



## The case of Somali language

By Professor Abdalla Omar Mansur

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When the Somali language was transcribed and became the national language in 1972, it was used extensively as the medium of instruction and administration. The way in which all this was realized became a model for imitation and emulation by other countries of the African continent. But after the collapse of the Somali state, this language that had gained such an important role for Somalis lost most of its prestige.

Before 1972, the languages of instruction and administration in Somalia were Italian and English, respectively adopted in the previous Italian and British colonies. They had such a prestige for the Somali urban population that the relevance of the mother tongue and the art of oral tradition were declining.

In 1972, when the national orthography was established, Somali became the official language of the state. After the launch of an important literacy campaign across the country, Somali immediately became the language of administration and the medium of instruction in schools. The new role assumed by the Somali language gave the entire population an access to their national heritage and cultural identity.



### New concepts, old terms

The use of the native language at all levels and in all contexts was possible since Somali acquired a very large number of technical and scientific terms to be able to express new concepts unfamiliar to the Somali culture. They adopted a system of neologism – contrary to what Western languages usually do by using Greek and Latin – restoring many archaic Somali terms in disuse.

Those terms, closely related to traditional culture, were given new meanings in some way related to the original one; the result was the creation of a new terminology that was accessible to the majority of the Somali people, at the time still without a high degree of education. In this way, the Somali vocabulary was enriched and it became possible to produce immediately many textbooks for all schools from primary to high schools.

Furthermore, the introduction of the writing system built a bridge between the nomadic culture and the urban one, not only because of the restoration of words and concepts belonging to the traditional culture, but also for the fact that it became possible to create a rich written literature drawn from the native cultural oral heritage. So the introduction of a writing system for the Somali language facilitated the collection of a cultural heritage of great value: the Somali oral literature such as poems, short stories, and proverbs.

In this way, from 1972 until 1990, the Somalis walked on a track of modernisation and of standardisation of the language, achieving tangible progress. One of the comments that **B.W. Andrzejewski** (1977) made after 5 years Somali had become the official language of the state, was this:

*“... one might venture to use the term “The Somali miracle” if one considers the sudden transformation of the country from national illiteracy to a leading position in the whole Africa as far as concerns the use of the patrial [native] language in education and public life, a transformation which has taken only five years”.*

He continues:

*“... Somali has already become, in this respect, a model for imitation and emulation by other countries of the African continent, and several African educationalists showed great interest in her achievements at the international seminar on language and education in Africa, held in Kinshasa last December. Recently a delegation from the Niger Republic visited Mogadisho to discover what the best policy would be for the use of patrial language in schools and adult education”.*

### **Civil war hurt the development of language**

But what is the situation now? After the collapse of the state in 1991, the civil war – having destroyed everything, not having saved any state structure – has even damaged the path towards development of the Somali language. As a consequence Somali is losing its important role both at home and abroad:

*A. Inside the country:*

- i) The schools which have been reactivated are teaching only in Arabic or English.
- ii) English is the vehicular language for administration in all fields.
- iii) The names of the schools, hotels, various agencies and other activities and the terminology in advertising are foreign names or hybrid ones (Somali-English).
- iv) It has become common to say the numbers in English, especially phone numbers, dates, time, as if numbers did not exist in the Somali language.

*B) Among the Somali diaspora:*

- i) Of the thousands of Somali children outside Somalia, most do not speak Somali, some speak it badly and just a few speak it quite well, thanks to their wise parents who value their cultural identity and want to maintain it.
- ii) Adults often mix Somali with English, both in formal and informal speeches. If the adults, especially parents behave this way, what can one expect of their children?
- iii) The names of the Somali televisions both at home and abroad are in English, regardless that they broadcast only in Somali: Horn Cable TV (HCTV), Universal TV, Royal TV, Somali National TV (SNTV), etc.
- iv) Some Somalis prefer to write to their Somali friends or even in Somali newspapers in English rather than Somali.

