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A survey of the Dahalik language,

an Afro-Semitic language spoken exclusively in Eritrea

Marie-Claude SIMEONE-SENELLE
LLACAN, INALCO -CNRS
simeone@vjf.cnrs.fr

In memory of Idris Abback

Abstract

The Dahalik language was listed for the first time during the 1996 French survey on the island of Dahlak Kebir, in the State of Eritrea. Up to this date the language had totally escaped to linguistic investigation. It is the mother tongue of about 2500 islanders, inhabitants of three islands of the archipelago of Dahlak: Dahlak Kebir, Nora and Dehil. The in-depth research and the linguistic description began only in 2002. In this article, I shall present the sociolinguistic situation on Dahlak Kebir, and salient linguistic features (phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary) of the language spoken on Dahlak Kebir. I shall point at the originality of Dahalik, and I shall try to determine more exactly the status of this language. Although many similitudes with Tigre, Dahalik is not to be considered as a dialect of Tigre, but as an original language within the Afro-Semitic group. This presentation is based of data collected during my fieldworks in Eritrea on Dahlak Kebir, Dehil, Nora, and in Massawa.

Introduction

Dahalik is an Afro-Semitic language spoken in the state of Eritrea, exclusively on three islands of the Dahlak archipelago, off Massawa: Dahlak Kebir (=DK), Nora, and Dehil. It was listed for the first time during the 1996 French exploratory survey[1] on the island of Dahlak Kebir. Up to this date the language, mother tongue of about 2500 speakers, had totally escaped linguistic investigation.

Dahalik [dahālík] is the term used by the native speakers when they refer to their language. Altough they claim its originality with regard to Tigre, many of them think that Dahalik is a mixed language based on Tigre, Arabic and Afar. In Eritrea, it is generally admitted that many islanders on DK speak Arabic or a dialect of Tigre. In the nineteenth century, W. Munziger (in Dillmann: 1) wrote that Tigre was the first language of the Dahlak inhabitants, and in 1961 Longrigg confirmed it in the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam.* However, Antoine d'Abbadie (1890: 26), according to the informations collected in Massawa in 1840, claimed that the language of the islands was close to Tigray [*i.e.* Tigrinya].[2]

After a sociolinguistic introduction to enlighten the interferences with other languages in contact (Afar and Arabic), I shall present some salient linguistic features (phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary), in order to point at the originality of Dahalik, and to try to determine more precisely the status of this language.

Data[3]

Data were collected during five fieldworks (1996, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) I have carried out in Eritrea, on DK, Nora, Dehil, and in Massawa. During the 1996 first fieldwork in different villages of DK[4], only a vocabulary list of about 250 items and very short texts were collected. These data made some lexical comparisons within the Semitic group possible (using the work of Leslau (1987) as reference), and they gave some informations about verbal and nominal morphology. My preliminary analyses suggested that, on the one hand, Dahalik does belong to the Afro-Semitic group, and that, on the other hand, it differs from Tigre and Tigrinya.

The in-depth research and the linguistic description of the language began only in January 2002, in Massawa, with seven native male-speakers from three different villages on DK. Some texts about the traditional and daily life on DK were recorded, transcribed, and commented with the informants. The corpus provided main data concerning phonetics, morphology and syntax, sufficient to begin the work on Dahalik dictionary.

In March 2003, during the fieldwork in the different villages on DK, I recorded a rich corpus including vocabulary, paradigms, narrative and discursive texts, with many Dahalik native speakers : children, women and men of different ages and belonging to different social categories. For the first time, I collected traditional literature (poetry, tales, stories), and I had the opportunity to record women talking about their daily life in the past and in the present time. In Massawa, in February 2004, the study of this corpus in more detail was carried on, and many new items concerning halieutic vocabulary were collected for the dictionary.

I have only few data collected on Nora and Dehil, during a short survey on these islands in 2005. Thus, I shall limit this presentation to the Dahalik language spoken on DK.

Linguistic situation on Dahlak Kebir

The native speakers of Dahalik think that they represent the majority of the population on Dahlak Kebir. The other languages spoken on the island are Arabic and Afar. There is no Tigre community on the islands.

The geographical distribution of languages spoken on the island (Dahalik, Arabic, Afar) depends on the villages. For example, in Durubbishet 98% of the villagers are Dahalik native speakers (2% are Afar or Arabic native speakers). All the villagers of Dasqo are Dahalik native speakers, while in Jimhile, 50% are Dahalik, 50% Afar, and there are no Arabic native speakers. Dahlak Kebir is the village where Afar native speakers are the most numerous; they make up to 70% of the population and the majority lives within their own circumscribed territory of the village. Other inhabitants are Dahalik (25%) and Arabic (5%) speakers.

