DEBATING LANGUAGE POLICY IN ETHIOPIA

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This paper is focused on the development of language policy in Ethiopia from the reign of Haile Selassie I (1930-1974) until the present day. After the Federal Constitution was introduced in 1994, Ethiopia has been divided into eleven regions along ethno-linguistic borders. The constitution gave every nation the right to develop its own language and its own culture, though only Amharic, Tigrigna, Somali, and Afaan Oromo became major regional languages. This situation caused growing ethno-linguistic nationalism, which can be seen especially in the Oromiya region as well as the SNNPR (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region). This paper will examine theoretical principles as well as case studies that seem to be important for a comprehensive analysis of language policy in Ethiopia. While the period until 1974 was characterized by a policy of Ethiopianization, the Derg government (1974-1991) introduced a policy of literacy and alphabetization. Several languages were standardized, including Somali, Oromo, Sidama and Wolayta. In reality, Amharic prevailed as a lingua franca and became the main administrative language.

Key words: Ethiopia, languages, language policy, Amharic, constitution

Introduction

According to Crawford,[1] language policy is:

> I. What a government does officially through legislation, court decisions, executive action or other means to:

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[1] CRAWFORD, J.W. Language Policy. [online]. [Retrieved 16 September, 2005]. Available at <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/ JWCrawford/langpol.htm>.

a. determine how languages are used in public contexts

b. cultivate language skills needed for national priorities, or

c. establish the rights of individuals or groups to learn use and maintain languages.

II. Government regulation of its own language including steps to facilitate clear communication, train and recruit personnel, guarantee due process, foster political participation, and provide access to public services, proceedings and documents.

As noted by Calvet,[2] the possession of authority is very important in the formulation of language policies. That is to say, language policy is the responsibility of the government. Patten[3] proposes four models of language policy: disestablishment, official multilingualism, language rationalization and language maintenance. The disestablishment or public disengagement model stipulates that there should not be any official publicly recognized language or languages. The second model, official multilingualism, maintains that there has be the same recognition for the various languages used in the country. The third model, language rationalization, strives for a privileged public language by either denying or limiting the recognition of other languages. The last model, language maintenance aims to make all languages equally successful. Before we proceed, it would be proper to ask: "Why do countries need a language policy?". For obvious reasons, the use of language for various purposes such as education, administration, communication etc in monolingual nations does not create problems. However, as Getachew and Derib[4] argued in multilingual nations like Ethiopia, the issue creates problems and the use of language is mostly supported by a language policy.

The Horn of Africa is one of the most diverse and complex linguistic areas in sub-Saharan Africa. The number of languages in this area is more than hundred, but only a few languages are "major": – Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya, Afar, Sidama, or Wolayta. According to Ethnologue,[5] there are some 114 languages in the area, including the ex-colonial languages (French, Italian, English as well as Standard Arabic). Appleyard and Orwin[6] questioned the number of languages presented by Ethnologue, since according to their view, some dialects of one language are considered separate languages. Recently several researches have been conducted in order to classify the status

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[2] CALVET, L-J. *Language Wars and Linguistics Politics.*

[3] PATTEN, A. Political Theory and Language Policy, pp. 691-715.

[4] GETACHEW, A., DERIB, A. Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends, p. 41.

[5] Available at <http://www.ethnologue.org>.

[6] APPLEYARD, D., ORWIN, M. The Horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. In: Simpson, A. (ed.): *Language and National Identity in Africa*, pp. 267-290.

and position of some languages that are regarded as dialects, such as Somali and others.[7] Dialects refer to "a form of language speech used by members of a regional, ethnic, or social group. Dialects that are mutually intelligible belong to the same language."[8]

In Ethiopia alone there are more than 75 languages which can be categorized under the language families of Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic and Nilotic.[9] The highest density of languages is to be found in the west and south-west of Ethiopia while the eastern parts of the Horn of Africa are rather "homogenous". Generally, the Horn of Africa is characterized not only by a high number of languages, but also by a high number of language families to which these belong as well as by languages whose affiliation is rather uncertain. One of these examples is represented by Ongota.[10] In the Horn we may thus find Afro-Asiatic languages, mainly Semitic and Cushitic, Nilo-Saharan languages, along the Sudanese-Ethiopian border, and in Eritrea, minor Bantu languages in Somalia, as well as Shabo or Ongota whose origin is still unknown.

Recently, it seems certain that the number of languages spoken in the Horn will decrease since a number of them are highly endangered. Only a few of the languages in the area have written forms, which means that a wide majority of languages remain only in their oral form without a standardized script. In spite of several attempts in recent history, it is not probable that the number of standardized languages will increase dramatically. The more probable scenario is that the number of people speaking the major languages, Amharic, Oromo, Somali and some others will increase due to several reasons. Due to a language shift, examined, for example, by Brenzinger et al.,[11] many languages in Africa become endangered because they are seen as socially "lower". The decision to "abandon one's own language always derives from a change in the self-esteem of the speech community. In cases of language shift one could observe that members, very often the younger generation of minorities, regard their own community as inferior."[12]

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[7] ABDIRASHID, M. Personal correspondence, 2007.

[8] SALZMANN, Z. *Language, Culture and Society. An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*, p. 166.

[9] GETACHEW, A., DERIB, A. Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends, p. 38.

[10] SAVÀ, G. *A Grammar of Ts'amakko.*; BLAŽEK, V. Cushitic and Omotic strata in Ongota, a moribund language of uncertain affiliation from Southeast Ethiopia, pp. 43-68.; BLAŽEK, V. Nilo-Saharan Stratum of Ongota. In PAYNE, D.L., REH, M. *Advances in Nilo-Saharan Linguistics. Proceedings of the 8th Nilo-Saharan Linguistics Colloquium*, pp. 9-18.

[11] BRENZINGER, M., HEINE, B., SOMMER, G. Language Death in Africa. In: Robins, R. H.; Uhlenbeck, E. M. (eds.): *Endangered Languages*, p. 37.

