

The Unity of the Somali Language Despite the Barrier of Regional Language Variants¹

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The Somali language possesses a tight structural unity that requires a further cross-fertilisation among language variants. The adoption of an official language should not hinder the involvement of the others in fashioning rich idioms that are more accessible to a larger public. Rather, it should work in favour of it.

The generosity of the Somali language overcomes and cancels out the sort of regional vernacular stereotypes that until now have perpetuated the mutual rejection of these language-variants. This is confirmed by the fact that the everyday speech of any Somali, of whatever region, includes some words that are not widely known.

I would hold, moreover, that an understanding of the language should spring from an osmosis of all the Somali language variants having everyday Somali as their melting-pot of origin. Despite the apparent contradictions and difficulties of assimilation, the language variants complement one another and are able to enrich themselves by drawing upon each other, in a process capable of forming a « Circular Somali », more complex and uninhibited, understandable in all its elements and gaining the position that it deserves.

The following examples, chosen especially for comparison, are intended to show the intrinsic limitation of the language-variants taken by themselves, a shortcoming resolved by adopting into the standard Somali all the lexical richness of language-variants presently denied it.

1. The Reciprocally Complementary Nature of Somali

1.1. Category of compound words whose parts are not found in their entirety in the standard language, whilst in a language-variant (in this particular case Maay) the two morphemes of the compound word are to be found. However, the same language-variant may not include the word as a constituent element.

¹ Because of the limited space allotted to this article in the proceedings the paper cannot appear in its original form. It should be consequently, noted that the important part of songs and poetry has been left out. A number of copies of the article, in its original form, was distributed at the SSIA Congress in Rome on May 1986, and I hope it will be possible to publish the entire article in specialized periodicals.

STANDARD SOMALI

1. *baadifad* + 1
 - a. *baadi* = included
 - b. *fad* = not included
2. *horseed* + 3
 - a. *hor* = included
 - b. *seed* = not included
3. *minfiiq* + 4
 - a. *min* = not included
 - b. *fiiq* = included
4. *minxiis* + 5
 - a. *min* = not included
 - b. *xiis* = included

+ 1 *baadifad*

+ 2 *fad* (Maay)

fadow (Maay), v.t.

+ 3 *horseed*

seedow (Maay), v.t.

+ 4 *minfiiq*

+ 5 *minxiis*

MAAY SOMALI

1. *baadëfad* + 2
 - a. *baad* = included
 - b. *fad* = included
2. *horseed*
 - a. *hor* = included
 - b. *seed* = included
3. *minfiiq*
 - a. *min* = included
 - b. *fiiq* = not included

4. *minxiis*
 - a. *min* = included
 - b. *xiis* (*hiis*) = included

= reward that is given to someone returning lost property or animals to their owner (universal usage).

= goods that the groom gives to the bride's family, generally before the wedding (*yarad* in the standard language).

= to want, to desire.

= person who goes before the group in transhumance, to find for them the best camping place (stand. language); in Maay the word is unknown, whilst the two parts of the compound word are found in the language-variant.

to go, to take oneself.

= brush, broom (stand. lang.), *Min* (Maay) = house, abode, thus part of the word is to be found in a dialect, whilst the other part in another. In Maay the word is unknown.

= person under whose direction and patronage the wedding feast takes place (probably in older times)

this person was a kind of « cheerleader », given that the institution is most archaic). The expression is not so well known in Maay. In any case, *minwayn* (first wife) and *minyaro* (second wite, inferior in status to the first), are common terms in all the language-variants.

1.2. Category of words which have an incomplete meaning in the standard language, whilst in the language variants attain fullness and vigour. From this category we have taken the following words: *ciriid*, *dhaashi*, *war (balli)*, *gudid*, *beel*, *so*, *gun*, *jamasho*, *shiid*, *muudaal*, *oogtid*, *tebin*.

