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The position of Somali among the languages of the World

For the last five years Somali has been in a state of rapid development, and it seems appropriate at this point to take stock, and to make an assessment of the changes which have taken place and of the present position.

Until 1972 the Somali language had no official orthography and no official status in public life. Although unofficial methods of writing Somali had been in use for some fifty years or more, their use was limited to a small fraction of the population of the country. From time immemorial the Somali people have had a beautiful and vigorous oral literature, dominated by alliterative poetry, but its riches were in danger of gradual erosion and eventual oblivion. (1)

As is well known, this unfortunate state of affairs was caused by a political deadlock over the choice of script, which was finally resolved by the Supreme Revolutionary Council and the Council of Secretaries by their historic decision announced on 21st October 1972, the third anniversary of the Revolution. Somali then became the sole official language of the country, and plans were announced for introducing it into schools as the medium of instruction. (2)

Among some sections of the Somali public, and some outside observers as well, there were misgivings about the speed with which these measures were implemented. There was also some diffidence as to the possibility of Somali becoming an efficient vehicle of administration and an adequate medium of instruction in those school subjects which fall within the fields of science, mathematics or technology. The grounds for this diffidence, at least among some people, derived from an assumption, totally erroneous from the scientific point of view, that languages differ inherently in their logical precision or their ability to construct abstract concepts or create new vocabularies. Modern linguistic research has established, however, that all the known languages of the world have a similar basic logical framework and infinite generative potentialities, and that they are all capable of an unlimited expansion of their vocabularies.

Thus the vocabulary expansion necessary to satisfy the needs of modern science and technology is not a matter of feasibility or non-feasibility; it simply involves an investment in terms of time, national effort and the allocation of economic resources. The recent development and modernization of the Somali language provides further proof of these findings.

For a linguist the changes which have taken place in Somali are not in themselves a cause for surprise. Somalia has passed along the path which many nations have taken before with complete success: the surprising thing is the speed with which these changes have been achieved. They would have been impossible without a national effort on a spectacular scale, and 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 continent of Africa as far as concerns the use of the patrial language in education and public life, a transformation which has taken only five years.

Before 1972 it was very difficult to have a serious discussion in Somali on any subject involving science, mathematics or technology, without recourse to lengthy circumlocutions. Now such a discussion is possible with the same ease as in English or any other language, provided, naturally, the participants know the subject matter and the requisite terminology in Somali. There are of course limits, and as yet there is no Somali vocabulary for highly advanced levels of science and mathematics, but it is already possible to use Somali for describing complicated calculations which involve the use of trigonometry, algebra, logarithms and the set theory in new mathematics. Even in the sphere of linguistics we have no need to grope for basic terms, since two handbooks of grammar and a college handbook of Somali phonetics have been published. (3) There are schoolbooks in Somali in such subjects as physics, chemistry, mathematics, general science, biology, geography, civics and sociology to supply the needs of the four years of elementary school, four years of intermediate school and the first year of secondary school. Textbooks for the remaining three years of secondary education are either already in the press or are in preparation. There are also textbooks for

technical schools and adult education, making it possible to teach such trades as building, plumbing or welding without recourse to a foreign language. (4)

The change has also involved developments in the fields of literature and history. Several works have been published containing collections of oral poems, obtained from poetry-reciters, together with biographies of the poets. New poetry and prose have appeared both in book form and in periodicals, and research into Somali history has already resulted in a number of publications. (5) Schoolbooks also contain excerpts from Somali literature, with explanations concerning their background and glossaries of the poetic or archaic vocabulary which might be unfamiliar to young people brought up in towns.

