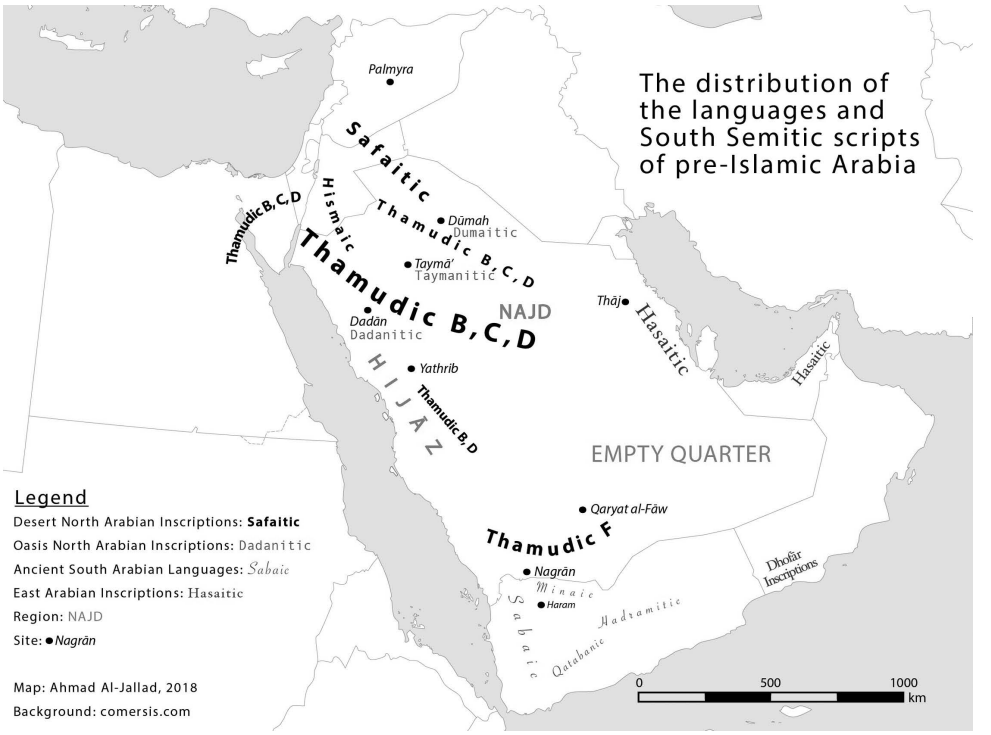

Figure 2.2 Map of the epigraphic scripts of North Arabia
Source: Map: Ahmad Al-Jallad, 2018; Background: comersis.com

Arabic as a written language

For most of its pre-Islamic history, Arabic was written in two northern varieties of the South Semitic script, Safaitic and Hismaic, produced by nomadic pastoralists of the southern Levant and North Arabia. Unlike the early Arabic script, these alphabets clearly distinguished between each of Arabic's twenty-eight consonants, although vowels of any length were not noted graphically. The nature of these inscriptions – and their relevance for the status of Arabic as a written language – has been the subject of considerable debate by scholars. The great North Arabian epigraphist, M.C.A. Macdonald, classified these texts as "graffiti of a non-literate society" (2015: 8). Macdonald goes on to define a non-literate society as one which does not employ writing for the purposes of daily communication and record (ibid.). Thus, it is thought that the Arabic-speaking nomads of northern Arabia and the southern Levant learned the art of writing from settled people and used it purely as a pastime while tending to their herds. Nevertheless, these texts are remarkably formulaic, both in terms of themes and stylistics, so as to suggest the existence of a true writing tradition. While some texts may be regarded as instances of self-expression, many of the epigraphic themes overlap with the monumental inscriptions of settled areas. For example, some Safaitic inscriptions mark graves, some are votive, others commemorate the building of a structure or installation. Texts of a religious nature are also attested – invocations to deities for prosperity, relief from adverse weather conditions, and protection from enemies are among the more common themes

(Al-Jallad 2015, §22). Thus, while the nomads may not have had any practical, that is to say, an administrative use for writing, they did in fact develop an elaborate writing tradition in the Arabic language. In many ways, the stylistics of some of the longer texts foreshadow later Arabic idiom:

