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## **What is New in Ethiopian and other African Language Areas ?**

### **Resumé**

Le ‘Sprachbund’ de l’Afrique Nord-Est ou, autrement, Macroethiopien, existe malgré des oppositions hypercritiques de certains linguistes. Il englobe au moins 9 moindre ‘Sprachbuende’ que j’ai déjà identifiées en 1991 et, à cette occasion, j’ai aussi démontré que seulement 6 traits des langues appartenant à ce ‘Sprachbund’, figurant sur la liste de Ferguson (et de Bender!) de 1976, peuvent être considérés comme étant apparus à la suite de contacts et d’interférences, tandis que les autres traits communs décolent de la parenté dans le cadre du sémitique et du chamito-sémitique. Je propose, au total traits types pour ce ‘Sprachbund’, auxquels il faut ajouter ceux établis par Crass, Meyer et Bisang et cette liste sera, très probablement, élargie. En Afrique, il existe de nombreux autres ‘Sprachbuende’ qui, souvent, s’embriquent, mais ne sont pas fondés, notamment à cause d’un degré trop élevé de généralité et du hasard, les tentatives de considérer toute l’Afrique comme un seul grand ‘Sprachbund’ et de chercher des traits prétendument africains typiques.

Historically what is still rather controversially called ‘African linguistics’ (does anything like ‘Asian linguistics’ exist?) has always been, apart from descriptive studies, a combination of genetic and typological approaches, frequently with a heavy preponderance of typology like in the Handbook of African Languages. Areal linguistics, although closely connected with typology, was not really in

focus for the long time although language contact and interference (in the past usually limited to the simplistic idea of ‘borrowing’) was a recognized and even often overestimated factor practically everywhere in Africa. The existence of the Ethiopian (or North-Eastern African) Language Area was recognized already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at least by Franz Praetorius (1871, 1879, 1880, 1893a and b; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century followed by Moreno 1948, Leslau 1945, 1952, 1959 and others) while this recognition has been usually attributed to the papers of 1970 and 1976 signed by Charles Ferguson but actually written together with or perhaps even mainly by M.L. Bender (see Bender 2003: 40; 31, 39). I was the first to reject not the idea of the Ethiopian Language Area but the mistaken Ferguson and Bender list of the alleged Ethiopian areal features (Zaborski 1991) which contains, in its majority (except the first six features!), actually genetic Semitic or Afroasiatic elements and I was the first to postulate the existence of the Ethiopian Macroarea consisting of a series of concatenated subareas. Since my papers of 1991 and its sequel (2003a) appeared in rather rare and not easily accessible publications, my ideas have remained largely unknown. The existence of the Ethiopian Language Area (cf. Anonymous n.d. and Ongaye Oda 2007) has been later questioned by Mauro Tosco who at first recognized the existence of areal problems in Ethiopia (see Tosco 1994 and 1996) but later (2000) based his negative approach on the rejection of most of the Bender’s and Ferguson’s genetic features (without a reference to my earlier paper!) postulating some rather hypercritical conditions (see also Stolz 2002 and Urban 2007; cf. Dimmendaal 2001 for much better discussion, also Simpson 1994) which could make impossible not only the recognition of the Ethiopian but also of many other if not all the acknowledged language areas. In his newest paper Tosco (2008) admits that there is, following my proposal of 1991 and using Thompson’s (1976) data, a subarea which he calls Northern Eritrean Language Area. Tosco’s insistence on the use of precise conditions which should be met in order to prove the existence of a language area is correct. Now Tosco even acknowledges that “the necessary genetic diversity of the languages of the area, and the (typological – A.Z.) ‘unnaturalness’ principle ...cannot, on both theo-

