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Languages

AFRICAN LANGUAGES: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

More than 1,500 languages are spoken in Africa today. Their histories, individually and collectively, reflect an immensely varied human history on the continent. Their genetic relationships and their vocabularies provide us with vast stores of information on that human past.

African Language Families

The great majority of the modern-day African languages belong to just four families: Khoisan, Afro-Asiatic (Afrasian), Nilo-Saharan, and Niger-Congo. A fifth family is represented by a single language, Shabo, spoken by hunter-foragers of far southwestern Ethiopia. Many scholars also separate off Hadza of Tanzania from Khoisan and place it in its own sixth family. The position of another group of languages, Kadu, found in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan, has been disputed. Some scholars include it in the Niger-Congo family, while others propose its membership in Nilo-Saharan. Still others see it as a seventh family.

For two of the families, Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan, there now exist full phonological reconstructions and extensive dictionaries of the reconstructed root words used in the proto-languages of each, along with provisional subclassifications of each family. A subclassification groups the languages of a family according to the relative closeness of their relationship. It can

usually be represented by a family tree diagram, examples of which appear in the tables accompanying this article. The notation *proto-* signifies the ancestral language, spoken long ago, from which all the languages of a family variously descend. We thus call the mother language of the Afro-Asiatic family *proto-Afro-Asiatic*, and the common ancestor of the Nilo-Saharan languages *proto-Nilo-Saharan*.

The historical comparative reconstruction of a third family, Niger-Congo, is less well advanced overall, simply because of its size: it contains perhaps three-quarters of Africa's languages. Interestingly, one major subgroup of Niger-Congo, Bantu, was already put on a solid historical comparative footing early in the 20th century. It was the first genetic grouping of African languages to be so studied. Strong beginnings toward a reconstruction of Niger-Congo as a whole have also been made, and one well-grounded provisional subclassification of the family now exists as well.

For the fourth major family, Khoisan, only tentative proposals on its historical comparative reconstruction have yet been offered. The deepest divisions in the family are clearly among the Sandawe language (spoken, as is Hadza, in Tanzania), the Southern African Khoisan branch, and Hadza, if it also belongs to the family.

Each of the four major language families of Africa has a great historical time depth, far greater than the Indo-European family to which English belongs. The proto-Indo-European speech community existed about 6,000 years ago. In contrast, the protolanguages of the Af-

frican families were each spoken between 12,000 and 20,000 years ago.

The Khoisan Family

Proto-Khoisan is probably the most ancient of the four protolanguages, dating possibly to 20,000 years ago. The present-day Khoisan-speaking peoples are heirs of a common cultural tradition that once occupied much of the eastern side of the continent, from northern East Africa to the Cape of Good Hope.

Scholars who accept the membership of Hadza in the family usually favor the family tree of Khoisan relationships as shown in table 10. The early stages of Khoisan history, this scheme implies, would have been played out in East Africa, with the spread of the Southern African Khoisan languages into South Africa and Namibia taking place at a later period.

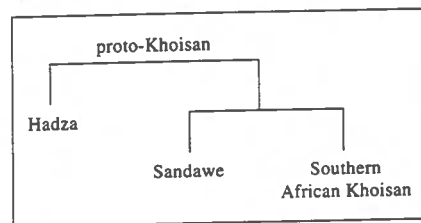
The early Khoisan-speaking communities were perhaps the makers of various versions of an East African Microlithic tradition. Tool assemblages of this broad affiliation appear in the archaeology of East Africa no later than about 17,000 years ago. The Microlithic Age reached south of the Limpopo River only much later, during about the 6th millennium B.C., when Wilton culture, the best-known version of the East African Microlithic tradition, took hold there. Such a history fits well, of course, with the implication of the Khoisan family tree proposed in table 10—that Khoisan languages spread south of the Limpopo only after having long been established farther north.

The Afro-Asiatic Family

Afro-Asiatic is the family of African languages best known to nonspecialists. Along with the more than 200 languages of its Cushitic, Omotic, and Chadic branches, it includes the Berber languages of northern and Saharan Africa, Ancient Egyptian, Semitic, and one subgroup of southwestern Asian languages. Because of the association of Semitic languages with several world religions, the Afro-Asiatic family has long been uncritically presumed by non-Africanist scholars to have originated in southwestern Asian.

