Some Cushitic Etymologies

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This article discusses the etymology of twelve lexical items that, to the best of my knowledge, have been lacking a diachronic explanation up to now. The focus will be on East Cushitic, in particular Somali.

Ir. baa⁶ "to exceed, surpass, win over"

I have argued in Peust (2005) that South Cushitic⁶ regularly corresponds to h of East Cushitic. We gain another example for this equation by comparing baa⁶ (proto-West-Rift reconstruction *ba⁶⁶ by Kießling & Mous 2003: 66) with the well-known East Cushitic root *baḥ- "to go out, to go up" represented, among others, in Som. bax "to go out, exit, leave", Or. baḥ⁶ "to go out, appear, (of sun, moon:) to rise", and Burji baḥ "to go out, appear; to go up, climb, rise" (see DolGOP'OL'SKIJ 1973: 318f. for further cognates). The meaning in Ir. can easily have developed from an earlier *⁺to go up". A similar semantic extension in the direction of "to win" has taken place in the English verb "to overcome".

Som. bojel "young female goat"

A Southern dialect word recorded by Tosco (1997: 200). A similar word for "goat", but with initial f-, appears in Ethio-Semitic, e.g. Amh. fayyel "goat", and in Agaw, e.g. Awngi fiyeli "goat" (form from HETZRON 1978: 138). It is usually assumed (APPLEYARD 1977: 67; LESLIE 1979, III: 252) that the word was borrowed from Agaw into Ethio-Semitic rather than vice versa. I have argued (Peust 2003a) that f > h is a regular sound change in the history of Somali. This makes a connection to bojel highly probable.

Similar words for "goat" are encountered also in Nubian languages where they might have been borrowed from Cushitic (Bechthaus-Gerst 1989: 32).

Som. far "to send, give a message"

In REINISCH 1902: 151 attested also as a noun "message". Cognates are only known from rather closely related Lowland Eastern Cushitic languages: Baiso for "to send", Afar farriim "to send, command, send a message". The comparison to a Southern Cushitic root *faaḍ "to count" by Kießling & Mous (2003: 102) is both semantically and phonologically unsatisfying.

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, word forms are cited from the following sources: Parker & Hayward (1985) for Afar; Kane (1990) for Amharic; WEHR (1983) for Arabic; HAYWARD (1979) for Baiso; ROPER (1928) for Beja; SASSE (1982) for Burji; Tosco (2001) for Dhaasanac; Hannig (1995) for Egyptian; LESLIE (1991) for Ge'ez; Mous et al. (2002) for Iraqw; Cerulli (1951) for Kafa; GRAGG (1982) and TILAHUN (1989) for Oromo; Pillinger & GALBRAITH (1999) for Rendille; GASPARINI (1983) for Sidamo; AGOSTINI et al. (1985) and ZARC & OSMAN (1993) for Somali; LAMBERTI & SOTTILE (1997) for Wolaytta.

The following language abbreviations are employed: Amh. = Amharic; Arab. = Arabic; Dha. = Dhaasanac; Egpt. = Egyptian; Heb. = Hebrew; Ir. = Iraqw; Or. = Oromo; Rend. = Rendille; Sid. = Sidamo; Som. = Somali; Wol. = Wolaytta.

I use the common orientalist transcription symbols for most languages. Only Somali is cited in its official orthography (i.e.: c = c; dḥ = ḍḥ; f = f; sh = ʃ; x = ɣ).

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I propose a connection to Som. *far "script, handwriting" and Afar *feeris "to write". Historical plausibility suggests that the Cushitic words for "script / to write" were borrowed from Old Nubian *par "to write" (form from Browne 1996: 145f.), which means that the shift in meaning must have proceeded from "script / write" towards "send". The closeness of both semantic concepts is paralleled by the Egypt. verb h3b (the conventional transcription symbol 3 stands for hr) "to send, to send a message, to write a letter", which after a proposal by Schneider (2003: 195) is the source of the Berber root *habb "to write" and, as I wish to add, for the terms for "to write" in several other African languages such as Kanuri ruwo- and Hausa riiƙunƙaƙa.

