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*History and Language of the Tigre-speaking Peoples*  
(Eritrea and Sudan)



*Photo courtesy of Dawit Habtu*

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## ABSTRACTS

*in the alphabetical order of the rapporteurs*

## **Tigre syntax: a contrastive approach**

Bogdan Burtea (Freie Universität Berlin)

Contrastive linguistic is, by general means, considered as a systematic approach, comparing two or more languages by a synchronically method seeking to describe their similarities and differences. However, within this methodological context, this particular paper compares some syntactic structures of Tigre with corresponding ones of Tigrinya as well as Amharic. In order to ensure the same *tertium comparationis*, excerpts from the Greek New Testament were chosen as basis for the contrastive treatise, for which – opportunely – translations into each of the respective ethio-semitic languages are existing. Moreover, similarities between the Ge'ez and Tigre syntax are also taken in consideration as a diachronically corrective to the synchronically analysis.

## **Greek and Latin sources for the history of Northern Eritrea**

Gianfranco Fiaccadori (Università di Milano)

The present paper shall focus on Greek and Latin sources on the history of the northern part Eritrea: mainly, Pliny the Elder, Strabo, Ptolemy, the anonymous *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, and Cosmas Indicopleustes. An attempt will be made at assessing their contribution to our knowledge of ancient toponyms and ethnonyms with special attention over the Red Sea area and the zone of Adulis.

## **The position of Tigre in the genetic classification of the Ethio-Semitic languages**

Leonid Kogan (Russian State University for the Humanities [RSUH], Moscow)  
& Maria Bulakh (Hamburg University)

The present contribution will discuss the relationship between Tigre and other Ethio-Semitic languages. The necessity of updating and reassessing the classification of Ethio-Semitic language suggested by Hetzron in 1972, has been stressed recently by Voigt (*16<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Trondheim, 2-7 July 2007). A close consideration of linguistic material shows that the reconstruction of the development of Ethio-Semitic languages as proposed by Hetzron can be elaborated and revised, in particular, in what concerns the position of Tigre. Hetzron's historical reconstruction implied that the first splitting of Proto-Ethio-Semitic occurred when a group of Proto-Ethio-Semitic community migrated to the south, their language becoming the Proto-South-Ethio-Semitic. Tigre, Tigrinya and Ge'ez, according to this hypothesis, remained in the Proto-Ethio-Semitic *Urheimat*; thus, they are not treated by Hetzron as daughter languages of one Proto-North-Ethio-Semitic language, but rather as close lects whose similarities are partially to be explained through their conservatism and partially through their geographic proximity.

Hetzron's reconstruction is not the only possible one. One can assume that prior to the separation of the South Ethio-Semitic there were some migrations and splitting in the Proto-Ethio-Semitic community. A number of common Proto-Ethio-Semitic innovations in which Tigre does not take part, seem to indicate that Tigre was the first language to split off from the common Proto-Ethio-Semitic stock. Such approach would provide a new explanation for the well-known conservatism of Tigre: since Tigre becomes a separate branch (and the most ancient) within the Ethio-Semitic language family, it is easy to imagine that the majority of

innovations took place in the Ethio-Semitic stock after the separation of Tigre. However, there is also contradicting evidence: a number of South Ethio-Semitic innovations are shared by Tigre and Tigrinya, but not by Geez; still others unite Geez and South-Ethio-Semitic, but not Tigre and Tigrinya. A careful analysis and evaluation of the linguistic evidence is thus necessary for reconstruction of Tigre early history.

### **Tigre and the others: linguistic and cultural changes within the Tigre area**

Gianfrancesco Lusini (Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”)

The geographic area inhabited by the Tigre-speaking peoples stretches from the north of Kärän up to the Sudanese borders, a region covering one third of the entire territory of the state of Eritrea. Since the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, this land has been subject to several peopling waves from the Nile Valley, the Red Sea and the southern highlands, each of them with its own cultural and linguistic features. In spite of differences in economic activities, social structures or religious beliefs, the inhabitants of this vast area has showed throughout centuries a strong commitment to non-conflictual coexistence. An analysis of written sources, oral traditions and linguistic data allows one to outline a historical sketch of the cultural interaction among groups of different origins who share a common land.

