

Linguistic Studies

Gene Gragg

Gene Gragg continues to divide his research activities along two fronts. In the ancient Near East proper, he is studying the languages of the ethnic groups to the north and northeast of Mesopotamia—the Hurrians (“Kurdistan”) and the Urartians (in historical Armenia). These two languages, the former known chiefly from a second millennium document, the latter from monumental inscriptions from the ninth to the seventh century, have long been known to be

related; and in the last ten years an ever clearer picture of the parent language is emerging. Professor Gragg is currently trying to work out a picture of the syntax of this Hurrian-Urartian parent language, and to see the typological similarities and contrasts with other languages in the region. He has lectured on this at the University of Michigan in April 1982, and at the Rencontre Assyriologique in London, in July.

On another front, with the publication of his dictionary (August 1982) of the Oromo

language behind him, he is now trying to establish the nature of the genetic relationships within the Cushitic language family (concentrated in the Horn of Africa), of which Oromo is a member, and to work from this back to the relationships among the Afroasiatic "super-family" as a whole, which comprises—in addition to Cushitic—Egyptian, Berber, Chadic, and all of the Semitic languages. The preliminary problem which he is now dealing with is that of organizing a complex data file containing information on a very large number of languages; a complete file would contain information on

nearly four hundred languages. It is becoming ever clearer that he will have to rely extensively on the data-handling capacity of the computer to build and maintain even a partial file. A related problem is that of assessing relative similarities and differences in such a vast and complex file. Statistical techniques for similar problems have been worked out in the biological and social sciences, and an initial test of these techniques on Semitic language data has been carried out. Gragg reported on his results at a conference on historical linguistics at the University of Michigan, and in a forthcoming article.