

## Book Review: English- Blin Categorized Dictionary

Author: Fitsum Asfaha Haile (2012). Dixia Tryckeri, Stockholm, Sweden, 162 pages

By Kiflemariam Hamde

*English- Blin Categorized Dictionary* is a bilingual dictionary which is the first of its kind authored by a native speaker. As a bilingual Dictionary, Fitsum's work is the first of its kind to be written by an original speaker of Blin. It follows another original work two decades ago, a dictionary, by Blin speaker group called "Blin Language Research Group" (edited by Kiflemariam Hamde and Paulos Zeremariam, 1992) and sponsored for publication by the Stockholm-based Blin Association.



The first, and by now classical, lexicon on Blin vocabulary, however, was that of Leo Reinisch (1887, *Wörterbouch der Bilin Sprache*). A due and an appropriate review could have been current to compare Fitsum's new publication with these two previous works but the current review limits itself to presenting the main contents and making only a few comments in passing. Additionally, as a stakeholder for the Blin Dictionary published in 1992, I do not pretend to provide an objective comparative assessment, or do not even dare, making such an evaluation. For the time being, I am content with welcoming this young author's original, bilingual Dictionary as it fills a wide gap in the development of Blin literature. Thus, I limit this review to the presentation of the *English-Blin Categorized*

*Dictionary*. Moreover, critical evaluations for Blin literary work, I believe, have to be postponed until such time when Blin native writers have sufficient material to pride themselves of, and until when they get established in and on Blin literature. Thus, this review is an informative note of the main contents and the layout

The current reviewed book opens up with an *Acknowledgment* (iv-v) where the author thanks a couple of people who directly or indirectly provided their advice and support during the research period, followed by the *Table of Contents* (vi-vii) which details the main chapters and entries in different parts of the book. This part makes reading easier and you can start reading with any part independently of each other. The Preface starts off with noting the importance in mastering one's own language, in English first, and then the Blin version continues the remaining argument for the relevance of the work. The purpose as described in page one runs: "*The main aim of the this book is to collect Blin words, terms or phrases and some basic idioms and proverbs, which are helpful in preserving and learning Blin language*" (page 1). The purpose derives from the argument in the previous paragraphs, that being interested in one's own language, writing and reading it, standardizing it can become one of way *preserving* that language. It is sound background from which to explore the 'collection', as the author puts it.

The layout provides subsequent parts of the book. The main body of the Dictionary starts off with an *Introduction* (pages 11-22) which sets the stage for the standardization of terms and phrases and refers to the UNESCO (1958) standard way of writing of vernacular languages (page 12) and also describes how to use this Dictionary. The introduction is followed by Four Chapters, each chapter providing a brief introduction about the scope, level of analysis, sources and main focus in the contents, first in English followed by the Blin version. The respective introductions in each chapter are very useful for readers who just want to understand the content of each chapter without taking the effort to read all of the contents.

*Chapter One* deals with 23 important categories, starting with ‘Parts of speech (Grammar)’, Words used in Blin writing, Parts of the body, People, relations and friendships, Jewelry and Cloths, House and Furniture, Animal names, Agriculture and herding, Food and drinks, Trees, vegetables and fruits, Education, Professions, Time, Measures and Gauge, Color, Light, Art and games, Religion and rituals, Country, buildings and social services, Communication and transport, Illness and medicine, and finally, Military and War. *Chapter One* is two-third in size of the whole work with 105 pages of the total 153 excluding the Appendix and the Bibliography. *Chapter Two* deals with 220 Blin Idioms and 130 proverbs (p. 106-125). *Chapter Three* deals with 300 alphabetically ordered Blin personal names, listing and interpreting their meaning briefly (p. 126-147). *Chapter Four*, the last and shortest one (p. 48-154) is titled *Blin Language and its neighbors*. Apparently the chapter deals with *language contact* where Blin is linked to the Semitic languages of Arabic, Geez, Tigre and Tigrinya. It gives “some examples of common false friends of Blin language” (p. 149). The two *Appendices* (p. 154-158) consist of two useful vocabulary lists not yet published in an ordered manner: (a) *Blin Cultural and Traditional Equipment* (p. 154-156), which includes *House and household’s material and farming instruments and dressing*. I can say that this (a) could also be classified under House and Furniture (pages 49-62). The second list (b) is on *Blin clans and their war cry*. I suggest that the right term is not war cry but *family nicknames* because the nicknames are not invoked only during war times and that both female and males have different nicknames characteristic of the clan or extended family in patriarchal terms. The nicknames are invoked in all communications occasions whenever required. This section (b) could also fit quite well with *Chapter Three* under Blin names (p. 126-147). Author references in *Bibliography* (pages 159-162) are entered first according to the Geez alphabetical order with 21 entries, followed by 20 entries according to the Roman (Latin) script. As is the praxis, Eritrean (and Ethiopian) authors are entered in the first name followed by father’s name, in contrast to the European system in which the last name precedes the given name.

