

## Afroasiatic Lexical Comparison: An Egyptologist's Point of View

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The prominent place of the lexicon for assessing links between languages and reconstructing families of languages has regularly been stressed.<sup>1</sup> The number of Egyptian words that have been connected to the Afro-Asiatic (henceforth AA) phylum is rather small. It is even smaller (ca. thirty words) when one considers the number of words for which there is a large agreement among scholars. In this group, the number of words that are related to ancient Egyptian is in the range of ten to twenty. When browsing Takács's *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*, one is struck by the number of cases (actually the majority) for which either the etymology is stated to be unknown, in dispute, obscure, difficult to decide, and so on, or the number of possible etymologies that have been suggested is in the range of five to ten.

In this chapter, I first discuss some questions related to the corpus and the collecting of the data, before addressing some questions of methodology. I then review the evidence and discuss some points in relation to the root patterns. I finally come to a few words of conclusion, with some ideas on the future development of lexical studies in ancient Egyptian.

### 3.1. The Corpus and the Collecting of the Data

Some issues about the corpus have already been stressed<sup>2</sup> but need to be reassessed.

First, the geographical dispersion of the languages that are supposed to belong to the AA phylum.

Second, the chronology is extremely stretched, with important disparities. Ancient Egyptian, which is the only member of its family, is attested from the end of the fourth millennium BCE (but one has to wait till the twenty-fifth century BCE to find texts that can be really used for linguistic purposes),<sup>3</sup> and was a dead language by the turn of the twelfth/thirteenth century CE. This means that one has to be very careful in how to handle the data. Even if a word that is attested only once in a comparatively late text




\* I here thank Stéphane Polis for his insightful comments and suggestions.

1. See, e.g., Rabin 1982, 24, cited by Takács 2001, xv. The following abbreviations are used: EEg (Earlier Egyptian, that is the first recorded stage of the language, comprising OEG and MEG), MEG (Middle Egyptian), LEG (Late Egyptian), NK (New Kingdom, that is, 18th to 20th dynasty), OEG (Old Egyptian).

2. See Quack 2002.

3. See Vernus 2001.

can theoretically be a serious witness of an older linguistic layer, it remains that one is on safer grounds with words that are already present in the oldest possible documentation. There are two main reasons for this: the first one, which has to do with phonology, does not need to be much discussed, for everyone will easily concede that words can dramatically change over more than three millennia. The second reason has to do with semantics: words obviously undergo semantic changes over time, but they usually do not do so in a straightforward way (there are no strict evolutionary rules in the sense one speaks of phonetic rules that apply blindly to all words that belong to a given pattern). Every word is an individual case in this respect.<sup>4</sup> Let us here take two examples:

- In Egyptian, the generic verbs for hearing and seeing show a contrasted behaviour:<sup>5</sup> while the generic verb for hearing, *sdm*, remained stable (both phonologically and semantically) from OEg down to Coptic (*sôt*), the generic verb that was used in OEg for seeing, *m33*, was replaced in LEg by *ptr*, which originally had the meaning of ‘perceive, distinguish’ in OEg; *ptr* was finally replaced in Demotic and Coptic by *nw* (resp.  $\text{N}\Delta\Theta$ ), which can also be connected to a verb already present in OEg (*nw3*).
- The verb *wh3* is attested from the OK down to Coptic (*ouôsh*), where it means ‘to wish, to desire’. In EEg, it was perceived as a verb of motion ‘to go here and there to seek something’.<sup>6</sup> Its semantic evolution, which can be retraced in the texts, left some traces in the spelling system of the hieroglyphic writing: indeed, the semantic classifier was originally the moving legs () which was later replaced by the more neutral papyrus scroll () or the man seated with his hand in the mouth () which is the classifier linked to cognitive processes and psychological states.

Third, most of the languages that belong to the African families of AA (Cushitic, Berber, Omotic, Chadic) are not well documented (often not documented at all) before the nineteenth century CE (with some exceptions for the Berber languages). As these languages have no written tradition in the sense of what is known for ancient cultures like Egypt or Mesopotamia, the degree of philological accuracy (even if the word philology sounds a bit weird for oral cultures) is very low when compared to Ancient Egyptian, Akkadian or Biblical Hebrew. While this situation remains a major concern for scholars working with old texts, it seems to be a bit overlooked by those who try to reconstruct the larger picture, especially if their original field of expertise lays outside Egyptology or ancient Semitic languages.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, most critical remarks actually point to how the data have been collected. As the major etymological lists or dictionaries one can rely on<sup>8</sup> have been compiled

4. In some cases, one can arguably suggest that the way words did or did not survive, did or did not acquire a specialized meaning, reflect some pre-Coptic dialectal diversity, which can unfortunately be only very partially described (Winand 2015b).

