What Terminal Speakers Can Do to Their Language: the Case of Elmolo

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1. *The Elmolo people and their language(s)*

The Elmolo are a small community of fishers living in two settlements along the eastern shore of Lake Turkana, in northern Kenya. Although long considered "the smallest tribe of Kenya" and almost on the verge of extinction, the Elmolo have actually been increasing in recent years: they number today approximately 700 – a big leap from the mere 143 counted by Spencer in 1958 (Spencer 1973) and the approximate figure of 200 reported by Heine (1980).

A minority of the Elmolo lives in the Division administrative centre of Loiyangalani, but the overwhelming majority inhabits two villages: Layieni (6 km.s North of Loiyangalani), which according to the 1999 Kenya National Census counted 70 households and 363 people; and Komote (13 km.s North of Loiyangalani), with 63 households and 250 members of the community, for a total of 613 Elmolo. Other Elmolo settle for at least a part of the year further North of Komote, especially in Palo (25 km.s North of Loiyangalani), where they fish and attend to the goats (no grazing is possible in Layieni and Komote).

Finally, a section of the Elmolo is settled in an island off Ileret, 70 km.s South of the border with Ethiopia. Just as the "southern" Elmolo have shifted to Samburu, their northern brethren have adopted Dhaasanac. No further informations on these "northern" Elmolos are, to the best of my knowledge, available, and their very existence has never been reported.
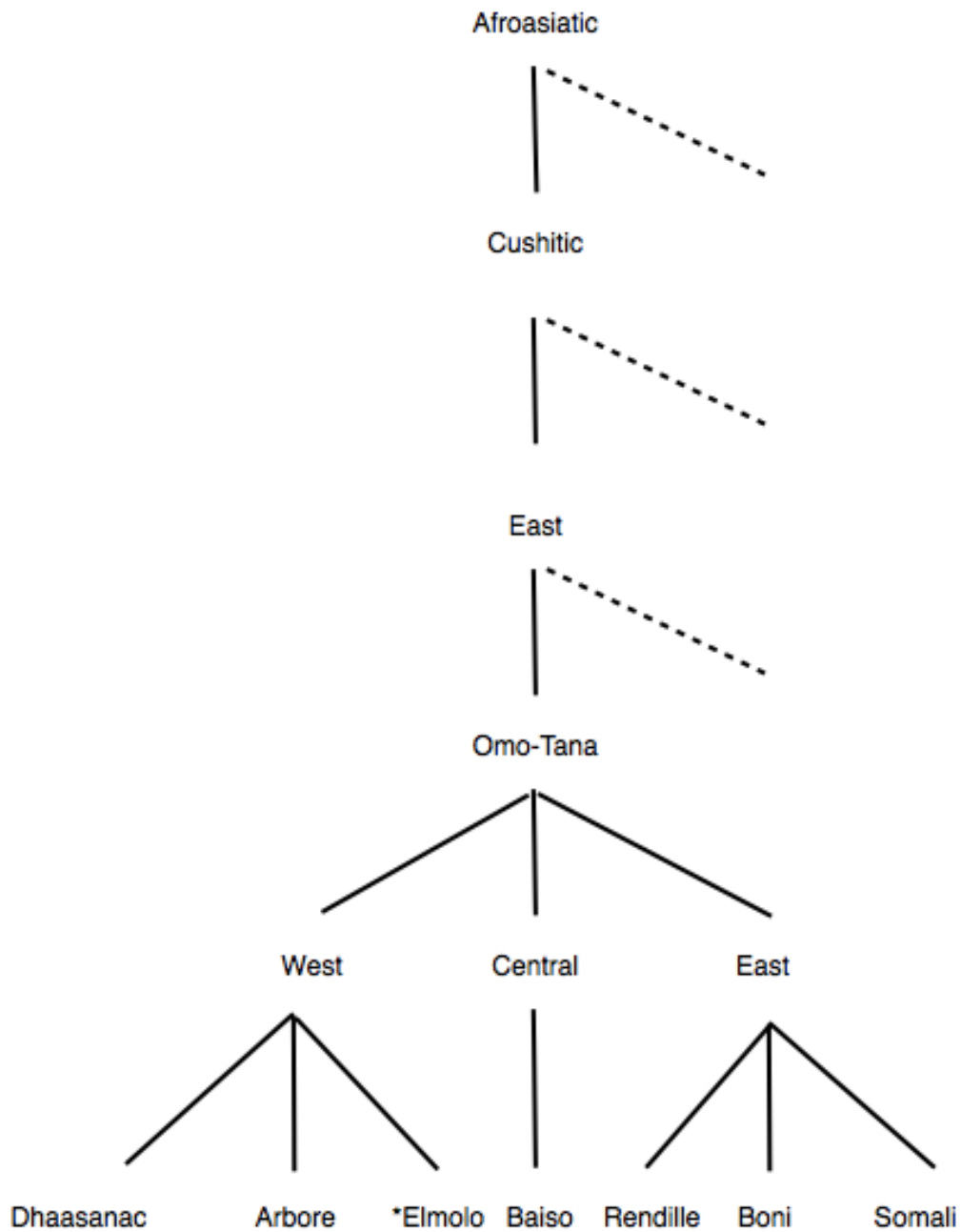
The location of Elmolo and the neighbouring languages is shown in the map below:
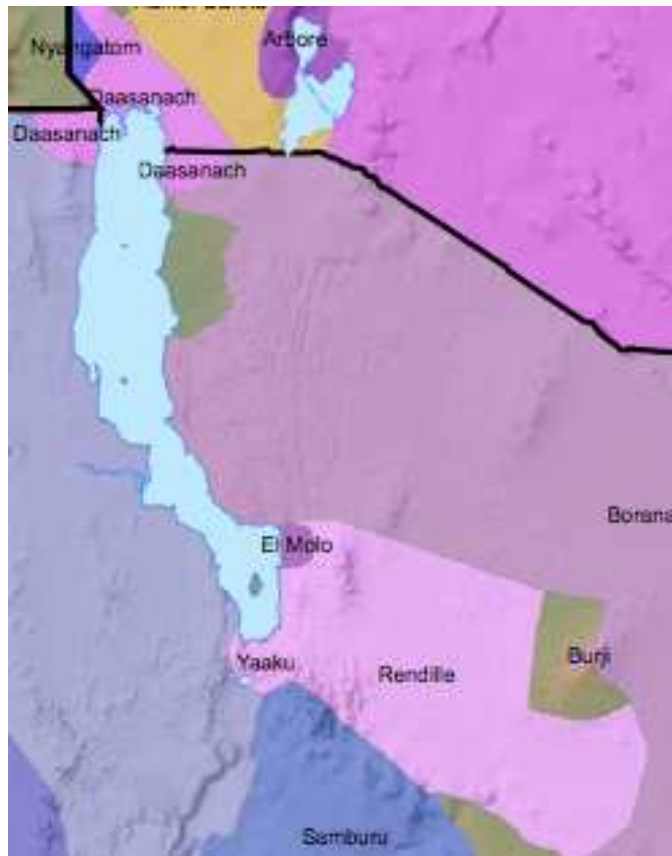
Elmolo and the neighbouring languages (from http://www.worldgeodatasets.com/language/huffman/; note that the location of Yaaku is wrong)

