

THE BEJA LANGUAGE TODAY IN SUDAN: THE STATE OF THE ART IN LINGUISTICS

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Beja language is spoken in the eastern part of the Sudan by some 1,100,000 Muslim people, according to the 1998 census. It belongs to the Cushitic family of the Afro-Asiatic genetic stock. It is the sole member of its northern branch, and is so different from other Cushitic languages in many respects and especially as regards to the lexicon, that the American linguist, Robert Hetzron (1980), thought it best to set it apart from Cushitic as an independent branch of Afro-Asiatic. But his new classification was not taken up by other linguists. On the contrary, the French linguist Didier Morin (2001)¹ has made an attempt to bridge the gap between Beja and another branch of Cushitic, namely Low-Land East Cushitic and in particular Afar and Saho, the linguistic hypothesis being historically grounded on the fact that the three languages were once geographically contiguous.

Beja is an unscripted language, but recently there has been two attempts to give it an orthography. The first one, using the Latin alphabet, is actually the one which was adopted two years ago by the Eritrean authorities for teaching Beja at school, thanks to a collaboration with two linguists from the SIL, Mr and Mrs Wedekind. In Sudan, another SIL member, Anna Fisher together with a group of Bejas, has been working on an Arabic based orthography, but this has not been recognized by the Sudanese authorities, as there is no official policy of mother tongue teaching at school in the Sudan, contrary to Eritrea.

The Beja society is organized in tribes, and the Bejas call themselves Arabs (*?arab*)², while the Beja language itself is designated by the term *beḏawiye*, which is a cognate form of the Arabic term for ‘bedouin’. But not all the Bejas speak Beja. Most of the Beni Amers for instance speak a variety of Tigre, while most of the Halengas speak Arabic.

¹ Following Moreno (1940).

² Arabs are named either *balawiyeet* or *ḏahli* (name of an Arab tribe).

2 OVERVIEW OF GRAMMATICAL STUDIES

Beja has been documented sporadically since the mid 19th century. I will just mention below the most important milestones.

The first work goes back to Almquist (1881-5), with a description of the Bishari dialect, but its value is often limited to a historical one rather than a linguistic one as he was far from having understood all the morphological rules and functions of the language.

Then comes the pioneer work in three volumes of the famous German scholar, Leo Reinisch (1893-4), which includes a grammatical description mixing elements of the northern and southern varieties (Beni Amer, Bishari and Hadendowa), with a lot of etymological notes, and a collection of texts in phonetic transcription with a translation into German, which was followed by a bilingual dictionary (1895). Unfortunately he lost most his description of the Halenga variety and could only publish a few phrases and sentences (1893:44-54).

Fundamental for Beja studies is the valuable reader, made of a grammar, a collection of texts and a lexicon, published by E.M. Roper in 1928, an administrator of the Red sea area during British rule over the Sudan. Although he states that his description is based on the dialect of the Hadendowas, it represents in fact an intermediary variety between the northern and southern zones, according to Didier Morin (1995:22). It contains also a number of interesting remarks about other varieties and no better reference grammar has been published so far, but of course it would need to be updated.

During the early 1960's, another British linguist, Richard Hudson (1964), wrote his Ph-D on the phonetics and morpho-syntax of the language, but within a theoretical framework which makes it very difficult for non-initiated readers to use it and to read the examples. More handy are his various sketches published in journals and collective books (Hudson 1974 and 1976). He gives little information about his informants, and the varieties he described are, according to Didier Morin (1995:357), those of Port Soudan and Tokar.

We owe to the Swedish linguist Östen Dahl (1984) a good sketch description of the functioning of the verbal system of Beja. Mainly based on a typological questionnaire which he filled in during a trip to Port-Soudan, his analysis is still in need to be enlarged to, and documented with, various sorts of texts.

The French and Polish scholars, David Cohen (1969-70 and 1972) and Andrzej Zaborski (1975), dealt more particularly with the historical development of the verbal system of Beja. Both their contributions are fundamental in this domain, and the critics of David Cohen's

hypothesis (1969-70) on the renewal of the verbal values by Voigt (1988) do not hold as he misunderstood the aspectual system of Beja (see Cohen forthcoming).

