

# A Survey of Blin Language Classification

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Starting during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, linguists have been studying and classifying languages, and one of the main types of language classifications is called **genetic classification**. A genetic classification groups languages according to their *ancestral or genetic relationship*. That means, languages which are believed to have a common ancestor are grouped into a language family.

The Blin language, which is one of the nine languages of Eritrea, had been at the focus of linguistic studies starting from the early 1870s. The first linguist who had studied this language very intensively was **Prof. Leo Reinisch**. Leo Reinisch was a distinguished *Austrian Scholar*. He was the dean of the *Philosophy Faculty*, and later on the director of *The Vienna University in Austria*. Leo Reinisch laid the foundations for the study and classification of many Cushitic languages in the horn of Africa, and he is now called the *Father of the Cushitic languages*.

Leo Reinisch's contribution to the Blin language was an outstanding one. He visited the Blin land, which was called the **Bogos Land**, before the colonial era. He stayed for several months at a time among the Blin people, starting from October 1875. He studied the Blin language, and wrote four books between 1882 and 1887, including a Blin dictionary, grammar, and a collection of Blin stories and fables. Leo Reinisch mentions in the introduction of his Blin dictionary, that he brought with him to Vienna a young Blin man, called **Yohannes Musa**. He says that this young Blin man stayed with him for two years, and it was from him that he was able to learn Blin very deeply.

Leo Reinisch's works on Blin and other Cushitic languages were greatly appreciated by latter linguists, for scientific study of these languages. **Prof. F.R. Palmer** in his "*Identification and Classification of Cushitic*, 1971 p. 80, says like this, " In fact, to a very large degree we must still rely for our information on the languages on the publications of Leo Reinisch at the end of the last century. In just over twenty years he produced authoritative works, often in two or even three volumes, with both grammars and dictionaries, on Saho, Bilin, Kamir Afar, Quara , Kafa (Sidama), Beja (Bedawi) and Somali. (Reinisch 1878 and 1889, 1882, 1884, 1887a, 1887b, 1893, and 1900 respectively)".

Another prominent linguist, **Dr. David Appleyard** wrote in a book called "*Leo Reinisch Werke Und Erbe* (Leo Reinisch Work and Heritage) 1989 p.97, like this, "It is a remarkable fact that, even today , it is still to Leo Reinisch that we are indebted for the most complete descriptions of three Agaw languages: Bilin, Xamir (Khamir) and Quara. ...p.98. Of the four or so Agaw languages or dialect clusters, it was Bilin that he studied most intensively, eventually producing three volumes in that language: *Die Bilin Sprache in Nordost-Africa* (1882), *Text der Bilin* (1883) and *Wörterbuch der Bilin* (1887), to which list may be appended his edition in Bilin of the *Gospel of St Mark*, which he produced for the *British and Foreign Bible Society in 1882*.

Indeed, it was with Bilin that Reinisch began his Agaw studies in earnest, when he first stayed in Bilin country in February and March 1876". (2<sup>nd</sup> stay Oct.1879-Jan. 1880)

After Leo Reinisch, *Carlo Conti Rossini* wrote his "*Raccanti E Canti Bileni* in 1907. His writing was not linguistic analyses of Blin , but an account of the historical background of the Blin people, including some important Blin popular songs of "*golia* and *hoy*". However , Conti Rossini produced some documents of high linguistic importance on various other Agaw languages, like his grammar of *Kemant* 1912.

For about 50 years after Conti Rossini, nothing specifically on Blin or other Agaw languages appeared until the 1950's. The next person who is said to have put the linguistic study of Blin in a more safe ground , (according to Dr. David Appleyard) is **Prof. F.R.Palmer**. Between 1957 and 1966 he published six articles of prime importance on various aspects of Blin, like, *The verb in Bilin*1957, *The noun in Bilin* 1958, *An outline of Bilin phonology* 1960, *Blin "to be" and "to have"* 1965. Palmer's works on Blin are said to have provided the next generation of linguists who studied Blin with the necessary means of evaluation for Reinisch's material, written over 70 years before. Dr. David Appleyard stresses this by saying, "Palmer's strictness of approach and methodological exactness, his emphasis on formal properties and patterns, prosodies and paradigms, stems from the *London of school of linguistics*".

