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**Review**

RONNY MEYER and RENATE RICHTER, *Language Use in Ethiopia  
from a Network Perspective*

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## Reviews

WENINGER *Verbalsystem* — STEFAN WENINGER, *Das Verbalsystem des Altäthiopischen* (Wiesbaden 2001).

Gideon Goldenberg, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

RONNY MEYER and RENATE RICHTER, *Language Use in Ethiopia from a Network Perspective* = Schriften in Afrikanistik Vol. 7. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 130 pp. Price: € 27,50. ISBN: 3-631-50259-1.

This little book contains much more valuable information, both for linguists and non-linguists, than can be inferred from its subtitle: “Results of a Sociolinguistic Survey conducted among High School Students”. Product of cooperation between Renate Richter, the well known and highly experienced specialist on Ethiopian sociolinguistics and her former student and promising young linguist Ronny Meyer, it contains not only the results of the above-mentioned survey conducted by a joint team from the Universities of Mainz and Addis Ababa in 1997 and 1998 (Chapters 3–6, pp. 41–81) but also an introductory Chapter (no 2, pp. 23–40) which contains a concise and enlightening description of the actual linguistic situation and of language policy in Ethiopia since the beginning of the 20th century. This chapter should become basic reading material for any sociologist, anthropologist and researcher in political science dealing with modern Ethiopia. Another merit of the book, beyond its purely sociolinguistic contribution, lies in its succinct analysis of the first really accurate and scientific data on the linguistic situation in Ethiopia as represented in the population census of 1994 (pp. 23–28 and Appendix III pp. 94–123).

The fact that during the last century the official language policy in Ethiopia has been completely reversed, though, for the time being, perhaps more in theory than in practice, clearly exemplifies the evolution in the political and social thinking of the leadership of this multilingual society. It started during the reign of Haile Sellasie as an uncompromising program of amharization<sup>1</sup> with gradual passage to English as language of instruction in more advanced stages of education. Haile Sellasie was quoted as having said: “Are Ethiopian only those who speak Amharic”.<sup>2</sup> In this connection it might have been inter-

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the numerous sources quoted in the book see also, for the language policy under Haile Sellasie: M. CHAUVIN, “Politique linguistique du gouvernement éthiopien”. In: *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies – Session A*, Nice 19–22 December 1977. Rotterdam: Balkema 1980, pp. 425–446.

<sup>2</sup> CHAUVIN, *op. cit.*, p. 428.

esting to mention that no use of other Ethiopian languages was authorized in the official educational system or in missionary schools, to the point that when Eritrea was united with Ethiopia, Tigrinya (which served, together with Arabic, as language of instruction and of administration) was replaced by Amharic causing a linguistic and cultural uprooting of the local educated class. That is one of the reasons why no brand of Tigrinya was firmly established as a generally accepted standard and why this problem was hotly debated at educational and academic forums in Eritrea after its independence.

During the next stage, between 1974–1991 under the Marxist regime, the notion of linguistic rights of minorities appeared for the first time in official Ethiopian political thinking under the inspiration of similar concepts in the early linguistic policy of the Soviet Union<sup>3</sup>, a pluralistic approach was adopted, advocating respect for the character of the country. However, the application of the Soviet model was only partial considering that the various local languages were used in adult education only (about fifteen languages at the peak of the National Literacy Campaign), whereas Amharic, replaced by English in more advanced stages of education, continued to serve as the language of instruction in schools and as the language of administration. It is interesting to point out that after the fall of Mengistu in 1991 the new regime, far from reverting to the ancient policy of amharization, carried even further the assimilation to the Soviet model by stipulating the use of some 25 local languages in regional administration and as language of instruction in the first six grades of primary education, with Amharic being taught as second language. Also the introduction of the Latin script for transcribing some unwritten languages, replacing the Ethiopian script which was used in the Literacy Campaigns of the 1970's and 1980's, is reminiscent of the practice in the Soviet Union in the 1920's and 1930's.

The authors are right in referring with caution to the latest linguistic program whose application is, anyway, too recent to be assessed.<sup>4</sup> It presents huge logistic problems related to the training of teachers and to the preparation of teaching material in languages for the most only seldom written, if at all. Although it offers an opportunity to speakers of some (but not all) minority languages to develop their cultural heritage and may add to their self esteem, it is not certain that the parents of students wish their

<sup>3</sup> See O. KAPELIUK, "Politique et alphabétisation en Ethiopie". In: *Le Monde Diplomatique*. March 1981, pp. 16–17; *id.*, "Language policy in Ethiopia since the revolution of 1974". In: *Asian and African Studies*. 14 (1980), pp. 269–278.