Arabic is the language of education in all the primary schools of the island.

The general situation on the island is characterised by multilingualism : Dahalik, Afar, Arabic. Maybe only very few old women are monolingual.

For professional reasons, the male population, fishermen and traders, are in regular contact with Arabic, Afar, Tigre languages in Massawa. Some of them understand Tigrinya but they do not speak it fluently. They have contact with Afar on the Eritrean coast, and Arabs in Yemen and Saudia Arabia. Besides, a variety of Arabic is the *lingua franca* along the African Red sea coast.[5]

Generally, Arabic, or more exactly, Arabic dialects from Yemen and Saudia Arabia, plays a predominant role on the island. Not only because of the origin of some

islanders, but also because of mixed marriage, schooling, and the influence of television. Albeit rare, TV sets are available on the island and they pick up broadcastings from Eritrea but also from Saudia Arabia and Yemen.

There are many Afar-Dahalik mixed marriages but very few intermarriages between Dahalik and Tigre speakers. As far as I know, there are no families in which both father and mother are Tigre and this language is never the only mother tongue for the children. This multilingual situation on the island is comparable with the situation inside the families where mother and father are native speakers of different languages: the children have two mother tongues. Moreover, because of the social organization, when they acquire their first language, they acquire at the same time a second one with parents, relatives, and a third one with their fellows.

This contact situation explains the influence of Arabic on Dahalik, the use of code-switching and loans from Arabic. But it cannot explain the similarity between Dahalik and Tigre.

Interestingly, Tigre native speakers report that they cannot speak Dahalik, while they understand it without much difficulty. However, according to the Dahalik speakers, Tigre speakers can only understand the vocabulary.[6]

The Dahalik native speakers are aware that they speak an original language, but many of them think that their speech is a mixed language[7] based essentially on Arabic, and Tigre (and for some of them, Afar). They consider it a result of contacts on the island between Arabic speakers coming from Yemen and speakers of Afro-Semitic or Cushitic languages coming from the Horn of Africa.

I shall quote one of my informants whose mother and father were Dahalik native speakers. His discourse is representative of the picture that many Dahalik speakers have of their language.

ana	**dahālík**	**aharre,**	**luġɛt-na**	**min**	**salas**	**luġɛt**	**maxluṭet-ta,**
I	Dahalik	I speak	speech-1pl.	from	3	speech	mixing-COP.fsg

tigre,	**šē**	**min-ˁarab**	**be-dīb-a,**	**šē**	**min-tigrinya**	**be-dīb-a,**	**wal-**
Tigre	thing	from-Arabic-	to-in-3fsg.	thing	from-Tigrinya	to-in-3fsg.	but-

-aktar	**tigre**	**taġarrib.**	**tigre**	**na-he**	**aharre**	**u-na-miwaˁ**	**sammeˁ**
-more	Tigre	she comes near	Tigre	of-1sg.	I speak	and-of-Massawa	I hear

As for me, I speak Dahalik. Our speech is a mixture of three speeches: there are in it Tigre, Arabic a little, Tigrinya a little, but it is closer to Tigre. I speak my own Tigre (Tigre variety of mine), and I understand the Tigre variety of Massawa.

The Dahalik native speakers have a very positive attitude towards their mother tongue. They state that it has been used by many generations over more than two thousand years, and that it is very important that it should not be forgotten, in order to save its specificity, and their cultural identity.

In the following, I shall present the features of this specificity that can be deduced at the present stage of my research. The work is not yet completed, so the results I report shoud be considered as preliminary and, by no means, exhaustive.

Linguistic characteristics[8]

1. Phonology and phonetics

Consonants

Table of the consonants

	plosive	fricative	ejective	nasal	lateral	rolled
labial	**b**	**f**		**m**		
denti-alveolar	**t** **d**		**ṭ**	**n**	**l**	**r**
dorso-alveolar		**s** **(z)**	**(ṣ)**			
palato-alveolar		**š** **ǧ**	**(č̌)**			
palatal	**g**	**y**				
velar	**k**	**(x)** **(ġ)**				
labio-velar		**w**				
uvular	**q**	**[χ]** **[ʁ]**				
pharyngeal		**ḥ** **ʕ**				
laryngeal		**h** **ʔ**				

Some specific phonetic features are to be noted :

— Except **č̌** in very few occurrences,[9] there is no ejective consonant in Dahalik, and the degree of pharyngealization in **ṭ** (the ejective in Tigre and emphatic consonant in Arabic) is weak.

