



Language for whose Audience in the Ethiopian context? A Message to PM Hailemariam Desalegn

IDEA Viewpoint

Ghelawdewos Araia, PhD

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This viewpoint is intended to critically appraise the mode of communicative language Ethiopians use whenever they want to express their ideas in the form of speech or writing. The majority of educated Ethiopians (high school to advanced degree levels) like to either speak in English or in Amharic or other Ethiopian languages bombarded with English language, even when they address illiterate peasants who don't understand English at all. It has become increasingly fashionable for urbanite "educated" Ethiopians to use *Guramayle* (English and Ethiopian languages) to exhibit that they are civilized and modern, but in doing so they have utterly disregarded the majority of Ethiopian people, who apparently are uneducated. They speak without due consideration of their audience, and most importantly they seem to have forgotten that the most sophisticated educated people are those who communicate with their audience in the language that the latter understands.

I watch Ethiopian TV nightly news almost every day and I am dumbfounded to witness that almost all journalists, member of parliaments, ministers, government bureaucrats, regional state governors etc speak in *Guramayle*. For instance, the TV anchors in Amharic and other Ethiopian languages almost always say 'transformation', 'construction', 'investment', 'budget' etc but they may have inadvertently ignored their audience. Do they think the Ethiopian peasants really understand those English words? I suggest that the Ethiopian TV anchors go through some sort of introspection or self-examination and rethink some of the English words and employ Ethiopian words instead. For instance, they can say ስነ-ህንጻ instead of 'construction' መሰረታዊ ለውጥ ወይም ስር-ነቀል ለውጥ instead of 'transformation'.

The other day I was watching a popular Ethiopian comedy show known as Betoeh (ቤቶች) and in one of the episodes where the parents decided to allocate stipends for their children, the lady of the house said, "announcement አለን", a typical *Guramayle* instead of simply saying የምንነግራችሁ ነገር አለ (we have something to tell you). This, of course, is a comedy show and the use of *Guramayle* may not be offensive, but the Ethiopian comedians must utilize Ethiopian language if indeed they want to transmit messages to the Ethiopian people. In one other episode where the youngest girl in the family got furious because of the cutting of a tree, Betoeh sends a powerful message to all Ethiopians and while I criticize the use of language I also would be remiss if I don't acknowledge the educational messages being conveyed by Betoeh and other Ethiopian shows such as *Sewlesew*.

At a more serious level, this viewpoint is intended to send a message to Ethiopian leaders in general and the Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in particular. Like I watch Ethiopian TV news and comedy, I also watched the recent interview of the Prime Minister by Ethiopian journalists. The journalists forwarded to the PM many and diverse questions ranging from the issue surrounding corruption to the controversy in relation to the Renaissance Dam, and most of them have used *Guramayle* instead of straight Amharic language.

Interestingly, but quite to my chagrin, the PM also extensively employed *Guramayle* in addressing the questions. The PM, in fact, was quite articulate in addressing specific questions and eloquent in explaining relevant issues to the questions. However, since he used too many English words in response to the questions asked, quite obviously the Ethiopians who are not educated but who happen to be listening to his interview would be completely lost. The transparency of the PM is to be admired, but I am afraid it could be compromised by lack of effective communication.

During the course of his interview, the PM have used the following words and phrases, but the listing below is only part of the overall usage of the English language in an Amharic interview:

- Figure, consolidated budget, fiscal policy
- በ fiscal policy ያለው ማዕቀብ
- Inflation ማውረድ ችለናል
- Investment, mechanism
- በ practice ወይም በ ተግባር
- የ trade deficit ከውጭ ምንዛሬ ጋር የተያያዘ ለመሆኑ
- ዘጠና ከመቶ capital goods
- Comparative advantage
- Export ለማድረግ
- ባስቀመጥነው limit እስከሄድን ድረስ
- Panel of Experts ያቀረቡት recommendation አለ
- Environmental Impact Assessment አስመልክቶ ግብጽና ሱዳን አላቀረቡም
- Environmental deterioration, oligopoly, equipment lease financing, efficiency
- Auditing Defense
- በአንድ agenda ዙርያ
- ይህ አንዱ part ነው
- የኢኮኖሚ ዕድገቱ political economy ው በሚቀየርበት ጊዜ...
- በአማርኛ እንዴት መግለጽ እንደሚቻል...በእንግሊዝኛ ግን no appreciable harm ይለታል
- Realistic የሆኑ ጥቅሞች
- በተወሰነ design, capacity
- Sub-base ዩ ካለቀ
- አገልግሎት cost ቢደረግ
- የተወሰነ የ cost calculation ላይ

After the interview ended, I said to myself “language for whose audience?” In an effort to render a constructive feedback to the good Prime Minister and other Ethiopian leaders, thus, I like to briefly address the purpose of language and/or communication for the consumption of an intended audience.

