

Language Change in Amharic

This presentation discusses the phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic changes witnessed in present-day Amharic. The qualitative data collected from spoken and written sources suggest that sounds are being articulated differently. The replacement of ejectives by non-ejectives as in ኢትዮጵያ /itɨyop'ɨya/ 'Ethiopia' vs. ኢትዮጵያ /itɨyopɨya/ has become common among the young-generation speakers. Ease of articulation or the tendency to be viewed as English-speaking, and hence 'modern' appear to account for this phonetic change. The tap /r/ is being articulated trilled. The 3MSG marker /-h/ is being replaced by /-k/ as in ደህና ነህ /dähna näh/ vs. ደህና ነክ /dähna näk/ 'How are you 2MSG?'. The young speakers of Amharic use the accompaniment marker ጋር /gar/ instead of the locative marker ጋ /ga/ as in አንተ እካ ጋር ቁም /antä ɨzza gar k'um/ instead of አንተ እካ ጋ ቁም /antä ɨzza ga k'um/ to mean 'You (2MSG) stand over there!'. The second person polite form is being replaced by the third person plural form as in ምን ትፈልጋለህ? /mɨn tɨfäll ɨgalla tɨfɨhu/ 'What do you (2PL) want?' instead of ምን ይፈልጋለ? /mɨn yɨfäll ɨgallu/ 'What do you (2RES.) want?'. This phenomenon is undoubtedly the result of the influence of Afan Oromo which uses the plural forms of pronouns for respect. There is now a tendency to replace the 1SG marker /-hu/ by /-w/ in verbs as in ነቅቻለሁ /näk'-itɨɨ-all-ähu/ vs. ነቅቻለው /näk'-itɨɨ-all-äw/ 'I am well aware.'. Double accusative case marking as in የእንግዶችን ማሳረፊያን ይመለከታል። /ya-ɨngido tɨɨ-in maräfiya-n yimmäläkkät-all/ 'It concerns the resting place of guests.' has become common. Tense incompatibility as in ትናንት ማክሰኞ ነው። /tinantina maksärɨno näw/ '*Yesterday is Tuesday.' instead of ትናንት ማክሰኞ ነበር። /tinant maksärɨno näbbär/ 'Yesterday was Tuesday.' has become customary. The extended greeting system is being reduced only to ሰላም /sälam/ 'peace'-based greetings.

Quite a large number of words are added into the Amharic lexicon either through borrowing, compounding or semantic extension. New expressions are introduced from English through loan translation as in ግማሽ ወንድም /gɨmmaɨ wondɨmm/ 'half brother', ወንበር ውሰድ! /wonbär wusäd/ 'Take a chair!', በአንድም ሆነ በሌላ መንገድ /bä-andɨmm honä bälela mängäd/ 'in one way or another' and so on. እንደ /ɨndä/, which functions as a subordinator and a preposition, has now added an adverbial function. በዋናነት /bä-wanna-nnät/ 'mainly' is a new frequently used emphatic construction. New trends of subordination have emerged in spoken and written Amharic. The word order has become loose subject to idiosyncrasies. All the changes witnessed are internally or externally motivated. The data apparently show that Amharic is changing rapidly. Quite a significant number of speakers believe that the language is developing, but at the same time worry, that it is suffering from unspeakable linguistic turbulence.