

## Sociolinguistic Distinctive Features: The Case of Semitic

JACK FELLMAN

(Ph. D., Bar-Ilan University, Dept. of Hebrew and Semitic Languages, Ramat-Gan, Israel)

Distinctive-feature notation has by now become a commonplace in linguistic description, particularly in phonology, but also, albeit less so, in morphology, syntax, and semantics. Given a set of linguistic entities (phonemes, morphemes, syntagmemes, lexemes), the purpose of a distinctive-feature analysis is to provide an economical and intuitively satisfying way of comparing and contrasting them. The present paper seeks to incorporate such a notation into sociolinguistic description. Given a set of languages, it should be possible to compare and contrast them by using a compact set of sociolinguistic parameters on the model of distinctive features.

For demonstrative purposes, we have chosen so to analyze here the Semitic family of languages, which form a well-defined, compact and homogeneous linguistic group centered in South-west Asia and the adjoining regions. These languages include in particular Hebrew(-Canaanite), Arabic, Aramaic, Akkadian, South Arabic, and Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic). The linguistic interrelationships between these languages are still under discussion in the literature (cf. perhaps most recently the discussion in Hetzron 1974). We wish to present here their sociolinguistic interrelationships.

Of the above six languages and language-groups, all but Akkadian and Ge'ez are today spoken languages, although Aramaic and South Arabic are clearly obsolescent (cf. on the term Swadesh 1948), while Hebrew has only been recently revived in speech (cf. Fellman 1973). Further, all but Akkadian and South Arabic are liturgical languages of the world's monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Finally, although all the above languages were, in their heyday(s), languages of empires, only Arabic is a true world-language, and today even an inter-national one.

With the above in mind, we suggest, then, the following sociolinguistic parameters:

Vernacular language / Non-vernacular language  
 Obsolescent language / Non-obsolescent language  
 Liturgical language / Non-liturgical language  
 International language / Non-international language

Using these parameters, we may set up a sociolinguistic distinctive-feature matrix for the above languages, parallel to the matrices set up in pure linguistic work.

|                        | Hebrew | Arabic | Aramaic | Akkadian | South Arabic | Ge'ez |
|------------------------|--------|--------|---------|----------|--------------|-------|
| Vernacular language    | +      | +      | +       | -        | +            | -     |
| Obsolescent language   | -      | -      | +       | 0        | +            | 0     |
| Liturgical language    | 0      | 0      | +       | -        | -            | +     |
| International language | -      | +      | 0       | 0        | 0            | 0     |

With this matrix is associated the following sociolinguistic tree diagram:

