



## **Controversies surrounding the classification of Omotic, causes and recommendations**

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Omotic is a language family with over 30 languages spoken in Ethiopia. Except for Ganza, which recent research has shown to be spoken in the border areas between Sudan and Ethiopia, Omotic languages are found exclusively in Ethiopia.

While Semitic, Cushitic, and Nilo-Saharan languages are spoken outside Ethiopia too, Omotic is exclusively Ethiopian. Most of these languages are spoken in a contiguous area in the Southern Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS). Exceptions to this are Yemsa in Oromia, Shinasha in Amhara Regional state, Hozo-Sezo, and Northern Mao in the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State.

One can say that the classification of Omotic is the most controversial language family than any other language family in Ethiopia. First of all, what is classification refers to? It is the human ability and activity of recognizing shared features or similarities between the elements of the experience of the world (such as objects, events, or ideas), organizing and classifying experience by associating them to a more abstract group based on their traits, features, similarities or other criteria.

Omotic is a category of genetically related languages that share certain common linguistic features to make a family. Ideally, according to Moligh (1987) language classification has four purposes: (1) to serve as referential systems, (2) to discover and reconstruct inherent cultural and historical relations, (3) to discover typological relations of linguistic and non-linguistic kinds,

and (4) to serve as a basis for language policy making, language planning and similar purposes in the applied field.

I have outlined the main controversies around Omotic as follows:

1. Divided opinions on the place of Omotic within Afro-Asiatic; Whether Omotic as a separate language family within Afro-Asiatic or part of Cushitic
2. Whether Omotic is more closely affiliated to Chadic
3. Whether Omotic is a branch of Afroasiatic or part of another super phylum like Nilo-Sharan or even Indo European
4. Whether Omotic, especially the South Omotic branch (Ari, Hamar, Dime...) is part of Omotic or rather part of Nilosaharn
5. Issues are also raised at a lower level, for instance, Omoto internal classifications

These and more are unresolved controversial issues that Omoticians have to address in future research. Let me try to see further on each of the above issues.

### **1. Divided opinions on the place of Omotic within Afro Asiatic**

It has been now over half a century since Omotic has been recognized as a separate language family within Afro-Asiatic. It was Fleming (1969) who first claimed that he realized a big difference between Western Cushitic and the rest of Cushitic, and so WC need to be reclassified as a distinct branch of Afro Asiatic named as Aari-Kafa (A-K). Fleming (1974) used what he regarded as two methods, lexicostatistics, and grammatical comparison to come up with such a conclusion. Lexicostatistics, developed by Morris Swadesh, involves measuring the percentage of cognates, and basic vocabulary with similar sounds and meanings in different languages. Between Aari-Kafa and the other branches of CU, the percentage of cognates falls below 10%, which is the same level as that pertaining between families of AA. Therefore, Aari-Kafa is a branch of AA, not of CU.

In (1974) Fleming replaced the name Aari-Kafa with the label Omotic, after the most prominent geographical feature of their region – the Omo river basin. Therefore, Fleming was the inventor of Omotic who set up the group as a sixth branch of Afro-Asiatic (Fleming 1969, 1974). The nomenclature “Omotic” was first used in print by Bender (1971).

The argument that Omotic significantly differs from the rest of Cushitic, and deserves to be considered as a separate language family has been supported by subsequent studies based on the

lexicon, phonological and grammatical data (see, for instance, Bender 1971, 2000; Fleming, 1974, 1976a, 1976b; Hayward, 2000; Blažek, 2008; Azeb, 2012).

Fleming presented some morphological features that he regarded as typically CU, and that were absent; there is no overall correspondence in the pronominal system between WC and CU, except 1pl n. He added two typological features: WC verb roots are commonly monosyllabic and more rigid than CU roots, and the characteristic conjugational patterns of ordinary CU are absent (Theil).

Fleming's claim is however not without critics and controversies that left the classification of Omotic as a separate language family within the Afroasiatic super family an open debate amongst the linguists working on the group. Scholars like Lamberti (1988), and (Zaborski 1984) tend to maintain the initial consideration of Omotic as a branch of Cushitic. They didn't find Fleming's proposal convincing enough. For instance, As Lamberti (1991) indicated Fleming presented no evidence of his lexical data and didn't provide details of the lexicostatistic computation, but he just offered the result of his lexical statistical test. All the data used during the inquiry has remained unknown so far. Therefore, Lamberti (1991) was arguing for Omotic to remain as part of Cushitic, criticizing Fleming's comparison for not being reliable.

