

METHODOLOGICAL PITFALLS IN CHADIC-AFROASIATIC COMPARISONS*

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In the thirty years since Greenberg (1950) explicitly proposed that the Chadic family be incorporated in the Afroasiatic (AA) phylum, little of value has been accomplished in the way of Chadic-AA comparisons.¹ The inclusion of Chadic within AA has had virtually no impact on proposals concerning the grammatical nature of proto-Afroasiatic (PAA) nor on the subclassification of the families within the phylum. The major difficulty has not been the inadequacy of descriptive materials - as often asserted - but rather the existence of an insidious circularity in the historical methodology: a strong bias to reconstruct Chadic so that it conforms to some supposedly typical AA pattern, followed in turn by the use of these same Chadic reconstructions as confirmation of the pan-AA nature of these patterns. Examples of erroneous, but generally accepted, Chadic-AA comparisons resulting from this faulty methodology can be illustrated in the areas of lexicon, phonology, and grammar.

In Jungraithmayr (1977), a form *S(H)-B-R/H is reconstructed as the proto-Chadic root for the verb 'to drink', which is then compared to Egyptian s-w-r / s-w-l, cited by Rössler (1971). The striking similarity between the two forms would seem to be significant in two respects: first, by providing a highly probable cognate pair between Chadic and Egyptian; second, by supporting the reconstruction of a trilateral protoform for this item in PAA. This assumes, of course, that the Chadic reconstruction is essentially accurate - which, unfortunately, is not the case. The proto-Chadic word for 'to drink' was most likely a simple, monoradical form *sa, both the consonant *and* the vowel being reconstructable (Newman and Ma 1966, Newman 1977a). There is little in the Chadic evidence to suggest that this word contained a second, much less a third, radical. This being the case, how does one account for the extravagant *S(H)-B-R/H reconstruction proposed by Jungraithmayr? The answer is that the comparison with the trilateral Egyptian form must have been made *before*, not after, the Chadic word was reconstructed, i.e. the Chadic item was reconstructed to fit a pre-determined target. The Chadic lexical reconstruction and the Chadic-Egyptian comparison amounted in effect to an exercise in circularity, leading from

one form to the other without really advancing our knowledge of the AA lexicon.

Carnochan (1977) describes a number of AA-like phonological features in Bachama, a language belonging to the Biu-Mandara branch of Chadic. Implied is that these features have been inherited from PAA and thus necessarily are to be ascribed to proto-Chadic. Among these features are the restriction against vowel-initial words and the status of glottal stop as a distinct phoneme, features claimed by Diakonoff (1965) to be common to all AA families. Surprisingly, these features cannot be reconstructed for proto-Chadic. While many Chadic languages, such as Bachama, Bole, and Hausa, do have these features - and one may ask whether this shared drift is of phylogenetic significance - proto-Chadic apparently did not. Contrary to the typical AA pattern, proto-Chadic had no glottal stop in its phonemic inventory; moreover, it did allow vowel-initial words (Newman 1976; 1977a). The generally supposed similarity of Chadic to AA in this regard turns out to be illusory. It is based on a comparison of AA, not with Chadic as reconstructed according to strict comparative procedures, but with Chadic as it has been presumed to be on *a priori* grounds.

A number of Chadic languages, most notably Mubi (East Branch) and Ron (West Branch), exhibit an opposition between perfective and imperfective verb stems, where the latter are marked by apophony involving internal *-a-*. This has been accepted by Chadicists for many years as a manifestation of the same aspectual dichotomy seen in Akkadian *iprus/iparras*, and therefore as one of the most important shared features relating Chadic to AA (see Greenberg 1952, Jungraithmayr 1968, Schuh 1976). The assumption underlying the long-range Chadic-AA comparison was that the Mubi and Ron constructions were cognate with one another and that the system of apophonically-formed imperfective stems could be reconstructed for proto-Chadic. This assumption, while reasonable, cannot be confirmed. Rather, one can show that all of the examples generally cited of apophonically-formed imperfective stems in Chadic have been the result of language-specific or group-specific developments of very shallow time depth (Newman 1977b). None of the examples can be taken to support the claim that such a morphological process existed in proto-Chadic. If proto-Chadic distinguished perfective from imperfective by the use of separate verb stems - and even this has now been challenged (Wolff, this volume) - then the latter was almost certainly marked by a suffix (*-a* or *-wa*) and not by internal vowel mutation. Again, a seemingly strong linguistic connection between strikingly similar phenomena in Chadic and other AA languages has proved invalid because the assumptions about proto-Chadic on which the comparison was based have failed to hold up.

Most comparative work between Chadic and AA to date has been concerned with demonstrating the membership of Chadic within the

phylum. Given certain generalizations about AA, the problem was to try to fit Chadic into this pre-set pattern. Since the aim of the comparisons was to prove relationship, there was a strong, unconscious bias to mould Chadic along AA lines. Thus resulted distortions and misinterpretations of Chadic of the type illustrated in this paper.

But Chadic-AA comparisons need not be concerned solely with the question of proof of relationship. One could provisionally take the question of relationship as settled and focus on what light Chadic might be able to throw on the general nature of AA. By providing a fresh perspective, Chadic findings could stimulate the rethinking of traditional analyses and assumptions long held about AA. From this point of view, differences between Chadic and AA become of as much interest as similarities. For example, while the negative conclusions concerning the Chadic-AA comparisons discussed above might be taken as raising doubts about the AA nature of Chadic, they could as easily be taken as raising doubts about the nature of AA as such. Should the AA word for 'to drink' really be reconstructed with a trilateral root similar to the Egyptian word? Can the dogma concerning the inadmissibility of vowel-initial words in AA stand up under modern descriptive and comparative phonological analysis? Does the perfective/imperfective dichotomy in Akkadian provide the best model on which to reconstruct the PAA verbal system?

The value of Chadic descriptions and reconstructions for comparative Afroasiatic studies ultimately depends, not on their matching AA in a simplistic way, but on their being reliable. 'Reliable' does not necessarily mean correct - reconstructions by their nature are speculative and involve a certain degree of error - but it does imply that work be consistent with the available facts and, above all, that it be methodologically sound.

Footnotes

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1. Of the various names offered as an alternative to 'Hamito-Semitic', Afroasiatic (without a hyphen) or Afrasian would seem to be the best. In any case, 'Hamito-Semitic' must be firmly rejected because it keeps alive the term 'Hamitic', with all of its linguistically inaccurate and culturally racist connotations. The argument that 'Hamito-Semitic' can be retained in a conventional sense for the phylum as a whole while rejecting the 'Hamitic' concept has proved to be false. Witness Marcel Cohen's failure in a lifetime of work to convince people that 'Hamito-Semitic' wasn't simply another way of referring to the combination of Hamitic and Semitic languages!

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