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***Mäsob*: Designing a new Amharic coursebook**

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Mäsob: Designing a new Amharic coursebook

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Abstract:

This article presents a project to design a new Amharic coursebook which draws upon current approaches to language teaching, and will provide stimulating learning materials for its users. The coursebook will target university students at A1 level, and in its content and structure will aim, for the first time in the history of Amharic language teaching, to conform to the spirit of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Topic-based and task-based syllabi will form the backbone of the coursebook. It will contain a range of activities in which students, while learning grammar, are engaged in using new language in a meaningful, communicative way. Apart from developing the usual four language skills, among which priority will be given to oral practice, the coursebook will help students to acquire cultural competence and support them in improving their language learning strategies.

Keywords: language teaching, teaching materials, teaching African languages

1 Introduction

A coursebook is a central tool in a foreign language class.¹ Although coursebooks have some drawbacks, the majority of teachers use them because a good coursebook spares hours of designing their own teaching materials (Kusiak-Pisowacka 2015: 65–67). Learners, in turn, find a coursebook practical and convenient because it “give[s] a sense of clarity, direction and progress” (Woodward 2001: 146).² In this article I will present my project to develop a new Amharic coursebook which draws upon up-to-date approaches to language

1 I would like to heartily thank Orin Gensler for English proofreading of the final version of this article.

2 See there also for a short discussion on advantages and disadvantages of using a coursebook.

teaching, and will provide interesting and pedagogically efficient materials for its users.

The idea of designing a coursebook occurred to me because as a practising Amharic teacher I face a severe lack of good teaching materials. For many reasons, which I will mention in this article, I am dissatisfied with the materials currently in use. I envisage my coursebook as yet another source of syllabus, texts and exercises rather than an ultimate book to which an Amharic teacher should feel handcuffed to. It is advisable for any teacher to avoid heavy dependence on a coursebook (White 2013: 3–4);³ using additional materials, self-made or ready-made, is highly recommended in a foreign language classroom. However, at the moment, we have few Amharic coursebooks and almost no supplemental materials targeting the learner of Amharic. Thus, my overall goal is to make our need for Amharic teaching materials less acute.

2 A review of selected Amharic coursebooks

Before I embark on describing my project in detail I will present briefly what kind of Amharic coursebooks are available. I will limit myself to those which, to my knowledge, are most often used by Amharic teachers both in Germany and elsewhere. These are *Amharic Textbook* (1967) by Wolf Leslau, *Lehrbuch der amharischen Sprache* (1987 1st ed., 1994 2nd ed.) by Renate Richter and *Colloquial Amharic* (1995 1st ed., 2012 2nd ed.)⁴ by David Appleyard.

What can be noted straightaway is that the three coursebooks were published many years ago (the *Amharic textbook* going back to the 1960's; the second editions of Richter's and Appleyard's books do not differ in any substantial way from their first editions) and, correspondingly, embody out-of-date approaches. All of them are designed for beginners and allow the learner to reach at most the intermediate

3 See there for references.

4 The first edition was reviewed by Azeb Amha (1997), Renate Richter (1997), and by Böll and Getie Gelaye (1998). It is interesting to note that the reviewers focused on the correctness of the Amharic contained in the coursebook rather than on its pedagogical value—whether *Colloquial Amharic* is an efficient teaching tool, and whether a learner can really attain the goals set by the author. The reviews show that, indeed, language pedagogy still has not entered the consciousness of specialists involved in the field of Amharic teaching.

level. None of them has a subsequent book for a more advanced level. As for the syllabus, grammatical syllabus is the backbone of the three coursebooks and, in general, of the majority of the Amharic teaching materials, i.e., they are organized around specific grammatical items: topics and functions of language are subordinate. *Amharic Textbook* is exceptionally grammar-oriented since its fifty units are devoted to particular grammatical items introduced gradually according to their complexity and practised in numerous drills. These units are abstracted from any communicative situation. In contrast, *Lehrbuch der amharischen Sprache* and *Colloquial Amharic* also introduce topics and functions but they too are subordinate to the grammatical syllabus of the course.

