OLGA KAPELIUK

Review

GÄBRÄ IYYÄSUS KIFLE, የሳርነ ያውለ አስነ ለለህ Tariq tawaddi እስሬन ጓው ለaurant [History of the origin of the ጓው language – in Tigrinya]

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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 $a$ 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 Gǝz gemination is no mystery. The author would have avoided many strange forms, such as for instance -kǝmmu for the suffix pronoun, as well as the ending of the perfect, in the 2nd person plural instead of -kkǝmmu, or ’antǝmμu for the more correct ’antttμu, 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 Gǝz 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 Gǝz, 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.
Later he travelled to Europe where he was granted a Master’s degree in theological studies. Among the reasons which led him to write the book under review the author mentions his feeling of frustration that Ge‘az and the history of its evolution should be studied and taught in foreign Universities but not in its own birthplace.

The author informs us that the composition of the book ended in the early 1970’s during one of his stays in Ethiopia, but since at that time no books were printed in Tigrinya, he wrote it in Amharic. However, when a few years later he presented it to the censor he was told the printing won’t get the necessary authorization. Abba Gábrá Iyyásus suggests that the cause of it was that he didn’t praise the Derg as was customary at that time, but the true reason might have been politic. During the Derg regime there was a certain trend in circles dealing with linguistics in Ethiopia to situate the Ethiopian languages mainly within their African – and in particular Cushitic – context and, consequently, to minimize their historical links with Semitic, especially since the Semitic perspective was identified with the European scholarship on Ethiopia. After Eritrea’s independence the author was forced to leave Addis Abába. He settled in Asmara, where he translated his book into Tigrinya. Probably it is the first book on the history of Ge‘az ever published in Tigrinya.

The major part of the book (pp. 16–102) is dedicated to the description of Ge‘az as a member of the Semitic language family according to the extant Western literature (Chamito-Semitic is mentioned en passant). The book contains surveys of the following ancient Semitic languages: Aramaic, Hebrew, Arabic, Assyrian, Ugaritic and Epigraphic South Arabian. Comparative tables of selected lexical items (written in the Ethiopian script), and a reduced table of personal pronouns and of the imperative (p. 99) are provided and similarities and divergences are stressed. The evolution of the Ethiopian script from the ESA alphabet is extensively documented. Further, Tigre and Tigrinya are defined as the direct descendants of Ge‘az and comparative tables of some words in these languages and in the other Semitic languages as well as in Ge‘az are established. By the way, an interesting neologism introduced by the author consists in using a suffix -ut to mark the names of languages, thus for instance: ٢٣٢, ٢٣٤, ٢٣٦, ٢٣٨, ٢٤٠, ٢٤٢, ٢٤٤, ٢٤٦ Arabic, ٢٢٤, ٢٢٦, ٢٢٨, ٢٣٠, ٢٣٢, ٢٣٤, ٢٣٦, ٢٣٨, ٢٤٠, ٢٤٢, ٢٤٤, ٢٤٦ Ugaritic, ٢٢٤, ٢٢٦, ٢٢٨, ٢٣٠, ٢٣٢, ٢٣٤, ٢٣٦, ٢٣٨, ٢٤٠, ٢٤٢, ٢٤٤, ٢٤٦ Russian, etc. The author explains this usage by the fact that also in other Semitic tongues the names of language are rendered by a feminine suffix (p. 45–46), but it rather reminds one of the perfectly identical Hebrew forms. In Tigrinya -ut is not exactly a feminine suffix but rather the feminine ending of the participle of the form qātali\(^1\) to which the feminine

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\(^1\) W. LESLAU, Documents tigrigna, Paris: Klincksieck 1941:28.
suffix -t was added. As a matter of fact, -it is an Amharic feminine suffix and it is surprising that the author should borrow from Amharic, considering his attitude towards this language.

Amharic is absent from the list and from the discussion in the chapter on “The languages related to Go’oz found in its vicinity” (p. 103–112). The list includes Argobba, Gafat, Gurage and Harari and so does the short comparative word sample which exemplifies some phonological correlations between them and Go’oz. The author explains that he didn’t have enough time to include the history of the evolution of Amharic and that he leaves it to someone who will do it in the future, but that anyway Amharic has so many words which are not of Semitic origin that “there were scholars (such as Aharon Aešcoly) who didn’t count it among the Semitic languages” (p. 110).

The book ends with a general word list in Go’oz and Tigrinya (p. 114–131), some short vocabularies arranged according to subject, and a few elementary notions of Go’oz grammar. These are followed by 18 exercises of conversation between the teacher and his assistant or his students, or between the students themselves, to be translated from Go’oz into Tigrinya or vice versa. These dialogues, which deal with perfectly lay matters, illustrate the author’s assumption that Go’oz, like Hebrew, could be brought back to life.

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