[12] Ibid.

The number of highly endangered and extinct languages in Ethiopia and the Horn is also relatively high, although low in comparison with Sudan or Nigeria. Batibo[13] presented a table of extinct and highly endangered languages in the Horn of Africa as follows:

Tab.1: Endangered Languages in the Horn of Africa

Country	*Highly endangered languages*	*Extinct or nearly extinct languages*
Eritrea	Bilen (Bogo, Bileng)	Ge'ez (Ancient Ethiopic)
Ethiopia	Anfillo, Bambassi, Kano, Kwama (Gongwama), Ometo, Saho, Opuuo (Cita, Kwira), Seze, Zay (Lak'í)	Argobba, Bayso, Burji, Gafat, Ganza (Ganzo, Koma), RerBare (Berebere, Adona), Agaw (western variety), Weyto, Kwegu (Bacha, Menja), Ongota (Birale), Gatame, Ganjule, Qwarenya, Gomba, Kimanteney (Qwara), Shabo, Omo-Murle, Xamtan'a, Ge'ez
Somalia	Chimiini (Bravanese), Bajuni (both remote varieties of Kiswahili), Garre (Af-Garre), Mushungulu, Tunni (Af-Tunni)	Boni (Boon, Af-Boon), still spoken in Kenya

Source: Batibo, M. *Language Decline and Death in Africa. Causes, Consequences and Challenges*, p. 147 and p. 150.

Languages in the Horn of Africa in historical perspective

Before we start with some analysis of contemporary language policy in Ethiopia, it is necessary to take a look at the historical process that contributed to the distribution of languages in the Horn of Africa and which shaped the recent language policies in the respective areas.

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[13] BATIBO, H. *Language Decline and Death in Africa. Causes, Consequences and Challenges*, pp. 147-150.

According to Bloor and Tamrat,[14] two main factors have contributed to the linguistic profile of the country. First, Ethiopia is the only African country that has never been colonized by a European power during the 19th century scramble for Africa. Second, it is the only African country where the dominant religion is an indigenous form of Christianity. Another unique feature is, of course, the Ethiopic script. The linguistic history of Ethiopia is strongly connected to Ge'ez, the early Semitic language of the Axumite kingdom, which served as the major language until the 16th century. It was Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868) who for the first time attempted to make Amharic a literary language.[15] The emperor changed the customary use of Ge'ez (in writing the Royal Chronicles) into Amharic. In his reign, Amharic was not only a mere lingua franca but also a literary language. Tewodros, thus, used a promotive and covert language policy.[16] Amharic then became the successor to Ge'ez and Heine[17] calls Amharic one of the "daughter" languages. It is better to say that Tigrinya and Tigre are the "daughter" languages of Ge'ez since Amharic represents its southern development strongly influenced by Agaw elements.

Amharic has long been called the *yanegus kwankwa*, or the language of the king, though the road to becoming an official language of the Ethiopian Empire is more recent.[18] The development of Amharic as the court language, or better to say its "golden age" began during the reign of Tewodros II, after the *zemane mesafint* period ended and Ethiopia began to be united under the central power. The Amharic vocabulary has received many accretions of Cushitic origin. Edward Ullendorff calls Amharic a "most expressive language; its lexical resources seem very adequate, and adaptation of new forms or meaning variants can be accomplished with ease".[19] Especially in the 20th century, as it became the language of administration, Amharic gained considerable prestige.

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[14] BLOOR, T., TAMRAT, W. Issues in Ethiopian Language Policy and Education. In *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, p. 322.

[15] GETACHEW, A., DERIB, A. Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends. In *Ethiopian Journal of Education & Science*, p. 41.

[16] There are various language policies depending on the type of government, place and time. Sometimes, governments follow "overt" policies, i.e., clear and explicit mostly supported by written legal documents such as constitutions, or "covert" language polices, which are also known as "de facto", "common law" or "traditional" (Crowford 2000; Getachew and Derib 2006, p. 40). Furthermore, language policies could be "promotive" or "tolerant" ("permissive"). "Promotive" language policy means there is a promotion of one or more languages in the form of constitutional, administrative and legal support by the government. On the other hand "tolerance" indicates the use of one specific language or more languages in the absence of financial or personnel support (Schiffman 2005; Getachew and Derib 2006, p. 40).

[17] HEINE, B. *Status and Use of African Lingua Francas*, p. 107.

[18] APPLEYARD, D., ORWIN, M. The Horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. In: Simpson, A. (ed.): *Language and National Identity in Africa*, pp. 267-290.

[19] ULLENDORFF, E. *The Ethiopians. An Introduction to Country and People*, p. 126.

The Afroasiatic and mainly the Ethio-Semitic languages are among the best known and most researched in Ethiopia, while some "peripheral" language, Nilo-Saharan or Cushitic still deserve attention from linguists in order to document them before they disappear. One such example is presented by Savà, whose research is focused on documentation of the Ongota language, a moribund language from the Woito Valley in Southern Ethiopia.[20] Andrzej Zaborski states that both "synchronic and diachronic studies of the Afroasiatic/Hamitosemitic languages are developing" but on the other hand he argues that a lot has been neglected, which means that Afroasiatic comparative-historical linguistics still remains an underdeveloped discipline.[21]

Policy of Ethiopianization[22]

The modern history of Ethiopia was characterized by a strong Ethiopianization of non-Amhara territories. While Menelik II (1889-1913) extended his territory from the highlands to the southern lowlands, it was Haile Sellasie (1930-1974) who by his centralized policy contributed to a relative linguistic unification of the country. These historical connotations have become a central point of various disputes regarding the status of languages in southern Ethiopia.

Sociolinguists warn that some languages are regarded as dialects, while other dialects are raised often due to political reasons to the position of standard languages. In this sense sociolinguists rather prefer the term "language varieties" which would substitute both previous terms.[23] Bamgbose pointed out that language is a powerful symbol of society, particularly if its potential is fully

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[20] SAVÀ, G. Personal communication, 2008.

