

**COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN OR LÈSE-MAJESTÉ:**  
how feudoid subgroups of the Yemma (Janjero) culture talk to each other<sup>1</sup>

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with an essay by  
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If Saul Bellow's hero "Henderson the Rain King" really was inspired by any culture other than Chicago - it must have been the Yemma culture. Where else would he find inspiration from lion tamers, fabulous kings, and fatal slips of the tongue?

But seriously: To judge from early journals, a traveller's encounter with the Yemma culture must have been fascinating - and a communication lapse, fatal indeed. Those travellers who, unlike Saul Bellow, actually had contacts with the Yemma kingdom - such as Cecchi and Cerulli - seem fascinated and perturbed.<sup>2</sup> The Yemma kingdom of Ethiopia is first mentioned in a victory song of the 1420's. Then there are Almeida's accounts of the travels of Fernandez in 1613, and more recently, Capitano Cecchi's and the linguist Cerulli's descriptions of their contacts with this culture and language. Until 1985, the only linguistic description of Yemsa was Cerulli's work of 1938.

One cultural trait which is mentioned repeatedly, is the threefold division of the Yemsa language - a division which to disregard (according to Cerulli 1938: 61) not only meant communication breakdown, but death.

To account for these rigid rules of language use, Cerulli has described Yemsa as consisting of three "special languages": royal, noble, and ordinary (ibid.: 61-64). It would be more accurate, actually, to speak of three subsets of vocabulary, and rules of their proper use - as Kassahun Regga has outlined below. The "special" vocabularies consist of certain terms (all nouns) for body parts, clothes, and weapons, as well as verbs for movements or functions of the human body - including some terms one may be surprised to find in a "royal" vocabulary. The first set of these words (see the list below) is used when referring to the king, the second, when referring to the Yemma elders or noblemen, and the third is the common vocabulary used in reference to the common people. From the lists given by Cerulli (1938: 66ff, passim), by Kassahun Regga (below) and by Wedekind (forthcoming b), it is obvious that the vast majority of the vocabulary is used in reference to all speakers. A few dozen terms are used in reference to royals and other respected people alike, and very few only (cf. the first two in the list below) in reference to the royal group alone.

Cerulli speaks of three "languages", and he ascribes certain phonological characteristics to one of these "languages", the royal one. (The language of the royal clan, Cerulli says, uses a uvular sound *q* where the language of the common people uses the common velar sound *k*.) Thus, he gives the impression that (1) a certain vocabulary, and (2) some phonological characteristics mark the speech of the royal group as a "language" of its own. Note, however, that there are not two or three separate languages: The vocabulary used in reference to the three cultural subgroups is used by all Yemsa speakers, while, on the other hand, there seems to be a separate speech form, phonologically marked, which is used by a family, as their distinct clan idiolect (group sociolect? hierolect?). From our work with two informants - apparently representing two groups - we can only confirm that different speakers from different Yemsa groups or areas<sup>3</sup> still use different phonetic variants today: velar forms versus postvelar or uvular forms of /k/.

Has the culture changed? Already at the time of Cerulli's journey (1928), the last independent

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<sup>1</sup> The people called Yemma (better known as Janjero, but "Yemma" is preferred as a more polite term; "Yemsa" refers to the language) live east of Jimma, Ethiopia, and are related to, but geographically isolated from, other groups speaking Omotic languages. There seem to be about 20,000 speakers of this language, where our new estimate - as against "1,000?" (Bender 1976: 9) - is based on an estimated membership of farmers' associations in the early 1980s. For most of the data and conversations about Yemsa, I am indebted to Ato Kassahun Regga. Kassahun has been unusually helpful and encouraging not only to myself but especially to various Ethiopian linguistics students who took part in my courses where he assisted. For more detail on Yemsa, see Cerulli (1938) and Wedekind (1985 and forthcoming). Bender lists Janjero as "one of the least known Ethiopian languages" (1976: 9).