5. Winand 1986.

6. Winand 2015b.

7. See the reviews of Takács 1999 by Quack 2002 and of Orel and Stolbova 1995 by Kammerzell 1996 for some representative examples.

8. Ehret 1995; Orel and Stolbova 1995; Takács 1999–2008; Dolgopolsky 2008.

by single individuals, the data have been inevitably collected by doing extensive data mining from the existing dictionaries that are available for each AA family. As regards ancient Egyptian, there has been a regular production of lexicographical tools and studies since the mid-twentieth century. As they are unfortunately widely scattered in the specialized literature, they have not consequently found their way to more general dictionaries.<sup>9</sup> Comparatists thus still usually rely on the *Berliner Wörterbuch*, which reflects the state of the art of the 1920s and '30s, with the occasional supplements provided by smaller dictionaries like Faulkner's *Classical Egyptian Dictionary*, which was actually first designed for academic use. There are now electronic thesauri that are totally or partially on-line (*Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* run by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, and the Ramses-Project hosted by the University of Liège), but they are admittedly difficult to use for non-Egyptologists because they only provide the raw material (texts where the words one is looking for are present, with references and translation), without lexicographical discussion. They are thus no substitute for a dictionary.

### 3.2. Reconstructing the AA Lexicon: Questions of Methodology

The methodology for reconstructing the AA-lexicon seems *a priori* quite straightforward. One can roughly proceed along the following steps:<sup>10</sup>

1. select languages one suspects to be related (assumed subjectivity)
2. select words that *a priori* seem to be connected semantically and phonologically
3. eliminate loanwords
4. give the priority to the oldest forms
5. isolate the core/original meaning, which will be subsequently used for comparison
6. make evident the semantic links that connect words coming from different languages
7. explain how the meaning attached to the reconstructed AA proto-lexemes has been identified
8. assess plainly the phonological correspondences

The first two points are not particularly controversial. One understands that these first steps are a kind of *bona fide* approach: one has to begin with something. Thus, superficial correspondences, some loose intuition can be as a good start as some other more sophisticated process.

9. Another reason is that Egyptologists are still lacking a dictionary that could replace Erman and Grapow's *Wörterbuch* (1926–63)—that is, a dictionary that would meet contemporary standards and integrate the new texts that have been published by taking into account the extensive progresses that have been made in our philological and grammatical understanding.

10. As was pointed out to me by Stéphane Polis (personal communication), a bottom-up approach is favored in computational linguistics, which means that lists of words are firstly set up for certain concepts, which lead to hierarchical analyses and make possible clustering procedures. If one puts aside that the transcription of words and their philological analysis often raise some justified criticism (especially when ancient languages are dealt with), this does not provide a firm basis for reconstructing the lexicon.

Point 3 is not controversial either, at least theoretically. Actually, it requires a lot of skills to be fully effective. First, it goes without saying that for the languages poorly documented diachronically (see 1.b and c above), the proof that a word is borrowed will probably remain elusive forever. Egyptian, which is a lucky case as regards the state of the textual evidence, gives us much to think about. During the NK, loanwords from languages spoken in the Middle East arrived *en masse* in the vocabulary. Scholars traditionally assume that a word is a Semitic loanword if (1) it was not known before the NK, (2) it is written in a special form of writing (the so-called syllabic writing), and (3) it can be linked to some Semitic cognate(s). Now, there are words that meet the first two criteria but are nonetheless genuine Egyptian words.<sup>11</sup> As regards the last criterion, it is less compelling than it seems. For if one gives some credit to the AA hypothesis, it is only natural to have Egyptian words that can be linked to Semitic cognates without implying a process of borrowing. Even if all criteria are met, there remains the possibility that a loanword came into Egyptian through a Semitic language without being itself a Semitic word.

Words are said to be more prone to being borrowed if they do not belong to the core vocabulary.<sup>12</sup> Technical terms (fauna, flora, artefacts) travel more easily than grammatical words (pronouns, negations, simple prepositions, etc.). This roughly matches the division commonly made between open and closed lexical classes. The same kind of reasoning is applied to classes of words that express inalienable entities or permanent relations, like body parts or kinship membership. Actually, languages behave in very different ways in this respect.<sup>13</sup> In Egyptian, many words expressing body parts, and words expressing kinship membership, like *s3* ‘son’, *jt* ‘father’, have no clear cognates in AA languages. On the other hand, *jt* ‘what’, an interrogative pronoun that appeared in Late Egyptian, which should be low on the scale of borrowability, turned out to be a Semitic loanword.<sup>14</sup> What I am here driving at is that this highly technical matter largely depends on the quantity *and* the quality of the textual sources one can rely on. Without systematically taking a sceptical attitude by default vis-à-vis all the connections that have been proposed between words from different languages, which would be counter-productive, I keep asking myself how one could effectively handle this permanent Damocles’s sword.

