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Colloquial Somali

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Martin Orwin

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Introduction

The Somali language is spoken by the Somali people who live in the eastern part of the Horn of Africa. This area includes the countries of Somalia, Somaliland¹ and parts of Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. During the late 1980s and early 1990s the Horn of Africa has undergone great change. The former regimes of Somalia and Ethiopia were both ousted and in the time since then there has been fighting in various parts of the area as well as the much-publicized intervention by the international community through the United Nations and the United States. There cannot be a Somali family anywhere that has not been in some way or another affected by these tragic events and it is hoped that peace will return to all parts of the Somali areas soon.

The Somali language is a member of the family of Cushitic languages which are spoken mostly in Ethiopia and Kenya. The Cushitic language with the greatest number of speakers is undoubtedly Oromo, spoken in Ethiopia and Kenya. All in all there may be between six and seven million Somali speakers in the world although there are no precise figures. The Somali people, as you will learn in one of the reading passages, are grouped into three main socio-economic groups. Most are nomadic pastoralists herding camels, sheep, goats and, in certain areas, cattle. The camel is the supreme domestic animal for the Somalis, since it is able to survive the most extreme conditions and provides so much nourishment in the form of its milk and meat. Horses are also much prized by the Somalis.

Other Somalis, especially those living along and between the rivers Jubba and Shabeelle, live a sedentary life, cultivating crops and sometimes keeping some livestock. Crops include sorghum, millet, cassava and bananas. The third group is the town dwellers. Over the last few decades more and more people have moved to the main towns and cities such as Mogadishu, Djibouti and Hargeisa.

Since the late 1980s a large number of people have left Somalia as refugees and are living in many different countries. Large numbers

of Somalis live in parts of London, Cardiff and Sheffield in the United Kingdom as well as in cities in the Middle East, the United States, Canada, Finland, The Netherlands, Italy, etc.

Somali culture, as with any society, is very much tied in with the way of life of the people. Probably the most important cultural form for the Somalis is poetry. This pervades all aspects of life, from watering camels to political debate. There are many genres of poetry and they follow strict stylistic rules of alliteration and metre, which demand great knowledge and skill of the poet. In recent decades the scope of poetry and the ways in which it is performed have expanded. In the 1940s and 1950s new genres of poetry developed in which a musical accompaniment became common. The instrument most used is the **kaman**, 'lute', although nowadays electrical instruments are also used.

Another important cultural movement was the development of Somali theatre. Theatre became very popular and important in Somali life, and at the core of the plays is poetry, the most important parts of the plays being composed in poetry.

Writing the Somali language and spelling

Somali has had an official orthography since 1972 when the Roman script was introduced by the ruling regime of the time. This script is now used by Somalis wherever they may be, and has proved very successful. There is one major factor, however, which must be borne in mind with regard to the orthography, namely that spelling has not become standardized. This means that the same word may be spelt in different ways. Most words are spelt in a regular way but there are some common spellings that seem to be optional. Perhaps the most common of these is the past tense ending **-ay** which may also be spelt **-ey**. Somali is essentially written as it is pronounced² and so such variations in spelling will not cause any problems. There are no 'odd' spellings in Somali as there are, for example, in English in words such as **bough** and **rough**.

The Somali language

The Somali language is not easy to learn for somebody who knows only English. Despite this, however, it is an extremely satisfying endeavour. The structure of sentences in Somali is different to the

structure of sentences in English, and there may at first seem to be a bewildering array of verbal forms. There is, however, a system to all of it and in this book an attempt has been made to convey the basics of the system.

Two main areas of language are dealt with: the structure of words and the way those words are put together into sentences. The structure of words is dealt with from the first lesson and introduced gradually. This includes such things as the plural formation of nouns and the formation of different moods and tenses of verbs, all of which involve patterns aiding the learner. Examples are given in each grammatical section and the vocabulary in the examples is restricted to allow the learner to concentrate on the grammatical point being made.

One important aspect of studying word structure is the way in which certain sound changes take place, for example, when a particular suffix is added to a verb ending in a certain consonant. These sound changes are introduced as necessary in the text but it is important to learn them as they are invariably used in parts of the grammar other than that of immediate concern.

Learning to put words together into sentences in Somali is not a particularly easy task and this book does not provide the most extensive coverage of this matter. Indeed, you will see in the later reading passages that the way in which sentences may be built up is very varied. As with anything, taking a little bit at a time is probably the best way, and building up a knowledge of basic sentence structure will be invaluable for later lessons. The section on relative clauses may prove to be particularly involved but, again, there is a rationale behind it and taking things at a steady pace will be the most successful way.

