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CHANGING A WRITING SYSTEM: THE CASE OF KONSO

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INTRODUCTION

Konso language community in Southwest Ethiopia is undergoing a change of writing system from the Ge'ez (Ethiopic) script, classified as abugida, to the Roman script. This study introduces the two orthographies for Konso and examines adult transfer literacy learners' (N=66) reflections about the two, with the aim of finding out what an ordinary reader values in an orthography and how that influences a script choice.

KONSO LANGUAGE

- Around 265 700 mother tongue speakers in Southwest Ethiopia
- Afro-Asiatic, Lowland East Cushitic, Oromoid, Konsoid
- 21 consonant and 5 vowel phonemes
- Phoneme quantity makes semantic differences
- Two tone levels with grammatical function

KONSO ABUGIDA ORTHOGRAPHY

- Twenty basic characters to denote consonants with inherent vowel /a/, and one character to denote word-initial /a/
- Six modifications for each basic character to denote short vowels /u, e, i, o/ and long /a:/ (see table below, rows 1-2) and /i:/ (3-4)
- Phoneme quantity not marked for consonants or for vowels /u, e, o/ (5)
- Syllable-final consonant and C+/i/ marked similarly (6-7)

KONSO ALPHABETIC ORTHOGRAPHY

- Twenty-one consonant characters, including two digraphs: *sh, ny* (8-9)
- Five vowel characters
- Quantity of all phonemes marked by doubling the character

No	Abugida spelling	Alphabetic spelling	Phonemic transcription	English gloss
1	መኅ	mana	/mana/	'house'
2	ማኅ	maana	/ma:na/	'what'
3	ክሰ	kisa	/kisa/	'cooking place'
4	ክሰሰ	kiisa	/ki:sa/	'cricket'
5	ከተ	kuta	/kuta/	'dog'
		kutta	/kut:a/	'dogs'
		kuuta	/ku:ta/	'edge'
6	ስፕላ	sipla	/sipla/	'metal'
7	ስፕሎተ	sipiloota	/sipilo:ta/	'digging stick'
8	ሽፕንሽፕራተ	shipinshipirraata	/ʃipinʃipir:a:ta/	'bat'
9	ኛኛ	nyaanyanya	/ɲa:ɲa/	'tomato'

Quotes from the learners' responses:

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

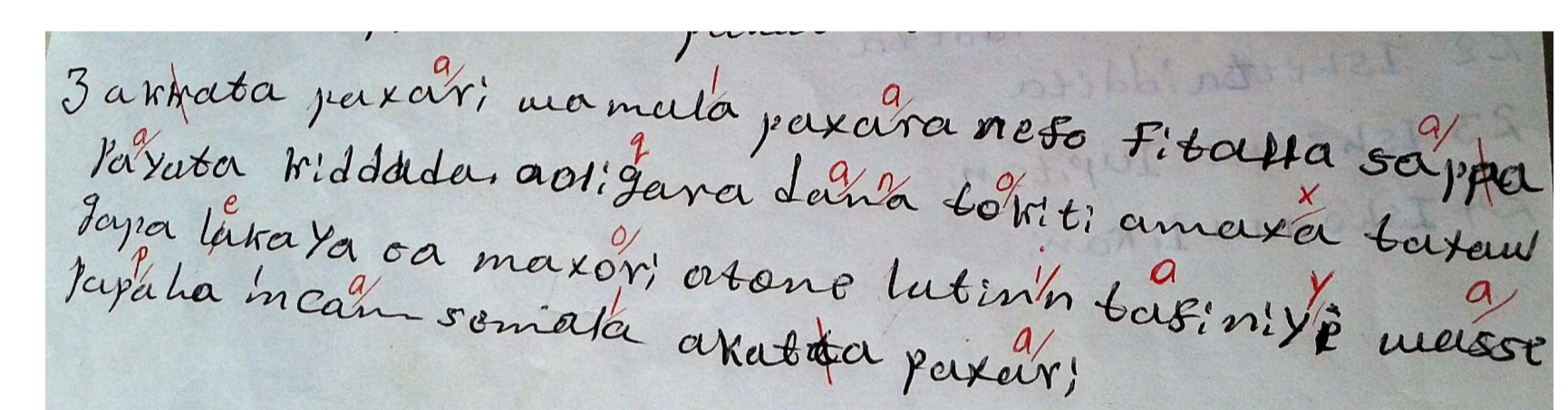
"Alphabetic orthography shows strong and weak sounds and also consonants and vowels, and all meanings become clear."

"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."



"It is good [to change to the alphabet] because the abugida spellings of words give many meanings whereas this does not happen in the alphabetic orthography."
(The spelling errors corrected with a red ink.)

TRANSFER LITERACY LEARNERS' REFLECTIONS

Konso abugida readers (N=66) attending transfer literacy training 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 responded only after the training. All learners preferred the alphabetic orthography - why?

	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
It helps in formal education	2	4	1
Roman script is international	4	4	2
It makes Konso language more developed	1	1	2
People like the alphabetic orthography	3	1	1

N.B. Not everybody gave a clear reason for their preference, and after the training some gave more than one reason, thus the numbers in each category do not correspond with the number of the respondents.

