Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic. Ancient Contact Features in Ge‘ez and Amharic

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It is probably impossible to find an Ethiopian language not influenced by [an]other language or languages.

(ZABORSKI 1991: 123)

The Semitic languages of Ethiopia have evolved, influenced, and been influenced by a range of Cushitic languages over an extensive period of two and a half millennia and probably longer. This obvious fact has been recognized for almost as long as Ethiopian Semitic languages have formed the object of scholarly study, and already in the nineteenth century the influence was noted of the Cushitic languages of the region on Ge‘ez and other languages, notably Amharic and Tigrinya. In two articles Praetorius (1889, 1893) listed some twenty items of Ge‘ez vocabulary to which he ascribed a Cushitic origin, as well as two morphological formatives. Earlier in the century, others had spoken of Amharic as “degenerate” from the supposed Semitic “type” or as “sub-Semitic,” based somewhat impressionistically on syntactic patterns, phonology, and presumably lexicon, too, implicitly seeing the influence of Cushitic languages at work.

In the above remarks it may seem that there has been the assumption that the influences, the contact features, have passed from Cushitic to Ethiopian Semitic (hereafter ES). However, features may of course move in both directions between languages in contact. Whilst it might be relatively easy to identify a lexical item, for instance, Ge‘ez dorho ‘chicken’, as a loanword that has come from a Cushitic source because no cognates occur in Semitic languages outside Ethiopia, whereas there are similar terms in various Cushitic languages, it is less easy always to be so certain about the direction of borrowing of many non-lexical features. For instance, all ES languages, Ge‘ez as well as the modern languages aside from Tigre, have a special converb form, traditionally called the gerund or gerundive, to denote a sequentially subordinate action or event to the main verb. The exact formation of the converb is, however, not the same across Ethiopian Semitic, and the various formations can be explained wholly within the terms of ES morphology. The category of converb does not, however, exist elsewhere in Semitic, but is present in the verbal systems of many Cushitic languages. The assumption is that ES devel-
Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic

oped a converb “under Cushitic influence” (Hetzron 1972: 99), and though it is likely, it is not so readily provable. More will be said about the converb below. Equally difficult to ascribe to a particular origin are semantic parallels between ES and Cushitic, for example, as exemplified by the widespread use across the region of a causative derivative of the verb ‘want’ in the sense of ‘be necessary’, e.g. Amh. asfāllāgā ‘it is necessary’ from fāllāgā ‘he wanted’ and Oromo barbaachisa ‘it is necessary’ from barbaada ‘he wants’. It cannot be said that one is explicitly a borrowing from or rather a calque on the other, that is in which direction the feature is copied. This kind of correspondence leads naturally to a consideration of the question of an Ethiopian language area, in which within a given region languages, which are not very closely related, show parallels, implicitly due to contact. The idea of an Ethiopian language area was originally expounded by Ferguson in two slightly different versions (1970, 1976) and was further refined by Zaborski (1991) into several subareas. The language area concept does not of course necessarily and simply propose to identify a given feature as borrowed from language X into language Y, but encompasses a geographical area in which languages (i.e. their speakers) are in contact and have influenced one another, including the possibility of parallel developments beyond the notion of direct, conscious borrowings. The Ethiopian region, which can be extended beyond the confines of the Ethiopian and Eritrean political entities, is one of the world’s more complex linguistic regions in terms of both the number of languages and the different language families involved. Alongside the ES languages, which number up to 23 varieties¹ grouped into three principal branches, there are over 30 Cushitic languages, properly speaking, and more if varieties are taken into account, stretching from the far south of Egypt to Tanzania. Not all of these are relevant to the issue of contact with ES, of course. In addition, there are also Omotic and a number of Nilo-Saharan languages within the “Ethiopian” language area, which again do not seem to be relevant to the issues of language contact with ES that is the subject of the present study. However, when it comes to looking for those languages that have been in contact with ES over a long period of time and which demonstrate contact features, beyond isolated lexical borrowing, the number is greatly reduced. The time factor is important here as well as the nature of the contact features, because whilst it can be demonstrated that Amharic, for instance, has borrowed lexicon from a range of Ethiopian languages and that a

¹ I use the neutral term ‘variety’ so as not to prejudge what are languages or dialects. Some of the separate varieties subsumed under the name Gurage are probably better described as dialects. The figure of 23 ES varieties is drawn from Hetzron’s 1972 study. For Cushitic, see inter alia Appleyard 2012: 198–201.