A REEVALUATION OF THE SEMITIC DIRECT OBJECT MARKERS*

Aren M. Wilson-Wright
University of Texas at Austin

This paper aims to clarify the relationship between the superficially similar direct object markers attested in Modern South Arabian, Ge’ez, Arabic, Aramaic, Samalian, Hebrew, and Phoenician. I argue that the direct object markers in Aramaic and the Canaanite languages derive from a single innovative form, which I reconstruct as *ayāt-. I further claim that the remaining forms are unrelated.

Although verbal objects were originally marked with the accusative case in Semitic, several languages developed independent morphemes to mark the object of a transitive verb, which in some cases functioned alongside the accusative case.¹ Scholars have long debated the relationship between the similar-looking Modern South Arabian, Ge’ez, Arabic, Aramaic, Samalian, Hebrew, and Phoenician direct object markers. Many favor a maximal interpretation linking most, if not all, such forms despite clear phonological differences.² In this paper, I will take a more minimalistic approach. I argue that the direct object markers in Aramaic and the Canaanite languages derive from

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¹ I would like to thank Na’ama Pat-El, John Huehnergard, and Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Any remaining errors are mine alone.

² The accusative case could coexist with the direct object marker in certain Semitic languages like Ge’ez and Arabic because they did not fulfill the same function. The accusative case marked verbal objects without distinction and could also assume adverbial functions, while the direct object markers marked pronominal objects and, in some cases, definite noun phrases. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the Semitic direct object markers developed to replace an ailing or defunct case system. P. Bekins, Transitivity and Object Marking in Biblical Hebrew (HSS 64; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), pp. 203–204, provides a good summary of the distinctive features of direct object markers.

¹ For the sake of brevity, I will refer to previous studies as necessary rather than providing a detailed literature review. For a summary of scholarship up to 2005, see A. Rubin, Studies in Semitic Grammaticalization (HSS 57; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), pp. 117–121. All of the scholars cited by Rubin assume that most of the Semitic direct object markers are related and provide their own explanations to account for the phonological differences between them as do J. Blau. Only P. Noorlander, “Sam’alian in Its Northwest Semitic Setting: A Historical-Comparative Approach,” Or 81 (2012): 225–226, suggests the possibility of independent innovation across the different branches of Semitic.
a single innovative form, which I reconstruct as *ayāt. The remaining forms are all unrelated.

1. THEARAMAIC AND CANAANITE EVIDENCE

A direct object marker in γyt or yt occurs in many Aramaic dialects. In Old Aramaic, it takes the form χyt and introduces both independent nouns (Sefire II C 5) and pronominal suffixes (Sefire III 11). In later dialects of Aramaic, the aleph of χyt was lost due to aphaeresis, an inconsistent but fairly widespread sound change in this branch of Semitic. The full form χyt, however, appears to have survived in Qumran Aramaic in secondary usage as a demonstrative in accordance with Kuryłowicz’s fourth law of analogy. Later dialects mostly restricted the usage of the direct object marker; some use it before suffixes, others before definite nouns.

The vocalization of the Old Aramaic direct object marker can be reconstructed using data from several sources. In Peshitta Syriac and Targumic Aramaic, the short form yt is realized as yāṯ, which corresponds to the second syllable of the earlier form. The quality of the initial syllable, on the other hand, can be inferred from comparative Aramaic and Semitic evidence. In most cases of aleph aphaeresis in Aramaic, the offending aleph preceded an a vowel (e.g., Proto-Aramaic *aḥad ‘one’ > ḥad). Furthermore, the nominal pattern *qatāl is far more common among the Semitic languages than the patterns *qitāl and *quṭāl. Therefore, I tentatively vocalize Old Aramaic γyt as *ayāt.