All these examples show that foreign languages have gained a lot of prestige among the Somalis, both inside and outside the country, while the prestige of the mother tongue is declining. This proves that many Somalis are losing what is called "language loyalty":

*“To be loyal to one's language is generally evidenced by a desire to retain an identity that is articulated through the use of that language, and to adhere to cultural practices associated with that language. Language loyalty leads people to work toward maintaining the language in question even under adverse conditions. Language maintenance consists of strategies that groups use to keep the language to which they are loyal alive; language persistence is the result.” (Szecsy 2008)*

If one ignores his/her language, he/she is in fact losing his/her identity and this is so not only at the individual level, but also at the national level, because the deepest feeling of identity is linked to the sharing of a common language. In fact the Somali language is the most important cohesive factor in our community.

On one hand, there are other factors such as religion or somatic aspects that characterize Somalis, but we also share them with others, non-Somali people. On the other hand, there are customs such as ways of dressing or traditional dances that are not common to all Somalis, but vary from region to region.

### **The relevance of the native language**

Now, after two decades of neglecting their own language, many Somalis are starting to realize the importance of language and becoming sensitive to linguistic issues.

In recent years some have expressed the idea that the Somali language is likely to die out. It is clear that this feeling is unfounded, but it is a sign of preoccupation, and therefore, it should be evaluated with respect. Others see that the Somali language is not stable, and they ascribe this mainly to the Somali orthography system that they consider to be incomplete.

With all due respect, I do not agree with them and the way they justify their protest. I do not think that the Somali orthography is less perfect than that of the most used languages in the world; it is very simple, without diacritics, and Somali can be written with any computer with Latin characters.

Furthermore, others appear to be confused about the concept of language and dialect, which is perhaps due to the impact of the political situation in Somalia. As an example, let us see Chapter one, Article 5 of the Somali constitution that says:

“*Afka rasmiga ah ee Jamhuuriyadda Federaalka Soomaaliya waa Af-Soomaaliga (Maay iyo Maxaatiri), Af-Carbabiguna waa luqadda labaad.*” [The official language of the Federal Republic of Somalia is Somali (*Maay* and *Maxaatiri*), and the Arabic language is the second language]

In this Article the constitution establishes that only two of the language varieties spoken in Somalia are to be considered national languages, but the modern linguistic studies, for example **Marcello Lamberti**, shows that within the Somali language we can identify five groups of dialects: *Maxaatiri*, *Maay*, *Banaadir*, *Ashraaf* and four Digil dialects (*Jiiddu*, *Garre*, *Tunni*, *Dabarre*).

*Maxaatiri* – knowns also as Northern dialects – in all its varieties is spoken mainly from Central Somalia to the North and one part of current Jubbaland area; the *Maay* varieties are spoken mainly in the South-West; *Banaadir* and *Ashraaf* dialects are spoken along the Southern coast; and *Digil* dialects are spoken in one part of South-West Somalia.

Therefore, *Maxaatiri* and *Maay* are not the only two dialects spoken in Somalia.

Going back to the article 5 in the Constitution, if it is intended that *Maay* and *Maxaatiri* are two dialects of Somali, then what sense does it make to mention only two if there are other dialects as well?

If it is intended that *Maay* and *Maxaatiri* are two languages, then it should be said that the official languages are two: the *Maay* language and the *Maxaatiri* language. In that case “the Somali language” in the Article should be removed since the Somali language, like any other language, cannot be constituted by two different languages, but only various dialects.

### **Binary classifications**

In my opinion the confusion regarding the concepts of language and dialect is caused by two cultural factors:

First, in the Somali tradition there is no concept nor a corresponding word for a dialect. Indeed, we use indifferently the word *af* (language) for both language and dialect: *Af-Soomaali*, *Af-Maay*, *Af-Garre*, *Af-Maxaatiri* etc. Since the term dialect does not exist, we now use *lahjad* (which is Arabic) or *afguri* (home language) –even in this case the word *af* (language) appears.

Second, according to the traditional Somali way of thinking, the Somali society is structured in two distinctive groups, i.e. *Maay* and *Maxaatiri* speakers. *Maay* and *Maxaatiri* are the most spoken dialects both in terms of the number of people who speak these varieties, as well as in terms of the extension of geographical area.

