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THE LOSS OF SYLLABLE-FINAL PROTO-NUBIAN

CONSONANTS

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1 INTRODUCTION

Nubian languages are scattered over a vast area comprising western Sudan, the Nile valley of northern Sudan, and southern Egypt. The Nubian language group includes Midob and Birgid of eastern Darfur, Kordofan Nubian spoken in the northern Nuba Mountains, and the languages of the Nile valley, Kenzi, Dongolawi, Nobiin, and its medieval predecessor, Old Nubian. As these languages share many lexical and grammatical similarities it is assumed that they are genetically related, i.e. that they are the descendants of a common ancestor language. This hypothetical ancestor language is called Proto-Nubian.

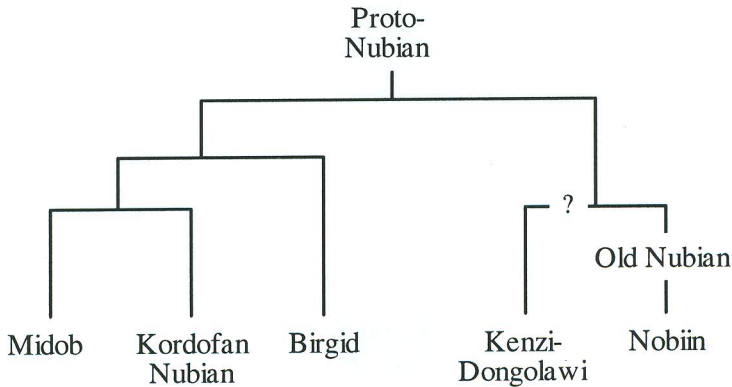
In order to gain insights into the different degrees of genetic relationship between the individual Nubian languages, several scholars have endeavoured to reconstruct the Proto-Nubian sound system. While ZYHLARZ's (1949/50) reconstruction is restricted to the consonant system, BECHHAUS-GERST (1984/85, 1989) and RILLY (ms 2003) deal with the consonant and the vowel system. Thanks to RILLY's thorough comparative study, the consonantal changes in initial position are fairly well understood now. Although he also accounts for the even more complex consonantal changes in non-initial position, the loss of consonants in syllable-final position has not been investigated in detail. These phenomena are in the focus of this paper.

RILLY's model of the Nubian language family and its subgroups (see Diagram 1) is based on phonological innovations, particularly on consonantal changes in word-initial position. The question mark indicates that the affiliation of Kenzi-Dongolawi is doubtful. Does it form a sub-group along with Old Nubian and Nobiin or, as BECHHAUS-GERST (1984/85, 1992) argues, does it rather belong to the Midob-Kordofan-Nubian-Birgid branch?

BECHHAUS-GERST assumes that the pre-Nobiin speakers were the first to split off from the rest of the Nubian group and that they immigrated to the Nile valley long before the pre-Kenzi-Dongolawi speakers did. The numerous lexical, phonological and morphological similarities between Kenzi-Dongolawi and Nobiin would then be due to close contact and borrowing rather than to close genetic relationship.

Diagram 1:

The Nubian language family (adapted from RILLY ms 2003: 264)



The data for this historical comparative study come from various published and unpublished sources: Kenzi data from MASSENBACH (1933), Dongolawi data from ARMBRUSTER (1965), Birgid data from THELWALL (1977) and IDRIS (ms 2004), Midob data from THELWALL (1983) and WERNER (1993), Nobiin data from LEPSIUS (1880) and WERNER (1987), and Old Nubian data from BROWNE (1996). The Kordofan Nubian data, particularly those drawn from the Tagle and Karko dialects, originate in my own mostly unpublished field notes which I collected in collaboration with Gumma Ibrahim Ghulfan and Ahmad Hamdan Farah (JAKOBI ms 2001). Among the languages mentioned above, Birgid is the least documented one. In the tables below, Birgid data are therefore often missing.

Historical linguists assume that all parts of a language may change in the course of time: the structure of phrases, the structure and meaning of lexical items and the sounds. Sounds are prone to change in certain positions, especially in syllable-initial and syllable-final position. Sounds in syllable-initial position tend to increase their consonantal strength – though weakening and loss do occur, too (see, for example, the loss of **k* in Midob, Table 5 below). Sounds in syllable-final position tend to decrease their consonantal strength (cf. VENNEMANN 1988 and his critic BERG 1990). The

