

CHAPTER 13

MORE ON THE ETHIOPIAN LANGUAGE CRISIS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition. Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

—THE ETHIOPIAN CONSTITUTION

[T]he current education system in Ethiopia is a failed system by many standards. Students go to school and having finished a four-year training, they cannot even [properly] read and write in their own native language... Students complete secondary schools and even [tertiary education] and graduate without gaining sufficient knowledge... In my opinion, the main reason for the failure of the education system in Ethiopia is the government's decision to [keep] the English language as the medium of instruction in the country... the Ethiopian student is obligated to learn in a language he or she does not speak, [which means that] the student has difficulty learning in the English language, and the teacher also has difficulty teaching in the English language.

—TEKESTE NEGASH,
Ethiopian scholar and educationist

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Following the liberalization of the sociopolitical space in the early 1990s, Ethiopians wrote a new constitution that reflected the reality of a multilingual nation. The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia that came into force in 1995 corrected the historical errors made by previous constitutions and governments with their lopsided language policies, many of which were unwritten. As a solution to this, Article 39 of the Constitution stipulates that “Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its language; to express and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.” The Constitution provided the legal framework for the establishment of nine federated regions and two special administrative areas that make up the new Ethiopia dreamed by many including those who sacrificed their lives in the struggle against the Derig regime—a military communist dictatorship that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 until it was removed by the coalition forces of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front in 1991. The regions of the new Ethiopia (**Figure 13.1**) have their own legislative, judiciary, and executive bodies with a working language at the regional level in addition to any other working language they may have for each zone within them (**Table 13.1**).

