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## The Ethio-Semitic Languages (Re-examining the Classification)\*

Girma A. Demeke\*

### Abstract

This paper re-examines the classification of Ethio-Semitic languages and the position of this language group in the overall classification of the Semitic language family. Contra classifications such as that of Faber (1997) and the like, which consider Ethio-Semitic as a branch of Western South Semitic, this paper argues that the Ethio-Semitic group is a separate branch directly derived from Proto-Semitic. It also suggests some modifications on the internal classification of Ethio-Semitic languages proposed by Hetzron (1977). Unlike Hetzron (1977), the present work classifies Muher under Western Gurage, and Mäsqa under North Gurage. There are also some differences between Hetzron's classification and the classification proposed here, which emanate from grammatical features, facts of mutual intelligibility among most of the speech varieties in question, and recent findings by other scholars.

### 1. Introduction

There are two issues which are not settled in the literature on Semitic. One is the internal classification of the Ethio-Semitic languages, especially that of South-Ethiopic, and the other is the position of Ethio-Semitic itself within the overall classification of the Semitic language family.

Many scholars such as Hudson (2000b, 2000c) have addressed the issues, but to the best of my knowledge, there has been no complete work of classification that has integrated recent findings to-date. In this paper, attempt will be made to consider such findings, assumptions about the origin of Proto-Semitic and Proto-Afroasiatic, discussions on the internal relationship of some of the Gurage languages in particular and South Ethio-Semitic in general such as that of Leslau (1996), and my own primary data from native speakers of various Gurage languages. On the bases of these considerations, I will propose a classification for Ethio-Semitic and also show the general position of this language group with respect to other language groups of Semitic

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The paper is organized in the following manner. Following this section, I make some introductory remarks about the term Semitic and the history of the family. In section 3, I deal with the general classification of the Semitic languages, seeking the exact position of Ethio-Semitic. In section 4, I deal with the internal classification of Ethio-Semitic languages with a brief introductory description provided for most of the languages under investigation here. Section five concludes the discussion.

## **2. On the Term Semitic and the Origin of the Family**

### **2.1. On the Term Semitic**

The term Semitic refers to a group of languages which have the same origin and, resultingly, share many features. This language family is one of the six families of Afroasiatic.<sup>1</sup> The term was brought into use around the 18th century for a group of languages spoken by a quasi-racial group, namely, the Arabs, Hebrews, Armenians, and Abyssinians, who are considered descendants of Shem (cf. O'Leary 1969; S  n  z-Badillos 1993; Moscati 1964; Vycichl 1987; Weninger 1993; Dillmann 1889; Faber 1997 among others).

This theory was based on the genealogy given in Genesis x, according to which both Aram and Arphaxad are made the children of Shem, and the further genealogy in Genesis xi, which makes Arphaxad the ancestor of Abraham from whom were descended the Israelites and the Arabs who claimed to be the children of Ishmael.

Closer scrutiny of these genealogies shows that the members are grouped simply according to political relations. Thus Elam and Lud are noted in Genesis x, 22, as brothers of Asshur and sons of Shem: but the Elamies, Lydians, and Assyrians are not kindred races, and they are so grouped simply because they were united under Assyrian rule at the time when the genealogies were composed (O'leary 1969: 2).

Furthermore, if the genealogical classification of languages had to follow the Biblical genealogy, which implies racial ideas, we were supposed to have only two more language families in the world. This is because the present day human races are assumed to be descended from Noah's three children, Shem, Japheth and Ham. On the other hand, if we were to actually follow the Biblical account strictly, it would be hard to trace any relationship between languages and races, since it is assumed that all humans had the same language before the tower of Babel (cf. Genesis XI). Of course, the truth could be different and as O'leary puts, "strictly, we cannot justify the name

Semitic, but it is a term in common use and convenient” (1969: 2). Rather than inventing a new term, following O’leary, I will, thus, use the term Semitic simply because it is a convenient term in common use.<sup>2</sup>

## **2.2. The Origin and History of the Semitic Languages**

There are two major hypotheses regarding the origin of the Semitic languages in particular and the Afroasiatic languages in general. One of the hypotheses is that Afroasiatic and its branch Semitic is originated in Asia and then migrated to Africa. The Semitic people, after their separation from Afroasiatic, stayed long in Asia and the Semitic Proto-language developed its own features and divided into subgroups one of which migrated to Ethiopia. It is also claimed that these “immigrant” people diffused from South Arabia at about 1000 BC (cf. Ullendorf 1955; Leslau 1958a; Ehret 1988). This is, in fact, the most widely held hypothesis especially in earlier times, with minor differences only on the date of the assumed migration.<sup>3</sup>

Alternative to the migration hypothesis is what Hudson (1978) suggests as a possible consideration, which is that

ES [Ethio-Semitic] is an autochthonous group, the descendants of that group of Afroasiatic peoples which in pre-Semitic times separated from the other speakers of Afroasiatic language varieties in Ethiopia and, with the passage of time, developed the language characteristics which remain stamped on those languages which today we know as Semitic (1978: 235).

This alternative hypothesis seems to have a stronger ground than the former one. Two of the basic pieces of evidence provided in support of it are the following: One is that Afroasiatic has six language families, namely Semitic, Omotic, Cushitic, Berber, Chadic and Old Egyptian. Only a few of the Semitic languages are spoken in Asia whereas most are spoken in Africa. Furthermore, of the six families, three; namely Omotic, Cushitic and Semitic are spoken in Ethiopia. Note here also that Beja and Ongota, two languages of Ethiopia, formerly classified as Cushitic, are now assumed to be separate families on their own.<sup>4</sup> If this is true, the number of language families within Afroasiatic would have to be eight and the language families spoken within Ethiopia would have to be raised to five. Following the “least-moves” principle, it is most likely that the origin of the Proto-Afroasiatic languages is Africa, especially Ethiopia, and not Asia (see McCall 1998; Hudson 2000b; Greenberg 1971 among others).<sup>5</sup>

The fact that speakers of all the other language stocks of the Semito-Hamitic [Afroasiatic] phylum are indigenous to the eastern

and northern parts of Africa strongly suggests that their last common home region was on that continent, presumably in the eastern rather than more western parts of it; the Semites would then have moved eastwards to their historical sites of habitation (Murtonen 1991: 1120).

The second major reason, according to Hudson (2000b), is diversity. There is no place in this world where we find such diversity of Semitic languages other than Ethiopia. Presently, there are more than 16 languages spoken in Ethiopia whereas not more than four such languages in Asia (Hudson 2001: 9).<sup>6</sup>

In this work, I will adopt this second hypothesis regarding the origin of Proto-Afroasiatic and its branch Proto-Semitic. However, the choice of this hypothesis is not only motivated by the two arguments mentioned above but also by the lack of such evidence in support of the other hypothesis. For example, in a recent article on the grammar of Ge'ez, Gragg (1997) made the following statements:

It [Ge'ez] is presumably derived from one or more forms of South Semitic brought from Yemen, probably in the first half of the first millennium BCE.... One may presume that Ethiopic Semitic evolved out of a South Arabian-based trade lingua franca. The substratum languages in this development presumably belonged to the Cushitic language family (Gragg 1997: 242).

He further suggests that Ge'ez is a kind of pidgin language, although, it “maintains the level of morphological complexity inconsistent with any radical pidginization” (Ibid.). If Ge'ez were developed as a pidgin as Gragg assumes, we would not have explanation for the origin of the other Semitic languages found in Ethiopia. There would be two options in which Gragg's assumption could be true.

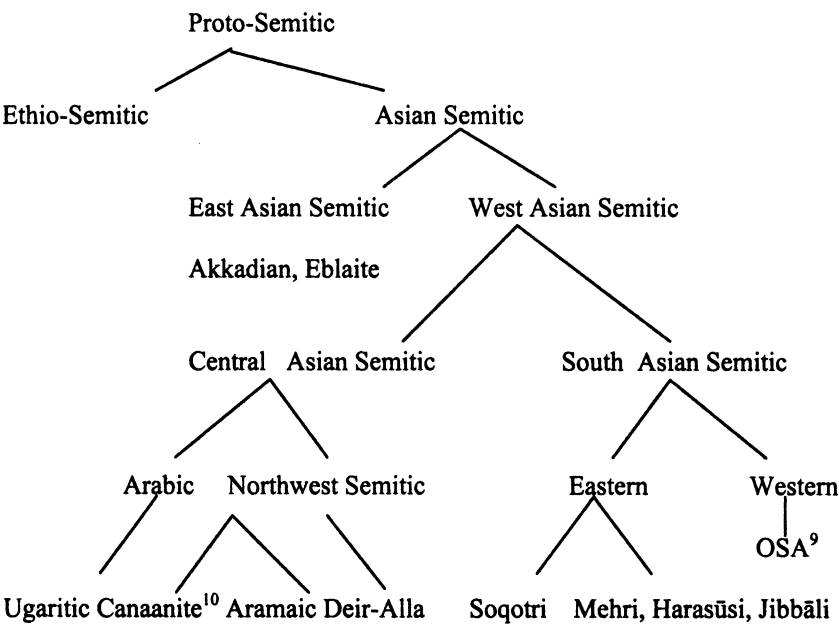
One is that Ge'ez has to be the direct ancestor of the other Ethio-Semitic languages, a point which has been effectively argued against by Hetzron (1972; 1977); Hetzron and Bender (1976) and many others. Gragg's suggestion might have stemmed from lack of knowledge about the fact that there are more than 16 Semitic languages in Ethiopia (cf. Hudson 2001 for the number). Or it may be that he is not aware of work already done by many scholars like Hetzron (1972, 1977), Hetzron and Bender (1976), which argue that none of the Semitic languages of Ethiopia are derived from Ge'ez. In this connection, (Hetzron 1977: 18)<sup>7</sup> says, “Not only is Ge'ez not the direct ancestor of the South Ethiopic languages, but it is not the direct ancestor of any living tongue. There are innovations in Ge'ez not found in Tigrinya and Tigre, in these respects the modern languages are more archaic” And almost all the modern languages of Ethiopia are assumed to be already spoken at the time Ge'ez was coming into

existence. “The modern Ethiopian languages were already coming into being at the same time Giiz [Ge’ez] was just becoming a language on its own” (Hetzron and Bender 1976: 26).