Another person who is said to be the greatest name in contemporary Agaw research together with Prof. F.R. Palmer, is *Prof. Robert Hetzron*. From his publications on Agaw languages, "*The Agaw languages 1976*" can be mentioned.

*Dr. David Appleyard* is another prominent contemporary linguist, who is still deeply engaged on the study of Blin and other Agaw languages. From his works, "*A descriptive outline of Kemant 1975*", "*The internal classification of the Agaw languages 1984*" and "*The radical extension of the verb in Agaw 1986*" can be mentioned.

The list of the many language experts, who contributed for the linguistic study of Blin, or the Agaw languages in general, includes additional names like *Zobarski Andrzej*, *Sasse- Jürgen Hans*, *Joseph Tubiana*, *M. Lionel Bender* etc. To this list can be added the name of Dr. Paul D. Fallon, who is still engaged on the study of Blin language, with many recent contributions, like, *Blin Orthography, a History and an Assessment*.

Language classification needs the involvement and cooperation of many linguists, who study different languages, and work on finding the relationship between the languages, so as to classify related languages into groups and branches of families.

How do linguists decide that some languages are related? The hypothesis that linguists apply to identify the relationship of languages is that, *where languages share some sets of features in common, these features are to be attributed to their common ancestor*. The sets of features may be of a phonemic nature (sound, letters), lexical (words) or syntactical (grammar). There are some exceptions to these: for example two languages can not be called related languages, simply, because they

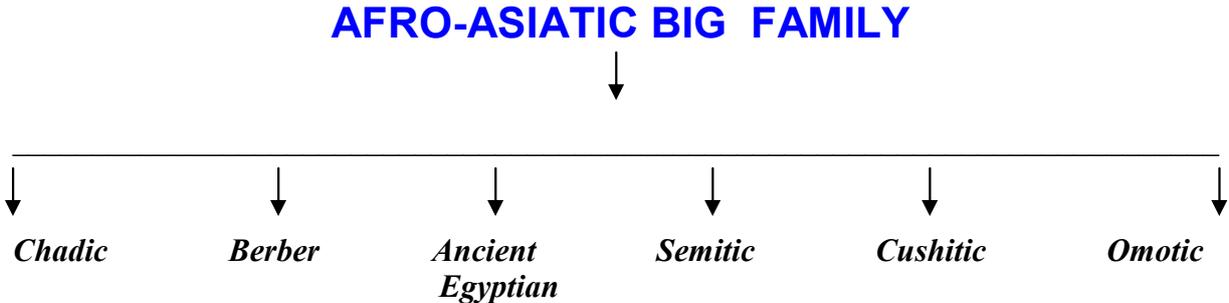
Have borrowed some words from each other. As the result of the dedicated works of many language scientists, the majority of the about 6900 world languages are now classified, and the following are some of the major language families of the world:

***The Indo-European languages , The Afro-Asiatic Languages, The Austronesian languages and the Sino-Tibetan languages.***

The Blin language is classified as ***Afro-asiatic, Cushitic, Central, Agaw, and Northern***. That means *Afro-Asiatic* is the common ancestor of Blin and many other languages. From the Afro-Asiatic big family of languages or *phylum*, Blin belongs to the *Cushitic family*. From the Cushitic family, it belongs to the *Central Cushitic* sub-family, called *Agaw*, and from the Agaw languages Blin is called *Northern Agaw*.

1. The ***Afro-Asiatic languages*** constitute a big family, with over 300 languages and about 300 million speakers, occupying today the major part of the Middle East, all of North Africa, much of North-East Africa and a considerable area of northwestern corner of Central Africa. The Afro-Asiatic language family was also called “*Semito-Hamitic*” or “*Hamito-Semitic*” earlier. This name was depreciated later on, because no “*Hamitic*” linguistic family, or branch of family was found as contrasted to the Semitic branch. The name “*Afro-Asiatic*” was suggested by ***Joseph H. Greenberg***, in his “*Studies in African Linguistic Classification 1955*”, and his suggestion was based on the fact that this language family was the only one being represented both in Africa and Asia. (The name ***Erythraean*** was also suggested by *Tucker 1966*, but Afro-Asiatic is now the accepted name for this language family).

