



What Language Should Ethiopians Speak?

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This essay attempts to resolve the age-old controversy of the use of one language in Ethiopia as a lingua franca or a working language, and will discuss the anatomy of language, not only in its narrow definition related to the mechanical facilitation of communication but also in its broader conception of expressing and embodying culture in the micro and macro senses.

I have addressed the question of “official” language in Ethiopia as far back as 1990 when I defended my doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. Since then, I have raised issues pertaining to a working language for Ethiopia in many of my articles and in my debut book *ETHIOPIA: The Political Economy of Transition*.¹

Recently, I have come across a title ‘Choosing a Working Language in Multiethnic Nations: Rethinking Ethiopia’s Language Policy’ by Fiseha Haftetsion Gebresellassie, and the central theme (or message) of his essay is to discard Amharic and use English instead as a working language for Ethiopia. Since the author of this article cautioned the reader not to quote him because his essay is still under construction and is not yet published in a journal, I will have to respect his copyright wish. However, I will make general references to his work so that readers could benefit from the critical appraisal I am going to make in this essay.

From making a cursory glance and then, for the second time, a serious reading between lines of Ato Fiseha’s essay, I can sense his sincerity in his overall deliberations and analyses. However, his proposal of abandoning Amharic as working language and replacing it by English is an idea that I am fiercely opposed to. I shall demonstrate my stance on this controversy later, and now I like to begin by underscoring several pertinent issues such as the significance of indigenous languages, the essentialist and social contexts of language, and above all the significance of language in the presentation of history, culture, and identity.

Ato Fiseha’s thesis boils down to the utilitarian function of language because he reasons that the use of English could enable Ethiopians to use a neutral language and help Ethiopia easily integrate into the global economy. To be sure, he succinctly puts the pros and cons vis-à-vis Amharic and English as lingua franca, but he does not thoroughly examine the complex and subtle nuance of language attributed especially to culture, history, and identity that I have alluded to above.

Language does not just constitute a jumble of words that people use to communicate with one another. It is not also simply a formally structured speech with some rules and grammar. Language goes beyond all these technicalities and embodies rather expressions of conventions, beliefs, oral traditions, religious principles, talents, scientific and

philosophical extrapolations, and reflections of names and identities (constant reminders of who we are as a people).

J. N. Hattiangadi, who superbly examines ‘philosophical reflections in the evolution of language and knowledge’, argues, “Languages presuppose social conventions. If we understand each other to any degree of sophistication, then it is because we share the conventions (e.g. the “idiom”) of some linguistic tradition. The argument for believing that social conventions are necessary for language – in some sense of the word “convention” – lies in the existence of diversity of languages.”²

All linguists, including Hattiangadi, acknowledged that the main function of language is communication, but they all also agree that language is a social phenomenon. The expressions used in languages are largely influenced and determined by the respective cultures of societies. Conventions are generally agreed upon – accepted by the majority members of a community and/or society – *modus operandi* that particularly regulate expressions and guide members of society in selecting and employing words, for example, the consequence of the use of polite and/or vulgar terms in public arenas.

The words that we use in our respective languages, however, are not mere words. They have meanings and “meaning is best studied in relation to culture and thought”³ as R. A. Hudson amply puts it. If the meaning of a word, a concept, a proverb, a puzzle, a metaphor, or an overarching ideology is understood in the context of culture, then we must pause for a moment and diagnose culture: It is a cumulative and collective human experience that is transmitted from generation to generation. In brief, it is acquired knowledge of a given people; it is their memory as well as their history that they understand. But, people can better understand their experience through their own language only, not via alien languages that could neither help them remember their oral traditions and history, nor assist them in reaffirming their identity, nor adequately interpret for them the nuances of their cultures.

Indigenous languages, unlike alien languages, help people place themselves in the larger society and in the world. “A good deal of evidence shows,” says Hudson, “that people use language in order to locate themselves in multidimensional social space.”⁴

Ethiopia, like other multiethnic and multicultural countries, is a perfect example of a people who live side by side in a multidimensional social space. In other words, Ethiopia is home to diverse cultures – 75 to 80 linguistic groups – and they should be able to use their local languages to celebrate their cultures, but they should also use Amharic to communicate with one another.

