

# The Ethiosemitic Languages

**Lecture 02**  
**LIN 4409/5609**

September, 11 2023

# The Afroasiatic Macrophyllum

The Semitic language family is part of the larger Afroasiatic macrophylum

## Berber

Shilha - Morocco, 7.2M

Kabyle - Algeria, 6M

## Chadic

Hausa - Nigeria and Niger, 60M

## Cushitic

Oromo - Ethiopia and Kenya, 30.4M

Somali - Somalia and Djibouti, 21.8M

## Egyptian (†)

## Semitic

Arabic - Africa and Middle East, 350M

Amharic - Ethiopia, 32M

## Omotic

Wolaitta - Ethiopia, 1.6M

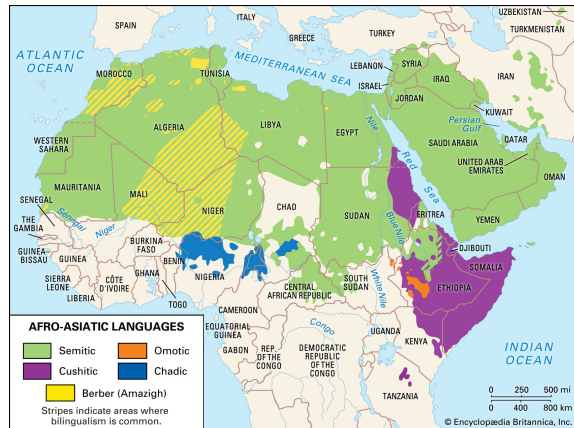


Figure: Distribution of Afroasiatic languages

# The Semitic Language Family

An influential model of the grouping of Semitic languages is as follows (Rubin 2008):

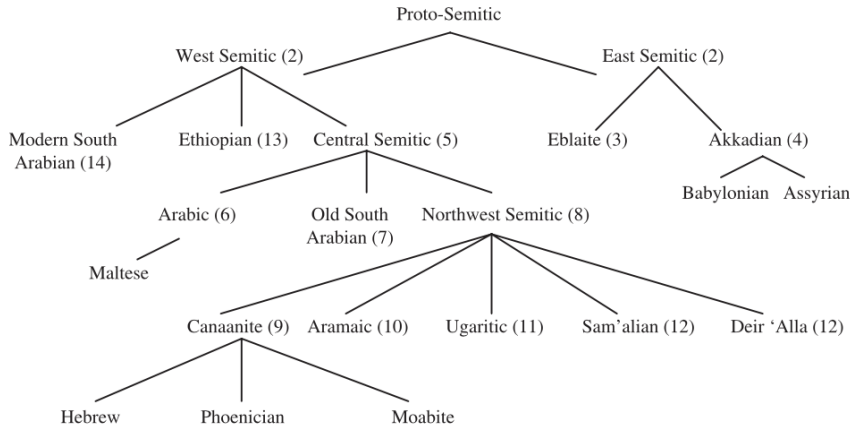
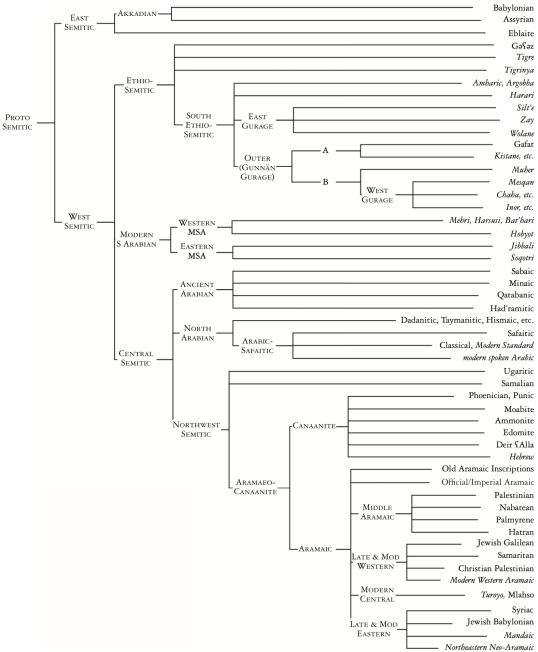


