Review

GROVER HUDSON, *Northeast African Semitic: Lexical Comparisons and Analysis*

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Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume


**AethFor** Äthiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. Bausi and S. Uhlig (ibid., 2011ff.); 76ff. ed. by A. Bausi (ibid., 2012ff.).


**CSCO** Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.


**EMML** Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.


**OrChr** Orien Christianus, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.

**PdP** La Parola del Passato. Rivista di studi classici, Napoli 1946ff.


**PO** Patrologia Orientalis, 1903ff.


**RRAI** Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, Roma, 1892ff.


**SAe** Scriptores Aethiopicorum.
Reviews

lativieren. Besonders interessant sind ihre Beobachtungen zum Kulturkon-
takt, zu den nicht so offensichtlichen Formen weiblicher Rhetorik und
Selbstausdruck sowie zu ihrem eigenen persönlichen Bewusstseinswandel.
Aus diesen Gründen ist eine Lektüre auch für nicht mit Südäthiopiern be-
schäftigte WissenschaftlerInnen sehr zu empfehlen.

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Grover Hudson’s book belongs to the tradition of the lexicostatistical studies of Ethiopian Semitic (henceforth: ESe) languages. Moreover, this book is probably the most ambitious attempt at a lexicostatistical classification of ESe. First brought to the attention of modern linguistics by Morris Swadesh in the 1950s, lexicostatistics carries out a quantitative comparative analysis of the relationship between languages based on lexical cognates. As such, lexicostatistics counts and assumes to measure the mutual affinity or distance (agreement or disagreement) between languages in quantitative terms in order to subclassify them, yet without implying any precise correlation between time and degree of differentiation. This further step is proper to glottochronology, which uses the methods of lexicostatistics but attempts to correlate increasing disagreement with increasing distance over time since languages are assumed to have split from a common ancestor language. A somewhat different field is linguistic palaeontology, that uses lexical evidence for historical (also non-linguistic) reconstruction. These latter aspects are not dealt with in this book, and glottochronological hypotheses in particular are cautiously discarded.1

The book has a complex structure. Chapter 1, Background (pp. 1–55), introduces the themes and plan of the book, illustrates the Semitic languages of northeast Africa, namely, their diversity, the notions of language and dialect,

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and details on each of the ESe languages considered: thirty language varieties are briefly presented, roughly ordered according to geographical criteria with special attention given to questions of name, documentation, and the state of the art, particularly for the less documented languages. The ESe languages have obviously very different status and this is particularly true for a language documented for many centuries like Ge‘ez (p. 10) as opposed to all others. To say that this language ‘is known from inscriptions dated to some 2000 years ago’, whereas inscriptions are attested from the second/third centuries CE at the earliest, and substantially only from the fourth, that ‘Conventional wisdom has long considered Ge‘ez descendant from an Ancient South Arabian language’, while this hypothesis was as early criticised as from the 1950s, and in particular that ‘Our knowledge of Ge‘ez grammar and lexicon is mostly based on a considerable body of Ge‘ez manuscript literature dating from 1270–1770’, whereas many writings certainly antedate this period and certainly also some manuscripts (not to say that part of the lexicon of Aksumite inscriptions is obscure and not yet registered in lexica)—is rather vague. A more detailed presentation of the Gurage languages is given, together with a section on mutual intelligibility. The rest of the chapter is intended to introduce the methodological aspects of the research as well as details on history of lexicostatistics, with special reference to Marvin L. Bender’s important contribution. For practical purposes only fifteen languages are considered: Tigre; Dahalik; Tigrinya; Go‘az; Gafat; Soddo and the Gogot, Dobbi and Galila dialects; Mesqan and the Urib dialect; Muher; Chaha and the Ezha, Gumer and Gura dialects; Inor and the Ener, Indegany, Gyeta, Meger and Mesmes dialects; Silt’e and the Welene, Inneqor, and Ulbareg dialects; Zay; Harari; Argobba; Amharic. The vexata quaestio of language classification including a short discussion of lexicostatistical reliability concludes the chapter.

The following chapter 2, Lexical comparisons (pp. 57–104), is subdivided into two sections: the first section defines the corpus for the lexicostatistical analysis, consisting of a word list of two hundred and fifty items—far more extensive than the list of ninety-eight words used by Bender, although the latter extended his research to all Ethiopian languages—and some methodological premises. The second subsection (pp. 69–104) presents the corpus in the form of tables of comparison, where to each word of the list (for example, ‘able, be – (v)’, ‘all’, ‘animal, domestic’, etc.), the words of each of fourteen languages (all except Dahalik, for lack of data) are given. This same corpus is presented in chapter 3, Dictionary (pp. 105–277), in the form of a systematic comparative-etymological dictionary of the 3,301 words in the tables. The

dictionary proper (pp. 108–236) is followed by refined indexes of Proto-Semitic, Proto-Agaw, Proto-East-Cushitic cognates, Proto-ESe lexical reconstructions, cognates sets, cognates shared by ESe and proto-languages, and ESe with Agaw cognates. The relatively short chapter 4, Findings and Analysis (pp. 279–297), provides a first estimation of the data, that is already of great interest: the final diagram tree (dendrogram) on p. 289 presents a classification into five groups, where North ESe is still a group, but not opposed to a unitary South ESe. The rich list of references and an index (pp. 299–323) conclude the volume, provided with four maps, 22 tables, and seven tree diagrams.

The author is honest in presenting also some points of criticism of lexicostatistical analysis, but more could have been said on the intrinsic nature of linguistic classification. In the end, lexicostatistics counts, but does not weigh (to some extent at least): comparing what is done in philology, lexicostatistics does not produce genealogical trees or stemmata codicum, but only correspondents of dendrograms, that are in the end not necessarily decisive for linguistic history without consideration of other aspects. A blatant example of this is Hudson’s criticism of the importance of the Agaw substratum influence on ESe (pp. 290–291): this influence is very apparent in syntax and cannot be discarded on the basis of weak lexical evidence.

This book is going to remain an indispensable companion for lexicostatistics of ESe languages and provides a new benchmark in the field. A substantial mass of data has been collected and wonderfully organized. Leaving more comprehensive hypotheses to a later date (as Hudson states on p. 279, § 4.1 Significance, on the comparisons as ‘evidence for ESe and Semitic linguistic history’, will be better appreciated in a further publication), Hudson’s main goal is to provide coherent and reliable evidence, and the book is a major contribution to general comparative lexicography and historical linguistics and to issues in linguistic classification and descriptive and comparative linguistics.

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