

LANGUAGE SUBAREAS IN ETHIOPIA RECONSIDERED¹

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Traditional terms and ideas of ‘Sprachbund’ and ‘language area’ as its best English equivalent are better than ‘revisionist’ neologisms. There is a North East African Macro-Area including languages belonging to the Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Bantu language families. There is an interesting phenomenon of resistance to influence and ‘borrowing’ in some realms in spite of ‘borrowing’ elsewhere in the same languages.

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At first I would like to emphasize that I prefer to speak not about a ‘linguistic area’ but about ‘language area’ in spite of the fact that ‘linguistic area’ was EMENAU’S (1956) translation of TRUBETZKOY’S ‘Sprachbund’ (1928) which is still used as a loan e.g. in French and sometimes even in English, see CARON & ZIMA 2006. In some languages the loan ‘Sprachbund’, plural ‘Sprachbünde’ is difficult but at the same time attractive due to its ‘exotic’ spelling and pronunciation. I prefer ‘language area’ for the same reason why I do not like to speak about ‘linguistic families’ and prefer to speak about ‘language families’. ‘Linguistic’ must be associated rather with ‘linguistics’ and we know that many contemporary ‘schools’ of linguistics concentrate not so much on natural languages but rather on linguistics in a truly autistic approach. I belong to the old school emphasizing that linguistics is a study of real languages while theoretical linguistics, which is obviously important, is rather a tool and not a primary goal in itself. I know that sometimes ‘language areas’ is a term used for “the regions of brains which are devoted to particular aspects of the use of language” (e.g. TRASK 2007: 133) but this should be disambiguated by expansion to ‘language areas of human brain’. Of course this terminological problem is not very complicate and important at all.

Some scholars attribute the discovery of ‘Ethiopian Language Area’ to J. H. GREENBERG (1959: 24) but it was at least Franz Praetorius who ascribed not only lexical borrowing but also some grammatical innovations in Ethiosemitic to the contact with Cushitic languages (PRAETORIUS 1880, 1893a, b) and some Oromo features to the influence of Ethiosemitic (PRAETORIUS 1893b: 285). Later there were also the articles by MORENO (1948) and LESLAU

¹ This is a slightly updated version of the paper read at the 5th International Conference of Cushitic and Omotic Languages in April 2008 in Paris.

(1945, 1952, 1959). Already Praetorius emphasized also the mutual influence of Ethiosemitic languages, e.g. the influence of Amharic on the grammar of Tigrinya (PRAETORIUS 1871: 3). Here it must be emphasized that the problem of mutual contact and interference of Ethiosemitic languages has remained underestimated up to now.

The general idea of ‘Sprachbund’ or ‘language area’ is actually older than TRUBETZKOY’S publications (already in 1923 but finally in 1928/1930). Trubetzkoy’s definition wrongly emphasized that members of a Sprachbund could not have a n y common lexemes in the basic vocabulary while s o m e loans even in the basic vocabulary are possible although Thomason’s idea that everything can be borrowed is certainly wrong – see ZABORSKI 2003b and cf. CURNOW 2001. At least Hugo Schuchardt must be considered as one of the most important forerunners with his ideas about language mixing (e.g. SCHUCHARDT 1917 and in several much earlier publications, see CAMPBELL 2006: 2 for the earlier history of the problem). The concept of Sprachbund/language area has been questioned by some linguists who analyzed and criticized different definitions and have come to the conclusion that the reality is too nasty since it does not want to adjust itself to the preconceived definitions and therefore not only definitions but also the reality itself, viz. facts should be rejected. This mistaken ‘logic’ is not very surprising at all since definitions adopted in an *a priori* manner must be in conflict with reality, with real complex situation often not deprived of inconsistencies and contradictions. A somewhat similar conflict was seen in the past when some linguists created more or less *a priori* definitions of ‘Semitic language’, then asked whether Modern Hebrew or Amharic was ‘Semitic’ and questioned both the use of the term ‘Semitic’ and the genetic roots of the languages in question.

