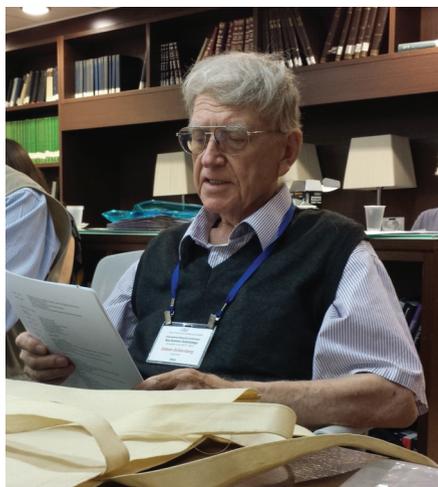


Book Review

Gideon Goldenberg, *Semitic languages: Features, structures, relations, processes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, xix + 363 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-964491-9 (hardback), GBP 75.

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DOI 10.1515/lingty-2015-0005



(picture © Charles G. Häberl 2013)

In memoriam Gideon Goldenberg

1 Introduction

Gideon Goldenberg, emeritus professor of Linguistics at the Hebrew University, passed away on the 30th July 2013 in Jerusalem at the age of 83 years. He was recognised by many as one of the greatest Semitic linguists of our times. But he also saw himself as contributing to general linguistics and in particular to typology: he firmly believed (Goldenberg 2002) that through analysing Semitic languages many points in the general study of language could be illuminated.¹

¹ Most of his articles are now available in two collections, Goldenberg (1998) and Goldenberg (2013). A more extensive bibliography of his writings can be found at <http://ling.huji.ac.il/Staff/>

Just half a year before his death, Goldenberg was able to publish a new book, *Semitic languages: Features, structures, relations, processes*, assembling the results of a life-time of research and addressing a wider linguistic audience.² In this review, I shall concentrate on its interest for typologists, and leave aside points which may be of greater concern for Semitic specialists.

2 Typological significance

The book provides the typologist interested in Semitic languages with a wealth of well-documented and incisively-analysed data from languages many of which have received scarce scholarly attention, such as the Modern South Arabian languages or the Ethio-Semitic languages of the Gurage region. As such, it can contribute to typological research where the ambition is to take into consideration various Semitic languages and not just the most obvious and best-known candidates. The fact that all examples are authentic ones “extracted from connected texts or actual discourse” (p. 6) adds to the credibility of the description. Of course, the book is by no means a descriptive grammar of the twenty or so languages discussed in it, but it does cover the most important points about each language. The detailed table of contents is very helpful in this respect, while the index is less satisfactory.

More importantly, the book presents the reader, albeit indirectly, with a new vision of how to do typology, by introducing and illustrating certain theoretical concepts and tools. I write this with some trepidation, since the author himself assures us, to the contrary, as follows: “The approach adopted here can ideally be characterised as prejudice-free, non-aprioristic, and empirically-based, intended to describe each language in its own terms” (p. 4). Nonetheless, Goldenberg has a certain morphosyntactic framework on his agenda, and this is the theory of the “three basic grammatical relations”: the Predicative, Attributive, and Completive relations (Chapter 11; see also Goldenberg 1987).³

Gideon_Goldenberg/index.html. The significance of his work is amply acknowledged in a festschrift for Goldenberg, Bar & Cohen (eds.) (2007).

² To that aim, all Semitic examples are transliterated in the Latin script, and most of the examples are glossed following the Leipzig Glossing Rules (<http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>).

³ Goldenberg acknowledges the German philologist Karl Ferdinand Becker (1775–1849) as being “the most influential promulgator of this doctrine” (p. 142). See, for instance, Becker (1830: 10). In modern terms, we can regard this analytic framework as a kind of Dependency Grammar, but without exploiting any strict formal apparatus.

Goldenberg presents the theory as general in scope and at the same time especially adequate to the Semitic family (p. 142):

The recognition of three essential types of grammatical relations, or bonds, has been a major approach to syntactic analysis commonly pursued in linguistics during the last two centuries. With regard to Semitic languages and in connexion with case declension such a conception appositely reflects the very structure of the languages involved.

