

# DEVELOPMENT OF THE AFAR LANGUAGE

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A conference will be held during one week, 21-24 May 2007, at **WIK'S Folk High School situated on the outskirts of Uppsala in Sweden** and a concluding seminar on Friday the 25<sup>th</sup> of May at **"Korskyrkan" facilities at Våktargatan 2D in Uppsala**. Authors, linguists and other representatives of the Afar linguists from Djibouti, Eritrea and Ethiopia will participate and share their work on the development of the Afar language. The conference will treat the different Afar sound representations with the objective of finding out which of the forms that is most suited to the Afar language and therefore is best considered as the Afar written language.

## 2. OBJECTIVE

The main objective of the conference is to standardise the Afar written language by bringing together authors, linguists and other representatives of the Afar society in Djibouti, Eritrea and Ethiopia, for them to discuss and finally agree upon one common script for the Afar language that can be used in all countries concerned. This would be very favourable to the Afar society in its efforts to combat poverty, disease and environmental degradation as it would facilitate cross-boarder communications.

In order to attain this far-reaching goal the conference will discuss issues such as:

- How far has the Afar language developed up-to-now?
- Which are the thus far encountered problems?
- Which of these problems have already been solved?
- What are the future prospects for the Afar language when it comes to – a) the development in general and b) the development of a common script?

## 3. BACKGROUND

The Afar region in the horn of Africa, better known as the Afar Triangle, stretches across the borders of three countries – Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia – on the Horn of Africa. The Afar region is one of the hottest and driest areas in the world and the Afar people are to a very large extent illiterate. These facts contribute to the Afar people being struck very hard in connection with natural catastrophes, war and HIV/AIDS epidemics. Many people have died as a result of these conditions only during the last ten years. Both men and women are affected by the problems, but women are hit hardest due to deeply rooted traditions, e.g., uneven work loads and female genital mutilation. The fact that educational materials are lacking in the Afar language makes it even more difficult for the man/woman on the street to gain access to vital information in his/her own language. Literacy severely affects women more than any other sector.

The different written forms of the Afar language that are used in the three countries today can, in the long run, have a negative impact on the common understanding of the Afar people and obstruct their opportunities to develop. The meagre resources that are available for literacy efforts and other

educational measures cannot be used efficiently when different scripts of the Afar language are used in the different countries.

In 2001, in co-operation with ABF Uppsala County, Afar Friends in Sweden organised a three day conference, the Pan-AFAR CONFERENCE, where the problems facing the Afar people and the possible support that can be provided to the governments in the three countries to acknowledge the Afar situation were discussed. In a concluding press release, the conference invited all development and humanitarian organisations that work to help the Afar people to initiate and manage development projects that emphasize the development of the Afar language.

Afar Friends in Sweden responded to this invitation and has since then carried out some important measures in cooperation with our partners in Djibouti and Ethiopia. In 2003, we participated in the effort arranged by the Djiboutian Government to standardise the words and expressions that are used by the Afar newscasters in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Four weeks of work resulted in an Afar-French-English dictionary. At the moment, we are involved in literacy projects in Ethiopia and Djibouti and plan to produce materials that are equally important for the Afar people in Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia. These efforts made us and our partners realise the importance of having a standardised written language. A common culture and a common language calls for a common written language, which would facilitate for the Afar people to sustain their common culture and keep the family ties that exist in spite of the divided political situation.

The Afar written language is yet to be standardised. As we speak, a number of projects are running that aim at giving Afar people the fundamental ability to read and write. We'd especially like to point out the efforts made by the governments in the three countries to develop the local languages. In this connection, we also want to mention the assiduous work done by ILD (Institut des Langues de Djibouti), Ministry of Education in Eritrea and Afar Language Studies & Enrichment Center (**ALSEC**) in the **ANRS** of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Still, in comparison with the huge task of the literacy campaign, very few school books and only a small number of literary efforts exist in the Afar language. Already in 2003, when we visited our partners APDA (Afar Pastoralist Development Association) and UDC (Union pour le Développement Culturel), they suggested that we help them arrange a conference where a standardisation of the Afar written language should be discussed.

#### 4. THE DIFFERENT PHASES OF THE CONFERENCE

The conference will be carried out in phases. The first phase "A Common Script for the Afar Language" is earmarked for authors and linguists who will discuss and agree on which one of the current written forms, based on scholarly analysis, is best suited for the Afar language. The discussions will be held during one week and be led by a neutral, initiated moderator. This first step entails to agree on which system of characters/spelling conventions that is to be used – the Arabic, one of the Latin systems or one of the traditional sets of symbols. Consequently, the conference is not about inventing a whole new set of characters.

In Phase Two, Friday 25<sup>th</sup> of May a one day conference will be held in Uppsala concluding the week long discussions by informing invited diplomats from the three countries, immigrants and refugees from these countries, the Swedish general public and Swedish media of the results of Phase One.

To conclude - in order to achieve a common written language, representatives of the different written forms must meet and agree on the form that is best suited to the Afar language from a scholarly point of view. Afar Friends in Sweden's aim is to facilitate this.

## 5. WHY THIS CONFERENCE?

A common written language will in the long run lead to increased literacy and contribute to change – for good and bad. In our opinion, it is very important not to disturb the harmonic coexistence between people, animals and environment that the Afar people treasure. At the same time, it is necessary to face the outer world that is making itself more and more known to the Afars, and in this world literacy is a necessity. Without the means of reading and writing, it is impossible to make good use of the modern technological world and be prepared to meet exploitation in different forms.

Your participation makes a difference, which is why we would be very happy to see you as our guest in Uppsala, Sweden, the 21-25 May 2007

## 6. FUNDING

The conference is financed by SIDA by way of ForumSyd. ABF UPPSALA COUNTY defrays part of the cost.

## 7. ORGANISATION

The conference is arranged by Afar Friends in Sweden in cooperation with ABF Uppsala County.

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