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Non-dominant varieties of pluricentric languages: Perspectives and views on the Eastern (Harar) Oromic variety

Abstract

This paper explores the Oromo language, Afaan Oromoo (endonym), otherwise referred to as Oromic. Oromic is a pluricentric language, with a variety that can be identified as a non-dominant variety, as initiated by Michael Clyne and subsequent extensions (WGNDV Website). The Oromo language is spoken by around 42 million Oromos (amongst others) in Ethiopia, distributed over a vast area from the Sudanese border in the West and across the Somali border in the East, from the Tigray area in northern Ethiopia to the south, across the Kenyan border to the Indian Ocean (Janko 207:89-90; Heine 1981, Map 2, Appendix I). As such, it is spoken mainly in Ethiopia, with a considerable amount of native speakers located in Kenya and Somalia. There is a significant Oromo immigrant population in neighbouring countries such as the Middle East, North America, Europe, and the South Pacific (Jalata, 2011).

1. Introduction – The Oromo language (Oromic)

The Oromo language belongs to an Afro-asiatic, east Cushitic branch (Clamons, 1995: 389). It is the third native Afro-asiatic language after Arabic and Hausa and the second largest mother tongue in Africa after Hausa (Gragg, 1982 p. viii). It uses a phonetic Roman alphabet-based orthography without diacritics, which was only officially adopted in 1991 (Gamta, 1993). As observed in the Oromo case, the demographic size and geographic spread of a language promotes the existence of language diversity; it is then likely that linguistic dominance and hegemony will subsequently follow.

2. Eastern Oromic as a non-dominant variety

It is stated that "[p]luricentric languages are usually marked by an asymmetric relationship between their national varieties", according to Muhr

(2015: 13). The main focus of this work is to indicate such asymmetry through characterizing the Eastern (Harar) Oromic variety as an example of a non-dominant variety. This characteristic is nuanced in the developments throughout the last three decades, which correspond with the adoption of orthography. In contrast, the Western (Mac'c'a) variety is characterized as a currently dominant variety of Oromic in every case of language usage, including media, school curriculum, and official communications.

Primarily, even though these varieties are spoken in the same country, there are certain features that are not shared by the other different varieties that contribute to the peculiarities of Eastern Oromic. Such features are not only linguistic, but also historical, geographical, economic and cultural factors that differentiate the eastern Oromo region from other regions. To contextualise the linguistic peculiarity of Oromo, it is important to discuss the non-linguistic elements that characterize the region.

Firstly, the eastern economy is more monetized, given that the only railway connecting Ethiopia to the neighbouring Djibouti port passes through the biggest city of the Harar Zone, Dirre Dhawa. Furthermore, cash crop agriculture predominates in this region. There is also more openness to the outside world via the northern Samali region. Historically, the region had been under Ottoman Egyptian occupation from 1875 to 1885 (Hassen, 2008: 33-61), during which there was a mass conversion to Islam, Arabic language influence and diversification of agriculture. The following section will analyse the linguistic factors while considering this context.

3. Linguistic features of Eastern Oromic

The most salient of the linguistic features that distinguish Eastern Oromic is the switch of *d* (the alveolar implosive sound) in the verb root *jed*- 'say' with *ʔ* (a voiceless glottal stop sound) (Owens, 1985, p. 71). Thus *jed*- becomes *jiʔ*- in the Eastern variant. The morpheme (verb root) *jed*- 'say' is one of the most common word roots in the language with its derived and inflected extensions. *jed* also aligns with the majority of idiophones (ideas in sound imitation) in the language. Therefore, whether a speaker or a writer is speaking or writing, this variety can be quickly identified.

Another linguistic feature of Eastern Oromic is the phoneme /x/ (a velar voiceless fricative sound), which is close to and in complementary distribution with /k/ (the velar voiceless stop sound). /k/ is only used following a consonant (Owens, 1985, p. 15), even if the consonant is the final segment of the

preceding word. Phonetically, it follows the phonological rule /x/ → [k]/ C(#); read /x/ becomes /k/ if/when it comes after a consonant, even if the consonant is the final segment of the preceding word. Thus, what is read in the Eastern variety as *baxakka*: 'thunder' is read *bakakka*:. Similarly, in some other varieties, *xaxu*: 'oath' is read *kaku*;; *ol ka:ji*' put up' is *ol ka:ji*, no difference, while *bux* 'pop up' is *buk* in some other varieties.

A further specific feature of Eastern Oromic is the palatalization of the velar stops (Owens, 1985, p. 24), including the ejective /k'/, (a sound similar to /k/ but involves constricted glottis) before the coronal /s/, /t/ or /n/-initial suffixes. Thus, when conjugated for first plural perfect suffixes *-ne*, *da:k-* 'grind' becomes *dajne* 'we ground'; *la:k'-* 'mix' becomes *lajne* 'we mixed', noticeably not *da:kne* and *la:k'ne* respectively, which is generally the case, especially in the Mc'c'a variety.

