



Terminology Problems in Amharic: focus on borrowing  
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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate problems in using borrowing as a terminology strategy in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia. Text analysis is employed to investigate the problems. Researches and papers about the terminology of Amharic are used as the source of data. Wholesale borrowing, disagreement in the choice of the source language and lack of knowledge in the use of borrowing are found to be the problems of borrowing in Amharic. Lack of knowledge of the internal terminology strategies, lack of knowledge of translation, negative attitude towards Amharic and lack of knowledge of conditions of borrowing are the reasons for wholesale borrowing. Problems related to disagreement in the source language are realized by disagreement in the classification of the source languages, and disagreement in the use of internal borrowing. The use of borrowing as a terminology strategy is also characterized by lack of knowledge of the different manifestation of borrowing. This is realized by differences in the modification of loan terms, and differences in identifying semantic borrowing and strategy borrowing as parts of borrowing.

Keywords: borrowing, source language, target language, terminology, terminology strategy

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Terminology and terminology strategy

Terms are a means of acquiring, retrieving, creating, communicating, storing, representing and operationalizing specialized knowledge (Antia, 2000, xv). Similarly terms are used in generating (in research and development); using (in specialized texts), recording and processing (in databases), passing on (via training and teaching), implementing (in technology and knowledge transfer) or translating and interpreting domain specific information and knowledge (UNESCO, 2005, 2).

The word terminology refers to the following three different concepts (Cabr , 1999, 32):

- a. The principles and conceptual bases that govern the study of terms
- b. The guidelines used in terminographic work
- c. The set of terms of a particular special subject

The first one refers to the science, i.e. the description of domain-specific knowledge structures and how they are transmitted in different communicative contexts while the second one refers to the methodology, i.e. the organization and recording of the meaning and usage of terms in terminological resources such as term bases, dictionaries and glossaries (Faber and Montero-Mart nez, 2019,1).The last one, on the other hand, refers to the vocabulary of a particular subject field.

Generally, the prime object of terminology study is words of natural language occurring in a specialized discourse.

Languages employ different terminology strategies whenever they encounter a new concept or a new word. According to UNESCO(2005,10), creating new terms, derivation, compounding, abbreviated forms, existing words, conversion, semantic transfer, trans-disciplinary borrowing, trans-lingual borrowing, direct borrowing and loan translation are terminology strategies which can be employed by languages. On the other hand, Taljard (2010, 91-92) classified terminology strategies into two; namely language internal and language external. Semantic transfer, paraphrase and compounding are considered as language internal terminology strategies while

borrowing is external. Accordingly, UNESCO(2005)'s terminology strategies can be classified into language internal which include creating new terms, derivation, compounding, abbreviated forms, existing words, conversion, semantic transfer, and borrowing which includes trans-disciplinary borrowing, trans-lingual borrowing, direct borrowing and loan translation.

### **1.2 Manifestation of borrowing**

A number of scholars define borrowing in different but related ways. Haugen (1950, 210); Robin (1964, 313); Gal (1979, 79); Fromkin and Rodman (1984, 309), and Hudson (1994, 18) are among scholars who define borrowing (as cited in Ariyati, 2014, 230).

Generally, the very essence of borrowing is the taking on and/or adaptation of a linguistic element or feature (mostly a word or phrase) from one language to another language.

The synchronic description of borrowing shows that form and meaning are the subjects of borrowing. Accordingly, the copying of both the form and the meaning of the source language term is one of the ways by which borrowing is manifested. The copying of the meaning of the source language is another one. The first one is called loan word while the second one is called loan shift (Haugen, 1950 as cited in Hamid 2017, 17; and Hocket, 1958 as cited in Hoffer, 2005, 53).

Based on the modification of the form of the loan word, borrowing can also take different forms. In this respect, borrowing can be partial, i.e. partial modification (phonology and/or morphology) of the loan word which is termed as loan blends where a copied part exists along with a native part (Haugen 1950, as cited in Hamid, 2017, 17). Borrowing can be total, i.e. total modification (phonology and morphology) of the loan word which is called transliteration where the phonological and morphological structure of the loan word is adapted to the structure of the borrowing language (Gauton et al., 2003, 82; Taljard, 2010, 92).

In Linguistics, borrowing can also take another form. Creating new words based on the pattern of loan words is another way by which borrowing is manifested. This can be called strategy/pattern borrowing. In Indonesia, English words like *university* are transformed into 'universitas' suggesting that the native suffix '-sitas' is employed to transform the suffix '-city' (Sadtono, 2004, as cited in Ariyati, 2014, 31).