In the following part of the Review, I would like to raise some few critical comments for the sake of professional integrity on authorship, and for the required revision of a possible second edition of *English-Blin Categorized Dictionary*. The strength in the *introductory chapter* lies quite rightly in the instructions as to ‘how to use’ the *English-Blin Categorized Dictionary* as well as why the author chose a certain standard in the grammatical, script and phonology. Yet, readers are left ignorant about similar previous work in Blin in that direction. Right references help readers to judge themselves the originality and independence in such an important literature. This is not a novel literature but one based on terms, facts and words that have a precedent in writing tradition. This could have simply shown which of the sources are primary

and which of them are taken from secondary sources. Only then can the contribution of this new work for writing in Blin using the Geezword be evaluate objectively by any reader. Many newer works are indeed refereed to. For example, the author rightly refers on works which appeared after the publication of the first *Blin Dictionary* by native authors (1992, which was written with limited or no accessible publications), Tekie Albekit' *Introductory phonology and Grammar* (1992 and *Blin Fables and Stories*, 2007), Tekleghiorghis Yohannes Aftai's (1992) *Blin Grammar*, and a work by Blin Study Group in Keren (*Gerbasha* (1997)). Other refereed works are from the publications by the Eritrean Ministry of Education (1999, 2000, 2001, and 2004) that have been used in conjunction with Blin mother tongue education in the primary curriculum. A very telling and relevant addition is on the Category under "Trees, Vegetables, and Fruits" (Pages 68-73) which mainly bases on the work of Bein, et al. (1996) on *Useful Trees, Shrubs in Eritrea*. This reviewer welcomes this section because the 1992 Dictionary translated almost all names of trees as simply " a kind of tree", and now, Fitsum could have access, and used, even the corresponding scientific names of these tress is a development in the right direction. David Appleyard's (2007) *Comparative Dictionary of the Agew Languages* (2007) is also referred to in Chapter Four (p. 148) but no further comparison is made. What I would like to note here is that it is not exactly clear for the ordinary reader which terms or references are adopted in the current work from previous authors' work, and which were quite new. There are in fact quite many innovative terms that the author himself has suggested, including the Blin work *takestakhw* as a translation of the English word for *Categorized*. But I leave this for future critical evaluation.

The author also suggested on standards in English pages 14 and 15. Yet, at this stage, mention should have been made on the standardization attempts that were made by four authors (Tekie et al., 1994) and specially the most original work by Tekie Albekit (1992) *Introductory Phonetics and Grammar*. In the English version in pages 14-15, Fistum rightly quotes previous works but the appropriate referencing and comments page wise are just left out in the analyses part (pages 15-22). Again, I have in mind the work of Tekie Albekit (1992) in which the latter takes a detailed discussion on those parts where Fitsum has described in pages 16-22. I have noted above that the Introduction part deals mainly with suggestions for choices of the terms and above all, how to use the *Dictionary*. Even as such, I think that Tekie (1992: pages 22-44) deals with the same phenomena as in the current reviewed work. What is the link? What does the current work contribute that was not included in Tekie's work? These questions are merely left out and they invite for a joint discussion in the future. What we need in the near future is to get together again and agree on standards that Blin authors might follow, the same or at least similar to those suggested in Tekie et al. (1994). This comment however is a paradoxical one. On the one hand, the reviewer encourages younger authors to be creative and skillful enough and publish texts that would develop Blin writing. On the other hand, the referencing system should also be commonly used and generally accepted one so that Blin writing follows the general framework for authors and that the authors need to acknowledge previous works. Authorship requires balancing both demands.

Fitsum's extensive list of 130 proverbs (pages 119-122) in *Chapter Two* greatly enhances documenting one of the sources of Blin rich wisdom. However, the author does not specify if previous published work were available, referred to, or used in collecting them. includes 24

proverbs which were already published: 14 by Kiflemariam (1989), 24 proverbs by Tekleghiorghis (p 175-176), 10 proverbs by Tekie (1992, pages 107-109), and 100 proverbs by the Blin Study Group in *Gerbasha* (Pages 38-41). While the new collection is a welcome addition, it could have been fair to acknowledge previous publications. The quality or the nature of the proverbs in relation to the languages could still be discussed in future reviews. *Chapter Two* also includes 220 *Blin idioms*. Mention should have made on the 100 *Blin Idioms* in Tekie (1992: 100-106) and perhaps he should have pointed out which were newly added. Both the list of proverbs and idioms, however, are appreciated very much and this reviewer believes that the work contributes to the continued documentation of oral tradition in Blin language which had remained merely spoken for long (Abba Keflemariam Fadega, 1984).