The 'Ground' Form Revisited: Arabic Morphology and Cognitive Semantics

Current analyses of the Arabic verb treat the ground form as basic, and there is frequently no distinction between the meaning associated with a consonantal root and the meaning assigned to the ground form verb in which that root appears (Holes, 2004; Watson, 2002). This causes problems when members of a word family share a semantic connection that is not identical to the meaning of the ground form verb. For example, if the verb *rafaʕa* 'to raise' has this meaning only because its root happens to mean 'raise', we are obliged to derive the adjective *rafiiʕ* 'high class' from this basic meaning component. A more sensible explanation is that neither word is derived from the other, but that both share the notion of height associated with the root consonants. While establishing a separation between a root and the ground form solves one problem however, it creates another: if the ground form is not exactly equivalent to the root, why does a ground form verb mean what it means? If we cannot say that a verb means *x* because its root means *x,* we need a new account of what the ground form represents.

In this paper I argue that the ground form variants traditionally referred to as *faʕala*, *faʕila* and *faʕula* denote three different semantic structures that organize the semantic content associated with the consonantal root. Drawing on work in cognitive semantics (Croft, 1990, 1991; Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987, 1990, 1999) I propose an idealized cognitive model consisting of the prototypical structuring of participant roles in an event or situation: A acts on B; A is located relative to B; A relates to B. A ground form verb represents the organization of semantic content in a structure that either matches this prototypical structure (or is close enough to be considered a match), or that deviates. Deviations from the prototype are semantically marked, and the Arabic verbs that construe them are therefore marked morphologically. I present contemporary and historical data to illustrate that Arabic verbs formed in the *faʕala* pattern all have subjects with roles that match the first argument in the prototypical structure. Hence the subject is typically agentive (as with *rafaʕa* 'to raise'), but may also simply be located or compared relative to a reference point (as with *daxala* 'to enter' or archaic *kabara* 'to be older than'). Verbs formed in *faʕila* all have subjects with roles that match the second argument of the prototype. Their subjects are frequently affected experiencers (like the subject of *hazina* 'to become sad'), but may also be locations with reference to which some other argument is located (*labisa* 'to put on, wear'), or they may be preceded in a temporal or spatial sequence (*tabiʕa* 'to follow'). It is well established that *faʕula* verbs construe stative meaning (Wright, 1859), and this pattern represents a third semantic structure wherein an entity is related to a property state (as with *hasuna* 'to be or become good'). I show that the same semantic content may be organized in one or more of these semantic structures, and hence the same root may appear in more than one ground form variant, with no form being more or less basic than the other.

The approach I outline here is able to explain why a given ground form verb means what it does without simply equating the verb with its root. The paper expands our knowledge of the relationship between morphological form and meaning, and contributes to a growing body of research that seeks to determine how meaning is constructed in the mind and construed to others with linguistic form.

Subfields: Semantics; Morphology

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