

## THE BEST WAY TO DRINK IN BEJA AND BEYOND: WATER AND MILK

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**Abstract:** In the Beja society of the eastern arid zone of Sudan, water and milk are essential beverages for survival, and are also salient elements of the culture as reflected by a rich lexicon. This paper shows how social rules, time intervals, and incompleteness are encoded in monolexemic drinking and milking items, as well as lexical differences based on the animacy hierarchy between humans and animals in the domain of thirst. The structure of the Beja lexicon is compared with that of other African languages, and the Beja social rules related to drinking and milking are illustrated with two anecdotes extracted from oral literature texts.

**Key words:** Beja, African languages, semantics, lexicon, ingestion, oral literature

### 1. Introduction

Since Gouffé's (1966) seminal study of an African language (Hausa, Chadic, AA), the body of crosslinguistic research on the semantic domain of *INGESTION* (roughly 'eating' and 'drinking') has grown both for African languages (see e.g. Bonvini 2008; Boyeldieu 2008) and beyond (e.g. Newman 2009a, and articles therein; Burenhult & Kruspe 2016). Among all this research, less attention has been paid to the ingestion of fluids. In the arid area of eastern Sudan where Beja, the sole language of the Northern branch of Cushitic (AA), is mainly spoken, such a universal human (and animal) activity is particularly challenging for survival reasons, and important in social practices. This

is why the focus of this paper is limited to activities related to water and milk.

The lexicalization of the concept of *INGESTION* greatly differs across languages (see Newman 2009b for a crosslinguistic overview), ranging from the absence of a lexical distinction between the concepts of *EAT* and *DRINK* (see e.g. Aikhenvald 2009; Wierzbicka 2009) to highly specialised and idiosyncratic terms as in Athapaskan languages (Rice 2009) or Aslian languages (Burenhult & Kruspe 2016). Beja does make a lexical distinction between generic ‘eat’ *tam* and generic ‘drink’ *g<sup>w</sup>?*, but shows interesting, and at times, unique patterns of hyponymic lexicalisations that will be presented below.

In this paper, we will deal with the lexicalisation patterns of activities directly linked to the semantic domain of drinking for the consumption of water (§2.1) and milk (§3.1) in Beja, as well as milking and thirst, along the way making some comparisons with other African languages. We also will very briefly illustrate the social rules associated with water and milk with two short anecdotes taken from oral literature texts (§2.2 and §3.2).

## 2. Water

### 2.1. The lexicon

Water is essential to human beings as well as their domesticated animals. In the Beja society the division between the two categories is partly reflected in the lexical domain of drinking, as well as thirst.

First, for humans and animals, thirst is expressed differently at the lexical level: *jiwa:j* ‘to be thirsty’ applies to humans, while *nigir* applies to animals. However, they both ‘drink’ (water or any beverage) similarly: *g<sup>w</sup>?* ‘to drink’ is used for humans and their cattle alike.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This verb, when applied to humans, also means ‘to smoke’ as in many languages of the world. See e.g. Bonvini (2008) for some Niger-Congo languages, Aikhenvald (2009) for some Ndu languages, and Newman (2009b) for a cross-linguistic perspective. The RefLex database (Seegerer & Flavier 2011–2020), which,

Moreover, the verb *fari:b* (< Arabic *faraba* ‘to drink’) is also used for humans and animals, but it refers to the production of a sound together with drinking in large sips. The noun *farba*, which is derived from the same root, has lost its Arabic meaning ‘sip’; in Beja it means ‘a forced sip through mouth and nose done by a drowning person’. For other domesticated animals like dogs, the Beja verb is *kal* ‘to lap’.