> Uraynibah West Hismaic inscription (Zwettler & Graf 2004, trans. and vocalization Al-Jallad):
>
> PN [w] *sqm f tḏrʿ w tʿny w . . . l- ʾlhṣʿb f l ymḥl -h w yśk l-h w [ḥ]bs nfs-h ʿl-h w ytrḥm ʿl-h w ynl[-h] w yhb l-h ḥnn f ygzy nḏr-h w yzd w ḏkrt lt. . .*
>
> Vocalization: [wa] saqoma pa taśarraʿa wa taʿānaya wa . . . le-ʾelāh Ṣaʿb pa lā yomaḥḥel-ho wa yaśki laho wa [ḥa]basa napsa-ho ʿalay-ho wa yataraḥḥam ʿalay-ho wa yonil-[ho] wa yaheb laho ḥanāna pa yagzeya naḏra-ho wa yazīda wa ḏakarat allāt. . . .
>
> And he was ill (in disposition?) and supplicated and suffered . . . for (the favour of) the god $Ṣaʿb_x$, so may he_x not make his condition worse as he has petitioned him_x, while dedicating himself to him_x exclusively, so may he_x show mercy upon him, cause him to obtain (said mercy) and show him favor that he may fulfill his vow and do more; and may Lāt be mindful of. . . (a list of the author's companions).

Unlike their nomadic colinguals, the settled Arabic-speakers of the Nabataean kingdom (third c. BCE – second c. CE) developed a literate society, where the written word was employed for practical, day-to-day purposes. The language used, however, was not Arabic, but rather a form of Achaemenid Aramaic, known conventionally as Nabataean Aramaic, written in a distinctive cursive variant of the Aramaic square script. Nabataean Aramaic was not likely a spoken language. Its roots in Achaemenid Aramaic – an eastern Aramaic dialect – make it foreign to the region in which it is attested, where western Aramaic dialects were spoken. Several pieces of evidence support the idea that Arabic remained widely spoken in the Nabataean realm. Nabataean Aramaic legal terms, in documents from near the Dead Sea, are accompanied by Arabic glosses.[8] This observation led Macdonald (2010) to suggest that the legal proceedings of the Nabataeans must have been in Arabic, while they were put into writing in Aramaic. The Aramaic of the Nabataean rock inscriptions is marked by several conventionalized Arabisms, such as the optative use of the suffix conjugation, function words like *ʿyr* */ġayr/ "other", and several loanwords. The consistency in which these terms are employed suggest that they had been integrated into the writing tradition, rather than reflecting a subconscious deviation from Aramaic by speakers of Arabic, or careless mistakes. Lastly, a large component of the Nabataean onomasticon derives from Arabic. While personal names are not a reliable source for the spoken language of a population, it is hard to imagine why a population of Aramaic-speaking settled people would take over Arabic names *en masse*. The phonology of these names, moreover, differs from Aramaic, suggesting that their traditional pronunciations were kept intact. The combination of this evidence supports the idea that Arabic remained a vernacular rather than being simply a heritage language among settled Nabataeans.

One may wonder why speakers of Arabic did not resort to the use of their own language for the purposes of administration and record-keeping. A definitive answer is impossible, but it seems likely that since Aramaic was used across the Near East as a chancellery language, and had been for centuries, it was simply more practical to employ it, with its established literary conventions and stylistics adapted for legal expression and other matters, rather than developing from the spoken language a new means of literary expression.

While Nabataean political independence came to an end with the annexation of the kingdom in 106 CE by the Romans, the script, and the writing tradition associated with it, continued well after. In the subsequent centuries, however, we see the gradual transition of the script to what is recognizably the early Arabic script. During this transition, one may also notice a gradual increase in the use of Arabic terminology, expressions and even grammar in the inscriptions (Nehme 2013). The consistency of the distribution of the Aramaic makes the idea that the language was slowly being forgotten as a spoken language rather unlikely. Instead, the writing tradition was changing, and Arabic was replacing Aramaic as a literary language, with the latter being restricted to a few formulaic expressions. It is, therefore, likely that during these centuries Arabic began its transformation into a literary language, used for official purposes.

