

“Ex Uno Plura”: the uneasy road of Ethiopian languages toward standardization*

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Abstract

The history of Ethiopia has witnessed a constant struggle between centralizing forces and regional powers. Since 1991 the pendulum has swung clearly toward a policy of “ethnic federalism.” Nevertheless, to date only a few of the about eighty ethnic groups of Ethiopia have implemented the right to fully develop their own language and use it in education and administration, as enshrined in the new federal constitution. Actually, only Oromo (the second or possibly even the first language of the country in demographic terms) has been equipped to become a full-fledged medium in the fields of education, administration, and publication. For many other languages, reshaping has been limited to the selection of an orthography, accompanied by the introduction of the local language in the first years of the school curriculum and the production of primers or dictionaries. After a comparison with the previous language policies of the country and of neighboring Eritrea, the article discusses the problems facing the standardization and Ausbauization of Ethiopian languages: orthographic choices, the selection of the official variety to be implemented, the elaboration of modern technical vocabulary, and the production of high-quality written material.

1. Ethiopia between centralization and pluralism

As far as its ethnic heterogeneity is concerned, Ethiopia is a typical African country. It hosts about eighty ethnic groups who speak roughly the same number of languages. Ethiopian languages are classified into four genetic groups: Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic, and Nilo-Saharan. The first three belong to the Afroasiatic family and cover the greatest part of the country. The Nilo-Saharan languages are spoken by only approximately 1% of the population in the western part of Ethiopia along the international boundary with the Sudan.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, has several peculiarities that make it exceptional in the African context. One of these is the possibility, thanks to the early introduction of writing, to reconstruct its ancient and medieval history. It is nevertheless a severely biased history: ethnically it is limited to two main groups, the Tigreans and the Amharas; politically it is based upon the history of their powerful kingdom; religiously it is confined to Christianity; and geographically it is restricted to the northern highland areas, the so-called Abyssinian Plateau. The role of other ethnic entities in this history is nothing but marginal; their territories were up for expansion and as sources of slaves and riches for the central power. This biased view of Ethiopia as a kind of *ante litteram* nation state can be found in classical works such as Ullendorff (1960) and is still very common. In his plea for a radical revision of Ethiopian historiography, Clapham (2002: 40; emphasis in the original) notes the persistent assumption according to which “[...] those who speak Amharic and Tigrinya, are Ethiopia, whereas other peoples merely become part of Ethiopia” and that “Amharas and Tigrayans have a *history*, whereas other peoples have only an anthropology, or at best a kind of sub-national sub-history that eventually gets subsumed within the national epic.” The fact that there are people whose history is much easier to reconstruct because they have been more powerful than the others “does not entitle them to become the *only* people with a history, or deny us the obligation to treat other histories as fully as the sources allow and to treat the people who created and experienced that on a level with those whom ‘Ethiopian history’ has largely been restricted” (Clapham 2002: 40; emphasis in the original).

The political history of Ethiopia has always been characterized by the struggle between central government and regional powers. Amda S’iyon, who ruled in the thirteenth century, had no fixed headquarters.¹ He moved all around the empire, establishing a net of commercial routes, in order to control and constantly levy taxes on the local Ras (“chiefs”) and to undertake military campaigns against the northern and southern regions (Taddesse 1972: 72–89).² Zara Yak’ob (fifteenth century) secured a strong centralized government, reformed the secular administration, and reduced to nothing the power of provincial lords by appointing his own officials. During the following three centuries, Christian Orthodox Ethiopia had to resist a Muslim invasion (which was averted thanks to the intervention of the Portuguese) and, soon afterwards, Catholicism (introduced by Portuguese Jesuits). In such a difficult situation the emperors could not keep under check the growing power of regional rulers. The result was that from 1750 to 1855 Ethiopia witnessed the *Zemene Mesafint* ‘the Era of the Princes’. The fact that a capital was established by Emperor Fasiladas (1632–1667) in the northern town of Gondar “had

almost symbolical significance, for it reflected the inchoate withdrawal of the monarchy from the centre of the Ethiopian scene” (Ullendorff 1960: 79). The local warlords could get *de facto* independence from the central government and “[u]ntil 1855, when Kasa Haylu became Emperor Tewodros II and restored the power and prestige of the imperial throne, the successive emperors were little more than puppets in the hand of the forceful nobility. An emperor had practically no army of his own” (Bahru 1991: 11). Tewodros II (1855–1868) is well known for his modernization of Ethiopia through a renewed strong centralized power. After his death, Ras Kasa Mercha won the struggle for succession and became Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–1889). Yohannes had a mild approach with the local powers and took full control of the northern regions only. The most powerful of the Ras, Menelik (1889–1913), took advantage of Yohannes’s policy, imposing his control on South Ethiopia and becoming emperor after Yohannes’s death. As Emperor Menelik II, he gave a great impulse to the economic and political growth of the empire and expanded his territories southwards to its modern boundaries (Ullendorff 1960: 93). Ethiopia was solidly united again, but an external element was going to undermine Ethiopian political unity. Already in 1869, Italy had established a commercial base in Assab, on the Red Sea coast. Through commercial and diplomatic agreements with Menelik and with British approval, Italy was able to gain control of Eritrea, which officially became an Italian colony in 1889. Italy conquered the whole of Ethiopia in 1936, and Emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1974) went to exile in England. The short-lived Italian Empire came to an end in 1941, when British forces managed to occupy the whole of East Africa. After the war the Emperor tried to rebuild Ethiopian unity and incorporate Eritrea. The UN Resolution 390V (2 December 1950) established the federation of Eritrea to Ethiopia — a solution which, “designed to satisfy everybody, ended up by pleasing no one” (Bahru 1991: 183). In the following years a series of laws reduced the Eritrean autonomy, until the federation was terminated and Eritrea fully incorporated on 15 November 1962. This final step sparked a thirty-year independence war. Haile Selassie faced the conflict for ten years, until in 1974 he was deposed and later killed by a military junta (the *Derg*) headed by Mengistu Haile Maryam, who established a Communist regime.

It was only in 1991 that the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the last Amhara-dominated government in Ethiopian history. After a transitional period a parliament was elected; in 1994, the parliament voted a new constitution, which came into force in August 1995. The constitution established an ethnic-based federal system. One of the

first acts of the Ethiopian parliament was to let the Eritreans vote for secession. Eritrea became officially independent in 1993.

2. Bottom-up and top-down language policies: Ethiopia and Eritrea before and after 1991

The post-1991 changes in the Ethiopian political and cultural climate have had a clear reflection on language policy. The most momentous decision was to give full rights to any local language. It was therefore a complete reversal of the whole modern history of Ethiopia, and a most severe blow to the official status of Amharic. At the same time, the Amharas lost their key role as the dominant ethnic group — a position which, with little interruption, they had kept since 1270.

The 1955 imperial constitution (which took the place of the first Ethiopian constitution of 1931) simply stated in Article 125 that “The official language of the Empire is Amharic.” Amharic was used in administration, media, and education (alongside English in foreign relations and in tertiary education). It was extended to the whole country, while writing and teaching in the local languages was forbidden.³ Amharic was also imposed on Eritrea after the dissolution of federation in 1962. On that occasion, Tigrinya, the main Eritrean language and one of the biggest in Ethiopia, was banned and Tigrinya books burned.

