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Ronny Meyer

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Comptes rendus de lecture

Book reviews

Marlene Guss-Kosicka, *Die Verbalsysteme des Amharischen und Tigrinischen: Eine vergleichende Analyse* [The verbal systems of Amharic and Tigrinya: A comparative analysis] (Studien zum Horn von Afrika 7), Cologne, Rüdiger Köppe, 2019, xx + 336 p.

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The book under review, based on a PhD dissertation defended at Freie Universität Berlin in 2016, is a continuation of studies on the verbal system of Ethiosemitic languages starting with Goldenberg (1966) on Amharic, Voigt (1977) on Tigrinya and Weninger (2001) on Geez. In comparing the verbal systems of Amharic and Tigrinya, Guss-Kosicka has the aim of providing a better understanding of the respective languages as well as of Semitic in general. Moreover, the results could be of interest for general linguistics (p. 5).

Overview: The book is divided into nine chapters. The introduction (p. 1-5) provides information on the sociolinguistic situation of Amharic and Tigrinya, comments on their genetic classification, and lists descriptive grammars and a selection of earlier works on the verbal systems of the two languages. A short subsection outlines the research methodology. Although this is not stated explicitly, Guss-Kosicka uses two types of data in her study: verb forms and information on their assumed functions gathered from previously published works (see Appendix: Secondary sources) and illustrative examples from novels (see Appendix: Primary sources). Note that I mainly retain the technical terms used by Guss-Kosicka, even if I do not consider them to be appropriate.

The following four chapters (p. 7-176) are concerned with the "Perfect", the "Gerund", the "Imperfect", and the "Jussive and Imperative". In these chapters, she first describes the basic conjugations of regular triliteral verbs and then elaborates on complex predicates consisting of an inflected verb followed by a copula or an auxiliary. Furthermore, certain types of subordinate verbs are discussed, including verbs in conditional clauses, and in grammaticalized sequences of two verbs, e.g. "gerund with *awwäqä* and *fälätä*" (p. 58-59); i.e. the *experiential perfect*, see Crass & Meyer (2008: 243) for the term. At the end of each chapter, the Amharic and Tigrinya verb forms are contrasted in tables with the dummy verb √sbr 'break'.

The next chapter, "Periphrastic Constructions with the Participle and the Infinitive" (p. 177-189), deals with complex predicates that are exclusive to Amharic: combinations of an infinitive (bare or with a relational

prefix) or a participle (with agentive nominal pattern $C_1äC_2aC_3i$) with a copula or existential verb. The infinitive, for instance, expresses an event in the near future if marked by a possessive suffix and followed by the copula, see *mähed-e näw* (VN.go-POSS.1SG COP.3SM 'I am about to go', p. 180), but denotes an ongoing action if marked by the locative prefix *bä-* and the postponed relational noun *lay* 'on top of, above', see *bä-mässatäf lay načč̣äw* (LOC-VN.participate above COP.3PL 'they are currently participating', p. 184). These and other complex predicates are listed with present, past, and future time reference, in main and subordinate clauses, and in affirmative and negative clauses.

The last three chapters (p. 191-312) are concerned with verbal constructions in Amharic and Tigrinya involving a relativized verb. The chapter "Relativized Verb Form" illustrates the formation of relative verbs of simple perfect and imperfect verbs, and of complex predicates. Then their use as modifiers in noun phrases and as (nominalized) heads of subordinate and complement clauses is illustrated. The next chapter, "Qualifying Copula Clauses", deals with constructions in which a 'be'-verb takes a headless relative verb as its complement. Referring to Kapeliuk (1988), Guss-Kosicka (p. 235f.) argues that the same verb depicts semantically distinct nuances when occurring as verbal predicate or as relative verb in a qualifying copula clause. The former expresses a dynamic situation, e.g. Amharic *yə-säbr-all* (3SM-break\IPFV-AUX.NPS) 'he is breaking/breaks', whereas the latter represents the same situation from a stative point of view by ascribing a characteristic feature to the subject, e.g. *yämm-i-säbr näw* (REL-3SM-break\IPFV COP.3SM) 'He is a breaker, i.e. somebody who (usually) breaks (something)'. The book ends with a chapter on the structure and functions of cleft sentences.