retical and empirical grounds, be fully met” (p. 119, see also p. 115 and 116). Obviously a radical application of the condition of the lack of even remote genetic relationship and the rejection of “area-defining features (established – A.Z.) on the basis of typological tendencies and regularities” (p. 114) would nullify even the ‘classical’ Balkan language area whose minor details are still subject of discussion. But it is difficult to agree with Tosco’s third condition that “language areas should not be overlapping – unless one accepts that a language can belong to two different areas defined, at least partially, by the same features” (p. 115). In my opinion this statement is rather circular. At first Tosco excludes Beja as well as Tigrinya and Saho for the subarea in quite an arbitrary way saying that “all these languages do not conform fully to the word order patterns discussed here” (p. 117) but on the same page he himself shows that the languages he has included in the subarea, viz. Tigre, Bilin, Kunama and Nera also do not ‘fully conform’ to the selected patterns! Who can deny that there has been Tigre-Southern Beja, Tigre-Tigrinya, Bilin-Tigrinya, Saho-Tigrinya and even Saho-Tigre contact and interference which left traces not only in the lexicon? Can we exclude Tigrinya-Amharic secondary interference (certainly blurred by their genetic ties!)? Within the ‘Eritrean’ subarea there are smaller subareas involving Beja, Tigre and Arabic, then Bilin and Tigre, then Bilin, Tigre and Nara, then Saho, Afar, Tigre and Tigrinya etc. Everywhere Arabic (not one variety!) appears as an adstratum. By the way it is noteworthy that such an interesting areal feature like independent pronouns (Zaborski 1989, 1998 and 2003: 63, Tewolde 2005) consisting of possessive pronouns suffixed to a noun (sometimes only a particle like in Arabic *inna-ni*, *inna-ka* etc.?) are common to Beja (e.g. *bar-uu/uus* ‘he’; *bar*+suffixed pronoun has been borrowed into Shukriyya Arabic of the Sudan in which even the first person, e.g. *ana baraa-y* ‘I myself’ has been created) and to Tigrinya (*nEss-u* ‘he’) but not to Tigre (at least Tigre dialects that we know) which has been in contact with Beja for many centuries, perhaps almost two millennia and this type of independent pronouns occurs also far in the South, e.g. in Amharic and in Gurage while in the North it was a very early innovation of Egyptian. ‘Afar-Tigrinya

and ‘Afar-Arabic contact and interference is a fact and although the influence of Tigrinya upon ‘Afar has been greatly exaggerated by Hayward (who stressed first of all the retention of the prefix conjugation as allegedly due mainly to the contact with Tigrinya but this could be only a minor influence since so many other Cushitic languages contacting and interfering with languages having well preserved prefix conjugations have either greatly limited its use like Somali or given it up; cf. also Hayward 1991 and 2000), nevertheless these languages make a small area also with Arabic as only a relatively younger adstratum. Exactly North-Eastern Africa is a very good example of overlapping (or interacting) areas.

Genetic and areal studies cannot be separated and I do not think that “Language arealness is ... orthogonal so to speak to other classifications, not complementary to them” (Tosco 2008: 119) whatever the meaning of the metaphor “orthogonal” in this case may be. I also do not think that “we will have discovered history through language arealness, rather than the other way round” (Tosco: 119-120). Whenever reliable historical (not linguistic!) sources showing not only geographical proximity but also cultural and communicative, viz. language contact are available we must use them for reconstructing the wider background of the cultural and not only language area. Obviously there can be no language area without a cultural area, the latter not necessarily interpreted in the old “Kulturkreis” sense. Not only in the case of the lack of non-linguistic historical sources areal linguistics helps to throw some light on prehistory.

Crass and Meyer (2008: 234-250) have made a very important contribution discovering a number of new areal features which are by no means trivial. I only have to express my astonishment by the fact that both authors say that they “enlarge the Ferguson’s number of features considerably”. The first thing to do should be either a very drastic reduction of Bender/Ferguson features (Zaborski 1991 and 2003a – only six morphological common features are valid) or rather sending their mistaken ideas back to the museum of the history of research since it should **not** be “the reference for all scholars” (Crass 2006: 231, see also Crass and Bisang 2004; Bisang 2006).

In my opinion nine subareas (Zaborski 1991 and 2003a: 64) of the Ethiopian Macroarea are rather uncontested and some other are quite probable: 1. Eritrean, 2. Sudano-Eritrean, 3. Central Ethiopian, 4. Gurage-Highland East Cushitic-Yemsa (cf. Rapold and Zaugg-Coretti n.d.) - Welamo, 5. South Western (see Sasse 1986), 6. Western peripheral, 7. Eastern peripheral, 8. Kenyan (see e.g. Klein-Arendt 1988), 9. Tanzanian. The actual number cannot be a simple total of individual subareas since there are subareas of the first and of a second order, e.g. Northern Omo, Southern Omo and Maji. As I said, the subareas are overlapping (their boundaries are as fuzzy as most boundaries between dialects of the same language where transitional dialects are frequent) and some features extend over two or more subareas, e.g. the so-called 'selectors' or preverbal clitic clusters for person, tense etc. which appear in languages of Southern Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. A division into core nucleus and periphery may not always be easy or even possible to discover. We should start with the investigation and surveys of the smallest subareas like Crass and Meyer have done. The simplistic approach e.g. by Sarah Thomason (2001) telling us about a unilateral influence of Cushitic on Ethiosemitic is obviously wrong (Zaborski 2003b; on the interaction of Ethiosemitic and Cushitic see e.g. Kapeliuk 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2005; Raz 1989, Appleyard 1978, 1989). The influence of the contacting and interfering languages has been mutual or bidirectional although the degree of this mutual influence, its intensity and scope has been different for various linguistic and sociolinguistic reasons. The same language could be both a donor and a borrower, e.g. Amharic and Oromo have both influenced other languages and have been influenced by them. Moreover a diachronic perspective must be taken into consideration although, due to the lack of earlier records, it is very difficult to reconstruct the directions and relative chronologies of different and recurring waves. There can be no doubt that in different periods and in different regions (migrations resulted in contact with different languages) 'Cushitic' features have been transmitted by Cushiticized Semites and some Ethiosemitic features have been transmitted farther by Semiticized Cushites.

