I. The subject of research and methodology

A short history of Amharic

Ethiopia is an ethnically and, in consequence, linguistically diversified country with around ninety languages being spoken on its territory (Teshome G. Wagaw 1997: 391). The languages of Ethiopia belong to at least two language families, Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan (Greenberg 1963). The Afro-Asiatic family is represented by Semitic, Kushitic and Omotic groups and the Ethio-Semitic languages belong to the southern representatives of the Semitic group. Of all the living Ethio-Semitic languages Amharic is most developed due to the role it played in the history of the Ethiopian Empire.

The language spoken by the Amhara ethnic group, whose representatives ruled almost continually from the 13th century up to the 1974 revolution, was initially the language of the king and court as well as the instrument of power. Unlike its older cousin[1], the Giiz language, used in church liturgy and literature, Amharic, in its spoken version, served all purposes of everyday life. In that early phase of its development, oral artistic output began to emerge: laudable chants sung by knights to praise the king, his bravery and his name. These songs in the versions known from the 14th-16th centuries are the oldest relics of the Amharic language[2]. The first manuscripts come from a later period, so it can be assumed they were

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[1] A question of the degree of kinship between Giiz and Amharic has still not been clarified. For the classification of Ethiopian Semitic languages see, *inter alia*:, Ullendorff (1955), Hetzron (1972), Hudson (2000), Demeke (2001).

[2] It was really a language called Old-Amharic considered by some scholars as an ancient version of Amharic.

transmitted in an oral form. Amharic was also used for the interpretation of religious works written in Giiz and in the theological disputes with the Jesuits, which were taking place in Ethiopia in the 17th century.

In the second half of the 19th century, under the rule of Tēwodros II, who followed the policy of unification, the standardized written form of Amharic began to develop. For the first time in history the chronicle of the Emperor's reign was written in Amharic[3], which started to replace Giiz, used up to that time in historiography. It was in the 19th century that Amharic started to supersede Giiz also in other literary genres such as religious writings, grammar books and poetry.

In the 20th century, by means of the language policy imposed by the authorities, Amharic, in its standardized version, was widely used in education, administration and the media. As the language of literature as well as the tongue in which the substance of the radical socio-political post-revolutionary changes were verbalized, Amharic, among other languages of Ethiopia, was best adjusted for twentieth century Ethiopian reality. It has played a very important role of *lingua franca* in the complex co-existence of numerous ethnic groups and in the historical process of shaping the Ethiopian nation.

Language policy

Language both reflects and shapes reality. Reality, on the other hand, has an effect on language. That was true of twentieth-century Ethiopia: extreme political transformations triggered similar changes in language policy (Wołk 2001). The conception of modernization and the building of an Ethiopian state as an international power, initiated by Minīlik II, were continued with great zest and skill by Hayle Sillasē I during his almost half-century-long reign. Their policy was based on the conception of a strong centralized government and used Amharic as a tool for unifying the country. In the 1955 constitution, Hayle Sillasē granted Amharic the

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[3] In Europe there are two chronicles of this Emperor's reign: the first by *alek'a* Welde Maryam in the collection of C. Mondon-Vidailhet in Paris and the second by *debtera* Zeneb in the Royal Library in Berlin.

status of the official language of the Empire[4]. It has become the language of instruction in primary education as well as the language of administration, radio and the press. In consequence, a good command of Amharic was the basic condition for holding any post in state administration. It was the language of the capital – Addis Ababa – the site of the government and the centre of the Ethiopian intelligentsia. Other languages, including the remaining languages of the Ethio-Semitic group that had their written form, such as Tigrinya, were not officially used. Basic level teaching in Eritrea after its annexation to Ethiopia in 1962 was conducted in Amharic (Kapeliuk 1980: 270). English has become a complementary language used in international communication, technology, secondary and university education. Governmental documents such as *Negarīt Gazēta* and legal codes were published both in Amharic and English.

The superior position of Amharic, among other languages of Ethiopia, was attributed to its higher development. Amharic was seen as best suited to confront new challenges of civilization and to find ways of creating suitable vocabulary, and at the same time not to lose its originality[5]. The representatives of other ethnic groups perceived the policy of amharization as repression and tried to resist it. The problem was particularly severe in the second half of the 20th century.

