

Mehri verbal system: an inventive Semitic morphology

1. In this paper we investigate the verbal morphology of Mehri (Modern South Arabic, spoken in Yemen and Oman). Like other Semitic languages, Mehri has a root-and-pattern morphology, which is organized around consonantal roots, templates, and non-concatenative mechanisms (1). However, Mehri is remarkable among Semitic in having an accentual system of the Icelandic type (*i.e.* Tonic Lengthening, with *Closed Syllable Vowel Shortening*, where final closed syllables behave like open syllables). Mehri verbal system therefore provides a testing ground for evaluating the consequences of quantitative stress on non-concatenative morphology, in particular stem-internal lengthening. Our aim is to provide a coherent classification of the verb forms, and account for the peculiarity of derivational and aspectual/modal marking in Mehri among Semitic.

2. The forms to be considered are the perfective (PF), the subjunctive (SBJ), and the imperfective (IPF) of **va** (2). Other IPF forms are either suppletive (**vc**, **vt₂**, **vš₂**, **pass**, **vb**, **vt₁**), or simply built by prefixation of the personal markers (**vh**, **vš₁**). The conditional is always "SBJ + ən" (note that a and ə are the short correspondants in closed syll. of oo/ee and ii in open syll. respectively, and oo/uu ~ ii alternation (**vb**, **pass**, **vt₂**) is a regular effect of ən affixation).

3. Our point of departure is the template proposed for Classical Arabic by [GL90] (3a) where *A* marks voice, *V_{th}* is the thematic vowel and DS (*Derivational Syllable*) hosts the gemination of the second root-C (form II *kattaba*), C-infixation, and lengthening of *V₁* (form III *kaataba*). In Mehri, the original (Proto-Sem.) phonological contrast of vocalic length has been lost, so that vocalic length is no longer available for morphology. Moreover, Mehri does not make use of the gemination of the second root-C as a morphological device [Jo75:105]. As a result, DS has been lost in Mehri (3b), and this is the property which sets Mehri apart from the other Semitic languages. On this analysis, the Mehri verb system is expected to exhibit, besides apophony, only external (prefixal) markers. However, this is not true (1). This raises the question of how Mehri expresses its internal (non-apophonic) morphology.

4. To address this question, we show that, (i) *V₁* is a new morphological site in the verb template (2e, f, h), (ii) the floating morpheme *A* receives a new, central, role: its association to the verb template defines the form as derived (2d, f, i) or marked for aspect/modality (2e, h), and (iii) apophony applies only in basic forms (2a, pass, b vs 2d, e, f, g, h, i).

4.1. Consider first the basic form *rəkuuz* (4a). Its head is the thematic vowel *u*. The SBJ form is derived by apophony (4b). Consider now **vc** (*a*)*rookəz*. The PF and SBJ stems are identical (5). In our analysis, this is due to the association of *A* to *V₁* in the PF, which marks the form as derived, and blocks any further stem-internal operation.

4.2. The PF of **vš₁** *šarkuuz* and **vš₂** *šareekəz* are in the same relation as the PF of **va** *rəkuuz* and **vc** (*a*)*rookəz*. In *šarkuuz*, however, the prefix is occupied by *š*. This prevents apophony to apply, and the SBJ is derived by association of *A* to the morphological head, *i.e.* the prefix (*yə-šarkəz*). We thus claim that the morphological value of *A* depends on its *location*: in *V₁* it marks derivation, in the prefix it marks modality and aspect. Notice that in Mehri, *A* is not a *Voice* marker anymore; voice is derived by apophony: **pass**. *rəkeez* vs **va** *rəkuuz*.

4.3. Finally, we turn to IPF **va** *yəruukəz* and **vb** *riikəz*. In these forms, *V₁* is identified, but not by *A*. We show that none of these forms is derived. In *yəruukəz*, *V₁* is identified by *V_{th}*. The resulting form is a form marked for aspect (IPF). **vb** *riikəz* corresponds to the simple stems of Class. Ar. *labisa* / *kabura*. The identification of *V₁* by a marker other than *A* does not yield a derived form. This mirrors the situation in SBJ **vš₁** *yəšarkəz*: the identification of a site other than *V₁* by *A* does not yield a derived form but a form which is marked for aspect / modality.

5. Our analysis leads to the classification in (6). Further it provides a simple account of the peculiarity of Mehri among Semitic, which results from the loss of DS in the verbal template. The morpheme *A* acquires a much more widespread role. It may mark modal and aspectual oppositions as well as derivation. These facts show that the morphological value of a given phonological process depends crucially on its location in the template, not just on its segmental value.

