

Newman, P. (2000). Review of Hausa Comparative Dictionary by Neil Skinner. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 21: 81–85.

Neil Skinner: *Hausa Comparative Dictionary*. (Westafrikanische Studien: Frankfurter Beiträge zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte, 11.) Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 1996. xxi + 337 pp. DM 64.

Neil Skinner, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, is internationally recognized as a major figure in Hausa language scholarship. His many books include pedagogical grammars, dictionaries, translations of literary and biographical texts, and collections of Hausa literature. His latest contribution is a *Hausa Comparative Dictionary* (henceforth *HCD*). Whether *HCD* succeeds in achieving the high academic level of his previous works is not so easy to say. This is one of those difficult cases where one keeps on asking whether the glass is half full or half empty. Some days, I tend to regard *HCD* as a rich compendium of data that constitutes an indispensable tool for any Hausaist or Chadic/Afroasiatic comparativist. Skinner has sifted through innumerable sources and has amassed an incredible amount of lexical material related to the Hausa lexicon. On other days, however, I cannot help but feel that this book is unreliable, user unfriendly, and methodologically flawed.

HCD contains approximately 3,500 Hausa headwords (with translation) accompanied by phonologically similar words, often quite extensive, drawn from over 250 other languages. The treatment of loanwords—mostly from Arabic and English—is generally straightforward and not problematic, e.g., *bayti* ‘verse’ < Ar. *bayt*; *kwalbati* ‘culvert’ < Eng. The inclusion of a full complement of Arabic loanwords is extremely useful, especially since *HCD* specifies the form of the source word, thereby allowing the scholar who is not an Arabist to be cognizant of the phonological adjustments that took place in the process of borrowing. The treatment of English loanwords is also well done, although here there is a bit of randomness as to which English words (e.g., *nas* ‘nurse’) are included and which (e.g., *bam* ‘bomb’) are not.) In the case of English loanwords, *HCD* often includes a cross reference to Sierra Leone Krio, e.g., *kabeji* ‘cabbage’ < Eng. cf. Kri. *kabej*, the purpose of which totally escapes me. Sometimes intermediate pathways are specified for loanwords when Hausa has borrowed an Arabic word via Kanuri or an English word via Yoruba, etc., but many of these have been missed (e.g., *tasha* ‘station’ < Eng, presumably borrowed indirectly (but not specified) since, a direct borrowing would probably have been pronounced with initial /s/ plus an epenthetic /i/).

The entries for non-loanwords are much more elaborate. They contain more comparative citations and involve more of the compiler’s imagination. The entries often include related morphological forms (such as plurals), a cross reference to another Hausa word, as well as previous reconstructions from Chadic

(taken from Newman 1977), or Afroasiatic (from Orel and Stolbova 1995). The following sample entry (from p. 22) is typical, though on the relatively simple side. (To make it interpretable here, the language abbreviations have been spelled out):

biri monkey P.Chadic (N) *bədi cf. bika OS *bid-, *fir- “monkey”

3a. Masa vir- 9. Fulani (Volta) bayl- Makua tubīli Swahili tumbili “m. sp.”

Yao tilumbīri 7. Berber b-d- 8. Bagirmi beti, bulu Kanzi ablāi “Affe”.

(Curiously, German and French glosses are often cited as is and not translated into English.)

The numerals preceding the examples refer to language groups, namely 1. West Chadic, 2. Central Chadic, 3. East Chadic, 3a. Masa Group, 4. Cushitic, 4a. Omotic, 5. Egyptian, Coptic, 6. Semitic, 7. Berber, 8. Nilo-Saharan, 9. Niger-Congo. Note that there is no attempt to explicitly treat Chadic as a unit as opposed to non-Chadic nor Afroasiatic as opposed to non-Afroasiatic. As seen in the sample above, the examples are not presented in numerical order, rather, “The order in which these entries has been made has varied and, increasingly, resemblance in form and meaning has suggested juxtaposition, even where this has meant separating groups in which genetic theory might predict cognacy” (xi).

HCD is good at relating semantically and phonologically similar Hausa words or parts of words, e.g., **ranā** ‘sun’ and **rāni** ‘hot season’; **sau/sāwu** ‘foot’ and **sau** ‘times’, **bana** ‘this year’, **badī** ‘next year’, and **bāra** ‘last year’ (all with initial **ba(a)**-. *HCD* is also good – but in this case with English intonation expressing the negative meaning too good – in proposing complex morphological structure of presumed etymological significance with only weak supporting evidence, e.g., **hanci** nose ? < **M + ci**() cf. **ji** [smell, feel, hear], **sansan** [smell, sniff] (104). Skinner states that “explicit diachronic speculation has mostly been avoided” (x), but implicit speculation is found throughout *HCD*, e.g., **hafo** ‘nose bleed’ P.Ch. (N) ***bar** (100) [implying an etymological relationship that is unlikely], or **tara** **nine** ? < ***taha-** (253) [ignoring the short /a/ in the first syllable of the Hausa word] cf. Ron ***hara** “hand” see **hannu**.