Recently CAMPBELL (2006: 17–19, cf. 1994 and 1996; but cf. BISANG 2006: 88 and 89) has been inclined to discard not the idea but rather a definition of Sprachbund. BISANG (2006: 75, see also BISANG & CRASS 2007 who are for a reasonably elastic definition) has proposed to eliminate the old label ‘Sprachbund’, viz. ‘language area’ and suggested a new lengthy label ‘zone of contact-induced structural convergence’ (or ‘zone of convergence’ in a shorter version) but a label as such does not really matter and what does matter is the definition behind the label. Bisang’s label is logical and transparent but I think that it is better to preserve the old label, viz. Sprachbund with ‘language area’ (rather than ‘language union’ or ‘language league’) as its English equivalent because an explosion of new linguistic terminology, viz. misuse of terminology has been one of the pathological features of general linguistics since some sixty years, resulting in a real terminological Tower of Babel. The trouble is that at least in some older schools of cultural anthropology the term ‘convergence’ (cf. HAYWARD 2000: 621–622) has been and still frequently is used for parallel developments due either to what we call today ‘universals’ and/or pure accident. The term ‘diffusion’ would be better than ‘convergence’ but why reject ‘language area/Sprachbund’? For the same reasons I do not think it makes sense to introduce the new term ‘spread zone’ (NICHOLS 1992, accepted by GÜLDEMANN 2008: 152).

While some linguists pretend that ‘Sprachbund’ and ‘language/linguistic area’ are not the same (but they are unable to provide a *differentia specifica* like a specialist on Japanese who challenged me in a discussion after my lecture on Ethiopian language area in Warsaw a few years ago!), others make things more complicate in different ways speaking in a strange way about the spread of features, viz. interference without contact in a rather

telepathic way! Here I can only mention the idea of ‘language affinity’ (but not genetic relationship!) developed e.g. by PISANI (1952). I do not think that it makes sense to introduce conventionally an opposition between ‘linguistic area’ (comprising languages sharing only lexical but not necessarily grammatical structure – similarities of structure without lexical borrowing can be only accidental) and ‘linguistic league’ where the bonds are considerably stronger, viz. obligatory structural (*pace* URBAN 2007: 151) since such a conventional division introduces more terminological confusion than clarification.

Several scholars have expressed the correct opinion that each Sprachbund is rather unique. Therefore a very detailed definition embracing all particular language areas is questionable. A very broad definition can be limited to the following (which is not new at all!):

Language area is 1. A group of not very closely genetically related languages which contact – this means that some speakers of at least some of the languages spoken by the communities in geographical and cultural contact have communicated with speakers of other communities in one (sometimes more!) of the ‘foreign’ neighboring languages or used an ‘interethnic’ (‘international’ or ‘vehicular’) language in question, 2. For different sociolinguistic and linguistic reasons there is a grammatical interference or interaction between the ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ neighboring or pan-ethnic languages and some results of this interference become permanent and thus they change one or both interfering systems which results in common features. Lexical borrowing with phonological interference precedes grammatical (at first syntactic and then morphological) interference. But there is no language shift which is typical of pidginization and creolization although at an early stage of contact and of learning another language a use of a kind of pidgin variant may be common.

While some linguists emphasize that there is no basic difference between the contact of dialects of the ‘same’ language (cf. TRUDGILL 1986 and GOEBL 2001) and the contact and interference between different languages, I would like to say that this opinion is only partially correct. There can be no doubt that contact and interference between closely related languages sharing many common features and being partially mutually intelligible cannot be the same both from the point of view of quantity and quality as in case of unrelated or even distantly related but quite unintelligible and, what is more important, typologically different languages. As is well known, the ‘classical’ Balkan language area involves first of all quite distantly related languages while genetically unrelated Turkish has been a relatively late ad-/super-stratum and is not considered to be a real member of the Sprachbund in spite of the number of Turkish loan words in other languages. It was typologically too different to influence grammatical systems. This does not change the fact that the most interesting language areas involve very different languages (e.g. Songhay and Berber, Bantu and Khoisan, Chadic and Niger-Congo) whose interference has resulted in typologically very interesting or even surprising grammatical changes which would have been rather impossible or at least difficult without contact and interference. As is well known, sometimes it may be difficult or even impossible to say whether a common feature is due to common genetic origin, to universal trends or to contact. But even in such an ambiguous situation contact, viz. areal origin cannot be simply discarded.

