

SOCIAL AND PRAGMATIC RULES OF CURSING AND OTHER ROUTINE FORMULAS IN GURAGE AND NORWEGIAN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The Gurage are South Ethiosemitic speakers living in the Gurage Zone in Ethiopia. In the Gurage culture, cursing expressions have differing sociological significance. They are used both literally and pragmatically. Although the cursing expressions are endangered due to modern religions, they are not well studied and documented. The objective of this article is to describe the sociolinguistic and pragmatic meanings and the structural patterns of cursing expressions in the Gurage culture, and then to compare the expressions with Nordic countries' cursing to uncover if there are universal tendencies in the rules and routines of cursing. The study follows qualitative research methodology. The cursing expressions were partly collected from literature and largely elicited from key informants. For the cursing in Gurage, the Gumer variety, from among other 12 dialect clusters of Guragina, was chosen to maintain uniformity in description. The findings showed that self-cursing in Gurage is used to express regret, encouragement, admiration, congratulation, condolence and politeness. Alter cursing is used to cause fear, to express emotions and negative attitude towards others. Age and gender determine cursing practice. Only elder men can take part in formal group alter cursing. Women generally curse themselves and individuals in informal situations. Formal alter cursing in Gurage is graded by elders for its severity. Cursing in the Nordic countries of to-day is more restricted to psychological functions and a kind of identity construction. In the past, however, several of its functions were similar to the ones in Gurage.

[1] INTRODUCTION

[1.1] *Background*

This article presents different types of cursing in two language cultures, and takes account of some social and pragmatic rules that are regulating this special kind of linguistic behaviour.

Gurage refers to the Gurage Zone within the Southern Ethiopia, and to the

people of the area (Fekede 2014a)¹. The language of the people is Guragina (Gebreyesus 1991; Fekede 2014c), which has about twelve clusters of dialects. A few of the dialects are less intelligible than the others (Fekede 2013, 2014b; Gutt 1980). The language is grouped into the South Ethiosemitic phylum within the Afro-Asiatic language family.

Norway is a small country in Northern Europe and belongs to the Nordic cultural area. The Norwegian language belongs to the North Germanic language family and is intelligible to Swedes, Danes and some Finns as well as the Norwegians. Norway has a small population and a more than a thousand years of Christian culture.

Any society's definition of what in general is linguistically taboo and especially is cursing, is to regulate social orders in a society. Cursing is prominent in both Gurage and Norwegian. However, there is varying vocabulary and several specific functions in the two cultures, some of which we try to document in this article.

Lexically, cursing belongs to the routine formulas, which occur in a vocabulary as fixed or semi-fixed expressions. Routine formulas often have undergone a split that divides their semantic and pragmatic meaning, like the German *Guten Appetit* or French *Bon Appétit*, which has the semantic meaning 'I hope that the food becomes you well' and a pragmatic meaning 'it is okay to start eating'. Routine formulas of cursing are under-documented in our dictionaries, maybe since they are mostly used orally, and many of them were also taboo to the lexicographers.

A preliminary and general definition of cursing is a negative speech act to cause fear or harm by some magical power of the expressions used. In addition, the Gurage people can utter cursing addressed to oneself as a positive means of expressing greetings and other polite routine formulas. In such cases, the cursing creates pleasure and warmth of welcome to the addressee rather than creating fear. In Norwegian cursing might also be used to boast of oneself or others but with taboo words in an ironical function, which also may be seen as a positive function of cursing. But the most common function is the negative one.

This article deals with cursing only, not other types of bad language, such as insults or vulgarities. Cursing, unlike other types of bad language, is a more serious speech act performed by the power of the words uttered. Therefore, the types of words or phrases that have to be used to express a curse are not ran-

[1] Hetzron and Bender (1976), however, consider Gurage to refer only to the geographical area in the Gurage Zone. Fekede (2002) and Tenkir (1991) provide the etymology of Gurage as: 'gura' referring to 'left' and '-ge' to 'land' or 'village'

dom, as in many insults and vulgarities, but usually selected carefully and graded for their severity.

The Gurage people earn their living through traditional farming. According to Henry (2006), the Gurage people are also renowned traders scattered across Ethiopia and overseas. The total population of the people as of the Central Statistics Authority (CSA) (2007) is 1,867,377.

The Nordic countries are industrialised and have about 20 million inhabitants with mutually understandable languages; Norway alone has a population of 5.2 million inhabitants. The culture is generally now urbanised and Western-modern, but only 50 years ago, the culture was more rural and traditional.

As a society of traditional ways of living, Gurage is interesting for investigating whether its linguistic taboos and social ideas are different from those in urbanised, western societies like that of Norway. Such a comparison might also shed some light on the history of cursing and uncover if there are common patterns of use in different cultures which have little contact.

[1.2] *Statement of the Problem*

Language use is a dynamic phenomenon; expressions that have been used in the past change over time because of changes in the social structure, socio-economic development, and changes in ideology, including politics and religion. Cursing, as one aspect of language use, is also constantly in a state of change. In the Gurage context, cursing, particularly the institutionalised cursing by elderly peoples, has become endangered mainly due to modern religions, such as Christianity and Islam, but has also been influenced by other modern trends and sociological factors. Cursing for youngsters is less forceful than it is for elders. Despite this endangerment, the language of cursing in the Gurage culture is not documented; the way cursing language is used, and the various sociolinguistic and pragmatic meanings in the Gurage culture has not been studied. Thus, the present study is an attempt to document some of the cursing language, and to show its sociolinguistic and pragmatic uses in the Gurage culture.

In Nordic linguistics there are some studies of cursing. One of the first is Jespersen (1911) *Om banden og sværgen* (On cursing and swearing), which discusses the problem of modern people's mindless use of old cursing expressions without regarding their original meaning and function, and how modern cursing breaks several grammatical rules as a result of that (1911:34). Jespersen thinks that the function of cursing is mostly to make statements more forceful. But he also believes that people will curse less as education and good manners

increases in the modern society. He hence fears that the language will lose something picturesque (1911:39). It turns out that his fear was unjustified; investigations show that the use of cursing formulas is increasing in almost all types of communication in modern Norway (Fjeld 2014a). Nevertheless, most of the modern cursing vocabulary in Norwegian is not comprehensible to the language users; the formulas are semantically bleached, just as Jespersen predicted a hundred years ago.