— The fricative uvulars are reflexes of the plosive. In intervocalic position, the prevailing articulation of the voiceless uvular plosive /**q**/ is [ʁ] voiced uvular fricative, and [χ] in front of an other fricative:

    saḥaʁa he laughed, but **saḥaqko** I laughed; **buqḥet** or **buχḥet** tomorrow; **ʕanqar** uvula.

The uvular fricative and the voiceless uvular plosive **q** may alternate like in some Arabic dialects of the Arabian peninsula, and like in Arabic used as a *Lingua Franca* by the Dahalik and Afar speakers on the island :

    baqar or **baʁar** cow; **wadaʁa** he fell (cf. Te. **wädqa**, Ta. **wädäqä**[10] to fall, and Arabic **wadaqa** to drop); **qanem** sheep (cf. **ġanam** in Arabic); **qadafa** he rowed; **faraʁa** he shared; **farraq** he shares. The same speaker says **qalīl** or **ʁalīl** (even **ġalīl**) little, but in 'conscious' borrowings from Arabic: **luġet** language, **šuġul** work, business.

Moreover [χ] may be the reflex of the voiceless velar plosive /**k**/:

    aχtar-hum most of them.

— The velar fricative **x**, not present in the phonological consonantic system of Afro-Semitic languages, occurs only in Arabic loans, as in

    xudra fruit.

— The palato-alveolar fricative **ǧ** (IPA /ɟ/), is articulated by some speakers as [dʸ]:

    ǧiran or **dʸiran** crab,

or as a voiced velar stop (maybe only in Arabic loans):

    gediret island (and **ǧediret**); **gamel** camel.

— /**z**/ is not present in the phonological consonant system, it occurs only in some borrowings from Arabic, or in the speech of informants in very close and regular contact with Arabic:

    azakkar I remember; **wazana** he weighted; **guzur** islands (or **ǧuzur**), **gediret** or **ǧeziret**, for singular, in the same sentence.

Other relevant phonetic characteristics are :

– Unstable status of /**h**/ in initial position:

    alle or **halle** to be, to have;

and /ʔ/ in intervocalic position:

> **gaʔis** or **gayis** to leave, to go.

− Weakening of the final dental /**t**/:

> **be ʔ úmm-u** (/**bēt ummu**/) his mother's house

− Assimilation of **b, t, d, l** as final consonants of a noun followed by a deictic, of a verb or a preposition followed by a personal index, a suffixed pronoun or a noun:

> **bikko** (/**bil-ko**/) I said; **binna** (/**bil-na**/) we said; **dimmakinet** (/**dib-makinet**/) in (the) car; **gediredda** (/**gediret-da**/) this (f.) island.

− Gemination of the initial consonant of the suffix pronoun after a verb or a noun:

> **bilenna** (/**bile-na**/) he said (to) us.

− Gemination of the final consonant of a noun phrase when followed by a suffix pronoun:

> **beḥát-tu**[11] (/**bēt-ḥat-u**/) <house-aunt-pr.3msg> his maternal aunt's house.

Vowels

The phonology of the vocalic system remains to be set up.

There are six vocalic timbres: **i, e, ə, a, o, u** (maybe seven with **ɛ**). **ə** occurs only in unstressed syllable.

I cannot assert that the lenght is a relevant feature in the vocalic system of Dahalik. In examples such as:

> **amāʕud** guts; **bōʔa** inside; **ʕīša** to live; **rūḥuq** far,

the long vowel can be conditioned by stress or be an allophone of the short vowel, in contact with a pharyngeal or a glottal stop. Moreover this feature seems to depend on the speaker. Some of them say:

> **bet**, and others **bēt**, house.

We note that in the phonological system of the Afro-Semitic languages, such as Tigrinya, there are no long vowels (Kogan 1997: 427). In Tigre (Raz 1983: 7) "Long vowels are likely to be found in syllables that carry prominent stress". But in the languages in contact with Dahalik (Arabic and Afar) the vocalic quantity is relevant.

− Backward vocalic harmony was noted in the data:

> **ḥɛmbirit** navel, **ḥɛmburut-u** his navel.

Syllabic structure and stress

− The most common syllabic structures are **Cv** and **CvC**.

− In nominal or verbal phrases, the word limit is reorganized:

> **bet úmm-ā** <house/ mother-suf. pr. 3fsg>: [**betúm-mā**] her mother's house; cf. above **bet ḥat-u** => [**beḥát-tu**].

When the first component is disyllabic, its final consonant is articulated as the initial phonem of the second element:

> **ḥénnet ublu-ha** [**ḥénne-tubluha**] <specific dance (fsg.)/ they say-suf. pr. 3 fsg > they call it *hennet* dance.

