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**Review**

MENGISTU AMBERBER, *Verb Classes and Transitivity in Amharic*

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MENGISTU AMBERBER, *Verb Classes and Transitivity in Amharic* = Lincom Studies in Afro-Asiatic Linguistics 6. München: Lincom Europa, 2002. IV, 108 pp. Price: € 46,-. ISBN: 3-89586-404-8.

Mengistu Amberber, like many Ethiopian Linguists who graduated from the Department of Linguistics of the Addis Ababa University and then travelled abroad to English speaking countries for the continuation of their studies, chose in his book Amharic tense system as his corpus of study and a purely theoretical approach as his method of analysis. While many of his former peers working in Ethiopia and elsewhere<sup>1</sup> take advantage of the incredible linguistic wealth and variety of their country in order to describe unknown or little known local languages, providing substantial and innovative contributions to our knowledge of the various branches of Afro-Asiatic, the author examines once more and mostly for the benefit of his foreign colleagues, the Amharic verb classes, albeit applying a refined and updated neo-generative technique. He proceeds by a method combining morphological analysis with considerations about the verb's valency, i.e. about the number of nominal participants in the action (subject and object/s) and then seeks to explain some anomalies and deviations from a preconceived ideal model by resorting to the semantics of the verb or lexical semantics according to his terminology. The latter approach, together with typological hints, represents perhaps a kind of tribute to his country of adoption, Australia, and its prominent linguists Anna Wierzbicka, Robert Dixon, Alexandra Aikhenvald and others.

The book holds six chapters. In the first chapter the author briefly sketches the basics of the Amharic verb morphology introducing the forms with no prefixes; the next four chapters deal with the derived verb classes formed by prefixation of *tä-*, *a-*, and *as-* and their combinations, and the ensuing internal changes of the verbal bases. In the last chapter forms composed with the verb *alä* are discussed. In this concise and very clearly formulated book the author shows his undeniable capacity to assimilate the recent trends in theoretical linguistics and adapt them to the analysis of his native tongue. He is well read and his attempt to construct, within a reduced space (108 pages), a cohesive system out of one of the most complicated chapters of Amharic grammar may be considered a success. However, by conforming too faithfully to the preconceived general linguistic rules formulated under strong influence of English, his treatment of certain phenomena may seem arbitrary.

<sup>1</sup> Just to mention Azeb Amha in Leiden working on Wäläyṭta and other Omotic languages, Anbessa Teferra in Jerusalem on Sidamo, Zelealem Leyew in Köln on Kāmant and Agāw in general.

Thus, for instance, in the second chapter those verb classes are treated which undergo, following prefixation of *tä-*, a decrease of valency from two nominal participants to one (from subject+direct object to subject alone), resulting in the passive and intransitive classes. It is probably the classification according to the principle of valency which dictated to the author the separation between the passive from the reflexive verbs (later described conjointly with the reflexives in chapter 4), despite the identical prefix *tä-* in their formation, because the reflexive verbs may be accompanied by two nominal participants: subject and direct object similarly to transitive verbs, e.g. *aster əḡḡ<sup>w</sup>an taṭṭäbäčč* ‘Aster washed her hands’ (Chapter 4 ‘The Reflexive and the Reciprocal’ p. 67). But then, why to include together reflexive with reciprocal verbs if the latter, by the author’s own testimony, do not admit a direct object and, although also created by prefixation of *tä-*, necessitate far reaching changes of the base (notably to the frequentative – p. 73)? Isn’t it the sempiternal and indestructible English model of the generative linguistics, with its dissimilar formation of the passive (was washed) from both the reflexive and reciprocal (washed himself and washed one another) that dictated to the author the separation of the two morphologically identical *tä-* forms, traditionally included under the label of reflexive-passive?

