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North-Cushitic

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1. Introduction

The North-Cushitic branch of the Afroasiatic phylum (formerly known as Hamito-Semitic) consists of only one language, Beja, named *beḏawije=t* (< Arabic *badu* 'bedouin'; *=t* is the feminine indefinite article) by the Beja people. It is mainly spoken in Eastern Sudan by some 1,100,000 speakers (1993 census), and in Northern Eritrea (approx. 60,000 speakers). It used to be spoken in Southern Egypt, but it seems all or almost all speakers have now shifted to Arabic. Twenty years ago, Morin (1995: 19) mentioned speakers at Aswan and Daraw, and Wedekind (2012) still does.

It is necessary to recall the question of Meroitic, the language of the so-called "black pharaohs" attested in the inscriptions of the monuments along the Sudanese part of the river Nile. Since the beginning of the 20th century, scholars have been discussing three possible classifications: Nilo-Saharan (Nubian and Nara), Afroasiatic (Beja or Omotic) or an isolated language (for an overview, see Rilly 2010). If the Nilo-Saharan hypothesis has been favoured since the second half the 20th century, it is only recently that Rilly (2010) could prove, with the comparative method, that Meroitic indeed belongs to Nilo-Saharan, and more precisely to a North-Eastern Sudanic branch, which includes also Nubian, Nara, Taman and Nyima, and not to North-Cushitic.

It had long been believed that the Blemmye-s, already mentioned by the Egyptians and the Greeks, were the ancestors of the Beja-s, but Browne (2003) could only prove recently that that their language was the ancestor of the Beja language. In his opuscule written in Latin, he shows that the beginning of the text of a Blemmye ostracon from Saqqara (7th century AD), contains words cognates with Beja words, as well as the beginning of Psalm 29, in which Beja morphological devices are recognizable in addition to the lexicon. He also showed that numerous Blemmye anthroponyms could be linked to Beja nouns, in particular those ending in *tek* or *tak*, 'man' in Beja. According to Rilly (2014: 1171), the first possible attestation of Beja, may go as far back as 1000 BC, on an Egyptian papyrus written by a scribe, named Djehoutymose, which contains a spell starting with a word meaning 'go away!' in Beja (*sigi*), an opening typical of Egyptian spells. If this hypothesis is correct, it means that the Beja language has been present in the Nile valley for thousands of years.

2. *The history of the classification of Beja*

Joseph Halévy (1873), a French orientalist, had already noticed in the second half of the 19th century, the close links that existed between Agaw, Beja, Danakil (i.e. Afar), Oromo and Somali. Two decades later, Reinisch (1893-94) proposed a bipartite classification of Cushitic languages and grouped Beja together with Saho-Afar, Somali, and Oromo in a "Lowland Cushitic" group. As Lamberti (1991: 552) pointed out, Reinisch's classification made sense towards the end of the 19th century considering the poor knowledge of the time, but it is now out of date. Lamberti (1991: 553) could deduce a more refined classification from Cerulli's various publications on Cushitic languages, which appeared during the second quarter of the 20th century. This classification sets Beja apart as the sole language of the North-Cushitic branch, and groups the other languages into Central, Lowland and Sidama groups. During the same period, Moreno (1940) stuck to a two-branch division, somewhat different from Reinisch's. It did not make Beja an independent branch from the rest of Cushitic but grouped it with Central Cushitic in addition to Lowland Cushitic. Among the specialists of Cushitic languages, Cerulli's classification of Beja prevailed against Moreno's, but for various reasons it remained disputed until the beginning of the 21th century. An important public debate took place at the *Conférence internationale sur les langues couchitiques et les peuples qui les parlent* which was held in Paris in 1975, and whose transcripts and audio files are now available in Enguehard *et al.* (2015). During the conference, the late Joseph Tubiana initiated a debate about what defined and characterized Cushitic languages. Typological and genetic arguments were at the core of the numerous discussions that took place, and very prominently for Beja. Zaborski was one of the participants who strongly advocated, on genetic comparative grounds, in favour of a North-Cushitic branch comprising only Beja. His position was developed in his *Cushitic overview*, published in Bender's (1976) volume. Several participants noted that the study of Beja was marginalized at that time, and were struck by the very low number of cognates with Oromo and Somali and by its proximity with Semitic languages, in particular concerning the root structure and the role of apophony. Some five years later, Hetzron (1980, in particular 99-101), who did not attend the 1975 conference, discussed the position of Beja within Afroasiatic. He considered it as too different from other Cushitic languages "in too many respects" and consequently proposed to set it apart from Cushitic as an independent branch of Afroasiatic. Hetzron's proposition was criticized by other linguists (e.g. Zaborski 1997; Tosco 2000), and Appleyard (2004) showed that

Hetzron's features were in fact limited to five Cushitic morphological innovations that Beja does not share with the other Cushitic groups, and to a different chronology of a putative word order change, an argument of typological nature. Our increasing knowledge of Cushitic languages has not changed Cerulli's classification of Beja, and it still prevails until now.

