

Levant and North Africa: Afroasiatic linguistic history

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This chapter examines the linguistic history of the Afroasiatic language family that spans much of the Near East and North Africa. It extends further the discussions of North African population history in chapters 12 and 14, and favors an Asian rather than African ultimate source for the whole Afroasiatic family.

Afroasiatic classification and homeland

The prehistoric Afroasiatic migrations (see Figure 12.1 for the distribution of this family) can be linguistically determined only indirectly, on the basis of ecological and cultural lexicon and mutual borrowings from and into substrata, adstrata, and superstrata. Very useful is a detailed genetic classification, ideally with an absolute chronology of sequential divergences. Without literary documents and absolute chronology of loans the only linguistic tool is the method called glottochronology. Although in its “classical” form, as formulated by Swadesh, it was discredited, its recalibrated modification developed by Sergei Starostin gives much more realistic estimations. For Afroasiatic, Starostin (2010) and Militarev (2005) have obtained almost the same shape of tree-diagram (Figure 15.1), although they operated with 50- and 100-word lists of basic vocabulary items respectively.

Rather problematic results for Omotic should be ascribed to extremely strong substratum influences. Various influences, especially Nilo-Saharan, are also apparent in Cushitic, plus Khoisan and Bantu in Dahalo and South Cushitic. Less apparent, but identifiable, is the Nilo-Saharan influence in Ancient Egyptian (Takács 1999: 38–46) and Berber (Militarev 1991: 248–65); stronger in Chadic are influences of Saharan from the east (Jungrathmayr 1989), Songhai from the west (Zima 1990), plus Niger-Congo from the south (Gerhardt 1983).

To map the early Afroasiatic migrations, it is necessary to localize the Afroasiatic homeland in space and time. The fact that five of the six branches of Afroasiatic are situated in Africa has been interpreted as an axiomatic argument against an Asiatic

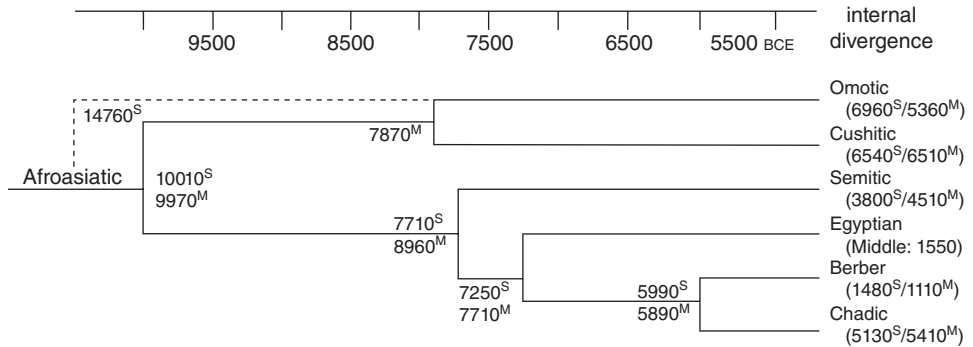


Figure 15.1 Classification of the six major subgroups of the Afroasiatic languages (S = Starostin 2010; M = Militarev 2005). Chronology is in calendar years BCE.

homeland (Fellman 1991–93:56). But it is possible to find many counter-examples of languages spreading from relatively small regions into distant and significantly larger areas: for example, English from England to North America and Oceania; Spanish from Spain to Latin America; Portuguese from Portugal to Brazil; Arabic from Central Arabia to the Near East and North Africa; Swahili from Zanzibar to Equatorial Africa. Among whole language families the most striking example is Austronesian, spreading initially from South China, through Taiwan, to innumerable islands from Madagascar to Easter Island (chapter 35).

A number of arguments speak for a Levantine location for Proto-Afroasiatic, as modeled in Figure 15.2. The family has distant relationships with Kartvelian, Dravidian, Indo-European, and other Eurasiatic language families within the framework of the Nostratic hypothesis (Illič-Svityč 1971–84; Blažek 2002; Dolgopolsky 2008; Bomhard 2008). There are lexical parallels connecting Afroasiatic with other Near Eastern languages which cannot be explained from Semitic; these include Sumerian-Afroasiatic lexical parallels indicating an Afroasiatic substratum in Sumerian (Militarev 1995). There are also Elamite-Afroasiatic lexical and grammatical cognates explainable as a common heritage (Blažek 1999), and North Caucasian-Afroasiatic parallels in cultural lexicon explainable by ancient geographical proximity (Militarev & Starostin 1984).