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3 See A. Rubin, Studies in Semitic Grammaticalization, p. 102, for the full distribution.
5 The motivating factor for aleph aphaeresis in Aramaic seems to have been the absence of stress, and, as a proclitic particle, γyt certainly fits this criterion.
6 wbγyth bym[m] ‘on that same day’ (4QEnastr d 1 iii:4). Compare the similar expressions with yt in Christian Palestinian and Samaritan Aramaic: Christian Palestinian Aramaic byw[m] γyth ‘on that very day’ (1 Sam 6:15, apud C. Müller-Kessler, Grammatik des christlich-palästinisch-Aramäischen. Teil 1: Schriftlehre, Lautlehre, Formenlehre [Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1991], p. 72) and Samaritan Aramaic byth ywmh ‘on that day’ (Deut 31:17, apud R. Macuch, Grammatik des samaritanischen Aramäisch [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982], p. 135). H. Drawnel, The Aramaic Astronomical Book (4Q208–4Q211) from Qumran: Text, Translation, and Commentary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 419, and the other scholars whom he cites all read this form as wbγwt, but the scribe who wrote the text did not distinguish between wāw and yōd in his handwriting. I read this form as wbγyth since wbγwt does not produce a native Aramaic word but rather a Hebraicized form of ‘āt ‘sign’ or the Hebrew direct object marker, while the construction wbγyth bym[m] has good parallels in other Aramaic dialects.
9 In any case, the aleph had to be followed by a short vowel, otherwise aphaeresis would not have occurred.
10 J. Fox, Semitic Noun Patterns (HSS 52; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), pp. 223, 229.
A similar looking direct object marker, 'yt, occurs in Phoenician beginning in the eighth century B.C.E. (KAI 26:3). Over time, this form underwent phonological reduction to 't in certain dialects (such as Byblian, KAI 10:3, 7), although the full form survived until the Neo-Punic period in other dialects (KAI 62:1). The Phoenician direct object marker introduces independent nouns almost exclusively. Only in two cases, both in Punic, does it carry a pronominal suffix (CIS I 580.3; CIS I 6001.1/2).

The vocalization of the Phoenician direct object markers 'yt and 't is hard to ascertain, but there are clues. The y of 'yt in early inscriptions must be consonantal because Phoenician orthography did not employ vowel letters until the Punic period. Furthermore, 'yt was probably bi-syllabic 'vyvt, since diphthongs contracted in Phoenician, which fits the reconstruction of Aramaic 'yt as *'ayāt. The shortened form 't is rendered əθ in a Neo-Punic inscription in Greek script from Wasta, Syria (KAI 174:5) reflecting *'ayāt > *'ayōt > *'ōt > *'ūt > 'út. Two further transcriptions of 't appear in Plautus’ Poenulus: yth (940B) and et (930, 945). Fox suggests that yth reflects an earlier Greek transcription υθ from Plautus’s lost Greek source, which in turn, reflects Phoenician īt or it from *ut. But he has skipped a step in the transmission of Poenulus. As Gratwick points out, Latin orthography at the time of Plautus lacked both y and th. In their place, Plautus would have used u and t. Thus, yth reflects earlier Latin ut, which would have sounded like Greek əθ, the form found in KAI 174:5. The form et proves more problematic. On the surface, it resembles the Hebrew pre-nominal form of the direct object marker 'et (see its discussion below). Elsewhere in Poenulus, however, etymological *ō is rendered e (e.g., *'anōkī > anec in 947/937. 949. 995; *qanōt > caneth in 932). Friedrich, Röllig, and Amadasi Guzzo suggest that these transcriptions

13 For this sequence of sound changes, see J. Fox, “A Sequence of Vowel Shifts in Phoenician and Other Languages,” JNES 55 (1996): 37.
14 The different forms probably come from two different dialects of Punic: one consulted by Plautus in the third century B.C.E. while writing Poenulus; the other consulted by a later editor in the early imperial period in order to fix a badly corrupted text: A. S. Gratwick, “Hanno’s Punic Speech in the Poenulus of Plautus,” Hermes 99 (1971): 37.
reflect a later rounding of etymological ō to ũ.\textsuperscript{18} Whatever the underlying phonological process, we can reconcile ḥbl, yth, and et with the other Phoenician and Aramaic evidence. The shortened forms ṭ'ut and ṭ'ūt can plausibly derive from *.setStroke(\textsuperscript{18})ayāt, which became *.setStroke(\textsuperscript{20})ayōt with the operation of the Canaanite shift and then *stroke(\textsuperscript{21})ōt > *stroke(\textsuperscript{20})ūt > ṭ'ut > ṭ'ūt.