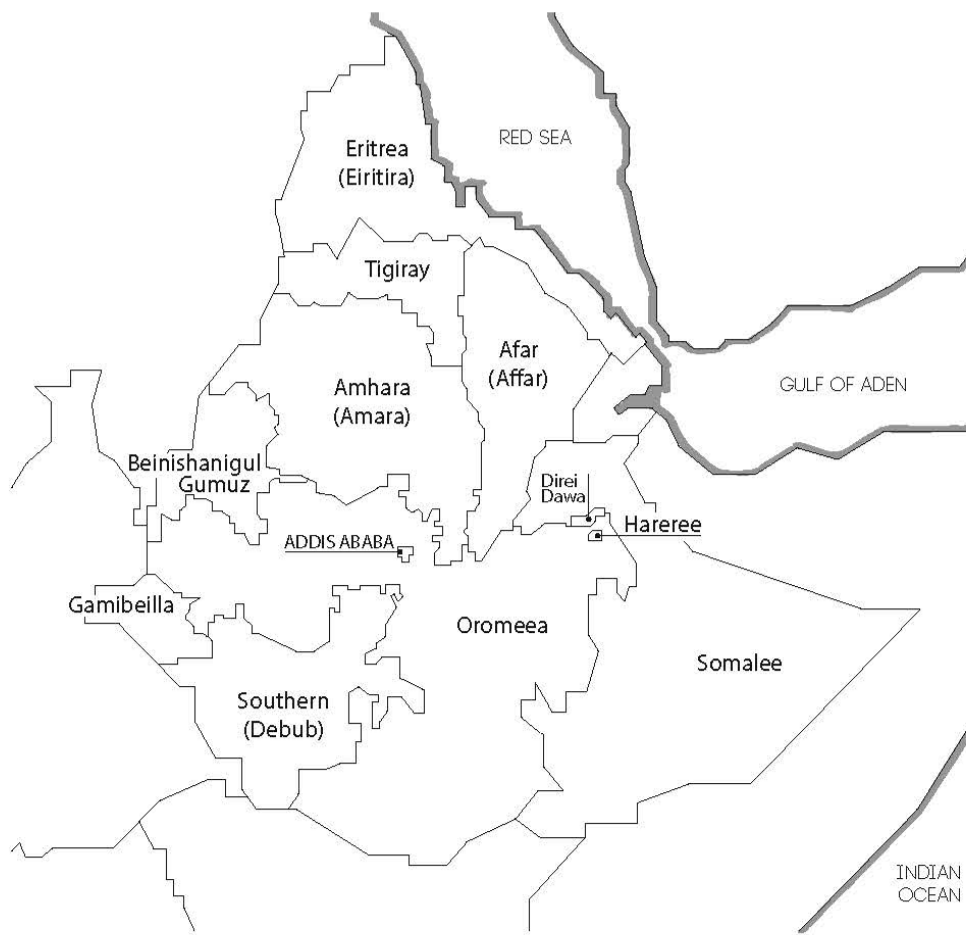


Figure 13.1: The regions and special administrative areas of Ethiopia

The Constitution also stipulates that “Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.” Amharic has been the lingua franca in Ethiopia for the last few centuries. Various Ethiopian leaders in the past 150 years, including the great defender of Ethiopia Emperor Yohannis (Yohannes) IV (1837-1889), who rose from Tigiray, used Amharic to govern. Today, Amharic is spoken as widely as ever before. In fact, anecdotal evidence indicates that more and more people from all corners of the country are learning Amharic as their first language. Amharic is thought in elementary and high schools throughout Ethiopia as a national language in addition to local language instructions in any particular area. In addition to having millions of first language speakers, today Amharic is the most widely spoken second language in Ethiopia according to the 2007 Population and Housing Census. In spite of this Ethiopia does not have a detailed, comprehensive language policy reflecting the complex needs and opportunities that exist for communication in a nation with 80 languages and dialects. The necessity for developing such a policy will be discussed in this chapter.

Ethiopia’s language dilemma will have implications for generations to come unless appropriate measures are taken sooner rather than later.

Table 13.1: The official or working languages of the nine regions and two special administrative areas of Ethiopia

NUMBER*	REGION	WORKING LANGUAGE (REGIONAL LEVEL)	WORKING LANGUAGES (ZONAL LEVEL)
R. 1	Tigray	Tigrinya	Tigrinya
R. 2	Affar	Affarinya	Affarinya
R. 3	Amhara	Amharic (Amarinya)	Amharic, Oromiffa (Oromee Zone)
R. 4	Oromee (Oromia)	Oromiffa	Oromiffa, various dialects
R. 5	Somalee	Somaleenya	Somaleenya
R. 6	Beinishanigul & Gumuz	Amharic	Beinishanigul, Gumuz
R. 7 – 11*	Southern*	Amharic	Various
R. 12	Gamibeilla	Amharic	
R. 13	Hareree	Oromiffa, Amharic, Harereenya	
R. 14	Addis Ababa*	Amharic	Amharic
	Direi Dawa (Dire Dawa)*	Amharic, Oromiffa, Somaleenya	
	Eritrea	Tigrinya	Tigrinya

Notes: (1) The region numbers were assigned by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-95) after the fall of the military government to tentatively identify the newly minted federal regions until these regions gained their official names. Although the general geographic areas where the new regions cover were informally known by the ethnic names of their inhabitants for centuries, despite the arbitrariness of their official boundaries—such as Tigray, Amhara, Oromo, and Affar—it was necessary to confirm their names through each region's legislature. Today the ethnic distribution and the political boundaries are coterminous. (2) Southern Region is an amalgamation of five regions (Regions 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11), which merged to form a single socio-economic region in 1994. (3) The official name of the Southern Region in English is Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). (4) Direi Dawa (Dire Dawa) and Addis Ababa are special administrative areas.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN THE ETHIOPIAN LANGUAGE CRISIS

Although additional research may be required, I propose that three fundamental causes have precipitated the current language crisis in Ethiopia (also refer to Chapter 5: Overview of Language Crisis and Miscommunication in Ethiopia). First, South Central Amharic's loss of its stronghold—the Amhara hinterland—combined with illiteracy and lack of a strong literary culture are partly responsible for the deterioration of the language's ability to convey accurate information. Second, Addis Ababa's disproportional role and influence over the rest of the country as the political, cultural, and economic capital city of the country has skewed the development of language in Ethiopia. What Addis does and speaks affects the rest of the country because it is the source of almost all broadcasting services and print media in the country. Addisabans have one of the worst language skills in the nation, which they unfortunately effortlessly export to the rest of the country as residents of the largest urban area in the nation. The third and perhaps the most serious menace that has ravaged Ethiopian languages, particularly Amharic, may be the continued use of English as the medium of instruction past the junior elementary school system of the nation.

Many Addisabans are able to speak languages other than Amharic, Addis' official language, making them conduits for conveying the metropolis' language trends, good or bad, to their ancestral languages and regions.