<sup>2</sup> Captain Cecchi (1888: 315-331), for instance, gives detailed reports, but does so with a lot of reserve. He carefully, and repeatedly, disclaims insight into, or acceptance of, what he reports about this culture. For a summary of the early reports about Yemma, cf. Ernesta Cerulli (1956: 137).

<sup>3</sup> I did not find it appropriate then to inquire about the clan affiliation of both of these speakers.

Yemma king had been dethroned, and his son had just received a feudal position from Menelik II again. Now it has been ten years since a socialist revolution vehemently attacked and uprooted feudalism in all its forms.

Has the language changed? Have the special subsets of vocabulary disappeared? Is it dangerous, possible, or acceptable now to communicate from subgroup to subgroup using the same vocabulary? And what would be expected of an outsider?

In 1983 two Yemsa speakers assisted in our linguistic courses at the Addis Abeba University. They were asked about present day language use in Yemma country. The answers seem to imply that the issue of new egalitarianism on the one hand, and the issue of feudoid language use on the other, are two unrelated issues. At least in the mind of the speaker of this language, the first issue has very little to do with the second. To both of the informants it seemed to be a matter of course that the Yemsa language, and its different sets of vocabulary, would continue to be used in the same way as before. A short essay written by Ato Kassahun Regga reports about the present day use of the Yemsa language. The essay is given in the language itself, and so it may, in a more direct manner, speak about the weight, or the atmosphere, which this issue has to speakers of the language themselves.

Has the language changed then? Ato Kassahun's essay says: No. Failure to communicate according to the proper rules would still put the speaker outside the Yemma society at once.

**A Yemsa Essay on Rules of Proper Language Use<sup>4</sup>**  
[as told by Kassahun Regga, Addis Abeba, Dec. 1983]

1.  
Kon<sup>2</sup>Ka<sup>2</sup> wo<sup>1</sup>yi<sup>3</sup> kaa<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>2</sup>,  
language or speech,
2.  
sho<sup>2</sup>wo<sup>2</sup> al<sup>1</sup>u<sup>2</sup> a<sup>1</sup>i<sup>1</sup>fe<sup>2</sup> a<sup>1</sup>su<sup>1</sup>si<sup>2</sup>  
different life live people
3.  
muu<sup>2</sup>ni<sup>1</sup>, du<sup>2</sup>wu<sup>2</sup>nil, wos<sup>1</sup>to<sup>2</sup>nil,  
eating, sitting/living, working,
4.  
ku<sup>1</sup>tu<sup>1</sup>ne<sup>2</sup>wa<sup>2</sup> sin<sup>1</sup>fa<sup>1</sup>  
the-going on-and-on
5.  
ba<sup>1</sup>ron<sup>1</sup> ko<sup>3</sup>tte<sup>2</sup> ma<sup>2</sup>kok<sup>2</sup> chi<sup>1</sup>ma<sup>1</sup> ma<sup>1</sup>ssa<sup>1</sup>ra<sup>2</sup>.  
it express to-tell able instrument.
6.  
es<sup>3</sup>ba<sup>1</sup> sin<sup>1</sup>fa<sup>1</sup>nak<sup>1</sup>nu<sup>2</sup> dey<sup>2</sup> es<sup>3</sup> ko<sup>3</sup>tte<sup>2</sup> ma<sup>1</sup>kos<sup>2</sup>  
Since it-is-so and this express to-tell
7.  
boo<sup>1</sup>ta<sup>2</sup>tan<sup>2</sup> boo<sup>1</sup>ta<sup>2</sup> oo<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>2</sup> oo<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>2</sup>.  
from-place to-place different different.
8.  
mi<sup>1</sup>ssaa<sup>1</sup>e<sup>2</sup>, i<sup>1</sup>nno<sup>2</sup> yem<sup>1</sup>sa<sup>2</sup> kaa<sup>3</sup>maa<sup>2</sup>ssi<sup>2</sup>,  
e.g., our Yemsa language-in,
9.  
e<sup>1</sup>ra<sup>1</sup>sho<sup>1</sup>nik<sup>3</sup> i<sup>1</sup>di<sup>2</sup>mek<sup>2</sup> ar<sup>1</sup>ki<sup>1/2</sup> ba<sup>3</sup>rik<sup>3</sup>ne<sup>2</sup>wa<sup>2</sup>  
royals-for, age-by older it(age)-and,
10.  
daa<sup>1</sup> ka<sup>1</sup>lo<sup>2</sup> ta<sup>2</sup>ra<sup>2</sup> a<sup>1</sup>su<sup>1</sup>sik<sup>3</sup>, den<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Our phonemic transcription is based on IPA symbols, but with /j, ch/ for the palatal affricates, with capital letters /P, T, Ch, K/ (in loans) for glottalized sounds, /ʔ/ for glottal stop, and double symbols for gemination or vowel length. For the sake of easy reading, tone is identified with every syllable, as CV1 Low, CV2 Mid, and CV3 High. A more abstract analysis would posit accents or complex tonemes (Wedekind forthcoming).