Since most of the Ethiopian Semitic languages share more features from Cushitic than from Ge’ez, the only option for the validity of Gragg’s suggestion would be to say that there were more than sixteen migrations and pidginization for the sixteen or more Ethio-Semitic languages.<sup>8</sup> However, it is difficult to support such an argument with evidence from any perspective linguistic, historical or anthropological.

3. The Classification of the Semitic Languages

According to Hetzron and Bender (1976: 23) “there is little doubt as to which languages are Semitic and which are not. However, there is much more controversy about subgrouping within the Semitic family”. This controversy still does not seem to be settled. For example, in a recent paper Faber (1997: 6) classifies the languages as follows:



Classifications like that of Faber, though not identical, are found in many works such as Hetzron (1972; 1977). If we are correct in assuming with Hudson (1977; 1978; etc.); Murtonen (1967; 1969); McCall (1998) and many others, that the parent Semitic languages originated in Ethiopia and then dispersed from there to Asia, the Ethiopian

Semitic languages have to be considered as a direct descendant of a Proto-Semitic originated in their homeland. Unless we assume that there were about four migrations which took place at different times from Ethiopia to Asia, (see the discussion below), classifications like the above cannot fit the hypothesis that the origin of Proto-Semitic is Ethiopia. If Faber's (1997) or Hetzron's (1972, 1977) kind of classification were right, it would mean that the South Arabian and the Ethiopian languages are descended from the same parent language which is itself a descendant of South Semitic; where South Semitic also descended from West Semitic and West Semitic from Proto-Semitic.

Although Hudson argues in a number of works that the origin of Proto-Semitic language is Ethiopia, he does not provide any classification fitting his argument. Rather, he believes that the classification proposed by Faber (1997) is basically correct, thus contradicting his own proposal about the origin of Proto-Semitic (cf. Hudson 2000a). In fact, according to him, assuming the Ethiopian Semitic autochthony, Faber's family tree can be interpreted as follows:

East Semitic separated from West Semitic, *which stayed home*; central West Semitic separated from South-West Semitic, *which stayed home*; Central split into Arabic and Northwest; South split into Eastern and Western, *which stayed home*; Eastern diverged into the Modern South Arabian languages; in Western South Semitic Ancient South Arabian separated from ES [Ethiopian Semitic], *which stayed home*; Ancient South Arabian diverged into Sabea, etc.; and North ES separated from ES, *which stayed home* (Hudson 2000b: 5).

If Hudson's claim is correct, it means that there were at least four times when the Semitic people migrated from Africa to Asia in violation of the "least moves" principle. Not only will this suggestion abandon one of the strong arguments for the African origin of Proto-Afroasiatic, but also raises a number of questions for which no easy answer is possible to find. For example, if the migration is assumed to have taken place at least four times, there will be no explanation why other linguistic groups, such as the Chusitic speaking people did not migrate to Asia in at least one of the assumed migrations. This is expected given that there has always been a significant number of Cushitic speaking people along the shore of the Red Sea. A lot more such questions could be raised.

In fact, a crucial question is whether or not there is any grammatical evidence for grouping Ethiopian Semitic along with South Arabian. To the best of my knowledge, there is nothing convincing along this line. Most of the features, believed to be common to Ethio-Semitic and South Arabian languages, are also found in



Akkadian.<sup>11</sup> For example, the imperfective form  $C_1VC_2(C_2V)C_3$  of triradical verbs assumed to be a common feature of Ethiopic and South Arabian is also attested in this language as discussed in more detail in Murtonen (1967).<sup>12</sup>

According to Murtonen (1967), the features which are assumed (for example, by Leslau) to be shared by Ethiopic and South Arabian are also found in other groups. In terms of grammatical features “ancient South Arabic [Arabian] is more closely related to (Northern) Arabic [Arabian] and North-West Semitic rather than Ethiopic” (Murtonen 1967: 74).

On the basis of phonology-based and lexicostatistics work, Murtonen’s (1969) also proves that the distance between Ethio-Semitic and South Arabian is much greater than was assumed before, thus, suggesting that the two cannot form a group.

The other feature, however, viz., as far as Semitic languages are concerned, that South Arabic [Arabian] (particularly Soqotri) and South Ethiopic again stand widest apart on the scale, can hardly be interpreted as supporting such a theory, in any case not one in which Ethiopic is regarded as a direct descendant of ancient South Arabic [Arabian] (Murtonen 1969: 45).

Consider, also Faber (1997: 12) who suggests the classification, mentioned above, where Ethiopic and South Arabian form a single group:

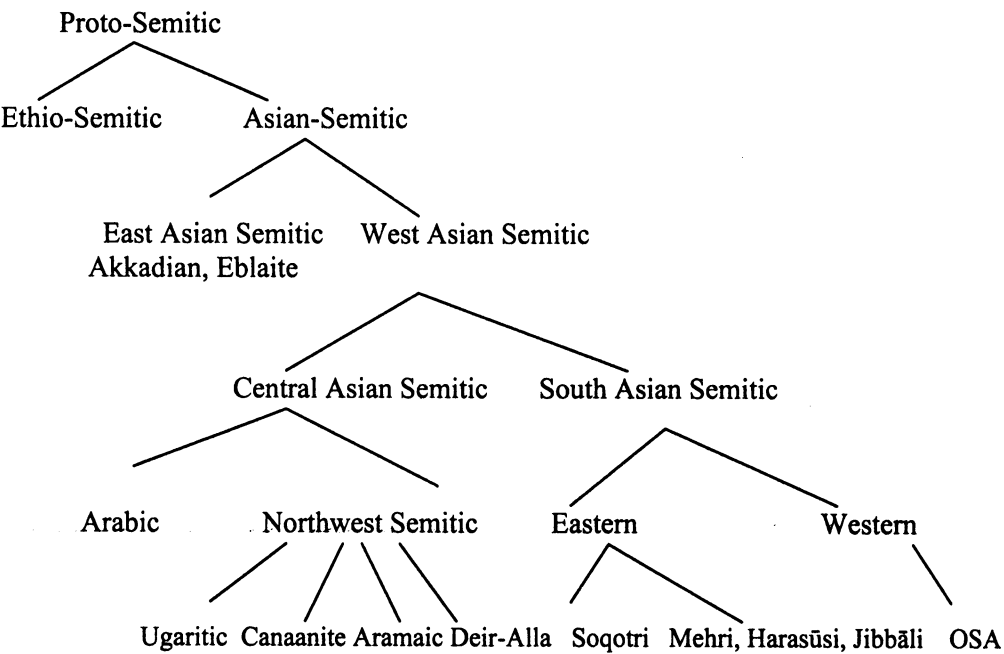
Although virtually all discussions of Semitic subgrouping assume a single Ethiopian Semitic branch which later split into North Ethiopic and South Ethiopic, there is virtually no linguistic evidence for such a Common Ethiopian stage. Yet..., neither is there any evidence that the diverse forms attested in North and South Ethiopic do not reflect a stage of shared descent from South Semitic that is independent of Old and Modern South Arabian (Faber 1997: 12).

Fleming (1968) also suggests that South Ethiopic and North Ethiopic may not come from a single Proto-Ethiopic.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, although Gragg raises the point from a different perspective, he states that “it is not possible to derive Ethiopic Semitic from any attested form of Old South Arabian” (Gragg 1997: 242). If we look at Faber’s and Gragg’s statements from the perspective of this paper, it is possible to say that they show the lack of grammatical evidence in support of the grouping of Ethiopic with South Arabian.



Since there are no sufficient reasons to suggest that Ethiopian Semitic originated from South Arabian, Murtonen (1969) state that Ethio-Semitic has to be considered as a separate branch of the Semitic languages which were probably direct descendents of Proto-Semitic, in their original habitat ( also quoted in Hetzron 1977: 9).

Though Hetzron (1977) and Hudson (2000b) have different suggestions, according to Hetzron (1977) there are a number of archaic features found in Ethio-Semitic which, according to Hudson (2000b: 1), “often enable Proto-Semitic reconstruction on the ES [Ethiopian Semitic] alone”. If so, it is logical to assume the following classification of the Semitic languages in general and Faber’s classification for the internal subgrouping within each group. However, I consider Old South Arabian as the only representative of Western South Semitic.



As shown in the above diagram, the parent Semitic language is divided into Ethio-Semitic and Asian-Semitic. The Asian Semitic is sub-divided into East Semitic and West Semitic. According to this classification, the Asian and the Ethiopian languages developed their own feature independently. I now turn to the internal classification of the Ethio-Semitic languages.

