

Research article

Amikam Gai*

Adjective + Complement in Semitic Languages

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Abstract: The relationship between the two components of the construction known in Arabic as *الاضافة غير الحقيقية*, e.g., *الحَسَنُ الْوَجْهَ*, Hebrew *יָפֵה עֵינָיִם*, and Akkadian *damqam inim* ‘beautiful-faced/eyed’, is commonly held to be one of nexus: ‘His/her eyes/face are/is beautiful’. The author of the article argues that the relationship is rather that of a verb/(verbal) root with its complement – similar to Arabic *تميز*, e.g., *حَسَنٌ وَجْهًا* ‘He is beautiful, as for his face’. A 1996 article by the author used analytical arguments to prove this; the present article, which is a continuation, does not repeat the analytical arguments, but presents examples contradicting the “Nexus Theory” along with examples unequivocally supporting the “Complement Theory”.

Keywords: Semitic linguistics, adjective, complement, accusative, genitive

1 Introduction

In 1996 I published an article titled “Adnominal and Adverbial Attributes in Semitic Languages” (Le Muséon 109, pp. 369–393), in which I argued that in the construction called in Arabic *الاضافة غير الحقيقية* e.g. *الحَسَنُ الْوَجْهَ*, Hebrew *יָפֵה עֵינָיִם*, and Akkadian *damqam inim* ‘beautiful-faced/eyed’, the syntactic relationship between the two components of the collocation does not correspond to that of a nexus, but rather to that of a noun or a verb with its complement, i.e. object or “genitive”. I based this statement largely on parallels and analogies.

I will succinctly summarize the basic theses of that article and the terminology I use.

The relationship of the object or adverb to its verb is the same as that of the adnominal attribute to its qualified substantive. In other words, the object of the verb and the attribute of the noun are allosyntagms of the same syntagmeme.

לְשַׁפֵּט יְהוֹם ‘Judge the fatherless’ (Jes. 1:17) vs. מִשְׁפֵּט יְהוֹם ‘The judgment of the fatherless’ (Deut. 10:18).

ابن عبد ربه احمد بن) فَإِنَّا إِن ركبنا الفلاة مِتْنَا ‘And as for us, if we ride [through] the desert, we will die’ (1359–1372 h], vol. v p. 263 line 1) vs. *فَهُمْ ه بن ق يركوب الفلاة* ‘and H. ibn Q. worried about riding [through] the desert’ (same book, p. 262 line 2 from bottom).

To convey this syntagmeme I use the term “complement”, and to convey the two allosyntagms I use “object” and “(adnominal) attribute”.

The relationship between the different appearances of the (verbal) root with its different complements is one and the same:

(1) ל-ב-ש

- וְלָבַשׁ אֶת-בְּגָדֵי הַבָּד ‘He shall put on the linen clothes’ (Lev. 16:32) – Verb + Object.
- וְאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּתוֹכָם לְבוּשׁ בָּדִים ‘And one man among them, clothed in linen’ (Ez. 9:2) – Adjective (Pass. Participle) + Object.
- וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-הָאִישׁ הַלְבוּשׁ הַבָּדִים ‘And he called to the man clothed in linen’ (Ez. 9:3) – Adjective (Pass. Participle) + Object.

* Jerusalem, E-mail: amikamgai@gmail.com.

d. והנה האיש לבש הבדים ‘And behold the man clothed in linen’ (Ez. 9:11) – Adjective (Pass. Participle) + nominal attribute.

(2) מ-ל-א

a. ומלאו בתי מצרים את-העֶרֶב ‘The houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with wild beasts’ (Ex. 8:17) – Verb + Object.

b. וכבוד יהוה מלא את-המשכן ‘And the Presence of the Lord is filling the Tabernacle’ (Ex. 40:34,35) – Adjective + Object.

c. הנֶשֶׁר הגָּדוֹל ... מלא הנוצה ‘The great eagle ... with the full plumage’ (Ez. 17:1) – Adjective + Object (acc.).

d. זָקֵן עִם מְלֵא יָמִים ‘... the aged [person] with him that is full of days’ (Jer. 6:10) – Adjective + nominal attribute (gen.).

