The Present-Future in Amorite:
A Rejoinder

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Abstract

Andrason and Vita (2014) argued on typological grounds that the Amorite verbal system should be reconstructed with a present-future form. They proposed that in Amorite there were two such forms, yaqtulu *and* yaqattal, *the latter being more prominent. In their view, such a reconstruction corresponds to a dynamic vision of language evolution with resulting fuzzy dialectal boundaries. Their argumentation is, however, flawed in several points. In spite of their claims, the exclusively onomastic nature of the evidence for Amorite does not permit a characterisation of the verbal semantics which is required by their argumentation. Notwithstanding the adoption of a diachronic view of language, their argument compares forms which belong to different stages of the evolution of the Semitic verbal system and in this way it neglects the factor of time. Their argumentation is hypothetical and can even better support the view that Amorite had only one present-future form,* yaqtulu.*

A Recent Proposal

Andrason and Vita[1] have recently proposed the existence of the present-future prefixed verbal form of the *yaqattal* type in Amorite.[2] Their main argument has a typological nature. As generally reconstructed, beside a Precative form beginning with *l-*,[3] the Amorite verbal system possessed the perfective prefixed *yaqtul* used as a preterite and directive-volitive form,[4] and the suffixed form, which probably described states and had possibly developed some active-transitive usages with the past meaning.[5] The means of expressing the actions ongoing at the moment of speaking and

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* This work was supported by a grant from the National Science Center, Poland.
[1] Andrason and Vita 2014.
[2] I refrain from providing basic information on Amorite because it is readily available in Andrason and Vita 2014 and in Streck 2011. A caveat on the use of "Amorite" as a designation of a particular language is salutary. The "Amorite language" is almost certainly a linguistic phantom constructed by assigning a shared linguistic background to the names identified for various reasons as "Amorite." As rightly observed by Huehnergard, the "Amorite" names "represent not a single language, or even necessarily a continuum of closely related dialects, but rather a set of languages" (1992, p. 159). The consequences of this state of affairs for linguistic reconstructions are obviously devastating. To use Huehnergard's words again, "since 'Amorite' is not a linguistic unity, or even, perhaps, a linguistic entity, it is difficult to say anything meaningful about phonology, morphology, or classification that would obtain across the entire set of names" (1992, p. 159). Given the conventional nature of the "Amorite language", it is quite possible that research into particular elements of its grammar, including the form(s) of the present-future tense, is illusory, because it continues the practice of fabricating the language which never existed as a historical reality. This is yet another problem which Andrason and Vita 2014 do not face.
[3] Gelb 1958, pp. 156–157; Huffmon 1965, pp. 78–81.
[4] Huffmon 1965, pp. 63–78; Knudsen 1991, pp. 878–879.
[5] Buccellati 1995, p. 857; Gelb 1958, pp. 155, 157–158; Huffmon 1965, pp. 87–94.

extending to the future constitute an obvious lacuna in the current reconstructions. Because a language without a present-future tense is hardly imaginable, Andrason and Vita propose that Amorite had to have such forms, *yaqattal* and *yaqtulu*, the former being more prominent. In advancing their hypothesis, they reprove the current classificatory methodology employed in Semitic philology for not taking into account the dynamic nature of language evolution and the resulting fuzzy dialectal boundaries. Andrason and Vita argue that such a dynamic vision of the language calls for the co-existence of competing forms, in this case, of *yaqattal* and *yaqtulu*, rather than the exclusive use of one form. If accepted, this proposal requires reconstructing *yaqattal* as a Proto-Semitic present-future form and revising the current classificatory criteria and schemes. Because of these far-reaching consequences, the hypothesis advanced by Andrason and Vita merits a careful and critical evaluation.

The Problems with the Identification of the Verbal Forms in Amorite

The available evidence on the Amorite language consists exclusively of *circa* 7000 proper (mostly personal) names and several dozen loanwords.[6] The onomastic nature of the evidence, compounded by the lack of texts, hinders, if not totally excludes, a full and secure reconstruction of the Amorite verbal system.[7] The main difficulty consists in establishing the range of meanings and functions of individual forms.[8] In turn, this problem affects the identification of forms other than *yaqtul*.

