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INFILLS: NOUNS AND VERBS WITHOUT LEXICAL
MEANINGS IN SOMALI ORAL POETRY

B. W. Andrzejewski

EDITORIAL

Some ten years ago publication of the journal *African Language Studies* was suspended. *African Languages and Cultures* (ALC) is a new journal from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London that intends to pick up where ALS left off and carry on the tradition of Africanist scholarship in language and language-related studies. The crisis in African language studies in Britain that came about as a result of cuts in government funding in the early 1980s has, at least temporarily, passed over. The founding of ALC marks our faith in the future of our studies and by a happy and auspicious chance also marks the fiftieth year of African Studies at SOAS. We see this journal as providing an outlet for research relating to language and culture within the general field of African studies.

Within African studies we see a gap between journals specializing in linguistics on the one hand and social sciences on the other. It is our intention to bridge that gap by representing a range of intellectual interests, both interdisciplinary and specialist, within language and cultural studies. We welcome Africa-oriented papers in descriptive linguistics, comparative linguistics and classification, and other areas of the humanities such as oral literature, African writing in African and metropolitan languages, African art and music. Further, we will look to publish papers from the perspective of other disciplines focussing on language data or language issues.

To cater for material, whether language monograph or thematic collections of papers, that is too bulky for the journal, it is the intention of the editorial committee to produce occasional supplementary volumes. ALC is produced by an editorial team based at SOAS.

1. Introduction

In the last three decades substantial progress has been made in the study of Somali poetry.¹ One aspect, however, has not yet received adequate attention, namely, the occurrence in poetry of nouns and verbs² which have no lexical meaning in isolation from their context. This omission is due, in my view, to the fact that no models are available in established literary theory and criticism which would be readily applicable to the relevant Somali data. The subject lends itself much more to description and discussion if some of the insights derived from the deconstructionist approach to the process of literary communication are taken into account. In particular, I have in mind the emphasis given by that approach to the active and creative role of the reader in the reception of a text. One has, of course, to make some adjustments when applying these insights to Somali oral poetry since deconstructionist theoretical writings deal almost exclusively with written texts. One has, in fact, to replace mentally such terms as 'reader', 'reading' and 'text' by 'listener', 'hearing' and 'oral text'.

The observations presented in this article apply to oral poetry only and take the audience as the central point of reference. Written poetry, as well as poetry which uses writing in its composition but is disseminated orally, are excluded even though the phenomenon described here is also found in them. There are some differences of detail between them and purely oral poetry and they require separate treatment which, it is hoped, will be given at a later stage in another publication.

Nouns and verbs which have no lexical meaning are frequently encountered by the listener in Somali oral poems. Such words if they were to be heard in isolation from the unique context of a particular poem would not be understood by him at all since they are not stored, like other words, in his

¹ General information and bibliographical guidance concerning Somali poetry can be found in: Abdillahi Deria Guled (1980); Andrzejewski (1984, 1985 and 1986); Antinucci and Axmed Faarax Cali 'Idaajaa' (1986); Cerulli (1959 and 1964); Johnson (1972, 1974, 1979, 1980, 1984 and 'in press' (a) and (b)); Lamberti (1986); Suid S. Samatar (1980 and 1982); and Yaasiin Cismaan Keenadiid (1984); (see References).

² The term 'verb' includes here 'hybrid verbs', that is those which belong to the 4th Conjugation in the classification adopted in Agostini, Puglielli and Ciise Moxamed Siyaad (1985). This conjugation subsumes the verbs of the 4th Conjugation and adjectives in the classification used in Bell (1953) and in Saecid (1987).

lexical memory. Yet the unwritten code of Somali poetics demands of him that he should fill such semantically empty words with meaning by making inferences from the context in which they occur in the poem. He must not dismiss them as something extraneous to the language or something totally meaningless. In this respect the poetic code compels the listener to use his creative imagination and his powers of logical reasoning to cooperate with the poet by filling the semantic blanks in the oral text. At the same time it gives him a wide latitude of interpretation.

In this article I propose to call these semantically empty words *infills*,³ a word which aims at conveying the creative role of the listener when he fills their semantic vacuum with meaning obtained from the inferences derived from the context of a particular poem. Infills have the formal characteristics of ordinary nouns and verbs: they conform to all the rules of Somali morphology and syntax and unlike onomatopoeic words do not have any distinctive phonological features. They can be divided into three types: opaque archaisms, unabsorbed loan-words and words with invented roots.