Pre-Islamic diglossia

The contemporary Arabic-speaking world is characterized by diglossia, a situation in which the written language reflects a different, and often not mutually intelligible, register of the spoken one. Scholars remain divided as to the antiquity of this situation. Some believe that diglossia was present in the pre-Islamic period, while others suggest that it emerged following the Islamic Conquests.[9] The debate on this subject has suffered from the lack of authentic sources and anachronistic expectations. By the latter statement, I mean that one should not expect to find the language of the grammatical tradition – one that was deliberately studied and codified – in documents preceding this effort. The extant epigraphic and papyrological material proves that several developments that characterized the low register of later Arabic diglossia (the so-called New Arabic) had already taken place in the pre-Islamic period, but were for the most part not very widespread.

Declensional endings

The Petra Papyri (Al-Jallad et al. 2013; Al-Jallad 2017, 2018b), for example, indicate that cases had already disappeared in the Arabic dialect of that town by the 6th century CE. Notice, for example, the absence of case in construct forms: Αρβαθ Γαρουαν /ẖarbat garwān/ "the ruin of Garwān," and not **ẖarbatu garwān. Perhaps as late as the 4th century, the accusative case survived and seemed productive, in at least the Arabic dialect spoken by the nomads of the Syrian desert: ειραυ βακλα /yirʿaw baqla/ "they pastured on fresh herbage" (Al-Jallad & al-Manaser 2015). The ʿAin ʿAvdat inscription, which is perhaps even earlier, shows a three-case system: nominative: *ʾlmwtw* /ʾal-mawtu/ "death", genitive: *tymʾlhy* /Taym(u)ʾallāhi/ "servant of Allāh (a personal name) and accusative: *ʾtrʾ* /ʾaṯara/ "a reward" (Bellamy 1990). While all three texts come from different areas and represent different genres, they do supply evidence for the breakdown of the Arabic nominal case system in the centuries preceding the rise of Islam in the northern dialects of Old Arabic.[10] It must be remembered, however, that these examples cannot be generalized to the entire Arabic-speaking realm. It is certainly possible that some dialects maintained a fully functional case system, but simply have not yet appeared/or remain undetectable in the epigraphic record.

Sound changes

Some sound changes that characterize New Arabic had already taken place in the pre-Islamic period. In some Hismaic inscriptions, the voiced interdental ḏ had merged with the plain d, so *dkrt*/dakarat/"may she be mindful of" instead of the more common *ḏkrt/ḏakarat/*. Two

Safaitic inscriptions display the change of *q* to ʾ, typical of the contemporary urban dialects of the Levant and Egypt. A couple of inscriptions also show the merger of *ḏ* and *ẓ*, but to what seems to be *ḏ* (Al-Jallad 2015: 52–54). The extreme rarity of these sound changes suggests that they were not very widespread in the pre-Islamic period. While Old Arabic is most often written in purely consonantal scripts, Greek transcriptions show that none of the developments in the vowels had taken place, such as the merger of *u and *i, the collapse of diphthongs, or vowel syncope.

Other features

None of the other features typical of New Arabic and later diglossia seem to have taken place in the pre-Islamic period. The dual seems fully productive in verbs, nouns and adjectives (Al-Jallad 2015: 61, 103, 139). The Nisba ending is always a consonantal *y* and never a long vowel ī: *ʾl-nbṯy* */ʾal-nabaṭeyy/, h-yhdy* "the Jew" */hay-yahūdeyy/. The C-stem (form IV) of the verb, *ʾafʿal*, is fully productive (Al-Jallad 2015: 127–137). The feminine endings *-ah* (< *at), *āʾ* (< *āy) and *ā* (< *ay) remained distinct as well. No evidence for the new relative pronoun *ʾalli (Modern Arabia *illi*/*alli*) is attested. Instead, forms derived directly from the relative-demonstrative base ḏ are most common, and retain inflection for gender and number (Al-Jallad 2015: 85–88); one inscription from the northwestern Ḥiǧāz attests the feminine form *ʾlt*/ʾallatī/ (Al-Jallad 2018b: 23-24).

