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The Stages of Hamito-Semitic

So far the division of the Hamito-Semitic or Afroasiatic languages according to diachronic stages has been elaborated in the best way by I. M. Diakonoff¹. Some critics of Diakonoff's analysis have pointed out that a division into stages is somewhat artificial and it has to be admitted that they have been right to some extent. It would be banal to say that while we can systematize the chronology of the particular languages that have a recorded history (e. g. Egyptian) rather safely, establishing a chronology of the development of a widely differentiated family like Hamito-Semitic is quite a different and very difficult enterprise simply because we have to deal not with a chronology of a historical but of a prehistorical development. Moreover, dividing branches and particular languages into stages certainly forces us to compare what is, in a sense, incomparable since, in spite of the existence of some diachronic universals, i. e. some universals of language change, languages of the same family and even of the same branch develop in their quite idiosyncratic ways. Therefore inevitably any division into stages must be more or less arbitrary and artificial. We should not forget, however, that also current genetic divisions following openly or tacitly the "genealogical tree" pattern are arbitrary, though to a less extent.

Of course we have to ask a very crucial question: what is the use of such a largely arbitrary and simplified stage chronology? An obvious reply is that such a chronology is always better than nothing and that "genealogical tree" classifications, even if treated only as illustrations without claims to reflect the real evolution indicate a relative chronology only to a limited extent. For example, a genealogical tree schema does not indicate explicitly that Classical Arabic is more archaic or conservative than Hebrew. Actually both genealogical tree and diachronic stages schemata are mutually complementary and both are only useful aids and not fully adequate reconstructions.

¹ I. M. Diakonoff, *Semito-Hamitic Languages*, Moscow 1965, pp. 11-14; *Yaziki Drevney Peredney Azii*, Moskva 1967, pp. 180-187; *Hamito-Semitic Languages*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th Edition, 1974, vol. 8, p. 591 ff.

There is also at least one practical advantage of speculations about the diachronic stages: if we establish an approximate relative chronology of the particular branches and of the particular languages, then we can avoid an error of comparing directly languages which are so divergent though still genetically related as Chadic Hausa, Cushitic Sidamo, Omotic Kaffa and finally Berber. Errors of this kind are still inevitable in case of e.g. Chadic and Omotic languages since so many of them are still undescribed. There is not so much wonder that when only Hausa was known and was compared directly with more archaic Semitic there were doubts about its inclusion in the Hamito-Semitic family². The Cushitic branch of Hamito-Semitic is better known than Chadic but it still happens that linguists working on general Hamito-Semitic problems take their examples from a random selection of languages (sometimes a very simple explanation may be that they take examples from books they have accidentally on their shelves!) which represent quite different stages, e.g. archaic stage Afar-Saho, old stage Somali, late stage Sidamo and new stage Iraqw. As far as the Semitic branch is concerned, most if not all Semitists agree that Akkadian and Classical Arabic represent the most archaic or conservative stage³ and nobody would compare Akkadian (except for etymology) directly with e.g. Amharic or Mandaic.

I wish to emphasize that obviously not only languages that represent the most archaic or conservative stages can be used for comparative purposes. Certainly even languages belonging to a new stage can preserve some single archaic traits. But the languages of the most archaic stages are the most important for the reconstruction, inevitably only a partial reconstruction of structures. I wish to emphasize also that a division of the whole family into diachronic stages should be based on a prior division into such stages of the particular branches and sub-branches. There is, in this respect, no problem with Egyptian since here we deal with only one language with a rather well defined historical chronology. The division of the Semitic branch is not very controversial though not elaborated in detail. I also think that we can grasp the basic points of the relative chronology of the Cushitic languages. There is still no relative chronology of the Berber dialects or languages though opinions have been expressed that Tuareg and perhaps also Kabyle (less!) are especially archaic. Since the majority of Chadic languages is still undescribed it is impossible to speak about their relative chronology but it is very probable that this group, being very differentiated, represents different stages of archaism and innovation.

² Hypercriticism and typological approach was also responsible for these doubts.

