Selected Comparative-Historical Afrasian Linguistic Studies

in Memory of Igor M. Diakonoff

M. LIONEL BENDER, GÁBOR TAKÁCS & DAVID L. APPILEYARD (eds.)

2003
LINCOM EUROPA
10. CUSHITIC AND OMOTIC OVERVIEW
MAURO TOSCO

1. Background
According to a generally-held, but not uncontroversial, view two separate indigenous Afrasian branches are spoken in East Africa: Cushitic and Omotic. As will become apparent below, there is no general consensus on their external limits nor on the internal composition of these branches, while the very status of Omotic as an independent branch is still disputed.

The Cushitic languages are spoken from the Egypt–Sudan border to the North, along the Sudanese coast, across most of Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, and Northern Kenya. Pockets of Cushitic speakers are found further south in Tanzania. There are probably between 35 and 40 million speakers of Cushitic languages. The bulk of these live in Ethiopia, where, according to the most recent census, there were 26 million speakers of Cushitic languages out of a total population slightly exceeding 53 million: i.e., one half of the Ethiopians speak a Cushitic language. To this number one must add the much smaller populations of Somalia and Jibouti, as well as substantial minorities in Kenya and Eritrea and smaller portions of the populations of Sudan and Tanzania (as well as many expatriates). Oromo is the first language in terms of number of speakers, with almost 17 million in Ethiopia and a few hundred thousand in Kenya. Somali ranks second with at least nine million; lagging well behind, one finds Sidamo, ‘Afar, Beja, &c. At the other extreme of the spectrum, apart from extinct Elmolo, Yaaku, and Asax, one can mention Dahalo in Kenya (probably 400 speakers) and Bayso in Ethiopia (500?). Several Agaw varieties are also endangered.

Omotic is much smaller and entirely contained within Southwest Ethiopia (a variety of Ganza once spoken in Sudan has apparently died out); there are approximately four million speakers of Omotic languages. The lion’s share is taken by Wolaytta and the closely related Ometo languages (Gamo, Gofa, Basketo, Male, Chara, &c.) with a total of about three million.

2. Classification
a. Cushitic
Cushitic is generally divided into four coordinate branches: North, Central, East, and South. East Cushitic is the most complex branch and alone makes up the great majority of all the Cushitic languages.

North Cushitic is made up of a single language, Beja, whose membership in the Cushitic family has often been disputed, most notably by Hetzron (1980). Among others, Zaborski has addressed the question in a number of works (v., e.g., Zaborski [1997]), and most scholars agree that Beja is a bona fide, although probably the most divergent, Cushitic language, maybe representing the very first split off Common Cushitic. Along these lines, Voigt (1996) has proposed that the first division within Cushitic opposes a Northern (represented by Beja) and a Southern branch (all the other languages).

The status of Central Cushitic (made up of the several Agaw languages spoken in the Ethiopian Highlands: Bilin, Keman, Kvara, Khamtanga, Avngi) as a major branching has also
been called into question, the alternative solution being to attach it to East Cushitic. After Hetzron’s (1980) proposal of a Central Cushitic–Highland East Cushitic branch (which he called “Highland Cushitic”), Zaborski (2001) has recently supported a major “downgrading” of Central Cushitic into East Cushitic on the basis of evidence in the prefix verbs.

Finally, the very existence of a separate South Cushitic branch has been a bone of contention since its birth (Greenberg 1963). The flaws in Ehret’s (1980) comparative reconstruction have often been pointed out. Of the allegedly South Cushitic languages, Asax and Kw’adza are practically unknown, another (Ma’ara or Mbugu) has been at times regarded as a mixed language and presents in any case special problems to classification, and still another, Dhalo, is certainly peripheral to South Cushitic and possibly belongs to East Cushitic (v. Tosco 2000). What remains is a cluster of languages and dialects centered around Iraqw. Hetzron (1980) and Ehret (1995) have proposed dragging Iraqw and its “satellites” within the orbit of East Cushitic. Kießling (2001) has recently reviewed the evidence but has found it mostly based upon typological data and inconclusive.

