

ANDRZEJ ZABORSKI

(Kraków)

Perspectives on Afroasiatic Linguistics

Abstract

Cushitic ‘Afar and Saho ‘temporal’ and aspectual endings *-e*, *-a* and *-u* have cognates in archaic East Chadic. Moreover Cushitic ending *-a* has a cognate in Semitic Subjunctive *-a* while Cushitic *-u* has a cognate in Semitic Imperfect *-u* which has been shifted to subordinate clauses in Akkadian. Proto-Semitic Preterite zero ending may be going back to at least Proto-Semito-Cushito-Berber **-i* which resulted in zero in Semitic due to the ‘emphatic’ stress when Preterite was used also as Jussive while in Cushitic it survived mainly as *-e*. Another rival hypothesis: Cushitic Preterite/Perfect *-e* of the old prefix conjugation is due to analogy with the new suffix conjugation. Semitic Energetic with *-an* preserved in Modern Semitic of Southern Arabia (I think that this name is better than ‘Modern South Arabian’ in spite of its length) mainly as Conditional could be reconstructed as original Preterite and perhaps original *-an* > *-ən* could result in Cushitic *-e*. Egyptian independent pronouns of the second and third persons are innovations (apart from older forms which left traces in Old Egyptian) and therefore it is quite probable that in Egyptian, a relatively innovating language, prefix conjugation has been lost like in Middle Cushitic and the new suffix conjugation corresponding to nominalizations with suffixed possessive pronouns in Semitic has expanded.

Old Afroasiatic languages are rather closely related so that the comparative study of their morphologies seems to be rather easy in relative terms. The problem is that, as is well known, only the reconstruction of Proto-Semitic phonology and morphology is more or less satisfactory since the most archaic languages belonging to this branch are as closely related as Romance or even Slavonic languages. But even in case of Semitic there are problems which I am going to mention below. The relationship of the varieties of Berber is even closer and I do not think that it makes sense to speak about ‘Berber

languages' both from a purely linguistic and/or sociolinguistic/anthropological point of view – there are dialects of Berber language since there is a widespread consciousness of the cultural relationship of the speakers of different varieties especially thanks to the renaissance of Berber culture since about a quarter of century. Why the comparative grammar of Berber dialects is still in its initial stage? The reasons are manifold. The older generation of specialists in Berber had a typically positivist approach and it was frequently hypercritical and reluctant to undertake reconstruction. It is true that there are still dialects of Berber which have not been described at all or have been analyzed only superficially but what we already know is enough for a systematic comparison and reconstruction of Proto-Berber morphology which should be supplemented by the data from future studies of little known dialects and subdialects. The Cushitic branch is very differentiated since at least four stages of the development are clearly visible but languages of the most archaic stage, viz. Beja (North Cushitic and certainly not a separate branch of Afroasiatic!), 'Afar-Saho and Somali-Rendille show so many archaic traits that their comparison with Semitic and Berber is a relatively simple matter. So far the archaism of Beja has been emphasized but it seems that in several respects 'Afar-Saho is closer to Semitic than Beja. As I have shown in several papers, 'Afar-Saho independent pronouns are closer to Semitic pronouns than Beja pronouns which are, apart from the first person both singular and plural, innovations typologically identical (i.e. consisting of possessive pronouns suffixed to a noun, e.g. Beja *bar-uu-k* 'you masc.', *bat-uu-k* 'you fem.', *bar-u-h/bar-u-s* 'he') with pronouns in Egyptian, Tigrinya and several other Ethiosemitic languages which seems to be due largely although not exclusively to contact in the frame of the North East African language area and its subareas (e.g. Erythrean language subarea). Moreover 'Afar-Saho has preserved the vocalic endings of the 'tenses', viz. *-u* and *-a* which have cognates in Semitic 'Imperfect' *-u* (not only in Classical Arabic but also in Akkadian *iparras-u*, *iprus-u*, *iptaras-u* in the non-pausal position, viz. in subordinated clauses and hence called 'Subordinative' which is correct synchronically but not diachronically while calling *iprus-u* 'Subjunctive' is an error (pace Jungraihtmayr 2005!) also since this is the Old Imperfect shifted to dependent clauses; in 'Afar-Saho forms with *-u* have been shifted to Subjunctive/Jussive) and Subjunctive *-a* (in 'Afar-Saho preserved in Negative Present that is a typically modal form) which have been lost in Berber like in the great majority of the Semitic languages but preserved in East Chadic and in 'Middle' West Cushitic, e.g. Mubi Perfect *mòt-i* and Imperfect *mòt-a* 'to die', Mokilko Perfect *zír-è*, Imperfect *sár-á* 'to beat, Perfect 'ûn-è, Imperfect 'àaniy-á, Cohortative 'àan-ò (see Saho Subjunctive with *-o* and 'Afar 'Requestive *na-duur-o*? 'may we return?'); Migama Perfect 'ùll-é, Imperfect 'òllòw-á 'to lick'; there is *-e* or *-i* in the Perfect and *-u* in the Subjunctive of many verbs in Tangale and other languages of the Bole-Tangale group. The relationship of Cushitic and Chadic Perfect *-e/-i*, Imperfect *-a*, Subjunctive *-u/-o* is striking. This is a very important isogloss which I indicated to H. Jungraihtmayr in Budapest years ago.

