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# The Ethiopian Linguistic Area

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SUMMER SCHOOL “SEMANTIC SHIFTS: FROM LEXICON TO GRAMMAR”,  
FRÉJUS, 11-23 SEPTEMBER 2022

# Overview of the lectures

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- 1: Ethiopian languages: An introduction
  - + Avoidance lexicon in Highland East Cushitic
  - + ‘know’ as experiential perfect marker
- **2: Defining (and contested) features of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area**
  - + **Sub-areas of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area**
- 3: Shared lexicalisation patterns
- 4: Shared multifunctionality
  - ‘like’ as purposive marker

Focus on Areality

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# Features of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area

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# Part 1: Preliminaries

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# Linguistic Area: Preliminaries

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- Emeneau's classical definition: "This term '**linguistic area**' may be defined as meaning an area which includes languages belonging to more than one family but showing traits in common which are found not to belong to the other members of (at least) one of the families." (Emeneau 1956: 16, fn. 28; proposed as a translation of Trubetzkoy's *sprachbund*)

# Linguistic Area: Preliminaries

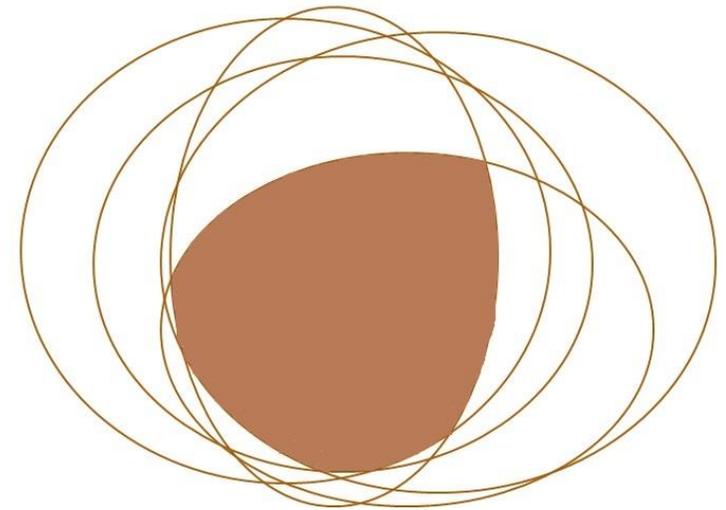
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- Linguistic Area
  - = Sprachbund, diffusion area, convergence area ...
  - Central feature: structural similarities shared among languages of a geographical area
  - Assumption: The reason why certain features are shared is because they have been borrowed **between**/diffused **among** the languages.
- Disagreement about the criteria used to define a Linguistic Area
  - Number of areal features necessary to justify the label “Linguistic Area”  
→ “the more the merrier” (Campbell 2017)
  - Number of different language families involved; some authors require a minimum of 2
  - Higher/lower importance to be attributed to features, i.e. question whether features can be more or less diagnostic, e.g. the adoption of certain phonological features might be easier than the change from VSO to SOV

# Linguistic Area: Preliminaries

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- Boundaries of a Linguistic Area
  - Areal features do not bundle neatly
  - Outer borders of a Linguistic Area are notoriously difficult (or impossible) to define
  - “The most typical pattern is where languages within the core of an area may share a number of features, but the geographical expanses of the individual traits may vary considerably one from another.” (Campbell 2017)



# Linguistic Area: Preliminaries

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- Ethiopian Linguistic Area
  - Other authors go for:
    - (Eritrean independence in 1993) Ethio-Eritrean Linguistic Area
    - Horn of Africa as a linguistic area
    - North East African language area
    - Ethiopian highlands as a linguistic area
  - The Ethiopian Linguistic Area is both a well-established, often-cited example of a Linguistic Area (e.g. on a par with the Balkan sprachbund; see e.g. the works of Thomason and Kaufman) and at the same time contested
  - Linguists working in Ethiopia have the “feeling” that one can easily translate between languages (due to shared structures, shared lexicalisation patterns) but to pinpoint features exactly has proven to be a difficult task

## Part 2: History of research on the Ethiopian Linguistic Area

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# Early works on the Ethiopian Linguistic Area

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- Leslau (1945): “The Influence of Cushitic on the Semitic languages of Ethiopia a problem of substratum”

One-way influence Cushitic > Semitic

**The student of the Ethiopic languages,<sup>2</sup> even though he knows that these languages belong to the Semitic group, cannot help being struck by their non-Semitic character. Even Antoine d'Abbadie, author of the *Dictionnaire de la langue amariñña* (Paris, 1881), stated in the introduction of his work (p. XXVII) that Amharic and Guragué belong to “sous-sémitique”, and elsewhere<sup>3</sup> he classes in “sous-sémitique” the Semitic languages of Ethiopia: Amharic, Guragué, Gafat, Harari, and the Cushitic languages: Galla, Somali, Saho-Afar.**