Thus, the relationship between the different appearances of the roots ל-ב-ש and מ-ל-א and their different complements is that of a lexeme with its complement. Analogically, this is the relationship that exists between similar “genitive constructions”¹ like טַבַּת מְרֵאָה ‘(The girl is) good / she is considered good as for / because of her appearance’, or اليوم الشديد البرد ‘in the powerful day, (powerful) from the point of view of coldness’ – rather than ‘her appearance is beautiful’ or ‘the coldness of that day was strong’ respectively. The relationship between the two components of such genitive constructions is not that of nexus but that of a lexeme and its complement, analogical to that of a verb with its object.

The two Arabic constructions *الاضافة غير الحقيقية* and *تمیيز* confirm this statement. These sister-constructions are in a complementary distribution: when the adjective is undetermined it is complemented by the accusative, and the construction is called *تمیيز (حسنٌ وجهًا)*; when the adjective is determined, it is complemented by the genitive and is called *الاضافة غير الحقيقية (الحسنُ الوجه)*. The relationship between the adjective and its complement is one and the same in both constructions, and the version with the accusative, the *تمیيز*, demonstrates unequivocally that this relationship is one of lexeme and complement (rather than nexus), parallel to that of a verb and its object.

Over the years I have realized that this idea is difficult for many to accept, although I have not seen any reasoned argument contradicting it. Gideon Goldenberg entirely rejects this analysis but his only arguments are as follows: “Similarly, it is patently absurd to construe the Hebrew *rabbat bānīm* ‘she that has many children’ (ISam. ii5) as ‘she that is many’ with a limited applicability of ‘many’ ... And yet, the explanation of direct attribution with limitation of applicability will still be found everywhere, and ten years after Diem’s article,² the unwarrantable claim is found insistently repeated.”³

It is difficult to accept that in the collocation *الشدید البرد (في اليوم)* ‘powerful from the point of view of coldness’ it is the day that is qualified as ‘powerful’ rather than the coldness. This difficulty arises first of all because of our intuitive interpretation of the collocation, and secondly because, as the roots of the adjectives are considered intransitive, they are not expected to govern a complement, especially not an accusative; consequently, the interpretation of the relationship between the two components as one of nexus goes without saying.

In this article I will not repeat my arguments from 1996, but rather will try to make it more conceivable that the roots conveying qualities and traits, from which adjectives are derived and which are considered intransitive by modern European speakers, may take the accusative; and consequently that an adjective taking the accusative and a construction parallel to that relationship is not “patently absurd”, but merely natural in Semitic languages. To make this thesis easier to accept, I will mainly

1 إضافة, סמיכות.

2 Werner Diem, “Alienable und inalienable Possession im Semitischen”, *ZDMG* 136 (1986) pp. 227–291.

3 Gideon Goldenberg, “Two Types of Phrase Adjectivization”, in W. Arnold and H. Bobzin (eds), *Sprich doch mit deinen Knechten aramäisch, wir verstehen es! 60 Beiträge zur Semitistik: Festschrift für Otto Jastrow zum 60. Geburtstag*, 2002, pp. 193–208 (p. 204).

adduce examples illustrating this complex statement;⁴ while the first article was an analytical-analogical one, the present article is a didactic one. I will accordingly adduce examples exemplifying (1) “genitive constructions” in which the meaning completely abolishes the possibility of interpreting the relationship between their components as one of nexus, such that their interpretation as adjective + complement is inescapable; and (2) verbs derived from attributive roots – from which the adjectives are derived – and adjectives taking complements.