#### 4. The Classification of Ethio-Semitic

In section 4.1, I briefly examine the term Gurage. Since a detailed descriptive work is lacking for most of the Gurage speech varieties, their number is not definitive. In section 4.2, I raise the issue of dialect versus language and point out the number of Semitic languages spoken in Ethiopia. In 4.3, I critically examine previous classifications proposed for these languages and suggest a modification on the version of Hetzron's (1977) classification. Section 4.4 presents a general chart of the classification proposed in this paper.

##### 4.1 Some Points on the So-called Gurage Languages

The term Gurage plays a crucial role in understanding the Semitic peoples/ languages of Ethiopia. The term refers to a group of Semitic people who call themselves (and are also called by other nationalities) as Gurage.

The region of Gurage is situated Southwest of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. It is bordered on the north by the river Awash, on the east by lake Zway, and on the south and west by the river Omo. Its neighbors to the south and west are Hadiyya, the Kembata, the Alaba; to the northwest the Qabenna; to the north and east the ... (Oromo), with an enclave of Maräqo between Lake Zway and East Gurage (Leslau 1979: X)

From a linguistic perspective, the term does not signify any close relation between the so-called Gurage languages in comparison to other Semitic languages of Ethiopia.

The so-called Gurage languages do not constitute one genetic branch. East Gurage is closer to Harari than to the rest of Gurage, and Soddo and Gogot are closer to Gafat than to what I called "tt-languages" (Muher, Mäsqaṇ etc.). Thus, the use of the term "Gurage" is justified only in the following sense: a conglomeration of Semitic speaking tribes surrounded by speakers of Cushitic (Hetzron 1977: 3).

Fleming also says the same about the usage of the term Gurage in relation to the linguistic affinities among the languages spoken by the people. "The so-called Gurage dialect-cluster of South Ethiopic was not a valid unity; rather some so-called Gurage dialects had more cognates with non-Gurage languages than with other Gurage 'dialects'" (Fleming 1973: 86).

However Leslau's position regarding the so-called Gurage languages is really amazing. What is amazing (see for example Leslau (1979, 1992), is that, for example, Harari, a non-Gurage language, is considered to be closer to East Gurage languages than to other so-called Gurage languages, and Gafat, another non-Gurage language, is grouped with North Gurage languages. But he claims that the term Gurage is a valid linguistic group. To put it in his own words; "East Gurage is linguistically related to Harari; Soddo is related to Gafat; but West Gurage, even though it has for the most part South Ethiopian features and a few notable North Ethiopian features still has no particular close connection with any specific South Ethiopian language" (Leslau 1979, Vol. 1: XII). However, as mentioned above, Leslau also states that the term Gurage refers to a single linguistic entity for which he tries to construct a Proto-Gurage (Leslau 1965). This, however, is implausible whatever reason one would think of in support.

Although Leslau refers to this language group as a dialect or language cluster in several of his works, he recognizes that in this group, there are a number of different speech varieties with little mutual intelligibility. But the complexity of these so-called Gurage languages, especially West Gurage, is very extensive. For example, Hetzron (1977: 4) states that what he has collected as Endegeñ differs in some respect from that of Leslau's (1971) Endegeñ. Hetzron mentions as a special problem the fact that "the names listed may sometimes refer to tribal divisions rather than to linguistic entities" (1977: 4). Since inter-marriage among people from different speech varieties is common in this area and, furthermore, since most of the West Gurage people speak more than one speech varieties, it is hard to tell the exact number of the Gurage languages. Consider the following for example;

The Gurage cluster consists of twelve dialects. They include Chaha, Ezha, Ennemor, Endegeñ, Gyeta/ Gyeto, Muher, Gogot, Mäsqan, Soddo, Selti [Silte], Wolane, and Zway [Zay]. Some of them have subdialects, such as Gumer, a subdialect of Chaha, Enär, a subdialect of Endegeñ; Ulbarag (or Urbarag), a subdialect of Selti [Silte] and possibly others that have not come to our attention (Leslau 1969b: 96).

Since Leslau uses terms like language cluster, dialect and language interchangeably without providing any technical definition, it is impossible to know from his works which varieties are languages and which are dialects.<sup>14</sup> I will turn to this in the following section.

## **4.2 The Language vs. Dialect Issue in Ethio-Semitic**

As I have pointed out above, the exact number of the Ethiopian Semitic languages is not clear from the existing literature. For example, consider the following statements:

Excluding two extinct languages, there are eight Ethio-Semitic languages and three dialect clusters represented in the family tree. The languages are Tigre, Tigrigna [Tigrinya], Amharic, Harari, Soddo, Gogot, Muxir [Muher], and Mesqan [Mäsqan]. We may consider Argobba as a dialect of Amharic and some of the Gurage varieties as being dialects of one language since they are mutually intelligible. East Gurage, Central Western Gurage, and Peripheral Western Gurage are all dialect clusters, but Northern Gurage consists of three rather different languages (Hetzron and Bender 1976: 30).

Leslau also states the following: “The Semitic languages of Ethiopia are Ge’ez, Tigre, Tigrinya, Amharic, Argobba, Gafat, Harari, and Gurage. The Gurage cluster includes Chaha, Ezha, Ennemor, Endegeñ, Gyeta [Geyto], Muher, Mäsqan, Gogot, Soddo, Selti [Silte], Wolane, and Zway [Zay]” (Leslau 1992: 559).

If we count all the speech varieties of Leslau as independent languages, we will have 19 languages. However, according to Hetzron and Bender, the number is just thirteen including the two extinct languages. For Palmer (1958: 121) the number is eight, and for Hudson (2001) about eighteen. The languages listed in Hudson are Ge’ez, Tigre, Tigrinya, Amharic, Argobba, Harari, Silte, Zay, Gafat, Gogot, Soddo, Muher, and “six languages from Western Gurage” (Hudson 2001: 9). The question which needs a clear answer here is not a matter of which author is right or not, but which speech varieties are languages and which dialects.

For some linguists, Chaha, Ezha, Ennemor, Endegeñ and Geyto on the one hand; Silte, Wolane and Zay on the other, can be considered as dialects of each other. However, according to my Ezha native speaker informant, who is a fourth year linguistic student at the Addis Ababa University, the relation between Endegeñ and the others is very distant. But the difference between Ezha, her mother tongue, and Chaha is very little. She also believes that she understands Ennemor and Geyto, though there are considerable differences between Ezha and Ennemor, and Ezha and Gyeto. However for her, Endegeñ is a different language altogether, and that Ezha speakers do not understand Endegeñ at all. This means that we have at least one language from Hetzron’s Peripheral Western Gurage and Central Western Gurage each as suggested by Hetzron and Bender, see above.<sup>15</sup>

However, note that here though, Ezha is much closer to Chaha, it is radically different from any speech variety in the 3TG (three tense group) when considered in light of the gemination of the penultimate consonant of the perfective form. Except in Endegeñ, in all the other speech varieties of the group, gemination is reduced to

devoicing. In Ezha, however, there is gemination as in Mäsqaṇ, Amharic and most other South Ethio-Semitic languages. Even in Endegeñ, gemination is observed as devoicing, for example, *näkkär-* from *näggär-* (cf. Leslau 1992: 389). In this respect, all the speech varieties, including Endegeñ, are closer to Chaha than Ezha is to Chaha.

When we come to the East Gurage varieties, according to recent literature, Zay can be considered as a language though it has a close resemblance to Wolane and Silte.<sup>16</sup> “The closer analysis of... [Zay, Wolane and Silte] will prove that Zway [Zay] is distinct from Silte [Silte] and Wolane” (Leslau 1999: 164). Hudson (2001) also treats Zay as a separate language. Though the relation of Wolane to Silte in most works is one of dialectal, I prefer to consider Wolane as a separate language. One reason is that there is no satisfactory descriptive work on Wolane to show the extent to which it has grammatical relation with Silte.<sup>17</sup> Another reason is that though I am aware of the present political situation between Wolane and Silte, according to most of my Wolane informants, Wolane has to be considered as a separate language and not as a dialect of Silte since the Wolane speakers do not understand it.<sup>18</sup> This, however, needs to be verified with further intelligibility test.

