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First preliminary report on the project for a new Cushitic comparative dictionary

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Abstract: The paper reports about the start of the joint research project by the two authors for the 4th attempt at composing the comparative dictionary of all Cushitic languages.

Keywords: comparative and historical linguistics, lexicography, linguistic reconstruction, etymology, Afro-Asiatic, Cushitic languages.

Dedicated to the blessed memories of
Aharon Dolgopolsky (1930-2012) and
Marvin Lionel Bender (1934-2008),
Authors of a few giant steps of
Cushitic and Omotic lexical comparison

Introduction

The Cushitic languages, in the current classification,¹ represent the fourth branch of the immense Afro-Asiatic macrofamily beside (1) Semitic, (2) Egyptian, (3) Berber, (4) Omotic and (5) Chadic. According to several lexicostatistical-glottochronological

* This paper is to hallmark the 30th anniversary of the collaboration between both authors, whose correspondence on Afro-Asiatic etymologies has started in March 1994.

¹ Established by J.H. Greenberg (1955, 1963) and modified by M.L. Bender (1975) adding Omotic.

calculations, Cushitic has been multiply corroborated as one of the earliest branch to have split off from the Afro-Asiatic parental community.²

Since none of the Cushitic languages were written in ancient times and Cushitic lexical items were only very scarcely recorded in ancient Egyptian sources,³ they are only known as spoken today or in the best case from the records of the past one and a half century made mostly by European linguists, which is why the historical linguistic reconstruction of the Cushitic lexicon has approximately similar importance and chances as, e.g., in the Fenno-Ugric (Uralic) language family (first attested sporadically in medieval Hungarian).

The *communis opinio* has divided Cushitic in four equipotential subbranches: (1) northern (Bed'awye of the nomadic Beja tribes located along the Red Sea coastline from Eritrea up to Egypt), (2) central (Agaw in Ethiopia), (3) East Cushitic (the biggest one, spread across Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya), (4) Southern Cushitic (where several daughter languages are either extinct or endangered on the border of Kenya and Tanzania, the southernmost extremity of the entire macrofamily).

Previous Cushitic lexicons

So far three common Cushitic lexicons of a similar scope, albeit fundamentally diverging in their approach and nature of their methodology, have been published.

The pioneering milestone was set by A.B. Dolgopol'skij (Moscow), the co-founder mastermind of the Muscovite school of historical linguistics, whose ground-breaking *Sravnitel'no-istoričeskaja fonetika kušitskich jazykov* ("Comparative-historical phonology of the Cushitic languages", usually abbreviated SIFKJa, where Omotic was included also as not yet treated as a separate branch at that day) has appeared in 1973 after a hole decade of comparative research on the Cushitic lexicon (starting in the early 1960s), where he has first demonstrated a system of regular consonantal correlations through hundreds of reconstructed Cushomotic lexical items, whose principal weakness is that, following the convention since L. Reinisch, the Viennese giant of Ethiopian field research and the supreme authority of Cushomotic linguistics for many decades, numerous distinct roots were forced together in one entry, while Dolgopol'skij immediately targeted to set up Proto-Cushomotic forms without first establishing the corresponding forms of the intermediate phases at the younger diachronic levels, e.g., Proto-Agaw vs. Proto-East Cushitic or Proto-Somaloid vs. Proto-Highland East Cushitic. Later on, esp. after his

² Already I.M. D'jakonov (1975) has pointed out by lexicostatistical means Cushitic (handled at that day yet as one branch with Omotic) to have branched off PAA as the first back in the 8th mill. BC.

