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THE CONTINUED IMPORTANCE OF THE
SOMALI LANGUAGE IN THE EASTERN
HORN OF AFRICA

by

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*The continued importance of the Somali language in the
Eastern Horn of Africa.*

In this paper I would like to convey some ideas which have to do with what I see as the importance of the Somali language to the Somali people at this time. The paper will look at the Somali language as part of Somali identity, following this an outline of the linguistic map of the eastern Horn of Africa will be given and the language situation mentioned as it stands in the different countries in which the Somalis live. Mention will then be made of the advantages of the fact that the Somalis share a common language looking briefly at the issue of social stratification on the basis of language knowledge. Literacy will be mentioned in this context. Finally reference will be made to the important role the Somali language plays in terms of its role as the common language of the Somali diaspora.

Before continuing I must make it clear that I am approaching this subject as a linguist interested in the structure of language and literature and that this paper is an initial attempt at setting down a few ideas. I hope that during the conference discussion which will take place will provide further details and ideas which I shall be able to incorporate into a version for publication in the proceedings.

In the general literature on the Somali people there are generally three aspects which are referred to as essentially characterizing Somali identity. These are: Islam, the nomadic way of life and the Somali language. Of these three the one which is not shared by any other group of people in the world is the Somali language. There are other groups of people who practise nomadic

pastoralism in Africa as well as in other parts of the world. Also there are Muslims living in every continent on earth. Somali on the other hand is the language of the Somalis.

Further to this the Somali language is shared by people who may not belong to the other two categories given above. Not all Somalis are Muslims although it is clear to anyone that Somalis who are not Muslims are few and far between. Taking the third category not all Somalis are nomads. People practising agriculture live in various areas particularly along and between the two great rivers the Shabeelle and the Jubba as well as in some of the north western regions of the Somali territories. Aside from the agriculturalists there are the people who live in the towns and cities. There have of course always been people living in the towns and cities but the number has risen in the last few decades and now constitutes a larger proportion of the population than it did in previous times.

In addition to the agriculturalists there is a further group of people who must not be neglected. That is the Somalis who live outside the Horn of Africa. Again this has been the case for a long time. Here in the United Kingdom for example there are well established communities around the ports where Somalis who worked at sea settled. Places such as the East End of London, Cardiff and Liverpool. Equally there have for a long time been Somalis living in the southern part of the Arabian peninsular for example in Aden. In recent years, however, the number of people living away from the Horn of Africa has risen dramatically. There are very many people living in the Gulf States and Yemen, in Kenya, moving further afield in the Middle East and on into Europe, the United States and Canada, India and on throughout the world. I remember Cabdisalaam Hereerey of the BBC Somali Section of the World Service, in their special Ciid programme in 1992, interviewed a Somali living in Papua New Guinea; and he was not the only Somali living there.

Despite what has just been said the Islamic and pastoralist aspects of Somali identity remain strong. The point I wish to make here

however is that of all the three aspects associated with Somali identity, the Somali language seems to be the most pervasive. Given this the role of the language can not be underestimated in the life of the Somalis and thus in the reconstruction and development needed now in the eastern Horn of Africa.

Before looking at this it must be pointed out that the Somali language is not quite the homogenous language which one might assume from what I have just said or from the general literature on matters Somali. Somali, like all languages, comprises a number of different dialects which vary in differing degrees from each other. For more information on Somali dialects the reader is referred to Lamberti, M. (1986). Despite this difference in dialects a lingua franca dialect has developed and this continues to develop as a lingua franca very much through its use in the media, perhaps most importantly the medium of radio.

Other languages which are spoken in the Somali areas is another matter which we may address. The Somali territories as we all know do not share with the majority of other African countries a great diversity of indigenous languages. The inhabitants of Somalia and Somaliland speak one language: Somali. There are however a small number of languages other than Somali spoken in these areas Lamberti, M. (1986) gives the following languages, note that he was talking about the former Somali Democratic Republic in his book: Oromo, Af-Boon, Af- Mushungulu and Swahili.

Oromo is spoken in the Gedo region (the dialects of Oromo being Af-Arussi, Af-Qotto, Af-Boraan and Af-Garre) and in the southern part of Jubbada Hoose (Lower Juba) region where, according to Lamberti's informants, the dialects Af-Garre and Af-Wardeyg are spoken.