Som. *gefer "to run loose (usually of a horse)"

Rendille has a verb fir-d-: "to flee, run away" (-d-: medio-passive suffix) which can be combined with the ablative preverb ka-, productive in both Rendille and Somali, to result in ka-fir-d-: "to flee from, run away from (some danger)". It appears that two comparable items once existed at an earlier stage of Som., but *ka-fir- underwent a process of univerbation which lead to phonetic developments obscuring the etymological relationship between both forms. The form *fird-: may, as Heine (1981: 186) thinks, survive with some change in meaning in Som. firdhoo "to scatter, disperse (intr.)". On the other hand, I suggest that *ka-fir- survives in Som. gefer.

The development -a-i- > -e-e- is in agreement with a general trend towards word-internal vowel levelling in Som. and can probably be regarded as the regular phonetic development; cf. Som. leben "bricks" < Arab. labin and Som. meseggo = Baiso bašinga = Burji matyŋogu, all "millet". This also explains why the initial velar failed to undergo a palatalization which would have been expected before an original front vowel (Lamberti 1986: 246). An analogous process -a-i- > -o-o- can be observed e.g. in Som. dhogor "animal's coat, pelt" = geez s'agwr "hair, fur", to be reconstructed approximately as *e'agu. Most Som. words that have one of the short vowel sequences -a-i- or -a-u- today are obvious borrowings or secondary formations.

The voicing of initial k > g is irregular by the present state of our knowledge but not unparalleled, consider Som. gaguur "area around the mouth, snout, muzzle" = geez känfär "lip" and Som. galoof "animal giving no milk" (Agostini et al. 1985, Zorc & Osman 1993) ~ "a female not at the moment pregnant" (Abraham 1962) ~ "barren woman or animal" (Reinisch 1902) = saho kuruf "impotent" (form and etymology from Reinsch 1890: 221). The presence of an f in all three examples may not be accidental.

Som. geri "giraffe"

Closely related Rendille also has geri "giraffe". The preservation of the initial velar points to an earlier *gari. Other evident Cushitic cognates are lacking, but some Eastern Nilotic languages have a root *kr, e.g. Turkana e-kori, Bari kurit (forms from Voßen 1982: 374). In Semitic, we find words evidencing a base *zir: Geez zäräi, Arab. zaïrafa(h) "giraffe" (with a suffix -f of unknown origin). Already Reinsch (1896) suspected a connection at least between the Somali and the Geez forms. The Semitic words appear to have been borrowed from a form such as *geri or *kori after it had been palatalized into something like *zeri or *zeri in the hypothetical African donor language.

Egyptian has a word sr written with a giraffe hieroglyph. Its usual meaning is "to predict, announce", but the word is also attested as "giraffe" proper (some occurrences are cited by Meeks 1981: 336). This probably derives from the same source.

The European words come from Arabic via Italian giraffa (l/-). It is curious that the stop pronunciation, which I consider original, has been restituted by misinterpretation of the Italian writing in some languages such as German Giraffe and Finnish kirahvi.
Som. **hoos** "bottom; down"

The only cognate known to me is *husseem* "to bend down, become low" in the closely related Baiso language, where -(e)m is a medio-passival verbal extension. This is another example of the Somali simplification of long consonants with compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel as described by Ehret (1991: 271).

Or. **inta** "daughter, girl"

No etymology has so far been proposed for this item of the core vocabulary. Konso, the closest relative of Oromo, has a form *inanta* "girl, daughter" (Black 1974: 221), which does show some resemblance. In Somali, we have *in'an* "boy; (with different accentuation:) girl"; *ilm-o* "children". This clearly points (with Lamberti 1986: 334) to a stem *il(a)m-*, from which *in'an* resulted by nasal assimilation at a distance. The representation of -m as -n is trivial since -m is not tolerated as a word final consonant in Somali. This stem *il(a)m-* again seems (with Dolgopolskij 1973: 188f) to be an extension with the medio-passival suffix -n- from the wide-spread Cushitic-Omotic root *il* ~ *yl* "to give birth" (e.g. Sid. *lla* "to beget, bear", Wol. *yl* "to give birth"), which in its turn could be identical to Egypt. *jwr* "to be(com)e pregnant" (on the correspondency Cushitic *l* = Egypt. *r* see Peust 2003b: 349). The designation of "child" as "born one" is obvious and found in many languages, e.g. Danish *barn*, Greek τέκνον, etc.

Returning now to *inta*, I suggest that it was derived by metathesis from a Proto-Oromoid form *ilanta*. Konso *inanta* developed from the same *ilanta* with a nasal assimilation like the one found in Somali. This *ilanta* appears to be an expansion with a suffix -ta from *ilam-*, which survives in Oromo as *ilma* "son". The suffix -ta must have been a feminine suffix, but it is no longer productive in the language (modern Oromo has a feminine suffix -tii).

