

**Dahālik, a newly discovered Afro-Semitic language
spoken exclusively in Eritrea**

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Dahālik is the term used by the native speakers when they refer to their language: literally (**haka (na) dahālik** means '(language (of)) the people of Dahlak'. Up to 1996 French survey on the island, this language had totally escaped linguistic investigation. Dahalik is spoken exclusively in Eritrea off Massawa, on three islands of the archipelago of Dahlak: Dahlak Kebir, Nora and Dehil. It is the mother tongue of about 2500 speakers.

Many people in Eritrea think that the mother tongue of the islanders is either a dialect of Tigre or Arabic. Whereas the Dahalik speakers claim the originality of their language with regard to Tigre, many of them think that it is a mixed language based on Tigre, Arabic and Afar. Moreover Tigre native speakers in Massawa report that they cannot speak Dahalik, while they understand it without much difficulty. Actually they understand the vocabulary but not the meaning of the discourse. The linguistic situation on Dahlak Kebir is characterized by multilingualism: Dahalik, Afar, Arabic, and, to a lesser degree, Tigre. Modern Standard Arabic is the language of primary schooling on the islands.

The corpus collected during my four fieldworks, two on Dahlak Kebir and two in Massawa, provided main data concerning phonetics, morphology, syntax, vocabulary and oral literature. The study of these data suggested that, on one hand, Dahalik does belong to the Afro-Semitic group (within the Southern Semitic), like Tigre and Tigrinya, and that, on the other hand, it differs from both.

Many linguistic features point out to the specificity of the Dahalik language. Although the results of my research should be considered as preliminary, however they allow here and now to set apart Dahalik as an original unit within Northern Afro-Semitic sub-group.

A few linguistic characteristics of Dahalik

The **phonemic system** includes 24 consonants, as in Tigre. But unlike Tigre there is no ejective consonant in Dahalik, except **ç** in very few (loan?) items. The degree of pharyngealization in **ṭ** and **ṣ** (corresponding to ejectives in Tigre and emphatic consonants in Arabic) is weak. /q/ is commonly articulated as an uvular: voiced in intervocalic position, voiceless in front of a consonant.

There are seven vocalic timbres : **a, ε, e, i, o, u,** and **ə** in unstressed syllable. The status of long vowels has yet to be specified. Vocalic harmony is a phenomenon noted in the

data. Assimilation of the apico-alveolars, and bilabials with the first consonant of the suffix is regular.

Morphology

— The **nouns** have two genders and two numbers.

Gender opposition for adjectives is very often marked by vocalic apophony: **ellim**, **ellam** ‘black (m., f.)’; **nūš**, **nīš** ‘small, young (m., f.)’.

Broken plurals are widely spread: ʕayaf ‘birds’(sg.ʕōf), **betātin** ‘sperm whales’ (sg. **bettān**), but external plurals with suffixes are rare: **ḥaʕanet** ‘children’ (sg. **ḥaʕan**).

The independent pronouns are: **ana** ‘I’; **enta**, **enti** ‘you (m., f.)’; **itu** ‘he’, **ita** ‘she’; **nehna** ‘we’; **intum**, **intun** ‘you (m., f.)’; **itun**, **itan** ‘they (m., f.)’.

— The **verb** morphology is based on aspectual opposition with two simple paradigms: **balaʕa** ‘he ate’, **balleʕ** ‘he eats’.

At the perfect and the imperfect, the verbal personal markers are the same as in Tigre, except for the imperfect 3m. sg. (**nasaʕa** ‘he took’, **nasseʕ** ‘he takes’), and 3m.f.pl. (**nasaʕáyu**, **nasaʕáya** ‘they (m., f.) took’, **nasseʕu**, **nasseʕa** ‘they (m., f.) take’), with no personal marker, number and gender marker only.

At the imperfect, a few irregular verbs have the prefix marker **i-** for 3m./f. pl, as in Tigrinya: **ibil** ‘he says’ (**tibil** ‘she says’), **ibilu**, **íbila(n)** ‘they (m., f.) say’.

This aspectual system is enlarged by composed conjugations with two auxiliaries /to BE/ (**h**)alle and **kōna**: **tuwallid hallet** ‘she is about to give birth’, **amerk(o) kunko** ‘I have known’.

There are derived verbs. The derivative prefixes and the semantic values of derived forms are comparable to Tigre.