EVALUATION: This study follows a radical form-oriented approach, which is reflected in the long lists of verbal constructions named with abstract dummy verbs. The semantic and pragmatic differences of verb forms within one language and between cognate forms in the two languages are rarely elaborated on. As the study shows, despite the genetic proximity of Amharic and Tigrinya, their verbal forms and constructions cannot be easily matched onto one another, and their verbal systems are fairly different. The reason for this diversity, however, remains unexplored.

The complex chapter and section numbering system and the extensive footnote apparatus with comments, definitions and abbreviated sources make the book needlessly difficult to follow. The example sentences are only given in transliteration followed by a free translation. Orthographic, dialectal, and historical idiosyncrasies in the data remain uncommented, as Guss-Kosicka considers them merely "orthographic variants" (p. 5). Lexi-

cal and grammatical glosses are consistently lacking, and morphemes discussed in the text are usually not translated, e.g. Tigrinya *ʔəmmo* 'therefore, in consequence' (p. 60), and Amharic *əndʒi* 'except, in contrast' (p. 68). Thus, the understanding of the data and their description requires a certain level of competence in Amharic and Tigrinya. On the other hand, experts of the two languages would certainly have preferred to see the examples also in the original script.

The entire work lacks a theoretical framework in which central concepts like perfect, imperfect, jussive, etc. are viewed. Instead, the reader is usually given uncommented lists of definitions for these terms, often taken from Bußmann (2002), see the definition of "viewpoint aspect" and "aktionsart" (p. 51, fn. 202, 204-206), or the German authority for orthography, the Duden (2005), as for the concept of telicity (p. 51, fn. 209-210). The standard literature on TAM, such as Dahl (1985), Bybee *et al.* (1994), Sasse (1991 and 1987), and Filip (2012), is not consulted. Comparative works on TAM in Semitic, e.g. Lipiński (2001) and Stempel (1999a and 1999b), and in Ethiosemitic, e.g. Meyer (2016a and 2016b), are not taken into account. Relevant theses of Ethiopian scholars are ignored, e.g. Abdu (2011), Desalegn (2009 and 2016), Mulusew (2014), Demissie (1977), Mengistu (2002), etc.

I take major issue with Guss-Kosicka's database, which seems to comprise primarily of sample sentences from grammatical descriptions (her "secondary sources"), notably Voigt (1977), which is given as the source of most cited Tigrinya examples, as well as Praetorius (1879), Leslau (1995), and Goldenberg (1966) for Amharic, and several works by Kapeliuk for both languages. However, 18 Amharic and 11 Tigrinya novels and textbooks are said to have served as "primary sources". Out of the 29 primary sources, 18 were published in the first half of the twentieth century, which yields a strong bias towards the early stages of modern literature. Actually, these sources seem to be of little relevance. A count of the sample sentences in §2 (*Perfect*) reveals a ratio of 29 primary *vs.* 36 secondary sources for Tigrinya, and 40 primary *vs.* 47 secondary sources for Amharic, i.e. more than half of the examples are taken from grammatical descriptions. This raises the question whether and what kind of a corpus study has been undertaken and challenges the validity of the various frequency statements, such as "while Tigrinya *k-ällo* constructions are quite frequent, the Amharic *s-allä* constructions is only very rarely used" (p. 100).

Even more problematic is that data from different time periods and dialects are presented as a uniform language construct, as if they existed side-by-side. Obsolete and archaic Amharic forms include the archaic *mäṣṣahu* (p. 12) for today's *mäṭṭah*^{w} 'I came' (but also in the sense 'I am about to

come'), the obsolete question marker *-nə* (e.g. p. 95 and 132), the archaic postposed complementizer *zänd* (p. 107), which has been ousted by the prefix *ənd-*, and an obsolete double auxiliary construction (p. 128), which no longer exists in contemporary Amharic.

The technical terms used by Guss-Kosicka are an obstacle to understanding the function of the verb forms in question. Semitists may correctly assume that, for instance, "perfect" and "gerund" refer to forms that typologists would call "perfective" and "converb". However, it is likely that most readers are lost when complex predicates are called "construction *alsäbbärämm näbbär*" (p. 35, for the Amharic negative perfective followed by the past auxiliary).

