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(Article begins on next page)

## CHAPTER 21

# EAST CUSHITIC

MAURO TOSCO

### 21.1 BACKGROUND

THE sheer majority of Cushitic languages belong to one single subgroup: East Cushitic (EC). Its speech area extends from Eritrea with Saho to Mount Kenya with the extinct Yaaku language, and from the Indian Ocean with Afar and Somali to the Sudanese—Ethiopian border with Dhaasanac (see Map 21.1). Thirty-three of the forty-five Cushitic languages—a few of them actually members of macro-languages—counted by *Ethnologue* are classified under EC. Ongota, a highly endangered language of southwest Ethiopia of uncertain stock, may be yet another EC language (Savà and Tosco 2000).

In demographic terms, a few languages take the lion's share: at least five languages (Oromo, Somali, Sidamo, Afar, and Hadiya) have more than one million speakers each, (and the first two—Oromo and Somali—much more than ten million each). At the other end of the spectrum, a couple of EC languages are extinct: Elmolo and Yaaku, both formerly spoken in Kenya, belong here. Aasá(x) and Kw'adza, spoken in Tanzania, may also belong to the list of dead EC languages. Many more have a few thousand or hundred speakers at most.

In this chapter, only the genetic classification of EC will be discussed.

The genetic classification of languages follows biological taxonomy in striving for perfect nestedness, i.e. to assign to each and every language a unique position in a branched tree, thus representing its genealogical position. It will, however, be assumed that genetic classification does not show perfect “nestedness” because certain types of natural languages (pidgins and creoles, true mixed languages, and planned languages) are beyond its scope. The establishment of isoglosses is central in order to justify subgrouping, and genetic classification follows biological taxonomy in being cladistic rather than phenetic: not just any isogloss or shared similarity between languages counts as decisive; only shared innovations (synapomorphies) do. As stated in Tosco (2000a), genetic classification does not depict the history of a language but merely shows its position within a classificatory tree. Of course, because languages notoriously adopt so many features through contact, classification per se does not show much of what a language looks like. In the case of Cushitic, and EC in particular, this involves the difficult task of disentangling the role of the much debated Ethiopian language area(s) (see Tosco 2000b for a critical view).



MAP 21.1 The geographical distribution of East Cushitic languages

## 21.2 EC AS CUSHITIC PAR EXCELLENCE?

The usual classificatory tree of Cushitic involves four parallel branches. The richness of the EC branch stands out clearly (Figure 21.1)

The other three branches of Cushitic (North, Central, and South) are each much smaller and less diverse: to one extreme, North Cushitic (NC) corresponds to a single language, Beja (see Vanhove, chapter 22 of this volume). The divergence between Beja and the rest of Cushitic has been remarked upon many times, and even its classificatory position outside Cushitic has been proposed. Zaborski (1997: 49) has aptly defined the whole question as “a classical rumour” devoid of any scientific basis. Still, the differences between Beja and the rest of Cushitic are huge at all levels: Ehret (1976: 87) noted a percentage of

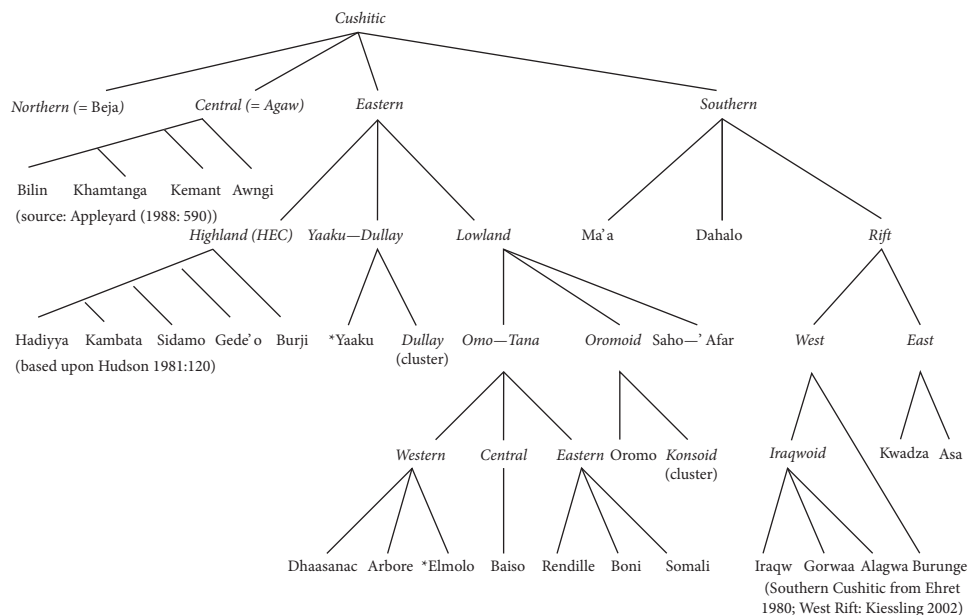


FIGURE 21.1 The Cushitic languages (from Tosco 2000a)

