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Proverbs in Language Teaching:

Using the Example of Let's Speak Tigrinya (2018)

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Proverbs in Language Teaching: Using the Example of *Let's Speak Tigrinya* (2018)*

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Introduction

The present article discusses the proverbs used in Issayas Tesfamariam's recently published Təgrəñña textbook,¹ and investigates the role of proverbs in language teaching in general and the teaching of Təgrəñña as a foreign language in particular. The article aims at presenting the necessary analysis, translations, and annotations of the proverbs in question, which are crucial from a pedagogical perspective, but not covered in the textbook itself. Another objective pursued here is to link the proverbs used in the textbook to existing works on Təgrəñña proverbs, to trace them back to proverb collections, and to provide, where possible, alternative versions attested elsewhere. The article intends not only to serve as a mere addendum to the textbook by filling an important gap, but intends also to make a significant contribution to the study of the Təgrəñña oral tradition, going towards applying a more rigorous approach or methodology than that employed thus far.

The Təgrəñña textbook examined here is the latest (twenty-second, in fact) issue in the “Let's Speak” African Language Series by the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC) at Indiana University Bloomington. Based on the communicative approach to language learning, the series, which started in 1993 with the Yoruba textbook, sets out to offer

* I would like to express my special thanks to Professor Dr Rainer Voigt for his advice and support, particularly for putting Təgrəñña proverb collections at my disposal for comparative analysis. I am also grateful to Tedros Afenigus, Dr Gidena Mesfin Kebede, Ruth Worrede, Mussie Tesfagiorgis, and Tesfom Melake for their help with some of the proverbs discussed in the present article.

¹ Issayas Tesfamariam, ትግርኛ ንዛሬብ: *Let's Speak Tigrinya, Elementary Level, A First-Year Textbook, A Multidimensional Approach to the Teaching and Learning of Tigrinya As a Foreign Language*, NALRC “Let's Speak” African Language Series (Bloomington, IN: National African Language Resource Center Press, 2018); xxv, 299 pp. Price: \$35.00. ISBN: 978-1-59703-030-4.

students authentic conversations embedded in real life situations. The author of the Təgrəñña issue, Issayas Tesfamariam, has been teaching Amharic and Təgrəñña at Stanford University since 1994, where he also heads the microfilm department at the Hoover Institution Library & Archives. He has also produced several documentaries on Eritrea and runs the cultural blog kemey.blogspot.com and the website Kemey.net.

The book came out more than ten years after the publication of textbooks on other major languages of the Horn of Africa, Amharic and Somali. Unlike numerous other titles in the series, it lacks an accompanying audio CD. In tune with the series' concept, the textbook contains numerous exercises, conversation situations, and cultural notes. Interestingly, alongside the traditional foreign language teaching forms such as monologues, dialogues, and texts, students are offered several poems and a wide range of proverbs, amounting to forty-four such expressions. Their importance is explained in the Preface (p. xvi): 'These are common [...] proverbs that serve as mnemonic devices or teaching virtues valued in the culture. Learning these [proverbs] exposes students to authentic materials.' Nine lessons of fifteen have a proverb section at the end, with four to six proverbial units in each. Most of the selected proverbs are related—content-wise or grammatically—to the topics dealt with in the immediate or previous lessons, containing, for instance, numerals, infinitives, or subordinate clauses, namely subjects already covered in the book up to that point. In some cases, words from the vocabulary lesson are used in these proverbs in their secondary meaning, or the vocabulary is expanded by synonyms.

By talking of 'learning' proverbs the author describes the approach used in the textbook quite precisely. Namely, they are not provided with translations, or even pronunciation aid such as gemination marking. Just as elsewhere in the book, misspelt words are not uncommon in the proverb sections. Although the present contribution is not intended as a review,² the following requires comment. With the exception of the introductory part, the work refrains from the use of transliteration or any other references on pronunciation, and the little transliteration that is used is defective. The book is apparently designed as a course book, with most exercises requiring the involvement of a teacher, rendering it barely suitable for self-learning. This applies particularly to the proverbs, since a mere 'learning', or, as the students are advised to do, 'reciting', is not nearly enough to learn to appreciate their cultural value. While the criticism on the chosen format is worth

² See the review by Rainer Voigt in this volume of *Aethiopica*, pp. 308–314.

a separate review article, an annotated overview of all forty-four proverbs used in it will be presented here according to the scheme outlined below.

Proverb quotations in *fidäl* strictly following the writing in the textbook are given along with the corresponding transliteration, highlighting the detected misspellings. In the *fidäl* text, the author's use of the former word separator (፣) as a comma instead of the correspondent mark (፡), following the contemporary punctuation practices in Eritrea and Təgray, is noteworthy. This is also the case in some proverb collections cited here, along with the use of the semicolon (፤) in the same function. It also should be pointed out that the consistent employment of **θ** in preference of **ʁ** to represent *ṣ* in the sources published in Təgray is used here for comparison. In transliteration, the assimilation of *ä* to *w* is marked as *â*. The transliteration is followed by a translation that may be close to the Təgrāñña original, supplemented in some cases by literal translations parenthesized and marked by double quotes. Square brackets indicate complements not given in the original, but which the context makes apparent. This is followed by explanations and interpretations of the meaning as well as other commentaries or grammatical notes. Appropriate references are provided for the expressions documented in other works, or possible lexical or dialectal variations. All translations and interpretations are by the author of the article unless stated otherwise.