The Hebrew direct object marker exhibits a suppletive paradigm. Before nouns and the 2 m. pl. and 3 f. pl. suffixes it takes the form ṭ'et-, but before the remaining suffixes it takes the form ṭ'ōt- (table 1). This distribution is attested in all of the Hebrew vocalization traditions (see table 1 below).\textsuperscript{19} Praetorius, followed by Gesenius, Bauer and Leander, and Blau, posited a phonological explanation for this distribution: *stroke(\textsuperscript{19})āt > ṭ'at when unaccented, and then ṭ'at > ṭ'et (like yadken > yedken in Ezek 13:21).\textsuperscript{20} While Praetorius’ argument explains the Hebrew forms, it does not fit the comparative evidence.\textsuperscript{21} For his explanation to be correct, *stroke(\textsuperscript{19})ayāt must contract to *stroke(\textsuperscript{20})āt before the operation of the Canaanite shift in Proto-Canaanite. Otherwise *stroke(\textsuperscript{19})ayāt would become *stroke(\textsuperscript{20})ayōt > ṭ'ōt, which would not reduce to ṭ'at when unaccented. Yet, the Phoenician form remains uncontracted in its earliest attestations, which means *stroke(\textsuperscript{19})ayāt had not yet contracted in proto-Canaanite. Apart from this, there is no regular phonological process that would transmute *stroke(\textsuperscript{19})ayāt into ṭ'et.\textsuperscript{22} Because of this, I suggest that ṭ'ōt- and ṭ'et come from separate morphemes: ṭ'ōt- is a reflex of the proto-Canaanite direct object marker *stroke(\textsuperscript{22})ayāt with a regular contraction of the triphthong (cf. the infinitive absolute of ŚYM ‘to put’: *stroke(\textsuperscript{19})sayām > śōm), while ṭ'et derives from the inherited Proto-Semitic preposition *stroke(\textsuperscript{22})itt- ‘with’. In Proto-Hebrew, *stroke(\textsuperscript{22})itt- infiltrated the paradigm, displacing ṭ'ōt before nouns, due to an analogy in the verbal syntax of these particles. Certain verbs, such as nilḥam ‘to fight’ and dibbēr ‘to speak’, can govern both ṭ'ōt- and *stroke(\textsuperscript{22})itt- with minimal difference:


\textsuperscript{19} A few exceptions to this division appear throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Ezek 23:47; Josh 23:15), on which see below.


\textsuperscript{21} Praetorius’ explanation works if the Hebrew and Phoenician direct object markers are unrelated.

\textsuperscript{22} Grammaticalization provides a convenient label for such irregular phonological reductions, but it does not explain the mechanisms of such a change. For a lengthy critique of grammaticalization, see B. D. Joseph, “Grammaticalization: A General Critique,” in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Grammaticalization} (ed. H. Narrog and B. Heine; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 193–205.
nillāḥamā ʾôtām
Let us fight them (1 Kgs 20:25)

nillāḥēm ʾittām
Let us fight with them (1 Kgs 20:23)\(^23\)

way-yēdabbēr mōšé wē-ʾelʿāzār hak-kōhēn ʾôtām
And Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke to them (Num 26:3)\(^24\)

way-yēdabbēr ʾittām
And he spoke with them (Gen 23:8)

Over time, speakers of Hebrew generalized ʾet as the pre-nominal form of the direct object marker on the basis of verbs like nilḥam and dibbēr. They then transferred the nucleus of the pre-nominal form to the 2 m. pl. and 3 f. pl. suffix forms due to vowel harmony: for example, ʾōtkem > ʾetkem under the influence of the pronominal variant ʾet.\(^25\) The forms ʾōthen (Ezek 23:47), ʾōtkem (Josh 23:15), and ʾōthem (Ezek 23:45) represent relics of the earlier paradigm. Alternative 3 f. pl. forms, like ʾōtān (Ezek 16:54; Ezek 34:23 in Babylonian manuscripts; regularly in Mishnaic Hebrew) and ʾōtānā (Exod 25:26; Ezek 34:21), did not undergo vowel harmony because the suffix did not contain an i vowel, the conditioning factor for this change.

\(^23\) These examples come from the same story, suggesting that nilḥam ʾitt- and nilḥam ʾōt- were both acceptable even within historical Hebrew. Theoretically, nillāḥamā ʾôtām could represent a late substitution of ʾōt- for ʾitt- as in Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Second Isaiah. But nilḥam governs ʾōt- in Josh 10:25 and Isa 37:9, neither of which is considered a late text.

\(^24\) See also Gen 21:2: lam-mō-ʾēd ʾāser dibber ʾōtō ʾēlōhîm ‘at the time God spoke to him’. The verbs yārad ‘to go down’ (2 Kgs 1:15 vs. 1 Sam 26:6) and lāqaḥ ‘to take’ (2 Kgs 3:26 vs. Exod 17:5) can also govern both ʾōt- and ʾitt- with minimal difference.