[21] ZABORSKI, A. Afroasiatic/Hamitosemitic Comparative-Historical Linguistics as a Developing Discipline. In: Machalík, T.; Záhořík, J. (eds.): *Viva Africa 2007. Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on African Studies*, p. 9.

[22] As Getachew and Derib (2006, p. 44) rightly pointed out, a considerable number of researchers use the term "Amhararization" rather than "Ethiopianization". In this paper we prefer to use the term "Ethiopianization" instead of the term "Amhararization" due to the fact that the rulers of the country always identify themselves as rulers of Ethiopia. Moreover, the Ethiopian rulers who campaigned for the re-unification of the country did not come only from the Amhara ethnic group. As indicated by the contemporary Oromo politician and researcher, Merera Gudina (2003, pp. 102-103,) the previous ruling circles and monarchs of Ethiopia (Ex. Menelik II, and Haile Selassie I) had more Oromo blood than Amhara blood. Moreover, in the re-unification campaigns which largely took place in the reign of Menelik, there were many non-Amhara military commanders and administrators (Ibid.). On this issue Derib (2006, p. 44) said "While the 'Ethiopianization' during Emperor Minilik incorporated local elites the *'Ethiopianization' during Emperor Haile Sellasie aimed to encompass the general population.*" It is also important to note that contrary to the existing myth of Amhara domination, as indicated by Darkwah (1975), Menelik appointed non-Amhara, Muslim rulers in the eastern part of the country.

[23] DURANTI, A. *Linguistic Anthropology. An Introduction*, p. 70.

recognized and exploited.[24] Batibo then adds that when African countries gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, they realized "from the outset the importance of a powerful national medium when faced with the many tasks of dismantling colonial legacies. Only a few states, including Ethiopia, have developed (the others are Tanzania and Somalia) indigenous African languages to the level of national languages.[25]

In several African countries we have seen a growth of linguistic nationalism in the last decades in connection with the directed effort of the so-called homogenization of "nations". Batibo then adds that the processes of linguistic revitalization are often linked to a desire for freedom in the use or promotion of an indigenous language and culture. Ethnic insurgencies are "motivated not only by the wish to preserve indigenous languages and cultures but also to sensitize the authorities to recognize and appreciate the linguistic and cultural diversity of the respective countries. Such moves can, in a certain extent, serve to reinforce language survival and revitalization".[26]

Languages were for a long time taken as a necessary part of ethnic identity, but several researches in recent times have shown that this statement cannot be taken as generally valid. As an example we may show the Serer of Senegal, who were since independence Wolofized, but recently a strong effort has been produced to strengthen the Serer culture and ethnic identity. Furthermore, the Serer people consider Wolofs "lower" and strengthening or accenting their own ethnic identity without language is an attempt to resist total Wolof domination.[27]

Before we get to the discussion on language status in Ethiopia, it is worth clarifying some basic terms which fit into what we call language policy. Van Dyken in her study examines a multilingual society from various perspectives. While *mother tongue* is the language children can speak fluently before going to school, a *community language* is a language which is the first language or mother tongue of part of the population of a country which is also used by non-native speakers in a given geographical area as a second language. A *lingua franca* is then a language used for communication by people speaking different languages. It need not be an indigenous language of the area. *Languages of minority groups* seem to be those spoken by a relatively small percentage of a country's population. A *national language* is an indigenous language which is given recognized status by the national government for use in government

[24] BAMGBOSE, A. *Language and Exclusion. The Consequences of Language Question in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 30.

[25] BATIBO, H. *Language Decline and Death in Africa. Causes, Consequences and Challenges*, p. 111.

[26] Ibid.

[27] BRENZINGER, M., HEINE, B., SOMMER, G. Language Death in Africa. In ROBINS, R. H.; UHLENBECK, E. M. *Endangered Languages*, p. 36.

and/or education. An official language is the language of government business and other formal purposes in a country.[28] One such an example is Amharic in Ethiopia which can be presented as an official as well as a national language and in certain areas a lingua franca.

Changes after 1991 have also had an impact on language policy. The most important factor was a decision to give full rights to local languages. This has meant a complete revision of modern Ethiopian history, and "the most severe blow to the official status of Amharic".[29] Article 5 of the Constitution says *"All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition. Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal government. Members of the Federation may by law determine their respective working languages."* The new Ethiopian constitution proclaimed pluralism, promising at least a redefinition of the dominant status of Amharic and strengthening of the position of some other big languages. The imperial constitution of 1955 simply stated that Amharic is the official language of the Empire (Article 125). Amharic was used in administration, media and education.

When Eritrea became one of the Ethiopian provinces in 1962 and the federation was abolished, Amharic became the only official language there. At this time books written in Tigrinya were burnt and Tigrinya banned as an official language.[30] Marxist regime (since 1974) and its proclaimed socialist constitution in 1987 created an atmosphere of plurality within the state including language policy. From the long-term period it was clear that nothing revolutionary happened because at the same time the prominent role of Amharic as the truly national language was stressed.

In spite of this, the second half of the 1970s brought a flourishing development of linguistic pluralism as compared to the previous era. In 1975, the first Oromo magazine – *Bariisaa* – was published and a year later the Communist Manifesto (*Maanifestoo Paartii Kommonistii*) was translated in Oromo. Radios started broadcasting in five languages – Amharic, Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya and Wolayta. Financially supported by UNESCO, the government launched an alphabetization campaign that included besides the already mentioned big languages also Hadiya, Kambaata, Gurage, Gedeo, Kefa-Mocha, Saho, Afar, Tigré and Kunama. However, it is clear that the only language that took advantage of the campaign was Amharic since all major

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[28] VAN DYKEN, R. J. The Role of Languages of Minority Groups for Literacy and Education in Africa, pp. 40-41.
[29] SAVÀ, G., TOSCO, M. "Ex Uno Plura": The uneasy road of Ethiopian languages towards standardization. Manuscript.
[30] SAVÀ, G., TOSCO, M. "Ex Uno Plura": The uneasy road of Ethiopian languages towards standardization. Manuscript.