Within East Cushitic, a major division (dating from Reinisch) is traditionally drawn between a Lowland and a Highland group. While the unitary status of the much smaller Highland East Cushitic (with such languages as Sidamo, Hadhyya, Kambata, Burjii) is more or less clear, no coherent internal classification of Lowland East Cushitic has been reached so far. Moreover, this dichotomy leaves out a few languages whose position is unclear: the Dullay cluster and the now extinct Yaaku. In an alternative, “flatter” view, no mention of a unitary Lowland group is made and the whole of East Cushitic is divided at least into the following parallel groups: a. Highland East Cushitic; b. Saho–Afar; c. Omo–Tana (Somali, Rendille, Bayso, Dhaasanac, Arobre, etc.); d. Oromoid (Oromó, Konso and various “Konsoid” varieties); e. Dullay; f. Yaaku (or, alternatively, e.+f. are grouped together in a Yaaku–Dullay group, e.g., Hayward [1978]). In Tosco (2000) I have proposed the following picture, in which each successive node branches off in a binary way: (a. Highland, b. Saho–Afar, c. Southern, d. Omo–Tana, e. Oromoid; f. Transversal).

b. Omotic Moreno (1940) had already proposed to divide Cushitic into two basic groups according to the shape of the independent personal pronouns of 1st and 2nd Singular: while most languages keep the Afraasi–inherited ani (1st) and ati (2nd), the West Cushitic languages had apparently the reverse pattern, with ta (1st) and ne (2nd). In 1969 Harold Fleming first proposed detachning from the bulk of Cushitic the “ta/ne–languages” and attaching them directly under Afrasian. Fleming’s view was backed up by Bender, and has become standard, although staunch criticism of the “Omotic Hypothesis” has been expressed several times, especially by Zaborski (1986) and by Lambert (esp. 1987, 1993). The whole question of the ani/ati vs. ta/ne isogloss is probably overstated; Bender (2000) has proposed to derive the 1st Sg. ta from a former copula, while the 2nd Sg. ne could well be a retention from Afrasian.

Bender (1986) put forward a bridging hypothesis under the label of “Cushmanotic”, within which the highest split would oppose Omotic and Cushitic. If, following recent attempts to lump together one or more of the four traditional Cushitic branches, Central Cushitic is downgraded to a branch of East Cushitic, and if South Cushitic suffers a similar fate, one will end up with two branches only: North (i.e., Beja), and all the rest (cf. also
CUSHITIC AND OMOTIC OVERVIEW

underwent fusion with it. In many languages (e.g., in Highland East Cushitic) the same development has occurred more than once and has given rise to new suffix-conjugated paradigms. The basic paradigms consist of a Past, a Non–Past, and a Dependent or a Present Negative. These paradigms are generally characterized by the endings –i, *-a, and *-u, respectively, which follow the subject-marking suffixes. Traces of a common Afromasian Stative conjugation are found in the Non–Past of the adjectival verbs in Saho and Somali, but also in the Affirmative Past in Burji and elsewhere (Banti 1987, forthcoming).

Cushitic and Omotic verbs have rich derivational systems, with at least a Causative (generally marked by *-a), a Reflexive–Middle (whose exponent is generally *-d or *-t), a Passive (marked by *-m, but lost or lexicalized in many languages), and various denominal extensions. Partial or total reduplication is common, generally with an iconic meaning: plural in nouns (e.g., Somali dab ‘fire’, dabab ‘fires’) and repetitive/iterative, or the like, in verbs.

5. Lexicon
The lexicon of Omotic is specifically discussed in this volume by Bender (v. Ch. 11; v. also Bender 2002). The percentages of lexical cognates between Cushitic languages are extremely low. As the four branches can be arranged on a North–South axis, cognates are generally higher between neighboring branches; according to Ehret (1976), they range from as low as 5–6% between North (Beja) and South Cushitic, and 8–14% between geographical neighboring groups (such as Central and East branches). It is therefore no surprise that attempts at lexical reconstruction have generally been limited to the single branches of Cushitic, with a particular emphasis on East Cushitic (v. Sasse [1982]).

REFERENCES