### **Remarks on the archaeology of the Tigre area**

Andrea Manzo (Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”)

The archaeological exploration of the Tigre area is still in its infancy. Just in its northern fringes, on the Sudanese side of the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands, systematic archaeological explorations were conducted by an expedition of the University “L’Orientale” and by a Joint Expedition of the University of Khartoum and Southern Methodist University (Dallas). Other sites were recorded and partially investigated in the Tigre core area during colonial times and more recently by the staff of the National Museum (Asmara). A first sketch of the earliest phases of the history of the region and some preliminary remarks on the relationships between material culture, identities and languages in the area arise from these explorations and will be discussed in this paper.

### **About the classification of Tigre**

Paolo Marrassini (Università di Firenze)

### **Between Tigre and Tigrinya**

Meaza Haile Revol-Tissot (CNRS-LLACAN-INALCO)

The language contact between Tigrinya speakers and Tigre speakers reveals the same cultural background, which is illustrated in naming a new born, and very often so many loan names in both languages.

## **Constructing and deconstructing the ‘Tigre Frontier’ in the long 19<sup>th</sup> cent.**

Jonathan Miran (Western Washington University & Humboldt Research Fellow, 2008)

Working from within a broad multi-focal regional and interregional analytical perspective, this paper proposes a reflection on the evolution and transformation of the congeries of regions inhabited by Tigre-speaking societies from the middle of the eighteenth century to the early twentieth. The paper lays out a macro-historical framework which identifies and points to several questions and directions for further research.

Sharing comparable modes of production, social structures, traditions of origin, language, religious orientations as well as a complex relationship with the agriculture-based polities on the northern Ethiopian plateau, I will lay out the essential characteristics of what I conceive as the ‘Tigre frontier space’. The paper will move on to examine two interrelated sets of political, economic and religious processes that occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and which significantly shaped the area’s historical trajectories. The first process was characterized by the expansion and amplification of interregional connections, linking more closely and dynamically Tigre-speaking communities in the Eritrean region with people and influences from the Nile Valley, the Arabian Peninsula, the Red Sea area at large as well as Europe. A second set of concomitant processes operated on a more regional level. It involved the laying out of social, political, commercial, and (Islamic) religious networks, relationships and alliances which molded an interconnected space in areas of eastern, northern and western Eritrea. In the second half of the nineteenth century, nevertheless, Egyptian imperialism, the hegemonic ambitions of highland Ethiopian rulers, the Mahdiyya in the Sudan, and the advent of European colonialism, constituted pressures and generated a variety of responses which increasingly divided and challenged Tigre-speaking communities.

It is my contention that the unraveling of such processes not only contributes to the reconstruction of the history of the Tigre-speaking peoples, but may assist in unveiling patterns of linguistic and cultural formation and transformation such as the incorporation of Arabic loanwords in Tigre resulting from intensified contact with Arabic-speaking migrants as well as a consequence of conversions to Islam; the evolution of Tigre-Saho, Tigre-Bejja and Tigre-Tigrinya interactions; the development of different Tigre dialects; the background for religious change ; the absence of an overarching ‘Tigre ethnicity’ and so forth

### ***Räb‘at*, the Tigre traditional youth organization**

Mohammed Ali (Ministry of Education of the State of Eritrea)

*Räb‘at* is a traditional system for common work, socialization, entertainment and administration. It was a widespread traditional organization throughout the Tigre communities in the absence of government’s control. Its present practices deteriorated because of the expansion of governmental services and the integration of different communities. The word *räb‘at* originated from *räba‘at*, i.e., the right age group for physical and mental fitness, working, leading, judging, playing and fighting on behalf of the community. This paper examines the organizational structure, the age categories within the Tigre community and the role of *räb‘at* in coordinating and integrating age groups in its system, duties and responsibilities of *räb‘at* in the community and within the organization. The information were orally collected in different areas from former *räb‘at* leaders and community members, since there is no written documentation about it.

## **Territoriality in a linguistic perspective: the case of Beni-Amer**

Didier Morin (CNRS-LLACAN-INALCO)

As elsewhere in Africa, the linguistic variation is a key-question for the descriptivist. In the case of Tigre, and especially of the Tigre spoken in the Lowlands of Eritrea and in the Sudan, due to historical and sociological factors, but also in relation with individual choices, what can be identified as Tigre encompasses very different corpus which go from Beja-influenced varieties to Arabic or Tigrinya hybrids. The paper will explain the necessity to concentrate on a limited number of isoglosses when classifying the dialects of Tigre with a special attention to what is linguistically relevant and what is a socio-linguistic “*signe d'appartenance*”.