Using Proverbs in Language Teaching

Proverbs constitute an important element of any language, penetrating various spheres of human life including literature, mass media, politics, social sciences, and education.³ Not only do they serve as a mirror of social norms, but they may also justify—to an extent—or even reinforce existing stereotypes.⁴ In terms of foreign language teaching, proverbs are seen as a door-opener into a new culture as well as the mindset and history of the native speakers of the relevant language. This may be one of the reasons why proverbs have been used in language teaching over centuries.⁵ Moreover, the mastery of proverbs is associated with language fluency and regarded as having a positive impact on communication between language learners and natives.⁶ Nowadays, proverbs not only remain a crucial part of instruction in group language courses, but are often included as ‘useful phrases’ in lan-

³ Mieder 2004, 137–153.

⁴ Solomon Berhane Hagos 2015; Fiedler 2014, 298.

⁵ For the European context see Magwire 2005, 129.

⁶ Fiedler 2014.

guage textbooks. The following textbooks containing proverbs, adages, and sayings exemplify the proverb's significance: Swedish for Russian speakers (265 units), Lithuanian for English speakers (73 units), Icelandic for English speakers (34 units), as well as Modern Standard Arabic (103 units) and Syrian Arabic (15 units) for German speakers.⁷ The use of proverbs in foreign language teaching has recently become an independent research field, investigating, among other things, methods and the paremiological minimum applied in this process, as well as its impacts.⁸

Little is known about the use of proverbs in teaching Təgrəñña as a foreign language, not least due to the sparsity of relevant teaching materials in the West European or Anglo-Saxon context. One of the few examples is *Documents tigrigna* by Wolf Leslau,⁹ in which, following the major trend of including annotated proverb lists into own linguistic works, he presents a selection of twenty Təgrəñña proverbs with commentaries. At the same time, the importance of proverbs and other related genres, such as riddles, is often emphasized in Təgrəñña language education materials aimed at young people both in Təgray and Eritrea. In numerous proverb collections, the authors express the hope that their work will contribute to the younger generations' appreciation of their own oral heritage, as well as to its preservation.¹⁰

A number of scholars of Semitic and Ethiopian studies have contributed to the study, translation, and annotation of Təgrəñña proverbs, among them Franz Praetorius, Wolf Leslau, Carlo Conti Rossini, and Enno Littmann. Most of the respective works in European languages were published in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, of which the major works were the annotated Italian language collections of 489 and 432 proverbs.¹¹ Nonetheless, the many smaller papers are by no means of lesser importance. The collections published in Ethiopia, Eritrea, or the Təgrəñña-speaking diaspora usually constitute mere alphabetical lists, with barely a single publication explaining the proverbs, and but few organized by subject. All are monolingual with the exception of the collection by Şəgeräda Təklä, ʾAsmällaš Wäldä Maryam, and ʾAsmärom Gäbrä Səllasä, that features an Amharic

⁷ See for Swedish Žukova 2009, 246–250; for Lithuanian Paulauskienė and Valeika 1994, 494–497; for Icelandic Glendening 1979, 109–110; for Modern Standard Arabic Zafer Youssef and Arnold 2000, 311–317; Rima Aldoukhi et al. 2014, 8, 14, 122 and *passim*.

⁸ Magwire 2005; see for German Wilson 2004; for Arabic McCarus 1956.

⁹ Leslau 1941, 368–378.

¹⁰ Yətbaräḳ Gəḍäy 1998/1999, iii; ʿAndä Mikaʿel Sälonon 2008/2009, ix.

¹¹ Conti Rossini 1942; Di Savoia-Genova and Simonini 1943.

translation.¹² The same proverbs or variations thereof frequently appear in a number of collections, providing fertile ground for dialectological research. It is worthwhile noting that verb negations in Təgrəñña proverbs often lack the suffixed marker *-n* and are thus easily mistaken for jussive mood at first glance.¹³

Proverbial Corpus of *Let's Speak Tigrinya*

Activities, personal information, numbers, and infinitive (p. 71):

1) ሓደ ዓመት ብወዝ ፡ ሓደ ዓመት ብደግዝ, *ḥadä ʿamät bə-wāz, ḥadä ʿamät bə-dämoz*, ‘One year with sweat [in the face], another (“one”) year with wage’. One is rewarded after having first worked hard. Used in a language teaching class, this proverb might be a suitable motivational motto for students. While the main meaning of *wāz* is ‘shine’, ‘beauty’, ‘clearness of the facial skin’, it is derived from the concept that a healthy, beautiful face has a glossy sheen. Conversely, another meaning is ‘perspiration’, ‘sweat’, ‘tiredness’.¹⁴ Both *wāz* and *dämoz* are to be seen as original Amharisms, extremely common in Təgray, while the latter contains the former (the Semitic *däm*, ‘blood’ + *wāz*). The equivalent Təgrəñña root for *wāz* would be *ʷwḥz*.

