COMMON ORIGIN OF ETHIOPIAN SEMITIC: THE LEXICAL DIMENSION*

Introduction

Semitists have a tendency to be sceptical with regards to genetic classification and negative statements about «the questionable usefulness of classificatory schematizations» (Renfroe 1992:7) can easily be found on the pages of Semitological treatises. In spite of this trend, various aspects of genetic classification of Semitic have always occupied many of the best minds working in this branch of comparative linguistics. A proper evaluation of the sub-grouping procedure as applied to Semitic languages has been admirably outlined in a recent survey by John Huehnergard: «Classification and sub-grouping of language families are among the most important of the comparativist’s tasks, and this obtains in our field, too... Indeed, classification and subgouping should inform comparative work and historical reconstruction, for these activities are inextricably interwined ... In other words, classification is not simply a mind game...» (Huehnergard 2002:130).

A coherent classificatory pattern of Semitic has two facets: several major splits and unities are to be postulated and proved, such as East Semitic vs. West Semitic or Central Semitic vs. South Semitic; simultaneously, the common origin of each minor subdivision (Cannanite, Aramaic, ESA, Ethiopian,

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*I am deeply grateful to Maria Bulakh and Alexander Militarev for their critical remarks on a preliminary draft of this article. The work on the present topic was carried out within the project «Studies in the Genetic Classification of Semitic» supported by the Center for Fundamental Research (project No. РД02-3.17-101) which deserves my most sincere gratitude for its assistance. My work on the present contribution was carried out in the framework of the projects 03-06-80435-a (РФФИ) and 04-04-00324a (РГНФ). I am grateful to both institutions for their help.

1 In reply to the following statement from Ullendorff 1961:30: «Classification is harmless, unobjectionable, and at times even useful if limited to describing present-day habitat and the prevailing geographical circumstances, but it becomes positively dangerous, i. e. obscuring rather than illuminating, if meant to explain genetic connections». [For the list of abbreviations used in this article see p. 392.] Ullendorff’s position is rightly qualified by Huehnergard as «without parallel in comparative work in other language families». For another highly positive assessment of linguistic classification v. Goldenberg 1998:461, quoting such outstanding figures of general and Indo-European comparative studies as Baudouin de Courtenay, Meillet and Greenberg.
MSA etc.) is to be demonstrated as clearly as possible. Demonstration of the diachronic unity of Ethiopian Semitic (ES) is a model illustration of the second task: a compact, geographically and historically isolated group of languages whose similarity is intuitively realized by every student of Semitics should provide many specific features from which a reliable net of classificatory criteria could be worked out.

According to a wide consensus, the principal method by which genetic classification of Semitic has to be guided is that of shared morphological innovations. This method, elaborated in a series of important contributions by R. Hetzron (e.g., 1972:13 and passim), was successfully applied by him and his successors to demonstrate the unity of West Semitic as opposed to East Semitic (Akkadian) and the unity of Central Semitic as opposed to other West Semitic languages. In spite of some difficulties connected with the formal shape of the corresponding classificatory features and the fact that conflicting isoglosses have been adduced by some authors, the essence of Hetzron’s method proved to be valid and there is no doubt that it should be applied whenever possible — i.e., whenever important morphological innovations can be discovered for a given sub-branch of Semitic.

Is this the case for Ethiopian Semitic? Regrettably, the answer seems to be overwhelmingly negative. As stated in Faber 1997:12, «although virtually all discussions of Semitic subgrouping assume a single Ethiopian Semitic branch which later split into North Ethiopic and South Ethiopic, there is virtually no linguistic evidence for such a Common Ethiopian stage». Indeed, even if Geez alone is confronted with Arabic, Sabaic or Mehri, reliable morphological innovations separating it from these languages are rather difficult to find, and the more so if such innovations are expected to be shared by, e.g., Tigre, Tigrinya and Amharic. Faber’s claim is perhaps exaggerated since

2 The origin of the second -a- in the Common WS New Perfect *katal-a and that of -u in the Common CS New Imperfect *ya-ktul-u are still uncertain (Huehnergard 2002:126 is well aware of this difficulty).


4 Within Faber’s approach, «linguistic evidence» is clearly synonymous with «shared morphological innovations». This implicit equation — independent of its relevance for the subgrouping question — is terminologically inaccurate as it automatically excludes phonology, lexicon and syntax from linguistics.

5 No doubt, a fully justified reaction against many attempts to collect various allegedly specific Ethiopian features, all or most of which are actually absent from several languages of the group (notably, Geez), or turn out to be obvious retentions from PS, or can be qualified as typologically trivial developments possibly of areal nature. A typical example of such a list is Leslau 1975 (as recognized already by Ullendorff in his comments on Leslau’s communication). Hetzron 1972:17–19 provides a far more serious attempt but the final outcome is also somewhat disappoint-