As far as I know, only Mauro TOSCO (2000; the title of Tosco’s paper read in Leiden in 2001 was even more radical “Ethiopian Language Area – No, Thank You!”) has seriously questioned the existence of the Ethiopian language area (which he had accepted in 1994: 225 and 1996) although BENDER (2005: 413) was also critical following Tosco. I understand that Tosco acted rather as an *advocatus diaboli* and his provocation could be justified as an attempt to force us to reconsider some facts and some theoretical assumptions. In his newest

paper Tosco (2008) admits that there is, following my proposal of 1991, a Northern Eritrean Language Area. His demands are at first quite maximalist or fundamentalist – according to him an areal feature should be typologically “unnatural” but then he proposes a mild and a rather correct version saying (2006: 119):

We cannot expect all the language areas to comply with the ‘unnaturalness’ requirement, and a collection of different traits, all of them perfectly natural by themselves but typologically unrelated, may still act as a beacon to a ‘good’ language area lurking there.

Typological ‘unnaturalness’ can be the ultimate proof of the existence of a Sprachbund like ‘an emergence of shared cross-codal features that did not exist in any of the codes prior to the contacts between them’ (JOHANSON 2005: 6) but this does not mean that less clear-cut, ‘weaker’ proofs should be discarded if there is no ultimate proof. As is well known, also the concept and definition of ‘language family’ (definitions like ‘a group of languages that share a common ancestor’ are simply circular!) and a proof of existence of a language family are not clear at all in case of remote genetic relationship. There are well-established language families and there are hypothetical families and in the same way there are well-established and hypothetical Sprachbünde. As is known since the beginning of dialect and language geography in the 19th century, boundaries between dialects and languages are very often very fuzzy and so are the boundaries between language areas and subareas. ZIMA (2006: 18, cf. ZIMA 1969) exaggerates only a little bit when he says that “Sprachbund represents such an idealizing extreme generalization as are such traditional concepts as ‘dialects’, or maybe even other ‘lects’”. But the main question is what is the alternative when someone is unhappy with an alleged language area? Then the most important problem is whether alternative solutions, viz. fortuitous similarity (Pisani’s ‘affinity’), convergence without contact or genetic relationship are much less convincing. It is interesting to note that there had been some doubts even about the existence of the ‘classical’ Balkan Language Area (see FRIEDMAN 2006: 671) which have been refuted. AIKHENVALD (2006: 29 and 2007: 14) says that

Languages which have never been in contact or never formed a linguistic area can share diffused properties, if they have borrowed the features independently from the same or a similar source. This was probably the case for numerous Ethio-Semitic languages which share similar features, taken from shared Cushitic substrata (Tosco 2000).

The first, general part of this statement is rather circular: languages which have borrowed the features (independently or not) must have been in contact and have formed a linguistic area. The problem is that there could be different historical stages or waves of contact and borrowing/calquing and some borrowing could be ‘second hand’, viz. from a ‘middleman’ and not directly from the ‘original’ source which may be even unknown or little known like the alleged but not really proven ‘Agaw’ substrate of Amharic which obviously has been influenced by Cushitic but perhaps not by ‘Agaw’ or not only by ‘Agaw’.

I do not think that Tosco’s rather lonely provocation justifies the opinion expressed in the otherwise very good encyclopedic article by CRASS (2006: 234) that the existence of the Ethiopian Language Area itself is not ‘generally accepted’. HEINE & NURSE (2008b: 2) refer to TOSCO (2005) while DIMMENDAAL (2008: 275) in the same volume says “As argued by TOSCO (2005), the notion of an ‘Ethiopian language area’ as such is false, given the disparity of typological features found within the country”, then SIMEONE-SENELLE & VANHOVE (2006: 32) spoke about “Tosco’s grounded critics”. This means that TOSCO’S 2000 paper has caused a considerable confusion and readers not well acquainted with the problem may think that

the idea of this language area is rejected not only by Tosco. After the publication of Tosco's 2008 paper I hope that his 2000 paper has not only forced him and all of us to reconsider the problem but has, indirectly, strengthened the opinion that the Ethiopian language area is a reality indeed. The growing number of publications on particular problems (see 'References' below) provides ample proofs.