[1.3] *Objective*

The intention of this article is to investigate the different types of cursing in the two diverse cultures and languages of Gurage and Norway. We attempt to find out what is different and what is similar between those two traditions, and discuss whether the similarities might be universal for this special type of linguistic expressions.

The study presents our attempt to document some of the cursing vocabulary in the two languages and cultures, to show its sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules, and concludes with a short summary of the cursing in those two languages and cultures. In general, our main idea is to provide an account of cursing expressions in the Gurage and the Nordic culture and to describe their pragmatic functions. This has the following two specific objectives:

- (i) to record the vocabulary for cursing in the two languages, to explain the way cursing expressions are used in different contexts and situations of language use, and to uncover the various functions they have; and
- (ii) to map out specific patterns in the cursing expressions in Gurage and Norwegian.

[1.4] *Significance*

The study will be significant in accounting for the development of the language of cursing, through documentation of the various socio-cultural and pragmatic meanings of cursing used by different social groups: male, female, youngsters, elders, etc. The findings of this comparative study, in the Ethiopian and Norwegian contexts, will contribute to the field of pragmatics and anthropological linguistics in general. The comparison of cursing vocabularies might even indicate some universals in the functions of cursing. Documentation of the vocabulary of cursing will also be a resource for dictionary making, where such vocabulary often is neglected.

[1.5] *Methodology*

The study follows an eclectic and practical research methodology. The vocabulary used in the article is collected in different ways. Linguistic elicitation and texts on cursing are used to find the Gurage examples. The Gumer variety, among other 12 dialect clusters, was chosen because the dialect is least studied. Four informants were asked to reproduce some cursing expressions, two males and two females, aged 25 – 65 years. The participants were interviewed on the topic of cursing and their responses were audio and video recorded, which subsequently were transcribed as text. The text was glossed morpheme-by-morpheme and then transliterated into English.

The Norwegian examples have been manually collected through observation and scrutiny of literature, newspapers and electronic text corpora. Through several years of language counselling, the vocabulary has been recorded, systematised and presented in Fjeld (2002, 2014), while some of the vocabulary was obtained from several articles of cursing in the Nordic literature, e.g. Stroh Wollin (2014), who has investigated cursing vocabulary in Swedish dramas through 300 years. Systematic investigation of dictionaries, especially *Bokmålsordboka* (Wangensteen 2005), and existing lexicographical collections of slips at the University of Oslo has been manually investigated.

[1.6] *Definitions and state of the art*

Cursing can literally be defined as breaking a linguistic taboo with the intent to invoke harm on another person (Fjeld 2014:200), as cited in Jay (1992:2):

- curse (vt): to call upon divine or supernatural power to send injury upon.
- curse (n) a prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come to one.

In general, cursing is a bad wish for someone else (alter-cursing) or for oneself (ego-cursing). It is the use of language by a speaker to cause fear, an intended harm, by the very power of the language used, to an interlocutor or a self. This intended curse to self and others can have several pragmatic functions, depending on socio-cultural settings.

According to Jay (1992), words for cursing get their power through religious or social demarcation. Cursing implies danger for the speaker and has the function of transferring attention from the speaker to the target of the curse.

Wyss (1984:17) classifies curses as a magical or a prophetic speech act, and says that a curse is the negative counterpart to a blessing. A curse also implies a release of affectivity. Wyss further writes that cursing may occur as:

Affektentladung im weitesten Sinn, als Unheilswunsch, als ritualisierte Verdammung (Bann), als Fluchzauber und als Fluchgebet, ausgesprochen oder auf Tafeln geschrieben.

[emotional release in the broadest sense, as the wish to bring about misfortune, as a ritualised damnation (ban), as a cursing spell and as curse prayer, spoken or written on boards.]

A curse can be performed by an individual against an individual or a group, and by a group against an individual or a group. The supernatural power is attached to gods, deities, and other spirits who may have power to cause harm to the cursed.

There is so far little literature on cursing in Ethiopian languages, but we have consulted two works on cursing on the topic: Baye (2013) that compares cursing expressions in four Ethiopian languages: Amharic, Oromo, Wolayitta and Nuer, which belong to the Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan phylum, respectively. His findings showed that there are convergences conceptually and linguistically among the four languages' cursing expressions, as well as in the expressions of greetings (Baye, 1997).

Tesfaye (2012) describes self-cursing expressions used by women in the Kistane variety of Guragina. It is found that self-cursing is used to encourage, admire, condole, congratulate, and express politeness in greetings. This study does not deal with group cursing and individual cursing addressed to others.

There is a more comprehensive literature documenting cursing expressions in the Nordic languages, especially for Swedish, such as Ljung (1984). One of the earliest studies was Jespersen (1911) for Danish and Fjeld (2002) for Norwegian. However, most works have been unsystematic and have not tried to explain the functions or the meaning of the general vocabulary of cursing in a scientific way, cf. Fjeld (2014:199-202) for an overview of definitions and types in Nordic cursing.

A comparison between Ethiopian and Nordic cursing may thus give other perspectives on the pragmatics of cursing,

[2] RESULTS

There can be several causes for cursing, e.g. neurological as in brain damage, emotional arousal, psychological as in deviance, religiosity, moral reasoning, coping skills, and sociological, such as formality, intimacy, taboo, privacy, gender role (since particular gender groups have to curse, for example, themselves for various purposes) and disgust. We shall not go further here into every possible explanation, but will instead focus our results with reference to some so-

cial variables, where gender is prominent in the comparison between Gurage and Norwegian.