STANDARD SOMALI

OTHER DIALECTS

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|--|--|
| <p>1. <i>ciriid</i> = the heat of sand made red-hot by the sun (an incomplete meaning and often confused).</p> | <p>1. <i>irë</i> (Maay) = sun.</p> |
| <p>2. <i>dhaashi</i> = cream or other ointment more or less scented which is spread over the face (a definition which may seem incomplete)</p> | <p>2. <i>dhaaysë</i> (Maay) = clarified butter (standard language <i>subag</i>).</p> |
| <p>3. <i>war</i> (relatively recent) = basin, generally artificial, used for conserving rainwater.</p> | <p>3. <i>warë</i> (Jiiddo) = water.</p> |
| <p>4. <i>gudid</i> = circumcision (not inflected in the sense of cut).</p> | <p>4. <i>godaal</i> (Jiiddo) = the cut. (<i>gudin</i> and <i>gudid</i> sound better together in this sense than with <i>goyn</i> and <i>go'id</i>).</p> |
| <p>5. <i>beel</i> = community or group of persons living in the same village.</p> | <p>5. <i>beel</i> (Garre) = friend.
In the way of many neologisms, <i>beel</i> stands for the administrative or municipal level immediately below that of District (<i>degmo</i>).</p> |
| <p>6. <i>so</i> = almost unknown and sometimes used as comparative <i>so iyo sar</i> = flesh vs. skin.</p> | <p>6. <i>so</i> (Maay) = meat.</p> |
| <p>7. <i>gun</i> = common people; rabble; inferior; belonging to the mass (in the way of the pejorative meaning</p> | <p>7. <i>gun</i> (in various Southern language variants) = people; tribe; the most representative part of the</p> |

given to the word people in several modern European languages).

aristocratic group (the word has a connotation of solidarity and pride in the context of the specific group).

8. *jamasho* = to long for something (almost always referring to the whims of pregnant women).
9. *shiidid* = 1.v.t. to throw a stone at something or someone. 2. v.t. to grind; 3. v. int. to go to the bottom of; for other uses of the word one needs to search archaic literature², insofar as *shiid* for stone is not commonly used in the standard language.
10. *muudal* = adj. miserly; stingy; niggardly (used only in this sense).
11. *oogtid* = v.t. to light (fire); to set alight (used rarely and as a metaphor). The verb does not conjugate in the form 'to be alight'.
12. *tebin* = 1. v.t. to send
2. to jump (a cycle). The word that derives from *tegid* (go) appears to have distanced itself over time and describes a limited sphere of the same action.
8. *jammë* (Jiiddo) = desire; *ja-jamaal* v.t. to want.
9. *shiid* = stone; pebble
1. *shiidooyow* = v.t. to throw a stone at something or someone.
2. *shiidow* = v.t. to grind
3. *shiidow* = v.t. to sink;.
10. *modaal* (Jiiddo) = v.t. to prohibit; to deny (standard language *reebid*).
11. *oogow* (Maay) = v.i. ref. to burn oneself; 2. *oojiyow* (Maay) = to light.
dabaa oogowhaaya = the fire continues to burn (here the verb conjugates).
12. *tabow* (Maay) = v.t. to go, leave.

2. The Dynamic of the Use of the Pharyngeals in Somali

Apart from what has been consolidated into the standard language in bygone times, the use of the pharyngeals the h in n and the a in c (*cayn*) is a process still under way; for example, the word *huluulasho* (to crouch under a low roof)

² *Shiidkiyo quruuruxa miyaad aniga ii sheegi* (you come to speak to me of rocks and pebbles?) is the answer of the poet Gabayhawle to a poetic riddle that begins with this cutting remark: *shahwo nimaan lahayn oo dhallaan shaaribbada haysto; haddaad gabay nin shaacira ku tahay, sheeg haddaad garato* = (to somebody without any sperm, with children that caress his moustache; if you are a real poet, tell me if you have understood). Yaasiin C. Keenadiid (1984).

can be pronounced *xuluulasho* also. The former pronunciation is found often in the language variants in Southern and Central Somalia and thus could have been the original form. Very recently the word *mahaysato* (property-less) was changed into *maxaysato* (which does not jar because the main morpheme is dropped). The x in general is a sound very much influenced by Arabic, and is part of the letters of the alphabet in which the Arabic content is considerable, such as: *xaaqin*, *xusuus*, *xin*, *xarraan*, *xayraamid*, *xeelad*, *xisaab*, *xoqid*, *xilo* etc.

