

# La chasse aux papillons: Butterflies, Oaks, Spinning Tops, Braggarts, and Devils between Indo-European and Semitic

By

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**T**his contribution originated while following a butterfly – more precisely, the Modern Hebrew word for ‘butterfly,’ *parpar*<sup>1</sup>. *Parpar* is both fascinating and elusive: seemingly well-known, yet persistently intriguing. The term was introduced into Modern Hebrew by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and is commonly believed to derive from a playful adaptation of the Italian *farfalla* combined with the Hebrew root *pirper*<sup>2</sup>. A comparative analysis of mainly Levantine and Arabian Semitic lexicons, including various Arabic dialects, suggests that verbal and nominal outcomes of the root p.r.p.r may have entered Hebrew through Aramaic. Aramaic also appears to underlie the Arabic developments of p.r.p.r, notably frequent in Levantine and Christian varieties. Aramaic may have introduced p.r.p.r into Semitic from Indo-European, where the root \*pr- yields a wide semantic network including ‘beat,’ ‘split,’ and ‘axe,’ and its reduplicated form produces lexemes for ‘butterfly’ and ‘oak.’ While p.r.p.r enters Semitic as a reduplicated root of Indo-European origin, triconsonantal expansions from biconsonantal \*pr- likely developed within Semitic, possibly also through Indo-European roots and flexed forms. Ben-Yehuda’s coining *parpar* thus seems to draw more from Hebrew literary tradition and his familiarity with Slavic vocabulary than from any direct Italian model. Contemporary develop-

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<sup>1</sup> EVEN-SHOSHAN 1979, p. 2165.

<sup>2</sup> GIL’AD 2016.

ments of p.r.p.r in Arabic and Modern Hebrew are reported. Finally, several semantic extensions of p.r.p.r in Arabic are highlighted (instability in relationships, boasting, noise-making, and nonsensical speech). These seem semantically and phonetically connected to Provençal *fanfa*, French *fanfare*, and Italian *farfallone*, *farfallino*, *fanfarra*, *fanfarone*, *farfugliare*, *vanvera*, and *furfante*.

### 1. The Modern Hebrew p.r Radical Network: A Synchronic Overview

Native Hebrew speakers perceive p.r as phonetically and semantically akin to a substantial group of roots showing a core radical pair, p.r, and its expansions realized by adding a third radical consonant (C<sub>3</sub>) or by reduplication. In the synchronic perspective of contemporary Modern Hebrew speakers, p.r. and its extensions produce intriguing “variations on a theme.” Such variations formally belong to four main types: 1. p.r. + C<sub>3</sub>\_C<sub>3</sub> ≠ r; 2. p.r + C<sub>3</sub>\_C<sub>3</sub> = r; 3. p.r + C<sub>3</sub>C<sub>4</sub>\_C<sub>3</sub>C<sub>4</sub> ≠ p.r; and 4. p.r + C<sub>3</sub>C<sub>4</sub>\_C<sub>3</sub>C<sub>4</sub> = p.r. Examples for each type follow<sup>3</sup>:

1. p.r.d (*preda*, *hafrada* ‘separation’); p.r.z (*hafraza* ‘excess’; *peruz* ‘disarmament’); p.r.ḥ (*priḥa*, ‘blossoming, flourishing,’ ‘(skin) rash’; *perah*, ‘cadet’; *lifroaḥ*, ‘to fly’); p.r.ṭ (*pariṭ* ‘single item,’ *praṭi* ‘personal, individual,’ *bifraṭ* ‘specifically,’ *tafriṭ* ‘menu’); p.r.y (*pri* ‘offspring,’ ‘fruit’); p.r.k (*paroket* ‘curtains (of the Ark),’ *prikut* ‘brittleness’); p.r.m (*parum* ‘unraveled, unstitched’); p.r.s (*prusa* ‘slice’); p.r.‘ (*pera* ‘on ‘settlement (of payment),’ *parua* ‘disheveled, wild’); p.r.š (*pereš* ‘outflow, outburst’; *lifroš* ‘to break, to erupt’); p.r.q (*peruq* ‘dismantling, dissolution’; *mifraqim* ‘joints’); p.r.š (*hefreš* ‘difference’; *paraša* ‘explanation (of religious text),’ ‘separation’; *paršanut* ‘interpretation’; *hafraša* ‘excretion’; *priša* ‘retirement’); and p.r.ś (*priša* ‘spreading, extending’);
2. p.r.r (*porer* ‘to crumble’; *perur* ‘crumb, bit, crumbling,’ pl. *perurim* ‘breadcrumbs’);
3. p.r.s.m (*pirsum* ‘publication’; *pirsomet* ‘advertisement’);
4. p.r.p.r (*pirpur* ‘spasm, convulsion, struggle, fibrillation’; *pirper* ‘to struggle, shake, jerk’; *parporet* ‘crumb cake’).

Whatever the nature and history of the connections between this group of roots, in Modern Hebrew speakers’ cognition, they are synchronically linked by a network of assonances and resonances, that is, by phonetic and semantic connections that refer to the conceptual cluster of division, spread, opening, unraveling, explanation, separation, crush, and unfolding. This extended network includes many Modern Hebrew expressions and idioms, such as *lifroaḥ meha roš*, lit. ‘to fly away from (one’s) head,’ i.e., ‘to slip from one’s memory,’ ‘to be forgotten,’ and *lifroš knafaym* ‘to spread wings,’ both literally and metaphorically.

### 2. The p.r Network within Semitic

The above-mentioned Modern Hebrew roots have numerous, clear etymological parallels and similar meanings in related Semitic lexical inventories. Several examples follow. The list is not intended to be comprehensive regarding the languages considered, and further investigation is needed regarding the occurrence of similar roots in other Semitic languages.

Akkadian: *parāsum* ‘to spread’<sup>4</sup>; Biblical Hebrew: *pāraś* ‘to spread’<sup>5</sup>; Aramaic<sup>6</sup>: *pr* ‘dawn’;

<sup>3</sup> From ZILBERMAN 2006.

<sup>4</sup> COHEN 2011, p. 197.

<sup>5</sup> BROWN et al. 1975, p. 831.

<sup>6</sup> From CAL.

*pgr/prg* ‘to change, to reverse, to destroy’; *prg* ‘to shine’; *prd* ‘to flee,’ ‘to separate’; *prt* ‘excrement’; *prdd* ‘to break up’; *prwd* ‘little bits’; *prz* ‘to keep something away’; *prw* ‘fertility’; *prwr* ‘outlying area’; *prwwr* ‘courtyard’; *prwh/* ‘cloud, curl’; *prwhw/t* ‘flight’; *prwth/prwtt* ‘small coin’; *prwky* ‘curtain’; *prwm* ‘cutter’; *prws* ‘bedspread’; *pyrw* ‘wildness, disarray (of one’s hair)’; *prw’w*, *prw’wt* ‘remuneration’; *prwqh* ‘joint’; *prwš/* ‘voyage, rider, sailor’; *prwšw/t* ‘distinction’; *prz’prz’* ‘bit of bread’; *przm* ‘to divide, extract’; *prh* ‘to fly,’ ‘to blossom’; *prt* ‘to split’; *pryd* ‘fleeing,’ ‘fleeting’; *pry* ‘to be fruitful’; *prk* ‘to crumble’; *prysh*, *pryst* ‘bread’; *pryq* ‘distant’; *pryšh*, *pryšt* ‘spread’; *pršw*, *pršwt* ‘separation’; *prs* ‘to divide,’ ‘to have hoofs,’ ‘to spread’; *prs* ‘half unit’; *prsy/prsm* ‘to uncover, to reveal’; *prpr* ‘to flap wings’; *prpšh/prpšt* ‘small door’ (Modern Hebrew *pišpaš* ‘cat door’); *prš* ‘to make a breach’; *prq* ‘to dismantle’; *prt* ‘to split’; *prtk* ‘to be divided into tiny pieces’; *parpēr* ‘to move about’<sup>7</sup>; Arabic: *fağr* ‘daybreak’<sup>8</sup>; *farida* ‘to be alone’<sup>9</sup>; *farq* ‘division’<sup>10</sup>; *farraxa* ‘to sprout (of plants)’<sup>11</sup>; *faraša* ‘to spread (bed, carpet)’<sup>12</sup>; *fārra* ‘to flee’<sup>13</sup>; *farra* ‘to fly,’ ‘to escape’<sup>14</sup>; *firra* ‘smiling’<sup>15</sup>; *firrā’a* ‘beautiful in the front teeth (of woman)’<sup>16</sup>; *furrayra* ‘spinning top (toy)’<sup>17</sup>; *farfara* ‘to walk quickly, taking short steps, to act foolishly or irrationally, to ramble or speak incoherently, to tear or split something, to shake the body violently, to shake or flap, like a bird flapping its wings (sometimes compared to a freshly slaughtered bird), to disturb or gossip about someone, to shorten a garment, to expose or shake something off’; *farfār* ‘a hardy, fire-resistant tree, used to make bowls and similar objects’; *furāfir* ‘a reckless, clumsy person’ and ‘a mature young man’; *furr* ‘the best/choice part of something’<sup>18</sup>; Al-Andalus Arabic: *fard* ‘unique’<sup>19</sup>; Egyptian Arabic: *farad* ‘to separate, set aside’; *faraz* ‘to sort, select’<sup>20</sup>; *muftari* ‘ruthless’<sup>21</sup>; *imfiri* ‘verwildert’<sup>22</sup>; Ḥassāniya Arabic: *vrad* ‘séparer l’un de l’autre’<sup>23</sup>; Kəndērīb Arabic: *farrax* ‘Junge zur Welt bringen’<sup>24</sup>; Lebanese Arabic: *fağar* ‘couler, se répandre’<sup>25</sup>; Maltese: *fağar* ‘far uscire il sangue o altro umore’<sup>26</sup>; *farfar* ‘scuotere, sbattere, scacciare da sé’<sup>27</sup>; *perper* ‘sventolarsi in

