Introduction

Counting just under 1,300 pages, this “handbook”—one of the latest contributions in DeGruyter’s HSK series of linguistic reference works1—aims to present “a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on the Semitic languages” (p. v).

Its seventy-four chapters are the product of fifty-eight contributors, compiled under the oversight of Stefan Weninger, professor of Semitic Studies at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies of Philipps University in Marburg, Germany,2 together with his editorial team. (A number of articles are authored by the editors themselves.) Following the series’ style, a brief biographical sketch on each author is not provided but this would have complemented the volume.

The chapters vary in subject matter. Some are grammatical descriptions (such as chapter 37 on Mandaic, an ancient Aramaic language) while others are primarily sociolinguistic studies (such as chapter 26 on Hebrew as a national language). One of the longest chapters (chapter 8) is a lexicography of proto-Semitic.

The ancient Semitic languages—such as Akkadian, Classical Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Old Ethiopic—receive due attention; many of them are the subject of multiple chapters. Smaller, lesser-known languages are included as well, such as Maltese, Gurage, or even Hobyot with its three hundred speakers living along the coast of Oman.

Overview of contents

The book’s contents are grouped into seven sections. Section I covers contact with the neighboring language families Egyptian, Berber, Chadic, and Cushitic/Omotic. Section II is a reconstruction of the Semitic proto-language. The remaining sections, III–VII, all have as their
main title “Semitic Languages and Dialects,” which, rather confusingly, is followed in each case by another capital roman numeral from I to V before the subheading. Thus, for example, section VI is titled: “VI. The Semitic Languages and Dialects IV: Languages of the Arabian Peninsula.”

Further confusing the layout is that the first of these subsections deals with the language family as a whole and has the subheading “Their Typology” while the remaining sections all cover groups of individual languages and dialects under the following headings: East Semitic, North-West Semitic, Languages of the Arabian Peninsula, and Ethio-Semitic.1

Noteworthy is the fact that languages of the Arabian Peninsula (which include Arabic and the South Arabian languages) are treated in a separate section. It appears that in this way the editors are attempting to steer clear of the controversy whether Arabic and the South Arabian languages should be grouped along with the Ethiopian Semitic languages across the Red Sea as part of South-Semitic (the traditional classification) or whether Arabic (but not the Arabian languages) belongs with Hebrew and Aramaic to the north as part of Central Semitic (the classification of Hetzron 1972, as also adopted by the Ethnologue4). For more on this topic, see chapters 9 and 65.

Critique

A comprehensive map showing the distribution of the Semitic languages would have been helpful. A few individual maps do appear scattered throughout the text—though a list of maps is not provided. The map of Arabia (on p. 757) is difficult to read. Much clearer is the map of Ethio-Semitic (on p. 1123), based in part on the Ethnologue.

For a work that intends to be a “ready reference,”5 this handbook might be expected to include a detailed and carefully prepared index as a principal means of accessing the information. Disappointingly, the index amounts to no more than a little over ten pages—which is a ratio of approximately 127 pages of text to one index page, or an index of less than 1 percent.6

Moreover, none of the index entries contain subentries, with the result that quite a few entries consist merely of a long string of page numbers (such as that for the heading adjective with its 82 page references). Being a terminological index only, it excludes, for example, authors, places, and language names. Together, these factors conspire to make it difficult for the interested reader to access the wealth of information buried in this work.

One can only imagine the amount of editing required for a massive volume such as this. (Pity the editor assigned the lexicon of chapter 8.) It is no wonder the book “has undergone a long period of preparation” (p. v). A few more months of delay to prepare a thorough index would, however, have been worth the wait.

Mention is made briefly in the introduction to the book of other anthologies on the Semitic languages, but apart from the fact that the present volume is not restricted to grammatical descriptions, these are not discussed further (except as referenced in individual chapters).
Usefulness

The limitations of the index notwithstanding, this handbook, in providing an overview of current research on Semitic languages, will undoubtedly be a valuable resource for linguists working in Semitic languages, or even in neighboring languages. Some chapters contain extensive reference lists, which will prove useful for more in-depth research.

Biblical scholars and Bible translators will appreciate the survey of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic and other ancient languages. For those seeking to familiarize themselves with the distinctive features of the Semitic language family as a whole, a good starting point will be section III on typology with its two chapters treating morphology (chapter 10) and syntax (chapter 11). Gensler, author of the former, sums it all up well:

What general linguists tend to know about the morphological specialness of Semitic is its nonconcatenative root-and-pattern morphology. But the Semitic family, and individual Semitic languages, display many other rare, curious, and distinctive morphological behaviors. (p. 280)

As research continues on these languages, this handbook, though doubtless not the last word that will be written on the Semitic language family, will help guide a new generation of researchers unearth more of these linguistic treasures.

Notes


3 It might have been better to label section III “Typology of the Semitic Language Family” and reserve the headings “The Semitic Languages and Dialects” for the discussion of the individual languages and dialects in sections IV–VII. Or another option would have been to divide the contents into two parts with part A covering the language family as a whole and part B could then have the title “The Semitic Languages and Dialects.”


5 Webster defines a handbook as a “book capable of being conveniently carried as a ready reference” or “a concise reference book covering a particular subject” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary; 11th ed.).

6 Indexing “guru” Nancy C. Mulvany (1994:72) recommends a 7–8 percent index for scholarly books. That would bring the recommended index for a book this size to 89–102 pages.
References

