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Some Brief Remarks on Teaching Amharic: A Personal View

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This is an opening note based on the paper which I delivered for the proceedings of the conference on The Teaching of Amharic in Europe, organized by Delombera Negga and held in Paris at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (Inalco) on 7–8 January 2009, which, however, have never been published. On 1 February 2018, while welcoming the attendants of the workshop የአማርኛ ቋንቋ ትምህርት አሰጣጥ በጀርመን አገር – ዓውደ ጥናት/Workshop: Amharisch Unterrichten in Deutschland/Workshop on the Teaching of Amharic in Germany, held on 1–2 February 2018 at the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies,¹ I shared and updated some of the considerations I had developed, on the basis of my teaching and working experience in Naples and Hamburg.

Introduction

There is no need to stress that Amharic has played a special role in Ethiopian studies. Apart from the case where purely linguistic interests are involved—which lessens the chance of offering a broader range of topics in Ethiopian studies—Amharic has obtained a prominent position in teaching and in research as a consequence of well-known historical and institutional facts: Amharic has the status of a language spoken as mother tongue by the ethnic group which has substantially, both politically and culturally, dominated both Ethiopia and Eritrea for centuries; and Amharic—in keeping with the former factor and as a consequence of consistent policies developed especially during the middle decades of the twentieth century (Ḥāyla

¹ At this workshop I only played the role of host and sponsor, since the initiative was mainly funded by the European Research Council, European Union Seventh Framework Programme IDEAS (FP7/2007–2013), ERC Advanced Grant agreement no. 338756, project TraCES: From Translation to Creation: Changes in Ethiopic Style and Lexicon from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages (2014–2019). But it is important for me to stress that the workshop was conceived, proposed, and organized by Getie Gelaye and Magdalena Krzyżanowska, to both of whom I offer my sincere thanks and congratulations for this achievement.

Šəllāse's reign, 1916–1974)—has kept the status of an official language, later on of a 'lingua franca', and later still of a 'recognized working language'.² It appears therefore that, in contrast to Gə'əz, the primacy of Amharic can be regarded as depending primarily on political circumstances, and is thus more likely to undergo rapid evolution. As for Gə'əz, although it is a dead language, it has for centuries—along with Arabic, and to a much greater extent than Amharic—unquestionably been the most important written language of the area. Thus, as maintained by Carlo Conti Rossini, any serious investigation of the past of the country is impossible without Gə'əz.³ An evaluation of the present conditions of the teaching of Amharic might start with the above-mentioned premises, together with a closer look at the role Amharic has been assigned in the last years in some of the academic programmes in which I was personally involved.

The Bologna Process and its Consequences

Although not a specialist in the Amharic language, I taught Amharic in Hamburg for a few semesters in 2010 and 2011 (two hours a week), and in Naples, in 2008 and 2009. In both cases my involvement was part of measures taken by the respective institutions,⁴ to restructure the academic programmes in line with the Bologna Process. This process reached a culminating point, yet neither the first nor the last one, in 1999 with the Bologna Declaration, that extended well beyond the European Union and also involved the Council of Europe and other countries. The aim of this process, now with forty-eight participating countries, is the creation of the European Higher Education Area, making academic degree standards and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe, in particular under the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (also known

² Cf. 'Amharic', *EAE*, I (2003), 232b–238a (D. L. Appleyard), here especially 232b.

³ Cf. Conti Rossini 1937, 99–100, 'chiunque voglia seriamente e con criteri scientifici studiare lingue o storia della nostra Africa Orientale, da essa [i.e. Gə'əz] deve partire'.

⁴ Istituto Universitario Orientale, later on Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, BA and MA academic programmes Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa and MA programme Linguistics of Asia and Africa; and Universität Hamburg, Fakultät für Geisteswissenschaften, Asien-Afrika-Institut, Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik, BA academic programme Afrikanistik and international MA academic programme Äthiopistik/Ethiopian Studies.

as Lisbon Recognition Convention, 1997).⁵ Essential features of this process were the general introduction of BA and MA degree levels and a system of credit points.