publications were written in it and it thus further spread its influence over the country.[31]

The major change in terms of national identity was brought by the Socialist constitution as well. While during the period of the Empire, Ethiopia's existence and sovereignty was legitimized by the descent from King Solomon and his son Menelik as well as by the legacy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in the 1970s and 1980s, religion and history were replaced by "national unification". In contrast to this, the current Ethiopian constitution does not speak about the "nation" but replaces this term by an unclear and in a certain sense hesitant statement of "nations, nationalities and peoples", which documents an ambivalence of the authors of the constitution in terms of state identity. To the contrary, the Eritrean constitution does not deal with these terms as it begins with words *"We, the People of Eritrea"*.[32]

In comparison with its Ethiopian counterpart the Eritrean constitution is rather brief. In Article 4 it states equality is guaranteed to all Eritrean languages Article 14 adds that "no person may be discriminated against on account of race, ethnic origin, language, colour, gender, religion, disability, age, political view, or social or economic status or any other improper factors".[33] In reality, English, Arabic and Tigrinya gained the leading role in Eritrea. Arabic has a special status presumably because Eritrea has been a member of the Arab League since 2003 with the status of an observer.[34] The other languages – Tigré, Afar, Saho, Beja, Bilin, Kunama and Nara – are part of the elementary school curricula.

It is evident that Ethiopia and Eritrea each chose different ways of solving the problem of multilingualism. While Ethiopia transferred at least partially some degree of responsibility to select an official language to the regions, Eritrea in its language policy generally followed a more centralized model of state. The Eritrean government thus privileged the right to decide which languages are the right ones. Thus, the contemporary Eritrean language policy in a certain sense copies the Marxist Ethiopian model of the 1980s, which on the one hand recognized the pluralistic character of the state in terms of ethnic and language areas, but on the other hand it controlled every decision in these

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[31] SAVÀ, G., TOSCO, M. "Ex Uno Plura": The uneasy road of Ethiopian languages towards standardization. Manuscript.

[32] Eritrea Constitution [online]. Available at
<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/cafrad/unpan004654.pdf>. [cit. 2008-10-20]

[33] Ibid.

[34] See e.g.: Eritrea Joins Arab League as Observer [online]. Available at
<http://www.somalilandtimes.net/2003/52/5214.htm>. [cit. 2008-08-04]

questions. The government chose which languages could become languages of cultural, educational and social prestige.

Although Ethiopia is a multilingual country, the role of one language, Amharic, as the major means of communication and instruction has been evident at least for the last two centuries. It was the Derg revolution of 1974 that brought a new language policy in terms of the use of the so-called "ethnic languages" for education. The literacy campaign that started in 1979 had to emancipate other languages in regions including Afaan Oromo, Sidama, Wolayta, etc. The Derg government decided to use Ethiopic script for transcribing these languages because most of them were unwritten until that time and the use of one script meant a united system of writing.

The difference between Amharic and other major Ethiopian languages also involved the relative homogeneity of Amharic as compared to Oromo. Amharic does not show signs of linguistic differentiation despite its territorial expansion. Amharic has always been an inseparable part of the Ethiopian state and as shown by Claudia Kramsch, the culture of text and "its respect for and obedience to textual authority was also central to the Judaic and early Christian traditions".[35] It is then not surprising that Semitic languages like Ge'ez, and later Amharic enjoyed a greater respect than other, mainly Cushitic languages, usually called pre-literal. The fact that language can be used as a political tool can be examined in many cases throughout the history of Africa as well as Europe. For example, in Spain, General Franco "declared the very speaking of any languages other than Castilian Spanish to be illegal, and Basques, Catalans and Galicians were routinely ordered to 'stop barking like dogs' and to 'speak the language of the Christians'".[36]

Although the contemporary Ethiopian constitution is a subject of criticism it has to be stated that in the context of previous constitutions the new one presents a move away from obvious centralization and Ethiopianization, as proposed by the Ethiopian constitutions in 1931 and 1955. Previous constitutions did not deal with ethnic heterogeneity since the country was united under the rule of the *Siyum Egziabiher, Neguse Negest Zä-Itiop'ia*, which can be translated as *the Elect of God, King of Kings of Ethiopia* as Haile Selassie I was titled by the 1931 Constitution.[37] The 1931 Constitution did not mention the official language of the country despite the fact that the Constitution itself was written in Amharic.[38] The Derg regime established the alphabetization campaign resulting in growing literacy of the Ethiopian population, although the proclaimed modernization did not prevent Ethiopia from continuing

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[35] KRAMSCH, C. *Language and Culture*, p. 53.

[36] TRASK, R. J. *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics*, p. 145.

[37] JEMBERE, A. *An Introduction to the Legal History of Ethiopia 1434-1974*, pp. 163-167.

[38] GETACHEW, A., DERIB, A. Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends, p. 44.

Ethiopianization. Moreover, as shown by Savà and Tosco, "plurality of languages was paid lip service, and a restricted number of "big" regional languages were somehow recognized and tentatively written down using the Ethiopic syllabary. At the same time, the eminent role of Amharic as "national language" was stressed."[39]

Oromo language

Some authors[40] stress the role of the mass media and broadcasting in African languages as one of the main contributions to language emancipation in many African countries. Ethiopia was no different.

Oromo is nowadays, together with Amharic, the most wide-spread language of Ethiopia. The National census in 1994 tells us that 17,080,318 ethnic Oromo live in the country, while 16,777,976 inhabitants indicated Afaan Oromo as their mother tongue. For other 1,535,434 inhabitants Afaan Oromo was the second language. As compared to this Amharic seems to be the real lingua franca since 17,372,913 Ethiopians indicated it as their mother tongue and another 5 millions as the second language. The number of ethnic Amharas was 16 millions.