Nothing substantial changed during the Marxist dictatorship and with the promulgation of the socialist constitution (1987). Plurality of languages was paid lip service, and a restricted number of “big” regional languages was somehow recognized and tentatively written down using the Ethiopic syllabary. At the same time, the eminent role of Amharic as “national language” was stressed. The following quotation from a text on language policies in Africa published in the German Democratic Republic may illustrate the typical rhetoric of the regime: “Zum ersten Mal in der Geschichte des Landes wurde im Programm der Nationaldemokratischen Revolution die Gleichberechtigung aller Nationalitäten Äthiopiens verankert und deren Geschichte, Kultur, Sprache und Religion gleichermaßen anerkannt.” On the other hand, “Die Förderung funktional bedeutender äthiopischer Sprachen und *die aktive Verbreitung der amharischen Sprache als gemeinsames Kommunikationsmittel* ist Ausdruck der schöpferischen Anwendung der Leninschen Nationalitäten- und Sprachpolitik auf die äthiopischen Verhältnisse” (Autorenkollektiv 1985: 72–73; emphasis ours).

Radio programs in Oromo were introduced and five languages (Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya, Wolaitta, and Somali) used in alphabetization crash campaigns in 1974; in 1975 the first Oromo magazine (*Bariisaa*

‘The Morning Star’) was launched; in 1976 came the Oromo translation of the Communist Manifesto (*Maanifestoo Paartii Kommonistii*). With the financial support of UNESCO, the following languages were later used in alphabetization, and language material was produced (or at least planned) in Amharic and fourteen other languages: Oromo, Tigrinya, Wolaitta, Somali, Sidamo, Hadiya, Kambaata, “Gurage”,⁴ Gedeo, Kefa-Mocha, Saho, ‘Afar, Tigre, and Kunama — this order, as given in Autorenkollektiv (1985: 72), seems to reflect the numerical strength of each language in decreasing order. As a matter of fact, “erscheint das entsprechende Angebot für die kuschitischen Sprachen, auch für das Oromo, verschwindend klein” (El-Solami-Mewis 1985: 127). In hindsight, the same author later acknowledged that “wurde die Alphabetisierungskampagne für die äthiopischen Sprachen außer Amharisch zu einem Flop” (Griefenow-Mewis 1994: 164). If any, the only language that took advantage of the alphabetization campaigns was Amharic, which further spread its influence in the country through the sheer number of publications that were made available in it.

This is far from surprising, as the Ethiopian nationhood was even more strongly affirmed during socialist Ethiopia than before. In imperial times, the ideological bases of state legitimacy were found in Christian Orthodoxy and the sacred descent (through King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba) of the Imperial Lineage. The socialist regime replaced religion with nationhood: in this sense, as in many other cases, what was officially labeled a “Revolution” (and had actually been a military coup) simply brought about the accomplishment and perfection of the inner tendencies of a former state of affairs.

The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (adopted on 8 December 1994) is a clear breakaway. There is an unmistakable American flavor in it, but with a stronger emphasis on the plurality of its founding elements. The Preamble does not begin with anything like: “We, the People (or even ‘Peoples’) of Ethiopia” (along the model of “We, the People of the United States”). It rather says: “We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia.” No appeal to Ethiopian identity and nationhood is made. As regards languages, the constitution solemnly declares within its General Provisions:

Article 5

Languages

1. All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition.
2. Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Government.
3. Members of the Federation may by law determine their respective working languages.

While for “Members of the Federation” the Federal States are meant, the most remarkable fact about this article is that no language is declared as the official or national one. The language policy to be followed is further outlined in Article 39 of Part Two, “Democratic Rights.” As will become immediately obvious, this has been and still is a highly controversial article, since in its first section the “unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession” is recognized:

Article 39

Rights of Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples

1. Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.
2. Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.
[...]
5. A “Nation, Nationality or People” for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities (*sic*), a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.

While Amharic, once the only official language of the country, retains the status of “federal working language,” no special status is attributed to Tigrinya, in spite of the fact that many of the true power holders come from Tigrinya-speaking areas. In fact, at a bureaucratic level, Tigrinya is somehow taking the place of Amharic and is often heard more than Amharic in central government offices.

The constitution of Eritrea was adopted on 23 May 1997. Again, no provision on official language(s) is found and Tigrinya, the major language, has officially no special status. According to Hailemariam et al. (1999: 488) “no official status is offered to any one language in order not to marginalise the speakers of other languages.”⁵

Compared to the Ethiopian constitution, references to language are much scantier and are limited to the following:

Article 4

“National Symbols and Languages”

3. The equality of all Eritrean languages is guaranteed.

Article 14

“*Equality under the Law*”

2. No person may be discriminated against on account of race, ethnic origin, language, color, gender, religion, disability, age, political view, or social or economic status or any other improper factors.

Article 17

“*Arrest, Detention and Fair Trial*”

3. Every person arrested or detained shall be informed of the grounds for his arrest or detention and of the rights he has in connection with his arrest or detention in a language he understands.

In practice, Tigrinya and Arabic (although Arabic is hardly spoken natively; in January 2003, Eritrea joined the Arab League as an observer) are together with English the working languages of the country,⁶ while the following other languages have been introduced in the elementary school curriculum (English being used in secondary and tertiary education): Tigre (a member of the Semitic branch of Afroasiatic); ‘Afar, Beja, Bilin, and Saho (languages of the Cushitic branch of Afroasiatic); Kuna and Nera (belonging to the Nilo-Saharan phylum).

It is evident that Ethiopia and Eritrea have chosen strikingly opposite solutions to the problem of multilingualism. The Ethiopian approach may be defined in terms of a bottom-up ethnic federalism: the local communities choose their medium of communication; to standardize, if any, their language; and how to do it (e.g., which script to employ, and in which spheres will the local language be implemented). The Eritrean solution is a fairly classical top-down approach, whereby the central government, through its agencies, choose and define which are “the” languages of the country, and therefore what will be reshaped, and how much (it will be seen below that this strategy is carried to its logical consequences: a single uniform orthography is used, as far as possible, throughout the country).

From an ideological point of view, the Eritrean approach may instead be compared to the one tentatively and erratically followed by Ethiopia itself during the Marxist dictatorship: multilingualism was recognized but “channeled”: a restricted number of “major” languages was recognized and graciously given semi-official status in rigidly determined spheres. And again, consequently, orthography was a political issue to be dealt with by central political bodies — which for pre-1991 Ethiopia meant the use of the Ethiopic script.

3. Status planning: defining languages and groups in post-1991 Ethiopia

The Ethiopian constitution defines nine ethnic-based regional states, together with their powers, functions, and rights. The states are Afar, Amhara, Benishangul/Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, Oromia, Somali, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP), and Tigray. Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa are city states and enjoy state-like administrative status (see Figure 1).