Second, there are a few highly specialised terms that apply specifically to domestic animals, in particular camels (*ka:m*, pl. *kam*), which were central (and still are to a lesser extent today, but remain highly valued) to the traditional way of life in many respects, for transportation of loads, travelling, trading, sustenance, etc. These terms are related to the intervals between two periods during which the camels are given water. Two of them are derived from the same root as *nigir* ‘to be thirsty (animal)’. One is the causative verb *si-nagir* ‘to prevent from drinking’, and the second is the masculine noun *naga:r* ‘abstinence from drinking (during one day)’. In the genitive noun phrase *naga:r-i b?i* (lit. abstinence\_from\_drinking-GEN day), it precisely indicates the ‘day when the cattle are not given water’. It can also be used in combination with the verb *gʷ?* ‘to drink’, and followed by the ablative postposition =*i*: to indicate that the animal is drinking every other day; the term for ‘day’ (*b?i*) is not overtly mentioned, as in (1):

- (1) *u:=kam*                      *naga:r=i*:  
 DEF.SG.M.NOM=camel    abstinence\_from\_drinking=ABL.SG  
*gʷ?-i:ni*  
 drink-IPFV.3M.SG  
 ‘The camel drinks every other day.’

There is, in addition, a specific ordinal number which refers to an interval of two days, *sirma:j* ‘one day out of three’. It is unrelated to *mhaj* ‘three’ or *mhali* ‘two’. It collocates with the verb *gʷ?* and its derived forms, as in (2) with the causative form:

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as of April 2020, contains 1,315,438 entries covering 870 languages from 1,428 sources, contains some 50 polysemies of this type.

- (2) *ti=kam=t=e:*                      *sirma:j*  
 DEF.F=camel=F=POSS.3PL.ACC      one\_day\_out\_of\_three  
*g<sup>w</sup>ʔa-s-i:ni*  
 drink-CAUS-IPFV.3M.SG  
 ‘He gives water to his she-camels every three days.’

From this term is derived the middle verb *sirma:m* ‘to drink with an interval of two days’ (i.e. one day out of three).<sup>2</sup>

A search in the RefLex database on the topic of drinking and thirst for parallel lexicalisations based on time frequency and species turned out to be fruitless. It may be the case that Beja is unique in this respect, unless equivalent terms have been overlooked by lexicographers. However, in sources outside RefLex, in Northwest Africa, semantically related verbs exist in Hassaniyya (the Arabic variety spoken in Mauritania; Semitic, AA) and Zenaga (the Berber – AA – variety of Mauritania) which designate ‘to miss one day at the trough’, *ǧabb* in the former language, and *yäššugä/yäššägä* in the latter (Taine-Cheikh forth.).

In terms of humans, there are five more specialised drinking verbs, which are all linked to the quantity absorbed, a common lexicalisation crosslinguistically. However, three of them additionally specify that the action of drinking is not completed, and in what proportion, precisions which we have not been able to trace in other languages so far. These two verbs are *gibit* ‘to drink long sips of the majority of a beverage without finishing it’, and *g<sup>w</sup>ham* ‘to drink (several) sips of the minority

<sup>2</sup> In Roper’s (1928) lexicon, one also finds the masculine noun *simha*. He translates it as ‘the day that comes after an interval of three days’. He considers it as derived from *mhaj* ‘three’. The adverb *simhaj* is translated by ‘in four days’ time, every four days’, from which the middle verb *simh-am* ‘to drink every fourth day (camel)’ is derived, and the causative *simh-as* ‘to make drink every fourth day (camel)’. None of these terms are known today, and the translations provided by Roper seem highly dubious to Beja speakers. An enquiry made about these terms among Beja camel breeders and speakers by the second author triggered reactions of surprise and indignation such as, “A good camel breeder should not let his camels wait four days without drinking!”

of a beverage without finishing it'. When used with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person ablative pronoun *ho:j*, *g<sup>w</sup>ham* simply means 'to sip', and the action noun *g<sup>w</sup>hi:m* means 'sip'. Its pluractional form, *g<sup>w</sup>a~g<sup>w</sup>hi:m*, means 'to sip in a repeated and continuous manner'. In addition, it indicates that this sipping covers only a minor part of the quantity at hand, like the base form. The two other verbs are *tʔim* 'to drink long sips' and *si:k<sup>w</sup>* 'to drink a small quantity', which do not denote further reference to the proportion of the beverage left in the container nor to the incompleteness of the action.