Remember that in case-marking Semitic languages (Classical Arabic, Akkadian), there are exactly three cases, which correspond to the three relations highlighted by Goldenberg.

Given their Semitic inspiration, one may wonder whether these relations are of universal applicability and thus truly of typological significance. Goldenberg hints that this is indeed the case (p. 140):

An important feature of Semitic languages is the capability of actualizing, in most of their representations, all three basic types of grammatical relations both by syntactical and by morphological means. It seems that such a trait, not universally common, should have greater significance for understanding linguistic structure than a typological classification based, e.g., on the order of constituents (like SOV, SVO).

The idea is that by recognising these three relations, and investigating how they are realised across languages, we can achieve a better typology. Referring again to Semitic languages, Goldenberg continues that “we may be able to better understand the meaning of changes in some innovative languages and thus perhaps even to measure typological innovation.”

Consequently, for the typologically interested reader, the most rewarding chapters are those dealing with these grammatical relations: these are Chapter 11, which presents the relations in general and relates them to the Semitic case systems; Chapter 12, dealing with the Predicative relation, and to a lesser extent Chapter 13, presenting the verbal systems of various Semitic languages (mostly from a TAM perspective); Chapter 14, a true masterpiece, presenting the Attributive relation; Chapter 15, presenting the Completive relation; and finally Chapter 16, dealing with expressions of existence, belonging, and possession. These six chapters add up to slightly more than half of the book. Here I shall present in some depth only topics covered in Chapters 12 and 14, reflecting some of the most important results of Goldenberg’s research.

3 The Predicative relation

The Predicative relation is the relation holding between a subject and a predicate. As Goldenberg notes, it has been defined by the (structural) function

of COHESION and (pragmatic) function of ASSERTION (the qualifications in parenthesis are mine). This is important, since it puts us on solid ground as how to define it crosslinguistically.

One of Goldenberg's contributions is the recognition that the Predicative relation itself, also termed NEXUS, is part of any nuclear sentence. In other words, a typical sentence does not consist of two components (subject and predicate), but rather of three components (subject, predicate, and nexus). Formally, he introduces the use of the tie-bar to represent the nexus, representing symbolically a sentence as $S \bar{\text{P}}$ (irrespective of word order). The necessity of distinguishing the nexus from the predicate is clear in Semitic languages, where nominal sentences (i.e., clauses whose predicate is not verbal) express the nexus syntactically (typically by juxtaposition and definiteness asymmetry), while the subject and predicate are kept apart (see also Goldenberg 1985).

Yet another important observation of Goldenberg's is that the morphological correlate of the nominal sentence is simply the finite verb. Thus, the essential difference between a finite verb and a nominal sentence is only that in the former the nexus is realised morphologically and in the latter syntactically (p. 151). Consequently, the subject incorporated into a finite verb is always a pronoun. In this view the pronominal inflection of a verb is never merely "agreement", but rather reflects the existence of a subject node in the morphologically realised sentence. This relates to his more general view of morphology (p. 5):

Inflectional morphology [...] is thus imposed on basic structure, combining pieces of various syntactic units, interfering in the integrity of syntactic elements and crossing the boundaries between them. So words are not the elements arranged in syntax, but compounds that break them.

How can these observations be brought to bear on typological research? The chapter presents a variety of research directions. Sections 12.5–6, for instance, analyse the verbalisation process in Syriac (a variety of Aramaic), in which the enclitic personal pronoun, following a nominal predicate, incorporates into it both the subject-pronoun and the marking of the predicative relation.⁴ When the predicate is a participle, the enclitic resembles true verbal inflection. A further development of this trend is the disappearance of true nominal sentences in Neo-Aramaic, as nominal predicates must be followed by inflected copulas.

⁴ However, compare with the view of Gutman & Van Peursen (2011: 100), who claim that the enclitic personal pronoun is better analysed as a focus marker.

As Aramaic has a richly documented history, we can quite reliably trace these developments, but it would be interesting to see whether they represent a typologically common process.