2 The nomen rectum and the nomen regens are not in a nexus relationship

In this section I adduce examples of “genitive constructions” in which the meaning completely abolishes the possibility of interpreting the relationship between their components as one of nexus. Consequently, their interpretation as adjective + complement is inescapable:

- (1) וְשָׂבַע-רָגְזוֹ ... אָדָם יְלוּד אִשָּׁה ‘Man that is born of a woman is ... (and) sated with trouble.’ (Job 14:1) – It is the man that is born to a woman, not the woman; the woman is the one who gives birth. It is the man that is sated with trouble; it is not the trouble that is sated.
- (2) עָרֵיכֶם שָׂרְפוֹת אֵשׁ ‘Your cities are burned with fire’ (Isa. 1:7) – The cities are burned, not the fire.
- (3) שִׁפְט וְדַרְשׁ מִשְׁפָּט וּמְהֵר צְדָקָה ‘... judging and seeking judgment, and hastening justice.’ (Isa. 16:5) – It is not the justice but the person that is quick. Moreover, the syntactic connection between the components of the collocation מְהֵר צְדָקָה + מִשְׁפָּט repeats that of דַּרְשׁ מִשְׁפָּט: an adjective (a participle is a kind of adjective) + its complement.
- (4) עוֹל יָמִים וְזָקֵן ‘... young (one) [lit. young as for (his) days] and old (one)’ (Isa. 65:20) – It is the person that is young, not the days.
- (5) וְיֹעֵז וְחָכֵם הַרְשִׁים וְגִבּוֹן לְחַשׁ ‘... and counsellor, and skilled magician, [lit. skilled with regard to sorcery], and expert enchanter [lit. expert in/with regard to incantation]’ (Isa. 3:3) – It is the person that is skilled, not the sorcery; it is the person that is an expert, not the incantations.
- (6) וְתִהְיֶינָה נְשֵׁיהֶם שְׂכָלוֹת וְאֵלְמָנוֹת וְאֲנָשֵׁיהֶם יִהְיוּ הַרְגֵי מָוֶת בְּחַוְרֵיהֶם מִכִּי-חָרֵב בְּמִלְחָמָה ‘Let their wives be bereaved of their children, and be widows, and let their men be put to death, let their young men be slain by the sword.’ (Jer. 18:21) – הַרְגֵי מָוֶת, It is not the death that is killed; מִכִּי-חָרֵב, It is not the swords that are slain.
- (7) כָּלֶם עָרְלִים חָלְלֵי-חָרֵב ... כָּלֶם עָרְלִים מְחַלְלֵי חָרֵב ‘They are all uncircumcised, slain by the sword ... They are all uncircumcised, pierced through by the sword.’ (Ez. 32:25–26) – It is not the sword that is slain or pierced through, but they.
- (8) מְבֹרָכָת יְהוָה אֶרְצוֹ ‘Blessed of the Lord be his [Joseph’s] land’ (Deut. 33:13) – The verse does not say that God is blessed, but that the land (of Joseph) is blessed, by God.
- (9) *alpu pa-a-šu ipuš-ma i-qab-bi iz-za-kár a-na sīš na-’-id qab-li* ‘The ox opened his mouth speaking, addressing the horse, glorious in battle.’ (Lambert BWL⁵ p. 177 line 24) – It is the horse that is glorious, not the battle.

These examples show that the allegedly necessary and self-evident nexus relationship between the two components of the collocation does not hold.

⁴ With a few exceptions, I do not repeat the examples I presented in the 1996 article.

⁵ W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 1960.

3 The attributive root/lexeme as a verb or an adjective governing an object

While in the first section I exemplified the adjective + complement relationship of the collocations negatively, showing that the relationship cannot parallel that of a nexus, in the following sections I exemplify the relationship positively, by adducing examples of verbs derived from attributive roots – from which adjectives are derived – and adjectives taking complements. That the relationship between the components of the collocations parallels that of lexeme + complement is unequivocal.

