

# Language Issues and Education in Somalia

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To discuss language issues in education in Somalia is to examine a paradox. As one of the handful of «monolingual» countries among the multilingual nations of Africa, Somalia is in a good position to formulate a straightforward, workable plan for language use in its education system. Yet inconsistencies and discontinuities in the present language choices for instruction are not only illogical but wasteful. This paper argues that Somalia needs to establish a coherent policy for language use and language teaching in its schools.

Adoption of a script for the Somali language in 1972 was an essential first step in laying the groundwork for a national educational system. It was also, predictably, an expensive step. Though the Latin script requires no modification of existing typewriters and printing facilities, the costs of writing or translating new materials and of printing them in the volume needed are great.

The next step was to rewrite school texts and curricula in Somali. The decision was to do this as fast as possible for all grades of both primary and secondary schools, an ambitious undertaking. More recent modifications to language policy risk overburdening resources already stretched thin by scrapping newly created educational materials even before they can be put to use. That is why it is important to reach a prompt and well-planned decision about which language to use for specific subjects and which one to use at each level of the educational system through university, including technical schools. A curriculum needs to be developed that anticipates changes in language of instruction by providing training in that language as a school subject for several years before the switch occurs. Until the government is able to adopt a long-term language policy for education, it will continue to lose effort, manpower, and time in writing basic school curricula and in providing special courses to teach students the language they need to continue their education.

This discussion will review the history of Somalia's language policy development and the country's present policies and practices in the educational system. It will then identify issues that arise as language policy evolves and constraints to language planning that need to be considered in pursuing a language policy consistent with Somalia's needs.

## **Historical Setting**

In the years since independence, Somalia has had to deal with two major language issues that have important consequences for its educational system. They are:

1) The choice of a script for writing Somali; and

2) Determination of the role Arabic, English, and Italian should play in the educational system and the communication system of the nation.

The script question was finally settled in 1972, after a period of indecision that lasted for the duration of the first independent regime in Somalia. Development of the educational system could not begin in earnest until the choice of a script had been resolved.

The decision about which of Somalia's three external language(s) to use as the main vehicles of higher education and international or commercial communication is not yet firm. All three are currently in use with somewhat different but overlapping functions in the total communication context of the country. As a result, there is duplication of educational materials that the fledgling educational system can ill afford.

## **A Script for Somali**

Among African nations, Somalia is fortunate in having a single language for its population. Ninety-five percent of Somali nationals speak Somali, generally as their mother tongue. Of the three main dialects of the language, Northern Somali is becoming the accepted standard. Radio broadcasting in Somali began in 1941 in Hargeisa, using the northern dialect; over the following thirty years the radio was an active agent in standardizing the language and enlarging its vocabulary for modern use (Andrzejewski 1971).

Somali is, first and foremost, a spoken language. Somalis pride themselves on skill in speech and on their tradition of poetry composition and recitation. As John Johnson has described in detail (1974), it is through poetry that Somalis record their history, celebrate important events, transmit news, and rally political factions. The first nationalist hero, Sayyid Mohamud Abdille Hassan, one of the country's greatest poets, used his talents in launching and sustaining the dervish movement against the colonial powers early in this century. Skilled memorizers and reciters preserve the Somali oral poetry heritage; even in modern times activists express their views in rich and metaphoric Somali verse. Today, debates are carried on through alliterative poem cycles, now sometimes recorded and transmitted on tape cassettes. Perhaps because the oral language tradition has been so vital, Somalia did not rush to choose a script.

A standard writing system for Somali was a key element in unifying independent Somalia. The choice of a script, however, was a hotly disputed issue. The major split was between many of the modern intelligentsia, who favored some form of Latin script and orthography, and groups of religious conservatives and of nationalist youths who opposed a «Christian» or a colonialist script and favored either an adaptation of Arabic script or one of several «national» scripts invented for the Somali language. Clan factionalism entered the picture, as well, since the proposed «national» scripts were associated with particular clans which advocated each of them (Mumin 1985).

The first independent government immediately convened a script committee in 1960 but permanently shelved the report it produced in 1961. After the 1969 revolution, still without announcing a script decision, the new government set up a second committee to write elementary school texts and Somali grammar and dictionary. After some initial hesitation, this committee, which included some members of the 1960 group, carried out its task. On October 21, 1972, on the third anniversary of the revolution, the new script was announced with a dramatic gesture: helicopters overflying the celebrating crowds in Mogadishu dropped colorful pamphlets containing the text of the president's speech, written in Somali in Latin script.<sup>1</sup>

During the following year, a literacy campaign was mounted in Mogadishu, first for government workers, then for the urban population. In 1974-75, it was followed by a country-wide literacy and rural development campaign. All schools were closed for the year, and over 25,000 students from Grade Six through Grade Eleven were sent out to introduce the new script to nomads and subsistence agriculturalists. Of the 1.25 million Somalis initially enrolled in the campaign, close to 740,000 passed their literacy test.