<sup>7</sup> JASTROW 1886, p. 1236.

<sup>8</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2349.

<sup>9</sup> HAVA 1982, p. 553.

<sup>10</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2384.

<sup>11</sup> HAVA 1982, p. 553.

<sup>12</sup> HAVA 1982, p. 555.

<sup>13</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2356.

<sup>14</sup> HAVA 1982, p. 552.

<sup>15</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2356.

<sup>16</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2356.

<sup>17</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2356.

<sup>18</sup> AL-MA‘ĀNIY 2025.

<sup>19</sup> CORRIENTE 1997, p. 393.

<sup>20</sup> SPIRO 1895, p. 448.

<sup>21</sup> SPIRO 1895, p. 454.

<sup>22</sup> BEHNSTEDT, WOIDICH 1994, p. 353.

<sup>23</sup> TAINE-CHEIKH 1990, p. 135.

<sup>24</sup> JASTROW 2005, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> DENIZEAU 1960, p. 381.

<sup>26</sup> VASSALLI 1796, p. 178.

<sup>27</sup> VASSALLI 1796, p. 182.

qua e in là'<sup>28</sup>; *parpar* 'to leave in a hurry'<sup>29</sup>; Najd Arabic: *fağğar* 'to burst, break open'<sup>30</sup>; *fara* 'to rip open'<sup>31</sup>; Omani Arabic: *farx* 'Jüngling'<sup>32</sup>; Palestinian Arabic: *farr* 'fliehen'<sup>33</sup>; *faraz* 'trennen'<sup>34</sup>; *farfar* 'to urinate' (colloquial; author's observation); Yemen Arabic: *fārī* 'savage'<sup>35</sup>; *farr* 'weglaufen'<sup>36</sup>; Sabaic: *fr* 'Beginn, Anfang, Spitze'<sup>37</sup>; 'crops'<sup>38</sup>; 'früctbares Gefilde'<sup>39</sup>; 'oberer Teil'<sup>40</sup>; *fršt* 'Teil'<sup>41</sup>; *fršt* 'green field'<sup>42</sup>; Jibbālī<sup>43</sup>: *ferr* 'to fly, flee'; *anferfēr* 'to have a fit, have epilepsy, to panic'; *fēra* 'to win'; *fērōd* 'to run away'; *fōrōd* 'to separate vertebrae'; *efūrg* 'to open a way'; *fērāg* 'to open up (flowers)'; *fērōk* 'to leave one's spouse'; *fōrōs* 'to mash (potatoes)'; Mehri<sup>44</sup>: *fərfir* 'hasty person'; *fātrāg* 'to bloom'; *fərōx* 'to split (legs) apart.'

### 3. The p.r(-) Network in Semitic Fauna Terminology

In particular, across the Semitic linguistic space, p.r and its puzzling network often include fauna and animal-related terminology. Several examples follow. This list is not exhaustive for the languages mentioned, and the presence of similar roots in other Semitic languages remains to be examined.

Hebrew<sup>45</sup>: *efroah* 'chick, chicken'; *pere* 'wild ass'<sup>46</sup>; *par* 'bull' and *para* 'cow'; *pargit* 'chick, chicken'; *pered* 'mule'; *par* 'oš' 'flea'; *parva* 'fur'; *paraš* 'horseman' and *parašut* 'horsemanship'; *parpar* 'butterfly'; Aramaic<sup>47</sup>: *pr* 'bullock'; *p'r* 'lamb'; *pr* 'h' 'onagre'; *pr* 'a type of fish'; *prgy/prgyt* 'young bird'; *prgyl* 'young bird'; *prd* 'mule'; *prd* 'suet'; *pardws* 'pardo, panther'; *prdyn* 'leopard, disease with spots'; *prh/prt* 'cow, ewe lamb'; *prwg* 'chick'; *prwgy* 'having chicks'; *prwt* 'sheepskin robe'; *prhdwd* 'bat, firefly (?)'; *prhh/prht*

<sup>28</sup> VASSALLI 1796, p. 559.

<sup>29</sup> BORG 2021, p. 511.

<sup>30</sup> KURPERSHOEK 1999, p. 436.

<sup>31</sup> SOWAYAN 1992, p. 287.

<sup>32</sup> REINHARDT 1894, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> BAUER 1957, p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> BAUER 1957, p. 305.

<sup>35</sup> JAYAKAR 1889, p. 268.

<sup>36</sup> BEHNSTEDT 1987, p. 286.

<sup>37</sup> STEIN 2005.

<sup>38</sup> BEESTON 1956.

<sup>39</sup> NEBES 2016.

<sup>40</sup> SIMA 2000.

<sup>41</sup> STEIN 2010.

<sup>42</sup> JAMME 1962.

<sup>43</sup> JOHNSTONE 1981.

<sup>44</sup> JOHNSTONE 1987.

<sup>45</sup> From EVEN-SHOSHAN 1979

<sup>46</sup> BROWN et al., 1975, p. 825.

<sup>47</sup> From CAL.

‘bird’; *prsh/prst* ‘hoof’; *prpwr* ‘sparrow (?)’; *prš/* ‘horseman’; *pršwt* ‘horsemanship’; Arabic: *fār* ‘mouse’<sup>48</sup>; *fara* ‘wilder Esel’<sup>49</sup>; *faras* ‘mare’<sup>50</sup>; *farrūḡ* ‘the young of the domestic hen’<sup>51</sup>; *furfūr* ‘young bird, young sheep, young man’<sup>52</sup> and ‘young man,’ ‘fat lamb,’ ‘small bird,’ ‘sparrow’, *furfur/firfir* ‘small bird’<sup>53</sup>; *furāfir* ‘a horse that moves about, agitated’<sup>54</sup>; *farāša* ‘moth’<sup>55</sup>; *furāfir* ‘the offspring of a goat, ewe, or wild cow, a lion tearing apart its prey, a lamb growing fat and strong, a horse shaking its bridle to try to remove it from its head’<sup>56</sup>; *farfār* ‘a women’s saddle or mount’<sup>57</sup>; Aleppo Arabic *rafraḡ* ‘battere des ailes avant de prendre son essor (oiseau)’<sup>58</sup>; *farrax* ‘to hatch’ (*farraxat al-bayḡah*)<sup>59</sup>; Anatolian Arabic (S.-E.) *farr* ‘fliegen’<sup>60</sup>; Egyptian Arabic *rafraḡ* ‘to flutter, flap the wings’, *farxa* ‘hen’<sup>61</sup>; Kəndērīb Arabic *parpar* ‘flattern (Vogel)’<sup>62</sup>; Lebanese Arabic *farfar* ‘to try to fly’<sup>63</sup>; Maltese *ferħ* ‘polledro’<sup>64</sup>; Palestinian Arabic *farā* ‘wildesel’<sup>65</sup>; *rafraḡ* ‘flattern’<sup>66</sup>; *firr* ‘Wachtel’<sup>67</sup>; Tunisian Arabic *fārḡ* ‘pigeon’<sup>68</sup>; Yemenite Arabic *fuxrī* ‘poulet’<sup>69</sup>; *farḡ* ‘Küken’<sup>70</sup>; Sabaic *fr* ‘Wildesel’<sup>71</sup>; *frs* ‘Pferd’<sup>72</sup>; *frwt* ‘Schurwolle’<sup>73</sup>; Jibbālī<sup>74</sup> *fērāḡ* ‘to start to fly’; *ənferḡés/ənferkés* ‘to start to move and spread out after having been couched in a group (cows)’; *fōrūt* ‘to remove undigested food from the guts and stomach of a slaughtered animal’; *fērāḡ* ‘to split open (egg)’; Mehri<sup>75</sup> *fārōḡ* ‘(bird) to hatch (eggs)’; *fārōz* ‘to separate one’s animals from common herds.

