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When plural is a gender: evidence from Gawwada

Mauro Tosco

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M.-C. Simeone-Senelle, F. Mahamoud Hadji Ali et M. Hassan Kamil (éds)

Système nominal et acte de nommer dans des langues couchitiques de la Corne de l'Afrique

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Publications

Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle, Fatouma Mahamoud Hadji Ali
et Mohamed Hassan Kamil (éds)

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de la Corne de l'Afrique*



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Diversité des langues 1



Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle,
Fatouma Mahamoud Hadji Ali
et Mohamed Hassan Kamil édés

*Systeme nominal
et acte de nommer dans des
langues couchitiques parlées
dans la Corne de l'Afrique*

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Avertissement

Les articles réunis dans ce volume émanent de communications faites lors de la *Journée d'études sur les langues sémitiques et couchitiques* qui avait pour thème *Le système nominal et l'acte de nommer dans les langues couchitiques et sémitiques parlées dans la Corne de l'Afrique* (Djibouti, 13 décembre 2018). Cet ouvrage inaugure la collection *Diversité des langues* des Lacito Publications, accessible en ligne et gratuitement à l'adresse suivante : <http://lacito-publications.cnrs.fr/>.

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When plural is a gender: evidence from Gawwada

by

Mauro Tosco

1. Overview

The complexity of plurality in Afroasiatic has long attracted the interest of linguists. In Cushitic, the richness of the number-related nominal morphemes has been the subject of a whole monograph (Zaborski 1986), while many articles have explored its syntactic and semantic complexity. Savà (2007) is of particular interest as it deals with a variety, Ts'amakko, particularly close to the one which will be our focus here, Gawwada. Mous (2016) has explicitly called the attention to the use of number as an exponent of gender, while Tsegaye, Mous and Schiller (2014) have found evidence in psycholinguistic tests based on the Konso language. Ongaye and Tosco (2019) deal with the correlation between the expression of number in the nominal and verbal systems.

These works have also recognized that number in Cushitic is characterized by a number of derivational features. Inflection is defined by Haspelmath (2002: 15) as “the relationship between word-forms of a lexeme”, and derivation as “the relationship between lexemes of a word family” (Haspelmath 2002: 15). Mattioli (2016) has applied Haspelmath's criteria for derivational vs. inflectional morphology to a number of Cushitic languages, reaching the conclusion that, although not all languages behave alike and give the same results, the Cushitic number systems “can be generally considered derivational and not inflectional devices” (Mattioli 2016: 24).

In the next sections we will see how, using the case of Gawwada, the basic form of a noun may encode the whole class of referents and is actualized through different morphemes, themselves derivational in nature.

2. The three genders and three numbers of Gawwada

The bulk of this article is based upon my mostly unpublished (but *cf.* Tosco *forth.*) data on Gawwada, a member of the Dullay cluster.

Gawwada is best analyzed as a three-genders and three-numbers language, where gender is an inflectional property and number a derivational one. Under this approach,

the three genders are:

- Masculine (M)¹
- Feminine (F)
- Plural (PL)

While the three numbers are:

- Preternumeral (unmarked)
- Singulative (SING)
- Plurative (PLUR)

I call *preternumeral* (“beyond number”) the morphologically simplest form of a noun and the one used as the base in number morphology; it corresponds to Hayward’s (1984) “unit reference form” and Mattiola’s (2016) “anumeral.” The term “Plurative” was apparently originated by Dimmendaal (1983: 224); its use in Gawwada follows Savà’s (2005, 2007) analysis of Ts’amakko, and denotes a derivational semantic plural related to the morphologically more basic Preternumeral, in the same way that the Singulative denotes a semantic singular derived from the morphologically more basic Preternumeral.

A certain similarity with the Gawwada Plurative may be found in the distributives of many native North American languages,² ranging e.g. from Mohawk (Iroquian) to Navajo (Athabaskan) and which in certain instances have become “real” plural markers. While the similarity with the North American distributive – most commonly found in verbs – looms large in the expression of number in verbal derivation (a topic outside the scope of this article), the Gawwada Plurative does not seem to have the most typical meaning of the nominal distributive, i.e., to ‘distribute entities over types’ (Mithun 1999: 88). Therefore, a Gawwada Plurative form such as *sik-k-e* ‘pots’ may, but does not necessarily, mean that different types of pots are implied.

The overall shape of a Gawwada noun is:

STEM {± NUMBER} + GENDER

i.e., a noun is obligatorily composed by a stem and an (inflectional) affixal gender marker. A derivational marker expressing number can be inserted between the stem and the gender.