The Teaching of Amharic in Naples

Having been formally and informally involved—and indeed intensively in Naples and to some extent in Hamburg—in the hard work of adapting the old curricula to the new academic order and rules inspired by the Bologna Process, I will briefly recount what was possible *before* and *after* it was applied.⁶

To understand better the *before*, something has to be said about the role Naples played in the history of Amharic teaching in Europe. The Istituto Universitario Orientale (at the time, Regio Istituto Orientale) was the earliest established professorship for Amharic at university level in Europe and

⁵ I take this information from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bologna_Process (accessed on 5 January 2019), to which I also refer for further details. This process is definitely an ongoing one. The Bologna Process ‘is named after the University of Bologna, where the Bologna declaration was signed by education ministers from 29 European countries in 1999. The process was opened to other countries in the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe, and governmental meetings have been held in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007) and Leuven (2009). Before the signing of the Bologna declaration, the Magna Charta Universitatum was issued at a meeting of university rectors celebrating the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna (and European universities) in 1988. One year before the [Bologna] declaration, education ministers Claude Allegre (France), Jürgen Rüttgers (Germany), Luigi Berlinguer (Italy) and Baroness Blackstone (UK) signed the Sorbonne declaration in Paris in 1998, committing themselves to “harmonising the architecture of the European Higher Education system”. The Bologna Process has 48 participating countries’ (ibid.).

⁶ In Naples, in particular, I was the assistant and then deputy of the general academic director of the BA and MA programmes on Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa at the Faculty of Arts from 1999 to 2004; I was formal academic director of the same BA academic programme in 2004 and 2005; general academic director of all BA and MA programmes on Asia and Africa at the Faculty of Arts in 2007 and 2008 (BA and MA programmes Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, and MA programme Linguistics of Asia and Africa). In Italy, the teaching of Amharic was undertaken at lecturer level at other universities, for instance in Florence, as a complement to Semitic linguistics. In this note only teaching at professorship level or by appointment will be considered.

in the world, with Francesco Gallina in 1891.⁷ Gallina also supported the printing (in Rome) of the first modern narrative work in Amharic, with the *Ləbb wallad t̄arik*, later reprinted as *Tobyā*, by Afawarq Gabra Iyasus in 1908, prefaced by Gallina himself.⁸ A chair for Amharic was always present in Naples (with only a short interruption in the aftermath of World War II) as a permanent position,⁹ flanked in the beginning by temporary positions for Təgrəññā (held by Gallina) and Somali.¹⁰ The years of the Italian aggres-

⁷ Even though Naples was the major academic centre for the study of Amharic in Italy, Francesco Gallina was a pupil of Ignazio Guidi, and the school always represented itself as the ‘Roman school’, cf. Ricci 1971, 156. According to Ricci, in the ‘modesta ma gloriosa “piccola Scuola Romana”’, Conti Rossini also included “l’Istituto Orientale di Napoli, poiché il Gallina fu allievo del Guidi” (Conti Rossini’s own words in double quotation marks); on this see also Bausi 2016. For rapid and reliable information on Francesco Gallina, as well as on Ignazio Guidi, Afawarq Gabra Iyasus, Martino Mario Moreno, Lanfranco Ricci, and Luigi Fusella, cf. *EAE* s.v.

⁸ Cf. Ricci 1986, 152, ‘Nel 1891 fu l’Istituto Orientale ad avere la prima cattedra etiopistica di ruolo (lingua amarica) che mai fosse creata sia in Italia che fuori; fu l’Istituto Orientale a tenere a battesimo, sotto la fervida guida di Francesco Gallina (titolare della cattedra ora detta), la prima opera di grammatologia, in lingua italiana, e il primo romanzo, meglio, racconto lungo, in lingua amarica, le une e l’altra di ispirazione “occidentale”, ad opera di un personaggio etiopico di grande rilievo, Afawarq Gabra Iyasus, con il quale, in tal guisa, nasceva la odierna narrativa etiopica, in lingua amarica, di matrice “occidentale”’.