The transformation of Amharic from its traditional Christian heritage into the language of the contemporary world with its own diverse problems could not have taken place without the help of experts. The Academy of Amharic Language was set up in 1972, adopting as its main task the creation of a new vocabulary which would reflect the new reality, preserving at the same time Ethiopian roots. The opening up of Ethiopia to the world caused, in the first place, transformation in the mentality of Ethiopians. The feudal state organism outdated and dysfunctional in the new reality, and with Hayle Sillasē I at its head, gave way to a Marxist-Lenin-

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[4] *Yenigusē negestu mengist gizat medebenynya (ofīsīyel) k'wank'wa amarinynya new* 'the main (official) language of the empire shall be Amharic', amended 1955 constitution, paragraph 125, *Negarīt Gazēta,* 15, 2, Addis Ababa 1948 AM (1955 AD): 3-20.

[5] About language policy under the rule of Emperor Hayle Sillasē I, see Chauvin, 1980.

ist regime[6] – a system with no relation to Ethiopian tradition and completely alien to this part of the world. This fact has drastically changed the sense of national identity among Ethiopians. The ruling élites, until that time dominated by Amharic or amharized people, were substituted by forces of diversified socio-ethnic origin. The adoption by the new Ethiopian authorities of the Leninist ideology, with its principle of national equality, was bound to bring about the official acknowledgement of linguistic and national pluralism. As a result, in 1976, the Academy of the Amharic Language was transformed into the Academy of Ethiopian Languages. Its aim was to develop and enrich the languages of different ethnic groups as well as to find written forms for those tongues that did not have them. It was therefore meant as a widely understood literacy campaign of the country[7]. The new government with Mengistu Hayle Maryam at its head launched this huge scale campaign with zeal and conviction. Experts from Ethiopia and fellow socialist countries were employed to implement Lenin's doctrine of each nation's right to equality and self-determination. Education was perceived as the main tool for uprooting feudalism and building a new social order (Richter 1983: 76). Every step was to be taken in order to eliminate illiteracy. The adult education UNESCO expert's advice referring to the teaching of adults in their mother tongues was used side by side with the Soviet model of language policy. It was expected that in the mid-eighties 90% of the society would have been included in the campaign and illiteracy would be eradicated within a decade.

The Ethiopian alphabet was used for the transcription of languages that did not have a written form. It was perceived as one of the means of national integration, facilitating the learning of other languages of Ethiopia, including Amharic. The use of the Ethiopian script for the notation of languages not belonging to the Semitic group caused certain formal difficulties (for instance, in order to transcribe long vowels in Oromo, a Cushitic language, new graphic signs had to be created) as well as protests of an ethnic liberation nature. Special attention was paid to Amharic with

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[6] Ruling in Ethiopia from July 1974 to May 1991.

[7] *Bihērawī meserete timhirt zemecha* – Ethiopian name for the National Literacy Campaign of 1979-1991.

two aims in mind: it played the role of a *lingua franca* unifying the peoples of socialist Ethiopia and it was hoped to become an important factor in the process of forming the Ethiopian nation based on the new social norms (Richter 1983: 78). As the most developed among the languages of Ethiopia it was best suited for producing new terminology which would reflect the new ideology. Words and ideas unknown until now in this part of the world were formed with exceptional ingenuity by means of native (Amharic and Giiz) roots (Ricci 1978-9). The process resembled what took place in the first half of the 20th century in the Soviet Union and served as a model for Ethiopia. Circumstances in both countries were analogical: both were multinational states with mass illiteracy. The slogans of each nation's right to self-determination combined with the literacy campaign, implemented with a high degree of effort and enthusiasm, show that the process was identical to rusification in the Soviet Union.

The literacy campaign, especially in the countryside, did not bring long lasting effects. A lack of written materials, apart from basic textbooks and the fact that reading and writing skills in the native languages did not open any employment possibilities, explains why everything that was taught was quickly forgotten (Hoben 1995: 185). This does not apply to the Amharic language – regions populated by its speakers were the ones where the campaign was successful and has given lasting results. The fact that elementary education of children was conducted in Amharic in the whole country additionally strengthened the position of the language, despite all the effort of the government to educate in their native languages other ethnic groups inhabiting Ethiopia.

