

The Ethio-Semitic Languages (Re-examining the Classification)

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Classification

What is being classified?

- Ethiosemitic position in the Semitic Tree
- Internal Classification of Ethiosemitic

Used in Classification:

- Grammatical features
- Facts of Mutual Intelligibility
- Recent Findings (as of Dec. 2001)

Classification in this paper is more dependent on similarities between languages than historical linguistics

“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” p.84

Afroasiatic Languages

Afroasiatic has six official families:

- Semitic
- Omotic
- Cushitic
- Old Egyptian (*extinct*)
- Berber
- Chadic

Possible families (originally Cushitic):

- Beja
- Ongota

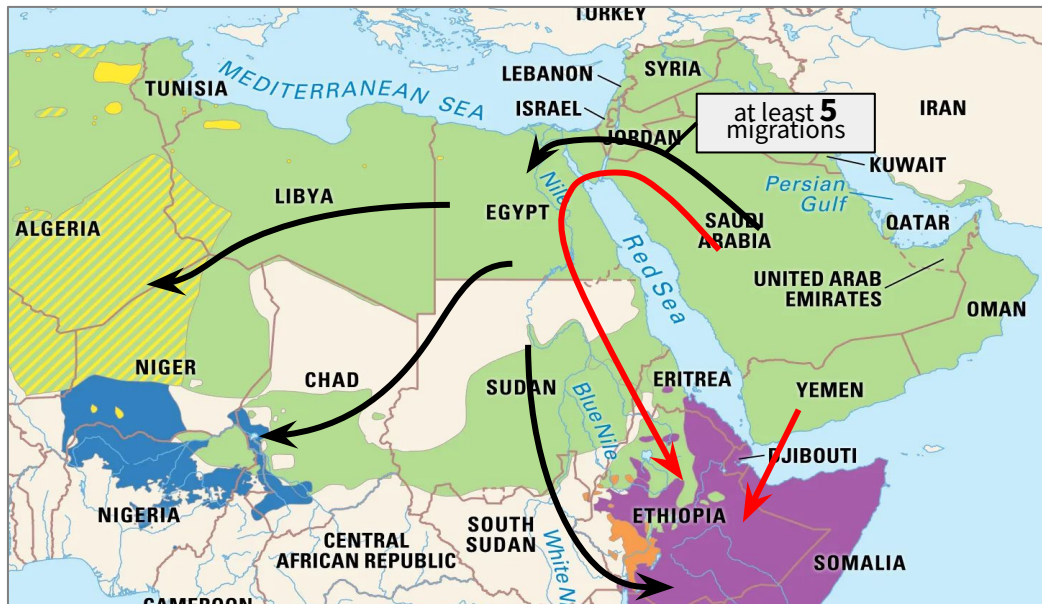
Of the possible eight families of Afroasiatic five are spoken in Ethiopia



Origin Theories

Theory 1

- Afroasiatic languages originated in Asia then migrated to Africa several times
- A group stayed long enough for Proto-Semitic to develop and have subgroups
- A group migrated to Ethiopia after splitting from South Arabian speakers around 1000 BCE



Theory 2

- Afroasiatic languages originated in or near Ethiopia
- A group separated from other Afroasiatic speakers in Ethiopia later to speak Proto-Semitic
- Others spread throughout northern Africa
- Some semitic speakers moved into Asia

Demeke mostly agrees with Theory 2

Evidence for Theory 2:

- Greatest number of Afroasiatic languages are in Africa
- Greatest diversity of in Ethiopia

