



Aethiopia 11 (2008)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Review

GEORGI KAPCHITS, *Sentence Particles in the Somali Language and their Usage in Proverbs*

Aethiopia 11 (2008), 297–300

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

Reviews

LaTosky das Bild zurecht, das sich Außenstehende von verheirateten Mursi-Frauen mit ihren Lippentellern machen, und untersucht dabei das Spannungsfeld zwischen Selbstachtung und Stigmatisierung.

Solche Aufsatzsammlungen sind selbstverständlich auch immer ein Versuch, die – häufig sehr heterogenen – Forschungsthemen und -ansätze unter einem theoretischen Dach zu vereinen. Im vorliegenden Fall ist dies meist gut gelungen. Die Artikel sind von durchgehend guter bis sehr guter Qualität, so dass das Buch trotz mittelmäßiger Druckqualität sehr zu empfehlen ist, und dies nicht nur für Personen mit einem Forschungsinteresse in Südäthiopien. Denn die Themen des Buches lehnen sich trotz ihrer regional begrenzten Ausrichtung an die zur Zeit sehr aktuellen Themen der Globalisierung, die international stattfindenden Kriege unter der Prämisse der Terrorbekämpfung, den “Kampf der Kulturen” und die besonders in Europa geführten Diskussionen um Integration an. In Äthiopien sind diese Themen aufgrund der Umformung des Staates von einem zentralen zu einem föderalen System relevant. Eine Einordnung, die jedoch nur Jon Abbink in seinem Artikel (und weniger weit gefasst Shiferaw Bekele in seinem Vorwort) ähnlich andeutet (S. 227). Die vorliegenden Untersuchungen leisten über den thematischen Ansatz des Buches hinaus auch einen wertvollen Beitrag zur Ethnographie der behandelten Gruppen. Besonders schön sind dabei diejenigen Artikel, in denen die Menschen selber zu Wort kommen (z.B. Epple, Gabbert, LaTosky, Strecker).

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GEORGI KAPCHITS, *Sentence Particles in the Somali Language and their Usage in Proverbs* = *Semitica et Semitoamitica Berolinensia* 4. Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2005. 114 pp. Price: € 24,80. ISBN: 3-8322-4737-8

This booklet is a new contribution to the growing literature on information structure in Somali. The author is well aware of it and quotes many of the most important titles.¹ His approach differs from that of most other previous studies in the specific kind of corpus he uses as a basis for his study, namely his huge collection of Somali proverbs and proverb-like sayings,

¹ For instance: B.W. ANDRZEJEWSKI, The rôle of indicator particles in Somali = *Afroasiatic Linguistics* 1/6 (1975) 123–191; ANNARITA PUGLIELLI, *Sintassi della lingua somala* = *Studi Somali* 2 (Rome 1981); JOHN IBRAHIM SAEED, *The syntax of focus and topic in Somali* = *Kuschitische Sprachstudien* 3 (Hamburg 1984); JOHN IBRAHIM SAEED, *Somali* (Amsterdam – Philadelphia 1999).

that has been the object of several other publications by him, e.g., *Qaamuuska maabmaahyada Soomaaliyeed/The dictionary of Somali proverbs* (Moscow 1998), and *Hubsiiimo hal baa la siistaa, To know something for sure, one would even part with a she-camel – Somali proverbs: a study in popularity* (Moscow 2002). In addition to this, the booklet reviewed here is addressed to readers who do not necessarily know Somali, and thus includes an introductory section (pp. 11–29) that outlines the genetic classification of Somali, a short sketch of its grammatical system and of its syntax, as well as a typological characterization of the focus systems of this language and of its main dialects. It should be noted that the variety of Somali described by Kapchits here is Northern Somali as it is generally used in writing. According to the source he draw his proverbs from, there is at times some oscillation between north-western forms like *gadh* ‘beard’ (p. 37) or *yidhi* ‘he said’ (p. 67), and forms such as *gaari* ‘reach’ (p. 38) where the typically north-western post-vocalic retroflex *dh* is shifted to alveolar *r*.

In the following chapters the author discusses the three major focus constructions of Somali: the construction with the sentence particle *waa* (Ch. 1), that with the sentence particle *baa* (and its variant *ayaa*, Ch. 2), and that with the sentence particle *waxaa* (Ch. 3). The first one focuses nominal and verbal predicates, the second one NP’s, while the third one is used in cleft sentences. Kapchits’s considerable knowledge of Somali makes it possible for him to describe the syntax of each of these particles in considerable detail; for instance, Ch. 2 includes subchapters on “The function of the particle *baa*” (Subch. 2.1), “Case and tone in a sentence with the particle *baa*” (Subch. 2.2), “The particle *baa* with short subjective pronouns” (Subch. 2.3), “The order of words in a sentence with the particle *baa*” (Subch. 2.4), “The particle *baa* and the agreement of the predicate with the subject” (Subch. 2.5), and “The particle *baa* in special syntactic constructions” (Subch. 2.6).

