The beginning and growth of a new language - Somali Sign Language

**Doreen E Woodford (Deaf Africa Fund) UK
Email:** Dewdaf@aol.com

Paper presented to the International Conference on Languages and Education in Africa, Oslo University, 19-24 June 2006

# Somalia and Somaliland

Somalia is situated in the Horn of Africa and Somaliland is a region of North-West Somalia. It has a varied and mainly harsh terrain, and faces many difficulties including wide-spread poverty, shortages of food and water, poor telephone communication and no postal system. Political problems have also played a significant part in the difficulties leading to great instability and constant conflict and lawlessness. These and other difficulties have affected the development of a language for deaf people - a minority group with specific needs.

The region of Somalia which was formerly British Somaliland declared itself an autonomous independent state in 1991, but has so far failed to gain international recognition. Djibouti, formerly French Somaliland is a separate republic. Somalia now covers the former Italian Somaliland, within which the region of Puntland regards itself as autonomous but not independent.

# The Somali Nation

The Somali people live in a far wider area than just Somalia and Somaliland. They also live in parts of Kenya and Ethiopia and share a common faith, Islam, and language, 'af-Somali', which only became a written language in 1973. This sense of Somali nationhood is both a matter of pride and a situation which has affected the growth of Somali Sign Language (SSL).

Educational and medical provision was non-existent for a period of 30 years from the mid-1960s. Since 1996 immense efforts have been made in Somaliland to reinstate health and education services, but they are still limited.

# The Education of Deaf Children

As far as is known, prior to 1996, there was no school or other provision for deaf children in any of the Somali-Nation areas mentioned, with the important exception of Kenya. A school had been established in Kenya in the 1980s - the 'Wajir' school, which was to play a vital part in the development of SSL. The children who attended the school were Somali Kenyans. Kenya developed a strong national sign language - Kenya Sign Language (KSL) and the pupils became fluent adult sign language users.

An Italian Catholic aid worker was caring for disabled children in the Wajir area. She sent deaf children to the school in Wajir and established a good working relationship with the then headmaster. Her care extended beyond paying the fees, and for many she became a mother-figure.

Eventually she moved to Boroma, the second largest town in Somaliland, where she became an internationally renowned TB expert. Meanwhile the head teacher moved from Wajir but has continued his work with deaf and deafblind children in East Africa.

This background is important if the unusual factors in the development of SSL are to be understood.

# The Process of the Development of Sign language

In most countries in Africa the establishment of a school, or schools, for deaf children preceded the development of the national sign language by many years. This is certainly the case for Namibia, where the newly developed sign language has been much researched and quoted.

Somaliland and Djibouti were different, as the rapid development of sign language started simultaneously with the opening of the first school at Boroma in 1997. The presence of at least a couple of educated deaf people is a great asset to any new educational activity. Yet this was a country with no visible adult deaf persons at all.

It was rumoured that there were some uneducated women, and assumed there must be some uneducated men, but none could be found. Any educated deaf Somalis had been educated outside Somalia in various countries, and had stayed outside.

Later some unschooled deaf men were discovered in Djibouti. They used a form of 'home-language' to communicate with each other, and in some cases with hearing wives and other family members.

# The Start of Education for Deaf Children

The Somali Nation has a widespread diaspora (Somali people are scattered all over the world). This has led to one of the major remittance communities existing today. Somalis who work in other countries keep in touch with family and friends, send money home and return whenever they can.

In 1977 one of the deaf men educated at Wajir and cared for by the Italian aid worker was visiting her in Boroma, and suggested starting a school for the deaf children there. This was done in a brushwood shelter in the yard of the Italian aid worker, later moving to a room and then another site.

Here we have the main factor in the rapid development of SSL - a deaf person, himself a sign language user, started the school - a deaf person with the same culture, the same language, as well as skills in reading and writing English.

The situation with the development of other African sign languages has been somewhat different. In most countries, the majority of the first schools, and many subsequent schools, for deaf children, were started by hearing people. One notable exception is a school in the Kisangani area of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which was started by a deaf man.

