Some Notes on *muṣawwitat* in Medieval Hebrew and Arabic Literature

SHELOMO MORAG
Hebrew University

Having read, in 1963, my paper "Towards an Interpretation of the Term *muṣawwitat*," which was published in Hebrew (*Lešonenu* 26 [1961/62], 273–78), Professor Meir Max Bravmann wrote to me, suggesting the publication of an English version of the paper. Because of other commitments, however, the preparation of the English version was delayed. When I received the invitation to offer a contribution to a volume dedicated to the memory of this great Arabist and Semitist, I thought it appropriate to devote my contribution to a subject—the term *muṣawwitat*—which belongs to a domain within the wide range of Bravmann's interests, and with which he dealt in his doctoral dissertation *Materialien und Untersuchungen zu den phonetischen Lehren der Araber* (Göttingen, 1934). The present paper includes a fair number of additions to the aforementioned Hebrew article and is arranged in a different way. We shall deal here with the use of the term in the writings of Jewish and Arabic grammarians and add a note on the use of the same terms in phonology and musicology.

A. The term *muṣawwitat* in medieval Jewish grammatical literature

Let us first review some sources in which the term appears.

(1) Ibn Ǧanāḥ, in his *kitāb al-luma*[^1], mentions in two passages a book by the name of *kitāb al-*muṣawwitat*.[^2] In the first passage[^3] the book is mentioned in connection with the Tiberian rules concerning the pronunciation of /ʁ/[^4]; in the second[^5] Ibn Ǧanāḥ refers to a statement of the soferim[^6], mentioned in *kitāb al-*muṣawwitat*, with regard to the changes affecting the noun in the construct state.

[^1]: The occurrence of the name of the book in these passages, as well as in those brought below, nos. 2–4, was first pointed out by Prof. S. Abramson, *Lešonenu* 26 (1961/2), 24f. [in Hebrew].
[^5]: This term may refer also to the Massoretes.
(2) A third passage of Ibn Ḥanāḵī’s, in kitāb al-taqreb wal-tashil,6 mentions an interpretation proposed by the author of kitāb al-muṣawwitat with regard to the vocalization of the wāw of wa ʿamōtētēhū (2 Sam. 1:10), with a pataḥ rather than with a qameṣ. Ibn Ḥanāḵī takes a stand against this interpretation.

(3) That very same interpretation, given by the author of kitāb al-muṣawwitat with regard to the qameṣ of the wāw of wa ʿamōtētēhū is included in a passage from an unknown grammatical treatise, preserved in part in a ms. of the Antonin collection in Leningrad.7

(4) The anonymous author of a grammatical treatise, of which only a fragment has been preserved,8 presents kitāb al-muṣawwitat as a work of Saadia. The book is mentioned in this fragment with regard to the vocalization of the word ḥārās (Isa. 44:12) with two qameṣ signs (and not with a qameṣ followed by a pataḥ)—a vocalization which was attributed to Saadiah and which the author of the fragment contests. There is, however, room to doubt whether Saadiah did in fact produce a work by this name.9

(5) A grammatical treatise, important parts of which were preserved in two Genizah fragments.10 In this work, which may well be the lost kitāb al-muṣawwitat,11 there are quite a few occurrences of the term muṣawwitat in the meaning of a vowel.12

(6) In a Genizah fragment of a Massoretic work,13 the term occurs twice, also, apparently, in the aforementioned meaning.

(7) In a Genizah fragment, which according to a statement in its fourth line, presents a treatment by Saadiah of ḫqd kpt following a word ending with a vowel, the hard and soft pronunciation of the /t/:14 bi-muṣawwitat min al-muṣawwitat ‘with any vowel’.15 This fragment also includes an affiliated term, namely tašwīṭ: ʿ[ ] an ṣəqțaʿuḥu tašwītuḥu.16 The pronominal suffix in yaqṭaʿuḥu apparently goes back to the tongue (al-lisan). As the main part of the context is missing, it is rather difficult to make out the precise meaning of this phrase.

