

1. Introduction

1.1. General Remarks

Classical Ethiopic is an ancient Semitic language that was spoken in northern Ethiopia in the area around the ancient city of Aksum. Aksum is located near the northern edge of the great Ethiopian plateau that rises west of the Red Sea coast. Today, its location is close to the border of Eritrea.¹ Classical Ethiopic is also called Gəʿəz, which is the native designation for the language (ልሳነ ግዕዝ *lassāna gəʿz*). The native term is derived from the noun ግዕዝ *gəʿz* ‘nature, manner, custom, conduct’.²

The city of Aksum constituted the center of Ethiopian culture. It was the capital of the Aksumite Empire, a nation that was one of the major players in the trade network between India and the Mediterranean from ca. 100 (all dates given are Common Era unless otherwise specified). At its height, the Aksumite Empire stretched from what today is northern Ethiopia to Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, and Yemen. Around 340, the kingdom of Aksum converted to Christianity under the reign of king ʿEzānā (ca. 330–365).³ In time, the Ethiopian church became associated with the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The spread of Christianity in Ethiopia is commonly attributed to foreign missionaries, specifically Syriac missionaries, who were active in the late fifth/early sixth century. This theory, however, has been challenged in more recent years.⁴ Syriac influence on Ethiopia can be established for a later period, the so-called Solomonic period (1270–1770), but at this time, this influence was most commonly mediated by Arabic-speaking Christianity.⁵ Nevertheless, the Christianization of Ethiopia triggered the rise of a productive period of translation of (mostly) Christian literature from Greek, and

¹ The spelling of the name Aksum and the corresponding adjective, as in “Aksumite Empire,” differs in various publications. It is also written as Axum/Axumite. The transliteration “Aksum” has been chosen throughout this grammar because it more faithfully reflects the Ethiopic spelling of the name አክሱም. The etymology of the name Aksum is unclear.

² Also compare the verbal root ግዕዝ *gəʿza* (II) ‘to become free, be set free’ and its derivatives አግዳሚ *ʾagʿāz* and አግዳሚ *ʾagʿāzi*, ‘free man, Ethiopian’.

³ For a general description of Aksum and the Aksumite Empire, see Phillipson 2012.

⁴ See specifically Marrassini 1990, who argues that loanwords that had been considered to be from Syriac can mostly only be proven to be from Aramaic in general, and that the personal names of certain personalities associated with the Christianization of Ethiopia cannot be shown to be Syriac.

⁵ For Syriac influence on Ethiopia see, for example, Butts 2011.

after the rise of Islam, from Arabic, into Classical Ethiopic. With the rise of Islam, the Aksumite kingdom began to decline. The ultimate end of the Aksumite kingdom is commonly thought to have occurred around 960. In accordance with the aforementioned three major historical periods, scholars distinguish a pre-Aksumite, Aksumite (pre-Christian and Christian), and a post-Aksumite period.

The origin of groups of Semitic-speaking people in Ethiopia is still a matter of debate. The most common theory is that Semitic groups migrated in various waves from southern Arabia, although the linguistic evidence for such a theory is unconvincing since Ethiopian Semitic is not a descendant of any of the known Old South Arabian languages as far as it is possible to tell. However, if this theory is indeed correct, at least one migration wave, possibly the first, must have taken place as early as the first half of the first millennium BCE (probably during the eighth or seventh century BCE), since evidence for a South Arabian presence in the area around Aksum is attested in the form of Sabaic inscriptions from this time on. Cultural and economic contacts between South Arabia and Ethiopia continued until the fall of the Aksumite kingdom.

1.2. Literature

The oldest written material for Ethiopian is attested in the form of stone inscriptions. Twelve such inscriptions were found in Aksum, which are in part written in the unvocalized script of South Arabia, partly in a non-vocalized or partially vocalized version of the Ethiopic script, and partly in a fully vocalized variant of the Ethiopic script (cf. §2.3.1.). The oldest inscriptions of the fully vocalized type are inscriptions from the king ʿEzānā (ca. 330–365). These inscriptions do not provide much data for the understanding of Ethiopian grammar, but they are nevertheless of significance since they reflect the only evidence for literature written in Gəʿəz during the Aksumite period that is not based on translations.

