The Afro-Asiatic Languages

20 April 2012

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Overview

- Language classification: Semitic and its external relations
- Language typology: Linguistic features of different branches
- More in-depth: Berber languages
- Challenges for future work on the language family

Genetic linguistic classification

- Lexicostatistics
  - Take basic vocabulary (100-200 most common words)
  - Calculate percentages!
- Comparative method
  - Sound-meaning correspondences
- Mass comparison
  - Take as many words as possible, superficial formal comparison
- Shortcomings
  - Word-based methods, but: lexicon easy to borrow
  - Mass comparison and lexicostatistics error-prone
  - Comparative method is best, but: Beware of "randomising" or test language principles!

The classification of African languages

- Joseph H. Greenberg
- Principles and Methods
  - Mass comparison of lexical data (no proper reconstruction!)
  - Sometimes typological properties (clicks for Khoisan)

Afro-Asiatic: general characteristics

Special in many regards:
- High number of speakers
- Long written tradition for some AA languages
- Longest academic interest, spoken also outside Africa
- Typological phenomena: Templatic morphology...

Which sub-families?
- Chadic
- Omotic
- Cushitic
- Egyptian
- Semitic
- Berber

Chadic (140 languages)

- West Chadic (Nigeria, etc.)
  - Hausa (25 mio. speakers)
  - Several others
- Blu-Mandara (Nigeria/Cameroon)
- East Chadic (Chad/ N Cameroon/C.A.R.)
- Masa (SW Chad/ N Cameroon)
Omotic
- Greenberg: West Cushitic
- South Omotic
  - Hamer (among others)
- North Omotic
  - Several small clusters
  - Ometo as biggest group
- Mao

Cushitic
- Northern Cushitic: Beja
- Central Cushitic (Ethiopia/Eritrea): Agaw languages
- Highland East Cushitic (SC Ethiopia)
  - Burji, Sidamo, Kambeata
- Lowland East Cushitic
  - Oromo, Rendille, Somali
- Dullay
- Southern Cushitic
  - Iraqw, Mbugu/Ma’a, Dahalo

Afro-Asiatic languages in the North-East
- Egyptian
  - †Old Egyptian
  - †Demotic
  - †Coptic
- Semitic
  - Arabic
  - Hebrew
  - Amharic
  - Tigre

Berber
- Dialect continuum in the NW
- Oases and other more isolated pockets
- Saharan Tuareg varieties
- Zenaga (Mauritania)
  - †Guanche,
  - †Old-Libyan

The sub-classification of Afroasiatic
- Family tree according to SIL
- But there are more…

Conflicting views on Afroasiatic sub-divisions
Typological characteristics

- VSO – verb-initial word order
  - But: E.g. Cushitic languages quite strictly V-final!!
- Templatic morphology (Root and pattern)
- Emphatic consonants
  - Pharyngealised consonants
  - Ejectives

Cognate verb conjugation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Arabic (Semitic)</th>
<th>Kabyle (Berber)</th>
<th>Somali (Cushitic)</th>
<th>Baja (verb is “arrive”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>he dies</td>
<td>yamudu</td>
<td>yemmut</td>
<td>wudinta</td>
<td>idim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she dies</td>
<td>tamudtu</td>
<td>temmut</td>
<td>wadinta</td>
<td>idim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they (m.) die</td>
<td>yamuddunu</td>
<td>mmutun</td>
<td>wadimata</td>
<td>idimna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you (m., sg.) die</td>
<td>tamuddu</td>
<td>temmut</td>
<td>wadimate</td>
<td>idima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you (m., pl.) die</td>
<td>tamudduna</td>
<td>temmutem</td>
<td>wadimalan</td>
<td>itikima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I die</td>
<td>tamutu</td>
<td>temuty</td>
<td>wadinta</td>
<td>akdim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we die</td>
<td>namutu</td>
<td>nnmut</td>
<td>wadimane</td>
<td>nikdim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In-depth: Berber

- Phonetics/phonology
- Case-marking system and order of core constituents
- Libyco-Berber writing systems

An example

“I see Hassan’s sister” ژريو ultmas ــن-ه-Nasen

- There are only three phonological vowels in Tashelhit.
  - [e] = /i/ ; [æ], [œ] = /a/ ; [u] = /u/
- General reduction of vowel length, but along different lines
  - Tuareg varieties retained complex distinctions
  - Other varieties more complete…
  - Schwa even more reduced in some varieties, notably Tashelhit

Example nouns

- Gender
  - Feminines differ from masculine by using t (-t)
  - aydi’ ‘dog’
  - taydi’ ‘bitch’
- Number
  - Plural forms show initial -g
  - Sometimes final -n
  - Sometimes internal vowels affected
  - argaz > irgazn
  - agbalu > igbula
- Case
  - Often initial -a (> ar)
  - Often initial -s (> š)
  - argaz > argaz
  - tasrdunt > tstårdunt

Morphology of the Berber noun

- amyar ‘man, chief’
  - Root: mýr
  - Vocalisation: aC₁C₂aC₃
- imyarín ‘old men’
- tamyart ‘old man’
- timyarín ‘old women’
How to use the cases…

- Direct object is in *état libre* (=accusative).
  \[\texttt{ Direct object } \rightarrow \text{ état libre } \]
  \[\text{ (ntta) izra argaz } \quad \text{‘(he) sees the man’} \]
- Subject is in *état d’annexion* (=nominative) when following the verb.
  \[\text{ Subject } \rightarrow \text{ état d’annexion } \]
  \[\text{ ikšm urgaz } \quad \text{‘the man enters’} \]

Positional condition!