3.1 Verbs + direct object

- (1) רַק לַעֵת זְקֵנְתּוֹ הָלָה אֶת־רַגְלָיו ‘Nevertheless, in the time of his old age he was diseased in his feet^{acc.}’ (1K 15:23) – Parallel with and equivalent to a genitive qualifying a substantive: בְּמַחְלָה מְעֵיךְ ‘Disease of your bowels’ (2Chr. 21:15)
- (2) *eš-me-e-ma* ^{SAL}*Na-an-na-me* | *si-im-ma-am mar-ša-at* ‘I have heard that Nana is ill of a carbuncle^{acc.}’ (ARM⁶ 10, 129:4–5)
- (3) *ul sa-qa-at* ^{uzu}*GABA-sa (irissa)* ‘her breast is not restrained’ [lit. She is not narrow as to her breast^{acc.}] (Iraq 31 a. line 44)⁷
- (4) *ši-i-ri ul ta-ba-an-ni-ma* ‘My body is not good (about) me^{acc.}’ [= I am ill] (El Amarna Tablets,⁸ Letter 7, line 9)

Analogously, adjectives derived from those roots take the accusative too; such an accusative is known as *تمییز*.⁹

Akkadian exemplifies this claim the best, because, like Arabic, it has cases and expresses complementation explicitly and unequivocally; in contrast to Arabic, however, the choice of the complement of the adjective, accusative or genitive, is not conditioned, but rather free. It is instructive to note the difference between Akkadian and Arabic in the phenomenon of the commutation between *تمییز* and *الاضافة غير الحقيقية*: While in Arabic, which has a definite article, the distribution is conditioned by determination – an undetermined collocation taking the form *تمییز (حسنٌ وجهًا)*, and a determined collocation taking the form *الاضافة غير الحقيقية (الحسنُ الوجه)* – in Akkadian, which lacks a definite article, the two constructions are free variations.

Just as the accusative-complement (object) of the verb may precede or follow the verb, the accusative-complement of the adjective in Akkadian may precede or follow the adjective; the two possibilities can appear in parallel alongside each other.

- (1) *iš-ta-nu eṭ-lu a-tir ši-kit-ta* | *mi-na-ta šur-ruḥ lu-bu-uš-ta ud-du-[u]š* ‘A remarkable young man, of outstanding physique^{acc.}, massive in his body^{acc.}, clothed in a new garment^{acc.}’ [lit. renewed by a new garment] (Lambert BWL p. 48 lines 9–10)
- (2) *ur-ru-uk bi-ir-ka-šu* | *a-ru-uḥ la-sa-ma-am* | *i-iš bu-bu-tam* | *it-nu-uš a-ka-lam* ‘He [the dog] is long of leg^{acc.}, quick at running^{acc.}, short of sustenance^{acc.}, poor in food^{acc.}’ (LB 2001¹⁰ lines 7–10)

6 Archives royales de Mari.

7 According to W.G. Lambert, “A middle Assyrian Medical Text”, *Iraq* 31 (1969) pp. 28–39.

8 According to *The Tell El-Amarna Tablets*, ed. S.A.B. Mercer, 1939, p. 20; can also be found in *Die El-Amarna-Tafeln*, published by J.A. Knudtzon, 1915, p. 80.

9 Much literature could be cited; however, I refrain from doing so, as I am not really enthusiastic about the academic ritual of refer-as-refer-can.

10 According to F.M.Th. de Liagre Böhl, “Zwei altbabylonische Beschwörungstexte LB 2001 und LB 1001”, *BiOr* 11 (1954) pp. 81–83; can be found also in M.P. Streck and N. Wasserman, *Sources of Early Akkadian Literature* (= SEAL), at <http://www.seal.uni-leipzig.de/>, 5.1.6.5.

damqam īnim 'beautiful-faced/eyed'. The inner relationship between the components of the collocation does not change as a consequence; they do not cease to be in the relationship of root + complement, and they do not acquire a nexus relationship.