It should be noted that the theoretical framework used by the author for describing information structure centres upon the notions of theme and its dynamic combination with the rheme, i.e., it is based upon the Prague School’s so-called Functional Sentence Perspective as it has been subsequently developed by Russian linguists such as Krušel’nickaya, Padučeva and others, mentioned on p. 23. However, he explicitly states that his aim is not a theoretical one because he considers “it necessary to concentrate, at the present stage of Somali language studies, on the immediate task, that is the elucidation of the surface manifestations of the mechanisms of rheme-making” (p. 23).

Among these “surface manifestations” attention is given not only to the main ones, that have been more frequently discussed in the literature, but also to less known ones, such as those where neither *waa*, nor *baa* or *waxaa* is used. This happens systematically whenever one of five different tenses is

used: the Past Independent of verbs of the first, second and third conjugations, the Present and Past Comparative and the Present and Past exclamatory of “attributive” verbs, also known as verbs of the fourth conjugation.² These are tenses that are not much used in everyday speech, but occur more frequently in folktales and, especially, in more formalized genres of Somali oral literature such as poetry, riddles, curses as well as proverbs and proverbial sayings. The particular corpus used by Kapchits in this publication is thus particularly suited for looking into their use.

Another peculiarity of a paremiological corpus consists in the fact that proverbs and proverbial sayings are short, self-contained utterances that are used for making a particular point or stating a general truth. They can be adapted to different contexts, but their formal structure does not depend upon a specific prior discourse. It has been frequently stated, e.g., by Knud Lambrecht (*Information structure and sentence form*, Cambridge – New York – Melbourne 1994), that information structure has its formal manifestations at sentence level, but can only be understood at discourse level. Indeed, this is why many aspects of Somali information structure have only been noticed when its manifestations have been looked at not just in individual sentences elicited from informants, but also in full texts where the flow of topics, of old vs. new information, and the different procedures for redirecting the listener’s or the reader’s attention could be tracked over the span of several successive sentences.³ But proverbs and proverbial sayings are instances of self-contained discourse that in most cases consist of just one sentence, where the topic and what is affirmed, negated or asked about it are established without referring to a wider context of prior discourse. For instance, the sentence structure of the proverb *Rag qabri iyo qawl baa ka hara* (p. 88) ‘of a man, only a tomb and fame remain’, clearly posits *rag* ‘a man’ as its topic (theme), while what follows is the comment (rheme), where the alliterative couplet *qabri iyo qawl*, lit. ‘tomb and word’ is what is more prominently affirmed, i.e., the affirmative focus marked by the particle *baa*. Proverbs and proverbial sayings provide thus an ideal corpus for looking at information structure in minimally simple and easily observed discourse situations, because they are their own contexts.

In Chapter 4 the author describes the main peculiarities of Somali proverbs, such as their tendency towards alliteration, and metrical and syntactic

² The names of tenses are those used by B.W. ANDRZEJEWSKI in several publications. The names of the four conjugations are those used in FRANCESCO AGOSTINI *et al.*, *Dizionario somalo italiano* (Rome 1985).

³ This appears particularly in JOHN IBRAHIM SAEED (1999, cf. note 1), and in MAURO TOSCO, A whole lotta focusin’ goin’ on: information packaging in Somali texts = *Studies in African Linguistics* 31 (2002) 27–53.

parallelism. A typology of the different paremiological genres of Somali is briefly provided in section 4.2, based upon Permyakov's "theory of cliché" (p. 77). Proper proverbs are thus distinguished from proverbial sentences, wellerisms and scenes; each of these three genres is further subdivided into three subgenres so as to yield an elaborate typology of 16 taxa. For instance, *Been sheeg, laakiin been run u eg sheeg* 'tell lies, but tell lies that resemble the truth' is classified by Kapchits as a "folk aphorism", the second subgenre of proverbs. Instead, *Abeeso waxay tidhi "Aadane abaal ma leh"* 'The snake said "A human being has no gratitude"' is classified as a "contextual wellerism", the third subgenre of wellerisms, because it consists in a character who delivers an aphorism that can only be understood by referring to a well-known story. (About a man who found a snake at his side when he woke up, and tried to kill it in spite of the fact that it had done no harm to him while he was lying asleep.) In section 4.6.1 numerical sayings are also briefly discussed, "without going into the problem" of their classification, even though they are quite frequent in Somali folklore. Indeed they are a rather diverse group of sayings based upon two, three, four or even more complex sets of parallel statements, such as the following: *Rag waxaa ugu xun saddex: nin maqan oon la tebin, nin jooga oon la tirin iyo nin tegeya oon la celin* (p. 94) 'among men, three are the worst: he who is absent and is not remembered, he who is present and is ignored, and he who departs and is not stopped'.

The final sections discuss the peculiarities and different frequencies of the three major focus constructions and of sentences with the five tenses that cannot occur with sentence particles in the author's paremiological corpus. Several interesting syntactic constructions are met here, such as *Laga barayba laga badi* 'one surpasses whom one has learnt something from', where the Past Independent verb *badi* is used with the value of a gnomic present and has as its complement governed by *-ga* 'from, than' the headless relative clause *laga baray*. (Notice that *-ba* here is a strengthening particle, different from the sentential particle *baa*.)

In conclusion, Kapchits's volume is an important reading for those who work on Somali, as well as for people who are more generally interested in the peculiarities of the language and structure of proverbs and proverb-like genres.

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