

EWA WOŁK

The Main Concepts Structuring the Sphere of Personal Relations in Verbal Communication in Amharic

Abstract

In this paper I tried to show the main elements of verbal communication in Amharic that structure the sphere of personal relations in Ethiopian society. In order to reveal the inner conceptualization of the language I followed the cognitive method of analysis of source materials, which comprise almost exclusively contemporary Amharic texts. I concentrated on decoding those values that make up the linguistic picture of the world of the Amharic speaking Ethiopians. My research confirmed the importance of respect in their system of values and showed that familiarity is connected with protection and above all affection. I also included here a pattern of the forms of address most often used by Ethiopians structured on the basis of nuclear family. All those features give a picture of social relations unique to this part of the world.

Introduction

Over the last few years I have conducted research as the basis for my Ph.D. dissertation, the subject of which was the sphere of personal relations as reflected in Amharic. The importance of the language as the *lingua franca* of Ethiopia's multilingual society is unquestionable. It can be treated as a medium containing the linguistically coded cultural heritage of its users. In my research, I perceived language as a carrier, a transmitter, but also as a creator of all values, judgments, valuations and norms around which the postures, actions and beliefs of members of a given society concentrate.¹ I followed the cognitive approach to source materials for it was my aim to allow the language to reveal its inner

¹ J. Anusiewicz, A. Dąbrowska, M. Fleisher, 'Językowy obraz świata i kultura. Projekt koncepcji badawczej', in: *Język a Kultura*, 13 (2000), p. 21.

concepts. My efforts concentrated on decoding the values that make up the linguistic picture of the world of the Amharic speaking Ethiopians. Reconstruction of the linguistic picture of the world of a given society is possible only by analyzing naturally created utterances of its language.² The research was based mainly on contemporary Amharic text materials comprising a variety of novels, short stories, films, newspaper articles, official letters and proclamations, as well as personal observations of spoken Amharic that I was able to make during my four-month stay in Ethiopia in the spring of 2002. In the source materials I searched for examples that seemed to me the most natural and I also depicted in detail the situations in which they occurred. The idea of extended descriptions was a result of the importance I ascribed to presenting the grammatical and lexical forms in their contexts. It is particularly important in the case of those notions that form the basis of conceptualization of a language.

In this article I would like to present a short summary of my research. In my source materials I came across a sentence that seemed very interesting to me for it presented a way of decoding the meaning of a short communication. The whole mental process of the addressee was described giving the picture of the sociolinguistic microcosm of the employees of a certain office in Addis Ababa. I base the first part of my article on this one sentence and later I give an account of my research, which confirms the importance of respect in Ethiopian society. Politeness is expressed in Amharic not only by the forms of address but also by the terms of reference. I also refer in this article to the domain of familiarity, which together with the domain of politeness forms the sphere of personal relations in Amharic. Including a sketch here of the forms of address most often employed by Amharic speaking Ethiopians also seems appropriate as it provides a picture of social relations unique to this part of the world.

Sociolinguistic Microcosm

A linguistic picture of the world can be seen as a specific way of perceiving reality, reflected in the semantic, grammatic, syntactic and pragmatic categories of a given natural language.³ Even one short utterance can give us an account of the sociolinguistic microcosm indicating the hierarchy and relationships between the members of a certain group of people. The following sentence can serve as an example (1):

- (1) *dewwilew felligewih nebber* (2) *bila nebber ts'ehaftw yan 'ilet t'ewat arifdo*
 call-3pl [look-for]-3pl-2ms say-3fs secretary-the that day morning late

bīrow sīgeba man alalatim issu bemmīserabbet hulettenynya
 office-the when-enter-3ms who not-say-3fs he in-which-work second

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<i>fok'</i>	<i>lay</i>	<i>antu</i>	<i>irswō</i>	<i>irsachchew</i>	<i>iyyetebale</i>	<i>yemmīnnegerillachchew</i>	
floor	on	'you' <i>pol.</i>	'you' <i>pol.</i>	'he' <i>pol.</i>	while-it-is-said	to-whom-it-is-spoken-3 <i>pl</i>	
<i>yessu</i>	<i>alek'a</i>	<i>bicha</i>	<i>nachchew</i>	<i>yeterrefew</i>	<i>be'idmēm</i>	<i>besilt'anīm</i>	<i>tek'erarabī</i>
his	boss	only	be-3 <i>pl</i>	the-rest	in-age-also	in-position	close
<i>new</i>	<i>ante</i>	<i>andandēm</i>	<i>anchī</i>	<i>new</i>	<i>yemmībbabalew</i> ⁴		
is	'you'- <i>m</i>	sometime	'you'- <i>f</i>	is	who-are-called		

"He called [looking for] you" (2) said his secretary when he entered the office in the morning. He didn't ask her: "Who did?" On the second floor, where he works, it is only his boss that is referred to as *antu*, *irswō*, *irsachchew*. All the others are close in age and position and therefore addressed by *ante* or *anchī*.