Thus, while Old Arabic exhibits many differences from the codified Classical language, it does not display most of the changes characteristic of New Arabic. Moreover, the great amount of linguistic variation in the inscriptions suggests the absence of an established grammatical standard. It seems, therefore, that while texts were formulaic in their composition, authors used a language very close to the spoken varieties.

Foci of language contact

While diglossia may be hard to pin down, varying degrees of bilingualism/multilingualism in Arabia are widespread, in both settled areas and the deserts. As mentioned earlier, the Nabataean inscriptions reveal a stable situation of Arabic-Aramaic written bilingualism. Inscriptions seemingly code switch between Arabic and Aramaic, as best illustrated by this famous Nabataean inscription from Ḥegrā (MadāʾinṢāliḥ), JSNab 17:

> JSNab 17, Hegra 267 CE (Aramaic is bolded); see Macdonald's reading and commentary in Fiema et al. 2015: 402–405.
>
> 1 **dnh** qbrw ṣnʿ-h kʿbw **br**
> 2 ḥrtt l-rqwš **brt**
> 3 ʿbdmnwtw ʾm-h w hy
> 4 hlkt py ʾl-ḥgrw
> 5 **šnt mʾh w štyn**
> **6 w tryn b-yrḥ tmwz** w lʿn
> 7 **mry** ʿ**lm**ʾ mn yšnʿ ʾl-qbrw
> 8 d[ʾ] w mn yptḥ-h ḥšy (w)
> 9 wld-h w lʿn mn yqbr w {y}ʿly mn-h

(1) **This** is the tomb which Kaʿbō **son of** Ḥāreṯah built (2) for Rqwš **daughter** (3) of ʿbdmnwtw his mother, and she (4) died in ʾal-Ḥegrō (= Ḥegrā) (5) **in the year one hundred and sixty (6) two in the month of Tammūz** so may (7) **Mry-ʿlmʾ (lit. lord of eternity)** curse whosoever alters this tomb (8) or opens it except (9) his children and may he curse whosoever buries or removes from it [a body].

This mixed linguistic situation is encountered even in the latest inscriptions, written in a transitional script between Nabataean Aramaic and Arabic:

S1, Sakākā (NW Saudi Arabia, 428 CE; Arabic is bolded); see Nehmé 2010: 71–72.

1 dkyrw mḥrbw w ʾ**ṣḥb-h**
2 ʾ**l-**ʿ**šrh** w ʿnymw w [w]ʾlw w ḥrtw w {k}ḥšw
3 b-ṭb w mḥrbw br ʿwydʾlt ktb yd-h ywm ʿšrh
4 w tmnh b- ʾyr šnt 2 + 100 + 100 + 20 + 3 {ʾ}{d}{.}{ḥ/g}
5 ʾ**l-ḥyrh**

(1) may Mḥrbw be remembered and **his ten** (2) **companions** and ʿnymw and Wʾlw and Ḥrtw and Kḥšw (3) well; Mḥrbw son of ʿwydlt, (this is) the writing of his hand, the eighteenth day (4) of ʾiyyār (April), the year 323. . . (5) **al-Ḥīrah or 'wellness'**[?]

Thus, the inscriptional evidence of Northwest Arabia and the southern Levant illustrates half a millennium – if not more – of language contact between Arabic and Aramaic.

There is some limited evidence for bi- and multilingualism among the nomads of Syria and Jordan. All of the bilingual texts discovered so far consist of personal names and simple memorial expressions. A small number of bilingual Hismaic-Nabataean texts (Hayajneh 2009) have been discovered in central Jordan, while the eastern panhandle has yielded a number of Safaitic-Greek bilingual texts (Al-Jallad & al-Manaser 2015, 2016). A number of monolingual Greek inscriptions composed by nomads as well suggest that Greek was relatively well understood by some members of these communities (Al-Jallad & al-Manaser 2015). A unique Graeco-Arabic inscription, A1, could suggest that some members of these communities had an imperfect command of Greek. This text was composed by a member of a nomadic tribe ʾidām, perhaps the *ʾl ʾdm* /ʾāl ʾidām/ of the Safaitic inscriptions. The author begins in Greek, giving his lineage according to established conventions, but shifts to Arabic, written in Greek letters, to write his tribal affiliation and the remainder of the text, suggesting perhaps that he had exhausted his knowledge of Greek.

