

Overview of the Ethiopian language policy

Ethiopia is a home of around eighty indigenous languages. Amharic is the lingua franca and was the nationwide official language and the medium of instruction in primary education throughout the country until 1994¹.

In 1970s and 80s a National Literacy Campaign for adult population was run in Amharic and in fourteen other Ethiopian languages in respective language areas². Orthographies and basic literacy materials using the Ge'ez (Ethiopic) script were developed for the languages, but the follow-up literature was in Amharic, and the campaign did not have long-term effects on the adult literacy rate³.

When the new Constitution came into effect in 1994, the Ethiopian language policy changed substantially. Every language community is now granted the right to develop their language in written form and to choose between the Ge'ez and the Roman scripts. The local languages can be used for local administration and as the medium of instruction in primary education.

The multilingual and bi-script language policy has drastically altered the literacy landscape of Ethiopia. By 2017 forty-one languages had been adopted as the medium of instruction in lower primary (grades 1-4) and seven more taught as a subject in respective language areas⁴. Forty of these languages use the Roman script and eight the Ge'ez script. At present, orthographies and mother-tongue-medium curriculum materials for primary schools are developed for more languages.

Given the current situation, Ethiopia offers a rich field for psycholinguistic research about the effects of a script for phonological awareness and literacy learning. However, so far there are no larger study programs about the topic in any of the Ethiopian universities. The bi-script policy divides opinions and has created strong reactions both for and against the Roman script, making objective study more challenging.

Konso language

Konso is a Cushitic language spoken as a mother tongue by c. 299 600 people in Southwest Ethiopia⁵.

The inventory of phonemes includes twenty-one consonants and five vowels. Vowel length and gemination (i.e. quantity of phonemes) make frequently meaning differences on lexical items, and gemination has also grammatical functions. Two tone levels are distinguished and carry a restricted grammatical function. The syllable structure is simple, including open and closed syllables. Both the onset and the coda can be filled by one consonant. The syllable onset is minimally filled with a glottal stop⁶.

Konso orthographies

Konso abugida orthography was developed in 1970s by the initiative of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus (EECMY) and Ethiopian Bible Society. The orthography uses the Ge'ez script, originally developed in the 4th century for the Ethio-Semitic Ge'ez⁷, and later modified for Cushitic languages⁸ to show the length of the two most frequent vowels in the typical Cushitic vowel system (Table 1).

In 1986 a more transparent version of the Konso abugida orthography was developed⁹. It marked the quantity of all phonemes and distinguished between a syllable-final consonant (coda) and a Ci-sequence, which the previous orthography marked similarly. However, the language community rejected the changes. No written records have been found about the reasons for the rejection.

A decision to adopt the Roman script and to develop an alphabetic orthography for Konso was made in 2012 by Konso scholars, local language experts and community elders in a Language and Culture Symposium. To implement the decision a Konso Language Promotion Committee was established, and the alphabetic orthography for Konso was launched in 2014.

Use of written Konso

Since 1993 EECMY has run a non-formal literacy program for adults and published spiritual, educational and traditional literature in the Konso abugida. According to the annual reports of the EECMY Literacy Office, the number of literacy students in 1998-2016 has been 2562-4194 per year, and according to a rough estimation by the Literacy Office around 50% of the Konso population can read the abugida.

After the alphabetic orthography for Konso was launched, EECMY developed a non-formal transfer literacy training program for adults to learn alphabetic literacy skills. The program is currently running in Konso villages. The Ministry of Education in Konso is developing a mother-tongue-medium primary education program for grades 1-4. In the academic year 2018-19 mother-tongue-medium teaching is piloted on grades 1-2, and the curriculum for grade 3 is being prepared.

The Konso abugida orthography

- A basic character for each consonant with an inherent vowel and six modifications for denoting seven CV-sequences, and a separate set of seven characters for word-initial vowels. (Table 1)
- Types of under-differentiation:
 - o A syllable-final consonant and a Ci-sequence marked similarly.
 - o Length marked only for two of the five vowels.
 - o Gemination not marked.