2) ሓደ ጊዜ ካብ ምዘራብ ፡ ሰለስተ ጊዜ ምሕሳብ, *ḥadä gize kab mazzərab, sälästä gize məḥsab*, ‘Better than to say once is to think thrice’. This expression has a regional variation urging to think twice, advising one to carefully consider decisions in advance to avoid unwanted consequences and is present in similar forms in other languages.

3) ሓደ ከይበልካ ፡ ክልተ ኣይበሃልን, *ḥadä k-äy-bälka, kəlättä ʿay-yəbbəhalən*, ‘Before you say “one”, “two” is not said’. Similar to the previous proverb, this one implies that every action should be done in its time and order, and once an action has begun, it has to be finished before proceeding further.

4) ሓደ ከምዘየሎ ፡ ክልተ ክንድ ሓደ, *ḥadä käm-z-äy-ällo, kəlättä kəndə ḥadä*, ‘One is as if it would not exist, two equal one’. This is a version of a proverb from Conti Rossini’s collection: *ḥaw ḥadä käm z-äy-təwoldä*, ‘One brother is as if [none] was born [at all]’.¹⁵ Yet another version can be found in an Eritrean

¹² Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993.

¹³ Cf. Voigt 1977, 62.

¹⁴ Kane 2000, II, 1764; cf. Täkkəʾä Täsfay 1999, 682; Nay ʿItyopya qʷanqʷatat ʿakkadami 1996/1997, 667.

¹⁵ Conti Rossini 1942, 94, no. 422.

reference book: **ሓደ ከም ዘይተወለደ ፡ ክልተ ክንድ ሓደ**, *ḥadä kām z-äy-täwäldä, kälättä kändä ḥadä*, ‘One is as if he was not born, two equal one’.¹⁶ Theoretically, instead of a brother, a child in general could be meant.

5) **ወላዲኻ ከሎ ጉያ ፡ ጸሓይ ከሎ ዕያ**, *wäladi=ka k-ällo g^wäya, šäḥay k-ällo ^cäya*, ‘Hit the road (“run”) as long as your father lives, work as long as the sun shines’. The words *g^wäya* and *^cäya* here are rather misspelled imperative forms *g^wäyā* and *^cäyā*: although *g^wäya* could be interpreted as a noun (in this case, *g^wäyḡa*), it would not explain the form *^cäya*. Besides, other collections have these forms as imperatives: *guyä, ^cäyā*.¹⁷ Compare in Amharic, **አባት ሳለ አገጥ ፥ ዠምበር ሳለ ሩጥ**, *‘abbat s-allä ^ʔagit, žämbär s-allä rut*, ‘As long as your father lives, adorn yourself [with nice clothes]; as long as the sun shines, run’.¹⁸ The proverb underlines the necessity of acting as long as the conditions are favourable, similar to the expression *carpe diem* and the like.

Personalities, beauty, description, and comparison (p. 119):

6) **ሓላዊ ከም አፉ ፡ ሰራቺ ከም አዱ**, *ḥassawi kām ^ʔaf=u, säraqi kām ^ʔid=u*, ‘A liar is like his mouth, a thief is like his hand’. Actions reveal people’s true nature, and people are to be judged accordingly.

7) **ጸቡቕ ግብሪ ፡ ንዘልዓለም ክብሪ**, *šəbbuq gəbri, nə-zä-l-^cälām kəbri*, ‘A good deed [means] an everlasting respect (honour, glory)’. The person who does deeds considered to be good by society will be rewarded with esteem and respect within society, and, including a possible religious connotation, in the afterlife too.

8) **ክፉኑ ትደርፍ ፡ አብኡ ትተርፍ**, *kəfu^c tädärrəf, ^ʔab=^u tətärrəf*, ‘She/You sing(s) badly [and] she/you stay(s) there [repeating the same bad song]’. The proverb stresses the importance of recognizing and correcting one’s own mistakes. Notably, the author uses *^cayn* in *kəfu^c*, which appears to be a conscious choice, as it also appears in other parts of the book. Other words where he consistently uses *^cayn* instead of *^ʔalef* including, notably, *qur^can* (p. 251).

9) **ሓሶት ድራር ሓደ ምሽት**, *ḥassot dərar ḥadä məšät*, ‘Lie is a one-evening supper’. This means a lie does not last long, or, like the English equivalent, lies have short legs.

¹⁶ Yämanä Bərhan Gərma Šen 2011, 233.

¹⁷ Šəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 268; Yosef ^ʔAlämayyāhu 2000/2001, 79.

¹⁸ Richter and Eshetu Kebede 1994, 21; cf. in Guidi 1891, 54, with imperfect: **ጸሓይ ፡ ሳለ ፡ ይሮጧል ፡ አባት ፡ ሳለ ፡ ያጌጧል**, *šäḥay s-allä yəroṭ^w-all, ^ʔabbat s-allä yaṡeṭ^w-all*.