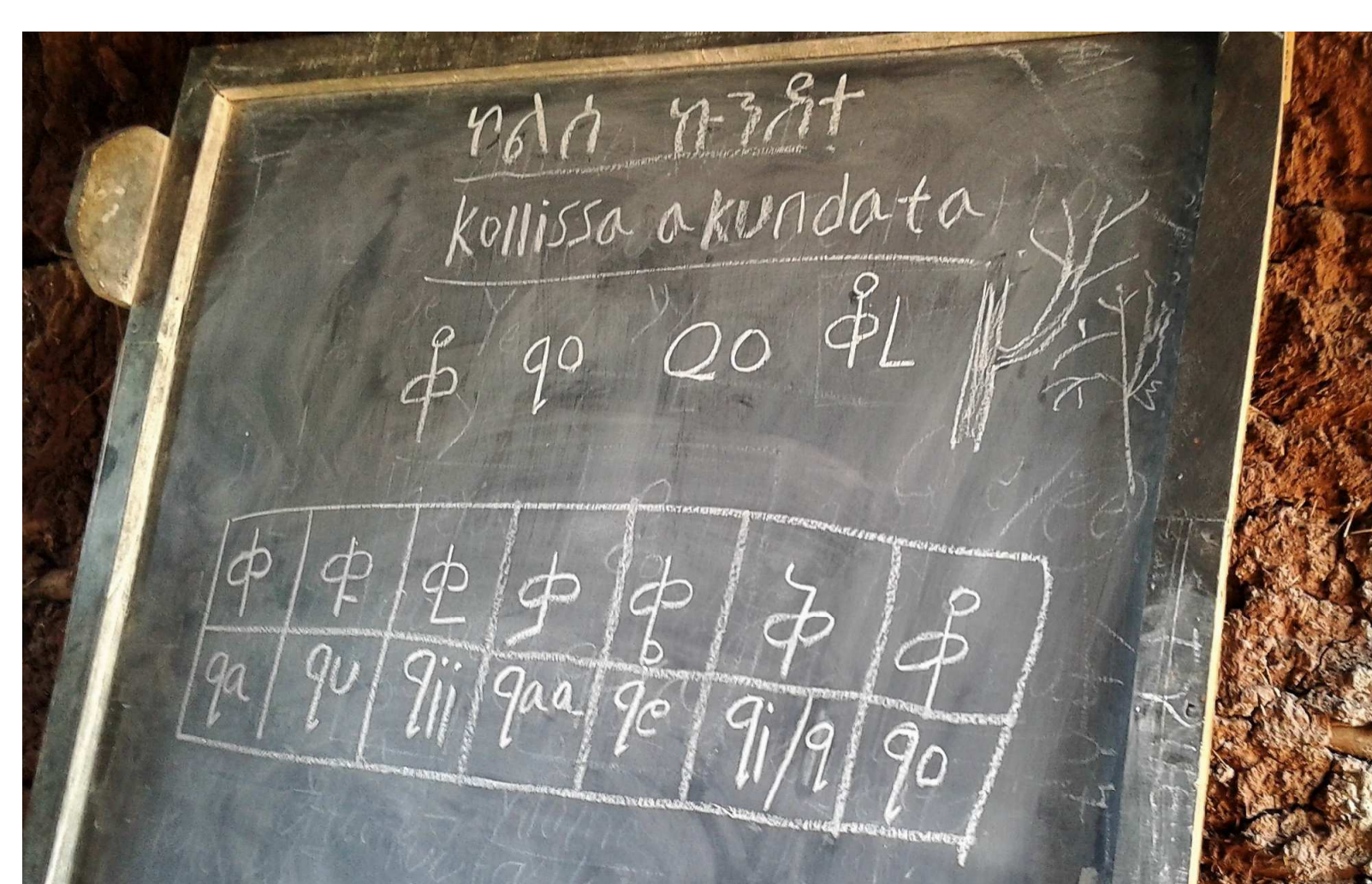
After the training 45 learners wrote that the alphabetic orthography was difficult - why?

- It requires mastering quantity differences. (19)
- It is new and different from the abugida. (14)
- Many letters are needed to write a word. (4)

13 learners wrote that it was easy - why?

- Marking quantity makes meanings clear. (6)
- It resembles English. (2)

5 learners wrote that it was easy to read, but difficult to write.



The seven characters of the consonant /d/

WHAT DOES A READER VALUE IN AN ORTHOGRAPHY?

Both before and after the exposure to the alphabetic orthography the learners valued it for opening up opportunities for learning. Some saw it as a tool for learning English or as a help in formal education, while others saw it more generally as a chance to learn something new. The latter resonates with the scarcity of learning opportunities in the community.

After the learners had understood the differences between the two orthographies, the most common reason for preferring the alphabetic orthography was its transparency in marking the quantity of all phonemes. This was despite the fact that they found the alphabetic spelling very difficult because of the quantity marking.

WHAT INFLUENCES A SCRIPT CHOICE?

The Konso transfer literacy learners' preference for the alphabetic script was largely influenced by social and educational values which they assigned to it. The alphabetic orthography was regarded as more advanced than the abugida, and the mere script change as raising the status of the language and making it somehow more developed.

But the exposure to the alphabetic orthography made the learners look at the script issue also from the viewpoint of readability. This did not alter their script preference, but underlines the value of orthographic transparency for an ordinary reader and illustrates the value of the exposure for making an informed choice.