As it may be recalled in the poetry of Cabdullahi Suldaan Timacadde³ it appears that the *Madawayn* plain has been rescued to changing into *Madaxwayn*. The same process may happen to the letter c (*cayn*), and in this regard let us recall the poetic riddle waged between Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xassan and Xaaji Gooni (Cabdi Xaaji) where the latter says: *wan cafuufanoo coobir wado, madax-na caal haysto ... caynkaasna aniga arkee cara e yaa sheega?*⁴ (swollen ram led by an old man, and another who pulls him along by its drooping chin, this I have seen and who knows how to solve it?). In this poetic riddle of the Sayid there is also the following: *caskar ulo leh oo geed cumbulan gobolna coon joogo ... oo qool cuddinayaan arkee, cara ee yaa sheega?* (soldiers armed with clubs, in a scrum under a spreading tree ... I saw them shake their clubs ... and who knows how to solve it?). Evidently the poet has changed the word *afuufan* into *cafuufan*, and *askar* into *caskar* for the purpose of alliteration. Thus *arlada* becomes *carrada* (earth), whilst *armal* (widow or divorced woman) and *iid* (feast) are transformed into *carmal* and *ciid*. The strange thing about this change in the sound is that *carro*, i.e. *carmal*, the origin of c in Arabic is a. Just as for x, the c is also among the letters that many Arab words have: *caabbiyid*, *caado*, *caal*, *coon*, *cab-bid*, *caraf*, *caro*, *carbis*, *carbuun*, *ceejin*, *ceeb*, etc.

3. Affinity of Semantic Mould between the Language Variants

There is an extraordinary affinity of semantic form between the language variants of Somalia that bears upon the plasticity of thought. In certain cases the semantic affinity in question, more than the lexical structure, is complemented by phonological harmony, and thus there is not only a common meaning of the word, but also a vocal harmony of the same word found in two or more language-variants. Here are shown some examples of this in the following comparison:

STANDARD LANGUAGE

1. *mahaayommoog*, small child, lit. 'I an not unaware'.
Or rather for him who has to have milk, whenever and wherever

OTHER DIALECTS

1. *mataallë moog*⁵ (Maay), identical meaning, lit. 'there is nothing unaware'. The two expressions are so close even in modulation of

³ (The heat which the herd dies, and wonderment is the carcasses of the oxen, whilst lived at Madaxwayn and Muluclay, and no grass was to found at Meder ...). Boobe Yuusuf Ducaale (1983, p. 25). Madaxwayn is a plain in this district of Hargeisa.

⁴ Jaamac Cumar Ciise (1974, p.199).

⁵ *Mëtaallë moogtaa lëkiin maalee* ... (in Maay). This strophe is part of an *adar* of Maxamed Naasir (Akaakow), poet, songwriter and singer from Huddur, and is incorporated into the collection of poetry, songs and *adar* of the writer.

he needs, who definitely does not ask if there's any.

sound, as to be inter-changeable.

2. *Afmiinshaar*⁶

Given over politically to opportunism; near to the center of power (orig. meaning). Spreader of false and tendentious rumour (current meaning).

2. *Afyaambo* (Lower Shabeelle)

Power broker and politician in rural societies.

3. *Takhaantakhi* from verb

takhaantakhayn: violent push given to someone shoving him by the hand on the nape of the neck, making him jump forward.