Opaque archaisms are words which are intuitively perceived by the listener as belonging to the earlier stages of the language but which are no longer meaningful to him. He might have heard them before but at the time he either did not understand them or understood them but afterwards forgot what they meant. They must be distinguished from ordinary archaisms which are numerous in Somali and which are kept alive by their frequent occurrence in proverbs and popular quotations from oral poems. It is a common practice among Somalis to spice their conversations, even if the subject is concerned with practical matters, with proverbs and lines of poetry.

It is also necessary to bear in mind that till 1972 Somali society was almost entirely non-literate in its own language and even the number of people who were literate in foreign languages was relatively small in proportion to the total population. Thus the audience of oral poems could not after the performance consult dictionaries where meanings of archaic words would be explained. Even now, in spite of great progress in Somali lexicography, the number of copies of dictionaries in circulation is still very small and, in addition, many archaic words have evaded the word searches undertaken by dictionary compilers. This is hardly surprising since the main sources of information on archaisms are still the memories of old men and women scattered throughout

³ I am indebted to my wife for suggesting 'infill', a term borrowed from the terminology of architecture, as a label for the type of words discussed in this article. I also acknowledge the help I received from Axmed Yuusuf Faarax and Maxamed Xaamud Sheekh, researchers at the Somali Academy of Arts, Sciences and Literature, who gave me the opportunity of discussing with them the use of infills and the theoretical issues involved in this practice. During the early stages of my research into this aspect of Somali poetics I profited greatly from the guidance I received from the late Musse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal, one of the leading Somali literary scholars and a renowned connoisseur and reciter of oral poetry.

the country. Written documentation of the older stages of the Somali language is very scanty indeed and does not go back further than the 19th century.

The opaqueness of archaisms is relative since the knowledge of ordinary archaisms differs from person to person depending on his life experience and age. What is opaque to one listener of a poem may not be so to another.

To the second type of infills belong unabsorbed loan-words. Somali oral poets often borrow words from languages with which they became acquainted through living on the linguistic borders of Somali speaking territories, through contact with foreigners at home and abroad, or through study. The words they borrow are frequently entirely new to the language and have not been previously absorbed into the normal vocabulary. In consequence they would not be understood by a monolingual speaker or one who does not know the particular source of the unabsorbed loan-word. On the other hand, if the listener knows the etymon of such a loan-word it is no longer an infill to him and in this lies its relativity.

Poets also invent entirely new word-roots which have no lexical meaning for any listener outside their particular context. Such words, like all other infills, are nouns and verbs from the point of view of their morphology and syntactic behaviour. They differ sharply from coined words⁴ which, though new, derive their meaning from existing roots through previously unused combinations with other roots or affixes or through semantic shift. Thus such a coined word as *shabeelnaagood* 'an inveterate trickster who seduces women and ruins them' derives its meaning from the existing lexical items *shabeel* 'leopard' and *naag* 'woman', combined with the genitive plural suffix *-ood*. In a word like *gantaa1* 'rocket missile' its modern meaning is a result of a semantic shift from the original lexical item which means 'arrow'.

Words with invented roots are at times difficult to distinguish from opaque archaisms or from unabsorbed loan-words taken from little known languages, and even listeners who are connoisseurs of poetry are often uncertain which they are. Some of them, when in doubt, tend to assume that all infills, unless there is evidence to the contrary, are opaque archaisms, a view which reinforces their pride in the lexical riches of their mother tongue. But the practice of using words with invented roots as infills is generally known and some poets admit to it openly. There is also another proof of the existence of this practice in the fact that some poetic infills are not recognised as archaisms even by very old people who come from the same locality as the particular poet and have had the same linguistic background and the same contacts, if any, with foreign languages.

⁴ For a description of word-coining methods used in Somali see Caney (1984).

2. *How inferences are made from the context*

A Somali listener to an oral poem is helped in his task of making instant inferences from the context by the fact that poems are normally chanted or sung at a slow speed and that they are interspersed with pauses. Repetition of lines is commonly practised by reciters or singers and this gives the listener even more time for making inferences. As verbatim memorisation is widely used, a listener with a good memory can go back to a particular line if he wishes to peruse the particular infill and its context at leisure after hearing it. He can also do so by attending another performance of the poem; an individual listener can even secure a repeated performance in private if he shows particular appreciation for the poem or reveals that he wishes to memorise the whole text verbatim.