### **1.3 Reasons and attitudes towards borrowing**

The sociolinguistics of borrowing includes a plenty of factors that account for different linguistic and sociocultural contexts. Generally, need and prestige are the two major reasons for borrowing (Haspelmath, 2009; Hamid, 2017). According to Haspelmath (2009,46-49) the two reasons of borrowing are termed, respectively, as cultural borrowing and core borrowing. A language can use borrowing if it does not have a word for a given concept (Hamid, 2017,19). This is about sociocultural need. Speakers, on the other hand, borrow words that have equivalents in the target language. This is about prestige, i.e. core borrowing, which is motivated by socioeconomic factors (social class, educational level, income, etc.) (Hamid, 2017, 19).

In addition to cultural borrowing and core borrowing, Haspelmath (2009,50) added therapeutic borrowing as another third reason for borrowing which is motivated when the original word of the borrowing language is either taboo or homonymy.

Borrowing is the simplest strategy in cultivating a language's terminology. Borrowing is not, however, easily understood by the target user, since a borrowed term does not provide clue to conceptual content. There is also another reason for choosing language internal terminology strategies. The motive behind taking such a stance can also be the need to preserve cultural identity. This is about linguistic purism where speakers choose language internal terminology strategies irrespective of need or prestige (Taljad, 2010, 92; Talebinejad et al., 2012, 169). Due to this fact the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy was a contentious issue and the topic of much debate (Taljad, 2010, 92).

### **1.4 Amharic**

Amharic is the second largest Semitic language in the world, next to Arabic. It serves as the regional official language in the SNNPR, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambela regional states. It also serves as the de facto official language in Afar (Leyew, 2012, 37). Meyer (2006, as cited in Leyew, 2012, 38) has pointed out that Amharic is spoken by 80% of the population in Ethiopia both as first and second language. It is also the most widely spoken language in Ethiopia (Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency, 1994, as cited in Handamo, 2017, 7). This suggests that Amharic is functioning as lingua franca in Ethiopia (Leyew, 2012, 37).

Amharic is the medium of instruction from 1-6 in Addis Ababa, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gurage zone and some other places in Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region from 1-8 in the Amhara region (Leyew, 2012,34). It is taught as a subject in all regions of the country. It is also being given as an area of specialization at the level of BA, MA and PhD in some of Ethiopian universities, including Addis Ababa University (Meyer 2006, 117, as cited in Handamo ,2017, 8).

As compared to other Ethiopian languages, Amharic is also the most studied language. As a Semitic language, Amharic is characterized by root-and-pattern morphology where consonants characterize the roots of verbs. The Amharic alphabet has thirty three different basic symbols each has seven different shapes called ‘orders’. According to the vowel with which the basic symbol is combined, each graphic symbol represents a consonant together with its vowel (Leslau, 1969,1).

The following are the symbols which depict the seven orders of the consonant *l*.

*ለ(ለ) ለ(ለ) ሊ(ሊ) ላ(ላ) ሌ(ሌ) ል(ል) ሎ(ሎ)*

In general, the use of Amharic in education, mass media and various governmental and non-governmental services requires terminology. In this respect, Amharic has been enriched for various scientific and technological concepts. But there are still problems. The use of borrowing as a terminology strategy is the most problem in Amharic (Demoz, 1963; Demoz, 1966;Aklilu, 1987).

### **1.5 The Problem**

Lack of terminology is the biggest problem in translating scientific and technical texts. No language is rich from its birth, and therefore the survival of a language is guaranteed by furnishing it with modern terminologies obtained either by coining (neologisms), or borrowing words (Talebinejad et al., 2012, 168).

Borrowing is considered as the simplest strategy in cultivating a language’s terminology. It is simple because it needs only the copying of the phonetic and/morphological material of the source language. Borrowing is not, however, easily understood by the target user, since a

borrowed term does not provide clue to conceptual content. Borrowing is also considered as a treat for the purity of a language. Due to this fact the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy was a contentious issue (Taljad, 2010,92).

For some time, borrowing has attracted scholars in different fields of linguistics (like Whitney, 1875; deSaussure, 1915; Sapir, 1921; Pedersen, 1931; Haugen, 1950; Lehmann, 1962; Hockett, 1979; Anttila, 1989, as cited in Hoffer, 2005,53). Borrowing is a common phenomenon across bilinguals. According to Hockett (1958), borrowing is the immediate solution when a speaker of a language encounters new concepts and ideas in another language (Hoffer, 2005, 53). Borrowing is also the immediate terminology strategy for African languages (Gauton et al., 2003, 82).

