

Shared quirks, ancient areality, and homelands:
A case study from Afroasiatic

One of the most useful ways that the notion of quirks or *rara* can contribute to linguistics is in language diachrony. Quirks can be useful in diachronic problems of all kinds, whether genetic or areal or — as in the present case — both. This paper, focusing by way of example on Afroasiatic and drawing in an essential way on quirky behavior, presents a new kind of plausibility argument for the location of protohomelands: an appeal to "ancient areality".

Several preconditions must hold for the argument to work. One is that an otherwise *rare* structural feature *S* is found across a geographically farflung language family *F*. Such a family-wide "shared quirk" is maximally unlikely to represent accidental parallel development in the individual branches, but rather points to a shared history (contact or genetic) of some kind. Because the family is farflung, inter-branch contact is not likely. Hence genetic reconstructibility to Proto-*F* becomes the most likely option.

A further precondition is that the feature *S*, though rare, does recur in a few languages (or language groups) outside of *F*, but geographically nearby. The feature *S* is thus synchronically an areal feature; and *S* also existed in Proto-*F*. The simplest scenario that integrates these two facts is that the present-day areality continues an ancient areality, and that Proto-*F* was itself spoken in the given area.

Thus far the abstract theory. In the concrete case of Afroasiatic (AA), two marked, quirky features can be reconstructed to early stages of AA: (1) a "Marked Nominative" (MkNom) case system, and (2) the 2nd-person feminine-singular marker *m*. Both have implications for AA homelands.

MkNom is extremely unusual worldwide, but is found in Cushitic, Omotic, and Berber, in traces in Semitic, and arguably in Egyptian — hence reconstructible to some early Afroasiatic stage AA' (not necessarily Proto-Afroasiatic). MkNom also recurs elsewhere in Northeast Africa, in several Nilo-Saharan groups (Nilotic and Surmic). It is thus a present-day areal feature, centering on southern Ethiopia; on the present argument, it was also an ancient areal feature, so that AA' was probably spoken near southern Ethiopia.

2nd-person markers in Afroasiatic usually involve *k*. But Egyptian, Berber, and Chadic have 2nd-fem-sg markers in *m*, arguably reconstructible to some early stage AA'' (not necessarily the same as AA'). Outside of AA, 2sg markers in *m* are common in the Pacific Rim but quite rare in Africa — in fact, areally restricted to an East-West sub-Sahel belt, with a hotbed in present-day Chad. This argues for an early AA'' homeland near present-day Chad.

The fact that two independent applications of the method yield homelands in roughly the same region (Northeast Africa) speaks well for its usefulness — especially since this is where Afroasiaticists (for totally different reasons) tend to locate Afroasiatic anyway. That the two homelands (Ethiopia, Chad) are not identical is unproblematical: different proto-stages are involved.