In fact, only six regional states are ethnically fairly homogeneous or have an ethnic majority (Afar, Amhara, Harar, Oromia, Somali, Tigray). The SNNP, Gambella, and Benishangul/Gumuz consist of several ethnic groups, which in the SNNP alone reach the approximate number of 50 (only 45 of which are officially recognized). It comes therefore as no surprise that certain regional governments, such as the government of the SNNP, have chosen (in other words, they have retained) Amharic as their working language.⁷

The regional states have a council that “establishes its own administration, with responsibility for the state’s civil service, law and order and the state police force. It should execute state constitutions, and laws, eco-

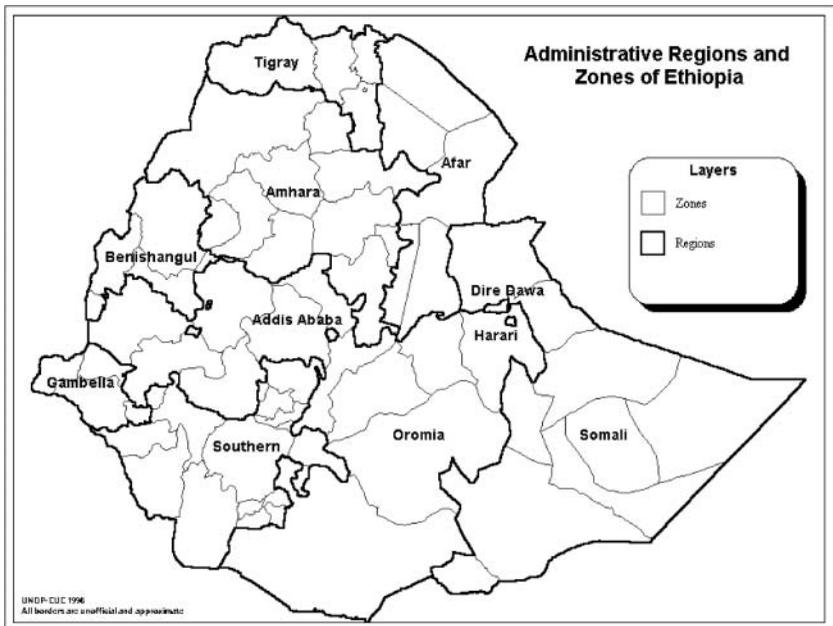


Figure 1. *Administrative regions and zones of Ethiopia*

nomic, social and developmental policies and plans and administer its own budget, land and natural resources under federal law” (Aalen 2002: 1407). Subregional administrative units are called *zon* (from English ‘zone’), *wäräda*, and *qäbäle*. These were established by Proclamation 7, 1992, and are not mentioned in the constitution. In principle, each ethnic group should have its own *zon* or *wäräda*. The *wäräda* is the level with legislative power, it is “the basic unit of hierarchy of every Nation/Regional Transitional Self-Government” (Procl. 7, 1992, Ch. 1, Art. 5, 1), and must “prepare, determine and implement within its own areas concerning social services and economic development” (Procl. 7, 1992, Ch. 4, Art. 40, 1; Aalen 2002: 1407). The *wärädas* are part of a *zon*, which has only administrative tasks (the SNNP is exceptional here, insofar as the *zons* have a council with special powers). The administration of a *wäräda* may be subdivided in *qäbäle*.

The first problem in the implementation of the very liberal approach to language problems embodied in the constitution is that the member states do not have the same degree of ethnic homogeneity. In states such as the SNNP, where a predominant language does not exist, 45 languages could in principle be entitled to recognition and implementation. And although most of the states have a majority language, ideally all minority languages can apply for recognition. Moreover, the ethnic groups and their political bodies have to choose the standard version of its language from a number of dialectal varieties. In other words, they have either to select one dialect for reshaping or have to develop an artificial interdialectal variety.

3.1. *Let's be different!*

The first lesson to be learned is that dialectal differences that are associated with separate and antagonistic ethnic groups cannot be overcome in the name of a unified *Ausbau* language: over a wide area of South Ethiopia (administratively a part of the SNNP) the so-called Central Omoto varieties are spoken (in their turn a part of the Omotic family). Many of these varieties are fairly similar linguistically and mutually comprehensible, with a minimum of 79% shared cognates according to Hirut (2005: 187; cf. also Alemayehu 2001, 2002; Girard 2002). But no common ethnonym exists, and each variety is associated with a separate ethnic group.

The 1994 Ethiopian Census listed the Central Omoto varieties separately, although in a peculiar graphic arrangement that betrays the linguistic-ethnic ambiguity. For example, the relative numerical strength of each group is given as follows:⁸

Wolaitta	1,269,216
Dorze	28,990
Gamo	719,847
Gofa	241,530
Konta	49,627
Kulo	331,483
Mello	20,189

It will be noted that a grand total is not given, although all the varieties are represented as subentries of Wolaitta. At the same time, a few of these varieties are far from negligible in demographic terms: the Gamo alone (stretching south of the Wolaitta and in the important town of Arba Minch) number 719,847. Most of all, each group has a strong sense of identity.

Trying to develop a single unified language, an artificial variety called, for want of a better term, WOGAGODA (an acronym based upon Wolaitta, GAMo, GOfa, and DAWuro) was planned and primers written in it:

WOGAGODA was considered as a written version of the four dialects. The intention to develop such a composite language may be due to lack of expertise from each of the four groups, financial constraints to prepare text books in each dialect, and perhaps other political reasons (Hirut forthcoming). However, WOGAGODA has not been accepted by the people. Since 2000, therefore, a decision was made to recognize each one of the dialect [*sic!*] as the distinct language of education and administration for the respective ethnolinguistic group. (Hirut 2005: 191, fn. 5)

What Hirut does not say but is worth mentioning is that the opposition to WOGAGODA was far from merely academic, and involved public demonstrations, burned books, clashes with security forces, and even victims.⁹

3.2. *Let's be one and the same!*

Quite the opposite has been the case for Oromo: spoken over a substantial part of central and southern Ethiopia, the Oromo (generally called Galla in former literature, a derogatory label meaning 'heathen', 'uncivilized') are the second, or even the first ethnic group of the country: according to the 1994 National Census, there were 17,080,318 ethnic Oromo, 16,777,976 Ethiopians gave Oromo as their mother tongue, while for another 1,535,434 Oromo was the second language. It is interesting

in this regard to look at the data for what concerns Amharic, the former official language: according to the same source, there were 16,007,933 ethnic Amharas, but 17,372,913 Ethiopians gave Amharic as their first language, and 5,104,150 as their second language. This shows that Amharic is both an ethnic language and an interethnic medium — in fact, the only truly interethnic nation-wide language.¹⁰

Although the dialectal differences within Oromo are far from negligible, a strong sense of identity (at least at the official and intellectual level) has prevented the fragmentation of the written language (which is essentially based upon the western and central varieties).

The history of Oromo as a written language is fairly old and is essentially linked to the years-long educational and publishing activities of Onesimos Nasib (?–1931).¹¹ Kidnapped when he was four years old, he became a slave, was bought free by the Swiss explorer Werner Munzinger and handed over to the Swedish Lutheran mission in Massawa (Eritrea) in 1870. Onesimos started as a servant, was schooled and later brought to Sweden in 1876. Back in Massawa in 1881, he started teaching and translating in Oromo. Between 1885 and 1898, Onesimos and his team accomplished the translation of the New Testament, of Luther’s Catechism, and of the Bible (*Macafa Qulqulluu*, published in 1899), the publication of an Oromo reader and much else.