Although the Elmolo still basically live on fishing, they have also acquired many goats and even some cattle. The Elmolo are Catholics. Most of them know Swahili, a few at least some English.

The Elmolo are native speakers of Samburu (ISO 639 code: saq), a northern Maa variety (Nilo-Saharan, Eastern Nilotoc branch) specially close to Chamus but also to the Maa as spoken by the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania. The Elmolo shifted from an East Cushitic language we call Elmolo (ISO 639 code: elo) to their present Samburu during the first half of the 20th century. The old Cushitic language of the Elmolo was close to two languages spoken mainly across the border in southwest Ethiopia: Dhaasanac (Tosco 2001) and particularly Arbore (Hayward 1984). The classificatory position of Elmolo within the Omo-Tana subgroup of East Cushitic is shown in the following figure:

Afroasiatic

Cushitic

East

Omo-Tana

West   Central   East

Dhaasanac   Arbore   *Elmolo   Baiso   Rendille   Boni   Somali

The classification of Elmolo

The story of the Elmolo language shift has been documented by Heine (1980) and Brenzinger (1992). Basically, the Elmolo accepted the language of the Samburu, the dominating ethnic group in the area, and stopped active language transmission. Language shift was preceded by the acquisition of Samburu as a

local lingua franca and, economically, by the introduction of goats. The Elmolo also acquired male circumcision and, much later, gave up endogamy. According to my informants (2010), the last "good" speaker of Cushitic Elmolo, Kaayo, died in 1999.

To be true, tads and bits of the old language are still in use: a good number of words belonging to basic vocabulary are still known among the elders, while possibly hundreds of words pertaining to fishing (from fish names and fish parts to fishing implements) – which were simply absent in the language of the pastoralist Samburu – have been grafted onto the "new" Samburu language of the Elmolo. Finally, a few formulaic expressions in the old language are still used in songs, greetings and propitiatory rituals. In any case, the Samburu phonology is followed, and the Cushitic morphology and syntax has been completely lost.

