

The Cushitic Language Project

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For the first time an Oriental Institute staff member is organizing a research project in sub-Saharan Africa. Political conditions permitting, I will be spending a year in Ethiopia gathering material for a small dictionary of the Galla language (or better, as its speakers call it, Oromo).

Actually this project is less tangential to traditional preoccupations of the Oriental Institute than might at first seem to be the case. In the first place Ethiopia, isolated on its high plateau, has always been a unique kind of crossroads between Africa and the Near East, a fabulous kingdom just on the periphery of the known world of the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Greeks. It was the first point of entry (return?) of Semitic-speaking peoples into Africa, from Southern Arabia across the narrow Bab al-Mandab, the mouth of the Red Sea; Amharic, the official language of the country, is a Semitic language. In the second place, and more important for my purposes, Ethiopia is the home of the Cushitic languages. With the exception of a couple of problematic outliers in Tanzania, all of the forty-odd Cushitic languages are spoken in Ethiopia, with spillover into Somalia and the border areas of Kenya and Sudan. Oromo is the most prominent representative of the Cushitic family.

For more than a century it has been thought that two central linguistic concerns of the Oriental Institute, Egyptian and Semitic, are

related in a way which cannot be explained by chance resemblance, or in terms of the rather superficial contact between Egypt and Western Asia during and preceding the dawn of the historical period. The hypothesis most usually advanced is that they are descended from a parent language which existed (in Africa? in Asia?) long before the earliest attestations of Egyptian or Akkadian, the oldest representative of Semitic. In the course of the last century Berber, Cushitic, and Chadic (whose best known but in many ways least typical representative is Hausa) were added to the group. This super-family consisting of five coordinately related families was known first as Hamito-Semitic. More recently, in order to avoid the false implication that there is some special independent Hamitic group, the preferred term has been Afro-Asiatic.

As opposed to the comparatively well studied Egyptian and Semitic and the relatively homogeneous Berber, the Chadic and Cushitic languages are extremely diverse and very poorly studied. Each of them is approximately as diversified as Indo-European, and for all practical purposes documentation began only in the nineteenth century. Oromo is, in terms of number of speakers, one of the most important of the modern Afro-Asiatic languages, after Arabic and Hausa. While it is true that numbers do not guarantee intrinsic historical importance, it is clear that Oromo will inevitably be a major factor to be accounted for in any attempt to trace the development of Afro-Asiatic, as well as an important source of data. For this purpose it is essential that our information be as accurate and complete as possible.

A crucial step in historical reconstruction is the comparing of the shape of lexical items in related languages and seeing whether general rules can be formulated which will account for the way in which each cognate pair developed from a word in the parent language. It is only when an interlocking set of such correspondences have been established that the relationship of the languages can be considered demonstrated, and statements made about the parent language. (Thus the starting point for Indo-European reconstruction was the demonstration by Grimm in the beginning of the last century of the regularity of the recurring correspondences exemplified in Latin *decem* = English *ten* = German *zehn*, Latin *duo* = English *two* = German *zwei*, etc.) As a first step in such an undertaking for Cushitic I am going to gather information on the exact sound-shape and meaning of

the core vocabulary of Oromo (some 5,000 words). At the same time I am going to try to establish the location of dialect boundaries within the language and the extent of dialect variation. All of this information is contained very vaguely and misleadingly, if at all, in the existing dictionaries drawn up by missionaries and explorers, who frequently knew the language quite well but did not control the techniques necessary to represent what they knew.

For basic lexical information, I will rely on speakers from the Wallagga Province, in Southwestern Ethiopia. I have been working for two years in Chicago with a native speaker of Oromo from this province, and have established a basic lexical file. For fixing dialect boundaries and variation, and determining the relation of Wallagga Oromo to other varieties, I will work with Oromo speakers of various origins who live in the capital, Addis Ababa, which is fortunately located at the intersection of the east-west (Harar to Wallagga) and north-south (Wallo to northern Kenya) axes of the approximately cruciform Oromo-speaking area. My main technique for gathering the latter kind of information will be a linguistic questionnaire which I hope to be able to submit to Oromo-speaking students at the university in Addis Ababa.

With this information, and additional phonological and grammatical information, I will collaborate with scholars from other universities who have done similar work on other branches of Cushitic in an attempt to determine what can be known about proto-Cushitic, the language ancestral to the modern Cushitic languages. The results of this collaboration will obviously be crucial to any theories about the nature and history of proto-Afro-Asiatic. There are already preliminary indications, based mainly on comparative percentages of shared basic vocabulary (body parts, basic human activities, etc.) that what has hitherto been known as "Western Cushitic," spoken south and west of Oromo, is indeed Afro-Asiatic, but it is not Cushitic at all. Rather, the hypothesis goes, it is a separate, coordinate branch of Afro-Asiatic, on a par with Semitic or Chadic. This is a risky hypothesis, in view of the fact that virtually nothing is known about proto-Cushitic, and consequently about what might and what might not be Cushitic. If it should turn out to be tenable, then Ethiopia, containing indigenous within its borders two major branches of Afro-Asiatic, becomes automatically a prime candidate for being the Afro-Asiatic homeland.