Worth mentioning also are the more recent publications of my French colleague Didier Morin, and especially his grammatical sketch in Morin (1995). It mainly deals with the southern variety of the Gash area and the register of oral literature, of which a short sample of three tales is given. This work is based on the survey he completed in Kassala (south) in the early 1990-s, and his collaboration with Beja speakers settled in Cairo, and some informations are given on dialectal variation. Valuable comments on the Beja language are also to be found in his work on Beja poetry (1999).

Since 2000, I have personally been able to do fieldwork regularly on a yearly basis in various Beja areas in Sudan, and published a number of articles, some of them with my Sudanese and Beja colleague Mohamed-Tahir Hamid Ahmed, on different aspects of the language, dealing with phonetics, syntax, prosody, grammaticalization processes, and code-switching.

All these descriptions do not give yet a complete picture of the grammar of the language, and although Beja is far from being the more ill-known language of Sudan, a lot still remains to be done. It must be mentioned that in a near future a grammatical overview of the variety of Beja spoken in Eritrea should be published in Cologne, and that an Australian student is planning to write a reference grammar of Sudanese Beja for her Ph-D thesis, with the assistance of Beja speakers settled in Australia. In what follows, I would like to comment more particularly on four different domains of Beja studies: lexicology, dialectology, sociolinguistics and bilingualism, as well as my own results since 2000.

3 LEXICOLOGY

In the lexical domain, the documentation is rich of four lexicons³. That of Almqvist, although full of mistakes, can still bring some information when carefully confronted to the others. Reinisch's work contains a dictionary which seems to have items from both the northern and the southern varieties, while Roper's is mainly based on the intermediate variety. Hudson's lexicon which was available on the net⁴ looks like a mixture of varieties, but no precisions are given. Using these works and unpublished material, the Czech comparatist,

³ I have been told that a dictionary of the Beja variety of Eritrea has been recently issued, but I have not been able to trace it yet.

Václav Blažek, has undertaken the edition of an etymological dictionary of Beja. Two parts are already published, organized by lexical fields: fauna and kinship terms. This is the first important contribution in this domain since the less systematic attempts by Reinisch. Together with his works on the reconstruction of the phonetic correspondences between Cushitic and Afro-Asiatic languages, this etymological lexicon, when completed, will hopefully give the linguists a sound ground for comparing Beja to other Cushitic languages. But what Beja still needs is a complete dictionary of the language and its dialectal varieties illustrated systematically with examples. Together with my Sudanese colleague, M-T. Hamid Ahmed, we are preparing the edition of a quadrilingual dictionary (Beja – Arabic – English – French), which will be published hopefully in a not too remote future.

4 DIALECTOLOGY

In the domain of Beja dialectology, although the main zones are identified and documented, little has been written in a systematic way about the linguistic criteria which found the classification, nor on further sub-classifications.

Since Didier Morin's work (1995), following Beja speakers' own divisions, it is now considered that there are two major dialectal zones, a northern one named after its Beja geographical designation *mimhit beḍawiye*, and a southern one, divided into the Gash area (*gašit beḍawiye*) and the transition zone of Sinkat which is a contact area for both varieties. But the precise limits of each zone are not clearly identified, neither are the sub-varieties. The linguistic criteria which was explicitly adopted for such a division is based mainly on the vocalic system (a short *u* in the northern zone, and a short *i* in the southern one, plus a tendency to vowel lengthening in the Gash area, Morin 1995). In all other linguistic domains, morphology, syntax, prosody, lexicon, the linguistic criterias are not explicitly and systematically reviewed, apart from scattered mentions in the literature, such as the pronominal suffixes *-hoos / -hoosna* for third persons for the Halenga tribe variety as against a zero morpheme for other dialects.

As a matter of fact, during the early period of Beja studies, the different varieties were usually referred to by the names of the tribes who spoke them, and this probably represented, and still represents, some kind of a reality, as the few phonetic and grammatical differences mentioned e.g. by Roper bear witness. Actually the variety spoken by the Halenga tribe, as

⁴ It seems to be no longer available (on 02/22/2006) on the website from which I downloaded four years ago.

well as the one spoken by the Bishariyin in the northern zone are still regarded today by Beja speakers as particular entities, as is the variety spoken by the Eebshar in the southern zone. But on which linguistic criterias, I have not been able to enquire yet.

