

Somali Language: The Mirror that Reflects our Identity

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April 24, 2014

Language is a system that is unique to human beings. Some animal species may mimic or learn some features of human language but these creatures do not have the language faculty that endowed or unique to humans known as Language Acquisition Devise (LAD)

When we say we speak a language, particularly our native languages, we know the sound system of that particular language. The knowledge of our first language sound system starts in early stages in our life. For instance, we are exposed to a very rich language input by hearing our mothers' songs and lullabies. As children, we are able to produce all the phonemes of our language. Phonemes are the minimal meaningful units in a language. These speech sounds could be identified by the native speakers or those who acquired them as a second or third language.

The phonemic sounds of languages are different from one language to another. For instance, the sound of the Somali phoneme of /c/ is different from the English /a/. Some of the Somali sounds like /q/, /kh/, /x/ are not in the English sound system. Similarly, the English phonemes like /z/, /p/, and /v/ are not available in Somali sound system or **phonetics**.

The second component of language system is our knowledge of **phonology**. Phonology is the study of how phonemes are grouped or sequenced so they can work together as a system. For example, we know as Somali speakers that consonants should be separated by either short or long vowels. Like *wabi* should not be pronounced or written as *wbi*. We also know that English have the sound feature known as consonant clusters where two or more consonants are grouped without vowels.

These are not the only things we know about a language. The third component of the language system is **morphology** or the study or the knowledge of word formation. If you know the word *magac*(name) in Somali, you can form the words like: *magacaygu* or *magacyadiinu* or *magacyadoodu*. To say it differently, we can form many words from the stem or the root words by adding affixes (prefixes and suffixes.) In addition to those features we also know **syntax** (grammar) or the how to arrange words to make varied, limitless and meaningful sentences.

The other two aspects of language system are **semantics**-the study of meanings and **Pragmatics**-which refers the way we use language in various social and academic contexts.

The purpose of these notes are not to discuss the language system but to highlight what we know when we speak our first language-Somali. We acquired these linguistic features of our first language unconsciously. First and second language acquisition literature believe that normal children learn these language aspects in the first five years of their life. The research points out children acquire 50% of their native language during the first 5-6 years of their life.

In this context, it is very important to mention the difference between acquiring and learning a language. Whenever Acquisition-Learning is discussed, Stephan Krashen's The Monitor Model Hypothesis has to be mentioned. Krashen writes while defining acquisition and learning:

“Acquisition is a process similar, if not identical to the way children develop ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring a language but they only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication.....The second way to develop competence in a second language is language learning. We will use the term “learning” henceforth to refer the conscious knowledge of the second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them”(Krashen,1982,p.10)

From the above definition, we acquired Somali language as children without difficulty, without even noticing that we are learning it and without paying the least attention to the rules of grammar or pronunciation. For those of us back

home and those who immigrated to the West and Europe and other parts of the world with fully developed Somali language system are aware of this.

We were fortunate to learn Somali in the Target Language Community. TLC for Somali language is Somalia, Djibouti, Somali speaking regions in today's Ethiopia and Kenya. On the contrary, children of Somali parents in the West, Europe and other countries around the world are not acquiring Somali as their first language but they are learning it as a second, heritage or foreign language.

One can argue why these children are not learning Somali since their parents are Somali. There are multiple answers to this question. One of them is children are acquiring other languages to be successful in their new countries academically and socially. Another answer is children are far from Somali Language Target Communities so the Somali language input they are exposed in all language learning skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing is very limited. The third answer could be parents are not speaking Somali to their children misguided by the concepts of language superiority and language power. Another factor that contributes to the lack of Somali acquisition among these children is the lack of Somali language literacy programs in their schools. In the event of having these programs in few schools around the world, lack of children's literacy resources in Somali is the biggest challenge. Another issue that contributes to Somali children's lack of oral fluency in Somali is the language input children are exposed in their homes. Parents who are learning their new country's languages are speaking to their children in languages they themselves are in the process of learning.

The natural use of the language takes place at home. The authenticity and the comprehensibility of language input by the parents and other adults at home are the best Somali language learning environment. I do encourage parents to speak Somali to their children. If they don't, the gap of communication between them and their children will be wider to the extent that both sides could not be able to communicate with each other.