- Unusual features of Ethiosemitic languages observed early (attributed to Cushitic influence), e.g.
  - Emphatic consonants of Semitic are realised as ejectives /p', t', ts', k'/ in Ethiosemitic
  - Verb-final; subordinate before superordinate clauses; modifiers before the noun
  - (see Leslau 1945 for an extensive list; see also Moreno 1948)

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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- **Ferguson** (1970, revised 1976) is the first to argue in more detail for a Linguistic Area
- Proposes a list of phonological and grammatical features considered characteristic of the area
  - 18 languages (incl. Arabic and English)
  - 8 phonological and 18 grammatical features

“The languages of Ethiopia constitute a linguistic area in the sense that they tend to share a number of features which, **taken together**, distinguish them from any other geographically defined group of languages in the world. Some of these shared features are due to genetic relationship, [...] while others result from the processes of **reciprocal** diffusion among languages which have been in contact for many centuries. Not every language has all these features, and a few languages do not fit into the pattern at all, but **in general most** of the languages in an area roughly **coincident with Ethiopia’s boundaries** have features of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and patterns of expression which are, taken together, distinctive and characteristic of the area.” (1976: 63f; emphasis mine)

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

## - Phonological features

- P1: /f/ voiceless counterpart of /b/
- P2: palatalization as a common morphophonological process
- P3: series of ejectives (see Kb.’s obstruent inventory)
- P4: contrast /d/ vs. implosive /ɗ/
- P5: pharyngeal fricatives /ħ, ʕ/
- P6: consonant gemination phonemic, e.g.
  - Kb. /dasu/ - /dasːu/ ‘be late’ – ‘chop’
  - /k’o:k’ata/ - /k’o:k’ːata/ ‘blind (SG vs. PL)’
- P7: central vowels
  - 7-vowel system: a, e, ε, i, i, o, u
- P8: “Helping” (epenthetic) vowel i

full set		“Ethiopian set”	
<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	-	<i>b</i>
<i>f</i>	<i>v</i>	<i>f</i>	-

			labial	alveolar	palato-alveolar	velar	glottal
Obstruents	Stops and affricates	voiceless	(p)	t	tʃ	k	ʔ
		voiced	b	d	dʒ	g	
		ejective	pʼ	tʼ	tʃʼ	kʼ	
	Fricatives	voiceless	f	s	ʃ		h
		voiced	(v)	z	(ʒ)		

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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- In the works of different authors, all features were criticized for being inherited from Proto-Afroasiatic, for being too restricted, or for being typologically too common to be diagnostic
- What is left: P3 and the **absence** [!] of P5 in central parts of Ethiopia is considered areal (see Crass 2002)

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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- Grammatical features
  - G1: SOV
  - G2: Subordinate before main clauses
  - G3: Converbs
  - G4: Postpositions
  - G5: Direct speech construction to express intention
  - G6: “Compound verbs”: Coverb plus ‘say’
  - G7: Negative copula
  - G8: Singular used with numerals
  - G9: Possessive suffixes  $\approx$  object suffixes
  - G10: msc./fem. distinction in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular pronouns and subject indexes
  - G11: A tense form marked by prefixes with 2m=3f syncretism
  - G12: Root and pattern morphology
  - G13: Reduplicated intensives and plurals
  - G14: “Broken plurals” (change of the vowel pattern to mark plurality)
  - G15: Separate imperfective paradigms for main and subordinate clauses (long vs. short IPFV)
  - G16: Agreement with plural nouns is marked by F.SG
  - G17: Suppletive imperative for ‘come’
  - G18: Unmarked form of a noun can be plural or collective, base for the singulative

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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Interdependent  
features

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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Typologically  
very common

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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Typical of Semitic languages