The main sentence (1) in this example is a three-word utterance followed by a socio-linguistic interpretation of its contents (2), which had been codified by the speaker. The fact that the narrator presents this long explanation indicates that this kind of communication, although understood by native speakers, requires some reasoning to decode the meaning contained in short codified speech. From statement (1) it can be seen that the verb is the main and mandatory component of a sentence but it can also be deduced that it is the main indicator of perception of a person in Amharic. Its inflected form, in this case the third person plural – isomorphic with a polite form – is the main carrier of information regarding the respectful way of referring to a person and is sufficient for drawing further assumptions. The addressee has no doubts that it has to be the boss, for he is the only person in this office that is addressed and referred to in a respectful way. All the others, close in age and position, are addressed and referred to in a familiar manner.

The next (3) example shows how the addressee made the final deduction:

- (3) *yifelliguħall issachchew alek'aw borch'amu alek'aw*⁵
 [look for]-3*pl*-2*mso* 'he'-*pol* boss-the big-bellied boss-the
 "He [is looking for] you" – he – the boss – the big-bellied boss.'

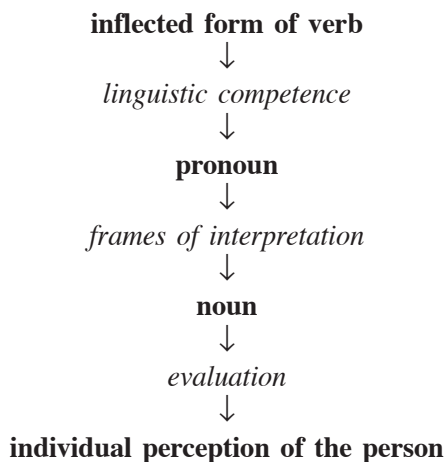
The grammatical form of the verb applied here 3*pl* corresponds to the pronoun – *issachchew* 'he(*pol*)'. One can draw the assumption that the verb is an obligatory component of the communication, while the pronoun and the noun are facultative. On the basis of the information included in the honorific marking⁶ of the verb the receiver deciphers the information about the pronoun implied by a given verb form and subse-

⁴ Serk' Da., *K'onjowochu*, Addis Ababa 1998, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ Term used by R. H u s z c z a (*Honoryfikatywność. Gramatyka. Pragmatyka. Typologia*, Warszawa 1997, p. 51) describing formal diversification of the signs of the language reflecting different social ranks of passive and active participants of the verbal interaction.

quently about the noun describing the person to whom the pronoun refers. The addition of the adjective 'big-bellied' has a clear modal characteristic and it expresses the attitude of the receiver to the boss. This characteristic can be seen as evaluative. The above reasoning can be put schematically in the following way:



The figure shows the potential information about a person that can be contained in a statement and also the hierarchy of the linguistic means, which may be used to express it. The obligatory inflected form of the verb can serve as a sole component of the sentence, for the linguistic competence of the addressee, i.e. the knowledge of the lexicon and grammar of his language, allows him to draw further assumptions. In this case it will be the form of the verb *3ppl* that is isomorphic with the form of respectful reference to a person. The receiver of the communication has at his disposal frames of interpretation⁷ acquired in the process of socialization, i.e. the knowledge of who could be referred to as *irsachchew* 'he (*pol*)'. The conclusion is that it could only be the boss. In his thoughts the receiver of the communication, by adding the adjective 'big-bellied', expresses his personal perception of the boss, which is a result of his evaluation of the world.

Let us further analyze the sociolinguistic study of the personal relations included in the example (2). The two main principles employed as criteria to distinguish between a respectful and a familiar way of perceiving a person indicated here are: *idmē* 'age' and *silt'an* 'position'. The sequence in which they are presented here is not insignificant. The results of my research confirmed the general importance of the criterion of age in the field of personal relations, with the social position coming second. I will discuss this in more detail in the last part of this article.