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<sup>48</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2324.

<sup>49</sup> WAHRMUND 1898, II, p. 394.

<sup>50</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2367.

<sup>51</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2360.

<sup>52</sup> AL-ĠANIY 2011.

<sup>53</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2357.

<sup>54</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2357.

<sup>55</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2370.

<sup>56</sup> AL-MA‘ĀNIY 2025.

<sup>57</sup> AL-MA‘ĀNIY 2025.

<sup>58</sup> BARTHÉLEMY 1935-69, p. 286, 599.

<sup>59</sup> AL-ASADĪ 1988, VI, p. 39.

<sup>60</sup> VOCKE, WALDNER 1982, pp. 309-312.

<sup>61</sup> SPIRO 1895, pp. 446-448.

<sup>62</sup> JASTROW 2005, p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> FRAYHA 1973, p. 128.

<sup>64</sup> VASSALLI 1796, p. 193.

<sup>65</sup> KAMPPFMEYER 1936, p. 54.

<sup>66</sup> BAUER 1957, p. 155.

<sup>67</sup> DALMAN 1928-39, I, 1, p. 168.

<sup>68</sup> COHEN 1975, p. 141.

<sup>69</sup> VANHOVE, 1995, p. 265.

<sup>70</sup> BEHNSTEDT 1987, p. 286.

<sup>71</sup> ROBIN, ANTONINI DE MAIGRET 2017.

<sup>72</sup> STEIN 2003.

<sup>73</sup> MARAQTEN 2014.

<sup>74</sup> JOHNSTONE 1981.

<sup>75</sup> JOHNSTONE 1987.

#### 4. *p.r(-) out of Semitic, into Ancient Egyptian and Berber*

Through genetic affiliation and linguistic contact, the \*p.r(-) root network and its phonological transformations extend beyond the confines of Semitic proper, for instance, into Ancient Egyptian and Berber languages. Some examples from different ancient Egyptian varieties have been proposed by Borg<sup>76</sup>: *fgn* ‘sich entleeren, vom Menschen (mit Bezug auf Kot und Harn)’<sup>77</sup>; *prḥ* ‘aufblühen, sich entfalten (von Blüte und Blatt); ausbreiten’<sup>78</sup>; *p3* ‘to fly, fly up’<sup>79</sup>; *prpr* ‘umherspringen’<sup>80</sup>; *prḏ* ‘trennen’<sup>81</sup>; *prj* ‘ferocious bull’<sup>82</sup>. The Semitic root \*p.r.ḥ meaning ‘young animal/human’ seems to have been adopted by Ghomara Berber, where the word *afrux* means ‘small chicken, boy, girl’<sup>83</sup>.

#### 5. *Butterflies and the Spirit World in Indo-European Antiquities*

Catalan *papallona*<sup>84</sup> and French *papillon*<sup>85</sup> are evidently direct descendants of the Latin word *papiliō*, ‘butterfly, moth’<sup>86</sup>. Even though *papiliō* is generally considered the ancestor of *farfalla*, the etymology of the Italian word for ‘butterfly’ seems less obviously directly derivable from its proposed Latin ancestor than its Catalan and French parallels. It seems more advisable to postulate the existence of a common ancestor to both Latin *papiliō* and Italian *farfalla*, probably something like \**parpari-*, that must have evolved differently in various official and popular Latin registers and spoken vernaculars, thus ending up in Romance and, eventually, Italian vocabulary. The existence of a common ancestor for both official Latin and spoken pre-Romance ‘butterfly’ is supported by the Italian *parpaglione* ‘Nome pop. ant. dato alle grosse farfalle’<sup>87</sup>, Occitan *parpalhon*<sup>88</sup>, Ligurian *parpaggia*<sup>89</sup>, Venetian *pavejo*<sup>90</sup>, and Sicilian *parpagghiuni*<sup>91</sup>. Latin *papiliō* has directly evolved into the Italian words *padiglione*, ‘pavilion,’ and *parpaglione* ‘Nell’attrezzatura navale medievale, vela di taglio simile a un fiocco’<sup>92</sup>, as *papiliō* also metaphorically referred to the military tents unfolded at Roman army encampments<sup>93</sup>.

Indeed, across the Indo-European linguistic space, many languages, from the Atlantic to Iran, preserve, with phonetic variations, a labial (p/b/f/v) + sonorant (r/l) root associated with

<sup>76</sup> BORG 2021.

<sup>77</sup> ERMAN, GRAPOW 1926-1961, I, p. 580.

<sup>78</sup> ERMAN, GRAPOW 1926-1961, I, p. 532.

<sup>79</sup> FAULKNER 1962, p. 87.

<sup>80</sup> ERMAN, GRAPOW 1926-1961, I, p. 248, 532.

<sup>81</sup> DG 1954, p. 137.

<sup>82</sup> FAULKNER 1962, p. 91.

<sup>83</sup> MOURIGH 2016, p. 388.

<sup>84</sup> DACCO 2012.

<sup>85</sup> CHEVALLEY et al. 1940.

<sup>86</sup> OLD 1968.

<sup>87</sup> TRECCANI ONLINE 2025.

<sup>88</sup> DOM 2016.

<sup>89</sup> APROSIO 2002.

<sup>90</sup> BOERIO 1829.

<sup>91</sup> TRAINA 1868.

<sup>92</sup> TRECCANI ONLINE 2025.

<sup>93</sup> OLD 1968.

the concept of ‘butterfly.’ Notably, this root stem is often reduplicated, as in the antecedents of *papiliō* and *farfalla*. The cases reported here belong to Indo-European languages and non-Indo-European languages that were in contact with Indo-European varieties. A comprehensive overview of all relevant attestations would entail a study of such breadth – both diachronically and geographically – that it would exceed the scope of this short contribution. Here are just a few examples:

Old English *fīfalde*<sup>94</sup>, Irish *féileacán/péileacán*<sup>95</sup>, Welsh *pili pala*<sup>96</sup>, Old High German *vīvaltra*<sup>97</sup>, Middle High German *vīvalter*<sup>98</sup>, Yiddish *flaterl*<sup>99</sup>, Faroese *firvaldur*<sup>100</sup>, Manx *folican*<sup>101</sup>, Friulano *pave*<sup>102</sup>, Galician *bolboreta*<sup>103</sup>, Portuguese *borboleta*<sup>104</sup>, Russian *babāchka* ‘butterfly’<sup>105</sup>, Dutch *vlinder*<sup>106</sup>, Lithuanian *plaštākė*<sup>107</sup>, Hungarian *pillangó*<sup>108</sup>, Romani *paparuga/peperuga*<sup>109</sup>, Romanian *fluture*<sup>110</sup>, Bulgarian *peperúda*<sup>111</sup>; alternative forms: *preperúda*, *pem-perúda*, *peperúga*, *preperúga*, *pepeljúga*, *peperúha*, *peperúša*, *peperúna*;<sup>112</sup> Macedonian *peperutka*<sup>113</sup>, Proto-Kartvelian *perper-*<sup>114</sup>, Old Georgian *pepeli*<sup>115</sup>, Georgian *pepela*<sup>116</sup>, Laz *parpali*<sup>117</sup>, Mingrelian *parpalia*<sup>118</sup>, Svan *pärpold/pärpänd*<sup>119</sup>, Chechen *polā*<sup>120</sup>, Tsova-Tush

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<sup>94</sup> KUIPERS 2023.