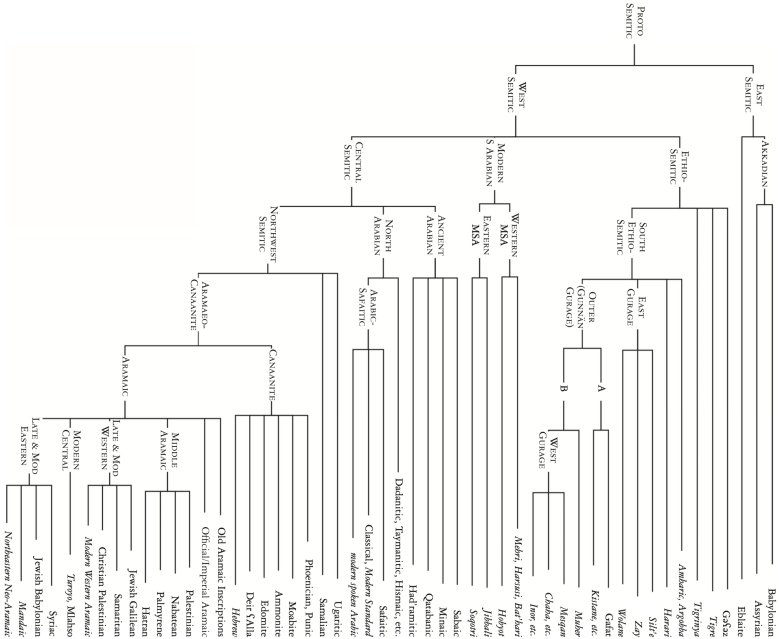
Figure: Grouping of Semitic languages

A more articulated view of Semitic languages comes from Huehnergard & Rubin (2011)

# The Semitic Language Family



# The Semitic Language Family



# The Semitic Language Family

The Semitic languages are distributed across Northern Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East

## Akkadian (E)(†)

Assyrian(†) - Middle East

Babylonian(†) - Middle East

## Central Semitic (W)

Arabic - Africa and Middle East, 350M

Chaldean - Middle East, 829K

## Modern South Arabian (W)

Mehri - Yemen and Oman, 166K

Soqotri - Socotra archipelago, 70K

## Ethiosemitic (W)

Amharic - Ethiopia, 32M

Tigrinya - Eritrea and Ethiopia, 9.85M

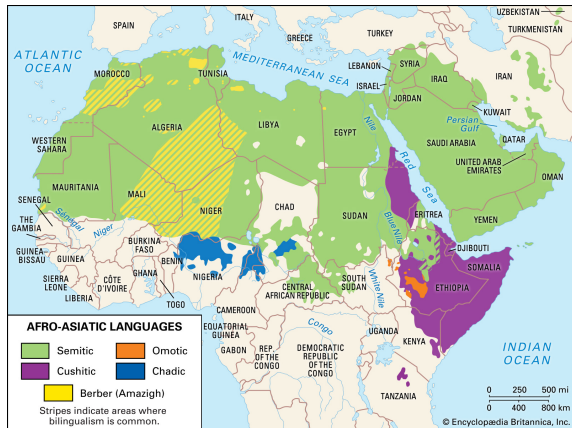


Figure: Distribution of Afroasiatic languages

# The Ethiosemitic Language Family

The Ethiosemitic languages are distributed Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan

## North Ethiosemitic

Ge'ez (†) - Horn of Africa

Tigre - Eritrea, 1.05M

Tigrinya - Eritrea and Ethiopia, 9.85M

## South Ethiosemitic

Amharic - Ethiopia, 32M

Argobba - Central Ethiopia, 44K

Gafat (†) - Western Ethiopia

Gurage languages - Central Ethiopia, 2M

Harari - Eastern Ethiopia, 26K

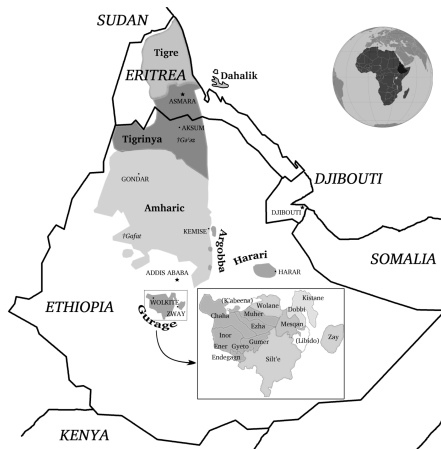


Figure: Distribution of Ethiosemitic languages

# Grouping of Ethiosemitic within Semitic

The Ethiosemitic language family as a subgrouping of Semitic languages is long-standing and well-accepted, at least in part on the basis of geographical and historical-cultural reality

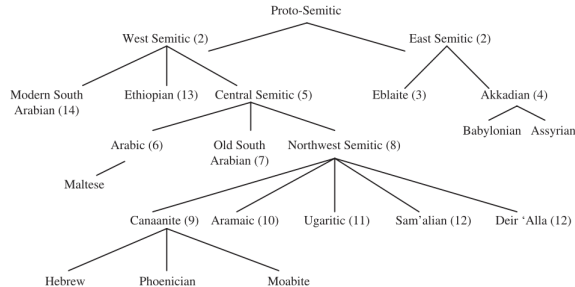


Figure: Grouping of Semitic languages (Rubin 2008)

The earliest classificatory work grouped Ethiosemitic with Arabic and Modern South Arabian (i.e., South Semitic) largely on the basis of broken plurals, which was later determined to be inherited from Proto-Semitic

Later work grouped Ethiosemitic together with Modern South Arabian as a branch of Semitic languages



# Grouping of Ethiosemitic within Semitic

Ethiosemitic and Modern South Arabian in fact share many features (Weninger 2011b, Porkhomovsky 2020):

Emphatic consonants realized as ejectives /k/, /k'/'

Seven-vowel systems

i	i	u
e	ə	o
	a	

4-radical and 5-radical roots

1st and 2nd person singular suffixes [-kV] in the perfect verb form

Specific prefixal subject agreement patterns in the imperfect and jussive verb forms

(1) [jɨ-säbbɨr] 'it(m.) breaks'

(2) [jɨ-sbär] 'let it(m.) break'

Regardless, none of these are convincingly shared innovations, as opposed to retentions or areal features

# Grouping of Ethiosemitic within Semitic

Ethiosemitic languages are commonly viewed as their own subgrouping within the Semitic languages

Evidence for the unity of Ethiosemitic is in reality fairly sparse; there are very few shared features that can reliably be called shared innovations, as opposed to inherited or areal features (Weninger 2011b)

Agent nouns with pater CäCaCi(j)

Infinitives ending with [-ot]

Existential verb /hlw/

- (3)    ʔit-a    gäza    säb        ʔall-o-wa  
         that-FS house.F person.M AUX.PRES-S3MS-O3FS  
         'There are people in the house.'

*(Tigrinya)*

Ethiosemitic languages have nonetheless developed together into a class of languages distinct from the rest of the Semitic language family, perhaps in part due to contact with Cushitic languages (Feleke 2021)

# Internal Grouping of Ethiosemitic Languages

The internal grouping of Ethiosemitic is not well understood

The difficulty in internally classifying the Ethiosemitic language family comes from:

- A lack of shared characteristic features amongst the languages

- The status of the languages as under-studied and under-represented, sometimes severely

- A lack of understanding regarding the dialectal variation within the languages

# Internal Grouping of Ethiosemitic Languages

Early and influential classifications by Wolf Leslau and Robert Hetzron divide Ethiosemitic languages into two major branches