− The gemination of the second radical consonant in the imperfect conjugation can affect another consonant of the root when the personal pronoun is suffixed to the verb :

> **ʕāsa tanáššef** you (ms) dry fish, and **tanašéff-o** you dry it.

warred he goes down, he pulls down, and **nawarudd-un** we put them down.

2 Morphology

2.1 Pronominal morphology

It is close to Tigre but there are some differences concerning the independent pronouns and the object / dependent pronouns suffixed to a verb or to a noun.

Comparative table of personal independent pronouns

	Dahalik	Tigre (Raz: 36)
sg. 1	**ana**	**ʔana**
2m.	**enta**	**ʔənta**
2f.	**enti**	**ʔənti**
3m.	**itu**	**hətu**
3f.	**ita**	**həta**
pl. 1	**neḥna**	**ḥəna**
2m	**intum**	**ʔəntum**
2f	**intun**	**ʔəntən**
3m	**itun**	**hətom**
3f	**itan**	**hətan**

Some Dahalik speakers have for the 2nd and 3rd pl. **hintum, hintun**; **hitun, hitan**.

Dependent pronouns suffixed to nouns and verbs.

	Dahalik	Tigre (Raz: 37-8)		Dahalik	Tigre
	singular			plural	
1	**-(h)e**; **-ni**	**-ye**; **-ni**		**-na**	**-na**
2m	**-ak**	**-ka**		**-kum**	**-kum**
.					
2f.	**-ik**	**-ki**		**-kan**	**-kən**
3m	**-o, (h)u**	**-u**; **-o, -wo, -yo, hu, -yu**	**-(h)um***	**-om**; **-wom, -yom, -hom**
3f.	**-a**	**-a, -wa, -ya, -ha**	**-(h)an**	**-an, -wan, -yan, -han**

*One fifty years old speaker from Jimhile says -(**h**)**un**.

> **ḥū-he** <brother-1sg> my brother; **ḫēt-e** <sister-1sg> my sister;

> **bayn-e** < alone-1sg> myself; **bayn-ak** yourself (msg.), f. **bayn-ik**; (3msg) **bayn-o**, (f.) **bayn-a**; (1pl) **bayn-e-na**; (2mpl.) **bayn-e-kum**, (f.) **bayn-e-kan**; (3mpl.) **bayn-um**, (f.) **bayn-an** (but the 3rd f.pl. is often similar to the 3rd mpl. **bayn-um** themselves (m. & f.pl.)

There is an epenthtic vowel **i** between the preposition or particle and the suffix pronoun with pronoun suffixed to a particle:

> **misī-ha** (/**misi-i-hā**/) with her; **ʕadér-i-ha** after her; **kamsál-l-i-he** <like-gemination-epenthetic vowel-suf.pr. 1sg> like me.

2.2 Nominal morphology

The substantives (nouns and adjectives) have two genders, two numbers for nouns, but generally a common plural for adjectives. Gender opposition for adjectives is very often marked by vocalic apophony:

> (m.) **ḥačer**, (f.) **ḥačar** short; (m.) **ḥayir**, (f.) **ḥaʔar** small, young.

-**t** is the feminine marker for nouns and a few adjectives:

darbet storm (f.); **itu dahalākéy** you (m.sg) (are) Dahlaki; (f.) **ita dahalākéyt**.

In Dahalik, internal plurals (syllabic or vocalic patterns are different from those of the singular) are widely spread:

(sg. **darbet**) **darāb** storms; (msg. **ḥačar**) pl. **ḥačyir** short

External plurals with suffixes are rare for nouns (more common for adjectives):

(sg. **haʾan**) **haʾan-et** children; **ḥayir-in** (c. pl.) small, young; **ṭawilin** (c. pl.) tall.

2.3 Verbal morphology

The verbal morphology of the basic and derived verbs is close to both Tigre and Tigrinya:

Table of the paradigms of the personal/gender/number indices in the verbal conjugations.