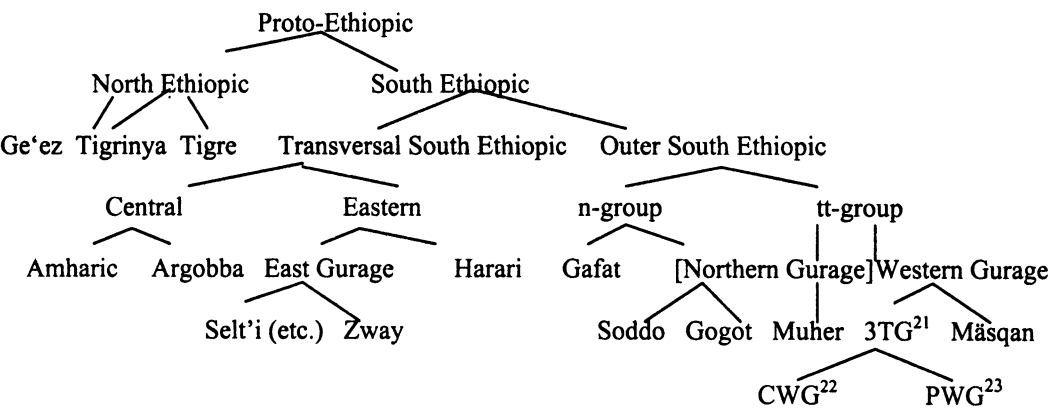
When we come to the relation of Argobba to Amharic, I do not see any dialectal relationships between them, as it is claimed in Leslau (1997) and Hetzron and Bender (1976: 30), since the two varieties are mutually unintelligible. For me, Argobba is a different language though it has a considerable degree of resemblance to Amharic (See also Hudson 2001).<sup>19</sup>

From the forgoing presentation, we may say that there at least 16 Semitic languages in Ethiopia with quite a number of dialects/ speech varieties. The languages are Ge’ez, Tigre, Tigrinya, Amharic, Argobba, Harari, Zay, Wolane, Silte, Soddo, Muher, Gogot, Mäsqaṇ, Gafat, Chaha and Endegeñ.<sup>20</sup>

### 4.3 Re-examining the Classification of Ethio-Semitic

Although there are quite a good number of proposals on the classification of the Ethiopian Semitic languages, for example, Leslau (1992), Hetzron (1969, 1972, 1977) among others, Hudson (2000c) in a recent article states that what we know about Ethiopian Semitic classification is very little. One of the reasons for this is “lack of reasonably complete data on most of the ‘Gurage’ languages” (Hudson 2000c: 82). After examining Hetzron’s (Hetzron 1969) classification of Ethiopian Semitic, Murtonen (1969: 47-48, fn. 1) concludes that Hetzron’s work is inadequate. However, with all its limitations, it is the most complete we have on the classification of Ethiopian Semitic as also noticed in Hudson (2000c). Hetzron’s classification is shown below:

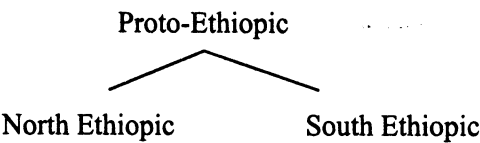
Hetzron’s (1977: 17) Classification of Ethio-Semitic Languages



As we can see from the above diagram, the Ethiopian Semitic languages are divided into North Ethiopic and South Ethiopic. The North Ethiopic branch consists of three languages one of which is Ge’ez, the classical language of Ethiopia. The other two are Tigre and Tigrinya, the modern languages of north Ethiopic. South Ethiopic, on the other hand, is divided into two branches; namely Transversal South Ethiopic and Outer South Ethiopic. In this section, I will examine the classification of this group mostly based on the above classification of Hetzron (1977)

4.3.1 North vs. South Ethiopic

Almost in all works, Ethio-Semitic languages are classified into two major subgroups, North Ethiopic and South Ethiopic.



The division of Ethiopian Semitic into North and South Ethiopic is not a problem. What is problematic is the question of where the North and South Ethiopic branches originate. Though most linguists assume that the North Ethio-Semitic and the South Ethio-Semitic languages came from dialect clusters of Proto-Ethiopian. As mentioned above, Fleming (1968) rejects this assumption and suggests that South-Ethiopian languages derived from Arabia independently.



However, according to Palmer, “they [the Semitic languages of Ethiopia] form a well defined linguistic group: even at first sight they have close resemblance one to another, while their similarities to any other languages, even to the South Arabian languages, with which they are believed to have the closest linguistic affinity, is far less obvious” (1958: 121). According to Hetzron and Bender, it is also possible to assume that “modern Ethio-Semitic languages are descended from a common ancestor” (1976: 25).

I do not want to discuss the issue of origin again but what is interesting is that there is a clear difference between North and South Ethiopic irrespective of the question of whether or not they belong to a common origin. Hetzron (1977) notes two basic differences between these two groups. The major difference, according to him (1977: 18), is the lengthening of the penultimate consonant in the so-called type A verbs. Consider the following for example:

	North Prototype	South Prototype
Perfective:	säbärä	säbbärä    ‘he broke’
Imperfective:	yisäbbîr	yisäbîr    ‘he breaks’

As we can see from the above table, in the imperfective form of the verb, the penultimate consonant geminates in North Ethiopic but not in South Ethiopic. According to Hetzron, see also Teferra (1979) for Tigrinya, Raz (1983) for Tigre, and Weninger (1993) for Ge‘ez. The gemination in North Ethiopic is observed when there is no suffix attached to the stem (see the tables below). In South Ethiopic, with the exception of East Gurage and Harari, gemination of the penultimate consonant is observed only in the perfective but not in the imperfective.<sup>24</sup>

Another feature mentioned in Hetzron (1977) which also differentiates the two groups is the presence or absence of an auxiliary in the simple non-past tense clause. In North Ethiopic, such tense is expressed with the bare imperfective verb form; however, in some south Ethiopic languages, it is expressed with the addition of a non-past auxiliary to the imperfective form of the verb. In fact, this cannot be taken as good evidence for the difference between the groups. Except in the Transversal South Ethiopic languages, no tense marker is added to express the non-past tense in the rest of the 2TG and the present tense of the 3TG languages (cf. Demeke forthcoming; chapter five and chapter six).

However, there are a number of features that differentiate the two groups. One of these is that in North Ethiopic we have broken plural whereas in South the plural is marked mostly by means of concatenative morphemes. There is also a high degree of vocabulary similarity among North Ethiopic languages as noticed by many grammarians. Furthermore, beside the gemination of the penultimate consonant in the



imperfective, other non-concatenative inflectional pattern of the verbal forms in these languages are also almost identical. Compare the following three tables where most of the patterns of the non-concatenative verbal forms of triradical roots in all the three North Ethiopic languages are illustrated.

TABLE 1:  
Basic non-concatenative verbal inflectional patterns of triradical roots in Tigre

Verb types	perfective	imperfective	imperative	jussive
Type A	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> (C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>2</sub> aC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> aC <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type B	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> aC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> (C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> (C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> (C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type C	C <sub>1</sub> aaC <sub>2</sub> aC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aaC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aaC <sub>2</sub> ( <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)	-C <sub>1</sub> aaC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)

TABLE 2:  
Basic non-concatenative verbal inflectional patterns of triradical roots in Tigrinya

Verb types	perfective	imperfective	imperative	gerund	jussive
Type A	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> (C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> -/ C <sub>1</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> iC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> (-)/ -C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type B	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> -	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> iC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type C	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> (C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> -	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> iC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)

TABLE 3:  
Basic non-concatenative verbal inflectional patterns of triradical roots in Ge‘ez

Verb types	perfective	imperfective	imperative	gerund	jussive
Type A <sup>25</sup>	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> (C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> -/ C <sub>1</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> iC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> (-)/ -C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type B	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> eC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> -	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> iC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type C	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> (C <sub>2</sub> <sup>ˆ</sup> )C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> -	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> iC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)

On the bases of the above facts, I also consider the division of Ethio-Semitic into North and South as valid and turn to the internal subgrouping of each.

4.3.2 North Ethiopic

Ge‘ez was considered by Ullendorf (1955) and some others, as the ancestor of modern Ethiopian Semitic languages. Leslau also suggests that, “the language of Ge‘ez can be considered as representative of the Proto-Ethiopic type” (Leslau 1958b: 3). However some other linguists, such as Cohn (in Hetzron 1977:18) considered only

Tigre and Tigrinya as descendants of Ge'ez, leaving the other modern Ethio-Semitic languages aside.

Houghton (1949: 10) also assumes that Tigre and Tigrinya are derived from Ge'ez. Leslau (1992) does not take any position regarding the relation of Tigre, Tigrinya and Ge'ez; i.e. the North Ethio-Semitic languages. "In view of the fact that no thorough investigation has been made, the question of the relationship between Tigre, Tigrinya and Ge'ez remains open" (1992: 564). Bender, Fulass & Cowley also mention that "the question of whether Giiz [Ge'ez] is the parent language or whether both Tigrinya and Giiz [Ge'ez] derive from some Proto-Ethiopic languages or languages is not well definitely settled" (Bender, Fulass & Cowley 1976: 108).

For some other linguists, however, the relation of Ge'ez, Tigre and Tigrinya is clear. For Fleming (1968) and some others, for example, Ge'ez and Tigrinya have more in common than Tigre and Ge'ez or Tigre and Tigrinya. According to them, Tigrinya can be considered as "a direct continuation of spoken Ge'ez" (Fleming 1968: 363). Rejecting such kind of assumption, Hetzron (1972, 1977) states that "neither Tigre nor Tigrinna [Tigrinya] is descended from what we know as standard Ge'ez, as used in classical texts and codified by grammarians. Ge'ez contains a number of innovations with respect to Semitic not shared by Tigre and Tigrinna [Tigrinya]" (Hetzron 1972: 20). He gives empirical evidence to strengthen this.

Hetzron and Bender (1976: 25) also state that the assumed common ancestor of modern Ethio-Semitic languages could not be Ge'ez because there are features which are typical of Semitic found in other (modern) Ethio-Semitic but not in Ge'ez. According to such grammarians, see also the discussion in 2.2, based on ancient inscriptions and other evidence the modern Ethiopian languages and Ge'ez were coming into being at about the year AD 100 (cf. Hetzron and Bender 1976: 26).

#### **4.3.2.1 Ge'ez**

Ge'ez is an ancient literate language of Ethiopia assumed to cease to be spoken sometime between the 10th and 12th centuries (cf. Leslau 1958a, Weninger 1993) or before (cf. Gragg 1997); but it still serves in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It was used in former governments as the only medium of written documents, such as official correspondance, in addition to its use as a vehicle of historical accounts, religious themes etc., until the middle of the 19th century; i.e. until the reign of Emperor Tewodros II.

