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# The Ethiopian Linguistic Area

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## 1 DEFINITION OF LINGUISTIC AREA

Languages may resemble each other due to four major reasons: (i) a common ancestor language, (ii) typological universals, (iii) borrowings due to language contact, and (iv) chance. The last reason, chance, can be neglected because it is always present to a limited extent. However, it is not always easy to clearly distinguish between the remaining three reasons. Common ancestry is usually established through cognates, most frequently lexical items but also paradigmatic sets of bound morphemes, which show that the concerned languages most probably developed out of a single proto-language. With regard to Ethiosemitic and Cushitic, see for instance Kogan (2005; 2015), Hudson (1989) and Sasse (1982) for lexical cognates, and Hetzron (1972; 1975a) for the use of morphology for genetic classification. Typological universals, in contrast, are based on the comparison of genetically divergent languages which share similar grammatical structures and possess constituents with a similar functional range (see e.g. Comrie 1989).<sup>1</sup>

Long lasting and intense contact between speakers of different languages, genetically related or not, usually results in widespread bi- and multilingualism and may also trigger various layers of multidirectional borrowing processes of lexical items and grammatical structures so that eventually the involved languages closely resemble each other – although it often remains unclear from which particular language or language group the concerned feature originates. Even if borrowing processes are most commonly found the lexicon (here particularly nouns and discourse particles), all parts of a language can be affected by contact-induced linguistic change (see e.g. Weinreich 1953; Thomason & Kaufmann 1988; Thomason 2001). If languages in a geographically defined area share one or more features, which cannot be explained through genetic ancestry or linguistic universals, then they might form a linguistic area or convergence zone. In an ideal situation, a linguistic area includes genetically unrelated languages that also have sister languages which are spoken outside the area. In this case, languages in the linguistic area can be compared with genetically related languages outside it to detect contact-induced changes. With regard to the Ethiopian Linguistic Area, for instance, a prominent feature is the SOV word order. It could be detected by comparing ancient with modern Ethiosemitic languages (i.e. Geez and Amharic) as well as with Semitic languages spoken in Asia, like Arabic, and Cushitic languages (e.g. Oromo), as in (1).

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<sup>1</sup> An online database and description of typological linguistic features in a vast selection of the world's languages is Dryer & Haspelmath (2013).

## (1) a. SEMITIC–ARABIC

VERB	SUBJECT	OBJECT
<i>ʔiftara:</i>	<i>l-ʔabu</i>	<i>daḏa:ḏatan siminatan.</i>
buy\PFV.3SM	DEF-father.NOM	chicken.SF.ACC fat.SF.ACC

‘The father bought a fat chicken.’ (Abu-Chacra 2007: 48)

## b. ANCIENT ETHIOSEMITIC–GEEZ

VERB	SUBJECT	OBJECT
<i>räkäb-ä</i>	<i>josef</i>	<i>mogäs-ä...</i>
find\PFV-3SM	Joseph	grace-ACC

‘Joseph found grace ...’ (Tropper 2002: 227)

## c. MODERN ETHIOSEMITIC–AMHARIC

SUBJECT	OBJECT	VERB
<i>abbat-u</i>	<i>wäfram doro</i>	<i>gäzza.</i>
father-DEF	fat chicken	buy.PFV.3SM

‘The father bought a fat chicken.’

## d. CUSHITIC–OROMO

SUBJECT	OBJECT	VERB
<i>Nam-ichi</i>	<i>farda guddaa sana</i>	<i>arg-e.</i>
man-SNG.NOM	horse.ABT big.ABT PRX.ABT	see-3SM.PFV

‘The man saw that big horse.’

The neutral word in Proto-Semitic was VSO (Huehnergard 2019: 69), as shown in (1a) for Arabic and in (1b) for ancient Ethiosemitic Geez. However, The modern Ethiosemitic languages changed the word order to SOV, as in the Amharic example (1c), most probably through the influence of Cushitic languages, which are of the SOV type, as Oromo in (1d). Thus, the geographically related languages Amharic and Oromo are more similar to each other than the genetically closely related languages Amharic and Geez, as well as Amharic and Arabic. This scenario suggests that Proto-Ethiosemitic might still have been of the Proto-Semitic VSO type but later changed through language contact to SOV.

