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## **Some issues in somali orthography**

Habqorista af-soomaaligu si habboon ma u xasili kartaa?

**T**he debate on the writing of the Somali language (SomL) began in the late 19th century, when different formal proposals for writing this language were first made. From those years, there has been a long debate and, since 1951, several successive committees were appointed for choosing a script for SomL. Among them, with the exception of the first committee for the SomL (1951) who could not choose any writing, the following three official committees (1960, 1965, 1970) all suggested some adapted Latin-based orthography as the most appropriate. However, although the *Guddi* set up by the Somali Republic in 1961 preferred this writing, it took 12 years for it to be accepted and the might of a mainly military government to impose it.

Already in 1951, linguists knew that the Latin script was an easier (*sahlan*) and more economical writing, which would allow a rapid harmonization of the educational and administrative systems between the northern and southern parts of the country. At the same time there was an ideological polarisation between the supporters of the Arabic script, those of local ones such as the so-called *Osmaniya* script and the Latin-based one was almost out of the competition. As already pointed out, twenty years had to pass for the latter to be accepted. We should recognize that the different committees of the SomL worked and produced much. Many of the questions that arise today were previously raised by them, to which they found several solutions even if some of them were not implemented.

What are the difficulties that arise in writing the SomL? What were the solutions that were recommended and why did it happen that some of them were not implemented? What might be the prospects for improving and stabilizing the writing of Somali? Here are some questions we try to answer in this article.

### **1- The issues addressed by the 1960 Somali language Committee (SLC)**

The SLC established these seventeen rules concerning the script and the orthography of SomL (cf. *Linguistic Report*, 1960, pp.11-12) which have been followed successfully:

1. "It<sup>17</sup> must be phonetic.
2. It must be simple in setting.
3. It must not have any diacritic except by those which have been approved by the committee, i.e. one for accent and one to modify sound.
4. It must not have any sign which has more than one function.
5. It must not have signs which are differentiated only by means of diacritics.
6. It must not have any diacritics which are representing basic sounds of the language themselves.
7. It must have printing machines available in the country.
8. It must conform to the International Telegraphic Notations.
9. It must be standardized.
10. It must be based on an alphabetic system.
11. It must be economical in all aspects.
12. It must be cursive as all well as printing forms.
13. It must be susceptible to further modification without altering its basic foundation.
14. It must be applicable for all the Somali dialects.
15. It must be taught in schools.
16. It must be unique; i.e. it must not be composed of letters normally known to belong to other script.
17. It should not cause any confusion to its readers."

As the committee was composed of scholars who had been debating about how to write this language for almost twenty years, they had acquired a sound knowledge about the phonetic and grammatical structure of this language. Among the rules listed above, although each of them addresses a specific problem about choosing a script and/or an orthography, some have been particularly productive. In fact, they pointed out certain phonetic particularities of SomL, proposing an orthographic solution for each of them.

For instance, the third rule states that letters should not contain diacritics. This rule has been successfully implemented although many have tried to review it, because writing *inan baa libaax arkay* does not permit to distinguish sentences like: *inàn bàà libàax àrkày*, "a lion saw a boy" and *inàn bàà libáàx àrkáy*, "a boy saw a lion".

<sup>17</sup> That is the writing of SomL.

Second, the context is often sufficient to avoid ambiguity of the sentence as Cabdalla states in his article of the present volume (*id.*:29). This is allowed by the fact that in SomL tonal accent only encodes grammatical categories (gender, number, case), most of which can be generally recovered from the discourse context or the word order.

This fact also answers the question whether back and front vowels should be distinguished by means of diacritics, e.g. *caḍ* (+ATR)<sup>18</sup>, “meat” or *cad* (-ATR), “white”. The SLC (1960) answered negatively, probably according to the simplification rule (cf. n°2) and economical rule (cf. n°11) they had established. To this day this rule is observed, because again the context is sufficient to avoid ambiguity even if, in a very restricted number of construction, we may feel ambiguity in the sentences: *guur iyo guur kala da’a*<sup>19</sup>:/ literally “do not associate marriage and the fact of leaving early in the morning” (meaning: marriage is not compatible with the fact of leaving early in the morning).