Teachers, released from their classroom duties during the campaign, either supervised the student campaigners or were assigned the task of writing texts in Somali for the remainder of the elementary school cycle and for the secondary schools. At the time, the government elected to reduce the primary school cycle from eight to six years, hoping to achieve educational economies through the use of Somali rather than a foreign language in the schools. Thus, between 1974 and 1976 a series of primary school texts designed for the six-year cycle were prepared in Somali. Actually printing them took much longer; the eleventh grade texts, for example, were not ready for distribution until seven years later. Long before the whole textbook series was published, the shortened primary cycle proved to be inadequate. In 1979 it was lengthened again to eight years, with the result that the primary school texts and the curriculum were no longer coordinated.

### **The Role of Arabic, English, and Italian**

Arabic, English, and Italian all played roles as colonial languages in Somalia. Egyptian attempts to bring Somalia under its domination predate the establishment of British and Italian colonies but have left Somalis with ambivalent feelings about Arabic, although as the language of the Koran it is important to learn. English was the language of administration and of post-elementary education on the British colony in northwestern Somalia; Arabic was used in the early grades. Italian played a part similar to English in the southern Italian protectorate, although there instruction started in Italian from the very beginning.

The two colonial education systems produced a small Western-educated intelligentsia. Some of its members had studied under the British system and spoke

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was written for a USAID report. Somalia Education and Human Resources Sector Assessment, January 1984, and based on research carried out during the summer of 1983. The opinions expressed here are my own, however, and in no way reflect AID policy. Much of the background information presented here is drawn from the research and writings of Hussein M. Adam (1979) and David Laitin (1977).

English; others had had their university training in Italy. A third group, many of them from the north, pursued their education in the universities of the Arab world. At independence, Somali intellectuals were linguistically divided into three groups: those who spoke English, those who spoke Italian, and those who spoke Arabic.

At independence, Arabic, English, and Italian, were made co-equal official languages in Somalia for written records and education. Somali was used for parliamentary debate and as the official spoken language.

Although complete unification of the two colonial education systems had to wait for resolution of the script issue, a unified curriculum for northern and southern primary and secondary schools was developed during the 1960s. In 1965, a UNESCO commission recommending that English be used for university education noted the lack of standardization of language use in the secondary system. In addition to English in the northern schools and Italian in the south, several secondary schools used Arabic as the language of instruction.

### **The Current Situation: Disjunctures between Policy and Practice**

The adoption of a Latin spelling system for Somali made it possible to simplify Somalia's language policy and to Somalize the education system. Today Somali and Arabic are the two official languages. All government employees must be literate in one or the other. English and Italian, although not official languages, are used for special functions: English as a language of commerce, technology, and international communication; and Italian for certain legal and administrative purposes.

Somali is officially the language of instruction throughout the primary and general secondary schools. It may also be used for lectures at the University. The government strongly encourages children four to six years old to spend two years in Koranic school before entering first grade, and Arabic, is taught as school subject from first grade onward. It is also used to teach a few subjects, notably religion, in government schools. In secondary school English is added as a subject, while Italian has been dropped completely.

In practice, a number of post-primary schools in Somalia, including most of the vocational and technical schools and some specialized institutions, such as the National Range Management Institute, use English as the medium of instruction. Since they accept students who have just completed the primary cycle they are obliged to provide an intensive English course for their incoming students. If English were introduced as a subject, starting in fifth grade, students would have had some introduction to the language before secondary school. Various Ministry of Education officials have considered this possibility, but it has not had high priority.

Expanding the teaching of Arabic and its use as the medium of instruction of certain subjects is supported by certain of the Gulf States and by ALESCO, the Arab League Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Knowledge of Arabic has practical as well as religious value; many Somalis find lucrative work in the Gulf States, where it stands them in good stead.

Using a European language as the medium of instruction becomes a necessity at the university level. English and Italian are the two candidates; the current

dominance of Italian owes more to pragmatism than to planning. Despite the official decision in 1965, backed by UNESCO, to move to an English-language university system, the situation at the post-secondary level has always been linguistically schizophrenic. In the mid — and late — 1960s the beginnings of Somalia's National University were embodied in a Faculty of Law and a Faculty of Economics developed from two Italian post-secondary institutes and in the National Teacher Education Center (NTEC) established by Eastern Michigan University through USAID support. Italian was used at the Law and Economics faculties, English at NTEC.

When the government sought assistance for establishment of a full-scale National University, English-language donors refused, while Italy made a generous offer. Of the twelve faculties that comprised the University in 1983, nine used Italian as the language of instruction and three, the Faculties of Languages, Journalism, and Education (which was an outgrowth of NTEC) used English. The Italian-language faculties were technical or disciplinary schools and relatively small in size. The Faculty of Education offered a multidisciplinary curriculum modeled on the American liberal arts college and received over 45 percent of the incoming students. In all, approximately 45 percent of the university student body were studying in English.