A changing political state of affairs (with the waning of the Samburu domination and the ascendancy of the Turkana) has stimulated in recent years a renewed pride in their traditions and their old language on the part of the Elmolo. In 1995 the "Elmolo Development Group" (EDG) was established in order 'to promote self reliance among the Elmolo people through responsible utilization of the resources of Lake Turkana' (Omondi and Otieno 2008: 3). In 2000 EDG changed its name into "Gura Pau Community Based Organization (CBO)," which 'is basically involved in projects that empower the Elmolo people. It is under such initiatives that the Elmolo language revival program was begun' (Omondi and Otieno 2008:3).

Founder and chairman of the Gura Pau CBO is Michael Basili. Longtime teacher and later schoolmaster and later Education Officer of the Loiyangalani Division, he retired in 2006. Michael Basili's dream is to reinstate Elmolo as the language of the community through teaching it to the children. For the time being, isolated words in the old language are taught to the children, also with the aid of a practical Latin alphabet devised by the present writer in 2010; an alphabet chart has been printed and somewhat disseminated among the Elmolo.

2. *All the trouble with the Elmolo data*

In the seventies of the past century a few old speakers were still to be found among the community, and served as informants for Bernd Heine: 'Only eight Elmolo have been found to have a speaking competence of the language. They include four men and four women, all over 50 years old' (Heine 1980: 175). Heine could publish a glossary (Heine 1972/73) and a grammatical sketch (1975/76) in German, followed a few years later by a revised sketch and glossary in English (Heine 1980).

From the data, Elmolo looks like a bona fide Eastern Cushitic language of the Omo-Tana subgroup: a few basic verbs are prefix-conjugated, while the majority of verbs use suffixes only. Subjects are expressed through preverbal clitics; as common in not-Highland East Cushitic, modifiers follow their head, but for the rest the language is consequently verb-final, etc.

Still, a closer look at the morphology casts more than a doubt, as eloquently expressed by Sasse:

'[...] I was impressed by the fact that the verbal paradigms were so deviant from those of the neighboring and related Arbore. [...] Elmolo and Arbore seem to be so closely related that they can be considered dialects of each other [...] the impression remains that Elmolo is much "poorer" than Arbore (Sasse 1992: 76).

Where did Sasse's doubts stem from? And are they justified?

After twenty years, our data fully confirm Sasse's doubts and suggest that Heine's informants were at best rusty, terminal speakers of the old Cushitic language.

2.1. PREFIX-CONJUGATED VERBS

The analysis will be limited to verbal morphology, by far the most complex part of the grammar of any Cushitic (and Afroasiatic) language.

As in other Omo-Tana languages, there is in Elmolo a minority of prefix-conjugated verbs and a vast majority of suffix-conjugated verbs. Quite often, the prefix verbs are themselves highly heterogeneous in conjugation and subject to any sort of dialectal variation and analogical change. Seven verbs appear as prefix-conjugated in Heine's sketch.

As may well be expected, the highly complex and irregular prefix-conjugated verbs are a major source of inconsistency. To start with, Table 1. presents the Imperfect positive paradigm of three such prefix-conjugated verbs. As usual in Cushitic, verbs are quoted under the form of the Imperative Singular, Positive. The actual verbal forms are preceded by the subject clitics (as in Dhaasanac and Arbore, different sets of clitics are used in the Imperfect and Perfect):[1]

	íit 'to go'	*ekis* 'to kill'	*ekin* 'to swallow'
1Sg	*aŋ-íit-a*	*aŋ-ékis-a*	*aŋ-ékin-a*
2Sg	*a-yeet-e, a-téet-a*	*a-tékis-a*	*a-tékin-a*
3SgM	*í-yeet-e*	*í-yákas-a*	*í-yéken-e*
3SgF	*í-yeet-e*	*í-tákas-a*	*í-téken-e*
1Pl	*ínó-neet-e*	*ínó-nakas-a*	*ínó-neken-e*
2Pl	*ín-yeet-e, ín-teet-e*	*ín-tákas-a*	*ín-teken-e*
3Pl	*í-yeet-e*	*í-yákas-a*	*í-yeken-e*

Table 1. A few prefix-conjugated Imperfect paradigms (from Heine 1980: 190-191)

It is apparent that the paradigms are internally inconsistent, and that the 1Sg of all the verbs, plus the 2SG of 'to kill' and 'to swallow' use a partially different stem; e.g., the verb 'to go' uses in all the other forms of the paradigm the stem *-eet-* (as expected in an Imperfect paradigm), except for the 1st Singular, which appears in what looks like a Perfect form (with a typical high stem vowel): *aŋ-íit-a*.