A fast pace of introducing new items seems to be a weak point of *Lehrbuch der amharischen Sprache*, and *Colloquial Amharic*. They contain fairly densely packed units where whole paradigms, and even several similar paradigms in tandem are presented. In the case of *Colloquial Amharic*, this is coupled with a smallish number of exercises. Topics included in the coursebooks are fairly conventional, such as greetings, shopping, renting a room, visit to the doctor, etc. However, their presentation is uninteresting and predictable since all teaching units have a homogenous arrangement. In *Lehrbuch der amharischen Sprache* some of the topics are no longer relevant as they deal with the reality of Ethiopia and East Germany during communist times. Also some vocabulary of *Amharic textbook* reflects the feudal relations still obtaining between people in the reign of Haile Selassie I. Texts in the coursebooks are usually dull, devoid of any humour and tinged with naiveté.

The vast majority of activities designed for consolidating new items are based on various kinds of drills. Other activities used in the discussed coursebooks do not go beyond translation exercises, filling in blank spaces with a word in the right form, easy transformation exercises and answering questions to texts. Another limitation of the activities included in the coursebooks is that they are designed to mainly practise grammatical structures. It should be stressed, however, that the grammar is usually described in a very crude manner, as a manipulation of forms, whereas not enough attention is paid to the semantics and to the communicative context. Even though the vocabulary of Amharic differs in many respects (morphologically, semantically and collocationally) and to a considerable extent from

the vocabulary of European languages, very little space is dedicated to learning vocabulary and putting it into practice. They are no activities addressing functions of language, such as asking for information, giving information, excusing oneself, etc.

Although I have levelled much criticism at the three coursebooks I have to do their authors justice. *Amharic textbook* and *Lehrbuch der amharischen Sprache* were products of their time. They used the standard approaches prevalent in the 1960s and 1980s. Appleyard's *Colloquial Amharic* is designed according to the principles prescribed for the *Colloquial Series* and hence imposed by the publisher.

At the end of this short review I should add a few words about Amharic textbooks produced in Russia. Russian teachers of Amharic have a range of books to choose from. There are two full series of coursebooks,⁵ from the beginner to the advanced levels. The syllabus of the majority of the Russian coursebooks is highly grammar-oriented. There is very little space and practice devoted to functions. I find the language of some of the textbooks in-authentic.

3 Mäsob: general characteristics

The principal aim of my project is to design an Amharic coursebook, called *Mäsob*, targeting beginners. The word *mäsob* refers to a culturally important basket which serves for storing and eating injera, Ethiopians' daily bread. It symbolizes productivity and sense of community. Apart from the student's book I am planning to produce a CD and a teacher's booklet, containing teaching notes, additional activities, suggestions, and key to activities.

The Amharic of Shewa, especially Addis Ababa, will be used as a model for grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Because the spelling of Amharic has not been standardized, basically I will employ the orthographic rules laid down in Leslau's *English-Amharic context dictionary* (1973: XI–XIII). Occasionally a “non-standard” item (usually a single word) will be included from a regional variety

5 See, for example, the first part of a series of Russian coursebooks by E.P. Zavadskaia (2007). There is another series of Russian coursebooks, which I have not had a chance to see, whose title *Speaking practice. Textbook for the 1st course. The Amharic language* promises quite a different, speaking-oriented and communicative, approach (Renžin 1983).

of Amharic, to make the students aware of some dialectal differences within the language.

3.1 Target group

Mäsob will target adult learners studying Amharic as a foreign language at the university. The coursebook will cater to the needs of university students for at least three reasons. First of all, because the majority of Amharic courses are provided by universities (in Ethiopia also by various language centres and by private teachers). Secondly, because of my relatively long experience in teaching Amharic to university students in Poland and in Germany. Thirdly, and in connection with the second point, before publishing the coursebook during the process of developing it I will need a constant evaluation of its contents against a certain group of students. As long as I am employed at the university, I can test the coursebook and get feedback from the group of students that I will be teaching at that period.

The fact that my coursebook targets university students has some additional implications. For instance, at my home institution, the department of Asien-Afrika-Institut in Hamburg, Amharic is provided for students who, within a 3- or 4-year study, receive a range of linguistic courses preparing them for analyzing a language. Having this in mind, *Mäsob* will contain a balanced dose of linguistic terms and descriptions which will enable the students to recycle and apply the knowledge gained in general linguistic courses to the sphere of this particular language.