Regarding the tree-diagram in Figure 15.1, the hypothetical scenario of the disintegration of Proto-Afroasiatic should contain two non-synchronic migrations from the Levantine homeland. Firstly, Cushitic (and Omotic?) separated circa the 10th millennium BCE (during the late Natufian archaeological phase) and spread into the Arabian peninsula and ultimately across the Red Sea into Eritrea/Ethiopia (chapter 12). Secondly, Egyptian, Berber, and Chadic split from Semitic (the latter remaining in the Levant) around the 8th millennium BCE and dispersed into the Nile Delta and Valley.

The dispersal of the Cushitic languages

There is general agreement about the classification of Cushitic; only the positions of Yaaku and Dahalo are problematic, having been influenced by strong substrata and adstrata (Ehret et al. 1989). Having identified a Cushitic-like substratum in modern

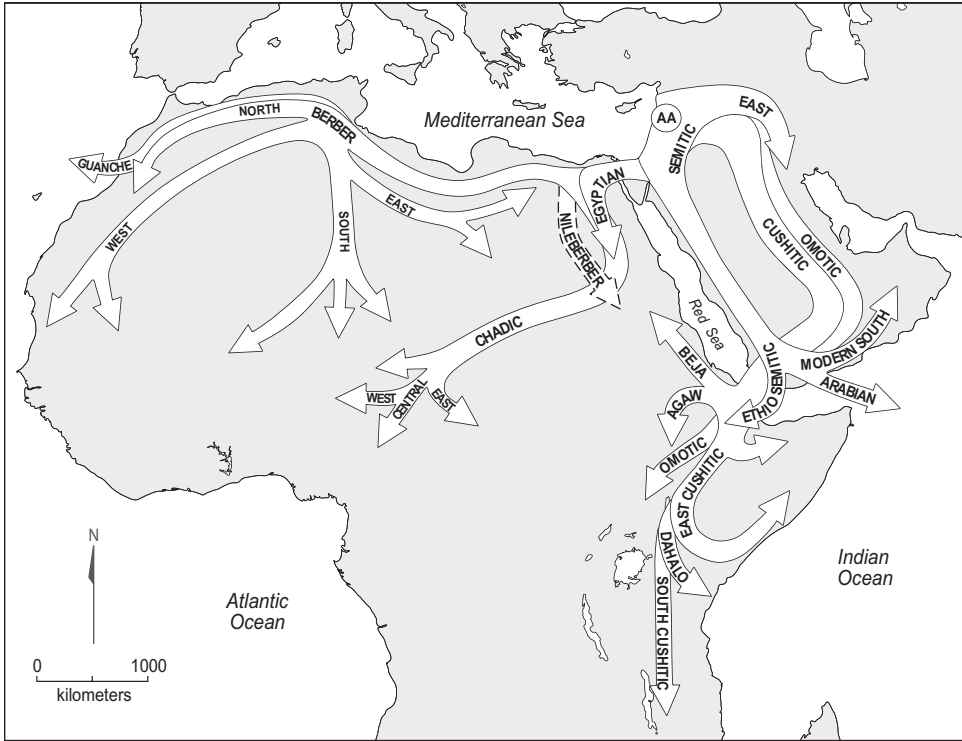


Figure 15.2 The Levant homeland (suggested as AA on the map) and likely routes of expansion of the subgroups within the Afroasiatic language family. Map production by Education and Multimedia Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

South Arabian, Militarev (1984: 18–19; cf. also Belova 2003) proposes that Cushites originally lived throughout the Arabian peninsula; thus they would have been the original southern neighbors of the Semites, who then assimilated those Cushites who did not move into Ethiopia. The spread of Cushites in Africa is connected with the Rift Valley. In the coastal area of Eritrea and Djibouti, where the Rift enters into the African mainland, three archaic representatives of the north, central (=Agaw) and eastern branches of Cushitic appear: Beja, Bilin, and Afar-Saho respectively. In this place the disintegration of Cushitic probably began. Ancestors of the Agaw spread in the north of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Beja also in Sudan between the Nile and the Red Sea. Other East and South Cushitic languages moved southward along the Rift Valley through Ethiopia, Kenya, as far as Central Tanzania. Partial migrations from the Rift reached areas more distant, for example the Horn by Somaloid populations (Heine 1978: 65–70) or the lower basin of the Tana in Kenya by the Dahalo and recently by the South Oromo.