<sup>95</sup> DOHERTY 2023.

<sup>96</sup> HAWKE 2023.

<sup>97</sup> MILLER 2023.

<sup>98</sup> CROSSGROVE 2023.

<sup>99</sup> GLASSER 2023.

<sup>100</sup> YOUNG, CLEWER 1921.

<sup>101</sup> KELLY et al. 1923.

<sup>102</sup> PIRONA 1871.

<sup>103</sup> CLUVI 2018.

<sup>104</sup> TAYLOR 1958.

<sup>105</sup> LAPIDUS, SHEVTSOVA 1963.

<sup>106</sup> BICHAKJIAN, HETTEMA 2023.

<sup>107</sup> PLIOPLYS 2023.

<sup>108</sup> POMOZI, VOLMRE 2023.

<sup>109</sup> KENRICK 2023.

<sup>110</sup> SCHÖNKRON 1991.

<sup>111</sup> VAKARELIYSKA, HORISSIAN 2023.

<sup>112</sup> DURIDANOV et al. 1996, p. 161.

<sup>113</sup> HILL et al. 2021.

<sup>114</sup> KLIMOV 1998, p. 149.

<sup>115</sup> KLIMOV 1998, p. 149.

<sup>116</sup> KLIMOV 1998, p. 149.

<sup>117</sup> KLIMOV 1998, p. 149.

<sup>118</sup> KLIMOV 1998, p. 149.

<sup>119</sup> KLIMOV 1998, p. 149.

<sup>120</sup> KHALILOV 2023a.

*pēpli*<sup>121</sup>, Bezhta *pāpāt'ō*<sup>122</sup>, Hunzib *papat'u*<sup>123</sup>, Judeo-Tat *pelpelü*<sup>124</sup>, Tabasaran *pālahan*<sup>125</sup>, Kryz *pāmpāl*<sup>126</sup>, Udi *pampaluk*<sup>127</sup>, Abkhaz *aparpalyk'/aparpalaki*<sup>128</sup>, Kurdish *pinpinik*<sup>129</sup>, Central Kursdish *pepwle*<sup>130</sup>, Albanian *flutur*<sup>131</sup>, Northern Saami *beaiveloddi*<sup>132</sup>, Finnish *peñho-nen*<sup>133</sup>, Swedish *fjäril*<sup>134</sup>, Persian *pærvane*<sup>135</sup>.

According to Oehl<sup>136</sup>, in the Old English *butterfleoge*, from which 'butterfly' derives, the first element *butter-* may derive from some *pete-/bete-* element. This element would be linked to the Proto-Indo-European root \*pet, from which Greek πίπτω 'to fall,' Old English *feðer* 'wing, feather,' Old Norse *fjōðr* 'feather,' Italian *pinna* 'wing, feather,' Old Church Slavonic *pero* 'feather,' Hittite *pāt-tar* 'wing, feather'<sup>137</sup>, and probably also Modern Greek πεταλούδα 'butterfly' derive<sup>138</sup>. According to Oehl, the same etymon may relate to Russian *babāchka* 'butterfly'<sup>139</sup>. However, Oehl's hypothesis did not take hold, and the English 'butterfly' is thought to derive from a kind of supra-ordinated taxon 'fly' (also found in 'dragonfly'), such as 'fly of the butter.' While this interpretation may sound like folk etymology, it is socio-culturally based on the notion that insects consume and spoil uncovered butter or milk. The association of 'butterfly' with 'butter/fat' is widespread across the Germanic area, as the German *Schmetterling* shows. The association with butter may be due to the light color of many species's wings or excrement, as in Dutch *boterschijte*. Finally, Danish *sommerfugl* associates butterflies with summer.

The spread of compound names for 'butterfly' in the Germanic area may be due to a taboo-driven preference for periphrastic forms to designate the insect. Spiritual and taboo-related factors may also have influenced the formation of the Russian *babāchka*, which means 'granny,' and is a diminutive of *baba* 'grandmother,' a word associated with mythical female ancestors, custodians of the mysteries of death and rebirth (Baba Yaga), later reinterpreted as witches<sup>140</sup>. Indeed, ancient Indo-European beliefs attribute a special connection with the magical and otherworldly realms to butterflies. In particular, in the Germanic area, butterflies were believed to

<sup>121</sup> KHALILOV 2023b.

<sup>122</sup> KHALILOV 2023c.

<sup>123</sup> KHALILOV 2023d.

<sup>124</sup> KHALILOV 2023e.

<sup>125</sup> KHALILOV 2023f.

<sup>126</sup> KHALILOV 2023g.

<sup>127</sup> KHALILOV 2023h.

<sup>128</sup> KLIMOV 1998, p. 149.

<sup>129</sup> CHYET 2003.

<sup>130</sup> AWDE 2009.

<sup>131</sup> NEWMARK 2023.

<sup>132</sup> JAGAU, KALLAVUS 2023.

<sup>133</sup> KUUSK 2023.

<sup>134</sup> GUNNEMARK, KOLLMAN 2023.

<sup>135</sup> PERRY 2023.

<sup>136</sup> OEHL 1933.

<sup>137</sup> IE Lexicon.

<sup>138</sup> PRING 1965.

<sup>139</sup> LAPIDUS, SHEVTSOVA 1963.

<sup>140</sup> JOHNS 2004.



be witches in disguise who stole butter or caused it to spoil<sup>141</sup>. Across Italy, the appearance of nocturnal butterflies is believed to indicate the benevolent presence of deceased family members' souls. The association between butterflies and otherworldly visits is evident in a popular Greek word used for 'butterfly,' i.e., ψυχή, which primarily means 'soul'<sup>142</sup>.

In the Slavic and Balkan regions, butterflies are associated with the deceased, particularly in connection with the rain cycle and, consequently, with rain-making rituals and ceremonies<sup>143</sup>. The word for 'butterfly,' *peperúda/peperúna* as above reported for Bulgarian, and its variations<sup>144</sup>, also designates a traditional ceremony dating back to pre-Christian times and widely spread across the Balkans<sup>145</sup>. The ceremony also goes by the name of *dodola*, in the various contiguous spellings of this word. Indeed, both *dodola* and *peperúda/peperúna* derive from different Indo-European roots with the same meaning of 'butterfly' (for Indo-European cognates of *dodola* 'butterfly,' compare, among others: Pashto *tetli*<sup>146</sup>, Punjabi *titali*<sup>147</sup>, Armenian *tiṭerr*<sup>148</sup>, Sindhi *tatal*<sup>149</sup>, and Urdu *tatali*<sup>150</sup>).

Across the Balkans and in Slavic folklore, *dodola* and *peperúda* represent the proper name of the rain goddess Dodola/Perperuna. Perperuna is believed to be the wife of Perun, the Slavic thunder god, with mixed features of Jupiter and Mars. The existence of this divine couple is supported by gendered doublet forms such as Old Norse *Fjörgyn–Fjörgynn* and Lithuanian *Perkūnas–Perkūnija*<sup>151</sup>. In particular, the Balcanic/Slavic name Perperuna seems to be based on a stem reduplication from the name Perun.

## 6. \*Perk<sup>w</sup>ūnos: the Oak, the Thunder, the Axe... and the Phoenicians

The word 'Perun' is thought to derive from \*Perk<sup>w</sup>ūnos, primarily meaning 'the Lord of Oaks.' The root \*k<sup>w</sup>érk<sup>w</sup>us- is associated with various kinds of oaks across the Indo-European linguistic families. From \*k<sup>w</sup>érk<sup>w</sup>us-, the root may have evolved in three directions. The evolution of the first k<sup>w</sup>- group into a labial sound \*p/b/f/v-érk<sup>w</sup>us is widely attested: Proto-Germanic \*fer(k)hwaz<sup>152</sup>; Old Norse *fyri*-, Old Danish *fyr*, Old High German *foraha*, German *Föhre*, Middle English *fyrre*, 'fir'<sup>153</sup>; Lombardic *fereha* 'a kind of oak'; Gothic *fairgunni*, 'mountainous region,' Old English *firgen* 'mountain forest,' and *furhwudu*, 'pine wood,' Middle High German *Virgunt* 'mountain forest, Sudetes'<sup>154</sup>; Punjabi *pargāi*, 'sacred oak'<sup>155</sup>; Hindi *pargai* 'the

<sup>141</sup> GRIMM 1835.