⁹ In contrast to Rome, where no permanent chair of Ethiopian studies or Ethiopian languages was ever established, even though temporary appointments were made, from Ignazio Guidi, through Carlo Conti Rossini, Martino Mario Moreno, and Lanfranco Ricci till 1977, cf. Ricci 1986, 151, ‘la Università di Roma (Facoltà di Lettere) nel 1977 lasciò andare in perenzione l’insegnamento di Storia lingue e letterature dell’Etiopia, creato alla fine del secolo scorso e ricoperto dapprima da Ignazio Guidi, e poi da Carlo Conti Rossini e Martino Mario Moreno (insegnamento, sia ricordato esplicitamente, tenuto sempre per incarico solamente, dal momento che l’Università di Roma mai si preoccupò di trasformarlo in cattedra di ruolo, come Giorgio Levi della Vida ebbe un giorno a far rilevare con imbarazzato stupore)’. On Levi della Vida, cf. Boatti 2010, 89–137.

¹⁰ This was established in the order of 1913; since 1926 only Amharic and Təgrəññā were foreseen, cf. Ricci 1971, 151, ‘In realtà, nel “Riordinamento” e connesso “Regolamento” del Reale Istituto Orientale, approvati nel 1913, fra gli insegnamenti elencati apparivano: a) amarico, impartito da un docente di ruolo; b) tigrino e somalo, impartiti da docenti incaricati; di fatto, poi, l’insegnamento costantemente attuato fu quello dell’amarico, ad opera del prof. Gallina, che, come risulta da documenti interni dell’Istituto, tenne anche per anni l’incarico dell’insegnamento del tigrino, mentre il somalo non sembra che fosse mai stato effettivamente insegnato. Nel nuovo “Statu-

sion and occupation of Ethiopia and of the creation of the Africa Orientale Italiana immediately afterwards (1935–1941) saw a rapidly growing interest in Amharic, as well as in other languages spoken in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, such as Təgrə, as well as in related subjects,¹¹ both in and outside of university institutions.¹²

In the aftermath of World War II, the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples reached the apogee of its potential due to the enterprise of Lanfranco Ricci, who was full professor of Amharic (later Amharic Language and Literature) from 1962 to 1986. Ricci had already been appointed temporarily to this position in 1953, and was appointed permanently in 1962, when the permanent position for Amharic was re-established. The Seminar for African Studies founded in 1966 (Seminario di Africanistica, then, since 1974, the Seminario di Studi Africani, later the Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e Paesi Arabi, and at present subsumed into the newly established and more comprehensive Dipartimento Asia Africa e Mediterraneo) rapidly developed into an important institution with a substantial and probably unparalleled set of chairs for Ethiopian studies: firstly, that for Gəʼəz (later Gəʼəz Language and Literature and then Ancient Ethiopic Lan-

to” del 1926 figurano come insegnamenti solo l’amarico e il tigrino, mentre il somalo non è più menzionato’.

¹¹ Cf. Ricci 1971, 156, ‘A Napoli, all’Istituto Orientale, nel 1937–39 un nuovo Statuto prevedeva, oltre agli insegnamenti di Amarico e Tigrino già esistenti, come si è accennato, anche quelli di Tigrè (menzionato insieme al tigrino), di Geʼez, di Somalo galla e altre lingue camitiche, di Storia e istituzioni abissine, mentre contemporaneamente l’ordinamento offriva la possibilità di conseguire una laurea in Lingue letterature e istituzioni orientali, articolata in diversi sottogruppi di specializzazione (Africanistica; Amarico tigrino e tigrè; Somalo galla ed altre lingue camitiche), ed un’altra in Scienze coloniali’.