The fourth rule in the list imposes a unique correspondence between graphemes and sounds (a letter for a sound). This rule has been implemented partially since back and front vowels are written with the same symbols. The economical necessity of the written form has prevailed (cf. n°11) against the total application of it. But this has not caused significant damage for the reading of SomL, specifically when it is done by Somali speakers.

In fact, these two rules have induced the fact that to read SomL one first needs to understand the meaning of the words. We can understand that for the SLC as for everybody entitled to establish a script for a specific community, the Somali script was first of all a need of Somali speakers, specifically developed for their literacy.

## 2- Standardization and linguistic variation of Somali language

The first difficulty we meet in Somali writing is not properly due to the writing itself but to the regional variation. As the Northern Somali includes several varieties (cf. Banti 2010, Ismail, 2011), which are more or less divergent, the question of deciding which form should be considered as a standard and be written, often arises. This issue has been addressed by different authors among which, Yaasiin (1976), Mustafa (2015) and especially Cabdalla (2015) who differentiates three cases of writing divergence, each one of them finding an appropriate solution.

<sup>18</sup> The symbols used to mark fronting or backing varies according to authors: *cæd* (Saeed, 1999:10), *cäd* (Morin, 2011:374-381), *caḍ*, Puglielli & Mansur (2012:116), etc.

<sup>19</sup> The Djiboutian poet and artist Cumar Kuul has written poems for children based on minimal pairs. They have been published by the Cripén (Centre de Recherche et d'Information Pédagogique de l'Éducation Nationale) of Djibouti. See also Salaax Xaashi Carab, 2003.

The second difficulty is due either to the fact that there has been an insufficient standardization of SomL, or to the natural evolution of writing which tends to be economical. The 1961 SLC decided to use phonetic transcription of isolated words, as is always the case for first transcriptions of a language using the alphabetic script. But the question of using a morphemic or a phonetic transcription arises for sentences or groups of words, e.g., *waa uu yimi(d)* or *wuu yimi(d)* “he came”. In this case Cabdalla (2015:29) proposes to use phonetic transcription, which is most economical. This rule is conclusive most of the time without changing the register of language, such as the examples given by the author: *Dubai baadna soo mari* is more economical and less critical for understanding than *Dubai baa na aad soo mari /baa aad na soo mari* (meaning: “And you will pass through Dubai.”). There is strictly no difference of register between these sentences.

But what can be added to this statement is the fact that there can be two different registers of writing, as in several languages with a longer tradition of writing. The registers of language have not been discussed by the different committees, because syntax and discourse levels were not among their objectives: they didn't intend to discuss the relation between the different registers of SomL and writing. But it is obvious that a careful style of writing, which as much as possible clarifies the different parts of speech, will mark a difference, e.g., “...*maantoo ay ka soo wareegtay*...” (‘that today has returned from...’ Yaasiin, 1976-ix) can also be written either as “...*maanta oo ay ka soo wareegtay*...” or as “...*mantooy ka soo wareegtay*...” The first sentence, which is intermediate from an economical point of view is often used in the writings, and belongs to the standard oral production. The second way of writing is encouraged by some authors such as Maxamed X. Raabbi, whereas the last one should not be encouraged in careful writing because it may cause ambiguities and confusion.

## 3- Harmonisation of writing

There are some issues which have been discussed by the 1960 and 1972 SLCs, such as the gemination of consonants, and how to spell compound words, but several open questions remain. For instance, the 1972 SLC identified seven consonants, i.e. *b, d, g, l, m, n, r*, which can geminate (cf. Yaasiin, *id.*, p.xxv). Saalax X. Carab (2003, p.19) added four more consonants, which geminate (*dh, s, f, j*), whereas Cabdalla (2015 : 27) considered that all Somali consonants can geminate, except the glottal stop or *hamza*.

