IN DEFENCE OF IMPROBABLE LEMMAS IN SOMALI LEXICOGRAPHY
B.W. Andrzejewski

Introduction

This paper presents some observations which may throw light on the problem involved in the use of the 2nd person singular of the imperative as the lemma, i.e. the lexical entry form,[1] for the weak verbs in Somali, which form the vast majority of all the verbs in the language.[2] Although the subject is mainly of interest to specialists in Somali it involves some general theoretical issues which are relevant to lexicography in societies where the use of dictionaries is still a recent innovation. There is a large number of such societies in Africa and I hope that this paper may lead to some exchange of views in the columns of *AAP*.

A Background Note

Since lemmas are used as the headings of dictionary entries they stand in isolation from any syntactic context. Among Somali weak verbs, however, only the forms of the imperative and the independent past tense can by themselves constitute meaningful utterances. All the other verbal forms require certain minimum syntactic contexts of sentences or phrases without which it is difficult and even sometimes impossible to understand their meaning or to identify their grammatical status unambiguously. Thus they are highly unsuitable to serve as lemmas.[3]

The forms of the independent past tense suffer from a different kind of disadvantage. They are rare and archaic and unless they are tone marked they can be confused with other verbal or even nominal forms. This leaves the imperative forms as the only feasible choice for lemmas of weak verbs. The second person singular of the imperative is particularly suitable for that purpose since it has the added advantage of having no termination and of consisting only of the stem of the verb. This form in fact has been chosen in the recently published *Dizionario somalo-italiano*,[4] a work of pivotal importance in Somali lexicography.

Objections to the Choice

In a paper published in 1981 by the late Professor Francesco Agostini, assisted by a group of Italian and Somali colleagues,[5] the choice of lemmas for verbs is described as *un problema sempre spinoso* "always a thorny problem". When the authors of this paper refer to the use of the

imperative forms as lemmas for verbs they observe that it has the inconven-
ience of not being available for many verbs, for semantic reasons. This
is not an isolated opinion among Somalis and non-Somalis alike and it
seems highly probable that the choice of the verbal noun instead of the
imperative as the lemma for verbs in *Qaamuuska Af-Soomaaliga*, a mono-
lingual dictionary compiled by an eminent Somali scholar, was motivated by
similar views.[6]

The semantic reasons which militate against the choice of imperative
forms as lemmas for verbs are very simple and are not limited to Somali.
The main function of the imperative is to express commands and these are
normally addressed only to humans. The problem arises when a verb de-
notes an action or state which is normally applicable only to animals or
inanimate objects. Some Somalis, when they are confronted with the imp-
erative forms of such verbs, isolated from any specific context of situa-
tion, are either puzzled or amused by them, and if they admit the potent-
iality of their occurrence they regard them as improbable. One can under-
stand their immediate reaction to such commands as those listed below.[7]

Beeran!	"Be planted!" (v.it.1)
Biyow!	"Turn into water!" (v.it.1)
Caanow!	"Turn into milk!" (v.it.1)
Daaq!	"Graze!" (v.tr.1)
Dhalo!	"Be born!" (v.it.1)
Dhisnaw!	"Be upraised!" OR "Be built!" (v.it.3)
Doogow!	"Sprout fresh grass!" OR "Be covered with fresh grass!" (v.it.1)
Madoobow!	"Become black!" (v.it.3)
Raaran!	"Be suspended!" OR "Be placed high up!" (v.it.1)
Radeeban!	"Be blunted!" (v.it.1)
Reeban!	"Be driven back!" OR "Be driven aside!" (v.it.1)
Riixan!	"Be pushed away!" (v.it.1)
Ruq!	"Be uprooted!" (v.it.1)
Weynow!	"Become big!" (v.it.3)

The First Line of Defence

There are two grounds on which the use of imperative forms as lemmas
can be defended even if they may appear at first as improbable as the
examples listed above. The first of them is that many imperative forms
are improbable only in the contexts of everyday life communication but may
occur in other contexts. I have in mind the universe of discourse which
encompasses blessings, incantations, accounts of supernatural events,
poetry and imaginative prose. In fact all the imperatives listed in the
preceding section were obtained from authentic Somali sources. *Caanow*
and *doogow* are old traditional blessings. The former used to be addressed
to newly dug wells and expressed the wish that the camels or cows which
would drink their water would yield plentiful milk, and the latter was add-
ressed to pasture land. The traditional Somali way of thanking someone
for a favour is to bestow a blessing on him or her and the imperative
weynow is one of such blessings addressed to a child.

