Challenging the Myth of Language Homogeneity in the Somali Society

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1. Introduction

In a continent where multilingualism is a norm rather than an exception, Somalia presents itself as one of the few African nations with an arguably high level of linguistic homogeneity (Eno, 2005: 9). For the most, the Somali community is assumed to be a monolingual society because of its sociolinguistic composition (Abdullahi & Wei, 2021: 17). Nevertheless, the existence of linguistic diversity and minority languages is an attested fact by research and the constitution (Eno, 2017: 24). Like any other nation, the essence of national unity has been used as an argument to push for monolingualism. This is attributed to the long-standing characterization of the Somali community as speakers of only one language. Nevertheless, the reality on the ground speaks to diversity with both dialectology and the presence of minority languages (Olanrewaju, 2014: 9). For some, dialectology presents geographic-based variation, while others present it as a social unit that is mainly clan-oriented (Kaldhol & Johnsen, 2021; Andrzejewski, 1979; Tosco, 1993; and Fleming, 1976). Whichever way the explanation for the variation goes, it indicates a reality of linguistic diversity in society mainly based on minority languages and dialects (Nurse, 2018: 10).

When diversity is a norm in a society with minority languages and dialect differences, language use can be explained by examining the costs and benefits of adopting ways of speaking, which may differ for each individual or group of speakers in each situation (Cong, 2019: 12). The aspiration to be included in a particular communication domain instigates participants to devise a mechanism that grants them equal opportunity to express themselves and understand the dialogue to their maximum potential (Scotton, 1983: 83). Therefore, the existence of variation in language, dialect, and even sociolect among participants of a communication endeavor is a driving factor for compromise towards the use of the language or dialect perceived as prestigious interims of status, efficient interims of acquiring the desired response, and preference for the one that is believed to be assuring interims of group belongingness and identity (Valentine *et al*., 2008: 384). This negotiation process, compromising the cost-benefit analysis that a communication participant makes at every encounter of the variation, is an exciting aspect of sociolinguistics. This is the situation we find with the Somali language and the Somali community. This article looks into these diversities in contrast to the predominantly presented linguistic homogeneity.

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1.2. The Somali Language

The Somali language (Af Soomaali) is a member of the Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. It is closely related to the Afar and Oromo languages and distantly related to Arabic, especially since the arrival of Islam to the region from which the Somali language has borrowed many words (Cust, 1898: 97). It is also related to other Semitic languages like Hebrew and Amharic. It has also borrowed some words from languages like English, Italian, and Indian, particularly during colonial times (Simpson, 2008: 299 and Fleming, 1976: 43). It is also spoken in Eastern and Southern Africa (Tanzania, South Africa, etc.) and the Arabian Peninsula by emigrant communities. Relatively large Somali language-speaking communities have been established in the United Kingdom, Italy, the United States, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries, especially since the political events that affected Somalia in the early 90s (Abdirachid, 2011: 7).

The Somali Language is also a cross-border language spoken in Somalia, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya, where it is conveyed as a mother tongue with official language status in Somalia, Somaliland, and Ethiopia. About 23 million people speak Somali as their mother tongue (Moret, 2015: 45). According to Ethnologue (2023), Somalia is also home to 11 living indigenous languages, with Somali being the country's official language. Among the Linguistic minorities in Somalia are Oromo, Boon, Mushungulu, Jiddu, Tunni, and Swahili speakers. Landinfo believes it is highly likely that the number of members of these groups currently in Somalia is low due to the turmoil during the civil war, language policy, and language use incentive factors. To understand the language policy and use interplay, looking at the second function of language, aka Identity, is essential (Webersik, 2004: 6).

1.3. Somali as a Language and Identity

To fully comprehend the language policy for the Somali language, a compulsory aspect to navigate through is the notion behind the word "Somali" itself and what it entails as an identity, language, and nation. In this regard, Abdirashid (2011) states what "Somali" stands for by categorizing it into three components: Anthropological, Political, and Linguistic aspects as signifying factors. He says that by its history, the term "Somali" has become ambiguous and multidimensional. This is what was also declared by Morin (1986: 58) and Green & Morrison (2018: 210), who labeled Somali as a "triple identification: Somali (ethnic), Somali (national), and Somali (language). It is important to see the interconnectivity of the three and why and how it shapes the linguistic delineation of the term "Somali."