Moreover, a single form í-yeet-e for all the 3rd persons (Masculine, Feminine, and Plural). Per se, this could be an instance of a subject-focus constructions: whenever a subject is contrastively focused, many Eastern Cushitic languages show a suspension or reduction of subject-verb agreement, and the generalization of the 3rd Masculine (Singular) for all or most persons. But this hypothesis is contradicted by the use of a different form for the 1st Plural (where the inherited -n- is preserved: -neet-e). Against the paradigms for 'to kill,' where the final vowel is the expected Imperfect marker -a, in 'to go' the forms end with -e, and this is repeated in the forms of 'to swallow.' But in both cases we could interpret this as an instance of vowel harmony induced by the /e/ in the stem.

Somewhat better preserved is the paradigm for 'to kill' (the 3rd Masculine and Feminine persons are regularly opposed through *y-* vs. t- before the verbal stem: *í-yákas-a* vs. *í-tákas-a*), but the same stem

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1. Heine's (1980) transcription is followed, except for the marking of stress (" ' "). Subject markers are probably to be considered clitics (and should therefore separated from the following stem by "="). The attentive reader will also note many inconsistencies in tonal marking.

confusion emerges here too: the 1st and 2nd Singular show again a different stem *-ekis-* vs. *-akas-* of the other forms. The same pattern (1Sg&2Sg vs. the other forms) is again true of the verb 'to swallow,' with *-ekin-* vs. *-eken-*. We could start thinking that this is more than chance, and that Elmolo did actually use a different vowel stem for a part of the paradigm. Again, this is not what the other prefix verbs show:[2]

	má-ac 'to come'	*áam* 'to eat'	*áw* 'to shoot'	*al* 'to stand'
1Sg	*aŋ-áac-a*	*aŋ-áam-a*	*aŋ-áw-a*	*(k)aŋ-al-a*
2Sg	*a-táac-a*	*a-táam-a*	*a-táw-a*	*(k)a-tal-a*
3SgM	*í-yáac-a*	*í-yáam-a*	*í-yáw-a*	*í-(ka)-yal-a*
3SgF	*í-yáac-a*	*í-táam-a*	*í-táw-a*	*í-(ka)-tal-a*
...	...	...	...	

Table 2. The singular forms of the four other Imperfect paradigms (from Heine 1980: 190-191)

While no stem-alternation within the paradigm is found in the verbs of Table 2., we find again the verbs in Table 2. show the same irregular absence of a 3SgF form with initial *t-* in 'to come,' while the Feminine is regularly marked in the remaining three verbs. The 3Pl form is again always identical to the 3SGM, while the 2Pl is always distinguished through the use of a different subject marker: *ín-* vs. 2Sg *a-*, the verbal form itself being instead identical to the 2Sg.

We could expect the Perfect positive paradigm to fare better and to better preserved in conditions of language attrite and language shift – if anything, due to its much higher frequency in respect to the Imperfect. Five out of seven prefix-conjugated Perfect positive paradigms are shown in Table 3.

	íit 'to go'	*má-ac* 'to come'	*áam* 'to eat'	*aw* 'to shoot'	*ekin* 'to swallow'
1Sg	*anáŋ-et*	*anáŋ-ec*	*anáŋ-om*	*anáŋ-aw-i/-ew-e*	*anáŋ-ekin*
2Sg	*aná-tet*	*aná-tec*	*aná-tom*	*aná-taw-i*	*aná-tekin*
3SgM	*iní-yet*	*iní-yec*	*iní-yom*	*iní-yew-i*	*iní-yekin*
3SgF	*iní-yet*	*iní-yec*	*iní-yom*	*iní-tew-i*	*iní-tekin*
1Pl	*iníno-net*	*iníno-nec*	*ínno-nom*	*iníno-naw-i*	*iníno-nekin*
2Pl	*inín-tet*	*inín-tec*	*inín-tom*	*inín-taw-i*	*inin-tekin*
3Pl	*inísu-yet*	*nísu-yec*	*inísu-yom*	*inísu-yaw-i*	*inísu-yekin*

Table 3. A few prefix-conjugated Perfect paradigms (from Heine 1980: 190-191)

2. The *k-/ka-* element found in the paradigm of 'to stand' is a locative adposition and can be disregarded for the comparison purposes.

Are our expectations of a better preservation borne out by the data? Partially yes: except for one case (the verb 'to shoot') no stem alternation within the paradigm is reported.

And except again for the conjugation of 'to shoot,' the Prefix has no final vowel, and the aspectual value is carried by the stem only. But regularity stops here, and the feminine marker *t-* is irregularly preserved (in 2 verbs out of 5) in the 3SgF.