(8) In an anonymous treatise, usually referred to now as hammaʿāmār ʿal haššēwā,17 which treats aspects of Tiberian grammar of Hebrew—notably the nature and pronunciation of

---

7 See Abramson, Lešonenu 26 (1961/2), 25. The passage was included in a letter written by A. A. Harkavi to S. A. Poznanski, which was published by the latter in Zeitschrift für Hebräische Bibliographie 1 (1897), 97.
8 Published by Poznanski (see n. 7 above); see Abramson, Lešonenu 26 (1961/2), n. 10.
9 See ibid., 26.
10 These fragments are: (a) IX A 24 of the library of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in Paris; (b) T. S. Arab. 32, 31 of the Cambridge University Library. The fragments were published, with an introduction, translation and extensive commentary, by N. Allony, Lešonenu 29 (1964/5), 9–23; 136–59. In this publication Allony recovered parts of an important grammatical work, which he considers to be the kitāb al-muṣawwitat, mentioned in several medieval sources (see nn. 1, 2, 4, 9 above).
11 See preceding note.
12 Allony’s publication, 138, line 9; lines 20–21; line 24, 140, line 28; 144, line 53; 148, line 76; 152, line 112; 154, lines 116 and 122.
13 Cambridge University Library, T. S. Arab. 9, 5. The relevant passages were published by N. Allony, Kirjat–Sepher 38 (1962/3), 117 [In Hebrew].
15 Ibid., 45, lines 21–22.
16 Allony, Sēfer Hanniqūṭ, 46, line 32.
17 Kurt Levy, Zur masorethischen Grammatik (Stuttgart, 1936).
the šewā—there is a significant passage that clearly states that muṣawwitat is the Tiberian term for 'vowels': wa‘a‘a‘nī bi-qawlt al-sab‘ah mulāk wahu‘m alla‘di yusammatātah al-tābarānīt yu‘mu‘a‘nī [al-muṣawwitat wahum ʾa, ʾā, ʾe, ʾe], ʾi, ʾo, ʾu—“and what I mean in my words are the seven [mulāk] which the Tiberians call [al-muṣawwitat and they are a, ʾā, ʾe, ʾe], ʾi, ʾo, ʾu.” The term mulāk ‘vowels’ is widely used in medieval Hebrew grammatical works.

(9) Rav Nissim Gaon, in his book Megillat Setārīm,19 mentions kitāb al-muṣawwitat as a work written by Ben-Asher. No hint is given as to the nature of the book. There is thus definitive evidence for the use of the term muṣawwitat in the meaning of ‘a vowel’. The title of the treatise kitāb al-muṣawwitat is, therefore, to be translated, “The Book of the Vowels,” but the question of to which work this title refers will not concern us here.20 We may add in passing, though, that the term muṣawwitat is used also in a musical sense, by Saadiah, in his Siddur.21

B. The emergence of the term in muṣawwitat and its use in Arabic phonology.

In his Poetics, Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of sounds: (a) a ‘sonorant’ sound (φωνή) (b) a ‘semi-sonorant’ (ημίφωνον); and (c) a ‘non-sonorant’ or ‘mute’ sound (ἀφωνον).22 The concept of the ‘sonorant’ sound is identical to that of the vowel; the category of the ‘semi-sonorant’ sounds includes ο and κ, while the category of the ‘non-sonorant’ sounds includes the stops and the fricatives, with the exception of κ.23 Aristotle’s Poetics were translated into Arabic, from Syriac, by Abū Bīr Mattā,24 and there exist Arabic versions of the book by Al-Fārābī,25 Ibn-Sinā,26 and Ibn Ruṣd.27

The three Aristotelian categories of sounds mentioned above appear in Abū Bīr’s translation of the Poetics as (a) muṣawwitat; (b) nīṣf al-muṣawwitat; and (c) lā muṣawwitat.28