THE DEVASTATING EFFECT OF THE USE OF ENGLISH AS THE MEDIUM OF EDUCATION

The dominance of English in Ethiopian schools started sometime after the end of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1941. Before 1941, Emperor Mineelik (Menelik) had established what was the first modern school in Ethiopia in 1908 (Wodajo, 1959) with an emphasis on the study of different languages including Giiz, Amharic, Arabic, Italian, and French. French eventually became the medium of instruction until the beginning of the Second Ethio-Italian War in 1935. By the time the Italians were defeated and schools were reopened, it is said that the war had decimated what was a tiny progress made in modern education in Ethiopia with devastating consequences for generations.¹ Wright (1964) argued, however, that after the restoration of the imperial throne in 1941 “interest in modern printed books [began] to be apparent; the Italian war and occupation had brought many people into contact with new ideas, and shown them the need to adopt new attitudes in a “modernized” world.”²

In the years following the end of the Second World War, British influence on the government of Emperor Haile Selassie resulted in the installation of a curriculum that mandated the use of English as the medium of instruction from grade seven onwards (i.e. middle, secondary and tertiary educational institutions),³ making the nation almost entirely dependent on a foreign language for its future. Not only is this a potential area of vulnerability for Ethiopian security, but it is also the main cause of the language crisis currently gripping the nation with devastating socio-economic and political consequences for generations to come.

Ironically, English is choking the development of Ethiopian languages even when very few people finish school with a mastery of the English language. Most students are taught by Ethiopian teachers who studied English as a second language from their teachers who studied English as a second language and so on. Ojo and Umera-Okeke (undated paper) argued that part of the reason for the poor acquisition of English in the Ethiopian school system could be traced back to the flight of foreign teachers, including Britons and Americans, during the 1970's political instability in the country that started with the demise of the Imperial government and the rise to power of the Derig (military junta). The loss of highly educated Ethiopians to the Derig's genocidal campaign *Qey Shibbir* (Red Terror) or self-imposed exile in opposition to the regime resulted in the recruitment of unqualified teachers to higher educational institutions. The result has been generations of graduates who are incapable of articulating almost anything in Amharic, English, or any other language. Many graduates of Ethiopian colleges and universities turn out to be linguistically and professionally stunted after spending much of their school years studying in a language neither they nor their teachers properly understood. According to Baye Yimam (2000 E.C.), employers frequently complain that graduate students at all levels lack the skills to prepare ordinary reports and are unable to formulate their thoughts and express them using correct sentences.

Similarly, Tekeste Negash, who is an educationist and a visiting professor at Addis Ababa University and who was once a student in the Imperial Ethiopia of the 1950's and 60's, argued in an Amharic radio interview (SBS Radio, 2014) that today the Ethiopian education system has failed. According to Negash, even after finishing a four-year training, the majority of students cannot correctly read and

The Ethiopian school system is producing ever increasing number of graduates who are linguistically and professionally stunted.

No nation on earth with a sizable population has become developed by using a foreign language as its medium of instruction in its education system.

write in their native language—language that they are taught as one of the subjects in school. Graduates leave secondary schools and even tertiary education without gaining sufficient knowledge due to a poor comprehension of the medium of instruction—the English language. Negash, who was born in the 1940's, further stated that when he was a student, most of his teachers were Americans and Indians. When he finished grade 8 in 1962, the number of grade 8 students in all of Ethiopia was only 8,162, which according to Negash, made it necessary to hire foreign teachers trained in English. However, as the reach of formal education increased in the country such as by the time the Derig came to power in 1974, it became apparent that continuing the English language as the medium of instruction was untenable. Negash further asserted that the great weakness of the education system is that the student is obligated to learn in an environment where he or she struggles to learn in English the same way as the teacher struggles to teach in English.⁴ Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the reasons why the majority of students in Ethiopia have very low levels of language skills.

I propose that Ethiopian students are triple burdened.* Firstly, the challenge of having to constantly refer to the dictionary, encyclopedia or other sources to translate foreign words even to work on simple assignments is a great burden that takes crucial time away from the actual goal of learning the subject matter. The burden can eventually wear most students to the point of negatively affecting their performance in school as well as their professional future. In a 2012 Ethiopian Television reportage on a computer interface developed by an Ethiopian computer innovator that used Ethiopic for its input, several computer engineering students at the Addis Ababa University stated that the prospect of using Ethiopian languages directly on a computer application was extremely necessary and beneficial for the nation. Reflecting the sentiment of millions of Ethiopians, the students further stated that most of them had not been able to be connected to the rest of the world because of lack of mastery of English and that many people across the country had been unable to develop their potential due to the language barrier.

Since most resources are provided in English, the students lamented that as soon as they started working on any project, they faced the challenges of dealing with English often involving the necessity of having to spend valuable time looking up the meanings of English words in the dictionary, encyclopedia or other language resources. The fact that a proud people like the Ethiopians should be reduced to learning a foreign language in order to learn their country's history or any other subject is indefensible. A nation that successfully resisted the Scramble for Africa more than a century ago, Ethiopians were never colonized by any nation that could have subjected them to a foreign language or culture. Unfortunately, their own successive governments have been unwittingly imposing a foreign language on them with devastating consequences to generations of students with extremely negative spillover effects on society.