#### **4.3.2.2 Tigre**

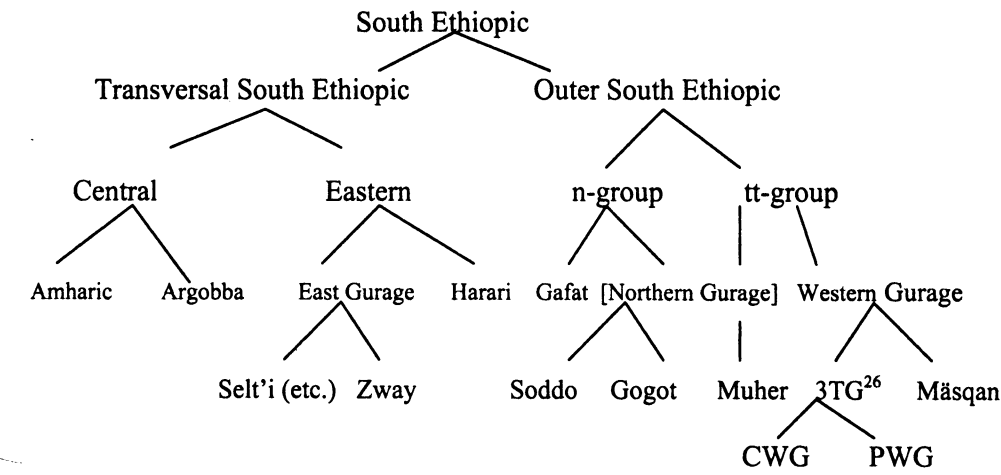
Tigre, as mentioned above, has a close relationship with Tigrinya and Ge'ez. It is spoken in Keren, Northern part of Eritrea, in Massawa, and on the islands of Dahlak (cf. Leslau 1958: 3).

4.3.2.3 Tigrinya

Tigrinya is the Second most widely spoken Semitic language in Ethiopia and the third most widely spoken Semitic language after Arabic and Amharic. It is spoken in the northern parts of Ethiopia and in the highlands of Eritrea.

4.3.3 South Ethiopic

Compared to North Ethiopic, the classification in South Ethiopic is much complex. I will first repeat Hetzron's (1977: 17) classification for ease of reference and then re-examine the classification.



As we can see from the above diagram, South Ethiopic is divided into two branches; namely Transversal South Ethiopic and Outer South Ethiopic. Transversal South Ethiopic consists of two sub-branches: Central Transversal South Ethiopic and Eastern Transversal South Ethiopic. Central Transversal South Ethiopic in turn consists of two very closely related languages, Amharic and Argobba, and East Gurage constitutes another branch with Harari. The Outer South Ethiopic is sub-divided into two major branches. I will briefly examine each group below.

4.3.3.1 Outer South Ethiopic

According to Hetzron (1972), this group is sub-divided into an n-group and a tt-group. The division is based on the so-called main verb marker, which turns out to be n in some varieties and tt in others, according to Hetzron. However, since such morphemes are not common in all the speech varieties, the classification of Outer South Ethiopic on the bases of only such morphological features is not convincing.

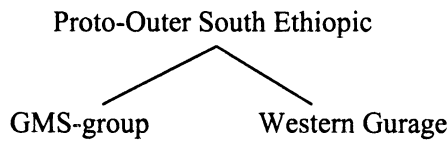
Let us see first, Hetzron's own statement: "The division into main groups: *n* and *tt* was primarily based on the so-called "heavy" Main Verb Markers, Soddo-Gogot *yisäbrimu-n* vs. Muher [Muher] *yisäbrimu-tt* 'they (will) break'. These Main Verb Markers do not exist (in my opinion anymore) in the other Outer South-Ethiopic languages" (Hetzron 1971: 193).

What are labeled in Hetzron as Main Verb Markers are, in fact, tense markers in Muher (cf. Rose 1996 and Demeke forthcoming). Furthermore, as Hetzron himself also admits, since there is no evidence that the morpheme *tt* is found neither as a main verb marker nor as tense marker in Hetzron's other *tt*-languages, there is no point in classifying the languages along such morphological lines. I will thus propose another classification here. Before that, however, I will examine the grouping by other scholars of these so-called Outer South Ethiopic languages.

According to Leslau (1969b,) the Ethiopian Semitic languages in general can be classified as follows:

- a. North Ethiopic: Ge'ez, Tigre, Tigrinya
- b. South Ethiopic
  - Amharic-Argobba
  - East Gurage-Harari
  - Soddo-Gafat (North Gurage)
  - West Gurage (Leslau 1969b/ 1992: 559)

As we can see from the list, Leslau (1969b) classifies the so-called Gurage languages into three; East Gurage comprising Silte, Wolane and Zay; West Gurage consisting of Chaha, Gyeto, Ezha, Ennemor, and Mäsqa; and North Gurage, with Soddo as the only member.<sup>27</sup> In his earlier studies, Leslau had classified Muher, Mäsqa and Gogot as a subdivision of Western Gurage with a note for further investigation: "Until more investigation is undertaken I am still inclined to classify Muher, Gogot and Mäsqa as a sub-branch of Western Gurage" (Leslau 1992: 259). In another work, Leslau (1979) prefers to leave Muher, Mäsqa, and Gogot unclassified. Rose (1997), in line with Leslau (1969b) but contra Hetzron (1972, 1977), considers Muher as one of the Western Gurage languages.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, I will follow Leslau (1969b) and Rose (1997) and take Muher as Western for reasons to be briefly discussed below. Unlike Hetzron, I also consider Mäsqa as North Gurage along with Mäsqa, Soddo and Gogot. As also suggested by Leslau (1969b), Hetzron (1977) and many others, this group extends to Gafat. By taking the initial letters of Gafat, Gogot, Mäsqa and Soddo, I will label this group GMS. Hence, according to my proposal, Outer South Ethiopic has the following divisions:



I will now briefly examine each group by outlining the facts that lead to such a classification.

**4.3.3.1.1 The GMS-group**

This group is divided into Gafat and North Gurage, the latter consisting of the three different languages Soddo, Gogot and Mäsqan.

**4.3.3.1.1.1 Gafat**

Gafat is a language once spoken in the province of Gojjam, now considered to have been extinct. There does not seem to be any problem in grouping this language with North Gurage (see the aforementioned literature).

**4.3.3.1.1.2 North Gurage**

For the grouping of Soddo, Gogot and Mäsqan under North Gurage, I provide here four basic morphological arguments. First, all the three languages have only two tenses — past and non-past; the latter being indistinct of the future and present. All other Western Gurage languages (probably with the exception of Muher) have three tenses — past, present and future.

Second, all the three languages (Soddo, Mäsqan and Gogot) do not have a phonologically visible marker for the simple tenses; that is neither for the simple past nor for the non-past.<sup>29</sup> But this is not true of Western Gurage languages, because these varieties either have a tense marker for the simple past and future or for only the future tense as in Endegeñ.

Third, Soddo, Mäsqan and Gogot are the only languages, which have present perfect construction with the perfective form of the verb and the suffix morpheme *-m*; as the following examples may show.

- (1) geyi acc-u-m  
(Soddo)  
house-the close<sub>perf</sub>-3ms<sub>s</sub>-m(T<sub>pres</sub>)  
‘The house is closed’

- (2) qät't'är-hu-m  
       (Mäsqaṇ)  
       kill<sub>perf</sub> 1s<sub>s</sub>- m(T<sub>pres</sub>)  
       'I have killed'
- (3) säbbär-ätt^-m  
       (Gogot)  
       break<sub>perf</sub> 3fs<sub>s</sub>- m(T<sub>pres</sub>)  
       'She has broken'

However, in Western Gurage languages, including Muher, such combinations are found in the simple past. I will illustrate this by considering only two speech varieties; (see Demeke (forthcoming) for an extensive discussion on this)

- (4) käbbädä wärr-ä-m  
       (Ezha)  
       K. go<sub>perf</sub> 3ms<sub>s</sub>- m(T<sub>past</sub>)  
       'Kebbede went'
- (5) näqär-ä-m  
       (Chaha)  
       pull<sub>perf</sub> 3ms<sub>s</sub>- m(T<sub>past</sub>)  
       'he pulled out' (Leslau 1950/ 1992: 135)

Fourth, the non-concatenative verbal patterns of the three languages are almost identical. Consider the following tables:

TABLE 4:  
Basic non-concatenative verbal inflectional patterns of triradical roots in Mäsqaṇ

Verb types	perfective	imperfective	imperative	jussive
Type A	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> ^C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type B	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type C	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)

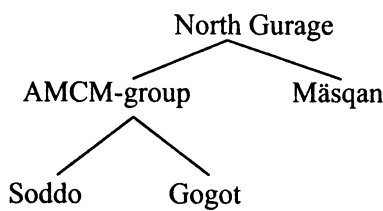
TABLE 5:  
Basic non-concatenative verbal inflectional patterns of triradical roots in Soddo

Verb types	perfective	imperfective	imperative	jussive
Type A	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> ^C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type B	C <sub>1</sub> iC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> iC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type C	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)

As we can see from the above tables, there is gemination in the perfective form in almost all verb types in Mäsqaṇ and Soddo.<sup>30</sup> Such gemination clearly contrasts them from most of the speech varieties of Western Gurage where gemination is reduced to devoicing.