¹² Cf. Ricci 1971, 157, ‘Vi fu, è vero, un periodo, fra il 1935 e il 1942, che vide folte studentesche frequentare corsi di culture e di lingue etiopiche attuali, ma soprattutto di amarico, che si svolgevano presso istituzioni autonome in alcune grandi città, al di fuori dell’Università, ma si trattò in ogni caso di insegnamenti impartiti e seguiti con fini del tutto pratici, gli stessi che provocarono il centuplicarsi degli studenti di lingua amarica all’Istituto Orientale di Napoli dopo il 1937–39, allorché quella lingua [Footnote: ‘Dapprima, nello Statuto del 1937–39, insieme, ma in posizione preponderante, con le altre lingue sopra accennate e con Storia e istituzioni etc., poi da sola, insieme alla Storia ora detta, in quello del 1941.’] costituì materia necessaria per il conseguimento della laurea in scienze coloniali’. The interesting contribution by Marassini 2004 focuses on Eritrea and only marginally touches upon the role of Amharic.

guage and Literature), taken first by Luigi Fusella in 1970,¹³ then, after the latter's retirement, by Paolo Marrassini for four years from 1990 to 1994, and by myself from 2002 to 2009; secondly, that for Təgrāñña Language and Literature by Yaqob Beyene in 1984 till his retirement in 2008. In 1974, a position for Ethiopian Archaeology was also established, the only case in the history of Ethiopian studies. Since its establishment, the position was occupied by Rodolfo Fattovich,¹⁴ eventually as a full professor, first at the Faculty of Arts, and for some years at the Faculty of Islamic Studies. As for the teaching of Amharic, after Ricci's retirement, the task was first taken on by Yaqob Beyene (till his retirement in 2008), and then assigned to myself (in 2008 and 2009). A basic Amharic course was also offered by Gianfrancesco Lusini in the same years at the Faculty of Islamic Studies. Unfortunately, despite such a glorious past, a dramatic shortage of funding and human resources has resulted in this basic course being the only course of Amharic still taught in Naples, at present at the Dipartimento Asia Africa e Mediterraneo.

Before the reform and into the 1990s, the Istituto Universitario Orientale offered the possibility of a uniquely rich curriculum in Ethiopian studies—as I have sketched out above. In a four-year course, this curriculum allowed the combination of all possible subjects offered by the faculty relating to Ethiopian and African studies, including the languages (not less than three,

¹³ Cf. Haberland 1986, 149, 'Luigi Fusella è il grande maestro della lingua amarica e più ancora della letteratura di questa gente. Io credo che egli padroneggi questa complicata lingua meglio di molti amara. Per questo noi vogliamo conferirgli il titolo onorifico di *alaqa*'.

¹⁴ For a clear presentation of the facts, cf. Ricci 1986, 151–152, 'l'Istituto Orientale di Napoli è andato gradatamente rinsanguando e allargando la rosa di insegnamenti di etiopistica, che dal 1966 passarono a costituire, insieme ad altri dello stesso indirizzo, il Seminario di Africanistica (e, dal 1974, Seminario di Studi Africani), trasformato nel 1984 in Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e Paesi Arabi, con l'aggregazione, come vedesi, del ramo delle discipline arabistiche e islamistiche. Divenuta nuovamente di ruolo la cattedra di amarico, successivamente denominata di lingua e letteratura amarica, negli anni del 1970 passò di ruolo anche la cattedra di ge'ez, passata alla denominazione di lingua e letteratura ge'ez; poi, nel 1974, veniva istituito l'insegnamento di archeologia e antichità etiopiche, assolutamente nuovo, l'unico esistente sia in Italia che all'estero, con il quale veniva finalmente colmato un vuoto sempre più evidente nel molteplice mondo degli studi etiopici; infine, nel 1984, aveva inizio l'insegnamento di lingua e letteratura tigrina, anche questo unico nel suo genere nelle università sia italiane che straniere'. Courses in Ethiopian history and institutions were also held for many years by Alessandro Triulzi at the Faculty of Political Sciences, and later (from 2002 to 2009) by myself at the Faculty of Arts.

Gəʿəz, Amharic, and Təgrəññā, also combining two of them, plus Arabic as an optional subject), the regional history of the Horn of Africa, and archaeology.

