

## **THE BEST IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH: SCOURING A PREVIOUSLY DOCUMENTED LANGUAGE FOR MORE\***

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### **1 INTRODUCTION**

Krauss (1992:7) predicted that the ‘the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages’. This alarming statistic has prompted a welcome flurry of scholarly activity, both for the public at large and within the profession: the formation of committees and organizations (e.g. the Linguistic Society of America’s Committee on Endangered Languages), scholarly conferences (e.g. Brenzinger 2002 [1997] and Brenzinger’s Symposium on Endangered and Marginalized Languages of Africa, held in conjunction with WOCAL 4), and important monographs (e.g. Nettle and Romaine 2000). With a growing sense of urgency, linguists are describing languages on the threshold of extinction, and are studying linguistic features of language death: Zelealem (2003) describes Kemantney, a Central Cushitic language of Ethiopia with only 1,625 native speakers; Haruna (2002) describes Bubburè, a West Chadic language of Nigeria with 50 semi-speakers; Appleyard (2002) describes Qwarenya, a Central Cushitic language once spoken by Ethiopian Jews and now lingering as a shadowy memory of six elderly speakers in Israel.

Since the median number of speakers for the world’s languages is somewhere between 5,000 and 6,000 speakers, it certainly makes sense for linguists to concentrate on documenting those languages closest to the brink of extinction. However, in this paper I will argue that there is scientific and cultural value in studying and describing even the best-documented of minority languages like Bilin, a Central Cushitic language of Eritrea. One anonymous scholar, in reviewing a grant proposal, objected to this idea, writing:

I wince when I hear that yet another doctoral dissertation has been devoted to well-studied languages like Bilin, while at the same time most Cushitic and Omotic languages could really benefit from being brought up to the level that Bilin reached in the 1880s! Bilin hardly needs more descriptive work and hardly faces extinction with thousands of speakers.

While I am sympathetic to the view expressed above that linguists must describe the thousands of languages which remain undescribed, especially those about to disappear, I must also respectfully disagree with the idea that descriptions of Bilin have reached even linguistically adequate standards of grammatical descriptions. Furthermore, although Bilin does not face immediate extinction, it too is perched close enough to the brink that its future may not seem so secure in a mere one or two generations more.

## 2 PREVIOUS STUDIES OF BILIN

Bilin, a Central Cushitic (or Agaw) language spoken by approximately 85,000 people in the Anseba region of Eritrea, is the best documented Central Cushitic language, and perhaps second only to Somali or Oromo among Cushitic languages. Its first published descriptions are by the great Cushiticist Leo Reinisch (1882). Appleyard (1987) notes that 'it is a remarkable fact that even today it is still to Leo Reinisch that we are indebted for the most complete descriptions of three Agaw languages: Bilin, Xamir, and Quara'. Reinisch translated the Gospel of Mark, wrote a descriptive grammar, collected a volume of texts, and compiled a Bilin-German dictionary with proposed etymologies. Nevertheless both Appleyard (1987) and Hetzron (1976), while praising Reinisch's pioneering achievements, also note his shortcomings, including his transcription of vowel length and glottalization, and his speculative etymologies.

In the 1950s and 1960s, F.R. Palmer published a series of articles on Bilin phonology, nouns, verbs, and word classes, using a Firthian approach. Hetzron (1976:38) writes of Palmer's description of Bilin that the primary picture it gives is a set of systems of formal exponents rather than a system of meaningful elements. He further notes that

Syntactic information concerning the use of the forms is often absent, even glosses are sparingly given and are left to the reader to figure out by himself. For this reason, his statements, though very precise, are often hard to decipher.

In short, the work is frustrating and requires much of the reader. Palmer's many verbal paradigms are succinct, but nearly impossible to re-elicite in the field without sufficient pragmatic context.

In the 1990s, Lamberti and Tonelli published clear descriptive works on Bilin phonology (1996) and noun classes (1997) which are full of examples. Fallon (2001) wrote of detailed segmental phonological processes in the language. There is also the historical-comparative work on Agaw by David Appleyard, and a few other scattered articles on miscellaneous aspects of Bilin grammar. In addition to these works published by linguists, some enthusiastic amateur linguists compiled a respectable 5,000-word Bilin monolingual dictionary with English glosses (Kiflemariam and Paulos 1992), though the dictionary lacks some essential morphological information. There are also a few volumes on pedagogical grammar, poetry, and culture in Bilin by native speakers. However, despite these fairly solid descriptions, many discoveries still await the investigator, discoveries which hold importance for both descriptive adequacy of the language itself and linguistic theory as a whole.