A similar English model is doubtless hidden behind the statement that in Amharic a periphrastic/analytic causative “can be formed with the independent verb *adärrägä*” (Chapter 3 “The Causative and the Applicative” p. 53) illustrated by examples such as *aster lämma wädä bet ändihed adärrägäčč*. But in English *make A do x* is a close verb combination with the infinitive in its bound form devoid of *to* such as in *must go, will go* etc. and can perhaps be considered as a verbal class. In Amharic, however this is a syntactical construction of two separate sentences, one main and one subordinate, and it cannot be classified as part of the verbal system. Only in the composite construction *aynun fəṭəṭṭ adärrägä* (p. 95) *adärrägä* may be considered as an agent of causativization within the verbal system, but only in suppletion with *alä* and when accompanied by a nominal component.

Imposing on Amharic English lexical semantic categories may also prove arbitrary. In trying to explain why certain intransitive verbs are causativized by the prefix *a-* and other are not and receive the prefix *as-* (Chapter 3 “The Causative and the Applicative” pp. 30–42), the author distinguishes between two kinds of intransitives. On the one hand are intransitives marking a state or “unaccusatives” in his terminology, and on the other hand “unergatives” indicating an action. The intransitive verbs are classified into a few sub-categories and according to the author himself: “most of the category labels for the verb classes are adapted from Levin’s study on English verb

classes”.<sup>2</sup> But what makes the author distinguish between *gäbba* ‘enter’, *wärrädä* ‘descend’ and *wätta* ‘exit’ on the one hand, and *fälläsä* ‘migrate’ on the other hand and classify the former as unaccusative and the latter as unergative? Is there really a difference between to exit and to migrate?<sup>3</sup> And why is *bäqqälä* ‘grow’ (of plants) defined as a verb of state while *saqä* ‘laugh’ is in the action category? Providing lexical-semantic explanation for morphological phenomena is an extremely hazardous enterprise, unless it is limited to a very restricted semantic group, such as, for instance, the verbs of sensations (pp. 19–23). Otherwise the author may be asked if he has checked the entire corpus of the intransitive verbs in the Amharic lexicon and if not, how may he be sure that his rule may be applied to all of them? Lexicon is different from phonology and morphology in which correct rules may be arrived at by checking a few representative cases. In the heterogeneous corpus of the lexicon, a result of centuries of unsystematic accumulation due to internal evolution, foreign borrowings and historical heritage, there is very little room for broad generalizations.

Speaking of historical heritage, why not loosen a little the ban on diachronic considerations and, instead of creating an unnecessary mystery, admit that some stems which look identical are the result of historical phonological evolution and there is no reason to put together as independent versus bond (Chapter 5 “Bound Verbal Stems” pp. 83–84) such pairs as *färra* ‘fear’ and *afärra* ‘fructify’, respectively from Gəʕəz ፈርሮ and አፍረዖ (denominative from ፍሬ ‘fruit’); *tälla* ‘hate’ from ጸለኦ and *aṭälla* ‘shade’ from አጽለለ (denominative from ጽላሎት?); *marä* ‘have mercy’ from መሐረ and *tämarä* from ተግፀረ; *salä* ‘cough, paint’ respectively from ሰዐለ and ሠዐለ versus *täsalä* from ተሰለለ; *g<sup>w</sup>ädägg<sup>w</sup>äda* ‘sink’ of unknown etymology and *täng<sup>w</sup>ädägg<sup>w</sup>ädä* from Gəʕəz አንገድገድ etc.?

As to the Amharic language material in the book, some of the illustrations are too schematic and sound real strange. May a non-native non-speaker of Amharic be excused for pointing out to Mengistu Amberber that a sentence such as *tämaräw tämälläsä* (p. 17) may only mean in human language ‘The student returned’ and never ‘The student was returned’ and that *aster mäträgiyawn dägg<sup>w</sup> tärädäčč* (p. 56) may only be translated ‘Aster swept the broom with a doorway’ rather than ‘Aster swept a doorway with the broom’ as indicated by the author. When eliding the preposition *b-* from an instrumental verb complement it has to be indefinite and stand close to the verb; and in extremis the correct sentence would be: *aster dägg<sup>w</sup>un mä rägiya tärägäčč*.

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<sup>2</sup> LEVIN, BETH: *English Verb Classes*. Chicago, 1993: Chicago University Press.

<sup>3</sup> In modern Hebrew the verb *yarad* ‘descend’ also means ‘emigrate’ when speaking of Israelis who leave the country.