

## **LANGUAGE PLANNING AND INSTRUCTION**

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Unpublished paper presented at the 12th Somali Studies International Association Congress – Helsinki, Finland – 19/23 August 2015

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The theme of my talk is relative to the fundamental role of language in any educational system, and therefore the need of a clear and definite underlying language policy. This is particularly necessary in a context like Somalia where an urgent process of reconstruction is needed, and we believe that no real reconstruction is possible without a solid and widespread educational system.

1.

If we believe that in Somalia the emergency phase is over, and it is now time to think about rehabilitation and reconstruction, then adequate planning should take place - a necessary prerequisite for success – and consequent implementation of the defined plans.

Many documents and reports have been produced after 1991 – the outburst of the civil war (starting with the Unesco 1993 document) but often the emphasis is on the destruction of the structures and the lack of teachers, teaching materials and didactic supports rather than functional aspects: the need of requalification of existing teachers and training of new ones, the need of redefinition of the whole educational system and a clearly defined language policy.

We believe, on the contrary, that training and education are a fundamental asset for reconstruction, and that the creation of competence is somehow more relevant than the physical reconstruction of infrastructures. The objectives of such an approach would be to make the training component a central aspect toward the creation of competence in each field.

We believe that the policy should be of this type because the past has taught us that any type of structure (in any field, industrial, agricultural etc.) created in any country without creating at the same time the “operational competence” needed for its functioning, will result in a debacle and not in real help to development.

[This is true even in the case of external aid; if the help coming from foreign countries is mediated by training, this will give a better chance to the projects to succeed, giving the local operators the opportunity to absorb the new proposals, and to the partner the possibility and time to evaluate their offer and eventually modify it according to the context.]

2.

Let us concentrate though on the educational system, since we are convinced that a real reconstruction of a country so deeply damaged, can only take place if the educational process concerns the majority of the population, and the nation can count on a general substratum of “educated people”, and not only on a limited number of excellent individuals and or groups. [And this is true – as far as Somalia is concerned – independently of the shape the State (Federal etc.)] .

As far as the educational system is concerned it is our conviction/belief that:

- a) it must be the concern of the ‘state’ i.e. the Government authority (be it national and/or regional) and should not be left to private entities and interests;
- b) it should be defined in terms of contents and objectives and standards. That means defining the knowledge and abilities to be obtained on one hand, and on the other hand the type of competence needed by the teachers who will be the persons in charge of the educational process and the curriculum needed for their training;
- c) and finally, since language is the basic instrument for instruction, as well as a very important element of identity, the educational decisions in this field should be taken on the bases of a clearly defined language policy and planning.

Just a few words to explain why we think the role of language so important and the basic element of any educational process.

Language is **the founding element** both at an individual level and at a community level. As an individual it is the basic instrument for cognitive development, conceptualization and knowledge acquisition.

In community life it is the necessary substratum to any activity; its role is fundamental both in interpersonal relations and in any other type of rapport – from the village community, to regional, national and international relations. Being so deeply rooted in our lives we take it for granted and we tend to underestimate its relevance. It is for these reasons that particular attention should be given to language planning and development in all contexts, but even more in situations like the one Somalia is living these days, and in general in African countries where the role of “mother tongues” (native language) often marginalized

needs to be re-evaluated since those languages are carriers of traditional culture, collective memories and different visions of the world.

3.

It seems interesting to go through a rapid review of the role of Somali language in education in the different regions where it is the native language of part of the population and in some cases the majority of it:

#### **I. Djibouti**

In Djibouti the official languages are French and Arabic but Somali and Afar (at a distance) are the native languages of the majority of the people (a complete description of the situation in Abdirashid's article).

Somali and Afar are not taught in public schools; they are taught only in one private secondary school (grades 6 to 9) one hour per week. At the university level they are taught in the third year of the curriculum in French language and Literature, only one semester for a total of 12 hrs for each language. This is the actual situation though about 15 years ago different positions were taken in this respect from the government: Somali and afar were supposed to become languages of instruction.

On the other hand the Government in Djibouti is giving a lot of support to Somali Language: it was at the University of Djibouti that an important International Congress was organized on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Somali Orthography in 2012, and there has been founded the Intergovernmental Academy of the Somali Language, and finally the President of Djibouti together with the Somali President layed the foundation stone of the 'reconstruction' of the Somali Academy in Mogadishu last February (though up till now it does not seem that there has been much progress.)

Somehow there seems to be a clear discrepancy between the ‘ideological level’ and the realization of a concrete language policy on the territory.

## **II. Somali National Regional State of Ethiopia**

Quite different the situation in the Somali National Regional State of Ethiopia where the Somali language is officially used in all affairs – though the national language in Ethiopia is Amharic.

As far as education is concerned Somali is the medium of instruction from grade 1 to 8 and Amharic and English are given as subjects: All the different subjects therefore are taught in Somali; at the end of this cycle the students have to go through a national exam given in Somali and those who pass it will proceed to secondary school. At the secondary level – grades 9-10 Somali becomes a subject in the curriculum, and all other subjects are taught in English. Of the national examinations at the end of his level, one is given in Somali. Grades 11-12, that in the Ethiopian education system are preparatory grades for higher education, have Somali language as one of the subjects being taught.