18 Ibid., lines 14-15; see also Alony, Lešonenu 26 (1961/62), 271. The supplementation of the missing words is made certain by the following lines. For mulāk see line 14; for al-muṣawwitat see line 16.
19 See S. Abramson’s publication of this book in his R. Nissim Gaon Libelli Quinque (Jerusalem, 1965 [in Hebrew]). For the passage in question, see the Arabic original on p. 323 and the Hebrew translation on p. 324. See also Abramson’s discussion on p. 318.
20 Abramson, Lešonenu 26, (1961/2), 26–27, regards kitāb al-muṣawwitat as a general term, applicable to any book dealing with vocalization and accentuation, and assumes that Ibn Ganāth, as well as other medieval Jewish grammarians, used it in referring to Ben-Asher’s Dikdūkay haṭ-qe‘āmim. See, however, A. Dotan, Lešonenu 29 (1964/65), 9f.
21 As pointed by N. Alony, Kirjath Sepher 28 (1962/3), 117.
23 Although of the ‘sonants’ Aristotle mentions only μ, it appears that this sound stands here for the whole category, including also λ, μ, ν. See ibid., 200.
24 This translation was published by D. S. Margoliouth, Analecta Orientalia ad poeticae Aristotelicae (London 1887); by J. Tkatsch, Die arabishe Übersetzung der Poetik des Aristoteles (Vienna, 1928–1972); and more recently by ‘Abd al-Rahmān Badawi, Aristaṭīlīs, fann al-šār (Cairo, 1953).
26 Published by Margoliouth, Analecta, and by Badawi, Aristaṭīlīs, 161–98.
27 F. Lasinio, Il commento medio di Averroa alla poesia di Aristotele (Pisa, 1872); Badawi, Aristaṭīlīs, 201–50.
These Arabic equivalents are to be found also in Ibn Sinā's\(^29\) and Ibn Ruṣd's\(^30\) versions. Ibn Sinā, however, has ṣāmīt 'silent' for (c).\(^31\) Al-Fārābī's version does not include Aristotle's classification of sounds. But the term musāwウィた is in the meaning of 'a letter representing a vowel', a 'mater lectionis', occurs in other works of his.\(^32\)

In his version of the Poetics, Ibn Sinā makes a distinction between two kinds of musāwウィた: while the letters representing the long vowels are musāwウィた mamdūdah 'stretched m.', the short vowels, those not represented by letters, are termed musāwウィた maqṣūrah 'limited m.'\(^33\) In another work, the risālah fi ʿasbāb ḥudūt al-ḥurūf,\(^34\) Ibn Sinā employs the terms ʿalīf musāwウィた, wāw musāwウィた, yā musāwウィた, for the letters representing the long vowels. These terms are presented in contrast to the wāw ṣāmītah and the yā ṣāmītah, which denote the semi-vowels Ṣ and y.\(^35\) In another source\(^36\) the use of the term musāwウィた is restricted to the letters that represent the long vowels while ḥarakāt denotes the short vowels.\(^37\) As observed above, the restriction of the term musāwウィた to the long vowels is attested also in Al-Fārābī's works.

Thus, several stages appear to have existed in the use of the term musāwウィた. It first emerged as a term coined for Aristotle's 'sonorant' sounds; later it contrasted with ḥarakāt, acquiring the sense of 'a long vowel' (originally: 'a letter representing a long vowel'), while the latter was employed for 'a short vowel'.

---

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 126. For the Greek counterparts of these Arabic terms see also M. M. Bravmann, Materialien und Untersuchungen zu den phonetischen Lehren der Araber (Göttingen, 1934), viii, n.2.

\(^{29}\) Margoliouth, Analecta, 107 (Arabic numerals); Badawī, Arīṣūtālis, 191. See also C. H. M. Versteegh, Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking (Leiden, 1977), 21.

\(^{30}\) Ibn Ruṣd has gayr musāwウィた for (c). For Ibn Ruṣd's use of the term see Bravmann, loc. cit.

\(^{31}\) To be more precise, what Ibn Sinā has is al ḥurūf al-ṣāmītah 'the silent letters'.