Table 1 CV-characters for consonants /m/ and /l/ and characters for initial V:

	a	u/ uu	ii	aa	e/ ee	i/ -	o/ oo
m / mm	ᄁ	ᄂ	ᄃ	ᄄ	ᄅ	ᄆ	ᄇ
l / ll	ᄈ	ᄉ	ᄊ	ᄋ	ᄌ	ᄍ	ᄎ
	ᄏ	ᄐ	ᄑ	ᄒ	ᄓ	ᄔ	ᄕ

Examples of heterophonic homographs, the dots indicate character breaks:

ኩተ /ku.ta/ 'dog',	ቶመ /to.ma/ 'wooden plate'	ሰፕለ /si.p.la/ 'metal'
/ku.tta/ 'dogs,	/too.ma/ 'weeds'	ሰፕሎተ /si.pi.loo.ta/ 'digging stick'
/kuu.ta/ 'edge'	/too.mma/ 'let us dispose'	እልተ /i.l.ta/ 'eyes'
		ሎከልተ /lu.kka.li.tta/ 'chicken'
ኪን ቀፕ /ke.n qa.pa/ 'I have you'		
/ke.ni qa.pa/ 'He has five'		

The Konso alphabetic orthography

- Each phoneme denoted by a separate character (including two digraphs)
- Consonant characters: /b, c, d, f, h, j, k, l, m, n, ny, p, q, r, s, sh, t, w, x, y, ' /
- Vowel characters: /a, e, i, o, u/
- Quantity marked by doubling the character

A sample text written in the two orthographies

Konso abugida	Konso alphabetic orthography
አውተ ተካዬ፥ አፕ ተከ ከለፖ ኪናኔ	Awta takkaayye, aappa takka Kallapo kiinaane
አተንተ ፖረ አሞቶቀ አፕ አን።	otanta pora a mottooqa oppa anni.
ኤቴ ከይቴ፥ ሞቶቀ ከ እሽ ከመ ደሰ ደን።	Ete kayte, mottooqa ka isha kamma desa deeni.
እሽ ኡመ እንደከይኔ መ አንተው አን። ሞቶቀሴ	Isha umma indakayne ma antaw anni. Mottooqase
ከ ደሴ ከ እቱሮፕ እሽ ከቴ መ ቶተ ኪለ	ka de'e ka itturopa isha kate ma toota kela
ሸከይተኤ ፕሄ።	shakkayta'e pahe.

አውተ	ተካዬ፥	አፕ	ተከ	ከለፖ	ኪናኔ	አተንተ	ፖረ	አሞቶቀ	አፕ	አን
Awta	takkaayye,	aappa	takka	Kallapo	kiinaane	otanta	pora	amottooqa	oppa	anni
day	one-on	father	one	Kallapo	named	middle	road	of-car	on	walks

Transfer literacy learners’ thoughts about the Konso abugida and the Konso alphabetic orthography

Adult Konso people who were fluent readers of the Konso abugida and attended transfer literacy training to learn the new alphabetic orthography for Konso were asked to write down their thoughts about the two orthographies and which of the two they preferred. Out of the learners 42 responded before the transfer literacy training and again after the training. The remaining 24 learners responded only after the training.

The learners’ preference for the alphabetic orthography

All learners preferred the alphabetic orthography before and after the training. The reasons they gave for the preference were broadly grouped under eight categories (Table 2). Because not everybody gave reasons for their preference and some gave more than one reason, the numbers in each category do not correspond with the number of the respondents.

Table 2 Reasons given by the learners for their preference to the alphabetic orthography

Reasons:	Before training N=42	After training N=42	After training N=24*
Meanings of words are clear	3	16	8
It is good to learn something new	7	10	4
It has been decided & literature will be produced	2	7	1
It makes learning English easier	8	6	2
Helps in formal education	2	4	1
Roman script is international	4	4	2
Makes Konso language more developed	1	1	2
People like alphabetic writing	3	1	1

*The learners who responded only after the training.