Orthogonal to the topic of this paper, but nevertheless interesting, is the fact that Beja has dedicated verbs for 'going to the well' and 'leaving the well' where people fetch water. *ʔarib* means 'to go to the well' (as opposed to the generic verb *baj* 'to go'), which by extension simply also came to mean 'to drink water' (for humans and animals) and 'to have water'. Its reciprocal-sociative form *am-ʔarba* means 'to go to the well together'. The verb *wirʔa* more specifically means 'to go to the well to bring water back', from which an agent noun is derived: *wirʔinna* is the person realising this action. 'To leave the well' is *nage:m* (as opposed to the generic verb *dif* 'to leave'). It is related to a period of the day, the afternoon, and also means 'to leave in the afternoon'. All these verbs can only be used in the masculine, as going to fetch water at the well is a male activity in the Beja culture.

In the RefLex database, there are fourteen languages which show a similar lexicalization, twelve of them are Dogon (NC) languages, e.g. Ben Tey *kóó* 'to go and draw water' (Heath 2013). In Sereer (Atlantic, NC), *buunnik* is even more specific, meaning, 'to go to the well to wait for the water to rise' (Crétois 1973–1977), as well as in Wolof (Atlantic, NC) *baawlu* 'to go to the well without a rope and try to make s.o. offer you water' (Diouf 2003).

In the database, Afar (East-Cushitic, AA) is the sole language outside Beja that has a dedicated entry for 'to leave the well', but it is even more specific than in Beja: *hodá* 'going away thirsty (of animals), going away from a well without being watered' (Parker & Hayward 1985).

## 2.2. Oral literature

There are numerous Beja anecdotes about water and wells, and as is often the case, social transgressions are permitted in oral literature. Below is one example about a legendary character named Bafalib (lit. ‘he who does not fly away’), which is illustrative of supposed former behaviours between women and men (dancing together, a woman going to fetch water from the well and talking to an unknown man), as well as of the Beja sense of humour. For lack of space, only the English translation is provided. The full time-aligned and glossed text in Beja is available online.<sup>3</sup>

There was once a man whose name was Bafalib. At weddings, in the old days, women were dancing with men who were doing high-jump dancing (*bi:bo:b*) for them. Bafalib leaves. He goes to the wedding. On the road when he finds a well, at the well, a woman is waiting. After she has filled her goatskins, when he says to the woman, “Give me water!” she answers, “Go away! I won’t give you water! A man who is called Bafalib is coming and I want to see him”. Well, so, when the woman leaves after he has drunk, he leaves. Over there, at the wedding, now, when they are doing high-jump dancing, he jumps very high and when he dances, when she says, “Hey! Who is this one? Hey! Who is this one?” they say, “He is the one they call Bafalib”. She says, “Gosh! Gosh! I did not give you water at the well!”

## 3. Milk

### 3.1. The lexicon

When it comes to drinking milk, an essential element of the Beja diet, the lexical complexity is partly linked to social rules, not only to the manner of drinking. However unlike its sister languages Afar (Parker & Hayward 1985) and Hamar (Omoti, AA) (Petrollino 2016), Beja has no dedicated verb meaning ‘to drink milk’; one simply says *i:j?a:t*

<sup>3</sup> At [http://corporan.huma-num.fr/Archives/afficheTout\\_N2.php?ref=0%20:%20BEJ\\_MV\\_NARR\\_39\\_BAFALIB.EAF%20:%200](http://corporan.huma-num.fr/Archives/afficheTout_N2.php?ref=0%20:%20BEJ_MV_NARR_39_BAFALIB.EAF%20:%200).

*g<sup>w</sup>ʔa-te:na* ‘you (pl.) drink milk’ (lit. milk you drink), or *i:jʔa:t ti-ni:-na* ‘you (pl.) take milk’. Nevertheless, there are two specialised verbs that specifically denote the way milk is drunk: *fifi* ‘to drink all the milk in one gulp’ and the compound verb *simda:jsalo:l* ‘to drink milk from the cord that hangs from the goatskin’, from *simda* ‘cord of goatskin’ and *salo:l* ‘to guide with hand’.

