

Review article

HAROLD C. FLEMING, *Ongota: a Decisive Language in African Pre-history* = Aethiopistische Forschungen 64. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag. 2006. ix, 214 pp., 5 ill. Price: € 78. ISBN: 3-447-05124-8.

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1. Introduction

Ongota is an unclassified language spoken by hunter-gatherer and partially pastoralists. According to local traditions, they have always been living isolated and shifting settlement quite often (Savà – Thubauville 2006). The language is the expression of a highly conservative culture and represents a unique source of historical information. It is probably the most endangered language in Ethiopia. The community, about 100, has by now adopted the neighbouring Cushitic language Ts’amakko (Tsamai) as first language. Only about 15 elders speak their traditional language (Savà – Thubauville 2006).

Bender (1994) includes Ongota among the “mystery languages” of Ethiopia, which are the languages whose classification remains unclear. Indeed, no scholar has been able to isolate the genetic features of Ongota and prove a definite classification. The hypotheses put forward so far propose affiliations with neighbouring language groups: South Omotic (Ehret p.c.), Nilo-Saharan (Blažek 1991, 2001 and forth.), Cushitic (Bender p.c.) and East Cushitic (Savà – Tosco 2003). In the opinion of Aklilu the language is a pidginised creole (Aklilu p.c.). Ongota is also mentioned as an isolate (see, for example, Mous 2003).

Several reasons make the classification of Ongota a highly problematic task. There are few clear lexical etymologies and the massive presence of recent Ts’amakko borrowings blurs the situation. Phonology and syntax are not helpful, since they have been very likely shaped under Ts’amakko pressure. Morphology is scarce compared to the languages of the area and the few morphological exponents are either Ts’amakko or unique, or may show similarities with any language group. The collection of new data is also a delicate task. The last speakers use Ts’amakko in everyday conversation, while Ongota has an extremely limited application. Moreover, the language

recorded from them is not stable, it shows inconsistencies and it is obscured by code-switching¹.

The volume under review aims at a new classificatory hypothesis for Ongota. It is based on the assumption that Ongota is an Afroasiatic language. However, it cannot be included in any existing Afroasiatic group and it represents a main ramification of the whole phylum. The volume also contains an analysis of the pre-historical connections and implications of this classification.

The classification has the advantage to account for the presence of clearly Cushitic and Omotic elements in the language. They do not prove genetic relations and, in most cases, are not borrowings, but rather retentions from the main ramification of Afroasiatic. Talking about the study of Ongota by other scholars Fleming states that he “reached out to the whole Afrasian world in searching for good etymologies, and it seems that they did not” (p. 172). Indeed, his reconstructions are supported by the involvement of language belonging to other Afroasiatic language groups (Semitic, Chadic, Berber and Egyptian) in the etymologies. The fact that the proposed Ongotan branch of Afroasiatic has low percentages of shared lexicon is justified by similar percentages relating all the branches to each other. The reasoning behind the hypothesis also considers the possibility that similarities are due to borrowings from Ongota to other languages, an idea that has never been considered before. On the other hand, Fleming’s study is open to a number of criticisms. Those presented in this review concern the volume in general, proofs supporting the main hypothesis and research methodology.

2. General remarks

The volume consists of Dedication and Acknowledgments (p. IX); Introduction (pp. 1–21); four unnumbered main chapters (pp. 23–145); Epilogue (pp. 159–172); an Appendix containing the English–Ongota lexicon (pp. 173–203) and a Bibliography (pp. 205–214). The four main chapters are: “The Ongota Language (pp. 23–72)”; “Classifying Ongota I: Morphological and Statistical Evidence (pp. 73–86)”; “Classifying Ongota II: Etymological Evidence (pp. 87–133)” and “Conclusions (pp. 135–157)”.