All these works — for a long time banned in Ethiopia — used the Ethiopic syllabary. The major (although not unsurpassable, cf. Section 4) drawback of the syllabary is the failure to distinguish consonant gemination and vowel length, both of which are distinctive in Oromo (and generally in Cushitic and Omotic languages).¹²

Much later — but, again, much in the spirit of the syllabary — an autochthonous writing was devised in the 1950s by Shayhk Bakri Sapâlō (1895–1980).¹³ During the Communist regime, the Ethiopic script was prescribed as the basis for the orthography of Oromo. The impact of syllabary-written Oromo was negligible; discussing the impact of the Oromo magazine in Ethiopic script *Bariisaa*, El-Solami-Mewis (1985: 127) reported that “nach Aussage von Zeitungs-verkäufern in Addis Ababa wird diese Zeitung kaum gekauft, ‘weil die Leute sie nicht lesen können.’”

In the meantime, expatriate intellectuals had agreed upon a Latin-based orthography, which came to be known as *Qubee*. *Qubee* soon got the upper hand in publications in Oromo: “While the Derg’s Ethiopia allowed to publish about 8 books in the past 15 years in afaan Oromo, Oromos outside the country and underground have published more than 20 books — as an example 10 books were published in 1980” (Tamene 1990: 641).

Qubee got official status in Ethiopia in 1992, becoming the universally recognized orthography.¹⁴ The Oromo *Qubee* has actually been in recent years the inspiration in the orthographical development of other Ethiopian languages, to which we turn now our attention.

4. From status to corpus planning, I: the problem of scripts and orthographies

As always, standardization and the creation of an *Ausbau* language is more a political than a linguistic operation. In Ethiopia, the first level is the determination and implementation of a script. Most of the Ethiopian languages are at a pre-literary stage. Two scripts are nowadays in competition: the Ethiopic syllabary, or *fidel* (in recent times also called *abugida*), and the Latin alphabet. Autochthonous scripts and the Arabic alphabet have been abandoned for official purposes — although the Arabic script is still widely used for Harari and, less frequently, for Muslim religious literature in Oromo and Amharic (G. Banti p.c.).¹⁵

The general tendency has been to use the Ethiopic syllabary for previously unwritten Semitic languages (alongside the model of Amharic, Tigrinya, and Classical Ethiopic, or Ge'ez, which have a long written tradition). In all the other cases, the Latin alphabet has been officially preferred. In fact, the situation is more complex and it is still much in evolution.

In general, an orthography may be devised in order to minimize differences with the other varieties or to maximize them. Among minority languages, “dividing” orthographies seem on the whole to be more common than “uniting” orthographies, and this for obvious reasons: the orthography becomes a powerful tool in the expression of the group’s identity and difference. Ethiopia is no exception: but it is interesting to remark how these considerations, which one may label of “orthographic nationalism,” need not be shared by the community. Quite the contrary: while the political elites and the intellectuals invariably favor the Latin script, the mass of the population, as far as anything is known about their attitudes, often prefer the Ethiopic syllabary. This is the only script known and widely seen by many speakers, and it is also the script of the Orthodox Church (and many Evangelical denominations). Moreover, the Ethiopic syllabary is often more economical in terms of the number of signs to be written.

In a few cases, both an “official” (i.e., sponsored by the local authorities) Latin-based orthography and a more widespread “community orthography” based upon the Ethiopic script occur side by side: in Ethiopia a case in point is Konso (an East Cushitic language of the Oromoid

group spoken in the homonymous Special District of the SNNP by 149,508), in Eritrea it is Bilin (Fallon 2003).

In the case of Konso the Ethiopic script had been finalized already in 1978 and has been used (more extensively than the officially recognized Latin script) within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus (EECMY) for the translation of the Bible, as well as in the production of primers and collections of folk literature (Ahlberg 2005).

In Bilin (a Central Cushitic language spoken in Eritrea by approximately 90,000), the whole Bible has been published using the Ethiopic syllabary just at the eve of independence in 1992, but the language had somehow been written using the syllabary for over a century. The Eritrean Ministry of Education has instead supported the introduction of the Latin alphabet. As reported by Fallon (2003), to support one script or the other is among the Bilin a matter of religious allegiance, age, and education (with the young and the educated generally favoring the now official Latin orthography).

K’abeena (a Highland East Cushitic language spoken by 35,783 in 1994) is so far the only non-Semitic language of Ethiopia officially making use of the Ethiopic script. In this case, adherence to Christian Orthodoxy played no role, as the great majority of the K’abeena are Muslim. Contact with and widespread bilingualism in the neighboring Semitic languages of the Gurage group (which, if any, use the Ethiopic script) has certainly been a decisive factor, but, one can suggest, strengthened by the desire to distinguish oneself from the neighboring and similar languages, such as Alaba and Kambata.¹⁶ The K’abeena tendency seems on the whole to be gaining ground in today’s Ethiopia.

A look at the “new” Ethiopian orthographies in Table A in the appendix shows that a few orthographic choices are shared by quite a few languages.¹⁷ This is the case in particular of the symbols used in distinguishing the plain/ejective phonemes; see Table 1.

It will be noted that three different systems find their application: either two unrelated symbols are used (<t> versus <x>, <k> versus <q>) or a

Table 1. *The spelling of the plain and ejective stops in selected Latin orthographies of Ethiopia*

Point of articulation	Plain	Oromo, Wolaitta, Sidamo	Ejective	Oromo, Wolaitta, Sidamo
bilabial	/p/	p	/p’/	ph
dento-alveolar	/t/	t	/t’/	x
palato-alveolar	/tʃ/	ch	/tʃ’/	c
velar	/k/	k	/k’/	q

combination of two signs stands for one of the members of the opposition; but in one case the ejective is marked (<ph> versus plain <p>), in the other the plain (<ch> versus ejective <c>).

The system originated in Oromo and has been extended in recent years to other Cushitic (e.g., Sidamo) and Omotic (e.g., Wolaitta and other Omoto) languages.¹⁸ Although Oromo is definitely a “big” language, the policy of “ethnic federalism” seems to guarantee smaller languages that, by and large, no encroachment on the part of Oromo is likely: Oromo is just one among the many languages of the country and the only language with a special status is Amharic (which, as was seen above, is the working language of the federal government, although no longer the official language of Ethiopia). It is Amharic that is the “enemy” from which you must distance yourself, not Oromo.¹⁹

From a language-internal point of view, the ratio behind the notation is interesting in itself and deserves a comment:

1. The ejective and plain bilabials are both rare and mainly occur in loan vocabulary: in this case, the iconic decision to mark the ejective with an additional sign has been followed, and, sensibly, <ph> has been chosen.
2. To the contrary, both /k/ and /k'/ are very common; in this case, two separate signs have been used; moreover, the use of <q> for the velar ejective /k'/ brings the additional bonus of being consistent with the scholarly and semi-scholarly tradition in Ethiopian studies.
3. The same criterion (a single sign for a very common phoneme) was followed in the case of the dento-alveolar pair /t-/t'/, making use of a totally unrelated sign for the latter: <x>.
4. When faced with the problem of the palato-alveolar affricate plain /tʃ/ and ejective /tʃ'/, where no ready-made single signs were available, the criterion of frequency has again been followed, yielding surprising results: ejective /tʃ'/ being more common than plain /tʃ/, the sign <c> has been reserved for the ejective, and the double sign <ch> for the plain.