1.3.1. Anthropological Dimension

The anthropological sense of the word 'Somali' varies among different authors, who often base their research, whether solely or partly, on oral literature, cultural practices, socioeconomic, physiological, and ethnic grouping of the people concerned. These authors, however, predominantly trace the origin of all populations of Somalia in two parental lines: Sab and Samaale. Cerulli (1926) and I.M. Lewis (2019) indicate that the descendants of the Sab people exist in southern Somalia today, specifically in the region between the Shabelle and Jubba rivers. However, per these authors, these people would not be consid-

ered Somalis. Cerulli (1926: 160) believes that they would be coming from a clan, *Boran (Oromo), Sabo,* and states that this name could be the origin of the *Sab*. I.M. Lewis (1988) acknowledges that the Somali nation is composed of two parts, which he named the "Somali" and the "*Sab*", even though he stresses that the word "Somali" doesn't represent the "sab" group and the two stand in opposition in the total genealogy of the Somali nation.

However, authors like Hersi (1977: 12), and especially Lewis (1966: 42), consider all Somalis to be composed of two groups, Sab and Samaal (sometimes pronounced Samaale by Somali speakers). This division even questions the Somali society on which H.S. Lewis (1966: 42-43) stated that Sab, also known as Rahanween and Digil, is the first Somali population. As seen here, from a purely anthropological point of view, the term 'Somali' still has an unresolved domain of reference to which it stands. Nevertheless, the dominant articulation refers only to the shepherds and nomads from Northern Somalia as "Somali." At the same time, the agro-pastoral populations living between the Shabelle and Jubba rivers are considered non-pure Somali.

1.3.2. Political Dimension

The political connotation of the word 'Somali" has been used as gluing magic for the national and political advantage in the history of Somalia that appears in historical records, and it was during a war that includes various clans identified by Arab authors as Somalis (Abdirachid, 2011: 24). One may think this identification is also based on the majority language spoken by that group. It is therefore not surprising that this term was used trans-tribal whenever "Somali nation" was facing an external enemy, be it in the 16th century, at the time of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi and its attempt to conquer Christian Ethiopia or at the beginning of the 17th century, at the time of Sayyid Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan and resistance to Italian and British colonization. Later, after the Second World War, the Somali Youth League (SYL) extensively similarly used the term. In the 70s, the policy of the Nationalist General Siad Barre also made great use of this word for the same unifying goal: to win over the people of Ogden under the rule of the Ethiopian territory. This continued to interplay as a driving concept to the later development of an attempt to unite all the Somali territories divided by the colonial border and bring all the areas inhabited by Somali speakers to form what is called " Great Somalia." Hence, the term " Somali" is now a manifest polysemy shaped by several centuries of regional and colonial history, which gave the word a meaning that superimposed ethnicity, territoriality, or nationality.

1.3.3. Linguistic Dimension

The linguistic profile of a community is a complex matter that demands an understanding of the different layers of identity and the communicating function of a language. In the Somali language, the linguistic profile has a two-way dichotomy: "*Mahathir"* and "*Maay"*. While there is also a majority and minority language status, researchers state that the term 'Somali', when it is used to refer to the linguistic dimension, is only utilized to describe the variety spoken mainly in Northern Somalia, which was the basis for the officially used 'Standard' written language since 1972. This variety is the language of instruction taught at school and used in the media, like the BBC broadcasts of Voice of America or all the regional radio stations in Ethiopia and Djibouti, but also in the written press

and audio-visual Somalia, not to mention Internet (Nilsson, 2016: 32). This variety is also the language of written literature, theatre, and cinema. Giorgio Banti (2015: 7) explains it in detail, claiming that linguists use the term "Somali language" in at least two distinct meanings: **(1)** the written Somali language and the corresponding spoken *koine* (Lingua Franka), and **(2)** the Northern Somali dialects and their most closely related varieties even though there is no consensus about which such related varieties are.

1.4. Dialects of Somali Language

The general language and dialect dichotomy is still a point of discussion for the Somali language. Lamberti (1986a: 9) points out that the Somali dialect situation is complicated as a single dialect usually has several varieties. Moreover, it is also challenging to clarify it as geographic-based naming and categorization are confronted as several dialects are often used in the same geographical area. Additionally, nomadism, clan relationships, and migration are essential factors that have influenced and changed the dialect situation in Somalia. Lamberti (1986a: 13) draws attention to the fact that, due to Somali nationalism, a strong tendency for language convergence among the Somali dialects has developed. The 1980s typically featured support for eliminating or reducing the diversity of dialects. Many dialects within the traditional category of Somali dialectology have a continuum that enables mutual understanding. Nevertheless, the continuum is highly challenged and reaches the level where speakers of the same language find themselves in a total deadlock to communicate. This is the case between the *Mahatiry* and *Maay* speakers, who are presented as dialects of the same language but don't understand each other. Abdullahi (2010: 4) has illustrated that the *Maay* is a language in its merit and relates more closely to other Cushitic languages, such as Oromo, than Somali. The limitation of using the different dialect groups due to their societal status in the community has forced them to assimilate and shift to the dominant one. This was magnified by the direction of Somali language policy in the 1980s, which aligned with the political and government system followed by the socialist government.

