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IOSIF FRIDMAN, HSE University

Review

TAMARA PRISCHNEGG, *Sälam! ሰላም! Lehr- und Arbeitsbuch Amharisch*

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by Aaron Michael Butts

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Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt, Hewan Semon Marye,
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Reviews

Moreover, during the study period, government initiatives demanded new forms of political allegiance—the same seems to be the case now. Such attempts of inclusion increased the degree of marginality, as argued by the author. Nevertheless, an enduring optimism for a better life, despite political authoritarianism and widening social disparities, is visible. Di Nunzio boils the concept of marginality down by describing it as ‘the result of actions, responsibilities, and relationships of force’ (p. 214). This conclusion raises important issues that are extremely topical today. On the one hand, the current administration has invested a lot of effort and resources in the beautification of the capital city. On the other hand, the display of wealth amassed by a novel elite is unprecedented in scale and excessiveness. Growing authoritarianism, widening social inequalities, coupled with instability, economic uncertainty, and hardship, overshadow the optimistic mood that was visible with the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed one year prior to the publication of the book. Di Nunzio described the feeling of Ibrahim and others as doubtful with little hope for actual change. This dovetails with a recent quote of a resident regarding the major demolition that started in March 2024 across Arada—‘[i]t’s my heritage that’s been destroyed in front of my eyes, without any consultation at all. We were never told the plan’.⁴ In the end, it seems Ibrahim and Haile were right after all.

Benedikt Kamski, Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute

TAMARA PRISCHNEGG, *Sälam! ሰላም! Lehr- und Arbeitsbuch Amharisch, I*, (Hamburg: Buske, 2024). 347 pp. Price: €48.00. ISBN: 978-3-96769-377-5.

The book under review is a newly published teaching and learning tool of the Amharic language. The author of the book, Tamara Prischnegg, learned the language while studying at Addis Ababa University. For more than ten years she has taught Amharic and Somali at the University of Vienna alongside German as a foreign language in Graz, Austria.

The book comprises both a textbook and a workbook. The main goal of anyone who will conduct classes with this book is to have their students reach the A1 level of competence according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It is generally known among language teachers in Europe and elsewhere that the A1 level includes, first and foremost, the ability to understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction

⁴ See fn. 2.

of needs of a concrete type, as well as to write and read in the target language at least within the limits foreseen by the above definition.

Any Amharic textbook of this particular level cannot do completely without transcription. In order to transcribe Amharic words and texts, the author has opted for a system differing both from the International Phonetic Alphabet and from the standard of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (= EAe).¹ As such, the conventions used by Prischnegg most closely resemble, if not fully coincide with, those employed in the well-known textbook by David Appleyard.² The ejective consonants are written just as in the IPA; the postalveolar sibilants and affricates which in the IPA are conveyed by the symbols /ʃ/, /ʒ/ and /tʃ/, /dʒ/ respectively, are represented in the textbook under review as /š/, /ž/, /č/ and /j/. As for the vocalic transcription signs employed by Prischnegg, the only deviation (both from the IPA and the EAe standards) is the neutral vowel conventionally termed schwa—instead of choosing either the IPA symbol /i/ or the EAe symbol /ə/, she rather prefers (just as D. Appleyard does) to use the sign /i/. On pp. 12–13 the author presents a table listing the whole of the Amharic syllabary in its handwritten form, and the typographical shapes of all the syllabic signs as well as of the traditional Ethiopian numbers are adduced on the inner side of the book's front cover.