Within Afaan Oromo we register several dialects whose similarity is relatively high, as shown recently by Blažek.[41] The reason for the low fragmentation of Afaan Oromo may lie in a strong sense of ethnic identity at least at the official and intellectual level. It was mainly the Oromo diaspora and intellectual circles that were concerned with the development of Oromo culture, history and language. The history of written Oromo is relatively long as it traces back to Onesimose Nasiba, who died in 1931. As a child, he was kidnapped, he became a slave and then bought free by the Swiss explorer Werner Munzinger and handed over to the Swedish Lutheran Mission in Massawa in 1870. In 1876 he got to Sweden where he became a teacher, back in Massawa in 1881 he started translating into Oromo. Between 1885 and 1898 he worked on translations of the New Testament, Luther's Catechism and the Bible, published in Oromo in 1898.[42]

For Cushitic languages it is problematic to use the Ethiopic syllabary script since it does not reflect gemination of consonants and length of vowels which is a typical attribute of Cushitic and Omotic languages. The above-mentioned

[39] SAVÀ, G., TOSCO, M. "Ex Uno Plura": The uneasy road of Ethiopian languages towards standardization. Manuscript.
[40] See e.g. OBIENG, S. G., ADEGBIJA, E. Sub-Saharan Africa. In: Fisherman, J. A. (ed.): *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity.*
[41] BLAŽEK, V. Oromo dialects. Paper presented at the 36th Colloquium on African Languages and Linguistics, 27-29 August, 2006, Leiden.
[42] SAVÀ, G., TOSCO, M. "Ex Uno Plura": The uneasy road of Ethiopian languages towards standardization. Manuscript.

works were written in Ethiopic script. During the Communist regime the syllabary system was prescribed for the Oromo orthography. Oromo intellectuals, often living in diaspora, agreed during the previous regime on the Latin orthography called *qubee*. *Qubee* was officially recognized in 1992 and played a remarkable role in the development and standardization of other Ethiopian languages, mainly Cushitic and Omotic.[43]

Standardization of languages is not a linguistic but rather a political decision. Implementation of a script seemed to be one of the major issues of ethnic and language policies in Ethiopia since the promotion of the new constitution. The majority of Ethiopian languages are still kept in a preliteral stage, though the number of researches focused on documentation of oral traditions of existing languages is increasing. One such an example could be given – an accent on ethno-linguistic and cultural diversity, which can be seen, for example, at the Ethnological museum in Addis Ababa. A certain space is given to preliteral oral traditions including those of Banna, Gamo, Yem and Basketo. On the other hand, Haile in his thesis showed the marginal position of minority languages in the Ethiopian parliament.[44] Enormous effort of Ethiopian and foreign linguists and anthropologists to document minority ethnic groups and languages, their oral traditions, poetry and other cultural aspects is slowed down by the absence_of standardization of these languages or by using the Ethiopic script for transliteration. The result is often disunited or problematic phonetic transcription which makes orientation in texts difficult.[45]

Nowadays, there are two scripts being used: firstly the Ethiopic script *fidel* (recently called *abugida* as well) and secondly Latin script. Arabic script was for centuries perceived as the script of enemies and in Ethiopia itself its use was not allowed, though at present it is used for the Harari language, or seldom for purposes of Muslim Oromo and Amharic literatures.[46] In the past, the Ethiopic script was used of course also for other Semitic languages in Ethiopia (Ge'ez, Tigrinya, Tigré, Argobba, Gurage), while in other cases it was more adequate to use the Latin script. Generally, it is necessary to use such an orthography which suits the character of the given language. Orthography thus can become a powerful tool for expression of a group identity or differences. Savà and Tosco show that while the Ethiopian masses use *fidel*, the intellectual elites incline to

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[43] SAVÀ, G., TOSCO, M. "Ex Uno Plura": The uneasy road of Ethiopian languages towards standardization. Manuscript.

[44] HAILE, H. *Language Diversity and Communication Gap: The Case of the Linguistically Plural Members of the House of People's Representatives of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.* Research Paper. Addis Ababa University.

[45] TASEW, B. *Anyuaa Folktales. Waac-Leere Mo Anyuaa.* Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University.

[46] SAVÀ, G., TOSCO, M. "Ex Uno Plura": The uneasy road of Ethiopian languages towards standardization. Manuscript.

the Latin script. The reason is in tradition. While *fidel* is used by the Orthodox Church, the intellectual elites, mostly educated in the West, know several foreign languages written in Latin script.[47]

The only non-Semitic language of Ethiopia which currently uses Amharic script is K'abeena. In this case the Ethiopian Orthodox Church played no role since the majority of its speakers claim Islamic affiliation. The most decisive fact was a contact with neighbouring Gurage. We may assume that there was also a certain tendency to distinguish from the neighbouring related languages Alaba and Kambaata.[48] On the other hand, at present an attempt to standardize one minor Cushitic language of Southern Ethiopia – Tsamakko – has occurred. So far, the only text for Tsamakko is Savà.[49] Together with Pavel Mikeš, Graziano Savà is working on a primer for schools which could be used for education in Woito. The authors are also preparing the Tsamakko folk tales.[50] For a standardized form of Tsamakko they use a Latin script which corresponds more properly to the spoken Tsamakko.

Oromo in the struggle over policy of linguistic homogenization in Ethiopia
Despite many clichés from the past, the Oromo share several basic cultural traits with the other Cushitic-speaking peoples of the Horn of Africa. Like the Afar or Somali, many Oromo people prefer Islam rather than Christianity.[51] Today it is mainly the language which differentiates them from their neighbours. In the past, the Oromo people played a remarkable role in demographic change of the country, though the state remained in the hands of the Amhara cultural sphere.[52] Traditional Amharic superiority thus denied the real distribution of power in the country, where there is no ethnic majority.[53] The difference between Amharic and other big language can be seen in the lack of internal differentiation despite territorial extension throughout last couple of centuries.