'Afar-Saho has preserved also a cognate of the Semitic Energetic (surviving in Akkadian as 'Ventive' mainly in verbs of motion!) with *-an* in the paradigms called

Imperfect and Perfect Probable as well as in 'Purposive'. By the way, this Energetic which today survives as a Conditional (sometimes also in the Imperfect, e.g. Jibbali Perfect *efúkur*, Imperfect and Conditional *yfúkr-en*, Subjunctive *yfókur* 'to think'; Harsusi Perfect *aqāf*, Imperfect *yaqāf-en*, Subjunctive *yaqāf* 'to turn away') in several Modern Semitic languages of Southern Arabia (I prefer this lengthy name to the current 'Modern South Arabian') may be reconstructed as an Old Past tense limited to conditional and to volitive clauses. Modern Semitic of Southern Arabia (MSSA) languages are the most archaic living Semitic languages but, unfortunately, their description has been greatly neglected. In my opinion one of the most important archaisms surviving in MSSA is found in the verbal morphology where in some conjugations (in the Latin sense!) 'Imperfect Indicative' and Subjunctive as well as Conditional have different stem ablaut, e.g. Jibbali Perfect *emyét*, Imperfect *yamyət-an*, Subjunctive *yémyət* 'to die', Perfect *fhem*, Imperfect *yāfhúm*, Subjunctive *yāfhūn* 'to understand'. I think that the situation in Semitic where Imperfect Indicative, Preterite and Subjunctive differed only in vocalic endings (-*u*, zero and -*a* respectively) is a later development; traces of different stem vocalism are seen e.g. in the different, allegedly optional, vocalism of the Prefix Conjugation stem in Classical Arabic. The situation in 'Afar-Saho where there are both different stem ablauts and different vocal endings seems to be the most archaic although secondary vowel assimilations might have also occurred. East Chadic languages also preserve many examples of stem ablaut in different 'tenses'. On the basis of these important pronominal and verbal isoglosses it is possible to postulate a relationship between Semitic and Cushitic closer than the relationship between Semitic and Berber although we must always remember that in case of closely related languages isoglosses are often fuzzy and contradictory and there are transitory dialects ('Übergangsdialekte' in German) which have some features typical of two otherwise separate branches. By the way, both Beja and Berber have at least one feature in common: Beja prefixed and declined definite article has a cognate in Berber vocalic prefixes of 'state' which can be a relative common archaism (even West Semitic definite article should be reconstructed as inflected masculine **han(V)*, **hin(V)*, fem. **hat(T)*, **hit(V)*, plural **hal(V)*, **hil(V)* with **h- > ' and with assimilation of -C except -l in Classical Arabic to the first stem consonant; see also probable remnants of the definite article in Hausa *há-rshèe* 'tongue' going back to Afroasiatic **lis*, and *há-ncii* 'nose' < Chadic **ntn*) although it can be also an areal feature. The hypothesis that among Archaic Cushitic languages Beja might be the closest to Berber should be reconsidered. In any case it is clear that there is a separate branch consisting of Semitic, Cushitic and Berber (all of them have well preserved prefix conjugations which are absent in Egyptian and in Chadic) and perhaps this subgroup can be further divided into Semitocushitic and Berber.*