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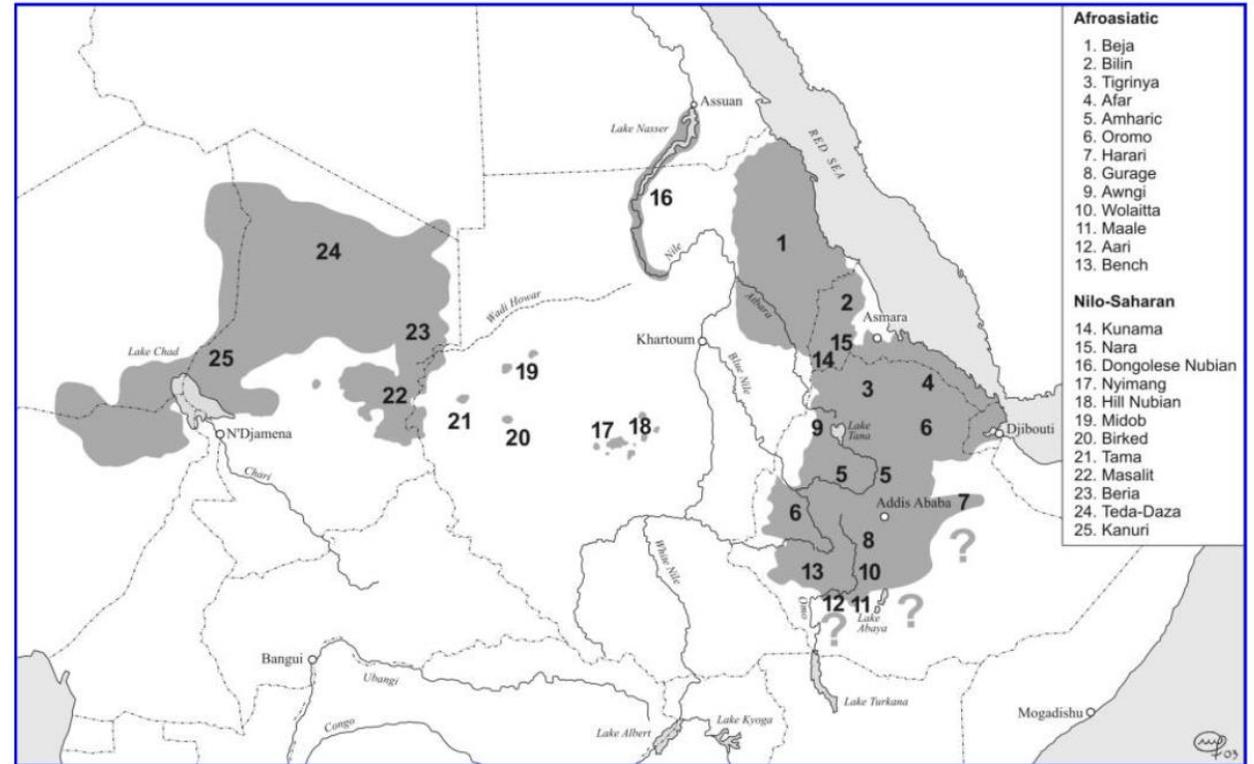
# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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# Converbs in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (and beyond)

- Converb: non-finite/semi-finite verb forms marking clausal dependency; morphologically distinct from main verb forms and from verb forms used in adverbial clauses (e.g. conditional, purpose, reason clauses)
- Converbs are particularly common in verb-final languages (cf. Haspelmath & König 1995)
- Converbs are very common in Ethiopia, but:
- Azeb & Dimmendaal (2006) show their distribution across north-eastern Africa (= Güldemann's "Chad-Ethiopia")



# Converbs in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (and beyond)

- Azeb & Dimmendaal (2006) provide examples from Omotic, Cushitic, Semitic, “Nilo-Saharan”...
- Languages differ in how many (semantically distinct) converbs they have, whether converbs index the subject ... (cf. Treis & Vanhove forthc. on Cushitic)
- Illustrative example of a converb in Semitic (more on converbs later); only last verb fully finite

<i>bärr-u-n</i> door-DEF-ACC	<i>käft- ó</i> open-3MSG:CNV	<i>ï-bet</i> LOC-house	<i>gäbt -ó</i> enter-3MSG:CNV
<i>ik'awin</i> goods.DEF-ACC	<i>azzägajt- ó</i> arrange-3MSG:CNV	<i>bet-u-n</i> house-DEF-ACC	
<i>t'ärg- ó</i> sweep-3MSG:CNV	<i>hedä</i> go:3MSG :PFV		

‘He opened the door, entered the house, arranged the things, swept the house, and left’

Amharic (Semitic):  
1 general converb  
(Azeb & Dimmendaal 2006: 413)

# Converbs in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (and beyond)

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- Illustrative example of a converb in Cushitic (here Kambaata); only last verb fully finite

(Saint-Exupéry 2018: 34)

Kank-áta            j-eechch-úta    barg-ám-m  
that.much-F.ACC time-SGV-F.ACC add-PASS-1PL.PFV.CVB

he'-nn-áni-yan      káan            dag-g-ú'nna  
live-1PL-IPFV.CVB-DS P\_DEM1.M.ACC know-2SG-NEG4

fa'-oontí-ihu                                    íi            luus-áane-et  
remain-2SG.PFV.REL-NMZ1.M.NOM 1SG.GEN mistake-F.ICP-COP3

'It is my fault (lit. by my fault) that you have not learned (lit. known) this in the whole time that we have been living together.'