We shall group our analysis into ego and alter cursing (cf. Fjeld 2014:206) because the Gurage people do curse themselves and others with different pragmatic functions from those in Norwegian. Finally, we discuss these findings in the form of a summary.

[2.1] *Self-Cursing*

Based on the gender of the participants who curse themselves, we can group self-cursing in Gurage into two types: those practiced by both gender groups (male and female) and those practiced only by females. There is no type of self-cursing only practiced by men.

1) Self-cursing by men and women

Both men and women tend to curse themselves in different situations. The examples below show some cursing expressions which may be used by both gender groups:

- (1) əgrə-na tə-t-səppərə
 leg-POSS² COND-PASS- break s-3sg
 'Had my leg been broken'

This means 'instead of being here by travelling with my legs, it would have been great if my legs had broken so that I might not have come to see or do such a horrible thing'. This is a desiderative expression of cursing, whereby the speaker curses his/her leg that brought him/her to a place where an undesired thing happened to himself or someone else. It is an expression of regret for an unpleasant action or situation through self-cursing.

A similar desiderative kind of self-cursing is given in (2) below:

[2] The abbreviations used in this article are: POSS=Possessive; BENF= Benefactive; COND= Conditional; CONV= Converb. COP= Copula; F= Feminine; FOC= Focus; GEN= Genitive; M= Masculine; MALF= Malefactive; NEG=Negative; O= Object; PASS= Passive; PL= Plural; PST= Past; S=singular; VOC = Vocative.

- (2) mot t-osəd-e
 death COND-take 1SO
 'It would have been great if death
 had taken me'

These kinds of self-cursing expressions, in this case wishing bad for oneself, may be made by male, or female, youngsters or adults in regret about a bad thing that happened to themselves, to loved one(s), or because they have seen or done something unpleasant or terrifying to others.

In Norwegian a typical self-cursing formula would be *Søren klype meg* (may Søren pinch me), as a mild self-curse, where *Søren* is an euphemised form of Satan, and to pinch is a mild way of expressing what he might do. A more severe kind of self-cursing would be *Det er faen i meg helt sikkert* (May the devil take me if this is untrue), as a reinforcement of the truth value of a statement (cf. example 21a for Gurage).

Both types might be performed by modern men and women, but traditionally the euphemised form is typically female and the severe one is a typically male cursing formula.

II) Self cursing by women only

Self-cursing in Gurage is performed by women in most cases. Men do only self-cursing in exceptional cases, such as to express politeness or show that they are down to earth, like a woman. Women curse themselves in several situations and contexts to express ranges of contextual meanings. It is also worth noting that mothers (elderly women) curse themselves more often than girls. The most common self-cursing expressions of women and the contexts in which they are used can be categorised into six functional sub types, as presented in the following:

i) Encouragement

Mothers curse themselves to encourage their children to perform or do certain things, as in the example in (3):

- (3) ika-w-ʃ ədʒ-əna afər
 like-COP-FOC hand-1S.POSS soil
 'It is like that; let my hand be soil'

This means 'you are doing very well, go ahead with doing the job'. This self-cursing can also be made when a child tries to do something but actually does

not manage it. The child is encouraged to do it again by boosting its moral, as for example to take a bitter medicine (cf. Leslau 1968; Tesfaye 2012 for Kistane).

- (4) afər nī-bra (nī-st'e)
 soil 1s-eat 1s- drink
 'Let me eat/ drink soil'

Metaphorically, such a curse means 'let me die,' but its function in the discourse can be a response for a child's speech, for example 'I am hungry', or when a child is eating with good appetite, and is about to finish the food; hence, the mother wants to offer the child some additional food. Similarly, *afərnist'e* can be used to encourage a child to drink, if it has finished the liquid; hence, the mother feels that the drink was insufficient, and she wants to give it more. The context, therefore, determines the actual intended meaning of the cursing phrase used by the mothers.

ii) Admiration

Women may curse themselves to admire or thank somebody, often their children, as in the examples below:

- (5) ədʒ-əna k'ut' jə-bər
 hand-POSS shrink be-say
 'Let my hand get shrunk'

The expression 'let my hand get shrunk' can mean you did great or 'thank you for your good job'. Thus, it has actually nothing to do with a shrinking of a hand.

- (6) amf-əna afər jə-hir
 mouth-POSS soil 3s-happen
 'Let my mouth be soil'

In (6) the intended meaning is 'wonderful, you spoke the truth ' or 'you replied with the right response', so the self-cursing does not necessarily mean a wish for the woman's mouth to die and thereby turn into soil, since a person dies in whole, not in part - for example just a mouth.

iii) Condolence

Women use self-cursing to express their condolence to the addressee in a conversation about losing property, getting hurt, missing a beloved, etc. The fol-

lowing are some examples of such expressions:

- (7) *ija* *ni-k'i*
 me *1s-lose*
 'Let me become lost'

This means that the addressee has lost something or someone, e.g. a child has escaped from his village and his whereabouts is not known, or someone has died, etc. The speaker, thus, expresses her condolences by cursing herself. The verbs used as cursing are based on the malefactive or the adverse circumstance that happened to the person spoken to (addressee).

- (8) *ija* *ni-frət'*
 me *1s-get.blind*
 'Let me be blind'

This implies that the addressee's beloved or child has become blind due to illness or an accident, hence, the speaker is expressing her condolences by cursing herself; actually, wishing that the bad circumstance had happened to her (the speaker) instead of to the addressee or the addressee's beloved.

iv) Congratulation

Self-cursing can be used to congratulate, particularly women when they give birth to a baby as in (9):

- (9) *jə-mbuw-ən* *jə-sət'-in*
 let-split-1s *let-split-1s*
 'Let me be split'

This is emphatic cursing whereby a woman visiting another woman who gave birth to a baby curses herself saying 'may I be split like wood, and further be split into pieces the same way your body, particularly your organ with which you delivered a baby has split, and is causing you severe pain'. Such self-cursing actually is an expression of congratulation. The cursing is made only once, on the first visit of the woman who has given birth. On the other visiting days, the visitor says:

- (10) tʃ'in-o marjam ta-tʃ'awdi- hj
You, woman who gave to a birth-voc marry let-chat-2SF
'You, woman who gave birth to a baby, let merry chat to you'

The expression in (10) is more a kind of wish than a congratulation. It is even not a self-cursing. In the Gurage culture, a woman who has given birth to a baby has to stay at home for two months; hence, during this seclusion period she feels lonely, as nobody stays with her except her baby. That is why visiting women wish her merry to chat to her during the periods of her loneliness.

