IMPACT: Studies in Language, Culture and Society 48

The languages of Ethiopia

Aspects of the sociolinguistic profile

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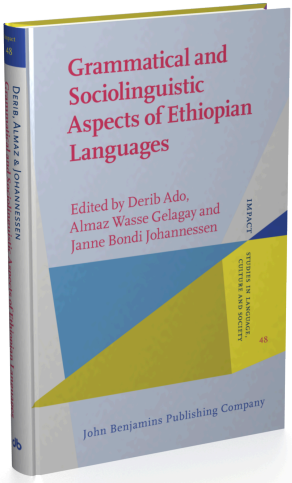
https://doi.org/10.1075/impact.48.int



Pages 1–12 of
Grammatical and Sociolinguistic Aspects of Ethiopian Languages
Edited by Derib Ado, Almaz Wasse Gelagay and Janne Bondi Johannessen †
[**IMPACT: Studies in Language, Culture and Society**, 48]
2021. viii, 415 pp.

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University of Oslo

This book is part of the research work supported by the project Linguistic Capacity Building, tools for the inclusive development of Ethiopia (LCB),[1] which has been working on the development of resources and training of human power involved in linguistic work. The works in this volume are papers presented at different international conferences including the 46th North Atlantic Conference on Afroasiatic Linguistics, Long Beach, California from 1–3 June 2018 and the 20th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Mekele, Ethiopia from 1–5 October 2018 with support from the LCB project. The researches focus on different languages in all the three language families in the Afro-Asiatic phyla, namely Cushitic and Omotic and a Nilotic language from the Nilo-Saharan phyla. This volume also included two papers on Ethiopian sign language, for which there are no prior publications in any of the microlinguistic fields.

Ethiopia is home to more than 85 varieties of languages. There have been a lot of grammatical descriptions and other linguistic works produced as PhD dissertations and MA theses, mainly at Addis Ababa University. Nevertheless, most of the works by PhD students and staff remain unpublished. This volume is a contribution towards dissemination of linguistic research on Ethiopian languages conducted mostly by staff and PhD students in Ethiopian universities. We believe that such collective volumes give access to dissemination of research on Ethiopian languages while building the capacity of the linguists involved.

In this introductory section, we present the genetic classification, geographical distribution, population and functions of the major Ethiopian languages. We also provide a brief overview on language and identity in contemporary Ethiopia. Then we give a short overview of this book: the individual chapters and the reviewers.

1. <https://www.hf.uio.no/iln/english/about/organization/text-laboratory/projects/Ethiopia/>, <http://www.aau.edu.et/chls/norad-lcb/>

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1. Aspects of the sociolinguistics profile of the languages

1.1 Genetic classification of Ethiopian languages

The East African country Ethiopia with a population of more than 110 million is home to more than 85 languages (The number varies depending on who counts and what is counted. For instance, Lewis (2009) listed 86 languages.). The languages of Ethiopia belong to the two language families: Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan. The Afro-Asiatic languages spoken in Ethiopia belong to the Cushitic, Omotic and Semitic families. Of the Cushitic languages Oromo has the largest number of speakers, followed by Somali and Afar. Other major languages in the Cushitic family are Sidama, Kambata and Hadiyya. Gordon (2005) presents 47 languages belonging to the Cushitic family, but the number is far from perfect. An example is the case of Oromo, which is presented as three separate languages i.e., Oromo West, Oromo East and Oromo Central, though they are usually considered to be one language with several regional dialects. The Cushitic languages are spoken mainly in the eastern and central parts.

The Omotic family is spoken in Ethiopia only, mainly in the Omo valley in the South Nations Nationalities and Peoples regional state (SNNPRS). This language family was first classified as Western Cushitic but later renamed as Omotic. Theil (2006) claims that this language family is not Afro-Asiatic but instead an independent language family. Wolaita, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro are major Omotic languages with a substantial number of speakers.

The Semitic languages consist of the following major languages: Amharic, Tigrinya, Geʿez and the Gurage cluster, which consists of several languages with dialect clusters. Amharic has the largest number of speakers from the Semitic languages followed by Tigrinya and the Gurage languages. Geʿez does not have native speakers but is widely used as a classical religious language in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church throughout the country. The Semitic languages of Ethiopia are commonly referred to as Ethio-Semitic and are spoken in northern and central Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian Nilo-Saharan languages are spoken in the western part of Ethiopia bordering the Sudan and South Sudan. The total population of the Ethiopian Nilo-Saharan languages was less than 500,000 in the 1994 census (OPHCC 1998).