Kambaata (Cushitic):

- 1 sequential/manner converb
- 1 simultaneity converb (IPFV)
- 1 negative converb (NEG4)

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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## “Compound verbs” in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (and beyond)

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- “Compound verbs”: Complex predicate consisting of a non-verbal coverb plus a light verb
- In the Ethiopian Linguistic Area typically: ideophone plus a ‘say’ in intransitive contexts and ‘do’ in transitive contexts (light-verb construction pair)
- Ideophones are morphologically invariant > require a light verb to be integrated into a clause

*mikk.míll=y-itu’nnáachch*      *címm=yít*      *afuu’ll-it,*  
 move.a.bit.IDEO=say-3F.NEG5    slump.IDEO=say-3F.PFV.CVB    sit-3F.PFV.CVB

*ill-í-se*                      *al-í,*      *muggeenn-á,*      *gur-á[ta],*      *makk-íta*  
 eye-F.ACC-3F.POSS up-M.ACC    down-M.ACC    left-F.ACC    right-F.ACC

*bolóng-bolóng=at-táa’,*  
 move.one’s.eyes.IDEO-RED=do-3F.IPFV

*tah-íchch-u*              *waal-anó=g-a*                      *zug-gán.*  
 flies-SGV-M.NOM    come-3F.IPFV.REL=SIM-M.ACC    lie.in.ambush-3F.PFV.CV

(Speaking about a chameleon (= grammatically feminine):) ‘She sat (there) stock-still, slumped down, (and only) moved her eyes up, down, to the left, to the right, (while) lying in ambush for a fly.’ (TH2016-02-11\_001)

Kambaata (Cushitic)

## “Compound verbs” in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (and beyond)

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- Light-verb constructions with ‘say’ extend well beyond the Ethiopian Linguistic Area, as shown by Cohen et al. (2000) and Güldemann (2005)

# Ferguson on the Ethiopian Language Area

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## Suppletive imperatives in the Ethiopian Linguistic Area (and beyond)

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- Ferguson (1976: 74): Languages of the Ethiopian Linguistic Area have suppletive imperatives for the verb ‘come’
- Amharic: *mät't'a* 3M.PFV ‘he came’  
based on a different stem: *na / näy / nu* ‘come (2M/2F/2PL.IMP)’
- Other languages mentioned by Ferguson: Tigre, Tigrinya, Chaha (S); Awngi, Afar, Oromo, Somali, Sidaama (C); Wolaitta (O)
- Some languages only have a suppletive imperative; others have two ‘come’ imperatives  
e.g. Kambaata: *waal-* ‘come’ > *wáal-i* ‘come (2SG)’  
 (“deictic imperative”) *ám-i* ‘come over here for a sec!’
- Cohen (1979-1984) argues that suppletive ‘come’ imperatives are likely to be an inherited Afroasiatic feature (because also found in Egyptian, Berber and Chadic)
- And if this critique of Ferguson was not yet enough ....

# Critique of Ferguson

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- Bender (2003): “Most of the grammatical features are flawed.”
- Tosco (2000: Is there an “Ethiopian Language Area”): Scathing critique
  - Points raised:
    - Cushitic, Semitic, Omotic all belong to the Afroasiatic family
    - Unilateral influence from Cushitic on Semitic
    - Features extend beyond Ethiopia
- After the “destruction” of Ferguson, what are we actually left with?

# Reaction to the critique

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- Or in the words of Tosco: “What to do when you are unhappy with language areas but you do not want to quit” [= Title of his 2008 paper]
- Proposals of bigger areas
- Proposals of smaller areas
- Proposals of areal traits

# Marco area proposals

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- Güldemann (2018) proposes a large macro-area **Ethiopia-Chad**
  - Head-final syntax, incl. converbs
  - Bound markers for non-subject/non-object roles
  - Complex predicates with a light verb ‘say’
  - Missing /p/ (= determines the southern boundary of the macro-area)
- Heine & Zelealem (2008), Heine (2009): **Africa** as a linguistic area (cf. Greenberg 1959)
  - Questionable endeavour
  - Questionable pan-African properties

- [1] Labial-velar stops
- [2] Implosive stops
- [3] Lexical and/or grammatical tones
- [4] ATR-based vowel harmony
- [5] Verbal derivational suffixes
- [6] Nominal modifiers follow the noun.
- [7] Colexification ‘drink/pull’ and ‘smoke’
- [8] Colexification: ‘hear/see’ and ‘understand’
- [9] Colexification: ‘animal’ and ‘meat’
- [10] Comparative construction based on the action schema (‘X is big defeats/surpasses/passes Y’ or ‘X defeats/surpasses/passes Y in size’)
- [11] Noun ‘child’ used productively to express diminutive meaning