Point 4 also seems self-evident. In practice, this is not so simple to do. There are languages for which a deep chronological stratification can be more or less easily reconstructed (this is the case for ancient Egyptian and Akkadian).<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, for most languages that belong to the African families of the phylum, the data are compacted in a rather thin and late synchronic slice. When comparing the Egyptian oldest forms with their eventual descendants in Coptic, which used an alphabetic script, one quickly realizes how important the differences can be.<sup>16</sup> For instance, several words

11. Winand 2017. See also Quack 2010 for earlier stages and Demotic.

12. Matras 2009, 193–208.

13. Haspelmath 2010.

14. Winand 2017.

15. For Egyptian, see Allen 2013.

16. This is also true for the grammatical system: for instance, the verbal system went down from more than twenty different suffix patterns in OEg to nearly zero in Coptic. Constructions like the so-called sequential (*iw.f hr sdm*), which was the default narrative scheme in Late Egyptian, left no trace in later

that were phonologically distinct in earlier Egyptian have become homonyms in Coptic due to some drastic reduction and convergence in the consonantal system.<sup>17</sup> Even if one stays within Egyptian, one can sometimes face serious problems to link Coptic words with their older forms in EEg.<sup>18</sup>

Points 5–7 are the most important ones for what I am trying to show here. It is my impression that the semantic component of the comparison is almost always treated in an unsophisticated manner. For reasons that are rarely made explicit, scholars tend to easily admit a vague resemblance to justify a connection between words.<sup>19</sup> Reconstructing an AA proto-lexeme with a given basic meaning supposes that one has to successfully pass the three steps listed above:

- Point 5: it is of course not a trivial matter to organize in a principled way all the meanings a word can take over time, to distinguish its prototypical meaning from secondary developments (see 3.5 below). Furthermore, determining what is the prototypical meaning of a word at a moment  $t(x)$  is no proof that it was already so previously at a moment  $t(x-y)$ . The example of  $wxʒ$  ‘to move here and there to seek something’ > ‘to wish, to desire’ (see above 1.b.2) is a good illustration thereof. If access to older strata of Egyptian were definitely barred to us, that is if the evidence of Coptic was the only available one, our perception of ancient Egyptian lexical semantics would be totally different.
- Point 6 also deserves a great deal of attention. When browsing the lists of possible AA cognates that have been compiled, one has the feeling that connections are somewhat made very loosely. For instance, that words coming from different languages express some vague similar kind of motion is not sufficient to enlist them in a shadow army of AA proto-lexemes (see 3.3 below).
- Point 7 is most often (if not always) left in the dark. If one takes for granted, for the sake of argument, that some words coming from different AA families can be linked, and are therefore inherited from an AA proto-lexeme, the core meaning attributed to this AA ancestor should be made explicit. How has one arrived at this proto-meaning? What kind of semantic process can be reconstructed to reach an abstract notion that is supposed to explain the meanings that are actually attested in the documentation? This issue should of course be raised as regards the individual AA families as well. Except for ancient Egyptian, which stands alone in its family, when one tries to reconstruct an AA proto-lexeme, one deals with reconstructed words that are themselves proto-lexemes in their respective families. Thus, one should be explicit on how the meaning of a proto-Semitic or proto-Cushitic lexeme has been reconstructed.

stages; it would thus have gone totally unnoticed if one could not rely but on Coptic texts for reconstructing the history of Ancient Egyptian.

17. A quick look at the first letter of Vycichl’s *Dictionnaire étymologique* (1983) suffices to be fully convinced:  $\lambda\lambda\theta\theta$  ‘jeune homme’ and ‘pupille’,  $\lambda\mu\theta\mu$  ‘faire paître’ and ‘débarquer’,  $\lambda\mu\lambda\text{ } \text{t}\text{w}$  ‘bouquet de fleurs’ and ‘serment’,  $\lambda\text{ } \text{t}\text{w}$  ‘quoi?’ and ‘four’,  $\lambda\text{ } \text{f}$  ‘chair; viande’ and ‘mouche’,  $\lambda\text{ } \text{z}\text{e}$  ‘oui, vraiment’ and ‘durée de vie’. A good illustration thereof is the homograph  $\epsilon\chi\text{p}\lambda\iota$ , which can mean ‘up’ (<  $r\text{-}hrj$ ) or ‘down’ (<  $r\text{-}hrj$ ).

