

Ethiopian evidence for stronger and weaker forms of the claim that "Languages are inherently designed to be written"

Klaus Wedekind, A.Abeba, August 1993

Abstract - Paper presented at the "X. Afrikanistentag", 23.-25. September 1993, Zurich

1. Description: the word *ora* 'pause, focus shift' in Burji

As descriptive background, some Burji data will be presented to illustrate typical differences between spoken and written texts - but the morpheme *ora*, which functions like a "pause morpheme" or "focus switch", will be highlighted.

Quantitatively speaking, the frequency of this morpheme varies in remarkable ways: In spoken texts, *ora* accounts for 1% of all words - while some texts do entirely without it - but in written texts, it accounts for 3.4%. This makes it the most frequent word in written "style". Qualitatively speaking, this word is rather "useless" in spoken language - while it seems to "come home" into its proper function when the language is written. Needless to say that in translations from Amharic, English or Oromo, it corresponds to none of the morphemes of the source language. (1) As explanations for these 3.4% *ora*, we offer two claims:

2.1 Explanation: a variation (+2.4%) caused by the medium

The weaker claim is, of course, that *ora* is a functional substitute for gestures of the spoken language (such as pause, intonation, eye contact and other pragmatic signals). This explanation identifies the change of media (tongue to pen) as a cause, and the change of signals as the effect. The issue is regarded as a quantitative difference, where oral and written texts are two points in a continuum of stylistic variations.(2)

2.2 Explanation: a morpheme (*ora*) designed for the medium

If, for a moment, we allow ourselves to consider *purpose* and *design* in language, then the claim is, in its stronger form, that *languages are inherently designed to be written*. E.g., in Burji the morpheme *ora* has always been there as a silent witness that one of the *proper* uses of this language actually was for it to be written. The issue is regarded in its qualitative dimension, where orature and literature are categorically different.(3)

3. Context of the argument

As linguists, we take writing for granted; *we are not amazed*.

The amazement is fresh however, where the odds against literacy are overwhelming, where a nation is strained by literacy efforts, where scholars say there is no conceivable use for literacy (and therefore no justification!) - and where literacy workers will seriously ask themselves, "what are we *doing* here, reducing this language to writing, *alienating* this language from its natural use?(4) Was this language *meant* to be written?" There are arguments both ways.(5)

Notes and references

(1) For illustrations and descriptions of *ora*, cf. handout, also: Burji NT and Burji text collections by Charlotte Wedekind (mss.). (2) Deborah Tannen focuses on the quantitative aspect in 1980, "Spoken/written language and the oral/literate continuum, Proceedings of the 6th Ann. Meetg., Berkeley Ling. Soc., 207-218) (3) Recently, various instances of neo-teleological argumentation by aristotelian "design", "goal" or "purpose" have appeared - e.g. cf. R. Anshen in her preface to N.Chomsky's "Knowledge of Language" (1986, "Convergence", pp.11-22, N.Y., London), cf. L. Newbiggin, 1991, "Truth to Tell", Geneva, - vs. M.Horkheimer & Th. W.-Adorno, 1969 Dialektik der Aufklärung, Frankfurt. (4) Cf. Th.E. Beck, 1971, "Ethiopia, Kafa Province: Realities of Language Use [...] UCLA Thesis (5) Pro: cf. Th.Bearth's "style soigné" as "registre littéraire 'avant la lettre' (1986 "L'articulation du temps et de l'aspect dans le discours toura", Berne: Lang, p.104), contra: W. Bright (1985, "The virtues of illiteracy", pp.93-104 in Pieper & Stickel, eds., 1986 "Studia Linguistica [...]", Berlin)

References

Anshen, R. 1986, "Convergence", Preface to N.Chomsky's "Knowledge of Language" pp.11-22, N.Y., London
Beath, Thomas, 1986. "L'articulation du temps et de l'aspect dans le discours toura", Berne: Lang, p.104),
Beck, Th.E.,1971, "Ethiopia, Kafa Province: Realities of Language Use" UCLA Thesis
Bright, W., 1985, "The virtues of illiteracy", pp.93-104 in Pieper & Stickel, eds., 1986 "Studia Linguistica [...]", Berlin
Horkheimer, M. & Th. W.-Adorno, 1969 Dialektik der Aufklärung, Frankfurt.
Newbiggin, L., 1991, "Truth to Tell", Geneva,
Tannen, Deborah Tannen, 1980, Spoken/written language and the oral/literate continuum, in: Proceedings of the 6th Ann. Meetg., Berkeley Ling. Soc., 207-218)
Wedekind, Charlotte, 1993, Burji NT and Burji text collections (mss.).