Hence, pending good counter-evidence to such facts, I assume that the classification of Mäsqaṇ, Gogot and Soddo under one group is logical. In a more recent work, Leslau does not propose any classification, but he admits that Mäsqaṇ, like Soddo and Gogot, has a few features common to Western Gurage (Leslau 1996: 111). Note also that Mäsqaṇ and Soddo are linguistic neighbors.<sup>31</sup> However, the relationship of these three languages is not uniform since Soddo and Gogot are more related to each other than is Mäsqaṇ to any of them. I will point out two facts here.

First, the type B roots in Soddo and Gogot are known not only for the gemination of the penultimate consonant throughout the verbal conjugations, but also for the occurrence of the front vowel after the first radical in the perfective and imperfective conjugations. However, this is not the case in Mäsqaṇ, as we can see from the above tables. Second, in Soddo and Gogot simplex and matrix clauses, there are the so-called main verb markers, which encode (positive) polarity and force features, but there are no such morphemes in Mäsqaṇ. Hence, I will group Soddo and Gogot under one group, which has the unique feature of showing main clauses. I call the group AMCM for Affirmative Main Clause Markers, which is a positive polarity value characterising the clause. The classification is the following:



4.3.3.1.2 The Western Gurage Group

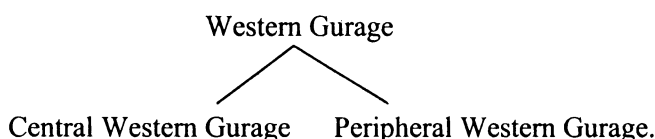
Before examining the internal classification of this group in general, I will justify the grouping of Muher in this same group. Although I fail to prove Rose’s (1996) claim that Muher has three tenses like the rest of Western Gurage speech varieties with primary data, it is undeniably true (even for Hetzron) that Muher shows its simple past with the morpheme -m attached to the perfective stem.



- (6) säbbär-ä-m  
    (Muher)  
    break<sub>perf</sub>-3ms<sub>s</sub>- m(T<sub>past</sub>)  
    ‘He broke’ (Demeke forthcoming: 238)

Furthermore, as I have mentioned above, the so-called Muher Main Verb Markers labeled by Hetzron (cf. 1968, 1977) are, in fact, either present tense or non-past tense markers since they are found only in simple non-past tense forms (see also Rose 1996 and Demeke forthcoming). I now turn to the internal classification of the group.

As we can see from his classification given above, Hetzron sub-divides Western Gurage into a two-tense group (2TG) and a three-tense group (3TG). The 2TG has only one language, Mäsqaṇ, whereas the 3TG divides itself into Central Western Gurage and Peripheral Western Gurage. For the reason already mentioned, I will abandon the 2TG versus 3TG classification though the fate of Muher as 2TG or as 3TG has to be left for empirical investigation in the future. Hence, I will divide this group directly into Central Western Gurage versus Peripheral Western Gurage.



Hetzron (1972: 8 and 62) suggests a classification in which Chaha and Ezha form Central Western Gurage and Gyeto, Endegeñ, Ennemor and Enär form Peripheral Western Gurage. However, Leslau (1996) makes a critical comment on the relationship between Ennemor and Chaha following a comparative analysis of the phonological and morphological features of these two speech varieties. He concludes that Ennemor is so close to Chaha that it can be considered as a dialect of it. He shows a number of common features from the phonology and morphology of these varieties, which my Ennemor informants also verify.<sup>32</sup>

I will follow Leslau and propose that Chaha and Ennemor form a single group. Recall that Chaha is one of the Central Western Gurage languages in Hetzron's classification. Let us take this grouping straightforwardly and also suggest that Ennemor belongs to this group. The question that remains now is the position of Muher with respect to others.

In Muher, we find the gemination of the penultimate consonant in the perfective paradigms of all verb types. This is also true for Ezha, but not for other Western Gurage languages, as I have briefly shown above. In Ezha and Muher, other non-

concatenative inflectional verbal forms are also almost identical as we can see from the following tables.

TABLE 6:  
Basic non-concatenative verbal inflectional patterns of triradical roots in Ezha

Verb types	perfective	imperfective	imperative	jussive
Type A	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> ^C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type B	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type C	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)

TABLE 7:  
Basic non-concatenative verbal inflectional patterns of triradical roots in Muher

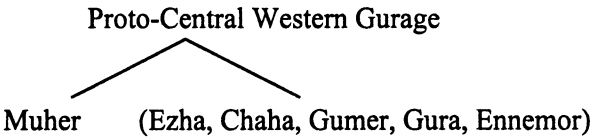
Verb types	perfective	imperfective	imperative	jussive
Type A	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> ^C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type B	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type C	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)

The inflectional patterns of other Western Gurage speech varieties can be illustrated as follows:

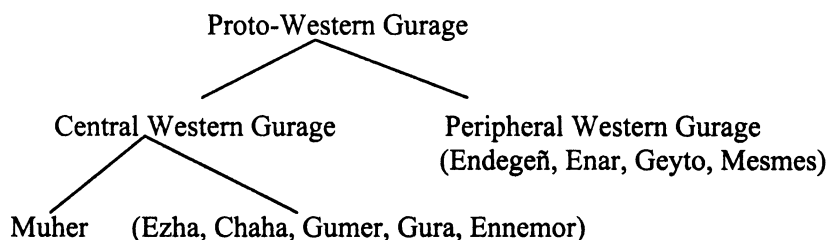
TABLE 8:  
Basic non-concatenative verbal inflectional patterns of triliteral roots in non- Western Gurage, excluding Endegeñ, Ezha and Muher

Verb types	perfective	imperfective	imperative	jussive
Type A	C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> äC <sub>2</sub> (^)C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> ^C <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)	-C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type B	C <sub>1</sub> eC <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> eC <sub>2</sub> (^)C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> eC <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)	-C <sub>1</sub> eC <sub>2</sub> ^C <sub>3</sub> (-)
Type C	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> äC <sub>3</sub> -	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> (^)C <sub>3</sub> (-)	C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)	-C <sub>1</sub> aC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub> (-)

Based on such morphological facts, I will categorize Muher with the Ezha group. Since Ezha and Chaha are closely related and both belong to Central Western Gurage, I suggest that Muher also falls under this group. However, Muher differs from the other Western Gurage varieties in some respects. For example, no Western Gurage language has a visible morphological marker for the present tense whereas Muher has.<sup>33</sup> Leslau (1996: 111) also states that Muher considerably differs from other Western Gurage languages. Hence, I will propose Central Western Gurage to be divided into Muher on the one hand, and Chaha, Ennemor etc on the other.<sup>34</sup>



The general classification of Western Gurage can be represented as follows:



#### 4.3.3.2 Transversal South Ethiopic

This group branches into Central Transversal Ethiopic and Eastern Transversal Ethiopic. The Central Transversal group consists of two languages, Amharic and Argobba. The Eastern Transversal group further divides into Harari, Zay and East Gurage. I will assume here, pending further investigation, that the classification of this group by Hetzron is more or less complete and, hence, I will suggest a minor change in the classification of only the eastern group.

##### 4.3.3.2.1 Eastern South Ethiopic

In previous works, this group has been divided into Harari and Eastern Gurage. However, I grouped Zay along the same line as Harari and Eastern Gurage. Since the term Gurage does not show any linguistic affinity and, since the Zay peoples are not Gurage, I do not find any good reason for grouping this language under the name of Eastern Gurage.<sup>35</sup> But note that the grouping of Zay, Harari and Eastern Gurage along the same line does not mean that Zay has a closer relation with Harari than with East Gurage speech varieties, such as Wolane and Silte, or vice versa. I do not have any evidence to prove this claim, though.

Regarding Eastern Gurage, Drewes (1996: 72) suggests that “in contradiction to Western Gurage, where the differences between the dialects are considerable, the eastern Gurage language area is quite homogeneous, with the notable exception of Zway [Zay]”. Since for Drewes (1996), Leslau (1951), Hetzron (1972) and many others, the differences between Silte, Ulbarag, Daloããa and Ennäqor are minimal, Ulbarag, Daloããa and Ennäqor can be considered as dialects of Silte, a claim which is also accepted by their respective speakers. However, the relation of Wolane to Silte needs some explanation.

Although my two elderly Wolane informants accept the view that there is mutual intelligibility between Silte and Wolane, all my other Wolane informants believe that they do not understand and communicate with the Silte people, because Silte is a

different language. However, whether this is true or a politically motivated attitude is very hard to tell at this stage, since there is no sufficient grammatical work done on Wolane. The reason for the difference between my informants might be due to the fact that Wolane youngsters are politically more sensitive than their elders. It might also be the case that due to long standing interaction with Silte speakers, it is easier for the elderly to understand Silte than for the young because the latter do not have such exposure “or, perhaps, in the past there was more interaction” (Grover Hudson p.c.). If the latter is true, it means that these two speech varieties should be considered separate languages. As in the present context, since no detailed grammatical work is available on Wolane, and since none of my informants want their language to be referred to as a dialect of Silte, I will consider Wolane as a separate language until further work has been done.<sup>36</sup>

#### **4.3.3.2.2 Central South Ethiopic**

As shown in the diagram above, there are two languages in this group, Amharic and Argobba. Though their relation is not very well studied, they can be considered as distinct languages simply from facts of common observation.