But recent studies have determined that the ancestral language, proto-Afro-Asiatic, was spo-

Table 10 The Khoisan language family



ken in Africa. A family tree of early Afro-Asiatic language history (see table 11) shows us that the first two divergences in the family gave rise to the Omotic branch and the Cushitic branch, both comprising languages spoken no farther north than the southern Red Sea Hills region. Only after the proto-Erythraic stage did the more northerly Afro-Asiatic language groupings come into being.

A second kind of testimony comes from words used in the very early Afro-Asiatic languages. The proto-Afro-Asiatic vocabulary included terms for *flour* (*dzayj-), *grains* (*zar-, *ʕeyl-), and *grindstone* (*baayn-) and also for *donkey* (*k'er-), but no words at all implying herding or cultivating. By the proto-Erythraic stage, words for *cow* in general (*ʕo-) and *male cattle* (*legʔ-, *yawr-) had been added, showing knowledge of a new animal. But still lacking in proto-Erythraic were any words specifically indicating cultivation or herding.

These developments in vocabulary show that the proto-Afro-Asiatics gathered wild grains for food and lived within the natural range of the wild donkey. Their proto-Erythraic descendants continued this way of life. To judge from new words for *cattle*, they either moved to areas where the wild cow could be found or experienced a climate shift that allowed the animal to spread into their lands.

This history is strikingly paralleled in the archaeology of northeastern Africa. Wild donkeys ranged the Red Sea Hills and northern edges of the Ethiopian Highlands, just where the proto-Afro-Asiatic language is most probably to be placed. In parts of the same broad region—in Nubia to the west and in the northeastern Ethiopian Highlands—the intensive collection of wild

grains took hold before 13,000 B.C. and remained a basic subsistence practice for several thousand years more. The conclusion that the inventors of this way of life were the early Afro-Asiatics seems difficult to avoid.

After the 13th millennium B.C., grain collection spread north to Egypt, and after about 10,000 B.C., to southwestern Asia as well. Peoples who adopted the Afro-Asiatic languages as their own probably extended grain collection at each stage. Wild cattle moved south from the Mediterranean with the beginning of wetter climate in the 11th millennium and so became part of Afro-Asiatic knowledge after proto-Afro-Asiatic times, just as the word histories indicate.

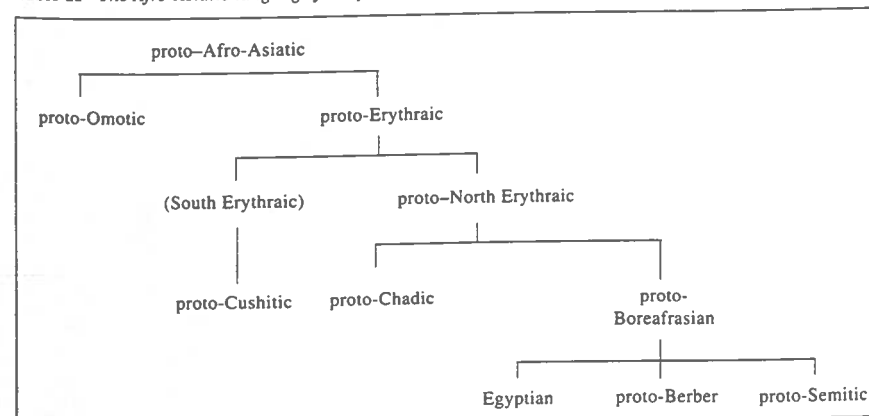
The first unmistakable testimony of food production in Afro-Asiatic languages does not appear until the proto-Cushitic, proto-Chadic, and proto-Boreafasian periods. The proto-Cushitic language contained, for example, nouns for *cultivated field* (*paʔr-) and *cattle pen* (*mawr-) and the verbs for *milking* (*ʕilm-) and *cultivating* (*ʔabr-). Old Cushitic terms for *finger millet* (*dangawc-) and *teff* (*tl'eff-) identify two crops that they cultivated. Similarly, the proto-Chadic people had words for *cultivated field* (*mar) and *sorghum* (*dāwr) and numerous domestic animal terms, such as for *cow* (*ʕa), *sheep* (*tam-k-),

ram (*nzəl), and *goat* (*bəkʔr). Through archaeological research, these initial moves of Afro-Asiatic peoples toward food production can probably be seen in the spread, beginning around the 9th millennium, of Capsian-related cultures through the northern Sahara and in a nearly contemporaneous spread of proto-Cushitic communities, as yet undiscovered archaeologically, along the northern edges of the Ethiopian Highlands.