<sup>142</sup> PRING 1965.

<sup>143</sup> QAFLESHI 2011.

<sup>144</sup> GIMBUTAS 1967.

<sup>145</sup> JAKOBSON 1985.

<sup>146</sup> AWDE 2002.

<sup>147</sup> SINGH 1895.

<sup>148</sup> BARATYAN 2011.

<sup>149</sup> SHASHANI 1979.

<sup>150</sup> KALIMUDDIN 1998.

<sup>151</sup> JACKSON 2002.

<sup>152</sup> KROONEN 2013.

<sup>153</sup> GAMKRELIDZE, IVANOV 1994.

<sup>154</sup> GAMKRELIDZE, IVANOV 1994.

<sup>155</sup> LAJOYE, OUDAER 2014.

evergreen oak,’ and Sanskrit *paraktah* ‘the holy fig tree’<sup>156</sup>; Greek *πῖνος* ‘holm oak, ilex’<sup>157</sup>, and probably Proto-Slavic \**brinъ*, ‘juniper, larch’<sup>158</sup>, Old Church Slavonic *borъ* ‘fir’<sup>159</sup>, Czech *bor* ‘pine forest’<sup>160</sup>, and Pyrenees’ epigraphic Latin *Expercennius* ‘(god of the) six oaks’<sup>161</sup>. From the primary meaning of ‘forest, wooded mountain,’ the meaning of ‘land,’ ‘cliff,’ and ‘mountain develops’ across various languages, as in Germanic *Fjörgynn* ‘the land’<sup>162</sup>; Hittite *pēru* ‘rock, cliff, boulder’<sup>163</sup>; Avestan *pauruuatā* ‘mountains’<sup>164</sup>; the Sanskrit name of the goddess Parvati and the epithet Parvateshwara, ‘lord of mountains,’ attached to her father Himavat<sup>165</sup>.

In Latin, the first *k<sup>w</sup>*- group remains labiovelar, as attested in *quercuus* ‘oak’<sup>166</sup>, *querquetulanae*, ‘oak nymphs,’ and *Quaquerni*, a tribal name<sup>167</sup>. In central Italian, peri-Roman dialects, the initial *k<sup>w</sup>*- group dissimilates from labiovelar to velar *k-*, as *kerk<sup>w</sup>u-*, as in the dialectal Umbrian word *cerqua* ‘oak,’ in which the initial velar undergoes fricativization due to the vocalic environment. This phonological outcome appears in toponyms such as Cerqueto, and family names such as Cerqueglini, among others. Further outcomes from \**k<sup>w</sup>érk<sup>w</sup>us* might be the Italian *cerro*, a quasi-synonym of *quercia* ‘oak’ and, perhaps, the Spanish *cerro*, ‘hill, peak.’ These two last words may be related to the Latin *cirrus* ‘curl,’ metaphorically indicating plentiful vegetation. Their etymology is generally linked to Proto-Germanic \**hērą* ‘hair’<sup>168</sup>. A third possible development of the original Indo-European \**k<sup>w</sup>érk<sup>w</sup>us* root is seen in the name of the Greek spring-nymph Herkyna<sup>169</sup>, in the Latin name of a forest, *Silva Hercynia*<sup>170</sup>; and in Gaulish *erc-* ‘oak’<sup>171</sup>.

The association of the god Perun with oaks emerges in idioms and expressions found in various languages: Lithuanian *Perkūno ąžuolas* ‘Perkūnas’s oak,’ Latvian *Pērkōna uōzuōls* ‘Pērkōn’s oak,’ and Old Russian *Perunovŭ dubŭ* ‘Perun’s oak’<sup>172</sup>. In ancient Thracia, Περκοϝ/Περκων was a heroic horseman depicted facing a tree surrounded by a snake<sup>173</sup>.

Perun is also associated with the Indo-European root \**per-* ‘to strike,’ probably a derivation from \**k<sup>w</sup>erku-*. The noun \**Perk<sup>w</sup>unos* seems to be related to Old Prussian *percunis* ‘thunder,’

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<sup>156</sup> GAMKRELIDZ, IVANOV 1994.

<sup>157</sup> BEEKES 2010.

<sup>158</sup> SNOJ 2003.

<sup>159</sup> LEHMAN 1986.

<sup>160</sup> POKORNY 1959.

<sup>161</sup> LAJOYE 2016.

<sup>162</sup> WEST 2007.

<sup>163</sup> GÜTERBOCK, HOFFNER 1997.

<sup>164</sup> WEEKS 1985.

<sup>165</sup> DEHEJIA 1999.

<sup>166</sup> DE VAAN 2008.

<sup>167</sup> LAJOYE, OUDAER 2014.

<sup>168</sup> SMITH 1890.

<sup>169</sup> WEST 2007.

<sup>170</sup> GAMKRELIDZE, IVANOV 1994.

<sup>171</sup> DELAMARRE 2003.

<sup>172</sup> DEMIRAJ 1997.

<sup>173</sup> TOPOROV 1990.

Polish *piorun*, ‘thunderbolt,’ Latvian *pērkauns* ‘thunderbolt,’ and Lithuanian *perkūnas* ‘thunder’ and *perkūnija* ‘thunderstorm’<sup>174</sup>. κεραυνός, the name of Zeus’s thunderbolt, which was sometimes deified, seems to derive from the same root, with metathesis<sup>175</sup>.

The association between oak trees and the action of striking may have developed because these trees were often struck by lightning (that is nonetheless a different concept than ‘thunder’). It is easy to be seduced by the idea that \*perk<sup>w</sup>u- has something to do with Semitic b.r.q, ‘flash/lightning,’ Late Egyptian *brg* ‘leuchten, glänzen (von den Augen)’<sup>176</sup>, Arabic *balaġa* ‘schimmern, leuchten (Morgenröte)’<sup>177</sup>, and Palestinian Arabic *balġa* ‘la nuit de 3 à 4’<sup>178</sup>.

The connection between oak trees and striking may be attributed to wood’s use in creating strong, blunt tools such as axes. The Greek words πέλεκϋς ‘axe’ and πέλεκκον ‘axe handle’ and the German *Beil* ‘axe’ seem to provide good etymological evidence, assuming that the \*per-/pel- alternation was possible in some ancient Indo-European varieties. Furthermore, the Greek βέλεκκος ‘kind of pulse’ highlights the many connections of the root with the idea of ‘bit/hit/strike.’ In Italian, *battere* designates the action of the heart beating/pulsing, beating someone, hitting a body part, and flapping wings while flying (*battere le ali*). Aside from the oak, the axe is one of Perun’s symbols<sup>179</sup>.

Interestingly, some authors consider πέλεκϋς ‘axe’ a *Wanderwort*, as it is strikingly found in Akkadian *pilakku/pilaqu* and Sumerian *balag* ‘wooden handle’<sup>180</sup>, Arabic فَلَاقَ *falaqa*, ‘to split apart,’ and Hebrew *peleg* ‘stream, faction, sect.’ Since the Phoenicians were woodcutters, carpenters, and shipbuilders, perhaps the Egyptian transcription of the ethnonym *fnḥw* that designates them on the obelisk of Karnak<sup>181</sup> is also connected to the *Wanderwort* for ‘axe.’ Indeed, the l/n alternation in ancient Egyptian is quite common<sup>182</sup>. Furthermore, concerning the plosive/fricative alternation of the third radical, Arabic *falaqa* ‘to split apart’ alternates with *falaḥa* ‘to split, cleave, plough’<sup>183</sup>, from which the Arabic word for ‘farmer’ *fallāḥ*, corresponding to Aramaic *plah* ‘to till’ and Hebrew *palah* ‘to split, dig, till’<sup>184</sup> derive. Notably, the Sanskrit word for ‘axe’ is *paraśú*, cognate to Latin *pars* ‘part,’ *parto* ‘to depart,’ and *separo* ‘to split’ and suspiciously similar to the Semitic root p.r.s/š/ś ‘to separate’/‘to divide’ seen in previous chapters and with Albanian *prish* ‘to break, destroy’<sup>185</sup>.

