Review

Stefan Weninger, *Das Verbsystem des Altäthiopischen – Eine Untersuchung seiner Verwendung und Funktion unter Berücksichtigung des Interferenzproblems*  
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The book under review is a monograph presented in 1997 for habilitation at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. This purpose clearly transpires from its dimensions, systematic arrangement, extreme abundance of


9 Bei WOLF LESLAU, Comparative Dictionary of Ge‘ez (Wiesbaden 1987), 414 ist die Quellenangabe “T.M.” zu streichen, da sie nach LESLAUS Zitiersystem impliziert, daß das Wort bei DILLMANN fehlt. Dies ist aber nicht der Fall, vgl. CHR. FR. AUGUST DILLMANN, Lexicon linguae aethiopicae (Lipsiae 1865), 1252.
The author himself opens his introduction with the statement that, after the great boom of the 19th century, grammatical study of Ge'ez made little progress in comparison with the achievements in the domain of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic grammar. He offers two possible explanations of this phenomenon: a) The linguistic study of these languages is a by-product of the religious interest in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, together with certain political motivations for the latter. b) Those linguists who did turn to Ethiopian linguistics preferred the modern languages to Ge'ez. To these two a third reason may perhaps be added, namely that the last part in A. Dillmann’s *Ethiopic Grammar* (first published in 1857) which witnesses of his acute insight in matters of syntax, and the great amount of important syntactic information under the relevant entries in his *Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicae* (1865) were found satisfying enough by linguists for the needs of their research and teaching.

Moreover, interest in Ge'ez didn’t really fade away, as demonstrated by the publication of W. Leslau’s *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez* (1987), an important event which should have been mentioned, even if it doesn’t conform to the strict definition of “grammatische Erforschung”. In addition, the author and the readers will probably be surprised to learn that there were, until not so long ago, universities in which Ge’ez was taught and studied for many decades on a regular basis and in linguistic perspective, such as the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris since the time of Marcel Cohen or the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In the latter, Ge’ez, introduced by H.J. Polotsky, had been taught for nearly half a century in the Department of Linguistics as a subject in its own right, rather than an amateurish appendix to comparative Semitic studies, with students reading...
texts for years and writing seminar papers and master dissertations. Also the list of articles dealing with Go¿z syntax supplied by S. Weninger (p. 5-6) is not complete. The author should have examined more carefully such publications as the *Proceedings of the International Conferences of Ethiopian Studies*, or even the publication hosting this review, to find that the more general term Ethio-Semitic often also hides a discussion of syntactical problems in Go¿z. Similarly the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* issued by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of the Addis Ababa University should have been scrutinized (despite the fact that it is ignored by the *Bibliographie Linguistique*).

As to the theoretical approach, the author declares having opted for the “Noetic method” which, according to him, has already been successfully applied to several Semitic languages. This method is based on the assumption that verbal categories, rather than being moulded by the language, have an existence of their own, as abstract notions (pp. 24–36). This conception does not seem far from the Universals theory, with that difference that what is supposed to be universal is formulated now in terms of German examples instead of the usual English model. Nevertheless the classification of the forms in the book still follows the usual Semitic division into *qatala*, *yiqattal* etc. even though, within the description of each morphological form, the author distinguishes different characteristics of an action. But had he been fully consistent in his intention to adopt the abstract notions inherent to the verbal system as his starting point, he should have given up the mechanical traditional arrangement altogether and started, for instance, with such a notion as the past. In that kind of arrangement in the following example the perfect and the imperfect would have been treated together as different aspects of past actions: ӺӒӿشدӬә ӊߧۊܚۊؤԓߐә ؊ӊԓӂԃӎӞԈ_yiqattal_ inevitably ӊڝߐԓѭԈ_yiqattal_ etc. yet it seems that a parallel, in syntactic terms,
with the Epigraphic South Arabian infinitive might be drawn. Moreover, in a work dealing in particular with “interferenzproblem”, this was the right moment to refer to, or at least to hint at the Cushitic influence on Go’az. Yet, there is no mention of Cushitic whatsoever in the whole book and it is absent from the index. True, there is no direct testimony of what was the Cushitic substrate of Go’az, but the existence of gerundial forms in practically all the living local languages with which Ethio-Semitic came in contact and the distinction between main and subordinate verb forms, so characteristic of Cushitic, deserve at least a brief mention. Such an approach would have introduced in this rather traditional study (despite the complicated linguistic apparatus) some of the more recent tendencies in the study of Ethio-Semitic, envisaged in its areal context.