There is no simple resolution to the language question at the University. As a stopgap, the University offers a pre-enrollment course of intensive Italian for students who need it, and it allows Somali instructors to lecture in Somali. Possible alternative long-range solutions would be:

— to move toward an all-Somali university; a move that would have the unfortunate effect of isolating the institution from international research and scholarship and of restricting students' access to further higher education;

— to move toward an all-Italian university. This, however, is not practical in the long run for a country in close proximity to the English-language universities of Eastern Africa and oriented toward the Arab world, which uses English in a large number of its educational institutions and as an international language; or

— to move toward an all-English university. Although this has many practical advantages, doing this may not be feasible until Somalia can support its university without Italian aid, which has been substantial.

The present course seems to be to live as well as possible with the *status quo* at least until the university is completed.

## **Problems and Issues**

To maintain links with outside world and with her own past Somalia needs to retain Arabic, English, and Italian to some degree as languages of external communication of religion, commerce, technology, scholarship. At the same time the nation must continue to promote the Somali language to maintain national unity and to assure all Somalis of access to education, government services, and a chance to participate in building their future.

Because a long-term language policy could not be implemented until as late as 1972, Somalia has had an unusually short time to develop a coherent plan for the use and teaching of its languages. Some of the discontinuities evident now are the growing pains of a developing policy. Nevertheless, indeterminacy

creates problems and leads to expensive and inefficient activities that the country can ill afford. Specific problems include:

— The need to pause at several points in the educational cycle (e.g., at entrance to technical secondary school and to the university) to «retool» linguistically. This is expensive in terms of students' and teachers' time, materials prepared for a limited audience, and delays in producing trained manpower; and

— Vacillations in the school curriculum to accommodate changes in school language policy. With the limited resources available, curriculum development has had difficulties keeping up with its primary task of producing materials for the basic school courses. Unnecessary changes can render past work inappropriate or useless. This inefficiency is costly. To begin to solve these problems, policy makers have to resolve two underlying issues:

1) Is Somalia going to move to an all-Somali education system through the university level? If not, where will the switch in language of instruction occur, and to what language? In deciding these matters, major considerations are:

— Internal access: Who will be able to enter the system or continue to the next level? Will entrants have been prepared linguistically by their prior schooling for the language of instruction at each level?

— Affordability: How much will materials and text preparation or revision cost? Can use be made of existing materials?

— External access: Which language(s) will give the best access to international commerce, technology, research, and scholarship?

2) Which of the three international languages is it practical to retain? What are the long-term priorities? Over the long run, what purposes will each serve?

### **Constraints to Language Planning and Language Development**

Problems in implementing national language policy inevitably affect decisions about language use in the education system. The costs of conversion to written Somali are major constraints to language development. Their nature and extent are not always well understood.

The financial cost is perhaps the most obvious. Even though the Latin script requires no modification of existing typewriters and printing facilities, the volume of new materials needed is great: from paper and additional printing facilities, to writers, translators, and editors. Some donor support, especially from the World Bank, has been forthcoming for start-up costs.

Less attention has been given to other logistic bottlenecks to expanding printing and distribution that ultimately impede the advancement of literacy in Somalia. Because Somalia did not start out with a cadre of experienced printers and printing machinery repairmen to keep presses functioning near capacity, machinery breakdowns have, at times, led to long delays in the publication process. There is also no established distribution system for moving Somali publications of all types outside the capital: no regular shipping routes, no warehouses, no local distribution centers in outlying areas. The national printing effort has been closely controlled by the government; the promotion of private initiatives in these areas would undoubtedly expand both production and distribution.

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<sup>2</sup> This discussion of the script debate and its resolution is based mainly on Laitin (1977).

Sociolinguistic constraints to implementing the national language policy are least well understood of all. Adoption of a script and spelling system is only the first step in developing Somali as a written language. To forge a unified and standardized written language, several sorts of guides to writing and editing are essential: dictionaries, technical glossaries, stylebooks and editing manuals, and teaching grammars for native speakers of Somali. All of these things take linguistic research and serious thought to develop. Work in this area has been assigned to the Somali Academy of Science and Arts, with a small staff and virtually no outside resources. Work on grammars is being undertaken at Lafoole College of Education; editorial stylebooks have yet to be compiled. Under the circumstances, editing prose works written by neophyte writers has proved very difficult and time consuming.

A final constraint to development of a consistent, long-range language policy has been the distortion introduced by financial incentives to use the language of various donors. The general direction of language policy was originally to use Somali as the national language for internal communication and English as the main language of international contact and higher education. Arabic, of course, retains importance as language of religion and a link to the other members of the Arab League. But, because Italy has been the major donor for developing the National University, the government has agreed to the use of Italian as a medium of instruction in it. Since Italian has been dropped from the school curricula, however, this means that there is no preparation at the secondary level for this usage at the University. Similarly, the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction in social science subjects throughout the primary and secondary education systems is being urged as a condition for major ALESCO assistance to education. To do this means dropping newly published Somali texts for those subjects and revising the curriculum for a fourth time since 1972. Aside from the financial lure, there is no good pedagogical reason to do this.

## **Conclusion**

In any country the decision about which language to use at the various levels of education and training has a decided effect on students' work opportunities and on their chances for further education. The benefits of training students who have a good grasp of the languages they will need for employment are obvious, but they may be lost when there is no coherent plan for introducing foreign languages into the curriculum.

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