

# THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DOMAINS TO THE RECEDING OF AWNGI LANGUAGE

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper views Awi people as a bilingual society with two languages to the extent that the total number of languages spoken right now in Awi zone is two languages. This linguistic diversity in this zone has occasioned the development and the spread of the concepts of bilingualism and diglossia and language choice. As a result of this diversity, it is noticed that the phenomenon of Language Choice has become inevitable on the language use habit of these people as every domain of language use has its language features. The increasing contact between languages in the context of globalization motivates such a shift of paradigms. Despite the bilingual nature of the languages in the zone, Amharic Language is the dominant language over Awngi in almost all the domains, and specifically, it is used for all government functions. This is mainly due to historical, political and government policies, numerical strength of the speakers of Amharic and other meaningful motives.*

*Keywords: Prestigiousness, bilingualism, multilingualism, diaglossia, domains.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Awi people are demographically bounded by Amharic speaking community. Hence, the languages spoken in Awi zone of Amhara region in Ethiopia are Amharic and Awngi. The number of speakers of Awngi is declining as generation passes. It is fact that 50-year-old and above in Awi zone is capable of speaking Awngi while their children are hardly to speak. Gumuz is rarely spoken at the boundaries of Benshangul Gumuz and Amhara region, where Awi zone is located. These languages are assigned different roles or functions depending on the domains and occasions. Therefore, language use situation in Awi zone is different from what obtains in other monolingual districts like East Gojjam and West Gojjam in Amhara region where there is only Amharic spoken. There is the government policy concerning domains of language use in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia (1985), and the National Policy on Education (1987). It is obvious that government understands the

importance of clear allocation of roles to both indigenous languages.

It is desirable for every Awi person to speak Awngi. Accordingly, Amharic shall be the official language in Ethiopia and it shall be compulsory in primary, Junior Secondly Schools and at the Senior Schools. However, despite government and individual efforts to plan and allocate distinct roles to each of these languages in well-stated domains, the phenomena of borrowing, interference, code-switching and domestication of these languages each other is common. These phenomena are products of language contact, co-existence of both Amharic and Awngi indigenous languages in Awi bilingual environment. Speakers of Amharic and Awngi languages tend to switch from one to the other because of the existence of these languages in their linguistic repertoires. Bilingualism relates to speaking or using two languages; so, it is possible for an individual or a society to be bilingual. Due to the existence of two ethnic groups in Awi, it is therefore a bilingual and a bicultural speech community where these languages and cultures compete.

It is also observed that contacts between these indigenous languages and cultures have greater potential for enhancing harmonious inter-language and inter-cultural communication. Awi and Amhara people are put in the same political administrative constituency, and this increased the level of contact among them. However, due to different reasons, the dominance of Amharic, Awngi is receding. This continual shift of language is obviously evident in the past decades.

## 2. BILINGUALISM AND POLYGLOTISM

Bilingualism as the generic term is the traditional position that reflect the importance of research involving two languages rather than additional languages, and it generally refers to two languages but can include more languages (Cook & Bassetti, 2011). Bilingualism and trilingualism are instances of polyglotism. Some researchers use the term bilingual for users of two languages and multilingual for three or more (De Groot, 2011). This position is also common among scholars working on third language acquisition and trilingualism (Kemp, 2009).

Some languages may be more functionally silent in a particular context than others. A language could be used to perform certain functions based on the perception of its users, its suitability for certain occasions, participants, the intention of the communicative encounter, interpersonal goals relating to identity, solidarity, exclusion and commitment of oneself (Adegbija, 1987).

Multilingualism is a complex phenomenon that can be studied from different perspectives in disciplines such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and education. polyglotism is the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives.

### 2.1. The Social Dimension of Polyglotism

Ayeomoni, Moses Omoniyi (2012) states “traditionally, there have been more multilinguals in areas where regional or minority languages are spoken or in border areas. For example, it is also possible to find many monolingual speakers in big cities in Europe or North America where there is a

very high level of linguistic diversity as a result of immigration particularly, in contexts in which English is the majority language”.

