

『On-site Education of Practical Languages for Area Studies』 2008 Academic Year Report

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Theme of the Study

The study was a follow up of my first trip which was conducted in periods between December, 2007 and March, 2008. I started to investigate dialectal differences in Sidama language during my first stay in Sidama. It was learnt that the Sidama living north show dialectal differences from those who live south. In addition to this geographical location based distinction, I was able to observe dialectal difference in difference social settings as in sacred and secular social spaces. During the second trip, I concentrated fully on learning more about the latter type of difference: social setting based differences in language use.

My thesis research is a study into a local religious institution. I have been working to understand how the local religious institution changes in response to changes in its environment. I have also been interested on how the religious institution continues to retain some of its traits. This focus on local religion facilitated my study into social setting based dialectal differences a great deal. Two prominent features characterize the sacred setting from the more secular context in Sidama language use. One is in the fact that more archaic language forms which are no more in everyday language use are used at the religious setting. Even if I speak the language, it was often the case that I use some assistance to understand fully what was meant by a particular expression.

The second arises from the religious syncretism that exists in the local religion. The local religion has a long history of contact with Islam. There are even Mosques within the premises of the local religious institution where I conducted my research. It was observed that ritual languages and ritual music bear strong influence from Arabic as a consequence. Phrases and expressions were borrowed and they were given a localized meaning and a localized pronunciation.

This borrowed and yet modified elements of language use in ritual settings have become so much part of the language that some of my informants argued the expressions have “always” been part of the Sidama language.

Features of the Language

The Sidama language is a Cushitic language closely related to Haadiyya, kembata, Gedeo and Burgi, which together constitute the High land East Cushitic language branch. There are about 3.7 million mother tongue speakers of the language. Sidama is a recently codified language. It is only since 1990's Sidama language became a working and teaching language in Sidama land. The syntax of language is SOV and it has five vowels.



Contents of the Course

The contents of course followed a similar format as it was in my first fieldwork. I spent part of my time in the field and the remainder on class-room based instruction. I set out to compare language use differences in religious and ordinary settings. Attending ritual events was one area where I collected my data. I was able to record the expressions used in ritual prayers involving group rituals and also private rituals. I also videotaped as many ritual songs as I could. After recording, I will sit down with my assistant and listen to the recordings. When I have expressions unfamiliar coming up, I will ask for their meanings from the assistant, a traditional religion follower himself and well versed in the ritual language, and note them down. As to comparing the language use at the religious place with that of contexts out of it, I relied on two things. One is socializing with the village people and noting if there are similarities. The second is my own ability of the Sidama language which I used to facilitate my learning both of the everyday life and religious activities



Interview with a ritual assistant



Observing rituals at a religious compound

Overall Impression of the course

Ritual language and ritual songs are embedded with rich information of the beliefs and practices, and also have valuable historical information. It is the case that some of this information is conveyed using language forms that are no more in everyday use. Learning the social setting differences in language use was helpful in identifying and understanding of the meanings of these old or classic expressions. This in turn has enhanced my understanding of the local beliefs and practices. Also, my introduction to the existence of localized Arabic expressions was useful in understanding history of inter-religious interactions in the area.

Self-assessment of the extent of achievement

The course has been a big support in my thesis work. I benefited from learning of language use which helps me understand the local religion better. I believe that the theme of dialects, particularly of social dialects is worth returning to. At this point, I can say I have achieved the learning objectives I have set before trip to Sidama successfully.