Men can also use the same phrase 'let merry chat to you' on the second or later visits, but they do not use self-cursing either in the first nor second visits. They would rather use the following phrase:

- (11) gweta atənəfə-nahj-i-m
God save-2SF-BENF-PST
'God saved you'

This men's congratulation assumes the meaning that 'it was possible for you to die during delivery, but thanks to God who saved you'. So, men congratulate by expressing God's mercy instead of cursing themselves.

v) Communicate Politeness

Self-cursing is used to express politeness in welcoming, saying goodbye, asking for information or directions, etc. Each of these contextual meanings of self-cursing is exemplified below:

a) Welcoming:

- [illegible]

- (15) *kisfət* *jə-tə-bi*
 rogue 3SM-come-MALF.3SO
 'let a rogue come onto me'

All the welcoming phrases in (12-15) contain self-cursing. In (12) 'The self-curse refers to an indefinite bad thing to come adversely to the speaker, in (13) *afər* 'soil' is metaphorically used as 'death;' hence, the speaker is wishing death to come against herself; in (14), *mot* 'death' is expressed overtly, unlike in (12) and (13), so the woman is wishing the killer, death, sometimes referred to as *zilel*, to come and kill her. In (15), the woman curses herself for an unspecified rogue to come and affect herself negatively. The extent the woman cursed herself with words expressing different levels of adversity inversely express the degree of love or affection she has for the guest or addressee who is welcomed. For instance, *jə-tən-bi* 'let it bring me adversity' is a less evil curse than *mot bəfwər-ənəjə-tə-n* 'let death come onto my back'; similarly, the former expresses less love or affection than the latter. Hence, the guest knows to what extent s/he was welcomed by the welcoming phrases in the self-cursing used by the speaker.

The addressee often responds to the self-cursing, here welcoming, with *b-ijə-m* [onto-me-too] meaning 'let the rogue, death, or whatever evil was mentioned comes onto me (the addressee), too.

b) Farewell

Gurage women consider or at least pretend to view departure, even for a short period of time, as if they will be missing that somebody - a parent, beloved, relative or guest for a long time. In such cases, they use self-cursing as an expression of farewell. A few examples are given below:

- (16) *b-ohe* *k'ar* *əgr-əna* *afər*
 in-good thing leg-1S.POSS soil
 'in a good thing, let my leg be soil'

The expression in (16) literally assumes the meaning: 'I wish you good things, and let my legs become soil for your benefit'. Actually, the expression means 'goodbye and I wish you all the best things.' The sympathetic cursing phrase *əgr-ənaafər* is simply an expression of courtesy.

- (17) b-afər ni-wər hi b-ohe k'ar
 on-soil 1s-go okay in-good thing
 'let me go on soil, okay, in good things'

The phrase in (17) is similar to (16), but here the self-cursing word is stronger than the one in (16) where just the leg is assumed to be soil. In (17) the whole body is expected to be soil (metaphorically to die). The person to whom the farewell was addressed to, responds to the self-cursing expression by saying: *ija-m* [I-too] meaning 'let my leg be soil, too'/'let me be soil too,' which could be transliterated as 'let me die, too'

Men often say goodbye without cursing themselves. Hence, they may use other farewell phrases like:

- (18) b-ohe k'ar/zəŋga b-ohe ni-trahəb-nə
 in-good thing in- good 2PL-meet-2PL
 'in a good thing'/'let us meet in good'

A male's farewell; thus, is a wish of peace on the way to the destination and/or a wish to meet the person again in peace and health sometimes in the future.

c) Polite request

- (19) baʃa-h-o ʃim-ahə mwan-u
 ailment-2SM.POSS-VOC name-POSS who-COP
 your ailment, what is your name?; 'Please, tell me your name'
- (20) baʃa-hj-o jə-darsamo bet et-əta-w
 ailment-2SF-VOC GEN-Darsamo house which-one-COP
 'your ailment, which one is Darsamo's house'

In the examples in (19-20), *baʃaho* 'please (M)' and *baʃahjo* 'please (F)' are used as a polite request, although *baʃə* literally means disease or ailment and *-h* and *-hj* show the possessive forms of 2SM and 2SF, respectively. Saying these polite request words means literally 'let me take from you whatever ailments you may have, but tell me.' It is important that such self-cursing words are used when the speaker is not familiar or acquainted with the addressee.

We can see from such expressions that there are differences in the language use between men and women in the Gurage culture. Men seldom use self-cursing expressions compared to women. To use self-cursing expressions by a man is assumed to make the man 'womanish' and 'powerless'. On the contrary, women's use of self-cursing expression is considered as being down to earth

and polite. Such differences in linguistic power between men and women are common in other socio-cultural groups cross-linguistically (Coates, 1993: 84). The expressions of self-cursing used as greeting show how women in the Gurage culture are selfless in welcoming and saying farewell to guests or relatives.