I have presented here the sociolinguistic microcosm of a group of certain office employees which, however, can also be seen in the broader perspective of the Amharic speaking Ethiopian society as a whole. The text examples shown above introduce certain

⁷ R. Grzegorzczkova, *Wprowadzenie do semantyki językoznawczej*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 151–152.

elements structuring the sphere of personal relations in Amharic. The sphere can be divided into two domains; that of politeness and that of familiarity. The forms of address as well as the terms of reference are the elements that structure both domains. There seems to be no place for a neutral way of referring to a person in Ethiopia.

Politeness in Amharic

The grammatical term which serves in Amharic for expressing politeness is *akbirot*. It is an abstract noun derived from the root *kebbere* ‘be precious, become honoured, be respected, get rich, be wealthy’.⁸ *Akbirot* – ‘respect, deference, homage’⁹ – signifies not only treating another person with respect, as reflected in a polite way of speaking to someone, but also thinking of a person with respect, which is manifested in the deferential narrative forms. These concepts are marked in Amharic verbal forms, as well as in personal pronouns of respectful address in the second and the third person singular. Thus the term *akbirot* is a grammatical term denoting politeness, and as such is an important part of the language-internal conceptualization of the sphere of personal relations in Amharic. It is expressed in Amharic by special linguistic characteristics. *Ye-akbirot k’al*¹⁰ is a grammatical term for those Amharic personal pronouns, which are used to express politeness: *irswo* (a term of address) and *irsachchew* (a term of reference), as well as *antu*, a pronoun formerly used in direct address that is almost obsolete now, but still very important as a concept. The importance of *antu* is demonstrated by the fact that it serves as the base for the derived form of *antuta*¹¹ – an abstract noun denoting a respectful way of perceiving another person. *Antuta* is thus a further step in the conceptualization of personal relations in Amharic contained in the term *akbirot*. Thus it can be said that the label for the category of politeness is the term *akbirot* and its realization can be seen as *antuta*. The main attributes of that category are the following features:

- grammatical form of the verb isomorphic with the third person plural;
- independent, possessive or object pronoun – for direct address respectively: *irswo*, *-wo*, *-wot*; and for reference: *irsachchew* (*issachchew*), *-achchew*;
- lexical forms of address, known in Amharic by the term *ye-akbirot sim*;¹² they are, among others: *ato* ‘Mr.’,¹³ *gēta*(*yyē*) ‘Sir’,¹⁴ *weyzero* ‘Mrs.’,¹⁵ *immebēt* ‘Madam’.¹⁶

⁸ W. Leslau, *Concise Amharic Dictionary*, Wiesbaden 1976, p. 160.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁰ Mersē Hazen Welde K’irk’os, *Yeamarinyanya sewasiw*, Addis Ababa 1956, p. 44.

¹¹ *antuta* – *antu malet*, *yeakbirot at’erar weym annegager* (to say *antu*, polite form of address or term of reference), Haregweyn Kebede, Liulseged Irk’iyihun, Melaku Azzene et al, *Amarinyanya mezgebe k’alat*, Addis Ababa 2001, p. 325.

¹² Mersē..., p. 22.

¹³ W. Leslau ..., p. 413.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

In my research I also came across the term *keberēta*¹⁷ which, according to one of the Amharic dictionaries, together with *kibir* ‘respect, honor, dignity, prestige, distinction’¹⁸ is listed as a synonym of *akbirot*, but is not used as a grammatical term. It however drew my attention to a similarly formed term that could be applied to the domain of familiarity.

How to Express Familiarity

Although the grammatical terms denoting politeness are relatively easy to establish for they are used quite frequently, the terms indicating familiarity are not so evident in the grammatical terminology of Amharic. The term *k’erebēta*, which is explained as ‘closeness (of kinship or friendship)’¹⁹, appears to correspond to the word *keberēta* mentioned above, for it is derived in a similar manner from a root *k’errebe* ‘come close, come near, be near’²⁰ but it is used very rarely and certainly not in a grammatical sense. However it denotes closeness, friendship, intimacy, kinship – in other words – familiarity.