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<sup>174</sup> WEST 2007.

<sup>175</sup> WEST 2007.

<sup>176</sup> ERMAN, GRAPOW 1926-1961, II, p. 466.

<sup>177</sup> WAHRMUND 1898, I, p. 248.

<sup>178</sup> DENIZEAU 1960, p. 486.

<sup>179</sup> DIXON-KENNEDY 1998.

<sup>180</sup> MALLORY, ADAMS 2006.

<sup>181</sup> BRESCIANI, 1997.

<sup>182</sup> BORG 2021.

<sup>183</sup> WAHRMUND 1898, II, p. 430.

<sup>184</sup> JASTROW 1886.

<sup>185</sup> MANN 1947.

## 7. \*Perk<sup>w</sup>ūnos, Thunder, and Perperuna, Butterfly

Perk<sup>w</sup>ūnos has left traces in neighboring cultures and languages across the Slavic, Balkan, and Scandinavian areas. Several toponyms reflect the presence of the ancient god<sup>186</sup>. Several words connected to the otherworldly spheres preserve traces of the god's name, often through the filter and stigma of Christianization. For example, the chief god of the Finnish pagan pantheon, the thunder god Ukko, was also called Perkele. The word *perkele* survives in today's Finnish with the meaning of 'evil spirit' and is exclaimed as a curse word. In Estonian, *põrgu* means 'hell,' and the Karelian *perkeleh* 'evil spirit'<sup>187</sup>.

Regarding the name Perperuna and its multiple local declensions, the derivation of her name from Perun and its connection with butterflies are generally accepted by historians of religions and etymologists today. As discussed above, her name may derive directly from the root \*kwerk<sup>w</sup>- in its labial outcome. Some non-Indo-European (Caucasian) languages at the periphery of the Indo-European world and in contact with it seem to have acquired the word for 'butterfly' from the velar outcome of the \*k<sup>w</sup>erk<sup>w</sup>- root. Here are some examples: Bagvalal *k'ark'ima*<sup>188</sup>, Tindi *k'urk'ula*<sup>189</sup>, Dargwa *čirčikan*<sup>190</sup>, Avar *kałkuç*<sup>191</sup>. That said, this last observation is difficult to substantiate, given that the word for 'butterfly' across Indo-European languages appears to have developed from a labial variant of the root.

Perperuna also seems to be associated with *Perunitsa*, 'Perun's one,' an old goddess found in the Slavic and Balkan world, whose attributes were transferred to the Christian saint Fiery Mary. Fiery Mary is considered a sister of Saint Elijah 'the Thunderer,' who seems to have inherited attributes and functions of the god Perun. She is connected with fire, armed with lightning bolts and arrows, and can inflict drought as punishment for sins. Traces of Perunitsa are found in Slavic folk songs that mention her as 'the Lightning,' sister of the Sun and bride of the Moon. She is connected with snakes, probably because lightning is analogically connected to snakes across Slavic countries. On July 30, her holiday, using items resembling snakes, such as threads or ropes, is forbidden.

According to the scholarship, the legacy of the ancient god Perk<sup>w</sup>ūnos is felt beyond northern Europe, in the Levant, in the functions of the Luwian and Hittite weather gods *Tarhunz* and *Tarhunna* and the Hattian storm god Taru<sup>192</sup>. Anatolians may have dropped the old names of weather gods in order to adopt \*tr̥hu-ent- 'conquering,' from the proto-Indo-European \*terh<sub>2</sub>- 'to cross over, pass through, overcome,' from which the Vedic *túrvant-* 'conquering,' an epithet of the weather god Indra<sup>193</sup>, also derives.

Many other Indo-European theonyms are related to 'thunder' through the root \*(s)tenh<sub>2</sub>-, e.g., Germanic *Punraz* (Thor), Celtic *Taranis* (from an earlier \*Tonaros), and the Latin epithet

<sup>186</sup> GIMBUTAS 1967; LAJOYE 2015; ZAROFF 1999.

<sup>187</sup> SALO 1990.

<sup>188</sup> KHALILOV 2023i.

<sup>189</sup> KHALILOV 2023l.

<sup>190</sup> KHALILOV 2023m.

<sup>191</sup> KHALILOV 2023n.

<sup>192</sup> HUTTER 2003; KLOEKHORST 2008.

<sup>193</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 1997.

of Jupiter, *Tonans*<sup>194</sup>. It is worth mentioning here that the Latvian word for ‘butterfly’ is *taurenis/tauriņš*<sup>195</sup>, probably connected with the attributes of the divine couple Perun/Perperuna in its manifold manifestations.

## 8. ‘Butterflies’ around the Mediterranean

The Italian word for ‘butterfly’ *farfalla*, or rather Sicilian *farfadda*<sup>196</sup>, seems to have influenced the formation of the word for ‘butterfly’ in various Arabic varieties, such as Moroccan Arabic *farṭuṭ* ‘moth’ and *farṭuṭṭu* ‘butterfly,’ Tunisian Arabic *farfaṭṭu/farṭaṭṭu* ‘butterfly,’ and Maltese *farfett* ‘butterfly’ and *farfett il-lejl* ‘bat’<sup>197</sup>. The Maghrebi Arabic words for butterfly seem to have entered the lexicon of some Berber varieties, as shown by Kabyle *aferṭeṭṭu*<sup>198</sup>.

## 9. Interim Summary and Research Question

A summary of the key observations drawn from the surveys undertaken is necessary at this stage. Semitic languages have an extensive network of roots with C<sub>1</sub> p/b and C<sub>2</sub> l/r that relate to notions of division, separation, distribution, and diffusion. This phenomenon may be pan-Semitic and could even reflect ancient lexicalization strategies involving variation in the third radical. However, in some Semitic languages, there are also roots with the same C<sub>1</sub> and C<sub>2</sub> (p/b and l/r), formally similar to the previous ones, which instead denote sudden movements, shifts in speed, or pulsating motion. Despite the formal resemblance and the semantic similarity often perceived by modern speakers, the roots of the two groups are not etymological cognates. It is advisable to analyze their etymological affiliation case by case.

While the first type of root may have spread from the Proto-Semitic stage, the second seems to have entered the Semitic sphere later. Both types of roots appear to have been used in the Semitic languages discussed here in forming animal-related vocabulary, which is known to be particularly volatile. In particular, the term for ‘butterfly’ seems especially prone to borrowing through language contact for spiritual and taxonomic reasons. The reduplicated root *prpr*, which seems to be attested in a limited number of Semitic varieties, mainly in the Levant, may have entered from Indo-European languages to refer to sudden, pulsating motion or specifically as a term for ‘butterfly.’

It should also be noted that the strategy of reduplication – in both Indo-European and Semitic – might have served as an iconic and metaphorical means of representing certain types of movement or action, ascribed, for instance, to specific animal species. Thus, was Ben-Yehuda’s coinage of Modern Hebrew *parpar* inspired by the Italian *farfalla*? Or may the morphological and phonetic resemblance between the two words instead suggest much older, possibly shared roots?

## 10. Modern Hebrew *parpar* and its Semitic Background

Ben-Yehuda’s coinage *parpar* for ‘butterfly’ began to appear in Modern Hebrew literature in the first decade of the twentieth century. According to HDP, the first recorded instance of

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<sup>194</sup> MATASOVIĆ 2009.

<sup>195</sup> CIBUŁS 2023.

<sup>196</sup> TRAINA 1868.

<sup>197</sup> VASSALLI 1796.

<sup>198</sup> DALLEY 1982.

this word is found in a short literary essay by Frishman<sup>199</sup>. It was also used 27 times in twenty years by Bialik<sup>200</sup>, Gnessin<sup>201</sup>, Yosef H. Brenner in his translation of *Michael Kramer*<sup>202</sup>, and other authors.