3. *Qedaanqedi* (Maay), from the verb *qedaanqediyow* (identical meaning), only in this expression the nape (*qadaad*) is clearly the point of impact where the push comes from.

4. *Tuulo*, village.

4. *Buulo*, village in many language-variants.

5. *Coon*, person who seems younger than his actual age.

5. *Guun*, identical to *coon* in meaning, only that this word is Arabic in origin.

4. The Fusion of the Language-variants

Maay merges into the standard language and is pronounced almost identically as the latter in the case of the Arab letters in the *dugsi*⁷, or Koranic schools. This system of enunciation which commences with familiarising the student with Arabic letters, has the aim of making him learn firstly the distribution of the diacritical signs of the alphabet and the articulation of the sounds, and then the combination of the characters themselves. This didactic method is copied from Arabic and then adapted into Somali.

The oral tradition and recent historiography in Somali agree that Sharif Yuusuf Al-Kowneyn (also known as Aw-Barkhadle) (Cali Cabduraxmaan Xersi 1977: 126-127, and Mazamad Mukhtaar, manuscript) is the inventor of the method. The Somalisation of the method, which follows the Arabic form: *alif laa shay' loh, baa' nuqta min tahtahaa* etc, is shown below in two linguistic forms:

⁶ This word has changed to take on a pejorative slant, insofar as at the time of its coining it meant simply « politician ». *Afyaambo*, instead refers to the same person, the « power brokers » of rural societies.

⁷ This fact is important for historical research, since the use of the method in Maay is not original, and one could deduce from this that the teaching of the Koran was established in the Maxaatiri language-variants before it spread to the regions of the Maay language-variant.

⁸ It is an exception to the common rule in that it is pronounced *ku sedddexaale*.

STANDARD LANGUAGE	MAAY (ACTUAL)	NORMAL MAAY PRO- NOUNCIATION
<i>alif wax maale</i>	<i>alif wah maale</i>	<i>alif wal melleh</i>
<i>ba hooskaale</i>	<i>ba hoos kaale</i>	<i>ba hoos kulleh</i>
<i>ta kor ku lammaale</i>	<i>ta kor ku lammaale</i>	<i>ta lamma kor ku leh</i>
<i>tha kor ku seddexeale</i>	<i>the kor ku seddiileh</i>	<i>tha kor ku seddiileh</i>
<i>jiin hooskaale</i>	<i>jiin hooskaale</i>	<i>jiin hoos kulleh</i>
<i>xa wax maale</i>	<i>xa wax maale</i>	<i>xa wal melleh</i>
<i>kha korkaale</i>	<i>kha korkaale</i>	<i>kha kor kulleh</i>
<i>deel wax maale</i>	<i>deel wax maale</i>	<i>del wal melleh</i>
<i>thaal korkaale</i>	<i>thaal korkaale</i>	<i>thaal kor kulleh</i>
<i>ra wax maale</i>	<i>ra wax maale</i>	<i>ra wal melleh</i>
<i>za korkaale</i>	<i>za korkaale</i>	<i>za kor kulleh</i>
<i>siin kor ku seddexeale</i>	<i>siin kor ku seddexeale</i>	<i>siin kor ku seddiileh</i>
<i>saad wax maale</i>	<i>saad wal melleh</i>	<i>saad wal melleh</i>
<i>lhaad korkaale</i>	<i>lhaad korkaale</i>	<i>lhaad kor kulleh</i>
<i>dha wax maale</i>	<i>dha wax maale</i>	<i>dha wax maale</i>
<i>tda korkaale</i>	<i>tda korkaale</i>	<i>tda kor kulleh</i>
<i>cayn wax maale</i>	<i>cayn wax maale</i>	<i>cayn wal melleh</i>
<i>ghayn korkaale</i>	<i>gheen korkaale</i>	<i>gheen kor kulleh</i>
<i>fa korkaale</i>	<i>fa korkaale</i>	<i>fa kor kulleh</i>
<i>qaaf kor ku labaale</i>	<i>qaaf kor ku lammaale</i>	<i>qaaf lamma kor ku leh</i>
<i>kaaf wax maale</i>	<i>kaaf wax maale</i>	<i>kaaf wal melleh</i>
<i>laam wax maale</i>	<i>laam wax maale</i>	<i>laam wal melleh</i>
<i>miim wax maale</i>	<i>miim wax maale</i>	<i>miim wal melleh</i>
<i>nuun korkaale</i>	<i>nuun korkaale</i>	<i>nuun kor kulleh</i>
<i>waaw (woow) wax maale</i>	<i>waaw wax maale</i>	<i>waaw wal melleh</i>
<i>ha wax maale</i>	<i>ha wax maale</i>	<i>ha wal melleh</i>
<i>ya hooskaale</i> ⁹	<i>ya hooskaale</i>	<i>ya hoos lamma ku leh</i>