This is a slightly updated list (see Zaborski 2003a) of the typical (but not necessarily occurring in all the languages!) Macroethiopian areal features:

1. “Emphatic” consonants are pronounced as glottalized or ejective.
2. Labialized consonants are frequent
3. Some palatalized consonants are innovations
4. Geminated consonants are frequent
5. Subject in the oblique case
6. A tendency to limit the use of nominal plural
7. Widespread use of singulative
8. New forms of independent pronouns (mainly third and second persons) using suffixed pronouns (see above)
9. S-OV syntactic group order (for an exception see Bliese and Gignarta Sokka 1986; see also Dimmendaal 2008 for a wider perspective)
10. Dependent clauses precede main clauses
11. Main verbs precede auxiliaries
12. Adjectives precede nouns which they qualify (but cf. Tosco 2008)
13. Possessor precedes the possessed
14. Relative clauses are frequent when other languages use simple sentences
15. Limited use of indirect speech
16. Connectors (e.g. -t, -m) suffixed to verbs
17. Complicate new verbal systems with many new paradigms
18. In new periphrastic tenses both the main verb and the auxiliary are fully inflected
19. Relatively considerable number of different ‘to be’ verbs
20. Compound verbs with the auxiliary which etymologically means ‘to say’, ‘to live’, ‘to be’ (see Cohen, Simeone-Senelle, Vanhove 2002)
21. After a renewal of the Present tense the Old Present survives as Negative Present
22. Regular negative verbal paradigms; also negative copulas in many languages (on copulas see Crass and Meyer 2007)

23. Special paradigms of verbs in relative clauses
24. Special paradigms in focus constructions
25. Gerund or ‘converb’ (cf. Crass 2007)
26. Development of future tenses, sometimes two or even three
27. Postpositions and circumpositions
28. Postpositions functioning as new case endings

Languages provisionally classified as Nilo-Saharan and some Cushitic languages interfered in South West Ethiopia and Cushitic influenced Nilo-Saharan in the South up to Tanzania. In my opinion a part of the so-called ‘Omotic’ languages (mainly Hamer-Ari-Banna and probably also the little known Mao and company, see Zaborski 2004) are not Afroasiatic at all (cf. Theil 2008 who classifies all ‘Omotic’ as non-Afroasiatic) while another part can be hypothetically (!), viz. provisionally classified as West Cushitic. If the latter part could be classified as a separate sixth branch of Afroasiatic at all, the number of the alleged features of direct descent from Proto-Afroasiatic could have been very, very small (see Bender 2003, 27 admitting a possibility that Omotic languages are not Afroasiatic at all but elsewhere considering Omotic as a member of Afroasiatic, see p. 29 and note 16 on p. 41) while other Afroasiatic features could be easily ascribed to contact with Cushitic and actually it could be quite difficult to decide what goes back to Proto-Afroasiatic (via Proto-Cushitic) and what is due to secondary contact in the area. Most probably there have been at least two waves – one older and one recent – of Cushitic influence in South West Ethiopia. Actually after a better reconstruction even my alleged West Cushitic (that is ‘Omotic’ minus ‘South Omotic’ and ‘Maoid’) can appear to have been originally a branch (or branches?) of the enigmatic Nilo-Saharan branch which (this branch but not all the Nilo-Saharan languages whose genetic relationship is still largely hypothetical!) underwent a strong influence of a Cushitic adstratum. The newest study by Vaclav Blažek (2008) using the modernized version of lexicostatistics is important as far as the lexical comparison and phonological reconstruction is concerned but the final conclusion that Omotic actually can be a separate branch of Afroasiatic is quite hypotheti-



cal. In my opinion not only the number of cognates of the very little known ‘Maoid’ group as well as of ‘South Omotic’ (consisting of Ari, Hamar, Banna, Karo, Dime) with other languages is quite small and can be due to borrowing from Cushitic in spite of the fact that they belong to the basic vocabulary, but first of all the number of vocabulary shared by the alleged ‘Omotic’ with Afroasiatic languages but not with Cushitic is limited and may be due either to the loss of these lexemes in Cushitic or to our imperfect knowledge of the Cushitic lexicon. In other words so there is nothing detected in the lexicon that would force us to separate the alleged ‘Omotic’ from Cushitic.