Another instructive example is Goldenberg's account of "Two types of verb-initial sentences" (Section 12.7.5), offering crosslinguistic parallels between two Classical Arabic constructions and some non-Semitic languages (including Latin, Coptic, German, Russian, Italian, and French), and discussing word-order questions in general.

The basic issue concerns the distinction between verb-initial sentences in which the verb form is invariant and consequently not in agreement with a following nominal subject, and sentences where the verb does agree with the following nominal. In Goldenberg's terms, the former option represents a verb in which the "the incorporated $S^{3\text{pers.pron}}$ [is] non-referential, invariant, impersonal and unmarked" (p. 176). From a typological perspective, Goldenberg shows that both VS construction types exist in other languages, irrespectively of the question whether these languages are basically SV or VS. Thus, in French, for instance, we find both *lui dirent ses frères* and *il est venu trois personnes* (alongside the common SV order). Indeed, Goldenberg opts for a typology of constructions rather than a typology of languages. In his words (pp. 180–181): "[T]he enumeration of word order varieties so common in the typological literature does not explain very much. [...] It might rather be concluded that assuming an underlying 'canonical' structure should preferably be avoided."

4 The Attributive relation

Chapter 14, dealing with the Attributive relation, is a veritable *tour de force* of Goldenberg's approach. The Attributive relation is basically the relation holding between a nominal (or pronominal) and its attribute (see also Goldenberg 1995). Syntactically, it is expressed by genitive constructions, but this term is somewhat unfortunate for Semitic languages, most of which do not have case markings. Semitic languages typically express this relation through a head-marked construction, termed here ANNEXION, in which the head noun appears in a special bound form, the Construct State.⁵

⁵ This term, lacking in the Leipzig Glossing Rules, is glossed by the author as "CNST". Personally I would prefer a shorter variant such as "cst", and I take advantage of this platform to call for its adoption as a standard gloss.

As Goldenberg aptly shows throughout the chapter, a genitive construction can in principle be used whether the head is a noun or a pronoun (as well as a preposition or a conjunction). The attribute, on the other hand, may not only be a noun, but also a pronoun, a clause, or a PP. While not every language has one unique construction for all these possibilities, he assures us that “[t]he constitutional identity of constructions with genitive nominals, adjectives, and relative complexes will in any case belong to the profoundest level of language structure, not to be regarded as different semantic types of attribution that collapsed due to imperfect differentiation (Gil 2008)” (p. 235).

As for adjectives, these are not pure attributes, but rather “the syntactically independent expression of an entity as characterised by some quality or state. [...] The implied attributive relation marks the adjective [...] as the morphological correlate of the genitive annexion complex with a pronominal head” (p. 230).⁶ In other words, the adjective, much like the finite verb discussed above, is a complex entity, morphologically incorporating a pronominal head (recognisable in principle by the inflexion of the adjective) and an abstract attributive lexeme. Indeed, the primordially of a pronominal head as defining the category of adjectives is indirectly confirmed by typological work (such as Koptjevskaja-Tamm & Plank 1997) which shows that one of the most stable definitory properties of adjectives is their agreement with the modified noun. For Goldenberg, “agreement” should always be understood as the exponent of a morphologically couched pronoun, or in his words “appositive repetition” (Goldenberg 2002: 30).⁷

The syntactic independence of the annexion construction headed by a pronoun is discussed, with appropriate examples, in Section 14.10. As for the existence of a syntactically separate (though morphologically fused) pronominal head in adjectives, Section 14.15 provides ample evidence, through the discussion of two related phenomena of Classical Arabic.

One of the two, “impure annexion”, is the case of annexion constructions headed by adjectives, in which the morphological structure mismatches the syntactic structure. To exemplify this, Goldenberg takes the phrase *ḥasanu l-waǧhi* ‘he who has beautiful face’, and analyses its underlying syntactic

⁶ Elsewhere (Goldenberg 1995: 6), he criticises the simplistic definition of adjectives as a “word that names a quality”, a definition which we can also find in contemporary typological work (e.g., Haspelmath 2010: 670).