According to oral traditions, during the War of the Dervishes when
their cavalrymen charged enemy positions some of them shouted "Biyow!" to
the enemy bullets. Legend has it that when this incantation was uttered
by an exceptionally pious man the bullets would indeed turn into water and
leave him unharmed. The imperatives *raaran*, *radeeban*, *reeban* and *riixan*
all occur in an incantation in which the evils of this world are personi-
fied and are commanded to desist:[8]

Belaayada horaay riixan!

Ta dambaay reeban!

Ta saraay raaran!

Ta hoosaay radeeban!

You Evil who are in front, be pushed away!

You who are behind, be driven back!

You who are above, be suspended there!

You who are below, be blunted!

The form *madoobow* comes from young children's lore. Amazed and
amused by the chameleon's ability to change colour they speak to him comm-
anding him to show what he can do. The otherwise unlikely imperative
dhalo is taken from a didactic story which forms part of the repertoire of

oral prose narrated to older children and teenagers.[9]   In it a young man
is looking for a clever wife and uses the traditional home-made intelli-
gence test which consists of trick questions.   At one point he asks three
girls to tell him what in their view is the best way of protecting camels
against raiders.   The answer which he likes best is *Qolo adagna uga dhalo*,
qolo adagna uga guurso! "Be born into a strong clan and marry into a strong
clan!"

In the 1979 translation of the Bible into Somali,[10] which is reputed
for its very high literary standard, we find the forms *ruq* and *beeran*.
They occur in line 6 of Luukos (Luke) 17: *Ruq, oo badda ku beeran...*
"Be thou plucked by the root, and be thou planted in the sea...", a command
which was to be given to the mulberry tree.

Somali poets frequently address animals, birds, inanimate objects and
even the forces of nature in their poems.   The form *daaq* was used by
Ismaaciil Mire, one of the leaders of the Dervish forces.   After their de-
feat he, like many other Somalis, was deprived of access to good grazing
grounds for his camels as a result of changes in the demarcation of front-
iers.   Here he addresses his favourite she-camel called *Markab* and in its
last line he says to her:[11]

Diqdii qaayib awrtana la daaq deeq Allaad sugiye!
"Be contended with this derelict land and graze
with the male camels;   thus you will wait for
God's munificence".

The form *dhisnaw* is found in the refrain of a poem by Cali Diiriye
"Cali-Gaab",[12] which is addressed to the Somali national flag.   In his
poetic blessing he says to it: *Weligaa dhisnaw!* "Be upraised for ever"!

The Second Line of Defence

The second argument which can be brought in defence of using the 2nd
person singular of the imperative as the lemma for weak verbs lies in plac-
ing the problem in a wider perspective.   It is useful here to draw on the
experience of English-speaking countries since in the past the choice of
the lemma for English verbs also presented difficulties comparable to those
encountered in Somali.

Among the verbal forms in English only two can by themselves normally
constitute meaningful utterances, namely the imperative and the infini-
tive.   All the remaining forms have to have minimum syntactic contexts of
phrases or sentences.   The imperative form as the lemma for verbs suffers
from the same disadvantage as its Somali equivalent, namely that it ex-
presses commands and these are addressed only to humans, in normal every-
day communication.   Thus the imperatives of some verbs may seem improbable
except in the context of poetry or the supernatural.

It seems very likely that this limitation of the imperative induced
most of the early lexicographers of English[13] to use the infinitive in-
stead, even though it has the disadvantages of being composed of two
graphic units, "to" and the stem of the verb.   In their dictionaries
every entry which relates to a verb begins with "To".   The strangeness of
this practice (to a modern reader) is mitigated by the fact that the word
"To" is ignored in the alphabetical order, so that if we look up a word
like "to bring" we find it under the letter B and not under T.   The dic-
tionaries usually distinguish between the two parts of the infinitive
typographically.   Samuel Johnson, for example, uses italics for "To" and
roman capitals for the stem, e.g. *To* WALK.