The entire course of study is divided into 24 lessons, with each lesson comprising, on average, 6 to 8 pages. Every lesson contains audio-materials that are specially marked. All these materials can be downloaded from https://buske.de/hbv_de/sa-lam-1-16025. Each lesson is made up of the following parts: 1) 20 to 50 words and word combinations to be memorized that are grouped into semantic fields, e.g. 'Time of the day and days of the week', 'Furniture', 'Daily activities', etc.; 2) 3 to 4 syllabic signs of the Amharic *fidäl* script, in all their orders, and/or Ethiopic numbers; 3) 9 to 16 exercises designed to enhance word stock, grammar points, and speaking and writing abilities. Each block of three lessons is followed by a review lesson, the aim of which is to strengthen and reinforce the knowledge and skills acquired in the previous lessons; such review lessons are marked with the colours of the Ethiopian state flag.

Following the 24 lessons, the author has provided a number of valuable appendices, starting with the answer keys for the exercises which also include transcripts of all texts marked as audio materials. However, no keys are appended to

¹ S. Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; ed., in cooperation with A. Bausi, IV: O–X; A. Bausi, ed., in cooperation with S. Uhlig, V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).

² D. Appleyard, *Colloquial Amharic: The Complete Course for Beginners*, The Colloquial Series, 2nd edn (London–New York; NY: Routledge, 2013; 1st edn as *Colloquial Amharic: A Complete Language Course*, 1995).

those exercises which train pronunciation or which enhance spontaneous speaking abilities. In the body of the book such exercises are marked with the asterisk sign (*).

The keys are followed by grammar tables. A few words are in order here concerning the table entitled 'Konjugation "haben"': in Amharic there is no verb semantically and syntactically analogous to the 'have'-verbs of most European languages. Instead, Amharic makes use of the existential verb *allä* to which regular object markers are joined to express the possessor. I consider this 'simplification' quite helpful and even desirable, given that not all of the users of this textbook will plan to become philologists or linguists. The grammar tables also include three short tables that treat various issues in word formation (p. 284), namely, the deverbal *nomina instrumentis/loci* and the *nomina agentis* as well as the denominal adjectives with the suffix *-amma*. All three of these nominal patterns conform to very strict rules of formation and, as such, can be treated as something on the border between inflection and derivation.

The next section of the Appendix deals with the verb types and verb stems of Amharic. It must be pointed out here that Prischnegg uses the term *Verbstamm* in perfect conformity with the semitological tradition where this term has been used, for more than two centuries, to refer to certain root modifications conveying the grammatical semantics related to verbal valency changes and *Aktionsarten*. However, as for the other term employed here, the *Verbtyp*, its use by the author is not traditional. In the tradition of describing Ethio-Semitic languages, the term *Verbtyp* has come to denote the modifications of the basic verb stem which, synchronically, are of lexical rather than grammatical nature and are therefore not predictable.³ Indeed, apart from analyzing the diachrony of grammar, we cannot convincingly explain, e. g., why the Amharic verb *säbbärä* ('to break') belongs to type A while the verb *šällämä* ('to award') belongs to type B, but we have to bear this fact in mind in order to conjugate both verbs correctly. However, the author of this textbook prefers to employ the term *Verbtyp* to designate any constituent of the multifarious system of paradigmatic classes of the Amharic verb, the classes which present conceptual analogies with the four conjugations of Latin or with the well-known ten classes of the verb in Ancient Greek. I should emphasize here that this mixing-up of the two terms, in my opinion, does not negatively influence the pedagogical value of the book.

After the section on verb types and stems, Prischnegg provides two vocabularies: Amharic–German and German–Amharic. The Amharic–German Vocabulary is exhaustive, including all the lexemes and word combinations introduced in the book and corresponds to the A1 language mastery level. Due to layout issues, the

³ Cf. W. Leslau, *Reference Grammar of Amharic* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), 283–287.

first column—where additional grammatical information often accompanies verbal lexemes in Latin-based transcription—is, in my view, presented in a way that is slightly too complex to process easily. In the second column where the same lexeme as well as the grammatical information about it are given in Ethiopic script, however, these difficulties are neutralized in most cases. In the fourth and rightmost column, the author indicates the number(s) of the lesson(s) in which the given word is introduced or dwelt upon.

