

The Markers -mm and dämmo in Amharic: Developmental Approach

Authors : Hayat Omar

Abstract : Languages provide speakers with a wide range of linguistic units to organize and deliver information. There are several ways to verbally express the mental representations of events. According to the linguistic tools they have acquired, speakers select the one that brings out the most communicative effect to convey their message. Our study focuses on two markers, -mm and dämmo, in Amharic (Ethiopian Semitic language). Our aim is to examine, from a developmental perspective, how they are used by speakers. We seek to distinguish the communicative and pragmatic functions indicated by means of these markers. To do so, we created a corpus of sixty narrative productions of children from 5-6, 7-8 to 10-12 years old and adult Amharic speakers. The experimental material we used to collect our data is a series of pictures without text 'Frog, Where are you?'. Although -mm and dämmo are each used in specific contexts, they are sometimes analyzed as being interchangeable. The suffix -mm is complex and multifunctional. It marks the end of the negative verbal structure, it is found in the relative structure of the imperfect, it creates new words such as adverbials or pronouns, it also serves to coordinate words, sentences and to mark the link between macro-propositions within a larger textual unit. -mm was analyzed as marker of insistence, topic shift marker, element of concatenation, contrastive focus marker, 'bisyndetic' coordinator. On the other hand, dämmo has limited function and did not attract the attention of many authors. The only approach we could find analyzes it in terms of 'monosyndetic' coordinator. The paralleling of these two elements made it possible to understand their distinctive functions and refine their description. When it comes to marking a referent, the choice of -mm or dämmo is not neutral, depending on whether the tagged argument is newly introduced, maintained, promoted or reintroduced. The presence of these morphemes explains the inter-phrastic link. The information is seized by anaphora or presupposition: -mm goes upstream while dämmo arrows downstream, the latter requires new information. The speaker uses -mm or dämmo according to what he assumes to be known to his interlocutors. The results show that -mm and dämmo, although all the speakers use them both, do not always have the same scope according to the speaker and vary according to the age. dämmo is mainly used to mark a contrastive topic to signal the concomitance of events. It is more commonly used in young children's narratives ($F(3,56) = 3,82, p < .01$). Some values of -mm (additive) are acquired very early while others are rather late and increase with age ($F(3,56) = 3,2, p < .03$). The difficulty is due not only because of its synthetic structure but primarily because it is multi-purpose and requires a memory work. It highlights the constituent on which it operates to clarify how the message should be interpreted.

Keywords : acquisition, cohesion, connection, contrastive topic, contrastive focus, discourse marker, pragmatics

Conference Title : ICTCAL 2018 : International Conference on Theoretical Corpus and Applied Linguistics

Conference Location : Zurich, Switzerland

Conference Dates : September 13-14, 2018