Bulcha pointed at the discrepancy between the usual persuasion of politicians, according to whom a language homogenization is a necessary step towards social and economic development, and the case of Ethiopia, which tells us that the opposite is true. The policy of "one language one nation" became an obstacle to socioeconomic development, because insistence on the use of a

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[47] SAVÀ, G., TOSCO, M. "Ex Uno Plura": The uneasy road of Ethiopian languages towards standardization. Manuscript.

[48] CRASS, J. *Das K'abeena. Deskriptive Grammatik einer hochlandostkuschitischen Sprache*; YIGEZU, M. K'äbena Orthography, pp. 211-231.

[49] SAVÀ, G. *A Grammar of Ts'amakko*.

[50] MIKEŠ, P. Personal communication, 2007.

[51] MELBAA, G. *Oromia. An Introduction*. Khartoum 1988.

[52] BULCHA, M. The Politics of Linguistic Homogenization in Ethiopia and the Conflict over the Status of Afaan Oromo, p. 326.

[53] ABEGAZ, B. *Ethiopia: A Model Nation of Minorities*. Unpublished Paper.

single language prevented vital information from reaching the majority of the population. Radio Ethiopia, for instance, broadcast all information regarding health, agriculture, or education only in Amharic. This means that the "Amharic only" education and administration hampered Oromo education for decades.[54]

Education in schools was conducted only in Amharic during the reign of Haile Selassie. For many children it meant increasing problems at school since their mother tongues were considered "uncultivated". Education was conducted only in Amharic which caused many difficulties for children from non-Amhara regions. Moreover, it was reminded to them that their mother tongues were not "cultivated" and thus were not adequate to be used in the "civilized" environment of schools.[55] Bulcha presents an example from his childhood, when non-Amhara students were often ridiculed whenever they made grammatical errors or mispronounced words. Knowledge of Oromo, Sidama, Hadiya, or other languages was perceived as a sign of illiteracy since the only language of modernization had to be Amharic.[56]

Hameso states that "in a country, where the majority of the people live in the rural areas without speaking nor writing Amharic, maintaining the status of Amharic had perverse role in higher education. In primary schools, the use of Amharic language as a medium of education in the majority non-Amharic speaking areas was fiercely resisted as unfair and unjust as it favours Abyssinian settlers at the expense of indigenous speakers at state level."[57] Amharic is depicted by these arguments as a restricting factor for all non-Amharic speakers and the use of the Amharic-only policy a major challenge to the development of indigenous languages as well as education.

One last thought was suggested by Hameso, who states that the language policy only corresponds to general situation in Ethiopia, which can be clearly shown on the example of the distribution of knowledge, or better to say, access to education and school materials.[58] He thinks that the government does not even have the will to change the uneven distribution of libraries, now limited only to the few urban centres. The most affected are thus "the marginalized groups, women and people in the rural areas. In one instance, in the South, there were only a couple of public libraries for a population of over three million

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[54] BULCHA, M. The Politics of Linguistic Homogenization in Ethiopia and the Conflict over the Status of Afaan Oromo, p. 336.
[55] BULCHA, M. The Politics of Linguistic Homogenization in Ethiopia and the Conflict over the Status of Afaan Oromo, p. 336.
[56] BULCHA, M. The Politics of Linguistic Homogenization in Ethiopia and the Conflict over the Status of Afaan Oromo, pp. 337-338.
[57] HAMESO, S. Languages, Nations, and National Self-Determination in Ethiopia. In: Hameso, S.; Hassen, M. (eds.). *Arrested Development in Ethiopia. Essays on Underdevelopment, Democracy and Self-Determination*, p. 205.
[58] HAMESO, S. Languages, Nations, and National Self-Determination in Ethiopia, p. 208.

people and there are only three libraries in three high schools for that population group".[59]

On the other hand, access to education is not only restricted by the government of the country as is shown by the example of the Woito Valley area in the Southern Region. Although the situation is changing remarkably, for a long time education in state schools was seen as contradictory to the "traditional" mainly pastoral way of life among the Tsamay people. Due to the activities of foreign missionaries and developing infrastructure, more children attend schools though especially girls stay at their home helping with daily life work and care. At present, there are about five people at the tenth grade in Gisma, with one teacher of Tsamay origin. According to my informants and Amharic teachers in Luqa, it is obvious that there is only a limited percentage of Tsamay pupils who attend schools regularly.

Federal Constitution

The Federal Constitution created federal states of which there are seven more or less homogenous – Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somalia, Gambella, Harari – and two – Beni Shangul/Gumuz and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR) – heterogeneous. The big cities - Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa – gained special statuses since in these cases it is difficult to talk in ethnic terms. Regional units are called "states" in the Constitution though the term "regions" has become common. Until 1974 (or 1994), Amharic played the role of the superior language, while the new constitution confirmed the right to the development and determination of regional languages.

Article 39.2 claims that every "nation, nationality and people has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history". The Amhara region decided for Amharic, the Somali region for Somali language, and the Oromo region for Oromo. The Afar region and the SNNPR chose Amharic as well, since especially in the SNNPR there is no majority that could claim its language as official.[60] What does it mean "Nation, Nationality or People"? The Ethiopian constitution defines these terms as "a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological

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[59] HAMESO, S. Languages, Nations, and National Self-Determination in Ethiopia, p. 208.
[60] COHEN, G. The Development of Regional and Local Languages in Ethiopia's Federal System. In: Turton, D. (ed.): *Ethnic Federalism. The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, pp. 165-180.; HABTU, A. *Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia: Background, Present Conditions and Future Prospects*. Paper submitted to the Second EAF International Symposium on Contemporary Development Issues in Ethiopia, July 11-12 2003, Addis Ababa.

make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory".[61]

Status of European languages and Arabic

English is not an official language in Ethiopia but for many years it has had a special status there. Especially since the fall of the Italian East African Empire, English has become the major foreign language to be used for publications and at official levels. While during the Derg regime, the knowledge of English was limited, recently, especially at secondary level, English is widely used in urban areas. English, as a colonial language is usually regarded as one of three major languages spoken in Africa (along with French and Arabic). Bloor and Tamrat show that to call many African countries Anglophone is rather exaggerated since English is usually, except for South Africa and Liberia, spoken by educated elites. The authors admit that the situation is changing in Africa since English has become one of the central points of the school curriculum.[62] In Ethiopia, English is an important language of the press since various dailies are published in it including The Metropolitan, The Reporter or the Ethiopian Herald. Moreover, many Ethiopian web pages are run in English, including those owned by the Ethiopian diaspora.