The choices made in the orthography are therefore sensible from the users' point of view (being roughly based upon frequency), although they are inconsistent from a purely linguistic perspective. Already in 1986, a Working Group on Oromo Orthography convened at an International Symposium on Cushitic and Omotic Languages (Heine 1988). The group recommended to consistently use <h> in order to mark ejectives (i.e., /tʃ'/ = *<ch>, /t'/ = *<th>, /k'/ = *<kh>). More recently, much the same remarks have been leveled by Hirut (2005) on the subject of the Wolaitta orthography. Without mentioning Oromo (which by now has

developed a rich literature, and whose orthography is stable), Hirut has proposed to consistently use ⟨’⟩ for marking ejectivity (i.e., /t’/ = *⟨c’⟩, /t’/ = *⟨t’⟩, /k’/ = *⟨k’⟩, etc.) in Wolaitta.²⁰

It is interesting that at least in one case the use of ⟨x⟩ for /t’/ — perhaps the most salient feature of this orthography — has not been followed: in the Roman script used for Konso the sign ⟨x⟩ is used for the velar fricative /x/. While it is true that no phoneme /t’/ exists in Konso, it is also a fact that Konso is genetically and structurally very close to Oromo (both are classified within the Oromoid group of East Cushitic): again, the need to be different may have played a role in the choice.

Let us consider the non-Ethiopian orthographies. From Table A it is evident that ‘Afar is the odd man out: the ‘Afar orthography was designed in order to keep the visual form of the language as distinct as possible from neighboring Somali (whose orthography had been adopted in 1972). The voiced pharyngeal /ʕ/ was therefore spelled with ⟨q⟩:²¹ in Somali it is written ⟨c⟩. Conversely, the voiceless pharyngeal /ħ/, written ⟨x⟩ in Somali, came to be written ⟨c⟩ in ‘Afar. Finally, ⟨x⟩ was used for the retroflex voiced stop (/ɖ/), for which Somali avails itself of the digraph ⟨dh⟩.

The net effect of these decisions is that the same phonological strings and the identical meanings come to be spelled in very different ways. More recently, for Saho (Saaho in the local orthography; spoken to the north of ‘Afar mainly in Eritrea),²² unencumbered by proximity to Somali, the more iconic spelling of the latter has been adopted. More importantly, by doing so, Saho distanced itself from ‘Afar, genetically the closest language (with which it makes the Saho-‘Afar group of East Cushitic); see Table 2.

Table 2. *The spelling of the pharyngeal fricatives and of the retroflex stop in Somali, ‘Afar, and Saho*

Phonological string	Meaning	Somali spelling	‘Afar spelling	Saho spelling
/ʕad(o)/	‘to be white’	<i>cad</i> (/ʕ/ = ⟨c⟩)	<i>qado</i> (/ʕ/ = ⟨q⟩)	<i>cado</i> (/ʕ/ = ⟨c⟩)
/há:ki(m/n)/	‘judge’ (Somali); ‘governor’ (‘Afar); ‘doctor’ (Saho) (<Arabic)	<i>xaakin</i> (/ħ/ = ⟨x⟩)	<i>caakim</i> (/ħ/ = ⟨c⟩)	<i>xaakim</i> (/ħ/ = ⟨x⟩)
/ɖal(e)/	‘to give birth to’	<i>dhal</i> (/ɖ/ = ⟨dh⟩)	<i>xale</i> (/ɖ/ = ⟨x⟩)	<i>dhale</i> (/ɖ/ = ⟨dh⟩)

In a word: identity is masked and diversity fostered. But only between languages in different nations: within Eritrea there has been a conscious effort by the Ministry of Education to use as far as possible the same graphemes for the same or similar phonemes. Pressure has therefore been made on the ‘Afar of Eritrea to adopt the “Eritrean” Latin alphabet, with the result that Eritrean ‘Afar find themselves split between the desire to keep the same alphabet as the ‘Afar of Djibouti and Ethiopia, and the political necessity to adhere to the “Eritrean” alphabet.

Among the Ethiopic-syllabary-based orthographies (cf. Table B), two opposite strategies may be discerned: the orthographies favored by communities involve a simple juxtaposition of the existing syllabary, as used for Amharic, and an adaptation to the local language on the part of the reader. The solutions envisaged by intellectuals involve instead the manipulation of the syllabary: faced with the representation of long vowels and geminate consonants, which are not marked in the syllabary, the Konso script simply does not mark them; e.g., *karmaa* ‘lion’ is written **ከርጫ** <kärmä>, and *torraa* ‘story, news’ is **ቶረ** <torä> (Ahlberg 2005). The same holds true in Wolaitta: the same string that is written (somewhat awkwardly) <geeshsha> ‘holy’ in the Latin script is simply **ጌሽ** <gešä> in the Ethiopic one.²³

To the contrary, the K’abeena Ethiopic script, “designed in 1996 and put into use since 1997” (Moges 2005: 211), consistently renders gemination “by using the symbol for a consonant without a vowel, i.e. the *sadis* form followed by the symbol which stands for the consonant with a vowel” (2005: 226).²⁴ Similarly, vowel length is represented in K’abeena by the symbol *used in Amharic* for a glottal stop with the relevant vowel. E.g., the string /ro:/ is written **ሮኦ**, which in the Ethiopic script would stand for <roʔo>, and /k’a:/ is written **ቃኦ**, which would be read <qaʔa> in Amharic. The use of the glottal stop for the symbol etymologically equivalent to a voiced pharyngeal (**ፀ**) ensures that no confusion arises between a consonant followed by a long vowel and a consonant followed by a glottal stop; cf. **ቃኦ** = /wa:/ (<waʔa>) vs. **ቃፀ** = /waʔa/ (but graphically <waʔa>).

A different, possibly more iconic system has been devised for Harari:²⁵ vowel length is represented for the front consonants /i/ and /e/ with the symbol *used in Amharic* for a sixth-order (i.e., vowel-less) *y* (**ዩ**); i.e., **ቢዩ** [bi:] = <biy>, **ቤዩ** [be:] = <bey>. For the back consonants /u/ and /o/, length is marked with the symbol *used in Amharic* for a sixth-order *w* (**ወ**); i.e., **ቡወ** [bu:] = <buw>, **ቦወ** [bo:] = <bow>.²⁶ As for long /a/, the fourth order is followed, while the first order (which in Amharic stands for /v/, often transcribed /ä/) is reserved for short /a/. This is a very natural and economical way to mark the /a/-/a:/ distinction, and had al-

ready been used by Onesimos Nasib in his Oromo publications at the end of the nineteenth century (see above, Section 3.2). E.g., /sari/ ‘mountain’ is written ሰሪ <sāri> and /sa:r/ ‘grass’ is ሳር <sar> (Abdu Rahman 1991; cf. also Leslau 1963).

Both systems are very ingenious and show how autochthonous scripts can well be brought to overcome any difficulty — a point stressed by Moges (2005: 228): “the Ethiopic script, as adopted in K’abeena, shows that it does not have any inherent deficiency in representing gemination or lengthening.” The main question is rather one of practicality and long-time success: if the K’abeena speakers and would-be readers are familiar with Amharic and the Ethiopic syllabary *as used for Amharic*, will they accept the radical changes imposed upon that same script in order to write their language? Will they quickly adopt this clever but complex way to mark vowel length and gemination, or will they simply leave these features unmarked, as the Konso and many others do when employing the syllabary in order to note down their language?