The word order change on the clausal level also affected the order of constituents on the phrasal level, although here the picture is still more divergent. Accordingly, the order MODIFIER-HEAD predominates in Ethiosemitic, Highland East Cushitic, and Omotic. Its reversal, HEAD-MODIFIER, also occurs in Omotic languages (e.g. Aari, Sezo, Anfillo), but particularly in Lowland East Cushitic. Uncommon mixed patterns are also found, such as ADJECTIVE-NOUN/NOUN-GENITIVE in Bayso (cf. Bisang 2006: 90–91) and Tigre/Tigrinya (which also have GENITIVE-NOUN) (Tosco 1998), or ADJECTIVE-NOUN beside common NOUN-ADJECTIVE/GENITIVE in Geez (Bulakh 2012: 171). Auxiliaries typically follow the main verb. Case tends to be marked by (inflectional) suffixes and postpositions. In Ethiosemitic, case prefixes also exist (but uniformly changed to suffixes in Harari, see Lehmann 2011: §4.1.2), and case relators and determiners are usually attached to modifiers (2).

(2) AMHARIC (ETHIOSEMITIC)

SUBJECT	OBJECT	VERB
<i>käbbädä</i> Kebede.M	<i>?ad~addis-u-n</i> PL~new-DEF.M-ACC <i>libs</i> clothes	<i>yi-läbs</i> 3SM-wear\IPFV <i>ǧämmär.</i> AUX.begin(PFV)

‘Kebede started to wear (various pieces of) new clothes’ (Leslau 1995: 334)

## 2 THE ETHIOPIAN LINGUISTIC AREA

The Ethiopian Linguistic Area is found at the Horn of Africa in present day Ethiopia and Eritrea – sometimes it is also considered to include Djibouti and Somalia (e.g. Bender 2003).<sup>2</sup> It comprises languages from Nilo-Saharan and Afroasiatic phyla (i.e. Ethiosemitic, Cushitic and Omotic), and is an often cited as a typical example for an African linguistic area (e.g. Thomason & Kaufmann 1988). The Ethiopian Linguistic Area has arisen through intense contact between speakers of Semitic and Cushitic languages, which to a lesser extent also affected neighboring Omotic and Nilo-Saharan languages, i.e. it is mainly based on Cushitic–Ethiosemitic comparisons. As the Ethiosemitic languages have a number of particularities not found in Asian Semitic languages, it is commonly assumed that lasting and intense linguistic contacts with Cushitic languages triggered changes that made Ethiosemitic and Cushitic linguistically more similar to each other.

Early studies which particularly deal with Cushitic influence on Ethiosemitic include Praetorius (1889; 1893), Moreno (1948), and Leslau (1945; 1952; 1959). Subsequently, Greenberg (1959: 24) proposed the existence of a linguistic area in (former) Ethiopia and Somali, based on the following features: (i) complex consonant system with glottalized sounds, (ii) absence of tone, (iii) predominance of closed syllables, (iv) phrasal order of determiner–determined, and (v) shared lexical idiomatic expressions. However, most of these features are too general to define the Ethiopian linguistic area and partly not true (especially concerning tone). However, at the end of the 1960s, they reflect the then state-of-art, in which only some of the Ethiosemitic and Omotic languages were known to a certain extent, while the research on Omotic – the term itself was coined only years later (see Lamberti 1991) – and Ethiopian Nilo-Saharan languages was still in its infancy.

It was Ferguson (1970; 1976) who established the concept of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area through twenty-six phonological and grammatical features, which are shown in Table 1.

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<sup>2</sup> Meyer & Wolff (2019: 297–300) – in reference to Bender (2003) – call this area Northeast African Linguistic Area, as it currently encompasses Ethiopia and the surrounding countries.

Table 1 Ferguson's (1976: 69, 75) features of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area

**EIGHT PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES**

1. The voiceless fricative *f* replaces the voiceless plosive *p* as counterpart to the voiced plosive *b*;
2. Occurrence of *d* as single implosive consonant;
3. Occurrence of the pharyngeal fricatives *ħ* and *ʕ* as phonemes;
4. A series of ejective consonants;
5. Palatals occurs as phonemes and as result of palatalization, a phonological process most frequently occurring with alveolars;
6. Gemination as a phonemic feature in the lexicon and the grammar;
7. Occurrence of one or two central vowels *i*, *ä*;
8. Absence of consonant clusters with more than two consonants