Another issue is the pace of introducing the Ethiopic script. I am in favour of introducing the Ethiopic syllabographs (*fidäl*) at the beginning of the course and then practising them as the students enter the course proper. In that case the transliteration will be used only for a short period of time. However, it is useful for students to get familiar with transliteration in order to be able to follow publications which often employ the transliteration rather than the Ethiopic script. In fact, I advocate learning both systems (*fidäl* and transcription) at the same time. This approach contrasts with a method in which students gradually learn the syllabographs over an extended period of time and so are forced to continue using the transcription for a long period. I believe university students have enough intellectual capacity to absorb the Ethiopic syllabographs in a relatively short time.

I have decided to prepare the coursebook only in English, not in German. This is because I would like my coursebook to be accessible also to Amharic teachers from outside Germany. However, I want to take into consideration the fact that I teach in Germany and provide some hints concerning contrastive German-Amharic items in the teacher's booklet.

3.2 Level

Mäsob is intended to be the first part of a three-level course: A1, A2, B1. The levels of the coursebooks are in agreement with the Common Reference Levels proposed within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* 2001). I think it is useful and even necessary to set and define levels of proficiency in any language teaching (a practice still alien to the teaching of African languages). Establishing levels is helpful for developing curriculum and syllabus, for giving an overall structure to the course, and for assessing students' progress in a relatively objective way. The reference levels serve to discipline the teacher to be explicit and transparent about her/his objectives. They also help the teacher to better articulate what s/he wants her/his students to achieve, at the same time preventing the teacher from teaching at random, covering some material, to her/his liking. From the student's perspective, defining the level of proficiency gives a tangible goal to achieve, which, in turn, helps to maintain her/his motivation. When starting a language course, learners should be informed which level of proficiency they can reach. Thus, using a coursebook or a series of coursebooks with an explicitly established level of proficiency may help to maintain and raise the standard of teaching and create a clear and transparent environment for teaching and learning. The Common Reference Levels is the best tool that we have at hand now, which has been tested and proved to work well with European languages. I cannot see any reason against applying the Common Reference Levels to Amharic.

My project will aim at designing *Mäsob* 1 at A1 level. At this level the so-called Basic User receives the following skills: "Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal

details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help” (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* 2001: 24).

3.3 Goals

I have formulated the goals of *Mäsob* 1 coursebook using the KASA (the acronym stands for Knowledge, Awareness, Skills, Attitude) framework (Graves 2000: 83–84).

Knowledge: By the end of the coursebook, learners will know how to read and write the Ethiopic script.

They will know some aspects of Ethiopian culture.

They will know strategies of how to learn languages.

They will know basic linguistic terminology and how the language works.

Awareness: They will be aware of a language whose system differs greatly from their own.

They will be aware of a different writing system.

They will be aware of cross-cultural differences.

They will be aware that a foreign language needs to be studied regularly.

Skills: By the end of the coursebook, learners will obtain basic skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing.

They will be able to communicate in basic everyday situations.

Attitude: Learners will develop a positive attitude towards studying Amharic, towards the Ethiopians and their culture.

They will develop their interest in learning a language.

3.4 Syllabus

Mäsob will have, on the one hand, a topic-based syllabus which integrates structural, lexical, notional, functional procedural and situationally oriented syllabi and, on the other hand, a task-based syllabus.⁶ The many kinds of syllabi may give the impression that I had difficulties in deciding on one of them. This eclecticism, however, is

⁶ For the many types of syllabi see, for instance, Nunan (1988), Ur (1996, 2012).

nowadays a standard approach to designing a language syllabus (Ur 2012: 185–196). The course developer tries to take the best of the manifold ways of approaching language teaching, and creates a multifaceted syllabus. In my case, the topics will provide a solid backbone for the organizational structure of the coursebook. I have prepared a list of topics which draws on a list contained in a curriculum for teaching German to high school students (Łuniewska, Tworek & Wąsik, 2015: 9–12). It agrees with the list of topics provided in the book *Threshold level English* (a seminal work which provides a detailed description of language learning objectives; Ek & Alexander 1980).⁷ I will present here only a sample of topics and functions. By “function” is understood “things one can DO with language” (Ur 1996: 178) such as greeting, apologizing, asking and giving different kinds of information.