In this respect, the references to particular tribal varieties in the literature are to be taken with caution. For instance, although Roper explicitly mentions that he describes the particular tribal variety of the Hadendowa, he is in fact describing another variety, that of Sinkat (Morin 1995:22). On the other hand the changing transcriptions of Hudson and his unorthodox classification of phonemes also lead to the wrong characterisation of a particular tribal dialect, that of the Arteiga, by David Cohen (1988), followed by Didier Morin (1995). Contrary to what they wrongly understood from Hudson's publications, the variety spoken by the Arteiga tribe does have a palato-alveolar consonant *ʃ*, as do other Beja varieties (see Vanhove and Hamid Ahmed forthcoming).

One cannot conclude but that more studies are needed in the domain of dialectology. If indeed dialects are documented, most of the information dates back at least to half a century if not a century or more, and it obviously needs to be checked and updated. Today, the issue of having access to remote areas is a major obstacle to getting first hand information *in situ*. But as Beja males do travel a lot, and as big urban centers have been attracting more and more Bejas from rural areas since the last severe droughts of the mid 1980's, it is possible to get first hand information. But one has to be aware that these migration movements are bound to have changed to an unknown extent the dialectal map of Beja.

Although it seems today that the social and linguistic prestige of the Hadendowa tribe mainly settled in the Gash area is growing, nevertheless Beja speakers usually consider that the northern variety spoken in the area of Erkowit represents the "purest" variety of Beja, as I have been repeated over and over again. More precisely this concerns two tribes settled in this area, the Beḍawi and the Sinkatkinab (both are also settled in Sinkat and Tokar). Whatever "pure" may mean to Beja speakers, the belief is based on a sociological fact, i.e. the genealogy of the Beḍawi who consider themselves as the oldest Beja tribe and the most free of mixture with Arabs (M-T. Hamid Ahmed, p.c.). Whatever this belief means also for the history of the development of the Beja language is still an open question.

5 SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION

The sociolinguistic situation of the Beja community today is interesting in various respects, but more in this domain than others, very little is known. The information I can provide, although based on my own observations, are only very partial ones.

Today, most Beja male speakers are bilingual, to various degrees, and more in big urban centers than in rural zones, with a variety of Sudanese Arabic, sometimes, in the coastal urban center of Port-Soudan, also with Yemeni Arabic through trade, and settlements of Yemeni speakers. It is also believed that Bejas recently settled at the periphery of the urban centers are more monolingual than the rest of the Beja population of the cities and that they do not speak Arabic to their children. One would need an intensive study of the linguistic attitudes and practice in these areas, but my visits in the peripheral areas of Port-Soudan convinced me that there is some ground in this belief. On the other hand in the few rural settlements I have been able to go to in the Gash area, monolingualism seem to concern mainly the children, both boys and girls, who have not been to school, and a fairly important proportion of the women.

Regarding women, although again what I can tell is very fragmentary, the degree of bilingualism varies a lot according to the age of the speakers and to their geographical settlements. Of course, schooling has done a lot to give them at least a basic knowledge of Arabic in both its classical and Sudanese varieties, but if this is (at least partly) true in towns such as Kassala or Port-Soudan, it is by no means common in small settlements and villages and not all the fathers allow their daughters to go to school. Still, it is not so rare to meet young women in their twenties, with just a primary level education, who do not master Beja properly or who have only a passive knowledge of it, even in small villages like Wagar or Sinkat. Which is not without bothering Beja males because the Beja society regards as a transgression of its moral values the fact that women speak Arabic, which is considered as the language by means of which one can express things forbidden or impolite to be told in Beja (Hamid Ahmed 2005). I have observed repeatedly that women immediately stop speaking Arabic, be it with me or among themselves, whenever a man from their family enter their room. On the whole, one can state that the more traditional and conservative the environment, the lesser the degree of knowledge of Arabic among females.

In this respect, it has to be mentioned that the study of female speech has now become possible since surveys have been conducted also by women (Anna Fisher and myself), and this new opening has already brought to light a number of peculiarities of female speech which will have to be taken into account also for dialectal classifications. One cannot rely only on

half of the population to give an overview of a linguistic community! But the domain of gender studies in sociolinguistics is only beginning to be investigated.

