

Historical development of pluratives in Cushitic

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The Cushitic languages have a rich and complex nominal number morphology. It is common for nouns to have three forms: a basic or general number form from which plural (plurative hereafter) and singulative nouns are often derived (Corbett, 2000, p. 9), while the number marking is optional in Cushitic. The general number form can be used in generic, plural or singular contexts.

This study explores the historical development of the plurative (cf. Corbett, 2000, p. 17) suffixes in Cushitic, an Afroasiatic family of around 30 languages spoken in East Africa. The data used in the study come from 26 Cushitic languages from existing sources. Preliminary inventories of these suffixes can be found in Zaborski (1986) and Kiessling & Mous (2003).

In addition to the non-obligatory nature of number marking, there is less usage of the number-derived forms which might encourage reinterpretation, and make the markers prone to change. Thus, it is common to see sequences of plurative suffixes on a single stem (see below). Such stacking of the plurative markers in Cushitic provides evidence to investigate the history of shared innovations.

			Basic/Sg.	Pl.	
PWR ¹	*-aaww-ee	Gorwaa	<i>himtu</i>	<i>himt-aaw-ee</i>	'owl' (Harvey, 2018)
PEC	*-aaww-aa	Diraytata	<i>ſapá-t</i>	<i>ſáp-aww-a</i>	'thigh' (Hayward, 1981)
PHEC	*-uw-a	Hadiyya	<i>daay</i>	<i>daay-úw-a</i>	'brother' (Zaborski, 1986)
PO	*-aaww-aa	Oromo	<i>urji</i>	<i>urji-waa-n</i>	'star' (Zaborski, 1986)
PK	*-aaww-aa	Konso	<i>hinfaakka-ta</i>	<i>hinfaakka-ww-aa</i>	'ant' (Orkaydo, 2013)
CC	*-a, -aa	Awngi	<i>korm-i</i>	<i>korm-á</i>	'stallion' (Zaborski, 1986)
NC	*-a	Beja	<i>'ragad</i>	<i>ra'gad-a</i>	'leg' (Vanhove, 2014)

The extensive renewal of such optional plurative suffixes results in varying degrees of productivity and change in the languages. However, the number of comparable plurative suffixes across the Cushitic languages in East Africa such as the reconstructed forms above of the East Cushitic EC and the West Rift WR families indicates possible common development.

References

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¹ Cushitic sub-groups: CC = Central Cushitic, NC = North Cushitic, WR = West-Rift, EC = East Cushitic including HEC = Highland East Cushitic, and K = Konsoid which is part of O = Oromoid subgroup.. The P before the abbreviation of each language sub-family refers to the proto form, e.g. PWR = Proto-West Rift.