18. Take for instance the word  $\text{b}\text{c}\text{q}$  (*bōk* ‘go’), a generic verb of motion in Sahidic Coptic, which has no clear predecessor in older stages (see Vycichl 1983, 27).

19. See the review of Ehret 1995 by Kortland 1996 à propos the “weakening of the semantic criterion.”

Finally, considering by hypothesis that the words selected for comparison have been safely related to one another from a semantic viewpoint, one has still to assess their phonological correspondences (point 8). As this is treated by scholars far more competent than I am, I gratefully leave the matter with them. Suffice here to say that for someone who has not made phonology his everyday bread, the feeling is that one is still very remote from the kind of consensus that has been reached among specialists of Indo-European languages. In Egyptology, for instance, the so-called *neuere Komparatistik*, following Rössler's insights,<sup>20</sup> has largely dominated the field for the past twenty years without gaining general acceptance.<sup>21</sup>

In the following section, I very quickly do some fact checking to illustrate my points 5–7, before discussing briefly the status of the root in Egyptian.

### 3.3. Reviewing the Evidence

In table 3.1, I review the first twenty pages of the data given by Ehret.<sup>22</sup> There are sixty-four items. Only forty-two of them offer Egyptian cognates. As can be seen, at least eighteen are clearly questionable. The recurrent problems are: Egyptian words whose meaning has not been properly understood, Egyptian words that actually turned out to be loanwords, and words whose semantic connection with the alleged proto-AA lexeme can be questioned. I have not here paid any (even remote) attention to the phonological correspondences that have been alleged.

A similar exercise, but with a different perspective, could be done for Takács's etymological dictionary.<sup>23</sup> I will not discuss here all proposed etymologies based on plausible vague analogies, nor etymologies for words with problematic consonants that open up an uncontrollable range of possibilities.<sup>24</sup>

The conclusions one can already make from the data given above show that scholars are often too ready to accept a connection between two words based on a very loose semantic relation. For instance, one can imagine a link (Takács #67) between 'separate, select' and 'distribute' (one makes a selection before distributing), but these are actually two different operations. On the basis of the sign of the house used in both pr 'house' (𓂏) and prj 'go out' (𓂏), one could be tempted to see some semantic connection because it is possible to go out from a house.<sup>25</sup> One could also posit a relation between 'to kill' and 'to eat' because some hunters communities once viewed these two actions as two complementing parts of the same activity. In my opinion, this is precisely where science stops and uncontrolled imagination begins.

20. Rössler 1971.

21. See Gensler 2015, and more generally scholars more or less related to the Moscow School.

22. Ehret 1995, 80–100.

23. See already Quack 2002.

24. For instance, see *ba* 'to hack up', for which Takács (2001, 26–28) has proposed himself seven possible etymologies to which one must add eleven other propositions coming from different scholars!

25. This line of reasoning was largely followed in Horapollon's treatise and, generally speaking, in the speculative works of Late Antiquity that try to explain the hieroglyphic system as symbolic in essence (Winand 2019).