A1 Graeco-Arabic inscription from Wādī Salmā, northeastern Jordan (Al-Jallad & al-Manaser 2015)

Αυσος Ουδου βανααου Χαζιμ
Μου αλιδαμι αθα
ουα μισεια ζαταεω
α βανααα αδαυρα
αουα ειραυ βακλα βικανου[ν]

ʾAwsos ʿūdou Bannāʾou Kazimou al-ʾidāmī ʾatawa mis-seʿīʿ śatāw wa-Bannāʾa ad-dawra wa yirʿaw baqla bi-Kānū[n]

> Aws son of ʿūd son of Bannāʾ son of Kazim the Edomite came from Sīʿ (a town in southern Syria) to spend the winter in this region with Bannāʾ and they pastured on fresh herbage during Kānū[n]

In East Arabia, along the Arabian Gulf, Imperial Aramaic was also in use. However, the language, both spoken and written, of this region is unclear. Our only written testimony to the local languages comes from a small number of gravestones from the Ḥaṣā region and as far south as Mleiha in the UAE. The conventional term given to these inscriptions is Hasaitic. A bilingual Hasaitic-Aramaic inscription was recently discovered in Mleiha, indicating a degree of bilingualism at the royal courts of the region (Overlaet et al. 2016). The language of the Hasaitic inscriptions remains enigmatic, owing to the formulaic nature of these texts. Nevertheless, several linguistic features, such as a suffix ʾ definite article and the dual relative pronoun *dy* exclude it from the Arabic category (Al-Jallad 2018a: 30–32).

On the northern Yemeni frontier, in the Haram region, Sabaic seems to be in contact with a North Arabian language at the turn of the Era, perhaps Arabic but other possibilities exist. The inscriptions in this region differ from the standard Sabaic found further south and exhibit a number of features tying them to the north. These include the glottal stop causative morpheme ʾ rather than Sabaic *h* (i.e. *ʾafʿala* instead of *hafʿala*), negation of the past using *lam* and the prefix conjugation, and the use of the *t* morpheme rather than the *k* for person-number-gender marking on the 1st and 2nd persons of the suffix conjugation, *qtlt* "I killed" rather than *qtlk*. In other respects, however, the language of these texts conforms to Sabaic grammar. While a number of hypotheses have been forwarded to account for the mixed nature of these texts (Macdonald 2000 for a discussion), the regular distribution of North Arabianisms, for a lack of a better term, suggest that this was an established literary register rather than the product of poorly trained scribes (Al-Jallad 2018b: 28-30). Indeed, South Central Arabia seems to have been a transitional zone between North Arabian, perhaps even Arabic, and South Arabian. At the town of Qaryat al-Fāw, on the trade route northeast towards Thāj, a single document (so far) composed clearly in the local language has been discovered – the epitaph of Rbbl son of Hfʿm. The language of the document attests the *ʾal* article and *ʾafʿal* forms while also exhibiting mimation, instead of nunation, and a host of unique features, such as the adverb *ʿdky* and possibly a negator *bn* (Al-Jallad 2014, 2018b: 28–30). Qaryat al-Fāw was the seat of the kings of Kindah, *kdt*, and such text may reflect the spoken language of these tribes.