Ethiopians have no choice but to use Amharic as their *lingua franca*. It is the only one language that most Ethiopians understand and speak, and hence the only language that could conveniently serve as a working language for Ethiopians, especially if Ethiopians begin to perceive the language as a tool for communication.

I personally don’t harbor any illusion with respect to the use of Amharic as an official language in the olden days. There is no doubt that it was a dominant and privileged language and an instrument of oppression during the long reigns of the monarchs. However, if we make a little glance unto Ethiopian history, Amharic did not initially evolve as a dominant language, but by virtue of the geographical location of its speakers – inhabiting mostly in central Ethiopia – the language served, by default, as a bridge between northern and southern Ethiopia. Long before Emperors Haile Selassie and

Menelik, it was Emperor Yohannes who recognized the significance of Amharic as one that could be used as a lingua franca.

If we now employ a little logic vis-à-vis the use of Amharic, we could begin to appreciate, for instance, why Emperor Yohannes, who spoke Tigrinya and Amharic, had to communicate with the Abba Jiffar (who spoke Afan Oromo) in Amharic. By the same token, those patriotic and wonderful Ethiopians who converged at Adwa in 1896 to fight the Italian invading forces had no choice but to communicate with one another in Amharic. How else could Balcha Abba Nefso (Oromo) converse with Alula Abba Nega (Tigrayan), assuming that they had a chat at least after the resounding victory of Ethiopians?

In order for present generation of Ethiopians to recognize one Ethiopian language as working language, rather than an alien one, however, they must transcend their ethnocentric values and their narrow minded attitudes. They must at least emulate the integrationist policies of their forefathers. They should also be able to distinguish languages from their corresponding speakers. Otherwise, they will never liberate themselves from inhibiting stereotypical prejudices. In advancing this line of argument of mine, I like to make reference to a very lucid and cogent argument once presented by John Chaffee: “When we fall into stereotyping, we are not thinking critically. The ability to think critically gives us the insight and intellectual ability to distinguish people’s language use from their individual qualities, to correct inaccurate beliefs about people, and to avoid stereotypical responses in the future. These insights contribute to enlightened relationships with others and provide guidance for our spoken and written use of language.”⁵

Once we are enlightened, we will begin to see Amharic as a language and not as a tool of oppression, and even if it was used at one point by the dominant and oppressive classes, it is no longer a politico-cultural language and if we have a clear mind on this, we will avoid all potential conflicts in the future. Unfortunately, a significant number of Oromos rallied around the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), still perceive Amharic as language of the enemy or the oppressor, hence they would not speak in Amharic and they choose to converse with other Ethiopians in English. Those Oromos who are rallied around the Ethiopian Federalist Democratic Forum (opposition party) and the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO, part of the ruling EPRDF party), on the other hand, don’t mind speaking Amharic but they too would not encourage Oromifa to be written in Geez alphabets and they have chosen Latin instead.

What our Oromo brothers and sisters were unable to do is to ‘distinguish people’s languages from their individual qualities’ or from the speakers, and they have not understood that Amharic is not an oppressive language and that Latin alphabets are not efficient enough to represent the rich and complex language and culture of the Oromos.

Had our Oromo brothers and sisters considered using Geez alphabets (Fidel), they would have easily captured the subtlety of their language and culture more efficiently and elegantly in Fidel. Moreover, most Ethiopians – save the historians – don’t seem to know that even ancient Armenia had borrowed Geez Fidel for liturgy from Ethiopia. Similarly, East Asian nations like Korea and Japan borrowed Chinese characters and modified them to suit their cultures.

What is the point I am trying to make with respect to Geez Fidel? The answer is simple: Latin alphabets are extremely deficient compared to the Ethiopian Fidel (also known as

Ethiopic) in regards to capturing or representing words, concepts, ideas etc in a written form. Here is why: The following Geez characters don't have equivalents in Latin and hence could not be written in English or other European languages:

ጸ ቀ ጠ ጨ ጰ

The closest you can get to the above Ethiopian characters are **Tse, Qe, Te, Che,** and **Pe** respectively. The one Latin character that truly corresponds to the Geez Fidel in terms of its phonetic qualities and pronunciation (used by Spanish and Portuguese and not English) is **ñ**, which sounds exactly like the Ethiopian **ጸ**. Other than this, Latin could not best serve the Ethiopian interest in sociolinguistics.

