

Amharic

Amharic is an African-Semitic language and the national language of the Ethiopia. With over twenty-two million first-language speakers, four million second-language speakers according to the website “Allaboutlanguages.com. Amharic became the national language in 1955 after being proclaimed in article 125 of Ethiopia’s constitution and the Imperial Academy of the Amharic language was created to maintain its position in 1972 (Fellman, 125). Amharic is a diglossia of the Classical Ethiopian Language known as “Ge’ez,” which was the spoken language of Ethiopia, while Amharic was the spoken language.

Amharic has an interesting history with written language coming about in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century. According to Jack Fellman’s *The Birth of an African Literary Language: The Case of Amharic* The original language was Ge’ez, and there was a diglossic relationship between Amharic and Ge’ez with the latter being the most prestigious. Ge’ez was the more prestigious language because it was the written language. Things changed, however when Portugal who was supporting Ethiopia through political and military efforts began to adopt Amharic and created propaganda against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. By creating material in the native Ethiopian language of Ge’ez, the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries began to influence the Natives away from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Portuguese were cast from Ethiopia in 1632, and the propaganda literature was destroyed except for a few pieces retained for historical purposes.

Ge’ez almost returned as the predominant language of Ethiopia because of The European church. Just as the Portuguese arrived earlier, The European Church attempted to convert the native Ethiopians to Christianity. It was Emperor Theodore (ruled from 1855 to 1868) who used Amharic to unify Ethiopia by writing his *Royal Chronicles* in Amharic instead of Ge’ez as an act

of rebellion (Fellman,124). Emperor Theodore used Amharic to sway the natives away from the Christian Church; this laid the foundation for Amharic as the national language because Ge'ez became limited to religious and historical literature. The emperor did not speak Amharic and learned from the missionaries. The diglossia of Ge'ez was no longer possible as Ethiopia began to modernize. In 1911 Menelik II who succeeded Emperor Theodore founded the “Imperial Printing Press,” which is located in the country’s capital Addis-Ababa that further established Amharic as a spoken language.

Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo are the three most spoken languages in the Ethiopia. All three languages are creoles and originate from Ge'ez. All three have their distinct dialects, vocabulary and written language. This is significant to acknowledge because the official language of Ethiopia is Amharic, Oromo and Tigrinya are recognized throughout the country. Emperor Theodore united the people through one language and dispelled the diglossia of Ge'ez by way of accepting and allowing all regions to speak whatever language they decided. Tigrinya for example, has over 4.3 million first language speakers and is the national language of Eritrea and is divided into two main dialects reported by the website allaboutlanguages.com. The “Horn of Africa” is a region in Africa consisting of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. All countries recognize Amharic, Oromo, and Tigrinya as languages and the people can speak forms of the languages. Ethiopian television, literature, plays, and novels (Fellman,125). Not only is the country, but the region of these languages originate from all communicate by recognizing each area’s preferred way of communication.

The unity of a country by way of a language is in contrast to the narrative of the United States. In the U.S. the dominant language is English while multiple forms of English exist. “Standard American English” reigns supreme amongst all languages in the U.S. With many

people coming from all over the world many are limited in the U.S. because they do not speak what's considered "proper" or "correct" English. "Slang," "Spanglish" and other forms of English are spoken in pockets around the U.S. and are not recognized. The dialects are marginalized to the communities of their origin. Comparing that to Ethiopia, I wonder how America could benefit from understanding many languages. America is a cultural melting pot, but insists that every abandon their culture for "The American way of life." Ironically, nobody knows what "The American way of life" is and due American social constructs such as insisting everyone speak one language there is a disconnect between people. The charm of America is the blend of cultures by way of food, clothes, and language. It is hypocritical for America to enforce a single idea or actions when it is built and held together by blends of people. Emperor Theodore was ahead of his time when he united the country (along with a federation that included Eritrea) under the umbrella of one language while acknowledging the language the people used (Fellman,125). America could benefit from such an act; it would calm the tensions of the citizens because of cultural differences. Language and how we communicate with each other is a facet of culture, and before American can recover from its many issues, it must realize them, deal with them and finally learn from them.

Works Cited

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