

Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

(Un)classifying Shabo: phylogenetic methods and results

Tyler Schnoebelen, *Stanford University*

Classifying Shabo

Shabo is one of our greatest classification puzzles. Most researchers describe it as Nilo-Saharan (Bender 1977, Bender 1983, Teferra and Unseth 1989, Teferra 1991, Fleming 1991), but each of them note how much of the core vocabulary seems to have been borrowed. In fact, this is one of the reasons Ehret (1995) takes Shabo out of Nilo-Saharan: there are just too many similarities to too many different languages, he says.

Bender (1977) was the first to attempt categorization and placed Shabo with the Surmic languages—a decision that was probably unduly influenced by the fact that most Shabo speakers also know Majang. Bender updated his position in 1983, still favoring Nilo-Saharan. By the mid-1990s, Bender was more circumspect: "We just don't know. I think it is one of several 'strange hybrids' (e.g. Kwegu, Birale, and Mao)" (p.c. with Teferra 1995).

Most of the classification work on Shabo has been done based on wordlists. I add grammatical data based on a month of living amongst the Shabo in a remote Ethiopian village. Since the Shabo traditionally live alongside the Majang and/or the Shekkacho, I include parallel data I acquired on those languages, too.

Wichmann and Holman (forthcoming) have used computational models to determine which features in the World Atlas of Languages are the most stable for predicting genetic relationships. I examine Shabo in terms of the top 40 features, comparing it with about 250 languages of the region. Features like presence of initial velar nasals, case syncretism, and word order, supplemented by lexical comparisons of the core vocabulary, show which languages Shabo has affinities with.

Beyond documenting a highly endangered language (there are perhaps 400 speakers of Shabo), this paper offers an innovative use of phylogenetic tools that biologists have developed. I demonstrate the potential power of such methods in building classifications and exploring the increasing amounts of typological data available to us. These tools can be used heuristically to develop hypotheses: could Shabo be related to Fur, Tama, or Ngiti? In this case, no convincing "phylogenetic signal" emerges. And the evidence makes a Nilo-Saharan hypothesis especially unlikely. Based on our current understanding, it is better to call Shabo an isolate—the Basque or Burushaski of Africa.

References

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