⁷ Two elements are considered by Goldenberg to be in apposition if they share the same syntactic status, and thus apposition can be understood as a symmetric equivalence relation, different categorically from the Attributive relation, which is a dependency relation. Accordingly, he represents it as double-edged arrow (↕).

structure by means of a paraphrase, as in the following scheme (reconstructed from p. 277), to which I added the glosses from the running text:

(1)	Syntax	[<u>dū</u>	[<i>ħusni</i>]	<i>l-waġhi</i>]]
			possessor.CNST		beauty.GEN.CNST		ART-face.GEN	
	Morphology	[[<i>ħasanu</i>]	<i>l-waġhi</i>]		
			beautiful.CNST		ART-face.GEN			

The interplay of pronominal heads (or attributes) together with full noun phrases which can stand in apposition to them, outside the strict domain of the annexion construction, leads to a plenitude of “indirect” genitive constructions, which Goldenberg analyses skilfully. As one example, in the Syriac phrase *šmā* [*d- attāṭā*] ‘the name [of the woman]’ (p. 236, construction C⁺), he analyses the particle *d-* as a pronominal heading an annexion construction (bracketed), and the noun *šmā* ‘name’, as standing in apposition with it. This analysis, motivated by the bracketed constituent being syntactically independent, stands in stark contrast to a common alternative analysis in which the *d-* element is seen as a kind of genitive marker, and not as an independent head (see Footnote 27, p. 253). Goldenberg’s analysis (advocated previously, but often overlooked) may be relevant to many similar constructions outside the Semitic domain.

Similarly, addressing the by now well-known head- vs. dependent-marking typology (Nichols & Bickel 2008), he argues (p. 229):

Attributive, or possessive, syntactic relations are commonly regarded as being marked either on the head or on the dependent attribute, not only by stem form or case, but also by personal morphemes, as if the possessive relation in ‘the man ^{his}house’ (for ‘the man’s house’) is marked by ‘his’ on the head term ‘house’ [...] Pronominal morphemes, however, like other nominals or nominalizations, are not markers of the head-dependent relation, but belong with the TERMINI between which the relation is apprehended.

This insight permits him to elaborate a much richer typological classification of the constructions available in the different Semitic languages (and probably beyond).

5 Summary

While the book under review is modest in size, it covers many topics and many languages. Doing justice to the range of topics in a review like this would be impossible, so instead I have selected some of the main points of Goldenberg’s theorising and hope to have shown their relevance to linguistic typology. Goldenberg, by the way, does not take full personal credit for most of his

observations, but attributes them rather to classical linguistic traditions, Western or Semitic (and in this respect Chapter 6, “Special achievements of Semitic linguistic traditions”, is fascinating to read).

Linguistic typology in the twentieth century, in contrast to its nineteenth century antecedents, emerged to some extent as an antithesis to the strong nativist assumptions of the Generative school of thought. As such, it was only natural that it tried to distance itself from the formalising tendencies associated with the latter, and to concentrate rather on directly observable linguistic facts. While this approach is certainly laudable, the resulting analyses can sometimes be on the simplistic side.

Goldenberg’s sober approach may show us a way to confront this predicament. On the one hand, his claims and observations are always connected to linguistic reality, but on the other hand, he does not hesitate to draw generalisations going beyond individual languages and to analyse them in terms of abstract linguistic concepts such as the three grammatical relations. While Goldenberg applies them to the Semitic family in the first instance, it is easy to see how one can generalise them. Whether they should be regarded as universal linguistic concepts or rather as comparative concepts in the sense of Haspelmath (2010) may be debated, but their usefulness for typological research should be evident. Indeed, not every language will have unique structural equivalents of every relation, but this observation itself opens the way to a key typological question, namely to what extent are these relations structurally fragmented or conversely fused together in a given language. For instance, on p. 197 Goldenberg notes that in Egyptian (which is Afro-Asiatic but not Semitic) the same pronominal suffixes express both the actor of a verb and the possessor of a noun, thus participating in both the Predicative and Attributive relations.

To sum up, this book should be of interest to typologists, with or without special curiosity about Semitic languages. It is not a book to read in one swipe from cover to cover, but reading it in small portions, consulting the table of contents for points of interest, may prove to be a healthy typologist’s diet.

Abbreviations: ART = article; CNST = construct state; GEN = genitive.

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