The Somali language has never been standardized. In the 1900s, the language debate was focused on the writing system. Siyad Barre introduced the Latin alphabet in 1972 and used it for mass education from 1973 to 1975 (Warsame, 2001: 351). During this period, the entire school curriculum in the country was Somalised (up to then, the teaching languages in schools were English, Italian, and Arabic), which encouraged the writing of several textbooks in Somali. Lamberti (1986: 31) states that the *Darood* dialects from the Mudug region and the western parts of the Somali areas, i.e., *Ogaden* in Ethiopia, became the benchmark for the form of language in school textbooks and broadcasting. These dialects are spoken by many Somalis and understood and spoken by other Somalis, even though their dialect belongs to a different dialect group. Standard Somali is not a single established, official standard, but in practice, consists of various dialects and forms of expression, from which other users will form different understandings of what is deemed to be correct Somali (Landinfo, 2008). It has been noted that the term "standard Somali" has only been used in certain contexts such as the local language version of BBC broadcasts in Somali and on Radio Mogadishu before the civil war. It has not been commonly associated with or used by particular groups within the population. Despite this, written Somali still displays considerable variation (Zorc *et al.*, 1993: xii). This is reflected in pronunciation, orthography, vocabulary, and conjugation. Jama (2021) has developed a Somali corpus that has indicated the writing inconsistency and the challenge of having

standard Somali. The corpus generates a corrected version of the then Somali language, but it needs to account for dialect variations as the software is fed with materials written in Northern Somali Dialect due to the gap in finding written documents in other dialects.

1.5. Categorization of Somali Dialects

1.5.1. The Northern Somali Dialect Group

The Northern Somali dialect comprises multiple regional dialects and is named after the region where it originated. Due to migration over the past two centuries, it now extends to extreme southern Somalia and northern Kenya (Landinfo, 2008). Even though it is scattered in many geographic areas, scholars claim it is only possible to consider it a single dialect consisting of several dialects because of its high homogeneity. A simple criterion of homogeneity is mutual understanding that is much greater than the percentage of cognates with these dialects, according to Ehret & Nuuh (between 69 % and 92 %). Unfortunately, the inner comprehension criterion has never been quantified and cannot be a reference. Northern Somali is the lingua franca in the whole of Somalia and in the countries where the presence of Somali is secular (Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti). It is also the reference variety of Somali language in countries with dominant diaspora communities in the West. Therefore, it enjoyed a privileged position for an indefinite period.

1.5.2. The Maay Dialects

Lamberti only discusses *Rahanweyn* and *Rahanweyn-esque* Maay dialects as with the other dialects and dialect names in Somalia, the *Rahanweyn* dialect terms also coincide with the various Rahanweyn clans, such as Af-Elay. However, it is not just Rahanweyn clan members who speak Af-Rahanweyn – for example, in *Jilib*, according to Lamberti, the *Oojji* use the current Rahanweyn dialect of the area. However, the May dialects are relatively more homogeneous than the Northern Somali dialects. The boundaries between the different May dialects are fluid. The dialects are used in the *Bakool* region, the south-western part of the Hiraan region in the Jowhar district in the Middle Shebelle region, the entire Bay region, Gedo, Middle Juba, and Lower Shebelle, as well as in the eastern part of Lower Juba.

1.5.3. The Ashraaf Dialect

This dialect was very poorly studied as a very brief grammatical description by Moreno (1953), an article on the focusing system by Ajello (1984), and grammatical indications in Banti (1985) are the only references available outside of work by Lamberti (1980, 1984, 1986). This is why some authors like Ehret and Nuuh (1984: 74) and Abdullahi (2000) disputed the existence of such a dialect.