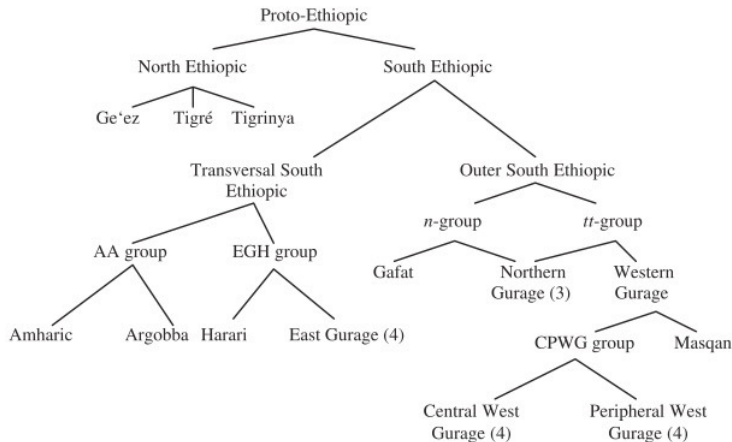


Figure: Ethiosemitic per Hetzron 1972

# Internal Grouping of Ethiosemitic Languages

The two groups of languages can be distinguished on a number of characteristic features (Weninger 2011b)

## **North Ethiosemitic :** Ge'ez, Tigre, Tigrinya

Preservation of laryngeal and pharyngeal consonants /h/, /ʔ/, /ħ/, /ʕ/

Gemination in the imperfect

Morpheme [-(ä)t] for feminine nouns

Broken plurals

Numeral 'nine' is a cognate of PS \*/tʃɪ/; [tʃəʕate] (*Tigrinya*)

## **South Ethiosemitic :** Amharic, Agrobba, Gafat, Guarage, Harari

Loss of laryngeal and pharyngeal consonants

Gemination in the perfect

Existence of alveopalatal consonants, including /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/

Numeral 'nine' is /za/, /ətän/, /ra/; [zät'äɲ] (*Amharic*)

# Internal Grouping of Ethiosemitic Languages

However . . .

- few if any of these features are characteristic of either group as a whole and
- no language displays all of the characteristic features of its group

This has called into question the existence of any historical North Ethiosemitic language, beyond their current descriptive similarity

A grouping that includes South Ethiosemitic remains the standard, although in various forms

## Internal Grouping of Ethiosemitic Languages

This leaves us with the following, more modern picture of the internal classification of Ethiosemitic languages

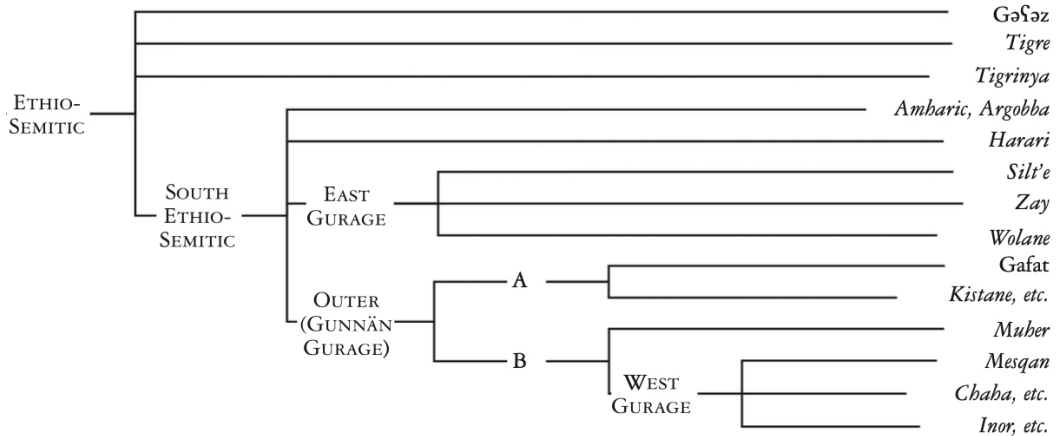


Figure: Ethiosemitic per Huehnergard & Rubin 2011

# Some Ethiosemitic Languages

Most Ethiosemitic languages remain are severely under-studied and under-represented from an academic perspective

Among the more well-known and well-understood languages are Ge'ez, Tigrinya, Amharic, and Tigré to a lesser extent

We will ultimately turn our focus to the structural and formal properties of Tigrinya and Amharic



# Some Ethiosemitic Languages – Ge'ez (Weninger 2011a)

**Ge'ez** (Old Ethiopic, Classical Ethiopic) is the historical language of the Axumite kingdom (Horn of Africa) spoken as early as 500 BCE

