THE INTRODUCTION OF A NATIONAL ORTHOGRAPHY FOR SOMALI

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On 21st October, 1972, the third anniversary of the Revolution,[1] the Somali Government introduced a national orthography for Somali in Latin script. Before that date several unofficial systems of transcription[2] were used by a small number of private citizens, but all government correspondence and records were in Italian, Arabic or English. The whole educational system was dependent on these three languages, not only as subjects of study but also as media of instruction. This was a paradoxical situation, since Somalia is one of the few African countries where, with the exception of minute minority groups, everyone speaks the same language. From a practical point of view the diversity of languages in written communication was a great hindrance to the efficiency of the administration, of education and of public service, and delayed the process of unification between the former Italian and former British parts of the country. Matters became even worse as a result of the numerous scholarships given by foreign countries where languages other than Italian, Arabic or English were spoken. People with qualifications obtained in Germany, Eastern Europe or China often had a limited knowledge of the three foreign languages already used in Somalia, even though they were highly proficient in the language of the country in which they had studied.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to probe into the political, religious and technical reasons for the delay in the introduction of an orthography: they are described in considerable detail in Adam 1958, Andrzejewski 1964 and Pirone 1967, all of which provide extensive bibliographical references. Briefly, three types of script contended as feasible candidates for an orthography: Latin, Arabic and a Somali script, introduced in the nineteen-twenties, which used entirely invented symbols. The supporters of the three scripts held wholly intransigent views and the issue was so inflammatory that on several occasions it led to demonstrations and threats of violence: if mishandled it could have resulted in bloodshed on a very wide scale, and previous governments were understandably wary in their approach to the problem, though always stating that it was their intention eventually to solve it.

[1] For a brief account of the most recent events in the history of Somalia see Lewis 1972; a more extensive description of these events can be found in an Arabic work written by a Somali scholar, see Jāma' 'Umar 'Īsā 1972. For an ideological profile of the Somali Revolution see Somali Democratic Republic 1970 and 1971.

[2] An account of these systems is provided in Musa Galaal 1973. Note that this author himself made a monumental contribution to the cause of written Somali through his activities and publications (see Johnson 1969 and 1973).

When the Revolutionary Government came to power in 1969 they declared the introduction of written Somali as one of the main objectives of internal policy and tackled the whole question with vigour tempered by prudence. Some of the groundwork had already been done, for as long ago as 1960, when Somalia became independent, a Somali Language Committee had been established to work on a national orthography, and there was also in the Cultural Department of the Ministry of Education, a sizeable team of full-time researchers employed in writing down, in various scripts, and tape recording the vast amount of oral poetry and prose narratives of the nation. Both these groups included among their number some of the most prominent collectors and connoisseurs of Somali oral literature, who collected literally thousands of pages of transcripts and notes, and their work has been regarded by successive Somali governments as a standing and continuous commitment.[3]

The new government reconstituted and strengthened the Somali Language Committee and instructed it to produce schoolbooks, handbooks for adult education, a dictionary and a grammar. Furthermore, they entrusted to them the creation of modern technical terms in Somali, a task which previously was the prerogative, in the main, of the broadcasting services (Andrzejewski 1971).

The instructions to the Committee did not include the choice of a script. Each member was allowed to use the script which he favoured, and it was then accepted as a guiding principle that whatever script was subsequently chosen by the government, works in other scripts would be promptly converted into it. The problem of convertibility was not a serious one, since there was never any substantial disagreement among the supporters of different scripts as to the number and nature of the phonemes of the language.

When the decision to adopt the Latin script was announced, the government issued immediate practical directives for its introduction at all levels of public life. These were implemented with a speed and thoroughness which surprised not only foreign observers but also the Somalis themselves. The works which had been prepared by the Language Committee were published with all speed, and in the first months of 1973 Somali was adopted as the sole medium of instruction in elementary schools, and was introduced as an important subject in intermediate and secondary schools and in the National University. Public servants were told that they had to pass a proficiency test in reading and writing Somali within three months, and the vast majority of them did so in this time, but eventually three months' grace was allowed for stragglers.

Within a few months Somali totally replaced foreign languages in the daily press, and the national newspaper *Xiddigta Oktoobar*, 'The Star of October', serves the everyday needs of the reading public. There was an extensive and

[3] See Johnson 1973 for details.

imaginative use of broadcasts related to the printed material in the daily paper: not only the use of symbols, but also word division rules, which present considerable problems in Somali, were announced each day in both media. Since March 1973 both media have also participated in a nationwide adult literacy campaign through specially designed programmes, articles and booklets with graded exercises illustrated by drawings. This campaign depends largely on voluntary teachers, and the current slogan displayed on posters says this of the national orthography: **Haddaad taqaan bar, haddaanad oqoon baro,** ' If you know it, teach it—if you don't know it, learn it '.