Secondly, learning a foreign language in order to learn another subject is not just a matter of translating words in a dictionary but a great barrier of knowledge to

* As a former student in the Ethiopian school system starting from the primary levels to graduating from Addis Ababa University, I can testify to this with a first hand experience.

students born and raised in a radically different world. Even with a dictionary at hand, the cultural and social context carried in a foreign language, such as some real life examples or idiomatic expressions may not be understood by an Ethiopian student in an Ethiopian context, which could make the learning process excruciatingly painful. Negash (2006) argued that,

English is not only a language but it is a value system. Attending all classes in English is tantamount to the wholesale adaptation of the culture that the English language represents at the price of one's native language and the values that such language contains.⁵

Lastly, the challenges of having to understand the actual subject (such as calculus or biochemistry) regardless of the medium of instruction is a burden on its own that does not need to be made worse by the addition of other unnecessary burdens. Students from low-income families, which are the majority of Ethiopian students, face even more burden compared to their peers from richer families when it comes to learning foreign languages. Students from wealthier families often go to the choicest schools and get relatively better training in English in addition to being exposed to better learning materials including through video and the Internet, while their poorer peers lack such opportunities.

It is not conceivable that Ethiopia can achieve its full potential without developing and using its own languages at the highest levels, such as in universities and technological and research institutions. Prah (2013) asserted that no country could aim to progress by using a foreign language spoken only by a minority, and Negash (2006) argued that modernization should not mean westernization. Ethiopia cannot be an exception in this regard, and although English should continue to be taught in schools as a subject, it must not be used as the medium of instruction, if the country wants to rescue its education system and bring the language crisis to an end. That the Ethiopic language crisis mainly affects urban areas, where the Ethiopian education system is the strongest, is a testament to the failure of the education system that has for generations relied on English as the medium of instruction as well as a rebuke to the authorities who have continued to ignore the problem.

Negash (2006) argued that the explosive growth of the school system throughout Ethiopia since 1991 coupled with the use of English as the medium of instruction are the fundamental reasons for the current education crisis in the country. In fact, in spite of the unprecedented growth in enrollment, the education system in Ethiopia is actually "on the verge of collapse."⁶ In order to eliminate the "curse of English as the medium of instruction," Negash further asserted that in 1980 the Derig's Ministry of Education had entertained the idea of using Amharic as the medium of instruction instead of English, and in 1983 the regime was advised by a committee who reviewed the matter to "study the issue further within the context of a new language policy."⁷ Nevertheless, at least officially, the medium of instruction in Ethiopia remains unchanged despite the mounting evidence against using English as the medium of instruction in the nation. It is interesting to note that in some regions, as a sign of desperation, some teachers have stopped teaching in English in grades 7 and 8 according to Negash. Negash (2006) stated that,

Both teachers and students found themselves in a classic vicious circle. The students could not follow their studies in English because their knowledge of English was poor and the teachers could not help their students since they themselves were not good at it.⁸

Negash attributed the failure rate in grade 10 of 70% to the lack of qualified textbooks in the students' native languages. The situation is not a lot different at higher levels. Ethiopian universities are consistently ranked among the lowest in international metrics even among African universities. The great tragedy of the English language-based Ethiopian school system may be that higher educational institutions produce graduates who, on average, are unable to properly narrate most things verbally, let alone to prepare professional reports and technical literature acceptable by the standards of any language—foreign or domestic (also see Bayei Yimam, 2000 E.C). As Ojo and Umera-Okeke (undated paper) observed, this is the “shock of most expatriate [teachers] in Ethiopia who run into the problem of [not] being understood by these students.”⁹

ETHIOPIAN LANGUAGES: USE THEM OR LOSE THEM

Not being used to their full potential, Ethiopian languages are losing their capacity as efficient communication tools. Just like disuse of muscle necessarily causes muscle wasting, disuse of language can have severe consequences that take root over time as evidenced in Amharic and other Ethiopian languages. Amharic and other domestic languages are being hollowed out quickly because English is eating into their vocabulary and grammar to the extent that the spoken and written communications by the Ethiopian elite today can barely be understood by the vast majority of Ethiopians. Neither are those communications more efficient than they were before the onset of the language crisis a few generations ago. Ethiopian languages are slowly dying since they are not being used in higher levels of communication. In an Amharic radio interview (2014), Negash stated that Amharic had not been made to develop to be used as a language of science and technology and instead of being ushered in properly, informal Amharic was creeping in through the back doors as slang and the slang was being used in schools. Negash criticized the phenomenon and called for the abolition of English language as the medium of instruction because it was hampering the healthy development of native languages. Griefenow-Mewis (2009) lamented the fact that despite having been used as an official language of Ethiopia for a long time, teaching materials for higher grades of education were not developed in Amharic. To make Amharic and other native languages usable in science and technology, Negash recommended that Government make a policy change sooner rather than later since it would take significant time to develop native languages for use in science and technology.