The history of the Omotic languages has been little studied as yet. Still, certain broad elements of their history are clear enough. The earliest Omotic speakers were an offshoot of the proto-Afro-Asiatic grain collectors. The early sites of grain collectors found in northeastern Ethiopia may well have been theirs. But their descendants of the last several millennia have been preeminently cultivators, and their staple crop, the ensete plant. The wide occurrence of Omotic loanwords in Cushitic languages reveals that Omotic agricultural societies, as recently as the 5th millennium B.C., occupied most of the Ethiopian Highlands.

One plausible hypothesis implicates environmental change as a major factor in Omotic agricultural invention. First, when the Holocene climatic optimum began around 10,500 B.C., highland areas of grassland were often replaced

Table 11 The Afro-Asiatic language family



by montane forest, threatening the original Omotic livelihood. In response, it can be proposed, the ancestors of the Omotic peoples of later times created an alternative kind of intensive food collection, using the wild ensete plant. A second transition, in this view, would have come after 6,000 B.C., when climate again became drier, decreasing the availability of wild ensete. To this challenge, some Omotic peoples responded by domesticating the plant. By enhancing their subsistence productivity in this way, these communities became able to expand through large parts of the Ethiopian Highlands.

From 4000 B.C. onward, however, Cushitic peoples began to spread their languages into successively wider areas. Agaw languages in time replaced Omotic tongues in northern and central Ethiopia, and Eastern Cushitic languages came to predominate in most areas around the Rift Valley and the eastern side of the highlands. Only in the southwest and in some areas along the rift have Omotic languages and culture continued to prevail.

One branch of the Cushitic languages, Southern Cushitic, advanced still farther south, first into northern Kenya after 3500 B.C. and then in subsequent centuries into central and southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. There the Cushites encountered Khoisan-speaking peoples of the old East African Microlithic or Cushitic expansions. In East Africa, we can connect the Southern Cushites with the Oldishi and Olmalenge varieties of the Savanna Pastoral Neolithic. These cultures continued to be prominent until the early 1st millennium A.D., and several Southern Cushitic languages are still spoken today in Tanzania and Kenya.

Other expansions of Afro-Asiatic languages took place in western Africa. Proto-Chadic, a member of the North Erythraic branch, was taken by its speakers south from the central Sahara into the eastern Lake Chad Basin in about the 6th millennium B.C. Between the 6th and 4th millennia B.C., descendant languages of proto-Chadic spread over the greater part of today's northern Nigeria and central Chad. Well more than 100 Chadic languages are currently spoken, the best known of which is Hausa.

The Berber languages, another subgroup of the North Erythraic branch, expanded at three

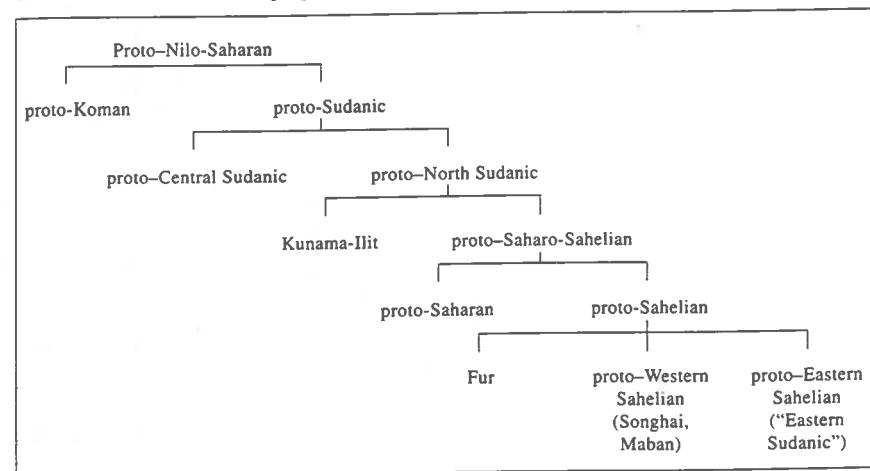
different periods. First, in the late 3rd millennium B.C., the speakers of proto-Berber spread across areas extending from the central Maghreb to the borders of Middle Kingdom Egypt. A second Berber expansion covered large parts of North Africa in the last millennium B.C. and gave rise to many of the Berber peoples documented in the Roman records. A final Berber spread took place in the 1st millennium A.D., when the Tuareg, by then possessors of camels, occupied the central Sahara.