common similarity between Beja and South Cushitic (SC) of only 5 to 6 (going up to 8 to 13 as compared with Central Cushitic (CC)). With regard to the morphological level, the complex problem of the verbal system of Beja has been discussed many times, most notably by Voigt (1988, 1996) and Zaborski (1975, 1984, 1987, 1997a, 1997b, 1998).

CC (see Zelealem, chapter 23 of this volume) is made up of a group of relatively closely related languages traditionally called Agaw, whose internal classification has been elaborated by Appleyard (1988). Hetzron (1980) proposed linking Agaw to a subgroup of EC, as will be discussed in some detail in section 21.4 below.

The doubts about SC (see Kießling, chapter 24 of this volume), notwithstanding Ehret's (1980) phonological reconstruction, have never been dissipated. As noted by Hetzron (1980: 70), "the fact that these languages do form a genetic unit does not necessarily mean that Southern Cushitic must be a branch coordinated with the other major branches of Cushitic, as has been assumed. It may still be a sub-branch of one of the major branches." Consequently, he tried to "place Iraqw, and with it the whole of the Southern Cushitic group, within Southern Lowland Cushitic," substantially on morphological grounds (traces of EC adpositions and subject marking in the Iraqw cluster). With regard to the other SC languages, nothing new can be said about the (quite certainly extinct) Aasá(x) and Kw'adza languages due to lack of data (cf. Petrollino and Mous 2010 for a review of the status of Aasá(x)). The position of Dahalo has been discussed in Tosco (2000a), where its reclassification within EC was proposed. Ma'a (or Mbugu) presents special problems due to its status as essentially a secret and partially planned language (Mous 2003).

The most radical proposal about the inclusion of much of Cushitic within EC—or rather the watering-down of EC within Cushitic as a whole—has been put forward by Voigt

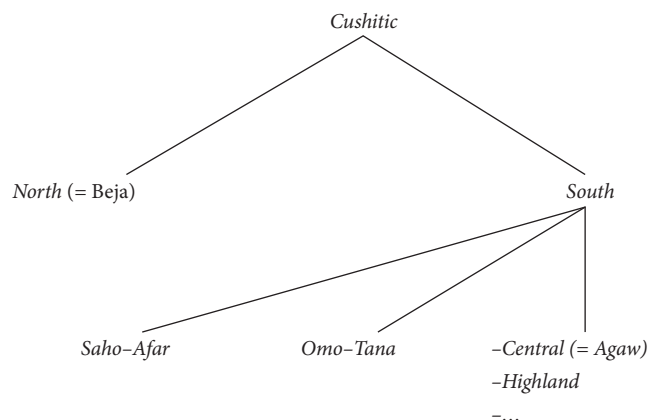


FIGURE 21.2 The classification of Cushitic according to Voigt (1996)

(1996). On the basis of some peculiarities of its prefix conjugation, he put Beja on equal status with all the rest of Cushitic, as schematically shown in Figure 21.2. In Voigt's proposal EC is denied any value as a classificatory unit and its subgroups are placed on the same footing with Agaw (CC) and SC.

However, no final proof for or against the inclusion of SC within EC will be offered here; attention will rather be paid to the “traditional” EC languages and their classification.

### 21.3 THE INTERNAL ORGANIZATION OF EC

It will come as no surprise that the internal classification of EC is a complex and not fully resolved problem. It must also be said that, after the wealth of comparative studies and proposals of the 1970s and 1980s (one of the best examples being Sasse's 1979 historical phonology of EC), recent years have rather witnessed a much welcomed rise in descriptive work, while comparison and reconstruction have been lagging behind.

Certain subgroups stand out clearly, but a few languages defy any easy classification. A major problem consists in the status of “Lowland EC” (LEC) against the well-established and sounder “Highland EC” (HEC). Although the distinction goes back to Leo Reinisch's work on different Cushitic languages in the nineteenth century, and Black (1974) attempted a reconstruction of LEC (from which Dullay, called “Werizoid”, and Yaaku—still unknown at that time—were excluded), the exact limits and the genetic (rather than typological) status of this group are still unclear.

