

Some Thoughts on Gurage (with special reference to Western Gurage)

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Gurage is a cover term in the linguistic literature for a group of some dozen south Ethiopian Semitic tongues spoken in Gurageland, a small area some 10 miles south-south West of Addis Ababa. These tongues are Soddo, Goggot, Muher, Mesqan, Chaha, Ezha, Ennemor, Endegegn, Gyeto, Selti, Wolane and Zay. The other south Ethiopian Semitic languages are Amharic, Gafat and Harari. (Argobba, also often mentioned in this connection, is actually a conservative dialect of Amharic and may be omitted from the discussion.)

The earliest scientific classification of Gurage is that of Cohen (1931). According to Cohen, Gurage consists of three clusters:

1. Eastern Gurage (suitably updated): Selti, Wolane and Zay, connected to Harari;
2. Western Gurage (suitably updated): Chaha, Ezha, Ennemor, Endegegn, Gyeto, Goggot, Muher, Masqan, connected to Amharic;
3. North (Eastern) Gurage: Soddo, intermediate between the other two groups.

However, on the basis of Polotsky's (1938:175) warning against exaggerating the Western Gurage-Amharic connection and due to Leslau's (1950) demonstration that Soddo is connected to Gafat, Cohen (1950) revised his 1931 classification according to the following scheme:

1. Eastern Gurage: Selti, Wolane, Zay, connected to Harari;
2. Western Gurage: Chaha, Ezha, Ennemor, Endegegn, Gyeto, Goggot, Muher, Masqan, *sui generis*;
3. North (East) Gurage: Soddo, connected to Gafat.

Leslau (1956) accepted the above classification, and it has become standard in the literature since then. True, Hetzron (1972) tried to revise the classification quite drastically (for example, he claimed Eastern Gurage-Harari were connected to Amharic!). But Goldenberg (1977) politely but firmly disapproved of Hetzron's rather revolutionary views.

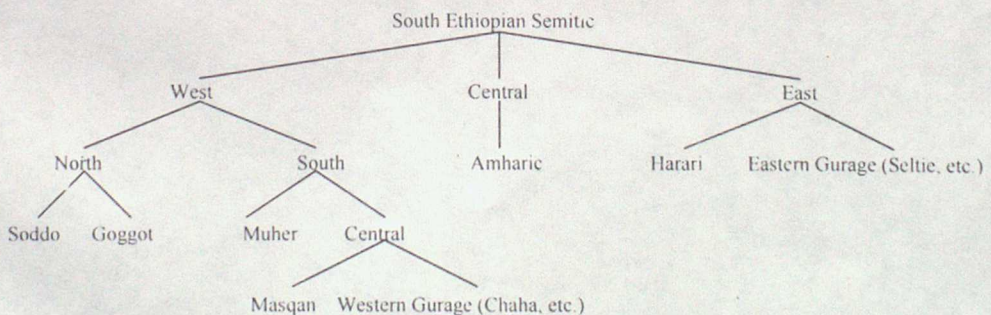
Still, we feel Cohen (1950) and Leslau (1956) can be further refined. In particular, Polotsky (1949:37, text and footnote 5) noted quite clearly that it was "unwarranted" to consider Soddo anything but Western Gurage according to Cohen's own major isoglosses. Further, Gafat has "striking affinities" to Western Gurage so expanded. Thus, for Polotsky (cf. also his 1938 comment above), Gurage consists of two groups.

1. Eastern Gurage: Selti, Wolane and Zay, connected to Harari;
2. Western Gurage: Chaha, Ezha, Ennemor, Endegegn, Gyeto, Goggot, Muher, Masqan, Soddo, connected to Gafat.

We feel that Polotsky's model, overlooked in the literature, deserves serious consideration. Nevertheless, Polotsky's Western Gurage seems terribly 'crowded' with its nine idioms. We therefore need to also note the following points:

1. Goldenberg (1968) showed that Soddo and Goggot are close. Goggot is "a somewhat modified form" of Soddo, "adequately understood" by Soddo speakers. Hetzron (1972) similarly noted (p.2) that Soddo and Goggot speakers "understood each other fairly well, and that Soddo speakers consider Goggot "a Soddo dialect."
2. Leslau (1969) showed that Mesqan is closer to Chaha than to Muher or Goggot or Soddo.
3. Hetzron (1972) also noted (p.2) that Soddo and Goggot speakers, who, as noted above, "understand each other fairly well," "have more difficulties in understanding Muher, which is partly understood by the adjacent Western Gurage speakers." Further, they understand Masqan only "with great difficulty," in contrast to other Western Gurage speakers.

With the above points taken into consideration, we point the following classification scheme for Gurage, within the South Ethiopian Semitic branch:



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