Since the book was written along a long span of time, not all the available material on Ongota has been included in the analysis. The author’s justification is that they reached him too late. This is really a pity, since material on Ongota is generally scarce and every bit of description or comparison is

¹ Graziano Savà has recently received from the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Documentation Programme a postdoctoral grant for the documentation of Ongota. He is personally grateful to Fleming for his encouragement to study Ongota (as mentioned at p. 172) and for his extensive and constant support in searching for funds for the documentation of this precious endangered language.

precious. The last publications, from 2000 to the date of publication, include two contributions by Graziano Savà alone and two other by both the authors of the present review. The latter are reviewed in the Epilogue. Fleming's "purpose [...] is to consider how this later research affects the general description of the Ongota, their language and their situation, as presented in this book" (p. 159). However, that research is presented in a way that does not affect Fleming's description at all, although, in our opinion, the recent data point to valid alternative research developments. Considering the comparative character of the work, one would also expect all possible descriptive and comparative publications on languages of the area to be included. However, among the bibliographic references one fails to find books such as "The Dhaasanach Language" by Tosco (2000) and "The Lexical Reconstruction of West-Rift Southern Cushitic" by Kießling and Mous (2003). It is therefore possible to improve, or to reject, the final results of the present study by taking full account of material issued since year 2000.

In the introductory parts on people and language there is hardly anything new with respect to Fleming et al. (1992). This is the article which made Ongota known to the academic world. What one may find strange is that even the presentation of the material looks very much the same, like everything was "copied and pasted". Also the first of the main chapters, completely devoted to the description of the Ongota language, has been copied from Fleming et al. (1992). After a brief introductory part, the chapter treats phonology (pp. 24–26), some morphology (pp. 26–28, most of which filled with lists of pronouns), two sections on syntax (pp. 28–37) and an Ongota–English lexicon (pp. 37–72). Obscure morphological phenomena are part of the syntactic description. One of these, which was left unsolved also in the 1992 article, is the absence of tense and person affixes on verbs. One may also notice that the term "Afrasian" is used all over the book, except that in the copied sections. Here "Afroasiatic" appears, since this is the term used in the above-mentioned article.

Only at p. 16 the reader comes to know the highly advanced state of endangerment of Ongota. The matter should have been put in evidence better and earlier, since there is no proper documentation of Ongota.

3. Fleming's hypothesis

[...] Ongota represents something new in the Afroasiatic phylum [...]" is a statement appearing at p. 28. However, it appeared fourteen years ago in Fleming et al. (1992). Fleming refers to the research reported in that publication when he states that the hypothesis "was the clear conclusion of my original inspection of Ongota data, recorded by Hayward fifteen years ago. I did, however, vigorously try other linguistic phyla (footnote 14, p. 73)".

Fleming's hypothesis is therefore not the outcome of an investigation which is open to all plausible conclusions. Instead, it is a working hypothesis, which his investigation aims to prove. An impressionistic working hypothesis, since it was generated by the observation of Ongota material consisting of about sixty words (Hayward 1985).

The first three pages of the introduction stress the importance of newly discovered unclassified languages for our understanding of language taxonomy and pre-history. The author makes clear that the final aim of the study is prehistorical reconstruction of the area and mentions some factors making Ongota an outstanding source of information about the prehistory of the Horn of Africa. The historical importance of Ongota is out of question, however the factors mentioned by Fleming are not completely convincing.

Ongota and its speaking community are assumed to be so different because they represent distinct linguistic and human African taxa. This does not really need to be, since the uniqueness of Ongota can be the result of divergent development due to massive and heterogeneous cultural and linguistic influence from neighbouring populations. There could well be conservative elements in Ongota, but their existence is too difficult to disclose and it is not easy to propose them as a convincing evidence for new African taxonomy.