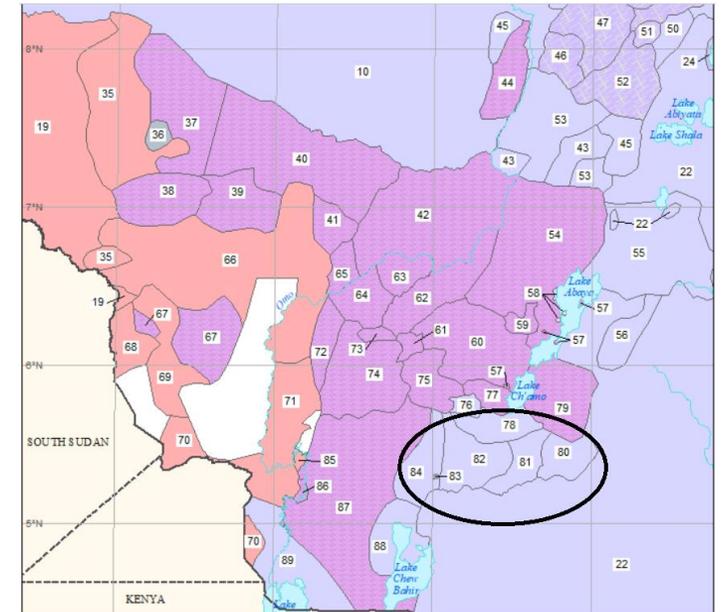
# Subarea proposals

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- Sasse (1986): Southwest Ethiopian Language Area
- Zaborski (1991, 2010a, 2010b): 7 subareas
- Works by Meyer & Crass Highland East Cushitic-Gurage contact zone
- Tosco (2008) contact zone in northern Eritrea

# Subarea proposals

- Sasse (1986): Sagan Language Area in SW Ethiopia
  - Linguistic features correlated with findings from ethnography and cultural history
  - Languages of 3 not very closely related groupings of the Cushitic language family: Konsoid languages, Dullay languages and Burji (Highland East Cushitic), plus possibly Koorete (Omotic)
  - Phonological and morphosyntactic features proposed, e.g. punctional derivation, see Konso *nap-* ‘paint with soot’ > *nap-p-* ‘make a single mark with soot’
  - Regionally confined words (reflect cultural ties between the speakers of the languages)
  - Lexical-semantic similarities: identical kinship systems (and parallel terminology)