1.5.4. Dialects between the two rivers (EDF)

This group comprises dialects between the two rivers, which are very heterogeneous. This is the only group in all dialects that is a very specific and recognized name by all, which refers to ethnicity and dialect. As Lamberti points out, the question of bringing them

back to a single group always arises for researchers working on the dialectology of Somali. However, because of the marked heterogeneity, the authors are not unanimous in classifying all these dialects in the same group. For example, some scholars put the Tunni dialect in this group (see Caniglia, 1935, Lewis, 1955; Lamberti, 1986, etc.), while Colucci (1924) doesn't consider Tunni part of the group. Caniglia and Lewis base their consideration of the dialects in these groups on ethnological considerations, while Colucci and Lamberti use linguistic observations as a primary criterion for it. According to the intuitive taxonomy of the Somali people, especially when considering the tribal structure of agrarian populations between the two rivers, *Maay* is not part of EDF. It is the mother tongue of persons belonging to the clan group *Mirifle* (or *Rahanween*) and another clan group, Shanta *Caleemood* [*ʃanta ʕaleemood*], which coexists with *Rahanween Dafeed* in the region (or *Wanle Weyn*). *Maay* is also spoken as a second or third language by many of *Digil* people. These three groups, *Digil, Mirifle, and Shanta Caleemood*, meet under the clan confederation "*Digil-Mirifle* ".

1.5.5. Dabarre

Aside from a monograph by Lamberti (1980a), which remained in manuscript form, and his work on the Somali dialects (id., 1983.1986), there still needs to be a description, succinct, of this dialect. The study of Gebert and Mansuur (1984) is one of the few publications too. As indicated by Lamberti (1986a: 44), the speakers of this dialect recognize two varieties of it: **i)** *Dabarre*, spoken in the districts of *Diinsoor, Qansax Dheere* and the *Bay* region, for those who call themselves "*Dabarre*, and **ii)** the Oroole spoke in the Jubba-Hoose (Lower Jubba), along the Jubba River, especially in the area of *Bu'aale*.

1.5.6. Garre

Outside of Lamberti's (1983, 1986) work, Tosco (1989, 1994) has exclusively studied this dialect. This researcher has dedicated a brief monograph that examines the different levels of descriptive language and a comparative study with the Boni in 1994, which was made for reference. His latest study highlights the dialect's linguistic proximity to the *Boni*.

1.5.7. Jiiddu

The brief article by Moreno (1951: 99-107), the trilingual glossary *Jiiddu*-Somali-English, established by Saalim Aliyow Ibraw, the unpublished study by Lamberti (1981) contained references in this dialect (1983, 1984, 1986c) and those on Banti possessive of these dialects (1984). Ehret and Nuuh (1984) have also integrated this dialect in their lexical comparison of Somali dialects; Diriye (2002) refers to it in his thesis. Cerulli (1964: 223) briefly referenced this dialect, considering it to result from a secret language.

1.5.8. Tunni

Tosco (1989) gave an entire monograph on this dialect. Apart from this study, the work of Lamberti (1983, 1984, 1986) has discussed the dialect. It is spoken in Shabelle and on the coastal strip between *Merka* and *Jamaame* in the Middle *Jubba*.

Rendille, Boni and Bayso

There are other languages, the *Sat* group, which includes the *Boni, Bay*so, and the *Rendille,* which are genetically close to the Somali language and are discussed in Somali dialectological studies. Also, in such studies, including a diachronic dimension, the *Boni*, the *Rendille*, and, to some extent, the *Bayso* cannot be ignored entirely because of the light they shed on the evolution of the Somali community from different aspects. The *Bayso* is spoken on the small islands of Lake *Abbaya*, in Southwestern Ethiopia, with a thousand people, according to Voigt (2003: 508). Ongoing research by Jigjiga University, which the author of this article is part of, also confirms the endangerment of the language (filed work 2023).

1.6. The confusion about Language and Dialect in the Somali Language

The classification of Somali into *Maxatiri and Maay* dialects is complicated by the question of what distinguishes a language from a dialect. Mutual intelligibility is crucial, and some argue that *Maay* should be considered a language rather than a dialect. However, *Maay* still needs to be standardized in written form, which complicates the issue. The social status of speakers enforces a hierarchy in Somali dialects, with no standard writing or proclamation for them. The national depiction of Somali as one ethnicity, language, and religion silences alternative linguistic voices. Promising research has been done on minority languages and dialects under the traditional *Maay* category.