Lexical subject NP occurs in the *état libre* (=accusative) when preceding the verb:

\[\text{ argaz ikšm } \quad \text{‘the man enters’} \]

Marked nominative

- Accusative case
  - Citation form
  - Direct objects
  - Subjects when preceding Verb
- (Marked) nominative case
  - Subjects in post-verbal position
  - Nouns headed by (most) prepositions
  - (Origin: merger with genitive)

Word order changes

- When does a lexical subject follow or precede the verb?
- What leads to the ordering of constituents in the sentence?

How do we systematize pragmatics?

- Sasse (1987): Categorical versus thetical statements
- *thème-rhème* distinction

Pragmatics: Information structure

- Information structure an ordering principle:
  - “Proceed from known to unknown!”
  - Topics come first, focused element later in the sentence
- Information structure & syntactic constituents:
  - Subject is what is talked about, i.e. the topic
  - The predicate, V + Object, provides the new information
- If both principles illustrated were universal, all languages should be expected to be (predominantly) SVO!
- Not so for Berber:
  \[\text{ argaz irgl tigmmi } \quad \text{‘the man closed the house’} \]
  \[\text{ irgl urgaz tigmmi } \quad \text{‘the man closed the house’} \]
- Hence, perhaps, a “fixed” basic word order VSO?

Material: elicited data

- Interview conducted with Hassan Akioud, (Tashelhit), Spain, summer 2005.
  - Task: Figure out the mechanisms leading to pre- versus post-verbal use of explicit S
  - Result(s)
    - Post-verbal subjects are “new information”, pre-verbal subjects are topicalised (receiving special emphasis as the thing being spoken about).
    - Diachronic explanation
      - VSO order with nominative-marked subjects.
      - Default subjects are usually not represented as lexical NPs
      - Thematic subjects shifted to the front.
      - If there is lexical NP after the V, it is interpreted as new information.
Further grammaticalisation

A similar grammaticalization pattern held responsible for the rise of the current a-/u-marked distinction between accusative and marked nominative in Berber.
- Fusion of a preceding pronominal element (>article) to a pro-clitic (>prefix) (cf. Sasse, 1984)
- When did this happen?
- Evidence from older sources
  - Currently, many Berber languages have lost the initial Vowel. No morphological case on nouns.
  - But: in older sources, the vowel is also often no there…

Case-marking patterns in the past

Libyco-Berber writing systems

Reviewing (a selection of) existing theories
- Mayan, Runic, etc.
- Independent innovation
- South-Semitic
- Phoenician(-Punic) origins

In search of the cradle: Carthage/Numidia?

Periodization of events in the development of LB script
- Formal considerations: ancient symbols versus more recent letters
  - Archaic
  - Classical
  - Transitional
  - Tifinagh

Azib n’Ikkis (Yagour, High Atlas)
Oldest attestations

- **Ancient/Archaic**
  - Rock inscriptions, pecked
  - Vertical direction of writing (↑)
  - 7th-4th century BCE
  - Spread to Canary Islands

The rise of classic LB

- From ancient to classic Libyco-Berber
  - Changes in the signs for sibilants
  - Sign for /y/-/q now attested
  - Many attestations from Numidia

Transitional script

- Most problematic
  - Inconclusive evidence, variation, dating problems
- Foum Chenna, Morocco
  - First dotted signs
  - None of the typical rounded Tifinagh characters
- Spread toward the East
  - Oued I-n-Ana, Algeria
  - Change of writing direction
  - Vowel signs

Distribution

Libyco-Berber and Tifinagh

- Possibly link to assumed “Saharien ancien”?
Tifinagh an independent innovation?

- LB script an independent innovation
  - All formal similarities with Phoenician doubtful
  - Adoption of writing without adoption of alphabet?
- Oldest evidence in the Sahara
  - Geographical distribution
  - Tuareg varieties of Berber linguistically rather conservative


Problem 1: Oldest variety uses symbols used at present, but not in the intermediate stages
Possible counterarguments
- In dialect clusters, co-existence of variants
- “Dotting” a medium-specific variant rather than strictly sequenced

Problem 2: Why an alphabet relying largely on consonants for Tuareg varieties?
Possible counterarguments
- Berber shows root/pattern morphology, therefore consonantal script adequate
- Not rare for an initial system to be underspecifying

Pichler’s thesis: Gibraltar straits

- Early Phoenician contacts promulgating the idea of writing
  - Contact-induced invention, rather than borrowing of a specific writing system
- Spread from N Atlas, through N interior, to Canary islands
- Tifinagh a later innovation (in the area supposed to be the cradle by Chaker/Hachi)

Problem 1: Geography/distribution
- Phoenician settlements along N African coast, but oldest testimony in Atlas mountains

Problem 2: What functional motivation for mountain herders and hunters to write?
- Argument brought forth by Chaker and Hachi, but of course equally problematic (if not more so) in their case – why would people innovate a writing system under similar circumstances?

Concluding with challenges

- Historical contact linguistics in the tamazgha (Berber domain)
  - Improved historical linguistic reconstructions
  - Application of refined contact linguistic models for the specific case of Berber
  - In practical terms, more easily accessible aligned corpora for comparative work

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