In Norwegian there are no such codified rules for men and women's use of polite routine formulas, and they will not be counted as cursing at all. For encouragement and admiration there are no fixed formulas, but the speech act of downgrading oneself to upgrade the other, was in the past also customary for women in Norway. Formulas for condolences and congratulations are used in the same way by both women and men, but to show intimacy, women often avoid the standard formulas and rephrase them in a personalised way. This is of course also allowed for men, but many men would feel this to be a female style; hence, they prefer to avoid it. As far as we know, the use of such formulas by different genders and other relevant social factors has not been systematically investigated in Norwegian. The standard expression for greetings is *god dag*, *morn* or *hei*, and for goodbye is *adjø*, *morna* or *ha det (bra)*. The phrase for condolences is *kondolerer*, but has long time been out of use by most people, and is still seen as a very formal way to show compassion. More personalised phrases are *jeg føler med deg* (I am so sorry for you), *det var så trist å høre* (this was a very sad message). Such rephrased and personalised condolences are more often used by women.

vi) Self-cursing to persuade

Self-cursing is also used to build trust rather than to harm someone else. Such a cursing may be used by children and adults of both genders, to convince or persuade the addressee about the truthfulness of an issue under discussion. A few examples of such persuasive self-cursing are given below:

- (21) a. *timirt-əna* *e-glət'-ni*
 lesson-POSS NEG-reveal- BENF
 'let my lesson not be revealed'
- b. *adij-əna* *t-imut*
 mother-POSS 3SF-die
 'let my mother die'

In (21a) the speaker is cursing himself/herself to persuade the interlocutor by

saying: 'if what I am telling you is not true, or if I am making lies with regard to what I said, let God not make my lesson clear or let me be stupid by the power of God'. Similarly, in (21b) the same meaning is assumed: 'if I am deceiving you or making a lie, let my mother die to my adversity'. Persuasive self-cursing is more like an oath, except that it is not performed officially in the presence of witnesses, which is the case for an oath.

Self-cursing in the Gurage culture is also used in the form of oaths: to promise that what has been agreed upon between the addresser and the addressee will be kept or fulfilled. This promise is also a sort of persuasion about actions that have not yet happened, but may happen in the future. An example of such self-cursing is given in (22):

- (22) bə-hədak-ə afja-na jə-hd-e
 COND-betray-2SM health-POSS 3SM-betray-1SO
 'If I betrayed you, let my health be betrayed'

Here in the self-cursing delivered as an oath, the speaker assures his interlocutor that he will not betray the addressee; she/he is affirming with words that 'I promise you that I will respect my own words'. She/he adds, 'If I betray you, let God betray my health or make me sick'. Since deviation from the promise is believed culturally to cause ailment to the person who gave the oath, it is an assurance that the speaker will keep his/her words.

This kind of self-cursing in Gurage is equivalent to Norwegian self-cursing, which often is formed as a pledge to the devil or to other bad powers, as an oath: *Det er faen i meg helt sikkert!* (May the devil take me if I lie!)

Historically such direct cursing was only used by men - women had to euphemise their oaths also, like *Søren brodere meg!* (Søren may embroider me!) (Søren as the nickname for Satan)

Both these oaths have an implicit premise for the promise: 'if this is not true/good/going to happen'. Children are normally not allowed to say such curses, but just to express the nick name of Satan would be accepted³.

[2.2] *Cursing Others*

We shall split the cursing of others into two groups: individual cursing, when a person curses another person or a group, and group cursing, when a group

[3] In a famous Norwegian children's play, *Kardemomme* by, by Thorbjørn Egner, goods have been stolen from a shop, and a chief constable says: *Neimen Sørensen!* (But Sørensen!) with stress on the first part of the family name, which was as much as one would curse in this context in the 1950s. Today the euphemised form Søren would also pass in a children's theater play.

curses an individual or a group.

1) Individual cursing

An individual may curse another individual or a group directly in the presence of the person, or in his or her absence. When the cursing is in face-to-face communication, it may turn into insults or into a physical attack of the interlocutors. Due to this, individual cursing is usually made in the absence of the addressee(s) in Gurage, assuming that a supernatural power would listen to the curse and adversely affect the cursed person. The curse is, thus, associated with spirits possessed by people, different deities, gods, etc., which have power over creatures, including human beings. The spirit or deities can, by their power, cause varieties of evils or provide mercy if they are asked for it by the right person, according to the popular belief. The most common cursing spirits possessing deities include: *boʒə* 'thunderbolt', *dəmuwamuwit* 'female deity of fertility' and *ank'it* 'deity of justice.' A few examples of cursing expressions addressed to individuals are given below:

- (23) *boʒə* *jərəd-ib-hə*
 thunderbolt down-MALF- 2SM
 'Let a thunderbolt hit you'

In the Gurage culture, the thunderbolt was worshipped and an annual feast was held to pacify the spirit of thunderbolt, since otherwise it might cause harm to the community. Since there was no scientific knowledge or understanding of thunderbolts, the people used to consider thunder as a spirit with emotions of anger that had to be pacified, and this spirit also had a mind to consider human requests and offer mercy.

The cursing in the power of the thunderbolt in (23) is an expression of the same assumption, whereby the curser is wishing the cursed to be hit and possibly die by the thunderbolt's power. A similar instance is cursing with *dəmuwamuwit*, which can usually cause an ailment and may lead to death. The example in (24) shows such a curse:

- (24) *dəmuwamuwit* *tɨ-t'ibt'-ihə*
 Demuwamuwit 3SF-catch-2SM
 'Let Demuwamuwit catch you'

In the same way that you catch 'cold' and suffer from it, Demuwamuit can 'catch you' and cause you an ailment. So, a person cursing another person with this spirit is wishing the person to be caught and inflicted by Demuwamuit's

spirit, so that s/he gets sick and may die.

The third type of spirit often used by married people is *ank'it*. Ank'it is a spirit of justice which works for married couples. If a partner violates the different rights and responsibilities of the other, for instance, by marrying another person before divorcing the existing partner, s/he may be cursed with Ank'it as in (25):

- (25) ank'it tə-fəraz ji-bədir ank'it jə-t'iwt'-in
 Ankit from-horse 3SM-advance Ankit 2S-catch- 3SM
 'Ank'it advances a horse's speed, let the Ank'it catch him'

Here in (25) the justice spirit is compared to the speed of a horse. The meaning is that the justice spirit will very soon bring the right justice to the victim, provided the *ank'it* is asked the right question if the curser's right really has been violated⁴. It is worth noting that the curse is only performed if the elders in the community could not bring justice to the victim, or the person who was supposed to have violated the rule has denied that s/he did so.