I'm a certified teacher in English Language Arts (ELA) and English as Second Language (ESL) in Minnesota and the first teacher to coordinate and teach Somali language literacy classes at Anne Sullivan School of Minneapolis Public Schools.

For five years that I was teaching Somali to children, I have to emphasize the notion of being bilingual is an asset not a liability. Teaching and speaking Somali to our children makes them smarter. It helps them grow cognitively, academically, socially and emotionally.

Somali language defines who we are. Therefore, it requires from entire Somali speaking people to invest in this language so we could use it for our daily social communication and academic purposes in the long run. The curriculum that adapted in various educational institutions in Somali speaking regions should include rigorous course works in Somali language literacy. Mandating Somali language as the language of instruction in public schools in Somali land, Puntland and Southern regions of the country is must.

Nations have educational policies that guide their entire education system. The major purpose of educational institutions is producing individuals who are good citizens, productive and useful for their local communities and for the entire nation.

Most developed countries are investing and developing their languages. They are constantly redesigning their curriculum and educational standards. On the contrary, the curriculum adapted and taught to Somali speaking children in Somali Land, Puntland, and the Southern regions of the country are designed by other nations and written either in English or Arabic. Somali children are learning historical events and geographic features of foreign countries. They are suffocated by the foreign culture transmitted through the imported teaching materials written in foreign languages.

I have felt that is the time the Somali educators, researchers, Somali language literacy advocates, poets, play writes, curriculum writers, Somali language development institutions-if there is any, Somali government , local administrations, parents, school children and local communities should address the need of designing and writing a curriculum and teaching materials in Somali across all content areas. The best way to learn a language is by teaching it through the content such as science, math, social studies and reading.

On March 31st, of this year 2014, I have watched a video clip about welcoming meeting of Ethiopian university faculty members and administrators in Borama, Awdal. The City's mayor, tribal chief and a community activist were the people who introduced the Ethiopian University delegate to the meeting. All of them emphasized the importance of opening a branch of that university in Borama. They also mentioned that it will bring quality education to Awdal. They sternly assured to people learning Amharic is the key to success and education. The *Harar* (ancient Islamic city in Ethiopia) that was mentioned in the meeting is not today's Harar. It was the seat of Islamic studies and culture not Amharic language learning classroom. Don't they know that Amharic is considered the language of oppressors to many Ethiopian ethnic groups like Oromo.

It is the responsibility of Awdal education regional office, Amoud and Elo University administrations, and faculty members, current and prospective students to address the linguistic, financial, cultural and religious impact of opening an Ethiopian University in Borama.

The bilingual programs in the United States Public and private schools have access to varied curriculum and teaching materials written in the enrolled children's native languages. For instance, Spanish language is gaining momentum in the United States. School material publishing companies are printing the Spanish version of those materials. Similarly, the Spanish speaking countries are developing and designing curriculum that schools in the United States could buy for their bilingual programs. Unfortunately, In Somali, Somali children are hearing teachers who are code-switching in the target language community. **Code-switching** is a language learning phenomena used by bilinguals. It is the act of inserting words or phrases of one language into the other. There is a myth believed both educated and non-educated Somali people. The myth is: Delivering instruction in foreign languages is more superior to teaching in Somali.

I cannot find more convincing answer to this myth more than this quote from Professor Rabi's long paper: *The Role of Somali Language in Education*

"A child's language engulfs him like sea water engulfs a fish. If the water gets saturated with pollutants, the fish finds it difficult to extract oxygen to breathe.

This affects its health. Similarly when foreign languages are exposed to children while they are living in their language environment during their formative years, the foreign languages serve as obstructive agents to their critical and creative thinking. This, of course, makes a child's speech defective and his ideas become strange. Foreign languages saturate his talk and an alien culture his behavior."

To conclude, Somali speaking children in Somalia need to develop literacy in their native language. To prepare the school children to be literate in Somali in the twenty first century requires intellectually challenging curricula written in Somali. In my point of view, high quality public education can be achieved when the cultural, linguistic and true and genuine historical interpretation of Somali people are woven into the curriculum. I do encourage bilingualism and multilingualism in Somali but not at the expense of less proficiency in Somali language.

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