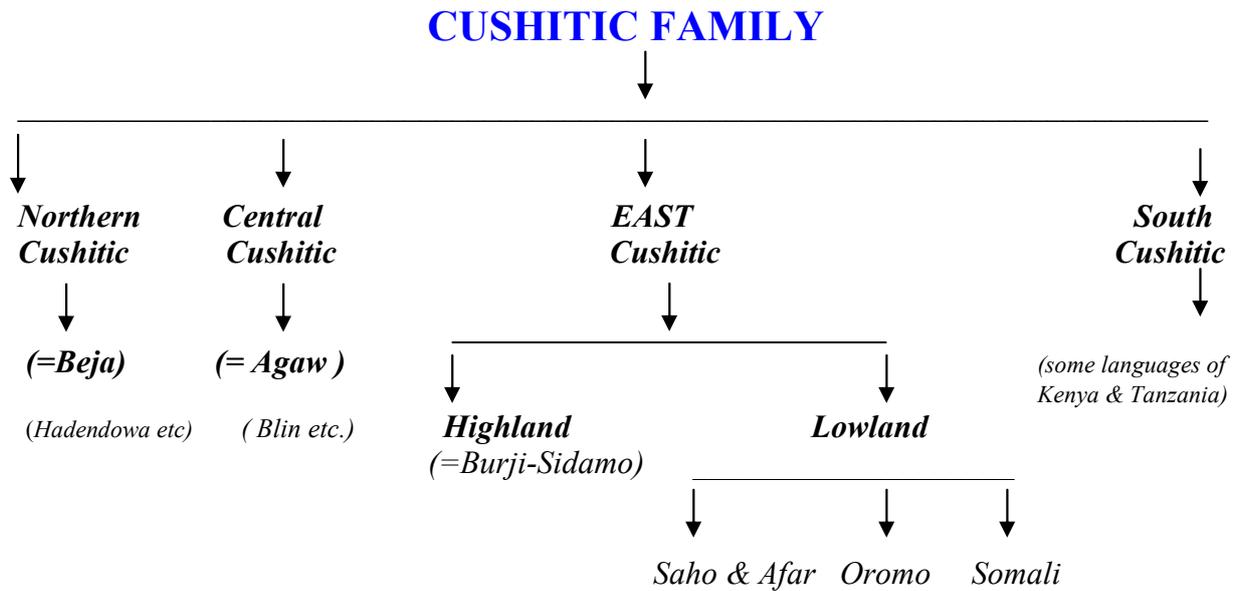
(1) Afro-Asiatic big-family tree diagram.



The Blin language, being a Cushitic language, thus is classified as belonging to the big family of Afro-Asiatic languages.

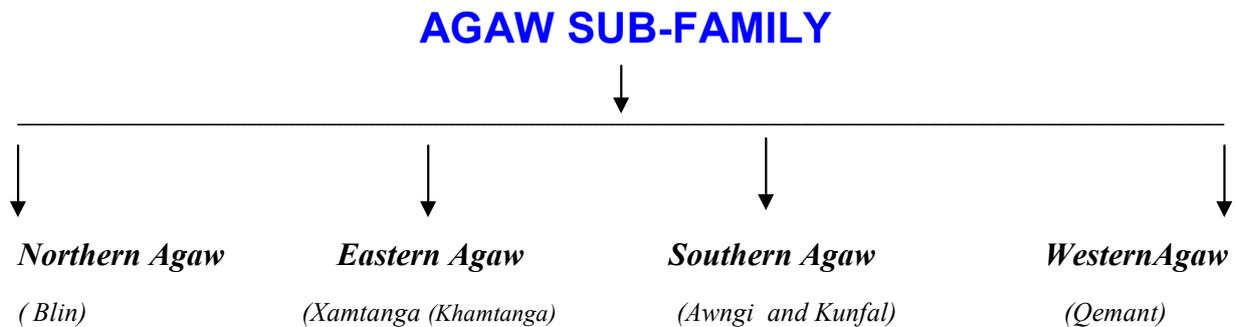
2. On the language family branch level, Blin is classified as ***Cushitic*** language. There are about 47 languages in the Cushitic branch. These languages are spoken in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, North-western Kenya and some parts of Tanzania. From the 9 languages spoken in Eritrea, 4 languages belong to the Cushitic branch, and they are Blin, Hadendowa , Saho and Afar.

