

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

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Having read, in 1963, my paper "Towards an Interpretation of the Term *muṣawwītāt*," which was published in Hebrew (*Leṣonenu* 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 *muṣawwītāt*—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 *muṣawwītāt* in medieval Jewish grammatical literature

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

- (1) Ibn ʿĠanāḥ, in his *kitāb al-lumaʿ*, mentions in two passages a book by the name of *kitāb al-muṣawwītāt*.¹ In the first passage² the book is mentioned in connection with the Tiberian rules concerning the pronunciation of /r/;³ in the second,⁴ Ibn ʿĠanāḥ refers to a statement of the *sōfērīm*,⁵ mentioned in *kitāb al-muṣawwītāt*, 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, *Leṣonenu* 26 (1961/2), 24f. [in Hebrew].

2 *Kitāb al-lumaʿ*, ed. J. Derenbourg (Paris, 1886), 29, lines 10–11.

3 Cf. my paper, "The Seven Double Letters: BGD KPRT," *Sefer Tur-Sinai*, Publications of the Israel Society for Biblical Research, 8 (Jerusalem, 1959/60), esp. 216f. [in Hebrew].

4 *Kitāb al-lumaʿ*, 219, line 26.

5 This term may refer also to the Massoretes.

- (2) A third passage of Ibn Ġanāḥ's, in *kitāb al-taqrīb wal-tashīl*,⁶ mentions an interpretation proposed by the author of *kitāb al-muṣawwītāt* with regard to the vocalization of the wāw of *wa ʾāmōtētēhū* (2 Sam. 1:10), with a *pataḥ* rather than with a *qameṣ*. Ibn Ġanāḥ takes a stand against this interpretation.
- (3) That very same interpretation, given by the author of *kitāb al-muṣawwītāt* with regard to the *qameṣ* of the wāw of *wa ʾāmōtētēhū* 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-muṣawwītāt* as a work of Saadia. The book is mentioned in this fragment with regard to the vocalization of the word *ḥārāš* (Isa. 44:12) with two *qameṣ* signs (and not with a *qameṣ* followed by a *pataḥ*)—a vocalization which was attributed to Saadia and which the author of the fragment contests. There is, however, room to doubt whether Saadia 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-muṣawwītāt*,¹¹ there are quite a few occurrences of the term *muṣawwīṭah* 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 Saadia of *bḡd kpt* following a word ending with a vowel, the hard and soft pronunciation of the /r/:¹⁴ *bi-muṣawwīṭah min al-muṣawwītāt* 'with any vowel'.¹⁵ This fragment also includes an affiliated term, namely *taṣwīt*: [] *an yuqṭa ʿuhu taṣwītuhu*.¹⁶ The pronominal suffix in *yuqṭa ʿuhu* apparently goes back to the tongue (*al-lisān*). 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 *hammaʾāmār ʿal haššewā*,¹⁷ which treats aspects of Tiberian grammar of Hebrew—notably the nature and pronunciation of

6 J. H. Derenbourg: *Opusculs et Traités d'Abou ʿl-Walid Merwān Ibn Djanāḥ* (Paris, 1880), 341.

7 See Abramson, *Leṣonenu* 26 (1961/2), 25. The passage was included in a letter written by A. A. Harkavi to S. A. Poznānski, which was published by the latter in *Zeitschrift für Hebräische Bibliographie* 1 (1897), 97.

8 Published by Poznānski (see n.7 above); see Abramson, *Leṣonenu* 26 (1961/2), n. 10.

9 See *ibid.*, 26.

10 These fragments are: (a) IX A 24 of the library of the Alliance Israélite 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, *Leṣonenu* 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-muṣawwītāt*, 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, *Kirjath-Sepher* 38 (1962/3), 117 [in Hebrew].

14 Cambridge University Library, T.S.N.S. 312, 33. The fragment was published in N. Allony, "Sēfer Hanniqūd by Rav Še'adya Gaon," *Beth-Mikra* 40 (1969/70), 19–63 [in Hebrew].

15 *Ibid.*, 45, lines 21–22.

16 Allony, *Sēfer Hanniqūd*, 46, line 32.

17 Kurt Levy, *Zur masoretischen Grammatik* (Stuttgart, 1936).

the *šewā*—there is a significant passage that clearly states that *muṣawwītāt* is the Tiberian term for ‘vowels’: *waʿaʿnī bi-qawlī al-sab[ʿah mulūk wahu]m alladī yusammūnaha al-tqbarāniyīn [al-muṣawwītāt wahum ʾa, ʾā, ʾe, ʾi, ʾo, ʾu—“and what I mean in my words are the seven [mulūk] which the Tiberians call [al-muṣawwītāt and they are a, ā, ē, e], i, o, u.*¹⁸ The term *mulūk* ‘vowels’ is widely used in medieval Hebrew grammatical works.

- (9) Rav Nissim Gaon, in his book *Meḡillat Sētārīm*,¹⁹ mentions *kitāb al-muṣawwītāt* as a work written by Ben-Ašer. No hint is given as to the nature of the book.

