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Review of [grammatical sketch and short vocabulary of the Ogiek language of Mariashoni] by [Ilaria Micheli]

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RECENSIONI



ILARIA MICHELI, *Grammatical Sketch and Short Vocabulary of the Ogiek Language of Mariashoni*. (Aree di transizione linguistiche e culturali in Africa, 4.) Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2018. Freely downloadable at www.openstarts.units.it/handle/10077/12993.

The work under review provides a first lexicon and grammatical analysis of the Ogiek language as spoken in Mariashoni, Kenya. This study concentrates in particular on the language as spoken by the seven clans of the Morisionig sub-family (p.2). These Ogiek live in the Eastern Mau forest and the forest is an essential habitat for them. Hunting and gathering is part of their economic activity and central to their culture. The book under review is an important contribution to our knowledge of the Southern Nilotic Kalenjin languages. It is suggested that the group once spoke a different language. Allusion is made to a click sound. But contrary to Micheli's statement, Distefano (1990) does not attest the presence of a click in Ogiek; rather he claims Khoisan origin for the word *lan* 'horn' linking it to Khoisan *tlana* 'horn' (p.2). The click that he mentions is in Dahalo, a Cushitic language off Kenya's coast, opposite Lamu. The analysis is based on fieldwork carried out by the author in 2013 and 2014 for a period of four months. She primarily worked with two speakers of the same dialect using the questionnaire by Bouquiaux and Thomas (1992) for elicitation on grammar, and the Dictionary Development approach from SIL for the collection of lexicon.¹

Recently, König, Heine and Legère published a grammar of Akie in Tanzania (2015). The Akie of the Tanzanian Maasai plains and the Ogiek of the Mau forest have a common origin and speak roughly the same language. The research on these varieties overlapped in time and the work on Tanzanian Akie appeared after Micheli's fieldwork. She refers extensively to this work on Akie thereby facilitating comparison within Kalenjin greatly as she points out differences and commonalities. She also discusses differences with other Kalenjin languages whenever that is appropriate.

The grammar is organized in the standard manner and starts with Chapter 2 on phonology. The author refers to her publication (Micheli 2016) for this chapter. However, the 2016 article deviates slightly from this chapter. The consonant table in this chapter presents the palatal voiceless stop and the post-alveolar affricate as two different consonants, whereas the article considers the affricate as a phonetic realisation of the stop phoneme *c* and this is more likely than a phonemic opposition between the two. This leaves the postalveolar voiceless fricative as only consonant in that column and with considerations of symmetry and simplicity it could then also be placed, phonologically, in the palatal column. The velar nasal *ŋ* is represented orthographically as *ng* in the consonant table. The article represents the palatal semivowel as *y* (orthography and African convention); the table in the current book as *j* (IPA). The chapter concludes with a table containing the IPA symbols and the

¹ Available at <https://www.sil.org/language-development>

graphemes proposed in Micheli (2016) but unfortunately this table contains some imprecisions: the IPA symbol for the grapheme *ch* should be *c* (or *tʃ*) which is also given as an equivalent); the IPA symbol for the velar nasal should be *ŋ*; the IPA symbol for the grapheme *y* should be *j*. This table proposes *j* as a grapheme representing the voiced palatal stop. This equivalence is absent in Micheli (2016) and I assume that the voiced palatal is an allophone of its voiceless counterpart *c* since stops are allophonically voiced between vowels and after voiced continuants; the palatal stop / postalveolar affricate is however not mentioned for this allophonic voicing in the book chapter, but it is in the article (Micheli 2016:90). As a further step of lenition the bilabial and velar stops optionally become (voiced) fricatives intervocally. Consonant lengthening occurs in a very limited set of four words.

Ogiek has a system of ten vowels, five -ATR and four +ATR. The vowel harmony which is claimed to exist (Micheli 2016:93) is not discussed in either publication. The vowel termed schwa (Micheli 2016) but written as [ə] is limited to word initial position before nasal (but also occurs in *əsímínjait* ‘mongoose’ in the lexicon of the book under review), and no orthographic equivalent is suggested. Ogiek is a tonal language and tone is indicated in the work but has not been analysed yet.