TABLE 3.1 Some Egyptian words with their supposed AA cognates<sup>a</sup>

Ehret-#	Proto-AA	Egyptian	Remarks
8	*- <i>boh</i> ‘to go away’	<i>bhn</i> ‘to drive off’ <i>bhs</i> ‘to hunt’	The semantic link is very elusive; actually <i>bhn</i> means ‘cut off’ (cf. the knife classifier); <i>bhs</i> is not attested before the NK
11	<i>bāk</i> ‘to burn, shine’	<i>bk3</i> ‘morrow’ <i>bk3</i> ‘to be bright’	The core meaning of <i>bk3</i> is rather ‘be pregnant’, the connection with the birth of the sun, and hence to the morning is secondary
18	<i>bīn/bān</i> ‘to beget’	<i>bnn</i> ‘to beget’	<i>bnn</i> and <i>bnnb</i> are usually derived from a common root
32	<i>bāayn</i> ‘grindstone’	<i>bnnb</i> ‘sacred stone’	
21–23		<i>brk, brg, brk</i>	Probably Semitic loanwords
24	<i>bās</i> ‘to start off’	<i>bs(j)</i> ‘to introduce’	(1) The semantic link is far from clear, (2) as shown by Kruchten (1989), the original meaning is the passing from one world to another; the sense of initiating, introducing someone in a new office is a late, secondary development
38	<i>baš</i> ‘to sit’	<i>bḥnw</i> ‘mounting’	(1) The semantic link completely eludes me, (2) there is no word <i>bḥnw</i> ; a word <i>bḥn</i> is attested in the NK, which means a kind of inlaying of precious stones, hence mounting, but this has nothing to do with ‘what a statue, etc. sits on’ (Ehret), (3) it has every chance to be a loanword
42	<i>pāh</i> ‘to take into the mouth’	Coptic <i>pōhs</i> ‘to bite’	The verb is originally <i>pzh</i>
45	<i>pil</i> ‘to drive, chase’	<i>prj</i> ‘to go out, escape’	The verb means ‘go out’, not ‘escape’; the semantic link is far from evident
51	<i>pīr</i> ‘to fly’	<i>prj</i> ‘to go up’	The two <i>prj</i> are of course one single verb; the meaning ‘go up’ is only metaphorical for the ascending of the dead king to the sun
85	<i>fīr</i> ‘flower’	<i>pr.t</i> ‘fruit’ <i>prš</i> ‘to blow’	<i>pr.t</i> is obviously derived from <i>prj</i> ‘to go out’ For the derivation of <i>prš</i> , see <i>infra</i> , §4.
52	<i>poor</i> ‘to speak’	<i>pry</i> ‘utterance’ (LEg)	Seems to be a shadow word; if it exists, should be linked to <i>prj</i> ‘go out’, cf. the expression <i>pr.t-r-ḥrw</i>
53	<i>pas</i> ‘to light up’	<i>psj, fsj</i> ‘to cook’	I failed to see a direct semantic connection <sup>b</sup>
57	<i>pax</i> ‘to bend’	<i>phr</i> ‘to turn, to revolve’	I cannot see how to connect bending and revolving
60	<i>pa?</i> ‘to spit out’	<i>p3j</i> ‘to spurt’	Seems to be a shadow word
64	<i>pūš</i> ‘to spill out’	<i>pḥp</i> ‘to drop (calf)’	(1) The word is a <i>hapax</i> , with the moving legs classifier; the sense of dropping is far from established, (2) the link of this supposed meaning with ‘to spill out’ is far from self-evident

<sup>a</sup>After Ehret 1995, 80–100.<sup>b</sup>Of course, one can always see a link between lightning, warming, and hence cooking. But if such a semantic chain cannot be properly documented, it remains purely speculative.

### 3.4. Root Patterns

For some scholars, the root in AA was basically biconsonantal, with a possible extension to a third consonant. For Ehret,<sup>26</sup> this third consonant was semantically motivated, which is different from the model proposed by Bohas.<sup>27</sup>

In ancient Egyptian, there are undisputedly triradical verbs sharing a common semantic base that seems to be contained in a biradical root. In my opinion, the extension to a third radical was motivated by morphological considerations, not semantic ones. Trying to isolate a particular meaning for the third radical (as is arguably done with prefixes) is misleading and does not really help.<sup>28</sup> When applied to specific verbs, it only leads to *ad hoc* explanations, and it forces scholars to adapt (sometimes distort) the core meaning of the biradical root to accommodate the supposed semantic adjunct added by the third radical.

In 1985, I first focused on the verb *ptr*, which became in Late Egyptian the generic verb for seeing.<sup>29</sup> In EEg, it is a member of a class of verbs, like *nw(3)*, *gmh*, *dgj*, that specify a particular mode of seeing.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly enough, *ptr*, which is written with the eye-sign (𓄀), that is the generic classifier for seeing, is sometimes written in the oldest texts with two frowned eyes (𓄀𓄀). According to the hieroglyphic writing system, this specific classifier should indicate some kind of intensive process (the duplication of a sign is iconically an intensifier, as is also the case for some morphological devices like the gemination or the reduplication, cf. the use of *zp-sn* ‘twice’). Elaborating on this, I suggested that *ptr* originally means ‘distinguish, discover something by looking intensively’. I then proceeded to investigate the root pattern of *ptr*. I pointed out that *ptr* could be linked to a class of verbs that display the basic biconsonantal structure P + R, whose core meaning turned out to be ‘split open’.<sup>31</sup> There are a lot of semantically related triradical verbs in Egyptian, but also in Akkadian, Arabic, and Hebrew, that are built upon this basic root (*prd*, *prz*, *prq*, *prs*, *pr<sup>c</sup>*, *prš*, *prk*, *prš*).