In a similar manner, the Somali tradition tends to use other binary classifications for different social aspects, for example: *Wadaad iyo waranle* (holy man and warrior), *Sab iyo Samaale* (the names of the two ancestors of all Somalis), *ab'ogaa iyo abaarikeentay* (indigenous and immigrant). The same thing for the food, as the tradition says that the food is “*cad iyo caano*” (meat and milk).

All these binary classifications are based on traditional nomadic culture and they are not supported by contemporary context and/or modern scientific evidence: we cannot claim that the Somali society is composed only of holy men and warriors, or that the Somali food is only milk and meat. In the same way, the idea of only two Somali dialects is not correct.

### **Standard language**

A national language usually originates from a dialect spoken in a geographic area that, for various factors such as power, culture and religion, has managed to impose itself on other dialects or languages. An example of the power factor is provided by the cases of French, Spanish and English, which are modeled on the language of the political and administrative capital.

In France, for example, various citizens in France were forced to accept the dominance of the language of Paris. Or in Ethiopia the official language is Amharic, although there are 72 other languages in the same country that belong to different language families or branches.

The function of the culture factor is seen in the development of Italian language. The language spoken in Italy is originally the Florentine dialect. But Florence has never been a political center with super-regional ambitions. Rather, Florence was the city that gave birth to great literature. The excellence of the great Florentine writers made the Florentine dialect instrument for recognized prestige at national level.

Regarding the religion factor, examples are provided by the two best known Semitic languages, Arabic and Hebrew. Modern Arabic used today by all Arab states as an official language is derived from a dialect that was spoken at Mecca 14 centuries ago, by “*Qureishits*”, and spread through the Quran, with the inevitable changes that time has determined. Hebrew lasted over the centuries just as a sacred language. After the Second World War, it managed to become the official language of the state of Israel, giving Jews, who returned from different parts of the world, the sense of belonging to the community.

Given that *Maxaatiri* dialects in Somalia have been used as the national language for 19 years (1972–1990), and after the state collapse people continued to use them, it is due time now to consider them the “standard language”. Of course the two factors we mentioned above for the other languages are both relevant: the speakers of Northern *Maxaatiri* have always been the

dominant ruling class of the Somali state and many of their writers have produced a very rich literature in this variety of the language.

And, as happens in the rest of the world, the other dialects must accept this sacrifice, as it is more convenient for a state to have a single official language. This does not mean that the other dialects must be cancelled; indeed they can contribute to the enrichment of standard Somali, and must be studied and described accurately.

## Conclusion

In order to recover its proper role, the Somali state must take care of the linguistic situation of the country by developing and implementing a language policy. This implies the planning of specific interventions with the following objectives:

- a) Restore the teaching of the national language – Somali – as the language of instruction from primary to high school and reintroduce it in the administration, concretely.
- b) Take actions to promote the continuation of the standardization process, and the research for the production of grammatical descriptions and of reference vocabularies (considering and developing those already existing), as well as the production of adequate textbooks for the teaching of Somali.
- c) Help the modernization and enrichment of the vocabulary in order to meet the needs of a language of wider communication, and continue as in the past the expansion in the technical, scientific and administrative lexical fields.
- d) Promote the standardization of the language with indications and care for some degree of linguistic purism (i.e. a limited inclusion of foreign words).

Finally, it is very important that the Somali authorities give full support to Regional Academy of the Somali language (AGA) founded in Djibouti in 2012, for the protection of the Somali language. AGA was promoted by several Somali intellectuals supported by various political forces of the Horn of Africa, especially the president **Ismail Omar Gelle** of the Republic of Djibouti.

Professor Abdalla Omar Mansur  
Email: [amansur44@gmail.com](mailto:amansur44@gmail.com)

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*The author was Head of Italian Department of Somali National University (1980–1990). After the collapse of the Somali state he has been teaching Arabic and Somali languages at the Università Roma Tre and he is an active member at the Centro Studi Somali (Università Roma Tre). He has published and co-published several books and papers on Somali language and culture such as *Qaamuuska Af Soomaaliga*, co-editor Professor Annarita Puglielli, Roma 2012 and *Le lingue Cuscitiche e il Somalo*, Studi Somali N. 8, Roma 1988.*

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