

Prasse, Karl-G. 2010. *Tuareg Elementary Course (Tahaggart)*. Reihe Berber Studies Band 33. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag. 220 pp., ISBN 978-3-89645-929-9, € 39,80

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Introduction

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The Tuareg – a traditionally nomadic people famous worldwide for the veil their men wear, and recently thrown back into world headlines by the Libyan conflict – are scattered across a vast area of the central Sahara and Sahel, in Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Their Berber language, Tuareg, has more than 1.5 million speakers. The dialect discussed in this book, Tahaggart, is numerically insignificant in comparison, spoken in Algeria and Libya around the Ahaggar Mountains by hardly more than 50,000 people; however, it is of particular historical and anthropological interest for its relative isolation both from Arabic and from sub-Saharan African languages, and was the subject of some of the earliest comprehensive lexicography (Foucauld 1951). The author of the book under review, Karl-G. Prasse, has devoted much of his long career to the linguistic study of Tuareg, including his four-volume *Manuel de grammaire touaregue (tahäggart)* (Prasse 1972). In this book he returns to the theme of Tuareg grammar, bringing to it the benefit of his intervening years' experience.

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Despite the title, this is not a language course in the usual sense – there are no exercises to go through, nor graded vocabulary lists to learn. A sufficiently motivated student should be able to parse Tuareg texts with some help from a dictionary after going through it, but would be well advised to find a teacher if the goal is to learn to speak the language. What this course is, however, is in some respects more useful to linguists: a carefully graded introduction to Tuareg grammar, and in particular to its fearsomely complicated morphology. I found this book to illuminate the structure of the language much more clearly than Prasse (1972), where an unwary reader is in serious danger of being overwhelmed by the work's monumental completeness and losing sight of the forest for the trees. Comments on morphological or phonetic history are sporadically present here, but play a less prominent role than in the former work.

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Syntax is covered much less systematically than morphology, but essential points are discussed, particularly where morphologically relevant, and are illustrated by a large number of example sentences. Even idiomatic usage is sometimes described (e.g., p. 41 on the usage of two different words for "who", or p. 64 on the use of "fall" for "worsen (of health)".) Phonology is discussed rather briefly; there are some notes on the stress system, but unfortunately stress is not consistently marked. The traditional writing system, Tifinagh, is only briefly mentioned, and the use of Arabic characters to write Tuareg, well-attested further south, is not mentioned at all; the course uses a variant of the Latin-based orthography which has become official in Mali and Niger. (For an examination of Tuareg orthographies, see Elghamis 2011.) The course also includes a brief alphabetical English-Tuareg and Tuareg-English vocabulary, as well as a short bibliography of useful reference works.

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The interest of the morphological system this book reveals should extend beyond Berber linguistics. Like most Afro-Asiatic subgroups, Berber in general is notorious for the complexity of its plural morphology; unlike many, it has an almost equally complex aspectual morphology. The categories themselves are relatively unproblematic; however, the correspondences between singular and plural (as well as free/annexed state) for nouns, and between different aspects/moods for verbs, fall into a large number of different declensions / conjugations. Tuareg also makes an unusually large number of demonstrative distinctions, spatial and temporal. It has locative copulas corresponding to prepositions ("be at", "be on" as well as "be").

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The larger part of this book is devoted to the verbal system. Prasse describes a total of 19 verbal conjugations here (excluding causative, passive, and reciprocal formations), many of which incorporate a number of significantly different subtypes. Some are associated with particular semantics – notably, conjugation IV is associated with qualities. Tuareg has retained a distinction between two short vowels which are collapsed into schwa in most Berber languages, allowing it to distinguish verb forms merged in most of its relatives. It also has one more major aspectual class – the intensive perfect – than is found in most Berber languages. Of course, not all the morphological classes found in Tuareg are necessarily retentions. However, it is almost impossible to understand the historical development of Berber verbal morphology without reference to the Tuareg case. It has also long been known that the Berber verbal system shows conspicuous analogies to those of other Afroasiatic languages, in particular Akkadian and some members of Cushitic (see e.g. Diakonoff 1988, Bennett 1998); these emerge clearly from an examination of Tuareg.

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With published grammars and dictionaries of all major varieties, Tuareg is an unusually well documented language in comparison to the rest of Berber and to Africa in general. However, relatively little of this documentation is in English. For Tuareg as a whole, while two reference grammars in English exist – Heath (2005) for Mali and Kossmann (2011) for the Air Mountains – the only other grammar course in English is Sudlow (2001), describing the southeastern Tuareg varieties of Burkina Faso. Prasse makes far fewer concessions to the learner's need for fixed phrases and daily greetings than Sudlow, but I found Prasse's presentation of the grammar rather clearer; in particular, Prasse's practice of introducing each conjugation separately with discussion makes them much easier to learn and understand than simply presenting paradigm tables without further comment. The southern varieties two of which Sudlow describes are spoken by far more people than the northern variety described by Prasse, so learners who simply want to be able to talk to Tuareg are likely to find Sudlow's book closer to the varieties spoken by their interlocutors. For northern Tuareg, however, this is the first linguistic reference in English.

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For beginners, this book makes an excellent introduction to Berber grammar; experts will appreciate the very clear overview it offers of Tahaggart Tuareg, and may well find that it helps clarify their understanding of the Berber verbal system.

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