The credit for these developments is without doubt due in the first place to the farsighted policy of the Revolutionary Government and their decision to divert a large part of the economic resources of the country to that purpose. At the creative levels, the implementation of this policy would not have been possible without the enthusiasm, hard work and undoubted talent and ingenuity of the people who created the new vocabulary and modernized the language. Among them the staff of the Ministry of Education and Youth Training, especially those working in the Curriculum Department, and the academic staff of the National University can be said to have laid lasting foundations for a system of education through the use of the mother tongue. No less important has been the contribution of the Somali Language Commission, who co-ordinate vocabulary expansion on a national scale, and the Academy of Culture, who have already published two dictionaries, two grammars and a sizable number of literary and historical texts, and who are entrusted with the collecting of and research into oral literature and other aspects of the Somali national heritage. (6) Individual specialists throughout the various ministries, government departments, autonomous agencies and the armed forces have all contributed to the modernization of Somali by providing the requisite terminology.

The success of this vocabulary expansion is to a large extent due to the wisdom of the principles applied to word-coining and borrowing. The general tendency is to invent new words, using as raw material the existing roots and derivational suffixes, for example:

saddexagal "triangle" (saddex "three", xagal "bend, angle")
isugeyn "addition" (is "each other", u 'to', geyn 'bringing')
labajibbaarane "square" labajibbaar "twice", -an /participial suffix/, -e /agentive suffix/ - thus suggesting the meaning "something that is in some way doubled", the reference being to the measuring of its area).

Sometimes the new terms are taken from the ordinary language and given a scientific meaning, e.g. jajab "fraction", which in the ordinary language means "something broken into fragments", to cadaadiska hawada "atmospheric pressure", which simply means "the pressing down of the air". The aim of using the Somali roots and derivational suffixes in vocabulary expansion is to provide mnemonic links between the ordinary and the scientific language, and this has apparently proved of considerable advantage in teaching. It is not carried to extremes, however, and some international terms which do not lend themselves easily to translation are simply adapted to Somali phonology: thus we have taanjent for "tangent", kosayn for "cosine" and logardam for "logarithm".

The progress which has been achieved so far provides grounds for an optimistic forecast for the future. If the present rate of progress is maintained for the next ten years, the modernization of the language could reach a point when Somali could become the medium of instruction at university level, which is in fact the professed goal of some of the educational planners in Somalia. Somalia 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. (7)
Recently a delegation from the Niger Republic visited Mogadishu to discover what the best policy would be for the use of patrial

languages in schools and adult education.

Paradoxically enough, the progress in the use of Somali in education and public life has intensified the need for a large core of Somali scholars, technologists and government officials who have a high level of knowledge of foreign languages. The strengthening of the existing core will soon become a pressing necessity, in order to feed into the Somali educational system, now operating in Somali, the most up-to-date knowledge which originates from outside centres of learning, and to provide the government departments and industry with a constant flow of reliable technical and scientific information. People with a good knowledge of foreign languages will also have to play a role of increasing importance in liaison work with foreign experts.(8) Since the introduction of Somali as an official language, the recommendations and reports prepared by foreign experts have to pass into the channels of communication in which Somali is used, in order to reach the level of implementation. The feed-back of information from the areas of implementation again has to be presented to the experts, and this again involves a change in the linguistic medium. One might argue, of course, that the need for foreign experts will diminish as Somalia develops a large cadre of her own specialists. This is likely to happen eventually, but there may be an intermediate period during which the need for foreign experts may increase as a result of the expected economic expansion and also, possibly, if highly profitable mineral resources such as oil or uranium are discovered here.

To assess the position of the Somali language in its new, transformed state, we have to see it in the wider perspective of the international scene today. Scientific and technological progress in the large industrialized countries has assumed such proportions that the relevant literature has to be constantly revised and augmented, and here the economics of book production plays a crucial role in the changes which can be observed today throughout the world in respect of the dissemination of knowledge. Since the printing of books involves mass production processes, the cost of each copy decreases as the number of copies increases. Thus if one publishes a book on physics which is likely to sell 100,000 copies, the cost of production per