10) መልክዕ ክሃስስ ፡ ልቦና ይደግኝ, *mälkä° kə-bassəs, ləbbona yədämməq*, ‘As beauty fades, sagacity remains lively’. Although a person’s physical appearance changes over the years, and youth fades, the *ləbbona*, ‘wit’, ‘wisdom’, ‘intelligence’, remains despite aging.

11) ንጸባስ ደቁ በለጹዎ, *nə-ṣäba-s däqq=u bäläsu=wo*, ‘As for the milk, its children outdo (“outdid”) it’. Although ‘milk children’ means ‘dairy products’, the general meaning here seems to be that children usually become better than their parents in some activities.

Talking about plans and future; subordinate clauses (p. 137):

12) ዝጠመየ ዝሓመመ ፡ ዝሓመመ ዝጠመየ ይመስል, *zə-ṭämäyā zə-ḥamämä, zə-ḥamämä zə-ṭämäyā yəmässəl*, ‘The one who is hungry resembles the one who is sick, the one who is sick resembles the one who is hungry’. No misfortune is better or worse than another, and, in their suffering, people troubled with differing hardships, nonetheless, resemble one another.

13) ዝመጽእ ክትፈልጥ ፡ ዝሓለፈ ፍለጥ, *zə-mäṣṣə° kə-təfallət, zə-ḥaläfä fälät*, ‘In order to know the future know the past’. We must learn from history in order to avoid the same mistakes made earlier.

14) ዝሰሓተ ይምከርካ ፡ ዝወግለ ይንገርካ, *zə-säḥatä yəmkär=ka, zə-wä° alä yəngär=ka*, ‘Let the one who erred advise you, let the one who was there tell you [what happened]’. This proverb appears in Kane’s dictionary.¹⁹ Moreover, a similar Amharic equivalent is listed in Jon Abbink’s legal proverbs collection.²⁰ Təgrəñña proverb collections offer other variations: *män yəngär? zə-näbärä; män yäləqqəs? zə-qäbärä*, ‘Who should tell [about the death]? The one who attended [the funeral]. Who should strike up the mourning song? The one who buried’;²¹ መን የርድኡ ክቕበረ መን ይህረብ ዝነበረ, *män yärəddə? zə-qäbärä; män yəzzaräb? zə-näbärä*, ‘Who should bring the news of someone’s death? The one who buried. Who should talk? The one who was there’.²²

15) ዝሎ ዘይሓልፍ ይመስል ፡ ዝሓለፈ ዘይነበረ ይመስል, *z-ällo z-äy-yəḥalləf yəmässəl, zə-ḥaläfä z-äy-näbärä yəmässəl*, ‘To the one who lives, it does not

¹⁹ Kane 2000, I, 646.

²⁰ መን ፡ ይመስከር ፡ የነበረ ፡ መን ፡ ያርዳ ፡ የቀበረ, *man yəmäskər yä-näbbärä, man y-arda yä-qäbbärä*, ‘The one who saw should witness, those attending a burial should speak (tell the death of a relative)’, Abbink 2017, 13, no. 33.

²¹ Conti Rossini 1942, 86, no. 375.

²² Yəṭbaräḵ Gəḍäy 1998/1999, 34.

seem that he would die [one day]; the one who passed away does not seem to have existed’. This proverb already appears in Conti Rossini’s collection, as well as in Təgrəñña language collections in a similar form.²³

16) **ዝኣረገት ነፍሱ ፡ ጸገን ሰብን ትደሊ**, *zə-^aarägät näfsi, šäba-n säb-an tädälli*, ‘The old person (also ‘soul’) [too] wants milk and company (“[another] person”)’. The meaning seems to be that people, despite being elderly, still need—and like—food and company. Another version has *səga*, ‘meat’, instead of *säb*, ‘man’.²⁴ Here, *näfsi* is feminine.

Shopping and negotiating (p. 179):

17) **ዋና ተወከሰ ፡ ባላ ተመርከሰ**, *wanna täwäkkäs, balla tämärkos*, ‘Consult the owner, lean on the forked cane’. In order to stand firmly on your feet, lean on a cane; in order to handle things better, consult the master. In terms of form and content, one might assume that it and the expressions that follow are most probably legal proverbs. In the textbook, they appear in the chapter discussing shopping and negotiation vocabulary. This proverb is also to be found in European collections.²⁵

18) **ዋርሳ የዋርሰ እንጀራ የቋርሰ**, *warsa yäwwarəs ^aənğära yäqq^warəs*, ‘Inheritance causes to inherit, ^aənğära-bread causes to break [more] ^aənğära-bread’. This expression presumably means that, if a person inherits something, they will pass it on later as their heritage, and, if there is food, it will be served, divided, and eaten up. Another plausible meaning could well be that, however much people have, they can never get enough.