The Vocabularies are followed by a very extensive index which lists all the grammar topics, semantic lexical fields, signs of the Ethiopic syllabary, and phonetic terms dealt with in the body of the textbook. Picture credits providing the necessary information on the entire illustrative material used by the author bring the book to completion.

One of the major strengths of the book is the abundance and diverse character of the exercises. As a randomly taken example, I may cite those encountered in Lesson 21. The topic of this lesson is ‘In a Restaurant’. The student is asked to describe their favourite dish and its ingredients; to say a few words about the perfectly laid out table in the picture; to insert correct object suffixes in the given verb forms; to give grammatically correct answers to questions posed by their fellow students; to insert impersonal⁴ verb forms in the given sentences; to translate sentences into Amharic using object pronominal suffixes; to change the given perfective verb forms with object markers into corresponding imperfective forms; and, last but not least, to play the role of a person telephoning a fast-food restaurant and ordering dishes to be delivered.

All these merits taken into consideration, Prischnegg’s book is not completely free of shortcomings. There are a number of misprints that are very conspicuous and eye-catching. On p. 5, in a commonly known Amharic proverb which serves as a kind of epigraph to the whole textbook, the word እንቁላል is transcribed as *inkulal*, without the diacritic mark designating the ejective pronunciation of *k* (*k*’, EAe = *q*). A particularly conspicuous mistake has been committed on p. 15: the sentence written in transcription as *yih wämbär mägzat yifälligal* (= EAe *yäh wämbär mägzat yäfällagal*) is translated into German as ‘Er möchte diesen Stuhl kaufen’. It is evident that the first word in the Amharic sentence, the demonstrative pronoun *yäh*, is devoid of the clitic *-ən* which obligatorily marks the direct object in such cases (i. e., when the head noun in a nominal phrase is modified by a demonstrative). On p. 55 the same phrase is repeated with the same misprint (or a grammatical mistake?), this time in a very large font size. On p. 89 we can observe a possible confirmation of our suggestion that the above sentence could

⁴ In view of recent advances in linguistic typology, it seems better to replace the traditional terminology (English ‘impersonal verbs’, German ‘unpersönliche Verben’) with the typologically more exact term ‘experiential verbs’.

be a grammatical error—indeed, here we read the following sentence: *innāzzih ik'awočč mägzat yifälligallu* (= EAe *ännāzzih əqawočč mägzat yəfälləgallu*). The Amharic demonstrative in a nounphrase obviously functioning as a direct object again lacks any morpheme that would point to its objecthood.

While reading the book, some more questions arose concerning (the current state of?) Amharic grammar. For example, on p. 55 the Amharic adjective አስቀያሚ is transcribed as *ask'äyami*, whereas in the Amharic–English dictionary by Thomas Leiper Kane it is rendered as *asqäyyami*.⁵ Likewise, on p. 77 the word አሳዛኝ is transcribed as *asazañ*, whereas in Kane's dictionary we find the transcription *asazzañ*.⁶ Are these mistakes only occasional misprints or are we witnessing changes in some rules governing the grammar of the language? In the absence of other witnesses of such changes, I am inclined to think that we are dealing here with a certain degree of inattentiveness. I have also never heard Amharic speakers say or write 'twelve' like *assir hulätt* (p. 113, = EAe *assər hulätt*). Rather the correct form is *asra hulätt*.

Notwithstanding these and similar faults, on the whole, the text- and workbook by Prischnegg represents an achievement in the field of teaching Amharic as a foreign language. Perhaps the chief advantage of the book lies in its not being overloaded with grammatical theory; grammar points are always explained in the minimalistic way, so that students might fully concentrate on acquiring communication skills.

Iosif Fridman, HSE University

⁵ T. L. Kane, *Amharic–English Dictionary*, I: **ሀ–ኀ** (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990), 815.

⁶ T. L. Kane, *Amharic–English Dictionary*, II: **ኘ–ኰ** (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990), 1280.