In the case of the suffixed conjugation, it is difficult to establish the extent to which it was used as a past transitive form. In fact, its alleged attestations may be better parsed as instances of the stative or the predicative use of nouns and participles. For example, the form *malak* in the name *Malak-ʾilī* seems a good candidate for the past suffixed conjugation because of its vocalic pattern, but the comparison of this name with its variant *Malaku-ʾil* shows that this form is a noun and that the name means "my god is king" rather than "my god took kingship."[9] Given that the suffixed forms cannot be securely identified as the stative or verbal *qatal*(*a*), even more so, their

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[6] Streck 2011, p. 453.

[7] An anonymous reviewer of this paper suggested a comparison which well illustrates this point: a reconstruction of the verbal system of Ancient Hebrew would be vague and lacunose had we used only the onomastic evidence.

[8] The value of names as linguistic evidence is very limited because of their conservative nature in comparison with the language in which they occur and because of problems inherent to their analysis. Huehnergard summarises the latter well: "Undoubtedly the most basic problem presented by names is the fact that they have no immediate semantic context; that is, the meaning of the elements in names have nothing to do with the texts in which they occur, and must therefore be divined entirely in isolation. Since certainty regarding the semantic value of many such elements, and even more of their combinations, must therefore remain elusive, the formal analysis of the elements must likewise be uncertain" (Huehnergard 1987, p. 714). This uncertainty concerning the semantic import of the individual components of the names creates another insurmountable difficulty for reconstructing the verbal system on their basis. Logically, the identification of a verbal form requires two steps. First, the morphology of the proposed form must be described. Second, the range of meanings expressed by this form must be established. In the case of identifying the present-future form in Amorite, this requires not only ascertaining its morphology by finding the relevant examples but also proving that these examples have a present-future meaning. As pointed out above by Huehnergard, this step of the analysis of names cannot produce secure results. In turn, the second step in establishing the present-future form on the basis of Amorite names is methodologically unfeasible. As I will argue below, the first step, the identification of the morphological shape of the form, is also elusive.

[9] Streck 2011, pp. 456–457.

semantics cannot be described. This specific difficulty stems from a more general problem: proper names do not provide adequate evidence of verbal semantics in any language, including Amorite. Yet, Andrason and Vita provide a rather precise characterisation of *qatal*(*a*) in terms of its grammaticalisation saying that it "occupies a slightly more advanced stage in comparison with the Akk. gram but still far from well-developed phases attested to by CS and NWS tongues."[10] In their view, this description of *qatal*(*a*) is one of several indications that the Amorite verbal system is closer to East than West Semitic. In light of previous observations, the semantic characterisation of *qatal*(*a*) made by Andrason and Vita does not directly reflect the evidence but projects an understanding of the development of the Semitic verbal system into the evidence. Its use in the reconstruction of the Amorite verbal system cannot provide an "empirical" argument, as wished by Andrason and Vita, but constitutes a vicious circle in which one reconstruction depends on another reconstruction.

The identification of the Amorite present-future form faces the difficulties which explain why scholars refrained from proposing it. Besides the possibility of parsing the presumed forms of *yaqattal* as the *yaqtul* of the D stem, a problem recognised but not addressed by Andrason and Vita, there are two additional issues.

The first problem is a strong preference for limited semantic patterns in Semitic onomastics. Generally speaking, Semitic names have as the subject a deity or another person important for the name giver. They typically contain a proclamation of a quality of that person with a nominal phrase, an invocation or request for a beneficial action by the subject, or a recognition of such an action in the past. In the last two cases, regarding beneficial actions, the short prefixed form *yaqtul* is normally used in the second millennium BCE for both types, while for the past action the *qatala* becomes popular only later, in the first millennium BCE. In the non-past context, personal names commonly refer to the qualities of the subject and employ accordingly a construct chain, a nominal clause with a noun or stative, and, in rare cases, a prepositional phrase.[11] The names which describe the ongoing action of the subject and use a present-future verbal form to this end are relatively rare.[12] This rarity of the present-future verbs in the Semitic onomastics is responsible for the paucity of possible specimens of a present-future verbal form in Amorite, a language known exclusively from proper names. Thus, the difficulty of individuating such a form in Amorite originates in great part from the nature of the available evidence, not the scholars' inability or reluctance to identify such a form.