This fact shows that Gawwada fully adheres to Haspelmath’s (2002) criterion #9, which predicts that derivation will be positioned closer to the base than inflection, which will rather be positioned at the periphery of the word. Figure 1. shows the interplay of gender and number in Gawwada.

1. See the list of abbreviations at the end of the article.
2. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

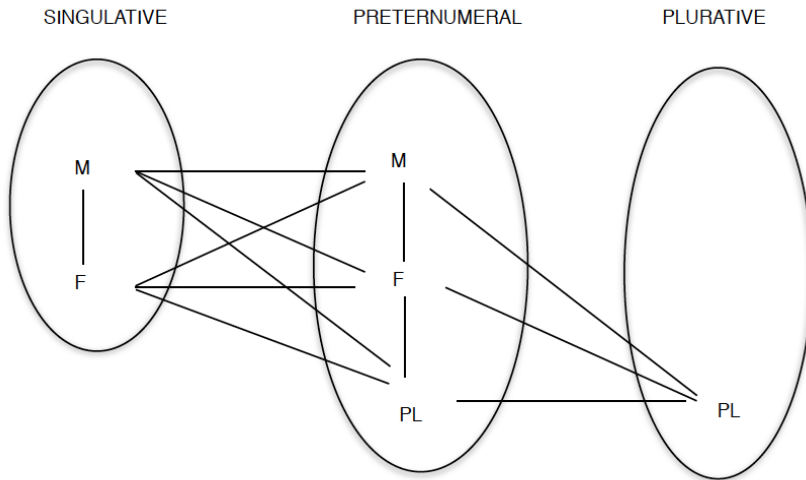


FIGURE 1. – The interplay of gender and number in Gawwada

In other words – and this remains an evident weakness in our analysis – the two systems of Gender and Number are far from being completely independent from each other: while Preternumeral nouns can belong to either one of the three genders, Singulative nouns are either Masculine or Feminine, and Plurative nouns always have Plural gender.

3. Gender in Gawwada

In Gawwada, nouns and actually almost all words are vowel-ending; exceptions are the (positive) Imperative Singular, which has no affixes and is therefore made up by the bare stem (which is always consonant-ending), a few verbal forms which end in the palatal glide /y/ (IPA [j]), and the ideophones.

Gender is expressed by the following affixes in nouns:

M nouns end in *-o*; a minority, mostly of them loans, end in *-a*;

F nouns end in *-e*;

PL nouns end in *-e*.

Nouns command gender agreement on adjectives, verbs and certain classes of pronouns:

- | | | | |
|-----|----------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| (1) | <i>šaamb-o</i> | <i>heet²-a</i> | ‘a/the good boy’ |
| | boy-M | good-M | |
| (2) | <i>šeett-e</i> | <i>piš-ay</i> | ‘a/the white girl’ |
| | girl-F | white-F | |

- (3) *ʔaak-e* *damm-ooma* 'Ø/the big animals'
 animal-PL big-PL

Examples 1 show that adjectives have the following gender markers:

- M adjectives end in *-a*;
- F adjectives end in *-ay*;
- PL adjectives end in *-ooma* (and other forms, a few of them idiosyncratic).

Within verbs, the opposition is correlated to morphological variation on the basis of aspect (perfective *vs.* imperfective), polarity (positive *vs.* negative), etc. The examples below show singular and plural opposition for the textually most used paradigm, the (positive) Perfective³:

- (4) *ʃaamb-o* *ʔi=ʔokaay-i* 'the boy came'
 boy-M INDV=come-PFV.3M
- (5) *ʃeett-e* *ʔi=ʔokaay-ti* 'the girl came'
 girl-F INDV=come-PFV.3F
- (6) *ʔaak-e* *ʔi=ʔokaay-e* 'the animals came'
 animal-PL INDV=come-PFV.3PL

On the basis of (4)-(6), we can establish the following gender affixes for the Perfective:

- M verbs in the (positive) Perfective end in *-i*;
- F verbs in the (positive) Perfective end in *-ti*;
- PL verbs in the (positive) Perfective end in *-e*.