Now that we have enumerated examples of the specific features of the eastern variety, we can use these examples to verify their status in the use of Oromic. To achieve this, we will examine literature produced within the last three decades in Oromia, the school curriculum, and the media inside and outside the country.

4. The representation of linguistic features of Eastern Oromic in textbooks and in linguistic literature

First, it is important to note that there is no mention of the first phonological feature, earlier identified as /d/ and /ʔ/ switching in *jed-*, even as a rare usage by an Oromo variety in any official document. However, neither speakers nor officials have decided to dismiss this /d / - /ʔ/ switch from use. Similarly, the /k/ /x/ alignment is not mentioned; the few writers who note the existence of the sound /x/ dismiss it as a 'foreign sound' (Galataa, 1996).

As for the assimilation rule of the velars, as mentioned above, in the Eastern variety *da:k-* 'grind' becomes *dajne/da:nne* 'we ground' when the first plural past indicator suffix *-ne* is added, whereas in the Western variety of Mac'c'a it is *da:kne*. This latter version is used in every piece of literature.

Regarding the etymological share of Eastern Oromic, the study carried out by Wondimu Tegegne (2015) shows that "the majority of the words used in the Grade 8 Afan Oromo textbook were taken from the Western Dialect" (p. 362). However, this study is limited as it only examines words, and not sounds. Through analysing language-teaching grammar books, it is revealed that there is not a single book that includes /x/ in the phoneme inventory. Strangely

enough, however, many authors allegedly employ the use of /v/, /p/ and even /s'/, the alveolar fricative ejective, all decidedly foreign sounds, to write 'borrowed words' while categorizing /x/ as a foreign sound that is consistently used by approximately 19% of the Oromo population (Google data).

From the list of observations in the extension of Clyne's original of 1992, which was summarised in Muhr (2012) and Muhr (2016) issued by 10 WGNDV, the condition of 'missing language loyalty of the elites' is apparent. Native Eastern variety speakers and linguists, like Ali et al. (1990), Muhammed (1994), and infamous lexicographer Muudee (1995), exclude /x/ from their consonant inventory, while foreign linguists such as Andrzejewski (1957), Owens (1985), Lloret (1997) include /x/ in their Oromo consonant inventories.

This dominance of the Eastern dialect has extended beyond the Oromia border. Even international media, such as the Voice of America and BBC Oromic Service, only employ individuals from other dialectal backgrounds, resulting in a notable absence of speakers of the Eastern variety. It seems as if corpus planning has been ongoing, despite the fact that there is no official standardization activity that currently exists.

It is proposed that the Mac'c' dialect, especially Wallaga, is the dominating variety. There are factors that facilitated this domination; one such factor is the relatively widespread opportunity for literacy in western Oromia, especially Wallaga. As stated by Gragg (1982), "... a surprisingly high degree of Oromo literacy has existed there since the early decades of this century, owing in large part to the widespread use of Onesimus Nasib's Oromo Bible by protestant and even Orthodox Christians, and the existence of mission-supported elementary education in Oromo" (p. xvi). See also Bulcha (1995: 57).

On the other hand, the Oromo in the East maintained a cautious relationship with the Christian-led government that assumed control following the Egyptian departure (Hassen, 2008: 33-61). They did not welcome missionaries, preferring to adhere to their newly acquired religion. Thus, the literacy gap between the East and the West continued to widen. Therefore, it is unsurprising that all literature produced in the country, including school curricula, media, and publications, is predominantly in the Mac'c'a variety.

However, the current trend in developing the overwhelming linguistic elite shows that standardizing the language is imperative. To do so, all the varieties must firstly be enumerated and recognized. Then, a clear criterion must be established, circulated through the available media, and adopted. This process will end the prevailing hegemony that entails mutual resentment of

the speakers of the eastern and other dominated dialects versus the Mac'c'a variety speakers. This process is for the general benefit of the language community, enabling the move towards minimizing ambivalence and discouragement in researching and developing the language. Moreover, standardization is indispensable for the precision required by digital technology and the necessity of teaching heritage language to the burgeoning diaspora of children.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that the Oromo language, Oromic, is a pluricentric language with dominant and non-dominant varieties within the same national boundary. The Eastern Oromic variety is shown to have specific features in terms of linguistics, caused by geographical, historical, and economical factors. Its status as a non-dominant variety is demonstrated through linguistic features and its relationship with the other varieties, especially the Western Mac'c'a variety. Finally, it suggests that future standardization of the language will level the current gap and promote the development of the language.

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