This divergence is due to the fact that for some words only the phonetic aspect of the variation is taken into account: *ama* vs *amma* “but”, *affaf* vs *afaf* “mouths, languages”, *hadda* vs *hada* “now”, etc. For some others, only the phonemic aspect is considered and some minimal pairs are given, such as *xabad* “chest” vs. *xabbad*

“bullet” or “one”; *carab* “Arab” vs. *carrab* “tongue”, *kabo* “shoes” vs. *kabbo* “to sip”, *walac* “spark” or “light” vs. *wallac* “signs or sickness of pregnancy”, etc. This creates considerable difficulties, and many literate Somali speakers don’t know which form is wrong and which is right when writing.

When we consider consonantal gemination in Somali language, it is easy to note that there is more variation on the phonetic level than on the phonemic one. For instance, the distinction between *ama* vs. *amma* “but”, or *dhammaan* vs. *dhamaan* “all”, *affar* vs. *afar* “four” and the like, are more a matter of an idiolectal or dialectal variation. If we consider the dialectal survey done by Ehret & Nuuh (1984), we see that the word *afar* “four” is given for all the *maxaa-tiri* dialects, but for the word “all” they register *dhamman* for most of the dialects, but *dhamaan*, for Hargeisa. We can observe this kind of variation in many words: *annaga* “we” (exclusive) vs. *anaga* and *annagga*, *saddex* “three” vs. *sadex*, *xiddid* “root” vs. *xidid*, etc.

In a purely phonetic aspect, we can consider with Cabdalla (2015:25) that all the Somali consonants can geminate, except the glottal stop [ʔ]. But most of the time, this gemination does not induce a change in the meaning. This is the case of certain consonants, such as *c*, *h*, *q*, *x*, *dh*, which can geminate when the article is assimilated; i.e. *magacca* “the name”, *madaxxa* “the head”, *rahha* “the frog”, etc. Instead, Saeed (1999, p. 31) takes into account a simplification rule which can follow the assimilation one, giving words like *sicii* “the cow” and not *siccii*, *subixii* “the morning” and not *subixxii*, etc.

Some phonetic realisations which indicate a gemination are even against the morphological structure of the words. The *fg* gemination in *affaf* is against the rule of plural formation of the monosyllabic words ending with a consonant. This rule only implies a reduplication of the last consonant and a supplementary vowel *a* which precede the consonant: *jiir* > *jiirar* “mouse”/“mice”; *aas* > *aasas* “burial”/“burials”, etc.<sup>20</sup>, in the same case, we should have *af* > *afaf* “mouth”/“mouths” as Mansur & Puglielli (1999:31) write. Besides this, the accentual pattern or the change of position of the high tone induces a sense of gemination felt by certain speakers, where there is no grammatical justification for it. It is the case of the gemination that we find sometimes in the causative form of certain verbs, such as *bax* “go out” > *bixi* “push someone outside, give something” and not *\*bixxi*, or *mar* “to pass through, to go through” > *mari* “to put through, to make pass through”, and not *\*marri*, etc.

If the harmonisation of writing is considered for this issue, it could be based on the phonemic level which are recognized by all, rather than the phonetic level which displays considerable variation. In this case, only the consonants with

distinctive gemination can be selected. This harmonisation can be also based on the morphological structure of the words and the correspondence between morphemes and pronunciation should be maintained when it is possible.

As pointed out above, another issue about Somali writing concerns the compound words which show a noticeable variation in their spellings. This has been commented by Cabdalla (2015:33), and we refer readers to his article. We only add here that the morphosyntactic aspect should be considered, and that compound words having a similar morphological structure should not be differentiated in their spelling: if we write *cilmi-afeed* “linguistics” as proposed by Cabdalla, in principle we should write *cilmi-beereed* “agronomy”, and not *cilmi beereed* as proposed by the author. These two last spellings can also co-exist but not *cilmi-afeed* and *\*cilmiafeed*, since phonetically these vowels in hiatus would cause an epenthetic semi-consonant *y* to be added, *\*[ʃilmiyafeed]*. Some people have used an apostrophe in similar cases, i.e., *cilmi'afeed*.