To sum up: 'Ethiopian' or North-East African Language area does exist and we cannot agree with BENDER (2003: 39) who said:

I am tempted to say that it would be more convenient if the attempt to establish an area fails because it would avoid the intricate problem of accounting for its origin!

Thanks God, intricate problems are many!

Obviously the attribute 'Ethiopian' can be challenged when we think about other countries from Southern Egypt up to Kenya and Tanzania while even Uganda must be included since it is a home of some languages which had been influenced by Cushitic and therefore incorrectly labeled 'Nilo-Hamitic' in the past not to mention the Arabic creole language Kinubi. There has also been Cushitic-Bantu contact in East Africa, see e.g. KLEIN-ARENDE 1988, HEINE & NURSE 2008b: 5–6; and the decisive solution of the Ma'a/Mbugu problem by Mous who has proven that Mbugu is not a 'mixed' language of double origin etc.; so that there is a concatenated Tanzanian Rift Valley language area (see KIESSLING et al. 2008). Nevertheless the name 'Ethiopian' can be retained as a purely linguistic and non-political conventional term. Another possibility which I suggested already before Tosco when I rejected Ferguson's most superficial and faulty list of common 'Ethiopian' areal features (ZABORSKI 1991), to use the name 'Northeast African Language Area', GREENBERG'S 'Horn of Africa Area' (1959 and 1983) being too narrow geographically.

Here I can only mention my idea (ZABORSKI 2005: 140) that actually there is a wider 'Red Sea Language Area'. This hypothesis has been rejected by SIMEONE-SENELLE and VANHOVE (2006) who correctly emphasize that the changes due to contact took place rather in Africa than on the Arabian Peninsula but they underestimate ancient contacts between North East Africa and Southern Arabia, viz. areal or Sprachbund processes in antiquity which are difficult to assess due to scarcity of data. On the other hand B. Heine's idea (HEINE 2006a; his idea goes back to GREENBERG 1959, cf. GILMAN 1986) that the whole continent of Africa is a 'super-area' (here I would like to mention that e.g. MILEWSKI 1965: 153–154 promoted the idea of something like "language cycle", viz. the idea of several 'Sprachbünde' concatenated or interconnected) is quite far-fetched and in the best case needs much further research in order to eliminate coincidence due to universals and to random typological similarity of proto-languages of different families. It is remarkable that on the next pages of the same encyclopedia HEINE (2006b) is more cautious and he says:

The question of areal relationship among African languages has been raised in a number of works, but so far no major results have emerged, apart from the fact that the Ethio-Eritrean highland region of north-eastern Africa stands out as a linguistic area.

Here there is a notable mistake: not only the highland but also the lowland region must be included! By the way: HEINE & ZELEALEM LEYEW (2008: 17) accept the idea that a language area should be identified without evidence of historical and/or present geographical, cultural and language contact which is, in my opinion, completely wrong!

So far I have authored two papers (ZABORSKI 1991 and 2003b) on ‘Ethiopian’ (with inverted commas!) or Northeast African Language Area which have remained little known since they appeared in not easily accessible publications. The first paper was largely devoted to the criticism and rejection (repeated later by Tosco and by Bender following Tosco) of FERGUSON’s (1970 and 1976) list of alleged Ethiopian areal features. Ferguson simply knew nothing on the languages of Ethiopia and on comparative Semitics. The question is how much we actually owe to Ferguson since BENDER 2003, 40 says “my input into FERGUSON’s 1976 was quite extensive, almost to the level of co-authorship and he compiled a naïve list which mixed elements due to common genetic descent with a few non-genetic isoglosses”. But my paper of 1991 concentrated on the idea of the existence of several particular micro- or subareas within a larger language macroarea (Güldemann n.d. a, 3 proposes a “Chad-Ethiopia” macroarea) with the subareas concatenated or partially overlapping, e.g. ‘Eritrean’ subarea and a Gurage-Highland East Cushitic and then Highland East Cushitic East Omotic subarea. The existence of several subareas has been accepted by HAYWARD (2000) and by BISANG (2006 and BISANG & CRASS 2007). For an unknown reason BISANG (2006) has not mentioned my second paper (ZABORSKI 2003) which was written as a kind of rejoinder to Tosco’s paper which had been read in Leiden but published in a slightly different version in *Anthropological Linguistics*. My second paper (ZABORSKI 2003b) has been commented by CRASS (2006: 233) who could not know that this was actually only a summary published in the Proceedings of the Polish Academy of Sciences in which only short versions up to four pages could be included. Therefore Crass was only partially right criticizing the fact that I had only enumerated the areal features.