The 19th century was a period of a rapid expansion in the use of Eng-
lish dictionaries in Great Britain and the United States.   They were pub-
lished in millions of copies and came to be used extensively in many
spheres of life, such as education, the publishing industry, business, pub-
lic administration, private reading and correspondence.   The mass produc-
tion of dictionaries militated strongly against the typographic waste in-
volved in placing the word "to" before every verb lemma in a dictionary and
the practice was gradually abandoned in the course of the 19th century.
As a result of this now all the infinitive verb lemmas, deprived of their
first component "to", became identical in shape with the imperative forms
and could have become the target of the same criticism as their Somali
equivalents.   The problem, however, solved itself and disappeared since
using a dictionary became by that time an institutionalized social activity
in the English-speaking world and created its own autonomous context of
situation, independent to a large extent of all other contexts.   The

modern user of an English dictionary when looking up the meaning, the spelling or the grammatical forms of a verb does so in the pragmatic context of seeking information. In such a context no one expects to receive written commands from a dictionary.

An average speaker of English today when confronted with a lemma like EVAPORATE (v.) does not stop to think whether the form is an imperative, a truncated infinitive or a decontextualized form of the simple present tense. It is simply a form used for providing information about verbs in a dictionary, and anyone asked to define its grammatical status would be astonished that such a question should be asked.

Concluding Observations

The compilation and mass production of dictionaries has to be seen as a form of technologizing language and involves introducing devices which may seem artificial. One such device is found in Arabic dictionaries where entries are grouped under main headings consisting of abstract consonantal frameworks of word roots which do not occur as words in any natural context. Thus for example the abstract framework *k-t-b* provides the heading for such words as *kataba* "[he] wrote", *iktataba* "[he] subscribed", *istaktaba* "[he] asked [someone] to write", *kātib* "secretary", *kitāb* "book", *maktab* "school", *maktabah* "library", *mukātib* "correspondent", etc. This device has proved to be very efficient and suits the structure of Arabic very well. It should be noted that the lemmas of verbs in Arabic dictionaries are the forms of the 3rd person singular masculine of the perfect tense. In modern bilingual dictionaries where the second language is a European one they are usually translated into the infinitive forms, e.g. *kataba* "to write" and no objection has been raised against this practice, as far as I have been able to ascertain.

In *Dizionario somalo-italiano* a similar method is adopted when translating the lemmas which are in the imperative in Somali. They are translated into the infinitive forms of corresponding Italian verbs, e.g. *qor* (v.tr.) "*scrivere*" and not into the imperative form "*scrivi*".

If the use of Somali dictionaries spreads on a wide scale and is backed by the educational system in Somalia, and if at the same time the imperative forms continue to be used as the lemmas for weak verbs it seems very

likely that the problem of improbable lemmas will lose its thorns and will cease to be a problem.

****

REFERENCES

Agostini, Francesco and others. 1981. "Lessico." In *Fonologia e lessico*. Studi Somali 1. Ed. Giorgio R. Cardona and Francesco Agostini. Rome: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Dipartimento per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo, Comitato Tecnico Linguistico per l'Università Somala, pp.141-187. [Pp. 143-149 are reprinted in Agostini, Puglielli and Ciise 1985 on pp.XI-XVI.]

Agostini, Francesco, Annarita Puglielli, Ciise Moxamed Siyaad (chief eds.) and others. 1985. *Dizionario somalo-italiano*. Rome: G. Gangemi for Cooperazione Italiana allo Sviluppo. [Distribution: Herder Editrice e Libreria, 00186 Roma, Piazza Montecitorio, 120.]

Alston, R.C. 1966. *The English Dictionary*. A Bibliography of the English Language from the Invention of Printing to the year 1800, Vol.5. Leeds: E.J. Arnold.

Andrzejewski, B.W. 1968. "Inflectional Characteristics of the So-called 'Weak Verbs' in Somali." *African Language Studies*, IX, pp.1-51.

Andrzejewski, B.W. 1975. "Indicator Particles in Somali." *Afro-asiatic Linguistics*, I, 6, pp.1-69.

Andrzejewski, B.W. 1987. Rev. of *Dizionario somalo-italiano* by Francesco Agostini, Annarita Pugglielli, Ciise Moxamed Siyaad and others. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, [in press].

Antinucci, Francesco and Axmed Faarax Cali "Idaajaa". 1986. *Poesia orale somala: Storia di una nazione*. Studi Somali 7. Rome: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Dipartimento per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo, Comitato Tecnico Linguistico per l'Università Somala.

