

Evidence of an argot for Amharic and theoretical phonology

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Abstract

Ethiopia seems to be an especially rich source of disguised speech forms, which it seems useful, with some precedence, to term "argots". A number of argots of Ethiopian Semitic languages, used by craft and ceremonial groups, were described by Leslau (1964), and an argot used especially by Oromo teenagers was recently described by Unseth (1990). This paper discusses an Amharic argot described by Teshome and Bender (1983), which is presently used by female bar-hosts in Addis Ababa, who employ it to exchange comments to each other without being understood by clients. After brief review of the data, this paper provides interpretations of the evidence of the argot on seven points of Amharic and theoretical phonology. Some of these interpretations contrast with those of McCarthy (1984, 1986), also based upon Teshome and Bender's data. Also, I argue that the argot is probably influenced by the so-called Gurage contact-languages of Amharic in Ethiopia.

1. Data

Teshome and Bender's data consist of 83 argot words and 17 argot sentences in which thirty of the 83 words appear with various of the verb forms. The argot employs a special, all-purpose, verb glossable as 'do', which forms stems and takes Amharic verbal affixes quite like an Amharic verb, and adapts other Amharic and English words, or roots underlying them, to words of a certain pattern, which take Amharic nominal affixes.

Following are four of the 17 sentences, Teshome and Bender's (1), (2), (9) and (11), respectively. The morpheme-by-morpheme interlinear translations are my own.