Among the typological points that make Ongota so divergent Fleming mentions OSV word order. This order would contradict "a purported universal grammar" requiring "that all languages have a so-called SOV (subject-object-verb) order to sentences" (p. 1). In fact, what Fleming refers to as the subject is a pronominal element prefixed, or better cliticised, to the verb. The question whether pronominal subjects are expressed in Ongota by personal pronouns or prefixes is considered on p. 167. Here Fleming explicitly affirms that these elements are pronouns and they can stand on their own with the addition of the suffix *-ta*. There is indeed a series of independent emphatic subject pronouns with that structure, but they always precede the object, just as nominal subjects normally do. From the statement "for many moons, historical linguists have been content to call these elements pronouns" (p. 167) one can see that Fleming's analysis is based upon historical linguistics. From the synchronic point of view, we prefer to consider these elements as clitics and as part and parcel of the verbal word; they act as the only indicators of the person of the subject, since Ongota lacks the usual person/tense affix morphemes which are common in the languages of the area. (The subject clitics can be omitted for pragmatic reasons partially described in Savà – Tosco 2000). According to this interpretation of the subject elements, Ongota is an (S)OV rather than an OSV language. Of course, one can still argue that Ongota was OSV and the subject pronouns were at a certain point cliticised to the verb. However, another possibility would be that Ongota, like other neigh-

bouring languages, is a SOV language, lost the person/tense affixes on the verb and cliticised the personal pronouns for subject-reference. Moreover, subject clitics can be observed in many East Cushitic languages. At this point it is useful to mention that Ongota also lacks suffixal expression of tense. This is expressed by the displacement of the tonal accent along the verbal word, which, of course, includes the subject clitic. This is a striking example of areal uniqueness which could have been mentioned instead of the contradiction to an assumedly universal linguistic law. Suprasegmentally-marked tense is a piece of analysis found in Savà and Tosco (2000), a sketch of Ongota that Fleming did not include when working out his hypothesis.

From the historical-ethnological point of view, Fleming considers the Ongota people so special because they are the remnant of hunter-gather pygmies. This conclusion is based on the interpretation of a travel report by Donaldson Smith, who was in south Ethiopia at the end of 1890. He speaks of the Borali as a pygmy population living north of the present Ongota area. According to a recently collected local history collected by Savà and Thubauville (2006), the Ongota were inhabiting that area and gradually moved towards the shore of the Weyto River. Donaldson Smith's record is extremely important. However, should his report be fully taken as true? It is worth remembering that at the end of the nineteenth century many travellers in Africa wished to disclose the myth of pygmies. Seeing some of them in Ethiopia would have given particular prestige also to the Scottish traveller (comment by Wolbert Smith, p.c.). We could see ourselves that the Ongota did not look like pygmies at all, even though Fleming refers to them as "short people" (p. 2) and mentions new genetic data showing "these tiny people to be a very old branch off the common *Homo sapiens* tree, and not simply a shortening or diminution of ordinary African Negroes [...]" (p. 2–3). These new DNA analyses, however, are unpublished and cannot be verified (see below).

More than the above-mentioned single elements, what we find too strong and hardly provable is the hypothesis generated from them: namely, that the Ongota speak a primordial language of original pygmies. But what kind of language was it? According to Fleming, it was Afroasiatic, since this is the most ancient phylum in Ethiopia and in Africa. The Ongota, in particular, represents "a most important reverberation in the Afrasian (Hamito-Semitic) family tree" (p. 2). The hypothesis is also based on the fact that shared lexicon among Afroasiatic groups is generally low and that Ongota scores no high cognates percentage with any group in particular. As we will see below there is no clear proof that the Afroasiatic elements in Ongota are retentions from Proto-Afroasiatic and not the result of borrowings or genetic relations with nearby Omotic or Cushitic languages.

