THE ROLE OF THE NEWSPAPER AND THE SCHOOL TEXT
BOOK IN THE MODERNISATION OF SOMALI VOCABULARY

In the comparatively short period since 1972, great advances have been made in the field of language reform in Somalia. The introduction of an official orthography has led to a highly successful mass literacy campaign, even in the remotest areas of the country, the appearance of the national Somali daily newspaper, Xiddiga Oktoobar, and the publication of school textbooks in all subjects for primary and secondary education. Such language engineering has been made easier and more effective given that all printing is under government control. The Somali Government’s success in bringing a formerly pastoral and agricultural society into the 20th century and in adapting the Somali language to meet the needs of a modern society is due, in great part, to the role that Somali has always played as a symbol of national culture and identity.

In a language with a recently acquired orthography, the expansion of its social functions is accelerated through the mass media. In the case of Somali, both the radio and the newspaper have had an important role to play in the dissemination of vocabulary. Somali radio, begun in the early 1940’s, had set the stage, and by the time that the Somali daily newspaper Xiddiga Oktoobar first appeared, a modern Standard Somali vocabulary was already established, facilitating the task of putting the spoken word into print. However, the leading part played by Somali radio for so long in the introduction of new vocabulary was now taken over by the newspaper, for the written word exerted more influence than the spoken and served as a source of reference, although the two media, both controlled by the Ministry of Information and Public Guidance, still continued to com-
plement one another. The Somalis were quick to realise the importance of the press in the dissemination of new vocabulary, due to the wide distribution of the newspaper. The newspaper became a teaching vehicle as well as a source of news. Hence, the question of the presentation of new words was considered very carefully. Borrowings posed no problem since written communication between Somalia prior to 1972 had been in Arabic, English or Italian, the three principal sources of such words. On the other hand, there was a certain reluctance to make use of borrowings because, for the Somalis, to do so might indicate the outsider, however erroneously, a certain inadequacy in their language.

Naturally, there is a preference for use to be made of indigenous Somali words, the meanings of which are usually immediately transparent, but to insert new words in a newspaper article involves close attention to the context in which they appear. For context to determine meaning, it is vital that the other words in the sentence explain the new word without ambiguity. This is not always possible. Context is an amalgam of interdependent words and its use must necessarily assume that all these words are understood by the reader. If they are not, then the meaning of the new word is usually lost. However, there are two methods of overcoming ambiguity and incomprehensibility, both used extensively in the Somali Press. The first involves new words which are likely to recur; in these cases, it is possible to insert the words even in ambiguous contexts because the reader will come across them so often that the meaning will become clear. The second method is to insert alongside the new word the Arabic, English or Italian equivalent and it is normally employed in the case of words which are unlikely to appear frequently and whose meaning may not be apparent from the context. Wherever possible it is left to the reader to determine the meaning of new words from context. Such a method of dissemination has two important aims; firstly, it promotes the idea of self-reliance, essential for progress in a developing nation, and a principal motive behind the use of indigenous lexical resources which can provide a link between the national culture of the speaker (which has its roots in the traditions of rural Somalia) and the modern world of science and technology, and secondly, if the reader is able to discover the meaning of a new term for himself, then the word is firmly implanted in his mind.

So far I have tried to show the importance of the Somali Press in the dissemination of the new vocabulary, but such a role should not be seen in isolation. While Xiddiga Oktobaar was being used as a teaching vehicle to provide a simple introduction for Somalia beyond school age to new topics such as science and economics – subjects which could never have been discussed without an expanded vocabulary – action was being taken, and continues to be taken by the Ministry of Education’s Curriculum Department to produce and publish a series of school textbooks in the Somali language on a wide range of subjects, designed specifically for present and future generations, and children will naturally learn more quickly and more willingly in their own language.

Through the production of these books, it has been possible to demonstrate the full capabilities of the language without resorting unnecessarily to the methods of translation and paraphrasing found in Xiddiga Oktobaar. There is little attempt made to provide Arabic, English or Italian equivalents in the texts to explain the newly introduced Somali words since they would mean very little to young Somali children born after the Revolution (Arabic and English are taught extensively in Somalia but only at secondary school level). For the children themselves, there is nothing odd about these new words. They have grown up with them and accept them. An incidental advantage of this is that children now can and will discuss their schoolwork with their parents,
thereby stimulating among adults an interest in both language and subject matter. Unlike that adopted by the Somali Press, the presentation of new vocabulary has, necessarily, to be different. It is essential that children in the same class discover and understand the new vocabulary at the same time. Therefore, it is not possible to depend upon the recurrence of particular words for their meaning to become clear. While this may be adequate for vocabulary appearing in the press, it is not acceptable in the school textbook. Nor is it possible to place in context opaque words relating to such subjects as mathematics, chemistry and physics. They are so specialised that context cannot usually provide their meaning.