(II) Cushitic family tree diagram.



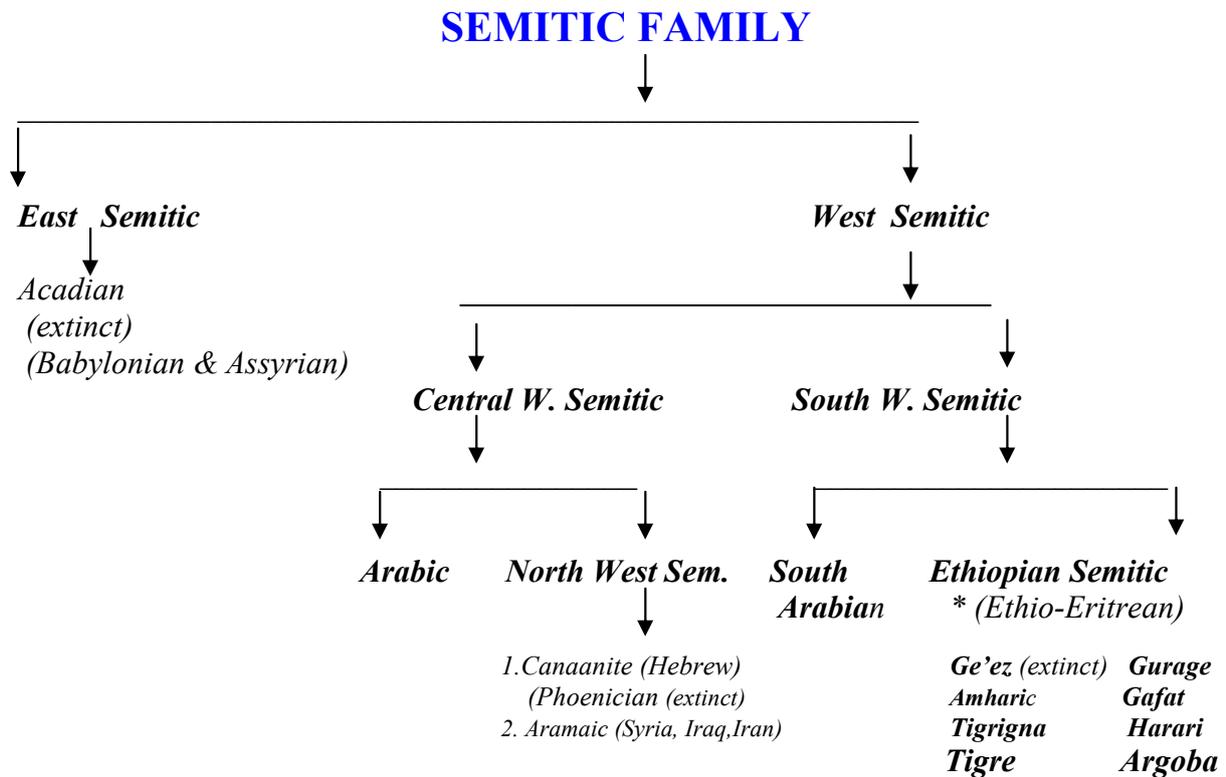
3. On the level of language sub-family, Blin is classified as an **Agaw Language**. There are 5 languages belonging to the Agaw sub-family. While Blin is spoken in Eritrea, the remaining 4 are spoken in Central Ethiopia.

(III) Agaw sub-family tree diagram.



4. As Afro-Asiatic is the same ancestor of both the Cushitic and Semitic languages, it means that the Semitic languages of Eritrea, like Tigrigna and Tigre share some linguistic set of features with the Cushitic languages of Eritrea. (see diagram of Semitic language family-tree below). The *Kunama* and *Nara* languages of Eritrea belong to another language family called *Nilo-Saharan*.

(IV) Semitic language family-tree diagram:



- It seems that it is fair to call the Semitic languages spoken in Ethiopia and Eritrea “Ethio-Eritrean Semitic”, instead of only calling them *Ethiopian*, as it used in linguistic study circles.

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