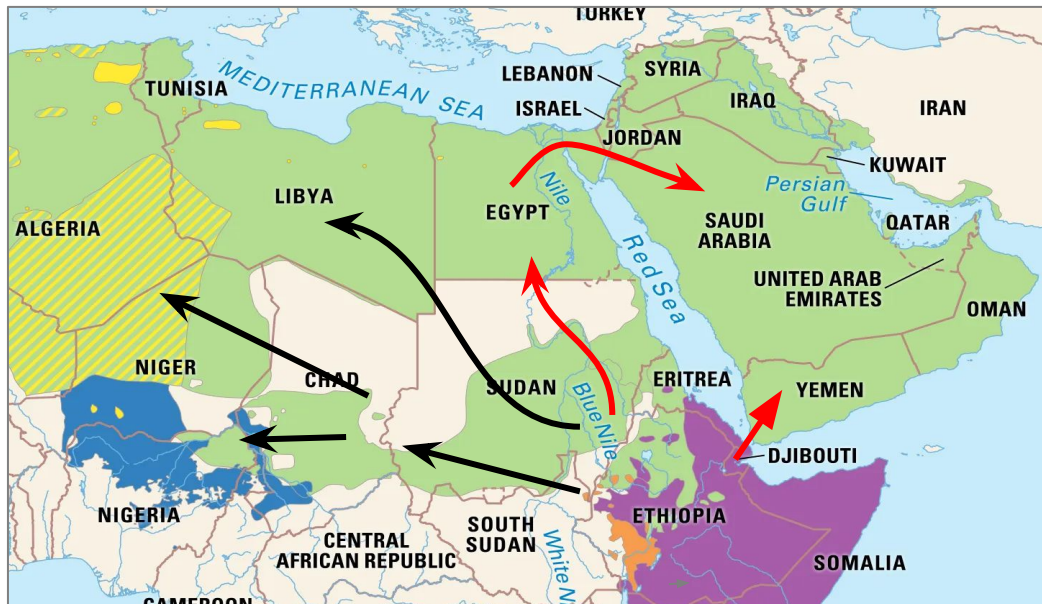
Evidence against Theory 1:

- Violates “least moves” principle
- Lack of convincing evidence

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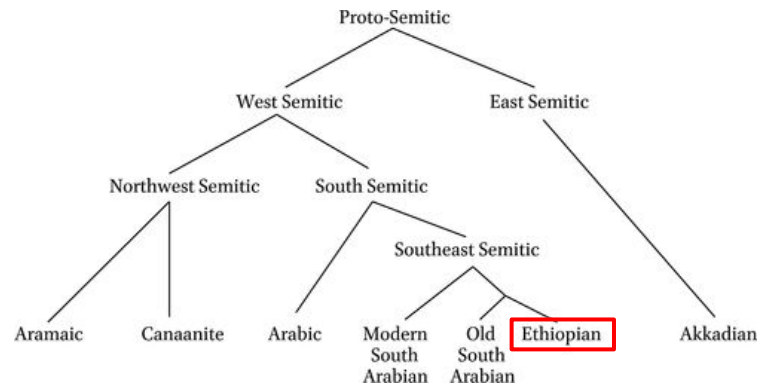
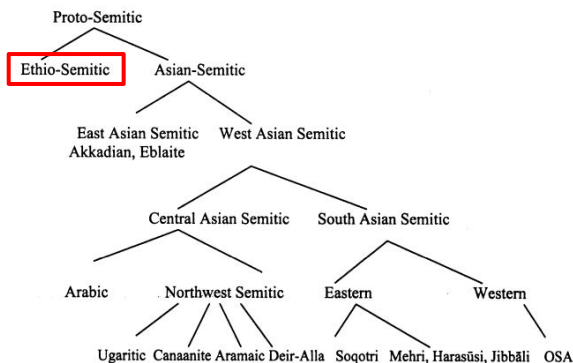
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Semitic Languages

- The origin of the phylum and how it split is important for looking at the classification of the Semitic family
 - Is Ethiosemitic a branch directly from Proto-Semitic or is it in the same branch as South Arabian
- Many people who side with Theory 2 also believe Afroasiatic originated in Ethiopia
 - Which would support Ethiosemitic as a branch off Proto-Semitic
- Demeke argues if Ethiopia was the origin there would have to have been four migrations into Asia which violates the “least moves” principle used against Theory 1
- Also the fact that the neighbouring Cushitic family shows up nowhere in Asia



Semitic Languages

Although Demeke is not convinced on Ethiopia being the origin of Semitic, he also doesn't agree with Ethiosemitic being so closely related to South Arabian

