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Linguistic Remarks on Modern and Old Harari Languages

Abdulhamid Abdulahi Ahmed

Abstract

The ancient Islamic capital, Harar, is located in the Horn of Africa, on the eastern edge of the Rift Valley. Harari is one of the languages of the Southeastern Ethiopian Ethio-Semitic language family. The Harari language, which has two variants – ancient and modern – has close linguistic ties to Somali. Although modern and ancient Harari have many similarities, Enrico Cerulli (1898 – 1988) was able to distinguish them thanks to a number of peculiar linguistic elements. Therefore, this article aims to provide some linguistic observations on both ancient and modern Harari.

Keywords: Harari, Modern languages, African languages.

1. Introduction

Being a repository of the indentations of successive civilizations over many centuries, Harar, the ancient capital of Islam, lies on the eastern brink of the Great Rift Valley in the Horn of Africa. It is located 525 km east of Addis Ababa at an average elevation of 1,750 m above sea level¹. Over the last five centuries the town had been major centre of Islamic learning and key hub of trade connecting Africa with the rest of the world. In 1520 CE, Harar became the capital of a Muslim dynasty of Adal strengthening its position as the main political center of Islam in the horn. Its leading role continued under 'Imam 'Ahmad bin 'Ibrahim al-Ġāzī, known as *'Ahmad Grañ*, and his successor *'Amīr al-Mu'minin Nur bin Muḡāhid*, who built the wall that still surrounds the town (Banti 200). Even though Harar maintained this role throughout the Dawudi dynasty of its Emirates, it was occupied by Egyptian in 1875 for ten years and was annexed in

¹ Alessandro Gori – Roberto Bianchini et al., Cultural Heritage of Harar; Mosques, Islamic Holy Graves, and Traditional Harari Houses. A Comprehensive Map, Rome 2003.

1887 by Menilik II King of Shewa. Today Harar is the administrative seat of the Harari people regional state, one of the regional states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (Waber 2009).

Harar's native ethnic group belongs to the South Ethio-Semitic linguistic group. They trace their ancestry to the *Harla* people who were allegedly lived specifically in the vast land of Harargey that covers the entire rift valley from northern highland of Ethiopia to the coastal borders of Somalia (Ahmed 2020). They are given different names by the neighboring peoples and by themselves. For instance, the Oromo call them *‘Adare* and their language *‘Afan ‘Adare*, whereas they call themselves *Gey ‘usu*; and their language *Gey Sinan* which respectively mean ‘city man’ and ‘city language.’ However Western scholars use the name Harari (Leslau 1958).

2 Harari Language

Harari is one of the south-east ethio-Semitic linguistic family of Ethiopia. Even though it is now spoken in the ancient city of Harar, Harari has close linguistic contact with Somali and oromoffa language. Since the town Harar has been an important hub of Islamic learning in the Horn of Africa, a considerable body of literature in Harar has been produced all the way through the centuries (Banti 2000). Some of these literatures have been studied and documented by western scholars. H. Salt², C. T. Beke³ and R. F. Burton⁴ published the first vocabularies with

² *A voyage to Abyssinia and travels into the interior of that country* (London, 1814). Appendix 1, pp.2 vi-x: English-Harari-Oromo vocabulary.

³ *‘On the languages and dialects of Abyssinia and the countries to the south’*, Proceedings of the Philological Society, 2 (London, 1846), 89-107. Among the various vocabularies of pp.3 97 Harari is also mentioned.

⁴ *First footsteps in East Africa*: (London, 1856), pp. 511-582. The English Harari vocabulary is given in translation.

small collections of texts of Harari. Later Paulitschke⁵ and Bricchetti-Robecchi⁶ furnished other vocabularies with small texts of Harari. In his various studies, E. Littmann⁷ reedited the various texts of Burton, Paulitschke, Bricchetti-Robecchi and Conti Rossini. On the other hand, Cerulli edited *kitāb al-farā'id* and classified Harari into modern Harari and old Harari. Based on Cerulli's classification, the following important linguistic remarks are given below.

3 Consonants

The consonant sound of modern and ancient Harari is almost similar. Here is old Harari consonant sound based on *Kitāb al-farā'id*.

