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Pattern morphology in contact

In many Afroasiatic languages, a morphologically complex word is often structured such that the consonants are determined by the input root or stem, while the vowels and word shape are determined by a fixed pattern, largely independent of the input, marking another morpheme. This type of templatic morphology is often called root-and-pattern morphology; since its input is often a stem rather than a root, *pattern morphology* seems a preferable label. While reminiscent of Indo-European ablaut in some respects, and of California Penutian non-vocalic pattern morphology in others, the productive use of transfixational morphemes with fixed vowel segments and word shape appears to be unique to the Afroasiatic phylum (Arcodia 2013). The need to account for this phenomenon without overgenerating has been a spur to the development of morphological theory, from Prosodic Morphology (McCarthy & Prince 1990) to consonantal root rejection (Bat-El 1994; Ussishkin 1999) and beyond. Its behaviour in language contact situations, however, has received much less attention than its system-internal behaviour within specific languages.

Derivational morphology in particular is frequently borrowed in language contact situations, and   pattern morphemes are no exception. Arabic has been the principal contributor of such forms in contact situations; recipient languages reported in the literature include Ghomara Berber for the diminutive template -CCəyCəC- (Mourigh 2016), Western Neo-Aramaic for the elative template aCCaC (Arnold 2007), and Israeli Hebrew for the slang adjectival template maCCuC (Bolozky 1999), to name some of the best-described cases.

A general survey of known examples of borrowed templatic morphology, including several previously unidentified ones, reveals a sufficiently large number of examples to identify patterns within the data. The most striking of these patterns is genetic: whereas Afroasiatic languages have in several instances borrowed pattern morphemes from one another, non-Afroasiatic languages have rarely, if ever, borrowed such morphemes productively, even in situations of similarly intense contact. Potential exceptions, such as Arabic broken plurals in Persian (Gardani fc), are not only strikingly marginal within the recipient languages but susceptible to alternative historical analyses. On the widely held assumption that language contact outcomes are primarily determined by social rather than structural factors (Thomason & Kaufman 1988), this result is counterintuitive; Arabic and other Afroasiatic languages have profoundly influenced non-Afroasiatic languages as well as Afroasiatic ones, and the lack of pattern morpheme borrowing in the former cannot be explained in terms of social factors alone.

Morpheme-specific case studies, in particular of the borrowing of the Arabic elative, cast light on the reasons for this difference. Within Semitic, the existence of lookalike cognates often facilitates the reinterpretation of borrowed items as morphologically complex forms built on patterns that can be reapplied. Even beyond Semitic, however, the prior presence of formally similar consonant extraction processes applied in similar contexts appears to give the relevant morphemes a foot in the door. Analysing the factors found to facilitate borrowing across systems provides a new set of data bearing on the question of which synchronic analysis of pattern morphology should be preferred.

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