The second issue touches on the distinctive features of the present-future forms, *yaqattal* and *yaqtulu*, which would permit us their secure identification. The difficulty of distinguishing between the forms of *yaqattal* and the D conjugation is well known but remains without a convincing solution.[13] At any rate, there are only several proposed *yaqattal* names out of *circa* 7000 names.[14] Even if the parsing of these names as genuine instances of *yaqattal* is accepted, it would be methodologically unsound to consider them proof of the existence of *yaqattal* in Amorite. Their rarity

[10] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 30.

[11] For these types and their Amorite examples, see a handy summary in Streck 1998, pp. 128–129.

[12] Whether the imperfective forms actually refer to the present is a debated question. See remarks on the Arabic names in Weninger 2002, p. 222.

[13] Huffmon 1965, pp. 82–85; Streck 2011, p. 456.

[14] Huffmon (1965, p. 82) considers seven names as candidates for *yaqattal*; von Soden (1985) discusses five names.

would call for a philological explanation rather than their parsing as specimens of a major verbal form. For example, given that *yaqattal* is known in Akkadian, a language with which Amorite speakers were in contact, the proposed Amorite *yaqattal* names could be borrowed from Akkadian or created following models known to the speakers of Amorite from Akkadian. In any case, five or seven out of 7000 names does not provide robust "empirical" evidence. The rarity of the proposed examples of the names with *yaqattal* is another problem not considered by Andrason and Vita.

Similarly, they do not notice an issue which affects the identification of *yaqtulu* in personal names. The characteristic ending *-u*, which would allow us to securely identify *yaqtulu*, in the names with the verbs at the end could be identical to the case ending *-u* and possibly dropped altogether, following the fate of the case endings in a significant number of names, and resulting in the zero ending.[15] This problem is aggravated by the observation that *yaqtulu* is expected to occur more often at the end of the name than at the beginning, where its final vowel could have a better chance of being preserved. This expectation is based on analogies with Ancient Hebrew. The indicative imperfective *yiqtol* is found in Ancient Hebrew typically in sentences with subject-verb order.[16] In Ancient Hebrew personal names, in the few cases where it is possible to distinguish in the second middle-weak verbs the forms of the short and long *yiqtol* conjugations (historically, going back to *yaqtul* and *yaqtulu*), the names with the short conjugation have the verb at the beginning, while the names with the long conjugation have it at the end.[17] The relevance of this Ancient Hebrew pattern for Amorite is obviously putative; nevertheless, it suggests that in Amorite too, the forms of the present-future *yaqtulu* occurred at the end of names where their distinctive ending merged with the *u*-case ending or was dropped.[18] In both cases, the identification of *yaqtulu* would be further hindered, adding to the difficulty stemming from the generally rare use of the present-future forms in Semitic onomastics. All these circumstances must be addressed before concluding that the failure to identify *yaqtulu* in the Amorite personal names constitutes a piece of evidence for its non-existence in Amorite.

A Model of Language Evolution and Classification and its Application to Amorite

It is impossible to assess and criticise the "model" of language evolution and classification on which Andrason and Vita rely, because they do not expose its theoretical assumptions nor specify how they conceive language evolution, its mechanisms and processes. The reference to several books on grammaticalisation[19] cannot provide such a comprehensive model, because grammaticalisation is just one of many processes in language evolution.

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[15] For a succinct description of the case endings in the Amorite personal names, see Streck 2011, pp. 454–455. He summarises there the results of his long study in Streck 2000, pp. 257–309.

[16] Notarius 2013, pp. 19–21, 283.

[17] Rechenmacher 2012, pp. 84–85.

[18] Zadok writes that "the type Subject + *yqtl*, which is common in early Aramaic, is totally absent in early Amorite, but extant in later Amorite, viz. at Emar and Ugarit" (1993, p. 317). This statement requires rectification in light of the typology of Streck, who lists the Subject + *yqtl* pattern in Amorite and gives examples (1998, p. 128).

[19] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 27.

