Book reviews

Christopher Ehret: *Reconstructing Proto-Afroasiatic (Proto-Afrasian): Vowels, Tone, Consonants, and Vocabulary.* (University of California Publications, Linguistics, 126.) xvii + 557 pp. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press 1995. US$ 62.

The reconstruction of a proto-language is a set of hypotheses about the prehistoric development of a family of cognate languages. It starts from the hypothesis that the languages are cognate in the first place. This hypothesis may turn out to be false if heavy borrowing took place at some prehistoric stage. In that case, a larger amount of data does not yield a better reconstruction because there simply is no proto-language to reconstruct. Conversely, two cognate languages may have very little vocabulary in common when the time depth is sufficiently large. It follows that the reconstruction of a proto-language cannot be based primarily on an analysis of common vocabulary.

When we look at language interference in bilingual communities, it appears that there is a marked difference in the ease of linguistic borrowing between grammar and lexicon, between bound and free morphemes, and between verbs and nouns. As a result, the older strata of a language are better preserved in the grammatical system than in the lexical stock, better in morphology than in phonology or syntax, better in verb stems and pronouns than in nouns and numerals. We must therefore look first of all at the verbal and pronominal morphology in order to establish a genetic relationship between languages. In the case of Afro-Asiatic, or Afrasian in Ehret's preferred terminology, there can be little doubt that there is a layer of common inheritance in the verb and the pronoun (for example, Sasse 1981: 138–145). We may therefore proceed to an establishment of the inherited vocabulary.

Those who try to reconstruct the Afro-Asiatic proto-language have been unable to produce an agreed list of reconstructible root morphemes (cf. Lieberman 1990: 570–573). The book under review "provides therefore a comprehensive, systematic reconstruction of the family, concrete and specific in

both evidence and argument. It proposes a full vowel and consonant reconstruction, along with a provisional reckoning of tone, and substantiates in detail each aspect of the reconstruction in an extensive comparative vocabulary of more than 1000 roots based on data from the Semitic, Egyptian, Cushitic, Chadic, and Omotic divisions of the family" (1). This is no small fry. Ehret emphasizes that his reconstruction "follows throughout the established techniques and approaches of the historical-comparative method. It is systematic, comprehensive, and rigorous, with unyielding phonological and demanding semantic requirements for cognation. It is detailed and thorough in its etymological analysis" (5) and "its arguments and conclusions rest on sound method and solid and detailed evidence" (6). In short, this is a positive book, full of assurance, confidence and satisfaction.

Ehret's reconstruction of Proto-Afro-Asiatic, or Proto-Afrasian, leans heavily on his own reconstruction of Proto-Cushitic (1987) and internal reconstruction of Semitic (1989). The latter study "allows for the first time an effective morphological analysis of Semitic triconsonantal roots and in consequence the identification of a great number of underlying pre-Semitic biliteral stems with which to compare the biliteral roots of Cushitic and Egyptian" (7). The third consonants are derived from morphological processes which were productive at early stages in the prehistory of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Proto-Semitic root shapes "tend to appear polysemic by reason of their polyphyletic origins" because "a great many instances were created of formal homonymy between what were once separate PAA roots" (7). This effectively reduces the correspondences between Semitic and Cushitic to the first two consonants and substantially weakens the criterion of semantic similarity. Moreover, it gave rise to "semantic usages which combine or blur originally distinct meanings" and to "opposing meanings for a seemingly unitary verb root" in Semitic (8), which again weakens the semantic criterion.

While the comparison of Cushitic, Egyptian and Semitic "lies at the heart of the present effort" (7), Chadic and Omotic "also contribute in significant ways" to the reconstruction, especially "to our understanding of PAA tone and vowels" (8). The Chadic evidence is largely based on Newman (1977) and Jungraithmayr and Shimizu (1981), and the Omotic evidence on studies by Bender and Hayward (e.g., 1990). Berber plays a minor part in Ehret's work because this subgroup "greatly reduced its range of consonant distinctions" and because an "extensive reconstruction" of the lexicon "is not yet available" (12). The comparative evidence for the reconstruction of Proto-Afro-Asiatic is presented in lists of sound and root correspondences which largely make up the three main chapters of the book, dealing with derivational morphology (15–54), vowels and tone (55–70), and consonants (71–482).

