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A grammar of Hamar : a South Omotic language of Ethiopia

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1 Introduction

This study focuses on the description of the phonology, morphology and syntax of Hamar, a language spoken by the agro-pastoralist people who are known by the same name, and live in the lower Omo valley of South West Ethiopia. The study is based on 9 months of fieldwork carried out between 2013 and 2014 in Hamar territories. Language data was gathered from 14 native speakers in Hamar villages, and it amounts to 50 texts of varying lengths and genres. While the exact classification of Hamar remains controversial, this work points out, without any claim of completeness, various putative links to language families and groups.

1.1 The language

The Hamar language is spoken by approximately 46.500 people (Lewis 2009). The Hamar refer to their own language as *hámar aapó* [ámar aaḶó] and they form a cultural (Lydall 1976:393) and linguistic unit together with the Banna and the BashadḶa: their languages are intelligible, but show minor variations in the lexicon and in the phonology. The commonly accepted classification sees Hamar as a South Omotic language within the Omotic family of the Afro-Asiatic phylum. Whereas there is general consensus on the genetic relationship between Hamar (including its dialects Banna and BashadḶa), Aari, Dime and Kara (that is, the South Omotic branch of the Omotic family), the controversy concerns the external relationships that this group of languages holds with Cushitic and/or Omotic, and at a higher level, with the Afro-Asiatic or the Nilo-Saharan phylum. See chapter 13 for further details.

1.1.1 Geographical location

The Hamar live in the South Omo Zone (*debub Omo*), one of the administrative zones of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' region (SNNPR) in South West Ethiopia. Their territory (including Banna and BashadḶa) is contained in between the Lower Omo River to the west, and the Chew Bahir lake (lake Stephanie) to the East (map 1 and 2). In the north their country ends at K'ey Afar and the highlands of Jinka, to the south it is delimited by the Kenyan border and the land inhabited by the Dhaasanec people. This area roughly corresponds to the administrative district called Hamar *woreda* (map 3). The neighbours of the Hamar are the Aari to the north (which border with the Banna), the Arbore (Marlé) to the east, the Dhaasanac (Gélabá) to the south, and the Nyangatom (Búme) and the Kara to the west (map 1 and 2). This study is based on the Hamar variety spoken around Dimeka Town (5°10'24.8"North 36°32'54.6"East) and in the wards (*k'ebele*) of the Hamar *woreda* called Dimeka Zuriya, Shanko, and Lala (map 3), see 1.2.1 for further geographical details.

1.1.2 Language variation and patterns of language use

Hamar is a thriving language and it is spoken by all generations in daily interactions, in the home and outside the home. Most of the Hamar speakers are monolingual. The degree of bilingualism in Amharic depends on the level of education¹ and it is proportional to the proximity to the main towns, Dimeka and Turmi, where the exposure to Amharic is greater. Hamar speakers are aware of the dialectal differences with Banna and Bashadfa as they can mock their way of speaking and point out phonological and lexical divergences with Banna or Bashadfa. A few lexical and phonological differences between Hamar and Bashadfa are listed in table 1.1:

Table 1.1: Some differences between Hamar and Bashadfa

	Hamar	Bashadfa
together	kínka	pailá
<i>parsí</i> beer mixed with honey	állá	ants'í
corn cob with no kernels	úpuri	kórmof ²
corn	boqólo	quló
let's go!	wo = yiʔé	wo = idé
we are eating	kummáto dáade	kummító dáade

I have noticed some small phonological variation within Hamar as well: this is not surprising given that Hamar homesteads are scattered and separated over a wide territory (see 1.2.1 for more precise information about the variety described in this book). Moving southwards from Dimeka to Turmi, the alveolar consonants /t/ and /z/ are realized as /d/:

/támpo/ 'tobacco'	[támpo] > [dámpo]
/tíngisha/ 'potato' (Amh.)	[tíngiʃa] > [díngiʃa]
/zeelí/ 'boma, kraal'	[zeelí] > [deelí]

During my stay in Hamar I also observed the simplified variety of Hamar referred to as 'pidgin Hamar' by Jean Lydall (1976:397). This variety is spoken between non-Hamar speakers such as traders, police officers, social workers, government authorities, tourist operators, school teachers, pastors, doctors and nurses, and Hamar native speakers, who use it as a 'foreign talk'. It can be heard especially in Dimeka and Turmi, or whenever non-native Hamar speakers try to interact with

¹ Alphabetization in the area started in the 80's (Lydall 2010). Hamar is not taught in school. Attending school for most of young Hamar means to leave their far away villages and settle in the towns of Dimeka or Turmi, see Niebling 2011.