#### 4- The spelling of borrowed words

There is a great deal of variation in the spelling of terms borrowed from other languages, such as Arabic or some European languages (English, Italian, and French). The late Academy for Somali language did not establish any rule for the writing of these terms and this explains somewhat this variation, at least for the recent borrowings. For the old borrowings, the problem is generally solved when the words developed a widely accepted and used Somali form: *wasaarad* from *wazaara* (Arabic, “ministry”); *makiinad*/*makkiinad* from *macchina* (Italian, “machine”); *iskuul* from *school* (English); *filin* from *film* (English); *kooraan* or *koronto* respectively from *courant* (French, “electricity”, in the Djibouti variety of SomL) and *corrente* (Italian). These borrowed words are so well integrated in SomL that their written forms make no difficulty for the readers to recognize them. For instance the word *kombiyuutar* (from *computer*), even if it is very different in its transcription from the original one, is easily recognizable by Somali readers.

But the main problem concerns the new borrowings. If one looks at those linked with new communication technologies, such as *mail*, *chat*, *roaming*, etc., these words become more or less unrecognisable when they are transcribed in Somali writing, particularly in their definite forms: *maylka*, *shatka*, *ruuminga*, etc. The lack of a harmonisation institution which proposes the most adapted transcription is the reason of this variation.

Another type of writing variation regards borrowed proper names, especially place names (towns, cities, countries, etc.). We can meet sometimes the name *Landhan*

20 Cf. Saeed, 1993, p. 48.

London, Raashia for Russia, Jineefa<sup>21</sup> for Geneva, etc. As Cabdalla (2015:29) proposes, it is preferable to keep the most common way to write these names. It can be a necessary phase given to Somali writing to be sufficiently implemented among Somali readers. The Somalisation of foreign proper names especially those of places can come through education.

## 5- Typography of Somali language

This issue is the least discussed in Somali writing, whereas this aspect is also essential to understand written sentences or discourses, and has to be standardised. The usage of periods, commas, semicolons, colons, ellipses, dashes, etc. depends on an author's inspiration or training. For instance, on the back cover of Jaamac C. Isse's book, *Hilimada Maansadii Hore* (vol.2), we can read:

*Ummad kasta waxay Qaran ku noqon kartaa Afkeeda Taariikhdeeda iyo dhaqankeeda, Af Soomaaliga aqoonyahanadii cilmi barista ku sameeyay shisheeye iyo sokeeye mid kasta ha ahaadeene markay u dhabba galeen dhuuxeen waxay ka marag fureen oo qireen in Af Soomaaligu yahay Af hodan ah cilmi ahaan iyo suugaan ahaana loogu dhaqmi karo<sup>22</sup>.*

This passage shows a minimal use of punctuation, and this can disrupt the reading as well as understanding. Besides, the writer uses the capital letter A for Af (language) which is very common. This is maybe justified by the fact he wants to distinguish it from af "mouth".

Most young Somali writers adapt the typography rules of the foreign language they have learnt. In general, this helps to achieve a better organization of texts:

*Maxaabbiiistii dhawr iyo tobanka qof ahayd ee aannu ku wada xidhnayn Saldhiga Booliska ee Boosaaso qaarkood ayaa jeelka ka baxay. Sababaha keenay in la sii daayo way kala duwanayd. Wiil dhalinyaro ah, oo ahaa kii maxaabiista<sup>23</sup> ugu da'da yaraa, isaga markiiba waa la sii daayey, sababta oo ah wuu ku xanuunsaday jeelka<sup>24</sup>.*

21 Cf. Axmed Sheekh Jaamac, 2013, p. 39.

22 "A people can become one nation because of its language, history and culture. The scholars who have made research on Somali language, both foreigners and locals, everyone has noticed, witnessed and reported that Somali language is sufficiently equipped to be used for science and literature."

23 Note in the same paragraph, the variation with geminate b: *Maxaabbiiistii* vs *maxaabiista*.

24 Cf. Abdibashir Ali, 2013, p. 74. "Some of the people that had been arrested and kept in the Police Station of Boosaaso have been released. The reasons for their release were of different kinds. A young boy, who was the youngest of the arrested people, was also released immediately, because he has fallen ill while in jail".