### 3 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF BILIN

#### 3.1 PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY

One of the most glaring omissions in descriptions of Bilin is the lack of any acoustic or instrumental phonetic descriptions. This is a significant lack of documentation, even for one of the ‘best described’ languages. However, I have collected some preliminary data based on word lists from three different speakers, and a report of these findings is in preparation.

Also of utmost importance is an understanding of the prosodic system of Bilin. The role of tone in the Cushitic languages is generally little understood. As Appleyard (1991:5) put it, ‘it is not always at first sight clear how tone and accent operate in individual Cushitic languages’. Palmer (1971:89) claims that in Bilin ‘the use of tone is minimal; one syllable at the most in any word may have a high tone and in some words there is no high tone at all’. Palmer finds the term stress misleading, since ‘it is phonetically always a high pitch and it may be absent altogether from some words, even “full words”’. Appleyard (1991:19) claims that Bilin appears ‘to have maintained a full tonal accent system’. Marcello and Lamberti (1996) assume that Bilin is not a tone language, but claim ‘it is not possible to decide whether [Bilin] belongs to the stress-accent type or to the pitch-accent type.’ Throughout the work, however, they do not even mark suprasegmentals, claiming that final prominence is most common.

Based on my own observations, there are many prominence patterns. Some suffixes are never prominent, e.g. the infinitival suffix */-na/*, as in */enkélna/* ‘to love’, while other suffixes are always prominent, e.g. the adessive suffix */li/* as in */kidiŋli/* ‘to the field’ (vs. */kidiŋ/* ‘field’). Prominence may appear in antepenultimate position, as in */enkelék<sup>w</sup>elna/* ‘I love you’. Some prominence contrasts seem to appear only in certain frames, e.g. in isolation (citation form) the homophonous *[bita]* ‘louse; dirt’, but in a carrier phrase, we observe a distinction first noted by Palmer:

- (1) ni bitá gín ‘This is a louse’ ni  
bita gín ‘This is dirt’

There is also preliminary, admittedly sketchy, evidence for tonal contours: *[k<sup>w</sup>ali]* ‘(I am) not eating’ vs. *[k<sup>w</sup>’ali]* ‘look! sg.’). In short, all descriptions of Bilin have not fully addressed the complex behavior of Bilin prosody. Future studies will need to carefully investigate the nature of prominence (probably as pitch accent or perhaps stress), and note the underlying prominence of lexical items, as well as typical changes in various frames, as in (1) above.

Previous descriptions of Bilin have not discussed in anything close to full detail the allophonic realization of all phonemes (though Lamberti and Tonelli 1996 provided a good beginning), and have virtually ignored phrasal and fast speech phenomena. Fallon (in press) has described some phonological processes for the first time such as vowel laxing, intervocalic lenition (*/b/* → *[β]* as in *[háβen]* ‘honor’), variable devoicing (*[ʃib]* ~

[ʃip] ‘number’), voicing assimilation (*/tukól/* ‘house’ → [*geresin dukól*] ‘Geresin’s hut’), syncope (*/bilin/* → [*blin*] ‘Bilin’), and vowel labialization (e.g. */ʔiŋg<sup>w</sup>ik<sup>w</sup>/* → [*ʔ<sup>h</sup>ŋg<sup>w</sup>uk<sup>w</sup>*] ‘breast’). I discuss below perhaps the two most significant processes.

A highly unusual process in Bilin is the voicing of ejectives, usually the affricate ejective /tʃ/, as in (2) below:

- (2) */lahátʃ<sup>w</sup>ina/* → [*lahádʒina*] ‘to bark’  
*/k<sup>w</sup>aratʃ<sup>w</sup>na/* → [*k<sup>w</sup>aradʒna*] ‘to cut’  
*/k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>ito/* → [*g<sup>w</sup>aʔ<sup>w</sup>ito*] ‘he was afraid’

This process provides an important empirical precedent for the Glottalic Theory of Indo-European (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1995), which reconstructs ejectives for the traditionally conceived series of voiced stops and which requires a sound change from ejective to voiced in many of the daughter languages. The attestation of this process shows just how important it is to thoroughly document a language in all its aspects because grammars are used not only by other specialists in the language family, but by other linguists from historical to theoretical.