2.2. BRINGING IN ARBORE

When we zoom out from Elmolo to take in Arbore, its closest sister language,[3] we get a few surprising discoveries.

The Imperfect positive of those prefix-conjugated Elmolo verbs which have a prefix-conjugated equivalent in Arbore is presented in Table 4.[4]

	ʔíit 'to go'	*may* 'to come'	*ʔikkin* 'to swallow'
1Sg	*ʔaŋ ʔíhita*	*ʔaŋ ʔáacca*	*ʔaŋ ʔíkkina*
2Sg	*ʔa téhete*	*ʔa táacca*	*ʔa tékkene*
3SgM	*ʔay ʔéhete*	*ʔay yáacca*	*ʔay yékkene*
3SgF	*ʔay téhete*	*ʔay táacca*	*ʔay tékkene*
1Pl	*ʔaná néhete*	*ʔaná naacca*	*ʔaná nekkene*
2Pl	*ʔíŋ téhete*	*ʔíŋ taacca*	*ʔíŋ tekkene*
3Pl	*ʔasó yéhete*	*ʔasó yaacca*	*ʔasó yekkene*

Table 4. A few prefix-conjugated Imperfect paradigms of Arbore (from Hayward 1984: 451 foll.)

The same verbs which have stem-alternation in the Imperfect in Elmolo (E) have it in Arbore (A), too. The paradigms to be compared are repeated in Table 5.

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3. There are 12 prefix conjugated verbs against 7 in Elmolo, but, as is common in Omo-Tana, which verbs are prefix-conjugated is largely a language-specific matter.

4. The transcription generally follows Hayward (1984), except for the marking of a few phonological rules. In particular, the effects of Translaryngeal vowel harmony (Hayward 1984: 73-76) are neglected here. Hayward does not mark afffix boundaries in his paradigms, and marks clitic boundaries with "-."

	E *íit* 'to go'	A *ʔíit* 'to go'	E *ekin* 'to swallow'	A *ʔikkin* 'to swallow'
1Sg	*aŋ-íit-a*	*ʔaŋ ʔíhita*	*aŋ-ékin-a*	*ʔaŋ ʔíkkina*
2Sg	*a-yeet-e, a-téet-a*	*ʔa téhete*	*a-tékin-a*	*ʔa tékkene*
3SgM	*í-yeet-e*	*ʔay ʔéhete*	*í-yéken-e*	*ʔay yékkene*
3SgF	*í-yeet-e*	*ʔay téhete*	*í-téken-e*	*ʔay tékkene*
1Pl	*ínó-neet-e*	*ʔaná néhete*	*ínó-neken-e*	*ʔaná nekkene*
2Pl	*ín-yeet-e, ín-teet-e*	*ʔíŋ téhete*	*ín-teken-e*	*ʔíŋ tekkene*
3Pl	*í-yeet-e*	*ʔasó yéhete*	*í-yeken-e*	*ʔasó yekkene*

Table 5. Stem alternation in the Elmolo and Arbore Imperfect positive

It will be noticed that stem alternaton is limited to the 1Sg in Arbore and extended to the 2Sg of the verb 'to swallow' (and, as was seen above, 'to kill') in Elmolo. It is further found in four other Arbore prefix-conjugated verbs with no parallel in Elmolo ('to chew,' 'to cause to step/tread on,' 'to erect, cause to stand, stop (tr.),' and 'to know'). Its high idiosyncracy can with no doubt be attributed to the Arbore-Elmolo parent language (with maybe Elmolo extending it to the 2Sg), and is therefore not an effect of language decay.

The same Arbore verbs have the following forms in the Perfect positive:

	ʔíit 'to go'	*may* 'to come'	*ʔikkin* 'to swallow'
1Sg	*ʔíŋ ʔihita*	*ʔíŋ ʔeecce*	*ʔíŋ ʔikkine*
2Sg	*ʔí tehete*	*ʔí teecce*	*ʔí tekkene*
3SgM	*ʔíy yehete*	*ʔíy yeecce*	*ʔíy yekkene*
3SgF	*ʔíy tehete*	*ʔíy teecce*	*ʔíy tekkene*
1Pl	*ʔína néhete*	*ʔína néecce*	*ʔiná nekkene*
2Pl	*ʔíŋ tehete*	*ʔíŋ teecce*	*ʔíŋ tekkene*
3Pl	*ʔíso yehete*	*ʔíso yeecce*	*ʔíso yekkene*

Table 6. A few prefix-conjugated Perfect paradigms of Arbore (from Hayward 1984: 451 foll.)

