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GIDEON GOLDENBERG

**Personalia**

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## In memoriam Robert Hetzron (1938–1997)

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Robert Hetzron, with his rich cultural background, extensive practical and theoretical knowledge of languages, natural talent for linguistic fieldwork, great grammatical acumen, intellectual creativity and enthusiasm for original research, was a distinguished linguist who greatly contributed to the study of Cushitic and Semitic languages, historical and comparative Hamito-Semitic and general linguistics, but also never lost interest in the linguistic investigation of his mother-tongue Hungarian and in studying and translating poetry (mostly into Hungarian).

Hetzron's main and special field of study was evidently Ethiopian languages, Semitic and Cushitic, in all their aspects, and it was in this branch of learning that his most remarkable contributions were made.

Robert Hetzron was born as Róbert Herzog in Budapest on 31 December 1938. He had general and Jewish-religious schooling before he went at the age of eighteen to the university of Budapest, where he took up Hungarian and Hebrew as major subjects (a rather unique feat because Hebrew did not exist officially as a major subject at that time) and started attending courses in the Department of Semitic Philology and Arabic. When a couple of months later the October 1956 Hungarian revolution broke out, Robert soon boarded a train heading for the West. After a short stay in Vienna, some wandering, and studying for a while in Strasbourg, he arrived in Paris. There he studied general linguistics with Martinet and others, and Amharic with Joseph Tubiana. Concluding his studies in Paris, Hetzron went to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to benefit from the teachings of H.J. Polotsky in general and Semitic linguistics. In Jerusalem he did his M.A., writing a thesis on "Object Suffixes in Amharic". He then moved to the University of California in Los Angeles to work with W. Leslau on his doctoral dissertation. For his Ph.D. thesis he prepared a grammatical description of the Cushitic little-known language of Southern Agaw, based on data he had collected in his fieldwork carried out in

Ethiopia in 1965–1966. Another result of the same journey to Ethiopia was the main part of his study of the Semitic Gurage dialects, unquestionably his real love. After returning from Ethiopia and finishing his studies in Los Angeles, Robert Hetzron was appointed professor in the Department of Germanic, Oriental and Slavic Languages at the University of California in Santa Barbara, where he remained until his retirement.

Among Hetzron's early writings there were some of his most important contributions to the linguistic study of Amharic, like "La voyelle du sixième ordre en amharique" (*Journal of African Languages* 3, 1964), showing the nature of the "schwa" vowel as a positional variant of zero depending on syllabic structure, and suggesting to mark those special cases where the same vowel occurs regardless of syllabic structure by the juncture sign /-/ which might symbolize the trace of the fallen laryngeal still holding the vowel; or "La rection du thème factitif en amharique" (*Le Muséon* 76, 1963), illustrating the full realization of quadrivalence with the factitive as-stem. His research of Agaw yielded two major publications, viz. *The Verbal System of Southern Agaw* (Berkeley & Los Angeles 1969) and "The Nominal System of Awngi (Southern Agaw)" (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41, 1978); also "The Agaw Languages" (*Afroasiatic Linguistics* 3:3, 1976) and others.

The research which attracted Robert most was that of Gurage. In fact he wanted to make Gurage the subject of his doctoral dissertation, had he not been directed towards the study of Agaw, so when he went to Ethiopia in 1965–66 for preparing his dissertation, he spent more time on the study of Gurage dialects than on Agaw, and collected all the materials on which his book *The Gunnän-Gurage Languages* (Napoli 1977) was based. He also wrote quite a few articles on Gurage, and a great part of his *Ethiopian Semitic: Studies in Classification* (Manchester 1972) was centred on Gurage. The last article that he wrote, "The Two Futures in Central and Peripheral Western Gurage", in *Essays on Gurage Language and Culture Dedicated to Wolf Leslau*, ed. G. Hudson (Wiesbaden 1996), was on this group of languages, and his last scholarly and human activity in collaboration with colleagues before his death was to invite to his home a group of young linguists (J.-F. Prunet, Berhanu Chamora, Sharon Rose and Degif Petros) for an informal workshop on Western Gurage. I deeply regret that I was unable to accept his invitation to participate in that workshop.

Much of Robert's energy was spent on the genetic-genealogical study of Semitic and Cushitic. His major contributions to this subject were his book just mentioned on Ethiopian Semitic and "The Limits of Cushitic" (*Sprache und*

Geschichte in Afrika 2, 1980). In Comparative Semitics, Cushitics and Hamito-Semitic in general Robert became a widely recognized authority.

In all the languages he investigated, Hetzron was deeply interested in the general linguistic aspects, and having a brilliant mind and thorough familiarity with the various languages that he researched, his theoretical linguistic writings show unusual creativity and originality. He had, however, a feeling that as a free-spirited critical scholar it would not be easy for him to get recognized and accepted in general linguistic circles with their ever-changing "mainstream" orthodoxies, and this caused him great frustration. To the offprint which he sent to me of his article on "Presentative function and presentative movement" Robert added an apology for the compromises in linguistic method that he had to make, with a sarcastic note saying "This is America, you must be non-conformist like all others". Besides his articles on various general linguistic issues, may I just mention here his book on Surfacing: From Dependency Relations to Linearity (Padova 1975).

Robert Hetzron was an active organizer and editor. He founded the North American Conferences of Afroasiatic Linguistics (NACAL), which has become an important American and international institution, he edited the monographic journal Afroasiatic Linguistics as long as it existed, and then the Journal of Afroasiatic Languages. His last editorial project was The Semitic Languages volume published by Routledge in 1997.

Robert had exquisite taste for music and was a great collector of vocal music recordings. He had a profound interest in the translation and prosodic analysis of poetry and published several articles on these subjects, with translations from Goethe into English, and printed an anthology (that was highly appreciated) of French, German, English, Finnish, Hebrew, Amharic and other poems translated into Hungarian.

For many years Robert was suffering from bad health, which also involved prolonged depressions. This had a cruel impact on his private life and family, and tragically broke more than once the continuity of his scholarly work. He died on 13 August 1997 before reaching his sixtieth birthday. He survives in his writings.