6 RECENT RESULTS

In this part of my presentation, I would like to go on with a brief overview of the main results, not all published yet, that I have achieved during the past six years since I started my survey in Sudan. They concern mainly four domains, code-switching and sociolinguistics, phonetics, grammaticalization processes, and discourse analysis. Apart from phonetics, these research are entirely new in the domain of Beja studies and were not tackled with before.

6.1 Sociolinguistics

One of the most obvious consequences of bilingualism is the growing practise of code-switching, that is the mixture of both Beja and Arabic within one utterance or turn of speech. This is true for males, but also for females at least in a town such as Port-Soudan, where I could observe the phenomenon myself. Of course such a practise is probably encouraged culturally by the pervasive rules of politeness and noble behaviour in speech which promotes allusion as the normal way of speaking (see Hamid Ahmed 2005). As Hamid Ahmed (2005) worded it, “the Beja language seems so linked with Beja ethics that Arabic-Beja bilingual speakers switch to Arabic in order to avoid transgressing Beja ethical rules.” But more common factors crosslinguistically are also at stake and lead to a change of language, in either direction. Using the technics of conversational analysis, I could show in a case study of female speech (Vanhove 2003), that pragmatic, pychological and social factors, such as forgotten episodes in a narration, forgotten words, a change of topic within a narration or the presence of a non-Beja or non-Arabic speaker in the audience, are also involved in the code-switching processes.

Still, eventhough the influence of Arabic cannot be denied, Beja speakers do not consider that their language is today an endangered language. The very facts that the highest moral and cultural values of this society are in one way or the other linked to their expression in Beja, that Beja poetry is still highly praised, and that the claims over the Beja land are only valid when expressed in Beja, are very strong social factors in favour of its preservation. True enough Arabic is considered as the language of modernity, but it is also very low in the scale of Beja cultural values as it is a means of transgressing social prohibitions. Beja is still the

prestigious language for most of its speakers because it conforms to the ethic values of the community.

Still the status of Beja vs Arabic is ambivalent and I have the feeling that the prestigious status of Beja is loosing ground at least in some parts of the Beja society, and not necessarily among intellectuals.

To my opinion, one of the main problems that Beja is facing today is the parent's attitude towards the practise of Beja for their children. There is a quite widespread belief among Beja speakers settled in urban centers such as Port-Soudan, but also outside the Beja land, e.g. in Khartoum, that speaking Beja to their children would prevent them from learning Arabic properly and therefore deprive them of the possibility of social promotion through education. The result is that in some families (whose number I have had no way to estimate) children are only spoken to in Sudanese Arabic, and have only a passive knowledge of Beja, if any. Of course, in addition to schooling, the ethnic and linguistic mixity of these urban centres is an important factor which favours a change in language attitudes.

A number of anecdotes are also good indicators of the decline of the prestigious status of Beja. Those which I recorded from young girls in their teens, living in rural areas, are quite relevant here. These are bilingual jokes based on misunderstandings of Arabic words, which are taken for Beja ones by rural males. The fact that they are adapted from the Arabic repertoire about the Beja people, as Catherine Miller pointed out to me, reveals some kind of acculturation process to the opinion of the Arabs about the Bejas. Laughing at monolingual men is a way to challenge the linguistic conservatism, as well as the traditional ethic values. Such anecdotes are signs of a changing sociolinguistic situation where Arabic is less and less despised, and also the sign (a timid one though) of a challenge to the forbiddance of speaking Arabic imposed on women.

Below is a summary of one of these anecdotes:

[A Beja peasant goes to the market to look for a job. He sees a lady that he immediately wants to marry⁵. Her family refuses unless he goes to study at school. The Beja enters the school at the moment when children are gathering in rows before entering the classrooms.]

1. *ti-mdiráasa íb-ayt*

After he had gone to school,

*ti-mdiraasáa-t-ib taabúuri-ib*⁶ *safá intibá iisiisódn-hoob*

at school when they ordered: '**Line up! at ease! attention!**' ,

⁵ An impossible situation in small towns, but less unlikely in big cities such as Kassala and Port-Soudan.