There can be important differences in the experience of acquiring and using languages. An individual can acquire the different languages simultaneously by being exposed to two or more languages from birth or successively by being exposed to second or additional languages later in life. These experiences are related to the different possibilities in the organization of bilingual memory and the distinctions between compound, coordinate and subordinate multilinguals (De Groot, 2011).

At the societal level, there is an important distinction between additive and subtractive polyglotism. In the case of additive multilingualism, a language is added to the linguistic repertoire of the speaker while the first language continues to be developed. In contrast, subtractive multilingualism refers to situations in which a new language is learned and replaces the first language (Kramersch, 2010).

Additive multilingualism is more likely to happen when speakers of a majority language acquire other languages; subtractive multilingualism can often be found when immigrant schoolchildren are required to shift to the language of the host country without being given the opportunity to develop their own language. A related issue is the difference between being multilingual in demographically strong languages with a high status and weaker languages (Kramersch, 2010).

### 2.2. Domains of Language Use.

An official language is a language that has been declared by a government of a country, with a legal backing, to be the language of the government. An official language is patronized by the government and used widely, not just for communication, but also for correspondence.

The two languages co-existing in study area vary greatly in functional, structural, and spatial characteristics. It is discovered that over 500,000 people speak Awngi, (Andreas Joswig and Hussein Mohammed, 2011). Amharic has been more noticeable in use than Awngi in Awi zone. It serves various functions as well as official and national language. It remains the language of bureaucracy of government, of education, of commerce, of science

and technology, of inter-ethnic cooperation and contacts, etc.

Awngi is more functionally silent in a particular context than Amharic.

The historical and political past tradition tends to attract greater functions to a language or languages (Adegbija. E, 2004).

At the societal level, language functions appear to be more fixed. The functions of languages especially in multilingual contexts include roles relating to official use of language, being used as national language, media language of wider communication, international communication purposes, school subjects, judiciary functions, roles relating to national identity, solidarity and for cohesiveness of the citizens (Ayeomoni, Moses Omoniyi, 2012).

### 2.3 Generic classification of the Agaw

The traditional view about the position of Agaw defines the language as Cushitic which is divided into a Northern branch represented only by Beja, the Agaw or Central Cushitic branch, a large Eastern family and Southern Cushitic, (Sasse 2003). Citing Hetzron (1976), Sasse (2003) sub classifies central Cushitic (Agaw) languages as follows.

1. Northern Agaw--Bilen
2. Eastern Agaw---Chamir, Xamtnga
3. Western Agaw --Qimant and others
4. Southern Agaw--Awngi, kunfel

Though Appleyard (1996) found no special genetic link between Agaw and Highland East Cushitic, Zaborski (2001) puts Agaw as a branch of East Cushitic.

Hayward (2000) divides the Cushitic family into six groups: Northern, Central, Highland East Cushitic, Lowland East Cushitic, Dullay chain, and Southern Cushitic.

Whatever its position within Cushitic, all scholars recognize the unity of Agaw languages, and Appleyard, the leading expert on this Cushitic family, who has worked on a number of living, moribund, and extinct languages in this family, has made an important contribution to both Agaw and Cushitic studies with his

outstanding and long-awaited (Appleyard 1996) comparative dictionary.

Appleyard (1988) confidently states Awngi speaking people settle not only in Agaw Meder but also in the central highlands of Matakal in Ethiopia.

## 3. DISCUSSION

### 3.1. The Determining Factors of Language status in Awi

According the residents of Awi zone, the following factors determine the domains in use of Awngi language:

#### a. Prestigiousness

Language potency and prestige are directly related to language functions. These functions assigned to a language enhance the prestige of a language. The two languages ( Amharic and Awngi) in Awi have distinct functional manifestations at levels of usage, that is, each of the languages has domains of use different from the other. They are assigned roles based on their prestige and status. For instance, the Amharic is a national lingua franca language which is broadly used in formal situations, in the media, in education, in different ceremonies including funeral, formal meetings etc. as a result of its prestige. As its function is throughout the country, not only people in Awi zone but also many Ethiopians prefer to use Amharic to their native languages.

In the Awi situation, bilingualism is directly linked to 'diglossia', the phenomenon which is about the coexistence of two closely related native languages among a certain population one of which is regarded to be more prestigious than the other.