##### **4.3.3.2.2.1 Amharic**

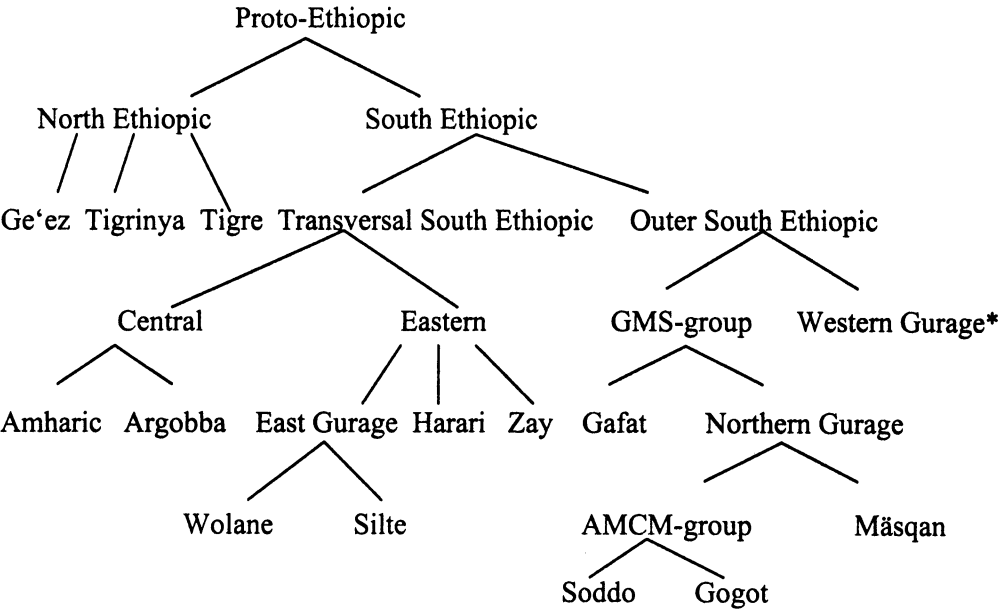
Although the history of Amharic is not well known, there is good evidence that in the 13th century it was said to be “lissanā nigus” (lit. Language of the king). Since then Amharic has had the opportunity to spread widely throughout the Empire as a language of government. It has served and is serving as a lingua franca by having the status of an official language of the country. Nowadays, it is the second most widely spoken Semitic language, next to Arabic.

##### **4.3.3.2.2.2 Argobba**

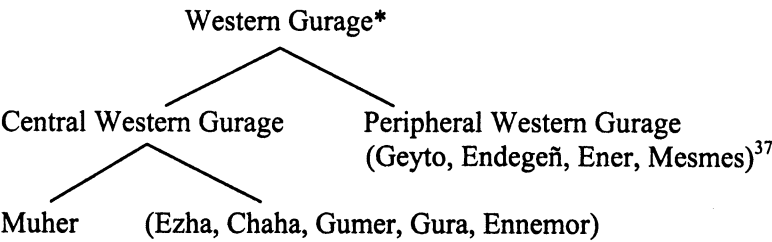
Argobba is a language spoken by a minority nationality. Since most Argobba do not speak it, it is considered as an endangered language (cf. Leslau 1997).

#### **4.4.4 Summary of the Proposed Classification of Ethio-Semitic**

In the preceding section, I have suggested a number of changes in the classification of South Ethiopic languages. I will now summarize the classification in this section for ease of clarity.



The grouping of Western Gurage is as follows:



The difference between Hetzron’s original classification and what is proposed above lies on the so-called Gurage languages. In the Eastern Gurage group, Wolane is considered as a separate language, and Zay is also considered to be in the same group as Harari and East Gurage rather than as a member of East Gurage for reasons already discussed. In Western Gurage, I group Ennemor under Central Western Gurage rather than under Peripheral Western Gurage. This is different from Hetzron’s original classification.

**5. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have re-examined the classification of Ethio-Semitic languages. The paper can be considered as an update of Hetzron’s (1972) classification incorporating

recent findings and providing data from native speakers. One of the major differences between the classification proposed here and that of Hetzron's (1972) and other such as Faber (1997), concern the position of Ethio-Semitic in relation to the overall classification of the Semitic family. Contra such classifications, this paper argues that Ethio-Semitic does not form a single group with South Arabian. The Ethio-Semitic group is considered here as a separate branch directly derived from Proto-Semitic; an idea which is forwarded also by Murtonen (1967, 1969). The other differences between the classification proposed here and in Hetzron (1977) concern the classification of Eastern, Northern and Western Gurage groups. Contra Hetzron, Muher is grouped under Western Gurage whereas Mäsqaṇ falls under North Gurage.

There are some important issues one has to consider carefully about the genetic classification of Semitic languages in general and the Ethio-Semitic languages in particular. The internal classification of Ethio-Semitic and its overall relation with respect to others cannot be defined with complete accuracy in terms of any particular grammatical feature, be it phonology, morphology or syntax. For example, if we consider equative clauses, Ge'ez and Tigre are closer to Arabic, Hebrew etc. than to any other Ethio-Semitic languages, including Tigrinya. In terms of word order, Ge'ez is closer to non-Ethiopic Semitic than to Tigre, Tigrinya or to any other Ethiopic language. When we look into the verb types of Ge'ez, Tigrinya and all South Ethiopic languages, almost all verb types are lexical except those of Tigre, in which most of the so-called type B, type C and type D verbs have equivalents in type A (cf. Raz 1983). In this respect, Tigre is closer to Arabic, Hebrew and to other non-Ethiopic than to Ge'ez, Tigrinya or any other Ethiopic languages.

In terms of the second vowel in the imperfective of type B verbs of Ge'ez, one may state that Ge'ez is much closer to Argobba, Zay, Gogot, Muher, Silte, Western Gurage and Wolane than to its sister languages of North-Ethiopic, Tigre and Tigrinya. Furthermore, the third person masculine singular subject marker in the imperfective form of the verb is *a* in Argobba, Harari and Tigre but not in others.

Some such common features may get explanation in terms of influence, but this is not entirely true. For example, Leslau observes that the third person masculine singular subject marker in the perfective form of the verb in Zay can be phonologically null as in "*säräq* 'he stole', *hid* 'he went', *mät*' (for *mät'aa*) 'he came', *fär* (for *färi*) 'he feared', *muut* (for *mutä*) 'he died'" (Leslau 1999: 70). The same is also true in Argobba.<sup>38</sup> According to Leslau, since the Argobbas are Muslims, it might be assumed that the language is influenced by "spoken Arabic (*katab* as against classical *kataba*)" (ibid.). However, he also states that since the Zay people are not Muslims, the argument of Arabic influence cannot hold for them. Note that in Amharic too, the past auxiliary *näbbär(ä)* is used without the suffix vowel *-ä*, but, of

course, optionally as in *Jonas izzih näbbär(-ä)* ‘Jonas was here’ (Jonas here Aux<sub>past</sub>(-3ms<sub>s</sub>)).<sup>39</sup>

Such details may suggest to us the fact that genetic classification based on grammatical features alone should be considered very carefully. A grammatical feature associated with some group can be found in another distant group, which may suggest a common origin or a process of grammaticalization at work. For example, Wetter (2000) suggests that the so-called compound verbs with the dummy verb “to say” in Ethio-Semitic cannot be considered as a result of influence from Cushitic as was advocated by many but as a process of grammaticalization, now considered a widely attested phenomenon, found in many natural languages.

One has to note that the so-called Gurage languages, particularly the Western Gurage speech varieties, are too complex. Hence, the classification proposed in this work should not be considered as showing the time depth of each speech variety. It only shows that the grouping of the languages reflects the similarity of individual speech varieties in each group and not necessarily the genetic relation of the speech varieties in each group.

This work is far from complete. There are, at least, two points which need further investigation. One is the relationship of the individual speech varieties in Western Gurage and the relation of Wonale to Silte. The other is the relation between Old South Arabian and Ethiopic languages. For example, Rodgers’s (1991) lexicostatistical examination of the vocabularies of Ethiopic and South Arabian languages shows that the percentages of shared cognates between Ethiopic and Sabaic is greater by 10% than that between Sabaic and Modern South Arabian. Furthermore, although Sabaic is assumed by some historians and linguists as being spoken originally in South Arabia and then defused to Ethiopia, one could possibly suggest the opposite — that it was first spoken in Ethiopia and then defused to South Arabia. This would mean that the Ethiopian-Sabaic is not an immigrant dialect. If this assumption is correct, in addition to Rodgers’s lexicostatistical examination, one need to examine, in detail the shared grammatical features between Ethiopic and Sabaic. I will leave this point for further research. However, one has to note here that, even if the origin of Sabaic is Ethiopia and one finds some proof of a genetic similarity between the two groups (which cannot be shared by others) the general classification of Proto-Semitic into Ethio-Semitic and Asian Semitic proposed here could be maintained; though it may need some modifications on the labels, Ethio-Semitic and Asian Semitic.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This phylum is also referred, especially in earlier literature, by the name Hamito-Semitic. However as Titov (1988:140) notes “there exists no special conspicuously delineated ‘Hamitic’ group of languages, which, with respect to certain traits, would be sharply opposite to the Semitic”. It’s Greenberg who replaces the name Hamito-Semitic by the new coined name Afroasiatic, since the languages are spoken in Africa and Asia. “Since there was no valid Hamitic group, and since the term Hamitic had racial (and racist) connotations, Greenberg proposed that the family name Hamito-Semitic be replaced by Afro-Asiatic” (Ruhlen 1987: 82). However, Ruhlen further points out that Greenberg is not actually who named it but he is the one who reintroduced the name Afroasiatic. According to Ruhlen, this term was first used by Delafosse in 1914 (Ruhlen 1987: 89).