Finally, there is Ethiopian Sign Language, spoken by a substantial part of the deaf and hard of hearing, estimated more than a million people (Simons & Fennig 2018).

1.2 Geographical distribution

The language map of Ethiopia coincides with the administrative regional boundaries for the five major languages: Afar, Amharic, Oromo, Somali and Tigrinya (see Figures 1 & 2). Amharic, apart from in the Amhara Regional State, is spoken in all towns throughout the country and serves as a lingua-franca (Meyer 2006; Meyer & Richter 2003). Tigrinya is spoken in the North in the Tigray regional state. Afar is spoken in the Afar regional state. Somali is spoken in the Somali regional state. Oromo is spoken mainly in the Oromia regional state, which covers the largest area in central, western and southern Ethiopia. The SNNPRS[2] is the most diverse region consisting of 56 ethnic groups. The major languages in this state include the Gurage Cluster, Silti, Sidama, Wolaita, Hadiyya, Kambata, Gedeo, Gamo and Dawro.

Figure 1. Map of administrative regions of Ethiopia (December 2019)

2. The Sidama Zone, which has been part of the SNNPRS, was established as Sidama National Regional State on July 4, 2020.

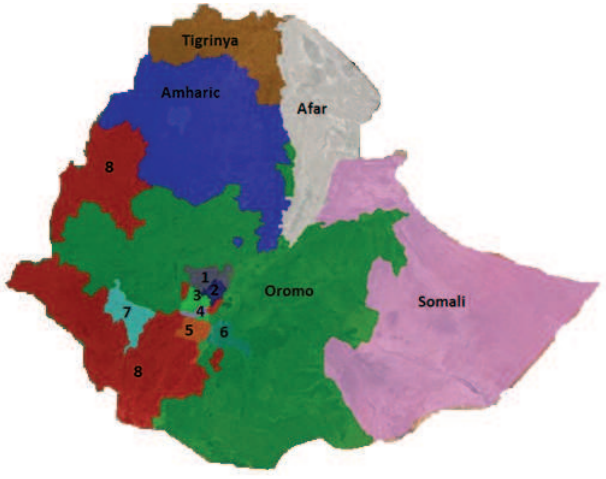

Figure 2. Map with the major Ethiopian languages: Afar, Amharic, Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya, Gurage (1), Silte (2), Hadiyya (3), Kambata (4), Wolaita (5), Sidama (6), Kafa (7) and others (8)

1.3 Speaker population

There is no reliable source of speaker population for Ethiopian languages to date. The 2007 census, which is the officially available data to date on speaker population presents the following number of mother tongue speakers from a total population of 73,918,505 as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Ethiopian languages with more than 500,000 speakers by 2007 (CSA 2018)

Language	No. of MT speakers	Language	No. of MT speakers
1. Oromo	24,930,424	9. Hadiyya	1,253,894
2. Amharic	21,634,396	10. Gamo	1,070,626
3. Somali	4,609,274	11. Gedeo	974,609
4. Tigrinya	4,324,933	12. Silti	880,818
5. Sidama	2,981,471	13. Kaffa	834,918
6. Wolaita	1,627,955	14. Kambata	614,807
7. Gurage	1,481,836 G	15. Dawuro	513,341
8. Afar	1,281,284		

It has been more than 12 years since the last census and the population of Ethiopia has exceeded 110,000,000 (UN 2019) and thus the number of speakers of the languages has also increased. There is no census data for the Ethiopian Sign language, but Simons and Fennig (2018) reported more than a million signers for it.

1.4 Status and functional distribution of Ethiopian languages

All languages have equal recognition in Ethiopia. Amharic is the working language of the federal government.[3] In addition, it is the working language of the Addis Ababa city government, the Dire Dawa city government, the South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional state, the Gambela regional state, and the Benishangul Gumuz regional state since it serves as a lingua franca among different ethnic groups that make up these regional states. Afar, Oromo, Somali and Tigrinya are languages that serve as regional working languages in the regional states where they are dominantly spoken.