Semitic verbal categories have been reconstructed so far mainly on the basis of the evidence of Akkadian which provides cognates with Berber (its Intensive Present with gemination in some conjugations and the suffix conjugation of stative verbs) as shown by O. Rö s s l e r. Akkadian certainly is very archaic in many (but not all!) respects but Assyriologists who are, in their majority, historians and philologists have a tendency to

confound archaism of the testimonies (i.e. the early date of the oldest written records) with linguistic archaism and protest against a comparison of Akkadian with Cushitic or Berber recorded over four thousand years later. As is well known, closely related archaic and very innovating languages can coexist, e.g. there is Afrikaans which is the most 'analytic', i.e. inflectionless Indo-European language and at the same time there is Icelandic with its very intricate and archaic inflection as well as Modern Standard German which is less archaic than Icelandic but much more archaic than Modern English which, in its turn, preserves more archaisms than Afrikaans etc. As is well known, Lithuanian recorded for the first time in the 16th century A.D. has preserved an immense amount of archaisms lost in many other living Indo-European languages. And finally we have to bear in mind that even if we had had data only on the living Hamitosemitic languages, viz. the data going back only to the 19th century A.D., our reconstruction of Proto-Semitic and Proto-Afroasiatic/Hamitosemitic would have been less clear in details but certainly not much different from the historical grammar taking into account 'ancient' Afroasiatic languages. The historians' and philologists' prejudice against Cushitic, Berber and Chadic languages should be abandoned and linguists working on Semitic linguistics should start learning at least Berber, 'Afar-Saho (hyperenthusiastically hailed as 'Semitic' by the 'classical' Semitist Ewald Wagner about 1840), Beja as well as Egyptian. However, it must be acknowledged that the best (although controversial in many respects) detailed comparative grammar of Semitic that we have, viz. the synthesis by Kienast (2001) presents also Kienast's comparison with Berber, a comparative overview of selected Cushitic languages by Gragg and a very positivist and rather 'anticomparativist' sketch of Egyptian by E. Graefe while Lipiński (second edition in 2001) also goes into non-Semitic branches of Afroasiatic but does it in a very unoriginal and unreliable way (cf. Zaborski 2005). Nevertheless the future will not be easy for Afroasiatic comparatism since there is still no Afroasiatic/Hamitosemitic curriculum comparable to Indo-European curricula.

As far as comparative phonology and comparative lexicon is concerned, after the rather limited success of the classical pioneer study by Marcel Cohen and the incomplete provisional version of the comparative dictionary by Igor Diakonoff and his pupils which has remained little known, both progress and regress have been achieved. The comparative study by Chris Ehret has been a failure almost in every respect while the comparative dictionary by Stolbova and Orel (the co-authors should be named rather in this order since Orel was not an Afroasiaticist at all) contains a portion of good reconstructions connected with Chadic thanks to Stolbova and a much bigger portion of faulty or at least uncertain comparisons so that the whole dictionary can be used only with the greatest caution. Most important contributions to the comparative lexicon of Afroasiatic have been published by V. Blažek in a number of articles and by G. Takács mainly in his etymological dictionary of Egyptian which, unfortunately, has been stopped by Brill publishers after a series of quite unfair and hypercritical attacks by Egyptologists, mainly philologists, who have no knowledge of other Afroasiatic languages. Although inaccuracies and even mistakes are inevitable in such a big enterprise as an

etymological dictionary, especially of an ancient language, nevertheless Takács's dictionary means great progress and its publication should be continued.