**EIGHTEEN GRAMMATICAL FEATURES**

9. SOV as unmarked word order;
10. Subordinate clauses precede main clauses;
11. High frequency of converbs;
12. High frequency of postposition;
13. Quoting clauses marked with the verb 'say';
14. Compound verbs (i.e. complex predicates) with the verb 'say';
15. Lexically/structurally distinct affirmative and negative copulas;
16. Use of singular (i.e. unmarked) nouns with numerals and quantifiers;
17. Occurrence of possessive suffixes;
18. Masculine/feminine gender distinction on personal pronouns and verb indexes of the second and third person singular;
19. Existence of a prefix conjugation in which the 2sm and 3sf subject is identically marked by *t*;
20. Use of non-linear (or non-concatinative) morphology for word formation;
21. Occurrence of broken plurals;
22. Reduplication marks a higher intensity;
23. Occurrence of formal morphological distinctions between imperfective verbs in main and subordinate clauses;
24. Use of singular feminine forms to mark plural;
25. Suppletive lexical items for expressing the imperative of the verb 'come';

26. Existence of basic nouns with a plural/collective reading from which a singulative forms can be derived.

Most Ethiosemitic languages and many Cushitic and Omotic languages exhibit several of these features, but they are less frequently found in Nilo-Saharan languages. For instance, unmarked SOV word order – see example (1) above – is common for Omotic languages and also found in a few Nilo-Saharan languages of the area, like Nara, Kunama and Nubian, while elsewhere in Nilo-Saharan SVO dominates (Güldemann 2010: 574; Bender 2003: 33). Furthermore, Nilo-Saharan languages in close proximity to Ethiosemitic and Cushitic languages may also exhibit the features (1) and (4).

Besides SOV word order, feature (23) in Table 1 – the morphological distinction between imperfective verbs in main and subordinate clauses – is a common phenomenon in Cushitic, Ethiosemitic and Omotic. That means many languages grammaticalized clause-type markers distinguishing between subordinate and main clause verbs, e.g. the contrast between main- and relative clause verbs in (3). The lack of any additional marker on the verb in the Libido examples (3b) indicates that it is a dependent relative verb, while the main clause imperfective verb in (3a) contains an additional suffix. In other languages, like Amharic (3c–d), main and subordinate imperfective verbs contain additional markers, but their form differs.

(3) LIBIDO (CUSHITIC)

- |   |        |  |
|---|--------|--|
| <p>a. <i>ʔit-t-aa-tt-oo</i><br/>eat-2SG-IPFV-2SG-IPFV.DCL<br/>'you eat'</p> | vs. b. | <p><i>hin-t-aa</i><br/>dig-2SG-IPFV[REL]<br/>'you who digs' (Crass 2014: 184, 186)</p> |
|---|--------|--|

AMHARIC (ETHIOSEMITIC)

- |  |        |  |
|--|--------|--|
| <p>c. <i>tibälalläh</i><br/>ti-bäla-allä-h<br/>2SM-eat\IPFV-AUX.NPST-2SM<br/>'you eat'</p> | vs. d. | <p><i>jämmi-tti-bäla</i><br/>REL-2SM-eat\IPFV<br/>'you who eats'</p> |
|--|--------|--|

Feature (23) is probably not limited to imperfective verbs and the distinction between main and subordinated verbs, but also applies the marking of illocutionary force, i.e. the distinction between declarative and interrogative clauses (4) and (5), and the distinction between affirmative and negative clauses (5):<sup>3</sup>

(4) HAMAR (OMOTIC)

- |  |    |  |
|--|----|--|
| <p>a. <i>ʊʃ-ʌ = tɛ = kɪ = d-ʌ = d-ɛ</i><br/>drink-PFV = LOC = 3 = be-PFV = be-IPFV<br/>'He is drinking.'</p> | b. | <p><i>taki ʊʃ-ʌ = tɛ = d-ʌ      ʌynʌ</i><br/>now drink-PFV = LOC = be-PFV who<br/>'Who is drinking now?'<br/>(Cupi et al. 2012: 188)</p> |
|--|----|--|

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<sup>3</sup> For further information on focus and illocutionary force in Zay, see Meyer (2002; 2006; 2014a).

(5) ZAY (ETHIOSEMITIC)

- a. *ʃäfät näk'äl-ä-n-u*      b. *ʃäfät näk'äl-ä-n*  
canoe take\PFV-3SM-FOC-DCL      canoe take\PFV-3SM-FOC  
'He took the canoe.'      'Did he take the canoe?'
- c. *ʃäfät ?al-niqäl-o.*  
canoe NEG-take\JUSS-3SM:DCL  
'He did not take the canoe.'