Why do we then want to adopt a language and its alphabets that do not represent our languages and cultures? Some fifteen years ago, in a mini-conference with my fellow Africans, I entered a dialogue on African cultures and languages, particularly in regards to lack of written culture. Most of my colleagues seemed to have forgotten that there were scripts used in many parts of Africa but most of them have been lost. Some of these alphabets are the Yoruba pitch characters in which three pitches are used for a single character or a word and they would give three different sounds and three different meanings (e.g. Oko, could mean canoe, spear, or married man); the Nsibidi characters of the Ejagham of Cameroon; not to mention the hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic styles of the ancient Egyptians, and the cursive alphabets of Kush.

However, my African colleagues were very much aware of the survival and existence of Ethiopian alphabets. I then used the opportunity to explain and write the Ethiopian characters and in due course of our discussion I suggested to them that other Africans use Ethiopic in lieu of Latin, in order to efficiently enrich their languages. All of them have agreed with my proposal and I suggested that we could begin writing Swahili in Geez Fidel as our pilot project. This idea, of course, did not materialize but at least there was a positive response by my fellow Africans to embrace the Ethiopian genius in an effort to practically unite the continent.

Why is that we want to write our languages with difficulty by adopting Latin/English when we have a ready-made, easy to write, and elegant alphabet? For instance, if my Oromo brothers want to write the word 'acid' in Oromifa by using Latin, s/he would write as 'Singigeesso' (11 characters), but if it were in Geez Fidel it would simply be ሲንገገግሶ (5 characters). By the same token, 'accountability' in Oromifa would be 'Shallagama' (10 Latin characters) and could have been simply ሻላጋማ (4 Geez characters).

On top of this representation problem in spoken language, literacy also must be considered seriously. Out of the 35 + million Oromos, how many of them are literate in Latin or English? Out of the estimated 83 million Ethiopians, how many of them are literate in English? Is it easier to teach Ethiopians in Amharic and make them write in Geez Fidel or in English and train them to write Latin alphabets? The answers are abundantly clear and I leave them to be figured out by the reader.

The current arrangement (as per the Ethiopian constitution) of Amharic as a working language of Ethiopia and the freedom granted to other ethnic groups to flourish their languages and cultures is a reasonable and viable option. Unity in diversity, in the long haul, creates a more tolerant and solid Ethiopian society. The nationality or ethnocentric

traditions, songs, and talent show, just to mention some, could be conducted in a multi-ethnic audience.

Therefore, if a Tigrayan cultural troupe, for example, is going to demonstrate how to prepare and eat Tihlo (ጥሕሎ - you see, the English version does not adequately represent the name), to an Ethiopian audience, the troupe leader or spokesperson should explain it in Amharic, not in English, which most Ethiopians understand. Same logic applies to Oromos who want to display the Gada or who want to do business with other Ethiopians in the Oromia Regional State. If this kind of positive ambience develops, Ethiopians could celebrate each other's cultures at their own volition.

In the same vein and in considering a multiethnic audience, an African-American writer by the name Walter Mosley once said, "A good novel comes out into the world and grows as people read it. I want black people to read the book and say, 'That is my language, that is my life, that is my history.' But I want white people to say, 'Boy, you know, I feel just like that.'"⁶ In the same spirit, Tihlo, Gada, and Amharic should be embraced and celebrated by all Ethiopians. By celebrating each other's culture and finding an ethnodimensional space in a multiethnic society, we Ethiopians must realize that we have achieved a unified synthesis of Ethiopian cultures. Additionally, we have liberated ourselves from the psychology of dissociation, which has now plagued Ethiopian communities especially in the Diaspora.