In the chapter “Conclusions” the author presents the results of the comparative study in a way to justify the inclusion of Ongota in a sub-branch of Afroasiatic. The final position of the “Ongotan” group in the family tree revised by Fleming is beside Cushitic and North Erythraic (the rest of Afroasiatic except Omotic). The three groups have a common ancestor, which has generated from one of the two main ramifications of Afroasiatic (the other one is Omotic). Fleming’s lengthy and complex discussion on the possible family trees of the Afroasiatic phylum and the position of the most problematic languages is too complex to report here. However, those pages confirm Fleming’s absolutely outstanding knowledge about facts concerning the classification of Afroasiatic languages. On the other hand, his specialization on the languages of the Horn has apparently influenced his final classificatory hypotheses: it is to be noted that Omotic (“discovered” by Fleming himself, in a way) and Ongotan are the most isolated branched. This is partially valid also for Cushitic. This means that these groups have a relatively higher weight in Fleming’s classificatory work. The conclusions about pre-historical reconstruction concern the question of the Afroasiatic homeland: Southwest Ethiopia is identified as the cradle of all Afroasiatic languages, and proto-Afroasiatic is dated back to the Neolithic era. The discussion of the genetic, anthropologic and chronological data, presented by Fleming is very rich and detailed. Our impression is that at the stage of our knowledge on the linguistic history of Ongota and neighbouring groups it is not possible to definitely prove Fleming’s hypothesis.

4. Fleming’s methodology

Pages 3–7 of the introduction treat the concept of pre-historical reconstruction and contain a discussion on methodology and scientific value of the “Four pillars of prehistory”: archaeology, paleoanthropology, biogenetics and genetic/historical linguistics. This overview helps us to realise that we are far from having enough data to reach good conclusions about the pre-history of the area. There is no archaeological and paleoanthropological research on the area. The biogenetic knowledge of the area is still in its infancy. The last paragraph of the introduction (pp. 17–21) shows its potentials; however, Fleming only reports the unpublished results of Mark Seielstad’s studies on the Y-chromosome pattern among Hamar, Ts’amakko and Ongota. The three are said to make a subunit of Ethiopids. Moreover, Ongota is closer to Ts’amakko than to Hamar. This is obvious, given the intensive intermarriage between Ongota and Ts’amakko, a fact also acknowledged by the author. Genetic/historical linguistics still has a number of problems to solve concerning methodology and lack of comparative and descriptive data.

The second and third chapters contain the comparative/classificatory part of the study. These are the most salient, new and attractive pages of the book. “Classifying Ongota I: Morphological and Statistical Evidence” starts with the opposition to the assumption that, in the search of cognates between languages, morphological comparison is more reliable than lexical comparison. The idea that morphological similarities are more probably due to genetic relation rather than borrowing is according to Fleming empirically false and is rather based on “doctrine or ideology imposed on students by their teachers” (p. 73). Fleming also objects that morphological evidences are to be preferred to lexical similarities “whenever they come into conflict” (p. 73). The discussion is pursued in other terms, since the real problem with Ongota is not only of quality, but also of quantity: Ongota lacks morphology and, therefore, grammatical comparison cannot furnish substantial evidences. In the Ongota case, lexicon should be preferred “mostly by default”. In spite of this, Fleming compares the few Ongota grammatical elements with other Afroasiatic languages. The comparison of pronouns is more challenging for him, since Blažek (1991, 2005 and forth) proposed the affiliation of Ongota to Nilo-Saharan on the basis of genetic pronominal similarities. Fleming rejects Blažek’s idea and in the same pronouns sees a connection to some Omotic languages. More comparisons with Nilo-Saharan languages are at pp. 81–85.

Preferring lexicon because it is numerically predominant is not the solution to the problem of searching for reliable comparative material. Each similarity, either lexical or morphological, must be carefully analysed in order to know if it is the result of genetic transmission. As soon as we have a set or words of morphemes which are not loans we can reach our classificatory conclusion. Fleming is aware of this and explicitly treats the search for unborrowed elements in the section on lexicostatistic of “Classifying Ongota I”, but the discussion is obviously limited to lexicon. The aim of the lexicostatistic technique is to “count *cognates retention*” (p. 76; emphasis in the original) between Ongota and other Afroasiatic languages. The problem is that in spite of his concern, no preliminary selection of those genetically-based similarities is made. Cognates are taken from “a selected list of meaning, a list meant to be universally valid” (p. 76). This consists of Swadesh’s 100-words. Our disagreement has a methodological basis: just as it is true that morphology can be borrowed it has also been proved that the 100-words Swadesh list is not borrowing-proof at all. Moreover, in the case of Ongota, a close distinction of genetic and borrowed elements is of extreme importance, since Ts’amakko influence has clearly reached morphology and lexicon, even the presumably most conservative core of lexicon. Also Fleming’s lexicostatistics gives evidence of this fact: Ts’amakko scores

