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Review of

GERTRUD SCHNEIDER-BLUM, *A Grammar of Alaaba. A Highland East
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Reviews

missing from the list of references; presumably this is Kazuhiro Kawachi's 2007 University of Buffalo thesis, *A Grammar of Sidaama (Sidamo)*.

These are, however, small detractions from what is an outstanding piece of linguistic description, providing what promises to be one of the most complete grammars of a Cushitic language to date once the eagerly awaited second volume appears.

Reference

JOACHIM CRASS, *Das K'abeena. Deskriptive Grammatik einer hochlandostkuschitischen Sprache* = Kuschitische Sprachstudien 23, Köln: Köppe Verlag 2005.

David Appleyard, Bath (England)

GERTRUD SCHNEIDER-BLUM, *A Grammar of Alaaba. A Highland East Cushitic Language of Ethiopia* = Cushitic Language Studies 25. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2007. XVI, 497 pp., 1 map, 57 tables. Price: € 64,-. ISBN: 978-3-89645-483-6.

A number of minority and endangered languages are still to be studied in the Horn of Africa. The grammar under review is the only one published so far on Alaaba. In 500 pages Gertrud Schneider-Blum condenses a remarkable wealth of descriptive details on this Cushitic language of Ethiopia. It is one of the three outstanding descriptions of Highland East Cushitic languages recently produced in Germany. The other two explore Kambaata (Yvonne Treis 2008) and K'abeena, (Joachim Crass 2005), respectively. All three were generated from PhD theses.

Schneider-Blum's data collection was based on intensive fieldwork in the town of Alaaba Kuliito. Judging from some of her comments on fieldwork conditions (see acknowledgements) one gets the impression that she enjoyed her time with the people of Alaaba Kuliito. The good relations with the Alaaba people is also reflected in the quality of her data. This is somewhat surprising since she had to use English, probably the third language of the informants, after Alaaba and Amharic, as the language of communication. Schneider-Blum does not mention her Alaaba fluency level or whether she used the language in the field or not.

The grammar has a traditional structure. An introduction on language, people and fieldwork precedes three large chapters "Phonology", "Morphology" and "Syntax". An "Appendix" with three texts, some tables and an Alaaba-English/English-Alaaba word-list precedes the closing list of references.

The author states that “The grammar is not based on a specific linguistic theory (p. 5)”. However, a structuralist background, with the concrete search for the one-form/one-meaning parallel, clearly informs her work. Some phenomena are indeed analysed in a more functional way and sometimes in a generative-style.

The analysis is so detailed and clear that it is hard to find any point of real criticism. Indeed, what strikes one about this grammar is the effort the author makes to uncover the smallest descriptive details. She is able to leave the reader with no doubts and to tie up all possible descriptive loose ends. For example, the grammar contains a number of graphs and spectrograms to explicitly show phonetic realisations and phonological phenomena.

In the section on phonetics and phonology, the author gets into the discussion of the status of final devoiced vowels. It is a highly debated and complex topic in Cushitic linguistics. One of her conclusions is that the devoicing of “single unstressed vowels” appears in the “coda of a (phrasal) word which has a high pitch on a non-final syllable” (p. 10). In keeping with its unclear phonological status, devoicing is indicated with brackets around the vowel (e.g.: *lokkát(a)* “leg”).

One possible criticism concerns nominal morphology. As reported on p. 61, “Most Alaaba nouns in their unmarked form are transnumeral, i.e. they can refer to a discrete item or several items as well as to a non-discrete entity”. This is a very common situation in the languages of the Horn, where normally basic nouns show number-neutrality and their reference to one or more entities is understood from the context. It is interesting to note, however, that in Alaaba some nouns in their unmarked form are always semantically singular. The example words reported are *c’uuli* “boy” and *c’uulita* “girl” (p. 64). Any noun can be specified as singular by addition of a singulative marker, but these words are not attested in such a singulative form in the author’s textual corpus. According to the reported opinion of her informant, there is no semantic difference between the unmarked forms of these nouns and the relevant singulative forms (p. 64). If this is in fact the case, one wonders how a question like “Are there boys?” is expressed. In the languages of the area, the noun would normally express a general number-unmarked entity “boy” with a transnumeral form. It is supposed that this is not the case in Alaaba, because the transnumeral of “boy” indicates “one boy”. Presumably, the plural form of “boy” is used in this case, but no example confirming this has been reported.

From the glosses, it appears that transnumeral or singular inherent value is a property of the case suffix carried by the noun. For example, *min-i* “house”, on p. 73, in its absolutive form is glossed “house-TN:M:ABS” and *c’uul-it(i)* “girl” in its nominative form is glossed “child-SG:F:NOM”. TN “transnu-

meral” and SG “singular” seem to define the number of the case suffix. They seem, instead, to be a property of the noun stem. A suggestion would be to gloss *min-i* “house:TN-M:ABS” and *c'uul-it(i)* “child:SG-F:NOM”.

Some comments regarding non-linguistic information. In the introduction, the source of the number of Alaba speakers (about 204,000) is said to be “Ato Ayyano, the mayor of Alaaba Kuliito” (p. 1, note 1). A figure taken from the Ethiopian National Census might be more precise. The Census, however, was used to give the percentage of the Alaaba people living in rural areas and practicing agriculture (91,1 %, p. 1–2).

The list of the main crops produced by the Alaaba includes *tef* (the main Ethiopian cereal grain), wheat and hot peppers. One wonders whether the so-called “false-banana tree” *Ἐnsät* (*Ensete ventricosum*) plays any role in the food habits of the Alaaba, since the Alaaba Zone is found within the Enset Complex Area.

As support for the reconstruction of movement and contacts of the Alaaba people in the area, there is a reference to a map by Braukämper (1980:168 and 177). It would have been nice to have the map reproduced. The one included on page XV seems to be too focused on the Alaaba Zone and does not show the position of neighbouring groups.

This Grammar of Alaaba is a reference work for those who want to learn about Alaaba and Cushitic language typology. It is the result of the hard work of a talented colleague who has filled another important gap in our knowledge of the languages of the Horn of Africa.

References

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- JOACHIM CRASS, *Das K'abeena. Deskriptive Grammatik einer hochlandostkuschitischen Sprache* = Cushitic Language Studies 23. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2005.
- YVONNE TREIS, *Towards a Grammar of Kambaata. Part I: Phonology, Nominal Morphology, and Non-verbal Predication* = Cushitic Language Studies 28. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2008.

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