There is thus definitive evidence for the use of the term *muṣawwītāt* in the meaning of ‘a vowel’. The title of the treatise *kitāb al-muṣawwītāt* 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 *muṣawwītāt* is used also in a musical sense, by Saadia, in his *Siddūr*.²¹

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

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of sounds: (a) a ‘sonorant’ sound (φωνήεν) (b) a ‘semi-sonorant’ (ἡμίφωνον); and (c) a ‘non-sonorant’ or ‘mute’ sound (ἄφωνον).²² The concept of the ‘sonorant’ sound is identical to that of the vowel; the category of the ‘semi-sonorant’ sounds includes ρ²³ and σ; while the category of the ‘non-sonorant’ sounds includes the stops and the fricatives, with the exception of σ.²³ Aristotle’s *Poetics* were translated into Arabic, from Syriac, by Abū Bišr Mattā,²⁴ and there exist Arabic versions of the book by Al-Fārābī,²⁵ Ibn-Sīnā,²⁶ and Ibn Rušd.²⁷

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

18 Ibid., lines 14–15; see also Allony, *Leṣonēnu* 26 (1961/62), 271. The supplementation of the missing words is made certain by the following lines. For *mulūk* see line 14; for *al-muṣawwītāt* 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, *Leṣonēnu* 26, (1961/2), 26–27, regards *kitāb al-muṣawwītāt* as a general term, applicable to any book dealing with vocalization and accentuation, and assumes that Ibn Ġanāh, as well as other medieval Jewish grammarians, used it in referring to Ben-Asher’s *Diḡdūḡey haṭ-ṭeʿāmim*. See, however, A. Dotan, *Leṣonēnu* 29 (1964/65), 9f.

21 As pointed by N. Allony, *Kirjath Sepher* 28 (1962/3), 117.

22 *Poetics*, Chap. 20, 1456^b. See also, e.g., H. Steinthal, *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft bei den Griechen und Römern* (Berlin, 1890), 1:259; D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* (Oxford, 1968), 200.

23 Although of the ‘sonants’ Aristotle mentions only ρ, 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 poeticam Aristotelem* (London 1887); by J. Tkatsch, *Die arabische Übersetzung der Poetik des Aristoteles* (Vienna, 1928–1972); and more recently by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Aristūṭālīs, fann al-šīʿr* (Cairo, 1953).

25 A. J. Arberry, *RSO* 17 (1938), 260–78.

26 Published by Margoliouth, *Analecta*, and by Badawī, *Aristūṭālīs*, 161–98.

27 F. Lasinio, *Il commento medio di Averroè alla poetica di Aristotele* (Pisa, 1872); Badawī, *Aristūṭālīs*, 201–50.

These Arabic equivalents are to be found also in Ibn Sīnā's²⁹ and Ibn Rušd's³⁰ versions. Ibn Sīnā, however, has *šāmit* 'silent' for (c).³¹ Al-Fārābī's version does not include Aristotle's classification of sounds. But the term *muṣawwītah* 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 Sīnā makes a distinction between two kinds of *muṣawwītāt*: while the letters representing the long vowels are *muṣawwītāt mamdūdah* 'stretched *m.*', the short vowels, those not represented by letters, are termed *muṣawwītāt maqṣūrah* 'limited *m.*'.³³ In another work, the *risālah fi 'asbāb ḥudūt al-ḥurūf*,³⁴ Ibn Sīnā employs the terms *ʾalif muṣawwītah*, *wāw muṣawwītah*, *yāʾ muṣawwītah*, for the letters representing the long vowels. These terms are presented in contrast to the *wāw šāmitah* and the *yāʾ šāmitah*, which denote the semi-vowels *w* and *y*.³⁵ In another source³⁶ the use of the term *muṣawwītāt* 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 *muṣawwītāt* 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 *muṣawwītah*. It first emerged as a term coined for Aristotle's 'sonorant' sounds; later it contrasted with *ḥarakah*, 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, *Aristūṭālīs*, 191. See also C. H. M. Versteegh, *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking* (Leiden, 1977), 21.

30 Ibn Rušd has *ḡayr muṣawwīt* for (c). For Ibn Rušd's use of the term see Bravmann, loc. cit.

31 To be more precise, what Ibn Sīnā has is *al-ḥurūf al-šāmitah* 'the silent letters'.

32 *Kitāb 'iḥṣā' al-ʿulūm*, ed. ʿUṭmān Muḥammad ʿAmīn (Cairo, 1931), 6. See also A. Gonzalez Palencia, *Al-Fārābī catálogo de las ciencias*,² (Madrid, 1953); Palencia's translation of *al-muṣawwītāt* by 'las consonantes' is erroneous. Bravmann, *Materialien*, 9–10, noted the use of the terms in Al-Fārābī's *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr*.