Ehret's reconstruction of Proto-Afro-Asiatic phonology "provides a strong and consistent demonstration of a particular subclassification of the family. Chadic, Berber, Egyptian, and Semitic together form one major genetic division of

Afroasiatic, called here North Erythraean. Within that division, Egyptian, Semitic, and Berber belong to one subgroup, termed Boreafrasian, while Chadic forms the second subgroup. Cushitic and Omotic stand as separate branches of still more distant relationship to North Erythraean as a whole and to each other" (483). The name "Erythraean" is proposed for Cushitic together with Chadic and Boreafrasian as opposed to Omotic (487). The concept of Cushomotic (for example, Bender 1990: 687) as a single branch of the family "finds no support whatsoever" (489). Whatever objections one may have to Ehret's exposition, lack of explicitness is not among them.

In an appendix (529–532), Ehret lists nine Proto-Boreafrasian (PBA) sound shifts, five Proto-North Erythraean (PNE) sound shifts, and one Proto-Erythraean sound shift. These numbers contrast sharply with the 18 Omotic and 41 Egyptian sound shifts adduced there. It thus appears that Proto-Afro-Asiatic disintegrated rather suddenly and that the separate branches then went through a long period of independent development. As a result, we may not expect a large part of the original PAA vocabulary to have survived into the attested languages. This expected paucity of evidence is compatible with the lack of agreement among scholars in the determination of cognate root morphemes, not with Ehret's "extensive comparative vocabulary of more than 1000 roots". It definitely weakens the credibility of his reconstructions.

The only sound shift which differentiates Proto-Erythraean (that is, non-Omotic) from Proto-Afro-Asiatic is the merger of *c, *j with *ts, *dz, respectively. The Omotic development of these sounds requires a series of different changes: *dz > *ž, *j > *č, *c > *š$_3$, *č- > *š$_1$–, *ts- > *s- (253), and subsequently Proto-Omotic *ž > ž, š, č, ts, s ; *č > č, ts, $^?$y ; *š$_3$ > š, č, s ; *š$_1$ > š; *s > s, š in the separate languages, according to the provisional reconstruction of the Omotic consonants (10, 11). More reluctant scholars might be inclined to equate Erythraean with Afro-Asiatic and to regard the Omotic reflexes as an unsolved problem. Ehret considers the rise of grammatical gender to be an innovation of Erythraean, as opposed to Omotic (487). It seems more probable that Omotic simply lost grammatical gender, especially because there are clear traces of gender in a number of Omotic languages (cf. Bender 1990: 676). Incidentally, nobody would regard the absence of grammatical gender in Armenian as an archaism in comparison with the other Indo-European languages.

Ehret lists no more than three sound shifts which differentiate Proto-Cushitic (PC) from Proto-Afro-Asiatic (488, 489 and 531), namely *b- > *m- before *-n; *-g > *-k after *d- and *w- ; and *ɣ- > *g- before *-x. The first development "is not entirely unique to Cushitic within Afro-Asiatic" (488), while the latter two are peculiar from a phonetic point of view. Moreover, they are based on

very little evidence indeed, as will be clear from the full list of instances adduced here [1]

(1)   PAA *bîn-, *bân-, PSC *manaʕ– 'baby', cf Eg **bnn** 'to beget', Ar **ibn** 'son', **bint** 'daughter'

(2)   PAA *bĭn-, PC *mĭn-, *măn- 'house', Beja **man-** 'to create', cf PS *bnn 'to build'

(3)   PAA *dug-, Somali **dugul** 'dark, black' < PEC *dukl-, cf Eg **dgi** 'to hide', PPS *dg 'to cover'

(4)   PAA *dagʷ-, PSC *ḍakʷ- 'to be going', cf Eg **dg3, dgs** 'to walk', Ar **dajj** 'to walk along'

(5)   PAA *wăag-, PC *wăak- 'lower face', cf Eg **wgi** 'to chew', **wgyt** 'jaw', PS *wgn, *wgm 'face'

(6)   PAA *waag-, PC *waak- 'to hate', cf Eg **wgg** 'miserable, disreputable', PPS *wg 'to fear, hate'

(7)   PAA *ɣôxʷ-, PC *goxʷ- 'to bend', cf Ar **jaxw** 'to hold upside down'

(8)   PAA *ɣʷax-, *ɣʷaax-, PC *g-ɣ- 'to go away' ("irregular voicing assimilation" of *x > ɣ), cf Eg **ḥ3** 'path, road', Ar **jaxx** 'to wander from place to place' < *g-x-.

