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**Review**

WOLF LESLAU, *Introductory Grammar of Amharic*

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## Reviews

presente il dato filologico e diacronico della tradizione – nella prospettiva della distinzione tra etiopico aksumita e postaksumita (cfr. a questo proposito l'incoraggiante saggio di S. WENINGER, *Kona qatala zum Ausdruck der Vorvergangenheit im Gə'əz?*, in N. NEBES [Hsg.], *Tempus und Aspekt in den semitischen Sprachen. Jenaer Kolloquium zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* [Jenaer Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient 1, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999] 171–183).

Alessandro Bausi

LESLAU, WOLF: *Introductory Grammar of Amharic* = Porta Linguarum Orientalium N.S. no 21. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000. xix, 232 pp., tables, indices. Price: Eur 49,-/sFr 84,-. ISBN: 3-447-04271-0.

While contemplating Professor Leslau's gigantic contribution to our scientific knowledge of all the Ethiopian languages, which places him at the top of all the ethiopianists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, students and teachers of Amharic cannot forget the debt they owe him also on practical level. Already in the middle of the 1960's Wolf Leslau published his two manuals: *An Amharic Conversation Book* (1965) and *An Amharic Textbook* (1967), destined for the volunteers of the Peace Corps preparing to work in Ethiopia, but that still serve for teaching Amharic courses at certain universities. However, the real breakthrough in teaching Amharic began with the publication of his *Concise Amharic Dictionary* in 1976 which contained considerable material from the every-day speech of Ethiopians as well as from the press and from modern literature. Many students who did not possess sufficient command of French, Italian or Russian in order to use the only dictionaries of Amharic extant at that time, turned with immense relief to this new tool. The dictionary also provided a full indication of the gemination in Amharic allowing them, for the first time, to learn the accurate pronunciation of all the words, beyond the fixed rules of morpho-phonemic gemination of verbs. The author of these lines still recalls the ordeal she had to endure before the publication of W. Leslau's *Concise Dictionary* in transcribing nearly one thousand Amharic sentences in her Ph.D. dissertation. The only source for accurate marking of gemination at that time was E. B. Gankin's *Russian-Amharic Dictionary* (1965). Consequently, in transcribing an Amharic word, she often had to consult a whole series of dictionaries to find first its meaning,

then its Russian equivalent and only at the end to check the gemination in Gankin's *Russian-Amharic Dictionary*<sup>1</sup>.

The book under review is another tool of that kind which will enable students of Amharic to acquire more easily this extremely rich and complicated language. But it may also be useful to linguists in their comparative work on Ethio-Semitic and Semitic in general and it was to this end that the author has included a full phonological transcription and literal translation of the Amharic material. Doubtless the book is a by-product of Wolf Leslau's *Reference Grammar of Amharic* (1995, 1044 pp.). The latter is the most complete description of Amharic to date and it encompasses all the new material published on this language during the last decades. Also the *Introductory Grammar* reflects the tendency to take into account recent publications as well as the evolution of the language itself and to present it under its actual form. This is reflected, for instance: in the inclusion of such grammatical phenomena as the existence of a 'Plural of nouns of kinship' rendered by a plural suffix with the consonant *m* not only in the well known pair 'brothers' and 'sisters' but also in other words such as **ዘመደሞች** *zämädämočč* 'relatives' (p. 41); in the description of the feminine gender not only as diminutive and deprecativ with inanimate objects but also as an expression of admiration or familiarity towards a male person, e.g.: **የኔ ልጅ ጮሎ ናት** *yäne läğ çolle nat* 'my boy is smart', **ታዲ መቼ ትመጫለሽ** *tadde mäče tәмäčalläš* 'Tadde (endearment form for Taddäsä), so when will you come?' (p. 39); in the frequent use, beside verbs of motion and rest, of nouns of place under their bare form, without a preposition or the accusative marker, e.g.: **ሌሎች ግጥምቶቹ ገና ትምህርት ቤት ናቸው** *leločč g<sup>w</sup>addännöoču gäna tәмhәrt bet näččәw* 'his other friends are still in school'; in adducing examples of such combinations as **እንደ** *ändä*+perfect+ **ነው** *nәw* (p. 61) and **እየ** *әyyä*+perfect+ **ነው** *nәw* (p. 141) as independent tenses, e.g.: **ሁልጊዜ እንደሠራህ ነህ (ነው)** *bulgize әndä-särrah näh (nәw)* 'you are always working', **ምን ትሠራለህ? እየበላሁ ነው** *mән täsaralläh? әyyä-bällä<sup>w</sup>h nәw* 'what are you doing? I am eating', etc.