In the standard view, EC is made up of two or maybe three branches: Highland, Lowland, and, as the case may be, a much smaller separate group consisting of Dullay and Yaaku. Lowland is further divided into three branches: Omo-Tana, Oromoid, and Saho-Afar. Although the last is shown as a single macro-language in Figure 21.1 above, two separate languages have to be recognized. Still, it remains a very small and coherent subgroup. The classification and historical phonology of Omo-Tana have been worked out by Sasse (1975) and, for its Eastern branch, by

Heine (1978), who labeled it “Sam”. Oromoid, as its name implies, is dominated by a single macro-language (Oromo) and a few other as yet very imperfectly known languages of southwest Ethiopia (Konso, Bussa, Diraasha—formerly known rather as Gidole).

Dullay and Yaaku (especially the latter, a dead language) are still poorly known. As shown above, even their membership in a single subgroup is debatable. In contrast to this, the unity of the HEC group seems evident.

## 21.4 HEC

This subgroup and its membership are quite well established. Only recently a number of high-quality grammatical descriptions of new varieties have been made available (Crass 2005 for K’abeena; Schneider-Blum 2007 for Alaaba; Treis 2008 for Kambaata).

A major factor in shaping the HEC languages has certainly been the long and strong contact with neighboring Omotic languages of the Omoto group. Syntactically, the HEC languages are characterized by S–O–V order at sentence level and modifier–head order at phrasal level (against head–modifier of LEC). They have quite complex systems of nominal cases and postpositions. Phonologically, they have ejectives but no implosives, distinctive vowel length but no [ATR] feature, and no tones.

Per se, all these features offer no proof of being more than a collection of areal features, with no or little decisive evidence of genetic unity. But the HEC languages also have a highly idiosyncratic lexical stock, as evidenced in Sasse’s (1982) comparative dictionary and Hudson (1981 and 1989—the latter on the internal organization of the subgroup).

While the cohesion of the HEC languages is clear, their external relations have been the matter of some contention, in particular with regard to CC (Agaw). In what remains probably one of his most audacious proposals, Hetzron (1980) reclassified CC with HEC.

It is important to note that most of Hetzron’s arguments apply to Awngi (the southernmost Agaw language) and Burji (the southernmost and most isolated member of HEC, but also the least affected by Omotic influence). He added that his hypothesis “is not proposed here ‘aggressively’, with a full commitment by the author to it” (Hetzron 1980: 54). As is common with Hetzron’s work, his isoglosses were morphological and therefore particularly strong, but Hetzron himself provided a stringent criticism of them, pointing to their areal or borrowed character, or to their status as archaisms rather than common innovations. In the end, the strongest piece of evidence, according to Hetzron, is the genitive agreement, whereby in Agaw and HEC the genitive markers attached to the possessor agree in gender (and also in number in Agaw) with the possessed (Hetzron 1980: 59; agreement with the possessor is obviously well attested elsewhere). Although they are syntactic in nature (the actual markers are the pan-Cushitic *-k* for masculine and *-t* for feminine), the highly idiosyncratic nature of the construction (with gender markers on the possessor agreeing with the possessed, in line with a consistent S–O–V syntax) may be accepted as a good Agaw–HEC isogloss. In the verbal system, what sets HEC apart from the other EC languages is the development of “extended” paradigms, which have come to dominate the verbal system at least in main declarative clauses. Even if possibly triggered by areal contact (Tosco 1996), this would still be a synapomorphy and, therefore, decisive in classification.

What is left of EC after HEC underwent its specific developments in the verbal system makes up LEC. It has preserved the old Cushitic suffix conjugation (and also the still older prefix conjugation) to a larger extent than HEC (and of CC). In this sense, LEC encompasses not only the “classical” Lowland languages but Yaaku and Dullay too.

## 21.5 DISENTANGLING LEC

Within LEC, a distinctive feature of Saho-Afar is the conservation (and development) of the prefix conjugation. Obviously, this conservative feature can hardly qualify in itself for genetic classification. Other well-known but isolated features in the basic lexicon (such as the replacement of the common EC word for ‘blood’) will also be disregarded here as possibly due to contact.

Syntactically, all LEC languages with the exception of Saho-Afar are characterized by a head–modifier phrasal order; being typologically unusual, this order is all the more interesting (Tosco 1994 considers it original in EC). Still, it is just a typological, syntactic feature, and scarcely a proof of genetic subgrouping.