The Hausa headwords are given in standard orthography, i.e., without tone, but with the overt marking of long vowels in non-final position. (Long /e/ and /o/ are not overtly marked, since these vowels are always long. Strictly speaking this is a reasonable convention, but it is one that lends itself to misinterpretation and misunderstanding on the part of the reader.) The decision not to mark final vowel length for any of the vowels is unfortunate, since, in the case of nouns, a short final vowel is a good indication of a loanword that might not otherwise be identified as such (see Gouffé 1965: 202ff.). More serious is the failure to mark the difference between Hausa’s two R’s: the tap/roll (which Hausaists often indicate as **ř**) and the flap (which is represented simply as **r**). Synchronically, the distinction has a low functional load and has even been lost in some dialects, but historically the distinction is extremely important. For example, syllable final **ř** typically reflects

an earlier **t** or **d** or **ɗ** that has undergone rhotacism, whereas flap **r** in the same position derives from an earlier liquid. Failure to distinguish the **R**'s thus leads to errors such as when **farka** (really **faṛka**) 'wake up' is compared with a West Chadic root ***f-r-** "open" (65) even though the Hausa word historically contained **ɗ**, not **r** (as seen in the doublet **fadaka**, which is cited, but then ignored). Moreover, since syllable initial **ṛ** is rarely found in native words, its presence can be used in the identification of unrecognized loanwords, e.g., **muṛa** 'cold' (illness) (with a short final vowel!), for which *HCD* provides a long list of putative Chadic and Afroasiatic cognates.

The discussion of the **R**'s leads to the general question of sound changes in the history of Hausa and Chadic. *HCD* does not discuss sound changes explicitly – the reader is referred to other works, such as Newman (1977), but surprisingly, not to the essential study by Klingenheben (1927/28) – but Skinner implicitly takes them into account to a greater or lesser extent. There are, however, a few serious gaffes. For example, Hausa **shūka** 'sow' (246) is compared with Hausa **sōk-** 'pierce', Afroasiatic ***sūk-**, Indo-European ***seg-**, etc. Appearances notwithstanding, the /k/ in **shūka** is not part of the lexical root, i.e., the comparisons are specious, but rather derives etymologically from a suffix **-ka**. The original root had the form ***sip-**, the syllable-final ***p** having weakened to /u/ in accordance with Klingenheben's law, and the resulting /iu/ diphthong simplifying to long /ū/ (after having conditioned palatalization of the preceding /s/).

To me, the greatest weakness in *HCD* – which, ironically, derives from Skinner's dedication to academic honesty and completeness – is the pervasive scientific "noise" that abounds. The book is filled with so much totally irrelevant material that it is difficult to ascertain what is important. In *HCD*, the all too common examples from closely related Gwandara are a major contributor to the noise. For example, in the entry **citta** 'four days hence', the first comparative citation is Gwandara **cita**; one of the first citations under **kuda** 'housefly' is Gwandara **ṛkunda**. These examples might be interesting if one were doing a study of Gwandara; but since Gwandara is not a sister language but rather a historically recent creolized offshoot of Hausa, which, among other characteristics, has reduced all geminate consonants, lost glottalization, and undergone extensive (though unpredictable) nasalization, these citations tell us nothing at all about Hausa. (Would anyone doing an etymological/historical dictionary of English impose on the reader the fact that the Sierra Leone Krio word for 'thief' is **tif** or that its word for 'rice' is **res**?) Or what is supposed to be the purpose of the odds and ends of Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo citations included in entries where *HCD* posits a proto-Chadic and/or proto-Afroasiatic reconstruction or includes a large number of cognate forms from other Chadic languages? Assuming that Hausa **kūsu** 'rat, mouse' (157) is a reflex of a proto-form reconstructable roughly as ***K-s-m**, for which there is ample evidence provided in *HCD*, then what possible significance is the Gbaya (Niger-Congo) citation **koe** "écureuil de terre, rat palmiste" or the Daza (Nilo-Saharan) word **kəɔ**?

In the early stages of comparative research, one naturally collects whatever one can find; but ultimately the researcher has to sift through the data to determine what is *relevant*. English is filled with clichés about not being able to find the forest for the trees or needing to separate the wheat from the chaff; whichever cliché one prefers more than applies to the treatment of data in *HCD*. One can understand Skinner's aversion to premature "diachronic speculation", of which we have had more than our share in the Afroasiatic phylum; but, this can hardly justify the opposite extreme in which the author absolves himself of the scientific responsibility of making reasoned judgments (rightly or wrongly) about which comparative citations are likely to be meaningful and which are extraneous look-alikes.

There is a Dutch saying, *Over smaak valt niet te twisten* "There's no arguing over taste". Although one normally applies this to matters of wine or music, one can extend the notion to intellectual style. Whereas, I am by nature a hard scientist, who accidentally ended up studying languages and the synchronic rules and diachronic laws that govern them, Skinner is a humanist for whom language is a thing of mystery and beauty. In my approach to historical linguistics, I am always searching for regular processes and patterns. Skinner, on the other hand, clearly subscribes to Gillieron's famous dictum that "every word has a history of its own". For me, fundamental linguistic research, whether synchronic or diachronic, requires rigorous application of the hypothetico-deductive method; Skinner obviously believes that linguistic results can be obtained from the haphazard collection of empirical data without overriding theories or preconceptions. From Skinner's vantage point, Chomsky's much maligned "butterfly collector" would be embraced with approbation.

So, what is my final judgment with regard to this book? Skinner states, "These pages are the result of some forty years' work with Hausa lexicon" (viii). One certainly must acknowledge that *HCD* was a labour of love and that the volume contains a wealth of ideas and data. Depending on their linguistic orientation and analytical approach, some scholars will be more troubled by its manifest inadequacies than others. In my own case, I cannot pick up *HCD* without being irritated by its excesses of irrelevance and fancy and its disregard for the tried and true canons of historical linguistic scholarship. Having said this, I must confess that whenever I am working on problems related to the history of the Hausa lexicon, I keep turning to Skinner's book and find that I keep on consulting it.

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