

THE CLASSIFICATION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES*

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OF THE more recent attempts at the classification of African languages which followed the pioneer period of Lepsius, Muller, and Cust, the one which has gained widest currency in this country, and therefore the one which will receive the most detailed consideration here, is that of Meinhof, known largely through A. Werner's popular exposition in *The Language Families of Africa*.¹

In accordance with this classification the languages of the continent are exhaustively assigned to five families: Semitic, Hamitic, Bantu, Sudanese, and Bushman. The basis of classification is an analysis into linguistic types in which each linguistic family is distinguished by a set of structural characteristics. Thus the Sudanic languages are monosyllabic, genderless, employ tone for semantic distinctions, and place the genitive before the governing noun. The Bantu languages are polysyllabic, employ class prefixes, use tone for grammatical rather than semantic distinctions, place the genitive after the governing noun, etc. While the deviations from the "pure" type are recognized, this typological method is the chief one utilized in untangling the complex African linguistic situation. The more marked deviations from type are ascribed to morphological borrowing from the language family in whose direction the variations of the particular language seems to point.

While morphological resemblances are indeed significant, the weakness of this criterion when it is made the focus of historic method can be shown by the fact that, applying Meinhof's methodology we might deny the Indo-European character of English because it lacks grammatical gender and a developed case-system, while such languages as the West African Fõ and classical Chinese, which exhibit a wide variety of morphological similarities, would be assigned to the same linguistic stock. In general, such a procedure means the adoption of a taxonomic classificatory approach characteristic of the pre-scientific period, and the abandonment of the genetic point of view associated with the successes of historical linguistic science. The weaknesses of this side of Meinhof's approach may be seen most clearly in his treatment of Hamitic.² Operating with such general concepts as grammatical gender, polarity and *ablaut*, he assigns certain languages to the Hamitic speech-family on very tenuous evidence.

Other, and equally grave weaknesses show themselves as a result of incomplete and one-sided appraisal of the linguistic materials, in his treatment of the Sudanic and Bantu languages. In his Sudanic are included all the non-

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¹ Meinhof, 1915; Werner, 1925. ² Meinhof, 1912.

Hamitic, non-Semitic languages north of the Bantu line. Starting from the monosyllabic, isolating tonal languages of the Guinea coast as "typical," Meinhof disregards, or is unaware of, the numerous languages of the Sudanese area which exhibit class prefixes or suffixes akin to those of Bantu. As a result, Bantu, with its complex prefix system, is set up as a distinct group in contrast to Sudanese. This misconception is mirrored in Werner's failure even to mention the widespread phenomenon of Sudanese class prefixes and suffixes in her *Language Families of Africa*³ and in her brief dismissal of the question in the more recent *Structure and Relationship of African Languages*.^{3a} This point of view seems to stem from Westermann's earlier conception of the Sudanese languages as typically isolating languages without nominal classification system.⁴ In his later treatment,⁵ he recognized the widespread character of class affixes in the Sudanese languages and the presence of relics of this system in the Kwa languages of the Guinea Coast. As a result, Bantu fell into its proper perspective as a Sudanese group with a more elaborate class system than most. Its probably recent expansion over a wide area, while a fact of great practical importance, does not justify us in separating it from the main Sudanese stock. Westermann's case for the position assigned to Bantu was further strengthened by a convincing number of lexical correspondences.

In spite of this, Westermann himself, in a more recent treatment of this topic,⁶ apparently through a mistaken idea of the "primitivity" of the Guinea Coast languages, still persisted in considering the classless languages as somehow more "typically" Sudanese. Yet the conclusion is inescapable that the class prefixes and suffixes found in such impressive, but discontinuous distribution from Senegal to Kordofan, and which are clearly related to Bantu,⁷ must be part of the general Sudanic inheritance and cannot be a result of borrowing. This interpretation is actually implied in Westermann's own use of the class morphemes in demonstrating the common origin of the Sudanic sub-groups.

Finally, in regard to Meinhof's treatment of Sudanic, it should be noted that he extended it to include many languages of the central and eastern Sudan whose connection with the relatively close-knit West Sudanese must either

³ Werner, 1925.

^{3a} Werner, 1930.

⁴ See particularly Westermann, 1911. The present writer is in substantial agreement with the discussion in Thomas, 1920.

⁵ Westermann, 1927.

⁶ Westermann, 1935a.

⁷ The chief groups of class languages are: (1) West-Atlantic (Wolof, Serer, Temne, etc., found in Senegal, French Guinea, Portuguese Guinea, and Sierra Leone); (2) Mossi-Grunshi (Mossi, Grunshi, Gurma, etc., found in French Volta, Gold Coast and western Nigeria); (3) Gur languages (northern part of the former German colony of Togo); (4) Benue-Cross languages (Munshi, etc., found in eastern Nigeria); (5) Kordofan-class languages (Jebel, Talodi, etc.).