Suffix indices at the perfect				Prefix and suffix indices at the imperfect		
	Singular	Plural			Singular	Plural
1	—**ko**	—**na**		1	(**a**)—	**n**v—
2m.	—**ka**	—**kum/n**		2m.	**t**v—	**t**v—**u**
2f.	—**ka**	—**kan**		2f.	**t**v—**i**	**t**v—**a**
3m.	—**a**	—**yu(n)**		3m.	(**i**)—	——**u**
3f.	—**e/ət**	—**ya(n)**		3f.	**t**v—	——**a**

At the perfect, the 1sg. personal index is similar to Tigre (Tigrinya -**ku**). At the imperfect, the vowel timbre (**e/ə/i/a**) of the personal index depends on the adjacent consonants. The verbal personal markers are similar to Tigre and Tigrinya, except for 3m.sg, and 3m.f.pl. However, for some irregular verbs such as **bīla** to say, which is also used as an auxiliary, the 3rd m.sg PI is **i-**:

ibil he says; **iblu** and **ibla** they (m. & f.) say, (**y**- in Ta, **l**- in Tigre) ;

— As in the other Semitic languages, verbs have a basic stem and derived forms (by prefixation of a morpheme). Basic regular verbs can be divided at least into 4 types on the basis of their pattern (as in the Afro-semitic languages): I and II (comparable with A and B in Te), and III & IV (different from C & D types in Te, or Ta).

Type I (perfect / imperfect): $R^1aR^2aR^3a / R^1aR^2R^2e/iR^3$ (Type A in Te: $R^1aR^2R^3a /$ l-$R^1aR^2R^2əR^3$). The verbs of type I are the most numerous one.

sakaba / sakkib to sleep; **masala / massil** to look like; **wade** / **waddi** to do; **hāba / hayib** to bring; **nasaʾa / nasseʾ** to take.

Type II: $R^1aR^2R^2aR^3a / R^1aR^2R^2iR^3$ (Type B in Te: $R^1aR^2R^2aR^3a /$ l-$R^1aR^2R^2əR^3$)

naššafa / naššef to dry (intrs.); **fakkara / fakker** to think.

Type III: $R^1aR^2aR^3a / R^1aR^2iR^3$ (type C in Te: $R^1āR^2aR^3a /$ lə-$R^1āR^2əR^3$; Ta: $R^1aR^2äR3ä /$ yə-$R^1aR^2əR^3$) :

fahama / fahim to understand;

Type IV: $R^1aR^2(R^3)e / R^1aR^2(R^3)i$ (type D in Te: $R^1aR^2āR^2aR^3a /$ lə-$R^1aR^2āR^2aR^3$):

ḥaʾe / ḥaʾi to marry ; **maʾe**, **meʾe / ma ʾi** to come.

The triliteral verbs are a majority.

Quadriliteral verbs follow the pattern: $R^1aR^2R^3aR^4a / R^1aR^2R^3eR^4$:

ʕambara / ʕamber to call (so); **nafnafa / nafnef** to sprinkle.

— The derivative prefixes and the semantic values of derived forms are comparable to Te.

adarasa / adarris to teach (**darasa / darris** to learn); **abde / abdi** to lose (**bade / baddi** to be lost); **alʔaka / alʔaki** to send.

— The negative conjugation of the verb is specific to Dahalik.

Similarly to Ta, verbs are denied by a discontinuous morpheme which is: **yi-** prefixed and **-ni** suffixed to the verb (or to the verb + suf. pr.). In Te, (Raz 1983: 76) "A verb is rendered negative by means of the prefixed particle ʔi-"[12]. In Ta (Leslau 1941: 75, 88), the negation of the imperfect is **ʔay—n**, and **y—n** in some contexts. In Dahalik the second element **-n** is reinforced by **-i**.[13]

yi-meʔe-ki-ni <neg.-he went-2fsg.-neg> he didn't visit you (f.sg.). **yi-ʔammer-ni** <NEG.-to know.impft.3m.sg-NEG> 'he does not know'; **yi-meʔe-ki-ni** <NEG.-to come.pft.3m.s.-pr.2fsg.(O)-NEG> 'he didn't visit you(f.sg)'.

The negation of existence is invariable in Dahalik and can be compared to Ta[14]. It is based on a verb /TO BE/, **(h)alle**:

y-allēn(i) there is nothing; **ḥente y-allē-ni** <one / there is no> there is nobody.

However, in a compound conjugation with the auxiliary **ḥaddi,** to want, the negation can be expressed by the negative shortened form of **(h)alle** (without the second element -**ni**):

aʔaddim y-elle-ḥaddi <he is quiet/ neg.-BE (pft-3msg.)-want> he does'nt want to be quiet; **naʔaddim yinne ḥaddi** we don't want to be quiet; **addim yuko**[15] **-ḥaddi** <I am quiet/ neg.-BE (pft-1sg)-want > I don't want to be quiet.

3 Syntax

3.1 Syntax of the verb

Tenses and modalities in the verbal system

The verbal system is very complex. It is based on an aspectual opposition, perfect vs imperfect. In addition, compound tenses enrich this basic system. They are based on periphrastic constructions: verb + copula / auxiliary, where both the auxiliary/copula, and the main verb are conjugated. This construction characterizes the relation of the speaker to the process or the relation between two processes inside a text (present, progressive, past, plus-perfect ...). Moreover, these compound conjugations make the expression of many modalities possible (future, inchoative, asserative ...).