\(^{32}\) Kitāb ʿilṣās al-ʿulūm, ed. 'Uṭmān Muḥammad Ḍimin (Cairo, 1931), 6. See also A. Gonzalez Palencia, Al-Fārābī catalogo de las ciencias,\(^2\) (Madrid, 1953); Palencia's translation of al-muṣawウィた by 'las consonantes' is erroneous. Bravmann, Materialien, 9–10, noted the use of the terms in Al-Fārābī's Kitāb al-maṣṭṣar q al-kaftar.

\(^{33}\) Badawī, Arīṣūtālis, 191 lines 14–31; this category also includes ḥurūf al-ṭillah (the weak letters). What Ibn Sinā probably has in mind here is the status of Ṣ and y (possibly also of gł) when they function as semi-vowels (in sequences such as aw or ay). Ibn Sinā considers this status to be equal to that of the short vowels, which is a rather unusual interpretation of the phonological status of the semi-vowels in Arabic grammatical literature. (I am indebted to my colleague Haim Blanc for his observations on this point.)

\(^{34}\) The risālah was edited by Muḥīb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb, (Cairo 1914) and by N. Khānlārī (Teheran, 1915), and translated into German by Bravmann, Materialien, 112-131, and into English by Kh. I. Semaan, Arabic Phonetics (Lahore, 1963). For the passage in question see al-Khaṭīb's edition, 13; Bravmann's translation, 126; Semaan's translation, 43-49.

\(^{35}\) Note in this passage the metaphor: we ʿamma al-ʿalīf al-muṣawウィた waʾukhtihū al-fataḥah "the fathaḥah is the sister of the long ā‘" (and similarly for the relationship between the ḍammah and al-wāw al-muṣawウィた).

\(^{36}\) A. Sprenger, Dictionary of Technical Terms used in the Sciences of the Musulmans (Calcutta, 1854–1862), 320–21, 344. Bravmann, Materialien, 9–10, noted the use of the term in this book, which presents summaries of earlier sources.

\(^{37}\) The short vowel is conceived as forming a part of the long vowel (al-ḥarāḥat ʿabād al-muṣawウィた, p. 344). This conception of the relationship between the long and the short vowels is also Ibn Ğinnī's: see H. Fleisch, ZDMG 108 (1958), 85, 87.
The following table summarizes the uses of the term in the sources reviewed above:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ibn Rušd's version of the Poetics</th>
<th>Ibn Sinā's version of the Poetics</th>
<th>Abū Bīr Matta's translation of the Poetics</th>
<th>Aristotle's Poetics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mušawwit</td>
<td>ʿalif mušawwitah wāw mušawwitah yāʾ mušawwitah 'letters representing long vowels'</td>
<td>mušawwit mušawwitāt mamdūdah 'long vowels' vs. mušawwitāt maqṣūrah 'short vowels'</td>
<td>(a) 'sonorant' sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nisf al-mušawwit</td>
<td>nisf al-mušawwit</td>
<td>nisf al-mušawwit</td>
<td>(b) 'semi-sonorant' sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḡayr mušawwit</td>
<td>ṣāmit</td>
<td>lā mušawwit</td>
<td>(c) 'non-sonorant' sound</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other sources:
1. Al-Farābī, *Kitāb ʿihṣāʾ al-ṭulūm*: mušawwitah = 'a letter representing a long vowel'.
2. Dict. of Tech. Terms: mušawwitah 'a long vowel' vs. ḫarakah 'a short vowel'.

The term mušawwitāt is, as seen above, a calque: it reflects Greek τὸ φωνητόν, conveyed to Arabic via Syriac (the middle link being missing). The denotation the term carries implies a clear conception of the role of the vowel in the syllable: it is the element which gives ṣawt, 'sound' to the (preceding) consonant, making it audible. This appears to have been the primary meaning of the term. Its use for 'a letter denoting a long vowel', contrasting with ḫarakah 'a short vowel, must have developed later. This later use of mušawwitāt was eventually superseded by that of ḫurūf al-madd wa l-īn.