The word-by-word translation is not based on a morphological analysis (which I do not have ready for this text), but is an immediate reflection of remarks made by the informant.

below /younger, lay- men-for, above

11.

ma<sup>1</sup>ja<sup>1</sup>mma<sup>1</sup>ra<sup>2</sup> mak<sup>1</sup>te<sup>3</sup> bar<sup>1</sup> ta<sup>1</sup>KKa<sup>1</sup>me<sup>1</sup>fa<sup>1</sup>na<sup>1</sup>  
first said it they-use

12.

ug<sup>1</sup>naas<sup>1</sup> oo<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>2</sup> oo<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>2</sup>;  
ways different different.

A.

e<sup>1</sup>ra<sup>1</sup>sho<sup>1</sup>nik<sup>3</sup> sin<sup>1</sup>fa<sup>1</sup> kaa<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>2</sup>  
royals-for used language

B.

kee<sup>1</sup> nil a<sup>1</sup>ba<sup>1</sup>nik<sup>3</sup> wo<sup>1</sup>yi<sup>3</sup> i<sup>1</sup>di<sup>2</sup>mek<sup>2</sup> ar<sup>1</sup>ki<sup>2</sup> a<sup>1</sup>su<sup>1</sup>nik<sup>3</sup> sin<sup>1</sup>fa<sup>1</sup> kaa<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>2</sup>;  
family head or age-by respected men-for used language;

C.

daa<sup>1</sup> ka<sup>1</sup>lo<sup>2</sup> ta<sup>2</sup>ra<sup>2</sup> a<sup>1</sup>su<sup>1</sup>nik<sup>3</sup> sin<sup>1</sup>fa<sup>1</sup> kaa<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>2</sup>  
non-respected men-for used language