In the Horn, the Italian language has played a significant role for the last one hundred years, though its importance is rapidly diminishing as the prominent role of English becomes entrenched. During the colonial period, it was reported by Trevaskis that one of the major aims of schools was to educate children in Italian language, culture and history.[63] Some Italians stayed in Eritrea after the fall of the Fascist empire but Italian has never become a widely spoken language. Some form of Italian "developed with some features of a pidgin but with little lexical or grammatical input from indigenous languages".[64]

French has always played a minor role in education, since it was a language of highly educated elites, including former Emperor Haile Sellassie I. There were some attempts to increase the role of French in the education system, especially during the 1960s and some schools teaching French were established, but as in the case of Italian, the significance of French is rather limited.

While Ethiopia has been traditionally perceived as a Christian country using the Ge'ez language for religious purposes, Arabic has always been the religious language of the Muslims. In this sense, it is called a special language by some scholars.[65] For Ethiopia, such a special language has been Ge'ez, though its role

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[61] The Federal Constitution of Ethiopia, p. 97.

[62] BLOOR, T., TAMRAT, W. Issues in Ethiopian Language Policy and Education, p. 324.

[63] TREVASKIS, G. K. N. *Eritrea. A Colony in Transition, 1941-1952*, p. 33.

[64] BLOOR, T., TAMRAT, W. Issues in Ethiopian Language Policy and Education, p. 325.

[65] BLOOR, T., TAMRAT, W. Issues in Ethiopian Language Policy and Education, p. 325.

is now limited only to liturgy. Some scholars compare Ge'ez in ancient Ethiopia to Latin in Western Europe or Sanskrit in India.

The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures was declared in Eritrea, after the conference titled *Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures in the 21st Century*. This was said to be the first conference on such a topic ever held on the African continent and it included writers and scholars from all parts of Africa as well as the African diaspora. The Declaration had ten points and stated that 1) African languages must take on the duty, the responsibility, and the challenge of speaking for the continent; 2) The vitality and equality of African languages must be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment of African peoples; 3) The diversity of African languages reflects the rich cultural heritage of Africa and must be used as an instrument of African unity; 4) Dialogue among African languages is essential: African languages must use the instrument of translation to advance communication among all people, including the disabled.[66]

Present time

After the 1991 fall of the Derg regime, the Ethiopian education system has undergone a huge change as have many other aspects of social and political life. No part of the educational system has been left untouched. Soon after the Transitional government was formed in 1991, a Conference for Peace and Democracy took place in Addis Ababa from July 2 to 6. The conference issued a policy guideline for the immediate provision of primary school instruction in five major languages. Moreover, there was a free decision in terms of choices of script, while the Derg regime educational system preferred the Ethiopian alphabet, which does not suit the Cushitic languages. As suggested by Alemu and Tekleselassie,[67] there is no proof that the respective speakers of the language were consulted to check on their needs, nor was an attempt made to explore the pros and cons of the two scripts in terms of providing the needed linguistic and educational opportunities for children. What perhaps makes this decision even more politically motivated is the prejudice against the Ethiopic alphabet because it is the script of the Amhara ethnic group that had been in power for a long time in history.

One of the main examples of the failed language policy of the Ethiopian federation is represented by the Wolayta in the SNNPR. The Wolayta are one of the major groups and were incorporated into the Southern Region in 1995, now

[66] THE ASMARA DECLARATION ON AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES [online]. Available at <http://www.outreach.psu.edu/programs/allodds/declaration.html> [cit. 2008-05-23].
[67] ALEMU, D. S., TEKLESELASSIE, A. A. Instructional Language Policy in Ethiopia: Motivated by Politics or the Educational Needs of Children?, p. 154.

they are administered under the North Omo Zone. The government attempted to create an artificial language called WOGAGODA (Wolayta – Gamo – Gofa – Dawro), a mixture of four different languages. The Wolayta integration and language policy created an atmosphere of tensions resulting in severe clashes. The wide-spread hostile reaction to the distribution of WOGAGODA textbooks was rapid and extreme. The Wolayta case demonstrates the centralized policy and limited local autonomy as basic features of the current ethnic-based federal Ethiopia.

The establishment of WOGAGODA came some two years after DAGAGO (Dawro – Gamo – Gofa) textbooks had been written along with Wolayta textbooks. The Wolayta language has, as compared to the others, a long history of its written standard. Written Wolayta was developed by the Sudan Interior Mission in the early 20th century. The creation of WOGAGODA was then perceived by many Wolayta people as an inferior variant of a long established literary standard, and thus a step backward.[68] It was this language dispute which resulted in the redefinition of the North Omo Zone. In 2000, the Ethiopian government allowed the division of the Zone into five units: three zones (Dawro, Gamo-Gofa, Wolayta) and two special *weredas* (Basketo and Konta).