\(^25\) Compare the similar process that accounts for the linking vowels before object and possessive pronouns which tend to mirror the vowel of the suffix, for example, *malkāhā > malkāh ʾher king’, *malkuhū > malkō ʾhis king’, etc.
Table 1: The realization of the direct object marker in different Hebrew vocalization traditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocalization Tradition</th>
<th>Before Nouns</th>
<th>Before Suffixes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masoretic</td>
<td>‘et</td>
<td>‘ôt-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babylonian26</td>
<td>‘et</td>
<td>‘ôt-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samaritan27</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>ūt-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hexapla28</td>
<td>εθ</td>
<td>oθ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mishnaic29</td>
<td>‘et</td>
<td>‘ôt-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Canaanite languages Moabite (KAI 181:5) and Edomite (Horvat Uzza, line 3) also use ‘t as a direct object marker, but the vocalization of these forms cannot—unsurprisingly—be ascertained.30 Nevertheless, their consonantal skeletons could conceivably derive from *’ayāt, just like Hebrew ‘ôt- and Phoenician ‘t.31 At the same time, Ammonite, the language of the Deir Alla inscriptions, and Amarna Canaanite do not attest independent direct object markers. Ammonite and the language of the Deir Alla inscriptions are poorly attested, so the absence of any such marker is probably an accident of preservation. Verbal objects in Amarna Canaanite are marked using Akkadian morphology and syntax, which lack an independent direct object marker.32 As it stands, *’ayāt can explain all of the Canaanite and Aramaic forms of the direct object marker (with the exception of the Hebrew pre-nominal form) without positing ad-hoc sound changes. Originally, this form would have introduced both independent nouns and prenominal suffixes, as in Old Aramaic and Hebrew as well as vestigially in Phoenician, but later its distribution became restricted in different daughter languages.33

33 Since *’ayāt is a semantically empty morpheme, its etymology proves murky, and so I will refrain from suggesting a concrete derivation for it. The most that can be said is that *’ayāt comes from a grammaticalized nominal form of the root ‘YT.
2. DIRECT OBJECT MARKERS IN OTHER SEMITIC LANGUAGES

So far I have shown that the direct object marker *ʾayāt constitutes a shared feature linking Aramaic and Canaanite, but it remains to be seen whether it is an innovative one. Several Semitic languages outside of Aramaic and Canaanite employ direct object markers, including Ge’ez, Modern South Arabian, Classical Arabic, and Samalian (table 2), which could be cognate with Aramaic and Canaanite *ʾayāt. As I will show, however, these forms cannot be related to *ʾayāt due to their phonology.

Table 2: Semitic direct object markers in comparative perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Direct Object Marker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aramaic / Canaanite</td>
<td>ʾayāt-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ge’ez</td>
<td>kiyā-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern South Arabian</td>
<td>ta-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical Arabic</td>
<td>ʾiyyā-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samalian and Zinjirli</td>
<td>wt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Ge’ez direct object marker kiyā- (< *kīyā-) only occurs before pronominal suffixes. Normally, Ge’ez k does not correspond to the glottal stop in the Central Semitic languages, so Brockelmann, followed by Tropper, suggests that it derives from the Arabic form ʾiyyā- with the addition of a demonstrative element k-.34 But he does not adduce comparative evidence for a preposed demonstrative k-. Several demonstratives throughout Semitic do contain k, but it is always suffixed to another demonstrative form as in Biblical Aramaic ʾillēk ‘those’ and Classical Arabic tilka ‘that’ (f.).35 Wright, on the other hand, suggests a weakening of kīyā to hīyā and then ʾiyyā, but this explanation relies on a series of ad-hoc sound changes.36 Thus, Ge’ez kiyā- is unlikely to be cognate with any of the other forms.

The Modern South Arabian languages exhibit a direct object marker ta- that is used before pronominal suffixes: wəzəmk to-h ‘I gave him’.37 This form, too, is unlikely to be cognate with the Aramaic and Canaanite direct object

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marker. It only shares a single consonant with *`ayāt, which does not provide a secure basis for genetic relatedness.\(^{38}\)

