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KONSOID: AN EXAMPLE OF EXTREME DIALECTAL DIFFERENTIATION

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Konsoid is a Lowland East Cushitic subgroup whose some hundred thousand speakers inhabit an area in southwestern Ethiopia to the southwest of Lake Chiamo. This group was first established by Bender (1971: 187) on the basis of lexicostatistical percentages between its three best known members, Konso, Gidole, and Bussa. Previously these varieties were so poorly attested that they were commonly grouped with a miscellany of other poorly known Cushitic languages (see Tucker and Bryan 1956: 130–1).

While Bender did not claim that these Konsoid varieties were in fact mutually unintelligible languages whose future linguistic developments might reasonably be regarded as mutually independent, such a view might be implied by the low values of their shared lexicostatistical percentages as calculated by Bender (1971: 174): the range of these percentages (between 51% and 62% out of 98 items) suggests relationships comparable to that between English and Scandinavian. This view might also seem justified on the basis of striking phonological differences between Konso and the remaining two; e.g., Konso túfe, Gidole šuhé ‘spit’ and Konso íšše, Gidole ikayyé ‘kill’ (these are cited as imperatives), where each pair consists of cognates.

Such observations are misleading, however, because they are based solely on the most divergent Konsoid varieties and fail to consider the possible existence of intermediate transitions between them, as unlikely as this may seem on the basis of the extreme divergence already noted. Bender (1971: 187) did mention one such variety, Gato, but only noted that it shared 92% with Konso. My research in the area (see also Black 1974) indicates that Gato, and more especially a fifth variety called Mashile, forms, or very nearly forms, links in a chain of mutual intelligibility stretching from Konso in the south through Gidole and Bussa in the north.

Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of these five varieties, which may conveniently be referred to as 'dialects' on the basis of sociological

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Fig. 1. Map of the Konsoid dialects, showing phonological and grammatical isoglosses.
Table 1

Phonological and grammatical isoglosses (cf. Fig. 1). Note that capital letters represent implosives (B, D, J, G) and ejectives (T, C, K).

1. *f becomes /h/ in Gidole; e.g. Gi. Duh-‘close’, elsewhere Duf- (Galla Cuf-).

2. Bussa distinguishes between a preadjectival heka- and a preverbal he- prefix, both of which correspond to Gidole he- and other Konsoid i-; e.g. Bu heka-Déh-a ‘it’s near’, Gi. he-Déh, elsewhere i-Déh-i; Bu. Gi. he-Dám-é elsewhere i-Dám-é ‘he ate’.


4. Bussa alone has nouns (other than names) ending in /o/; e.g. Bu. hayDo ‘fat’, Gidole, Mashile, Gato háyDa; Bu. Gayyó, ‘smoke’, Gi. Kayyá, Turo, Konso qáyya.

5. The /K/ of Gidole and North Bussa (recorded by Bender and Linton) corresponds to Mashile and South Bussa /G/ and to /q/ elsewhere; e.g. Gi. Koyr ‘tree’, N. Bu. Koraya (Bender), S. Bu. Goyrá, Ma. elsewhere qóyra.

6. The causative suffix is -iyy- in Gidole and Bussa and -iš- or -š- elsewhere (in prevocalic position); e.g. Bu. heDD-iyy- ‘sew’, heDD-iš- elsewhere.

7. *t becomes /š/ in Gidole and Bussa in most positions; e.g. Gi. šókko ‘one’, Bu. šokkóh, elsewhere tákka (c£. Galla tókko).


9. *k becomes /h/ in Gidole and Bussa in most positions, rather than /x/, which it generally (cf. 13 below) becomes elsewhere; e.g. Gi. Bu. hols- ‘laugh’, Mashile xols-, Gato xosil-, Turo, Konso xosal- (cf. Galla koff-).

10. *p becomes /f/ before /t/ and /n/ in Gidole, Mashile, and probably Bussa; e.g. common Konsoid up- ‘know’, perfective stem Gi. Ma. uf-naaD-, Gato, Turo, Konso up-naaD-.

11. Gidole, Bussa, and Mashile /mB/ corresponds to /m/ elsewhere; e.g. Gi. amB ‘breast’, Bu. amBá, Ma. ámBa, elsewhere ám.

12. Word final /e/ and /o/ appear to have merged with /i/ and /u/ respectively in Gidole, Bussa, Mashile, and Western Konso; thus e.g. hinDó ‘take it!’ is pronounced hinD[i] in these varieties.

13. *k remains /k/ before /i/, /e/, /a/ in Konso as opposed to /x/ elsewhere (cf. 9 above); e.g. Ko. kirp- ‘dance’, Bu. Gi. hirp-, elsewhere xirp- (cf. Galla sirb-, which supports the reconstruction of *k).

14. The Konso -e imperative suffix is unaccented; e.g. Ko. piDD-e ‘Buy it!’ elsewhere piDD-é.
criteria (e.g. group identification). A sixth variety, Turo, may or may not be distinct from Konso on this basis (the work of Hallpike (1972) suggests that it would not). Figure 1 also shows the isogloss boundaries for various phonological and grammatical differences described briefly in Table 1. While these differences are not of equal importance with respect to their effect on the ability to communicate, they do cluster heavily between Konso in the south and Gidole and Bussa in the north. Note however that the boundaries divide to pass Mashile on both the north and the south; Mashile is certainly transitional with respect to these differences as a whole, although it may be noted that the boundaries passing to the north may represent somewhat more far reaching differences than those passing to the south. Table 2 shows newly calculated lexicostatistical percentages among a dozen varieties (including four varieties of Konso, three of Gidole, and two of Bussa). These percentages are based on a nonstandard 141 item list chosen on the basis of data available for North Bussa (from Linton, Kaley, and Coolidge (undated)). The idiosyncratic nature of the list makes it difficult to compare the resultant percentages with those based on a standard list, but the internal significance is clear. Mashile, Gato, and Turo very clearly form links, with percentages of 75%, between Gidole and Bussa in the north and Konso in the south, whose common percentages are otherwise in the fifty to sixty percent range. Note also that Bussa and Gidole appear to be much more closely related here than in Bender's comparison. The reason for this is not entirely clear, although it is clear that his data contains at least a half dozen borrowings from the neighboring Omotic language of Zayse (see the data in Bender 1971: 248, 257).

The correlation between lexical, phonological, and grammatical similarity on the one

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexicostatistical percentages among twelve varieties of Konsoid</th>
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<tr>
<td>North Bussa</td>
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hand and mutual intelligibility on the other is undoubtedly a complex one, and unfortunately no formal tests of mutual intelligibility have been made. The situation is further complicated by the prevalence of multidialectalism, especially in the north. Observation and informal inquiry suggest, however, that Mashile is certainly linked with Konso by a chain of mutual intelligibility through Gato and Turo (if indeed it is not linked more directly) and that Gidole is mutually intelligible with at least some varieties of Bussa. Mashile was described as ‘an easy type of Konso’ by one Gidole informant, and is very probably mutually intelligible with Gidole to at least some degree. Even though such extremes as Konso and Gidole cannot be considered mutually intelligible, a Konso informant with relatively slight previous exposure to Gidole was easily able to gain a general idea of the content of a taped Gidole story.

Konsoid is thus perhaps best characterized as a linguistic cline currently well into the process of dividing up into two or more independent languages. Such a situation is difficult to describe in terms of a simplistic tree model of linguistic classification (see Black 1976 for an alternative approach). Nevertheless it is a state of affairs commonly found in well studied groups and whose potential existence should always be considered in attempts to classify more poorly studied ones.

REFERENCES