Chad-Ethiopian ‘zone’ has been hypothetically mentioned by some scholars (Heine 1975, Güldemann 2005 and 2008: 184). This may be a too far-fetched hypothesis especially since features like syntactic group (‘word’) order or tone cannot be taken alone as criteria without other, first of all morphological features.

There is no doubt about the existence of many other language areas in Africa like the ‘Tanzanian Rift Valley Area’ (see the very convincing characteristic by Kiessling, Mous and Nurse 2008) and even the “Macro-Sudan Belt (Area)” (as postulated by Güldemann; see also Caron and Zima 2006, Zima 2006) but is there anything like an ‘African language area’? This question has been asked by several scholars (e.g. Greenberg 1959, 1983, Meeussen 1975; Gilman 1986) but the answers have been either inconclusive or obviously premature. In the newest study by Heine and Zelealem Leyew (2008: 34) we read that “... there is evidence to define Africa as a linguistic area; African languages exhibit significantly more of the eleven properties ... than non-African languages do...” but a few lines later they present themselves several reservations which almost invalidate their first conclusion. Actually it is surprising that features like ‘lexical and/or grammatical tones’, ‘verbal derivational suffixes’, ‘nominal modifiers follow the noun’ etc. (see table 2.2 on p. 29) can be seriously considered as “African typological properties” since they are so common in many languages from other parts of the world. In my opinion this kind of generalizations backed by pseudo-statistical approach is completely mistaken.

In general, typological conclusions based on randomly selected number of the known languages (usually quite a limited number in comparison with hundreds of unknown languages!) are either very weak or, in the best case, quite provisional. E.g. for an investigation of the alleged ‘African areal features’ in the field of phonology the database consisting of some 150 languages (Clements and Rialland 2008: 83-85) is far too small to provide reliable evidence. It is remarkable that the ‘sixth phonological zones in Africa’ (Clements and Rialland 2008, see Map 3.1) had been postulated **before** the presentation of the data and their analysis in a clearly aprioric way. The authors make only superficial excuses for the fact that the frontiers between their ‘zones’ are quite arbitrary, e.g. they include Nubian languages within the North Zone together with Arabic and Berber, they do not even mention Nilo-Saharan languages (probably also a part of the so-called ‘Omotic’ languages belongs to the otherwise hypothetical Nilo-Saharan and on p. 72 the authors do not even suppose an ‘Omotic’/‘West Cushitic’ and Nilo-Saharan contact which is a well known fact!) in the North-Eastern African contact zone which they call, strangely enough, just ‘East’. The authors ask a trivial question whether a ‘characteristically African phonological property, that is common to the continent as a whole’ and the obvious answer is ‘no!’. The whole presentation is rather an unsystematic collection of information on some randomly selected languages and we hardly get an explanation of the existing situation. E.g. we learn that ‘It is not clear to us whether nasal systems of this type have been inherited from a common source, whether they result from diffusion, or whether they have evolved independently in different languages’ but without providing even hypothetical answers to similar questions it is impossible to establish any zones or areas in a serious way. There are also factual mistakes, e.g. how can we know that ‘all Chadic languages are tonal’ (p. 72) while most of the Chadic languages have not been described so far; we read that ‘predictable stress-accent occurs across most varieties of Arabic’ (p. 69) but actually there is no exception to this rule in Arabic dialects; it is not true that implosive consonants ‘occur distinctively ... in Cushitic languages’ (p. 59) although they do occur in Dahalo. The recon-

struction of /p/ for Proto-Afroasiatic is well secured (here it is only mentioned in a footnote, see p. 67) and I do not think that something like „P-lessness” in many African languages can be reasonably attributed to language contact in the scale of the continent.

Also the list of 19 morphosyntactic ‘African’ features is based on a far too limited evidence, it is imprecise and inconclusive. E.g. what is the use of a feature like “The use of special verb forms in sequential constructions” allegedly “particularly widespread among African languages” or the alleged feature formulated as “Focus strategies implying morphosyntactic alterations, and in particular focus marking be means of verbal inflection, are particularly common in Africa” (Creissels et al., 2008, p. 149)?

In short: ‘African linguistics’, viz. a whole-sale comparison of all the African languages is not scientifically justified in the same way as it does not make sense to compare all the ‘Asian’ languages. Typological comparison cannot be performed as a kind of unsystematic collection, actually a mix of trivialities, peculiarities, oddities and rarities. Typological comparison and analysis must take all the evidence into consideration and if so many languages remain unknown then generalizations must be either avoided or limited to small groups of languages. In general we need the study of the particular small sub-areas before we attempt to characterize larger areas or languages macro-areas not to mention real big linguistic cycles (this term was used e.g. by Milewski 1965: 153-154, 186) or nets, viz. overlapping or concatenated macro-areas.

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