19) **ዋና ዘይብሉ ኣቕሑ ፡ ቀርኒ ዘይብሉ ኣርሑ**, *wanna z-äy-bəll=u ^aaqḥa, qärni z-äy-bəll=u ^aarḥa*, ‘Furniture (also ‘goods’) which do(es) not have an owner [is/are like] a bull which does not have horns’. Noteworthy is the dialectal form *z-ebəll=u* in this proverb listed in ‘Andä Mika’el Sälonon’s collection.²⁶

20) **ዋናኡ ዘቃለሎ ብዕራይ ፡ ዓዳጊ ነይተቐባላይ**, *wanna=^au z-äqqaläl=o bə^cray, ^caddagi n-äy-täqäbbalay*, ‘An ox which has little esteem (or ‘no appreciation’) for his owner gets no buyer’. For the second part, other versions have

²³ Conti Rossini 1942, 64, no. 227; cf. Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 229; Hağ^wäs Qäläta 2007, 105.

²⁴ Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 320.

²⁵ Di Savoia-Genova and Simonini 1943, 27, no. 309.

²⁶ ‘Andä-Mika’el Sälonon 2008/2009, 68.

አብ ዕዳጋ ነይሽየጥ, [°]ab [°]adaga n-äy-yäšäyyät, ‘is not sold on the market’.²⁷ *Täqäbbalaya* literally means ‘receiver’.

Time and object suffixes (p. 190):

21) ጊዜ ዘለዎ ጊዜ አይጽበ፡ እንካ ዝበልዎ ይቀበል አይእበ, *gäze z-ällä=wwo gäze °ay-yäšäbbä, °änka zä-bäl=wo yäqqäbbäl °ay-yä°bä*, ‘The one who has time does not wait for [another] time; the one to whom one says, “Take!”, should accept and not deny’. In the bilingual collection, the first verb is also in jussive (አይጸበ, *°ay-yäššäbbä*, ‘should not wait’), alongside with the version where the second part of the proverb lacks completely, and an indirect object marker is added ([...] ንጊዜ አይጸበ, [...] *nä-gize °ay-yäššäbbä*).²⁸ Aside from that, a version in the second person exists: ጊዜ እንተላካ ፣ ጊዜ አይትጸበ, *gözä °ant-ällä=kka, gözä °ay-täššäbbä*, ‘If you have time, don’t wait for [another] time’.²⁹

22) ጊዜ ክጠልም መን ዘይጠልም፡ ጊዜ ክፈቱ መን ዘይፈቱ, *gäze kə-tälləm män z-äy-yäšälləm, gäze kə-fättu män z-äy-yäšättu*, ‘When the time acts treacherously, who does not act treacherously? When the time acts suitably, who does not act suitably?’ As discontent as one may be with things in life, there is always a positive and a negative side to them.

23) ጊዜ ዘይብሉ የልቦን፡ ካብ ዕድሉ ዝሓልፍ የልቦን, *gäze z-äy-bällu yälbön, kab °addäl=u zä-ḥalläf yälbön*, ‘There is no one who does not have time; there is no one who can escape his destiny’. Everyone will go through it; it is just a matter of time.

24) ጋሻን ሞትን ዝመጹሉ እዋን አይፍለጥን, *gašša-n mot-ən zä-mäšu=lu °əwan °ay-yäšällät-ən*, ‘One does not know the time when the guest or the death (“guest and death”) would come to one’s place’. One cannot foresee future events; one should always be prepared for one’s death just as one should be hospitable to unexpected visitors.

25) ጥራይካ ተወሊድካ፡ ብላይ ነጻላዶ (sic) ከፊሉካ, *ṭaray=ka täwälidka, bäl-lay näšäla-do käfi°u=kka?*, ‘You were born naked, [and now] a worn cotton mantle is not good enough for you?’ The proverb appears in several collec-

²⁷ Sälomon Gäbrä Krastos 1995, 233.

²⁸ Şögeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 342.

²⁹ Yosef °Alämayyähü 2000/2001, 99.

tions.³⁰ A rarer variant using a different kind of garment also exists, namely, a ‘lousy skin cloak’ (ዲኖ ቁማል, *dino qumal*).³¹

Food and prepositions (p. 208):

26) ሰብ ብደታ ፣ እኸሊ ብገብታ, *sāb bə-yatta, ʾəkli bə-gäbäta*, ‘A person [should be] with a good reputation, the food in large quantity’. Literally, *gäbäta* denotes a measure for grain of about twenty kilograms. However, figuratively, it often means ‘a large quantity’.

27) እንጀራ ዘለዎ ክቡድ ፣ እንጀራ ዘይብሉ ዕቡድ, *ʾənǧära z-ällä=ʾawwo kəbud, ʾənǧära z-äy-bəllu ʾəbud*, ‘The one who has food is honoured, the one who does not have food is mad’. This proverb is sometimes featured with *käbbid* instead of *kəbud* without a major change in the meaning.³² Here, the rhymed variant is presented.

28) እንካብ ነበረኒ ፣ ይሓይሽ አሎኒ, *ʾənkeb näbärä=nni, yəḥayyəs ʾallo=nni*, ‘Better than “I had” is “I have”’. Similar or extended variants can be found in existing collections: ካብደ ነበረንስ ፣ እኒህኒ, *kab-ya näbärä=nnä-s, ʾənniha=nni*, ‘As for “I had”, so “I have” is better’;³³ ካብ ነበረኒ አሎኒ ፣ ካብ አሎኒ እኒህኒ, *kab näbärä=nni ʾallo=nni, kab ʾallo=nni ʾənniho=nni*, ‘Better than “I had” is “I have”; better than “I have” is “Here it is!”’.³⁴ Although *ʾənniho=nni* might simply mean ‘I have’, in this context, the idea here is that showing something, thus proving one does really possess/have it, is better than merely expressing the fact in words.