Af-Boon is considered to be a Cushitic language, that is the same language family as Somali, (see Lamberti, M. (1986, p.7) which is in the process of dying out. Spoken in an area between the town

Jilib and the coast, only elderly people use the language as a mother tongue.

Af-Mushungulu is a Bantu language which, according to W.J.G.Möhlrig (as personally communicated to Lamberti see footnote 5 to chapter 1 on page 413 of Lamberti, M. (1986)) corresponds to the Shambaa language of Tanzania. It is spoken along the banks of the Jubba in the vicinity of the town Jamaame.

The Swahili speaking minority is divided into two groups. The speakers of a dialect known as Ki-Bajuni live along part of the coastal strip in the Jubbada Hoose region and especially in the town of Kismaayo. The second group speaking a dialect known as Chi-Mwiini live in the town Baraawe (Brava) and along the coast adjacent to the town.

Lamberti points out that the Oromo speakers, as is the case with the other speakers of minority languages, are very much integrated into the Somali society and men and young people can often speak fluent Somali.

Looking outside of the boundaries of Somalia and Somaliland the situation becomes gradually different as Somali comes into contact with other languages. The Northeastern province of Kenya is predominantly Somali speaking although the situation is not quite so clear cut. Oromo is also spoken and further west the language Rendille is spoken which is very closely related to Somali. Swahili and English have also had an impact on this region but Somali remains the main language.

Djibouti is another case in which the status of Somali is not as clear as in Somalia and Somaliland. Qafar is the other main language spoken in the republic and is closely related to Somali being a member of the Lowland East branch of the Cushitic language family. The other major player in the language situation in Djibouti is French which is predominant in many aspects of life in the country. The language situation in Djibouti is less akin to that in other Somali speaking areas because of the continued

importance and predominance of French, the former colonial language, and I shall not discuss the situation here.

Finally we come to the situation in Ethiopia which has changed dramatically since the time of Mengistu and also Haile Sellasie. Many people here will be aware of the situation which prevailed in Ethiopia during the regime of Haile Sellasie and, although the rhetoric was different, also during the Mengistu regime. Amharic was the official language and other languages were not encouraged. Amharic was also the language of administration and education thus ensuring the continued predominance of the language even in areas where it was not the local spoken language. The redrawing of internal boundaries in Ethiopia following the ousting of the Mengistu regime has been undertaken with languages very much in mind and the new zones reflect language speaking groups. The area which concerns us here is zone 5, *aagga shanaad*, in which the official language is Somali, the language now being used in education and administration. This has led among other things to the publication of a journal called *Sahan* in Somali in Dire Dhaba which as far as I understand is actually in zone 4. In the areas where Somali is spoken a number of other languages are also spoken probably the most important in terms of numbers of speakers is Oromo which as we have already seen is also spoken within the boundaries of Somalia.

Let us now turn briefly to look at some of the reasons why the Somali language is a very important aspect of what is happening at the moment in the eastern Horn of Africa. In his book *Politics, Language, and Thought The Somali Experience* Laitin has discussed the phenomenon of social stratification based on language knowledge. This phenomenon is particularly striking in the cases of colonies in which the language of the colonizer becomes the language of administration and bureaucracy. Put very simply those who are educated in the language of the colonizer are then able to undertake such jobs which require such language knowledge and a new elite is formed on this basis. Laitin quotes in his book a famous minute written by the president of the Committee of Public Instruction in India, Thomas Macaulay

which proposed the British should create a "class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from Western nomenclature." (Laitin p.8) Laitin goes on to point out however that this small class went on to maintain itself as a new elite given the new skills it developed. Laitin also mentions what happened later in independent India when this elite was threatened by the possibility of the introduction of Hindi as the sole national language of the country. Given the fact that there are a great number of languages spoken in India those who knew English and were able to capitalize on that with jobs in administration and the bureaucracy but were not Hindi speaking were threatened by the fact that they would lose their jobs in a Hindi speaking bureaucracy.