About fifty languages have now official orthographies and primary education is given in about 33 of the Ethiopian languages (Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2015) including the 15 languages win Table 1. The Ethiopic script and the Latin script are the most widely used scripts in writing Ethiopian languages. Among Ethiopian languages, Amharic is widely used for publication of newspapers, infotainment magazines, fiction and non-fiction materials.

1.5 Language and ethnic identity in Ethiopia

Identity is a very wide-ranging concept that relates to the association of oneself to a number of qualifications. It applies to individual personalities or groups who consider themselves as having something in common. As Edwards (2009: 19) states it, "the essence of identity is similarity." When the concept is taken in terms of group or social identity, it clearly indicates sharing of one or more social qualifications. In relation to individual identity, the concept of "similarity" may look vague since individuality bases itself in what makes one unique from other similar groups. However, Edwards (2009: 19) says: "Individuality does not arise through the possession of psychological components not to be found in anyone else." Those traits one claims to uniquely own can also be found in the other individual member of the same group.

A number of factors interplay in the construction of identity, and some include gender, age, social group, ethnicity, language, culture, etc. Research provides substantial evidence that language identifies speakers in many ways. It provides clues as to who the speakers are and where they are from including their ethnic background. Ethnic identity or ethnicity is a complex social topic to define. It is commonly perceived to be a social construct which is associated with "national

3. The Council of Ministers of FDRE added 4 languages-Afar, Oromo, Somali and Tigrinya- as working languages of the Federal government in early March 2020.

origin, language, food and culture" (Reyes 2010: 339). Language is a strong tool to bring people together as a group and to have sense of sameness. It plays a central role in the construction of collective or national identity. A shared language was taken to be a major criterion than were other common values to form nation states in different parts of the world. For instance, in France and Germany, "a shared language was understood to be the identifying mark of a nation, which could then claim a state (Heller 2005: 1582)."

Society's orientation towards language and ethnicity is high in Africa, specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa "there is strong emotional attachment to language and ethnicity (Obeng & Adegbija 1999: 353)." Each ethnic group identifies itself and is identifiable with a shared language and culture. Solidarity among speakers of the same language is also strong in many contexts than it is among different ethno-linguistic groups.

Currently, Ethiopia follows ethno-linguistic identity as a principle to organize itself into federal states (Abbink 2011: 596; Zahorik & Wondwosen 2009: 80). Regional and small provincial administration areas are discerned mostly based on the languages residents speak, and people who speak the same or mutually intelligible languages are assumed to be members of one ethnic identity. Recognition of all ethnic groups and provision of the right to develop one's language and culture in the country's constitution has given rise to ethno-linguistic identities. Ethnic and linguistic consciousness boosted and many individual and political institutes have become advocates of particular ethnic and linguistic group rights. Ethno-linguistic practices spiked after the declaration of the freedom of use as confirmed by much research and summarized by Abbink (2011: 603) as:

> The innovative and encouraging aspect of Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic based federalism in the 1990s was that it initiated a liberating phase of ethnic and linguistic self-expression. People used their freedom for ethnic, linguistic and cultural expression. For instance, a whole series of new ethno-historical, language and folkloric publications written by members of the groups themselves was published, and still is.

The ethno-linguistic based administration, however, has not guaranteed peace in the country up until this time since its implementation in 1995. The country faced a number of hurdles in almost every province in spite of the legislative recognition to ethnic and linguistic diversity. Conflicts were mainly ethnic or linguistic based which some included: the famous WoGaGoDa conflict in South West Ethiopia, the Anywa-Nuer Relation problem which killed dozens of people in Gambela town, Benishangul-Gumuz regional state where a number of inter-ethnic clashes erupted among "the various population groups, indigenous Berta, Gumuz and descendants of later immigrant groups like the Oromo, the Amhara and other "highlanders",

about political representation, ethnic districts, and the regional presidency", and the Somali-Oromo relations in South East Ethiopia in Moyale town (Abbink 2011: 906–907), and the recent disputes in different places of the country can be cited as examples.

Abbink (2011: 604) explains the reasons as to why such regional disputes recurrently occur in the country. Some of the causes to the ethno-linguistic conflicts are: Attempts to "resurgence of sub-national and ethnic identities" which stimulated the WoGaGoDa related conflict in Wolaita and Gamo areas. Empowered by the constitution, "A fair number of newly emphasized ethnic groups pleaded for their own separate administrative division." Regionally developed constitutions made "Territories…mono-ethnic, even if they were not so historically; they cannot be shared by two or more groups."