The various clausal status markers seems to have grammaticalized from a construction consisting of a lexical verb followed by an auxiliary or a copula constructions in declarative clauses (see Tosco 1996; Crass 2013; Dimmendaal 2013; Meyer 2014b: §3.5).<sup>4</sup>

Most of Ferguson's features, however, have been criticized in the literature (for further details see Zaborski 1991; 2003; 2010a; 2010b; Tosco 2000; 2008; Bender 2003; Bisang 2006; Crass & Meyer 2008). Some of them are so common that they can hardly be used to delimit the Ethiopian Linguistic Area, e.g. features (5–8), (17) and (22) in Table 1.

Other features have clearly a genetic origin, i.e. they are part of a common Afroasiatic ancestor language, e.g. features (3–4), (18–21) and probably (24) in Table 1. The distribution of feature (3) is very limited; it is usually found at the periphery, i.e. in North Ethiosemitic languages and in South Cushitic languages, but not in central areas of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area. Therefore, Crass (2002) argues that the reduction of the various Proto-Afroasiatic gutturals and pharyngeals to *ʔ* and *h* in the South Ethiosemitic and most Cushitic languages constitutes the areal feature. With regard to feature (4) – emphatic consonants (i.e. ejectives as in Ethiosemitic or pharyngealized consonants as in Arabic) – early research on Proto-Semitic had assumed that pharyngealized consonants represent the proto-form and the ejectives are innovations in Ethiosemitic due to language contact with Cushitic. However, the ejective pronunciation is also found in Semitic languages outside Ethiopia and is now considered to represent the original pronunciation in Proto-Semitic (see Kogan 2011: 59–61). Nevertheless, Crass (2002) argues that ejectives constitute an areal feature because they were lost diachronically in certain branches of Cushitic, particularly Agaw, but reintroduced through contact with Ethiosemitic (see e.g. Fallon 2015: 74–75 for Bilin).

Another group of features displays typological universal tendencies and is also not well suited to define a linguistic area, for instance the features (10–12) are typical for languages with SOV as common word order. Finally, some of the proposed areal features in Table 1, such as SOV word order, occurrence of postpositions, and use of quoting constructions, have a wider distribution in northern Africa and are probably

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<sup>4</sup> Note that cleft sentences are generally a very productive means for marking focus in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (Appleyard 1989).

part of a larger Chad–Ethiopia Linguistic Area (Güldemann 2010: 574–575; Heine 1975: 41–42).

Tosco (2000) and recently Güldemann (2018: 464–470) express serious doubt regarding the existence of an Ethiopian Linguistic Area. Tosco’s (2000) main objection is that most languages of the area have the same genetic ancestor, Proto-Afroasiatic, and thus it is difficult to determine whether a feature is inherited or borrowed, while Güldemann (2018: 464–470) argues that Ferguson’s (1976) features actually do not delimit the Ethiopian Linguistic Area but have a wider distribution or represent universal tendencies in linguistic typology.

### 3 ADDITIONAL FEATURES OF THE ETHIOPIAN LINGUISTIC AREA

As the actual extent of a large Ethiopian Linguistic Area are hard to define, several works focus on research into smaller sub-areas or contact/convergence zones within it (see Zaborski 1991; 2010b), such as Northern Eritrea (Tosco 1998; 2008), Highland East Cushitic–Gurage (Crass & Meyer 2008; and the contributions in Crass & Meyer 2007), Highland East Cushitic–North Omotic (Treis 2012), Highland East Cushitic–Gurage–Ometo (Tosco 1996), Surmic–Omotic–Cushitic (Dimmendaal 1998), and the Southwest Ethiopian Language Area (Sasse 1986; Ongaye 2009). The features suggested for these sub-areas also encompass complex constructions, which involve shared grammaticalization processes in different languages. For the Highland East Cushitic–Gurage sub-area, Crass & Meyer (2008: 244), for instance, describe the grammaticalization of an experiential perfect based on the verb ‘know’, as in (6), which Rapold & Zaugg-Coretti (2009) also confirmed for Omotic.

- (6) a. OROMO (CUSHITIC)  
*ameerikaa deem-tan-i beek-tuu?*  
 America go-2PL.PFV-CNV know-2PL.IPFV.Q  
 ‘Have you ever been to America?’
- b. AMHARIC (ETHIOSEMITIC)  
*amerika hedä-h t-awk’-allä-h?*  
 America go\CNV-2SM 2SM-know\IPFV-AUX.NPST-2SM  
 ‘Have you ever been to America?’