The listener also receives a great deal of help in making his inferences from the fact that the trend of thought of most Somali oral poems is very clear and their pragmatic message is easy to grasp. This is not surprising since poets are deeply involved in current public affairs, comment on them and endeavour to influence their course, often very successfully.⁵ This aspect of the poems constitutes an important part of their overall context and consequently assists the listener in dealing with the words which are infills to him.

What happens in the listener's mind when he makes inferences from the context cannot be known with complete certainty. Inquiries which I have made among the devotees and connoisseurs of Somali poetry, including such luminaries as Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal, suggest, however, that the process though subtle in its perception of detail is basically very simple and could be profitably compared to the experiences of an English-speaking person who reads a poem from the 15th or 16th century. If he has no specialised training in the English language of that period and does not take the trouble to use editorial notes or a specialised dictionary he will no doubt encounter words which to him are semantically empty, totally or in part. Like the Somali listener to a poem, he is likely to make instant inferences from the context. In spite of the vagueness and uncertainty of the meanings which he arrives at he may still fully understand the trend of the poem and enjoy it.

Some insight into how Somali listeners make their inferences can be obtained from the following experimental translation in which the infills are given in their Somali, untranslated form but are treated as English nouns and verbs from the point of view of their grammar and syntax. Three examples of such translations are given below and in them the untranslated Somali words are graphically differentiated. The examples are taken from a passage in a

poem by Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan⁶ in praise of Xuseen Dhiqle, his faithful friend. It was composed at the time when many members of Xuseen Dhiqle's clan deserted the Sayid and went back to their home region where Janan, a small dry river valley, is situated. The passage is given in full in the next section of this article.

According to several people whom I questioned on the subject, infills in (1), (2) and (3) below were perceived as belonging to the categories of opaque archaisms, unabsorbed loan-words and words with invented roots respectively.

- (1) Jirka da'ay jalleysaha gugii, hara jidhaamowday
'The shower that poured down, the jalleyse of the spring rains,
a pond that filled to the brim'

In the Somali text *jalleysaha* is a combination of the word *jalleyse* and the *-ha* form of the definite article, represented in the translation as 'the'. The passage of the poem from which this line is taken describes the arrival of spring rains after the hardships of the waterless season. For the Somali pastoralists this event brings joy not only on account of its visual beauty but also because their survival and that of their herds depends on it. From this extralinguistic context the listener can infer that the meaning of the infill *jalleyse* falls within such a range of options as 'joy', 'joy and splendour', 'joy and relief', etc. Alternatively, since spring rains are often torrential, he could assign to *jalleyse* such meanings as 'mighty force', 'vehemence', 'fury', etc.

- (2) Aadaa jamalka soo raray markay, Janan u guureene
'You loaded the *jamal*-s to come here, while they moved on to Janan⁷.'

In the Somali text *jamalka* is a combination of the word *jamal* with the *-ka* form of the definite article represented in the text of the translation as 'the'. From the point of view of its grammatical status *jamal* could be either a singular or a collective plural noun. The context of the whole passage makes it

⁶ The passage itself is taken from a transcript of a recital of the poem, written down by Sheekh Jaamac Cumar Ciise some time between 1955 and 1959. The oral performer from whom the transcript was taken was Cabdi Cali Guuleed 'Cabdiyaar', an elder who knew it by heart. The transcript was published in Jaamac Cumar Ciise (1974), on pp. 58-62. Another transcript of this oral poem, containing some minor variations, is provided in Yaasiin Cismaan Kccnadiid (1984), on pp. 165-67. For information about Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan, the leader of the Dervish Movement in Somalia, see Said S. Samatar (1982) and Yaasiin Cismaan Kccnadiid (1984).

⁷ I have not found Janan on any map or in any gazetteer and the information concerning its location is based on oral reports. Note that Janan is homophonous with *janan* 'a general' and this has led some people to interpret the phrase *markay Janan u guureene* as 'when they defected to a [foreign] general'.

⁵ Extensive information concerning the involvement of Somali poets in current affairs can be found in Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964), Antinucci and Axmed Faarax Cali 'Idaajaa' (1986), Johnson (1974), Laitin and Said S. Samatar (1987) and Said S. Samatar (1982).

clear that the pronoun -ay (in markay) 'they' refers to Xuseen's kinsmen and not to jamal-s.