The year 1991 marked the expansion of other than a communal type of democracy. This resulted in the end of the "cold war" and the fall of Apartheid, the greatest disgrace of the 20th century. It was also a significant year for Ethiopia as it ended the reign of the Marxist-Leninist regime of Mengistu Hayle Maryam. Hopes were incited that Ethiopia, like other countries of the world, would take the path towards true national freedom and democracy (*Ethiopian Register* 1999/2000: 2). It seems however that the federal government formed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, started its rule with a policy based on ethnic segregation (Teshome G. Wagaw 1997: 400).

Although at the basis of the present government's guiding principle lies the same ideology that belonged to the chief communist postulates, i.e. the acknowledgement of national minority rights, the execution thereof differs considerably. The language policy of the present government is an outcome of general policy with its broad principle of the right to self-determination of all the ethnic groups living within the borders of the country. Thus, "the right of nations, nationalities and peoples… to preserve and respect their identity, promote their culture and history, use and develop their language… administer their affairs on their own territory" (The Constitution of Ethiopia, 8th December 1994, art. 39) is executed with exceptional diligence. The territories of administrative units have been specified by the present government according to accepted ethnic borders that changed the traditional historical division of Ethiopia.

The plan of a new complex educational system was created. Amharic remained the common language of communication, trade and state administration[8]. Its speakers continued to receive an elementary level education in Amharic. As for the remaining languages of Ethiopia, the most developed ones, such as Tigrinya, Oromo, Somali, and Sidamo became the teaching languages in the 1-6 grades. It was promised that steps would be taken to enable education in the mother tongue for the speakers of less developed languages as soon as possible. Initially, it was conducted in Amharic only (Teshome G. Wagaw, 1997: 397). English as an international language is introduced from the first grade and from the seventh grade onwards it becomes the language of instruction. Teachers are being trained in the local training centres and teaching aids are being prepared with the active participation of representatives of local groups. This policy has not been successful so far as the strange case of *Wogagoda* proves. It is a common name for the languages which did not have their written form and are used in the Northern Omo Zone. The term is an amalgamation of the first syllables of the names of the Wolayta[9], Gamo, Goffa and Dawro peoples who inhabit the northern regions of the Omo River and

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[8] In the 1994 constitution it is referred to as "working language", *Yefēderal Ityop'ya gazēta, 1, art. 5.*

[9] Cohen (1999: 243), in his research, does not include the Wolayta language and describes the 'new' language as GGD (Gamo, Goffa, Dawro).

use four closely related languages. The government explained its decision of calling to life a *Wogagoda* language by the fact that the four languages share 85-90% of the lexicon and grammar. In order to reduce costs of teaching materials one textbook was prepared instead of four (*Ethiopian Register* 1999/2000: 6). The users of this textbook perceived the language as foreign. It contained numerous Amharic and English words, sentences were difficult to understand and, when read aloud, sounded strange (Cohen 1999: 251). It caused great controversy, in particular among the Wolayta people (Walelliny 1999: 7).

The position of the government in this matter is a consequence of the general policy aiming at the change of the status of individual nationalities making up the Ethiopian nation. In principle, this solution was supposed to serve the purpose of political and social equalization of individual ethnic groups. It was also supposed to strengthen ties among these peoples but it has not brought about this effect. Moreover, it has caused tensions and has led to arrests of *Wogagoda* opponents (*Ethiopian Register* 1999/2000: 7-12).

The present language and ethnic situation in Ethiopia, very complex as it is may lead to the weakening of its position as an independent political and cultural organism in its existing historical shape. The globalization process which seems to affect it to a greater extent now than ever before may result in the emergence of a new organism in the Horn of Africa, like the United States of America or the European Union. Since the transformations in this region of Africa are part of the course of the general transformations in the world, the problem of preservation or loss of one's cultural heritage in the era of globalization refers to Ethiopia as well as to other countries in a similar manner. Nevertheless, the situation in Ethiopia is more complex due to its cultural diversity. The Amharic language, historically one of the main instruments of the country's unification, is currently in a state of spontaneous, as opposed to systematic, development. What seems to be important is the question whether this language is rooted in the consciousness of Ethiopians and to what degree it forms their national identity. That is why the following research, based on the most recent materials available, can be important.