33 Badawī, *Aristūṭālīs*, 191 lines 14–31; this category also includes *ḥurūf al-ʿillah* (the weak letters). What Ibn Sīnā probably has in mind here is the status of *w* and *y* (possibly also of *ʾ*) when they function as semi-vowels (in sequences such as *aw* or *ay*). Ibn Sīnā 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 Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb, (Cairo 1914) and by N. Khānlarī (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 ʾammā al-alifū al-muṣawwītah waʾukhtuhā al-faṭḥatu* 'the *faṭḥah* is the sister of the long *a*' (and similarly for the relationship between the *ḍammah* and *al-wāw al-muṣawwītah*).

36 A. Sprenger, *Dictionary of Technical Terms used in the Sciences of the Muslims* (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-ḥarakāt ʾabʿād al-muṣawwītāt*, p. 344). This conception of the relationship between the long and the short vowels is also Ibn ʿĠinnī's: see H. Fleisch, *ZDMG* 108 (1958), 85, 87.

The following table summarizes the uses of the term in the sources reviewed above:

Ibn Ruṣd's version of the <i>Poetics</i>	Ibn Sinā's		Abū Bīṣr Mattā's translation of the <i>Poetics</i>	Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i>
	risālah fi 'asbāb ḥudūt al-ḥurūf	version of the <i>Poetics</i>		
<i>muṣawwīt</i>	ʿalif muṣawwīṭah wāw muṣawwīṭah yā' muṣawwīṭah 'letters representing long vowels'	<i>muṣawwīt</i> ; <i>muṣaw- wītāt mamdūdah</i> 'long vowels' vs. <i>muṣawwītāt</i> <i>maqṣūrah</i> 'short vowels'	<i>muṣawwīt</i>	(a) 'sonorant' sound
<i>niṣf al-muṣawwīt</i>		<i>niṣf al-muṣawwīt</i>	<i>niṣf al-muṣawwīt</i>	(b) 'semi-sonorant' sound
<i>ḡayr muṣawwīt</i>		<i>ṣāmit</i>	<i>lā muṣawwīt</i>	(c) 'non-sonorant' sound

Other sources:

1. Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb ḡiṣṣā' al-ʿulūm*: *muṣawwīṭah* = 'a letter representing a long vowel'.
2. *Dict. of Tech. Terms*: *muṣawwīṭah* 'a long vowel' vs. *ḥarakah* 'a short vowel'.

The term *muṣawwītāt* is, as seen above, a *calque*: it reflects Greek τὰ φωνήεντα, conveyed to Arabic via Syriac (the middle link being missing).³⁸ The denotation the term carries implies a clear conception of the role of the vowel in the syllable:³⁹ it is the element which gives *ṣawt*,⁴⁰ 'sound' to the (preceding) consonant, making it audible.⁴¹ This appears to have been the primary meaning of the term. Its use for 'a letter denoting a long vowel', contrasting with *ḥarakah* 'a short vowel', must have developed later. This later use of *muṣawwītāt* was eventually superseded by that of *ḥurūf al-madd wa l-līn*.

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.⁴² 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 *ḥarakah* also as a *calque*, reflecting Greek κίνησις '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*, 1456^b.

40 It should be noted that Sibawaihi uses *ṣawt* in the meaning of 'an element adding a vocalic quality to a consonant'. See *Al-kitāb*, ed. Derenbourg (Paris, 1889), 2:312, l.4. Cf. A. Schaade, *Sibawaihi's Lautlehre* (Leiden, 1911), 65; Bravmann, *Materialien*, viii.

41 It is therefore obvious that the term is to be read *muṣawwīṭah* and not *muṣawwāṭah*; the latter reading was suggested by Kurt Levy (above, n. 17), 3, and by ʿUṭmān Muḥammad Amīn, the editor of *Kitāb ḡiṣṣā' al-ʿlūm* (above, n. 32), 6.

42 Cf., e.g., R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* (Leiden-Paris, 1927), 851.

sources, including Saadiah's *Kutub al-luġah*.⁴³ The term is also employed for the biblical accents, for example, in an anonymous grammatical treatise used for centuries by the Yemenite community.⁴⁴

(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'.⁴⁵

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 *muṣawwītāt*); with some similarity, sound is essential for the musical performance (*taṣwīt*) of the latter.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

43 Professor N. Allony has devoted an extensive study to the use of *naġmah* 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 'a 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-tiġān ha-ʿarvit*. The term *naġamāt* is employed in this work for 'vowels' (p. 15: *wa-l-mulūk hiya al-nuqūṭ wa-hiya tusammā naġamāt* "the 'kings' [=the vowels] are represented by the vocalization signs and are called *naġamāt*") and for 'biblical accents' (p. 23: *al-naġamāt wa-l-ḥarakāt ʿaṣliyyah mimmōše rabbēnū misṣṭnay* "the accents and the vowel [signs] were originally given to Moses on Sinai"). For other sources which use *naġamāt* for biblical accents see Allony (preceding footnote), 20–21.

45 P. 28: *faṣl fī tabyīn ḥarakāt al-ʿāmiṃ al-ʿāmiṃ al-ʿiṭnay ʿaṣar min ġihat ḥarakātihā tanqasim ʿilā ʿalātāt 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 *ḥarakah*, 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 *Leṣonenu* 26 (1961/62), 277.