In my 2003 paper I listed 28 possible, mainly syntactic, features. CRASS (2006: 233) stresses the fact that ‘a number of features relate to the basic SOV word order’ (by the way see a very early discussion of the S+OV order and related syntactic processes by PRAETORIUS 1879: 3). If this is a kind of criticism, I have to say that we have to recognize the difference between the complete set of several syntactic features which are mutually connected in the system labeled ‘S+OV’ developed in a more or less ‘natural’ way and between the situation in which only some features of the whole S+OV system have been borrowed without other features. E.g. the allegedly universal (but there are exceptions!) rule that S+OV languages have postpositions does not have to work everywhere each time and S+OV languages without postpositions can exist, e.g. Akkadian in which the final position of the verbal predicate is due to interference with Sumerian. Cf. also the co-occurrence of VO and postpositions in Oromo (PRAETORIUS 1893b: 286–287 recalled by BISANG 2006: 82). Even Amharic which has both prepositions and postpositions does not make much use of postpositions as emphasized by HAYWARD (2000: 629 but cf. 635), cf. also Tigre. In Arabic varieties used in the region there is S+OV syntactic group/clause order but are there any postpositions? BENDER (2003: 27) suggested that S+OV order could be due to the contact with Nilo-Saharan; cf. BISANG 2006: 81 on the role of Ethiosemitic which could be, as I understand, only secondary. One thing is rather clear: since all the most archaic Cushitic languages have auxiliary verbs after the main verbs in periphrastic constructions, Proto-Cushitic dialect cluster must have had S+OV and it is impossible to decide whether this was due only to internal change or it was at least partially induced by contact. I think that the Nilo-Saharan influence could be rather something like a catalyst reinforcing an option or a variant that had already been extant in the relatively free (due mainly to inflection) Cushitic syntactic group order. By the way, I do

not think that Kanuri can be included in the S+OV macro- or rather hyperarea (*pace* HEINE & NURSE 2008b: 7) only on the basis of the constituent order feature. In general, simple ‘word order’ (actually syntactic group/clause order!) as a criterion is frequently risky or just rather weak: Berber with its V-S-O order cannot be grouped together with languages of East Africa not because allegedly its “status as VSO language... is not entirely clear” (this is a great exaggeration – *pace* HEINE & NURSE 2008b: 8!) but because there has been no geographical and cultural, including language, contact due to geographic distance (correctly taken into consideration by KÖNIG 2008: 252 but cf. p. 264, 266 and CREISSELS et al. 2008: 90 on quite superficial and insignificant comparison of Berber and Western Bantu case systems). But first of all syntactic group order is something different in different language types, e.g. in inflectional and in the so-called analytic languages. In this respect the opinion that “none of the well-documented African languages exhibits a ‘free’ clause-constituent order” (CREISSELS et al. 2008: 127; cf. DRYER 2009 where only 171 language out of the investigated 1228 world languages are said to be ‘lacking dominant word order’ while 497 have S+OV and 436 have S+VO) is rather astonishing and should be verified since e.g. DIMMENDAAL (2008: 275–277) draws examples from Maale in which there is S+OV, O-S-V and S+V-O, see also BENDER 2003: 33–35 who says that although there is S+OV order in Nara and in Kunama (obviously an areal feature!), other ‘Nilo-Saharan’ languages of the area do not have it. Some areal features can and actually must be grouped together. This is essentially true of syntactic features since by definition syntactic features are more or less interconnected. There is a kind of hierarchy and some features are more dominating and other are less relevant. Some of them can be, as CRASS (2006: 233) says, rather trivial but their relative triviality does not change the fact that they do occur and their relative frequency must be ascribed to areal contact. It is true that non-trivial similarities are most important but even trivial ones cannot be *a priori* rejected and must be evaluated (cf. SANSÒ 2006: 1030).