General Topic	Topic in detail	Function
Person	Personal identification	Asking and giving information about name, age, place of living Introducing oneself and other people; reacting to someone else’s introduction Beginning and ending of conversation Signaling that sth. is unclear, asking for repetition, asking that the interlocutor speak louder, quieter, more slowly Spelling and asking to spell
	Appearance	Describing someone’s appearance Asking and giving information about it
	Character	Describing people’s character Giving one’s own opinion about people’s traits of character
	Feelings and emotions	Asking about emotional state Expressing and describing positive and negative emotional states
	Interests	Asking about interests and hobbies Describing one’s own interests

7 See also its updated version by Ek & Trim (1998).

House and home	Place of living	Asking and giving information about the place of living
	Description of the house, rooms, furniture, household appliances	Describing places and objects in the house and in the neighbourhood; types of accommodation, rooms, furniture, household appliances
University	Subjects	Naming subjects and things concerning the course(s) of study Asking and giving opinions about one's interest in a subject
	University life	Describing events that happen at the university Describing people, places and activities
Work	Common occupations and professions	Asking and giving information about job Describing people, places and activities associated with different occupations Talking about future professional plans
	Work place	Asking and giving information about one's work and place of work Describing activities
Family life	Family members	Asking and giving information about family members Describing people (appearance, personality) and their activities
	Friends and acquaintances	Asking whether one knows a person Describing appearance and character Expressing feelings and emotions
	Everyday activities	Describing one's own day Reporting events
	Free time, entertainment	Asking and giving information about ways of spending free time (about plans); reporting events; describing people, places and activities Telling the time Expressing wishes and likings

Family life	Festivals and holidays	Reporting events (Christmas, other festivals, birthday) Congratulating, giving wishes, condolences Thanking and reacting to saying ‘Thanks’
	Styles of life	Describing people, places and activities
	Conflicts and problems	Reporting events Asking and giving information about problems at home and at the university

I envisage that these topics will be provided in such a way that items from the beginners’ level are presented in a simple manner, and are repeated and extended in successive levels.

The book will revolve around the lives of two Ethiopians, a young woman and a young man. I think that having protagonists who will accompany the learner in the process of studying Amharic will be helpful. The idea behind it is that young university students will be prone to identify themselves with their peers in Ethiopia. They will be keen on confronting their life style and cultural values with those of the two Ethiopians. There is, however, an interesting and paramount question whether the Amharic teaching materials should reflect only Ethiopian culture, or both Ethiopian culture and Western culture. I think that my students should be able to talk in Amharic also about their own life experiences and their own places of living. In other words, the coursebook should also contain personalized content. “Personalization”, a concept used in language pedagogy, “allow[s] students to use language to express their own ideas, feelings, preferences and opinions. [It] is an important part of the communicative approach, since it involves true communication, as learners communicate real information about themselves. [...] It makes language relevant to learners, makes communication activities meaningful, and also helps memorisation.”⁸ Thus, the coursebook should function as a kind of bridge between the two cultures.

I have presented a list of topics and functions on which the coursebook will be based. A challenging and daunting task will be to prepare a list of grammatical structures that should be taught at the A1 level and then to sequence them. The type of structure being taught must each time harmonize with the topic. The topic gives context to

⁸ <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/personalisation> (Accessed 29.04.2020).

the grammar; the grammar helps to build sentences pertaining to a given topic. Researchers dealing with language acquisition talk about developmental sequences, which means “stages” in the development of particular language features (Lightbrown & Spada 2006: 2). Surprisingly, the developmental sequences that native speakers pass through when acquiring a given language are the same for people who learn this language in a classroom setting. However, so far there has been no study concerning the developmental sequence of acquiring Amharic grammatical structures, neither by first language learners nor by second language learners. That is why the sequence of learning Amharic grammatical structures that I am going to propose will be somewhat subjective, based on common sense and the principle: present a simpler and less demanding structure before a more complex or more demanding.

