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Cushitic and its Classifications

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1. Introduction

Cushitic constitutes one of the largest and most important language families of East Africa. Nearly 30 million people have a Cushitic language as their mother tongue (Oromo alone counts more than 20 million speakers). The geographical area in which Cushitic is spoken stretches from North-east Sudan at the Egyptian border, embracing Eritrea, Jibouti, Somalia, Ethiopia, a considerable part of Kenya, and some areas of Northern Tanzania. This phylum comprises prestigious languages such as Oromo (the most widespread language of East Africa after Swahili), Somali, Agaw, etc.

Cushitic occupies a firm position within the Afroasiatic family by tradition. Since the Europeans came into contact with a language of the Cushitic family (i.e., Oromo) in the 17th century, its relationship with Semitic has been assumed and has never been seriously called into question until our days. According to the "Hamitentheorie," which was the dominant theory concerning the classification of this language family from 1870 until 1940, Cushitic forms the Hamitic branch of the Hamito-Semitic phylum together with Ancient

Egyptian and Berber. Cushitic owes its name to Cush who, according to the testimony of the Bible, was one of Ham's sons; the term "Hamitic" seems to have been coined to express a contrast to "Semitic," the other great family of this phylum. Since the 1950s Hamito-Semitic that was renamed by Greenberg "Afro-Asiatic," is subdivided in 5 main branches having an equal status, namely: Semitic, Ancient Egyptian, Berber, Cushitic, and Chadic.

The first studies of a Cushitic language go back to the 1840s, when the attention of some European travellers visiting East Africa was drawn to Oromo. The first scientific works on the Cushitic languages appeared about 100 years ago, written by the great Austrian Egyptologist Leo Reinisch. During some fieldwork in East Africa he collected and then published a great bulk of data on several Cushitic languages such as Beja (1893 and 1895), Bilin (1882, 1883, and 1887), Afar (1885–1887), Saho (1889–1890), Somali (1900–1903), etc. The quality of these works is quite diverse: while his data on Afar are often inexact and full of mistakes, those on Bilin can be considered a really masterly achievement, in spite of some weaknesses due to the time of writing (such as the lack of the distinction between phonology and phonetics). Anyway even if only for the quantity of the data that Reinisch made accessible to us, every Cushiticist owes him a good deal of gratitude. The present stage of knowledge in Cushitic studies would be unthinkable without Reinisch's contribution!

2. Reinisch and his Classification

Reinisch was also the first who tried to classify the Cushitic languages. He subdivided them in two main groups, thus laying the foundations for that dualism which again and again appears in course of the history of Cushitics. The two main groups of Reinisch's classification are:

- a) *Niederkuschitisch* (the Cushitic languages of the lowlands), i.e., Beja, Saho-Afar, Somali, and Oromo;
- b) *Hochkuschitisch* (the Cushitic languages of the highlands), i.e., Agaw and the West Cushitic languages known at that time.

From a today's point of view Reinisch's classification seems to be a geographical one and, above all, out of date; though if one takes into consideration the poor knowledge of his days, his classification is completely justified. In fact, one can realize there that Saho-Afar, Somali, and Oromo form a close unit and that this unit is in opposition to that of the Agaw and the West