To offset an appositive clause with double commas is rare in Somali writings. If this is made, it shows a perception, not only of the rhythm of the language, but also of its syntactic structure. Here, the author separates the pre-posed direct object phrase *wiil dhalinyaro ah*, the appositive relative clause "*oo ahaa kii maxaabiista ugu da'da yaraa*" and the phrase "*isaga markiiba*", with commas; this shows a greater awareness of grammatical relations of different parts of the text. Notice that this kind of punctuation is closer to the French use of punctuation than that of English, which is more synthetic:

Engl: *A young boy, who was the youngest of the arrested people, was also released immediately.* Fren: *Le jeune garçon, qui était le moins âgé parmi les prisonniers, a été, quant lui, immédiatement relâché.*

We observe in many Somali writings, the authors paid less attention to the typography, the consequence of this being a great variation of the use of punctuation; the reason of this being the lack of sufficient standardisation of this aspect of the language too. And yet, typography helps to read and understand more efficiently the written text. It is the reason that this issue also needs to be discussed for Somali writing standardisation.

## 6- Reference works for orthography and model of writings

The SomL is one of the most studied among sub-Saharan languages. Many monolingual dictionaries (cf. Yaasiin, 1976; Saalax. X. Carab, 2004; Khaalid Cali-Guul-Warsame, 2008; Puglielli & Mansur, 2012; Aadan Xasan, 2012) have been published, the two latter dictionaries containing several tens of thousands of words each. On the other hand, the number of bilingual dictionaries translating Somali into a foreign language or vice-versa is difficult to establish. From the *English-Somali* of Larajasse (1897) to the more recent and voluminous dictionaries of Agostini & al. (1985) and Puglielli (2010), there have been innumerable lexicographical works translating Somali to another foreign language (English, Arabic, Russian, Japanese, French, etc.) or vice-versa.

These works play a role in the standardisation of Somali writing. It is remarkable that the last two most recent monolingual dictionaries in Somali (Puglielli & Mansur, 2012, and Aadan Xasan, 2012) have few differences in their orthography. The most perceptible difference is in the variation between *dh* and *r*, between vowels and at the end of syllables, which is quite common and differentiates roughly the north western pronunciation against most other varieties of Northern and Benaadiri Somali.

Besides, the grammar of SomL has been widely and deeply studied for more than a hundred years, and described in many publications. This has permitted the publication of grammatical description of high quality (cf. Saeed, 1993, 1999; Maxamad Xaaji X. Raabi, 2003; Mansur & Puglielli, 1999, Puglielli & Mansur, 2012, etc.) which can serve as a reference and will help standardisation.

Behind the standardisation of a language there is often a language policy, but behind a variety of reference or a literary language there are often one or more great authors of this literature, i.e. Homer for Greek, Shakespeare for English, Goethe for German, Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio for Italian, Cervantes for Spanish, Molière for French, Pushkin and Dostoevsky for Russian, etc. In its oral literature the SomL has plenty of reference, from Raage Ugaas to the contemporary Maxamed Ibrahim Warsame "Hadraawi", going through Sayid Cabdalle Maxamed Xasan, Qamaan Bulxan, Cilmi Boodhari, and so many others who are considered as the classical poets of Somalis.

However, for the written literature there isn't yet a work or a group of works that can be regarded as being the reference, even though some writings have had a relatively great echo among Somalis when they appeared, such as *Aqoondarro waa u nacayb jacayl* of Faarax M.J. Cawl (1974) translated by Andrzejewski in 1982 with the title "Ignorance is the Enemy of Love"; the play of Xasan Sheekh Muumin, *Shabeelnaagood*, translated also by Andrzejewski in his "Leopard among Women", 1974; the famous story of Cilmi Boodhari told by Rashiid Maxamed Shabeele in his book *Ma dhabbaa jacayl waa loo dhintaa?* written in 1975; the writings of Shire Jaamac Axmed in his *Iftiinka Aqoonta*, in the mid-sixties, Muuse X. I. Galaal, Hikmad Soomaali, 1956<sup>25</sup>, or Afrax's *Maana Faay* that was first published in 1979.