Gender has the typical characteristics of inflectional genders; in particular, a low level of semantic predictability: (7) shows that all nouns are assigned a gender, irrespective of their animacy or the presence of biological gender, while (8) shows that the grammatical gender occasionally contradicts the biological gender of animate entities:

- (7) *pak-o* 'mouth; language' (a M noun denoting an inanimate entity)
 mouth-M
- (8) *hisk-att-o* 'woman' (a M noun denoting a female animate entity)
 woman-SING-M

Of more interest for our concerns here, Pl-gendered nouns may (occasionally) denote a single instance of an entity:

- (9) *minn-e* 'house'
 house-PL

The only nominal case of the language, the Associative (ASSOC) is likewise gender- (but not number-) sensitive and displays the following allomorphs:

3. The Individualizer (INDV) is used *inter alia* as a 3rd person Subject Clitic, which precedes any verbal form in main declarative clauses.

<i>-ito</i>	ASSOC.M
<i>-atte</i>	ASSOC.F
<i>-été</i>	ASSOC.PL

As exemplified in:

(10)	<i>kaar-k-o</i>	<i>kooʔ-été</i>	‘arrow shaft’
	tree-SING-M	arrow-ASSOC.PL	

4. Number in Gawwada

Things become much more complicated (and interesting) when we turn to number. For many nouns, number opposition finds its expression, as usual in Cushitic, through a variety of ways, basically stem suppletion (for a small minority of basic nouns, mainly involving age and sex groups) and affixation, either alone or coupled with partial stem reduplication:

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| a) stem suppletion: | (11) | <i>šaamb-o / deell-e</i> | ‘boy/s’ |
| | | boy-M / boys-PL | |
| b) affixation: | (12) | <i>ʔirkaʃ-o / ʔirkaʃ-aan-e</i> | ‘ax/es’ |
| | | ax-M / ax-PLUR-PL | |
| c) reduplication plus affixation: | (13) | <i>paš-o / paš~š-e</i> | ‘field/s’ |
| | | field-M / field~PLUR-PL | |

		NUMBER	GENDER	
		<i>-t</i>		
		<i>-att</i>		
		<i>-itt</i>	S	
		<i>-it</i>	I	
		<i>-k</i>	N	
		<i>-ak</i>	G	
		<i>-akk</i>		
		<i>-h</i>	{-o}	M
STEM	±		{-e}	F
		<i>-adɗ</i>	{-e}	PL
		<i>-idɗ</i>	P	
		~C	L	
		<i>-aan</i>	U	
		<i>-aam</i>	R	
		...		

FIGURE 2. – Gender and Number markers

The Singulative and Plurative markers come in a variety of forms. The Singulative markers based on {k} (*-k*, *-h*, *-ak(k)*) are always followed by a M gender marker, while those based on {t} (*-t*, *-att*, *-itt*) can be either followed by a F or a M gender marker.

As anticipated, the basic form of many nouns does not express number, and is composed by a stem and a gender affix. Examples are the nouns in (1)-(3) and (4)-(6). above. This form is semantically number-indifferent and its more common interpretation basically hinges upon the countability vs. uncountability of the entity being denoted. Therefore, in (14) the most common interpretation of *har-o* ‘dog’ will be a single instance of the domestic dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*), while the basic interpretation of *ʕand-e* ‘water’ in (15) will be an unspecified mass of water, but in neither case will this bar other contextually-based interpretations:

- (14) *har-o* ‘dog’
dog-M
- (15) *ʕand-e* ‘water’
water-PL

The expected most common case is where the Preternumeral is the base from which a “singular” and a “plural” will be formed, as graphically represented by Corbett as:

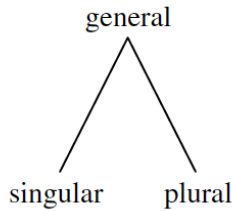


FIGURE 3. – The “general” number (Corbett, 2000: 11)

The actual range of possibilities is much richer. A list, far from exhaustive, include:

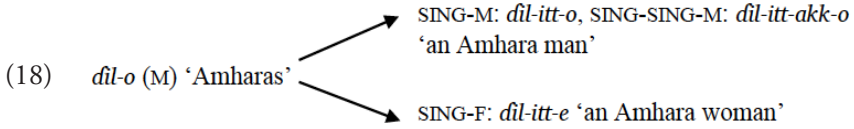
a. the formation from the Preternumeral of both a gender-unspecified “plural” and a gender-specific singular:

- (16) *har-o* ‘dog (both in general and male)’
dog-M
- ↓
- har-itt-e* ‘bitch’
dog-SING-F
- ↘ ↗
- har~r-e* ‘dogs; bitches’
dog~PLUR-PL

