

Secondary lateral obstruents in South Cushitic and their significance for the linguistic history of East Africa

The precise position of South Cushitic within Cushitic (Afroasiatic) is a matter of controversy. Proposals include South Cushitic as (1) a primary branch of Cushitic (Greenberg 1963:48-49, Tosco 2020:292), (2) a coordinate branch of East Cushitic under an East–South Cushitic node (Ehret 1995:489-490, 2008:159), (3) a sub-branch of East Cushitic (Tosco 2000:109), (4) part of Lowland East Cushitic (Appleyard 2012:278), and (5) a sub-branch of (Southern) Lowland East Cushitic (Hetzron 1980:77, 101).

South Cushitic is also unique in Cushitic for having lateral obstruents, **ɬ** and **ɬʰ**. These phonemes have been reconstructed to Proto-Cushitic (Ehret 1995, 2008), from which South Cushitic is thought to have inherited them (cf. Bender (2020:138) for an alternative view). Mous (2012:347) identifies the presence of lateral obstruents in South Cushitic as problematic for establishing its position within East Cushitic: The further down in the tree it is posited, the more events of loss of lateral obstruents have to be assumed in the rest of Cushitic, and/or the more wide-ranging the waves obliterating these sounds must have been; hence the less likely such a classification is *a priori*.

In this paper I propose that the lateral obstruents in at least some South Cushitic lexical items are secondary, i.e. not inherited *as lateral obstruents* from Proto-Cushitic. In these instances, then, lateral obstruents are no obstacle for a lower-level classification of South Cushitic. I further argue that these items are historically connected to Pre-Oromo, one of the lowest branches in Cushitic. I trace the sound changes involved in their development and establish the relative chronology of some of these processes.

An example is Proto-South Cushitic ***ɬaʔ** ‘to love, like, want’ (Kießling & Mous 2003:254) which is connected to Oromo **ja:l-** ‘to love’ < Proto-East Cushitic ***geʔl-** ‘*id.*’ (Sasse 1979:36). The following diagram shows the development of this root from Proto-East Cushitic to Oromo and Proto-South Cushitic, based on sound changes taken from the literature (Black 1974, Sasse 1979, Kießling & Mous 2003) and the assumption of an additional, cross-linguistically supported sound change **j > ɬ** that links the East and South Cushitic strands of development:

	East Cushitic		South Cushitic
	*geʔl-		
changes within Pre-Oromo			changes within Pre-Proto-S. Cush.
ʔ > ɬ	geʔl-		
g > j / _ {i, e}	jeʔl-		
e > a / [most contexts]	jaʔl-		
ʔ > V: / { _ C, C _ }	ja:l-		
Oromo	ja:l-		
			jaʔl-
			ɬaʔl-
			ɬaʔ-
			j > ɬ non-initial l > ∅
			Proto-South Cushitic

I discuss whether the link between South Cushitic and Pre-Oromo thus established is one of common inheritance or language contact and conclude that lateral transfer from Pre-Oromo to South Cushitic is the most likely scenario. In the final part of the paper the implications of this late emergence of seemingly archaic phonemes are drawn for the history of Cushitic and its speakers in East Africa.

References

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