Some constructions are close to Te, others are not attested in Te, but in Ta.

— Future may be expressed by imperfect and the suffixed copula (of pronominal origin): msg. -**tu**, fsg -**ta**, mpl. -**tun**, fpl. -**tan**.

2sg. m/f: **tibil-tu/ta**, 2pl. m/f **tebelū-tun/tebelā-tan** you will speak.

Cf. the expression of futurity in Te with a periphrasis: **ʔəgəl** + jussive + **tu** (invariable), (Raz 1983: 68-69).

— Another conjugation is used to express proximal future, progressive and imminence. The conjugation is compounded with the imperfect of the verb + the perfect of **(h)alle**, to be, to exist, to have (to be at), used as an auxiliary (cf. Tigre, Raz 1983:71).The process is presented as certain, sure.

maʔi halliko (var. **maʔilliko)** I'm coming, I'll come (that's sure).

tuwallid (h)allet she is about to give birth.
idamo! ana eštaġil (h)elliko Be quiet (pl.) ! I'm working.

ḥaddi, to want, is used as a modal auxiliary to express an uncertain future, probability.

adabbi l-a-ḥaddi <he sells/ he wants> he wants to sell, he will sell (it's not sure).

— To express past, Dahalik resorts to periphrastic construction with another verb /ᴛᴏ ʙᴇ/, **kūna**/**kōna**, used as an auxiliary. It is attested in Tigrinya, but not in Tigre.

kōna and **(h)alle** are to be distinguished. The former expresses a past tense, and the latter a present.

ḥumum kunko I was ill, I had been ill (compare to **ḥumum (h)alliko** I am ill).

The main verb and the auxiliary are at the perfect conjugation:

béḥin	**myet**	**riyāl**	**kuna**	**hayyib,**	**sáʕa**	**alf**	**riyāl**	**hayyib**
before	100	riyal	he was	he gives	now	1000	riyal	he gives

Before he was giving 100 riyals, now he gives (or he is giving) 1000 riyals.

3.2 Definite Article and deictic

ya- is the definite article. It is invariable, and always prefixed to the noun. Like article **la-** in Te, "it is used only to recall what has just been mentioned" (Raz 1983: 34-5).

gaw	**aw-**	**-a-walet**	**gaʔīs.**	**yā-(a)w**	**walet**	**gurum**	**ibil-l-un**
to	father	girl	he goes	ᴀʀᴛ-father	girl	well	he says-to-them

He goes to the girl's father. The girl's father speaks to them clearly.

The deictic[16] is variable in gender and number. As a pronoun, it is always suffixed to the preposition. As a determinative deictic, it is more often suffixed to the noun, sometimes reduplicated before the noun (but it is very rarely only prefixed).

digid-da to/for this one
m.s. **ḥaʔan** (or **ḥān**)-**di / dí ḥān-di** this child;
f.s. **walet-da** [**walédda**] / **dá waléd-da** this girl;
m.pl. **ḥaʔanet din** [**ḥāneddin**] / **din ḥaʔanet din** these children;
f.pl. **awālit-dan** [**awāliddan**] /**dan awālíd dan** these girls.

The deictic is used to recall what has been already mentioned in the context, but which is not in the immediate preceding context:

ginniyet-da <ginn (f.)-this(f.)> this ginn (as for the ginn), and just after in the sentence: **ya-ginniyet** the ginn (which I have just mentioned).

3.2 Syntax of the sentence

— In nominal phrases except for the article and sometimes for some deictics (cf. above), the usual order is Qualified + Qualifier:

be(t)-umm-u <house-mother-3msg.> his mother's house;
dabbābat na-maḥmūd <moped /of-Mahmud> Mahmud's moped;
bisíd-da (/bisit-da/) ʕabbáy <woman-this(f.)/ old (fsg.)> this old woman;

including when the determiner is a relative clause:

nahār	**d-elle-ḥaddi**
day	that-aux.3ms-he wants

The day that he will choose.

— There is a copula in nominal sentences. It varies for gender (and number, depending on the idiolects), and it is suffixed to the predicative nominal:

šuġul-un   **baḥar-tu,**
business-suf. pr. 3mpl   sea-COP.(msg)
Their business, it is the sea.

luġɛt   **maxluṭet-ta**
speech   mixing-COP.(fsg)
Language (loan from Arabic) is a mixture .

anis-din   **ʕabayi-tun**
women-these   old (pl.)-COP.pl
These women are old

ʕad   **nīš-ta**   **mingabbi, wa**   **ya-gámel**   **ʕabi-tu...**
village   small-cop. (fsg)   if   and   ART.-camel   big(msg)-COP.(msg)

If the village is small and (if) the camel is big ...