The nomadic-settled divide and Aramaic influence

Beside geography, the modern varieties of Arabic are divided into two categories based on historical lifestyle: nomad (Bedouin) and sedentary. In the Old Arabic period, some prominent differences between the Arabic of the nomads of the Syro-Jordanian desert and the settled Nabataean dialect are apparent. These, however, differ from the features typical of settled and nomadic dialects today. For example, the realization of Qāf in the ancient nomadic dialects was consistently voiceless, likely [q], as it was given in Greek transcription with Kappa, in contrast with the nomadic dialects today which universally exhibit a voiced [g] reflex of this phoneme. Some of the key differences are:

The definite article

In the Nabataean Arabic dialect, the definite article is always *ʾl*, even as late as the Petra Papyri, contrasting with the great variety of definite article forms attested in the Ancient North Arabian epigraphy, which include *h* */ha/, *ʾ* */ʾ a/, *ʾal** /ʾal/, and rarely no article at all. This

distribution suggests that the ʾal article, which came to characterize later Arabic and is the most common article form today, was a typical sedentary feature in the first half of the first millennium CE.

The feminine ending

The sound change of *at* to *ah* seems to have operated particularly in the Nabataean dialect, but did not spread to the nomadic dialects, where *t* is preserved in both pause and context: compare Petra Papyri αλσιρα /ʾal-ṣīrah/ "the animal enclosure" vs. Safaitic *ṣrt* /ṣīrat/. This change could perhaps be attributed to contact with Aramaic in the sedentary Nabataean dialect.

Triphthongs

The Nabataean dialect of Arabic seems to have collapsed word-final triphthongs in contrast to the nomadic dialects, which preserve these forms. For example, Nabataean Arabic *ʿbdʾlʿzʾ* */ʿabd al-ʿozzā/ or */ʿabd al-ʿozzē/ contrasts with a similar name in Safaitic, *mrʾʿzy* */marʾ-ʿozzay/. Greek transcriptions suggest that the Nabataean dialect collapsed this sequence to ē, even though it is spelled with the *alif*, while in Safaitic the spelling can only indicate a consonantal coda.

The in-depth geographic study of variation in the various corpora of Old Arabic remains a desideratum.

Conclusions and future directions

The last few decades have seen great advances in the classification of Arabic as a Semitic language and have moved us towards an evidence-based understanding of the language in its earliest attested stages. Much work remains to be done on the dialect geography of Old Arabic, and advances in documenting inscriptions with GIS technology will no doubt help understand the distribution of linguistic features in the landscape. The process of digitizing all of the inscriptions of Arabia is underway and will provide scholars with the ability to study the inscriptions of Arabia from a comparative perspective impossible before now. This will no doubt refine our understanding of the interrelationships between the diverse languages of the Peninsula and their connections with the languages of the Fertile Crescent and Horn of Africa.

Notes

1 The use of Old Arabic in this chapter differs from that of Owens (this book). Old Arabic refers to the corpus of Arabic attested in the pre-Islamic period in documentary sources and is distinguished from materials *attributed* to the pre-Islamic period from the 8th and 9th centuries CE by Arabic grammarians and philologists. It is, moreover, defined based on linguistic isoglosses rather than nonlinguistic criteria, like script, ethnicity or geography.

2 This group of languages is referred to in the literature by many names: Epigraphic South Arabian, Old South Arabian and Sayhadic. A.F.L Beeston coined the last term in an effort to avoid confusion with Arabic in languages like French, which cannot distinguish between Arabic and Arabian. Despite this, the term has not found many followers and is not used by specialists. The most widely used term in English is Ancient South Arabian.

3 Beeston (1962: 16) points out that Latin CARFIATHUM "autumn crop (of incense)" comes from ASA *ḫrf*, indicating that the reflex of *p was realized as [f].

4 For a discussion, see Goldenberg 1977.

5 See Huehnergard 2017 and Al-Jallad 2017b for a full discussion of the linguistic features that characterize Arabic.
6 E.g. II Chronicles 17:11, 21:16, 26:7.
7 For a discussion of these texts, see Macdonald 2008.
8 For a list of these terms, see Yardeni 2014.
9 The classic discussion of this issue is found in Blau 1977. See Versteegh (1997: 93–114) for a balanced discussion of the various scholarly positions.
10 Examples of pre-Islamic caseless forms cannot be used as evidence to support Jonathan Owens' ideas that Proto-Arabic lacked case. In fact, the epigraphic evidence speaks to the loss of case, with the earlier inscriptions exhibiting this feature and later ones lacking it. For a refutation of Owens' theory, see Al-Jallad and Van Putten 2017.

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