5. From status to corpus planning, II: lexical modernization between intellectual dreams and harsh realities

The lexical modernization of Oromo has received over the years a good amount of attention. Mohammed (1989) and later Griefenow-Mewis (1994) drew the attention to the inherent possibilities of Oromo in derivations and compounds. The best treatment so far is certainly Tamene’s (2000) technical dictionary. Lexical modernization has gone a long way in Oromo: countless neologisms, such as *dabalata* ‘addendum; appendix’ (from a root meaning ‘to add’), semantic extensions such as *xiyya* ‘arrow’ (not only a projectile but also a graphical symbol), semantic shifts such as *bilbila* ‘telephone’ (originally a small bell on the neck of an animal or child), and compounds such as *galmee jechoota* (‘list of words’) for ‘dictionary’ and *haala qilleensaa* (‘condition of the air/weather’) for ‘climate’ have entered the language and are by now well established. If abbreviations are a sign of the vitality and acceptance of neologisms, certainly the very common *fkn* ‘e.g.’ for *fakkeenyaaf* ‘for example’ passes the test.

Ideology is as much central in corpus planning as in status planning: faced with dialectal (and religious) variation in the word for ‘book’, written Oromo chooses the “more foreign” loanword: *kitaaba* (from Arabic *kitāb*) is preferred to *macaafa* (from Amharic *māshaf*). When Amharic has accepted (“preempted it,” in a way) an international word, Oromo tries to do without it, even at the cost of using another loan. E.g., for ‘politics’, Tamene (2000) proposed the native words *taliiga* and *malabultii*, as

well as *polotikaa* (ultimately from Italian *politica*). The winner and the word nowadays in general use is instead *siyaasaa* (a loan from Arabic *siyâsa*) and not by chance: Amharic has *polätika*. As to the native solutions, they were simply bad translations: *taliiga* (or *taliigaa*, with final long *a*) actually means ‘management’;²⁷ as for *malabultii*, it is a compound of *mala* ‘method, plan’, and *bultii* (or *bulcii*) taken in the sense of ‘government’.

But, struggling against the need to publish textbooks for the secondary schools (a task which so far only Oromo has set itself among the minority languages of the country), the recommendations of scholars and linguists are not enough and the richness of the existing vocabulary is easily forgotten. The result may be a direct adaptation, rather than a translation, of English technical and scientific vocabulary. Picking at random from a school textbook one finds:²⁸ *artimeetikii* ‘arithmetics’, *baayooloojii* ‘biology’, *elektiroomaagneetizimii* ‘electromagnetism’, *fiiziksii* ‘physics’, *ji’oo-giraafii* ‘geography’, *kaarriikulamii* ‘curriculum’, *keemistirii* ‘chemistry’, *siiviksii* ‘civics’. The order of constituents in the target language may be disregarded in compounds: *iskuweer ruutii* ‘square root’ and even *Milkii-Weeyii* ‘Milky Way’ (the Oromo order is Noun-Adjective). While Oromo has of course a native word for the planet Venus (*bakkalcha*), the textbook has *Veenusii* in the section on astronomy. When a native word is introduced it may be followed by a phonetic transcription of the English word for which it stands: *hawaa* (*yuunivarsii*) ‘The Universe’, or even by plain English in brackets: *hurkisiisuu* (*Evaporation*), *hamma dhalata* (*Birth rate*), etc. As is often the case in “young” and minor languages, proper names are often transcribed in the ethnic orthography: John Dalton becomes *Joon Daaltan* and Ernest Rutherford *Ernast Raazarfoord*.

Is such a haphazard and sloppy work the inevitable price to pay for the modernization of the language? Certainly not. In due time, many native coinages will emerge and eventually win out. But much road still lies ahead, and one may wonder about the price paid in the meantime by a whole generation of Oromo students.

6. Conclusions

Apart from Amharic — with its long tradition as an official and national language — and to a good extent Tigrinya, Oromo is by far the Ethiopian language that has experienced the greatest reshaping in order to become a modern medium in (almost) all spheres of communication. It is the only Ethiopian language (apart, of course, from Amharic) that can be widely seen all over its regional state: in Oromia (and to a certain extent also in

Addis Ababa) most private and public signs are written in Oromo (often together with Amharic in the case of private signs on shops and the like; often alongside English on public signs). Oromo is also widely used in publications, but here the lion's share is still made up by schoolbooks, and to a lesser extent by religious and political writings; fictional literature is rarely produced and sold, and when it does it mainly consists of collections of traditional, oral literature, rather than original fiction.

The reshaping of all the other languages that have been provided with an orthography (and they are still indeed a tiny minority of *all* the Ethiopian languages) lags far behind. Corpus planning, and therefore the modernization and enrichment of their vocabulary, is yet to come; most publications are primers, to which, and in a few cases only (e.g., in Sidamo), collections of proverbs or of oral literature may be added. The social impact of this production is in all probability very low, while mostly written and formal functions are still covered by Amharic, as well as, in certain contexts, English.

Politicians may take care of status planning, but corpus planning is not for them: hard, long work is needed. And it has hardly begun.

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Appendix

Table A. *Latin orthographies of the Horn of Africa*

IPA	<i>Ethiopia</i>				<i>Somalia</i>	<i>Djibouti</i>	<i>Eritrea</i> ^a		
	Oromo ^b	Sidamo ^c	Wolaitta (Latin) ^c	Konso (Latin) ^b	Somali ^b	‘Afar	Saho ^c	Beja ^c	Bilin (Latin) ^c
b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
p	(p) ^d	(p) ^d	p	p	—	—	p	—	—
p’	ph	ph	ph	—	—	—	—	—	—
m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
v	—	—	—	—	—	—	v	—	—
f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w
d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d
ɖ, ɗ	dh	‘r (dh when geminate) ^e	dh	—	dh	x	dh, rh ^f	dh	—
t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t
t’	x	x	x	—	—	—	th	th (= /t/)	th
ts	—	(ts)	ts	—	—	—	—	—	—
n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
z	(z)	(z)	z	—	—	—	z	—	(z)
s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s
s’	—	—	—	—	—	—	ts	—	(ch) ^d
r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r
l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l
dʒ	j	j	j	—	j	j	j	j	j
tʃ	ch	ch	ch	c	—	—	ç	—	?
tʃ’	c	c	c	j	—	—	ch	—	?
ɲ	ny	(ny)	ny	ny	—	—	gn ^g	—	—

ʒ	—	(zh)	zh	—	—	—	—	—	—
ʃ	sh	sh	sh	sh	sh	—	sh	sh	sh
j	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
g	g	g	g	—	g	g	g	g	g
k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k
kʰ	q	q	q	q	q (= /q/)	—	—	—	q
g ^w	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	gw	gw
k ^w	—	—	—	—	—	—	kw	kw	kw
ɣ	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	gh	—
x	—	—	—	x	kh	—	kh	kh (= /χ/)	kh
xʰ	—	—	—	—	—	—	qh	—	—
x ^w	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	khw
k ^w ʰ	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	qh
ŋ	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	ñ
ŋ ^w	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	ñw
ʃ	—	—	—	—	c	q	c	—	c
h	—	—	—	—	x	c	—	—	x
ʔ ^h	ʔ	ʔ, ʔi	ʔi	—	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ_k	ʔ	ʔ
h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h
a ^l	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a (both /a/ and /ɛ/)
e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e
i	i	i	i	i	i	i	i	i	i
o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
u	u	u	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
i	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	é

Notes on Table A:

- A few orthographies of Eritrea are omitted due to lacunous documentation and still ongoing changes; for example, the Latin alphabet used for Kunama has recently been modified in order to mark tones (Asfaha 2007).
- In Oromo, Konso, and Somali, gemination of a phoneme written with a digraph is marked by reduplication of the second member of that digraph only (i.e., <ddh> = /dq/, <ssh> = /ʃʃ/).