C. Some notes on the use of the same terms in phonology and musicology.

The verb ṣawwata is well attested in the domain of music. A parallel use is similarly evident in the writings of Jewish medieval grammarians with regard to the following terms:
(a) naḡm 'melodies'. Its use in the meaning of 'vowels' is found in a number of medieval

---

38 For the possibility of regarding ḫarakah also as a calque, reflecting Greek κίνης 'movement', see Bravmann, *Materialien*, 8–12. Cf. also Versteegh, *Greek Elements* (above, n. 29), 22–25.
39 This concept is explicit in Aristotle's definition of the 'non-sonorant' sounds, which become audible only when joined to a 'sonorant' (= vowel) sound. See *Poetics*, 1456b.
41 It is therefore obvious that the term is to be read mušawwitāt and not mušawwatāt; the latter reading was suggested by Kurt Levy (above, n. 17), 3, and by ʿUṯmān Muḥammad Aṭmān, the editor of *Kitāb ʿihṣāʾ al-ṭulūm* (above, n. 32), 6.
42 Cf., e.g., R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* (Leiden-Paris, 1927), 851.
sources, including Saadia’s *Kutub al-lu’ghah.* The term is also employed for the biblical accents, for example, in an anonymous grammatical treatise used for centuries by the Yemenite community.

(b) *ḥarakāt.* This term, commonly used for ‘vowels’, appears in the aforementioned grammatical treatise in the meaning of ‘the musical values of the biblical accents’.

This double use of the terms for ‘vowels’ and ‘musical accents’ may perhaps be explained by assuming that according to the theory underlying the use of the terms, vowels and musical accents have some features in common. First, the former lend sound, *ṣawt,* to the preceding consonant (compare the emergence of the term *muṣawwīt*); with some similarity, sound is essential for the musical performance (*taṣwīt*) of the latter. Second, for the classification of both vowels and musical accents into sub-groups, the notion of ‘height’ is used in some of the writings of medieval Jewish grammarians.

---

43 Professor N. Allony has devoted an extensive study to the use of *nağmah* in medieval sources: *Yuval* (Studies of the Jewish Music Research Centre) 2/2 (1971), 9–26 [in Hebrew]. For the use of the term for ‘vowel’ see pp. 11–13.

44 *Petite grammaire hébraïque provenant de Yemen,* ed. A. Neubauer (Leipzig, 1891). This treatise is presently referred to as *Maḥberet ha-ṭigān ha-ṣ’arvit.* The term *nağamāt* is employed in this work for ‘vowels’ (p. 15: *wa-l-mulūk hiya al-nuqūṯ wa-hiya tusammā nağamāt* ‘the ‘kings’ [= the vowels] are represented by the vocalization signs and are called *nağamāt*) and for ‘biblical accents’ (p. 23: *al-nağamāt wa-l-ḥarakāt ṣaḍliyyah mimmōše rabbēnā misītnay* ‘the accents and the vowel [signs] were originally given to Moses on Sinai’). For other sources which use *nağamāt* for biblical accents see Allony (preceding footnote), 20–21.

45 P. 28: *faṣl fi tabytn ḥarakāt al-ṭāʾāmīm al-ṭāʾāmīm al-ṭīnay ʿaṣar min ǧīhat ḥarakātīhā tanqasām ʿiḫū alātāt aqsām ...* “A chapter clarifying the musical values of the accents. The twelve accents are to be classified, as to their musical values, into three groups.”

46 Versteegh, *Greek Elements* (above, n. 29), 25, suggests that in adopting the term *ḥarakāh,* later Arab grammarians were influenced by a stoic doctrine according to which “a sound is a body because it moves.” Such a doctrine would, needless to say, consider both “sonorant” sounds (= vowels) and musical features to be within the realm of “movement.”

47 See *Lesionenu* 26 (1961/62), 277.