⁶ The word is Arabic, but the suffix *-ib* 'in' is Beja.

safá ?éen-hoob safá-b ká-aki ídi ?éen

when they said ‘**At ease!**’, he said: ‘I am not engaged yet!’ (engaged = *safa-b* in Beja)

intibá ?éen-hoob gáale han báaya-ab ká-aki ídi ?éen

When they said: ‘**Attention!**’, he said: ‘I did not go to anyone’s place!’ (*een tiba* <those / you went> in Beja)!, it is said.

I would not like to give the impression to overestimate the overall impact of these linguistic attitudes on the future of the Beja language. They are to be taken as symptoms for sure, but not as signs of an irreversible decline. Considering the absence of quantitative and statistical surveys, it is difficult to say whether Arabic is progressing significantly at the expense of Beja or not, but one must not forget that the use of Beja has already disappeared at the margins of its domain, in favour of Arabic at the Sudanese-Egyptian border, and of Tigre at the Sudanese-Eritrean border among the Beni Amer tribe. The phonetic and lexical pressure of Arabic on Beja is already obvious. For instance among the some 4,200 lexical items I have collected so far, almost 12% are of obvious Arabic origin, the large majority of which seeming to be recent borrowings. But whatever the future of Beja in the Sudan, it is definitely in need of a thorough survey of its sociolinguistic situation.

6.2 Phonetics

The phonetic study concerns one particular issue in the consonant system, in connection with comparative linguistics, that of the possible existence of a velar nasal consonant η . I could show (Vanhove 2004b), against Didier Morin’s statement (1995), that it cannot be considered as a phoneme in Beja, but simply as a phonetic variant of the nasal n in front of a velar consonant, as it was usually understood from previous descriptions. This study led to the discovery of a large set of semi-nasal articulations of consonantic groups starting with a nasal, which are no more phonological than the η . In turn, it led me also to analyse that part of the lexicon (some 50 items only, mainly nouns) which develops an unpredictable nasal element before another consonant only in certain inflectional and derivational processes or dialectal variants. For some of the items concerned, it is obviously the result of a partial loss of a former nasal (see already Reinisch 1894), but for others no cognate words could be found within Cushitic or Afro-Asiatic. Considering the variety of the items concerned, two different types of phonetic change had to be hypothesized, one in agreement with the etymological explanation, i.e. the loss of a nasal consonant in initial position, but also the reverse explanation, that of its acquisition in the same position. So, in part of the vocabulary, the introduction of a nasal could be the result of a recent change. Whether this is an inner

innovation, a structural heritage (Iraqw, another Cushitic language spoken in Tanzania, shows a similar process), or the result of linguistic contact still remains to be studied.

6.3 Grammaticalization

The research on grammaticalization processes has been tackled with at four different levels. The first one concerns an ongoing process within the verbal system, that of the use of an auxiliary verb meaning ‘say’ *di* (Vanhove forthcoming b). This auxiliary is used, as very often elsewhere in north-east Africa, as a kind of expressive morpheme independent of aspectual, temporal or modal values. Below is an example of this construction:

- too-lew* *bak šibib a-sisiyoo-d-eeb* *oo-door /* *batuu*
 ART.F.SG.A-stomach thus look PF1SG-CAUS-say-REL ART.M.SG.A-time / she.N
šaat-u / *šaat ʔataab-t-u /*
 meat-PRED3SG meat ful-F-PRED3SG
 When I looked at the stomach, it was meat, it was full of meat!

As the process is still limited in Beja (contrary to Afar for instance), it is possible to observe its initial stage in synchrony. From the semantic point of view, it is interesting to note that the construction is limited to five semantic types of lexical bases: movements, sensory and intellectual perceptions, noise, ingestion words, and violent actions, that is to cognitive processes based on the human body. As for the pragmatic point of view, the construction with ‘say’ is usually used to highlight the beginning of a new episode and key moments in a tale or a narration, what Longacre (1990) called ‘pivotal storyline actions and/or events’. *Di* is a good example of how pragmatics, cognition and lexical semantics are involved in grammaticalization processes.