³ Since a longer time there is a tendency, actually a fashion, to consider Akkadian as the most archaic Semitic language and to reject or at least underestimate the archaism of Arabic. To some extent this approach is due to a wrong idea that archaism of written records automatically means archaism of the language structure. Akkadian, as it seems now, has preserved the verbal system better than Arabic but it is more innovating as far as the phonology is concerned. In respect of internal inflection it is as archaic as Arabic which has in the best way preserved the older phonological system and represents also some other archaisms in comparison with Akkadian. Therefore both Akkadian and Arabic (Classical!) must be considered as representing the most archaic stage.

I. M. D i a k o n o f f has grouped⁴ the Hamito-Semitic languages into following stages: 1. Ancient: Akkadian, Old Canaanite, Ugaritic, Amorite, Classical Arabic, South Arabic, Old Egyptian and Middle Egyptian (the latter a "transition to the Middle Stage"), 2. Middle Stage: later stages of Babylonian and Assyrian, Old Hebrew, Moabite Phoenician, Old Aramaic including Syriac, Medieval Arabic dialects, Ge'ez, Neo-Egyptian and Demotic, perhaps also the language of Libyan inscriptions, 3. New stage: all other Hamito-Semitic languages. This division can be accepted as a very far reaching generalization that does not take details into consideration. First of all it is impossible to treat all the Cushitic languages as belonging to the same stage. The difference between the most archaic and the most innovating Cushitic languages is much, much greater than between the archaic Akkadian and, for example, Modern Arabic Dialects or Neoaramaic. There is also a problem of the Omotic languages, formerly known as West Cushitic. The classification of these little known languages within Hamito-Semitic still remains enigmatic. There has been even a suspicion that they do not belong to Hamito-Semitic at all but at least one language i.e. Janjero shows something that seems to be a trace of the Common Cushitic suffix conjugation⁵ and therefore it is not impossible that at least Janjero provides a clue indicating that Omotic is related to Cushitic (with Janjero as more archaic than other Omotic languages we know so far) and cannot form a separate branch of Hamito-Semitic. This is quite hypothetical and we have to wait for further data on other Omotic languages which may be the most innovating group not only within Cushitic but within the Hamito-Semitic in general. We can only hope that a language more archaic than Janjero will be discovered. It seems to me that now very few archaic traits have been found in the Chadic languages that we know now and it is possible that hopes expressed by some scholars (among them I. M. D i a k o n o f f) are largely exaggerated.

It must be said that D i a k o n o f f's division according to diachronic stages is based on a set of phonological and morphological criteria and his approach is in a way not only genetic but also typological. Certainly morphology⁶ is the most important criterion in any classification though phonological correspondences and phonological development cannot be underestimated. I cannot summarize I. M. D i a k o n o f f's criteria or features at this place and I can quote only his final statement that "Languages retaining all or most of these features can be classified as belonging to the Ancient Stage of Hamito-Semitic; those that retain no less than two-thirds of the ancient consonantal system and about one-half to two-thirds of the above-listed other features belong to the Middle Stage; those that have lost more than half of these characteristics belong to the New Stage"⁷. This quasi-statistical approach might be good for

⁴ Cf. note No 1.

⁵ Cf. E. C e r u l l i, *Studi Etiopici III: Il linguaggio dei Giangerò ed alcune lingue Sidama dell'Omo*, Roma, 1938, 14-19.

⁶ Cf. R. H e t z r o n, *La division des langues sémitiques*, in: ed. A. Caquot, D. Cohen, *Actes du Premier Congrès International de Linguistique Sémitique et Chamito-Sémitique*, The Hague-Paris 1974, 186.

⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 8, p. 591.

a quick and general classification but it does not take into consideration the hierarchy of the relevant features. Instead of this quasi-statistical approach I should use a different method, i.e. the method of relative chronology which is implicit also in I. M. Diakonoff's analysis. I use only features that can be attributed a top position in the hierarchy of isoglosses, namely the evolution of the original internal inflection or apophony or ablaut and the evolution of the original verbal system. I think that using less important criteria would only complicate the analysis without a substantial change of the general outline. It is widely known that isoglosses point into different directions and may suggest conflicting solutions.

