

SOME ASPECTS OF OROMO PHONOLOGY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia, as a nation, is comprised of four major ethnic groups. These include the Omotic people, the Nilotic people, the Semites, and the Cushites. Although these ethnic groups are bound together by one political boundary, each has its own history, culture and language distinct from the others'.

The Omotic people are the least numerous, and are confined to a small portion of land in southwest Ethiopia along the Omo River, hence the name Omotic.

The Nilotic people, as the name may suggest, inhabit the lowlands of Ethiopia along the Blue Nile, and also the remote fringes of Ethiopia along the Sudan border. They encompass a much larger area of land than the Omotic people, and are greater in number. The Nilotes are subdivided into several tribes. The Anuyak, Fakosho, Gunza, Mao, Nuer and Saysay are the most important ones. These groups have a much darker complexion than the rest of the Ethiopians, and that is due to the tremendous heat in the lowlands which they inhabit.

The Semites are Semitic speaking people who inhabit mainly the highlands of Ethiopia. Numerically, the Semites constitute approximately one-quarter of the total population, and they are subdivided into various tribes, of which the Amharas, the Tigreans, and the Gurage are the most significant. Of all the many tribes of Ethiopia, it is the Amharas who have totally dominated the political scene in the history of the nation. One of biggest achievements the Amharas

made is the promotion of their tribal language, Amharic, to national prominence over the other languages. Today Amharic is the national language of Ethiopia, and everybody is obligated to learn it.

The Cushites are people of the Hamito-Ethiopian stock. Estimated to be the largest ethnic group in the land, the Cushites are dispersed over the whole nation. The Cushites are subdivided into numerous tribes, among which Oromo¹, Somali, Borena, Afar, and Beja are the most important both in terms of number and political significance. Many of the Cushites have intermarried with the Semites, with the Amharas in particular, in the highlands and the central plains. However, some members of the Oromo tribe, the largest subdivision of the Cushites, have managed to stay pure and free of intermixing in the West, Southwest, and South. They thus preserve the culture, customs and language of true Oromo.

The Oromo language belongs to the Cushitic subclassification which in turn belongs to the Afro-Asiatic family of languages (see Greenberg 1970). It is the most widely spoken language in Ethiopia, occurring in virtually all of the fourteen provinces with expected regional variation². The Oromo analyzed in this monograph is that of Wallaga, a western province with which I am most familiar.

Oromo is a non-literary language, without a writing system of its own³. For many years now, Oromo intellectuals both at home and abroad have tried to elevate Oromo to a national prominence. Nevertheless, their effort has yet to be recognized as Oromo is still held to a low profile by government officials who are apparently non-Oromo speakers⁴.

For this reason, Oromo has remained hidden from and unexplored by many outsiders who possibly could have contributed the kind of linguistic analysis that, for instance, Amharic has been given. Today, however, things seem to have changed in Ethiopia as newspapers are allowed to be printed in Oromo, and Oromo even has a daily television and radio program⁵. Nonetheless, it is still overshadowed by Amharic.

Prior to the 1930's most of the work done on Oromo had been mostly by missionaries whose major interest was to learn the grammar for communication and pedagogical purposes. In recent years, there have been some linguistic contributions made in Oromo and in other related Cushitic languages of Ethiopia (e.g. Borena, Beja, Somali, Afar) by a few scholars here and there. The most notable individuals that have made contributions in one area or another include B.W. Andrzejewski (1957) on Borena phonology, J.J. Pia (1970) on Somali phonology, and L.F. Bliese (1975) on Afar vowel dissimilation. As far as contributions in the Oromo dialect of Wallaga, I find the works of R.J. Hayward (1976), and Gene Gragg (1976) to be very productive. Both Hayward and Gragg, while working independently, remark along the same line. Hayward's remark is on Oromo monophophonology in which he presents a clear and concise discussion on the subject. On the other hand, Gragg's work is more general and covers a lot more ground. Gragg's article entitled Oromo of Wallagga was edited by M.L. Bender (1976) in The Non-Semitic Languages of Ethiopia.

While intensive study in Oromo phonology is still lacking, such contributions as made by both Hayward and Gragg are significant and