In Norwegian alter-cursing, the most prominent power is the Christian God: *Herregud, så slem du er!* (Lord, how wicked you are!), but also the wicked powers and their localisation are often used.) *Gi faen!* (lit. give the devil = stop this, for Hell's sake) or *Dra til helvete!* (Go to hell). But even some memorials of pre-Christian religion can be found in formulas like *Det var da et heidundrende leven!* (This was a damned/thundering noise), with reference to the ancient god Tor with the hammer who caused the thunderbolt. The standard curse in modern Finnish is *perkele*, which also has a reference to the god of thunder. Another power is *nækken*, the water spirit, which is referred to in curses like *Det var da som bare nækken!* (This problem must be a spell by the water spirit!) Alter-cursing may also be related to sexual functions: *Din kødd!* (You prick!), or faecal functions: *Din dritt!* (you shit!).

II) Group cursing

Group cursing is only performed by elder males in Gurage, so gender, age, and social position in the community are important in this regard. Two forms of group cursing are recognized in the Gurage culture, namely:

- i) Cursing which begins as individual but ends with group cursing (e.g. jarəʃibudʒe)
- ii) Cursing in group throughout (e.g. awatʃatʃinə)

[4] The gender of both Thunderbolt & Ankit is masculine, but Demuwamuit is feminine

Cursing in some situations, as in *jarəfibudʒe*, can be done by an individual, but later a number of individuals gather to curse, in a group, the *arəfi* an 'evil eyed person'. In Gurage, people believe that persons who are nicknamed derogatorily *arəfi* 'evil eyed', can harm individuals or a whole society. They can cause a child or animal to get sick, just by their spirit. By looking at an animal or a person, they can make a farmer's harvest less fruitful.

Though such evil eyed people are identified by the community, nobody takes them into court or harms them physically, since it is believed that they often possess the spirit without their own will. However, they can be cursed, so that their power can be weakened and hence cannot cause harm to animate beings and inanimate things. The cursing takes place early in the morning, between 5-6 a.m. Every individual goes out of his house cursing the evil-eyed person with high audible voice. The cursing goes as following:

- (26) a. j-arəfi budʒ-e
 of- areshi take-3SM
 'Let it be taken from an Areshi'
- b. en-əta j-awutʃ'e
 eye-POSS 3S-taken.out
 'Let his eyes be taken out'
- c. tikə-ta jə-budʒe
 child-POSS 3S-taken
 'Let his child be taken'

The curses in (26) seek to remove the power of the evil eyed, his eyes are taken out so that he may not be able to see the people or the things that he harms, or his child is taken (dead) so that the evil eyed person may feel pain. As a result, he may not harm the children in the community.

Those who are cursing an evil eyed person meet each other as they curse him, and begin to curse the evil eye in groups travelling across the village so that everybody can also listen to the curse while being at home. And the listeners at home also curse, at least by an approving 'Amen!' All the people who are cursing the evil eyed across the street gather and sit together in a place where a group cursing begins. After a while, one person curses the *arəfi* and his belongings, and others approve saying *amen* 'let it be'. All the elderly male cursers together intone: *ə...ə...ə*, as a sign of crying', assuming that their cry would be heard by a super power and thereby weaken the power of the *arəfi*.

Another group cursing takes place in *awatʃaf'inə* 'investigation'. This is done when someone or a group has stolen a property, killed a person or animal,

burnt someone's hut, but it is not known who he or she is. In such a case, the inhabitants of the village are ordered to inform on the person who did the evil act, or the person himself is urged to confess his act. If either the unsolicited doer or his relatives do not admit to the truth of the case in a predefined time, usually between two weeks, the elders will then determine that the person and/or all his tribes will be cursed in public, as a means of both detection and punishment if not discovered. The elders announce to the community that the person, who did the undesired act, will be cursed if the person does not report to the elders what he or she has done to the community or to an individual.

Because the people of every tribe fear that the curse will harm them and their descendants, they strive to find out who did the evil act. They try to persuade any of their relatives who might have done it to confess, by promising that they will pay the fine for him to avoid the curse. Due to such a group effort, this kind of cursing happens only rarely. If, however, a clue to the perpetrator is not found, the unknown evil doer is cursed. The cursing may affect the individual, his relatives, and in some cases the cursers themselves if they have made an unjust curse.

Which curses an evil doer may be subjected to, must be agreed upon among the elders before it is done. Elders have to grade the curse according to the level of the evil act performed, similar to an assessment of sentence by the justice in Nordic culture. For instance, it must be decided whether the curse should be performed against the evil doer alone, or against his tribe as well. If his tribe has to be cursed, it should also be agreed upon as to how many lines of descents should be affected. After agreement as to the type of curse is reached, one more week is usually given to the community to consider how serious the issue is, before they subject the cursee to the actual curse on the cursing day. Most often, the people do inform on the evil doer before the cursing day and then negotiations begin. However, in very unfortunate circumstances the cursing does take place.

A thief who has stolen something, and, a murderer who has killed someone, will not be cursed in the same way. The vocabulary of cursing in Gurage for these two types of acts are completely different. During group cursing, one of the elders guides the cursing and the others follow. Some examples of group cursing include the following:

- (27) a *jə-zəna-n* *e-rma*
 GEN-SOW-3SM NEG-grow
 'Let what he sows never grow'

- b zər-əta e-tsəkət
 race-POSS NEG-good
 'Let his race not be good'
- c bərtfə jə-səbat zərə-ta jəsra
 same.evil GEN-seven descendants-POSS reach
 'Let the same evil, as he did to other, happen to him and
 his seven lines of descendants'

Such curses are believed to have adverse effects, and as the curses include the relatives of the cursed, they will also be affected by whatever unfortunate circumstances: sickness, death, being poor, being struck by a thunderbolt, etc. are associated with the curse that was made. Due to these adverse effects, the relatives of evil doer may become upset and less loyal to the perpetrator. As a result, after the cursing has taken place, they may expose the identity of the evil doer. In such instances, the person and his relatives have to pay not only compensation to the victim, but also for a cleansing ceremony in order to re-purify the cursed. The cleansing is undertaken by another person called *Wæg*, who has the power of cleansing the evil, depending on whether he has been told the whole truth regarding the evil done by the individual or a group. The *Wæg* also asks if other similar evil might have been done by their forefathers, which might not have been cleansed. The cleansing ceremony entails a ritual and some kind of payment to the victims, as well as to the ceremony performer. The ceremony seems to have some equivalence to the Christian absolution or remission of sins.