The inference which can be made from the immediate context given here is that jamal means 'one or several beasts of burden' or 'one or several vehicles' since it is the object of the verb raray 'loaded'. The second possibility would be eliminated by the fact, which is a matter of general knowledge, that the Dervishes had no motor transport at their disposal and did not normally use any vehicles drawn by animals. In Somalia the beasts of burden are either camels or donkeys, but for long distances transport camels would be used, so that jamal could only mean 'a camel' or 'camels'. Since it is rare for anyone to migrate with only one camel the inference would be that several are meant and this is reflected in the translation by adding the English plural suffix -s to the infill jamal. The word jamal is, in fact, Arabic and means 'a camel'.

- (3) Onkod jow leh daad soo jimraday, jahada oo khiintay
Thunder that reverberated, flood water that jimraday-ed, the earth and air ahead
that vibrated with sounds.'

In the Somali text jimraday is a verbal form of the General Past Tense and to show this the English suffix -ed is added to it in the translation. The form jimraday has the suffix -aday which places it in the 3rd Conjugation⁸ composed, with very rare exceptions, of non-stative verbs. Its tense and conjugation convey then the notion of an action of a non-continuous nature or a change of state, the nature of which can be inferred from the fact that the grammatical subject of jimraday is daad 'flood water'.

The meaning becomes more specific as the listener remembers what happens to water on the ground during heavy spring rain: it first lies in sheets and pools and then breaks into streams which gather into larger ones and the swiftness of their current and their volume increase rapidly.

As they reach deep valleys they turn into seasonal rivers in spate. The contextual meaning of the infill jimraday can thus be 'rushed on in spate' or 'turned into a river in spate'.

3. Infills and the constraints of alliteration and scansion

In dealing with cultural phenomena it is often impossible to establish unidirectional causal links between them. On the other hand, some may be so closely correlated that the possibility of accidental concomitance has to be excluded.⁹ Such a correlation can be posited between the use of infills and alliteration and a quantitative system of scansion, the two very rigid constraints which the Somali poetic code imposes upon poets.

⁸ According to the classification used both in Bell (1953) and Agostini, Puglielli and Ciise Moxamed Siyaad (1985).

⁹ The concept of 'cultural correlates' and its application to Somali poetry are discussed in Andrzejewski (1982).

The rules of Somali alliteration are very demanding. Every line, and in the case of long lines, every hemistich, must contain at least one alliterative word and the same alliteration has to be maintained throughout the whole poem. Clearly, this places a heavy burden on the lexical resources and inventiveness of the poet, who may have to find, for example, 400 words beginning with the same alliterative sound for a poem of 200 long lines.

A passage from the poem already quoted can serve as an example of how alliteration is used in Somali poetry. It was composed by Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan and it is known as Jiinley, i.e. 'the one which alliterates in the sound J'.¹⁰ In the text of this passage, given below, the alliterative words are given in capital letters.

The imagery which is used from the fifth line onwards is that of the first rains of spring and the Sayid uses it to symbolise the excellence of his poem in accordance with the Somali poetic custom which sanctions self-praise. The poem, like the spring rains, is to give comfort to his friend and reward him for his fidelity.

Adaa JAMALKA soo raray markay, JANAN u guureene
JUNNE weeye ruuxaan ahayn, JAADKA aad tahaye
Dadka kale ka JEESTAYE adaan, JAARI kuu ahaye
Waxaan kaa JARREERAYNHAYAA, sanada JIILAALE
Sagal JIIDAN caad JILICSAN iyo JARAR hillaacaya
Onkod JOW leh daad soo JIMRADAY, JAHADA oo khiintay
JOWJOWLIHII xalay sidi, JIBIN u guuxaayey
JIRKA da'ay JALLEYSAHA gugii, hara JIDHAAMOWDAY
JIDHIMADA afkaa marahalyo, JABABKA ceegaaga
JAQAARIDA geedaha noqdiyo, xamashka oo JIIQLE
Sidii JAAWO dhane loo shubaan, JEELKA kaa bi'ine
Waxaan kugu JALBEEBINAHAYAA, JOWHARTII gabaye
JALWISKAYGA maqal caawa waan, JALALABAAYAYE

You loaded the camels to come here, while they moved on Janan
A man who is not of your mettle is but a weakling.
I have turned away from other people but to you I am a close friend.
In the waterless season I shall solace and shield you.
A trailing of rosy light, hazy wisps high above, then towering precipices
of clouds, flashing lightning.
Thunder that reverberated, flood water that rushed on in spate, the earth
and air ahead that vibrated with sounds.
Last night's heavy shower that roared like a falling meteorite.
The shower that poured down, the splendour of spring rains, a pond
that filled to the brim.
Pools overflowing, hollows swelling with water.
The parched land sprouting grass, thickets rustling.
Just as Jaawo, the camel, slakes her craving when brine is poured for
her, so will your longings be allayed:

¹⁰ See Note 6.