Three movements of Semitic languages from Asia back into Africa require mention also. The Ethiopian languages, numbering today about 15 languages, all derive from a dialect of Epigraphic South Arabian carried to Eritrea in about the 6th century B.C. by settlers from Yemen. Because of their central role in commerce and in the rise of early states in the Horn, these immigrants spread their language to many of the indigenous Cushites. The older idea that South Arabian preeminence was caused by their bringing iron or plow agriculture into the region is simply not supported by the evidence. Plow cultivation, in fact, can be shown from Cushitic word histories to antedate the South Arabian arrival by 2,000 or 3,000 years. Today, the most well-known Ethiopian Semitic languages is Amharic.

Another Semitic tongue, Punic, came to be spoken in parts of North Africa in the last millennium B.C. Punic was derived from the language of the Phoenicians, founders of the city of Carthage. By the Roman period, Punic had long been the first language of many urban people in the area of modern-day Tunisia and a language of trade in surrounding regions. It gradually died out after the Arab conquest of North Africa in the 7th century.

Because of this conquest, still another Semitic tongue, Arabic, rapidly took hold all across North Africa, at first in government and commerce, then among townspeople, and eventually in many rural areas. In Egypt, Coptic, the descendant form of Ancient Egyptian, only slowly gave way to Arabic. Coptic finally ceased to be spoken in about the 17th century, although it continues as the scriptural language of Egyptian Christians. In the Maghreb, many Berber languages persist today as speech islands in a sea of Arabic. After

Table 12 The Nilo-Saharan language family



the 11th century, commercial relations, population movements, and the prestige of Islam combined to spread Arabic still farther south, across the western Sahara and a large part of the eastern Sudan.

The Nilo-Saharan Family

The earliest Nilo-Saharan peoples lived in the Middle Nile Basin between about 15,000 and 11,000 B.C. A family tree of Nilo-Saharan helps us picture how these languages came eventually to be spread over a vast expanse, from the bend of the Niger River in Mali to Sudan and Kenya (see table 12).

The first divergence, depicted in table 12, gave rise to the Koman branch, restricted in later times to the east side of the Middle Nile region. From the second divergence emerged the Central Sudanic branch, located in the southwestern parts of the basin, and the North Sudanic branch, originally found in northern areas of the basin. Only with the proto-Saharo-Sahelian period did Nilo-Saharan languages start to spread far west of the Middle Nile.

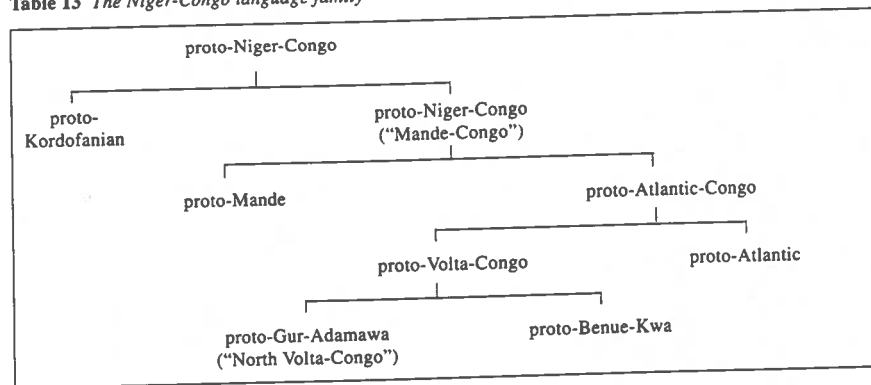
The evidence of early Nilo-Saharan words reveals two notable early developments: the making of pottery and the domestication of cattle by

the proto-North Sudanic communities. Indicative of this history are the reconstructed North Sudanic verbs for *fashioning pottery* (*ted) and for *driving cattle to pasture* (*šuk-) and to *water* (ya:t), along with a word for *cow* (*ya:yr). The proto-North Sudanians, it appears, also adopted, probably from their Afro-Asiatic neighbors, something else not known earlier among the Nilo-Saharan—*the gathering of wild grains*. In the reconstructed vocabulary of proto-North Sudanians are words for *grindstone* (*p'el), *grain* in general (*Way), and *ear of grain* (*ke:n).