Lack of Grammatical (and other) evidence - citing Fleming & Murtonen

Most of the features that said to be shared between South Arabian and Ethiosemitic are also shared by other Semitic languages

- The imperfective form $C_1VC_2(C_2V)C_3$ of triradical verbs are seen in other Semitic languages
- Difference in phonology can be quite large, especially with South Ethiopic and South Arabic

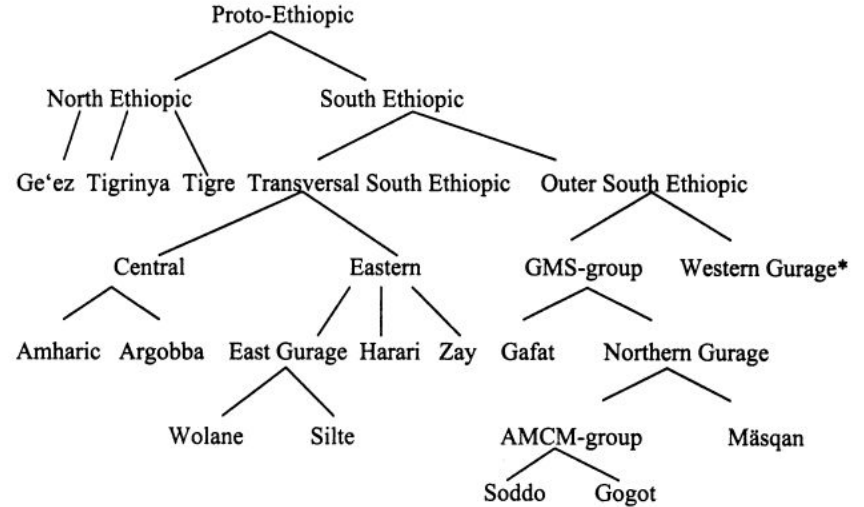
Still debate and uncertainty of the classification of Semitic Languages

Ethiosemitic

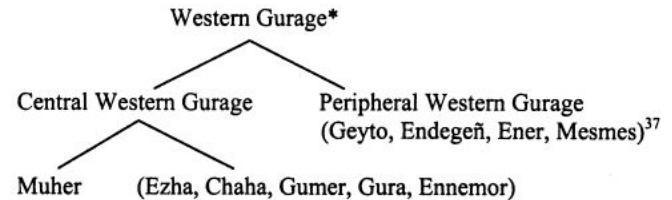
- About 24 speech varieties
 - Anywhere from 19 to 8 considered languages with an undetermined amount of dialects
- Found in Ethiopia and Eritrea

Linguists agree when it comes to which speech variates are Ethiosemitic

Disagreements come from how to classify them and which are languages and which are dialects



The grouping of Western Gurage is as follows:



Ethiosemitic

Language vs. Dialect

- Mutual intelligibility used as a determiner
 - Mutually Intelligible = Dialect
 - Not mutually Intelligible = Separate Languages
- Talking to Native Speakers is an important part of this process
- Also looks at similarity between the speech varieties

Issues:

- Doesn't give any other ways to determine the distinction between the two
- Doesn't elaborate on what makes them similar besides vaguely mentioning grammar
- Some speakers understand the other "dialect" while others can't
- The speakers could be biased about being a dialect of a certain language
 - Ex: Most of Demeke's Wolane speakers didn't want to be dialect of Silke despite the similarities
- **Lack of research**

North vs. South

What separates these groups?