At the morphosyntactic level, the development of preverbal subject clitics and “case markers” is common to all the LEC languages with the exception again of Saho-Afar. Hetzron (1980) discusses this feature at length as a truly innovative feature separating Saho-Afar from the rest. On the other hand, Hetzron himself (1980: 112, n. 66) also points to its broadly areal character.

What Hetzron calls case markers is actually adpositions, and, following Biber’s (1984) analysis for Somali, possibly former postpositions which got separated from their NP and moved before the verb. As to preverbal subject marking, the process whereby preverbal clitics came to replace or accompany the suffixal marking on the verb is not dissimilar from what was found elsewhere, as, for instance, in many Romance languages (cf. Tosco 2007 for a comparative typological analysis in terms of feature geometry), and is in any case doubtful as a base for genetic classification.

Again, these syntactic developments do not seem to warrant a genetic split between Saho-Afar and the rest of LEC. The case for the subject clitics to be a bona fide innovation of LEC is, nevertheless, reinforced by the actual morphemes, which bear a good resemblance across languages. Of course, the subject clitics go back to other pronominal series, and similarity is expected. The main shared features are an element *Vn* for the first person found, to quote just a few examples, in Somali and Elmolo (Omo-Tana), in the whole Oromoid branch, in Dullay, and in Yaaku. As discussed in Tosco (2007), the LEC languages seem to start their subject clitic series from the first person singular (against Romance languages, where the second person singular is the first and often the only subject clitic). In LEC, for the second person *-\*t* is preserved in Dirayta (or D’iraasha; Oromoid), or undergoes the usual phonological processes of the language (e.g., voicing, yielding, e.g., *aad* in Somali). In Dullay it is assimilated to a following consonant (yielding, e.g., *ʔaC=* in Gawwada).

All things considered, the development of preverbal subject and preverbal adpositions and of subject clitics, coupled with, for the latter, their actual exponents, seems robust enough to be taken as a proof of genetic unity of all the LEC languages with the exception of

Saho-Afar. Following Hetzron (1980), Tosco (2000a) proposed calling this branch “Southern Lowland East Cushitic”.

## 21.6 SOUTHERN LEC: OMO-TANA AND OROMOID VS. DULLAY AND YAAKU

As for the single branches of LEC, the existence of Omo-Tana and Oromoid is relatively uncontroversial. The validity of the former has been questioned by Lamberti (in Haberland and Lamberti 1988): according to him, its Western branch (Dhaasanac, Arbore, and the now ~~dead~~ Elmolo) would be a separate group within EC (which he called “Galaboid”, from *galab*, the Amharic denomination of the Dhaasanac), and coordinate to the Eastern branch (the “Sam” languages of Heine 1978, i.e., Somali, Rendille, and Boni) together with Baiso (whose special links to southern Somali dialects have been noted; cf., e.g., Ehret and Nuuh Ali 1984). Lamberti’s proposal is not convincing (cf. Tosco 2000a for a few critical remarks), and Omo-Tana remains a robust subgrouping. One of its strongest isoglosses is the imperative singular ending of the middle (autobenefactive) verbs in -o (with loss of final \*-t), as in Somali *furo*, Dhaasanac *fúru* ‘open for yourself!’.

A good starting point when looking for synapomorphies is the verbal system, which is the most complex part of Cushitic morphology. In particular, if we discount the grammaticalization of auxiliary constructions and analogical leveling, the positive paradigms are fairly well preserved in most Lowland languages. Not so the negative paradigms, which have been independently restructured in the different branches and languages. Banti (1991/92) offers a very detailed and exhaustive analysis of most negative verbal forms in their Afro-Asiatic context.

In both Omo-Tana and Oromoid one finds an invariable negative past opposed to a person-marked negative present. The negative past is marked by a nasal affix -*Vn* or -*nV*, with the former being more typical of Omo-Tana and the latter found in Oromoid (but not exclusively).

The presence of the invariable past negative is tentatively proposed as a synapomorphy for the setting up of a Nuclear Southern Lowland group (cf. Tosco 2000a), made up of Oromoid and Omo-Tana against the other Southern Lowland languages (Yaaku and Dullay).

A genetic link between Yaaku and Dullay was suggested by Ehret (1974, 1976) and substantiated by Hayward (1978) with lexical and phonological isoglosses. Although Hayward (1989) withdrew from his list of shared phonological innovations the devoicing of obstruents (which is not common to the whole of Dullay and is not unknown elsewhere in EC), the hypothesis that Dullay and Yaaku make up a true genetic subgroup still has some weight.