I shall entertain you with a jewel of a poem.
Listen to my words then – tonight I shall pour them out for you!

The demanding rules of alliteration are combined with those of quantitative scansion, which has a variety of metres allocated to each poetic genre.¹¹ In each metre there is a fixed number of morae, i.e. time units of syllabic length, with a short syllable counting as one mora and a long one as two. In addition there is a system of distribution of short and long syllables within the line described by Johnson as a *set rule*, which has two sub-rules. The first governs the distribution of short and long *semes*, i. e. 'slots' into which the vowels of the morae fit. The second is represented by a relationship between morae and syllables, called the moro-syllabic relationship.¹²

A syllable is long when it has a long vowel or diphthong and short when it has a short vowel or diphthong. The length of vowels is constant except in a small group of words where it varies according to the style of pronunciation. These variations are used by poets since they can choose between the short and long variants to suit the requirements of scansion. The words which contain variations are very few but have a high frequency of occurrence and they are limited to certain grammatical categories such as pronouns and the definite articles.¹³ Variations in the length of diphthongs depend on the nature of the sounds which follow them immediately and they again are used by poets as they can choose the variants which suit the scansion. It should be noted that the Somali national orthography, in which all the examples in this article are written, has standardised the spelling of words which contain variations in the length of vowels in favour of the longer variants. When oral poems are transcribed in it the reader has to make allowances for this and adjust mentally the spelling to the pronunciation, since otherwise there would be breaches in the scansion patterns.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to describe in detail the various metres and I shall give here only, by way of illustration, the rules for the genre called *gabay*, which dominates the poetry of the public forum. A *gabay* has long lines of 20 morae each, of which 12 occur in the first hemistich and 8 in the second, with a caesura which has to coincide with a word boundary. At the beginning of the first hemistich anacrusis is permitted, consisting of one mora, but in the second hemistich the number of morae admits of no such

additions. For example, the first mora in the scanned example below begins with an anacrusis.

Each line of a *gabay* is divided into 4 feet of 5 morae each. The distribution of the short and long syllables in each foot is governed by a moro-syllabic rule which permits only certain patterns. If we represent the short (one mora) and the long (two morae) syllables by the letters S and L respectively we can formulate this rule by listing the permitted patterns. They are as follows:

SSSSS
SSLS
LSSS
LLS

All other patterns are prohibited and there is an additional rule which demands that in the second hemistich of the line there are at least two long syllables.

How these rules for the *gabay* operate can be seen in the passage already quoted where the figures indicate the number of morae allocated to each syllable. The oblique strokes show the foot boundaries and the comma is placed in the position of the caesura. Note that in an oral delivery of this poem the last vowels in the words *waxaan* (in the fourth and the twelfth line) would be short: *waxan*.

Adaa jamalka soo raray markay, Janan u guureene
1/2 1 1 1/2 1 1 1/2, 1 1 1/2 2 1
Junne weeye ruuxaan ahayn, jaadka aad tahaye
1 1 2 1/2 2 1/2, 2 1/2 1 1 1

Dadka kale ka jeestayadaan, jaari kuu ahaye
1 1 1 1/2 1 1 1/2, 2 1/2 1 1 1
Waxaan kaa jarreeraynayaa, sanada jiilaale
1 1 2 1/2 2 1/2, 1 1 1/2 2 1
Sagal jiidan caad jilicsan iyo, jarar hillaacaaya
1 1 2 1/2 1 1 1/1 1, 1 1 1/2 2 1

Onkod jow leh daad soo jimraday, jahada oo khiintay
1 1 2 1/2 2 1/1 1, 1 1 1/2 2 1
Jowjowlihii xalay sidii, jibin u guuxaayey
2 2 1/2 1 1 1/2, 1 1 1/2 2 1
Jirka da'ay jalleysaha gugii, hara jidhaamowday
1 1 1 1/2 1 1 1/2, 1 1 1/2 2 1
Jidhimada afkaa marahayiyoo, jababka ceegaaga
1 1 1 1/2 1 1 1/1 1, 1 1 1/2 2 1