The second study (Hamid Ahmed and Vanhove 2004), also concerns the introduction of a new auxiliary verb, but this time for the expression of contrastive negation. The verb *rib*, meaning ‘refuse’ as a main verb, underlines, when auxiliated to another verb, a contrast with a real or supposed assertion, and its usage is so far limited to the narrative register, as in the following example:

- tak fađigtamun hawla takat dirʔaab* *ikte-yeet door-han firi-it*
 man forty year woman being married PF3SG-REL long time-even give birth-VN
tirib
 PF3F.SG-refuse
 After a man had been married 40 years, still his wife never gave birth.

The necessity to underline an unexpected negative event seems to be the pragmatic driving force for the introduction of new negative markers in Beja as in other languages. But social rules of politeness are also important mainsprings. In the Beja society, expressing directly a positive statement with an affirmative utterance is often considered as rude. So, using negative statements instead of affirmative ones enhances their positive content. The consequence thereof is that if a speaker wants to make clear that something is denied, other devices have to be introduced and among them, the use of *rib*. The euphemistic over use of negative utterances due to social reasons and taboos have lead to their linguistic weakening, hence the necessity to introduce new and more expressive structures. *Rib* illustrates not only the pragmatic dimension of an evolution, but also the social factors which are at stake.

With the third process of grammaticalization, also at its initial stage, one enters the domain of complex sentences, and the issue of the change of syntactic scope of the items concerned. The study dealt with the marking of purpose sentences with *miyaad*, a verbo-nominal form of the verb meaning ‘say’ (Vanhove 2004a), e.g.:

3. *oo-bhar eebi / y-ʔay-ee šig^wiq-a miyaad*
 ART.M.SG.A-sea go.IPF3M.SG ART.M.PL-hand-POS3PL wash-GER say.NA
 He is going to the seaside in order to wash his hands.

The construction seems to have emerged quite recently in the language as it had never been recorded before with the conjunctive value. This is an illustration that the grammaticalization chain which was once proposed for the verbs ‘say’ is neither universal nor unique, because two intermediary stages between ‘say’ and purpose conjunction are missing, the quotative marker and the complementizer. In Beja, the grammaticalization scenario corresponds to the one which integrates the meaning of a construction during its development (cf. Tom Güldemann 2001), in this particular case the notions of goal and intention which are also part of the meaning of ‘say’ and its derivative formations in Beja.

The last study (yet unpublished) also deals with a still marginal construction of Beja, that of a syntactic expression of focalisation, which is usually marked only by means of a special prosodic pattern. The syntactic construction involves the simultaneous use of both the verbal and the nominal predicative conjugations:

4. *ani adir-i ti-dhaniinaay indiy-eeb-ka*
 I.N kill.PF.1SG-PRED1SG ART.F.SG-monster say.IPF3M.SG-L-DISTR

Every time (someone) says: ‘I am the one who killed the monster’.

Such a construction was already recorded by E.M. Roper (1928), but with different values, that of deontic modalities. Today although the deontic value is still understood it seems to be out of use and considered as “old-fashioned”. Such a semantic change can easily be explained if one takes into account the fact that both values belong to the intersubjective modality, and that particular semantic reinterpretations of syntactic structures within a general semantic frame are indeed common processes of grammaticalization crosslinguistically.

What all these studies show is that, as is normal for any language, Beja is submitted to various processes of syntactic changes, and that these processes can be observed not only in the long term as comparative linguistics showed, but also at a particular moment of the development of the language in synchrony. Furthermore, they occur, in these instances, by means of the inner structure of the language without any influence of the languages in contact (Arabic, Tigre and also, to an unknown extent, Nubian).

6.4 Discourse organisation and prosody

The study of the enunciative functions of the independent pronouns tackled with another aspect of the linguistic system of Beja which is of interest at two different levels (Vanhove forthcoming a). First for the analysis of the textual and discourse organisation of the utterance, because this pronominal set, whose use is fairly rare, does not express syntactic functions but enunciative values of topicalisation, subject focalisation, viewpoint, and post-rhema. Second for the ongoing changes within the pronominal system diachronically. As a matter of fact, the independent pronouns occur quite often today with a deitic element which is cliticized to them and does not agree for gender, and often also, for case:

5. *um-barook* *ti-dhaniinaay* *bi-t-tam-ay-hook*
DEM.M.SG.N-you.M.SG.A ART.F-monster NEG-3F.SG-eat-OPT-O2M.SG
‘You, do not let the monster eat you!’