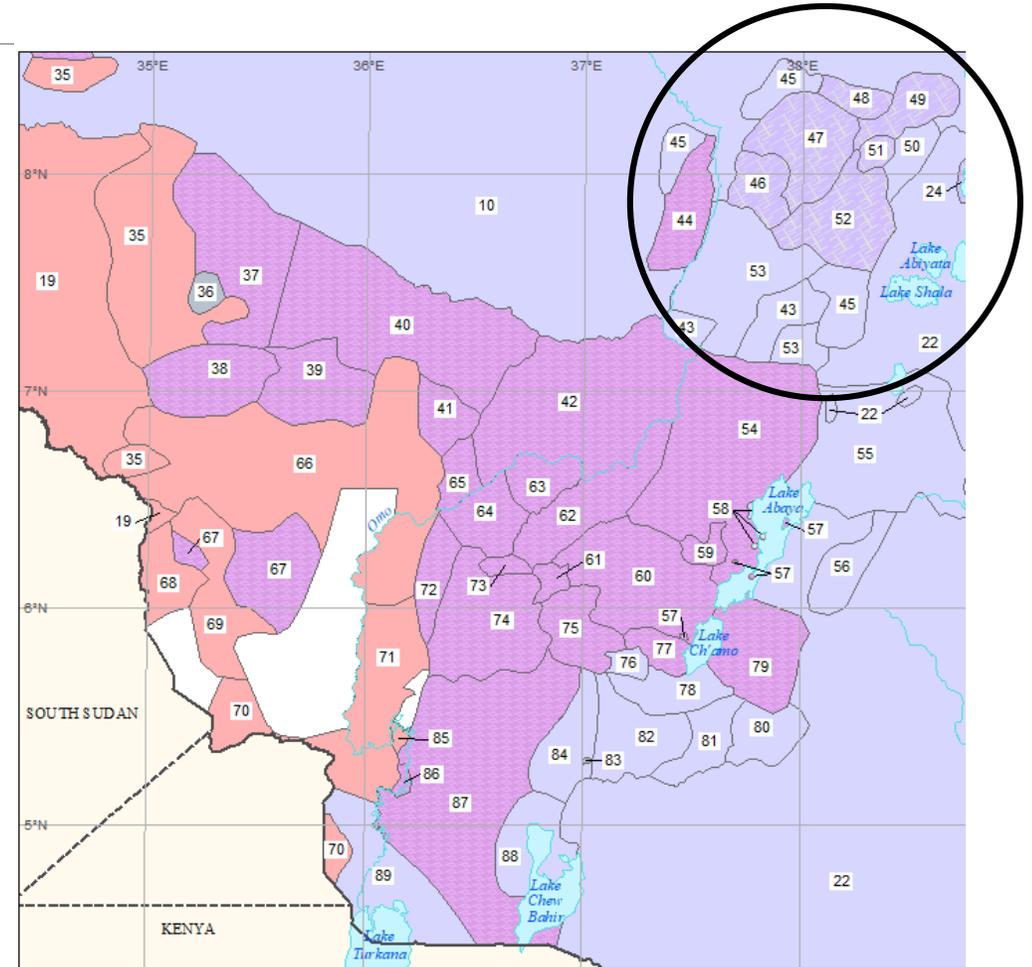


# Subarea proposals

- Works by Crass & Meyer (e.g. 2008) on the **Highland East Cushitic-Gurage** (Ethiosemitic) contact zone > propose 12 new features for the ELA, e.g.
- Ablative as comparative marker:  
‘X is taller than Y’ lit. “X is tall Y-from”  
(typical Ethiopian acc. to Heine & Zelealem 2003)

<i>Bóq-i</i>	<i>Makkeeb-éechch qeráa'rru-a</i>
B.-M.NOM	M.- <b>F.ABL</b> tall-M.PRED-M.COP2
‘Boqe is taller than Makkeebe (lit. Boqe is tall from Makkeebe).’	

- Experiential perfect with ‘know’ (recall Lecture 1)
- Simulative ‘like’ used as marker of complement and purpose clauses (cf. Treis 2007 and Lecture 4)



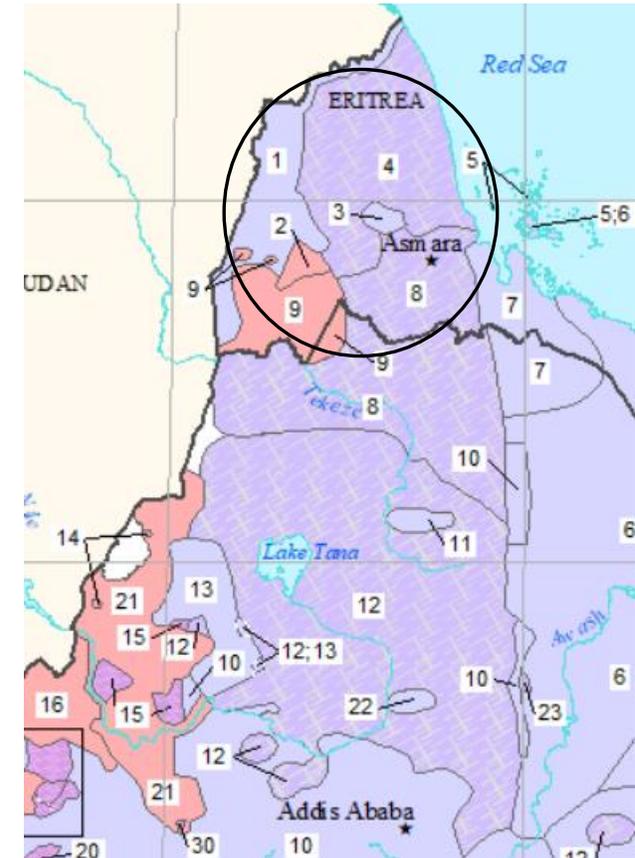
# Alternative approach

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- Rather than to search for traits that define the Ethiopian Area, first studying and understanding the diffused traits themselves seems a more promising research avenue
- Examples for area trait proposals:
  - Tosco (2008) on N Gen in northern Eritrea
  - Treis (2012) on switch-reference marking in SW Ethiopia
  - Treis (2017) on simulative-purpose multifunctionality in Ethiopian languages [> Lecture 4]

# Areal trait proposals

- Tosco: **Northern Eritrea** as a language area (“Small is good”)
  - Unrelated languages
  - Proposed features are typologically uncommon
  - Related languages do not share the trait
  - Based on one single features:
    - SOV, Adj N, Rel N, but: **N Gen**
  - Tigre (S), Bilin (C), Kunama, Nara (East Sudanic)
  - Influence of Tigre on neighbouring languages, which have developed N GEN as an alternative order



# Areal trait proposals: Switch-reference marking

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- Treis (2012): Switch-reference and Omotic-Cushitic language contact
  - Claim: Switch-reference marking system in Highland East Cushitic languages have developed under the influence of neighbouring Omotic languages
  - Switch-reference: a device to track referents across clauses; verbal affixes on dependent verbs indicate that arguments (most often subjects) of two consecutive clauses are (non-)coreferential
  - Classical example from Usan, a Papuan language

(a) *ye nam su-ab isomei*  
I tree cut-SS I\_went\_down  
'I cut the tree and went down.'