² It is interesting to note that the word *kórmof* means 'corn' in Kara language.

monolingual Hamar speakers.³ The knowledge of ‘pidgin Hamar’ varies among people, and I have observed that social workers, drivers, doctors and nurses (i.e. people who work closely with Hamar people) speak it comfortably. The ‘pidgin Hamar’ shows a high degree of phonological convergence with Amharic. Grammatically, it makes use of constructions which are deemed ungrammatical in Hamar: I have often witnessed the use of uninflected nouns followed by masculine demonstratives: **qulí kaa*, instead of *qultâ káa* (see chapter 3 and 7), or more generally the use of the masculine demonstrative *káa* as the modifier of any noun (uninflected, masculine, feminine, and plural). A common verb form used in this pidginized variety of Hamar is the following (the hyphen separates the verb root from the rest):

wuc’-índane ‘I/you/she/he/we/they will drink’

This verb form is not attested in the language spoken by monolingual Hamar speakers, even though one could identify Hamar morphemes in it, such as the copula *-ne* and the aspectual marker *-da*. It is interesting that some verb forms reported in Da Trento’s wordlist (1941) include a similar formative *-inden* attached to the verb root. When I moved outside of Dimeka and I started to carry out fieldwork with monolingual speakers, I was scolded when using these verb forms.

Even though Amharic is the language of the administration and of education⁴ in Dimeka and Turmi, and even if the number of Hamar town-dwellers who acquire Amharic is growing, the Hamar people are proud of their own culture and of speaking their own language. However, there are external factors which should be

³ Dimeka is the administrative town of the Hamar woreda, and Turmi is nowadays the main touristic attraction in south Omo: tourist agencies from Addis Ababa are based in Turmi; from there tourists visit the ‘Omo tribes’ such as the Hamar, the Mursi and the Kara. Dimeka and Turmi hosts three important markets (on Monday in Turmi, and Saturday and Tuesday in Dimeka, cf. chapter 5, 5.3.1) which attract people from all over the places. On market days the Hamar sell (and buy) goats and cattle, honey, milk, coffee husks, tobacco, salt, *berberé*. The most lucrative activity for Hamar town-dwellers is to sell various Hamar handicraft (carved gourds, headrests, beads, brass bracelets and so on) to tourists.

⁴ Hamar is proudly used by young Hamar and in town I have witnessed several situations in which the young students intentionally use Hamar as a tool to exclude others from communicative interactions. Often the Hamar students play linguistic jokes in their own language to make fun of teachers who don’t speak Hamar. One particular example was reported to me, in which a student sneezed during class and a Hamar class mate replied with the Hamar expression “*tudí sfíti*”. This expression is close to a swear word (it literally means ‘buttock’s hair’) and Hamar kids would never utter it in the presence of adults. The teacher, unaware of what was going on, asked if that was the Hamar expression for ‘bless you’, and the Hamar student, lying, replied positively. Later on the teacher has been reported to say the Hamar swear word at any student who would sneeze, and students even started to fake sneezes to trigger the hilarious answer of their teacher.

taken into account when evaluating the vitality of the language. Changes in the Hamar society and in their lifestyle are taking place at increasing pace in recent years due to the amelioration of roads, villagization policies, and the plan of the government to dam the Omo river for hydroelectric power and irrigation agriculture.

1.1.3 Previous linguistic studies

The Hamar have received a thorough ethnographic and anthropological attention thanks to the long-term research of Ivo Strecker, Jean Lydall and their students, who have produced a vast literature (including audiovisual material) on Hamar culture and society (see references). The language has received some attention by scholars interested in long-range comparisons and classifications, thus the material on the Hamar language has never gone beyond word-lists and superficial comparative morphological analyses. The older materials are mainly wordlists collected by explorers and missionaries. The first wordlist of what was mistaken for Hamar was provided by Donaldson Smith (1897:444) who reported “Lists of a few words spoken by the Konso, Dume, and Arbore (Amar) tribes”. As Cerulli (1942) noted later on, the wordlist that Donaldson Smith labeled as “Arbore and Amar” (ibid.:445) contains only Arbore words. Conti Rossini (1927) reported Donaldson Smith’s wordlist and erroneously assumed Arbore and Hamar to be one language,⁵ but he also stated that the Kara, the Bashadfa and the Hamar spoke the same language.⁶ Another Hamar wordlist is reported by Captain Montagu Wellby (1901): in his “limited vocabulary of different tribes” he includes two Hamar lists, “Hammer Koki Words”, of which only one resembles Hamar (the other contains Arbore words).⁷ Da Trento (1941) published a sixty-words list of various languages of southern Ethiopia transcribed in Italian orthography, including Hamar (Da Trento refers to Hamar as “Amarr cocche”). Cerulli commented on this list and on the material provided by Wellby and classified Hamar and Aari as Nilotic languages (Cerulli 1942:264). The linguists Lionel Bender and Harold Fleming collected word lists of Hamar and other closely related languages in the seventies. Bender’s wordlist of Banna has been lost (Bender 1994:141; 2000:160), and a copy of Fleming’s list circulated at the International Symposium on Cushitic and Omotic Languages in Cologne (Fleming 1986). The first comparative lexicon of Hamar, Aari and Dime was published by