These agreement discrepancies signal that the pronominal system is undergoing a process of morphological renewal on the basis of deictic elements, a widespread phenomenon crosslinguistically, and which is cyclical in Beja (eight of the ten pronouns of the independent set have already been renewed with a deictic basis as compared with other Cushitic and Afro-Asiatic languages).

Pragmatics, textual and discourse organisation as well as deixis are also at stake in studies of complex sentences.

The first one concerns the role of temporal clauses in the construction of narrative discourse as cataphoric and anaphoric elements (Vanhove 2005). In Beja, the repetition of an utterance by a temporal clause is a very frequent narrative technique, which from a pragmatic viewpoint allows memory processes to take place, and gives time for the integration of the linguistic message. At the discursive level temporal clauses constitute an iconic construction which builds the frame of the utterance by marking the chronological or logical succession of events and indicates that a follow up to the clause is coming:

6. *baaskiitya* *ʔeen* / *baaskiityan-eet* *ti-minda* / *uut* *tuu-yin*
 fast.PF3M.SG say.PF3PL fast.PF3M.SG-REL.F ART.F-time DEM.F.SG.N ART.F.SG.N-sun
q̣ib-at tirib *ʔeen* / *tuu-yin* *q̣ib-at tirib-eet* *ti-minda* /
 fall-VN refuse.PF3F.SG say.PF3PL ART.F.SG.N-sun fall-VN refuse.PF3F.SG-REL.F ART-time
too-yin geediya *ʔeen* /
 ART.F.SG.A-sun throw.INT.PF3M.SG say.PF3PL
 He fasted, they said. When he had fasted, that sun did not set, they said. When the sun did not set, he threw (a stone) at the sun, they said.

Anaphoric pronouns being rare in Beja, it can be hypothesized that this scarcity is compensated by the over-use of more complex syntactic structures of cross-reference, i.e. the temporal clauses. This is in line with what can be observed in other African languages such as Gula (Nilo-Saharan), Čamba-Daka (Adamawa), or Bata (Chadic).

The analysis of the values and functions of two converbs, i.e. non-finite verbal forms which occur only in dependent clauses, gave the opportunity to enlarge this type of studies also to prosodic criteria (Vanhove forthcoming c). Like temporal clauses, the clauses with converbs constitute either the temporal (iconic) frame of the utterance or its causal frame, depending on the converb, when they occur in initial position before the main clause.

7. *too-ndee* *ah-eetiit* / *uun* *w-ʔoor* *giigiini* /
 ART.F.SG.A-mother take-CNV / DEM.M.N ART.M.SG-boy leave.3M.SG.IPF /
 He took his mother, and that boy left.

8. *šaawi suur* *bee-ti* *ti-takat* *sangi-hoob* *q̣aab-e hooy*
 then in front go-CNV ART.F-woman be far.3SG.IPF-when run-CNV in it
iddag^wiig^v
 catch up.3M.SG.IPF
 Then because he is going forward when the woman is going away, he is running up to her.

But the rarer reverse order induces a change in discursive and semantic functions. The converb clause becomes the focus (or rhema) of the utterance. The study of the prosodic contours proved to be the clue to understand the reasons of the change of constituent order and of semantic function. One of them is linked to co-enunciative parameters and it allows to exclude from discussion the information given in the converb clause. In such a case the converb clause takes an explicative value instead of a causal one. The second reason belongs to the level of co-locution, by means of which the speaker points out to a forgotten element while keeping the mention of the chronology of events, even if not iconic any longer.

7 CONCLUSION

Beja, it needs to be stated again, is not at all an ill-described language as compared to other Sudanese languages. Still the aim of this presentation was to show that a good deal of the previous studies need to be updated and checked, and that the current situation of Beja in the Sudan, at all levels of analysis, needs to be accounted for in detail. It has been possible to introduce some new areas in the research that are of interest for general linguistics, Beja and Sudanese studies, but it is still a long way before a complete description of the language will be achieved.

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