29) ድሕሪ ጽጋብ ስካብ ፣ ድሕሪ ስካብ ሕሳብ, *dəḥri şəgab səkab, dəḥri səkab ḥəsab*, ‘After satiety [comes] sleep; after sleep [comes] the bill’. The unspirantized realization of *səkab* given here is also attested in other collections.³⁵

Professions and subordinate clauses (p. 222):

30) ዓወት ብሞያ ፣ ቅድድም ብጉያ, *ʾawät bə-moya, qədəddəm bə-g^wəyya*, ‘Success in the profession [is like] running in a race’. One cannot achieve remarkable results without practising, effort, and so on. A similar expres-

³⁰ Among others, in Gäbrä Kidan Dästa 2001/2002, 176; Mogäs ʿEqqubä Giyorgis 1965/1966, 123.

³¹ Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 354.

³² Yosef ʾAlämayyāhu 2000/2001, 67.

³³ Gäbrä Kidan Dästa 2001/2002, 144.

³⁴ Kəbräʾab Wäldä Giyorgis and ʾErməyas Kəbräʾab 2006, 138.

³⁵ Ibid., 183; Mogäs ʿEqqubä Giyorgis 1965/1966, 115.

sion says, **ዓወት ከም ዕለት ፥ ሙያ ከም ጉያ**, *‘awät kām ‘älät, muya kām guyya*, ‘Success is like a date, career/profession is like a race’.³⁶ Success is a temporal, ephemeral thing, so if one wants to achieve visible results in one’s profession, one has to work hard and not rely on momentary elusive moments of success.

31) **ሞያ ብግብሪ ፥ ዕድል ብፈጣሪ**, *moya bə-gəbri, ‘addäl bə-fäṭari*, ‘The job [is known] by [its] deeds, the fate (also ‘luck’) by [its] creator’. The second part resembles another expression found in many languages: every man is the artisan of his own fortune (Latin: *faber est suae quisque fortunae*).

32) **ዘይሰርሕ ኣይብላዕ ፥ ዘይሕገዝ ኣይጽላእ**, *z-äy-yäsärrəḥ ‘ay-yäbla‘, z-äy-yəḥəggəz ‘ay-yäsla‘*, ‘The one who does not work should not eat, the one who does not help should not hate’. Here, some basic aspects of communal life are discussed. Those not contributing to the common good are not allowed to participate in its sharing, just as he or she who does help others should not resent those who do not help him or her.

33) **ዝተጻሕፈ ይውሳእ ፥ ኣብ ቃል ዘሎ ይርሳዕ**, *zə-täsəḥfä yəwəssa‘, ‘ab qal z-ällo yəwəssa‘*, ‘What is written is listened to; what [only exists] in words is forgotten’. Obviously, this also applies to the whole of the traditionally oral genre of the proverb, which nowadays is actually kept alive in the form of numerous printed proverb collections.

Ceremonies, traditions, situational phrases, and connecting events (p. 239):

34) **ሸውዓተ ዓመት ከይመሃሩ ፥ ሰብዓ ዓመት ይድንቁሩ**, *šəw‘attä ‘amät k-äy-mäharu, säb‘a ‘amät yədənquru*, ‘Without having learnt in seven years, one remains ignorant for seventy years’. This proverb already appears in Conti Rossini’s compilation.³⁷ Further collections feature a similar saying using a different numbers of years.³⁸

35) **ሰም ተራፊ ፥ ብልዒ ሃላፊ**, *səm tārafi, bəl‘i halafi*, ‘A name remains, food is transient’. Reputation is of greater importance than the material goods one possesses. Usually, the more common orthographic variation *halafi* is used.³⁹ So here it should be interpreted as an Amharism.

³⁶ Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 290.

³⁷ Conti Rossini 1942, 75, no. 298.

³⁸ One year against seventy years in Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 43; one year against forty years in Yətbäräḳ Gəday 1998/1999, 29.

³⁹ Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 97.

36) ማይ ከይመጸ ፡ መገዲ ማይ ጽረግ, *may k-äy-mäsä, mägäddi may şaräg*, ‘Before the rain comes, clean out the drain!’ This is one of the ‘sayings’ listed in Kane’s dictionary.⁴⁰ It generally means that fixing a smaller problem in advance prevents the onset of a bigger problem requiring a far greater effort to remedy, in other words: prevention is better than cure.

37) መውስቦ ስጋ ንዘንተ-ዕለት ፡ መውስቦ መሬት ንሓደ ዓመት, *mäwsäbo säga nä-zäntä-^cälät, mäwsäbo märet nä-ḥadä ^camät*, ‘A marriage [based on] feelings (“flesh”, “senses”) [lasts] forever; a marriage for land [lasts] one year’. This observation implies that actions and arrangements based on true feelings last longer than bogus arrangements made out of convenience.