There is an intriguing phenomenon of optional word final spirantisation (written as raised ^{gh} in Micheli 2016:92) or creaky voice realisation of the velar obstruent in plural formation of nouns (p.17). Micheli refers to creepy voice but I assume creaky voice is what is meant, written as *g(h)*. This is presented in the chapter on nominal morphology. The phonology of Ogiek warrants a deeper study.

Chapter 3 on nominal morphology presents plural formation, compound nouns, a few examples of de-adjectival nominalisations as the only productive nominal derivation. The compound nouns includes the interesting example *pàtáimèsét* /back-of table/ for ‘on top of the table’. Using the body part ‘back’ for ‘on top of’ represents the cognitive model of the body of the cow rather than that of the human body according to Reh (1991), and is typical for languages of people for whom cattle is central in their spatial conceptualisation. However, Ogiek cannot be characterised as such a culture and there is no evidence that it has taken this conceptual frame from Maasai which has “back” = ‘behind’ evidencing a *human* body conceptual frame (Payne & Ole-Kotikash 2005).

Nominal clauses use a copula, termed *actualizer* which agrees in human/non-human to the subject. The non-human copula agrees in turn in number to the subject. (p.22-23). The forms of the non-human actualizers double as relative pronouns but then also used for human head nouns. The chapter discusses the various non-verbal word classes. It does so by providing ample examples enabling the reader to advance further analyses. Not all examples are glossed but the lexicon in the appendix enable the reader to work things out. When glosses are provided, these are unfortunately not in the standard aligned morpheme to gloss format. Where possible, comparisons are made to Akie, Nandi and Kipsigis. I find it most useful that Micheli reports on what does not exist in Ogiek, for example no time word for ‘late’ or ‘noon’ (p.25).

Chapter 4 deals with verbal morphology. Ogiek has a verb ‘to possess’ that includes the “possession” of diseases. The chapter provides the paradigms, affirmative and negative, for the various tenses and aspects, distinguishing verb stems with different initial vowels. Ogiek has an anti-passive and a causative suffix. The various modal verbs and their constructions are illustrated.

Chapter 5 deals with syntax. It is remarkable and applaudable that syntax is covered in such a sketch grammar. The language has VSO as basic order. An overview of simple sentences with all different complements is presented. Under complex syntactic structures, coordination is discussed, and subordinate clauses including relative clauses.

The book concludes with an Ogiek-English “short vocabulary” and an English-Ogiek word list. The vocabulary is not so short, consisting of 646 entries with for each an indication of word class, plural formation where applicable and sometimes additional cultural encyclopaedic information. The vocabulary is very rich and extremely valuable for comparative purposes. Only 18 items are marked as borrowing from Swahili, but there many more; to mention a few: *aibu* ‘ashamed’ (Sw. *aibu*), *áinù* ‘which?’ (Sw. *aina* ‘kind, sort’), *bongileit* ‘a type of traditional bracelet’ (Sw. *bangili* ‘bracelet’), *chànga* ‘alcoholic beverage made with millet flour’ (Sw. *changa* ‘a’ ‘illicit strong alcoholic drink’), *chogu* ‘cock’ (Sw. *jogoo*), *ínet* ‘nylon wire’ (Sw. *neti* ‘net’), *kààmbèt* ‘shoelace’ (Sw. *kamba* ‘rope’), *kètiit* ‘chair’ (Sw. *kiti*), *kitambáet* ‘foulard, scarf’ (Sw. *kitambaa* ‘piece of cloth’), *imágatit* ‘traditional soda salt’ (Sw. *magadi*), *kitara* ‘a kind of shelf’ (Sw. *kitara* ‘shelf’), *sóndugu* ‘box’ (Sw. *sanduku*). Although beekeeping is one of the central cultural traditional activities of the Ogiek, one of the words for beehive is borrowed from an unknown Bantu language: *mù-ingé-t* ‘traditional log-hive’, cf. Proto-Bantu **mu-dingà* (Bastin et al. 2002).

In conclusion, this sketch grammar with vocabulary of Ogiek is a very welcome first linguistic analysis of this language containing fascinating details which allow us a glimpse of the intriguing culture of the Ogiek whose culture has received quite some attention through their plight for the conservation of the Mau forest and the concern over the endangerment of their language and lifestyle. Their culture has been presented in numerous publications by Blackburn and Kratz, but their language which is in danger of disappearance has now received the attention it deserves. I hope this book is not the last one on the Ogiek language.

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