Since group cursing sooner or later causes fear, and because people do not want any evil to happen to themselves, their relatives or descendants, they usually refrain from doing evil, and if they do it, they feel compelled to confess and ask for mercy from the community. Thus, group cursing was used to maintain social order in the Gurage community for many generations. Though this process has become generally obsolete nowadays, a number of rural communities still perform it. The people believe that a curse will bring harm and a blessing success to individuals or a group.

The group cursing in Gurage seems to have much in common with what was called *bann* in traditional Nordic culture, which also has given the etymology of the Norwegian word for cursing, *banning* (Lindeman & Bjorvand, 2000:128). Wyss (1984:17) also counts ban or excommunication as what he describes as ritualised cursing. It is not practised in modern Norway, but in ancient times it was a way to exclude an unwanted person from social society where he or she had shown unwanted behaviour.

[3] SUMMARY

[3.1] *Cursing vocabulary in Gurage and Norwegian Cursing*

Cursing in both Gurage and Norwegian culture is part of the general language used in several types of discourse. Although if taken literally, cursing is said to be the use of bad words to harm, downgrade, humiliate or cause pain to others or oneself, their use in Gurage in practice shows that they may not necessarily express bad things or cause pain to the addressee.

Our study showed that in Gurage, cursing, particularly self-cursing by women, is used as a means of expressing positive speech acts such as encouragement, admiration, congratulation, politeness, farewell, condolence and persuasion. Self-cursing, besides the expression of regret, can express all sorts of emotive, desiderative, imperative or declarative acts.

The findings for Gurage in this article are in accordance with Baye (2013) and Tesfaye (2012) with regard to conceptual convergence of cursing expressions among most Ethiopian languages.

The study showed that the main cursing vocabulary in the Gurage culture are words like *afər* 'soil', implying death, and spirits, such as *dəmuwamuwit*, *ank'it* and *boʒə*. The most common fear-causing agents and the various functions of cursing expressions in Gurage are summarised thematically below:

Genre	Addressee	Functions	Insult/curse agents	What is insulted
cursing	self	Regret, encouragement, admiration, condolence, congratulation, politeness, persuasion, promise	Soil (death) Death spirit (zilel) Disability	Body parts: leg, hands, eyes, teeth, sex organ; genetic line: tribe, race; property: animals, plants, etc.
	others	Exorcise evil, detect evil doers, impose fear	Spirit: Demuwamuit, Bozhe, Ank'it	Whole body, soul, descendants

TABLE 1: Various functions of cursing expressions in Gurage.

Structurally, cursing expressions mainly assume the jussive mood. Socially, expressions of curse are gender sensitive. There is cursing of women and men.

For instance, women do curse themselves but men generally do not. In a group cursing only men, often the elders, take part, but not women. Semantically, the cursing expressions are often metaphorical extensions, and are pragmatic in that they are context sensitive, which can be interpreted based on socio-cultural contexts and social relationships between the interlocutors.

Similarly, Norwegian cursing vocabulary might be summarised as shown below:

Genre	Addressee	Functions	Insult/curse agents	What is cursed
cursing	self and others	persuasion, reinforcement of truth value, promise, emotional release like surprise, disappointment, anger	Devil, Hell, God, Christ and his mother, Heaven, thunder, water spirit, sexual activity, sex organs, faeces	Often a personality

TABLE 2: Norwegian cursing vocabulary.

[3.2] *Similarities and Differences between Gurage and Norwegian Cursing*

The aim of this article was to map similarities and differences between Gurage and Norwegian cursing. We assumed that language and culture in Ethiopia, in the middle of the African continent, is quite different from language and culture in the Nordic countries, since these cultures probably have had no direct influence on each other. But in spite of this, we found that there are several similarities in the pragmatics of cursing, and also some interesting differences. We shall therefore try to make a comparison of the cursing formulas and their functions in these two societies.

The Nordic countries are counted as the area where Scandinavian languages are used as mutually understandable language variants in the North West area of Europe: Norway, Sweden and Denmark, with a few references to Finland. Across the Scandinavian language area there are more or less the same cursing vocabulary and pragmatic rules for use. The cursing traditions in the area are relatively well documented, and can serve as a contrast to the less documented cursing traditions in the Gurage area.

It seems that the understanding of cursing is broader in Gurage than in Norwegian culture, which might explain some of the differences between the two cultures' cursing practice. Our definition of cursing is the use of language by a speaker to cause fear by the very power of the language used (cf. section 1.6). According to Fjeld (2002:153), cursing is also breaking a linguistic taboo in general, and it also requires a belief in supernatural powers to execute the bad wishes expressed in the taboo.

This means that greetings and other linguistic politeness also refer to supernatural powers. In Gurage this still implies explicit and active knowledge by the users, as in fact was also the case in Norway in ancient times. Most greetings and polite routine formulas refer to God and his power (as is still seen in the French *adieu* and the German *Grüss Gott!*)

This is supported by the Norwegian heritage word for cursing, which, according to Lindeman & Bjorvand (2000:57) has an etymology that indicates a link between cursing – *banning* – and praying – *be en bønn*. This etymological relation indicates that these two speech acts, to say a prayer or to say an imprecation, might have been two sides of the same action: calling upon witchcraft for the good or the bad by means of breaking a linguistic taboo, cf. Wyss (1984:17), who calls a curse a negative blessing.