By the next period, the proto-Saharo-Sahelian period, the domestication of grains had begun. The evidence includes verbs for *cultivating* (*dip^h), *clearing* (t'ayp^h), and *weeding* (*k'ay) and nouns for *cultivated field* (*qomp) and *granary* (*per). Then in the proto-Sahelian period, sheep and goats became known, too, as reflected in the proto-Sahelian adoption of several terms for both animals (for example, *ad for *goat*, *Wer for *sheep*, *g'ent for *he-goat*, and *menk^h for *ram*).

This history closely matches the sequence of changes exemplified in early Neolithic sites of far southern Egypt. There the same three stages appear in the archaeology as in the linguistic record:

Table 13 The Niger-Congo language family



1. Wild grain collection, with grindstones, pottery, and some cattle in the 8th or 9th millennium B.C.
2. Grain cultivation and cattle raising, with granaries, by the late 7th or 8th millennium B.C.
3. The addition of sheep and goats after 5700 B.C. (about the early 7th millennium B.C.)

A wide spreading out of Sahelian peoples brought the proto-Sahelian period to a close. One arm of this expansion moved as far west eventually as Niger. From this settlement came the Songhai society of much later times. Another major direction of expansion passed southward through the Middle Nile Basin. The peoples involved in this set of movements were the speakers of the Eastern Sahelian languages (formerly, Eastern Sudanic). The proposed dating of these movements, to about the 6th millennium B.C., suggests that the drying of the Sahara climate helped push the speakers of these languages into new areas farther south. The Eastern Sahelian expansions probably reached as far as the northern edges of Uganda by the 4th or 3rd millennium B.C. The Nilotic languages, such as Dinka and Maasai, are the best known modern-day languages that descended from these movements.

The Niger-Congo Family

Niger-Congo is another family with a long history. The protolanguage of the family was spoken as early as 15,000 or more years ago. The

most widely followed subclassification of the family divides it into a series of branches and subbranches as shown in table 13.

The first expansion of Niger-Congo peoples appears to have stretched from as far east as the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, where proto-Kordofanian would have been spoken, to as far west as Mali, the ancient territory of the Mande branch. The next two branchings depict a growing diversity of Niger-Congo peoples across the regions of the Upper Niger, Senegal, and Volta Rivers.

Two possible archaeological correlations have been proposed for these initial expansions of Niger-Congo. One is with the Aqualithic civilization, which became a prominent way of life, using waterside food resources, between 8000 and 6000 B.C. across 4,000 kilometers of Africa, from Lake Turkana in northern Kenya to the bend of the Niger River in Mali. The other is with the West African Microlithic, a grouping of cultures of the West African savanna areas dating to before that period. For two reasons, the latter attribution is preferred. First of all, the Aquatic adaptation came to prominence too late to be easily identifiable with the earliest Niger-Congo speakers. Second, the evidence of vocabulary shows that the bow (*-ta), a feature in keeping with a microlithic tool kit, was an ancient weapon among them, whereas the Aquatic peoples were principally harpoon and blade-tool users. More

likely, the Aquatic adaptation was the work of Nilo-Saharan peoples, including perhaps those of the Central Sudanic branch of the family (see table 12).

The next Niger-Congo divergence, of Volta-Congo into separate Gur-Ubangian and Benue-Congo groups, is best located in the savanna woodland areas that extend from the Volta Basin to central Nigeria. By this time, the beginnings of West African yam-based agriculture were already well underway among these peoples.

The still later spread of Benue-Congo peoples into the rain-forest belt of West Africa is likely to date to the period of full establishment of yam and oil-palm cultivation. The linguistic dating of this spread to the 6th and 5th millennia B.C. correlates well with the archaeologically dated appearance of polished stone axes in the rain-forest archaeology. Yams and oil palms require sunlight to grow, and axes would have been the essential tools of incoming cultivators for clearing forests.