The dispute around the terms "gerund" and "converb" attracts some attention in the study (p. 44f.). In the Ethiosemitic literature, both terms are used interchangeably to denote a conjugation which yields a subordinate verb that modifies a reference verb adverbially or narrates a sequence of events. Based on Goldenberg's (1977: 489ff.) discussion of the two terms, the author argues that "gerund" is more appropriate because the respective subordinate verb forms derive historically from a nominal to which person markers have been attached. The term "converb", in contrast, should be limited to verbs which have been formed by attaching a converb marker to an existing verbal paradigm, as proposed initially by Polotsky (1951: 41). Such a strict form-oriented approach might be of interest from an historical perspective but seems to have little relevance from a synchronic viewpoint and in a study of languages where the two types of non-finite verbs fulfill similar functions. Therefore, Hetzron (1972: 98-115), Meyer (2012: 186ff.; 2016a: 184-191), and Weninger (2001: 217-220) have opted for the term "converb", not least because it conforms to the use of the term in the typological literature. In contrast, typologists use the term "gerund" for a non-finite nominal form that can (also) function as an argument in a clause, which the so-called Amharic or Tigrinya "gerunds" never do.

Leaving the terminological issue aside, Guss-Kosicka overlooks a major problem related to this verb form, namely why it (as a non-finite verb or a verbal noun) frequently functions as predicate in main clauses in Tigrinya, whereas it must always be followed by an auxiliary in Standard Amharic main clauses (except in pragmatically marked contexts, like elliptic sentences or immediate responses to a question). I argue in Meyer (2016a: 229-232) that tense represents an obligatory feature of main-clause predicates in Modern Ethiosemitic and that the Tigrinya converb must be followed by a zero non-past tense marker in main clauses.

Apart from questionable analyses, the description also contains errors, some of which are listed here. Zay has no converb marker *-nəm* (p. 45),

but only *-m*. Contrary to the assumption of the author (p. 79), Amharic can combine a converb with an infinitive marked by the possessive suffix:

(1) ጀዋር ... ተባሮ መሆኑን መረጃዎች ያሳያሉ[1]

ğäwar ...	***täbarro***	***mähon-u-n***
Jawar	be_expelled\CNV.3SM	be\VN-POSS.3SM-ACC
märäğğa-wočč	*yassayyallu*	
evidence-PL	SBJ.3PL.show\IPFV:AUX.NPST.3PL	

'Evidence shows that Jawar ... has been expelled.'

The combination of a simple imperfect verb followed by *ʤämmär* 'begin (PFV base)' (p. 95) is not an asyndetic combination of two main verbs, but a complex predicate in which *ʤämmär* is a grammaticalized, invariant auxiliary indicating inchoative aktionsart (see e.g. Desalegn 2016: 87; Richter 1994: 539). The Amharic obligation construction *madräg allä-bb-ät* [make\VN exist\NPST:SBJ.3SM-MIL[2]-OBJ.3SM] has no benefactive origin, as implied by the translation 'Making is there for him' (p. 181), but rather a locative/malefactive source, i.e. 'Making is there on/against him' (Ahland 2009: 703-706). The prefixes attached to relativized verbs, i.e. Amharic *yä(mm)-* and Tigrinya *zə-*, are not "relative pronouns" (p. 191 *et passim*) but rather complementizers (see Wu 2012; Girma 2001).

In conclusion, the book does not advance our knowledge of Amharic and Tigrinya, nor does it provide an innovative comprehensive analysis of their verbal systems. Guss-Kosicka mainly deals with phenomena that are known to Semitists from previous publications. To typologists, these data remain inaccessible due to the lack of transparency in the selection of terms and in the presentation of the data. Furthermore, a historical comparative bias in the comparison of the two languages misrepresents the currently living character of the two languages. The book almost exclusively follows a form-oriented approach, without much attention to the function of the verbal forms vis-à-vis each other in a single language and across the two languages. In short, the book rather categorizes verbal forms than analyzes them.

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1. Source: https://www.facebook.com/ethiopiawin/photos/ጀዋር-በቅርቡ-የሰራውን-ወንጀል-የሰራው-ከወያኔና-መንግስት-ውስጥ-ካሉ-ባንዳ-የጸጥታ-ሰራተኞች-ጋር-ተባ-ሮ-መሆኑን-መረጃዎች-ያሳ/2357609504492003, accessed 29/12/2020.

2. MIL: multifunctional applicative morpheme for nominals with malefactive, instrumental or locative function.

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