Source materials

The scope of research covers the 20th century, a very intense period in the development of Amharic. However, it is contemporary Amharic that is examined here and most of the source texts come from the last decade of the century. This fully intentional choice aims at grasping the pulse of the language, investigating its developmental tendencies and establishing the extent to which the political, social and mentality transformations have affected its current state. The earlier period provides frames in which the main research is set. That is why texts written in the past[10] are treated as a supplement for the main body of material as well as a reference point for the registration of changes and shifts in the semantics of particular expressions. The historical background was drawn on the basis of the correspondence of Ethiopian monarchs from the turn of the and of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20[th]century. I have also used official speeches from that period illustrating t he forms of addressing Ethiopians by different rulers. The national epos *Fik'ir iske mek'abir* (FIK') by Haddis Alemayehu is the source of forms of address used in the feudal Ethiopia of Hayle Sillasē I. The short stories from the communist period in the history of this country *K'omchē ambaw* by Derejje Desta and *Yeloterī t'os* by Shambel Serrahiywet from the short stories collection *Ifta* (IFT) are the source for structures used in that time.

The recent period is represented in this work by the largest number of sources: the contemporary novels *Ishohama werk'* (ISH) by Se'ada Mehammed, *Kebuska bestejerba* (KEB) by Fik're-Mark'os Desta, *K'onjowochu* (K'ON) by Serk' Da., *Tikusat* (TIK) by Sibhat Gebre-Igzīabhēr, *Ifta* (IFT) – a collection of short stories by different authors, the Ethiopian movies *Sewwir chilot* (SEW), *Dīvī* (DIV), magazines, newspapers, television and radio programmes, interviews with Ethiopians, interviews with representatives of the older generation and personal observations *in situ* of everyday speech. The corpus is supplemented by questionnaires I distributed among Ethiopian young people in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar (Gojjam province).

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[10] I.e. under the rules of: Minīlik II (1889-1913), Hayle Sillasē I (1930-1974) and Mengistu Hayle Maryam (1974-1991).

In the texts studied, examples of interpersonal communication were of primary interest. Factors such as the relationship between the speech act's participants, including age difference, kinship, degree of familiarity, as well as the situations of interlocutors such as private vs. official or individual vs. group conversation were taken into account. Attention was paid to the ways of address in the media, including the forms of addressing the listeners by the speaker and the other way round, and the ways of addressing interviewers by the interviewees and vice versa. The third person narration as an expression of the way the speaker, the person spoken about or the listener are perceived in the society was also scrutinized.

Verbal communication understood and studied in this way forms a specific map of interpersonal relations. The concepts on this map are part of the linguistic picture of the world (JOS)[11], specific for a given nation and its culture. The term has been coined by Polish linguists to define: "enclosed in a language interpretation of reality, which can be verbalized in various ways, outlined by a pattern of opinions about the world" (Bartmiński 2006: 12). Studying it enables one to read the way social phenomena are being conceptualized in the reality of a given society.

> Usually the most developed vocabulary refers to this sphere of phenomena which plays the most important role in the life of a given community, while the vocabulary referring to meaningless phenomena is poor. As a result, the image of the world reflected in a language from the perspective of social life includes an element of subjectivity (Anusiewicz, Dąbrowska, Fleisher 2000: 27-28, translation mine).

The reconstruction of JOS and its description is possible only by means of an analysis of linguistic expressions which are manifestations of the language system. The elements of the system contain a picture of the world. They may belong to different categories: semantic, grammatical, syntactic and pragmatic of a given natural language, but taken together they form a specific way of reflecting the world and its elements. They supply a more general understanding of the world's organization, its hierarchies and values accepted by a given language community (Tokarski 1993: 358).

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[11] More about (JOS-językowy obraz świata) can be found in: *Język a Kultura*, vol. 13, 2000.