The North Omo Zone was also the main destination of the linguistic research conducted by Ralph Siebert, whose aim was "to gain a better understanding of the language policy, as it is applied to the Ometo languages".[69] He classifies three languages of the area – Gamo, Gofa, Dawro – as the minor languages rather than vernaculars, defined as the unstandardized native languages of speech societies. The difference lies in education because the minor language is "used as a medium of instruction above the first years of primary school, and has textbooks other than primers published in it".[70] The primers used for schools were prepared in the Latin script and it is also planned to have another standardized language of the area – Basketo. This plan was prepared by the Southern Regional Educational Bureau in Awassa, which plans to create the curricula for the whole region. The project of the aforementioned DAGAGO was aimed to "standardize the three spoken varieties into one

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[68] VAUGHAN, S. Responses to Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia's Southern Region. In: Turton, D. (ed.): *Ethnic Federalism. The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, p. 192.
[69] SIEBERT, R. Recent Developments Regarding Education Policy and Languages in the North Omo Administrative Region p. 3. [online]. Available at <http://www.ethnologue.org>. [cit. 2008-05-23].
[70] SIEBERT, R. Recent Developments Regarding Education Policy and Languages in the North Omo Administrative Region, p. 4. [online]. Available at <http://www.ethnologue.org>. [cit. 2008-05-23],.

orthographic norm".[71] There are two ways of solving the problems with vocabulary described by Siebert as follows:

> "The first one is to create a new term by "coining" it. Coining is the creation of terms which are made up of elements already in the language. The second way is to take the term of one of the varieties, include the other two corresponding terms in a glossary and explain the meaning."[72]

In a linguistically diverse nation, a shared language can serve as an agent of unification, a facilitator of economic development, and a symbol of nationhood. The government of multilingual states thus often has an interest in promoting the shared knowledge of a single language.[73] Every government specifies one or more languages in which all everyday business may legally be conducted, and a language singled out in this way is an official language within the territory of that government.[74] As we have seen, in recent Ethiopian history, Amharic served as an official language without being questioned. After the 1960s series of demonstrations and growth of nationalist tendencies among Oromo, Sidama, Somali or Afar, the language issue became a central point of political debates and Amharic was presented as an imperial language.

Recently, there has been a huge discussion over the status of Ethiopian languages and the national language, Amharic. What is the national language in a multilingual society? According to some scholars, a national language has to fulfil six basic aspects in order to be considered national. The national language has to be:

1) The emblem of national oneness and identity
2) Widely used for some everyday purposes
3) Widely and fluently spoken within the country
4) The major candidate for such a role, since there is no alternative, equally qualified language within the country
5) Acceptable as a symbol of authenticity
6) Having a link with the glorious past.[75]

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[71] SIEBERT, R. Recent Developments Regarding Education Policy and Languages in the North Omo Administrative Region, p. 6. [online]. Available at <http://www.ethnologue.org>. [cit. 2008-05-23],

[72] SIEBERT, R. Recent Developments Regarding Education Policy and Languages in the North Omo Administrative Region, p. 6. [online]. Available at <http://www.ethnologue.org> [cit. 2008-05-23],

[73] COOPER, R. L. Government Language Policy. In: Bender, M. L. et al. (eds.): *Language in Ethiopia*, p. 187.

[74] TRASK, R. J. *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics*, p. 214.

[75] OBIENG, S. G., ADEGBIJA, E. Sub-Saharan Africa. In FISHERMAN, J. A. *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*, p. 364.

In our opinion, it is particularly the first, the second and the last points of the list that make Amharic a national language, though many scholars would probably disagree since Afaan Oromo can be at least since 16th century regarded the second most important language in Ethiopia. The situation in Ethiopia can be compared to that of Nigeria or Ghana, where English plays a role of official and quasi-national language though there are a large number of African languages aspiring to that position.[76]

Conclusion

Language will always have, besides its linguistic and social aspects, a remarkable political nature, especially in those countries characterized by a strong diversity. According to Smith (2004), it seems that people in Ethiopia have had little opportunity to participate in a democratic process of resolving ethnolinguistic inequality. To conclude the paper focused on language policy in Ethiopia and difficulties connected with it would be worth repeating once again the story of the ratification of the charter of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia as summarized by Appleyard and Orwin. During the meeting of all Ethiopian parties one of the main goals was to determine the working language and since Amharic was the most widespread, it was chosen to be adopted as official, whilst organizations that had brought interpreters would be permitted to use their own languages if they wished. Thus the Eritrean leader chose Tigrinya, but was dissatisfied with his Amharic interpreter. The spokesman of the OLF spoke in Oromo, but his speech was translated into English, presumably because of the OLF's rejection of Amharic as the imperial language. The majority of other delegates had minimal knowledge of English and thus the OLF speech remained without response.[77]

This story still remains as a proof of Ethiopian linguistic plurality on one hand, and as a proof of the prominent position of Amharic as lingua franca in Ethiopia. Of course, mainly Oromo, Tigrinya and Somali are challenging its position but still Amharic stays the most important for daily life. Besides this, for political linguistics, English will strengthen its position not only as the official language of government (together with Amharic) but also as the main language for schools and education. No other language, in our opinion can have such a perspective in Ethiopia as English has.

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[76] OBIENG, S. G., ADEGBIJA, E. Sub-Saharan Africa. In FISHERMAN, J. A. *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*, p. 365.
[77] APPLEYARD, D., ORWIN, M. The Horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. In: Simpson, A. (ed.): *Language and National Identity in Africa*, pp. 267-290.

Another aspect we can see and we can hope for is standardization of other languages, especially in linguistically diverse area, mainly the Southern Region. Researches are conducted to document the most endangered languages whose destiny is not so optimistic but whose existence has to be documented in order to keep the richness of Ethiopian language and cultural history because language is the tool through which researchers may record oral history, folk tales and so on.

Of course, languages in Ethiopia, with its history of the so-called "linguistic imperialism" will keep their political sense, especially those representing ethnic groups with remarkable population potential including Oromo, Somali, Sidama, Wolayta and others. It rather seems that these languages, despite their growing importance, will keep their scope within relatively restricted areas, Somali in the Southeast, Tigrinya in the north, Oromo in the west and south and other languages, like Afar, Sidama, Wolayta and some others will remain important in more clearly defined local territories. Amharic, as a language of the official level, cannot be easily replaced by some other language because these would have much lower historical legitimization than Amharic. Especially in linguistically diverse areas, Amharic seems to be the only efficient means of inter-ethnic communication though in some peripheral areas, some other languages can take this role due to particular socioeconomic and historical conditions.

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