The dispersal of the Omotic languages

Both external and internal classification of Omotic are controversial. Separation of “West Cushitic“ as Omotic, an independent branch of Afroasiatic, was based on the

lexicostatistical estimations of Bender (1975). The careful grammatical analyses by Bender (2000) and Zaborski (2004) demonstrate that most of the Omotic grammemes inherited from Afroasiatic are common with Cushitic. Numerous lexical isoglosses connecting Omotic with other Afroasiatic branches, to the exclusion of Cushitic (Blažek 2008: 94–139), attest that Omotic and Cushitic are sister-branches, that is, they do not support the West Cushitic conception. On the other hand, Nilo-Saharan parallels to the unique pronominal systems of Aroid and Maoid indicate they could be “Omoticized“ (Zaborski [2004: 180–183] proposes their Nilo-Saharan origin). Regarding these conclusions, the model by Militarev (2005) dating the separation of Cushitic and Omotic to the early 8th millennium BCE and reconstructing their route through Arabia seems valid.

The dispersal of the Semitic languages

The Semitic ecological lexicon indicates the Semitic homeland was in the northern Levant (Kogan 2009: 18–19). The home of the Akkadians was northern and central Mesopotamia. From the time of the Sargonid Empire (24–23rd centuries BCE), Akkadian began to push Sumerian into southern Mesopotamia. Akkadian also spread into Elam, Syria, and Anatolia. In the 2nd millennium BCE the southern Semitic dialect, Babylonian, was used as a diplomatic language in the Near East, including Egypt. The massive migration of the Canaanite tribes into Lower (northern) Egypt at c.1700 BCE has been connected with the campaigns of the Hyksos. A part of this multiethnic conglomeration could have been the Hebrews, whose return c.1200 BCE was described in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. This mythic narration is supported by linguistic analysis of Egyptian toponyms from the Bible (Vycichl 1940).

The oldest Phoenician inscriptions are known from Byblos (11–10th centuries BCE), later also from Tyre, Sidon, and other Levantine ports. During the 1st millennium BCE, Phoenicians founded numerous bases in southern Anatolia, Cyprus, Malta, Sicily, Sardinia, Ibiza, and along the coasts of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Iberia, including several points along the Atlantic coast (modern Tangier, Cadiz). Although the strongest Phoenician state, Carthage, was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE, the Phoenician/Punic language survived in North Africa until the 5th century CE, and traces of Punic influence are identifiable in modern Berber languages (Vycichl 1952).

From the late 2nd millennium BCE, Arameans spread from northern Syria and Mesopotamia throughout the whole Fertile Crescent, and came into northern Mesopotamia as captives of the Assyrians from the end of the 9th to the mid-7th century BCE. By the time of the fall of Assyria (612 BCE), Aramaic was already a dominant language in northern Mesopotamia, and from the Babylonian captivity (586–539 BCE) it began to replace Hebrew in Palestine. Aramaic became a dominant Near Eastern language in the time of the Achaemenid empire (539–331 BCE), where it served as a language of administration from Egypt and northern Arabia to Central Asia and the borders of India, where the Aramaic script was adapted into local alphabetic scripts such as Kharoshthi and Brahmi. The dominant role of Aramaic in the Near East con-

tinued until the expansion of Arabic in the 7th century CE, but its presence there has never died.

Five hundred years before the rise of Islam, Arabs expanded from northern Arabia into the Levant and Mesopotamia. Two states dominated by Arabs controlled the commercial routes between the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf: Palmyra, and the Nabatean kingdom centered on Petra, although for official documents Aramaic still served. With the spread of Islam an unprecedented expansion of Arabic began, and by the 8th century Arabic was used from Morocco and Iberia to central Asia. Although in some areas Arabic lost its position (Iberia, Sicily, Persia), elsewhere its role expanded. In Africa, Arabic extended to the southern border of the Sahara and along the East African coast. One of the pre-Islamic Semitic languages of Yemen crossed the Red Sea in the role of a trade lingua franca in the early 1st millennium BCE and became the founder of the Ethio-Semitic branch (Gragg 1997: 242). Separation of north and south Ethio-Semitic sub-branches can be dated to c.890 BCE (Militarev 2005: 399).

Egyptian

Ancient Egyptian was spoken in the Nile Valley from Lower Nubia to the Delta, probably also in oases of the Western Desert, and also in Sinai and Palestine in the times of Egyptian expansion during the New Kingdom. The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, ca. 3226 BCE (Ignatjeva 1997: 20), probably stimulated a process of homogenization of local dialects (see also chapter 16).