For the relation of the class morphemes of these languages to those of Bantu see particularly Westermann, 1927 and 1935b. Tonal correspondences between Sudanese languages and Bantu have yet to be investigated. Some of the complications in the tonal systems of the Guinea Coast languages may prove to be the outcome of loss of class morphemes. Such results would further strengthen the case for this connection.

remain unproven through lack of evidence—one thinks particularly of the languages of Wadai and Darfur for which we are in some instances still dependent on vocabularies collected by the early explorers, Barth and Nachtigall—or so remote as to be considered doubtful in our present state of knowledge. It may surprise some to realize that Westermann, the originator of the concept of the Sudanic language family, with characteristic caution never authorized its extension to all the non-Hamitic languages of the central zone of Africa. He states that “the connection between the Niloto-Sudanic group and the Sudan languages is less close than, e.g., the relationship between the West Sudanic languages and the Bantu languages.”⁸

Against Meinhof's Hamitic, the objection may be urged that, in every case in which he wished to extend the group, he selected some African language which attracted his attention by reason of its practical importance or a relative abundance of data, and ignored its obvious connection with neighboring languages in favor of an isolated comparison with the standard Hamitic languages. For example, he treated Masai without reference to its membership in an extensive Nilotic group of languages. The first step, methodologically, was to institute a comparison of all the Nilotic languages to which Masai showed close resemblances, before considering its possible Hamitic connections. Otherwise one is easily led astray by recent convergences which a stricter method will show not to be a part of the linguistic inheritance of the group. In the same manner, he disregarded the Bushman affiliation of Hottentot and the close connection of Hausa with certain languages of Nigeria and the regions east of Lake Chad which form Delafosse's Niger-Chad, Lukas' Chado-Hamitic and Meek's Benue-Chad group.⁹ The whole group must stand or fall together as Hamitic.

Of the additions made by Meinhof to the accepted Hamitic group of Egyptian, Berber, and the Cushite languages, the case of Fulani is perhaps the most interesting. This language, with its initial alternations of stop and fricative, nasalized and unnasalized consonants in substantives accompanied by a class suffix system, has attracted the attention of even the earliest students of African languages. Meinhof interpreted these alternations in which one scheme, stop in the singular and fricative in the plural, is characteristic of persons, while the opposed scheme of fricative in the singular and stop in the plural is characteristic of things, as evidence of the Hamitic affiliations of Fulani.¹⁰ Actually he thought of Fulani as showing an earlier phase of Hamitic—he called it pre-Hamitic—and considered its distinction of persons and things, as well as its categories of small and large, based on a series of alternation of

⁸ Westermann, 1935a. By “Sudanic” Westermann here means West Sudanic.

⁹ Delafosse, 1924; Lukas, 1936; Meek, 1931, maps at end of Volume 2.

¹⁰ Examples of these alternations are *gorke* (sg), *worbe* (pl), “man”; *hayre* (sg), *ka'e* (pl), “stone.”

initial pre-nasalized and unnasalized stops, as prior to the development of sex-gender distinctions. In the opposite alternations of stop and fricative in singular and plural he saw an exemplification of his law of polarity or logical chiasmus.¹¹

As Klingenheben has shown,¹² this scheme is violated by the presence of stops as initial sources in the singular of inanimate nouns of certain suffix classes. In fact, the nature of the initial sound of the substantive depends, in general, on the suffix. The same writer has shown that there is a definite correlation between the final sound of the suffix and the nature of the initial sound of the noun to which it is affixed. Hence, the most likely hypothesis is that the noun was originally accompanied by both a class prefix and class suffix, and that the prefix was lost, leaving the present initial alternations. A final nasal in the prefix produced a pre-nasalized consonant, a final vowel produced a fricative and a final consonant produced an initial stop. This use of the class morpheme simultaneously as prefix and suffix is actually found in some languages of the Mossi-Grunshi group and in some languages of Westermann's West Atlantic. In fact, in one of these, Biafada of Portuguese Guinea, we also find the initial alternations of stop and fricative together with both class prefixes and suffixes, exactly the state of affairs posited for an earlier period of Fulani. With this, the apparently anomalous position of Fulani, which attracted Meinhof's attention, disappears, and it takes its place as another Sudanese class language. In line with this analysis, Westermann pointed to the general adherence of Fulani to his West Atlantic group, and Delafosse placed it in his equivalent Senegal-Guinéan group.

In a later publication,¹³ Meinhof, notwithstanding his acceptance of Klingenheben's explanation of initial consonant alternations in Fulani, an admission which destroys the main support for its classification as Hamitic, maintained its essentially Hamitic character.