Hence the onus is upon teachers to explain the new words contained in the children’s school books. They are assisted in this task by the great use made of illustrations in these books and of examples which are often drawn from both town and rural life and therefore within the experience of the pupils. In this regard, it must be remembered that the process of modernisation is still continuing. New vocabulary used in current school textbooks may be subject to change in subsequent editions as a result of the reports of the Ministry of Education’s school inspectors who maintain close liaison with teachers and seek their views and comments on newly introduced vocabulary.

The success of the Somali experiment is due entirely to the boldness, determination and dedication of the present Somali government which, despite the many economic and political problems besetting the nation, has given priority to this policy of lexical reform.

Their reason for undertaking such a task lies in the importance which all Somalis attach to their language. By making Somali the national language, the government sought to unify the country, for they realised that to ensure political and economic development, education was vital and had to be made available to all. The only way to achieve this was through the introduction of an official orthography and a co-ordinated programme of vocabulary expansion, whereby the language would be able to meet the demands made upon it by a modern world. Prior to 1972, all instruction in government schools had necessarily been in English, Italian, and, to a lesser extent, Arabic, and consequently Somalis had had no alternative but to learn one of these languages if they were to receive any education. The Somali government realised that instruction in three languages would become a barrier to learning in the long term, that it could instil a certain cultural alienation within the students towards their own society, that it could isolate the school from its community and that because of different systems of evaluation, it could prevent the channelling of students from one level to another, thereby affecting adversely their prospects of employment. They were afraid that, by continuing to maintain such an educational system, they were likely to create three sub-cultures between which there existed no mutual understanding, and they saw the existence of an elite educated through a foreign language and thus separated from the mass of the population as a threat to the type of society which they were trying to form. By giving the nation its own written language and by seeking to reduce dependence upon foreign languages in all sectors of public life, the government was also expressing the Pan-African desire to demonstrate to the rest of the world that African nations are able to administer their own affairs, despite views to the contrary prevalent since colonial days, and it is precisely such national self-reliance and self-confidence which is manifested in the success of the Somali experiment. This has shown quite clearly that, given the motivation and the will to succeed, it is possible to “modernise” a language within an extremely short period of time. The Somali has always been proud of
his language, but perhaps never more so than now when, at
last possessing an official orthography, he has observed
and appreciated the flexibility of Somali in coping with
even the most complex examples of modern thought and tech-
nology, and has witnessed the speed with which this mo-
dernisation has been accomplished.

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The rise of Somali prose fiction writing

Although Somalis have a highly developed oral literature
from as far back in history as their oral traditions can
reach, their written literature is a recent innovation,
and so far as is known there are no extant written works
which antedate the beginning of the present century. From
that time until 1972, when a national orthography was
introduced, most of the writing in Somali consisted of the
texts of oral poems which had been taperecorded or written
down under dictation from poetry-reciters, or on the other
hand of oral narratives either transcribed verbatim or
slightly modified to meet the needs of the printed page.

From 1972, however, there were new opportunities for
literary creativity, and the rapid spread of literacy
through the school system and the very effective adult
education campaigns assured new writers of a steadily ex-
panding circle of readers. It was fortunate for the smooth
continuation of the national culture that the strucutre
of Somali oral poetry was well suited to the needs of the
printed page. Its metric patterns provided natural bound-
aries for division into lines, and the appeal of its high-
ly condensed and elaborate diction was enhanced by the
opportunity for slow and deliberate appreciation which
print gave the reader. The new written poetry differs
very little from its oral equivalent, and in fact it is
sometimes difficult to tell the difference between a verbatim
transcript of an oral poem and a poem which has been entirely
created in the new written medium. In both cases, for in-
stance, the name of the poet will be given, for only light
traditional poetry was ever exempt from the custom of pub-
licly acknowledged authorship, and the new readers were no