Another important and previously undescribed process in Bilin is debuccalization, the removal of oral articulation with substitution or preservation of a glottal in its place. Bilin is unusual in that if a velar with secondary articulation debuccalizes, the secondary articulation (labialization) is still preserved. For example:

- (3) */dérek<sup>w</sup>a/* → [*déreʔ<sup>w</sup>a*] ‘type of mud for bricks’  
*/k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>ito/* → [*k<sup>w</sup>aʔ<sup>w</sup>ito*] ‘he was afraid’ (Ashera dialect)

The preservation of secondary features despite the loss of primary articulation is something predicted by Clements and Hume’s (1995) model of feature geometry, but not that of Halle (1993). The interested reader may consult Fallon (in press) for more on this in Bilin, and Fallon (2002) for the general theoretical consequences. Suffice it to say that better descriptions of languages will frequently yield theoretically interesting data, provided that the investigator is aware of the types of questions of interest to theory. Here I find myself in full agreement with Hayward, who exhorted that ‘wherever we can identify rare and unique features, we should highlight them, together with the clear message that without timely investigation these things would have been – or will be – forever lost’ (2002:17-18).

### 3.2 MORPHOLOGY

Bilin nominal morphology is well described in Palmer (1958) and Lamberti and Tonelli (1997), and the verbal morphology, in Palmer (1957). However, even here, the rich morphology has not been mined for all available generalizations. In the simple frequentative, for example, monosyllabic verb stems have the final stem consonant of the

root reduplicated, and a prominent suffix /-<sup>h</sup>ɛŋ/ is attached. Example (4) below shows the frequentative formation using the infinitive.

(4)	<u>Simple Active Inf.</u>	<u>Simple Frequentative Inf.</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
	gáb-na	ga- <b>bi</b> -b-íŋ-na	‘speak’
	g <sup>w</sup> ǎtina	g <sup>w</sup> - <b>tí</b> -t-íŋ-na	‘hurt (trans.)’
	gándʒ-na	gan- <b>dʒi</b> -dʒ-íŋ-na	‘sleep’
	bók <sup>w</sup> ’t-na	bok <sup>w</sup> ’- <b>tí</b> -t-íŋ-na	‘flow’

When the verb stem is disyllabic, however, the first CV sequence of the second syllable is reduplicated and infixated after the first syllable.

(5)	waxít-na	wa- <b>xi</b> -xít-na	‘fight’
	dǎrék-na	dǎ- <b>rǎ</b> -rék-na	‘push’
	bilk <sup>w</sup> íd-na	bil- <b>k<sup>w</sup>i</b> -k <sup>w</sup> íd-na	‘boil’
	wank’ér-na	wan- <b>k’ǎ</b> -k’ér-na	‘ask’

The generalization uniting the two forms of reduplication and infixation are a prosodically driven alternation of prominence, in which the reduplicant is placed before the prominent syllable, as shown in (6) below:

(6)a.	(σ σ) (σ̣ σ)	b.	(σ σ) (σ̣ σ)
	∧∧ ∨∧		∧∧ ∨∧
	sa. <b>di</b> . dǎŋ. na		kǎ. <b>tǎ</b> . tǎb.na
	‘hope repeatedly’		‘write frequently’

For an Optimality Theoretic analysis of this phenomenon, see Fallon (2003).

### 3.3 DISCOURSE AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

Another fertile area of exploration in Bilin is in discourse. Even some of the best contemporary descriptions of major languages stop short of descriptive adequacy at the discourse level; there is much to be learned by exploring this aspect of language. And in the case of Bilin, Reinisch’s (1883) collections of texts are 120 years old. How much has the language or its stylistic preferences changed in that period? Native speaker and linguist Tekie Alibekit has updated Reinisch’s animal fables (1993), allowing a comparison between Reinisch and contemporary usage. We begin with my own free translation of “The Boar, the Lion, the Donkey, and the Hyena” in (7), followed by a line-by-line comparison of Reinisch’s original (the a-lines in (8)), my field transcription of Tekie’s version in the b-lines, and a morphemic gloss. Reinisch’s barred *a* is interpreted as a schwa (mid central vowel); dotted *g* is a voiceless velar fricative.

- (7) 1. Once a boar and a lion were wrestling  
 2. and it is said that the boar made the lion fall down.  
 3. And the lion said to the boar, “Do you think that I, Suset’s father, am weaker than you?  
 4. “I fall down only to show you respect.”
- (8) 1a. Wǎnkíra-dí gaməná-dí lāmlām yinux.  
 1b. **ladón** waŋkiradí gamanadí ləməlóm jímóx<sup>w</sup>  
 once boar.NOM-and lion.NOM-and wrestling COP.3.PL.
- 2a. wǎnkírā ləbdúǵu-lū gámənas.  
 2b. **?íma** waŋkíra gámanas ləbduxúlu **jístək**<sup>w</sup>  
 and boar.NOM lion-OBJ fall-CAUS-PAST say.3SG.PASSIVE.
- 3a. nī yiǵé: “an Sūsa-t-eǵer kǔ-d-mǎ qǐlsó,  
 3b. **gamanaxá:** “?an sust áxər k<sup>w</sup>útma k’ilso **daśám**  
 lion-father 1.SG.NOM Suset.GEN. father.nom.SG.COMP. weak-COMP but
- 4a. kǔ-t haššə mó gin grā, kǔ-d ləbǎux-na an?”  
 4b. k<sup>w</sup>ít hašamdó gin ?an kwid labóx<sup>w</sup>  
 2.SG.GEN. respect COP 1.SG.NOM. 2.SG.ABL. 2.sg. fall-down.
- 5a. yúǵu-lū wǎnkí ras.  
 5b. jixúlu waŋkíras  
 say.PAST.3M.OBJ. boar.DAT