### **Is Dahalik a dialect of Tigre**

Saleh Mahmud Idris (Ministry of Education of the State of Eritrea)

Dahalik (the language of Dahlak) is described by some as one of the dialects of the Tigre language. Others considered it as pidgin or creole language. The preliminary findings of my pilot survey in this language, however, suggest that Dahalik might be a distinct language with its own grammatical structures and history. The intelligibility level between the Tigre of Maria Tsalam and the Dahalik language is about 33%. Words of common origin make about 40%. Dahalik is the most endangered linguistic variety of Eritrea because: a) it is not so far a written languages; b) most of the domains of language function such as schooling, administration, religion, court proceedings, etc. are currently navigated by Arabic and hence there are few domains in which the language is operational; c) the intermarriage between Dahalik and non-Dahalik residents of the islands is producing non-Dahalik speaking children; d) Dahalik speakers who visit the mainland frequently are shifting to the Tigre language of the Massawa area and taking this back to the islands; f) investment projects such as tourism and fishery are threatening the language and creating conducive atmosphere for more powerful languages to threaten the Dahalik language. In addition, the scarcity of folklore, the low value given to the language by the community and others, the community's lack of motivation and interest to preserve their language, and the use of dominant languages in the media is endangering the survival of this language. This study makes comparisons between Dahalik and 5 other Tigre dialects in terms of lexical similarities, intelligibility levels and sound patterns. It also examines its aspects of endangerment and tries to give an overview of the status of Dahalik as a linguistic variety.

### **The specificity of the Dahalik language within the Afro-semitic languages.**

Marie Claude Simeone-Senelle (CNRS-LLACAN-INALCO)

The Dahalik language is the mother-tongue of the majority of the 2500 inhabitants on three islands in the Dahlak archipelago, in the Red sea off Massawa, in Eritrea. It has been listed for the first time at the end of 1996, and its description began only in 2001. On the three islands, Dahalik is in contact with Arabic, another Semitic language, and on two of them it is also in contact with Afar, a Cushitic language. Nowadays, only some islanders have regular contacts with the Tigre-speaking area on the mainland. Contact with Tigrinya is relatively limited. The Dahalik language can be considered as endangered. It is changing very fast because of these contacts and further contacts with both banks of the Red sea. After a brief presentation of some Dahalik characteristics proving the relationship to the Northern South-Semitic, I will focus on the verb system. Indeed the study of the verb system and its development shows

original features, specific to Dahalik, together with similarities with other languages of the same sub-group. The aim of this presentation is to enlighten the morphogenesis of the verbal system of a language about which nothing was known up to 1996, and many aspects of which remain unexplored

### **Tigre groups between independence and Egyptian suzerainty, according to reports of the 1850s to 1870s from diplomatic and political archives**

Wolbert Smidt (Hamburg University)

Tigre groups and their leaders repeatedly appear in the political reports of the French and British vice-consuls stationed at the Ottoman, later Egyptian port of Massawa, at the beginning of a long period of international incursions and imperial expansion. The Tigre become a political factor to count with, especially the naib of Hirgigo. The vice-consuls regularly report on the developments in the region, and therefore also mention the relationship of Tigre groups with the newly arrived Egyptians and with the rulers of the nearby Abyssinian highlands. These reports are therefore an important contemporary source - even if the information we get is fragmentary and not always fully reliable. Scholarly reports, especially those written by Munzinger, the later Egyptian governor, add important details. Tigre groups seemed to keep a high degree of inner independence, rather allying themselves with the Egyptians in order to protect their own interests than merely submitting to them. Formally they were integrated into the expanding Egyptian Massawa Governorate. Internally, they seem to have kept a high degree of independence also from each other. The material discussed here is interesting from a point of view of international political history, but also from the very local perspective, as they can add some elements to the ethnohistory of the Tigre groups.