The majority of Classical Ethiopic literature is transmitted in manuscript-form.⁶ We can distinguish two main periods: the first period constitutes the height of the Aksumite kingdom in the time between the fourth and seventh centuries, while the second period begins, after a longer period of non-productivity that followed the collapse of the Aksumite kingdom, at around 1270 with the takeover of the Solomonic dynasty. This period lasted until the nineteenth century (with its peak in the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries). Despite the fact that Gəʿəz ceased

⁶ See also Littmann 1954 and Weninger 2001, 8–12.

to be a spoken language around 1000, the composition of literary works in Gəʿəz continued uninterrupted during the fourteenth through nineteenth centuries. The majority of manuscripts preserved and known today date to the post-Aksumite period (after the fourteenth century). Notable exceptions include the Abba Garima gospels, dated to Late Antiquity, and a manuscript fragment that is datable to prior to the 1230s.⁷ Contrary to Gəʿəz, Amharic was only rarely used as a literary language up to the nineteenth century.

Classical Ethiopic literature from the Aksumite period almost exclusively consists of translations of Greek originals. Among the oldest texts are the translations of the Gospels and Psalter. A complete translation of the Bible, except for Maccabees and a few other apocryphal books (such as the two additional books of Ezra, the Paralipomena of Jeremiah, the Ascension of Isaiah, Jubilees, and Enoch) was completed by the seventh century. Besides the biblical and apocryphal books, there are also several works composed by early church fathers that were translated from Greek.

Ethiopic literature dating to the post-Aksumite period contains many translations from Arabic, including numerous literary works of the Coptic church of Egypt (e.g., the Calendar of Saints “Synaxar” = *Sənkəsār*). These translations are often very literal. The post-Aksumite period further saw the composition of independent literary works such as homilies, lives of saints, liturgical works, and theological treatises (including works against Islam and the Roman-Catholic Church), magical literature, secular literature (philosophy, philology, and legal literature), and the Chronicles of Kings. The latter differs from other literary works from a linguistic point of view.

Contrary to the translations from Greek dating to the Aksumite period, translations into Gəʿəz from Arabic in the post-Aksumite period attest to a strong influence of Arabic on the syntactic structures (especially on the use of verbal categories) and the lexicon of Gəʿəz. These influences from Arabic that originated in translations also had a significant impact on the language of the independent literary works dating to the post-Aksumite period.

Classical Ethiopic still serves as the liturgical language in the Ethiopic and Eritrean church today and is taught in Christian schools.

⁷ For the Abba Garima gospels, see Mercier 2000 and McKenzie and Watson 2016; for the Ethiopic manuscript fragment, see el-Antony, Blid, and Butts 2016.

1.3. Linguistic Classification

Classical Ethiopic is a Semitic language and belongs to the West Semitic branch of the language family. Within this branch, it shares certain archaic characteristics with Modern South Arabian languages, such as the prefix conjugation base *yVqattVl. These archaisms are not sufficient, however, to group Ethiopian Semitic and Modern South Arabian together into one branch. Ethiopian Semitic is thus best considered an independent sub-branch of West Semitic – with the note that its relationship to Modern South Arabian still requires further study.⁸ Close contact also existed between Ethiopian Semitic and the Ancient South Arabian languages (Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Haḍramitic), as exhibited by the Ethiopian writing system, which is derived from the Old South Arabian alphabet. It is further noteworthy that there seem to be significant morphological and lexical correspondences between Classical Ethiopic and Akkadian, that is, East Semitic, which is both geographically and chronologically quite distant from the Ethiopian branch of Semitic.⁹

The Ethiopian languages, including Classical Ethiopic, were from the very beginning subject to influence from the surrounding Cushitic languages. Obvious influences from Cushitic are found in the Ethiopian lexicon and syntax, while other basic categories of the language, such as morphology and phonology, were mostly unaffected by language contact and remained surprisingly archaic. Classical Ethiopic thus cannot be considered a mixed language.

1.4. Other Ethiopian Languages

Classical Ethiopic ceased to be spoken shortly after the demise of the Aksumite kingdom in 960. Today, a large number of Ethiopian languages and dialects are spoken in Ethiopia and beyond, in addition to Cushitic and other languages.¹⁰

In the northern region we find (a) Tigre with ca. 800,000 mostly Muslim speakers (in the lowland of Eritrea and in the neighboring regions of Sudan), and (b)

⁸ For the yet unresolved issue of the relationship between Ethiopian Semitic and Modern South Arabian, see Porkhomovsky 1997. More recently, for the dismissal of such a relationship, see Kogan 2015, 124.