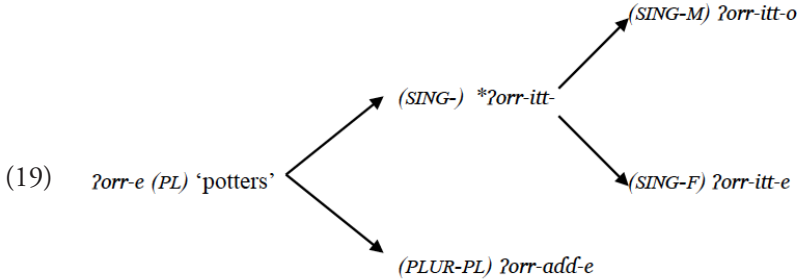
b. the formation of a “singular” from a generic (and basically collective) Preternumeral:

- (17) *kaar-e* → *kaar-k-o* ‘trees/tree’
tree-PL tree-SING-M

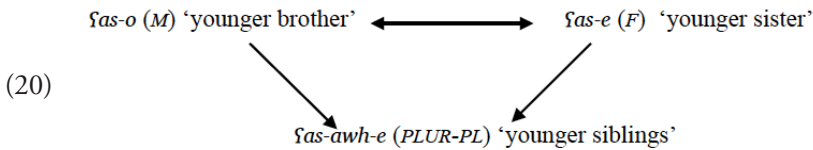
c. the formation of two gender-sensitive “singulars” out of a generic (and basically collective) Preternumeral. The semantic interpretation of the Preternumeral does not depend upon its gender; *e.g.*, the Preternumeral in (18) is a grammatical Masculine but semantically a collective, from which two gender-sensitive “singulars” are derived. The Masculine Singulative, in its turn, shows two instances of the Singulative marker:



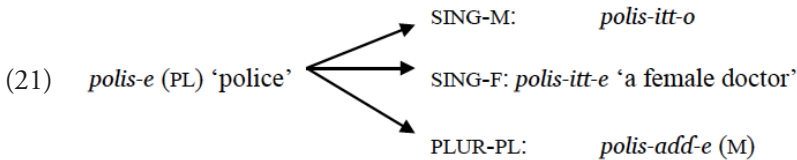
d. the formation of two gender-sensitive “singulars” and of a “plural” out of a generic (and basically collective) Preternumeral:



e. the formation of a gender-unspecified “plural” out of two gender-sensitive “singular” Preternumerals:



f. the formation out of a generic (and basically collective) Preternumeral of two gender-sensitive Singulative and a further gender-unspecified “plural”:



g. the formation of a “plural” out of a collective Preternumeral:

- (22) *sarawt-e* → *sarawt-add-e* ‘soldiers/soldier’
 soldier-PL soldier-PLUR-PL

The next step, and a further proof of the derivational nature of number, is lexicalization: many Singulatives act as the basis of derivation, from which further (semantically “true”) Singulatives and Pluratives are often derived. Morphologically, this amounts to the iteration of the number marker, confirming feature (12) in Haspelmath’s list. Again, the range of derivational possibilities is manifold:

a. from a frozen Singulative with a generic meaning a new Singulative may be formed. This pattern is very common for many nouns denoting vegetal or animal species, where the frozen Singulative denotes the species and the new, derived Singulative a single instance of it, e.g., a single plant or animal:

- (23) *ʔaww-akk-o* ‘ensete (*Ensete ventricosum*)’ → *ʔaww-att-akk-o* ‘a plant of ensete’
 ensete-SING-M ensete-SING-SING-M

b. in the case of mass nouns, the substance may be expressed by a frozen Singulative, out of which the Singulative and the Plurative express, respectively, a small and a large quantity of the same:

- (24) *čʼeeq-t-e* (SING-F) ‘blood’ → *čʼeeq-itt-e* (SING-F)
 → *čʼeeq~q-e, čʼeeq-add-e* (PLUR-PL)

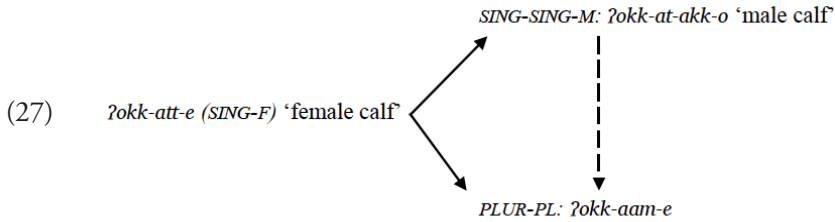
c. in other cases the Singulative is not really frozen, as it appears in two gender-specific forms, out of which a “plural” form is obtained:

