Proto-Berber language

Proto-Berber is the reconstructed proto-language from which the modern Berber languages stem. Proto-Berber was an Afroasiatic language, and its descendants (the Berber languages) are sisters to the Egyptian language, Cushitic languages, Semitic languages, Chadic languages, and the Omotic languages.[1]

1 History

Proto-Berber shows features which clearly distinguish it from all other branches of Afroasiatic, but modern Berber languages are relatively homogeneous, suggesting that whereas the split from the other known Afroasiatic branches was very ancient, on the order of 10000~9000 BP, according to glottochronological studies,[2] Proto-Berber might be as recent as 3000 BP. Louali & Philippson (2003) propose, on the basis of the lexical reconstruction of livestock-herding, a Proto-Berber 1 (PB1) stage around 7000 BP and a Proto-Berber 2 (PB2) stage as the direct ancestor of contemporary Berber languages.[3]

In the third millennium BC, proto-Berber speakers spread across the area from the central North Africa to Egypt. In the last millennium BC, another Berber expansion created the Berber peoples noted in Roman records. The final spread occurred in the first millennium BC, when the Tuareg moved into the central Sahara, by then possessing camels;[4] in the past, the northern parts of the Sahara were much more inhabitable than they are now.[5]

The fact that there are reconstructions for all major species of domestic ruminant except for the camel in Proto-Berber implies that its speakers produced livestock and were pastoralists.[6]

2 Phonology

Some earlier attempts to derive the phonemic inventory of proto-Berber were very Tuareg-influenced, due to the perception of it being particularly archaic.[7]

2.1 Vowels

Karl G. Prasse and Maarten Kossmann reconstruct three short vowels /a/, /i/, /u/ and four long vowels /aa/, /ii/, /uu/ and /ee/.[7][8] Their main reflexes in modern Berber languages are shown in the following table:

Tuareg and Ghadames also have /o/, which seems to have evolved from /u/ by vowel harmony in Tuareg[8] and from *aʔ in Ghadames.[10]

Allati gives /a/ /i/ /u/ /e/ and /o/.[11] Alexander Militarev reconstructs the vowels /a/, /i/, /u/ in his proto-forms.[12]

2.2 Consonants

Maarten Kossmann reconstructs the following consonantal phonemes for Proto-Berber:

As in modern Berber languages,[13] most Proto-Berber consonants had a homorganic tense counterpart, with some exceptions such as w~gg^w, γ~qq.[7]

The consonants *ɟ and *g have remained distinct in some Zenati languages:[7]

Similarly, Proto-Berber *c, corresponding to *k* in non-Zenati varieties, become *š* in Zenati (although a fair number of irregular correspondences for this are found).[7] For example, *căm* "you (f. sg.)" becomes *šəm*. (This change also occurs in Nafusi and Siwi.)

Eastern Berber languages:

- dˤ → tˤ

Proto-Berber *-*əβ* has become *-i* in Zenati.[14] For example, *arəβ* "write" becomes *ari*. (This change also occurs in varieties including the Central Atlas Tamazight dialect of the Izayan, Nafusi, and Siwi.)

Ghadamès and Awjila are the only Berber languages to preserve proto-Berber *β as β;[15] elsewhere in Berber it becomes *h* or disappears.

3 Grammar

Karl G. Prasse has produced a comprehensive reconstruction of Proto-Berber morphology based on Tuareg.[16] Additional work on the reconstruction of Proto-Berber morphology was done by Maarten Kossmann.[17] Proto-Berber had no *grammatical case*. Its descendants developed marked nominative which is still present in Northern Berber and Southern Berber / Tuareg. In some cases Proto-Berber lost it thereafter, recently in Eastern Berber and Western Berber (Zenaga).[18]

4   References

[1] Allati (2002:3)

[2] Militarev, A. (1984), "Sovremennoe sravnitel'no-istoricheskoe afrazijskoe jazykoznanie: chto ono mozhet dat' istoricheskoj nauke?", *Lingvisticheskaja rekonstrukcija i drevnejshaja istorija Vostoka* **3**, Moscow, pp. 3–26, 44–50

[3] Louali & Philippson 2003, "*Les Protoméditerranéens Capsiens sont-ils des protoberbères ? Interrogations de linguiste.*", GALF (Groupement des Anthropologues de Langue Française), Marrakech, 22-25 septembre 2003.

[4] Heine 2000, p. 292.

[5] Heath 2005, pp. 4-5.

[6] Blench 2006, p. 81.

[7] Kossmann, M.G. (1999): "Essai sur la phonologie du proto-berbère", Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, ISBN 978-3-89645-035-7

[8] K.-G. Prasse (1990), New Light on the Origin of the Tuareg Vowels E and O, in: H. G. Mukarovsky (ed), Proceedings of the Fifth International Hamito-Semitic Congress, Vienna, I 163-170. In earlier publications, Prasse had argued that /e/ and /o/ did not go back to Proto-Berber.

[9] Kossmann (2001a)

[10] Kossmann (2001b)

[11] Allati (2002:42)

[12] Berber etymology

[13] Kossmann, M.G.; Stroomer, H.J.: "Berber Phonology", in *Phonologies of Asia and Africa*, 461 - 475 (1997)

[14] See also Maarten Kossmann, "Les verbes à i finale en zénète", Etudes et Documents Berbères 13, 1995, pp. 99-104.

[15] Kossmann 1999:61.

[16] Prasse (1972-1974)

[17] See Publications of Maarten Kossmann

[18] König 2008, p. 288.

[19] Dolgopolsky, Aron (1999). *From Proto-Semitic to Hebrew*. Milan: Centro Studi Camito-Semitici di Milano. p. 11.

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6   External links

- Proto-Berber etymologies (Alexander Militarev)

- Berber languages and Berber peoples: genetic and linguistic diversity

- Berber languages PDF (4.2 MB)

- Proto-Berber kindship words PDF (23.8 KB)

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