The grammatical definitions are formulated in a very clear and concise manner, easily understandable to speakers of English. The chapter on the indefinite pronouns (pp. 24–33) even takes the English indefinite pronouns as its starting point and enumerates their Amharic equivalents. Considering the extreme complexity of this subject and the lack of any comprehensive in-depth study which would clarify the minute differences between the many variants in Amharic, this seems to be the best solution, especially since all the

<sup>1</sup> We also have to thank W. Leslau for having encouraged his disciple the late Thomas L. Kane in embarking upon the task of writing his monumental *Amharic-English Dictionary* (1990, 2351 pp.).

Amharic pronouns are listed in alphabetical order in a final paragraph. Some definitions would perhaps gain in being slightly expanded. Thus, for instance, in the paragraph on the infinitive with prepositions (p. 84) the combination of the preposition በ *bä* with the infinitive is said to express cause. But this is a simplification because in present day Amharic an infinitive with በ *bä* expresses cause only if it is followed by a suffix pronoun marking its subject. Otherwise, under its bare form, the infinitive preceded by በ *bä* indicates a concomitant action and serves as the equivalent of the gerund. These two usages are exemplified in the following example extracted from a novel published in 1983: ግን ባለመጠየቁ የሚፈልጋቸው ሚስቶች እንዳይቀሩበት በማሰብ ጥያቄውን ለወጥ አደረገ *gən b-alä-mätäyyäq-u yämmifällägaččäw mistəročč əndayəqärubbät bä-massäb təyyaqəwn läwätt adärrägä* ‘but he changed a little the question thinking (*bä-massäb*) that, because he didn’t ask (*b-alä-mätäyyäq-u*), some secrets which he was seeking might remain [hidden] from him’.

Similarly, in the paragraph on the pronunciation of consonants the author writes (p. 2): “Amharic *d* and *t* have their correspondence in English, but are pronounced somewhat differently. In Amharic these sounds are of a dental type, that is, the tip of the tongue touches the upper part of the teeth” (p. 2). This definition is not explicit enough to prepare the students for the unfamiliar sound of the Amharic *d* which could rather be defined as alveolar and often sounds very close to *r*, especially at the end of a syllable. This feature is reflected in the alternative spellings of the word ገድገዳ *gədgədda* or ገርገዳ *gərgədda* ‘wall’. The special pronunciation of *d* seems to be a regional phenomenon and is not limited to Semitic. The following definition of *d* in Agaw (R. HETZRON, *The Verbal System of Southern Agaw*, 1969, p. 4) could easily be applied to Amharic: “Voiced plosive /d/. Phonetically, it is retroflex, but it is not opposed to any other \**d* as it is in many other Cushitic languages. Its voiceless counterpart is a dental /t/”. Moreover, in some Agaw languages of the area the passage of *d* (and also of *t*) to *r* is quite a common feature, differentiating between languages. Thus Bilīn *wās-di-nauk* ‘you (pl.) hear’ corresponds to Xamir *waz-ī-nauk* while Saho and ‘Afar *adāgā* ‘market’, from Tigrinya ሰዳጋ *ədaga*, is rendered by *arāgā* or *arāyā* in Xamir (L. REINISCH, *Die Chamirsprache in Abessinien*, 1884, vol. I, p. 25).

In connection with the conjunction of subordination እየ *əyyä* ‘while’ (p. 140–142) it is interesting to add that it is often preferred upon other expressions of concomitance in a distributive context, similarly to the homophone adnominal distributive prefix (p. 26). It occurs either with a verb in its frequentative/reciprocal form, or beside some repeated component of the sentence, or with an indication of dispersion in space, time or among several actors. This tendency may be ascertained from the following examples ex-

tracted from Amharic literary texts: እየደገመች ትገልጽለት ነበር *əyyä-dägaggämäčč təgələšllät näbbär* ‘she used to reveal to him repeatedly’ (lit. while she repeated [many times]), ተያያዘው እየተጨዋውቱ *täyayazäw əyyä-täčäwawwätu* ‘while conversing with one another’, የሚራመደውም መሬት መሬቱን እየተመለከተ ነበር *yämmirrammädäwmm märet märetun əyyä-tämäläkkätä näbbär* ‘and it was just watching the ground (lit. while he watched ground the ground) that he marched’, ሁለት ሁለት እየሆን ሄድን *hulätt hulätt əyyä-honn hedn* ‘we went by twos’ (lit. while we were two two), ካንዱ መስሪያ ቤት ወደሌላ እያልክ *kandu mäsriya bet wädälela əyy-alk* ‘while you moved (lit. said) from one office to another’, 7 ቤት ወሎ ሁሉ ግብሩን እየያዘ ገባ *säbatt bet wällo hullu gəbrun əyyä-yazä gäbba* ‘all the seven houses (=tribes) of Wällo came with (lit. while it held) the tribute’; normally we would expect the gerund ይዞ *yəzo* as ‘with’, but in the distributive context of this sentence it has been replaced by the construction with እየ *əyyä*.