### **Observations on archaisms and innovations of Tigre prepositions**

Tesfay Tewolde (Asmara University)

Tigre has simple and compound prepositions. Besides, it has open class members like nouns which function as prepositions. But the aim of this paper is to discuss the simple and compound prepositions of Tigre and try to show prepositional archaisms and innovations of the language. Since the data from Afro-Asiatic languages are crucially important in distinguishing the archaic and innovated features (Dolgopolski 1988, 222), Tigre simple and compound prepositions are compared with their Afro-Asiatic and Semitic counterparts. Tigre is assumed to be closer to Giiz and Tigrinya (North Ethio-Eritrean Semitic languages). However, the prepositions do not seem to show any particular relationship even with those of North Ethio-Eritrean Semitic languages. The paper shows that Tigre prepositions share archaic features with several ancient Semitic and Afro-Asiatic languages.

## **Object suffixes and labialization in Tigre**

Rainer Voigt (Freie Universität Berlin)

In Tigre the addition of personal pronominal elements and suffixes reveals some particularities.

a) With verbs *tertiaie laryngalis*, the plural personal ending =u: is inserted in front of the “laryngal” in present tense, jussive and imperative, thus leaving the laryngeal in word-final position and without a following vowel, or as Littmann put it already in his work on the verb in Tigre (“Verbum” 1899): “dieser vocallos im Auslaute steht” (45f.).

b) Even the process triggered by the addition of object suffixes to verbs was treated by Littmann (“Pronomina” 1897). Here the object suffix (e.g. 3rd f.sg. =a:) shifts the personal pronominal element of the 3rd plural (=o:) onto the preceding vowel, i.e. the vowel preceding the third radical, in order to fuse with it. This process can only be described adequately by assuming that the plural suffix =o: shows in certain cases the suprasegmental morpheme variant =lw. For all these phenomena quotations from the literature will be offered.

## **A report on the automatic parsing of Tigre: lots of morphology and bits of syntax**

Klaus Wedekind (Asmara University)

*Introductory Remarks.* The Tigre parser is part of a machine translation project which was first presented at the “International Conference on Language and Literature”, Asmara 2000, and which had been launched at the Ministry of Education, Asmara, by Saleh Mahmud and Klaus Wedekind. In the early stages, the Tigre grammar by Shlomo Raz has served as a basis. This was supplemented by informal talks with the late Prof. Raz. For practical reasons, the Tigre parser starts from the Geez script (accepting its limitations). The input is transliterated into the Latin script and back again, by means of macros.

*Resources.* Currently the parser uses a “CARLA” machinery and database with 32 prefixes, 66 suffixes and 7985 roots. Among the roots, there are about 1300 verbs, 5180 nouns, and 2600 others (i.e. 96 prepositions, 79 pronouns, 12 numerals, 75 names, 39 interjections, 13 demonstratives, 50 conjunctions, 362 adverbs, and 779 adjectives). Another 9200 roots have been glossed by Abu Harish but are waiting to be tagged. The most demanding aspect in the preparation of the parser is the verb system, especially its harmonization with the verb systems of Arabic, Tigrigna and Beja. Presently, the parser of the Tigre verb system works on the assumption that there are 9 main verb classes with 32 subclasses.

*Results.* The rigor of machine parsing has led to a few refinements of existing analyses, such as Saleh Mahmud’s discovery of the assimilation of 3rd person prefixes before laryngeals (an areal feature also valid for Beja). After the limitations of the morphological parser have been made explicit, participants of the workshop will be invited to supply Tigre input samples which might be useful to demonstrate the mechanism of the parser. (Note: “=” and “-” indicate morpheme boundaries, “>” indicates changes, “+” indicates complex glosses, “...” indicates whatever follows, and “.” indicates sentence boundaries).

## **Tigre language in the Eritrean language area: historical perspective and some modern facts**

Andrzej Zaborski (Jagiellonian University in Krakow)

*Brevi cenni storico-amministrativi sulle popolazioni  
del commissariato regionale di Massawa, 1898:*  
**an unknown manuscript about Massawa and Northern Eritrea**  
Massimo Zaccaria (Università di Pavia)

The “Commissariato Regionale di Massawa” was established in 1898 and its original border included Samhar, Sahel, Northern Dankalia and part of the Akkele Guzai. The task of its very first organization fell on major Teobaldo Folchi, who spent six busy months in the Eritrean coastal town. Beside his administrative occupations, major T. Folchi wrote an impressive 600 pages report on the “Commissariato”, detailing information about people, places and resources of each single village of the “Commissariato”. A copy of the manuscript has recently been found and transcribed, offering new insights on the history and societies of Northern Eritrea and on the way the Italian administration gathered and organized data about its colonial territories.