Some of these are also attested with a metathesis of the last two consonants: *prz* vs. *pzr*, *prs* vs. *psr*, *pr<sup>c</sup>* vs. *par*, *prš* vs. *pšr*, *prt* vs. *pṯr*, without much semantic variation. Considering the available evidence, one can suggest that Eg. *ptr* is the result of a metathesis of an original \**prt* (unattested in Egyptian).<sup>32</sup> In this respect, the well-known verb *prj* ‘to go out’ could also be linked to an old biradical etymon meaning ‘to split’, hence ‘to open’ (cf. Hebrew *pr<sup>r</sup>*). One can also here recall that *prj* can occasionally take the meaning of excelling, standing out (cf. Hebrew *pr<sup>r</sup>*).<sup>33</sup>

26. Ehret 1995 and 2004.

27. Bohas 1991 and 1999. This model is usually rejected by scholars who work in a more traditional Arabic frame (see recently Zanned 2005). I came up with a similar idea some time before (Winand 1985), but this apparently went unnoticed.

28. See Vernus 2015, 423–24.

29. Winand 1985 and 1986. See also Depuydt 1988.

30. According to the *Wörterbuch*, there are nine verbs that can be translated as ‘to see’, with some limitations essentially depending on diachrony and the textual genres.

31. On this, see already Moscati 1947, 135.

32. See the evidence given in Winand 1985, 73–74. This hypothesis is not discussed in Takács 2001, 529–31, who does not take into account the information that can be gathered from the hieroglyphic writing system.

33. This shows, once more, that the third radical cannot be semantically motivated.

To sum up: biradicalism or triradicalism? The debate for sure is far from being over. But strange enough, some recent studies on proto-Semitic do not even allude to the controversy.<sup>34</sup> The limited case I discussed in this section strongly suggests that the assumption that everything can be brought back to the traditional view of a pervasive triconsonantal root system can at least be questioned, if not challenged.

### 3.5. By Way of Conclusion

Since the mid-twentieth century, tremendous work has been achieved as regards our understanding of ancient lexica. The following points can be underlined: (1) considerable progress in the collecting of the data, (2) the reconstruction of several phonological correspondences, (3) the reconstruction of some root patterns, (4) proposals on how to genetically organize languages in families, and how to fix an absolute chronology. Of course, the way scholars view the relations between the members of the AA phylum is far from being monolithic. In this respect, different proposals have been made to locate its birthplace. While an African origin seemed to remain undisputed, voices, mainly coming from the Moscow school, are arguing for a different place, closer to the IE phylum.<sup>35</sup> This should be considered in relation with point 6 hereunder. As regards the history of the migrations, scholars from the Moscow School proposed a detailed chronological reconstruction by using the glottochronology,<sup>36</sup> (5) the production of more or less extensive lists (dictionaries of AA roots, etymological dictionaries, etc.). Dictionaries or lists that have been produced so far<sup>37</sup> have sometimes been heavily criticized,<sup>38</sup> for various reasons. In different ways, however, they undoubtedly very positively contributed to the discussion, (6) attempts at reconstructing the cultural and societal background by using the lexicon,<sup>39</sup> and (7) attempts at reconstructing larger entities. In this respect, AA is regularly envisaged as a member of a larger family called Nostratic (among other names).<sup>40</sup> However, in spite of its enthusiastic research-

34. For instance, the question is not discussed at all in Gragg and Hoberman 2012. See Bohas's (1999, 397) statement:

Pour l'étude du lexique de l'arabe, la conclusion semble aller de soi: si l'on veut rendre compte des grandes régularités phonético-sémitiques que présente le lexique de l'arabe, et si l'on veut expliquer la polysémie et l'homonymie des radicaux, on adopte le modèle proposé. On développe l'analyse à tout le lexique et on en tire les conséquences pour l'organisation du modèle. Si l'on veut continuer de se boucher les yeux sur ces régularités et ne pas les considérer comme des faits linguistiques intéressants, et si l'on veut continuer à voir dans la polysémie et l'homonymie une mystérieuse propriété de l'arabe, on se limitera à la racine triconsonantique. Ce n'est pas parce que la majorité des chercheurs, durant le XXe siècle, s'est limitée à la racine triconsonantique que c'est la seule organisation possible et encore moins la bonne. Ce n'est pas parce qu'une idée s'est répandue au point de devenir une *doxa* qu'elle est devenue juste par la même occasion.

35. Militarev 2009; Blažek 2013a.

36. Militarev 2005; Blažek 2013a; Starostin 2000.

37. Ehret 1995; Orel and Stolbova 1995; Takács 1999–2008; Dolgopolsky 2008.

38. Kammerzell 1996 for Orel and Stolbova; Quack 2002 for Takács; Kortlandt 1996 and Gragg 1999 for Ehret.

39. Militarev 2009; Ehret 2011. See also Huehnergard 2011, 2068–69 for proto-Semitic.

40. The most recent synthesis is Bomhard 2018 (see also Dolgopolsky 2008 and more broadly people connected to the Moscow School).