Sometimes, the psychology of dissociation becomes prominent not because people are cynical but because they are ignorant of their common history, their shared cultures, and in some instances linguistic similarities and interdependence. For instance, a significant number of the Amharas in central Ethiopia (particularly the present generation) don't know that they have a lot in common with their Tigrayan cousins. They don't know that the generation of Yekunoamlak, Amdetsion, Zara Yacob, and Galawdewos spoke Amharic similar to Tigrinya, because they were conversant in Geez, the parent language of both languages. In the end, the Amharas, like the Tigre of Eritrea, not to mention the two Tigrinya speakers on either side of the Mereb, are extracts of the Aksumite civilization.

Some Ethiopians also don't know that Tigrinya aristocratic titles were used in Gondar during the Gondarian era from the first half of the 17th century to the first half of the 19th century. The battle heroes during the reign of Susenyos, for instance, were affectionately known as Arkee Negus (ዓርክ ንጉሥ, literally 'friend of the king') in Tigrinya.⁷

Other Ethiopians have taken it for granted that only the Semitic languages do have something in common; similarly only the Cushitic or Hamitic languages do have common origins and etymology of words. This is partly true, but not entirely correct. For thousands of years, the Ethiopian people have been living side-by-side, intermarrying and trading with one another, and at times confronting against one another. Either way, a significant degree of interaction took place, not only among Ethiopians but also amongst the Horn of Africa peoples, and that is why it is sometimes difficult to distinguish these peoples based on their physiognomy.

It is therefore not surprising to encounter Oromo terms like *Gutcha* (earings), *Hari* (silk), and *Halabdo* (cow milkers) that correspond to same words and meanings of Tigrinya; the former two are literally the same in both languages, and the latter is slightly different and is pronounced as *Halabti* in Tigrinya. Now, think of this name carefully: **Qe'bridehar** (ቀብሪ ደሐር) and it is the name of a place found not in Tigray but in the Somali

Regional State and the meaning of the name is ‘funeral or burial later’ in Tigrinya. This shows how the Ethiopian people were interacting for millennia and how they found a multi-dimensional space in a multiethnic society.

In an effort to study the relationship of some Ethiopian languages and continue to preserve our cultures, I have authored and published a book entitled *Cultures That We Must Preserve and Reject* (**መንከባከብና ማሰውገድ ያለብን ባህሎች፣ ክንዕቅዮምን ክንነጽጎምን ዘለና ባህልታት**) and it came out in Tigrinya (2003) and Amharic (2008). The purpose of the book, as its title implies, is to preserve the good Ethiopian cultures and eliminate the bad ones, and since language (as we have already digested) is the custodian of a continuing and living culture, I have dedicated one chapter (chapter 22) entitled ‘Our Language’ (**ቋንቋችን**) and this is what I have stated at the beginning of the chapter:

ከሁሉ የላቀና ያየለ የባህል መግለጫና አለኝታ ቋንቋ ነው። ያለ ቋንቋ፣ ባህል፣ እንኳን ሊገለጽና ከትውልድ ወደ ትውልድ ሊተላለፍ፣ ህልውናው ሳይቀር አጠራጣሪ ነው የሚሆነው። በዚህ ላይ ቋንቋ የአንድ ብሔር ወይም ብሔረሰብ አንድ የማንነት መልክያ ነው። እንግድ ያውስ ቋንቋ ከሐሳብ መግለጽ፣ ግንኙነት መፍጠርና መልእክት ማስተላለፍ አልፎ በባህል ላይ ዓብይና ወሳኝ ሚና ስለሚጫወት በዝርዝር መወያየቱ አስፈላጊ ሆኖ አግኝተነዋል።⁸

What I am trying to convey in the above Amharic statement is the kernel of my argument throughout this essay, i.e. the significance and role of language in preserving cultures beyond its mere utility of communication. With the above message in mind, thus, we can digress back to our earlier discussion of language and communication and we must understand that the latter is subject to interpretation, and it could only be understood if the target audience is exposed to shared expectations and meanings that make sense to them in light of their own experience. This, in brief, is what we call culture and that we have discussed earlier. In all cultures, a dominant framework of thinking or ideology organically emerges and cements the fabrics of a given community, a nation, or a nation-state, and the medium that facilitates the life and vigor of these entities is language, the language of the people.