Two verbs reflect social rules of behaviour regarding how one should drink milk in the Beja culture. Milking is generally an activity devoted to men, and under no circumstances should a male drink milk that has been milked by a woman (see §3.2). Neither should he directly drink the milk that he has milked. Instead, he should first make another man, or at least a boy who is circumcised, drink a few sips before him. The verb *ʔo:d* ‘to drink milk in a shocking, improper manner’ prototypically refers to a situation where those taboos are transgressed. On the other hand, there is a dedicated verb to express that this rule is duly observed: *ligag* specifically denotes, ‘to drink a few sips of the milk that has been milked by a man so that he can drink it in turn’.

Milking is also expressed by two hyponymic verbs. In addition to the generic verb *na:j* ‘to milk’, *sik<sup>w</sup>im* ‘to draw off thick milk from parturient animal’ refers to the quality of the milk and to the state of the animal, while *silit* ‘to milk an animal to the last drop’ is an extended meaning of ‘to scrape, to wipe’, and refers to the completeness of the action.

Not surprisingly, there is a correlation between pastoral societies for whom cattle breeding is a central activity, with milk consumption being an important part of their diet, and more precise vocabulary in this domain. Interestingly none of the languages concerned divide the lexicon similarly. In Africa, we came across four languages, in addition to Beja, with hyponymic verbs for ‘to drink milk’ and/or ‘to milk’, two in the RefLex database, and two in Taine-Cheikh (2010).

In the Maasina variety of Pulaar (Atlantic, NC) (Seydou 2014), there are three verbs meaning ‘to drink milk mixed with water’, *bayta* (which also means ‘to mix water with milk’), *suura* (whose first

meaning is ‘to dilute a beverage, in particular milk, with water’), and *semmba*, which also applies to any kind of beverage mixed with water.

As for milking, Pulaar has no less than eleven terms related to this activity, ten verbs (two of them referring to the interval between two milking sessions – no verb referring to intervals between drinking sessions is recorded in this language), and one action noun. They are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

**Milking-related terms in the Maasina variety of Pulaar (Seydou 2014)**

<b>Pulaar</b>	<b>Translation</b>	<b>Other meanings</b>
<i>bira</i>	‘to milk’	
<i>birda</i>	‘to milk with or into s.th.; to milk completely’	
<i>cowgol</i>	‘leaving a female animal without milking it during two days (so that it will provide more milk)’	‘folding’
<i>hewdoo</i>	‘to go on milking a cow whose calf is dead (to keep its lactation)’	
<i>sowa</i>	‘to milk every other day (when females have less milk)’	‘to fold into two; to do sth. one time out of two’
<i>towa</i>	‘to milk just one bowl (to offer it to an unexpected visitor)’	
<i>sowta</i>	‘to milk every two or three days (during the dry hot season)’	‘to unfold, to split into two’
<i>wuccoo</i>	‘to milk secretly (after the last evening milking); to milk an additional time at night (when cattle have a lot of milk)’	
<i>suncina</i>	‘not to milk a cow for some time to get more milk’	‘not to draw water from a well for some time to let the water rise’
<i>yoortina</i>	‘to stop milking a cow to dry up its milk’	
<i>duuya</i>	‘to offer (to a guest one wants to honour) some sips of the milk that one has just milked’	



Mixing water with milk is also part of the diet of the Moors of Mauritania, and it is reflected lexically in Zenaga and Hassaniyya (Taine-Cheikh 2010), which have several nouns for ‘milk mixed with water’ denoting the respective proportions of the two liquids. Interestingly, both languages have a dedicated hyponymic drinking verb for humans, which refers to the period of the day when the camel is milked. Zenaga *yässiʔgäl*, and Hassaniyya *säyyäk* both mean ‘to drink the milk that has been milked at an unusual time before dinner, before the evening’. In addition, Hassaniyya has two hyponymic verbs *žälwäž* ‘to drink milk with its froth’, and *xabb* ‘to suck the froth of the milk’. Zenaga has only one more hyponymic verb, *yufraq* ‘to suck the froth of the milk’.