As far as the division following the principle of the relative chronology is concerned e.g. within the Cushitic branch Afar-Saho and Beja⁸ are more archaic than Somali, Awngi etc., since Somali, Awngi etc. systems of apophony (ablaut) and verbal systems can be rather safely conceived as going back to proto-systems more like those in Afar-Saho and Beja. In a similar way Egyptian can be considered as less archaic than Semitic (archaic and Old Semitic!) since we can suppose that Egyptian developed its verbal system abandoning the older prefix conjugations. It is difficult to balance the relative archaism of Old Egyptian and Berber but perhaps it is safe to consider them as approximately equal since Berber has better preserved the verbal system though it is less conservative in some other points. Berber is more archaic than Cushitic since both in Beja and in Afar-Saho there are already more new elements (e.g. the Cushitic suffix conjugation which is a Cushitic innovation). It is difficult to judge whether Old Egyptian is more archaic than Cushitic but I think that generally speaking it is—not because its records are almost 5000 years older but because it has probably better preserved the apophony (ablaut) and it is in several respects closer to the most archaic Semitic.

How many stages there are finally? Since the whole division according to diachronic stages is largely arbitrary, the number of stages can always be enlarged if we take more particular features into consideration. In my opinion the hypothetical approximation may be for the time being as follows:

- Archaic: Archaic Semitic i. e. Akkadian and Classical Arabic, perhaps also Eblaite that has not been described yet.
- Old: Old Semitic: South Arabic, Ge'ez; Ugaritic, Old Canaanite.
- Middle: 1. Middle Semitic: Middle Arabic; Hebrew, Phoenician and Moabite, Old and Middle Aramaic⁹; Tigre and Tigrinya,
2. Berber (at least Tuareg),
3. Old and Middle Egyptian¹⁰,

⁸ There is a tendency recently to question the inclusion of Beja within Cushitic. I think that the fact that Beja has the Common Cushitic suffix conjugation is decisive and that Beja should be classified as Cushitic.

⁹ The division into Old and Middle Aramaic is important for the chronology of the Aramaic branch but it may be disregarded when Aramaic is considered in the larger scale of Hamito-Semitic.

¹⁰ Also the division Old versus Middle Egyptian which is quite relevant for the internal history of Egyptian can be disregarded in the larger scale.

4. Archaic Cushitic: Afar-Saho and Beja.
- Late: 1. New Semitic: Modern Arabic Dialects; Late Aramaic; Modern Hebrew; South Ethiopian,
2. Berber (other dialects),
3. Neo-Egyptian and Demotic,
4. Old Cushitic: Sam languages (i.e. Somali, Boni and Rendille), Elmolo, Dasenech; Awngi.
- New A: 1. Middle Cushitic: e.g. other Agaw languages: Bayso, Oromo (Galla), Konso, Gidole, Dahalo,
2. Coptic,
3. Old Chadic? E.g. Migama, Mubi, Ron.
- New B: 1. Late Cushitic: e.g. Highland East Cushitic branch with Burji as the most archaic language; Yaaku; Dullay; Burunge and Alagwa,
2. Middle Chadic? E.g. Hausa, Zime,
3. Old Omotic (at least Janjero)?
- New C: 1. New Cushitic: e.g. Iraqw,
2. New Chadic¹¹, E.g. Gisiga, Margi.
3. New Omotic?

I have no doubt that this classification or perhaps better stratification, can be easily challenged on different grounds. The whole domain of comparative Hamito-Semitic studies is still full of more or less daring and hazardous hypotheses which are inevitably subjective. This hypothesis which is an opinion of my own is only a step and I wish that it should be replaced by a better approximation as soon as possible.



¹¹ H. Jungraithmayr, *A Tentative Four Stage Model for the Development of the Chadic Languages*, in: ed. P. Fronzaroli, *Atti del Secondo Congresso Internazionale di Linguistica Camito-Semita*, Firenze 1978, p. 381-388, divides Chadic languages into four or even five ("Paideuma" 23, 1977, p. 95-100) stages but in this most general stratification three stages may be sufficient.