(9)   PAA *ɣʷeex-, POT *gooh- 'to cry out loudly' (POT *-h- < PC *-x-), cf Ar **jaxjax** 'to call, cry out'

If one requires more than two examples per sound shift, which seems reasonable, the evidence collapses and we are forced to equate Proto-Cushitic with Proto-Erythraean, and therefore with Proto-Afro-Asiatic if Ehret's view of Omotic as a primary branch of the family cannot be maintained

Excluding Cushitic and Omotic from consideration, we are left with the so-called North Erythraean sub-branch of the family, which comprises Chadic and Boreafrasian "The most notable set of phonological evidence for this branching consists of the sequence of three vowel sound shifts" (485, cf 60–66) This leads to the following set of vowel correspondences [2]

PAA = PC *a, *aa, *e, *o > PCh, PEg, PS *a
PAA = PC *ee, *i, *oo, *u > PCh *ə, PEg *i, PS *ə
PAA = PC *ii > PCh, PEg *i, PS *i, *ə
PAA = PC *uu > PCh, PEg *u, PS *u, *ə

The North Erythraean reduction of the vowel system was preceded by a monophthongization of **y**- and **w**-diphthongs, for example PAA **ay* > PNE **ee* and PAA **ey* > PNE **ii* (60). Though a large number of complex developments in the vocalic systems of Egyptian (63–65) and Semitic must be assumed, the hypothesis of a deep split between Cushitic (and Omotic) on the one hand and the other branches of Afro-Asiatic on the other may eventually turn out to be correct.

The case for Boreafrasian (that is Semitic, Egyptian and Berber, as opposed to Chadic, Cushitic and Omotic) is based primarily on two co-occurrence constraints, "disallowing all sequences of PAA **t* followed by any dental or alveolar obstruent" in a root and "disallowing in the same environment any sequences of sibilants" (483, cf. 123). Unfortunately, the specific development of these constraints is "not yet known" and remains "to be properly investigated" or "to be discovered" (123, 124). It follows that Ehret's dissimilations of PAA **t* and sibilants are no more than unproven hypotheses for which the specific evidence remains to be established. Ehret adduces two instances of PAA **z* > PBA **d* (124):

(1)   PAA = PC **sâaz*- 'to wait', Ar. **sadaḥ** 'to stay, abide'.

(2)   PAA = PC **zots*- or **zoc*-, Somali **doosh** 'point securing sail to prow, forward part of triangular sail' < PEC **zooc*-, Eg. **ds** 'knife, flint', Ar. **daθθ** 'to push forth leaves'.

This is very meagre evidence indeed, quite at variance with Ehret's outburst of enthusiasm in "exceptionally strong footing", "virtually beyond doubt", and "sweeping scope and consequence, with apparent point-for-point congruence in their specific effects" (483).

Another "notable phonological development diagnostic of the Boreafrasian grouping" is a sequence of two sound shifts, viz. PAA **s'*, **s* > PBA **s*, followed by PAA **h*- > PBA **ḥ*- before **-s* (484 and 120). The evidence for these developments is the following:

(1)   PAA **haas*-, PEC **haassaw*- 'to converse', Eg. **ḥsb** 'to count' (also PS), Ar. **ḥass, ḥiss** 'voice'.

(2)   PAA **haas'*-, PC **haats'*- 'sand', Jibbāli **ḥaši** 'soil' < PS **ḥs*.

(3)   PAA **hes'*-, Omotic: Malo **yes's'**- 'to sing' < **h*-, Proto-Somali **hees*- 'to sing' (loan from Omotic for expected **heš*- < PEC **hec*-), Eg. **ḥsi** 'to sing'.

