

Preface

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This issue of FAB which we are going to present is in its wider sense devoted to “language history”. It comprises a variety of relevant articles on language reconstruction and language use, shows the diverse scholarly approaches of the contributors towards historical aspects in a convincing way, and at the same time reflects their ongoing research interests.

The different case studies presented in this volume may be seen as general outlines, but also as detailed in-depth studies which examine different views of comparative historical linguistics and oral traditions. The geographical zone dealt with covers the central and eastern Sudanic region reaching from Nigeria up to Egypt. This linguistically heterogeneous and fascinating area is highlighted and may enable the reader to get a more profound impression on distinct languages, their historical development and changes, filling a gap that had hitherto existed in comparative as well as descriptive studies. The articles may serve as a key for future comparative analyses of diachronic and synchronic linguistic processes within the wider Sudanic region.

All articles have been written at the invitation of the editors and we would like to thank the authors for their willingness and kind participation and – at the same time – we would like to excuse ourselves for the delay in the production of the volume which was due to unforeseen circumstances ascribed to the editors.

“A guide to cognate discovery in Nilo-Saharan” is a fascinating study by Christopher Ehret. It is a profound phonological reconstruction beginning with systematic regular sound correspondences, followed then by a semantic reconstruction of thirty-five early Nilo-Saharan kin terms. Different from the traditional way of reconstructing possible cognates on phonological similarities, the author more than convincingly demonstrates that an essential condition in each stage of discovery are regular sound correspondences without exceptions. As an excellent scholar who is quite aware of his own (previous) shortcomings he then presents charts of correspondences of (stem-)initial and non-initial consonants as well as glides and vowels in various languages of the Nilo-Saharan family. In addition to phonological reconstruction, Ehret also deals with the problems of semantic reconstruction touching the matter of componential semantics and the morphological analysis of root identification. By using

more than fifteen (test-)languages he is able to analyse in his stimulating and highly inspiring article not only sound correspondences but also directions of meaning shift and, in some cases, the original meanings of the root which in particular concern kinship terms.

Olga Stolbova, one of the most renowned Russian scholars in historical comparative Afro-Asiatic, gives an account of “Velar prefixes in Chadic”. The initial velar prefix *k-* in Chadic nouns may often obscure or even change the root initial (consonant) and, therefore, leads – at least sometimes – to wrong lexical comparisons. The author examines more than forty etymologies admitting that the examples given do not cover the amount of relevant nouns found in Chadic. A striking feature, however, is that most of the nouns with such a prefix denote body parts and animals. Substantial references are made to Semitic, Cushitic and Old Egyptian, to which reliable parallels seem to exist. Although Stolbova admits that there are many “unrelated” words (in particular among nouns denoting animals), i.e. where no *k-* prefixes appear within the core data, she nevertheless presumes a former existence of it. Its loss may be traced back to the elision of a vowel followed then by an elision of that prefix.

Roger Blench, whose manifold scientific interests go far beyond “pure linguistics”, presents “New reconstructions of West African economic plants”. The author, who is fully aware of the great difficulties of reconstructing plant names – vide: lexical diffusion, semantic shift, cognacy between related languages –, undertakes, nevertheless, this meticulous challenge. He presents etymologies for some useful plants and compares them with archaeobotanical evidence. The data collected from Afroasiatic, Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan languages are exhaustive and convincingly presented as well as comparatively analysed. The author’s deep and profound knowledge of linguistics and ethnobotany makes his (true and therefore reliable) reconstructing convincing. The author’s unexceptionable approach, the careful way of approaching the topic as well as the reconstruction of plant denominations is a challenging task. Everyone, therefore, whose interests are linguistical and ethnobotanical may also enjoy reading about plant use and domestication.

One of the most captivating articles is Ulrich Luft’s contribution of “Conjugation bases in Sahidic Coptic: a reassessment”. It is written by one of the outstanding Hungarian Egyptologists. It deals with bipartite and tripartite systems of verbal conjugation. The bipartite and the tripartite conjugation differ in so far from each other that in the first mentioned the subject must be placed before the adverbial predicate, in the tripartite conjugation, however, the subject is inserted between a TAM marker and the verbal predicate. Coptic has two main tenses, i.e. present and past. Future may be expressed by using an adverbial structure.

“How the west was won: ways of making history in Hone (Jukun, Nigeria)” by Anne Storch is a fascinating case study showing how dramatically a cultural and linguistic change has affected the Hone in northern Nigeria in the last decades. It did not only lead to a language shift, but it also comprises a recast of their oral traditions. An interesting observation is that great differences in historical narratives exist depending on whether they are told by men or by women. This in particular concerns traditions of origin. Men – almost all are now Muslims – favour the Hone origin as coming from the east referring to the Kisra legend, women, however, emphasise the Hone’s pre-islamic roots and accentuate an origin with mythological heroes and spirits, a strategy to remind the society of the magic power they had before the advent of Islam. That language also can be magic is beautifully illustrated by the author.