³ Cf., e.g., the exceptionally ancient occurrence (probably the oldest one at all in the history Cushitic, of the Somali term for "frankincense" in the Egyptian texts as ʕntj.w (earliest attestation in Dyn. IV, cf. ÄWb I 279b, a special innovative formation of Somali, which is nowhere else attested in Cushitic, from ECU. *ʕan- "milk"), which was discovered by L. Reinisch (1902: 61 and 93) and then thoroughly demonstrated by G. Banti and R. Contini (1997: 175, 184), cf. also Takács (2014, coll. 8b-9b). Another old Cushitic trace ("only" some half of a millennium younger than the above one) has been detected among the dog names in the Middle Egyptian inscription of king Antef II (of Theban Dyn. XI, ca. 2100 BCE), cf. Kossman 2011 (with further literature).

alياهو (1976), Dolgopolsky himself abandoned his 1973 proto-forms and exploited the new results in reconstructing the Cushitic subbranches by H.-J. Sasse (1979) and Ch. Ehret (1980) for his milestone studies establishing some regular consonantal correspondences between East Cushitic and Egypto-Semitic (Dolgopolsky 1983 and 1988) as well as Southern Cushitic and Egypto-Semitic (Dolgopolsky 1987).

The circumstances for this latter approach have substantially bettered by the time when Ch. Ehret (UCLA) launched the second enterprise at a “Proto-Cushitic Reconstruction” (1987), which has greatly benefited from the epoch-maker progress in reconstructing the parental phonology and lexicon of Agaw by D. Appleyard (1984), of East Cushitic by P. Black (1974) and especially by H.-J. Sasse (1979) and of Southern Cushitic by Ch. Ehret (1980), although the latter work has rightly been blamed for little semantical rigour in establishing cognate pairs, which makes precisely the South Cushitic column of his comparative lexicon (where Omotic was excluded) less reliable and the weakest piece of chain in the whole work, which otherwise challenges to be used with care even today.

The third attempt was done by M.L. Bender somewhere between 2003-7,⁴ but the outcome had had to be long awaited (posthumously ed. by G. Hudson in 2020), where Bender followed the lexostatistic strategy of identifying cognacy without an emphasis on setting up too many complicated common proto-forms which in the indices suggest an utterly minimalistic conception of the parental Cushitic consonantal inventory. He, as usually in other comparative lexicons of his also, was working with selected semantical items of (mostly) the basic lexicon for achieving cognate pairs and their consonantal correlations and so a great deal in the vocabularies of the compared languages do not show up, while the entries are arranged in the alphabetic order of the selected English meanings.

Needless to say that all three attempts at Proto-Cushitic greatly differ in reconstructive methodology and, as a consequence, their results also. Each tool has its pros and cons and their progressive features complement one another. What makes the first attempt unchallenged in this context is Dolgopol’skij’s unique collection of comparative data (which only sometimes has to be re-arranged) and the true (not distorted or re-formatted) presentation of all the forms quoting directly the authentic sources with author names, while his original vision, first formulated in his SIFKJa, about a refined system of Cushitic sibilant affricates (that must be modified within Cushitic vs. Omotic on several points) has underlined the new model of Afro-Asiatic phonology⁵ as demonstrated in the

⁴ Which can be dated from the completion of his Omotic comparative lexicon (2003) until his premature passing away (in Jan. 2008), after which G. Hudson managed to overtake and edit Bender’s practically complete manuscript.

⁵ A.Ju. Militarev and O.V. Stolbova (1990: 45), successors of Dolgopol’skij in the Diakonovian dictionary team in a way, have expressed their view on this original vision of “the phonological principles of Afrasian reconstruction” in their talk on their “First approach to comparative-historical phonology of Afrasian (consonantism)” delivered for the Viennese Afro-Asiatic Congress (1987) as follows: “The funny thing about them is that A. Dolgopolsky’s brilliant hypothesis on Proto-Cushitic consonantism, he does not seem to insist upon any more, were among stimulating initial impulses in our work. What was not always well sustained in Cushitic has paradoxically proved more promising for Common Afrasian.”

revolutionary Afro-Asiatic comparative vocabulary (SISAJa I-III) by the team of I.M. D'jakonov a decade later. The highly fruitful exploitation of the Cushitic sublevel (Agaw, East and South Cushitic) reconstructions as well as the daring conception of the Cushitic parental consonantism (equally figured with a few sibilant affricates, only otherwise as in SIFKJa) make Ehret 1987 even today an unparalleled rich (over 640 entries with no semantical restrictions) and attractive inventory of Proto-Cushitic roots which approached the closest towards the maximally possible score of his day in this respect (it is only a pity that in 3 columns out of the 4, i.e., in Agaw, East and South Cushitic, mostly asterisked were only quoted, sometimes difficult to check back without the underlying real forms in the daughter languages). The comparative analysis of selected (mostly) basic semantemes in by Bender (2020) Cushitic has yielded reliable bases for certain lexicostatistical and glottochronological calculations instead of a comprehensive inventory of all the Cushitic roots one might possibly isolate.