In the 1960-s, another classification was proposed, from a very different perspective. Tucker (1967) proposed to apply a typological classification to Cushitic languages. In this work, he considers Beja, along with Agaw and East-Cushitic, a grouping reminiscent of Reinisch's even if based on different arguments, as an 'orthodox' Cushitic language, as opposed to the other language groups qualified as 'frindge' Cushitic.

Four decades later, Morin (2001) took up again the question of the classification of Beja within Cushitic and made a cautious attempt to bridge the gap between Beja and another branch of Cushitic, Lowland East-Cushitic, and more precisely Afar and Saho. He grounded his hypothesis on the geographical contiguity that existed in historical times between the three languages and exemplified his comparative linguistic arguments with a few parallel tendencies found in phonetic and lexical features. The phonetic ones concern a tendency shared by Beja and ᶜAsaurta, a dialect of Afar-Saho, to weaken the second or third (often final) consonant of a root, and to create diphthongs in fast speech due to glide deletion between vowels. The lexical argument concerns less than a dozen cultural (specialized, local or 'rare') cognate or putative cognate terms, shared by all three languages. This attempt, considered by the author as a first step, has had so far no further developments.

3. *Lexico-statistic studies*

Lexico-statistics and glottochronology, which calculate degrees of retention in the basic vocabulary, have also been applied to the classification of Beja and Cushitic languages in general. Cohen (1988: 267) showed that only approx. 20% of the basic vocabulary of Beja (based on a revised list of 116 items) is common with its closest neighbours, Afar and Somali (East-Cushitic), and with Agaw (Central Cushitic). It was hardly half of that ratio for the more distant East-Cushitic languages, Sidamo and Oromo, for example. Nevertheless, Cohen notes that these figures are somewhat similar to what was calculated for the different sub-groups of Cushitic (e.g., 20% of common basic vocabulary between Oromo and Afar, but only 5% to 9% between Sidamo, Kambata

and Hadiyya), thus bringing no reinforcement to Moreno's classification. In a more recent glottochronological study, Blažek (1997) added more data and languages, and used the recalibrated method proposed by Starostin (1989). From his work, one can deduce that the percentage of cognates between Central Cushitic, a rather homogenous branch with respect to basic vocabulary, ranging from 88% to 45% of cognates, and Beja equals the calculation made by Cohen (1988) (22% of cognates in Blažek's list of 137 items). East-Cushitic languages are much more heterogeneous and percentages of cognates rarely go over 35% and can be as low as 8% between the most distant language pairs. Blažek calculated a percentage of cognates of approx. 40% between Beja and Proto-East-Cushitic, which he qualifies as a "remarkable" closeness. But this relative proximity is due to the heterogeneity of the East-Cushitic data and its important time-depth which roughly goes back to eight millenniums, as compared to a modern language, Beja. It thus does not contradict Cohen's previous findings about the proportion of cognates between Beja and Afar.

4. Etymology and the comparative method

In the past decade, Blažek (2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2007) has been compiling a comparative and etymological dictionary of Beja, organized in semantic fields, and so far, the results for fauna, kinship and social terminology, natural phenomena, time and geographical terminology have been published. He did not attempt to revise the classification of Beja on this basis, but these works, based on regular phonetic correspondences and the identification of borrowings (not always specified as such), pave the way to in-depth comparative studies and provide ample data for further studies on the reconstruction and genetic classification of the language.

More recently a team of researchers, headed by Guillaume Segerer, compiled a huge database of lexicons and dictionaries of African languages freely available online (http://www.reflex.cnrs.fr/database/). Some Cushitic languages, among them Roper's (1928) vocabulary of Beja, and Afroasiatic languages are included. The various sets of tools for processing and analysing the million-word database are meant to ease comparative research, but remain to be exploited for Beja once additional Cushitic languages are implemented in the database.

5. The issue of language contact

One big issue when considering the classification and reconstruction of Beja concerns the extent to which language contact with Semitic languages, Arabic in Sudan and Tigre in Eritrea, other Cushitic languages, and Nilo-Saharan, in particular Nile Nubian, has had, and still has, an influence on Beja vocabulary, morphology and syntax. A lot of research remains to be done in this domain, but there are already a few studies of language contact between Arabic and Beja, and Nilo-Saharan and Beja, that can be mentioned.

5.1 Contact with Arabic

It is uncertain when exactly the Beja people started to convert to Islam. What we know for sure is that after the Egyptian conquest of Sudan in the 14th century AD, the Beja people gradually converted to Islam and it is generally believed that all of them had become Muslims as far back as the 16th century (some think 18th or 19th century). The Arabic language entered with Islam, and the Beja people, especially males, are nowadays very often bilingual (with various degrees of proficiency in Sudanese and "classical" Arabic). In Sudan, we are thus dealing with at least five centuries of language contact in recent history, which probably increased dramatically during the last fifty years, very different from the contacts Beja and other Cushitic languages have undergone in Ethiopia, Eritrea and northern Kenya. Such a situation probably partially explains why Beja is so unlike other Cushitic languages in many respects.