A short statement that the emergence of a new form in language passes through transitional stages which form a continuum[20] is as true as it is misleading because it does not specify how these stages relate to each other in the temporal and functional perspective. This defective vision of language evolution leads the two authors directly to claim that the Amorite verbal system should be reconstructed with two present-future forms. As they assert, such a reconstruction would reflect the competition between *yaqattal* and *yaqtulu* as expressions of the present-future in various Semitic languages and correspond to a modern vision of language as having a "fuzzy" structure, instead of following an antiquated and simplistic idea of language with discrete categories. Later on, they admit the co-existence of two forms in a language entails that they are "employed in different functions and characterized by a distinct degree of frequency,"[21] and therefore propose that *yaqattal* and *yaqtulu* co-existed in Amorite as two specialised present-future forms, the former being "more formal" and the latter "probably being restricted to the spoken language."[22] Given that nothing is known about the spoken register of Amorite, this proposal is not a serious argument but a gratuitous ad-hoc speculation. Moreover, it creates a contradiction not envisaged by Andrason and Vita. The assumption that *yaqtulu* characterised "the spoken language" entails its use in personal names which belong to the spoken rather than written and literary register. However, the Amorite names do not attest to *yaqtulu*, as Andrason and Vita rightly note.[23] They might provide specimens of *yaqattal*, as Andrason and Vita suggest,[24] without noticing that this distribution would contradict their previous hypothesis.

The Co-Existence of Verbal Forms According to the Current Scholarship

Furthermore, the claim of Andrason and Vita that the current classificatory schemes of Semitic languages do not take into account the dynamic life of languages[25] reflects a misrepresentation of these schemes. Contrary to what they say, the co-existence of two forms which have similar meanings, or had them in an earlier stage, is well known and accepted in Semitic linguistics. For example, the existence of two perfective forms in Biblical Hebrew, the *yiqtol* reflecting the historically short conjugation *yaqtul* (occurring in the *wayyiqtol* and occasionally independently)[26] and *qatal*, as well as their archaic and innovative nature correspondingly, is commonly accepted. The co-existence of these forms does not entail the same meanings and functions but different distribution and usages.[27] Similar is the case with *yaqattal* and *yaqtulu*. The two forms co-existed in Akkadian, albeit with different functions: *yaqattal* encoded the imperfective morphological aspect and often present-future actions, while *yaqtulu* gave rise to the so-called subordination marker. Similarly, the presence of both forms is reconstructed at the Proto-Semitic level. It appears that *yaqtulu* was the imperfective form in the G stem, while *yaqattal* or a similar form played the same role in a

[20] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 27
[21] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 29.
[22] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 31.
[23] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 31.
[24] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 31.
[25] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 28.
[26] Notarius 2015, pp. 239–241; Baranowski 2016.
[27] For example, see Isaksson 2014 with the bibliography there.

pluractional stem.[28] In both these examples, the forms belong to different temporal stages: *wayyiq-tol* and *yaqtulu* surviving in the subordination marker are archaisms, while *qatal* and *yaqattal* are innovations. These examples show that the co-existence of forms cannot be treated separately from their temporal dimension. Otherwise, Andrason and Vita's statement that the classification of a language as belonging to one branch does not exclude the possibility that it mingled the features typical to a different branch may be true to some extent at the synchronic level, but is misleading precisely from the evolutionary perspective adopted by them.

More on the Problem of Time Depth

The well-founded analyses and reconstructions of *yaqattal* and *yaqtulu* in Semitic linguistics I discussed earlier differ from the suggestions of Andrason and Vita[29] at a critical juncture. Certainly, the distribution of the co-existing forms may be used to build a synchronic picture of a dialectal continuum in which the languages using exclusively one of the competing forms are located on its edges. However, a classification of languages which would reflect their evolution, the methodology adopted by Andrason and Vita,[30] demands a temporal ordering of the relevant forms in terms of archaisms and innovations. The omission of the factor of time depth leads them to comparing and treating on par the forms which exhibit different stages of grammaticalisation. In turn, Andrason and Vita use these considerations on the forms outside of their temporal context as evidence in favour of the Amorite verbal system being closer to the East than West Semitic prototype. In their opinion, such characterisation of the Amorite verbal system favours the use of *yaqattal*, the para-digmatic East Semitic form, also in Amorite. This argument suffers from a fatal flaw: it is based on the classification of verbal forms whose semantics is not known directly from their usage in actual texts (Amorite) by comparing them with the roughly contemporaneous East Semitic system (Akkadian) and semantics of their counterparts known from centuries and even millennia later (Ugaritic, but mostly Ancient Hebrew and Arabic). This flaw affects in particular the characterisa-tions of *yaqtul* and *qatala*, which are crucial for Andrason and Vita in their general classification of the Amorite verbal system. Assuming that the Amorite *yaqtul* exhibited semantics close to the East Semitic *iprus*, it is true that it differed from West Semitic languages which employed *yaqtul* for preterite only marginally, as known from the Ancient Hebrew *wayyiqtol* and the Arabic *yaqtul* negated by the particles *lam* and *lammā*.[31] This observation is, however, methodologically unsound. It involves the comparison of an older language with relatively younger languages which over time underwent developments which set them apart from their older cognate languages. In order to be meaningful, the comparison would have to involve Amorite and contemporaneous West Semitic languages, or to exclude somehow that Amorite would have developed with time forms and usages similar to other Northwest Semitic dialects.