The new comparative Cushitic project

Regarding the enumerated achievements as well as deficiencies of the three pioneering works, without which our present agenda would be unthinkable, one can presumably easily imagine the requirements we are to state as most fundamental *sine qua non* about the new Cushitic comparative dictionary:

(1) First and foremost, it should represent an as complete and encyclopaedic thesaurus of all the lexical items that occur at least in two Cushitic subbranches and are not originating from some recent borrowing (e.g., from Ethio-Semitic), whereby they may be reliably used for reconstructing an older common Cushitic heritage.

(2) In an appendix, in addition, all the lexemes should also be presented that only occur (for the time being) in one subbranch but do not appear to be a loanword and so that these may also be exploited in later interbranch comparison.

(3) All the lexical data should be quoted in their authentic forms, referring to the sources where these may be checked back, with the necessary comments (if needed) as for orthographical, transcriptional peculiarities or phonetic realization.

(4) The compared forms should adhere to regular consonantal correspondences whose establishment may reliably only be elaborated and achieved by a careful comparison of the essence drawn from the results by the three predecessors with our own research results. In each individual etymological entry, any change deviant from the expectable correspondence should be remarked and possibly commented on in special (foot)note. The lexical material should be arranged according to the smaller units headed preferably by the adequate sublevel proto-form. If the sporadic attestation of the compared forms does not make the cognacy evident, additional elucidation on the supposed intermediate phonological shifts is required. In case of an alternative etymology, special comment should be adduced in a footnote for the introduction and a brief discussion of the problem, which should result in an annotated apparatus attached to each entry or disputed form. Each etymological entry has to begin with a Proto-Cushitic form to which all previous suggestions by other authors should be adduced in a footnote.

As an outcome, an A-Z thesaurus, representing the whole of the immense Cushitic lexical heritage in thoroughly annotated and footnoted entries, is expected by both co-authors, namely Václav Blažek (VB) and Gábor Takács (GT), who have shared the domains of their responsibility as follows:

Bed'awye or Beja

In the parts of Beja Etymological Dictionary VB has done his best for an exhaustive documentation from the beginning of the 19th cent. till the present (Blažek 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2006, 2007, 2013b, 2020, 2021, 2023). VB supposes that, for a comprehensive tool like our Cushitic Comparative Dictionary, it is not that practical to quote all records for the same item and so VB would chose the best transcribed examples, e.g. 2-3, with full documentation of their sources covering the same item.

Agaw

Although D. Appleyard has basically established Proto-Agaw over some two decades of publishing his research results (1984-2006), this was in fact achieved by comparing the lexical evidence for certain semantical items from selected daughter languages as recorded by selected field researchers, complemented by VB with additional Agaw daughter languages and sources on the basis of a 100 wordlist for lexicostatistical purposes (Blažek 2006-2007a; 2014: 299-315), which GT intends to complete by all missing semantical items and available records as well as emend the previous comparisons on certain points in the manner of his pilot study (Takács 2012).

East Cushitic

Concerning the East Cushitic part of the Cushitic comparative dictionary, VB has planned a maximum transparent pattern organized according to individual subgroups: 0. East Cushitic protoform, I. Afar-Saho, II. Somaloid, III. Galaboid, IV. Oromoid, V. Dullay, VI. Highland East Cushitic, VII. Yaaku. VB would like to quote all adequate examples from all described languages, always with sources. In case of multiple sources for the same lexeme, the more precisely transcribed example should be preferred. In the case of semantic dispersion in various sources, all examples from one and the same languages should be quoted (frequently it is the case of “big” languages as Oromo, Somali, Afar-Saho, Sidamo with richer documentation). It was Paul Black in his dissertation (1974) who initiated the application of the standard comparative method to the East Cushitic languages. Thanks to his field research, he had at his disposal fresh data from Konso and D'irayta, two archaic Oromoid languages. His results were developed by Hans-Jürgen Sasse in a series of articles (1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1979) and crowned by his *Etymological dictionary of Burji* (1982), where he significantly expanded the