As part of African languages the same is true for Amharic. In relation to the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy, there are principles which are suggested to be followed in Amharic. The principles are concerned with the conditions of employing borrowing as a terminology strategy, source of the borrowing languages, the depth of adaptation/modification of the loan term, and conditions of employing terminology strategies other than borrowing (Aklilu, 1987, 18-19).

As far as the principles of borrowing are concerned, studying the problem of borrowing in Amharic is informative. In addition, a number of analysts on Amharic terminology wrote about the different manifestations of borrowing. Some analysts in Amharic terminology classify borrowing into internal borrowing and external borrowing. This directly shows that there is a problem in the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy.

### **1.6 Objectives of the paper**

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the problems of borrowing in Amharic terminology. The paper has also the following three specific objectives:

- (1) To find the main problems of borrowing in Amharic terminology
- (2) To describe the realization of the problems
- (3) To explore the reasons behind the problems

### **2. Methodology**

Text analysis is employed to find and describe the problems, their realizations and reasons behind the use of borrowing as terminology strategy. For this purpose different texts were used

as a source of data. The texts include researches and papers written about Amharic terminology. The researches and papers used different documents which include elementary education science text books, documents of economics, language and linguistics, and art. The texts also include an Amharic-English Science and Technology Dictionary, as well as Amharic creative writings.

Therefore the current paper shows the problems, realizations and reasons in using borrowing as a terminology strategy. Ideas related to the issues are identified, organized and analyzed. Some loan terms are taken from the texts if it is necessary. Both phonetic and Ethiopic transcriptions are used to transcribe the terms, which is followed by English glosses.

### **3. Results and discussions**

In Amharic the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy is characterized by three problems which include wholesale borrowing, lack of agreement in the source language and lack of knowledge of borrowing.

In this section, the problems, their realizations and reasons behind the problems are presented in parallel.

#### **3.1 Wholesale borrowing**

In Amharic, the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy is not new. Almost all analysts suggest borrowing as a terminology strategy (Demoz, 1987; Demoz, 1966; Demoz, 1963; among others). But, borrowing as a terminology strategy is said to be characterized by wholesale borrowing. Demoz (1966) is the one who intended to describe wholesale borrowing.

The following can be mentioned as reasons for wholesale borrowing:

- (1) Lack of knowledge of the internal terminology strategies;
- (2) Lack of knowledge of translation;
- (3) Negative attitude towards Amharic; and
- (4) Lack of knowledge of conditions of borrowing;

Almost all analysts of Amharic terminology provide due attention in describing the internal terminology strategies. In relation to this, it is not uncommon to classify terminology strategies into language internal and language external strategies. Accordingly, the use of existing words, affixation and compounding are found to be used in Amharic (Demoz, 1980; አባቶ, 1980; Richter, 1988; Handamo, 2017).

The scenario shows that lack of knowledge of the internal terminology strategy is considered as one of the causes of wholesale borrowing.

The second reason for wholesale borrowing in Amharic is lack of knowledge of translation. Taddese (2000) openly mentions lack of knowledge of the translators as one of the main reasons for the problem of Amharic terminology. Using Amharic as an example, Fulas (1971), Aklilu (1980) and Aklilu (1987) describe concepts of translation. According to Fulas (1971), root, form and referent are the three variables which should be reflected in translating a given term.

Aklilu (1987,18-19), on his part, mentions two characteristics of a referent which should be used in translation. The first one is called internal which stands for the referent's shape, content, strength, and material from which the referent is made. The second one is called external which stands for the processes of manufacturing, the manufacturer, and the place of manufacturing the referent.

Attitude towards the target language and knowledge in the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy are the other reasons for wholesale borrowing. Fulas (1971) and Taddese (2000) are among those analysts who openly state that wholesale borrowing in Amharic is the result of the negative attitudes of language policy makers in particular and language users in general. This implies that those who suggest and employ borrowing as the first terminology strategy have negative attitude towards Amharic.

In relation to this, borrowing as a terminology strategy is suggested as the last terminology strategy. Accordingly, the following are suggested as reasons to use borrowing as a terminology strategy.

- (1) if there is no word in Amharic, and
- (2) if the source term is more specialized

The first reason is directly or indirectly suggested by all analysts of Amharic terminology while the second one is suggested by a few analysts, like Aklilu (1987) and አባነህ (1994).