As for the cases of a gerund with the main verb introduced by ṭa wa-‘and’ (pp. 225–227), they are also found in texts more reliable than the Royal chronicles, e.g.: ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa (Matthew 4:2) “And having fasted for forty days and forty nights, and then he became hungry”; ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa (variants: ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa and ṭa ṭa ) ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa (Genesis 19:3) “And they went into his house and he made unleavened cake and having drunk (variants: and he made them drink; they drank) and they ate”. It may be pointed out that such ṭa wa- sometimes appears with a main verb accompanied by some other kind of subordinate clause, not necessarily a gerundial one, e.g.: ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa ṭa (Acts 19:1) “And then, when Aplos was in Corinth and Paul went through the upper district and reached Ephesus”. In his Lexicon A. Dillmann (s.v. ṭa) translates the ṭa wa-in this position by: et statim, tum, ut, igitur, which amounts, more or less, to the ṭa naḥu ‘behold’ mentioned by the author in this connection.

The graphic presentation is clear and pleasant and the illustrations representing the value of the various tenses along the temporal line are quite useful, but some will miss the Ethiopic script since the Go’az text is written in transcription only. Besides the usual problems of Go’az transcription

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concerning the laryngeal and sibilant consonants, the author had to overcome also the problem of transcribing the vowel of the sixth order ə and the gemination. The latter seems to have constituted the major difficulty. The author writes (p. 47) that in the case of these two “wird versucht, grammatisch und etymologisch ‘richtig’ zu transkribieren. Insgesamt ist die hier verwendete Umschrift also mehr Transliteration als Transkription”. While referring to the marking of gemination the inverted commas around richtig couldn’t be more accurate. It definitely is not a transliteration because the author indicates regularly the gemination in all the forms of the imperfect, though it hasn’t much to do with etymology (except for the “intensive” stem) and had been “discovered” only thanks to the study of the traditional pronunciation of the Ethiopian priests. The truth is that correct transcription of Ga’az gemination is no mystery. The author would have avoided many strange forms, such as for instance -kəmmu for the suffix pronoun, as well as the ending of the perfect, in the 2nd person plural instead of -kkəmu, or ’antəmmu for the more correct ’antəmmu, if he had simply consulted more systematically W. Leslau’s Comparative Dictionary of Ge’ez and above all Eugen Mittwoch’s Die Traditionelle Aussprache des Aethiopischen (Berlin 1926) which isn’t even mentioned in the bibliography.

But, despite these minor remarks, S. Weninger deserves our warmest congratulations and gratitude for having presented us with this erudite and comprehensive work.

Olga Kapeliuk


The author of the book, Abba Gäbrä Iyyäsus Kifle – a monk and, for many years, a teacher in Ethiopian lay schools – studied Ga’az inside the traditional educational system from his earliest childhood and during some 20 years. Then he came to Jerusalem where he lived for several years, studying at the Hebrew University in the Departments of Biblical Studies and of Semitic Languages. His perfect mastery of Ga’az, Tigrinya and Amharic made him a sure source of information for countless queries from students and researchers in Ethiopian linguistics, including the author of these lines.

2 Like for instance in E. BERNAND, A.J. DREWES and R. SCHNEIDER, Recueil des Inscriptions de l’Ethiopie (Paris 1991) where the gemination is consistently ignored.