- c. In Sidamo, Wolaitta, Saho, and Beja, gemination of a phoneme written with a digraph is marked by reduplication of the whole digraph: <shsh> = /ʃʃ/, Wolaitta <ʔʔ> = /ʔʔ/, etc.; no clear-cut information is available for Bilin; there are no digraphs in the ‘Afar orthography.
- d. Rare phonemes, or phonemes occurring in loanwords only, are put between brackets.
- e. The phoneme /d/ is realized in Sidamo as “an apical-alveolar tap with slight downward movement of the glottis” while when geminate it is “a long implosive” (Yri 2004: 47). This double realization is reflected in the orthography. However, simple /d/ is still written <dh> when word-initial, and <r> word-medially. Yri (2004: 48) recommends to use the same symbol in any position, and to reduplicate it in geminates.
- f. The allophone /r/, written <rh>, occurs “after a vowel or after , <c>, <w> and <y>” (Vergari and Vergari 2003: 9).
- g. The digraph <gn> for a palatal nasal /ɲ/ is taken from the Italian orthography (cf. also note 9).
- h. A glottal stop is not written in word-initial position.
- i. The glottal stop in Sidamo is written either <ʔ> or <ʔʔ> (apparently depending on the schoolbook) as first member of a cluster; <ʔʔ> between vowels with identical quality; it is not written between vowels of different quality (Yri 2004: 48). This convention is only partially adhered to in the only Sidamo book we could come across (*Sidaamu afii maammashsha*. Addis Abba: Addis Ababa University, 1990 E.C. [1998]), where either <ʔ> or <ʔʔ> are used also between different vowels.
- j. The digit <7> is used for the glottal stop (in noninitial position) in Wolaitta.
- k. A hyphen <-> marks the glottal stop in Saho.
- l. Vowel length is always represented by doubling of the relevant sign.

Table B. *New Ethiopic-syllabary-based orthographies of Ethiopia and Eritrea*

IPA	Ethiopia				Eritrea
	K'abeena ^{a,b}	Konso ^{a,b}	Wolaitta ^{a,b}	Harari ^{a,b}	Bilin ^{a,b}
b	በ	ጸ	በ	በ	በ
p	ፐ	ፐ	ፐ	ፐ	ፐ
p'	ጸ	—	ጸ	—	ጸ
m	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ
v	—	—	—	—	ቨ
f	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ
w	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ
d	ደ	ደ	ደ	ደ	ደ
d, d _h	—	—	ደ	—	—
t	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ
t'	ጠ	—	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ
n	ነ	ነ	ነ	ነ	ነ
z	ዘ	—	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ
s	ሰ	ሰ	ሰ	ሰ/ሠ ^c	ሰ
s'	—	—	—	ጸ	ጸ
r	ረ	ረ	ረ	ረ	ረ
l	ለ	ለ	ለ	ለ	ለ
d _g	ጀ	ጨ	ጀ	ጀ	ጀ
tʃ	ቸ	ቸ	ቸ	ቸ	ቸ
tʃ'	ጨ	—	ጨ	ጨ	ጨ
ɲ	—	ኘ	—	ኘ	ኘ
ʒ	ዠ	—	ዠ	ዠ	ዠ
ʃ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ
j	የ	የ	የ	የ	የ
g	ጎ	—	ጎ	ጎ	ጎ
k	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ

Table B (Continued)

IPA	Ethiopia				Eritrea
	K'abeena ^{a,b}	Konso ^{a,b}	Wolaitta ^{a,b}	Harari ^{a,b}	Bilin ^{a,b}
k'	ቀ	ቀ	ቀ	ቀ	ቀ/ቀ ^d
g ^w	—	—	—	—	ጎ
k ^w	—	—	—	—	ኩ
x	—	ኸ	—	ኸ	ኸ
x ^w	—	—	—	—	ኸ
k ^{w'}	—	—	—	—	ቀ/ቀ ^d
ŋ	—	—	—	—	ጎ
ŋ ^w	—	—	—	—	ጎ
ʕ	—	—	—	—	ዐ
h	—	—	—	ሐ	ሐ
ʔ	ዐ	አ	አ	አ/ዐ ^e	አ
h	ሀ	ሀ	ሀ	ሀ	ሀ
a	(4th order) ^{f,g}	(1st order) ^{f,h}	(1st order) ^{f,g}	(1st order [short]/4th order [long]) ^{f,g}	(4th order) ^g
ä	(1st order)	—	—	—	(1st order)
e	(5th order)	(5th order)	(5th order)	(5th order)	(5th order)
i	(3rd order)	(6th order) ^g	(3rd order)	(3rd order)	(3rd order)
o	(7th order)	(7th order)	(7th order)	(7th order)	(7th order)
u	(2nd order)	(2nd order)	(2nd order)	(2nd order)	(2nd order)
i	—	—	—	—	(6th order) ⁱ

Notes on Table B:

- Following traditional usage, the consonants are shown in the first vocalic order. A consonantal sign in the sixth order in K'abeena, Wolaitta, and Harari corresponds to a consonant with no following vowel. In K'abeena, it is also used in the representation of gemination (cf. the text).
- Gemination is not represented in Wolaitta, Harari, Konso, and Bilin. It is represented in K'abeena (cf. the text).
- In Harari (as in Amharic), due to the historical merge of separate phonemes, /s/ can be represented either with ሰ or ሀ.
- In Bilin, there is alternation between ቀ and ቀ^d for /k'/, and between ቀ and ቀ^d for /k^w'/. Apparently, the characters with a stroke on top somewhat stress the glottalic feature of the relative basic form;

- e. In Harari (as in Amharic), the glottal stop can be represented either with **አ** or **ዐ**. This is due to the historical merge of the glottal stop and of the voiced pharyngeal fricative, etymologically written **ዐ**. The etymological sign for the voiced fricative is used in K’abeena for the glottal stop (cf. the text).
- f. Vowel length is not marked in Konso and Wolaitta. Cf. the text for its graphical expression in Harari and K’abeena.
- g. The distinction between the first and fourth vocalic orders may be qualitative or quantitative. It is qualitative in K’abeena and Bilin. The first order represents a mid-central vowel in K’abeena (transcribed /ä/ in Moges 2005: 214), and a mid-high vowel in Bilin. In both languages, the fourth order represents a mid-low vowel /a/. The distinction is qualitative in Harari: the first order is used for a short mid-low vowel /a/, the fourth for its long counterpart.
- h. The Konso vocalic inventory is /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. No characters in the fourth order are used because the vocalization in /a/ is represented by the first order and there is no third order because the vocalization in /i/ is represented by the sixth order.
- i. In Bilin, the sixth order represents a high-central vowel (notice the use of the fourth, first, and sixth order for the representation of low, central, and high-central vowels, respectively).