Other features contain additional modifications, not found in their original sense of the features as suggested by Ferguson (1976). For instance, quotative constructions based on a direct quotation as complement to the verb ‘say’ (7a) is an often cited feature, although these constructions are not limited to the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (Appleyard 2001; Cohen, Simeone-Senelle & Vanhove 2002; Meyer 2009).

- (7) AMHARIC  
 a. *?asfa «gibir al-käfl-imm» blo näggär-at.*  
 Asfa tax NEG.1SG-pay\IPFV-NEG say\CNV.3SM tell\PFV-SBJ.3SM:OBJ.3SF  
 ‘Asfa told her that he won’t pay taxes.’



- b. *bär-u*                      «*ali-kkäffät*»                      *?al-ä-ገገ.*  
door-DEF.M                      NEG.1SG-be\_open\IPFV                      say\PFV-SBJ.3SM-OBJ.1SG  
‘I could not open the door (lit. The door said to me, “I won’t be opened.”)’
- c. *lä-ne blo*                      *näw jä-mätt’a-w*  
DAT-1SG SAY\CNV.3SM COP.3SM REL-COME\PFV.3SM-DEF  
‘He came for the sake of me.’

Quoting clauses further grammaticalized into a benefactive focus construction (7c) (Crass & Meyer 2008: 242), and other complex predicates, like the negative circumstantial in (7b), in which ‘say’ functions as light verb, while the coverb is typically an ideophone.

Converbs – i.e. dependent verbs with restricted person, TAM, or polarity marking used for clause-chaining or adverbial modification – are another often-cited feature of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area. Within Cushitic, Beja, Agaw and Saho-Afar have a separate converb paradigm, while Oromo changes a regular perfective verb to a pseudo-converb by lengthening its final vowel or adding epenthetic *i* to a final consonant, as in (6a). Ethiosemitic innovated converbs due to contact with Cushitic. Geez, Tigrinya, Amharic and Argobba grammaticalized a verbal noun plus possessive suffix as converb. The remaining South Ethiosemitic languages have pseudo-converbs, marked by a suffix on inflected verbs: *-ä/-ani* in Wolane/Silt’e, and *-m(a)* (also augmented *-m tannä > -nta*) elsewhere (Meyer 2016: §4.4). Usually languages of the area have only a general converb, while Omotic, Highland East Cushitic, and certain Western Gurage languages also have specialized converbs (Azeb & Dimmendaal 2006; Banti 2010; Hetzron 1975b; Völlmin 2010). According to Treis (2012: §5), converbs in Omotic and Highland East Cushitic distinguish between same- and different-subject, which is rare elsewhere in Africa. She therefore concludes that switch-reference, uniformly marked by *\*-n/\*-m*, is peculiar to certain Omotic languages, from where it spread to Highland East Cushitic.

Another probable feature is the use of the simulative marker ‘like’ as a marker of purpose and complement clauses, which is found in Cushitic, Omotic and Ethiosemitic languages in central Ethiopia, but less so on the peripheral regions of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (Treis 2017). According to Treis (2017: 91), the simulative-purpose multifunctionality is rare cross-linguistically.

Another type of features which might determine the Ethiopian Linguistic Area stem are lexical items which acquired multiple senses. Hayward (1991; 2000), for instance, identifies similar conceptualization patterns in the lexicon of Cushitic, Ethiosemitic and Omotic languages, e.g. ‘go out’=‘go up’, causative of ‘enter’=‘marry’ (see also Appleyard 2001: 7). Further research in such conceptualization patterns will certainly enhance the characterization of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area.

Other features, which seem to be specific to the Ethiopian Linguistic Area but still need further research, include (i) copula splits in main and subordinated clauses, i.e.

the occurrence of different copulas in according to the clause type, e.g. particle copulas with no or restricted agreement in main clauses vs. fully inflected verbal copulas in subordinate clauses, (ii) widespread use of associative plurals, i.e. affixes attached to proper names and pronouns expressing ‘X and peoples associated to X’, like Amharic *innä-käbbädä* ‘Kebede and his associates’ and *innässu* ‘they’ (from *innä-issu* AP-3SM), (iii) fusion of case marking and definiteness.

Thus, despite the relatively extensive research over several decades, the Ethiopian Linguistic Area is still not sufficiently defined and needs further investigation.

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