The language use-based approach also supports this dialect dichotomy as the *Maxa-Tiri* is used more as an official language for Media, Education, and administrative purposes. At the same time, *Maay* stays in the primary communications domains like the family and, to some extent, in the neighborhood. This functional dichotomy statuesque is getting challenged, at least in the media domain, with the coming of popular songs in *Maay* and other minority languages, mainly through the Media. Social media is playing a significant role in this, with new music clips being aired and becoming a point of discussion even in questioning whether the "dialect" is a Somali language or not in a way, it is also becoming a point of exposure to show the diversity to those who have never had the chance to hear the dialects. However, it needs further investigation to see its true impact other than it becoming a way to inform the majority of Somali speakers who, both for political and historical reasons, refuse to believe there is a division and difference within the Somali linguistic community contrary to "one language, one nation" narration held high.

In the current movement in Southern Somalia, there has been an increasing visibility of linguistic diversity, which has led to the emergence of language rights for media and the right for linguistic diversity and access. Even officeholders and influential personalities have raised these issues more prominently. Recently, an incident occurred in the national parliament where one of the MPs, coming from what was perceived to be a minority clan group, used his dialect to address the gathering, only to be told to "speak the Somali language." This incident triggered a campaign that ultimately led to an apology from the speaker of the House. It is worth noting that the constitution of Somalia has enshrined the right for linguistic diversity and has enclosed in its article 5 a provision that the official language of Somalia is the Somali language (*Maay* and *Maxatiri)* and Arabic is a second official language. (Provisional Constitution, 2012). Article 31: 3 also talks about the state's

responsibility to promote the local culture and dialects of the minorities in the nation, even though local dialects of minorities are usually attributed to those believed to be different from the *Maay* one.

> *"The state shall promote the cultural practices and local dialects of minorities" (Provisional Constitution, 2012: 8).*

A community radio was told to transmit the message of health communication in "The Somali language," alluding that the variety of the Berwani minority community in Merka who are Somalis with their dialect are not Somalis or don't speak Somali, which again caused outrage and voicing of officials such as former presidents to craft their message in solidarity of the community which again has become a way to challenge the preconception of Maxaa-tiri as the only and proper Somali language. According to the chief editor of Radio Barawe, Fuad Shoble Kafe, around 8.30 p.m on Monday, Barawe District Commissioner (DC), Omar Sheikh Abdi, visited the radio station and verbally delivered the order to ban all programming in the Baravanese dialect, citing that "it was illegal to broadcast in such dialect" without providing any evidence for that.

> *"The Barawe DC, Omar Sheikh Abdi and the South West State Minister of Information, Ugas Hassan Abdi, both said that "Maay and Mahaa Tiri" are the only sanctioned dialects of the Somali language." (Somali Journalists Syndicate, April 2020).*

This was a reply to the discussion on the use of the dialects of the Somali language that disregards the constitutional adherence that allows the society the right of expression and minority languages to be respected, even though it doesn't specify these dialects. The community reaction from significant leaders was pushing forward the need for inclusion.

> *"Say whatever you want reer #Baraawe and #Barawani language is part of us, there's no one who can deny their beautiful language or culture. We're all Somalis and we're different, that's the beauty of #Somalia." (Abdirahman Aalto, independent journalist, April 24th 2020 -Twitter post).*

The above reflection has two components that is the diversity in the linguistic description of the Somali community and how the perceived Somali language and society is a contested aspect with a time-to-time claim by the minority language or dialect speakers for inclusion.

Among the people who spoke against the ruling of the government representative was the former president of Somalia President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed who used the Barawani dialect to pass his Ramadan wish for 2020 during which his message was highly circulated on social media.

While these all are a low-key attempt at the language vs dialect and one language narration, it is yet a long way from being a consolidated discussion to address the language, dialect, and related diversities, which is not a special case for Somali language but a good indicator for the situation.

Conclusion

The role of language to unite and build an enabling foundation for development is beyond question. The linguistic diversity in the world, especially in Africa, is a reality everyone must deal with. Many nations have walked the talk and have structured a language policy that attempts to be as inclusive as possible. With 11 official languages, South Africa is an example of such an accomplishment, followed by others, even though the practical implementation could be better. In the case of the Somali language, as presented by the article, the path is yet to be cleared with recognizing the diversity and re-engaging in informative research to see the linguistic situation on the ground after the length of conflict dominant national history. While it is a working document and itself has gaps, the constitution of 2012 has created an entry point that has yet to be tested clearly for its functionality. One thing is for sure: time has changed, and linguistic identity and language documentation have moved away from a paper-based advocacy. It must be practical and address diversity, as it can't sustain the myth of homogeneity in a nation where rich linguistic diversity is a reality.

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