SEMITICA


These two volumes represent the two-stage results of the research project “Circumstantial Clause Combining in Semitic,” which was funded by a Swedish Research Council grant in 2010-2012. The first volume, published in 2014, contains revised papers presented at a 2012 symposium connected to the research project, while the second volume, published in 2015, presents further fruit of the project. The fact that both volumes are related to the same research project explains the overlap of topic, the overlap of the editors and many contributors to each, and the combination of both into this single review.

The background to both volumes is addressed in the two prefaces, which can be usefully read together. In the preface to the first (2014) volume, the editors explain that the research project and symposium were concerned with non-main clause linking and that they invited papers that would investigate “ways of combining clauses other than through relative clause and complement clause constructions (2014:7). Although I can imagine a linguistic distinction that separates relative and complement clauses from other non-main clauses, it would have allowed the reader to avoid guessing at the motivation if the editors had explained this choice. In the preface to the second (2015) volume, the editors further address how and why the research project’s (and its two volumes’) focus had broadened from circumstantial clauses to non-main clause linking in Semitic: “it was soon felt that ‘circumstantial’ was too narrow a concept to cover the complexity of the phenomena we wanted to investigate” (2015:8). The broader scope was limited by excluding relative clauses, subject and object clauses, as well as clauses introduced by a subordinator. The questions that guided the research became: “How is hypotaxis marked in Semitic, other than by conjunctions? How does this affect the organization of texts? More specifically, what constitutes a circumstantial clause?” (ibid.). Finally, before surveying the articles in both volumes, it is worth noting for the linguistically-sensitive reader that those contributions that explicitly cite or build upon general linguistic frameworks—not all the studies do so—are exclusively functional (the works of Simon Dik, M.A.K. Halliday, or R.M.W. Dixon are found in numerous bibliographies) and/or typological in orientation.

The eleven articles of the first (2014) volume are divided into five sections: two articles cover Arabic dialects (Hélène Kammensjö on circumstantial clauses in oral Egyptian Arabic and Maria Persson on non-main clause linking and verb-form switching in Syrian Arabic), two articles cover written Arabic (Hans Lagerqvist on indefinite relative clauses and asyndetic ḥāl clauses in modern standard Arabic and Michal Marmorstein on verbal syntax and textual structure in-classical Arabic prose), five articles concern Biblical Hebrew (Gregor Geiger on phrases that precede the wayyiqtol, Bo Isaksson on linking finite clauses in archaic poetry, Reinhard G. Lehmann on Diethelm Michel’s “nominal clause” category, Aliviero Nicacci on background constructions within “main line” information, and Frank Polak on the circumstantial clause in discourse structure), one article on Ethio-Semitic (Lutz Edzard on serial verbs and converbs), and one article on East Semitic (Eran Cohen on the “domain” as a syntactic unit above the sentence).

The second (2015) volume is larger and contains an additional section, though it has fewer total articles (seven). Accounting for the difference in the number of articles is the reduction of studies on Biblical Hebrew—down to one in this volume—and the addition of an article on Aramaic. Other than this, the structure is nearly identical, as are many of the contributors. For Arabic dialects, Hélène Kammensjö and Maria Persson continue their work on circumstantial clauses in Egyptian Arabic and non-main clause linking in Syrian (specifically, Damascene) Arabic, respectively. Similarly, Michal Marmorstein again examines Classical Arabic, focusing in this volume on verbal circumstantial clauses. For Biblical Hebrew, Bo Isaksson broadens his scope in a very long article (100 pages!) by considering the verbal system in light of clause combining. Eran Cohen has contributed articles on two different languages, one on circumstantial clauses in the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialect of Zakho and a second on the circumstantial clause in Old Babylonian Akkadian. Finally, in place of the Ethio-Semitic in the 2014 volume, circumstantial clauses in Sabaean are examined by Jan Retsö.