Similarly, Zaborsiki (1986) came up with a claim that necessitates reinstating Omotic as WC. He provided an isogloss that connects Cushitic and Omotic for his argument. Theil (2012) has also criticized Fleming's comparison of the grammatical morphemes in different CU and OM languages. Even though some of the morphemes presented by Fleming resemble each other, no attempt is made to establish regular phonological correspondences between the languages, and that is a serious weakness.

Fleming lists grammatical morphemes that occur in one or just a few OM language(s), without telling why they should be regarded as retentions from POM. This is true for grammatical as well as lexical morphemes. Besides, the morphological comparison used by Fleming is not without further disapproval as it involves only short grammatical elements that are considered to be not reliable. According to different scholars, the shorter a morpheme, the higher the probability of finding accidental similarities. Fleming's morphological comparisons are found even less reliable than his lexical comparisons (see also Theil, 2012).

Also, as indicated by Theil, Fleming has not provided any systematic phonological comparisons between grammatical morphemes in OM and (other branches of) Afro Asiatic. This weakens

Fleming's argumentation, and that creates a door for further controversy in recognizing Western Cushitic as a separate language family.

In his earlier work, Bender (1986) was also trying to compromise the consideration of Omotic as a separate family from Cushitic. He argues that Cushitic and Omotic still share some unique higher-level affiliation to the exclusion of other groups within Afro-Asiatic. He then pointed out that Cushitic and Omotic should be rather two coordinated branches of a Cush-Omotic family within Afro-Asiatic. Later on, he changed his mind and accepted Fleming's proposal.

On the other hand, interestingly there have been those who tend to claim that Omotic shows an affinity to the Chadic language family, as against the remainder of Afro-Asiatic groups. Chadic languages, as you know form a branch of the Afro-Asiatic family spoken across northern Nigeria, South Niger, south Chad, central Africa, and northern Cameroon. Chadic is having a more Asian attribution. In this regard, Blažek (2008) claims that 80 percent of the names for body parts found among the various Omotic languages are identified to have Cognate counterparts among the Chadic languages—which ... is a family of languages situated on the other side of the African Continent.

As Dick Hayward (1990) pointed out, a participant in the Cushitic and Omotic symposium argued that based on lexical evidence, one can claim a close link between Chadic and Omotic than between Omotic and Cushitic

## **2. Omotic out of Afroasiatic superphylum**

At the other end of the spectrum, based on the information on Fleming's unpublished computations, some scholars tend to express their doubt regarding the relationship between Omotic and Afro-Asiatic, boldly arguing that there is no genetic relationship between OM and AA.

Fleming (1974), as mentioned earlier, indicated that Omotic languages show not more than 5% of shared retentions on the short Swadesh list when they are compared with other Afroasiatic languages outside Cushitic. Scholars like Cambell (1997) and Theil (2012) pointed out that a low level of «shared retentions» is not higher than accidental similarity expected between any two unrelated languages, which is usually estimated at 4%–5%, or even 7% (Campbell 1997: 229, 405).

According to Theil, no closer genetic relations have been demonstrated between OM and AA than between OM and any other language family. All of Fleming's Omotic- Afroasiatic lexical cognates have parallels in Proto Indo European, and in some cases, the similarities are more striking between OM and IE.

Theil (2012) argues that most of the resemblances in grammatical morphology shown between OM and AA used by Fleming are also attested between OM and Indo-European. This implies that it is equally possible to claim that Omotic is an Indo-European language family. This account needs a thorough further investigation.

### **3. Controversies over the unity of Omotic itself**

Opinions are also much divided about the unity of Omotic itself. The classification of South Omotic also called Aroid (Ari, Dime), is highly disputed as it shows distinct features not shared with the rest of Omotic. Rather, it resembles those in the Nilosahran superfamily as suggested by different linguists.