Jaqaqarida geedaha noqdiyo, xamashka oo jiiqle
1 1 1 1/2 1 1 1/1 1, 1 1 1/2 2 1

¹¹ Detailed accounts of the Somali system of scansion can be found in Abdillahi Deria Guled (1980), Antinucci and Axmed Faarax Cali 'Idaajaa' (1986), Johnson (1979, 1980, 1984 and 'in press' (a) and (b)). Johnson (1979) gives a bibliography of works on this subject published in Somali. Johnson has developed a highly sophisticated system of prosodic transcription which encodes Somali scansion rules and throws into relief their striking similarity to those used in Classical Greek poetry.

¹² See Johnson (1984 and 'in press' (b)).

¹³ For details concerning words with variable syllabic length see Johnson (1984).

Sidii Jaawo dhane loo shubaan, jeelka kaa bi'ine
 1 1 2 1/ 1 1 2 1/2, 2 1 2 1 1 1
 Waxaan kugu jalbeebinahayaa, jowhartii gabaye
 1 1 1 1 1/ 2 1 1 1/2, 2 1/ 2 1 1 1
 Jawiskayga maqal caawa waan, jalalabaayaaye
 1 1 2 1/1 1 2 1/2, 1 1 1/2 2 1

The combined rules of all-through alliteration and quantitative scansion are applied with all severity. Breaches of them lower the prestige and popularity of the poet, and if they are serious and frequent he may be silenced by a lack of listeners and by ridicule from his rivals. As the poet also has to conform to the rules of grammar and syntax and deliver his message in a diction which is aesthetically and intellectually satisfying to his listener, it seems obvious that the licence to make use of infills lightens the otherwise overwhelming burdens of formal constraints. This view is confirmed by the fact that the vast majority of infills carry the alliteration of the poem in which they occur.

Infills are particularly frequent in the classical genres, used mainly in the poetry of the public forum and composed almost entirely by men. They are also found in the poetic genres used by women but occur much less often and this can be explained by the fact that their poems are usually much shorter and thus less affected by the burden of the formal constraints just described.

4. Acceptance of infills by the listeners

Just as Somali poets obediently conform to the constraints of all-through alliteration and scansion, their listeners take it for granted that when they encounter infills they have to accept them as part of the unwritten code of Somali poetics. They depend on the context for their inferences as to their meanings and do not complain even when the levels of semantic uncertainty are unusually high. My observations suggest that many listeners enjoy the challenge of infills and that some of them derive intellectual pleasure from coping with them, which may perhaps be comparable to solving crossword puzzles or double equations.

Although the acceptance of infills can be treated as a matter of simple obedience to the poetic code, one can also posit a correlation with two other aspects of Somali culture. The first is the immense prestige which poets enjoy in Somali society and which has been a source of astonishment among outside observers from the time of the 19th-century explorers to the present day; the epithet 'a nation of poets' has been frequently applied to the Somalis.¹⁴ Given this high prestige, the words of the poet are not likely to be dismissed as nonsensical or looked down upon as ineptly obscure, even if they are infills. The normal reaction of the listeners, if they do not find a context sufficiently

¹⁴ For accounts of the position of poets in Somali society see Andrzejewski (1983), Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964), Johnson (1974), Laitin and Said S. Samatar (1987) and Said S. Samatar (1982).

clear to make the requisite inferences, is not to blame the poet but rather to blame themselves for not being sufficiently perceptive to rise to his level, especially if he is famous.

The other aspect of Somali culture which can be correlated with the willingness to accept infills is the popular belief that poets have contact with the supernatural world from which they derive their inspiration. These contacts are believed to enable the poets through their verses to harm people by curses, bless them effectively and predict the future.¹⁵ Beliefs of this kind are now very much eroded and are mainly confined to the traditional rural communities. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that they played some role in the acceptance of the practice of using infills at the time when it was first established in the remote past. It would hardly be surprising to hear vague and obscure words, not found in the lexical repertoire of ordinary mortals, in the verses of a poet if one thought he was in touch with supernatural forces.

