

Sound Symbolism and Reduplicated Quadrilaterals in Colloquial Arabic

Traditionally the task of studying and compiling inventories of words possessing qualities of sound symbolism and onomatopoeia have fallen to the lexicographers as most Arabic grammarians have seen the phenomena as linguistically irrelevant. In classical Arabic literature, sound symbolism is prevalent in environmental and animal names and sounds, especially in birds and camels. The word *hikaya* or imitation (for words such as *šiba šiba* for a camel drinking, or *ḡiq ḡiq* for the sound of a kettle boiling) is used to describe the sound symbolism found in Classical Arabic, but is a mixed category of elements that is not limited to the concept of onomatopoeia (Versteegh 283-284). Throughout this analysis I will focus primarily exploring the linguistic functions of quadrilaterals and sound symbolism in modern dialects, which play a limited role with relatively few references in literature.

Quadrilateral verb patterns are often some of the most expressive, colourful, and idiomatic elements in the Arabic dialects (Woidich, 97). Not by any means limited to asyndetic reduplication, quadrilaterals occur for a variety of reasons, such as arabizing foreign words such as ‘to telephone,’ ‘*talfan-a*’ and ‘to philosophize,’ ‘*falsaf-a*,’ acronymic roots such as ‘to say the name of god,’ ‘*basmal-a*,’ compound roots such as ‘to worship the sun’ ‘*absham-a*’ or to be petrified ‘*jalmad-a*,’ as well as the regular quadrilaterals such as ‘to translate,’ ‘*tarjam-a*’ and ‘to dominate,’ ‘*sayTar-a*.’ Quadrilaterals are also often times closely related to other trilateral verb forms such as Form II (which I will address in greater detail), III, and IV (Ryding, 599-603). In addition, quadrilaterals are often denominative and can connote an increased intensity, extensification of scope, and multiple agency, very closely related to Wood’s idea of pluractionality. Quadrilaterals have a variety of forms but in Colloquial Arabic, such as Syriac/Levantine and North African Arabic, the two primary patterns are C1C2C1C3 and C1C2C3C3 (Holes, 105). In addition to this Holes states that imitative and synesthetic sound symbolism and onomatopoeia is often expressed in dialect through the usage of reduplicated quadrilaterals which he calls “mimetic of extended or repeated sounds, movements and actions which occur in the physical world. . . [there is] very often a direct relationship in this verb type [reduplicated quadrilaterals] between physical phonetic form and semantic function” (at least when they are not obvious denominative derivations). There exists multiple forms of sound symbolism, and when asking how this phenomena is developed, Prunet suggests that procedures such as metathesis exist to derive or develop onomatopoeia, and the addition of sonorants such as those found in Lmnabha Arabic. An example of a variation before delving deeper into reduplication are echo words, such as ‘*siki miki*’ or ‘fashionable in Egyptian,’ ‘*sata mata*’ or ‘boisterous’ in Moroccan, and ‘*shuti muti*’ or ‘gummies [gummy worms, etc] in Syrian Levantine Arabic (Versteegh 50, 286).

In trying to make sense of the importance or meaning behind reduplication in Arabic, Prochazka suggests that seventy percent of these words can be divided into two simple categories; denoting intensive or rhythmic motion, or acoustic phenomena. Prochazka argues that only reduplicated quadrilateral nouns are onomatopoeic in nature, whereas animal names are relate to triradical nouns instead of onomatopoeia. In addition to this, he also states that often times the shorter version of a word was derived from the

longer, such as in *'takka' and taktaka'* for 'to tick' (Versteegh 286). Reduplication is often seen as signifying plurality or intensity, similar to the effect the *shadda* has in form II. Reduplication can also signify movement and the iterative of events, such as in the Neo-Arabic variety (*laflif*, to wrap up, *lamlim*, to gather up) and exhibits a degree of verbal plurality (Versteegh, 50). To take this a step further, according to Wood's 2007 analysis, this distribution of time and unified characterization is similar to that of pluractionality, and specifically event internal pluractionality. The semantic effect of C1C2C1C2 reduplication (referred to as the QRR class of quadrilateral), as seen in Iraqi, Omani and Zanzibar dialects of Arabic, as well as other semitic languages is the expression of pluractionality and intensification having to do with vigor, speed, magnitude and extent (Greenberg, 120, 155).