Notes

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1. In order to reflect common pronunciation and facilitate reading, the transliteration of Amharic and Ge'ez terms and names is rather free. This means that no phonemic/standard transliteration is used (see note 24 for the phonemic/standard transcription of some vowels).
 2. There are no family names in Ethiopia; following local usage, the first name is used for Ethiopian authors, with the father's name given in the references only without intervening comma.
 3. For example, Imperial Decree No. 3 of 1944, aiming at regulating the work of foreign missionaries, stated that Amharic only was the language of instruction and preaching, and that local languages could be used for ordinary oral communication only (Mekuria 1995: 55).
 4. Gurage is not a language but the traditional name of a cluster of, in a few cases very different, Semitic languages.
 5. Hailemariam et al. (1999), as well as Hailemariam's (2003) monograph, are the major sources on the Eritrean language policy and should be consulted for further information.
 6. Tigrinya and Arabic — taken as the written media of, respectively, the Christian and Muslim parts of Eritrea — had been used in education during the British occupation (1941–1952). A weekly newspaper in Tigrinya was founded in 1942, as well as a Tigrinya Language Council responsible for corpus planning (Hailemariam et al. 1999: 479).
 7. According to Proclamation 7, 1992, by the Transitional Government, fourteen regional states were originally planned, but five of them were later merged to form the SNNP.
 8. The figures on Ethiopian ethnic groups are taken from Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1998). Another Central Ometo group, the Oyda (numbering 14,075), was instead counted separately.
 9. Siebert (1995) reports on the project for a common Gamo-Gofa-Dawro variety to be used in education. These plans predate the WOGAGODA failed experiment.
 10. Other Ethiopian languages — Oromo included — have at most a local or regional use as interethnic media.
 11. The following lines are drawn extensively from Mekuria (1995), an excellent and lively account of Onesimos Nasib's life and work.
 12. Most Semitic languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea have a seven-vowel system but no vowel length; consonant gemination is widespread but is not marked in the syllabary.
 13. A few biographical notes on this Oromo scholar and his activities can be found in Hayward and Hassan (1981).
 14. The *Qubee* has not been without competitors even among Latin-based orthographies: in the 1970s, a slightly divergent alphabet had been proposed, whose main difference was the use of <th> for ejective /t'/. This is the system used in an early Oromo primer published in Somalia (*Furaa Afaan Oromo'o*. Mogadishu, 1976). Another source of

- variation has been the palatal nasal /ɲ/, which has often been written ⟨gn⟩ (following here the Italian orthography). This solution has often been used, as a kind of orthographic shibboleth, by Muslim Oromo and the Islamic movements in eastern Ethiopia.
15. For Harari in Arabic script, cf. Shaykh Abū al-Hasan (2000) and also Wagner (1997: 102–104).
 16. Crass (2005: 11) considers K’abeena to be in a situation of dialect chain with Alaaba and, to a lesser degree, with Kambaata and T’imbaaro. The overall language is generally called Kambaata, too, which would consist of two dialect groups: Alaaba-K’abeena versus Kambaata-T’imbaato. According to Crass (2005: 11), K’abeena is used in the first three school years, while an extension up to the sixth grade is foreseen. So far, the first schoolbook has been published (in year 2000); the second and third volume not yet. A K’abeena–Amharic dictionary is likewise in preparation.
 17. Only official orthographies and orthographies used in publications by nonofficial bodies (such as religious denominations) are shown in the tables. Proposals made by scholars or political bodies in conferences and the like, but not implemented in publications, are excluded.
 18. This is definitely a very incomplete list; e.g., Libido (a Highland East Cushitic language) “is written in a modified Latin script (connected with the Oromo orthography)” (R. Meyer p.c.).
 19. Similarly, in Kambaata “Oroomo and Hadiyya terms were introduced to replace Amharic terms, because Oroomo and Hadiyya sounded more Kambaata and less Amharic” (Y. Treis p.c.).
 20. Much the same suggestions have been proposed by Yri (2004) for Sidamo; again, Yri proposes to consistently mark ejectives with ⟨h⟩, thus reversing the signs used for /tʃ/ and /tʃʰ/, and doing away with the grapheme ⟨x⟩ for /tʰ/ and ⟨q⟩ for /kʰ/. He also suggests to use ⟨y⟩ for post-alveolarity and “not to repeat the diacritic in a geminate, but to write it only once at the end” (2004: 50; emphasis in the original). In practice, the widely established digraph ⟨sh⟩ should be replaced by ⟨sy⟩ (on the pattern of ⟨ny⟩ for /ɲ/); moreover, ⟨ssy⟩ would replace ⟨shsh⟩ for /ʃʃ/, ⟨kkh⟩ would replace ⟨qq⟩ for /kkʰ/, ⟨pph⟩ would replace ⟨phph⟩ for /ppʰ/, etc.
 21. Unlike in Somali, there is no uvular /q/ in ‘Afar.
 22. According to the 1994 Census, there were also 23,275 Saho in Ethiopia.
 23. The rule which prescribes that both elements of a digraph must be doubled in geminates is strictly adhered to in the Wolaitta Bible in Latin script (*Geeshsha Maxaafaa*, The Bible Society of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, 1995 E.C. [2002]) and in the Wolaitta-Amharic Dictionary (*Wolaittatto Qaalatu Amaaratto Birshshettaa*, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, 1991 E.C.); scarcely so in less controlled writing, such as many commercial signs in the Wolaitta capital town of Soddo.
 24. Each symbol of the Ethiopic syllabary represents the combination of a consonant and a vowel. The symbols are traditionally presented as a grid with the vowels as the horizontal and the consonants as the vertical axis. This means that each row of the grid presents the various forms that a consonantal sign may take with all the different vowels. The left-most column (first order) is graphically the simplest form of a consonant and stands for that consonant followed by the vowel /ä/ (generally [ɛ] phonetically); in the second column the same consonant followed by the vowel /u/ is shown; in the third, the consonant plus the vowel /i/, and so on. The sixth-order is used both for a consonant followed by a central vowel /ə/ (or [ɨ]) or for the consonant alone, e.g., in word-final position or as first member of a consonant cluster.
 25. According to the 1994 Census, the Harari ethnic group numbered 21,757 and there were 21,283 mother-tongue speakers of Harari.

26. It will be remarked that this system is very similar to the strategy used to mark long vowels in classical Semitic languages, most consistently in Arabic and, to a certain extent, Hebrew and Aramaic.
27. This is the only translation given in the *Galmee Jechoota Afaan Oromoo–Amaaraa–Inglizii* ('Oromo–Amharic–English Dictionary', Finfinnee [Addis Ababa], 1998 E.C. [2006]).
28. The following examples are taken from *Hojii Garee* (Dhaabbata Maxxansaa Meegaa/Mega Publishing Enterprise, Addis Ababa, 2004), a textbook for secondary schools (the title means 'Team Work').

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