A full analysis of the differences is not possible here due to limitations of both space and understanding of all pragmatic and syntactic aspects of the discourse. However, it is interesting to note that Tekie’s version (the b lines) contains more discourse markers, such as */ladón/* ‘once’ (1b), */?əma/* ‘and, conjunctive particle’ (2b) and */daśám/* ‘but, contrastive particle’ at the end of line (3b). There are also interesting differences in word order, as in line 2, where in Reinisch’s version, the word order is SVO, while in Tekie’s version, with the clause embedded within the construction ‘it is said that...’, the word order is SOV. The direct quote is introduced in line (3a) with the verb of saying: ‘he says’, while in (3b) it is implicit, introduced only by making the speaker implicit: ‘the lion-father’. All these and more differences in only the first few lines of one tale. This alone should indicate that even a language as well described as Bilin has perhaps undergone significant stylistic, pragmatic or syntactic changes in the past century, and that the best extant descriptions are possibly outdated and clearly not good enough.

#### 4. THE ENDANGERMENT OF BILIN

Finally, we turn to the question of whether Bilin is endangered. Okbazghi believes that Bilin 'is at the point of extinction and is used only for private conversation at home' (1991:7). Okbazghi's claim may be slightly alarmist, given a population of 85,000, though this is still below Krauss's threshold of 100,000 as a 'safety-in-numbers limit'. Following Wurm's (1998) terminology, the Bilin language is probably 'potentially endangered'—in Crystal's terms, 'socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to lose child speakers' (2000:21). And as Brenzinger and Dimmendaal (1992:4) point out, language shift puts 'a minority language into jeopardy, because the use of the languages tends to be restricted to such domains as home, traditional ceremonies, peer group meetings, etc.'

Although Bilin is not in imminent danger, its speakers comprise only 20% of the Anseba region, and 2% of the national population. The ethnic group is also split along religious lines, with 30-50% Christian (most Roman Catholic), and 50-70% Muslim. Finally, most Bilin are bi- or multilingual in Tigré and Tigrinya (and many speakers also know Arabic, Amharic, and/or English). The high degree of multilingualism, the eroding position of the Bilin relative to other sectors of society, a high degree of exogamy, a poor economy, a newly independent country suffering from war with its neighbors, famine, and a large diaspora, are all factors that could quickly trigger language shift within a generation (Abbebe 2001). "It is because the Bilin interact with the [Tigré] and/or [Tigrinya] whose languages are viewed as more prestigious, that their language is particularly threatened." (Abbebe 2001:77)

Among the positive factors noted by Abbebe which work in favor of Bilin are its recognition under the Constitution, a strong sense of identity, especially among Christian Bilin, cultural pride, and mother-tongue schooling through fifth grade. Abbebe concludes that "useful or not, Bilin is at present a language with enough positive symbolism to justify a lot of optimism for its survival" (2001:86).

A new orthography has been introduced for Bilin (see Fallon 2003a for an assessment), a dictionary in the Roman alphabet is in the preliminary stages of development, a language committee is coining or adapting the neologisms necessary for modern life (Sulus 2003), and a daily radio program, Dehai Gebayla, 'Voice of the Masses' is being used to introduce them (see Zeraghiorghis 1999 for an assessment). Furthermore, the Bilin speech community is small enough to have little significant dialect variation (Daniel and Sullus 1997), but is still large enough that its speakers do not display the linguistic phenomena of a language in decay, as well described in related languages by Zelealem (2002, 2003) for Kemantney and Appleyard (2002) for Qwarenya.

Because the language is now being used in various if modest official capacities, it is all the more imperative that the language be well described in a modern framework. Key components of this are a solid dictionary and an accurate grammar based on modern usage. Both of these depend on thorough descriptions of the language. Once the Bilin have codified the language, and a generation of children has been educated in the mother tongue, we can only hope that increased literacy in the mother tongue will produce indigenous literature, instill further pride in the language once the language is truly seen

as viable, and will secure the transmission of the language to younger generations. Bilin is just about at Robert Frost's fork where 'two roads diverged in a yellow wood'. Let us hope it does not choose the road less spoken.

## ENDNOTE

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