After the Bologna Process was enforced, it became virtually impossible to study Gəʿəz and Amharic and/or Təgrəññā (no longer offered) at the BA level, as was earlier possible. This was not only a consequence of the process itself, but much more than that, of the way the internal and Italian national rules conformed to the new directives and to the increasingly stricter requirements.¹⁵ The remodelling of all previous curricula in accordance with the new *modern language study* curriculum has led to the almost total disappearance of the Gəʿəz language from the regular teaching offer. Gəʿəz might have survived as an important language for students in Ethiopian archaeology, yet due to the specific requirements of the archaeological curriculum, which the archaeologists were forced to adopt, in a short time, it became virtually impossible for them to dedicate any credit points to Gəʿəz at the BA level.

A Brief Look at Hamburg

Let's now take a closer look at the academic structuring of Amharic teaching in Hamburg as it has emerged in the years immediately following the Bologna Process.¹⁶ In fact, I am convinced—as I have tried to outline in the case of Amharic teaching in Naples in its relation to Gəʿəz and other subjects in Ethiopian studies—that an understanding of the broader context is imperative if one is to have an idea as to whether the general academic setting makes a good training possible—one that also takes a cultural and historical perspective into account.

Having accepted the chair of Ethiopian studies in Hamburg in September 2009,¹⁷ I gradually became acquainted with the German system and the consequences of the Bologna Process and the local decisions of the depart-

¹⁵ A detailed presentation of the various steps is impossible here, even though it is certainly interesting, and essential to a deep understanding of the current state of affairs.

¹⁶ About the history of teaching Amharic at Universität Hamburg, cf. Hammerschmidt 1970, and Meyer-Bahlburg and Wolff 1986. The Hamburg tradition was especially marked by the teaching and research of August Klingenheben (1886–1967), who was active for many years in Amharic studies, cf. Hammerschmidt 1970, 58–60; and Meyer-Bahlburg and Wolff 1986, *passim*. See also 'Klingenheben, August', *EAE*, III (2007), 412b–413a (L. Gerhardt); and Bausi forthcoming.

¹⁷ Fakultät für Geisteswissenschaften, Asien-Afrika-Institut, Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik.

ment in Hamburg. In contrast to the system in Naples, the system in Hamburg (actually applied with some delay) retained important features of the traditional German academic structure. They can be summarized as follows:

– The concept of Afrikanistik as a study of African languages and cultures from the strictly linguistic point of view: Afrikanistik should not be confused with general Africa(n) studies. Thus, the programme within which the study of Amharic is based at Universität Hamburg (the department or section of Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik) is very unbalanced, since Afrikanistik focuses *strictly* on African languages and linguistics (irrespective of whatever additional subjects are present), whilst Äthiopistik (as it emerges from its history of international conferences of Ethiopian studies since 1959, general works such as the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, journals, series, etc.) is a more widely intended study that should certainly start with the languages (which unfortunately does not always happen!) and linguistics of the area, but should also include literature, philology, history, history of art, religion, anthropology, and archaeology at least. It goes without saying that any understanding even of Ethiopian (and especially Ethiopic) linguistics is impossible outside of the Semitic context, and that, for historical reasons, both the Ancient Near East and the Christian Orient must be taken into account for a correct understanding of basic facts, even at the BA level. From this point of view, the existence of a BA curriculum in African Manuscript Cultures (alongside two more linguistically oriented ones) is already something, but not enough.¹⁸

– The survival of a fundamental distinction between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ subjects (*‘Hauptfach’* and *‘Nebenfach’*) theoretically enhances the freedom of choice of the students, allowing them to combine different subjects; in fact, this possibility is strongly limited by various constraints and has—as far as I have experienced so far—little effect on the real chances of extending the scope of the study.