As part of the wider spread of Benue-Congo agriculturists, the speakers of the Bantu languages began moving into the equatorial rain forest of the Zaire Basin as early as the 4th millennium B.C. Over the course of the next 3,000 years, Bantu peoples gradually expanded their settlements through many parts of the forest and into the edges of the woodland savanna just south of it. At the same time, a parallel spread of the Ubangian peoples, an offshoot of the Gur-Adamawa branch, carried the same agricultural way of life eastward, through the woodland savanna zone just north of the equatorial forest.

Then, in the last millennium B.C., one particular set of peoples, the Mashariki (or Eastern) Bantu, moved farther east, into the Great Lakes region of Africa. Around the last three centuries B.C., the Mashariki communities began a relatively rapid expansion that scattered their descendants across eastern Africa from Uganda and Kenya in the north to KwaZulu-Natal in the south. Other Bantu groups spread at about the same time more directly south from the woodland savanna areas of southern Zaire into what is today Angola and Zambia. In all of southern and much of eastern Africa, Bantu expansion proceeded at the expense of Khoisan languages. In Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. Southern Cushitic and Eastern

Sahelian languages also were sometimes replaced by Bantu. The overall history of these developments is exceedingly complex, but the outcome is simply stated: because of these population movements, Bantu languages are today spoken across a third of the continent.

The adoption of iron technology in the last millennium B.C. is often credited with setting off the Mashariki expansion. But the history of words for *iron* and *iron tools* shows that the new technology often diffused across the lines of language spread. Instead, we will have to look to other factors, such as the Mashariki development of a new, more adaptive agricultural synthesis, combining Niger-Congo yams with Nilo-Saharan grains, if we are satisfactorily to understand this history.

Austronesian and Indo-European Families in African History

Languages of two other families have become indigenized in some African countries in the past 2,000 years.

Malagasy, an Austronesian language, was brought by Indonesian immigrants to previously uninhabited Madagascar in the early centuries of the 1st millennium A.D. The evidence of loanwords suggests that the Malagasy ancestors settled for a brief period among Bantu peoples along the East African coast before moving on to the island. A great deal of additional Bantu influence appears in the language, brought over from the mainland by different later immigrants from southeastern Africa.

Several Indo-European languages have been spoken in Africa by resident populations at different times. Greek was the language of the townspeople of Cyrene in Cyrenaica from about the 8th century B.C. and may have remained so until the Arab conquest. Portuguese has been a first language of at least small indigenized communities in several Atlantic coastal towns, such as Luanda in Angola, from the 16th century.

A third language, Dutch, taken to South Africa by European settlers in the 17th century, evolved in the interim into Afrikaans, the first language of a large number of people in that country. And because of the colonial era, several other Indo-European languages, among them English,

French, Hindi, and Gujarati, also established footholds on the continent in the 20th century. But none of these offers us evidence on the more ancient eras of African history.

African Language Families in the Longer View

To trace most of the 1,500 languages of Africa back to just four long-ago protolanguages may convey the false impression of a continent once nearly empty of people, but, of course, that was never so. There were probably well more than 1,000 languages spoken in Africa even 20,000 years ago.

Just as more recent Bantu settlements have led to the extinction of languages previously spoken in eastern or southern Africa, so the ancient spread of the Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Niger-Congo families in West Africa must each have displaced hundreds of languages, members oftentimes of families now wholly extinct. In the Zaire Basin today, the so-called Pygmies speak languages they have adopted at various times over the past four millennia from their Ubangian, Bantu, and even central Sudanic neighbors. But before that, they must have spoken other languages belonging to just such a now wholly extinct family of languages or to more than one such family. The language isolate Shabo, of Ethiopia, may well be the last member of another such family, once widely spread in the Ethiopian Highlands before the arrival of Omotic and other Afro-Asiatic languages.

From a historical perspective, the interesting issue is to explain why one family of languages expands at the expense of others. Sometimes the causes are fairly clear, as when peoples with the advantage of being fully agricultural move into the lands of food collectors. The farmers' social units are larger, and they can support many more people on the same amount of land. The same kind of advantage can be generated by the invention of a new kind of food collecting, as the spread of the Afro-Asiatic languages, tied apparently to the success of wild-grain collection, shows us. Our ability to reconstruct language relationships and the vocabularies of earlier times provides the evidence with which to seek out

cause and effect in language history and to connect that history to the findings of archaeology.