In respect to Elmolo, the Arbore Perfect is never consonant-ending: but again, there is no need to attribute the dropping of the final vowel to language decay (consonant-ending – i.e., stem-ending – Perfect forms are well attested even in Somali). The main difference between the Perfect of the two languages lies again in the coherence of Arbore against Elmolo.

2.3. SUFFIX-CONJUGATED VERBS: WHEN THINGS GET WORSE

When we turn to analyzing the suffix-conjugated verbs this impression is again confirmed and even reinforced:

(a)	*ap* 'to have, possess'	*geet* 'to bend'	*dis* 'to build'	*dewe* 'to ask for'
1Sg	*aŋ-áp-a*	*aŋ-gét-a*	*an-dís-a*	*an-déwe*
2Sg	*a-áp-ta*	*á-gét-a*	*a-dís-a*	*a-déwe-ta*
3SgM	*é-áp-a*	*í-gét-a*	*í-dís-a*	*í-déwe*
3SgF	*é-áp-ta*	*í-get-a*	*í-dís-a*	*í-déwe*
1Pl	*ínó-áp-na*	*ínó-get-a, gen-na*	*ínó-dis-a, di-na*	*ínó-dewe-na*
2Pl	*ín-áp-tan*	*ín-get-an*	*ín-dís-a*	*ín-dewe-tana*
3PlM	*é-áp-a*	*í-get-a*	*í-dís-a*	*í(su)-dewe*
3PlF	*é-áp-ta*			

(b)	*ap* 'to have, possess'	*geet* 'to bend'	*dis* 'to build'	*dewe* 'to ask for'
1Sg	*anáŋ-ap-e*	*anáŋ-get-e*	*anáŋ-dis-e*	*anáŋ-dewe*
2Sg	*aná-ap-te*	*aná-get-e*	*aná-dis-e*	*aná-dewe-te*
3SgM	*iní-ap-e*	*iní-get-e*	*iní-dis-e*	*iní-dewe*
3SgF	*iní-ap-te*	*iní-get-e*	*iní-dis-e*	*iní-dewe*
1Pl	*iníno-ap-ne*	*iníno-gen-ne*	*iníno-dis-ne*	*iníno-dewe-ne*
2Pl	*iníŋ-ap-ten*	*iníŋ-get-en*	*iníŋ-dis-en*	*iníŋ-dewe-te*
3PlM	*inísu-ap-e, iní-ap-e*	*inísu-get-e*	*inísu-dis-e, iní-dis-e*	*inísu-dewe*
3PlF	*inísu-ap-te, iní-ap-te*			

Table 7. Selected suffix-conjugated Imperfect (a) and Perfect (b) paradigms (from Heine 1980: 192-193)

Even more than in the case of prefix verbs, the erratic behaviour of the Elmolo verbs appears in full light in the Perfect: verbs such as *ap* 'to have, possess' display a full set of forms, with even a totally unexpected (and probably spurious, because segmentally identical to the 3SgF) 3PlF form. Many verbs have a partially reduced set of forms: *geet* 'to bend' (the vowel is always short in both the Imperfect and Perfect for reasons unclear) has an apparent reduction of gemination, whereby **get-ta/get-te* of 2Sg and 3SgF becomes *get-a/get-e* (if Heine's transcription can be trusted here). In still others, such as *dis* 'to build,' the whole paradigm has been reduced to a single form (Imperfect *dis-a*, Perfect *dis-e*). Other idiosyncracies crop out here and there: e.g., the Imperfect 2Pl of *dewe* 'to ask for' has am unexpected (and again, historically unwarranted) ending *-tana* instead of *-tan* (while the corresponding form of the Perfect has imply *-te*, not *-ten* as in other verbs). Still other verbs, not shown in Table 7. have other irregularities: for example, *tei* 'to get, receive' has an irregular dropping of its final stem-vowel *-i* in certain forms. Still others, like *kúré dai* 'to sing,' have no opposition at all between Perfect and Imperfect.