There have been two main approaches to the education of deaf children:

* **An absence of sign language**

Schools were established by hearing people who did not have any sign language skills and who came from environments that considered sign as disadvantageous to the development of language. This meant that the national sign language was slow to develop and faced many difficulties.

* **The introduction of foreign sign languages**

Schools were established by people who had sign language skills, but who used a sign language based on a very different culture. The national sign language developed more rapidly in these countries. There were still some difficulties, though probably less than in the first situation.

Both groups often imported controversies and ideologies held strongly in their own countries but largely irrelevant in the new situations in which they had come to work. The good contribution of both groups of hearing founders should not be minimised, but there is a better way.

Somaliland avoided these difficulties because its first school was started by a well-educated deaf man, using a culturally appropriate sign language. When deaf sign language users start a country's education for deaf children a more rapid development of a national sign language is ensured.

The deaf man who founded the school in Somaliland was joined by two educated deaf women from Wajir, one of whom was to help start a second school in the capital of Somaliland, Hargeisa. Although the second school started in more difficult circumstances the pattern of development was the same.

## The Teachers Involved

Three more deaf men now teach in the two schools together with one partially-hearing man who has learned to sign and about a dozen hearing teachers. It is hoped to increase the proportion of teachers who are deaf.

The second factor in the development of SSL has been the hearing teachers involved. Somalis use their hands freely in general conversation and most of these teachers felt little of the embarrassment hearing people often experience when asked to replace a spoken communication mode with a mode that involves use of hands, face and body. These teachers embraced sign with enthusiasm and, in most cases, quickly learned sufficient sign language to enhance their teaching. Indeed teachers in the school for hearing children which is on the same site, and many other adults involved with the schools, (a small school for blind children is also on the site), also learned to sign.

Several teachers are able to act as interpreters for the deaf adults in those situations where it is appropriate.

Hearing teachers are very dependent on a sign language dictionary and the Kenyan Sign Language Dictionary with its clear introduction about basics has proved very useful.

The third factor was a growing response in the local community to intensive deaf-awareness publicity. Presentations were made to many different groups including women's groups. Lectures were given on deaf-related subjects to the first groups of trainee teachers in the teacher-training college and students in the university, and also to the first maternity-nurse trainees. A talk was given to secondary senior pupils in the local school. (The teacher training and nurse training were the first courses held for 30 years.) Awareness raising in Hargeisa has been organised by the school. Both schools appear frequently on the local television programmes.

For four years all the then teachers, and one from Djibouti who subsequently started the first school to be opened in that country, received some basic training in both theory and practice, leading to a certificate of attendance but not a qualification. In spite of the difficulties for Somalis seeking to travel, with the help and continued interest of the ex-Wajir head teacher, who remained in close contact with all these developments, staff were able to visit well-established schools in Kenya and Uganda for month-long visits in pairs. New staff continue to do this, but are now trained by the original staff, one of whom was also able to visit a school in Ethiopia for six weeks. Leaving Djibouti is not so difficult and one teacher has done a course at STRIDE Jordan. (The sign language used in Djibouti remains SSL, but with a different pattern of development.) A further school is tentatively planned for Bossasso in Puntland, using SSL and STRIDE for training.

# Problems that Arose

Many problems were encountered in developing SSL.

1. ParentsIt is important to involve parents in educational and sign language programmes if they are to succeed. They need an opportunity to learn to communicate using sign. In Somaliland parents have the desire to learn, but otherwise there has been significant failure. Some of this is due to the daily difficulties the parents face and some is due to the boarding situation of a minority of pupils. However, the inability of the teachers to devise ways of teaching sign to parents has played a major part. They tried a written lesson/exercise with mainly illiterate parents. In effect, they were providing an unwanted and unskilled literacy training. When this failed no one was able to devise any alternative. It has been suggested that the first class of pupils to leave the school could be gainfully employed teaching adults, but this has not yet been implemented.

2. Mobile population
The population is very mobile. Pupils may attend any of the three schools. Therefore the composition of classes may change radically from day to day, with some pupils disappearing and others having long absences.

