

Learning to Read in Semitic Languages

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Abstract

Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic use alphabetic writing systems. But these alphabets are considerably different in their textual arrangement (setting) from most other alphabet systems developed from Greek and Latin, such as those practiced in Europe. The difference emanates from historical developments. But the results of this development are that contemporary readers of Semitic writing systems read texts in which vowel signs are not presented at all, and other texts in which vowel signs are completely encoded in the form of dots and strokes (diacritics), placed below, inside, or above the consonant letters, instead of to their left or right. Thus, when the eyes of Semitic alphabet readers scan the words horizontally, along the line, they are likely to perceive and decode the consonant graphemes together with the diacritic vowel signs as single units-- as if each consonant+vowel unit stands for a CV syllable. One question to be discussed in this presentation is whether this special graphemic arrangement influences differentially the reading of young students and adults, as well as the process of reading acquisition. We will report evidence from a variety of studies, in which the unique characteristics of reading in Hebrew and Arabic are investigated. We shall argue that this dual orthography arrangement has some advantages.

Another characteristic of Semitic languages is that unlike Indo-European languages in which complex words are combined by affixation in a linear (concatenated) manner. That is, affixes are placed before or after the word's base, while the base itself is an indivisible unit, in Semitic languages, this form of word inflection and derivation is not the only one form of morphemic composition. In Semitic languages, the word base, the uninflected form, is combined of two morphemes—the **root** and the **vocalic pattern**, which are interwoven in each other in a non-linear (non-concatenated) manner. In general, the root consists of three consonants and the vocalic pattern of the base consists of one or two vowels. The base itself can be inflected by all kinds of suffixation like most or all Indo-European languages. The second question to be discussed in this presentation is whether Semitic language speakers, including pre-schoolers, are sensitive to the Semitic morpheme structures (i.e., have developed morphological awareness), so that they can benefit from their morphological awareness in their reading acquisition.