

Amharic

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Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia is the Semitic language with the greatest number of speakers after Arabic. However, while there are large numbers of people throughout Ethiopia who speak Amharic as a second language, mother-tongue speakers are concentrated in the highland plateau extending from somewhat south of Addis Ababa, the capital, northwards to a line running approximately WNW from Korem. This territory is bounded to the East and West by lowland areas where other languages are spoken.

Some good descriptions of Amharic phonetics and phonology are to be found in Armbruster (1908: 4-50), Cohen (1970: 29-68), Ullendorff (1955), and Podolsky (1991). As regards its dialect situation, Amharic is in great need of systematic research. The only published work on the subject (Habte Mariam Marcos 1973) is both useful and suggestive for future work, but it is a brief pioneering effort. The speech of Addis Ababa has emerged as the standard dialect and has wide currency across all Amharic-speaking communities. The most divergent dialect is that of Gojjam province, though the Mänz and Wällo varieties also show their own marked features, especially in phonology.

Ato Yalew Kebede is a 29 year old male Amhara whose speech was recorded and transcribed for this illustration. He was also responsible for the translation of 'The North Wind and the Sun'. He grew up in Gondar, an urban centre noted for its 'good' Amharic. Gondar Amharic is extremely close to the Addis Ababa standard dialect in all its features. However, one or two things emerge in the passage which identify the origin of the speaker; for example, [bægənza fək'adu] instead of standard [bægəzza fək'adu] 'by his own will'.

Consonants

	Bilabial	Lab-dent.	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal	Labialized Labial	Labialized Velar
Plosive & Affricate	(p) b			t d	tʃ dʒ		k g		b ^w	k ^w g ^w
Nasal	m			n		ɲ	ŋ		m ^w	
Fricative		f		s z	ʃ ʒ		h		f ^w	
Tap/Trill				r						
Approximant	w					j				
Lateral Approx.				l						
Ejective stop	(p')			t'	tʃ'				(p ^w)	k ^w '

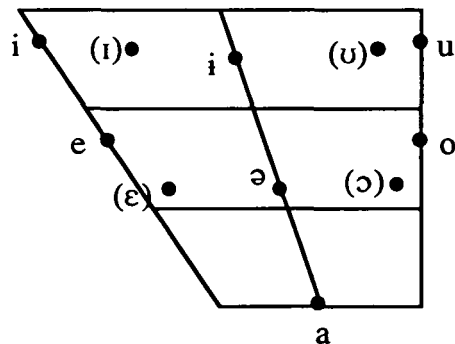
Additional consonants t^w', h^w', s'

p	posta	'post (mail)'	t	təkkələ	'he planted'	k	kəbbəbə	'he encircled'
b	bəkk'ələ	'it sprouted'	d	dərrəsə	'he arrived'	g	gərrəmən	'it surprised me'
p'	p'app'as	'church patriarch'	t'	t'ərrəgə	'he swept'	k'	k'əddədə	'he tore s.t.'
m	məkkərə	'he advised'	n	nəddəfə	'it stung'			
f	fəllək'ə	'it gushed up'	s	səbbərə	'he broke s.t.'	h	hakim	'doctor'
			z	zəffənə	'he danced'			
			s'	s'afə	'he wrote'			
			tʃ	tʃəlləmə	'it got dark'			
			dʒ	dʒəmmərə	'he began'			
			tʃ'	tʃ'ərrəsə	'he finished'			
			r	rəzzəmə	'it became long'			
			ʃ	ʃərrəbə	'he plaited'			
			ʒ	ʒəmbər	'sun'			
			l	ləmmənə	'he begged'			
			ɲ	təɲnə	'he lay down'			
			j	jəlləm	'there is not'			
w	wat'ə	'he swallowed s.t.'	tʷ	tʷ'af	'wax taper'	kʷ	kʷas	'ball'
pʷ	pʷ'ugʷame	13th month'				kʷ	kʷ'akʷ'ate	'whooping cough'
						gʷ	gʷaggʷa	'he became full of suspense'
bʷ	bʷambʷa	'pipe (conduit)'				hʷ	hʷala	'after'
mʷ	mʷammʷa	'it dissolved'						
fʷ	fʷaffʷa	'falling water of waterfall'						

The voiceless bilabial stops /p, p', pʷ/ are extremely rare, and are confined to words of foreign origin. Phonologically, the postalveolar affricates pattern with the stops. Because of its affinity with the labialized consonants, we have placed /w/ in the 'labial' column. All consonants with the exception of /p, p', tʷ/, h, hʷ/ have geminate counterparts. In the case of /ɲ/, single and geminate do not contrast phonologically, and it is usually claimed that the geminate variant occurs intervocalically, while the single variant occurs elsewhere. Consonants may be geminated (strengthened) following nasals; an interesting example in our text is /bət'inkare/ 'in strength' (see further below).