The above two reasons generally show that in Amharic the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy should not be forbidden. The reasons also suggest that there is misuse of borrowing and internal terminology strategies.

Generally, wholesale borrowing in Amharic is the result of different but related cases. Lack of knowledge of language internal terminology strategies, lack of knowledge of translation, lack of knowledge in the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy, and the attitude towards the target language are considered as the causes of wholesale borrowing.

Another problem in the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy emanates from disagreement in the source language. This is discussed in the following section.

### **3.2 Disagreement in the source language**

Amharic has borrowed a large number of terms from different languages. English, Arabic, French, Italian, Greek, Geez and Oromo are the source languages for borrowing (Aklilu, 1980 and Taddese, 2000). The choice of the source language was an issue of considerable debate in the history of Amharic terminology. In magazines, newspapers and research papers, there was a tradition of debate over the choice of the source language (አባነህ, 1980). Problems related to the choice of the source language are realized by the following two features;

(1) Disagreement in the classification of the source languages, and

(2) Disagreement in the use of internal borrowing

Aklilu (1980) is the one who classifies borrowing as internal borrowing and external borrowing. Internal borrowing considers borrowing from indigenous Ethiopian languages, like Geez. External borrowing, on the other hand, considers borrowing from foreign languages, like English. Geez is the special language in Ethiopia which was the classical Ethiosemitic language of the Axumite empire, now a dead language but important in the liturgy and literature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and still an important lexical resource for official and technical

terms. There are striking parallels between Geez in Ethiopia and Latin in Western Europe or Sanskrit in India (Bloor and Wondwosen, 1996, 326).

As it is an important source of lexical resources for official and technical terms, Geez is the first language which is suggested as the source language by different analysts (Aklilu,1980; አባትዮ 1980).In relation to this, አባትዮ (1980) describes the following three languages as sources of borrowing which should be used in step;

(1) Geez

If a term is not found from language internal terminology strategies, Geez should be the first source language;

(2) other Ethiopian languages

If the term is not found from Geez, the term should be found from other Ethiopian languages which are linguistically and culturally related to Amharic;

(3) foreign language

Finally, if the term is not found from linguistically and culturally related languages, the term should be borrowed from the foreign language.

Internal borrowing, in most cases using Geez as a source language, was a debating issue among different analysts. Terms from the Geez language are not, sometimes, understood equally as borrowed items. According to ተስፋዮ (1966,33), the term ርዕይነት *ri?ijunnat* ‘visibility’ is not considered as a borrowed item. The term which is suggested to be used in Amharic is borrowed from Geez, ርዕይነት *ri?ij*, ‘see’, its Amharic equivalent is የሚታይ *jəmmittaj* ‘visibility’, from አይ-ንጎ *aj-’see’*.

Polacek (1987), on the other hand, classifies borrowed terms of Amharic into terms borrowed from Geez and terms borrowed from English which suggests Geez is the source of internal borrowing.

### 3.3 Lack of knowledge about borrowing

In the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy, lack of knowledge of the different manifestation of borrowing is another problem. The following three aspects can describe the problem of borrowing which emanates from lack of knowledge of borrowing:

- (1) Depth of adaptation/modification of the loan term
- (2) Knowledge of semantic borrowing/loan translation
- (3) Knowledge of strategy borrowing

Phonology and morphology are the two main formal elements of loan words which can be subjected to modification. Some analysts gave due attention to the phonology and morphology of the borrowed items (Demoz, 1963 and Aklilu, 1980). This suggests that there is a problem in adapting the phonology and morphology of the source language term. Orthography should also be another element of adapting loan terms. The replacement of the Latin script by the Ethiopic/Geez script should also need due consideration in adapting the borrowed term.

In relation to this phonology, consonant cluster, use of homophones and word break confusion are the problems in the adaptation of Amharic loan terms. Accordingly, there is no standard way of writing loanwords with *sp-*, *st-*, *sk-* word initial consonant cluster (Handamo, 2017, 66). As Amharic does not allow word initial consonant cluster, some write the words with an initial epenthetic vowel /i/ which is suited for the monolingual, others write without the vowel which is suited for the bilingual.