And finally, perhaps the time is ripe to start including the copula among the auxiliaries within the tense system. The author is right in stating that “the conjunction እየ *əyyä*+perfect+ኑ *näw* expresses a progressive and continuous action in the present. A progressive action in the past is expressed by እየ *əyyä*+perfect+ነበር *näbbär*” (p. 141), but he still ranges the construction under the heading of conjunctions rather than among the tenses of the verb. The fact is that this combination, in particular with ኑ *näw*, has become very frequent in the spoken and written language as an alternative form of the present, beside the usual form of the present/future ይነግራል *yənägrall*. Considering the ambiguity inherent in the form ይነግራል *yənägrall*, whether it refers to the future or to the present, speakers of Amharic sometimes have to turn to alternative devices in order to make clear that they mean the actual present. One of these alternative means consists in the use of the compound gerund, as indicated by the author himself (p. 82) and illustrated by him, among others, by the following sentence: ምሳ ደርሷል *mäsa därs<sup>w</sup>all* ‘dinner is ready’ (lit. dinner has arrived). This usage is very common in the electronic media when the speaker opens the news saying: አሁን ዜናውን ጀምረናል *abun zənawon gämməranall* ‘we are starting the news now’ (lit. now we have started the news). Mostly the verbs used in the compound gerund to mark the actual present are perfective and designate an action completed at the moment of its occurrence.

Another solution consists in making use, as an auxiliary, of the copula which, together with the verb of existence አለ *allä*, represents the only genuine expression of the present in Amharic. The accompanying main verb appears in a form with gerundial function, i.e. either in the infinitive accompanied by the compound preposition በ... ላይ *bä... lay* ‘on, upon’ or, much more frequently, in the perfect with እየ *əyyä*, e.g.: ብዙ ሥራ ሠርተዋል ። አሁንም

በመሥራት ላይ ናቸው *bäzu sära särtäwall. abunamm bä-mäsrat lay näccäw* ‘He has done many deeds. Now too He is doing’, በኛም ቀበሌ ሆነ በሌሎች ቀበሌዎች አልፎ አልፎ በገሀድ ተከሰቶአል ። እየተከሰተ ነው *bännamm qäbäle honä bäleločč qäbälewočč alfo alfo bägähad tākästoall. äyyä-täkässätä näw* ‘[This phenomenon] has manifested itself openly both in our neighbourhood and in other neighbourhoods. It is [still] manifesting itself’. In these two examples the progressive character of the action is still easily recognizable. But in the case of እየ *äyyä*, probably as a result of its frequent use, the progressive aspect is sometimes obliterated and what remains is the indication of an action performed at the time of speech, e.g. [to a question of speaker A if he wants to come to a football game speaker B answers]: አዎን ፣ በጣም ደስ እያለኝ ነው *awon, bätam däss äyy-aläññ näw* ‘yes, with pleasure’ (lit. very pleasure while it says-me is).

All that has been said above represents not more than a few marginal remarks taking into account the recent evolution of Amharic syntax, and it doesn’t impair in any way the value of the present book. We, students and researchers, are infinitely grateful to the Grand Old Man of Ethiopian linguistics for all he has written and is still writing in our domain. While such Ethiopian linguist of the senior generation toils on constructing his own legend for future generations and another spends all his energy in aggressively promoting a pale protégé, Wolf Leslau, altruistically, continues to publish books which will enrich our knowledge and help us in imparting it to others.

Olga Kapeliuk

WOLF LESLAU and THOMAS L. KANE, *Amharic Cultural Reader* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Bd. 53. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001. ix, 319 pp. Index. Price: Eur 39,-. ISBN: 3-447-04496-9.

Drawing from his inexhaustible files, after publishing most valuable material on Argobba<sup>1</sup> and Zway<sup>2</sup>, Professor Wolf Leslau offers us now a collection of ethnographic texts in Amharic which he had commissioned from his Ethiopian students in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. The texts, which were composed with the double purpose “to give the advanced students of Amharic a sample of the Amharic writing style of the average educated Ethiopian and at

<sup>1</sup> Leslau, Wolf, *Ethiopic Documents: Argobba – Grammar and Dictionary*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997 (Aethiopistische Forschungen 47).

<sup>2</sup> Leslau, Wolf, *Zway – Ethiopic Documents: Grammar and Dictionary*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999 (Aethiopistische Forschungen 51).