- (25) *peel-h-o* (SING-M) ‘male friend’ ↔ *peel-t-e* (SING-F) ‘female friend’
 ↓ ↓
peel-l-e (PLUR-PL) ‘friends’

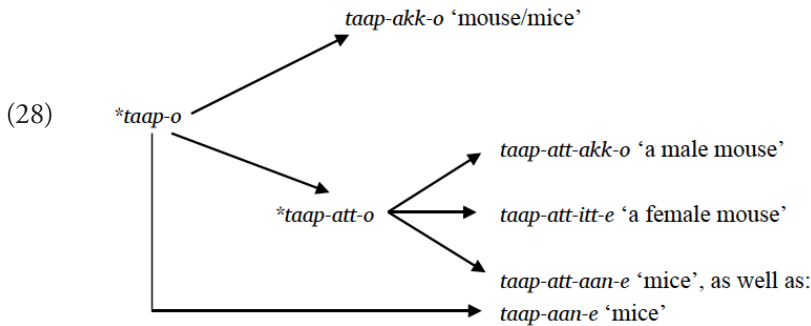
d. more complex derivational paths are not uncommon. In certain cases the formation of the “new” Singulative involves the insertion of a Singulative marker before, rather than after, the one used in the “basic” form:

- (26) *kaašan-k-o* (SING-M) ‘shield’ → SING-SING-M: *kaašan-t-akk-o*
 → PLUR-PL: *kaašam~m-e*

e. in the case of *ʔokk-att-e* “female calf”, the Singulative and Feminine is the basis from which the Masculine is derived (again, with the reduplication of the Singulative marker), while the gender-neutral plural involves the dropping of both the Singulative markers:



f. a very complex derivational path is attested in the case of *taap-akk-o* “mouse/mice”: while a basic form **taap-* is not in current use, its existence is warranted by the vocative form *taap-a* “Mouse!” (as found in folktales). It is from **taap-* that a “plural” *taap-aan-e* is formed, while for the Singulatives a further unattested form **taap-att-* gives rise to the double Singulatives *taap-att-akk-o* and *taap-att-itt-e* for, respectively, a male and female mouse, as well as of an alternative plural *taap-att-aan-e*:



Finally, agreement would be insensitive to the number of the Head noun, and would be triggered by its gender only, as seen above in (4)-(6).

5. An alternative analysis and the wider picture

One can weigh the pros and cons of this analysis against a more traditional one which analyzes the Gender and Number affixes of Gawwada as combined gender-plus-number markers, along the lines, *e.g.*, of:

- (13') *paš-o* ‘field’ → *paš-še* ‘fields’
 field-M field-PL

(cf. Mous 2013 and Ongaye and Tosco for a comparative analysis of number-related verbal derivation in Konso and Gawwada);

- a number of affixes (cf. Fig. 2), again all of them ending in /e/, and each of them used for a few nouns (cf. (12) *ʔirkaʃ-o* / *ʔirkaʃ-aan-e* ‘ax/es’ – the latter of course to be reanalyzed as *ʔirkaʃ-aane* ‘ax-PL”);

- for a handful of nouns again, stem suppletion (cf. (11) *ʃaamb-o* / *deell-e* ‘boy/s’).

For many other nouns, a Plural form would simply be non-existent or not in use. On the other hand, a derivational affix *-adit-* could in case convey the meaning of “exaggerated quantity or number of X.”

Is this analysis any better than the one sketched in Sections 2.-4.? Is to mark the whole Gawwada lexicon for a hypothetical [± PLURAL] feature really an improvement? It is very doubtful: to say the least, too much would be lost, in terms of simplicity of analysis. Moreover, we would be left with those nouns that denote a single instance of a countable entity and still display a “Plural” gender marker, such as again *minn-e* ‘house.’

On the other hand, we cannot certainly claim that Gawwada is representative of Cushitic, or even just East Cushitic, as a whole. Even the geographically and culturally close Konso, with which Gawwada shares so many features even in the domain of number (Ongaye and Tosco forth. for the verbal system), does not provide evidence for a Plurative. This category could indeed be an innovation of Dullay. Certainly, if we think of inflectionality and derivationality as points on a continuum, Gawwada and Dullay will comfortably occupy an extreme of the scale – and also a vantage point from which to look at Gender and Number in Cushitic at large.