As publication products, the two volumes combine to present a great deal of syntactic data on sequences of clauses, particularly related to “circumstantial” clauses, from the languages covered. Arabic and Biblical Hebrew are investigated with conspicuous depth. In fact, even though I am primarily a Hebraist, the inordinate coverage given to Biblical Hebrew—nearly half of the 2014 volume and a quarter of the 2015 volume—struck me as an infelicitous imbalance. In other ways, the quality of the volumes is mixed. While the articles in the 2014 volume generally share a similar length, no doubt due to their origin as symposium papers, the languages treated lacks an even distribution among Semitic (Aramaic is not represented and Biblical Hebrew over-represented). Conversely, the 2015 volume adds an Aramaic study and apparently intended to reduce the treatment of Biblical Hebrew, the length of articles differs radically. For example, Egyptian Arabic and Akkadian are each examined in 40 pages, while Sabaean takes 70 and the 100-page article on Biblical Hebrew is conspicuously oversized in comparison to
the others. Another features is the representation of data. As a collection of linguistic studies, the editors and authors are to be commended on providing linguistic glossing between the language data and English translations. This is important for making the articles accessible to not just other Semitists but those outside of Semitic studies for whom the issues are of linguistic interest. With that said, the editors do not include in either volume a list of the linguistic abbreviations; nor is it clear to this reviewer that the authors were using a common scheme, such as the widely used Leipzig Glossing Rules. Finally, I appreciate the addition of a brief index of terms in the 2015 volume, though to be usable it should have been trebled in detail. Unfortunately, the 2014 volume has no index at all, making it much more difficult to compare the included studies on a single topic or to use as a reference.

A few final comments on the substance of the volumes will complete this review, starting with the initial topic of the research project and many of the resulting studies, the circumstantial clause. As I mentioned, in the 2015 volume the editors clarify that they broadened the scope of the project to include non-main clause linking in Semitic; however, they do not successfully delimit a coherent focus in place of circumstantial clauses. The result is, for both volumes, a mixture of articles on circumstantial clauses (Kammensjö 2014, 2015, Lagerqvist 2014, Edzard 2014, Marmorstein 2015, Cohen 2015 [both], Restö 2015, and Polak 2014) with articles covering broader non-main clause linking (Persson 2014, 2015, Geiger 2014), general verbal syntax (Marmorstein 2014, Isaksson 2014, 2015), “nominal” clauses (Lehmann 2014), foreground-background patterns (Niccacci 2014) and information structure (Cohen 2014).

Among the studies in both volumes, the most intriguing for me are those that did not dispense with the project’s original topic and attempted to come to terms with circumstantial clauses, which many of the authors admit are not identifiable by syntactic criteria (i.e., there is no discrete set of particles marking a clause as circumstantial) or even by clear semantic criteria (e.g., the use of specific verb forms to signal circumstantial clauses). Indeed, in both her studies Persson questions the usefulness of identifying the circumstantial clause as a distinct syntactic or semantic category. Within the context of my own research into Biblical Hebrew syntax, especially on relative clauses, word order, apposition, and parenthesis, I arrived at the same conclusion a number of years ago. The implication of the likely non-existence of the circumstantial clause as a distinct syntactic or semantic feature of grammar puts a strange twist on all the other studies in these two volumes that focus on this linguistic chimera—how are data collected for something that defies definition? More to the point—why did the project hosts and volume editors keep the circumstantial clause front-and-center even in defining the attempted shift to a broader focus (2015:8, quoted above)?

In my judgment, these two works contain some methodological, structural, and communicative weaknesses, as I have described in the foregoing paragraphs. Nonetheless, my final word on these two volumes is a positive one. I commend the project organizers and editors, as well as the contributors, for what are clearly sober and rigorous examinations of a variety of inter-clausal syntactic constructions. The expertise of these scholars in their respective areas is evident in these studies, and differences of linguistic methodology aside and the lack of a key to the linguistic glossing notwithstanding, the data and arguments presented are interesting and often provocative and so certainly worth interacting with.

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