Axmed Faarax Cali "Idaajaa". 1974. *Ismaaciil Mire*. Xamar [Mogadishu]: Wasaaradda Hiddaha iyo Tacliinta Sare, Akademiyaha Dhaqanka.

Bell, C.R.V. 1953. *The Somali Language*. London: Longmans.

Kitaabka Qoduuska ah. N.p.: SIM Canada. [SIM = Sudan Interior Mission.]

Maffi, Luisa. 1982. "The Somali Language Program: Italian Technical Cooperation in Somalia." *African Research and Documentation*, 29, pp.13-15.

Muuse Haaji Ismaa'iil Galaal. 1956. *Hikmad Soomaali*. Ed. B.W. Andrzejewski. London: Oxford University Press.

Starnes, De Witt T. 1954. *Renaissance Dictionaries: English-Latin, Latin-English*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Wasaaradda Waxbarashada iyo Barbaarinta, Xarunta Horumarinta Manaahijta. 1983. *Soomaali: Fasalka Shanaad, Dugsiga Dhexe*. Mogadishu.

Yaasiin C. Keenadiid. 1976. *Qaamuuska Af-Soomaaliga*. N.p.: Wasaaradda Hiddaha iyo Tacliinta Sare, Akademiyaha Dhaqanka.

Zaunmueller, Wolfram. 1958. *Bibliographisches Handbuch der Sprach-wörterbücher*. New York and London: Hafner; Stuttgart: Anton Hierseman.

****

NOTES

1. The lemma of a word represents all its grammatical forms. In Andrzejewski 1968 the term "representative form" is applied to the lemmas used in grammatical description.

2. For the definition of "weak verbs" and the description of their paradigms see Andrzejewski 1968. They are composed of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd conjugations according to the classification introduced in Bell 1953.

3. These restrictions of occurrence are described in Andrzejewski 1975.

4. Agostini, Puglielli, Ciise and others 1985. This dictionary is a result of research and compilation work undertaken by an Italo-Somali lexicographical team composed of thirty-nine persons and extending over nine years, under the auspices of the Somali Academy of Arts and

Sciences, the Somali National University and Università degli Studi di Roma. In its scope and organization it is the best dictionary of Somali so far published and in its high degree of semantic accuracy it is comparable to *Qaamuuska Af-Soomaaliga* (Yaasiin 1976). For further details see Andrzejewski 1987. A general account of Italo-Somali cooperation in linguistic research and documentation is given in Maffi 1982.

5. Agostini and others 1981. Professor Agostini's untimely and much regretted death occurred in the year of the publication of that paper. His great contribution to the compilation of *Dizionario somalo-italiano* is reflected in his name being given on the title page as one of its three chief editors (*caporedattori*).

6. Yassiin 1974. Such a choice also presents serious difficulties since for some of the verbs there are no corresponding verbal nouns and for some there are several. This point is discussed in Agostini and others 1981, on p.147, where verbal noun is referred to as *nome d'azione*.

7. The figures in this list refer to conjugations and the abbreviations "v.", "tr." and "it." mean "verb", "transitive" and "intransitive" respectively. It should be noted that all the forms in this list which end in *-an* have a high tone combined with strong even stress on their penultimate syllable. This should be borne in mind when testing such forms with speakers of Somali. All the verbs in this list are inceptive and not stative, a distinction which it is difficult to convey in English translation.

8. I obtained the text of this traditional incantation from Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal at Sheikh in 1950.

9. Muuse 1956, p.40.

10. *Kitaabka Qoduuska ah*, 1979.

11. The transcript of this oral poem is given in Axmed 1974, pp.124-125, and in Antinucci and Axmed 1986, p.71. Male camels are often sent on difficult journeys to distant grazing grounds on account of their greater endurance and strength.

12. The text of this poem was published in a school-book; see Wasaaradda Waxbarashada 1983, p.59.

13. Such as John Baret and John Rider in the 16th century, Elisha Coles,
     Francis Gouldman, Thomas Holyoke and Christopher Wase in the 17th
     century, and Francis Allen, Nathan Bailey, Frederick Barlow, J. Cooke,
     J. Johnson, Samuel Johnson, John Kersey, Benjamin Martin and Thomas
     Sheridan in the 18th century.   For information concerning their dic-
     tionaries see Alston 1966 and Starnes 1954.   A general bibliography
     of English dictionaries is available in Zaunmueller 1958.