In teacher training Colleges, the Teachers who will teach in primary school are given lectures in Somali for all subjects (except, of course, English and Amharic). Finally Jigiiga University has recently started a degree in Somali Language, having created recently within the University itself an Institute for Somali Language and Literature Studies (Machadka Daraasaadka Afka iyo Suugaanta Soomaaliyeed).

(info by Abdinasir Ahmed Ibrahim, President of Jigiiga University).

It appears clear and evident that for the Somali National Regional State of Ethiopia the Somali language represents a strong element of identity, even if that Region is part of the Ethiopian State. As a consequence the

local government has taken its decisions on language policy and has implemented them.

### III. **Somaliland**

In Somaliland the official languages are Somali, English and Arabic. In state schools Somali is the language of instruction in primary and middle schools, while in high school the language of instruction is English: only in some schools Somali continues to be taught as a subject. In private schools English and Arabic are the languages of instruction and Somali is taught only in very few schools as a subject.

### IV **Puntland**

In Puntland, “autonomous region” since 1998 that recognizes the central authority of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, we find a situation very similar to that described for Somaliland.

[Asha Gelle declares that she retired her children from a private school because they were illiterate in Somali.]

V For Somalis of the **North Eastern Province**, the languages of instruction are English and Swahili as in the rest of the country. They are now planning to start the teaching of Somali, beginning from kinder-garden (according to what the Somali-kenyan poet Ina Awsgurow (Gaarisa, Kenya) told Abdalla Omar Mansur).

## **VI Federal Republic of Somalia**

Finally let us describe the situation of the Federal Republic of Somalia, the largest state where Somali is the native language, even if we do not have exhaustive data for the situation in the different regions.

We all know that in 1972 Somali was declared national language (together with Arabic), officially transcribed and introduced as language of instruction up to high school, where there were different situations. The literacy campaign in 1973-74 and many other initiatives in those years transformed Somali from an 'oral mother tongue', to a written official language for administration, instruction etc.

With the outburst of the civil war in 1991 the whole system collapsed - including the school system - with consequences also for Somali Language. And now, after 25 years from the beginning of the conflict, the situation is still devastated, and there are several reasons for that:

- The extension of the territory
- The number of clans involved and the not solved conflicts between them
- Even the opposition of Maay speaking intellectuals to the variety of language used as national language.

Anyway the situation at the moment is the following.

Private schools dominate the situation and the language of instruction are mainly English and Arabic: Somali does not seem to be present as a

subject at all. The number of state school operating on the territory using Somali as language of instruction is extremely small compared to the necessity of the need of education in a country that has to be rebuild. The impression we get is therefore that up till now not enough relevance has been given or has been possible to given to the educational system within the country system and to the underlying needed language policy. In fact the choice of Somali as national language has been restated in the Constitution but Somali is accompanied by - Maay and Maxaatiri – and this shows some kind of ambiguity. A legislative decree for the obligatory use of Somali in administration was emanated by the President, and the Somali Academy of Arts and Sciences has been reactivated, but this is still not enough. The decisive step toward the re-establishing of Somali as national language would be the restoring of an extensive state school system with Somali as language of instruction at least up to high school. But we have to discuss at least two more questions: 1) why Somali; 2) why the particular variety of Somali adopted in 1972.

1) The possible alternatives to Somali to be taken into consideration for well known reasons could be: English, or Italian or Arabic.

English is the national language in Somaliland, and it could not be such for the whole Somali territory, as we know, for historical reasons. Furthermore using a language as language of instruction



requires a more than advanced knowledge of that language on the part of the teachers, otherwise there will not be the conditions for effective teaching. Are there enough English speaking teachers for an extensive educational system for the whole country?

Arabic, the language of religion and of traditional ties with that culture could not become the only language of instruction for the same reasons as before.

Finally Italian that had a role in the past, and was in the 70s and 80s the language of university instruction at the Somali National University (the only university in Somalia at the time) is now definitely out of competition. The only reason why it would be worth to keep it at least as a subject taught at university level to be optionally chosen by students, is that its knowledge will give them access to a large amount of very relevant literature in several fields (law, history natural sciences, etc.). Therefore none of the above languages is a real alternative to Somali as national language and language of instruction.

2) There are a number of reasons that we will briefly discuss that stand in favour of maintaining the choice of the Maxaatiri variety as national language:

- it is not a recent choice, but goes back, as everybody knows, to the 1940s when it was used for radio broadcasting and therefore already spread as a common variety all over the country;
- that choice was validated by its transcription with Latin characters and its introduction and use as national language;
- its new status produced a renewed interest towards this language resulting on one hand in its development and in the other in an exponential increase of scientific research on it (grammatical and lexical with large production of descriptions ).
- It has spread as a common language all over the world because of the diaspora, and is the variety used in mass communication – television, internet etc.
- Finally and certainly most important, in the last 40 years Somali has become an extremely interesting language for researchers and therefore there is now available adequate information on its structure (at all levels), lexical organization etc. so that it is possible to produce adequate teaching materials for clearly defined objectives for schools.

Its standardization is still on the way and it will take sometime, as for all languages, but this process will be badly damaged if Somali does not maintain a real role of national language. And this necessarily goes

through its use as language of instruction in a country where the awareness that a widespread and solid educational system is the founding pillar of any reconstruction and future development.

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