By way of concluding, I like to make crystal clear that I am not objecting to the use of English as a medium of instruction in our schools. After all, English, despite its deficiency, has evolved over five centuries and has become an international language since Britain emerged as a world power in the post-Industrial Revolution period. And now, whether we like it or not, English is the world language, the lingua franca of globalization, if you will.

We will therefore continue to use English in the Ethiopian schools, but we must prioritize the use of local Ethiopian languages in business, schools, and government. All regional states must use their local languages at elementary school levels, but they also must teach Amharic as a subject. At secondary and college levels, given the level of Ethiopian development, English should continue as medium of instruction, but once Ethiopia reaches a certain threshold the Ministry of Education and the universities should recruit Ethiopian educators who could translate textbooks from English into Amharic in the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities.

Once Ethiopia enjoys the status of a middle-income country and beyond, Ethiopian college students should be able to learn and study in Amharic and simultaneously master

English for international consumption. All developed countries use their languages in all facets of social life, including in higher institutions of learning. Relatively developed countries like Russia have the best English school in the world, but their official and working language is Russian. China, Korea, and Japan, speak their respective languages at all levels and they use English for international business and diplomacy. Ethiopia must learn from these countries.

Finally, I like to urge Ethiopian intellectuals and writers to begin to write in the local Ethiopian languages. Men and women of letters, in particular, should seriously consider writing in the indigenous Ethiopian languages so that they can successfully capture the essence of the people's livelihood, encounters, and history, and also enhance grassroots pedagogy.

I don't think we could ever meaningfully describe or analyze the emotional dimension of language expressed for instance in the Melqes (መልቀሰ) of Tigray, the Engergro (እንግሮግሮ) of the Amhara, or the funeral rites of the Dorze. "In some ways, symbolizing emotions is more difficult than representing factual information about the world.... When emotive words are used in large groups (such as sentences, paragraphs, compositions, poems, plays, novels, and so on), they became even more powerful."⁹

The power of emotive language could be gained via indigenous languages only. I have had the opportunity to experience the power of language, when I translated H.E. Belaten Geta Herouy Woldeselassie's book from Amharic (ለልጅ ምክር ላባት መታሰብያ) into English, *Advice to the Son & in Memory to the Father*. I had to be extra careful not only to maintain the author's messages, but also to demonstrate the religious overtones and moral principles embedded throughout the book.¹⁰

The question of lingua franca cannot be settled by mere inspection and utilitarian logic. We should not choose language to mollify others; on the contrary, we must choose a lingua franca based on expediency, practicality, the nature of resources, and other historical factors. The question of a working language must be considered in light of all the complex issues I have discussed in this essay. Therefore, the Ethiopian policy spectrum that has already endorsed Amharic as a working language of Ethiopia and the use of nationality languages in the regional states and in national broadcasting should continue in deference to the Ethiopian constitution. Ethiopian officials, at this juncture, should not be tempted to accepting English in lieu of Amharic, as lingua franca of Ethiopia, for it would flagrantly contravene the Ethiopian interest and emasculate Ethiopian culture and identity.

Notes

1. See Ghelawdewos Araia, *The Political Economy of Famine and Strategies for Development in Ethiopia*, Doctoral Dissertation, Columbia University/U.M.I., 1990. See especially the section on education and the National Literacy Campaign and the use of 15 nationality languages during the Derg, pp. 185-190
2. J. N. Hattiangadi, *How is Language Possible?* Open Court, 1987, p. 24
3. R. A. Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 73

4. R. A. Hudson, *Ibid*, p. 195
5. John Chaffee, *Critical Thinking and Thoughtful Writing*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 199, p. 178
6. Walter Mosley, “Devil in a Blue Dress,” in Melvin Donalson, *CORNERSTONES: An Anthology of African American Literature*, St. Martin’s Press, p. 447
7. See Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderland: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century*, The Red Sea Press, Inc. 1997, p. 300
8. Ghelawdewos Araia, *Cultures That We Must Preserve and Reject*, Institute of Development and Education for Africa, Signature Book Printing, 2008, p. 95
9. John Chaffee, *op cit*, p. 187
10. Readers could get this book for free. See ad on top screen of www.africanidea.org

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