A	B	C	
mu <sup>1</sup> cho <sup>2</sup>	ke <sup>1</sup> wu <sup>2</sup>	du <sup>2</sup> (wu <sup>2</sup> )	'to sit'
bo <sup>2</sup> ssu <sup>2</sup>	tallra <sup>1</sup>	mu <sup>2</sup>	'to eat'
shag <sup>2</sup> to <sup>2</sup>	shag <sup>2</sup> to <sup>2</sup>	ma <sup>1</sup> s <sup>02</sup>	'to wash'
ke <sup>2</sup> mo <sup>2</sup>	ke <sup>2</sup> mo <sup>2</sup>	bi <sup>2</sup> ya <sup>2</sup>	'to see'
ka <sup>1</sup> ta <sup>1</sup>	ka <sup>1</sup> ta <sup>1</sup>	su <sup>1</sup> wa <sup>1</sup>	'to fart'
bu lss <sup>2</sup>	bu <sup>1</sup> ss <sup>02</sup>	wo <sup>1</sup> llo <sup>2</sup>	'to talk'
kwi <sup>2</sup> gu <sup>2</sup>	kwi <sup>2</sup> gu <sup>2</sup>	u <sup>3</sup> sha <sup>2</sup>	'to drink'
sel <sup>3</sup> to <sup>2</sup>	sel <sup>3</sup> to <sup>2</sup>	me <sup>1</sup> tt <sup>02</sup>	'to feel sick'
gi <sup>1</sup> gi <sup>1</sup> tto <sup>2</sup>	gil gi <sup>1</sup> tto <sup>2</sup>	a <sup>1</sup> fall(it <sup>1</sup> )to <sup>2</sup>	'to sleep'
o <sup>1</sup> fo <sup>2</sup>	o <sup>1</sup> fo <sup>2</sup>	yo <sup>2</sup> , a <sup>1</sup> ma <sup>1</sup>	'to come, to go'
be <sup>2</sup> ga <sup>2</sup>	be <sup>2</sup> ga <sup>2</sup>	tee <sup>1</sup> ta <sup>1</sup>	'head'
ke <sup>2</sup> ma <sup>2</sup>	ke <sup>2</sup> ma <sup>2</sup>	aa <sup>3</sup> fa <sup>2</sup>	'eye'
sir <sup>1</sup> m <sup>02</sup>	sir <sup>1</sup> m <sup>02</sup>	ka <sup>1</sup> ta <sup>1</sup>	'belly'
ti <sup>1</sup> bo <sup>2</sup>	ti <sup>1</sup> bo <sup>2</sup>	o <sup>1</sup> cho <sup>2</sup>	'foot, leg'
fi <sup>3</sup> tto <sup>2</sup>	fi <sup>3</sup> tto <sup>2</sup>	mu <sup>2</sup>	'food'
taw <sup>1</sup> na <sup>2</sup>	taw <sup>1</sup> na <sup>2</sup>	ku <sup>3</sup> shu <sup>2</sup>	'hand, arm'
fa <sup>3</sup> sho <sup>2</sup>	fa <sup>3</sup> sho <sup>2</sup>	maa <sup>1</sup> ma <sup>2</sup>	'clothes'

13.

i<sup>1</sup>sar<sup>3</sup> aw<sup>2</sup>nil mallak<sup>2</sup>to<sup>1</sup>  
one by(?) chance

14.

daa<sup>1</sup>ge<sup>3</sup>re<sup>2</sup> arlki<sup>2</sup>ssi<sup>2</sup>re<sup>2</sup> wo<sup>1</sup>llo<sup>2</sup> shak<sup>3</sup>fe<sup>2</sup>na<sup>1</sup>-ka<sup>2</sup>baa<sup>2</sup>sik<sup>2</sup>(<sup>3</sup>),  
refused respect talk if-not

15.

aa<sup>1</sup>fa<sup>3</sup> ba<sup>3</sup>rik<sup>3</sup> boo<sup>1</sup>ta<sup>2</sup> im<sup>3,03</sup>na<sup>2</sup>za<sup>2</sup>;  
not him place be-given;

16.

wo<sup>1</sup>yi<sup>3</sup> bar<sup>3</sup> aalfa<sup>3</sup> alsul zalggilre<sup>2</sup> biisl<sup>03</sup>na<sup>2</sup>za<sup>2</sup>.  
or he not man considered is-looked-at.

Translation as given by Kassahun Regga

1 Language

2-5 is an instrument which allows people to express themselves according to how they live, eat or work.

6 Since this is so, expressions

7 differ from place to place.

8 For instance, in our Yemsa language,

9 the ways of using language for royals, for elders,

10 or for young folks and common people

11 thus differ from group to group:

A Language used for royals

B Language used for heads of families, or men respected because of their age

C Language used for men deserving no special respect:

(Then follows a list of examples: see Yemsa text.)

13 If by chance anyone

14 would refuse to respect these in his communication,

15 he would not be given a place;

16 or he might not even be considered a human being.

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