['] / ء/, [b] / ب/, [ḡ] / ج/, [ḡ] / ج/, [d] / د/, [d] / ذ/, [h] / ه/, [w] / و/, [z] / ز/ [ḥ] / ح/, [t] / ط/, [c] / ط/, [y] / ي/, [k] / ك/, [l] / ل/, [m] / م/, [n] / ن/, [s] / س/, [ʔ] / ع/, [ḡ] / غ/, [f] / ف/, [ʂ] / ص/, [q] / ق/, [r] / ر/, [ʂ] / ش/, [č] / ش/, [t] / ت/, [t̪] / ث/, [ḥ] / خ/, [d] / ذ/, [d] / ض/, [z] / ظ/

As represented by *Kitāb al-farā'id* the above consonants of old Harari do not show variation from modern Harari except for sounds like ['] / ع/, [ḡ] / غ/, [ʂ] / ص/, [d] / ذ/, [d] / ض/, [z] / ظ/, [h] / ه/ [t̪] / ث/. All of these sounds, with the exception of the laryngeals [h] and ['], are a resulted from the influence of the Arabic language. Since Harar was the center of Islam, many Arabic loanwords made from the aforementioned sounds that are found in old Harari. Together with word that are formed with laryngeals [h] and ['] like هرعت, these words are not available in

⁵ 'Über die Harari-sprache im östlichen Afrika', Sitzungsberichte der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften. *Philosophische-historische klasse*, 44 (Wien, 1863), 601-613.

⁶ 'Lingue parlate somali, galla e harari', *Bollettino della Società geographica Italiana*, ser. 3, vol. 3 (Rome, 1892), pp. 257-271, 380-391, 689-708; 'Testi nelle lingue harar e galla', *Rendiconti della reale accademia dei lincei*.

⁷ 'Die partikel -ma im Harari', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 33(1921), 103-122; 'Bemerkungen zu den neuen Harari Texten', *ZDMG*, 75 (1921), 21-36; 'Harari Studien', *Zeitschrift für Semistik*, 1 (1922), 38-84.

modern Harari.

4 Vowel sound

Both modern and old Harari have identical vowel sound characteristics. Vowels length is distinctive in ancient and modern Harari language. Due to the change of the length of vowel sound change of meaning in a lexicon occurs. As illustrated below a lexicon’ s meaning can alter as a result of changes in vowel length.

Similar words with long and short vowels

Short vowel	Meaning	Long vowel	Meaning
<i>'ur</i>	Jump	<i>'ūr</i>	Show
<i>Sif</i>	Stich	<i>Sīf</i>	Sword
<i>Fur</i>	Swell	<i>Fūr</i>	Mouse
<i>Sam</i>	Silence	<i>Sām</i>	Share
<i>Hur</i>	Be there	<i>Hūr</i>	Nymph

5 Lexicon

Even though modern and old Harari share many common vocabularies, there are words that are changed through times. Several lexicons altered with time and many of the vocabularies of Kitāb al-farā'iḍ from old Harari have been lost in modern

Harari as it is shown below.

1. Alteration in vocabulary sound

Old Harari

har'at

Sa'a

'āña

'iqōt

Moden Harari

ḥar'at

sa'a

'āša

'iqōt

2. attrition in vocabulary sound

Old Harari

Sin'at

bar'i

hēm'ōt

har'at

ba'ara

su'ut

Moden Harari

sinat

bari

ḥēmōt

ḥarat

bāra

sūt

3. variation in a lexicon

Old Harari

Mağdab

Ni'mat

Bil'at

Habōya

'adan

qīt

sayyi'ātañña

sānōt

wiriš

hand

'istirāḥa 'āña

Saqi

ḥala

'iti

Wirišāt

Sa'ada

English

affluent

meal

food

serpent

cat

hawks

sinner

taking a care

awful

one

tranquilize

good

suffice

trunk

badness

become happy

Moden Harari

bāw

sōr

ḥangūr

ḥubāb

'adurru

ṭilli

dilḥañña

qēraḥōt

gusus

'aḥad

'atnafasa

'ōr

baqa

gufat

gissāt

tas bāyēw

Bēḡa	purify	ṭalala
Gōra	request	ṭōqasa
mithal	pin	čihāl

6 Conclusion

This diachronic study highlights the intricate relationship between modern and old Harari languages, revealing both their continuity and evolution over time. The analysis of consonant and vowel systems demonstrates that while the phonetic structures of the two varieties of Harari share significant similarities, they also exhibit notable changes influenced by historical, and linguistic factors, particularly the impact of Arabic due to Harar's longstanding role as a center of Islamic scholarship and trade.

The examination of lexical shifts further illustrates how the Harari language has adapted to changing social contexts, with many ancient terms. This attrition and variation in vocabulary not only reflect the dynamic nature of the language but also underscore the importance of documenting and preserving these linguistic features to maintain the cultural heritage of the Harari people.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the Harari language's evolution and its significance within the South-East Ethio-Semitic linguistic family. They also emphasize the need for continued research and documentation of both modern and ancient Harari to ensure that this rich linguistic tradition is preserved for future generations. By recognizing the historical and cultural contexts that shape language, we can appreciate the vital role that Harari plays in the broader tapestry of Ethiopian linguistics and identity.

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