5. Translatability of infills

The translation of infills presents problems which are not normally encountered when dealing with other Somali nouns and verbs. This applies both to the translation of transcripts of oral texts in which infills are found and to entries in dictionaries and glossaries. In the case of texts the translator is often confronted with the possibility of widely different choices and may receive no clear and decisive guidance from the context as to which interpretation is 'correct' and appropriate. If Somali is his mother tongue he can rely on his intuition and however subjective his choice may be it will always be faithful, in some sense, to the original, which was very likely to have engendered a variety of interpretations among listeners, one of which would most probably resemble his own.

For a translator who learnt Somali as an adult, reliance on his own intuition would be misplaced and he has to depend on the assistance of born speakers of the language. Both types of translators would produce translations involving a degree of subjectivity far higher than that which would be expected in texts containing no infills, for even an unusually gifted translator would rarely be able to convey the semantic uncertainty and vagueness of the original. A solution of this problem would be to provide introductory and textual annotations which would reveal to the reader the type of fidelity which has

¹⁵ The practice of cursing in verse is described in Said S. Samatar (1982), pp.81-4 and 177-8. Effective blessing and prediction of the future in that form, though a matter of common knowledge among Somalis, have not yet received attention in the literature on Somali culture. Some indication of the oracular powers of poets, however, is found in Faarax M. J. Cawl (1974), pp. 74-6 (translated into English in Faarax M. J. Cawl (1982) on pp. 45-7). Although this work is a fictionalised narrative it is derived from oral traditions.

been achieved. This would also protect the reputation of the translator if two or more translations of the same text were published with widely divergent interpretations.

If infills are entered in dictionaries or glossaries the situation would be simpler since we would take it for granted that various different meanings could be assigned to the same word. In the case of dictionary entries it would be desirable to cite the text in which the particular infill occurs, thus giving the reader some notion of the inferences from which the meanings are derived. In the categorization of lexical items, which is normally provided in dictionaries, it would of course be essential to provide some indication that the particular word is an infill.

6. Concluding observations

The brief account of infills presented here must be regarded as tentative but I hope that it will attract other researchers to this aspect of Somali poetic art. It could also be relevant to the general theory of literature and might be of interest to linguists working in the field of pragmatics, the branch of linguistics which is capable of offering powerful insights into the process of reception of literary texts, both written and oral.

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A DEFINITE ARTICLE IN XAMTANGA

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1. Introductory remarks

There has been a tendency in recent years in the still relatively new field of comparative Cushitic studies to look mainly at wider issues. Given the very nature of this kind of linguistic research, this temptation is both natural and to some degree forgivable. To direct one's sights ultimately at the reconstruction of Proto-Cushitic and beyond to Afroasiatic is a proper goal. Whilst some work in this field, however, is well-founded and scrupulously carried out, as in all comparative linguistic studies, especially in the 'early days', others may be said to have succumbed to temptation and to have promoted theories, or rather to have hazarded guesses on the scantiest of factual data. Be that as it may; in this paper I want to go to the other extreme and examine one small area of linguistic structure within a single language.

Three years ago I was fortunate enough to be able to collect at first hand a body of data on Xamtanga, an Agaw language spoken across the Amharic-Tigrinya language frontier in northern Wollo and southern Tigre provinces in Ethiopia. The first attraction of having the chance to work on this language was that it had not been subjected to any significant degree of study since the second half of the 1870's when the greatest pioneer of Cushitic studies, Leo Reinisch,¹ gathered material from a single native speaker then temporarily resident in Massawa on the Red Sea coast. The second reason for my joy at this opportunity was that the provision of new data on this branch of Agaw, collected with the hindsight of more developed methods of linguistic analysis than were available a hundred years ago, would hopefully allow the better advancement of comparative work on Agaw, a topic on which I had been engaged for some time. Thirdly, it is certain that, as with the other Agaw languages, the pressure of the dominant Ethiopian Semitic language, chiefly of course Amharic, is causing the rapid demise of this island of Cushitic speech. Consequently, any chance whatsoever to gather new data was not to be missed.²

Xamtanga is spoken in the north-eastern corner of the Amharic speaking area and in a region that has seen a good part of the problems and concomitant social upheavals to which Ethiopia has been subjected in recent years. What is

¹ Reinisch's research into Xamtanga was published almost a decade later: Reinisch (1884). For a discussion of the work of Leo Reinisch on the Agaw languages see Appleyard (1987c).

² The outline description of Xamtanga resulting from this fieldwork was published as Appleyard (1987a-b).