number of reliable Proto-East Cushitic reconstruction. Let us mention that Sasse newly described Dasanech (= Galab) and Burji languages. He also had an experience in diachronic Indo-European linguistics and was able to apply its principles to the comparative East Cushitic linguistics. In Sasse's *Etymological dictionary of Burji*, he included numerous comparisons identified by Dick Hayward, whose contribution to East Cushitic comparative linguistics was much more extensive as he published both descriptive and comparative studies devoted to the Dullay group (1978, 1989), Bayso (1978-9), D'irayta (1981), Afar (1985, co-authored by E. Parker) and Arbore (1984, 1988). Another scholar who shifted the level of reconstruction in the field the East Cushitic languages, namely of the group 'Sam' called by the author himself, was Bernd Heine (1976, 1978, 1981, 1982). Extraordinarily important are his comparative descriptions of Elmolo (1980) and especially Yaaku (1975). Challenged by Ch. Ehret & M. N. Ali's (1984) Proto-Somali based on the comparative survey of the Somali dialect for certain lexical items, the very useful reconstruction of Proto-Somali Marcello Lamberti (1986) was based on the same languages as Heine's Proto-Sam was (Somali dialects, Jiddu, Boni, Rendille). His daring alternative theory on labiovelar correlations in Cushitic-Omotiic (Lamberti 1988) is, however, rather hard for us to follow. Grover Hudson (1989) reconstructed a considerable part of the Highland East Cushitic protolanguage, including a rich lexical documentation according to English semantical items, collecting all possible forms for these items from the daughter languages including those not underlying any of the reconstructed items. Chris Ehret (1991) proposed his own conception of reconstructing Proto-East Cushitic phonetics, preceded by his attempt to reconstruct the Common Cushitic protolanguage (1987). He tried to expand the number of ejective consonants in both his East and Common Cushitic reconstructions. These ideas of Ehret have been further developed by Linda Arvanites in her dissertation (1991), devoted to the Proto-East Cushitic reconstruction. Taking into account all these attempts at reconstructing East Cushitic, we prefer the approach of Hans-Jürgen Sasse as the most convincing and reliable one. In addition, VB has published several studies mapping the selected partial (basic) lexicons of some individual East Cushitic groups (Somaloid, Dullay, Oromoid etc.) in a comparative context (2001, 2006-2007b, 2010, 2011; with Jan Záhorský 2008).

Southern Cushitic

No doubt, Ch. Ehret's (1980) pioneering phonological and lexical reconstruction of this southernmost, lexically pretty intact, subbranch of the entire Afro-Asiatic phylum requires fundamental revision for long known⁶ methodological reasons. This unique vocabulary, whose 100-item comparative wordlist has been re-arranged by VB on the basis of Ehret 1980 along with other sources for lexicostatistical purposes (Blažek 2005b; 2019: 45-88), has been since 1998 under permanent reconstruction by GT, who has released since then a whole series of papers and volume chapters on the exceptionally archaic traits of Southern Cushitic consonantism with a great number of newly reconstructed

⁶ Cf., e.g., the assessment by R. Hetzron & E.P. Tálós (1982).

lexical items (Takács 1999-2011). In addition, over the past many years, an entirely re-written and re-arranged Southern Cushitic comparative root dictionary has been on schedule by GT based on a comprehensive survey and re-evaluation of all the available lexical materials, to become an etymological dictionary, with due respect to the achievements so far in the comparison and reconstruction of the best studied West Rift languages (Whiteley 1958, Elderkin & Maghway 1992, Kießling 2002, Kießling & Mous 2004), which are being re-examined in constant contrast with East Rift, Ma'a and Dahalo (the other well-described lexicon of the subbranch). Although GT is aware of the recent dispute over the classification of the latter two languages, before drawing any hasty conclusions, he maintains the exploitation of their lexical treasure definitely displaying characteristic features of Southern Cushitic or Rift especially regarding the fine distinction of the labial triad (*b-, *p-, *f-) and their laterals (extinct from East Cushitic).

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