copy may come to the equivalent of 10 shillings per copy. If only 1,000 copies are produced and sold the cost may be 100 shillings per copy. There are not many languages in which one could find 100,000 potential readers for a book on physics or other scientific subjects. As a result of the hard economic facts which this example illustrates, one can see that in countries with relatively small numbers of speakers, scientific and technological works written in languages of wider communication are used in their original form on an increasing scale, and in certain professions the knowledge of at least one foreign language becomes an absolute necessity. This accounts for the fact that in Scandinavian countries, for example, books in English are widely used by university students and scientists, and in the Slav speaking countries a corresponding phenomenon takes place vis-a-vis publications in Russian. Furthermore, authors of scientific works often prefer to write at least some of their works in languages of wider communication as a way to gain worldwide recognition, or for reasons of better financial rewards if these are related to the number of copies sold. This process is gradually extending even to countries with quite large populations, at least at the higher levels of knowledge.

If we read the signs of the times correctly, we can say that, with the exception of languages with really gigantic numbers of speakers, all countries of the world are moving slowly to at least some degree of bilingualism or multilingualism among those sections of the community who have received higher education. At the same time there is no move anywhere in the world to diminish the role of patrial languages in the national life, in education and in the arts. In fact quite the opposite is the case, and there is growing awareness in many countries, especially those of the African continent, that the extensive use of patrial languages is indispensable in education, literary activity and a development of a sense of clear group identity and self-confience in dealing with the outside world.

The position of Somali among the languages of the world has changed radically in the last five years. It is now, like the languages of many other nations, the main medium of education and communication in all aspects of public life. At the same time, Somali, like the vast majority of the languages of the world, cannot be entirely self-sufficient. It is destined to remain in a situation of symbiosis with languages of wider communication in the fields of science and technology and in its commercial, cultural and political links with the outside world. This situation already exists to a very large extent and it will have to grow further if the ambitious aims of progress and development are to be fully achieved.

NOTES

1. For bibliographical and other **inf**ormation concerning Somali oral literature see Johnson 1969 and 1973, Andrzejewski 1975 and 1977 and the introduction to Hassan Sheikh Munin 1974.
2. For an account of these events and bibliographical information see Andrzejewski 1974 and Omar Osman Mohamed 1975.
3. The handbooks of grammar are Cabdullaahi Xaaji Maxamuud Insaaniya and others 1973, and Shire Jaamac Axmed 1976. The handbooks of phonetics is Maxamed Xaaji Xuseen Raabi 1977.
4. All schoolbooks in Somalia are now published by the Curriculum Department of the Ministry of Education and Youth Training (Xafiiska Manaahijta, Wasaaradda Waxbarashada iyo Barbaarinta). Adult education materials are published by the Adult Education Department (Xarunta Waxbarashada Dadka Waaweyn) of the same Ministry. Some of the practical handbooks are published by the appropriate government departments and autonomous agencies, mainly for the use of their staff and of the public directly involved in various development and training schemes. The initial pioneering work in the preparation of schoolbooks was undertaken, however, by the Somali Language Commission (Guddiga Af Soomaaliga) between 1971 and 1973.

5. For an account of these developments see Andrzejewski 1975 and 1977. The bibliographies given there should be supplemented by the following items: two works on history by Axmed Faarax Ibraahin (1975) and Jaamac Cumar Ciise (1976), and a work on the philosophy of the Somali Revolution by President Maxamed Siyaad Barre (1976). Two new periodicals have also appeared: Halgan, the official organ of the Central Committee of the Somali Socialist Revolutionary Party, and Himilo, which represents the Women's Movement within the Party.
6. The two dictionaries are: Cabdulqaadir F. Bootaan (ed.) 1975 and Yaasiin C. Keenadiid 1976. For other items see references given in Notes 1 and 3.
7. The proceedings of this seminar (including the section concerned with Somalia) are shortly to be published by the International African Institute, 210 High Holborn, London WC1V 7BW.
8. For a penetrating discussion of the problems arising from the cooperation between foreign experts and the Somali administrators and specialists working with them, as well as their impact on the public, see Omar Osman Mohamed 1976.

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* Note that the English translations of the titles of works in Somali have been added to the bibliographical entries. They do not appear on the title pages of the works concerned.