As a rule virtually all the nomenclature regarding the organisation of the *dugsi*, the religious practice relating to them, and the teaching methods, are similar throughout Somalia.¹⁰

In the standard language there may be various forms of articulation, however I am not able here to give the exact number of the « readings ».

It is certain, though, that in the Togdheer region (Burao), the following forms of syllabification are in use, amongst other possible readings: *alif wax ma leh*; *ba hoos ku hal leh*, *ta kor ku laba leh*; *tha kor ku seddex leh*; *jiin hoos ku hal leh* ... *ya hoos ku labaley*.¹¹

⁹ Even though in Maay certain letters such as c and x are difficult to pronounce, the reader of the Koran tries his utmost to adhere to the regular pronunciation of Arabic characters.

¹⁰ Cf. Maxamed C. Casdul-Kanim et al. (1978).

¹¹ The diacritical points of *ya* have not been mentioned, and are an exception as regards the position of the other letters. According to the prevailing articulation *ya* should be read as *ya laba ku hoosaale*.

5. The Liturgical Value of Song and its Cross-regional Effect on Dialects¹²

As has been noted almost all the traditional dances, songs, and general poetic creativity are associated with supernatural powers and mysteries. Moreover there are forms of ritual dances in which the aesthetic takes precedence over the magic, and vice versa. In all those dances (and there are many of them) where nobody is required to fall into a mystic fit, or pretend to do so, the aesthetic element of the dance or the song has more room to be developed. In pastoral communities those forms of dance or song that are less mysterious or less expensive are somehow easily adopted, and thus easy to organise and to assimilate. In this respect, while the language-variants may seem to be shut in closed compartments, the dances and songs that accompany them are able to break through the barriers of vernacular and to mix and superimpose themselves upon the melodies and dances typical of another distant region. As we shall see below, in Maay and Jiiddo, songs from Maxaatiri have been assimilated, and are recited along with those that are clearly local in a seamless melange.

The capacity of the receiving language-variant to assimilate cannot be diminished, in my opinion, by the fact that in the process of mediation certain words are changed and others replaced by similar-sounding local ones.

As far as I recall in the Bokool region, especially in the areas adjacent to the provisional administrative border, along the Abeesaale-Dhuurreey-Goryaale line (north-east, north, north-west of Xuddur), adjoining the border lands with Hiiraan, the influence of Maxaatiri is considerable on the dances and the songs, particularly on the *saar*,¹³ *weerar*¹⁴ and *Jiib*.¹⁵ There may well have been similar adaptations in other districts of the former region of Upper Giuba or even in other Southern regions, either in the Democratic Republic of Somalia, or beyond the temporary border.