With a very large number of indigenous languages, India is particularly susceptible to problems of this nature. However the problem is not unknown in Somalia. Everyone is no doubt aware of the lengthy and protracted debates which surrounded the adoption of the Somali script prior to and following independence. The problems associated with the use of the two colonial languages, Italian and English, as well as the use of Arabic in a country where everybody essentially speaks one language have been well documented. What is very important to recognize now is the fact that Somali is a written language and is now well established to function as an official national language in all of the Somali speaking areas. This means further that all who know the language will have at least that ability to participate in the development and reconstruction. Everybody knows the language thus there is not the potential for linguistic elites to develop as in the India case mentioned briefly above.

Two issues come to mind which are related to this idea. Firstly the involvement of what is generally termed the international community. If discussions are held at any time in which the people outside of the Somali community are involved then it

seems likely that such negotiations are held in a language other than Somali; Arabic, English and Italian are the languages which for obvious reasons immediately spring to mind. This, however would be to exclude those people who were not familiar with these languages. Thus only those with specific language skills would be able to partake unless interpreting facilities were made available. If interpreting is going to take place then why not in the other direction with discussions held in Somali? A further point related to this is that if Somali were the medium for discussion it would enable more ideas and proposals to pass from a more local level to the wider level. Discussions at a local level would take place in Somali and thus the results of such discussions would be available more directly so to speak in discussions at a wider level since Somali may be used throughout the Somali areas and is understood by everyone more people are able to participate.

The second issue referred to above is the matter of literacy. Literacy is a fundamental aspect of education and without going into the matter in detail literacy in one's own mother tongue is the obvious way of going about learning to read and write. As with language knowledge the more people have literacy skills the more they will be able to become involved in areas of life which require these skills thus there is less likelihood of the development of a literate elite. Given that Somali now has a well established script these two areas of literacy and language knowledge are a very important factor which cannot be overlooked in the reconstruction and reconciliation taking place now.

We mentioned above that there are a large number of Somalis living in areas outside of the Horn of Africa and that this number has increased greatly since the beginning of the crisis. One aspect of the Somali diaspora is that the Somalis now find themselves living in many different parts of the world. This in turn means that Somalis are learning many different languages as second or third languages, languages such as English, Italian, French, Norwegian, German, Finnish etc. The Somali language has thus becomes the means by which Somali people are able to communicate with each other across second language boundaries.

This becomes particularly important for young people. It is a sad fact that families become split up and find themselves in different countries. I have one friend who lives in the UK and has siblings in the Netherlands and in Finland. They all of course share their mother tongue Somali. But what of the newly born children of such families for these children? Somali would be the only language with which they may communicate with their relatives in other countries.

This is also important in terms of looking ahead to when peace returns to the eastern Horn of Africa. Many people may wish to return to their homeland and in the Somali language they will have one of the most important tools to the reconstruction: a national language which they all know. This is particularly important given the fact that people will have been using other languages during the time they had lived abroad.

Finally for the diaspora community the Somali language is the means by which Somalis can communicate in an international sense. This is manifest in a number of ways particularly the number of Somali journals which are now published: Qoraal, Sahan, Wargeyska Somaliland, Halabuur as well as many others in Scandinavia, the States and Canada and no doubt elsewhere. Through these journals Somalis are able to keep informed of events and opinions through the medium of their own language. An important part of these journals is literature which is often in a section of its own thus people are also able to continue to appreciate their rich cultural heritage in their language. In addition to the contribution made by the journals there have been a number of publications of Somali literature such as the recent publication of the poetry of one of the greatest poets Maxamed Ibrahiim Warsame 'Hadraawi' by Den Norske Somaliakomiteen, or the publication of 500 Somali proverbs collected by Axmed Yuusuf Saciid and published by the Somali Community Association Sheffield. Furthermore non literature publications to help Somalis with language skills in the country in which they live have been forthcoming. Haan Associates has been particularly active in this field in the UK and other ventures such as the publication of a

German - Somali dictionary in Germany show that similar initiatives are taken in other countries.

To conclude I wish to say that in my mind language plays a very important role in the present Somali crisis. This role has developed naturally amongst Somalis continuing to allow communication among people spread far and wide around the world. It is important for the "international community" to also bear this in mind. Of all the institutions and areas of life and society which need to be rebuilt the Somali language is not one of them, it is as robust as ever. I hope that this paper has gone some way towards a greater awareness of this matter.

References

Lamberti, M. (1986) *Die Somali-Dialekte* Kuschitische Sprachstudien Band 5. Helmut Buske Verlag, Hamburg.