To turn to the verbal system, Yaaku and Dullay also show an interesting parallelism in their negative paradigms. No invariable negative form **exists**; the negative perfective has a single form for all persons of the singular (marked by the suffix -*ú* in the Gawwada variety), while the plural persons have separate affixes.

Interestingly, the same, typologically quite odd pattern is found in Yaaku. Yaaku (Heine 1974/75) distinguishes definite and indefinite paradigms. The indefinite negative has a single form for all persons in the singular of certain verbs (while other verbs have distinct



forms); as in Dullay, no reduction occurs in the plural. It must be noted, on the other hand, that the Yaaku indefinite does not cover the Dullay perfective, and that it is, rather, present in meaning.

Instead, Dullay and Yaaku are very different in the other negative paradigms. The Dullay negative imperfective has basically the same syncretisms of the positive paradigms (with a single form shared by the first person singular and the third person masculine singular, and another shared by the second person singular and the third person feminine singular). The Yaaku negative definite has a singular form *-n* enlarged to *-nèn* in the plural. Banti (1991/92) has noted the “nouny” character of this Yaaku paradigm and the parallel with other concordless negative past forms, proposing their origin from nominal forms (Yaaku *-n* is obviously reminiscent of the Omo-Tana and Oromoid invariable negative past mentioned above, and even its enlargement to *-nèn* in the plural finds parallels, for example, in Karre of southern Somalia; cf. Tosco 1989).

Accepting Hayward’s (1978) evidence as well as this common development in the negative verbal forms, one can tentatively propose a Peripheral Southern Lowland group (called “Transversal” in Tosco 2000a) made up of Dullay and Yaaku. Alternatively, Dullay and Yaaku would not be a proper genetic group with its own synapomorphies but simply what was left of Southern Lowland after the rise of the Nuclear subgroup (Omo-Tana and Oromoid).

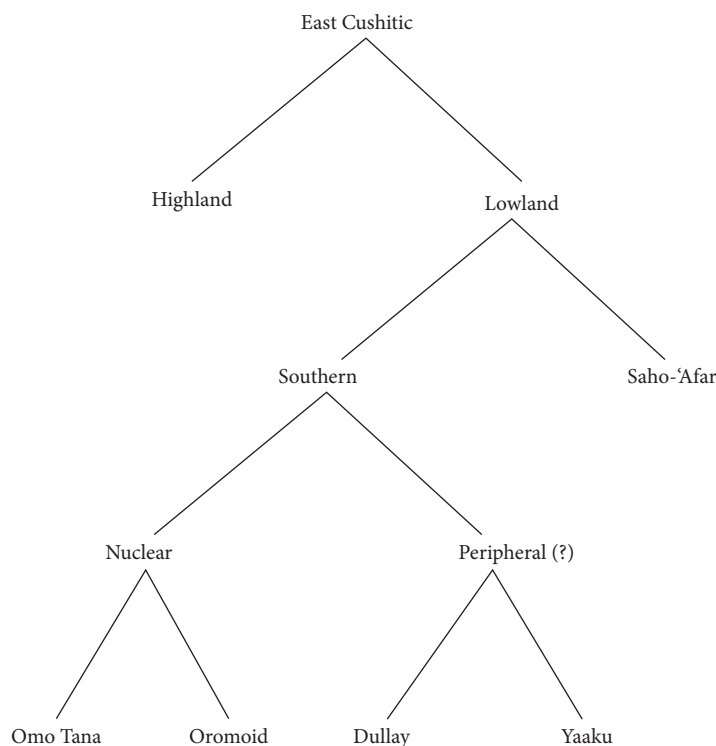


FIGURE 21.3 A revised classificatory tree of East Cushitic

To summarize: EC is divided into a Highland and a Lowland branch (see Figure 21.3). LEC is made up of what was left from common EC after HEC underwent its specific developments in the verbal system. Among the Lowland languages, Saho-Afar is the residual language; in its somewhat isolated location, Saho-Afar did not participate in the development of preverbal subject clitics (as per Hetzron 1980), which gave rise to Southern LEC. This was further divided by the rise of a Nuclear subgroup (Omo-Tana and Oromoid) characterized by specific developments in the negative paradigms. What was left, Dullay and Yaaku, may either form a Peripheral branch, or simply be what was left over after the rise of the Nuclear subgroup. The peripheral location of both languages seems to lend support to this view.

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