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[28] On this point I follow Kouwenberg 2010a, the best available historical reconstruction of the Semitic verbal sys-tem. For its essential presentation, see Kouwenberg 2010b, pp. 634–637.

[29] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 28.

[30] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 21.

[31] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 29.

The same problem occurs with the reasoning applied by Andrason and Vita to *qatala*. The assumption that the Amorite *qatala* is basically a stative form allows them to characterise it as close to its East Semitic counterpart and far different from West Semitic *qatala*, which developed a past transitive meaning. The difficulty which is glossed over is that the oldest relatively secure evidence for this use of West Semitic *qatala* comes from the Amarna letters from Canaan, which are several centuries more recent than the Amorite onomastic material. Again, there is no reason why Amorite would not have been able eventually to develop the same usages as its younger West Semitic cognate languages, nor is there evidence which would exclude that the West Semitic *qatala* contemporaneous with the Amorite material had usages similar to the Amorite stative *qatala*. Considering all this together, because of the issue of time depth, the comparison of Amorite and West Semitic *qatala* and *yaqtul* does not provide sound evidence for the Amorite verbal system being closer to East Semitic than West Semitic.

An Additional Hypothetical Argument

Superficially, the methodology which links the classification of Amorite and the typological characterisation of its verbal system with the prominence of *yaqattal* as the present-future in Amorite seems appealing. In reality, this methodology employs a hypothetical, not probative reasoning, a fact which Andrason and Vita explicitly recognise.[32] Its weakness becomes patently obvious with the realisation that it may actually better support the alternative thesis which holds that *yaqtulu* was the Amorite present-future form. Because some Amorite names attest to the distinct Northwest Semitic innovation, the change of the initial *$*w$ into *y*,[33] it is plausible that Amorite was a Northwest Semitic language or, rather, a cluster of Northwest Semitic-like dialects.[34] Applying the hypothetical-typological reasoning, it is more likely that Amorite, a Northwest Semitic language, also had the Northwest Semitic present-future form, namely *yaqtulu*. The relative strength of this reasoning is superior to that developed by Andrason and Vita in order to propose the existence of *yaqattal*, because it relies not on largely speculative considerations on semantics of the Amorite verbal forms but on a more secure phonetic development.

Concluding Comments

The work of Andrason and Vita has the merit of reminding researchers that the current reconstructions of the Amorite verbal system are partial, because the present-future form has not been identified. A system lacking an expression for present-future actions is defective and typologically unlikely. Andrason and Vita are certainly correct on this point. However, their case for *yaqattal* being this form in Amorite is unconvincing. Above all, the exclusively onomastic nature of the evidence on Amorite does not permit us to analyse verbal semantics in Amorite with the necessary degree of certainty, and then to employ the results of the analysis in further argumentation. Also,

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[32] Andrason and Vita 2014, p. 30.
[33] Huehnergard 1995, p. 2122.
[34] Streck 2011, pp. 452–453.

the temporal gap which separates the verbal systems, crucial to the hypothesis of Andrason and Vita, requires a diachronic rather than synchronic approach. The recourse to the Northwest Semitic affiliation of Amorite supports the conclusion opposite to Andrason and Vita's; namely, the determination that the paradigmatic present-future form in Amorite is *yaqtulu*.

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