The other term I have found is *anteta*,²¹ derived in the same way as *antuta* from the personal pronoun of the second person singular of masculine gender: *ante* ‘you(m)’, by the addition of a formant *-ta*. The term *anteta* belongs to the domain of familiarity, which complements the domain of politeness. I have not come across a similar term derived from a respective feminine pronoun *anchī* ‘you(f)’ so I can assume the term *anteta* can serve both genders. Similarly to *antuta*, it is also expressed by linguistic means on a grammatical and lexical level, i.e. talking to a person in a familiar way using verb forms and pronouns in the second person singular of either masculine or feminine gender. As for the terms of reference used in the domain of familiarity, the third person singular masculine or feminine of the verb is used as well as the pronouns *issu* (*irsu*) ‘he’ and *isswa* (*irswa*) ‘she’. It has to be noted that referring to a person in the above mentioned way can be the expression of a lack of respect.

Although the structure of the sphere of personal relations in verbal communication in Amharic is apparent in everyday communication and quite obvious to native speakers of the language, the labels are not so evident and used quite rarely. Only some are present as grammatical terminology in indigenous *sewasiw* books and the Amharic dictionaries written by Ethiopians,²² but not in grammar books or dictionaries written by scholars from outside Ethiopia.

¹⁷ Haregweyn..., p. 375.

¹⁸ Leslau..., p. 160.

¹⁹ Haregweyn..., p. 169.

²⁰ Leslau..., p. 72.

²¹ Kesatē Birhan Tesemma *Yeamarinyňa mezgebe k’alat*, Addis Ababa 1959, p. 767.

²² Haregweyn..., p. 325; Mersē..., p. 22, p. 44; Kesatē..., p. 767, Desta Tekle Weld, *Addis, yamarinyňa mezgebe k’alat*, Addis Ababa 1970, p. 129.

Some Lexical Forms of Address

As indicated in the source text (2) respect is granted in the first place to elder members of the Ethiopian society. The terms of reference of *shimagillē* for a man and *arogīt* for a woman are used to describe this age category of people. They are always used with respect, i.e. in the framework of *antuta*, even if applied to people of low status. So in the hierarchy of reasons for respectful treatment age comes first. The most characteristic group of Amharic lexical forms of address are kinship terms within the nuclear family – ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘older brother’, ‘older sister’, ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘child’ – commonly used to address persons from outside the family. It is a specific representation of the family microcosm in the macrocosm of society as a whole. The phenomenon of using kinship terms in social terminology is well known in cultural anthropology and is one of the characteristics of traditional societies.²³ It is, however, peculiar to Amharic that the complete nuclear family serves as the source of these terms and that they are used with respect to the social world. They structure Ethiopian society in a unique way. The usage of kinship terms in the social life of Ethiopians seems to have its roots in the roles ascribed to individual family members from the perspective of the age groups they belong to.

In direct address the terms employed are *abbat* ‘father’ for a man and *mazer* ‘mother’ for a woman, the latter borrowed from English, but used to address elderly Ethiopian women.²⁴ The indigenous term for a mother *innat* with its variations *imma*, *immamma* is generally reserved for one’s own mother. The term *imma* also serves to address a nun especially when accompanied by *hoy* – a word used as a sign of appreciation or respect.

- (4) *indēt walu immahoy ale ingida*
 how spend-day3pl [mother-O!] said stranger-the
 ‘How are you, [mother] said the stranger.

Similarly, the term *abbat* is a form of address for a priest or a monk, both always used in the framework of *antuta*. In the perception of clergy age comes second. It is conditioned by the high status of the church in Ethiopian society.

All those addressed by the above honorific terms tend to use *2ps* to address younger people regardless of their position. Estimating the age of a person is very vague in Ethiopia so the age difference has to be considerable. The term widely applied to a younger addressee is *lijj* ‘child’ as an expression of protection that elders feel towards the young. To complete the picture there are terms *wendim* ‘brother’ and *ihit* ‘sister’ used widely to address strangers in communication between equals.

Apart from the five basic forms of address mentioned above there also exist in Amharic terms denoting older siblings. Those terms are used for older brother and sister

²³ E. Gellner, *Pojęcie pokrewieństwa i inne szkice*, Kraków 1995, pp. 221–244.