Nonetheless, the root p.r.p.r has a long history in Jewish literature, especially in Aramaic. It appears first as a verb in *pi'el* form in Job 16:12 with the meaning 'to shatter.' Much has been written about the language of the Book of Job, especially regarding its numerous Aramaic features<sup>203</sup> and its possible author, perhaps of Arabian origin<sup>204</sup>. These observations are important because the root p.r.p.r in *pi'el*, meaning 'to shake, to tremble, to quiver, to thrash,' is primarily found in the Jewish literature in Aramaic and/or related to Aramaic cultural and linguistic milieus. The root in the first form is also found in Arabic and has the same meaning. Therefore, the phonetic or symbolic suggestion at the basis of Ben-Yehuda's coinage seems to be found in the Jewish religious literature, drowning from the Aramaic lexical basin. Indeed, according to the *Academy of the Hebrew Language – The Historical Dictionary Project*, the verb is found twice in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*<sup>205</sup>, twice in *Sifrei Bamidbar*<sup>206</sup>, once in *Sifrei Devarim*<sup>207</sup>, three times in the *Tosefta*<sup>208</sup>, once in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*<sup>209</sup>, four times in the Jerusalem Talmud, five times in the Babylonian Talmud, and once in the *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*<sup>210</sup>.

Several observations from the brief survey above support the connection with the Aramaic linguistic world. It should be noted that verbal uses of the root p.r.p.r to indicate verbs of motion in the semantic range of 'to beat, to shake' and 'to flap (wings)' are found in the Aramaic *prpr* 'to flap wings'<sup>211</sup> and *parpēr* 'to move about'<sup>212</sup>. Strikingly similar usages are found in Maltese *farfar* 'scuotere, sbattere, scacciare da sé'<sup>213</sup>, *perper* 'sventolarsi in qua e in là'<sup>214</sup>, and *parpar* 'to leave in a hurry'<sup>215</sup>. Further examples are from Kəndērīb Arabic *parpar* 'flattern (Vogel)'<sup>216</sup> and Lebanese Arabic *farfar* 'to try to fly'<sup>217</sup>. It seems that Aramaic could be the cradle of this quadrilateral root and its verbal uses: the Aramaic substrate in Maltese, Kəndērīb Arabic,

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<sup>199</sup> FRISHMAN 1907.

<sup>200</sup> BIALIK 1908, 1909.

<sup>201</sup> GNESSIN 1910.

<sup>202</sup> BRENNER 1911.

<sup>203</sup> GREENSTEIN 2020.

<sup>204</sup> SEOW 2013.

<sup>205</sup> LAUTERBACH 1961.

<sup>206</sup> NEUSNER 1986.

<sup>207</sup> NEUSNER 1987.

<sup>208</sup> LIEBERMAN 1955-1988.

<sup>209</sup> EPSTEIN, MELAMED 1955.

<sup>210</sup> BUBER 1868.

<sup>211</sup> CAL.

<sup>212</sup> JASTROW 1886, p. 1236.

<sup>213</sup> VASSALLI 1796, p. 182.

<sup>214</sup> VASSALLI 1796, p. 559.

<sup>215</sup> BORG 2021, p. 511.

<sup>216</sup> JASTROW 2005, p. 22.

<sup>217</sup> FRAYHA 1973, p. 128.

and Lebanese Arabic is clear. Lebanon and Kəndērīb belong to areas of ancient Aramaic presence. Moreover, even in the western Mediterranean, Christian Arabic has clear historical, cultural, and social continuity with Aramaic (Borg, 1994, 2004). Dictionaries of classical and modern standard Arabic report a much more extended semantic network for the verb *farfara*: ‘to walk quickly, taking short steps, to act foolishly or irrationally, to ramble or speak incoherently, to tear or split something, to shake the body violently, to shake or flap, like a bird flapping its wings (sometimes before death), to disturb or gossip about someone, to shorten a garment, to expose or shake something off’<sup>218</sup>.

Notably, in Arabic, as in Hebrew post-biblical literature, the p.r.p.r root develops into verbal forms indicating involuntary bodily movements such as tremors, convulsions, and spasms, especially death throes. The online Arabic dictionary *al-Ma‘āniy* (2025) reports the following idiomatic expressions: *an-nās tufarfir min al-ḥarr*: ‘People squirm (writhe) from the heat’; *waqa‘ dūna an yufarfir*: ‘He died instantly, without moving’; *waqa‘ mufarfiran ‘alā al-arḍ*: ‘He writhed on the ground from the intensity of the blow or pain.’ Jibbālī *ənferfēr* ‘to have a fit, have epilepsy, to panic’<sup>219</sup> seems to be derived from Arabic. Mehri does not show verbal forms from this root.

Examples of nominal lexicalization of the root p.r.p.r are found in Aramaic *prpwr* ‘sparrow (?)’<sup>220</sup>, Mehri *fərfir* ‘hasty person’<sup>221</sup>, and Arabic *furfūr* ‘young bird, young sheep, young man’<sup>222</sup>, ‘young man,’ ‘fat lamb,’ ‘small bird,’ ‘sparrow,’ *furfur/firfir* ‘small bird’<sup>223</sup>, *farfār* ‘a hardy, fire-resistant tree, used to make bowls and similar objects,’ *furāfir* ‘a reckless, clumsy person, a mature young man, the offspring of a goat, ewe, or wild cow, a lion tearing apart its prey, a lamb growing fat and strong, a horse shaking its bridle to try to remove it from its head’, and *farfār* ‘a women’s saddle or mount’<sup>224</sup>.

Interestingly, while Semitic languages have many roots with a \*pr- group, some examples of which have been reported in this study, the reduplicated root p.r.p.r is attested in few forms, especially in Aramaic, in the Arabic varieties, and Hebrew registers related to it. Furthermore, Arabic seems to have developed further meanings from the semantic core of the root. Aramaic likely acted as a conduit for a doubled root of primary Indo-European origin. Aramaic has indeed mediated the entry of many words from Greek into Arabic and Hebrew.

To conclude, then, Ben-Yehuda’s choice of *parpar* for Modern Hebrew ‘butterfly’ may have been, even unconsciously, driven more by influences from the internal history of Hebrew literary tradition and his knowledge of Slavic vocabulary (he was born in 1858 in the Russian Governorate of Vilna), than by contemporary Italian.

## 11. Oaks and Axe Blows in the Book of Daniel

Aramaic was permeated by Greek vocabulary, including specialized terms that have remained relatively marginal in the history of the Greek language itself. For example, in Aramaic,

<sup>218</sup> AL-MA‘ĀNIY 2025.

<sup>219</sup> JOHNSTONE 1987.

<sup>220</sup> CAL.

<sup>221</sup> JOHNSTONE 1987.

<sup>222</sup> AL-ĠĀNIY 2011.

<sup>223</sup> LANE, 1968, VI, p. 2357.

<sup>224</sup> AL-MA‘ĀNIY 2025.

we find the word *prynwn* for ‘oak’<sup>225</sup>, likely borrowed from the Greek *πῖνος* ‘holm oak, ilex’<sup>226</sup>, listed above. The word *prynwn* is found in the Syriac version of the Story of Susanna. The Story of Susanna is included in the Septuagint version of the Book of Daniel. It is part of the additions to the Book of Daniel, that is, those parts not present in the Hebrew/Aramaic textual tradition of the Book of Daniel before the Septuagint version. Therefore, the additions to the Book of Daniel in the Septuagint appear for the first time in the Greek of the Septuagint. Syriac *prynwn* is thus a loanword from the original Greek *πῖνος*. What is of great interest is a curious instance of wordplay that the editors of the Septuagint introduced in the original Greek involving this word.

A woman called Susanna is arrested and tried for adultery because she is accused of having had intercourse with a lover under a tree. Two witnesses are heard, but they contradict each other about what kind of tree it was. The names of the trees cited by the witnesses form interesting puns with the sentences given by the judge, Daniel. The first says that they were under a mastic tree (ὕπο σχίνον), and Daniel says that an angel stands ready to cut him in two (σχίσει). The second says they were under an oak tree (ὕπο πρίνον), and Daniel says that an angel stands ready to saw him in two (πρίσαι). The verbal form *πρίσαι* in Daniel’s book is an aorist infinitive from the Greek verb *πρίω* or *πρίζω* meaning ‘to saw’ (also ‘to grind’<sup>227</sup>).