Similarly, the term *theater*/θiətər/ in the theatrical arts field, for instance, was phonologically adapted in Amharic into six forms: ትዮትረቲየቲር, ቲዮትረቲየቲር, ቲኦትረቲየቲር, ቲኦትረቲየቲር, and ትኦትረቲየቲር (አባነህ 1994,28). The replacement of the non-existent English phoneme /θ/ with /t/ is common in all these forms. What makes different the forms is the adaptation of the diphthong, i.e. vowel sequence /iə/. The vowel sequence is adapted differently, as a vowel and semi vowel sequence of three types /iy/, /iy/ or /ey/, or as a vowel and consonant sequence of three types, /eʔ/, or /iʔ/ or /iʔ/.

On the other hand *carbohydrate*, which is written as a single word in English, is written as a separate word, i.e., ካርቦሃይድሬት (*karbohaydiret*). In contrary to this, separately written words or compound words in English are alternatively written as a single lexical item, as in *bar graph* ባርግራፍ (*bargirafor* ባርግራፍ *bar giraf*) (Handamo, 2017,66).

In relation to the adaptation of morphology, Aklilu (1980) gave due attention to the substitution of the affixes of the borrowed terms. In this regard, Aklilu (1980) provides lists of Amharic affixes in parallel with foreign affixes. This shows that copying the source language affix is a problem in using borrowing as a terminology strategy.

On the other hand, the changing of the Latin script by the Ethiopic script cannot sometimes be considered as another way of modifying loan terms in Amharic. According to Handamo(2017,182), words like ባንክ '*bank*', ቴሌፎን '*telephone*', and ቦርሳ '*borsa*', etc. are considered as unmodified though the script is changed from Latin to Ethiopic. Ethiopic script is easy to pronounce than the Latin one, especially for those who are monolingual.

Borrowing can be manifested by the transfer of the sense of the source language term. Borrowing can also be manifested by the adaptation of the pattern of the source language term. In Amharic, a few analysts (ፍቅሩ, 1964; Polacek, 1987; Gankin, 1988; and Richter, 1988) realized that borrowing can be manifested by borrowing the sense and the pattern of the source language term.

Gankin(1988) and Richter(1988) are among a few analysts who described, using examples, semantic borrowing as one of a terminology strategy employed in Amharic. ፍቅሩ (1964) was the one who exclusively described terms incorporated by semantic borrowing and showed how semantic borrowing hinders communication in Amharic.

Polacek(1987) and Gankin(1988), on the other hand, observed that Amharic copies Geez word forming strategies. Amharic extensively employs the Geez compound word forming strategy.

In general, lack of knowledge about borrowing is a problem in using borrowing as a terminology strategy. This is realized by lack of knowledge about the depth of modification of the loan term, and knowledge about loan translation and strategy borrowing.

**4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

In the history of Amharic, borrowing is employed as terminology strategy. In this paper it is shown that there are problems in the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy. Wholesale borrowing, disagreement in the source language and lack of knowledge of borrowing characterize the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy. Lack of knowledge of the internal terminology strategies, lack of knowledge of translation, negative attitude towards Amharic and lack of knowledge of conditions of borrowing are the reasons for wholesale borrowing. These reasons may have their roots either from the easiness of borrowing or the negative attitudes towards the target language, Amharic.

On the other hand, problems related to disagreement in the source language are realized by disagreement in the classification of the source languages, and disagreement in the use of internal borrowing. In relation to this, the use of Geez as a source language is considered either as language internal or language external.

In Amharic, the use of borrowing as a terminology strategy is also characterized by lack of knowledge of the different manifestation of borrowing. This is characterized by lack of knowledge about the adaptation/modification of the loan term, semantic borrowing/loan translation and strategy borrowing.

In general, the scenario in Amharic shows that knowledge and attitude matter in the use of borrowing as terminology strategy. This calls further investigation on other Ethiopian languages.

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 ለትምህርትባችለርዲግሪማሟያየቀረበጥናታዊጽሀፍ(ያልታተመ):: አዲስአበባ፤  
 ኃይለስላሴዩኒቨርሲቲ::

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ባችለርዲዳግሪማሚያየቀረበጥናታዊጽሁፍ(ያልታተመ):: አዲስአበባ፤አዲስአበባዩኒቨርሲቲ::  
 አባነህአሻግሬ::(1994)::የሙያቃላትስያሜአሳሳቢነትበትያትርዘርፍ :: *በየቋንቋዎችጥናትተቋም*  
*13ኛውአመታዊጉባኤ፤ገጽ 28-34::አዲስአበባዩኒቨርሲቲ፤የቋንቋዎችጥናትተቋም::*  
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