One of the social developments of a shared ethno-linguistic environment is what is called "exclusionism." It is illustrated by Obeng & Adegbija (1999: 355) as "the togetherness of the in-groups who had identical linguistic habits and ethnicity led to the exclusion of people who were linguistically and ethnically different." This is what is happening in almost all African countries, particularly in Ethiopia. A number of social hostilities, as indicated in the preceding paragraphs, shock each part of the country and the root of most of the unrests were ethnic based fueled by political orientations.

The correlation between language and ethnicity does not, however, entail that languages are not used beyond the ethnic group they index. Languages of wider communication in Africa (Obeng & Adegbija 1999: 355) and in Ethiopia are used by various ethnic groups and serve as vehicles of interethnic communication.

2. This book: The chapters

The book is organized in sixteen chapters in five major sections: lexicon, sociolinguistics and culture, grammar(morphology and syntax), phonetics and sign language.

2.1 Lexicon

The introduction of the Omotic language Gamo spoken in South-Western Ethiopia as a medium of instruction in primary education and as a language subject for all grade levels requires the creation of new terms for concepts that do not already exist in the language. **Almaz Wasse Gelagay** in her chapter *Term-formation methods in the Gamo language* describes the techniques used to form terms in the Gamo language, by studying recent text books for language and mathematics.

The ensete (false banana) plant is the topic of **Fekede Menuta** in his chapter *The ensete in Gurage: Nomenclature, use and meaning extension*. He shows how important this plant and its products are for the Gurage people, and shows that there are about 71 ensete varieties in Gurage. The people classify ensete varieties according to color, size, value, propensity, source of the plant and height, reflected in the terminology.

2.2 Sociolinguistics and culture

Awlachew Shumneka Nurga in his chapter *Language contact and its effects on language use of the Gurage varieties of Muher* investigates the language use of speakers of the Muher language. The speakers are all multilingual with knowledge of the official Amharic language and the neighbouring Ezha language, and the language is losing speakers as young people in the urban areas no longer has it as their first language.

In her chapter *Ethnolinguistic perception and identity in Gurage* **Emebet Bekele Birkie** explores the perceptions and attitudes of speakers towards language use and ethnolinguistic identity within the complex sociopolitical and linguistic milieu of the Gurage people. An empirical investigation based on mixed methods reveals that speakers of different Gurage varieties perceive language as strongly connected to their ethnolinguistic identity.

Etaferahu Hailu Tessema describes a secret language spoken by females of a traditional religion in her paper *Sociolinguistic functions of the secret language of Gurage females*. Through interviews she found that the sociolinguistic functions of this Fedwet include the establishment of a secret communication among young girls to form a specific identity, and for various religious purposes.

Fekede Menuta and Yigeremu Kifle in their chapter *Gender and women representation in Gurage culture* aim to describe the social, cultural and political representation of women in the Gumer district of the Gurage Zone. They have conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as well observations of events and consultation of documents. They find noticeable differences between men and women at all levels, including discourse.

2.3 Grammar (syntax and morphology)

Baye Yimam discusses how manner of movement such as spontaneity, intensity, iterativity, durativity and directionality, which are often expressed in manner adverbs in languages which have this productive category, must be expressed differently in Amharic, which lacks this category. His chapter *Manner of movement in Amharic*

shows that subordinate clauses and preposition phrases are used as manner expressions for actions.

Serial verbs in the Omotic language Sezo are investigated by **Girma Mengistu Desta** in his chapter *Serial verb constructions in Sezo*. They are explored with respect to the one major verb and the one or more minor verbs. These two classes of verbs occur under very different conditions in the serial verb construction.

Nuer, a Nilo-Saharan language spoken both in South Sudan and Ethiopia, is a language with a complex morphology. **John Koang Nyang** in his paper *Number marking in Nuer nouns* finds that though suffixation is a common way to form plurals, there are many other ways, including suppletion, vowel quantity, change in vowel quality and internal vowel modification and null formation. Many occur in combinations, too.

Case-marking in Semitic in the light of the evidence in the Ethiopian language area: linguistic convergence and divergence is the title of **Lutz Edzard's** chapter. He is interested in the fact that languages in the Ethiopian language area, independently of language family, typically exhibit a two-case system from a morphological point of view, while Semitic in general is usually reconstructed is has a three-case system is.