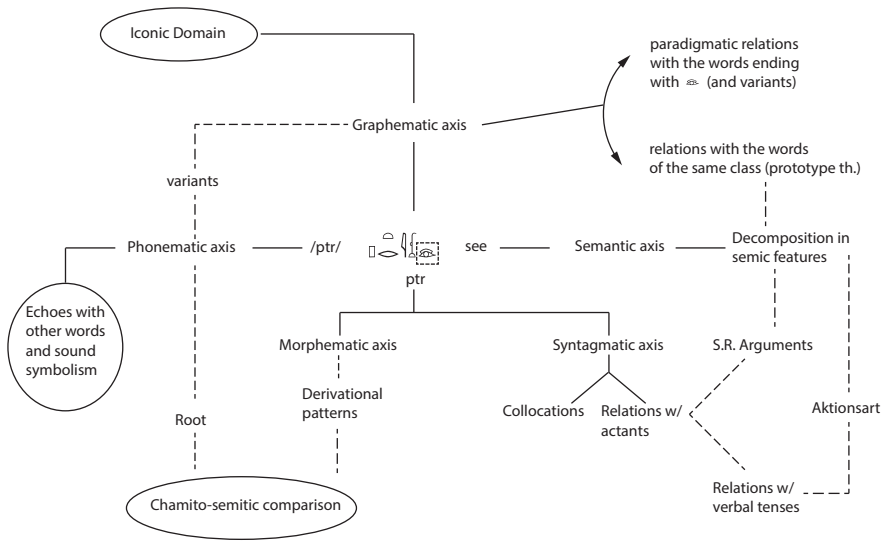


FIGURE 3.1. The Semantic Trail exemplified by the verb *ptr* 'see'

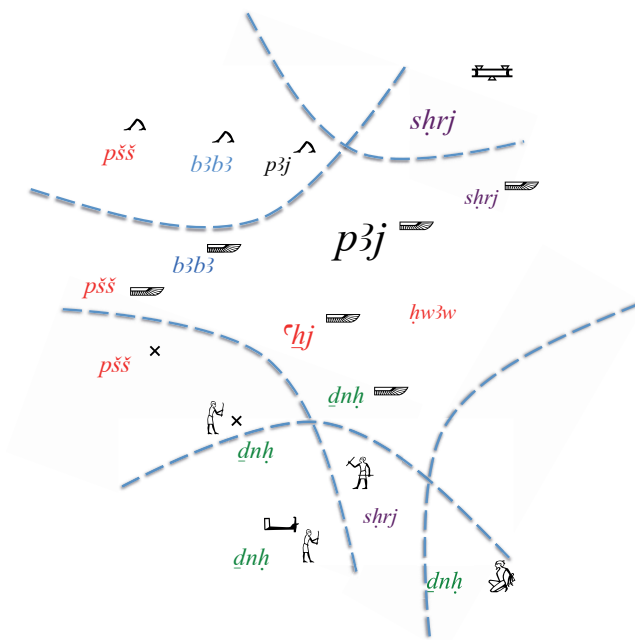


FIGURE 3.2. Graphic representation of VoM that can have  as semantic classifier

ers, this hypothesis has been met with scepticism by many scholars, who consider it as unfounded or at least premature.

From what precedes, it should be clear where I stand on the question of the reconstruction of a proto-AA lexicon. To the question “Is such a question legitimate?,” my answer is undoubtedly, YES. To the subsidiary question, “Can we handle this properly now?,” I fear the answer is NO. As far as I can see it, the urgency is to have a proper lexical tool for each (sub)-family of the supposed AA-phylum.<sup>41</sup> As regards ancient Egyptian, scholars have still to rely on a *Wörterbuch* that is about to turn one hundred. Even if progresses in our sciences are slower than in other fields like physics or biology, this is a respectable age. In a previous paper,<sup>42</sup> I proposed what I called a semantic trail for studying the lexicon, whose purpose is to identify viewpoints or axes for studying the lexicon. This procedure is encapsulated in figure 3.1

More recently, I strongly advocated to work with semantic categories,<sup>43</sup> more precisely by reconstructing semantic networks. The current research project “Verbs of motion and verbs of transfer in Late Egyptian” is a test-work involving more than three hundred lexemes. Figure 3.2 shows all that can be gained from the study of the classifiers for verbs that have in common the meaning of flying.