<sup>4</sup> Impressive results in teacher training, schooling materials, press and literature in Sidaama have been revealed by Anbessa Teferra at the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Hamburg in his presentation entitled "A survey of the linguistic development of Sidaama".

children to receive their education in languages which will automatically create linguistic ghettos and put them at a disadvantage on the national level vis-à-vis native speakers of Amharic or those who have been educated in it from early childhood because residing in Amharic speaking areas. Political decisions on language choice, whether inspired by the ideology of the traditional left, or by post-modernist aversion from a homogenous model imposed from above, or simply by Tigrinya oriented vindication, should not be applied without consulting those most closely concerned. Ethiopian authorities did not hesitate to organize a referendum on constitutional matters. What would have been easier than to add a question about the language in which the parents wished their children to be educated? It is not sure that Amharic would not have been the answer, the more so since the survey in question points out to a steady increase, over the last three generations, of speakers of Amharic as mother tongue.

The survey was conducted in central and southern Ethiopia among 3,579 high school and university students in 35 *kātāma*'s, i.e. urban settlements with population ranging from over two million to 2,000 inhabitants. The students were asked, with the help of a questionnaire written in Amharic or in Oromo (reproduced, together with its English translation, in Appendix I) about their linguist behavior, as well as that of their parents and grandparents. Consequently, the extremely interesting results, though not representative of the whole population, are not strictly limited to the educated class only. The study reveals that whereas Amharic was the native language of 34 % of the grandparents and of 38.4 % of the parents, it is now the mother tongue of 57.3 % of the students (Table 16). This considerable increase in the number of educated native speakers of Amharic is definitely not matched by the next language in size, namely Oromo (33.2 % speakers in the total population according to the census of 1994 – Table 3), often associated with the most outspoken nationalist and anti-Amharic aspirations. In Oromo, rather than growth, we witness in our survey a sudden decrease in the last generation in the numbers of native speakers, from 33.6 % for the grandparents and 33.7 % for the parents, to 27.5 % for the students (Table 16), and this despite the fact that Oromo was indicated as language of instruction, beside Amharic and English, in 10 out of the 37 schools visited by the survey team (Appendix II). The same applies to the position of Oromo as second language: from 23.3 % in the parent generation (Table 12) it has declined to 15.7 % among the students (Table 4) and even this percentage seems very high as compared with the national datum of 2.7 % of speakers of Oromo as second language provided by the 1994 census (Table 3). Moreover, when asked which language they liked and

wanted to learn, the students placed Oromo only in fourth position (10.9 %), after English, French and Arabic (Table 10).

Another interesting outcome of the survey, showing the decreasing number of the various Ethiopian tongues spoken as native languages from 35 in the generation of the grandparents (Tab 15), via 32 in the generation of the parents (Table 12) to 25 Ethiopian languages named by the students as their native languages (Table 4), may serve as an indicator of the fate awaiting some endangered small languages. Small languages such as Ari, Dassenech, Dorze, Gidole, Gimira etc. spoken in the generation of grandparents are missing from the list referring to their grandchildren. In a parallel manner, the number of native speakers of small languages (spoken by less than 500.000) was reduced from 6 % in the grandparents' generation to 5.4 % in the parents' category and to 3.3 % among the students (Table 16). The survey also included questions about the level of education and the occupation of the parents of the students and the answers are quite encouraging, as far as social mobility is concerned, given that 26.9 % of the parents had not attended school at all (Table 13) and that 35.4 % were peasants and 8.7 % workers (Table 14).

There still are many important details which can be retrieved from this rich and scientifically most reliable publication and we should be grateful to Renate Richter and to her team for providing us with all this information. It is absolutely imperative, now that the situation in Ethiopia is back to normal, that the survey be completed by information about those central and northern regions of the country which could not be visited in 1997 and 1998 because of the hostilities with Eritrea. If similar material could also be collected for Eritrea we could say that we are much wiser as to the linguistic situation in the area.

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HERBERT S. LEWIS, *Jimma Abba Jifar. An Oromo Monarchy: Ethiopia 1830–1932*. Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 2001. pp. 180. Price: \$ 21.95. ISBN: 1569020892.\*

For the Ethiopian and Ethiopia-focussed scientific public it was overdue that Lewis' *Galla Monarchy* was re-published as a paperback. It was all the more urgent because the book was forbidden to be distributed in Ethiopia when it was published first and because it is still not widespread there till recently. By direct and indirect censorship the contemporary Ethiopian

\* Originally: HERBERT S. LEWIS, *A Galla Monarchy*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965.