It is often mentioned that the Beja lexicon is full of borrowings from Arabic and Ethio-Semitic languages (e.g. Blažek 2003a: 230), which seems to be the case, but we are still lacking explicit figures about the proportion of the vocabulary, and types of semantic fields concerned. Cohen (1988: 256) noted that Beja is the Cushitic language, which has by far the largest proportion of tri-consonantal roots (52.8%), and states that they are in majority of Arabic origin.

At the morphological level, Beja is the language that has most retained the old prefix conjugation for all the indicative paradigms: 60% of the verbs are concerned, according to Cohen's counting (1988: 256), as opposed to 30% in Afar and only 5 verbs in Somali and South Agaw. To what extent this is due to the contact with Arabic remains to be clarified since the two systems are organized very differently: while the prefix and suffix conjugations are lexically assigned in Beja, in Arabic the morphological distinction is aspectually based. Beja is also the Cushitic language where the non-concatenative morphology is organized in stems and patterns, including stems with vocalic alternation,

is the most pervasive, and typologically very similar to the particularly robust Arabic one. Non-concatenative morphology is also found, but to a much lesser extent and without patterns with ablaut in the stem, in two neighbouring Cushitic languages, Afar and Saho, but not in any other Cushitic language. Vanhove (2012) showed that despite the apparent similarity, Beja and Arabic have developed their own pattern system, in terms of both semantics and forms, as flectional and derivational devices for the noun, verb and adjective categories. Beja does not bear witness of any clear case of borrowing, copying, or replication from the patterns of dominant and prestigious Arabic. Instead, sociolinguistic and linguistic data favours an interpretation in terms of a convergence phenomenon in a large part of the Beja morphology, for which Arabic acted as a strong factor for the preservation of a crosslinguistically uncommon system. Such a situation is particularly tricky to disentangle since we are dealing with related languages. It is even trickier since contact does not result in a change, but is a matter of preservation of a proto-system.

5.2 Contact with Nilo-Saharan

Blažek's (2014) studied the lexical borrowings between Beja and the three Nilo-Saharan languages that were in contact with it: Nile Nubian (Nobiin, Kenzi and Dongola varieties), Kunama and Nara. The author discusses the direction of 36 borrowings, which consist mostly of the comparisons provided by Reinisch. It turns out that Beja borrowings from Nilo-Saharan amount to only nine lexical items, plus one dubious one, seven from Nubian, two from Kunama and one from Nara (the item for 'white' was counted twice, as a borrowing from Nubian and from Nara). Two more loans, which came ultimately from Egyptian via Nubian could be added to these figures; for ten items the direction of borrowing is undecidable (and the twelve remaining items were borrowed from Beja into Nilo-Saharan). Overall, it seems thus that contact with Nilo-Saharan had very little impact on Beja, at least at the lexical level.

6. Dialectology and the internal classification of Beja

It had become a tradition to classify the different varieties of Beja by the name of the corresponding Beja tribes, with few typological features mentioned. Morin (1995: 21-23) is the first to have proposed a geographically based classification that he deducted from the observations made by Almkvist (1881-85) and Roper (1928). These two varieties consist in a northern and a southern dialect, to which Morin adds a transition zone. Apart from lexical specificities, the main distinctions he mentions, concern the

phonology of certain morphemes characterized by *i* in the south and *u* in the north, and a phonetic tendency to lengthen vowels (stressed or unstressed) in the south. These main divisions are further subdivided into sociolects: the Halenga tribe variety, with its characteristic morpheme *s*, often features prominently in the literature about Beja. Each variety is also subdivided into local dialects, such as the variety of the area of Erkowit, situated in the mountains above Port Sudan, close to Sinkat, and considered as the "purest" Beja variety by the Beja speakers, for reasons that are still unclear to me. Morin refines his classification by distinguishing two southern varieties in the migration zone of the Hadendowa tribe, that of Sinkat, a contact zone with the Ammar'ar tribe, who speak a northern variety (*miːmhit beḍawije*, also spoken by the Bishariyyin tribe), and that of the Gash area (*gaːʃit beḍawije*).

Wedekind (2012) proposes a somewhat different geographical division with three dialectal areas: North, Central and South, to which he gives the names of tribes or clans (p. 624): Bishari, Atman and Hadendowa. They cover respectively, to the East of the river Nile, (i) Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan until Haylab; (ii) the area North of Port Sudan, some quarters of Port Sudan, Suakin; (iii) the region from Port Sudan to Kassala in Sudan and Teseney in Eritrea. He also mentions sociolectal and local variations. To the features mentioned by Morin, he adds differences in the use of pitch accent in plural formation, the vowels of the definite article, and sociolinguistically based phonetic variants in borrowings from Arabic between urban and rural varieties. He also asserts the proximity of the three varieties using the Swadesh 100-word list, with a difference from 5 to 9%. This is similar to the retention rate calculated by Blažek (2013) with the recalibrated glottochronology.

7. References

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