Vowels

i	kis	'pocket'
i	min	'what?'
ɪ	jɪh ~ jih	'this'
e	k'es	'priest'
ɛ	jəmmil	'he who says'
a	bal	'husband'
ə	kəbt	'cattle'
ɔ	gʷɔrf	'flood'
o	s'om	'fast (n.)'
u	kʷʊlf	'lock'
u	t'ut'	'breast'



Phonetic diphthongs [aɪ], [aʊ], [əɪ], and [əʊ] occur, but phonotactic patterns suggest that these should be analysed as sequences of /a/ or /ə/ followed by /j/ or /w/. The latter interpretation is the one adopted in the transcription of the specimen passage below.

The vowels written /i/ and /ə/ here are often represented by the symbols [ə] and [ä] respectively. It is possible to argue that /i/ is not present in underlying representations, but is always epenthetic (see Hetzron 1964; Hayward 1986). In the Ethiopic script, where each symbol represents either C or CV, C and Ci are not distinguished; for example, the same symbol (፳) represents both /t/ and /ti/.

The vowels represented by the symbols [ɪ, ʊ, ɛ, ɔ] are not independent phonemes, but allophones of the central vowels /i/ and /ə/. Following postalveolar and palatal consonants, (which, from a phonological point of view, form a 'palatal' series), /i/ and /ə/ are often fronted to /ɪ/ and /ɛ/. Following labialised consonants and /w/, /i/ and /ə/ typically have retracted and rounded pronunciations ([ʊ] and [ɔ]). Spelling also needs to be taken into account here, since a literate speaker, whose spelling of a particular form indicates /i/ or /ə/, may pronounce [ɪ] or [ə], especially in careful speech (thus, the variation jih ~ jih noted above). In the specimen passage below, we have written [ɪ, ʊ, ɛ, ɔ], rather than more strictly phonemic /i/ and /ə/, in such cases.

The question also arises of whether [ɪ, ʊ, ɛ, ɔ] (as allophones of central vowels) are really distinct from the independent phonemes /i/, /u/, /e/, and /o/ respectively, as our chart indicates. With regard to the back rounded vowels, the issue is further complicated by the fact that consonants preceding them have anticipatory lip rounding. For example, the /k/ in /ku/ is phonetically [kʷ], and for this reason it is often difficult to choose between /kʷʊ/ (= /kʷi/ in a more strictly phonemic interpretation) and /ku/ on strictly phonetic grounds.

In non-final closed syllables and final syllables closed by two consonants, the two series of vowels do not contrast. We have interpreted all vowels in these environments as phonemic central vowels. For example, we have written /gʷʊlbət/ rather than /gulbət/ 'strength', and /wudd/ rather than /wudd/ 'dear, expensive'. This contrasts with our informant's spellings of the same words, which indicate gu- and wu- respectively.

In non-final open syllables and final syllables closed by a single consonant, both series of vowels may occur. In such environments, there is potentially a length contrast, /i, u, e, o/ being susceptible to prolongation. Prototypically, these long vowels contrast with short /ɪ, ʊ, ɛ, ɔ/ in both duration and quality, but there is a less certain middle ground. In the case of verbs and their derivatives, morphological considerations will often lead to a decision in favour of phonemic central vowels. For example, in the case of /kʷʊt'ir/ 'number', the decision to write /kʷʊ-/ (/kʷi/ in a more strictly phonemic representation) was influenced by the cognate verb /kʷʊt'ərə/ 'he counted'. This belongs to the same verb class as /kʷʊt'ərə/ 'he hired' and should, therefore, have the same underlying stem vowels; thus, a phonemicization /kʷʊt'ərə/ is to be preferred to /kʷʊt'ərə/. Our /kʷʊt'ir/ agrees with our informant's spelling, which also indicates an initial labialized velar. However, we found it very difficult to decide between /bəkʷʊl/ and /bəkʷʊl/ 'side, direction', where no such cognate forms are available for comparison. Our final choice of /bəkʷʊl/ contrasts with the '-kkul' of our informant's spelling. (The complexity of the situation is well-described in Ullendorff 1951; cf. especially pp. 82-83.)

Stress

Stress is weak, and its position is variable. Further investigation is needed concerning the relationship between stress and intonation on the one hand and between stress and gemination on the other.

Conventions

/p, t, tʃ, k, kʷ/ are all moderately aspirated. Voiced obstruents are devoiced pre-pausally and when a voiceless obstruent follows, for example in /libʰs/ 'clothes', [libʰs]. /b/ is realised as an approximant [β] medially between sonorants (for example, in /gʷɔlbət/ [gʷɔlbət]). /l/ is always clear, never dark. Single /r/ is a tap, geminate /rr/ a trill. When they precede the vowels /i/ and /e/, but more especially the latter, consonants may be strongly palatalized, for example in /gize/ [gʲizʲe] 'time'.