The dispersal of the Berber languages

To the Berber branch belong not only modern Berber languages spoken in North Africa from Senegal and Mauritania to Egypt (Siwa Oasis), but also the language(s) of Libyco-Berber inscriptions attested from the Canary Islands to Libya and dated from the 7-6th centuries BCE to the 4th century CE, together with fragments of Canary Island languages recorded by Spanish and Italian chroniclers in the 14-16th centuries. The oldest archaeological traces of a human settlement in the Canary Islands are known from Tenerife at c.540 BCE, including an archaic inscription from Hierro (Pichler 2007: 57-59). Taking account of glottochronological dating of the disintegration of Proto-Berber to the 7th century BCE (Blažek 2010), it is possible to see here the impact of Phoenician influence spreading from the Mediterranean coast. The adaptation of the Phoenician script and borrowing of about 20 Canaanite cultural terms, with different reflexes in all Berber branches (i.e. adapted before the disintegration of Common Berber), support this reconstruction. From this perspective, it is probable that the ancestors of the Berbers originally spread along the North African coast. The model of classification of the Berber languages prepared by George Starostin (2010), with the disintegration of Zenaga dated to 1480 BCE and disintegration of north, east and south sub-branches dated to 1080 BCE, is not compatible with the distribution of Phoenician loans in all Berber sub-branches. Their spread is thinkable only in the 1st millennium BCE.

Militarev (1991: 154) localized the area where the South Berber (Tuareg) sub-branch formed in the triangle Ghudāmis-Ghāt-Sabhah in west Libya. The ancient city of Garama also lay in this area, inhabited by the Garamantes, who are frequently identified with the ancestors of Tuaregs. More difficult is the reconstruction of the route of the West Berbers, represented by the Zenaga, living along the Senegal-Mauritanian border now, but in a large part of West Mauritania until the 17th century. The closest linguistic relative, Tetserret/Tameseghlalt, is spoken by a small, non-Tuareg, minority living among the Tuaregs of Niger (Souag 2010: 178). Other substratal traces of West Berber appear in the Arabic dialect Hassaniya, spoken in Mauritania, West Sahara, and Algeria, and in the North Songhai dialects Tadaksahak (East Mali, West Niger), Tagdal (West-Central Niger), and Kwarandzyey (West Algeria). Souag (2010: 186) favors a movement of Kwarandzyey from the basin of the Niger. In this case the migration of the West Berbers probably preceded the spread of the Tuaregs into the southwest.

In the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, before the formation of the historically attested Berber dialect continuum, linguistic traces of Berber related idioms appear in the Nile Valley. About 20 etymons occur in Nubian languages, all with good Berber etymologies (Blažek 2000). These Nubian lexemes are not limited to Nile Nubian, but are distributed in all Nubian branches. This means they would have been adopted before the disintegration of Nubian, dated to the 11th century BCE (Starostin 2010). The contact zone was perhaps around the mouth of Wadi al-Milk in the Nile valley in North Sudan (Behrens 1984: map 7.5; Blažek 2000: 40).

The dispersal of the Chadic languages

Starostin's date of 5130 BCE for the disintegration of Proto-Chadic (Figure 15.1) agrees very well with the estimate of 5410 BCE by Militarev (2005: 399). The easternmost Chadic language is Kajakse, from the archaic group Mubi, spoken in the Waddai highlands in southeast Chad. This area is accessible from the Nile Valley only in two ways: along the Wadi Howar north of Darfur (Blench 2006: 162) or along the Bahr al-Ghazal and its north tributary Bahr al-^CArab to the south of Darfur. The northern route could have led along the Batha river, today flowing into Lake Fitri, forming in a wetter past a part of Lake Chad (400,000 sq km at 4000 BCE; 1,350 sq km today). The southern route could have continued along the Bahr Azoum/Salamat into the basin of the Chari, the biggest tributary of Lake Chad.

Summary

The present scenario for the origins and dispersal of the Afroasiatic language family has its analogy in the much later spread of Semitic languages into Africa. In both cases, the movements occurred via a northern route through Sinai (Egyptian, chapter 16; Chadic; Berber; Aramaic; and Arabic), and a southern route through Bab el-Mandeb (Cushitic, chapter 12; Omotic; and Ethio-Semitic).

SEE ALSO: 12 Sub-Saharan Africa: linguistics; 14 Sub-Saharan Africa: human genetics;
16 Levant and North Africa: archaeology

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