

An Assessment of Bender's Proto-Cushitic

M. Lionel Bender (2009), his last and still unpublished work, is a reconstruction of the Cushitic lexicon and phonology. Using a Swadesh-type list of 120 items, and additional data, Bender reconstructs a total of 79 Proto-Cushitic roots. Following Jungraithmayr & Ibriszimow's (1994) reconstruction of Proto-Chadic, Bender graded the strength of each root either A (Excellent), B (good), or C (fair) in terms of confidence in the reconstruction and its distribution throughout the various subfamilies within Cushitic. Bender judged 23 of his roots (29%) to be A-quality, 32 (41%) roots to be good (B-grade), and 23 (29%) to be fair (C-grade). This paper analyzes and assesses the 55 roots of the A- and B-grades.

An example of an A-grade root is *PC *ʔaf* 'mouth', supported by material in North Cushitic Beja **+yaf+*; Central Cushitic Blin *ʔəb*, East Cushitic **ʔaf* (supported by data in Afar-Saho, Highland East Cushitic, Core East Cushitic), Dahalo *ʔáf + o*, and South Cushitic **ʔafa*. This root shows strong uniformity throughout Cushitic and is certainly an excellent candidate for Proto-Cushitic reconstruction. Ehret's (1987) reconstruction allows for an initial palatal glide, based on Roper's (1928) sketch of Beja: *yaf* 'mouth', thus **ʔaf-/yaf-*. An example of Bender's B-grade data, with lower confidence and fewer sub-branch attestations of the word is *PC *IVk+* 'foot, leg', with supporting data in Central Cushitic **ʔik^w*, East Cushitic **IVk* and Dahalo *luk + a*. This form contrasts with Ehret's (1987) reconstruction of 'foot': PC **ragad-/rigid-*, based on Beja *ragad*, Saho *rigid*, and a purportedly metathetic West Rift **dagara*.

This work examines and evaluates Bender's judgments as a starting point for reconstructing PC. Bender found Ehret's (1987) reconstruction of PC to contain "many useful comparable items" while conceding some of its forms were unreliable. However, Bender deliberately excluded many primary sources, and competing reconstructions such as Dolgopolskij's (1973) Cushitic, Lamberti & Sottile's (1997) "Old Cushitic", and Orel & Stolbova's (1995) Afrasian as methodologically problematic. In addition, some sources such as Takács' *Lexica Afroasiatica* (2002-2017) were not consulted, and Diakonoff et al.'s (1993-1997) sources were rarely utilized. Bender's reconstructions are viewed in light of these, with additional data from grammars published since Bender's work. Bender's PC **k'amb-* 'cold', although assigned a grade of B on the basis of Northern Agaw forms and possibly related forms in Lowland East Cushitic, is, as he later admits, shaky, and may be the result of a Wanderwort in the Eastern Cushitic.

This project thus suggests a refined and more detailed examination of the stronger and more secure parts of Bender's Proto-Cushitic reconstruction, as a step towards an improved and more solid reconstruction of this language family, which in turn contributes toward a better understanding of the Afroasiatic phylum as a whole.