Shimelis Mazengia investigates reduplication, the copying of a root or a stem, entirely or partially, in his chapter *Reduplication in Oromo*. The word classes amenable to reduplication are nouns, determiners, numerals, adverbs and adpositions, adjectives and verbs. Functionally, reduplicated nouns assume a predicative role and adpositions an adverbial role, while the reduplicative forms of the other word classes essentially have the sense of augmentation in terms of quantity, frequency or intensity.

Verbal Derivations in Inor is the title of **Tsehay Abza**'s chapter. Inor is a Gurage language, and she investigates derivation that applies to the verb stem and has the function of increasing or decreasing arguments, as well as conveying intensity, reciprocity or reflexivity. It may do so by affixation or by altering the stem's morpho-phonological properties.

2.4 Phonetics

The phonetics of Amharic fricatives have been studied by **Derib Ado** in his chapter *An acoustic analysis of Amharic fricatives.* The study aimed to identify acoustic correlates for place of articulation and airstream mechanisms. Frequency of peak intensity, maximum intensity, mean intensity, normalised intensity and spectral centre of gravity were found to be robust acoustic correlates of place of articulation.

Feda Negesse and Tujube Amansa explore vowel quantity in their chapter *Durational variations in Oromo vowels* using a high number of speakers. The

duration of the vowels was found to vary significantly across dialects in this Cushitic language, with the longest duration in the Eastern dialect and the shortest duration in the Western dialect. The voice and length of the following consonants were found to be significant factors for the duration of the vowels.

2.5 Sign language

Pawlos Kassu Abebe presents one of two chapters on sign linguistics. In his chapter *The linguistic nature of expression of aspect in Ethiopian Sign Language* he looks at the aspect system and discusses whether it should be regarded as inflectional, derivational or even gestural. His empirical investigation shows that the gestural nature must be refuted, and that aspect belongs to the area of inflectional morphology.

Woinshet Girma in her chapter *Polysemy of Ethiopian Sign Language* has used direct elicitation, video recording and analysis of EthSL dictionaries in order to find examples of polysemy and their etymology. She finds semantic extension processes, such as action vs. result of activity, systematic meaning relations and borrowings from oral languages and other sign languages.

2.6 The reviewers

This book has benefitted greatly from the advice of our reviewers. They have been exceptionally thorough and constructive, and some wrote long reviews of more than ten pages and even offered to read the revised papers. We are very grateful for their work, and honour them by mentioning their names here.

The reviewers are experts from universities and academic institutions across the world: Australia, the Czech Republic, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, the USA, and Zimbabwe. Their names are given in alphabetical order (Ethiopians by their first name):

Gisle Andersen (Norwegian School of Economics), Giorgio Banti (University of Naples), Baye Yimam (Addis Ababa University), Rosey Billington (University of Melbourne), Joshua Bousquette (University of Georgia-Athens), Katrin Bromber (The Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient), Herbert Chimhundu (Chinhoyi University of Technology), Jordi Cicres (University of Girona), Lutz Edzard (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität), Kristin Melum Eide (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), Kadir Gökgöz (Boğaziçi University), Qandeel Hussain (North Carolina State University), Paul Kerswill (University of York), Elizabeth Lanza (University of Oslo), Johanna Mesch (Stockholm University), Ronny Meyer (Inalco University), Moges Yigezu (Addis Ababa University), Tore Nesset (Arctic University of Norway), Deborah Chen Pichler (Gallaudet University), Marijn van Putten (University of Leiden), Maria Rosa Lloret

Romañach (University of Barcelona), Sharon Rose (UC San Diego), Unn Røyneland (University of Oslo), Joe Salmons (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Guri Bordal Steien (Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences), Mauro Tosco (University of Turin), Yvonne Treis (Inalco University), Jan Záhořík (University of West Bohemia), Zelealem Leyew (Addis Ababa University), Rainer Voigt (Freie Universität Berlin), Arnfinn Muruvik Vonen (Oslo Metropolitan University), Quentin Williams (University of Western Cape).

Funding

This work has had financial support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), under its NORHED program, for the project Linguistic Capacity Building – Tools for the inclusive development of Ethiopia. It has also received support from the Centre for multilingualism in society across the lifespan (MultiLing)at the University of Oslo, funded by the Research Council of Norway, project no. 22 32 65.

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