North Ethiopic Languages

Share similar vocabulary

Broken Plurals

Almost identical non-concatenative
inflection patterns in verbs

Gemination in Type A verbs

Perfective: sä**b**ärä Imperfective: yīsä**bb**[^]r

South Ethiopic Languages

Plural marked by concatenative morpheme

Larger variety of non-concatenative
inflection patterns in verbs

Gemination in Type A verbs

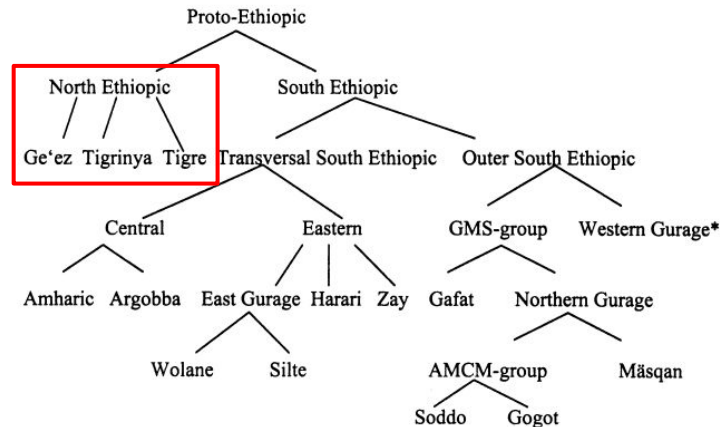
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North Ethiopic

Languages: Ge'ez, Tigrinya, Tigre

Ge'ez Theories

- Is extinct and an ancient literary language
- More similar to Tigrinya than to Tigre
- Much contention on how Ge'ez is related to Tigre and Tigrinya
 - Whether it is an ancestor to one, both, or neither
- Some have believed that Ge'ez is a common ancestor of modern Ethiosemitic languages but others have argued there are typical features found in other Semitic languages not in Ge'ez
- Many of modern Ethiosemitic languages were already spoken when Ge'ez was still alive
- One theory tried to argue Ge'ez was a pidgin even though there is more morphological complexity than you would find in radical pidginization. An also opens up possibilities of 16 migrations



South Ethiopic

Transversal - Central & Eastern

Central - Amharic & Argobba Eastern - East Gurage, Harai, & Zay

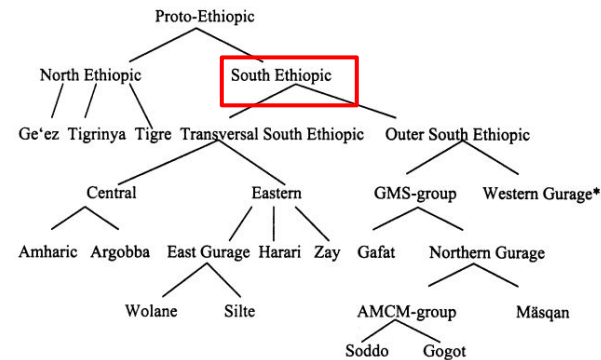
Outer - Western Gurage, Northern Gurage, & Gafat

Classification has changed with more research showing the “main verb markers” **-n** & **-tt** were analyzed incorrectly

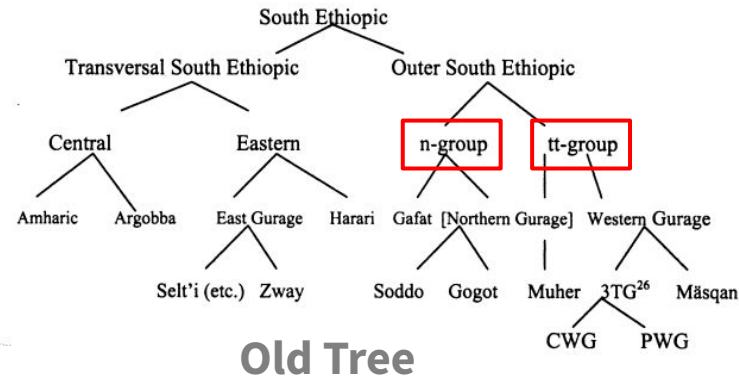
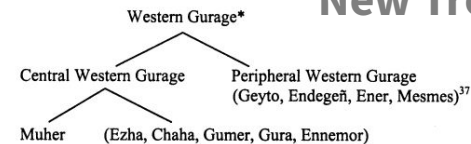
The **-tt** was actually a tense marker in only Muher and was not found consistently in any other “tt-group” language