Generally speaking, a language is considered prestigious if given prestigious functions and is considered low if it is not given any function at all or allocated low status functions (Ayeomoni, Moses Omoniyi 2012). Before twenty five years, Amharic was used as medium of instruction in all elementary (1-6) schools of Ethiopia due to its being a national language. This phenomena made Amharic functionally a high-prestigious domain of language till now. However, the attitude of people to a less

prestigious Awngi is being enhanced recently due to its being instructional media in grades 1-8.

#### b. Level of Development

The most basic measure of language development is its function. Other measures include availability of dictionaries and linguistic descriptions, lexical expansion, metalanguage or register. In Awi bilingual society, the functions allocated to a language seem to be directly proportional to the extent of their development. For instance, Amharic is an official and spoken everywhere in Ethiopia whereas Awngi is restricted only in Awi zone. As far as the written mode is concerned, Amharic can be said to be the predominant language at all levels of government. Consequently, government publications, newsletters, gazettes, policy documents such as the National Policy on Education, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia and newsletters of ministries are normally published in Amharic.

Amharic books and reference materials are more easily available than Awngi. Most people in urban areas of Awi zone, for their day to day activities, communicate with Amharic although they are capable of speaking both languages. Hence, the society in rural areas of Awi considers Amharic as a means of modernization and development and they usually prefer their children to learn Amharic than their mother tongue, Awngi. Such continuous attitude of Awi people leads to the phenomenon of Awngi language to shrink from time to time.

#### c. Institutional and political Policies

Languages that receive the institutional blessings tend to prosper functionally while those that do not tend to functionally wane or wither (Ayeomoni, Moses Omoniyi 2012).

Language nationalism often favors linguistic assimilation to make sure that every member of a speech community is able to use the dominant language. This results in transferring prestige to and asserting the superiority of the dominant language. In extreme cases, minority languages are given little or no rights.

It is important to distinguish between *official languages*, which have the State's official recognition and are usually designated for use in official and

public domains, and *national languages*, spoken by the majority of the people, and, in general, native to a country or State.

National languages can be recognized officially as such and be used in public domains, usually in education. They, yet have an *inferior* status with regard to the official language. Whatever the official status granted to languages, it is clear that only a small number of the world's languages are thus recognized, and that the majority of the world's languages have a minority status.

Language choice is motivated by the fact that national languages facilitate socio-cultural, economic and political communication with other countries and access to science and technology.

In Ethiopia, Amharic is prominently used at the three tiers of government: Federal, region and Local. National functions were assigned by using Amharic for hundreds of years. Institutional policies of government ministries, organs or agencies, cultural and religious organizations, language development centers, universities and the other educational institutions, legislative houses and the media within the country contribute remarkably to the determination of language functions.

In the same token, Amharic has played a great role in institutional policies of the government. It is also used in literary or creative writing, in mass media, in inter-ethnic communication among lower classes in all educational institutions; it functions as a language of wider communication in public institutions, public service and welfare centers, post offices, police stations, Army barracks and Magistrate centers, in market places and commercial centers. And right now, although Awngi is also being given political suggestions to be used in offices and schools, no one is practically implementing. This also discourages the language from expansion.

#### d. Numerical Strength

The number of speakers of a language tends to contribute to its prestige and status and it affects its allotted functions. The national function allocated to Amharic is traceable to the number of its speakers.

Language choice varies according to the different domains of use; this implies that language varies

according to situations as well as the relationship and the number of population that exists between the various interlocutors.

In countries like Ethiopia where a large number of languages coexist, a language of wider communication is felt to be the answer to communication problems. It is also a way of avoiding the choice between two or more competing national languages.

Awngi Language with a small population of speakers in Ethiopia was functionally underrated, oppressed and belittled compared to Amharic and other languages having a large number of speakers.

#### 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Some people in the society speak both languages equally; some speak one language better than the other.

Before 50 and above years, most of Awi people were monolinguals of Awngi. Then, after decades the population has been shifted into two language speaker (bilinguals). Bilingualism in Awi zone has occasioned the influence of Amharic language on Awngi. This bilingualism is conducted due to Prestigiousness, numeral strength of the population, the institutional and political policies and level of development.

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