— In verbal phrases, the usual order is verb (+ suf. pr.) + auxiliary, but this order is not fixed:

eštaġel-kunko or **kunko eštaġel** I was working; **gayis-kunko** I have left; **kūnayu ʕaʁobū-ni** they were waiting for me; **i-xaderiyu-n-ni darussu** they were not able to learn.

— In simple clause, the usual order is S O V:

sab min ʕad gīseyu <people/ from/ country/ they went>. People left the country (island/village).

— In conditional subordinate clauses, the subordinating marker is usually at the end of the clause or just before the verb:

ḥalib   **galil-tu**   **men-gabbi**   **kile**   **ḥabbet**   **affagir**
milk   few-cop.(msg)   if   2   piece   he pulls out
If there is little milk, he gets out two pieces (of cheese).

In other subordinate clauses the order varies:

ana   **muʁo**   **fādi**   **alleko**   **temaʔa-n-ne**
pr. S. 1sg   when   free   I had   you(sg) come-gem.-suf. pr. 1sg
You will come to me when I am available.

fādi   **nahar**   **ko**   **gabbiʔ**   **maʔe**
free   when   /alleko/   I became   I come
I'll come when I am available.

— Usually in complex sentences, the dependant/subordinate clause precedes the main one, cf. above, and:

itu raʔiya-ka meʔe <pr. S. 3m.sg/ he sees-suf. pr. 2m.sg/ he came> He came to see you; but **kunko ḥaddi ʕaddim** <I was/ I wanted/ I invite > I wanted to invite ... **ḥadagayu-ha tegayis maraḥeb** <they let-suf. pr. 3fsg/ she goes/ bush> They let her to go to the bush.

3.3 Descriptive compounds

In Dahalik, there is a means of verbal creation which is typical to the Afro-semitic languages and to several not genetically linked languages in this area. Depending on the languages, the basis of the new verbal periphrasis may come from either a noun, an adjective, an adverb, an onomatopoeic / ideophonic form, a verb or even a syntagm (Cohen, D. *et alii*, 2002). In my data, the construction is based on ideophonic or onomatopoeic element followed by the verb **bīla,** to say. This

composition is a very ancient means of verbal creation (a process for trans- and intra-categorial derivation), attested as far as in old Egyptian. These compound verbs were called 'descriptive compounds' by M. Cohen (1970: 262)[17]. In Dahalik they are used with an emphatic descriptive value in narrative stories and tales. But this phenomenom is less common than in Tigre and in Afar where it is very widely used.

> **bulluq** and **tubulluq** (reinforced form): splash! ⇒ **tubulluq bīla** <splash / he said> He fell into water with a big splash; **ḥawāt-o tubulluq bileyū-hu** <brothers-suf. pr. 3msg/ splash/ they said-suf. pr. 3msg> His brothers made him fall into water with a big splash; **sakata, tum bīla** <he was silent/ sh!/ he said> He was silent, he remained silent.

4. Vocabulary

Concerning vocabulary, the roots, with very few exceptions, belong to Semitic, or more precisely to Afro-Semitic vocabulary (cf. Leslau 1987):

> **igir** leg, foot (Te. **ʔəgər**, Ta. **ʔəgir**); **ʕīn** eye (Te. **ʕin**); **ʕōf** (Te ʕof, Ta. ʕof and ʕuf) bird; **ʕāsa** fish (Te., Ta. ʕasa); **isād / isad** fire (cf. Agaw **ʔəsād** but Te. **ʔəsat**); **bīlaʕ** he ate (Te. **bälʕe**, Ta. **bälʕa**); **sateʔ** he drank (Te. **säta**, Ta. **sätäyä**); **misi** with (Ta. **məs** and Te. **məsəl** from Semitic root <mtl>).

There are borrowings from Arabic:

> **ṭawīl** long; **xudra** fruit; **waraʁet** leaf; **šuġul** work, business; **eštaġel** I work, he works; **luġet** language.

Some words are borrowed from European languages, essentially from Italian :

> **kōkíyan** mother of pearl (from conchiglia), **salādi** (from soldi).

In my data there are no borrowing from Afar.

Conclusion

The structure of Dahalik language shows a close relationship with Tigre, and similarities with Tigrinya. However, the divergences with Tigre are too important to consider Dahalik as a dialect of Tigre.

