

Reviews

Rainer Voigt (ed.) Tigre studies in the 21st Century – Tigre-Studien im 21. Jahrhundert, „Studien zum Horn von Afrika” 2, Köln, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2015, 241 pp.

The book is the outcome of the III International Enno Littmann Conference held in Berlin in April 2009. Of all the papers presented during this meeting the editor has chosen only papers devoted to the study of the language and culture of the Tigre people. The Tigre language ranks as the fifth most spoken in the Semitic family and its speakers amount for roughly 20% of the population of Eritrea¹. It therefore certainly deserves scholarly attention. The book is, to the best of my knowledge, only the second collection of essays devoted to Tigre studies (the first one being Lusini 2010).

The volume opens with an essay by Hatem Elliesie, Stefan Sienell, Roswitha Stiegner, Bogdan Burtea „Der Littman-Nachlass im Archiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften“ in which the authors describe the fate of Enno Littmann’s personal library and papers, with special focus on the materials concerning the Tigre language. The collection is now housed in the Archiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Vienna. The remaining papers are grouped in two blocks: “Language and literature” (six chapters) and “Society, traditions and institutions” (four chapters).

In her article “The prefix ’at- in Tigre” Maria Bulakh attempts to clarify the usage of the causative marker ’at-. There are in fact two prefixes ’at-, one is the allophone of the more common ’a- before the guttural consonant, the other is an entirely distinct causative marker. Using the material from the dictionary by Enno Littmann and Maria Höfner (1962) the author presents a detailed analysis of the semantics of ’at- verbal formations and tentatively concludes that the two alternative causative markers are not connected with distinguishing between neutral and indirect causation, phenomenon known in some Ethiosemitic languages.

Bogdan Burtea in his essay „Anmerkungen zur Palatalisierung im Tigre“ studies the phonology of palatalization in Tigre. He identifies two types of palatalization. Fairly limited morphological palatalization occurs for example with the 1st person singular possessive suffix: *bet* “house” → *bečče* “my house”. Historical palatalization seems to be phonetically motivated for example by the vicinity of /r/ (Gə‘əz *ħasärä*, Təgre *ħacra*) or labialization (Gə‘əz *sokär*, Təgre *šəkkar*). This phenomenon displays some dialectal variation.

The article by Paolo Marrassini entitled “Linguistic stratification in Tigre” has been edited posthumously by Alessandro Bausi and seeks to address the issue of certain features of the Tigre language which can be interpreted as archaic within the Semitic language group. The author focuses on three such features namely the imperfect **yaqattal*, the nominal flexion and the definite article. The analysis takes into consideration wide comparative material from other Semitic languages while touching upon many issues of linguistic methodology such as problems of inadequate documentation or distinguishing between genetic isoglosses and parallel development.

Tesfay Tewelde in his essay “Relations between verb types and internal plurals in North Abyssinian Semitic” draws a parallel between the derivation of certain verbal form such as the so-called frequentative (*säbärä* → *təsabäru*) and the formation of nominal plural (*därho* → *därawəh*). His conclusion is that Tigre displays a plural pattern CaCāCVC which can be used for both verbs and nouns. The author further explores the possibility that this pattern “can be related to ancient adjective/stative CaCVC forms or to participles” (p. 111).

The editor of the volume, Rainer Voigt in his contribution “The development of Tigre literature” presents a very useful bibliographic survey of Tigre literature which he divides into five chronological stages. In the first three stages the production of literature in Tigre was the product of the contact between the Tigre speakers and Europeans. Interestingly, this contact in each stage had somewhat different character: first religious (Swedish Evangelical Mission and the French Lazarists), then scientific (Enno Littmann’s expedition), finally political (Italian colonial authorities). Further stages were marked by the emancipation of Tigre speakers, first during the war of independence and later in

¹ Cf. <http://www.ethnologue.com/country/ER/languages> [accessed August 12 2016].

the newly independent Eritrea. Apart from a wealth of rare bibliographical data, the author offers a comparison between two dictionaries of Tigre, a European and an Eritrean².

“Notes on Tigre-Beḡa interference” by Andrzej Zaborski is the second article in this volume which is published posthumously. It explores the linguistic manifestation of the ages-long vicinity of Beḡa and Tigre speakers in the Sudanese-Eritrean borderland. The examples of such manifestations include i. a. a similar origin of independent personal pronouns and *nota genitivi*, preservation of active participle or singulative suffix *-ay*. The author also briefly comments on the social nature of this linguistic contact within the context of multilinguality and serf-overlord relations in the region.

The essay which opens the block devoted society, traditions and institutions is “Conflict resolution and customary law in contemporary Eritrea: case studies of the Saho community” by Abdulkader Saleh Mohammed and Nicole Hirt. The authors seek to explain how traditional ways of conflict resolution contribute to maintaining stability and peace within Eritrean society and how they adapt to the bureaucracy of a contemporary nation-state. The example in question is the traditional law of Saho people. The authors briefly present the basic facts about the Saho and their customary law code and then proceed to analyze four case studies in which the application of this code is described.

Hatem Elliesie in his chapter “Social construct and system in Tigre tradition: a contribution to Eritrean customary law” focuses on the Mänsa’ group of the Tigre people and their traditional code of laws known as *Fätəḥ Mähari*. Their traditional society had a hierarchical character and consisted of three strata: the ruling class, the serfs and the slaves. The *Fätəḥ Mähari* specified the duties of each group. Interestingly, as the author suggests, the code applied to Christian and Muslim Tigre alike. The code also mentions a number of traditional offices (such as *käntebay* or *šum*) but their exact role appears to be difficult to define.

Mohammed-Ali Ibrahim in his article “Rab’at: the Tigre traditional youth organization” describes the *rab’at* which he defines as “a common traditional youth organization throughout the Tigre ethnic group [...] based on small tribes and clans who live together” (p.182). It appears from the article that *rab’at* is an institution which under various names and shapes is present in many groups in the Horn of Africa: a voluntary association with some internal organization whose overt function is to organize communal work for particular occasions but it is also a way of maintaining social control over its members as it has power to judge and punish. The author offers what seems to be a first-hand account of how *rab’at* affects the daily life and lists vocabulary pertaining to this institution.

Finally, Saleh Mahmud Idris in his chapter “The Tigre and their traditional beliefs and superstitions: a socio-linguistic survey” describes Tigre traditional beliefs regarding phenomena such as: witchcraft, traditional healing, forbidden activities, the language of respectful avoidance within the family, impure foods and drinks, omens and premonitions. Furthermore, the author analyzes the traditional way of house construction, marriage customs, the upbringing of children and property ownership, trying to define the values which underline the daily life of the Tigre people.

The book concludes with an index (pp. 239-241) and a reproduction of an article from a Tigre-language newspaper *Eratrəya Haddās* with a report from the conference which was the source of the volume under review.

Each article in the book is accompanied by a bibliography and in a very innovative decision also by a summary in Tigre as if to declare that the research on Tigre should be done also for and by the people themselves. Thanks to this approach, the book is not only a valuable scholarly contribution but also an important step in the construction of scientific terminology of the Təgre language.

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² They are: *Wörterbuch der Tigrê-Sprache* by Enno Littmann and Maria Höfner (Wiesbaden 1962) and *Kəbət qalat həgya Təgre* by Musa 'Aron (Asmara 2005).