(4)   PAA **hâys'*-, Omotic: Gonga, Bench **hays'*- 'tongue', Ar. **ḥasw** 'to drink, sip'.

Here again, there appears to be a large gap between Ehret's far-reaching claims and the available data supporting them.

Other innovations of the Boreafrasian subgroup include loss of final vowels, loss of phonemic tone, loss of distinctions between nasals, and loss of a nasal prefix (484, 531). It is peculiar that all of these losses took place in those branches of the Afro-Asiatic family which can boast of 5000 years of recorded history while the older situation was allegedly preserved in the branches where the sources hardly go back farther than the beginning of the present century. Alternatively, one could imagine that unknown factors transformed a language of the Boreafrasian type into Chadic or even into Cushitic. It seems to me that Ehret's analysis of the vocabulary has not disproved this possibility in a decisive manner.

The case for Boreafrasian would be much stronger if morphological evidence could be adduced. "One major morphological modification can be identified as a specifically PBA innovation, namely, the shift of the remaining productive verb extensions to a prefixal locus of application. The most notable example is that of the PAA *s causative" (484). While the causative *s is a suffix in Cushitic (and Omotic) and in isolated lexemes in Chadic, Egyptian and Semitic (50), Ehret assumes that in Boreafrasian it "moved to preverbal position, in syntagmatic conformity with the other major set of verb affixes, the predominantly prefixal conjugational morphemes" and that the same happened to two other suffixes in Semitic (485). I find such a development highly improbable. If the prefix *s- and the suffix *-s must indeed be identified, for which I see no cogent reason, it is much more plausible that we have to start from an auxiliary verb or verbal clitic which shifted its position in the sentence or simply adopted the causative suffix. The original situation may have been similar to what we actually find in Iraqw (cf. Mous 1993: 174):

> **inós baynu gi-na   ʕay-m-íis**
> he   pigs   them-PAST eat-ing-CAUS:he:PAST
> 'He fed the pigs.'

However this may be, I think that the prefixal position of the causative *s cannot serve as an unambiguous piece of evidence for the existence of a separate Boreafrasian subgroup, which remains an unproven hypothesis yet to be substantiated.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the book under review is a major contribution to the reconstruction of Proto-Afro-Asiatic because it brings together a large amount of data and presents a coherent view of how the proto-language disintegrated and developed into the separate branches of the family. If the details of Ehret's reconstructions remain open to serious doubts, this is because they reflect the state of the art. Most forms adduced in the standard etymological dictionary of the Indo-European language family (Pokorny 1959) probably do not go back to the proto-language. Against this background, it would be unrealistic to expect that most of Ehret's reconstructions are correct. They probably are not. But this does not diminish the value of his work, which

represents the first comprehensive collection and analysis of Proto-Afro-Asiatic vocabulary. Nobody will henceforth be able to write about the subject without taking Ehret's views into consideration.

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Helma Pasch (ed.): *Sango: The National Official Language of the Central African Republic; proceedings of the Colloquium "The Status and Uses of Sango in the Central African Republic", Cologne, September, 3–4, 1992.* With a foreword by Bernd Heine. Cologne: Rudiger Koppe 1994. 138 pp. DM 34.

Il s'agit dans ce livre, comme l'indique le titre, des actes du colloque tenu à Cologne du 3 au 4 septembre 1992 sous le thème "Statut et usages du sango en République Centrafricaine".

Ce qui frappe en premier lieu lorsque l'on porte un regard sur la liste des communications données à cette rencontre est le caractère éminemment international de celle-ci. Les participants appartiennent à des institutions universitaires aussi bien d'Afrique, d'Amérique, d'Australie, d'Europe Occidentale que d'Europe de l'Est. Ensuite, c'est sa sobriété du point de vue organisationnel: onze communications dont neuf constituent l'ouvrage sous examen ont suffi pour traiter les aspects importants en rapport avec le thème central du colloque: politique linguistique, rapports d'enquêtes linguistiques sous divers aspects, problèmes d'orthographe et de standardisation; mais aussi des