⁵ “Gli Amarr vivono nel territorio a N del Lago Stefania, e gli Arbore ne sono contermini ad oriente, toccando l’estremo settentrionale del lago. Sul loro linguaggio, che sarebbe unico, ha raccolto qualche cosa il Donaldson Smith: quanto basta a dimostrarli Somali” (Conti Rossini 1927: 253).

⁶ In the same page Conti Rossini reports a list of Kara numerals collected by the explorer Vittorio Bottego (Conti Rossini 1927:252).

⁷ The following words and expressions are reported by Wellby (1901:407-408): “nullah: *banty*; close: *kunjisni*; far: *pegni*; go: *yiman*; horse: *farda*; is: *wakindi*; water: *noko*; there is no water: *ogo noko lai*; mule or donkey: *okulli*; man: *angi*; woman: *mar*; how: *taki kaki*; take: *yetki kut*; leopard: *zobu*; cow: *waki*; today: *kena enni*; bring: *ba-an*; elephant: *donger*; camel: *gamli*.”

Bender (1994). The first modern sketch of the language was written by the anthropologist Jean Lydall (1976) and appeared in the volume edited by Bender, “The Non-Semitic Languages of Ethiopia”. Lydall wrote on other aspects of the language, such as the expression of gender (Lydall 1988) and the use of ideophones (Lydall 2002). A preliminary analysis of the verbal system of Hamar can be found in Cupi et al. (2012). Published papers which focus on comparison and classification are Tsuge (1996) and Moges (2007, 2015).

There is a number of unpublished papers on various aspects of the language, these are briefly mentioned here and are not included in the references. There are two theses written at the University of Addis Ababa: the BA thesis “Hamar Phonology”, written by Mary Yohannes in 1987, and the MA thesis “The structure of the Noun Phrase in Hamar” written by Getahun Amare in 1991. In 2011, the MA thesis “Indagine preliminare sulla fonetica e sulla fonologia della lingua hamer” was written by Loredana Cupi (University of Turin). Moges Yigezu, from the University of Addis Ababa, wrote a sketch of Hamar morphology in 1999 entitled “Hamar: A South Omotic Language”, and various articles written by him and Yona Takahashi (University of Tsukuba, Japan) are available online on the website of the Japan Association for Ethiopian Linguistics.⁸

1.2 Research background

The analysis underlying this work follows the theoretical framework on which descriptive linguistics is largely based, that is Basic Linguistic Theory (Dixon 1997, 2010a&b, 2012). The structure of the grammar is arranged according to an ascending model (Mosel 2006:48), thus the analysis moves from the phonology towards more complex units. In this section the fieldwork setting and methodology will be described (1.2.1), followed by a discussion on the data collected (1.2.2).

1.2.1 Fieldwork

Fieldwork was carried out mainly in four of the wards (*k'ebele*) of the Hamar woreda (see map 4): Dimeka Town, Dimeka Zuriya, Shanko and Lala. Since I was based in Dimeka Town (for access to electricity and drinkable water), I worked mainly in the area across the *kaske* river called *t'ia*; in my foster family's homesteads in Shanko, 20 km east of Dimeka, and in Lala, in the settlement called *gáma díika*. In 2014 I worked often in the Buska mountains, 37 km east of Dimeka. The Buska mountains used to be the original homeland of the Hamar before the conquest by Menelik II⁹ dispersed the Hamar down in the lowlands (Strecker 1979a:1; Lydall & Strecker 1979b:2, 157; Strecker 2013:25-26). I visited as well other settlements and homesteads throughout the Hamar land, especially south of Dimeka, (Turmi,

⁸ <http://ds22n.cc.yamaguchi-u.ac.jp/~abesha/SEL/index.html>, last accessed 22 September 2016.

⁹ Menelik II was emperor (*negus*) of Ethiopia from 1889 until his death in 1913.

Simbale, Zogola, Dambaiti) and I made a few trips to Banna and Bashad'da homesteads, north and west of Dimeka, respectively. My exposure to Kara, a closely related language spoken by fishermen along the shores of the Omo river and generally included with Hamar in the South Omotic branch, was limited to collecting one text, some vocabulary and verb paradigms with two speakers in Dimeka.