A focus of European research as early as the 16th century, it was initially considered to be Proto-Ethiosemitic

Following the decline of the Axumite kingdom around 900 CE, Ge'ez became (prestige) a literary and liturgical language, which it remains today

The Ge'ez script, a 182 symbol abugida (alphasyllabary), forms the basis for writing numerous Ethiosemitic languages and several other languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea

	<i>1st</i> <i>ä</i>	<i>2nd</i> <i>u</i>	<i>3rd</i> <i>i</i>	<i>4th</i> <i>a</i>	<i>5th</i> <i>e</i>	<i>6th</i> <i>ə/ø</i>	<i>7th</i> <i>o</i>
h	ሀ	ሁ	ሂ	ሃ	ሄ	ህ	ሆ
l	ለ	ሉ	ሊ	ላ	ሌ	ል	ሎ
ḥ	ሐ	ሑ	ሒ	ሓ	ሔ	ሕ	ሎ
m	መ	ሙ	ሚ	ማ	ሜ	ሞ	ሞ
ś	ሠ	ሡ	ሢ	ሣ	ሤ	ሥ	ሦ
r	ረ	ሩ	ሪ	ራ	ራ	ር	ሮ
s	ሰ	ሱ	ሲ	ሳ	ሴ	ሰ	ሶ
ḵ	ቀ	ቁ	ቂ	ቃ	ቄ	ቅ	ቆ
b	በ	ቡ	ቢ	ባ	ቤ	ብ	ቦ
t	ተ	ቱ	ቲ	ታ	ቼ	ት	ቸ

## Some Ethiosemitic Languages – Amharic (Meyer 2011)

**Amharic** is spoken by 32M people and serves as one of the official languages of Ethiopia, the working language of the government, and a lingua franca of the region

Amharic replaced Ge'ez as the oral lingua franca after 13th century overthrow of the Axumite kingdom

Amharic began to replace Ge'ez in official capacities in the middle of the 18th century

Around the middle of the 19th century Amharic became the primary language of instruction for primary education and saw the enactment of language policies and standardization

Despite the linguistic pluralism of Ethiopia, Amharic has taken a position of prestige

The current post-1991 government has an official policy supporting bilingualism, resulting in local languages replacing Amharic as working languages and languages of instruction

# Some Ethiosemitic Languages – Tigrinya (Voigt 2011)

**Tigrinya** is spoken by approximately 10M people in Eritrea and Ethiopia

It is spoken alongside Arabic as a working language of Eritrea

There is significant mutually-intelligible dialectal variation between north and south, which has received little descriptive or formal attention

Following the liberation of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1991, Tigrinya has taken on an important role in the identity of Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans

Tigrinya is now used as a primary language of instruction at all levels of education

# References I

- Feleke, Tekabe Legesse. 2021. Ethiosemitic languages: Classifications and classification determinants. *Ampersand* 8.
- Hetzron, Robert. 1972. *Ethiopian Semitic: Studies in classification*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Huehnergard, John, & Aaron D. Rubin. 2011. Phyla and waves: Models of classification of the Semitic languages. In *The Semitic Languages: An international handbook*, ed. Stefan Weninger, 259–278. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Meyer, Ronny. 2011. The role of Amharic as a national language and an African *lingua franca*. In *The Semitic Languages: An international handbook*, ed. Stefan Weninger, 1212–1219. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Porkhomovsky, Victor. 2020. Ethio-semitic. In *The Oxford Handbook of African Languages*, ed. Rainer Vossen & Gerrit J. Dimmendaal, 359–363. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Rubin, Aaron D. 2008. The subgrouping of the Semitic languages. *Language and Linguistic Compass* 2:79–102.
- Voigt, Rainer. 2011. Tigrinya as national language of Eritrea and Tigray. In *The Semitic Languages: An international handbook*, ed. Stefan Weninger, 1170–1177. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Weninger, Stefan. 2011a. Old ethiopic. In *The Semitic Languages: An international handbook*, ed. Stefan Weninger, 1124–1141. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Weninger, Stefan, ed. 2011b. *The Semitic Languages: An international handbook*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.