Abbreviations and Symbols

APPL: Applicative	PFV: Perfective
ASSOC: Associative	PL: Plural
F: Feminine	PLUR: Plurative
INDV: Individualizer	PUNCT: Punctual verbal derivation
LINK: Linker	SEQ: Sequential mood
M: Masculine	SING: Singulative
OUT: Centrifugal	~: reduplication

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Système nominal et acte de nommer dans des langues couchitiques de la Corne de l'Afrique rassemble une partie des communications faites lors de la Journée d'études sur les langues sémitiques et couchitiques qui s'est tenue à Djibouti en décembre 2018. Sept chapitres sont ainsi rassemblés ici, tous dévolus à des langues couchitiques parlées en République de Djibouti, en Érythrée, en Éthiopie et en Somalie.

Dans la première partie, cinq contributions abordent l'étude des systèmes nominaux dans une perspective typologique et comparatiste, à travers les procédés de compositions nominales en afar (M. Hassan Kamil), la formation des noms composés dans cette même langue (M.-C. Simeone-Senelle) et celle du pluriel en somali de Djibouti (N. Lampitelli). L'étude du pluriel en gawwada se fait sur un plan plus théorique, remettant en cause le rattachement traditionnel du pluriel à la catégorie du nombre (M. Tosco) ; enfin, pour clore cette session linguistique, A. Mohamed Ismail et Hawa A. Farah s'intéressent à la formation d'un nouveau système possessif qui émerge dans un sociolecte en somali de Djibouti. La deuxième partie est, quant à elle, dédiée à l'art de nommer dans la tradition orale. Elle est illustrée par deux textes. L'un aborde les transformations du système onomastique somali à travers l'étude de la dation du nom à un enfant comparée à celle attribuée aux personnages fictifs de théâtre (F. Mahamoud Hadji Ali). L'autre, qui clôt l'ouvrage, concerne la toponymie des quartiers périphériques de Djibouti-ville (A. Saïd Chiré). Il met en valeur son rôle dans la prise de possession et la maîtrise du territoire.

L'originalité de cet ouvrage réside dans la mise en valeur de la complexité de l'acte de nommer, tant du point de vue linguistique qu'ethnologique, et ce à travers une étude de trois langues couchitiques parlées dans la Corne de l'Afrique qui donne accès à la culture qu'elles véhiculent. Les linguistes seront intéressés par la description de faits caractéristiques du système nominal et de son évolution. Les ethnologues, sociologues et géographes apprécieront l'analyse des stratégies qui déterminent l'acte de dation et ses enjeux.

Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle, directrice de recherche émérite au LLACAN CNRS, est spécialiste de linguistique afro-asiatique. Elle étudie et documente les langues parlées des deux côtés de la mer Rouge, plus particulièrement l'afar parlé à Djibouti, en Érythrée et en Éthiopie, les langues sudarabiques modernes du Mahra et de l'île de Soqatra au Yémen, le dahaalik, langue éthio-sémitique parlée en Érythrée, et l'arabe vernaculaire et *lingua franca* au Yémen et dans la Corne de l'Afrique. Ses publications portent essentiellement sur la description linguistique, la comparaison, les contacts de langues et la littérature orale traditionnelle.

Fatouma Mahamoud Hadji Ali, docteure en langues, littératures et civilisations du monde de l'INALCO (2017), est actuellement chercheuse à l'Institut des langues de Djibouti (ILD). Elle est spécialiste de littérature orale somali, – domaine encore peu étudié à Djibouti –, en particulier du théâtre somali. Elle a publié des articles, entre autres dans les *Cahiers de littérature orale* et, fin 2020, un ouvrage illustré de chansons et poèmes-berceuses pour enfants en somali *Heeso carruureed* (L'Harmattan), avec traduction et commentaires.

Mohamed Hassan Kamil, docteur en sciences du langage, linguistique et didactique des langues de l'INALCO (2015), ancien président de l'Union pour le développement et la culture (2015-2019), est chercheur et directeur de l'Institut de langues au Centre d'étude et de recherche de Djibouti (CERD). Il a été lauréat du prix international « Kadima » de l'Agence intergouvernementale de la francophonie (AIF) en 2002 pour son manuel de grammaire *Parlons afar. Langue et culture* (L'Harmattan). Il est également auteur de nombreux ouvrages et articles sur la langue afar.

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Photo de couverture : La ville de Djibouti, melting pot, où, dans une des rues du centre, les boutiques ont des pancartes en plusieurs langues, où se croisent des gens de langue somali, afar, arabe, vêtus de façon traditionnelle ou non, dans un cadre architectural moderne (la tour, la mosquée) ou plus ancien (la maison de style « colonial »), déc. 2018 (cliché M.-C. Simeone-Senelle)

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