As Hetzron (1988, p. 115) in Bender (2000) also puts it that it seems South Omotic may gain membership to Afroasiatic only by being shown to be related to North Omotic. An earlier work by Cerulli (1942, p.272), also says that Hamar, Dime, and their kinds were Nilotic, but not part of the branch of Cushitic to which today's Omotic belongs to. Moges (2015) presents a comprehensive data and analysis that covers the pronoun system, grammatical system, philological and lexical systems. He came up with over 45 cognates that connect Nilo-Saharan and South Omotic languages. He argues that the South Omotic languages resemble the Nilotic group of the Nilo-Saharan superfamily rather than Afroasiatic.

In addition to the high-level classification issues, we have also quite several unresolved issues and lack of clarities at a lower level of classification and internal relationships among members of Omotic that remain contentious. For instance, there are many issues concerning the internal classification of the Omoto subgroup. The phenomenon of dialect continuum and the relationship among the different linguistic varieties within Omoto is not yet clear well defined. The various dialects of Gamo, their status, and their relationship with each other and with others around are also matters that need to be investigated to have a clear internal classification of Omotic.

**Reasons:** The main source of such challenges rests heavily on the question of adequacy. In most cases, conclusions to construct genetic classifications have been made based on taxonomical criteria based on lexico-statistical methods, but mainly based only on a few shared lexical similarities, not based on a wide range of data from as many representative languages.

The debate rests heavily on the presence or absence of certain features typical of Cushitic or Afro-Asiatic. The lack of sufficiently representative and thoroughly researched descriptions of the Omotic languages has hampered linguists' ability to determine reliable generalizations within Omotic.

The resemblances detected in mass comparison need to be further investigated to determine whether they come due to inheritance from a common ancestor or whether they result from borrowing, accident, onomatopoeia, sound symbolism, and the like.

The question of whether the classificatory criteria we are using, both lexical as well as grammatical, are adequate, first of all, is a matter of empirical testing. Also, there seems a problem with determining the units of comparison, I mean, the languages selected as representatives of a group. For instance, from among an unknown number of languages and dialects, FLEMING BENDER has selected certain representative languages, and on the bases of that constructed a classification that was intended to be valid for the whole of OMOITC.

From the point of view of taxonomical methods, of course, there is no objection to selecting the languages of classification as long as the units selected are representative also for the languages and dialects not included in the study. However, so far, the criterion of representativeness within the context of language classification itself seems a question. In most cases, out of a totality of individual language systems to be classified, only some are selected and submitted to classification, whereas the majority are neglected because of the defectiveness and incompleteness of the linguistic documentation at their disposal.

I think we need to revise even the confusing nomenclatures we give to groups of languages in Omotic. The language family is Omotic Fleming named it after the Omo river... the subgroup at a lower level of the family Omoto is also after the Omo river. That is confusing. I would have said it Abaya-Chamo...

## **In Conclusion**

Our knowledge about the Omotic languages is still lagging and may be far behind our knowledge about the other language families in Ethiopia. The Omotic we are concerned about is still under dispute and viewed differently by different linguists. Some still prefer to comprehend it as part of

Cushitic, others as a separate language family within Afroasiatic, still others as a linguistic group more affiliated to Chadic, and a few even suspect it to be part of the Indo-European superfamily, that is outside Afro-Asiatic; still others argue that it is part of the Nilo-Saharan, at least the south Omotic branch... There is no clarity. We have lots of uncertainties about the classification of these languages.

We need a large-scale examination of Omotic vs Cushitic, Omotic vs Chadic, Omotic vs Afroasiatic, Omotic vs Nilo-Saharan, and Omotic vs Endo European. We need to develop a better knowledge of Omotic, also require a clear criterion, a wide range of adequate lexical, phonological, and grammatical data, and as many representative languages as possible to clear out the confusion.

Currently, we have a better linguistic knowledge of more individual languages, thanks to the Ph.D. and MA theses in the department of linguistics. But we come across rare studies about comparative-historical works.

The Western linguists who used to engage with the classification of Ethiopian languages such as Fleming, Bender, Zaborsiky, Hayward, etc. seem retiring, some passed away, and it seems the conversations on the matter have not continued anymore. I hope this platform can contribute a lot towards having a piece of better knowledge about the classification and identity of Omotic languages.

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