3. Assassination
The Italian aid worker who had supported and encouraged the work with deaf children was assassinated.

4. Training
There is an urgent need to expand the training opportunities for the teachers and provide certification. No solution has yet been found.

5. Official languages
The children need to read and write in the official languages. In Somaliland these are af-Somali and English (in Djibouti, af-Somali and French). There were the usual debates about how much of each, and when they should be used. An initial suggestion of the introduction of another sign language was quickly dropped and an eventual pattern emerged.

These five difficulties were comparatively minor compared to the following two, which were much greater.

1. English as the medium for training
The first of these was that all the deaf-awareness and all the training, discussions and planning, whether community or educational, had to be carried out with the involvement of a non af-Somali speaker. English was the main medium of communication. For many involved in the training English was a second or third language, and for some it was not known at all. A lot of mutual co-operation and help, and much willing patient goodwill was involved, in order to overcome this problem. This is to the credit of all the Somalis involved, both in the schools and in the communities. No af-Somali speaker with the relevant knowledge has been found, if indeed such a person exists.

2. Spoken language
The situation of children who have become deaf after developing fluent speech presents a significant problem. Fifty per cent of the pupils in most schools for deaf children in Africa fall into this category, and all three of the Somali schools have this proportion. But there is an additional problem caused by the lack of any previous schooling, so that spoken af-Somali is their sole means of communication. Reading, writing and sign have all to be learned simultaneously whatever their age on becoming deaf. They need sign language but they would also benefit from maintenance and extension of the spoken language. At present the skills needed to achieve this are not present, nor is its importance recognised in the schools. Yet the families continue to use spoken language.

# Two Forms of Sign language

Despite the difficulties, the growth of SSL was, as has been described, steady and rapid. In the classrooms the hearing teachers teach the government syllabus in full. In Boroma the first leaving class (class 8) all reached a good pass level. (The other two schools have not yet had a leaving class.) They do this by using the written forms of both af-Somali and English (in Djibouti-French) supported by sign, which still shows its KSL roots.

Very few hearing teachers, wherever they teach deaf children, become full sign language users in the classroom. It is the children, in the playgrounds, in the towns, visiting each other's homes, who are creating and developing SSL. Those who have completed class 8 are the founders of the Somali deaf community.

Children are now admitted younger than in the early days, some have deaf siblings but there are no known parents who are deaf.

The teachers in all three schools meet to discuss common issues and a start has been made in arranging meetings between the older classes across the three schools.

# The Content and Structure of the Language

There has not, as yet, been anyone with the skill to observe the pupils in the playgrounds, so the development of SSL has remained unrecorded, and regrettably, the early years are lost.

In the fifth year, a deaf expert from Zambia was invited to assess the skill and progress of the teachers. His helpful report drew attention to some incomplete formation of signs, and poor placement and duration (of signs), but he was not asked to record the content.

It is imperative that a way is found to commence observation, recording, and, eventually, subject-dictionary compilation, leading to a SSL dictionary. It is hoped that funding can be found to enable the appropriate team of deaf and hearing researchers and linguists to do this work to ensure that the next ten years are not also lost.

In March 2006 the first conference to “Develop the National Sign Language” took place in Hargeisa. All the teachers from the Boroma school, most of those from Hargeisa school, two from the Djibouti School, several Government ministers, senior training college and university staff, representatives of NGOs, and one UK and one Ethiopian delegate were present.

A group of senior pupils from the Boroma school attended throughout and closed the conference with a drumming, dance and acting performance. Regrettably parents were not represented.

Papers were presented followed by discussion. The delegates discussed many of the issues and developments outlined in this paper. All of this was reported in the media and on television. In addition it was agreed that accurate collection of statistics, including numbers of deaf children, and possibly uneducated deaf adults, was needed. Investigation into the causes of deafness, attention to the prevention of acquired deafness and future school provision were also considered.

The next 10 years could be interesting and instructive.

**Reference:**
**Title:** The Beginning and Growth of a New Language - Somali Sign Language
**Author:** Woodford, D
**Date:** 2006