Ir. **naa** "to fear, be afraid"

It seems practically certain that this verb is related to East Cushitic words such as Som. *nar* "to be startled, frightened", Or. *nar* "to be excited, startled, frightened", and Burji *nar* "to fear". The sound correspondence for the second radical is the same as with Ir. *baa* "to exceed" discussed above.

Som. **qoor** "neck"

This is the base entry given in all the dictionaries I consulted. No satisfactory etymology has been found. Leslau (1963: 128) compares hesitatingly Harari *quru* "shoulder blade".

Zorc & Osman (1993: 332) cite *goodh* as an alternative form of *qoor*. According to Lamberti (1986: 164), the noun *qoor* is predominantly used in the Benaadir dialects, where, according to a well-known rule (Lamberti 1986: 345f.), *dh* shifted to *r* in postvocalic position. This makes it probable that *goodh* would be the etymologically expected form for standard Somali and the dominating realisation as *qoor* is due to a dialectal origin of the word. Departing from *goodh*, it is easy to find further cognates such as Af-Jidda *qij* "back of the neck" (form from Lamberti 1986: 164), Or. *quč'ee* "nape, the back of the neck" (form from Stroomer 1995: 202), or Kafa *qet'bo* "neck". To be reconstructed approximately as *qč'-e-. On the development of the vowel cf. *hoos* above.

Som. **shinni** "bee(s)"

It is a rule of thumb for Somali that most long consonants are the result of a comparatively recent assimilation of consonant clusters since the original geminates have largely been simplified in this
language (Ehret 1991: 271f.). The question therefore arises what the origin of *nn- is here. Cognates such as Rend. čini “bee” and even more so Or. kannissa “bee” make it clear in the first place that sh- is from *k- by the well-known palatalization rule (Lamberti 1986: 246). There now happens to be a noun kaneeco “mosquito(es)” in Somali. I suggest that shinni and kaneeco are two different nominal formations from a single root *kn- “insect that stings”. Shinni therefore goes back to a form such as *kiniti. Other words which probably belong here as well are Elmolo kenete (form from Heine 1980: 206) and Kafa šunuoo, both “mosquito”.

In view of this, the connection of Som. shinni to Hebr. kimām “gnats” envisaged by Militarev & Kogan (2005: No. 116) becomes somewhat less convincing, unless it could be shown that -n- could be lost by assimilation also in Semitic. The Hebr. word is probably rather to be connected with Egypt. šmns “mosquito”, as suggested already by Gesenius (1905: 317), and perhaps even with Greek κόνως “mosquito”.

Som. tataji “to push”

The ending -i is a causative suffix. There is also a verb taqaantagi with the same meaning. Assuming that both words are related, it becomes plausible to reconstruct their original forms as *taq-taq-i and *taq-aan-tag-i respectively. The structure X-aan-X is otherwise attested as a word formation pattern in Som. and related languages, such as in Som. buraanbar “poem; to sing a poem”, Som. giraaangiri “wheel”, and Som. culaacul “leech” (< *cul-aan-cul, cf. Or. uulaan qala "worm in water that attacks cow’s tongue" mentioned by Gragg 1982: 131).

In the former variety, the cluster *-qi- was simplified to -i-. Some cluster must be reconstructed here in any case because an original *-i- would have been voiced to -i- (Lamberti 1986: 280). The palatalization *qi > ji is regular (Lamberti 1986: 252f.) but it was suppressed in taqaantagi which is still synchronically recognizable as a reduplicated structure.

The presumed simplex *taq survives in two languages of the greater Somaloid group, namely Rend. taḥ and Dha. taʔ, both "to push". Sasse (1982: 177) connects these latter words to Or. tuq "to touch", where, however, the different vowel remains without explanation.

Som. tiraab "to talk"

This is an obvious derivation from the same root *tir- that also forms the base of Som. tiri "to count". The verbal extension -aab (-aaw) has been discussed by Hayward (1984: 99f.) and Saeed (1993: 67). The connection between both semantic concepts is otherwise known from Cushitic: Beja ḍīgwi "to count, to inform" = Agaw ḍaw (and varieties) "to speak" (Agaw form by Appleyard 1984: 40; etymology by Ehret 1987: 95), and even from Germanic: English tell = German zählen "to count", erzählen "to tell".

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