Data:

(1) Mehri verbal system

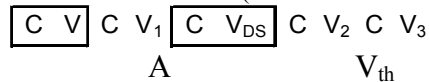
(data from *ML*; we use the same root \sqrt{rkz} in all forms; underlining indicates stress; stress is phonetically expressed by length)

<i>ML</i> :xix-lxxi	tag		perfective	imperfective	subjunctive	conditionnal
simple v. type (a), active	va	3ms	rə <u>kuuz</u>	yəruukəz	yərkeez	yərkeezən
simple v. type (a) passive	pass.	3ms	rə <u>keez</u>	yərkooz	yərkooz	yərkiizən
simple v. type (b)	vb	3ms	ri <u>kəz</u>	yərkooz	yərkooz	yərkiizən
intensive conative v.	vc	3ms	ar <u>ookəz</u>	yarakzən	yarookəz	yarakzən
causative v.	vh	3ms	hər <u>kuuz</u>	yəhərkuuz	yəharkəz	yəharkəzən
reflexive v. type (a)	vt₁	3ms	rat <u>kəz</u>	yərtəkuuz	yərtiikəz	yərtəkzən
reflexive v. type (b)	vt₂	3ms	ərtə <u>kuuz</u>	yərtəkiizən	yərtəkuuz	yərtəkiizən
caus. reflex. v. type (a)	vš₁	3ms	šər <u>kuuz</u>	yəšərkuuz	yəšarkəz	yəšarkəzən
caus. reflex. v. type (b)	vš₂	3ms	šəre <u>kəz</u>	yəšrakzən	yəšreekəz	yəšrakzən

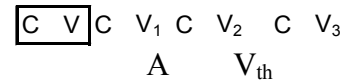
(2)

			perfective	subjunctive	imperfective
a.	va	3ms	rə <u>kuuz</u>	yərkeez	yəruukəz
b.	pass.	3ms	rə <u>keez</u>	yərkooz	
c.	vb	3ms	ri <u>kəz</u>	--	
d.	vc	3ms	(a)rookəz	yarookəz	
e.	vh	3ms	hər <u>kuuz</u>	yəharkəz	
f.	vt₁	3ms	rat <u>kəz</u>	yərtiikəz	
g.	vt₂	3ms	ərtə <u>kuuz</u>	yərtəkuuz	
h.	vš₁	3ms	šər <u>kuuz</u>	yəšarkəz	
i.	vš₂	3ms	šəre <u>kəz</u>	yəšreekəz	

(3) a. *Classical Arabic* (Guerssel & Lowenstamm (1990))

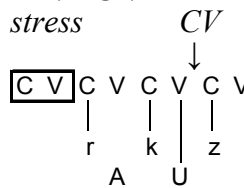


b. *Mehri*

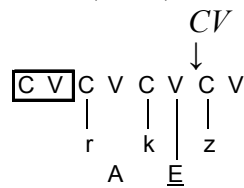


(4) **va**

a. PF rəkuuz
/rkUz/

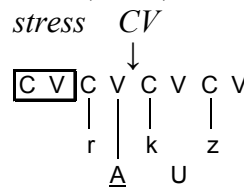


b. SBJ rəkeez
/rkEz/

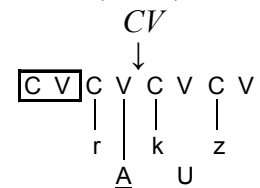


(5) **vc**

a. PF (a)rookəz
/rAkz/



b. SBJ (a)rookəz
/rAkz/



(6)

	<i>V₁ unidentified simplex stems</i>		<i>V₁ identified by A internally derived stems</i>	
	va	rə <u>kuuz</u>	pass	rə <u>keez</u>
<i>pref. identified by {h-, š-, t-}</i>	vh	hər <u>kuuz</u>		
<i>externally derived stems</i>	vš₁	šər <u>kuuz</u>		
	vt₂	ərtə <u>kuuz</u>		
			vc	(a)rookəz
			vš₂	šəre <u>kəz</u>
			vt₁	rat <u>kəz</u>

Selected references

Jo75 = Johnstone, T. M. (1975), The Modern South Arabian Languages, *AAL* 1/5:93-121.

ML = Johnstone, T. M. (1987), *Mehri Lexicon*, London: SOAS.

GL90 = Guerssel, M. & J. Lowenstamm (1990), *The Derivational Morphology of the Classical Arabic Verbal System*, ms. UQAM & University Paris 7.