²⁴ I witnessed this tendency in the surroundings of Addis Ababa as well as the contemporary literature and films.

respectively as well as for persons older than the speaker. The morpheme that appears here affixed to both words is a very important element of the sphere of personal relations, known as ‘the morpheme of endearment’.²⁵ Its meaning may be rendered as a combination of kindness and respect, even though the two concepts seem to be exclusive rather than complementary. In Amharic, however, these concepts are closely linked and in many cases expression of kindness is understood as a sign of respect, which may be confirmed by the fact that the morpheme can be added to the forms of address belonging to the domain of familiarity as well as those belonging to the domain of politeness. Considering the semantic implication of *yenē* as ‘my’ it may be claimed that this morpheme gives the expression a more emotional character and does not depend on the level of acquaintance between interlocutors. The term which remains after elimination of the morpheme *-yyē* – *gashsha* – means shield, which personifies an older brother. In general both these terms – *gashshē* and *itiyyē* – are used in the *antuta* convention and thus should be classified as respectful forms of address. However, *gashshē* is more often used with the name of the addressee as the equivalent of Mr.:

- (5) *gashshē haddīs kelibb amesegginiwotallehu sil tenagerku*
gashshē Haddīs from-heart thank-1sg-you(pol) said-1sg talked-1sg

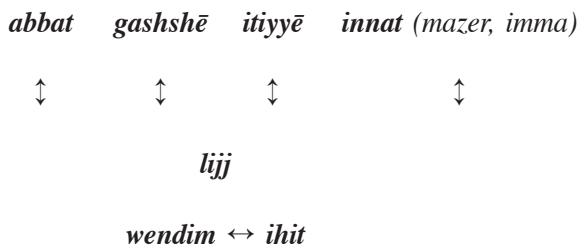
*minim aladerrekkullihim lijje*²⁶
 nothing did-not-do-1sg-for-you child-my

“‘*Gashshē Haddīs*, thank you with all of my heart!’ I said.

“I have done nothing for you, *lijje*.”

In the example (5) we see a typical way of using forms of address between two persons belonging to different age groups: one is addressed in a polite, the other in a familiar, manner. The morpheme of endearment is attached to both forms.

The system described above can be put schematically in the following (way), showing the levels of respect and familiarity:



²⁵ Taddese Beyene ‘Terms of endearment in Amharic. Their morphological structures and sociolinguistic norms’, in: *JES*, 22, (1989), p. 65.

²⁶ Tesfayye Gebreab ‘Yetesfa k’alat’, in: *Ifia* [short stories collection], Addis Ababa 2000, p. 379.

The forms of address presented here concentrate exclusively on kinship terms for it was my purpose in this article to present only the main features of the sphere of personal relations in Amharic. As has been shown it is structured on the basis of the nuclear family. Familiarity is connected with protection, affection and closeness of a family or friends. Respect, however, seems to have an institutional character in Ethiopian society, and is deeply rooted in its system of values.

References

- Anusiewicz J., A. Dąbrowska & M. Fleisher, 'Językowy obraz świata i kultura: Projekt koncepcji badawczej', *Język a Kultura* (Wrocław), 13 (2000), pp. 11–44.
- Desta Tekle Weld, *Addis, yamarinynya mezgebe k'alat*, Addis Ababa 1970.
- Gellner E., *Pojęcie pokrewieństwa i inne szkice*, Warszawa 1995.
- Grzegorzczukowa R., *Wprowadzenie do semantyki językoznawczej*, Warszawa 2001.
- Haddis Alemayyehu, *Fik'ir iske mek'abir*, Addis Ababa 1966.
- Haregweyn Kebede, Liulseged Irk'iyihun, Melaku Azzene & al, *Amarinynya mezgebe k'alat*, Addis Ababa 2001.
- Huszcza R., *Honoryfikatywność. Gramatyka. Pragmatyka. Typologia*, Warszawa 1997.
- Kesatē Birhan Tesemma, *Yamarinynya mezgebe k'alat*, Addis Ababa 1959.
- Leslau W., *Concise Amharic Dictionary*, Wiesbaden 1976.
- Mersē Hazen Welde K'irk'os, *Yamarinynya sewasiw*, Addis Ababa 1956.
- Serk' Da., *K'onjowochu*, Addis Ababa 1998.
- Taddese Beyene, 'Terms of endearment in Amharic: their morphological structures and socio-linguistic norms', *JES*, 22 (1989), pp. 65–74.
- Tesfayye Gebreab, 'Yetesfa k'alat', in: *Ifta* [collection of short stories], Addis Ababa 2000, pp. 375–384.