One form of *Jiib* that we shall call *Jiib-dooy* to distinguish it from other less

¹² We can here draw a distinction between on the one hand local dances and songs taken into the culture some considerable time ago, and whose means of communication is Somali, and on the other, forms of exorcism of recent introduction. Each of these two types of dance and song has its own ritual and the language of the ceremony, almost always incomprehensible to the listeners and quite often to the very celebrants. In the case of *Ugnukow*, the famous dance of propitiation of the Gosha (which is usually recited on moonless nights), the liturgy is a mixture from Yao, Makua and Magindo, peoples that live in the South of Tanzania and Malawi, land where the original inhabitants were the first settled community of the Gosha. (Harlow & Chiever, 1965, and Ingram, 1962). Zaylici and Mingis dances use ritual phrasing of uncertain origin, whilst the Sheikh Xuseen (Boorane) and Numbi (or Lumbi) dances the language of mediation is respectively Oromo and Kiswahili.

¹³ In general *saar* is divided (at least those forms known in Central Somalia) into *saar-mooy* (moo) and *saar-lugeed*. In the former as the term itself shows, the song is accompanied by a drum (a large wooden mortar whose cavity is covered by a half-tanned skin). Whilst the latter form is without musical instrument and the effect of the stamping of the feet, whence « *lugeed* », and the clapping of the hands that accompany the singing give a hypnotic rhythm to the dance. Apart from the magic content of the ceremony, *saar* expresses the strength and courage of its participants (for a fuller description see Cerulli, 1957).

¹⁴ It is a form of *shir* with various nuances and local features (the name itself implies the warlike character of the *weerar*).

¹⁵ It is recited at night by the young men in a special enclosure in the open *gamaas*, under the stars. It is a love song in which the young man exalts the virtue of his chosen maiden or else he rails against the « shrew » from which his pride has suffered, and so he describes her in terms of derision.

colourful types, seems to have had its origin in the Baardheere-Yaaq-Baraaway-Dinsoor triangle.

Jiib-dooy, despite maintaining the poetic Maay paradigm, draws freely from various Maxaatiri language-variants. However, the most versatile language-variant, possessing an intrinsic capacity to assimilate songs and dances from outside, is that of *Jiiddo*.

The strangest phenomenon of this language-variant, not being part of Maay, is in my opinion that it has taken in literally oral literature and folk traditions from other language-variants, yet still conserving their original lexical purity and basic aesthetic form.

What is remarkable here is that a single person or chorus can make up on the spot songs belonging to two, three or four language-variants and succeed in involving a large audience, who will appreciate and take in the songs with almost the same intensity as in their own language.

Thus the *gaar* or *geerar*¹⁶ and the *beeleeey*¹⁷ are sung in Jiiddoo; while *tugsi* (*tuugsi*)¹⁸ in maxaatiri (Benaadir): *beerey*¹⁹ and *gololow*²⁰ are sung in a mixture of language-variants (Jiiddo-Benaadir-Maay-Garre); whilst the *wegle*²¹ and the *waalo*²² are in Maay verses.²³

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¹⁶ Belongs to the epic type common in *Geerar* with local features.

¹⁷ Sung in chorus with the participation of soloists who ensure a continuity of verses, that are alternated in turn with the instant song composers.

¹⁸ This is a form of *shir* in the manner of Benaadir. As in *shir* the composers of *tugsi* are called *laashimiin* (sing. *laashin*) and the related *shrib* follows roughly the rhythm and metre of Benaadir.

¹⁹ This *beerey* of Qoryooley is different from the most famous *beerrey-waamo* (or *beerrey Jamaame*) in its rhythm and theatricality. This latter is perhaps one of the most beautiful folk dances of Somalia.

²⁰ This is a form of the *Beerrey-Waamo* in the metre of the singing, the rhythm of the dance and celebratory rules.

²¹ This is a song especially for the cattle, found widely in Central and Southern Somalia. It is generally felt that this sort of song pleases the cattle and helps to increase milk output and affection for the owner.

²² One of the youngmen's games most widely spread throughout Somalia with regional and local characteristics.

²³ These are forms heavily influenced by the Maxaatiri of Gedo and Bokool. There are many versions, especially in saar, in the afore mentioned regions that almost conserve the regional Maxaatiri linguistic purity.

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