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LANGUAGES OF EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this article is threefold. It sets out the language groupings relevant to eastern, southern, and south-central Africa, it outlines linguistic methods and indicates which results are certain and which are less certain, and it sketches possible or likely homelands and dispersal routes of languages to current locations.

Language Groupings

Following J. H. Greenberg's work of the 1960s, four major language groupings (or families) in Africa, with a few isolates, are widely accepted. Only one of these is now entirely based in eastern and southern Africa, the other four being only partly represented there.

The largest grouping in Africa, and specific to Africa, is Niger-Congo. Continentwide, it has nearly 400 million speakers and well more than 1,000 languages. The largest subset of Niger-Congo is Narrow Bantu. Some 250 million people

speak as their first languages one of the 300 to 600 Bantu languages today. The exact number of languages, here as in most other groupings, is hard to state firmly, for it depends on the distinction between language and dialect—criteria on which neither native speakers nor linguists agree. Bantu languages predominate in the whole area of sub-Saharan Africa south of a line from western Cameroon to far southern Somalia. The remaining Niger-Congo languages are distributed throughout western Africa and into north-central Africa.

With some 220 million speakers and more than 200 languages, the next biggest grouping in Africa is Afro-Asiatic (or Afrasian), whose best-known members are Arabic and Hebrew in the Middle East. All except 20 or so of these languages are spoken in Africa, which was the main reason for changing the name from older Hamito-Semitic, which emphasized the Middle East connection. Afro-Asiatic is presently divided into six branches, only one of which, Cushitic, is represented in East Africa. More than 200,000 people speak the Southern Cushitic languages of Tanzania, while 7 million speak Eastern Cushitic Somali, and some 25 million Ethiopians speak various Afro-Asiatic languages.

The third grouping is Nilo-Saharan, with perhaps 20 million people and some 60 languages mainly spoken in a band from Chad across Zaire, Sudan, and Uganda, down into Kenya. In East Africa, the largest subset consists of Nilotic speakers, with 6 million people and some 15 languages, concentrated in Uganda and western and northwestern Kenya but tapering down into northern Tanzania. There are a few hundred thousand Sudanic speakers in Uganda.

By far the smallest grouping, with just more than 200,000 speakers and ten languages, is Khoisan. One of these, Sandawe, in western Tanzania, has perhaps 50,000 speakers. Nearby sit perhaps 1,000 Hata, the affiliation of whose language is disputed but most often stated to be Khoisan. All the rest are located well more than 1,600 kilometers to the southwest, in Namibia, Botswana, and a smaller but unknown number in Angola.

Finally, it is appropriate to mention the Pygmies (or Pygmoids) of central Africa, most of whom are now, or are assumed once to have been,

hunter-foragers. They live dotted across the Zaire Basin in the area roughly bounded by north- and southeastern Zaire across to the Congo Republic, Gabon, and up to Cameroon. Unlike the Khoisan speakers, they have no single common language and speak local Bantu or Ubangian languages. On the other hand, since they are culturally, physically, genetically, and often economically different from their neighbors, they were also long assumed to have been the autochthons (native peoples with a long cultural development) of the forest. Linguistic work has centered on whether it is possible to extract a common set of words retained from a now lost Pygmy language, or languages, but so far the results are not conclusive. The Pygmies number some 200,000 today.

Methods, Problems, Results, and Reliability

The foregoing draws what appears to be a neat and composite picture, as does the content of the next section. But what is this picture based on? How reliable are its various components? What is not said? This section deals with such questions.

Linguists can be useful to archaeologists and historians in three main ways. The first way is by taking the languages of Africa, assigning them to a number of sets, and then combining these subsets into ever larger sets, until we end up with a few very large groupings. Examination of the geographical extent of groupings at all levels allows hypotheses about early homelands and later movements. This gives nonlinguists a basis for talking about early shared group history instead of having to focus on local and recent ethnic history.

In principle, linguists do this by applying the comparative method. Step one involves taking a collection of languages and trying to establish regular and frequent sound correspondences between each of them. Those for which this is possible are judged to be related, while the others are not. Those so related are said to be members of the same family. When the correspondences are stated, step two consists of positing an original sound for each set of correspondences. The original sound is considered to have once existed in the protolanguage ancestral to the set of languages. In step three, we examine a large set of vocabu-