

History of numerals as history of East African languages

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The West-Rift Southern Cushitic languages (Tanzania) have a word for ‘three’ ***tam** ‘3’ that is cognate with the word for ‘two’ ***lam(m)** ‘2’ in the East Cushitic branches (Sasse 1979); and a word for ‘four’ that is cognate to the word for ‘three’ in East Cushitic, while the terms for ‘five’ and ‘six’ correspond regularly in form and meaning with the rest of Cushitic. This remarkable semantic shift in itself shows that the East-Rift SC language Aasa which has the regular reflex for ‘two’ did not share this intriguing innovation, and is therefore not part of West-Rift; the other East-Rift SC language, Qwadza, does share this 2 > 3 semantic innovation, and is better classified as West-Rift. But how did this shift in meaning come about? I suggest that West-Rift Southern Cushitic had two competing reflexes of the Cushitic words for ‘2’. Blažek (2018:48) suggests that PWR ***ts’ad** ‘2’ may be related to **sada** ‘2’ in old-Arbore (East-Cushitic, Ethiopia), while present-day Arbore has the East-Cushitic reflex **laamá** for ‘2’ (Hayward 1984:446). This suggests two competing roots. While one was lost in Arbore, I propose a scenario in West-Rift South Cushitic of admixture with a later Cushitic group that brought a competing Proto East Cushitic word ***lam(m)** developing into PWR ***tam**, originally meaning ‘2’ in East-Cushitic but reinterpreted as ‘3’. In a similar vein, the similarity in form between an old Cushitic layer in Proto West-Rift related to ***sägya** ‘4’ for old Bilin (Blažek 2018:49), and a newer Cushitic from Proto East Cushitic ***sizah** ‘3’ led to the interpretation of the PWR reflex ***ts’igaha** as ‘4’. West-Rift Southern Cushitic does not have the East Cushitic word ***’afur** for ‘4’.

A secondary interesting historical number story is that of **haka** ‘4’: some unrelated languages in the region have this root for ‘4’: Aasa and Qwadza (both South Cushitic, Tanzania) have **hak**. The mixed register of the Bantu language Inner Mbugu (or Mixed Ma’á) has **hai**. Sandawe has **haká** ‘4’ which is a reflex of Khoekhoe ***haka** ‘4’ (Voßen 1997:503). This points to a Sandawe transfer into Qwadza, Aasa, and eventually Mixed Ma’á. These are all languages that are not directly related nor in direct contact presently. However, the word is also used in Gorwaa (South Cushitic) in the register of diviners counting stones (Andrew Harvey p.c.); showing that it is more widely known in the area. This requires scenarios of earlier contact.

The historical semantic shift in the numbers of West-Rift South Cushitic suggests a history that involves more than one Cushitic branch, and more than one language migration. The wide distribution of **haka** shows the earlier importance of Sandawe as a donor language with prestige.

References

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