Daniel’s wordplay prompts two reflections: the first concerns the linguistic sophistication of the Greek of the Septuagint, which never ceases to astonish. The pun between ‘oak’ and ‘split’ is based on an ancient etymology, as we have explored above – an etymology likely unknown to the Septuagint’s editors, yet one that subconsciously influenced them. The second reflection concerns the contact between Indo-European and Semitic languages and alludes to the fact that different inflected forms of the same verb can be reanalyzed as distinct roots in the recipient language of the borrowing, as in the case of the Greek *πρίω/πρίζω* and its aorist forms *πρίσ-* and the Semitic roots p.r-, p.r.z, and p.r.s. Nevertheless, this is only a suggestion.

## 12. Further Developments of p.r.p.r in Contemporary Arabic and Hebrew

The travels of the root p.r.p.r are far from over. Besides the few verbal and nominal forms mentioned, the root p.r.p.r has other developments in Arabic and Hebrew. Arabic *farfār* means ‘a breaker,’ ‘light and unsteady in mind,’ ‘loquacious,’ and ‘talkative’<sup>228</sup>. Palestinian Arabic *farfūr* means ‘flatterhaft, unstet (in Beziehungen zum anderen Geschlecht); flatterhafter Mensch, {schöner (galanter, koketter) Jüngling}’ and its feminine *farfūra* means ‘hübsches Mädchen’<sup>229</sup>, while *fīrfīr* is ‘revolver’<sup>230</sup>. According to a recent Google search, in the last several decades, the Arabic word *furfīra* has been used for games to indicate ‘table football,’ ‘zoom ball,’ and ‘spinning top.’ As the phonological evidence suggests, the word *furfīra* has entered the Modern Hebrew lexicon as *forfera* with the meaning of ‘spinning top.’

<sup>225</sup> CAL.

<sup>226</sup> BEEKES 2010.

<sup>227</sup> LIDDELL, SCOTT 1940.

<sup>228</sup> LANE 1968, VI, p. 2357.

<sup>229</sup> SEEGER 2022, p. 710.

<sup>230</sup> SEEGER 2022, p. 711.



### 13. Shared Cultural and Linguistic Features of Indo-European and Semitic

From the data above, it can be observed that in Arabic, the onomatopoeic repetition of the root – evoking a trembling or vibrating sound consistent with the meaning of ‘rapid beating’ or ‘fluttering’ – leads to a semantic shift toward two main domains: behavioral inconsistency and noisy speech. This shift significantly expands the semantic network compared to pre-modern Aramaic and Hebrew.

Interestingly, the Italian word *farfallone* lit. ‘big butterfly’ is used to describe a man who is fickle, particularly in romantic relationships<sup>231</sup>, like Arabic *farfūr*. The English ‘to flutter’ (to fly from girl to girl as butterflies flutter from flower to flower) parallels the French *papillonner*. Italian *farfallino/-a* lit. ‘butterfly-like’ suggests diffuse volubility, ultimately charming but somewhat irritating. Regarding sound-related effects, Arabic *farfār/furfār* is strikingly similar, in sound and meaning, to Italian *fanfarone* ‘braggart, boaster’ and *fanfarra*. As in other European languages, Italian *fanfarra*, borrowed from French *fanfare*, like English *fanfare*, Spanish *fanfarria*, and Portuguese *fanfarras*, originally designated a musical ensemble, typically composed of wind (e.g., trumpets, trombones, and clarinets) and percussion instruments that performs short and showy musical pieces – often called fanfares – especially during parades, official ceremonies, or military events. The word is used metaphorically across Neo-Latin languages to refer to boastful or exaggerated noise. Figuratively, *fanfarra* describes a boastful, ostentatious display made more to attract attention than to convey substantive content. The word is thought to originate from Provençal *fanfa* ‘chatter’<sup>232</sup>. Italian *furfante* could also be related to Arabic or Arabicized *farfār/furfār*, in the sense of ‘braggart,’ ‘liar.’ Since the Arabic *farfara* means, among other things, ‘to talk nonsense,’ the Italian *farfugliare* ‘to babble, to speak incoherently’ and *vanvera* in *parlare a vanvera* ‘to prattle’ are probably etymologically connected to the Provençal *fanfa* and likely have Arabic relatives.

### 14. Phonosymbolism

In the creation and dissemination of words based on the roots *pr-*, *fr-*, and their triconsonantal extensions and reduplications – both in Semitic and Indo-European languages – sound effects also undoubtedly play a suggestive role. Phonosymbolic evocation is often cited in the scholarly literature as an etymological explanation for the spread of such words. Thus, for example, the online *Treccani Online* dictionary of the Italian language (2025) offers the following explanation for the verb *frullare* ‘to whirl, to blend’: “Intransitive and transitive verb [onomatopoeic origin]. – 1. Intransitive: a. To make a noisy rustling sound; said specifically of birds flapping their wings as they take flight. b. To spin rapidly on itself: ‘the spinning top whirled’; c. Figurative: of thoughts, ideas, whims, to arise and stir in the mind: ‘What’s whirling around in your head?’ 2. Transitive: To beat with a whisk (eggs, cream, chocolate).”

### 15. Butterflies, Birds, and Winged Demons

I conclude this contribution with a quotation from Dante’s *Commedia*, conceived during a time of conflict that also led to significant contact between Europe and the Middle East. Dante Alighieri, in the XXII *Canto* of the *Inferno*, in the group of Malebranche devils, mentions the

<sup>231</sup> BONOMI 2004-2008.

<sup>232</sup> DOM 2016.

devil Farfarello. Old French *farfadet* and Tuscan *fanfanicchio* mean ‘sprite,’ while the Calabrian *farfariadu* denotes a southern wind that brings chaos. Some scholars cite the Arabic word *farfar* ‘sprite’ as the origin of one or more of these lexemes<sup>233</sup>, though I have not verified its existence. In Arabic theology, *ifrīt* is a type of powerful demon<sup>234</sup>, probably comparable to Mehri *’āfryēt*<sup>235</sup>. However, Dante constructs a sophisticated rhyme scheme in which Farfarello rhymes with *uccello* ‘bird.’ In so doing, the poet marvelously reconnects this name to the etymological field of winged and flying beings and its ancestral roots, flitting from time immemorial between Indo-European and Semitic:

*E ’l gran proposto, vòlto a Farfarello  
che stralunava li occhi per fedire,  
disse: “Fatti ’n costà, malvagio uccello!”*

And the grand Provost, turned to Farfarello,  
Who rolled his eyes about as if to strike,  
Said: “Stand aside there, thou malicious bird.”  
(XXII: 94-96; Longfellow, 1867)

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<sup>233</sup> PERRINO 2022.

<sup>234</sup> CHELHOD 1960-2005.

<sup>235</sup> JOHNSTONE 1987.

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## ABSTRACT

The Modern Hebrew word for ‘butterfly,’ *parpar*, was coined by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and is commonly believed to derive from a playful adaptation of the Italian *farfalla* combined with the Hebrew root *pirper*. A comparative analysis of the mainly Levantine and Arabian Semitic lexicons suggests that the root p.r.p.r entered Hebrew through Aramaic. Aramaic also appears to underlie the Arabic developments of p.r.p.r, notably frequent in Levantine and Christian varieties. Aramaic may have introduced p.r.p.r into Semitic from Indo-European, where the root \*pr- yields a wide semantic network including ‘beat,’ ‘split,’ ‘axe,’ and its reduplicated form produces lexemes for ‘butterfly’ and ‘oak.’ While p.r.p.r enters Semitic as a reduplicated root of Indo-European origin, triconsonantal expansions from biconsonantal \*pr- likely developed within Semitic, possibly also influenced by Indo-European roots and flexed forms. Ben-Yehuda’s *parpar* thus seems to draw more from Hebrew literary tradition and his familiarity with Slavic vocabulary than from any direct Italian model. Contemporary developments of p.r.p.r in Arabic and Modern Hebrew are reported. Finally, I address semantic extensions of p.r.p.r in Arabic (instability in relationships, boasting, noise-making, and nonsensical speech), which may be connected to Provençal *fanfa*, French *fanfare*, Italian *farfallone*, *farfallino*, *fanfarra*, *fanfarone*, *farfugliare*, *vanvera*, and *furfante*.

## KEYWORDS

1. Levantine Arabic-Modern Hebrew Isoglosses
2. Aramaic-Hebrew-Christian Arabic Isoglosses
3. Semitic Words for ‘Butterfly’
4. Indo-European–Semitic Contact
5. Semitic Fauna Lexicon