The project is to reconstruct networks based on what I call the lexical units (LexUnit), which are the building blocks that constitute a lexeme considered here as an abstract entity.<sup>44</sup> For instance, the verb *ph* ‘reach’ can be divided in at least three LexUnits. Figure 3.3 shows how one can represent on a map the relations of two basic verbs of motion, *ph* and *spr*, meaning ‘reach, attain’.<sup>45</sup>

One of the major problems one faces with lexical semantics is how to derive the attested meanings for a given word from a supposed primary meaning. The only possible way seems to make explicit the semantic bridges that can be posited by using the types of semantic transfer that are attested typologically. I have made such an attempt for the word *phwj*.<sup>46</sup> In this, I also tried to organize the data by taking into account the synonyms/antonyms specific for each LexUnit (fig. 3.4).

I am of course well aware that this takes—and will always take—time. But this is the price to pay for working on the “larger” picture (here AA reconstruction) without being accused of misusing the data that are brought into the discussion for lack of a proper understanding. This issue is crucial in every respect, because no significant progress will be made without gaining the general acceptance of specialists of individual languages. This in turn cannot be achieved if they feel that the data they are working with have not been given all the attention they deserve by comparatists. From an Egyptologist’s point of view, this is particularly relevant, for I am not aware of a single case where AA reconstruction helped solving a question of lexical semantics

41. See Quack 2003 for a similar opinion.

42. Polis and Winand 2015.

43. Treating the lexicon by semantic categories is of course not a new idea: cf. the series of studies by Takács, 1999–2008, devoted to body parts and numerals, so far; Blažek 2013b on Zoonyms; Militarev 2002 on farming, etc.

44. The division of a lexeme (more correctly vocable) in lexical units is much in accordance with Mel’čuk’s work 1984 (with Žolkovskij) and 2006.

45. Winand 2019. In a nutshell, *ph* means ‘to reach the ultimate goal’, while *spr* basically means ‘to make a stop on a journey’.

46. Polis and Winand 2015.



particular to the ancient Egyptian lexicon. This probably explains why there are so few scholars engaged in AA comparison that come from our field. In this respect, the situation probably looks different for scholars who study poorly documented or not well understood languages.

As should also be clear from what precedes, I do not envisage the result of a lexical study as a compiled list of individual words, however well described they might be. Any meaningful approach of the lexicon must start with semantic domains, for a word means nothing when considered in isolation. One has to reconstruct networks where the relations between words (or rather the LexUnits) in terms of synonymy, antonymy, hyperonymy, meronymy, etc., have been made explicit. I am completely agnostic as to whether something useful can really be grasped from various attempts at reconstructing an even larger picture (Nostratic hypothesis). While I freely concede how challenging this can be for the mind, as is the question of the possibility of life on exo-planets in other galaxies, reconstructing a proto-something with the help of a so-far elusive proto-AA seems to me premature given our current state of knowledge.

To sum up, John Huehnergard's statement about the situation of the AA studies has not lost its validity:<sup>47</sup> "One of the greatest hindrances to the reconstruction of Proto-Afroasiatic has been the difficulty of establishing clear cognate sets across the vocabularies of the several branches (this has also, of course, impeded efforts to establish sound correspondences across the branches and to reconstruct Proto-Afroasiatic phonology). Essentially, this must await the working out of reconstructed proto-vocabularies for the individual branches, which is still in its beginning stages, except for Semitic."

In the same vein, Bohas's statement (independently from one's own appreciation of his system) also calls for attention: "Pour le comparatisme dans le domaine des langues afro-asiatiques, la conclusion semble être qu'en ce qui concerne le lexique, la comparaison doit s'effectuer sur les étymons et les matrices et non pas sur les racines triconsonantiques. En d'autres termes, *qu'avant de comparer, il faut commencer par dégager les étymons et les matrices dans chaque langue.*"<sup>48</sup>

Otherwise, one risks to have the sad experience of Alexander Vovin, who, after spending twenty years studying proto-Altaic, was definitely convinced that these studies were engaged in a dead-end after reviewing the recently published *Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages* (EDAL). As stated by Vovin: "(EDAL is) a full scale demonstration that the Altaic hypothesis has failed, although the main goal of this grandiose publication was just the opposite: to prove to the outside world that the Altaic language family exists and that five language families included into this tentative stock are all genetically related. I really feel indebted to EDAL's authors for their massive effort to provide such a bulk of nonevidence for Altaic conveniently collected in one place for those of us who humbly disagree with the authors' main premise."<sup>49</sup>

47. Huehnergard 2002, 141. On the Semitic lexicon, see also Huehnergard 2002, 156: "Additional research is needed before the percentage of Proto-Semitic vocabulary inherited from common Afro-Asiatic can be estimated."

48. Bohas 1999, 397 (emphasis added).

49. Vovin 2005, 72–73.

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