38) መለበሚ አይግበርካ ፡ መለበሚ አይእኸላካ (*sic*), *mäläbbämi ^oay-yägbär=ka, mäläbbämi ^oay-^oäklä=keka (*sic*)*, ‘May no one take you as a [bad] example, may you not lack [good] advice’. The last verbal form is an obvious misspelling of አይኸላካ, *^oay-yäklä=ka*, ‘may not be denied’, which appears in all the collections where this expression is listed.⁴¹

39) ሓረስታይ ካብ አዝመርኡ ፡ ንሀቢ ካብ ኣውራኡ, *ḥarästay kab ^oazmär=^ou, näḥbi kab ^oawra=^ou*, ‘The ploughman is better than his harvest, the bee is better than its chief’, or ‘The ploughman is like his harvest, the bee is like its chief’. The literary meaning of *^oawra* is ‘principal’, ‘major’; here, it most probably refers to the queen bee. In some collections, the suffixed form አዝመራኡ, *^oazmära=^ou*, from አዝመራ, *^oazmära*, is preferred.⁴² Highlighting the importance of social usefulness, the expression implies that a skilled producer of goods is of greater esteem than the product of his work or the person of authority who stands above him for the real sustenance lies ultimately in his hands.

Life course and the particle *kə-/käy-* (p. 253):

40) ቁርበት ምስ ነቐጸ ፡ ቁልዓ ምስ ወርጸጸ ፡ ስም ምስ ወጸ ፡ እተ (*sic*) አይጥቐለስ ፡ እቲ አይምለስ ፡ እቲ አይድምስስ, *q^wərbät məs näqäšä, q^wäl’a məs wäršäšä, səm məs wäšä, ^oätä (*sic*) ^oay-yəṭəqälläs, ^oəti ^oay-yəmälläs, ^oəti ^oay-yədämsäs*, ‘The

⁴⁰ Kane 2000, I, 501.

⁴¹ Kəbrä’ab Wäldä Giyorgis and ‘Erməyas Kəbrä’ab 2006, 27; Mogaš ‘Əqqubä Giyorgis 1965/1966, 14; ‘Andä-Mika’el Sälomon 2008/2009, 10; Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 52; Gäbrä Kidan Dästa 2001/2002, 89.

⁴² Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 33. Note that *^oazmära* may also mean ‘light rains’, ‘first rains’, or ‘good times.’ Another possible interpretation in this context may be ‘the farmer’s success depends on the first rains, the success of a bee depends on the queen bee [who gives birth to the worker bees]’.

skin when it becomes dry [with age], the child when it grows up, the reputation when it is lost: the one cannot be reformed, the [other] one cannot be returned, the [third] one cannot be abrogated'. This version of the proverb appears in the German story collection published by the Arbeiterwohlfahrt Bundesverband e.V. (Workers' Welfare Association).⁴³ There is also a similar, shorter version: ቈርባት እንድሕሪ ነቂፀ ፣ ሰም እንድሕሪ ወጊኡ ፣ እቲ አይጥቅለል ፣ እቲ አይምለስ, *q^w arbät 'andəbri näqisu, səm 'andəbri wāsi'u, 'əti 'ay-yəṭəqläl, 'əti 'ay-yəmälläs*, 'The skin if it becomes dry, the [good] name when it is lost: the first one cannot be smoothed up, the second one cannot be reverted'.⁴⁴

41) ዕድመ ንንስሐ ፣ መዋእል ንፍስሐ, *admä nə-nəssəḥa, mäwa'al nə-fəssəḥa*, 'A whole life for repentance, a whole life for joy'. The longer one lives, the more things one experiences in life, so that there is enough time for joy and for sorrow. To use the words of Ecclesiastes (3:1–4), 'to everything there is a season [...], a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance'.

42) ከይኮነ ወግን ፣ ከይተሰብረ ጸግን, *k-äy-konä wäggən, k-äy-täsäbrä šäggən*, 'Arrange before it is there, repair before it is broken'. Some collections list an alternative version, featuring a different first part, for instance ከይኮነ ለብም, *k-äy-konä läbbəm*, 'consider/beware of it before it is there'.⁴⁵

43) ከይወዳሉ ይወዳዳሉ ፣ ከይተሰማሙ ይማሓሓሉ, *k-äy-wä'alu yəwəwä'ä'alu, k-äy-tä'amamänu yəmmahəḥalu*, 'Without spending much time [confering], they made a deal; without believing one another, they swore a mutually binding oath to each other'. Aside from being a nice example of the use of frequentative verb forms, the proverb warns against premature decisions and hasty agreements.

44) ከይጸገቡ አይዘሉ ፣ ከይዘለሉ አይሰንክሉ, *k-äy-šägäbu 'ay-yəzällu, k-äy-zälälu 'ay-yəsənkəlu*, 'They do not jump ('play', 'dance', 'have fun') before having become sated; they do not become crippled before having jumped'. This probably indicates an unfortunate person who does not wish to have fun on an empty stomach, and immediately hurts him- or herself once he or she starts having fun. Everything has a reason and a consequence and life is a sequence of unfortunate and happy events. Ignorance leads people to make silly mistakes, and silly mistakes may lead to grave dangers. As *šägäbä*

⁴³ Paulos Tesfazghi 1989, 74–75.