<sup>2</sup> “No doubt it would be preferable to denote language groups by symbols such as letters or figures, and to avoid names such as Semitic or Indo-European which imply racial or Geographical ideas. But it is practically more convenient to accept a term in general use than to invent a new terminology” (O’leary 1969: 3).

<sup>3</sup> “In one form or another the South-Arabian origin of Ethiopic, and of the Ethiopians, is today a generally accepted theory” (Drewes 1958: 115).

<sup>4</sup> See for similar discussion and relevant references McCall (1998: 139).

<sup>5</sup> Vycihl (1987) opposes this idea as follows: “It would seem that the original home of the Hamito-Semitic languages was somewhere in Africa, as it is easier to conceive the migration of a single group from Africa to Asia than that of four (sic. at least five) groups from Asia to Africa.

“There are, however, two arguments in favor of an Asiatic origin. The first one is an anthropological and prehistoric, as we have not the slightest evidence of migrations from Africa to Asia. The second is linguistics, as all specific Hamito-Semitic features at their most complete are found in Semitic and not in the Hamitic groups” (P. 109).

The above two “arguments” of Vycihl cannot be considered as arguments either. First of all, most of the (Vycihl’s) so-called “Hamitic” languages are not well described or do not have any description at all. Even in the Semitic group there are a number of languages which do not have a single descriptive work. Let alone the Afroasiatic features, the Proto-Semitic features are still in revision in light of recent findings from previously undescribed languages, such as the Gurage languages. In light of this, it is hard to consider without any hesitation, most of the Afroasiatic features as found in Semitic. The second anthropological and prehistoric

“argument” of Vycihl is based on Berber alone. Though the description about Berber itself can lead to a lot of questions, it cannot be taken to represent and provide an explanation for the other four families which are found in Africa. Note here also, as mentioned above, that only part of the Semitic languages are spoken in Asia.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, this suggestion seems a little bit exaggerated. As the reviewers of this article suggest the number of non-Ethiopic languages can be more than four; that is, contra Hudson (2001: 9). In some ‘dialects’ of Arabic there is less mutual intelligibility. For example, my former colleagues from Morocco and Syria cannot communicate using their native Arabic speech varieties. One of the reviewers of this article also pointed out that “speakers of the Palestinian dialect of Arabic are unable to understand Moroccan Arabs”. However, though we may have more than four languages spoken in Asia, the truth is that the languages presently spoken in Ethiopia out number the languages spoken in Asia. Note that also, since we don’t have any written documents of the ancient languages of Ethiopia, we do not know how many Semitic languages were spoken in this country. Therefore, a comparison based on counting languages in written sources cannot be considered valid (see also Hudson 2001).

<sup>7</sup> For example, without a correspondence in Ge’ez, Leslau (1969a) finds a considerable number of Amharic roots with Hebrew cognates. This is unexpected if Ge’ez is the parent language of Ethio-Semitic, including Amharic.

<sup>8</sup> For detailed arguments in connection with to the former hypothesis, see Hudson (1977, 1978, 1994), Murtonen (1967, 1969), Bernal (1987) among others.

<sup>9</sup> Canaanite includes Hebrew, Phoenician, Moabite, Ammonite, El-Amarna (cf. Faber 1997: 7)

<sup>10</sup> Old South Arabian.

<sup>11</sup> The other so-called shared features between Old South Arabian and Ethio-Semitic can be accounted in terms of long and extensive contacts by people on both sides of the Red Sea.

<sup>12</sup> See also Rodgers (1991) for some discussion of this sort and for relevant references.

<sup>13</sup> However, I will assume that the main difference between these two groups is observed not because they lack a common ancestor but because the separation might have taken place at a time longer than that was previously assumed. In fact, we find some interesting similarities between North and South Ethiopic groups, such as the compound verbs with the semantically dummy verb ‘to say’. But this kind of similarity can be considered as an areal rather than a genetic feature which developed recently among the Ethiopian languages after the division of Ethiopic into North and South.

<sup>14</sup> By a dialect I mean here a socially or geographically distinctive variety of a language where there is a high degree of similarity such that mutual intelligibility between the speakers of different speech varieties is possible. In turn, I will consider here a certain speech variety as a language where the speakers of certain speech varieties are mutually unintelligible, or in other words, if the speakers do not understand each other.

<sup>15</sup> From Hudson (2001), it is difficult to know which variety of Western Gurage is a language because he doesn’t list the varieties of the group. Pending further research, I will restrict myself to two varieties though it might be the case that the number of languages in this group could be six as Hudson has suggested or, at least, one may consider Ennemor and Geyto as different languages.

<sup>16</sup> Note also here, to the best of my knowledge no Zay people refers himself as Gurage and no other people, Oromo or Amhara, refer to Zay people as Gurage. We only find that this people are referred to as Gurage by a few historical linguists. See Meyer (2000) for more about these people.

<sup>17</sup> I only know a single work by Leslau (1994) which is a short article on the verb of this speech variety.

<sup>18</sup> There is a political problem between the Wolane and Silte peoples. Following the present Ethiopian government policy of mother tongue education all my Wolane informants told me that Wolane children are forced to get primary education with Silte language assuming that these two speech varieties are mutually intelligible. In which case the Wolanes strongly objected and claiming that Silte is “another language” to them.

<sup>19</sup> Grover Hudson (p.c.) further confirmed me that Argobba and Amharic are unlikely mutually intelligible.

<sup>20</sup> The choice of the names of the individual languages here is to some extent arbitrary. What is important here is that Silte is considered to represent language clusters in the East Gurage group such as Ulbarag, Innäqor and Daloäää; Endegeñ to represent Peripheral Western Gurage and Chaha to represent most of the speech varieties such as Ennemor, Ezha in Central Western Gurage.

<sup>21</sup> 3 tense group.

<sup>22</sup> Central Western Gurage. In this group Hetzron (1977) lists the following speech varieties: Ezha, Chaha, Gumer and Gura.

<sup>23</sup> Peripheral Western Gurage. In this group in his classification chart, Hetzron (1977) lists the following speech varieties: Geyto, Ennemor, Endegeñ, Ener and Mesmes.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, in most Western Gurage speech varieties, i.e. excluding Ezha and Endegeñ, there is no gemination of the penultimate consonant. However the gemination is assumed to be reduced to devoicing. What is important here is that none of the South-Semitic speech varieties has gemination in the imperfective form of the verb unlike the North Ethiopic languages which have such gemination.

<sup>25</sup> There are few roots which are categorized under type A but have a different pattern. For example, take the root *khl* ‘can’: it has the following pattern for the perfective:

(i) kähäl-ä

can<sub>perf</sub>-3ms<sub>s</sub>

‘he can’

<sup>26</sup> 3 tense group.

<sup>27</sup> Leslau (1992) attributes this division, i.e. the division of the so-called Gurage languages into North, East and West to Marcel Cohen.

<sup>28</sup> Note that according to Hetzron Soddo, Muher and Gogot form a North Gurage group (see the classification chart above).

<sup>29</sup> In fact, this is true also of Gafat (cf. Leslau 1945). This can be taken as a common feature for the GMS language group in general since none of the South Ethiopic languages has such property. In this regard, note that GMS-group behaves like North Ethiopic.

<sup>30</sup> The Gogot pattern can also be represented with this table as it is almost identical to Soddo.

<sup>31</sup> The other linguistic neighbors of Mäsqa are Silte, Muher, and Libido (Mareko), all of which (or at least three of them) have two simple tenses (cf. Shikur 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Note that Leslau does not provide any further classification for this group. He simply puts all the languages and the dialects together under the name Western Gurage. However, as mentioned by Hetzron, the relationship of each speech variety to another is not uniform. According to my Ezha informant, as discussed before, there is no way one can consider Endegeñ on the same level as the speech varieties of the Central group.

<sup>33</sup> It does not matter whether one calls the Muher tense marking elements non-past markers or present tense markers.

<sup>34</sup> One could further divide the Chah group, at least, into Ennemore and Chaha- Ezha-Gumer-Gura group. But to do such classification, we need to have a detailed grammatical description of individual speech varieties.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, recently the Silte have had a referendum on their identity and the majority voted not to be considered as Gurage. I do not think, however, the Wolane share such feeling with Silte. Unlike the Siltes the Wolane consider themselves as one of the important members which make up the Gurage people. If this is the case, it is appropriate to put only Wolane into Eastern Gurage, not to offend the Siltes.

Goldenberg (1970: 62) reports that the Soddo too do not consider themselves as Gurages. However, none of my informants confirms Goldenberg's claim. As Ronny Meyer (p.c.) suggests; this might be due to attitude change because of the recent ethnic politics of the government.

<sup>36</sup> Apart from linguistics, the status of language versus dialect is strongly related to politics and culture. For example, Chinese is referred as a single language, although there is no mutual intelligibility between speakers of most of the so-called Chinese dialects, such as Cantonese, Mandarin. The same is true for some of the Arabic dialects. On the other hand, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish are referred as languages on their own, although the Swedes, Danes and Norwegians can understand each other.

<sup>37</sup> Mesmes is now said to be extinct.

<sup>38</sup> "An abbreviated form appears in these languages on most verbs and auxiliary verbs such as *näbbär(ä)* in Argobba, *naar(ä)* in Zay" (Leslau 1999: 70).

<sup>39</sup> I will assume here that this is so because of the general semantic behaviour of the morpheme and not due to influence or genetic relations.

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