the highest percentage of “retentions” (we would, with more caution, call them mere similarities). Moreover, Fleming notices that the East Cushitic languages, such as Ts’amakko, tend to share “the more conservative words” (p. 78) with Ongota. In other words, not only it is not at all sure that these similarities are genetic retentions, but they could be proposed as proof of relation with the whole East Cushitic branch. The next step is to ask oneself “is the relation between Ongota and East Cushitic different from the rest of Afroasiatic?” (p. 78). To summarise, lexical similarities could relate Ongota either with Ts’amakko or East Cushitic or the whole Afroasiatic, and Fleming goes for the third one. The chapter ends with some notes on the technicalities of lexicostatistics.

“Classifying Ongota II: Etymological Evidence” proposes 147 etymologies between Ongota and other Afroasiatic languages. The etymological work is described in the following steps: selection of words with similar meaning and shape; selection of the cognates among the similarities; establishment of sound correspondences, even if this is not always possible because “cognition is determined by hypothesis, by judgement” (p. 86); establishing sound laws and starting reconstruction (Fleming calls lexical items “descended from common ancestors” (p. 86) “cousins”. This word is paralleled to Italian “*cognati*” (emphasis in the original). A nice parallel, but in Italian *cognati* means “brothers-in-law” (while the word for “cousins” is *cugini*). The items of the etymologies are divided in “inner core vocabulary”, i.e. the Swadesh list plus “other more conservative items”; “outer core vocabulary”, consisting of items that are “generally (but not always) quite conservative” and “cultural words”, which “are not expected to be conservative but are interesting and sometimes yield cognates” (p. 87).

One wonders here if there has been a proper selection of the cognates and if cognition should not be determined more scientifically. This could be done establishing convincing correspondences and sound laws. Reconstruction can be a test for the correctness of the sound laws. The etymological similarities between Ongota and Afroasiatic languages spoken far away are impressive. However, one expects to see a relation with a main branch of the Afroasiatic phylum proved by items exclusively shared by Ongota and Afroasiatic language groups, such as Berber, Chadic or Egyptian, with the exclusion of the neighbouring Cushitic and Omotic. In fact, with very few and doubtful exceptions, all the etymologies include Cushitic or Omotic languages. It makes more sense to think that those Afroasiatic items have been absorbed from these neighbouring languages or have been genetically derived from them (the question if they are genetically derived by one of the groups or both of them as Cush-Om group or just as Cushitic, is completely different and remains largely unsolved).

5. Conclusions

In the nineties, Fleming made Ongota known all over the world. With the monograph under review he has enormously enhanced the study of such an outstanding language. He is the first scholar who goes beyond the idea of Ongota relation with one of the language groups found in South Ethiopia.

We must thank Fleming first of all for his efforts in providing etymologies which will support future comparative works. These will be improved once all the material on Ongota is taken into account in future studies aiming at the definition of cognates and correspondences between Ongota and other languages. Only at that point his Afroasiatic conclusions can be accepted or, quoting the last words of the Epilogue, “may be overturned, too!” (p. 172).

The above-mentioned criticisms do not reduce the importance and interest of Fleming’s work. It represents a milestone in the classification and prehistory of the Ongota language and community. It remarkably stimulates further research on the historical reconstruction of languages and peoples of Northeast Africa. Anyone dealing with the Ongota language and people (and with that fascinating mosaic of languages and cultures which is Southwest Ethiopia) will have to start his or her work here: from Fleming’s ideas, intuitions and vision.

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