The amount of irregularity of these forms may be better grasped when compared with the situation in Arbore, where, as expected, a unique set of endings is found, accompanied by a limited number of

morphonological rules: stem shortening (as in *zerén* 'to pierce'), and different types of assimilations (as in *ɲoorís* 'to cause to arrive,'):

(a)	*ráf* 'to sleep'	*zerén* 'to pierce'	*ɲoorís* 'to cause to arrive'
1Sg	*ʔaɲ-ráfa*	*ʔaɲ-zérna*	*ʔaɲ-ɲóorsa*
2Sg	*ʔa-ráfta*	*ʔa-zérenta*	*ʔa-ɲóorisa*
3SgM	*ʔay-ráfa*	*ʔay-zérna*	*ʔay-ɲóorsa*
3SgF	*ʔay-ráfta*	*ʔay-zérenta*	*ʔay-ɲóorista*
1Pl	*ʔaná-rafna*	*ʔaná-zerenna*	*ʔaná-ɲoorina*
2Pl	*ʔíɲ-rafta*	*ʔíɲ-zerenta*	*ʔíɲ-ɲoorisa*
3Pl	*ʔasó-rafa*	*ʔasó-zerna*	*ʔasó-ɲoorisa*

(b)	*ráf* 'to sleep'	*zerén* 'to pierce'	*ɲoorís* 'to cause to arrive'
1Sg	*ʔíɲ-rafe*	*ʔíɲ-zerne*	*ʔíɲ-ɲoorse*
2Sg	*ʔí-rafte*	*ʔí-zerente*	*ʔí-ɲoorise*
3SgM	*ʔíy-rafe*	*ʔíy-zerne*	*ʔíy-ɲoorse*
3SgF	*ʔíy-rafte*	*ʔíy-zerente*	*ʔíy-ɲoorise*
1Pl	*ʔína-ráfne*	*ʔína-zérenne*	*ʔína-ɲoorine*
2Pl	*ʔíɲ-rafte*	*ʔíɲ-zerente*	*ʔíɲ-ɲoorise*
3Pl	*ʔíso-rafe*	*ʔíso-zerne*	*ʔíso-ɲoorse*

Table 8. Selected suffix-conjugated Imperfect (a) and Perfect (b) paradigms in Arbore
(from Hayward 1984: 277-285)

Provided a few morphonological rules, all the suffix-conjugated verbs of Arbore are easily conjugated. It is true that the same kind of rules (mainly assimilatory ones) are found in Elmolo, too. The next section will show how, if we enlarge the picture again and take in Dhaasanac, the third member of the West Omo-Tana branch, paradigm restructuring is quite common.

2.4. DHAASANAC: APPARENT CHAOS OUT OF IMPERFECT LANGUAGE LEARNING?

Of course, drastic changes and even collapses of highly complex morphology are not at all uncommon. Among Afroasiatic languages this involves first of all the structure of the verb, as exemplified by numberless examples from any family of the phylum.

North of Elmolo, cases of deamatic reductions in the verbal paradigm are found all over southwest Ethiopia. In Dhaasanac (belonging to the same Omo-Tana branch of East Cushitic as Elmolo and Arbore), all the verbal forms of the main Cushitic paradigm have been reduced to two only (called form A and B in Tosco 2001).

140

This has been the result of extensive assimilation and levelling rules (Tosco 2007), as seen from the comparison with the Perfect of Elmolo and Arbore and the more conservative (and more distantly related) Somali. Dhaasaac distinguishes coronal-ending and non-coronal-ending verbs; in the former the final coronal consonant of the stem is subject to alternation in the B-forms, as exemplified in the following Table for the *r*-ending verb fúr 'to open:'

	Somali, Past, *fúr* 'to open'	Elmolo, Perfect, *iif* 'to sleep'	Arbore, Perfect, *ráf* 'to sleep'	Dhaasanac, Perfect, *fúr* 'to open'
1Sg	*fur-ay*	*iif-e*	*raf-e*	*fur-i (A)*
2Sg	*fur-tay*	*iif-te*	*raf-te*	*fuɗ-ɗi (B)*
3SgM	*fur-ay*	*iif-e*	*raf-e*	*fur-i (A)*
3SgF	*fur-tay*	*iif-te*	*raf-te*	*fuɗ-ɗi (B)*
1Pl	*fur-nay*	*iif-ne*	*ráf-ne*	*(Excl.) fuɗ-ɗi (B)*
				(Incl.) fur-i (A)
2Pl	*fur-teen*	*iif-ten*	*raf-te*	*fuɗ-ɗi (B)*
3Pl	*fur-een*	*iif-e*	*raf-e*	*fur-i (A)*

Table 9. Subject-verb agreement reduction in Dhaasanac in comparison to Elmolo and Arbore

It is noteworthy that nothing comparable to such an extensive reduction as found in Dhaasanac is witnessed in the other languages; what is more, Elmolo has preserved the inherited final *-n* of the 2Pl and 3Pl (still found in Somali) in at least in the 2Pl (*iif-ten*), against both Dhaasanac and Arbore.