Besides, Zenaga has a dedicated verb to express ‘to die of thirst’, *yäkkuʔdä* (Taine-Cheikh 2010). Tupuri (Ruelland 1988) also has a similar verb, *läb-gë*, but it means both ‘to die of thirst’ and ‘to die of hunger’. Beja has no equivalent monolexemic verb.

In Sereer (Crétois 1973), hyponymic lexicalizations concern only ‘to milk’, not ‘to drink milk’. The generic verb ‘to milk’ is *bir*, while *caas* means ‘to milk a little the cow that has just calved’, referring both to the quantity of milk and the state of the animal; *lebatox* and *paasaatu* mean ‘to milk a cow after its calf has suckled’, referring to breeding practices.

### 3.2. Oral literature

The following Beja text, only provided in an abridged English translation for lack of space,<sup>4</sup> gives a flavour of what happens to friendship and male virility when one transgresses the taboo that prevents women from milking cattle.

A man was a regular customer of a water seller. The customer regularly invited him to drink tea. One day when he came earlier than

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<sup>4</sup> The annotated time-aligned text is available at [http://corporan.huma-num.fr/Archives/afficheTout\\_N2.php?ref=0%20:%20BEJ\\_MV\\_NARR\\_48\\_MILK.EAF%20:%200](http://corporan.huma-num.fr/Archives/afficheTout_N2.php?ref=0%20:%20BEJ_MV_NARR_48_MILK.EAF%20:%200).

usual, the water seller saw the customer's wife milking a goat. He refused the usual invitation and ran away. The customer went to his people, and said, 'Gosh, this man used to be my friend, he was bringing me good water. Reconcile me with him, I don't know what happened to him!' The clan tried hard to reconcile them without success. When eventually they had a large reconciliation meeting, and asked the water seller to give him water, he refused, saying, 'Never! I am telling you to stop this business with this man'. So they ask him, 'What happened to you that you refuse to give him water?' He answers, 'I am telling you this man made me drink tea with milk milked by his wife!' So they reply, 'Why did you not tell us long ago that he turned you into a sissy!?'

#### 4. Conclusion

This brief overview has shown that monolexemic Beja verbs encode fine-grained semantic distinctions in the domains of drinking, milking and thirst, even though not to the same extent as eating and drinking verbs in Aslian languages (Burenhult & Kruspe 2016). Of particular interest are the encoding of social rules, of time intervals, of incompleteness in drinking verbs, and the lexical differences based on animacy hierarchy between humans and animals in the domain of thirst, which, as far as we can judge, seem particular to Beja. Nevertheless, Beja shares fine-grained lexicalisations in the semantic domain of milk with other pastoral societies of Africa, even if not exactly the same ones.

In the domain of oral literature, which was even more briefly dealt with in this paper than the lexical domain, the focus was placed on anecdotes that reflect social rules of behaviours vis-à-vis drinking and milking, rules that literary detachment makes easier to transgress.

For lack of space, little could be said about the semantic extensions of DRINK, and nothing at all about coffee, another socially important beverage among the Beja. All this is open to further research. In the meantime, *здоровье Валентин!*

### Abbreviations

AA – Afroasiatic	DIR – directional	NC – Niger – Congo
ABL – ablative	F – feminine	NOM – nominative
ACC – accusative	GEN – genitive	OBJ – object
ADRF – address form	IMP – imperative	PFV – perfective
AOR – aorist	INDF – indefinite	PL – plural
CAUS – causative	INT – intensive	POSS – possessive
COORD – coordination	IPFV – imperfective	PROX – proximal
COP – copula	L – linker	REL – relator
CSL – causal	LOC – locative	SEQ – sequential
CVB – converb	M – masculine	SG – singular
DEF – definite	MNR – manner	/ – end of intonation unit

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