(b) *ye nam su-ine isorei*  
I tree cut-DS it\_went\_down  
'I cut the tree down.' (Haiman and Munro 1983b: xi; Stirling 1993: 14)

# Areal trait proposals: Switch-reference marking

- SR marking systems are uncommon in Africa; outside of Ethiopia only disputed or “non-canonical” examples
- In Ethiopia, SR marking was first reported for the Cushitic language Hadiyya (Sim 1989); illustrations come from the related language Kambaata
- Types of converbs: perfective (fairly general, sequential, manner), imperfective (simultaneity), negative (non-occurrence, posteriority)
- Different subject (DS) marker *-van*

		Perfective	Imperfective	Negative
1SG	3M	'(GEM/PAL)-Ø ~ -Ø- <i>i</i>	-Ø- <b>án</b>	-Ø- <b>ú'nná</b>
2SG	3F   3PL	'- <i>t</i>	- <i>t-án</i>	- <i>t-ú'nná</i>
3HON		- <i>éen</i>	- <i>een-án</i>	- <i>een-ú'nná</i>
1PL		'- <i>n</i>	- <i>n-án</i>	- <i>n-ú'nná</i>
2PL	2HON	- <i>téen</i>	- <i>teen-án</i>	- <i>teen-ú'nná</i>

	SS	DS
PFV.CVB	SbjAgr <sup>#</sup>	SbjAgr <sup>#</sup> - <b>yan</b>
IPFV.CVB	SbjAgr- <i>án</i>	SbjAgr- <i>án(i)-yan</i>
NEG.CVB	SbjAgr- <i>ú'nná</i>	

# The stem-final consonant is palatalized and/or geminated in the 1s and 3m forms.

# Areal trait proposals: Switch-reference marking

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## - Kambaata (Cushitic)

*Kazammáan-u*    *lokk-a-kki*    *zuru'mm-áta*    { *ág-g*  
this\_year-M.OBL    foot-F.GEN-2SG.POSS    finger-F.ACC    drink-2SG.PFV.CVB  
*dimb-ít*    *úb-b*    *birqiiqq-itáni-yan* }  
become.drunk-2SG.PFV.CVB    fall-2SG.PFV.CVB    toss.turn.on.ground-2SG.IPFV.CVB-DS  
*gotiichch-u* [...] *múrr-i-yan*  
hyena-M.NOM    cut-3M.PFV.CVB-DS  
*haakiim-í*    *min-éen*    *fayy-íteent*  
doctor-M.GEN    house-M.LOC    become.healthy-2SG.PRF

‘(Earlier) this year, (when) you drank (alcohol), became drunk, fell down, tossed and turned on the ground (unconscious) (DS→), a hyena bit (lit. “cut”) off (one of) your toe(s) (DS→) and you were treated (lit. “became healthy”) in the hospital.’