Dhaasanac non-coronal ending verbs are subject to even a more radical and spectacular phonological changes: the final consonant of the stem is dropped everywhere except in word-final position (i.e., in the Imperative Singular form). This results in an exceptional amount of irregularity, as exemplified in the following (very partial) list:

Imperative.Sg			Perfect, A-form	Perfect, B-form
ʔárik	'to chase'	→	*ʔariyyi*	*ʔariyyi*
ʔídik	'to sit'	→	*ʔijji*	*ʔiddi*
béʔ	'to be saved'	→	*bii*	*biyyi*
ðáab	'to sew'	→	*ðaai*	*ðaaci*
fáaʄ	'to have enough'	→	*faaʄi*	*faaʄiyyi*
géwuk	'to belch'	→	*gewii*	*gewiyyi*
kóm	'to eat'	→	*koi*	*koŋŋi*

Table 10. Final non-coronal dropping in Dhaasanac

141

In Tosco (2007) it was proposed to historically explain this apparently chaotic situation making recourse to local oral history: the Dhaasanac would not be an originally homogeneous people but the result of successive pastoral immigration attracted by the relative fertility of the low Omo River basin. These would have locally met an original fishing community (nowadays marginalized) and imperfectly acquired the Cushitic language of the latter. The end result of massive and imperfect language learning was a drastic morphological restructuring and overall simplification of the paradigms. Yet, morphological rules can still be found.

3. *Conclusions*

North and around Dhaasanac and Arbore, South Omotic languages often show similar cases of paradigm reduction. In Dime (Mulugeta 2008), most verbal paradigms have two forms only: 1st person vs. 2nd &3rd (both Singular and Plural). In the Past Progressive even this distinction is dropped:

to come'	1(SG/PL)	2(SG/PL)&3(SG/PL)
Imperfective	*ʔad-déét*	*ʔad-déén*
Perfective	*ʔad-i-t*	*ʔad-i-n*
Far past	*ʔad-ʔad-i-t*	*ʔad-ʔad-i-n*
Progressive (present)	*ʔad-ʔad-déét*	*ʔad-ʔad-déén*
Progressive (past)	*ʔad-ʔad-déén-ká*	

Table 11. Subject-verb agreement in Dime (from Mulugeta 2008)

Also in neighbouring Maale (North Omotic), drastic reduction is attested. According to Azeb (2001:113) '[...] the verbal paradigm in Maale is simplified: with few exceptions, e.g., the imperative, Maale verbs do not have agreement markers'.

What all these changes have in common, and what sets them radically apart from the situation in Elmolo is their systemic character: reduction in subject-verb agreement may be due to historical phonological processes, and languages often preserve relics of a past morphological wealth under the form of irregularities or otherwise unpredictable syncretisms (Dhaasanac and possibly Dime). Sometimes a drastic restructuring of the verbal system has taken place, as apparently in Hamer (South Omotic), where any trace of person marking on the main verb has been lost. Apart from a Singular and a Plural form regularly distinguished in the Imperative Positive, in all the other verbal forms the subject is expressed through subject clitics, and the verbal forms are generally compound forms built with an invariable nominal form of the verb and an auxiliary or a copula (or a combination of both; Cupi, Petrollino, Savà and Tosco forth.). Also Ongota (unclassified), although imperfectly known due to its status of nearly extinct language (again, a few old speakers only are left), can be mentioned: again, no subject agreement is shown on the verbal word and subject clitics are used; its origin out of a former pidgin has ven be proposed (Savà and Tosco 2000).

The situation in Elmolo is different: as noticed by Sasse, the Elmolo language as recorded and documented by Heine in the seventies of the last century was no longer in active, everyday use – as may well be expected, given that the Elmolo had stopped regularly transmitting their language to the new generations after 1920. Heine's fielwork took place for just two days in December 1971 and later in April and July 1976.

Most probably, Heine's infomants were born in the 1920s, maybe even later: too late to be exposed to Elmolo as the regular medium of the community. They were rusty speakers: when pressed to produce their speech, and especially the complex paradigms of Elmolo (radically different from the verbal forms of their everyday language, Samburu) they tried their best.

What we have as a result is no (longer) a language, but chunks of it, as maybe imperfectly learned – and certainly imperfectly remembered – by the last rusty speakers. As I saw during my fieldwork in 2010, what little is known of the old language is shared, discussed, refined or discarded within the community. The result is not a medium in the common sense of the word but part of the communal lore, to be treasured by the whole community. I suspect that much the same happened at Heine's times within the even smaller community of the Elmolo of the 1970s.

Confirming Sasse's doubts, Elmolo can only be used with the utmost care for purposes of comparison and reconstruction.

On my part, I wonder how many other Elmolos are lurking in our data: how many other imperfectly known (let alone recorded and analyzed) languages keep tampering with our reconstructions and classifications?

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