The features common to Dahalik and Tigre may be explained by their belonging to the same branch of the South Semitic group. The similarities are due to a genetic relationship, but the differences are important and specific enough to exclude the possibility that, today, Dahalik is a dialect of Tigre or a mixed language. Modern Dahalik can be considered as an original unit in the Afro-Semitic set. Dahalik can be considered, synchronically, as an original variety. This classification is based on three sets of arguments: (i) the linguistic characteristics, (ii) the awareness of the native speakers that their language is different from others, and (iii) the degree of non-understanding between Dahalik and Tigre speakers.

Note that I have collected examples which show that variation is attested in phonetics (such as the phenomena of vocalic harmonization), morphology (e.g. conjugations of weak verbs) and vocabulary (more or less important borrowings). On Dahlak Kebir, these variations seem to be due to dialectal or sociolectal differences, according to villages or to generations. An accurate dialectal study is necessary and should include the study of Dahalik spoken on the other two islands, Nora and Dehil. We must investigate the evolution of Dahalik in different

environments, and the consequences of linguistic interferences and contacts with other Semitic languages, and with Cushitic languages.

Research on Dahalik will have to define the status of Dahalik and to decide between two options, wether (i) the Dahalik language is the result of the evolution of an ancient Afro-Semitic language (or more generally of a Southern Semitic language), confined to a small area where for millenia populations of different languages were in contact; (ii) it is a new vernacularized language coming from an ancient and extinguished vernacular.

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[1] Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle (CNRS-UMR 8135) and Martine Vanhove (CNRS-UMR 8135).

[2] These informations about Munziger and d'Abbadie were given to me by R. Schneider (p. c. Jan. 1997).

[3] I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Dahalik native speakers who are collaborating to this research, and particularly to Mohammed Ramadan who is giving his time and his great knowledge with patience and kindness. I am conscious of how much my research is indebted to them. I acknowledge the Eritrean authorities, in Asmara and Massawa, for facilitating my fieldworks. I thank Saleh Mahmud at the *Curriculum Branch*, for fruitful discussions, and I hope that we can carry out our collaboration on the Dahalik language.

[4] We have planned initially to collect data on Afar and Arabic; when we discovered that there was a third original langage on the island, we recorded just short samples in this variety.

[5] Cf. Simeone-Senelle 2000a, 2000b.

[6] This information was confirmed in Paris by Idriss Abback, native Tigre speaker from Hirgigo. While listening to the recorded data, he could understand many lexical terms but not the meaning of the spoken text.

[7] The same conclusion applies to all the languages spoken on the island. One of my informants asserts that "Only women and their small children are speaking well their mother-tongue. Men are mixing all languages. Children are learning very soon the Dahalik language because all day long they are playing with Dahalik native speakers."

[8] Abbreviations: C consonant - cop. copula - DK Dahlak Kebir - f feminine - intrs. intransitive - m masculine - neg. negation - pft perfect - PI personal index - pl. plural - pref. prefix - pr. pronoun - R radical - sg. singular - suf. suffix - Ta Tigrinya - Te Tigre - trs. transitive - v vowel -var. variant

[9] In my corpus, there are only four examples with **č**, such as : **ḥačer** *short* (msg) - **čibt** *louse*.

[10] In the examples in Te, and Ta the transcription is given according to Leslau (1987).

[11] The non articulation of the final consonant in words such as **bet/bēt**, house, seems to be a dialectal feature.

[12] Example: **səmʕon ʔihalla** 'Simon is not here' (Raz 1983: 49).

[13] Saleh Mahmud (*Curriculum Branch*) informs me that the same construction is attested in Tigre of the area of Massawa (c.p. 2005).

[14] "La forme négative de **ʔallo** est **yällon** ou **ʔayällon** conjugué comme **ʔallo**, ou bien **yälbon** 'il n'y a pas' qui ne se conjugue pas..." (Leslau 1941: 75). In Tigre, the negation of existence is expressed by a negative suppletive form **ʔallabu** (Raz 1983: 49).

[15] The compound conjugation with **ḥaddi** and **elle** as an auxiliary (progressive value) is often grammaticalized **koḥaddi,** from **elliko ḥaddi** <aux.perfect.1s / want.impft.1s> 'I want, I am wanting'

[16] There is also a distal deictic, variable in gender and number. It is based on the morpheme **kɛy** followed by suf. personal pronoun: m.sg. **kɛy-hu**; f.sg. **kɛy-ha** 'that'; m.pl. **kɛy-hun**; f.pl. **kɛy-han** 'those'. It follows the noun.

[17] '*Composés descriptifs expressifs*', following Junot (1933).