Here I would like to demonstrate how this principle may be applied. Normally, when one teaches any Standard Average European language, but also Arabic and Hebrew, one introduces first the present tense and then other tenses. This allows students to talk about where they live, what they do, what are their routines. This track is not so obvious for Amharic. The point is that the form of the non-past in Amharic is quite complicated, in contrast to the past tense form, because it transparently incorporates an auxiliary. Example:

näggärä – tell (quoted form found in a dictionary)

näggär-ä – he told

näggär-hu – I told

yə-nägr-all-ø – he will tell, he tells

ə-nägr-all-ähu – I will tell, I tell

You can see that the past tense form (*näggär-ä*, *näggär-hu*) is simpler and thus easier to learn than the non-past tense form (*yə-nägr-all-ø*, *ə-nägr-all-ähu*), which has affixes added before and after the stem. That is why I opt for introducing students of Amharic first to the past tense form (as it was done in older Amharic textbooks) and create a suitable communicative context for learning it. Selected non-past tense forms, but not whole paradigms, can be taught in the meantime as lexical items.

3.5 Skills

Equal weighting will be given to all four skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening) but my main intention will be to develop oral communication skill. I think this is the most significant skill in the context of teaching African languages, the most neglected skill when it comes to teaching Amharic, and the most motivating skill for the students. Thus, to offer activities that build up and hone oral skills production will be the priority in designing the coursebook. In connection to this, I shall make a remark about the language contained in *Mäsob*. The Amharic language of *Mäsob* should have real world relevance; this means the language should be as authentic as possible at the given level and draw from authentic sources. In addition to the four skills mentioned above, students should gain some cultural competence in the course of learning the language.

3.6 Exercises

In the coursebook I want to offer grammar practice activities that will have two main features: first, they will be meaningful and engaging, second they will be focused (Larsen-Freeman 2003: 117). Whereas the vast majority of existing Amharic textbooks adopt a highly form-oriented approach, I would like to propose activities in which students while learning grammar will be engaged in using new language in a meaningful, communicative way. It has been shown “that teachers who focus students’ attention on linguistic form during communicative interactions are more effective than those who never focus on form or only do so in decontextualized grammar lessons” (Larsen-Freeman 2001: 251).

As mentioned, a task-based syllabus will be integrated into the coursebook. In this way, I would like to provide learners with more problem-solving activities, to the extent that it is possible at the A1 level, and with tasks. In the course of learning a given grammatical structure, students will first encounter form-oriented activities that focus on accuracy (Ur 1996: 83–84). These will gradually develop into activities focused on fluency that encourage free discourse. Because I am not going to write an additional workbook, the coursebook will contain a range of more controlled activities and activities that can be assigned as homework.

Along with grammar-oriented exercises, the coursebook will offer activities focusing on broadening and consolidating vocabulary. Because there exists no word frequency list for the Amharic language, I have no choice but to consult my own experience in compiling a list of vocabulary items on a given topic that are appropriate for the given level. In the activities emphasis will be put not only on learning the individual words but also words in collocations as well as whole chunks of language.

3.7 Length and organization

As for the length of the coursebook it will embrace around 150 hours of teaching. This means that I assume the book can be covered by the teacher within one year, if Amharic class takes place 6 (academic) hours per week for 30 weeks. That makes 180 hours; the remaining 30 hours are left for the teacher to implement her/his own ideas.

The coursebook will be divided into units and these into smaller parts. The units will basically have a uniform design but with some variety. A similar organization of the teaching material helps students to find the rhythm of learning but on the other hand the course may become too predictable and, consequently, boring. Every 4–5 units there will be a review unit.

4 Conclusion

The first version of this paper was delivered at the 23rd Afrikanistentag (25–26 May, 2018 Hamburg) in the panel “Teaching African languages: Methods and materials”. From the discussions among the panel participants it has become clear that for the majority of African languages (including Amharic) that are currently taught at German universities, there is a severe lack of good teaching materials. This is coupled with the non-existence of language pedagogy training that would support professional development of an African language teacher. This unfortunate situation contrasts with the fact that African languages pose an enormous challenge to both the teacher and students because of their structural, cultural and geographical remoteness. I believe that, as far as Amharic language teaching is concerned, the first, and major, desideratum is to design a comprehensive syllabus. Such a syllabus would contain a specification of lexicon, grammatical structures, topics and functions (also situations

and notions) which could serve as the basis for Amharic language courses of any kind. The Amharic coursebook that I present here will be an attempt to establish at least a part of such a syllabus and then apply it for designing *Mäsob 1*. Contemporary, and most importantly, efficient approaches to foreign language teaching developed for European and some Asian languages can be adopted, in a creative and motivating way, for Amharic and other African languages.

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