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Northeast African Semitic:
Lexical Comparisons and Analysis

2013
Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

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Preface

The first inspiration of this book was a question I have often heard: 'How many languages are there in Ethiopia?' Linguists are fond of answering such questions with a sigh, saying something like 'Well, it's hard to say', when the better answer, certainly as more satisfactory to the questioner, would be 'Probably about X' where X is a number reasonably derived from research.

People want linguists to tell them something about what they consider a reasonable measure of human diversity: number of languages. Linguists, however, often seem to prefer to minimize the significance and even good sense of this question, and, indeed, it concerns a complicated and difficult matter. But we shouldn't think the complications are as interesting or helpful to the questioner as would be (at least at the outset) a simple answer, if an estimate. So this book begins by offering a review of research which can answer the question for Semitic languages of northeast Africa, and goes on to present and interpret lexical evidence about these languages and language-group relations.

The geography of linguistic diversity can be critical evidence in the reconstruction of human prehistory, so the willingness of linguists to examine the question of number of languages, in northeast Africa and elsewhere, is important for our ability to understand present-day issues which have their origin in prehistory. It seems reasonable to suppose that northeast Africa, as the region of contact between Africa and the East, and Europe, has particular modern relevance for linguistic prehistory.

This is not the place to argue about what is the best evidence for linguistic subgrouping: whether this is shared innovations in the sound system, grammar, or lexicon; of course the evidence of this book must be seen as support for the third of these. Only lexical comparisons can be readily quantified, and as such provide unambiguous evidence for not just difference between languages but degree of difference, as an objective and comparative measure of the extent of linguistic diversity.

Compared to the evidence of sound change, which is usually fraught with difficult-to-recognize exceptions, and compared to the evidence of grammatical change (for example of Hetzron 1972), the significance of which as indicative of critically innovative change is usually controversial, the lexical evidence for subgrouping is at least usually better understood and more readily subject to checking and evaluation. Importantly also, the lexical evidence contributes not just hypotheses for subgrouping, but *quantified* hypotheses significant for degrees of relationship in subgrouping. The lexicon (more specifically the lexical as opposed to the grammatical morphology) concerns words and morphemes relatively numerous in relation to points of comparison in the sound system and grammar, which, problematically, are subject to the analogical and systemic pressures of paradigms. The lexicon is unquestionably the domain of language in which change is so possible and so frequent that the innovative changes critical for subgrouping have a good degree of likelihood.

Of course one has to be selective in accessing the lexical data: the raw comparisons and previously offered etymologies, which are already vast and always under revision. I hope my selections will be thought reasonable if not entirely sufficient. One has to weigh the extent of data-coverage against available time, and available time can only be very subjectively known. And, critically, one has to avoid too much imagination when deciding

whether to count words as cognate. Moreover, the raw lexical evidence, cognate comparison sets when these are numerous and detailed enough to enable sorting into the many environments relevant for sound change, is simultaneously evidence for the study of sound change, research which so far is insufficiently carried out in these languages. The tables of comparison below (§2.6) and additional comparisons presented in dictionary entries (§3.3) present several hundred such cognate comparison sets.

I want to call attention to the great contribution in the present work of the dictionaries of my teacher Wolf Leslau, especially his *Etymological Dictionary of Gurage* (1979) and *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez* (1987) (for full bibliographical information see §5). I once proposed the present project to Professor Leslau as a work of co-authorship, but unfortunately it didn't progress quickly enough on my part to have the benefit of his participation (had he been willing, indeed). The present work would surely have greatly benefitted, too, from consultation with two friends and colleagues whose foundational contributions must also be frequently apparent below, Robert Hetzron and Lionel Bender. I have deeply felt the absence of opportunity for their advice and criticism.

Very fortunately the publisher of this book is Professor Leslau's longtime publisher, Harrassowitz Verlag, with their unequaled skill and great experience in presenting Semitic linguistic scholarship. I owe thanks also to series editors Werner Diem and Lutz Edzard for accepting this book and waiting patiently, for several years, for it to be finished. I call to the attention of others what all Ethiopianists must know by now, that works like the present would be much more difficult and much less complete without the profound and thorough resource which is the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, also from Harrassowitz. We are in great debt to Professor Siegbert Uhlig and his team for realizing that ambitious and invaluable project.

As expression of thanks for the help I have had from other colleagues too many to name, perhaps it suffices to mention the organizer-hosts of two series of academic meetings the scholarly constancy and value of which have seemed to me critical to promoting and advancing knowledge of Afroasiatic linguistics: the North American Conference on Afroasiatic Linguistics (NACAL), and the Italian Meetings of Hamito-Semitic / Afroasiatic Linguistics. It is easy to overlook the importance of these meetings for the professional contacts, intellectual stimulus, and broad sense of the field which they make possible.

Reprinted by permission of SIL International is Map 4 (p. 26), from *Language Death in Mesmes: a Sociolinguistic and Historical-Comparative Examination of a Disappearing Ethiopian-Semitic Language*, 2010, by Michael Ahland, Dallas: SIL International.

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East Lansing, Michigan, July 2013