Brief mention may be made of Drexel's classification of African languages.¹⁴ This attempt is vitiated by the writer's outspoken aim of demonstrating correlations between linguistic areas and the cultural areas worked out by the Kulturkreis school of ethnologists. Drexel "succeeds" by dint of such expedients as putting the *tan* subdivisions of the Mandingo languages into a different linguistic family than the closely allied Mandingo-*fu*, and by considering the somewhat divergent but genuinely Bantu Fang dialects of the Cameroons as the resultant of three linguistic strata: the Wule (his name for the central Sudanic

¹¹ Here, as in Westermann's view of the isolating Guinea Coast languages as the "primitive" Sudanese type, we find vaguely expressed the evolutionary theory of language development. We pass from the isolating Sudanese through the agglutinative Bantu to the inflectional Hamitic. Meinhof interpreted the Fulani suffix system, whose connection with the Bantu prefixes he saw but incorrectly interpreted, as a survival of an earlier type of classification which was superseded by gender. Thus Fulani was, for him, a bridge between Bantu and Hamitic.

¹² Klingenheben, 1924.

¹³ Meinhof, 1936.

¹⁴ Drexel, 1921-1925.

division, including Madi, Bango, etc.), a Ngo-Nke totemistic stratum (roughly correlative linguistically with Westermann's Kwa), and last, and apparently least, a Bantu stratum. Although the relevance of linguistic relationships for ethnology must be constantly kept in mind, the linguistic data must be worked out independently. Drexel, however, puts the ethnologic cart before the linguistic horse, and talks as much about population movements as linguistic material.¹⁵ No adequate linguistic proof of his groupings is present. We may add that he brings, in a most irresponsible manner, such languages as Hittite, Elamite and Basque into relationship with the Kanuri of Lake Chad and Bantu, while he connects Fulani with Malayo-Polynesian on the basis of a word list replete with nursery words, mutual borrowings from Arabic, and improbable semantic resemblances. Schmidt and Kieckers in their general linguistic surveys of the globe¹⁶ have utilized Drexel's classification of African languages, purged of their extra-continental connections.

Finally, there is Delafosse's classification of the non-Bantu, non-Hamitic languages of Africa. In this sober and accurate grouping of the languages of the Sudanese zone, due attention is paid to the importance of the class prefix and suffix systems, and their connection with the Bantu class prefixes indicated. But if, on the one hand, Meinhof is prone to see gender and Hamitic wherever he looked, Delafosse's statement that "there is not a single Negro-African language in which one does not find, to a more or less degree, under one form or another, traces of noun classes"¹⁷ seems overdrawn, and there is a tendency to consider any type of noun classification as remnants of a class system. Thus, the genders of the Niger-Chad group, of at least probable Hamitic affiliation, are interpreted as an African class system. Here, as elsewhere, we must hold fast to the genetic point of view and show specific correspondences between the classificational elements of the Niger-Chad group and the prefixes and suffixes of the Sudanic group, a correspondence which seems to be lacking. Delafosse's viewpoint does not vitiate his groupings, which are simple enumerations, since he makes no attempts at more elaborate classification of his sixteen sub-groups.

Leaving aside doubtful groups of languages, and those for which data are almost lacking, it thus appears that there are two great linguistic groups in

¹⁵ One realized at one point, with something of a start, that perhaps the Kulturhistorische Schule denies diffusion. Drexel (1921, p. 108) concludes that the Wule linguistic groups, connected with the boomerang culture, must formerly have been widely distributed in West Africa, because of the scattered appearance of the characteristic throwing-knife in this area. Apparently diffusion is ruled out and what we have is, in every instance, the movement of peoples with their cultures kept fairly intact. Drexel thinks of languages as connected with the various Kulturkreise in this relatively stable manner. Very instructive in this respect is his use of the compound term "Sprachmenschen."

¹⁶ Schmidt, 1926; Kieckers, 1931.

¹⁷ Meillet and Cohen, 1924.

Africa, the Semito-Hamitic (since the ultimate relations of the Semitic group to the Hamitic cannot be doubted) and the Sudanese whose membership for the moment must be restricted to the West Sudanese and Bantu and which may some day be demonstrated to include all the other non-Hamitic languages.

The great desideratum of African linguistics remains more descriptive data. When one considers that of the hundreds of languages of Africa, a mere handful has received anything approaching a descriptive treatment adequate by present-day linguistic standards, that there are still languages of which we know hardly more than the name, it is evident that the careful reconstruction of the parent speech of each restricted group of languages and further comparisons carried out with the rigor demanded in historical linguistic work must, to a great extent, wait upon the further accumulation of accurate descriptive material. The hypothesis of widespread hybridization and morphological borrowing, so often assumed by the desperate classifier, while it cannot be ruled out *a priori*, must be subjected to the test of the normal methods of historic linguistics based on adequate material. The same Meinhof, whose disregard of sound historic method (understandable, perhaps, in view of the dearth of descriptive material) we have here criticized, was moved to carry out his own epoch-making historical analysis of Bantu by the conviction that regular phonetic change, and other linguistic processes observable in areas where linguistic material was more abundant, would also be found to hold for the languages of Africa.

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