I visited Hamar for the first time in 2010 with Prof. Mauro Tosco, and during that visit I could carry out a short preliminary research on the language (Cupi et al. 2012), and most importantly, I had the chance to establish contacts with the community. As part of my PhD program I carried out two fieldwork periods in Ethiopia (January-June 2013 and May-August 2014). During the first stay I took a one-month intensive course of Amharic, which I originally intended to use as a meta-language together with English. To my knowledge, there was only one trained linguist among the Hamar speakers at the time of my fieldwork. I could collaborate with this person only for a couple of weeks before he had to flee the country for political and personal reasons. For this reason, the ideal cooperation (Ameka 2006) between a native and non-native speaker both trained in linguistics, could not take place. The unforeseen departure of the person who was supposed to be my main collaborator in the research forced me to change my plans. I could not find, in fact, Hamar speakers who had an adequate knowledge of English and who could work with me: the few speakers who have basic communicative skills in English are educated Hamar, and they are either employed by the Ethiopian government, or live far away to pursue their college and university studies, therefore they could not participate full-time in my research. I then decided to learn the language with the help of Hamar students in Dimeka: their basic knowledge of English, coupled with my basic knowledge of Amharic, allowed communication among us, and it gave me the basis upon which I could start building a basic Hamar lexicon and simple sentences. When I felt comfortable I began to spend more time in Hamar homesteads outside of Dimeka. My foster Hamar family (Alfa Wengela's family) in *Shánqo* and in *T'ia* was essential in this learning process. Outside of Dimeka, my basic knowledge of Amharic became useless since the majority of Hamar people are still monolingual speakers. In Dimeka I was exposed to the 'pidginized' variety of Hamar (1.1.2) and that was the basis upon which I learnt Hamar. My closest Hamar friends who taught me the language and introduced me to their families urged me to learn the 'real' Hamar language.

The research has been based on participant observation along with semi-structured elicitation, which was carried out mainly in Hamar language. When I was in Dimeka, I would schedule English/Hamar working sessions with educated Hamar speakers who could check on my translations, confirm my hypotheses and clarify my doubts. However, because of the limitations in language that my Hamar collaborators and I had, and because of limited time, I was not able to dig into the deepest structures of the language and catch subtle semantic distinctions.

I transcribed and edited all the texts with the help of young Hamar students who would parse the content of the recordings. Even though they were acquainted with the orthographic conventions I used for Hamar, they never felt comfortable in transcribing texts by themselves since their primarily orthographic alphabet is the Amharic fidel.

1.2.2 Data

The data upon which this grammar is built is a selection of the actual corpus that was originally recorded and compiled during fieldwork. The corpus consists of audio recordings, transcriptions, grammatical annotations, glosses, translations, parsed words and processed data. The original corpus amounts to 70 gigabytes, and the processed and selected data used for the analysis amount to approximately 4,5 hours of media files. Out of 50 oral texts of varying length and genres, 40 have been transcribed, glossed and translated, and constitute the main source for the examples reported in this book. The selected data consists of 40 texts of varying length and genres, plus various context-free elicitation data and example utterances offered by the speakers and in-formal conversations that occurred during the recording sessions. Context-free elicitation data was collected for the phonological analysis, but elicitation was also aimed at collecting lexicon and study some specific grammatical topics. For instance, a typical example of context-free elicited data would be the elicitation of an un-inflected nominal form followed by all the inflected forms (masculine, feminine, plural) uttered in isolation and in context. An important part of the corpus consists as well of casual, informal conversations, hortatory expositions and folk definitions (Dingemanse 2015) that were recorded but not transcribed systematically: when I reached a reasonable knowledge of the language and I could follow the conversations, I resorted to these recordings and I transcribed only those sentences and chunks of conversations that were useful to illustrate a particular point. For this reason, the amount of recorded data does not correspond to the amount of transcribed and analysed data.

Along with traditional stories, descriptive texts, historical narrative and informal conversations, I recorded songs, proverbs, riddles and a few examples of *maz aafó*, a secret language of Hamar used by initiated boys (*maz*).¹⁰

A basic lexical database was built simultaneously to the transcription of texts with the software Fieldworks Language Explorer (FLEX), therefore it includes all the lexical morphemes that occur in the transcribed data (a selected lexicon can be found in the appendix at the end of the book). Spectograms were analysed by means of PRAAT and audio files are in uncompressed .wav formats.

¹⁰ Hamar discourse is rich of metaphoric speech in general, but the *maz aafó* is used as a secret language and can only be understood by the initiated boys, or neophytes. Ivo Strecker (1988a) has conducted an in-depth study of Hamar discourse strategies in social interaction, including the *maz aafó* and others metaphoric speech.