The Somali national orthography is identical with the system of transcription used by Shire Jaamac Axmed in his literary magazine, *Iftiinka-Aqoonta* (*Light of Education*). His system is explained in every issue of the magazine and also in all the early issues of *Xiddigta Oktoobar*. The explanations given there are designed for the Somali public; a foreign reader will find guidance to the system in Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964 and in Andrzejewski, Strelcyn and Tubiana 1969, but he must take into account the fact that these publications discuss the earlier version of Shire Jaamac Axmed's transcription where he uses **ch** instead of **x**.[4]

At the present moment Somali educationalists and scholars are engaged in the task of research for and production of books which will enable them eventually to introduce Somali as the medium of instruction in intermediate and secondary schools, relegating Italian, English and Arabic to the position of foreign languages taught as individual subjects.[5] Since April 1973 this work has become the responsibility of the Curriculum Department of the Ministry of Education and Training, a development which was one of several changes introduced by the Government at that time. A Ministry of Culture and Higher Education was created and within it an Academy of Culture concerned with research and documentation in the field of the Somali language, literature, history and the national heritage in general. The Somali Language Committee, having been relieved of its heavy burden of producing schoolbooks, merged with the Academy, and in fact the members of the Committee form the core of the full-time employees of the Academy; they are now free to devote themselves to such tasks as the editing of literary and historical texts and the preparation of an extensive reference grammar and a large monolingual dictionary, expansions of their previous work in this field. Some of them now give their attention to the linguistic features which the national orthography leaves out, namely the accentual patterns (consisting of tone and stress) and the ' fronting ' and ' backing ' which operate within the basic ten vowels, subdividing them into **shaqallo culus** ' heavy vowels ' and **shaqallo fudud** ' light vowels '.

[4] This change accounts for the divergence in the spelling of this author's name between his publications in 1965 and 1966–7.

[5] There are also more ambitious and more distant plans for introducing Somali as the medium of instruction at university level.

The accentual features are bound up in Somali with grammatical structure: they differentiate gender in nouns, and subject and object within a case system, and are an integral part of the verbal paradigms. But they never act as the sole distinguishing lexical feature: there are no pairs of words belonging to the same grammatical category and differentiated exclusively by their accentual pattern. The 'fronting' and 'backing' of the vowels, on the other hand, sometimes distinguishes lexical terms, e.g. **dùul** 'fly!' and **dụ̀ul** 'attack!' and also plays a role in distinguishing certain verbal forms, e.g. **dhís** 'build!' and **dhịs** 'he built'.

At the time when written Somali was introduced the members of the Language Committee all agreed on the importance of the accentual patterns and the 'fronting' and 'backing' dichotomy in Somali vowels, but they decided not to represent these features in the national orthography, which has mainly practical objectives. Experience has shown them to be right, since in the everyday use of the orthography points of semantic ambiguity are readily resolved by the context. In lexicography, however, and in a detailed analysis of grammar, these features have to be taken into account,[6] and an extensive description of them is now an obvious necessity.

It is an important characteristic of the endeavours towards national literacy, in the full sense of the words, that among the people who have been engaged in the work of the Language Committee and the Academy of Culture there are not only men with modern education but also traditional poets and bards, some of them of considerable age, who are treated with great reverence by their colleagues as the living carriers of the national heritage and as arbiters in matters concerning the aesthetic qualities of the Somali language.

The introduction of the national orthography is an historic step which is likely to have far reaching consequences. The intensive literacy campaign is making remarkable progress and extends even to remote rural areas, including nomadic villages, thus making the general public more receptive to the demands of social and economic change.[7] One consequence is already observable throughout the country: there is a narrowing of the gap between the *élite* who were trained abroad, and those citizens who were educated at home, or had little or no formal education. Since the national orthography can be very easily learned by a speaker of Somali within a few months, if not weeks, the practical advantages of knowing a foreign language have undergone a radical devaluation. Any citizen who simply knows his mother tongue in speech and writing can now participate fully in public life, as Somali has become the sole official language of the country.

[6] References to works in which these features are described can be found in Johnson 1969, marked with the code letters *gmr*, under Andrzejewski and Armstrong.

[7] A detailed account of the spectacular achievements of this campaign, already reached, and the resulting social changes is given in Omar Osman Mohamed 1973.

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