

THE NSF ETHIOPIA PROJECT

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As of August, 1975, the initial, data-collecting phase of the Oromo dictionary was over. During this initial stage I had gone to Ethiopia with my lexical files and spent a year collecting, correcting, expanding, and refining. What I brought back was on the one hand an enormously expanded lexical file, with additional words and more information (meaning, pronunciation, grammatical characteristics) on each word, and on the other hand hundreds of pages of transcribed texts, and dozens of hours of spoken Oromo on tape.

I had a bad moment at the airport when suspicious security personnel became concerned about my having pages upon pages filled with material written in Ethiopic script, but which they could not read—coded subversive material? For a while it looked like I would have to either leave without my material or miss my plane. They relented at literally the last moment, and with the help of a half-dozen airport employees who each scooped up an armful of papers, we ran to the plane, which had its engines running, and started taxiing as soon as the door closed behind us.

At this point the basic exploration was done. Now began the hard work of organizing this material into a dictionary.

Passing through Paris on my way home, I was asked to explain the project to an international conference on the Cushitic languages and the peoples who speak them (Oromo is the largest of the Cushitic languages) organized by the French Centre National des Recherches Scientifiques. Apart from the intrinsic interest of these languages and cultures, there is an increasing realization of the central role of Cushitic evidence for the history and pre-history of East Africa, for the process of mediation between the Near East and Africa generally, and for the pre-history of the Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) language family. At this conference I was able to exchange ideas with individuals from France and England engaged in similar projects in the Somali area and in the area of Ethiopic Semitic (which has interacted intensely with Cushitic).

My work this year has been to sort through my amassed data in order to pick out what is relevant to a dictionary. In particular I have tried to find in my texts, tapes, and elicited sentences at least one appropriate illustrative sentence for every word, and for every major sense-distinction within a word. At the beginning I was afraid I might not have enough, but I soon realized that for the major words and sense-distinctions, I had rather an *embarras de richesse*. This is a mixed blessing—when you have only one example, you simply take the example you have. When you have several dozen, it seems to take forever to pick the best one.

At this point I have lined up examples and words, and am starting to write the first entries. By the time this appears, a first draft of the first letter (words beginning with “b”) should be ready. I am, over-optimistically, projecting a complete first draft by the end of this calendar year.

As each letter is finished in first draft, the manuscript will be circulated to a dozen or so native speakers I have worked with in Ethiopia and abroad for criticism and correction. Depending on their promptness and helpfulness, I am hoping to have a final manuscript ready within a reasonable time after completion of the first draft.