# Areal trait proposals: Switch-reference marking

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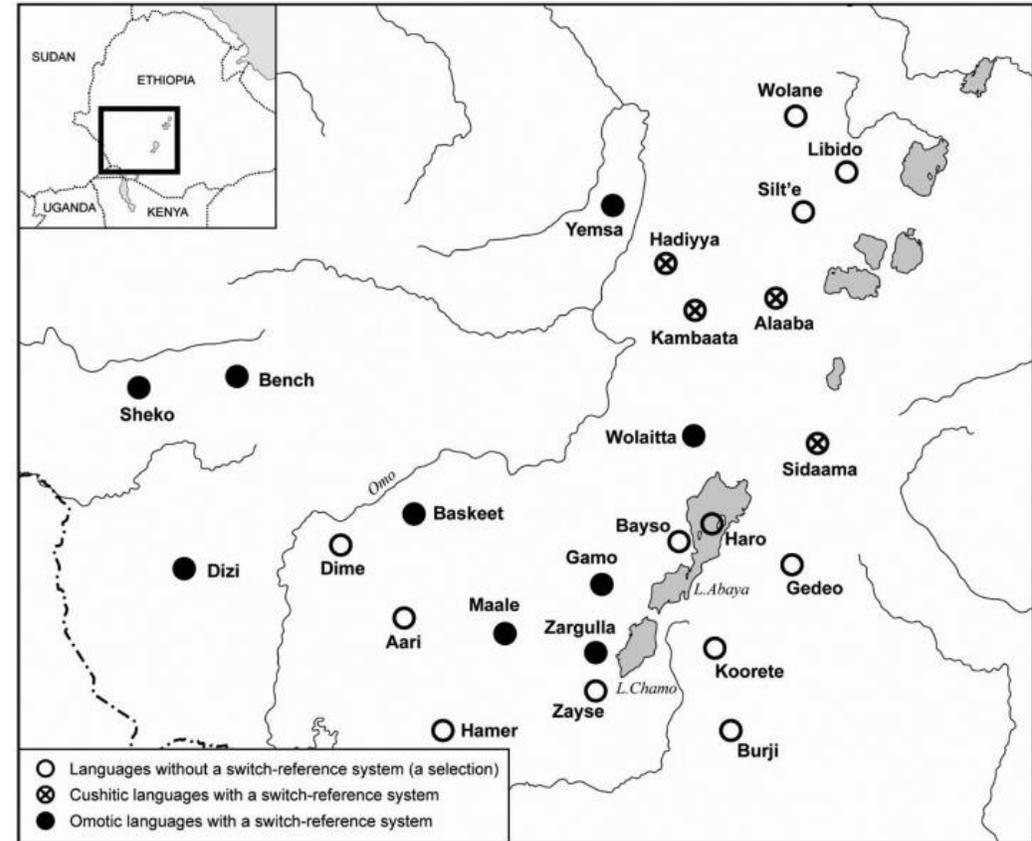
- Zargulla (Omotic)

*kiitá-y*            *ham-úm*    *boc'oc'-átt-us*            *?ekk-i*            *yeénne*  
message-NOM    go-CVB.**DS**    present-FOC-3PL.SBJ    take-CVB.**SS**    come.PAST  
'The message having gone (to them), (the hyenas) brought (lit. "take, come") *a present*.'  
(Azeb 2009: 205)

- North Omotic languages share a cognate DS morpheme
- Switch-reference marking is very widespread in North Omotic (not attested in Mao languages and South Omotic)
- Switch-reference marking in Cushitic is very restricted, only found in some of the Highland East Cushitic languages

# Areal trait proposals: Switch-reference marking

- SR marking in Cushitic can be attributed to language contact
- Open question: where do the DS-markers in Cushitic come from?
  - Matter borrowing
  - Pattern borrowing
  - Contact-induced grammaticalization
  - Reinterpretation of a formal distinction already marked on converbs as marking SS vs. DS
- Historical details still unclear



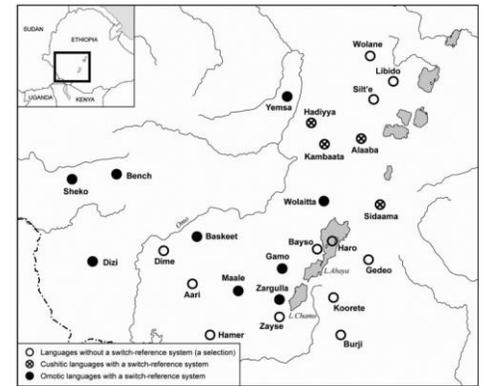


# Areal trait proposals: Switch-reference marking

- East Gurage languages: no SR system, but long and short converbs, conceptually tightly linked vs. separable events; if separable, then often DS (Meyer 2006: 131ff., 265-70) – cf. example from Wolane

[...]	<i>dəggəs</i>	<i>y-bɛl-y-ɛ</i>		<i>y-sɛč-y-āni</i>
	feast	3m-eat.IPV-3mO	<b>CV1</b>	3m-drink.IPV-3mO
				<b>CV2</b>
<i>bibbi</i>	<i>ʔənn(ɛ)-ʔazɛr</i>	<i>bētɛn-nim</i>		<i>y-yēnz-u-ɛ</i>
LOC.this	this-side	married_life-3pPOSS		3p-hold.IPV-p-CV1
<i>nəbər-nim</i>	<i>y-qēɪt'l-u-ān.</i>			
life-3pPOSS	3p-continue.IPV-p-AUX.NP			

‘[...] one gives (lit. “eats (and) drinks”) a feast [DS →] and afterwards they (the widow and her new husband) start their married life and continue (this way) their life.’ (Meyer, 2006: 270)



- Possible source in Kambaata and Hadiyya: Reinterpretation of a distinction already marked on converbs as marking SR?

# Conclusion

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- We need more in-depth studies of individual traits and their distribution (e.g. starting with traits that were proposed in more recent works such as Crass & Meyer 2008)
- Ferguson does list any shared colexifications, dislexifications, idioms
- → Lecture 3 on Hayward's proposed shared lexicalization patterns