In rural speech, /p/ may be replaced by /f/. In initial position, /ʒ/ is now found only in the speech of Mänz. In Addis Abbaba, it has been replaced by the affricate /dʒ/. /ɲ/ occurs initially in only one or two rare words. /s'/ is most commonly pronounced as an affricate, [ts']. It is tending to merge with /t'/, especially in initial position. However, complex regional and sociolinguistic factors affect the occurrence of initial /s'/, which may be retained in certain lexical items in educated speech. Our informant consistently pronounced initial [ts'] in the word /s'əhaj/ 'sun'.

/h/ is voiced between vowels, and may be realised simply as breathy voice on a preceding and/or following vowel (for example, in /bəzzihim/ 'and on these terms', phonetically [bəzzihim]). Following /i/ or /i/, /h/ is typically pronounced as a palatal fricative [ç]. Thus, the form [bəzzi] 'at this' would be pronounced [bəzziç] in isolation or in slow speech.

A prothetic [i] is often inserted before word-initial /r/, for example [irəzzim] 'tall' (no examples occur in the text). [i] may also be inserted after word-final consonants, when the following word begins with a consonant. In our speaker's rendering of the text below, there is variation, for example [libsi læbso] with epenthesis, but [libʰs k'adimo] without it. Such cases of epenthetic [i] are not noted in the transcription. Another case of epenthetic [i] in our informant's rendering of the text which is not noted in the transcription, but which needs to be mentioned, occurs in the form /bət'inkare/ [bət'inkare]. Here, the /k/ undergoes post-nasal strengthening and this conditions [i] insertion. In other cases, [i] may be devoiced and so short that it is barely audible. This occurs in two forms in our text, when it follows the feminine prefix /t-/ (in these morphological contexts geminated to tt-): [sittidzemmīr] 'when she was beginning' and [jemmittibalt'] 'she who is greatest'. In the second of these, the pronunciation of /b/ as [β] confirms the presence of the vowel.

Transcription of recorded passage

s'əhajinna kəsəmen jemminəfsəw nəfas

s'əhajinna kəsəmen bəkkʷɔl jemminəfsəw nəfas inenəɲ t'ənkarrə inenəɲ
t'ənkarrə bəmmil jikkərrəkəru nəbbər. bəzzi gize and mənɣədəɲna jəbird

mækkələkəjə libs ləbso jiggʷaz nəbbər. kəzjam mənɣədəjɲəw ləbird
 mækkələkəjə ləbsot jemmihedəw libs k'ədimo jaswəllək'ə bət'inkare
 jibəlt'al bəmmil təsmammu. bəzzihim məsərət kəsəmen bəkkʷul
 jemminəfsəw nəfas ballə bələlləw gʷulbət bəhajl nəffəsə. honomgin bəhajl
 bənəffəsə kʷ'ut'ir mənɣədəjɲəw jəbasəwnu bələbbəsəw libs jiddzəbbən
 jemmər. bəmətʃ'ərrəfam kəsəmen bəkkʷul jemminəfsəw nəfas bəgənza
 fək'adu akʷ'omə. s'ahajm bətərawa wətt'atʃinna muk'ətwan mawrəd
 sittidzəmmir mənɣədəjɲəw minimm saj kʷ'əj wədijawnu jələbbəsəwl libs
 awəllək'ə. bəmətʃ'ərrəfam kəsəmen bəkkʷul jemminəfsəw nəfas s'əhaj
 bət'inkare kəssu jemmittibəlt' məhonwan jaləwudd bəgidd amməne.

Orthographic version

ፀሐይና ከሶሚን በኩል የሚነፍሰው ነፋስ

ፀሐይና ከሶሚን በኩል የሚነፍሰው ነፋስ እኔ ነኝ ጠንካራ እኔ ነኝ ጠንካራ በሚል ይከረከሩ ነበር። በዚህ ጊዜ እንደ መንገደኛ የብርድ መከላከያ ልብስ ለብሶ ይጓዝ ነበር። ከዚያም መንገደኛው ለብርድ መከላከያ ለብሶት የሚሄደውን ልብስ ቀድሞ ያለውለቀ በጥንካራ ይበልጣል በሚል ተሰማሙ። በዚህም መሠረተከሶሚን በኩል የሚነፍሰው ነፋስ ባለባለው ጉልበት በሀይል ነፈሶ። ሆኖም ገን በሀይል በነፈሱ ቁጥር መንገደኛው የባሰው በለባሰው ልብስ ይጀባን ጀመር። በመጨረሻም ከሶሚን በኩል የሚነፍሰው ነፋስ በገንዘ ፈቃድ አቀመ። ፀሐይም በተረዋ ወጣችኛ ሙቀቷን ማውረድ ስትጀምር መንገደኛውምንም ላይቆይ ወዲያውኑ የለባሰውን ልብስ አወለቀ። በመጨረሻም ከሶሚን በኩል የሚነፍሰው ነፋስ ፀሐይ በጥንካራ ከሱ የምትበልጥ መሆኗን ያለውድ በገድ አመነ።

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