Any speaker or writer addressing a certain people must first and foremost understand that s/he is in a multi-dimensional space, that is to say s/he must recognize that there is an audience for whose purpose or benefit the language (spoken or written) is used. Language gives the speaker or writer a very clearly organized prism, which s/he can use in order to communicate with the audience.

The speaker or writer also must understand that language is social and it logically follows that communication is also social. Particularly in face-to-face interaction (e.g. interviews, meetings, addressing a parliament, addressing the nation etc) the speaker must first and foremost anticipate the level of comprehension of its audience and ask, “What language should I employ in order to effectively communicate with my audience?” Language in the latter context means the use of an Ethiopian language and it also means the use of diction and elocution, choice/selection of words and manner of speech respectively.

The above concern of mine was addressed by anthropologists, linguists, and social psychologists as “the ethnography of speaking or ethnography of communication” in the early 1960s. One of the early ethnographers, the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski says, “language functions as a link in concerted human activity,” but if people use languages that the intended audience doesn’t understand, they are not communicating with the people and they altogether defeat the purpose of language. In a chitchat or conversation format or what Malinowski calls “Phatic Communion”, people engage in order to recognize each other and a good example of phatic communion is the PM’s interview by the Ethiopian journalists and they have indeed established mutual recognition but they have failed to extend the communion to the Ethiopian people.

I have no doubt in my mind that the Ethiopian journalists and the PM are honest people and they had no intention of deliberately confusing Ethiopians, but since communication proposes answering questions as well as explaining and clarifying what the intended audience does not already know, both the journalists and the PM have an obligation to communicate with untainted Amharic.

Admittedly, sometimes, we all are tongue-tied when we express ourselves and we tend to employ English words in order to overcome the problem, but we must always bear in mind that we must strive to instantly recover from our incoherence and use the language that the people understand. When we deliver a speech or address an audience, we must seriously consider that the speech is intended to inform (empower) the audience and not simply lecture them. And when we speak, we have to be precise, concise, and to the point so that the audience grasps the essence of the message conveyed. This is what linguists call ‘comparative principle’, a fine principle that helps the speaker to be as informative as possible. In the case of the interview of the PM by the Ethiopian journalists, social psychologists would label it ‘discourse structure’ that involves ‘adjacency pairs’, in which the PM is expected to specifically address and clarify each question. In doing the latter the PM was successful, but in terms of comparative principle he was not, because he was not reaching out the larger Ethiopian society in areas such as Afar, the Somali region, Benishangul Gumuz, or the remotest parts of Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia.

One colleague of mine at the City University of New York by the name John Chaffee once said, “The more you think about your audience, the more concerned you are about making yourself clear, the better your writing will become. The real skill lies in writing so clearly and coherently that your audience will receive exactly the same message that you intended to send.” Furthermore, Chaffee says, “Effective writers are able to put themselves in their readers place and view their own writing through of their readers’

eyes. This perspective-taking helps them craft their writing so that it will best communicate the ideas and emotions they are seeking to convey. In other words, they think about how much background information their audience will need, or won't need, to understand the intended message. Anticipating possible questions that may come into the audience's minds, they try to answer the questions at appropriate places. Understanding that the audience may have strong feelings about the topic, they take those feelings into consideration when they write."¹

If the Ethiopian journalists, Ethiopian policy makers, the PM and his cabinet, and other leaders at all levels try to understand my concern and consider Chaffee's advice, the first thing they should do is liberate themselves from *Guramayle* and begin to refine their mother tongues and the lingua franca of Ethiopia and effectively communicate with the Ethiopian people.

¹ John Chaffee, *Critical Thinking, Thoughtful Writing*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999

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