

The classification of South Cushitic.

In his seminal work on the classification of African languages, Greenberg (1963) has South Cushitic as one of the primary branches of Cushitic. This proposal has been immensely influential in the interpretation of the history of East Africa. On the basis of this classification, the assumption is that the presence of South Cushitic in Tanzania is ancient (Ehret 1980), and pre-dates the entry of Bantu and Nilotic peoples (Ambrose 1998). As a consequence, (South) Cushitic has been linked to the Savannah Pastoral Neolithic cultural complex that is recognised in archaeology, and it has been proposed that the introduction of agriculture and cattle-keeping in Tanzania can be attributed to the South Cushitic speakers. Ehret's (1980) reconstruction of South Cushitic lexicon and phonology has been extremely influential in recognising linguistic contact in many of East Africa's Bantu and Nilotic languages despite the fact that this reconstruction has been severely criticised (Philippson 2013). Serious doubts on the classification of South Cushitic as primary branch have been raised though. Hetzron (1980) has pointed to many grammatical resemblances between South Cushitic and East Cushitic languages that argue for inclusion of South Cushitic within East Cushitic. In Tosco's (2000) Cushitic overview this uncertainty is represented by the fact that South Cushitic figures differently in his genetic trees: as primary branch of Cushitic for the classical view and as primary branch within East Cushitic reflecting Hetzron's suggestions; the issues are discussed in detail in Kießling (2001). Kießling and Mous (2003) provide an extensive lexical and phonological reconstruction of the four South Cushitic Tanzanian languages that are still spoken; while Kießling (2002) is a detailed morphological reconstruction of these languages. Kießling and Mous (2003) pointed out wider Cushitic parallels where they could but this did not enable them to suggest a position of Tanzanian Cushitic in the Cushitic tree. The challenges are the lexical innovations that Tanzanian Cushitic must have undergone and for many of these no other languages could be suggested as sources. In addition, the other languages that were classified as South Cushitic do not offer much for reconstruction: the languages Aasáx and Qwadza are obsolete and the data on these are unreliable because they were collected from rememberers rather than speakers (Kruijdsdijk 2023); Ma'á, often characterised as a mixed language, is Bantu, and not Cushitic, and some of the original Cushitic lexicon after language shift survives in a parallel register which also contains words from a variety of other sources including manipulated words from the basis Bantu vocabulary (Mous 2003). The last suggested member, Dahalo, is now considered to be (marginally) East Cushitic rather than South Cushitic (Tosco 1989, Tosco and Blazek 1994).

I propose that Tanzanian Cushitic is a primary branch of Cushitic after all. I also argue that the earliest South Cushitic expansion into Tanzania was followed by two others that have left their (lexical) impact on Tanzanian Cushitic. The latest is the pre-Oromo influence on Tanzanian Cushitic. The suggestion for such language contact showing transfer from pre-Oromo lexical and morphological material featured already in Kießling and Mous (2003), and was recently substantiated by Rapold (2023). There is plenty of reconstructed Tanzanian Cushitic material that is clearly Cushitic but did not undergo the Oromoid innovations. An earlier expansion is formed by speakers of the Dullay-Yaaku subgroup (see Hayward 1978 that this is a subgroup). Recently Sands and Tosco (2022) have argued that early Dullay-Yaaku speakers must have been in contact with Hadza (a language isolate and in the area of Tanzanian Cushitic). I provide further evidence for this intrusion by showing Dullay-Yaaku influence on proto-Tanzanian Cushitic while the Tanzanian Cushitic proto lexicon also contains Cushitic lexical evidence that pre-dates Dullay-Yaaku. The consequences for the interpretation of East Africa's history are far-reaching: There was not one migration of Cushitic speakers into Tanzania but at least three. For all Cushitic lexical transfer into Bantu and Nilotic languages of Tanzania and Kenya, the source needs to be considered.

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