⁹ For the presumed connection between Akkadian and Classical Ethiopic, see especially von Soden 1987. Von Soden, for example, assumes that the element ʾn- attested in ʾnbala 'without' is connected to the Akkadian preposition *ina* (1987, 560). For the assumption that there are lexical cognates between Akkadian and Classical Ethiopic, see Kogan 2006.

¹⁰ See also Ullendorff 1973 and Hetzron 1972.

Tigrinya (*Təgrəñña*) with about 8.8 million mostly Christian speakers (in the Eritrean highlands and in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray). Both languages are closely related to Gəʿəz.¹¹

Amharic is spoken in the southern region by ca. 15 million speakers and represents the most widely spoken and one of the typologically most innovative Ethiopian languages. Smaller linguistic units are represented by (a) Gurage, a dialect cluster spoken by ca. 1.8 million people southwest of Addis Ababa, (b) Harari (the language of the city Harar in eastern Ethiopia and of diaspora communities with about 26,000 speakers), and (c) Argobba, (spoken northwest of Addis Ababa, close to Ankober), which is close to extinction (the 1994 census listed about 100 monolingual speakers, while the 2007 census counted as many as 43,000 speakers, although most of these speak Amharic as their main language). Southern Ethiopian further includes (d) Gafat, which used to be spoken in western Ethiopia in the province of Goğgam but has now ceased to exist as a spoken language. Amharic and Tigrinya represent the second- and third-largest living Semitic languages today (after Arabic and before Modern Hebrew).

1.5. Grammars

The first linguistic description of Classical Ethiopic was made by August Dillmann: *Grammatik der äthiopischen Sprache* (1st ed. Leipzig, 1857). The second revised edition of Dillmann's grammar by Carl Bezold (Leipzig, 1899) and its English translation by James A. Crichton (London, 1907), which contains additions to the German edition and several indexes, represents the most important reference work for Classical Ethiopic. Dillmann and Bezold's grammar still reflects the state of the art of grammatical treatments of Classical Ethiopic, mostly because no comprehensive grammar of Gəʿəz has been published in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, Dillmann's grammar is difficult to use because it follows an order in the presentation of grammatical features that differs from more common and contemporary approaches.

¹¹ Traditionally, Ethiopian languages are divided into a northern and southern branch (see Cohen 1931 and Hetzron 1972). The northern branch includes Classical Ethiopic, Tigre, and Tigrinya, while the southern branch contains the remaining Ethiopian languages. It has further been assumed that Tigre is particularly close to Classical Ethiopic and might represent a direct descendant of Classical Ethiopic. The idea that Ethiopian Semitic consists of two main branches, a northern and a southern branch, has recently been challenged, however, and requires further study (see Voigt 2009 and especially Bulakh and Kogan 2010 and 2013).

Other descriptions of Classical Ethiopic that are designed as introductory textbooks include:

- Franz Praetorius, *Aethiopische Grammatik mit Paradigmen, Litteratur, Chrestomathie und Glossar* (= Praetorius 1886a)
- Franz Praetorius, *Grammatica aethiopica* (= Praetorius 1886b)
- Marius Chaîne, *Grammaire éthiopienne* (1938)
- Carlo Conti Rossini, *Grammatica elementare della lingua etiopica* (1941)
- Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Classical Ethiopic (Ge'ez)* (1978)

Two works by Stefan Weninger should likewise be mentioned:

- *Gəʿəz* (1993), a brief grammatical description (50 pages) primarily designed for general linguists
- *Das Verbalsystem des Altäthiopischen* (2001)

1.6. Dictionaries

The only scholarly dictionary of Classical Ethiopic that contains references to textual evidence is August Dillmann's *Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicae* (DL), which follows the order of the Ethiopic syllabary (Dillmann 1865).¹² Although not strictly a dictionary, see also Grébaut (1952) for textual references. For beginners, the easiest dictionary to use is W. Leslau's *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez* (CDG), which makes use of transliterations and is ordered according to the (modified) Latin alphabet. The CDG also includes numerous etymological references. A briefer version of the *Comparative Dictionary* intended for students that is arranged according to the Ethiopic syllabary was published by the same author under the title *Concise Dictionary of Ge'ez* (Leslau 1989).

1.7. General Studies

For a general reference work on Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies, the reader can refer to the *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* I: A-C; II: D-Hq; III He-N; IV: O-X; V: Y-Z, which was published between 2003–2014 by S. Uhlig et al., with cooperation by A. Bausi on volumes IV-V.

¹² Dillmann's dictionary has been digitized and is available online as part of *TrACES - From Translation to Creation: changes in Ethiopic Style and Lexicon from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*.