Demeke purposes changes to the South Ethiopic classification

- Move Zay up a branch and replace with Wolane
- “tt-group” removed to just end on Western Gurage
- Muher is put in with the Western Gurage group
- “n-group” is replaced with GMS-group (first initials of language names)
- Masqan moved from Western to Northern Gurage

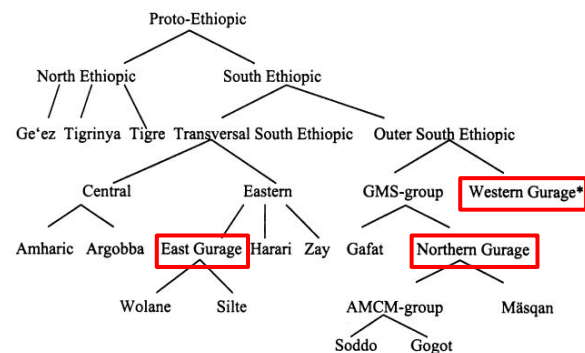


The grouping of Western Gurage is as follows:



Gurage Languages

- Complex languages used by the group of people in central Ethiopia
- The name comes from the people and not linguists
- This group is not a genetic branch of Ethiosemitic
- Some are linguistically closer to non-gurage languages than other gurage languages
- The term is still useful in linguistics due to the fact the cluster is surrounded by Cushitic Languages
- Since there is good amount of bilingualism in this area it is hard to determine exactly how many speech varieties there are



Gurage Languages

East Gurage - Silte & Wolane

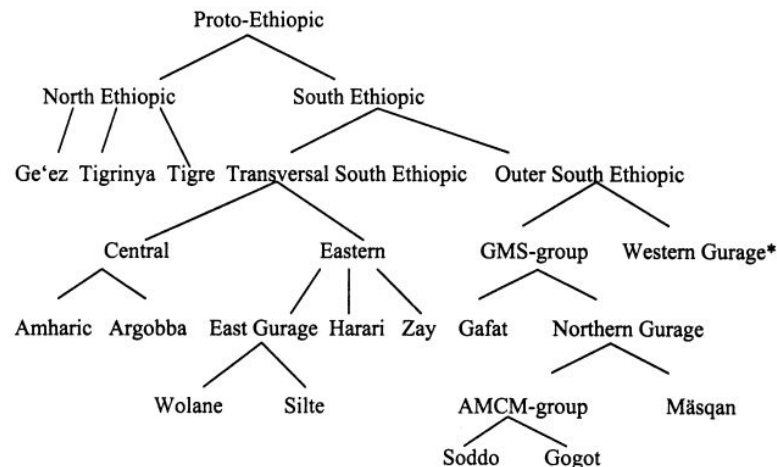
Related to non-Gurage languages Harari and Zay

North Gurage - Soddo, Mäsqaṇ and Godot

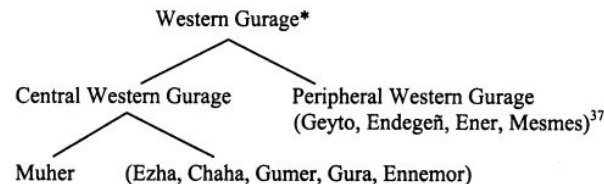
Related to non-Gurage language Gafat

West Gurage - Chaha, Gyeto, Ezha, Ennem,

- Most complex of Gurage Groups
- Not related any non-Gurage language



The grouping of Western Gurage is as follows:



Final Thoughts

- Demeke writes that there needs to be much research especially on the Gurage Languages
- He also talks about how relying only on grammatical evidence when classifying languages is not sufficient enough. You need to work with more tools to get the full picture. Ariel factors and happenstance could lead someone to believe two distant languages with some similar features have the same origin.
- Even talks about inconsistencies in this paper - Western Gurage having a language that is related to an Eastern Gurage Language, issues around South Arabian's and Sabaic's relationship to Ethiosemitic languages, and more
- Demeke ends with how the work on these languages are far from complete

Citation

Demeke, G.A. (2001) 'The Ethio-Semitic Languages (Re-examining the Classification)', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 34(2), pp. 57–93.