Some of these writings were not of a good quality in their orthography, even if the language style was, on the contrary, of a high level. On the one hand, this was due to the fact that SomL had not yet an established orthography when some of these works were published, or had acquired it only from a short time. The second reason was that the editing work and proofreading was very poor, since it was not done by professional editors.

Between the seventies and nineties, most of the Somali writings were published by the Academy of Sciences, Arts and Literature of Somalia, the National Printers, *Madbacadda Qaranka*, or the Ministry of Culture and Education, such as those of Shire Jaamac Axmed (1973), Axmad F. Cali Idaaja (1974, 1976), Jaamac Cumar Ciise (1974, 1976; re-edited, 2005), Yasiin Cismaan Keenadid (1976), Faarax M. J. Cawl (1980), Boobe Yusuf Ducale, (1983), Axmed Cartan Xaange (1984), etc. Even if these authors were quite versed in writing Somali, the edition quality of these works was not sufficient to serve as a model.

25 The last two quotations have been written before the formal Somali writing has been established.

In contrast, in the last thirty or twenty last years, we observe a noticeable increase of the quality of Somali writings. The new challenge faced by Somali writers, regarding the quality of editing, after the nineties and more particularly after 2000's can be seen through three publishing events which are outstanding. The first is the novel published by Xuseen Sh. Axmed Kaddare, *Waasuge iyo Warsame* in 1983, which is particularly well edited, even though the author belongs to the first generation of Somali writers, who paid less attention to editing. The second is the new 1997 edition of *Maana-Faay*, one of the most famous novels in Somali written literature, by Mohamed Dahir Afrax, with a quality which can be envied by major editors. Lastly, there is the emergence of professional Somali editors such as Ponte Invisible and Red-Sea On-Line, Haan Associates, ILD, Kasmoo Publishing LTD, Halabuur/Hal-abuur, Galool, AMA books, Iftiin Publishers, etc., who have published texts of considerable editing quality during these last years. The re-edition of Aw Jamaac Cumar Ciise books (2005), the conspicuous production of Salaax Xaashi Carab (2003, 2004, 2009), as well as the beautifully written books of Axmed Sheekh Jaamac, *Cadlidoonaha Daal Allaa Baday*, Rashiid Sheekh Cabdillahi, *Adduun iyo Taladii*, or Siciid Jaamac Xuseen's *Safar aan Jaho lahayn*, or *Xabbaddii Dunida Gilgishey* of Shukri Aaden Shire, among others, show this improvement of editing written Somali literature. Among magazines, we can quote the *Halabuur/Hal-abuur* magazine and many electronic Somali journals, which help to promote the emergence of a written Somali variety of a high quality.

## Conclusion

The main problem of the Somali language is linked to the fact that the central institution which had been in charge of its standardization collapsed with the central government of Somalia in 1992. From then, and even some years before, the Academy of Sciences, Arts and Literature stopped working on the improvement of this language and its writing. The Somali language Committees, especially those of 1960 and 1972, achieved remarkable results in terms of the standardization of the language.

However, with the dispersion of Somalis all around the world and the emergence of a more educated generation, the development of the new technology of communication increased the usage of Somali writing. This has created the need of an institution, which continues the work begun by the different SLC and the Academy of Sciences, Arts and Literature. All the issues evoked in this article need to be discussed so that this language can be reinforced and given the position it has among its speakers, and is beautifully evoked here by Aw Jamaac C. Ciise (2005b, vol1, p.13):

"Af-Soomaaligu waa af ballaaran, ereyadiisuna badan yihiin, dhan loo eegaba waa af hodan ah, hadal iyo hawraar, maanso iyo maah-maah, gabay iyo geeraar, masaafo iyo madadaalo, hees iyo heelo, sheeko iyo shararaaxin, qorriin iyo qun-u-hadal, gees loo raacaba waa af tanaad ah oo ay murti iyo hadallo macno weyn xambaarsani ka buuxaan."

"Somali is a copious language, with a great number of words; in every respect it is a rich language, its words and expressions, its poetry and proverbs, its odes and elegies, its poems and plays, its songs and ballads, its stories and tales, its written and oral genres, whatever aspect we consider, it is a great language, full of wisdom and sayings that convey profound ideas".

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