Difficulty of learning the alphabetic orthography

After the training 45 learners wrote that the alphabetic orthography was difficult to learn. The most common reasons were as follows:

- The alphabetic orthography requires mastering the quantity differences (19 learners).
- It is new and different from the abugida (14 learners).
- Many letters are needed for writing each word and therefore the words get long (4 learners).

On the contrary, 13 learners wrote that the alphabetic orthography was easy to learn, and 6 of them explained that it was easy because marking the quantity made all the meanings clear. They explained that in the abugida there were so many ambiguous spellings that understanding the correct meanings was often hampered.

Five learners wrote that the alphabetic orthography was easy to read, but that spelling words correctly was difficult. In a conversation about the topic one person noted: **“Reading is like eating, but writing is like making the food.”**

Quotes from the learners’ responses

“It is good to change to alphabetic writing, because one character becomes two, so we learn more.”

“Alphabetic orthography shows strong and weak sounds and also consonants and vowels, and all meanings become clear.”

“It is good to learn characters which we have not learned before.”

“Now everybody will learn to read English.”

“Alphabetic literacy skills will gradually make the educational level of our community rise.”

“It is good, because now we can use foreign characters in our own language.”

What does a reader value in an orthography and how does that influence a script choice?

In the Konso case the transfer literacy learners' script choice did not change after the exposure to the new alphabetic orthography. Both before and after the exposure, many learners valued the alphabetic orthography because they regarded it as an avenue for more learning. Some saw it as a tool for learning English or as a help in formal education, others more generally as a chance to learn something new. The latter resonates with the scarcity of learning opportunities in the local community. In many responses the Roman script was seen as international, and therefore the alphabetic orthography more advanced. Some responses indicated that the respondent interpreted the mere change to the alphabetic orthography to make even the language of higher standard, somehow more developed.

However, comparing the learners' responses before and after they had got exposure to the new alphabetic orthography, there was one notable difference. While learning the alphabetic spelling rules the learners had become aware of the quantity as an important feature of Konso phonology, and they appreciated the alphabetic orthography for making meanings clear by marking the quantity of all sounds. Many learners noted that even if it was very difficult for them to master the correct spelling of the quantity, they were willing to make the effort to learn it because of the clarity. The difficulty was two-fold: on the one hand the learners were not used to paying attention to the quantity and they lacked the metalinguistic quantity awareness skill, and on the other hand it was difficult for them to remember to mark the quantity by doubling the character.

Overall, the Konso transfer literacy learners' reflections underline the value of orthographic transparency for an ordinary reader. Also, it illustrates the value of the exposure for making an informed choice.

¹ Mekonnen Alemu Gebreyohannes. 2005. Multilingualism in Ethiopia, socio-cultural and pedagogical implications on mother tongue education in a multilingual society. M.A. Thesis, University of Oslo.

² Zelealem Leyew. 2012. The Ethiopian Language Policy: A historical and typological overview. *Ethiopian Journal of Languages and Literature* Vol XII (2): 1-55. College of Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism and Communication. Addis Ababa University.

³ Solomon Inquai. 1997. Adult education in Ethiopia: A historical sketch. IZZ/DVV Project Office Ethiopia.

⁴ Ethiopian Ministry of Education. 2017. በኢትዮጵያ ትምህርት የሚሰጥባቸው የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋዎች መረጃ [List of Mother Tongues used as the medium of instruction in Ethiopia].

⁵ Konso Zone, Department of Finance and Economic Development 2018.

⁶ For a comprehensive description of Konso phonology see: Ongaye Oda. 2013. A Grammar of Konso. PhD Thesis. University of Leiden. LOT, Utrecht, NL.

⁷ Getatchew Haile. 1996. Ethiopic writing system. In Peter T. Daniels & William Bright (Eds.), *The Worlds' writing systems*. New York: Oxford University Press. 569-576.

⁸ The Cushitic version of the script was established with Oromo Bible, published in 1899. (Personal communication with Dr. Loren Bliese, 17/11/2018.)

⁹ Haile Eyesus Engdashet. 1986. Konso orthography. Executive Agency: Ethiopian National Agency for UNESCO. Implementing Agency: Academy of Ethiopian Languages.