The departmental structure (up to 2010, when a number of changes were introduced), combined with a shortage of funding (only one lecturer with a half position for Amharic and one lecturer with a quarter position for Gəʿəz) gave rise to an extremely odd configuration. The African languages offered and taught in Hamburg still in 2010, starting from the BA level,

¹⁸ Another negative consequence of this structure is the rigidity in the number of credit points required and the consequent impossibility, for example, of combining the study of African languages and Arabic, actually a primary tool for investigating Islamic African cultures and related linguistic and philological documents, such as *‘aḡamī* manuscripts.

consisted of Swahili, Hausa, and—incredible as it may seem—Amharic-plus-Gəʿəz (i.e. roughly two-thirds Amharic plus one-third Gəʿəz of the total semester hours) offered as *a single language*. Far from being of any advantage, this combination strongly discouraged students from attending courses in Amharic (plus Gəʿəz). Besides the difficulty involved in getting acquainted with an exotic writing system (in contrast to Swahili and Hausa), the students of Amharic-plus-Gəʿəz faced manifold difficulties: two different grammatical and phonetic systems to be learnt at the same time, with the latter based on a distinct phonetic value of the same written syllables for Amharic and Gəʿəz respectively, and a general difference between a spoken and living language like Amharic, and a literary one like Gəʿəz referring to two distinct cultural worlds and backgrounds, and finally, double exams. It is as if one offered courses in German, English, or Italian-plus-Latin.

Some Preliminary Conclusions

One may agree or not with Conti Rossini's statement, that without Gəʿəz any serious investigation of the Ethiopian past is impossible.¹⁹ Based on my work for the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, that offered an extremely privileged platform from which to correlate the quality of the submitted articles with the background of the respective authors, I am strongly inclined to think that Gəʿəz remains a necessary prerequisite for general Ethiopian studies, and that the situation determined by the Bologna Process and by a shortage of human resources is very problematic.

The unsatisfactory situation of the teaching of Amharic at Universität Hamburg has recently improved to some extent.²⁰ The present order configures a perfect parallelism between the three languages offered in the department: Swahili, Hausa, and Amharic are offered as language courses, with Gəʿəz included in seminars, but not formally as a language course—exactly as required for a language that ultimately can only be the object of philological research. Taking all factors into consideration, I am convinced that this situation better corresponds to the requirements of a modern approach to Ethiopian studies.

¹⁹ See above.

²⁰ Thanks to the help of various people. In particular, I am extremely grateful to my PhD student, Angela Müller, who technically devised some of the measures to be undertaken. These measures were originally put into practice in 2010 and 2011, and formally confirmed in 2012.

Disregarding for the moment advanced research, and focusing on BA and MA curricula in Afrikanistik and in Ethiopian studies (as the Manuscript Cultures curriculum at Universität Hamburg), no other language can take the place of Amharic in its role as a strategic key to Ethiopian studies. In many cases Amharic will not be enough, of course, yet, as the major ‘lingua franca’ and ‘recognized working language’, it will always be needed. A few points relating to the didactic significance of Amharic might be added here:

– Amharic, as a Semitic language with a strongly Cushitized syntax, is particularly appropriate in providing insights into both Semitic and Cushitic linguistic features; it holds, so to speak, an interesting middle position that is particularly relevant for a student who, later, will be able to choose what he/she is going to study in depth.

– The study of Amharic, even in its early stages, presupposes mastering the *fidal*, which, apart from the necessities of a purely linguistic knowledge, is an essential cultural element for any well-grounded approach to Ethiopian studies.

– Some knowledge of Amharic facilitates the eventual study of Gəʿəz, which will then appear as a relatively simple language. Moreover, everything related to the ‘Gəʿəz tradition’ will be also much better visible and richer through the lens of Amharic, which in many cases (although not always) offers a definite possibility of acknowledging the very close cultural interrelationship between the two languages.

As a concluding remark, I would like to stress that the academic situation of Amharic teaching which emerged after the Bologna Process in Hamburg, even though not ideal, still provides the possibility of studying Amharic in the specific context of broader Ethiopian studies. Both Amharic and Gəʿəz can be offered, and the fact that Amharic is taught at an earlier curricular stage than Gəʿəz cannot be seen as a disadvantage, even for those primarily interested in the study of Gəʿəz.

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Summary

This article offers a brief comparative view of the teaching of Amharic in the last decades at two major European universities: the Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” and the Universität Hamburg. The aim of this brief history is to highlight the severe consequences on the teaching of Amharic enforced by measures set in motion by the Bologna Process since 1999. This changed framework requires adequate strategies and counter-measures in order to safeguard the quality of education and the continuity of our research traditions.