Onomatopoeic effects are also achieved through other means such as the juxtaposition of words, and sound symbolic contamination. The text also suggests that there is a relationship between letters or pronunciation and meaning; *'qatala'* to kill, *'qassa'* to cut, clip, *'gasama'* to divide, *'qata'a'* to cut, *'qarada'* to cut, sever, *'qaraba'* to cut, carve. This would equate to the English slip, slide, slither, slush, slime, where in both languages there is relatively similar meaning and sounds produced, but no connection between roots. Another example of the relation between sound and meaning, *faSama* 'to split or crack,' versus the stronger pronunciation of *qaSama* 'to break, shatter' is similar to that of *Tulm* 'a nick, notch,' versus *Tulb* 'defamation, slander. If you pronounce these words you can easily see the clear differences in 'strength' or 'clarity' in pronunciation for lack of better terms. In his Xasa'is Ibn Jinna states that the combination of sound 'f' with any of 'd,t,T,r,l,n' in Arabic symbolizes a weakness or lack of something, whereas when s'l'm is present in any sort of permutation there is a notion of gentleness. Although these examples are not directly related to reduplication and sound symbolism, Bohas believes there is a mimphonic relationship between the world and matrices, or phonetic features rather than phonemes which stand for a semantic core that persists in all resulting roots, in other words, sounds in some ways express the exterior world (Versteegh 287-288).

An important point to be understood, onomatopoeia and sound symbolism can be expressed differently between different cultures and languages, which is commonly seen in different Arabic dialects. In Clive Holes' exploration in onomatopoeia (mostly throughout Eastern Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman) we see that the Classic Literary Arabic *'baqbaqa'*, 'to make a gurgling sound, bubble, or blow bubbles in water,' is *'barbag'* in Kuwait and *'burbaq'* in Oman. Holes also presents the theory that in Damascene Arabic especially, 'r' or 'l' in quadrilaterals is not an insertion but rather the original second radical, then a copy of the initial radical in position three, an example of this being *'balbaS'* 'to dangle, to wag its tail [dog]' and *'garga'* 'in Sunni or *'gargaš'* in Shi'i 'to clatter, bang' derived from the Gulf custom of 'trick or treating' on the 15th of Ramadan. Holes also provides examples of clear onomatopoeia in Bahraini Arabic, *'bamba'* 'to bleat [for sheep] and *'dandar'* 'to bicker, squabble.' *'Tartar'* 'to talk aimlessly,' in Bahraini is very interesting as in Hebrew there exists a long list of reduplicated quadrilaterals all related to actions being done 'aimlessly' or as stated 'incassative reasoning' (Greenberg, 142, Woidich 103-106) Also in Omani, there are often times connections between reduplicated quadrilaterals derived from Classic Arabic such as *'tsansaH'* to slither, slide down' from CLA *'saHHa, tasaHHa'* (Woidich, 104-105). This example seems closely related to the Egyptian reduplicates *'mashmash'* to suck, gnaw, nibble' from *'mash'* 'to suck' as well as *'dashdish'* 'to reduce to fragments' from *'dash'* 'to mash, pound (Versteegh 51).

In a study done by Petra University, over one hundred common reduplicated quadrilaterals were divided into various semantic categories such as strictly onomatopoeic, kinesthetic, change in size,

muscular effort, motion, and speech defect and surveyors determined aspects such as their acceptability and formality in speech (Anani 2-4). Though I do not aim to analyze the results, this test puts into question the prevalence of these forms and the formality (as often times onomatopoeia is used for lower registers of speech such as 'baby talk).

In conclusion we can see the complexity of sound symbolism and reduplication and the its wide degree of variation different Arabic dialects. It is important to state that the semantic effect of reduplication is often times pluractionality and despite their onomatopoeic origin, some reduplicates fit into the overall derivational system, and roots can be extracted to and made the basis for the derivation of other forms (Versteegh, 50). After this analysis I still am left without an answer to exactly what percentage of onomatopoeia in Arabic is manifested in reduplicated quadrilaterals. Although 'waswas' to whisper is a clear case of onomatopoeia, 'hamasa' again 'to whisper and '~aTsha' 'to sneeze' also seem to be expressive of sound symbolism. In addition to this, apart from the pluractionality, the semantic and linguistic importance of sound symbolism and reduplication demands further research.

Works Cited:

Anani, Mohammad. "Acceptability of Arabic Reduplicates." *International Journal of Linguistics*. 4.4 (2012). Print.

Greenberg, Yael. "Event Internal Pluractionality In Modern Hebrew: A Semantic Analysis Of One Verbal Reduplication Pattern." *Brill's Annual Of Afroasiatic Languages & Linguistics* 2.1 (2010) : 119-164. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 16 Dec. 2013.

Holes, Clive. *Modern Arabic: Structures, Functions, and Varieties*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2004.

Ryding, Karin C. *A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.

Versteegh, Cornelis Henricus Maria. *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*. Vol. IV. Leiden: Brill, 2009. Print.

Woidich, Manfred, Martine Haak, Rudolf Erik De. Jong, and C. H. M. Versteegh. *Approaches to Arabic*

Dialects: A Collection of Articles Presented to Manfred Woidich on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday. Leiden: Brill, 2004. Print.