On the other hand, it seems that Gurage cursing still has this general function of regulating the society, for good and for bad. This is made very clear in explaining the functions of the group cursing, where the elder men in the society decide upon punishment for bad deeds and other unacceptable behaviour. However, in the Mediaeval Period, the same kind of group cursing took place in Norway, when a person did a crime or something unacceptable, he could be excommunicated or banned (*bannlyst*) which meant to be excluded from the church, and consequently from the entire social society. Such punishment was a very strong way of regulating people's behaviour, and was extremely important during the Catholic Church-era in Norway, from the advent of Christianity in 1030 until the Reformation in 1537. Such banning is, however, not the earliest known cursing in the Nordic culture, since wherever there are linguistic traces, cursing formulas are mentioned. Cursing formulas are found dating back to pre-Christian times, on runestones (e.g. Björketorp in Sweden, 6th Century), or in Egil's saga (dated back to 1240 AD). All of them involve words, written or said, that have some kind of magic power (Fjeld 2014:203).

The pragmatic functions of excommunication were in ancient times to punish the breakers of social rules and laws, in order to regulate society, all in accordance with the functions presented in the Gurage language. The punish-

ment was either related to the religion or a wish for the cursed person to catch a bad illness. Since the knowledge of diseases was poor, an explanation for catching them had to be found outside of the individual itself, in unknown or supernatural powers. Hence, sickness was seen as a kind of witchcraft, or explained as a punishment for the sick person's sins or breach of taboos.

Several of the cursing expressions in Norwegian are incomprehensible or at the best obscure to modern users, but they are still in frequent use. Some are nowadays seen as non-taboos, like *pytt pytt!* The formula refers to the pond of fire burning with brimstone in purgatory, which means it had a cursing function before its change in form, and its modern meaning is 'don't bother' or 'never mind!'. The formula is often completed by the contracted phrase which means 'he said', *sa'n* (often assimilated to one word, *pyttsann*). In this way the curse is made into a citation, which makes it less dangerous to utter, since the person cited was to blame, not the one who uttered the formula. In this case, the citation refers to the Bible and the words of God (the Book of Revelation 20:10). Generally the Bible and especially the second commandment has been the most important source for Norwegian cursing up until modern times. The other source was the evil powers, e.g. the devil, the thunder god (Tor with the hammer), the trolls or other supernatural powers as the water sprite.

Since the Medieval Period, references to breaking the rules in the Christian religion has been the most frequent type of cursing, especially naming God in vain.

A special type of cursing was breaking taboos related to certain words to avoid bad luck. Fishery was an important source of income for many Norwegians living at its long coast line. A person in a fishing boat was prohibited from mentioning many words, such as the priest or livestock animals. Fishermen had to use nicknames like *lang rompe* ('long tail') for the cow and *kvit kraje* ('white collar') for the priest in order to have fishing luck. If you did not, you would have to leave the boat, since you also spoiled the luck for the other fishermen (Grimstad 2011:10). Such belief in the supernatural power of certain words has been active up until late the late 19th century.

Most cursing in modern time in Norway is still related to Christianity, in the form of appeals to the good or the bad powers presented in the Bible. But in the last few years, words for sexual activity and faecal matter are becoming more frequent in cursing formulas, probably because of influences from American-English culture. Another reason might be the general profanation of the modern society. To break a commandment from a religion that you do not believe in has little or no power, apart from the social condemnation, which the curs-

ing person is obviously trying to challenge.

In our time, cursing is now more to be counted as a result of individual reactions, as expressions of pain, anger or helplessness, functioning as a kind of psychological safety valve or relief.

Both in Gurage and Norway, there are two main directions of cursing, the self-cursing and the cursing of other, called ego-cursing and alter-cursing (cf. Fjeld 2002), respectively. Nordic cursing formulas like *Det er faen i meg helt sikkert* ('damn me if this is not true'), (lit. The devil may take me if this is not true), or *Må lynet slå meg om jeg gjør deg urett!* ('May the thunder bolt strike me if I do injustice') are examples of typical ego cursing, and *Din forbannede idiot!* ('You damned idiot!') or *Faen ta deg!* (May the devil take you!) of alter cursing.

We can see from our comparison that the conceptions behind the formulas have several common features and references, such as the forces of nature (thunderbolt, sex organs), the good and bad powers (the gods, the devils and everything related to them), and the belief in some kind of witchcraft passing through words.

The main difference between Gurage and Norwegian cursing is that Gurage has special rules for male and female cursing. In the Norwegian tradition, women were not allowed to curse at all, and men should also not harm women by cursing in their presence (Fjeld 2002:163). As late as 1922, the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen wrote that it is unnatural for women to curse. And already in 1911 he wrote that cursing was about to disappear from the language as a consequence of increasing cultural education and its neutralising social effect (Jespersen 1911:40). In practice, however, cursing is now more frequently used than ever in modern Norwegian society, and there is no or little difference between the cursing formulas used by men and women. It seems that most well known cursing formulas are de-tabooised, since they are frequently seen in newspaper articles and heard in television and radio (Fjeld 2014:206).

According to Wyss (1984:17) a curse is the opposite of a blessing. However, if the desire is to curse someone else, in Gurage a bad wish against oneself may mean a good wish towards other persons. In Gurage, the cursing also may be undertaken by an individual or group of people whose language is said to be more powerful, and who is recognised by the community to perform the cursing.

It seems that in the Gurage language, cursing still functions as a common system for general regulation of a society, and other pragmatic functions. In Nordic languages, cursing in modern times has the function of identity construction and also a psychological function to convey your role, or the role you

want to convey, within society. The group alter cursing in Gurage was important in the Nordic countries until the Mediaeval Period, but is no longer operative cursing.

We have, in this article, made some comparisons between the Gurage and Norwegian cursing. An in-depth study of cursing expressions from a comparative perspective in different languages can enable one to establish cross-linguistic typology and draw conclusion as to how people from different cultures and philosophies of life use such linguistic expressions in their everyday lives.

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