Classical Arabic uses the direct object marker `iyyā before pronominal suffixes: `iyyā-ka ‘you’ (m. s. direct object).\(^{39}\) Wright, Brockelmann, and Blau suggest that the Northwest Semitic forms of the direct object marker derive from `iyyā with the addition of a final feminine –t.\(^{40}\) Yet, Classical Arabic `iyyā cannot be cognate to Hebrew `ôt and Aramaic `yāṯ for three reasons. First, `iyyā-t would not contract to `ôt in Hebrew since geminated glides are retained intervocally in that language (e.g., *li-qayyēm > lĕ-qayyēm Ezek 13:6; dayyan ‘judge’ > dayyān 1 Sam 24:16; `iyyāb PN > `iyyôb cf. Babylonian ayyābūm). Second, `iyyā-t would not undergo aphaeresis as it does in all Aramaic dialects after Old Aramaic, since the loss of the `aleph and its vowel would leave a word initial consonant cluster. Third, and most importantly, `iyyā- comes from a different root than *`ayāt-. As Testen has argued, Classical Arabic `iyā has probably comes from earlier `iyay.\(^{41}\) It is a qittal noun from the root √YY, whereas *`ayāt is probably a qatāl noun from the root √YT, as I have argued above.

Another direct object marker, wt, is attested in Samalian (KAI 214:28) and the recently discovered Zinjirli inscription.\(^{42}\) Brockelmann, Barth, Testen, Lipiński, and Wilmsen have all suggested that this form is related to the Canaanite and Aramaic direct object markers.\(^{43}\) It is easy to see why. The glides w and y frequently alternate in the Semitic languages as the result of assimilation to a neighboring vowel (e.g., *li-qawvvin > *li-qayyvin > lĕ-qayyēm Ezek 13:6). Thus, one could theoretically reconstruct *`iwāt > *`iyāt > yāṯ, `ôt, etc. But there is no reason for hypothesizing the loss of an


\(^{39}\) A. Al-Jallad, An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 107, has found a single instance of this morpheme in Safaitic, where it takes the consonantal form Y. Because it shares only a single consonant with Aramaic/Canaanite *`ayāt and no vowels for certain, it is likewise unlikely to be cognate. I would like to thank Ahmad Al-Jallad for sharing the pre-publication manuscript of his Safaitic grammar with me.

\(^{40}\) W. Wright, Lectures, p. 112; C. Brockelmann, Grundriss, pp. 313–314; J. Blau, Studies in Hebrew Linguistics, p. 82 n. 27.


initial *aleph in the Samalian and Zinjirli forms since *aleph is always retained word initially in Samalian and there is no evidence for the vocalization of *wt.\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, this reconstruction requires the original form to be vocalized \textsuperscript{*}iwāt, and there is some evidence that the initial vowel of Aramaic and Canaanite ROPERTY was an a (see above).

Instead, I suggest that wt derives from the preposition lēwāt ‘toward’, which is attested throughout Aramaic.\textsuperscript{45} Initially, the dative preposition liwāt was repurposed as a direct object marker before animate nouns.\textsuperscript{46} Speakers then reanalyzed liwāt as the preposition li- followed by a separate direct object marker wāt. Once this happened, wāt could function independently as a direct object marker. A similar process of reanalysis probably produced the compound preposition kē-wāt ‘like, as’ attested in Qumran Aramaic, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Syriac, and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, where the preposition lēwāt- is also attested.

The other Semitic direct object markers cannot be related to the Aramaic and Canaanite direct object marker. But they are, with the possible exception of the enigmatic Modern South Arabian ta-, unrelated to each other as well. Their phonological forms differ too much, and therefore they must have been innovated independently in different branches fairly recently.

3. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Superficially similar direct object markers are attested in Modern South Arabian, Ge’ez, Arabic, Aramaic, Samalian, Hebrew, and Phoenician, but their mutual relationship is the subject of debate. In this paper, I have argued that only the Aramaic and Canaanite markers are genetically related. They descend from the form \textsuperscript{*}ayāt, while the remaining direct object markers appear to be independent innovations. As such, the Aramaic and Canaanite direct object marker constitutes a shared morpho-syntactic innovation and therefore, could be used to refine the sub-grouping of the Northwest Semitic languages.


\textsuperscript{45} A. Rubin, \textit{Studies in Semitic Grammaticalization}, p. 94, calls WT a “prepositional base,” which could be compounded with other prepositions like li- and ka-. But lēwāt most likely derives from the verb √LWY ‘to accompany’, so the l is probably a root consonant. Likewise, P. Noorlander, “Sam’alian in Its Northwest Semitic Setting,” pp. 225–226, suggests that wāt serves as an “extension” in the compound prepositions lēwāt and kēwāt.

\textsuperscript{46} See A. Rubin, \textit{Studies in Semitic Grammaticalization}, pp. 110–111, for examples of this process.