It is obvious that the quality of phonological and lexical comparison on the general Afroasiatic scale depends on the range and quality of the internal comparison within particular branches of the superfamily. We still do not have a complete comparative dictionary of the Semitic languages since the dictionary initiated by David Cohen is progressing very slowly. Since its publications is going on, it is rather natural that, quite correctly, L. Kogan and A. Militarev have begun publication of another comparative Semitic dictionary (with important references to other Afroasiatic languages!) in separate volumes devoted to different parts of the lexicon. This is a very promising project indeed. For Berber K. Naït Zerrad has started publishing the comparative dictionary of Berber roots which will be the most valuable help for linguists working on other branches and on the general Afroasiatic level. There is nothing like a comparative dictionary of the Cushitic languages although we have, e.g. the comparative dictionary of the Agaw branch (in my view not a separate Central Cushitic branch but a subbranch of East Cushitic) by D. Appleyard and a comparative dictionary of Highland East Cushitic by G. Hudson, not to mention the 'classical' comparative study of the Cushitic phonology and lexicon by A. Dolgopolsky. For Chadic there is an overall comparison of lexical roots by H. Jungraithmayr and D. Ibrizimow which has been, unnecessarily, limited to rather arbitrarily selected basic lexicon and there is a comparative dictionary (dealing with all the Afroasiatic languages) of the Angas branch by G. Takács who has thus established a standard to be followed and developed by Chadicists.

It becomes clearer and clearer that, as expected, Afroasiatic languages have preserved a big amount of common vocabulary going back to Proto-Afroasiatic dialect cluster. Proto-Afroasiatic that we are able to reconstruct must have consisted of fairly closely related dialects with overlapping 'boundaries'. The present reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European takes the existence of dialect differentiation of the proto-language for granted (which does not mean that the reconstruction might abandon strict principles of comparison and reconstruction) and the same approach should be taken by specialists on Afroasiatic.

What about a possible relationship of Afroasiatic to other language families? The inclusion of Afroasiatic within the hypothetical Nostratic hyperfamily is possible but much more research must be done both on Afroasiatic and Nostratic level (including the comparative study and reconstruction of other branches of the hyperfamily). Personal pronouns seem to be the strongest isogloss. A possibility of a remote relationship (or only contact?) with some languages grouped rather provisionally under the label of 'Nilo-Saharan' is not very clear at all. In any case it seems to me certain, that at least languages labeled as 'South Omotic' and as 'Mao group' are not Afroasiatic at all and are genetically related to the neighboring languages classified as 'Nilo-Saharan'. Very little known Onghota certainly shows nothing in common with Afroasiatic (perhaps it belongs to the enigmatic Nilo-Saharan!) and its classification by H. Fleming is quite aberrant and actually antiscientific. Other 'Omotic' languages of South West Ethiopia can be probably (!) grouped back as West Cushitic but more research is needed to support

this hypothesis. Contact and interference in the South West Ethiopian language subarea have greatly complicated and obscured genetic ties between the languages of the region. It remains to be demonstrated whether this goes beyond recognition.

Chadic languages must have intensively interfered with non-Afroasiatic languages of West Africa. This is clear due both to linguistic and racial evidence. I know that racial arguments have been compromised in the past because of their racist misuse and they are, unduly, rather ‘unfashionable’ today but facts are facts – the speakers of the Chadic languages belong to another race and this is a proof of a strong interference with other languages in prehistoric times. I do not think that the comparison with Mande languages by M u k a r o v s k y really suggests genetic ties and I do not think that Songhai shows any special genetic ties with Afroasiatic as proposed by N i c o l a ĭ.

It is sad that progress in Afroasiatic linguistics has been quite slow in many respects (although so many ‘new’ Cushitic and Chadic languages have been recorded and described!) but on the other hand this discipline offers so much for younger scholars who can continue and achieve progress.

Selected References

- Jungraithmayr H. 2005. “Le paradigme verbal en –U dans les langues chamito-sémitiques”. *Faits de Langues* 26, 65–80.
- Kienast B. 2001. *Historische semitische Sprachwissenschaft*. Wiesbaden.
- Lipiński E. 2001. *Semitic Languages; Outline of a Comparative Grammar*. Leuven.
- Zaborski A. 2005. “Comparative Semitic Studies: *status quaestionis*”. *Aula Orientalis* 23, 9–15.