The negative conjugation of the verb is specific to Dahalik: **i-təharrikó-ni** ‘I didn’t speak’ ((**təharrikó** ‘I spoke’), **i-harre-ni** ‘I don’t/ he doesn’t speak’ (**harre** ‘I/he speak/s’); **y-allē-ni** ‘there is nothing’.

Syntax

There is a definite article **ya-**, invariable and prefixed to the noun. It is used only to recall what has just been mentioned (like article **la-** in Tigre, cf. Raz 1983: 34-5).

The proximal deictic is variable in gender and number: sg. m. **di**, f. **da** ‘this’, pl. m. **din**, f. **dan** ‘these’. As a determinative deictic, it is more often suffixed to the noun, sometimes reduplicated before the noun, but never only prefixed.

In nominal sentences there is a copula, the form of which is linked to the independent pronoun (3rd pers.). It varies for gender and number (in plural, agreement in gender is not fixed): msg. **-tu**, fsg. **-ta**; mpl. **-tun**, fpl. **-tan/-tun**.

It is always suffixed to the predicative nominal: ʕad ʕabbay-ta <village / big(fsg.)-COP(fsg)> ‘(the) village is big’; **kile walát alli-l-e ḥuʕuyēt-tun anis-tan** <two/ girls/ it is-to-1sg/ married-cop.mpl/ women-COP(fpl)> ‘I have two girls, they are married, they are women’.

Word order

— In **nominal phrases** the usual order is (article +) qualified + qualifier: **ya-aw-awlet** <art.-father-girl> ‘the girl’s father’, (**da**) **bisíd-da** (/bisit-da/) ʕabbáy <woman-this(f.)/ old(fsg.)> ‘this old woman’.

— The usual order in **verbal phrases** is: Verb (+ suffix pronoun) + auxiliary, but this order is not fixed.

— In **sentences**, the standard order is SOV.

sab min ʿad **gīseyu** <people / from/ village (or country)/ they went> ‘people left the island’
bisít arayah muqo tagarris hisas nedahí-nn-a**** <woman/ contractions/ when/ she feels/ ghee/
we cover-3sfg> ‘when a woman is having contractions, we cover and massage her with ghee’

Lexical sample in Dahalik

hente ‘one’, **kile** ‘two’, **salas** ‘three’, **?isat** ‘fire’, **may** ‘water’, **aḥay** ‘sun’, **wareḥ** / **qammaret** / **qamar** ‘moon’, **dam** ‘blood’, **lisan** ‘tongue’, **sin** ‘tooth’, ʿad ‘village, country, island’, **sab** ‘people’, **bəsit** (or **bisít**) ‘woman’, **inás** ‘man’, **ḥaʿan** ‘child, boy’, **walat** ‘girl’, **miwáʿ** Massawa.

Conclusion

The structure of Dahalik language shows many common features with Tigre, and, to a lesser degree, with Tigrinya. The three languages belong to the same branch of the South Semitic group, more precisely the Northern Afro-Semitic. The similarities between them are due to a genetic relationship. However as compared to Tigre the differences are important and specific enough to exclude the possibility that Dahalik is a dialect of Tigre. Modern Dahalik must be considered as an original unit. It still remains to understand how this language has emerged and what is its true status within the Afro-Semitic group. Classifying Dahalik as an original language is based on three sets of arguments: (i) the linguistic characteristics, (ii) the degree of non-understanding between Dahalik and Tigre speakers (cf. above), (iii) the awareness of the native speakers that their language is different and original .

Concerning the degree of liveliness of Dahalik nowadays, it should be noted that it is the mother tongue of about 2500 Eritrean citizens, and on Dahlak Kebir their language shows many variants in phonetics, morphology, and vocabulary. It is undoubtful that the next survey on Nora and Dehil will provide interesting data to evaluate the dialectology of Dahalik. The Dahalik oral literature (tales, poems) reveals very ancient cultural traditions, specific to the islands. Old people continue to pass it on, whereas some young poets create new pieces in a traditional way and in Dahalik.

It is of utmost importance to carry on with investigation on all the aspects of the Dahalik language. It is essential from a linguistic point of view, and it has pedagogic implications. Furthermore the better knowledge of the languages spoken by the citizens is involved in the preservation of national cultures transmitted through mother tongues. The in-depth study of Dahalik will enlighten the history of the population of the archipelago, and the role played by the Eritrean islands in the ‘semitisation’ of Africa. This research will contribute to save this part of the Eritrean inheritance, and to make broadly known its contribution to the Human patrimony.

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