Languages provisionally classified as Nilo-Saharan and some Cushitic languages interfered in South West Ethiopia and Cushitic influenced Nilo-Saharan in the South up to Tanzania. In my opinion a part of the so-called ‘Omotic’ languages (mainly Hamer-Ari-Banna and probably also the little known Mao and company, see ZABORSKI 2004) are not Afroasiatic at all (cf. THEIL 2008 who classifies all ‘Omotic’ as non-Afroasiatic) while another part can be hypothetically (!), viz. provisionally classified as West Cushitic. If the latter part could be classified as a separate sixth branch of Afroasiatic at all, the number of the alleged features of direct descent from Proto-Afroasiatic could have been very, very small (see BENDER 2003: 27 admitting a possibility that Omotic languages are not Afroasiatic at all but elsewhere considering Omotic as a member of Afroasiatic, see p. 29 and not 16 on p. 41) while other Afroasiatic features could be easily ascribed to contact with Cushitic and actually it could be quite difficult to decide what goes back to Proto-Afroasiatic (via Proto-Cushitic) and what is due to secondary contact in the area. Most probably there have been at least two waves – one older and one recent – of Cushitic influence in South West Ethiopia. Actually after a better reconstruction even the alleged West Cushitic can appear to be a branch (or branches?) of the enigmatic Nilo-Saharan which (this branch but not all the Nilo-Saharan languages!) underwent a strong influence of a Cushitic adstratum. Anthropological data support, as far as I know, this theory.

So far the study of language contacts and of language areas has concentrated on the mutual (although usually not balanced, viz. not to the same degree!) influence of languages but

it has not dealt with the problem of resistance to influence. On several occasions Hayward argued that 'Afar-Saho prefix conjugation survived so well thanks to the contact with Tigrinya although Arabic should be mentioned as well as is done by SIMEONE-SENELLE & VANHOVE (2006: 51). But the fact is that many other languages contacting with Ethiosemitic and/or with Arabic, e.g. Somali have preserved only a few prefix-conjugated verbs or have lost them altogether. What is more interesting, 'Afar and Saho have preserved several features which had been lost by Arabic and Tigrinya and, what is the most important, these surviving features could be expected to disappear in 'Afar and Saho under the influence of Arabic and Tigrinya, e.g. the vocalic endings -a and -u of the prefix conjugation which worked in Classical Arabic but are greatly reduced in Modern Literary Arabic and practically absent in spoken varieties of Arabic since well over a millennium. The analogy with Cushitic suffix conjugation alone cannot account for the retention of these endings. This is a very striking example of resistance. We should try to explain not only why contacting languages acquire similar or identical features but also why they can resist and remain different. As is well known, some languages of the same family can change very profoundly, almost beyond recognition when other related languages can resist changes retaining their very archaic features for amazingly long periods, like, first of all, Modern Semitic Languages of Southern Arabia, then Tigre and, in the Cushitic branch, 'Afar-Saho, Beja and to some extent even Iraqw. As rightly emphasized by BISANG (2006: 79) "the case of Ethiopia also shows that even the absence of a certain feature can be taken as in indicator of contact-induced change". The partial loss of the old Afroasiatic inflection in the Cushitic languages of the 'middle' and 'new' stage (see ZABORSKI 1976) is due not only to universals and a kind of universal 'drift' but also to the contact with more 'analytic' languages.

It would be also interesting to know whether there is now a kind of national language purism, e.g. whether some Amharic features are eliminated from Tigrinya (allegedly this is going on) or from Oromo etc. Obviously English works practically everywhere as adstratum not only in the realm of lexica but also of grammars.

Since Northeast Africa is a very multiethnic and multilingual area, areal linguistics in this region has not only a historical value but it also has a future since contact and interference continue and will be changing most if not all the languages of this great Sprachbund.

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