In many ways, the deterioration of Amharic and other Ethiopian languages as vehicles of efficient communication is an unintended result of the use of English as the medium of education in the country. Therefore, Government should put in place a plan to reverse this situation without delay. Government should also ensure that logic, grammar, and rhetoric, among others, are thought in all levels of the education system to create a generation that can communicate to each other more effectively than ever before in the history of Ethiopia. In so doing,

not only will Ethiopia be able to give its much deserving students the opportunity to learn better and quicker, but it will also help lay down the foundation for an economically and socially strong society.

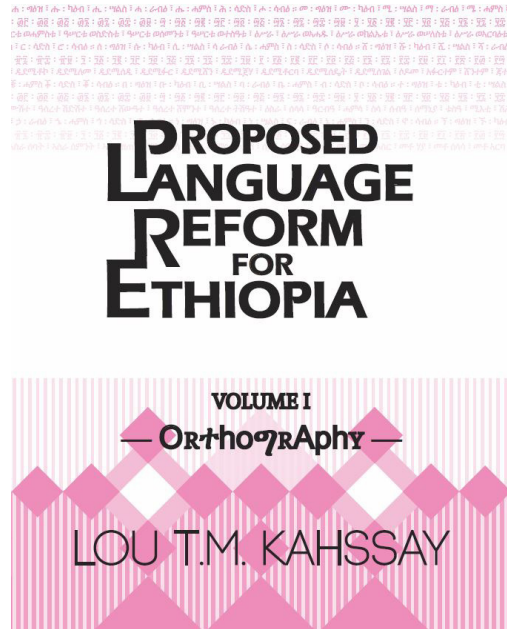
Another argument I propose against the use of English as the mandatory medium of education in Ethiopian schools is that it may be unconstitutional. The Ethiopian constitution guarantees the peoples' right to use their languages. Amharic is the working language of the federal government. Regional governments should be given special federal funding so that they can provide special schools (or special classes within regular schools) that use Amharic as the medium of instruction as a choice for students born in other regions or students whose parents are born in other regions and would like to be schooled in Amharic. Such schools or classes will have the local working language of the region as a mandatory subject in their curriculum while Amharic will be used to teach all other subjects.

The federal government may have to work with the regional governments to set up such schools or come up with a nationwide special schools system funded and run by the federal Ministry of Education. Universities and all other higher educational institutions funded by the federal government must use Amharic as their medium of instruction. If regional governments decide to fund their institutions of higher education, they can use their local language as the medium of instruction, especially since this can help them retain the skilled labour they produce. One of the unfortunate consequences of the use of English as the medium of education in Ethiopia has been what is referred to as human capital flight or brain drain. Every year, Africa loses billions of dollars due to brain drain. In effect, Africa subsidizes Western economies by providing them with skilled labour free of charge. Today, many students who were taught by Ethiopian taxpayers' money work in Western nations, particularly in English-speaking countries, at Ethiopia's great expense.

ORTHOGRAPHIC HARMONIZATION

The concept of orthographic harmonization, which is part of the solution to the Ethiopian language crisis, shall be defined as the use of alphabets based on a home-grown variety to the exclusion of all foreign varieties so that there is some orthographic harmony among the various writing systems in Ethiopia. Currently, the various alphabets in Ethiopia can be categorized into two major types—Ethiopic-based and Latin-based. Ethiopic-based alphabets include the Güz, Tigrinya, and Amharic alphabets among others. These are alphabets that are used as the writing systems for Ethiosemitic languages. The Latin-based alphabets, on the other hand, are used by many Ethiocushitic languages, such as Oromiffa and Somaleenya. As the proposed Ethiopic alphabet is home-grown, I propose that all alphabets in Ethiopia be reformed so that each one is Ethiopic-based. The proposed Ethiopic alphabet will not only eliminate the drawbacks of the traditional script—which are often cited as being the reasons Ethiocushitic language groups abandoned the script—but it will surpass the Latin alphabet in its ability to represent the sounds of the various languages in Ethiopia as discussed later in this chapter. The benefits of harmonizing the alphabets of Ethiopia include the social, economic and political issues summarized below:

End of sample pages from Chapter 13 of



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