⁴⁴ Şəgeräda Täklä et al. 1992/1993, 113.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 238.

also means ‘to be proud/boastful’, the proverb may also be a reminder of modesty, in the manner in which Leslau interprets the equivalent expression in Čaha.⁴⁶ A very similar proverb, however using affirmative verb forms, is also attested in Oromo.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The expressions presented in *Let’s Speak Tigrinya* and discussed here embrace a wide range of topics, offering students a brief insight into the rich culture of Təgrəñña proverbs. The importance ascribed to them in their use of language and the appreciation they enjoy among language speakers are reflected in the sheer number of these sayings selected for the textbook. Students may have the overall impression that there is no lack of proverbs suited, not only to any grammatical issue, but also nearly any subject or situation of life in general in Təgrəñña. This runs parallel to the realization of paremiologists that proverbs in language cultures around the globe represent all aspects of human life. In turn, this realization has enabled the development of a complex universal classification of proverbs by the Finnish researcher Matti Kuusi and his daughter Outi Lauhakangas.⁴⁸ Of the forty-four proverbs compiled by Issayas Tesfamariam for his coursebook, there seem to be expressions representing most, if not all, of the thirteen umbrella themes suggested by this classification system.

On the other hand, only few of these proverbial expressions can be understood through their word-by-word translation, whereas the vast majority requires explanations from individuals familiar with the cultural specifics, or from a language instructor, or both. The fact that proverb sections in the textbook are not provided with any commentaries, translation, pronunciation hints, explanations, or extra vocabulary, excludes all Təgrəñña learners from using the book as a self-learning material.⁴⁹ The misprints noted hardly contribute to a better understanding of these proverbs. Moreover, as already stated in the Introduction, the question arises whether Təgrəñña language students at Indiana University Bloomington get much beyond the simple recitation of the proverb lists with their classmates, as they are in-

⁴⁶ Leslau 1949, 221, no. 21.

⁴⁷ Tasgara Hirpo 1996, 99, no. 286 (‘The one who has enough (or ‘is sated’) jumps; the one who jumps breaks something (their leg, arm, or the like)’).

⁴⁸ Mieder 2004, 16–20.

⁴⁹ Hardly any proverb from the proverb sections is discussed in the respective lesson or elsewhere in the textbook, as is the case with the number (10) in this list (p. 109 in the textbook).

structed in the textbook. After all, as Sabine Fiedler states in her essay, ‘as the time that teachers have at their disposal in language classes is limited, it seems to be a sheer luxury to teach proverbs in a context in which the pronunciation of words and grammatical structures still causes problems.’⁵⁰ However, as a great effort has been made to select proverbs appropriate to the coursebook context, it would be a waste of resources and possibilities if nothing more were to be extracted from them than mere recitation. Among other things, many proverbs contain valuable information about social norms and beliefs, which may well be interesting from a socio-cultural or historical point of view.

The pictures and reading text contexts it contains show the textbook to be somewhat Eritrea-oriented, with Təgrāñña speakers from Təgray only mentioned *en passant* in the Foreword; the proverbs presented in the book are quite uniform, with barely any striking phonological or lexical peculiarities, or dialectal variations. Amharisms are few, but their use is undoubtedly noteworthy. A quick comparison with the contents of the proverb collections on hand published at different times in different places reveals that the textbook uses predominantly well-known expressions which are familiar in part from earlier European research works. As is usually the case with proverbs, the ones listed here can be found in numerous other collections, frequently featuring variations implementing similar or alternative wording.

Taking the latest research findings on the role of proverbs usage in language teaching into account and the general importance of proverbs as a genre in the Təgrāñña language culture, allied to the fact that they still remain insufficiently researched, one feels it is necessary to express the hope that in the future, regarding Təgrāñña learning materials, greater attention be given to the annotation of proverbs and their use as well as their historical and socio-cultural background.

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⁵⁰ Fiedler 2014, 294.

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Summary

Proverbs have been used in language teaching for centuries. Nowadays, language learners associate mastery of this traditionally oral genre to a certain level of fluency and regard it as an access key to a deeper understanding of the native speakers' culture. The recently released Təgrāñña coursebook *Let's Speak Tigrinya* (2018) contains almost fifty proverbs, and provides students with an insight into this old and rich tradition. However, owing to the lack of commentary or translation, the paper here seeks to compensate for this deficiency. In comparison with several Təgrāñña proverb collections, it becomes apparent that the expressions listed in the textbook are common in Eritrea as well as in the Təgray region, in several alternative variations, some of which have been attested to in earlier European research works. A few examples even have an Amharic equivalent. The proverbs focused on here cover a wide range of both grammatical and everyday life topics and should be implemented in a more effective manner than the textbook provides. However, due to the lack of translations and occasional misprints, their accessibility is radically reduced and of little use for the individual language learner unassisted by a classroom situation.