Pronunciation guide

Learning the correct pronunciation of Somali sounds is only really possible if you have access to the tapes that accompany this course or if you are able to work with a Somali speaker. Pronunciation does vary from speaker to speaker, and as with any language there are different dialects and accents. One of the biggest differences is in the way in which the sound **dh** is pronounced. In this course any instance in which **dh** is found is written as such. Many speakers, however, especially those from the southern regions of Somalia, pronounce **dh** as **r**.



The sounds of Somali (Audio 1: 1–13)

The sounds of the Somali alphabet are each represented by a specific letter. The alphabet does not include all the letters of the English alphabet, and some of the letters used represent sounds not found in English.

The alphabet is as follows:

a b c d dh e f g h i j k kh l m n o q r s sh t u w x y

Note that in the examples you will see accent marks. These are explained in a later section.

Consonants

Each sound is described below:

b This sound is generally pronounced as it is in English, although often at the end of words it may sound more like a **p** sound in English but without aspiration (the puff of air following the sound).

bád, ‘sea’

dáb, ‘fire’

dhábar, ‘back’

d This sound is also generally pronounced as it is in English except that the tongue is further forward than in English, touching the teeth.

dád, ‘people’

badán, ‘many’

dh This sound is made by curling the tongue back on itself so that the bottom part of the tongue is touching the top part of the mouth. When the sound occurs between two vowels and is not a geminate it is softened and is pronounced like a **r**-type sound, but with the tongue still curling back. In speakers from certain areas, for example Mogadishu, this sound is almost always pronounced as **r** and as such is written in this way.

dhúl, ‘earth’

yidhi, ‘he said’

bádh, ‘half’

g This sound is made in the same way as it is in English.

Gál!, ‘Enter!’

agagáar, ‘surroundings’

adág, ‘hard’

q This sound is technically known as a voiced uvular plosive. This means that it is made right at the back of the mouth where the uvular drops down. The best way of trying to make this sound is by saying **k** and then moving the back of your tongue as far back as possible, right to the back of the mouth.

qayb, 'part' **boqol**, 'hundred' **Báaq!**, 'Announce!'

t This sound is the same as in English except that it is never found at the end of syllables.

Tág!, 'Go!' **wáy keentay**, 'she brought it'

k This sound is pronounced in the same manner as in English. Like **t** it is never found at the end of syllables.

kalé, 'other' **nínka**, 'the man'

j This sound may be pronounced like **ch** in the English word **church**, or it can be pronounced as **j** in the English word **jingle**. Either pronunciation is correct.

jíd, 'road' **Joóji!**, 'Stop!' **xáj**, 'pilgrimage to Mecca'

f This sound is pronounced in the same way as it is in English.

fúre, 'key' **áfar**, 'four' **áf**, 'mouth, language'

s This sound is pronounced in the same way as in English.

Sii!, 'Give!' **libsó**, 'Buy!' **gées**, 'horn'

sh This sound is pronounced in the same way as it is in English.

shán, 'five' **Cashée!**, 'Have dinner!' **kúish**, 'bag'

kh This sound is made in the same part of the mouth as **q**, but with friction. It is the sound generally used for the Scottish pronunciation of the word **loch**. In Somali it is only found in loanwords from Arabic.

khudrád, 'vegetables' **Khamiis**, 'Thursday'

x This sound is technically known as a voiceless pharyngeal fricative. It is made in the pharynx, which is the part of the throat between the voice box and the uvula. This part of the throat is contracted when producing the sound. It is highly advisable to work on this sound with a Somali speaker or with the tapes that go with this course. It is also found in Arabic.

Xídh!, 'Close!' **wúu baxay**, 'he left' **Báx!**, 'Leave!'

h This sound is the same as in English.

heés, 'song' **báhal**, 'wild animal' **báh**, 'children born of the same mother'

c This sound is made in the same part of the throat as the sound **x** but with vibration of the vocal cords. It is also a difficult sound to make, and thus is best learnt with the help of a speaker of Somali or with the tapes. It is the ‘ayn of Arabic. It is somewhat similar to the sound you make when a doctor asks you to open your mouth wide and say ‘aaaaa’.

Cáb!, ‘Drink!’ **jecél**, ‘liking’ **mágac**, ‘name’

m This sound is the same as the English sound. It does not occur at the end of syllables (except if the following syllable begins with **b** or **m**).

máya, ‘no’ **lamadegáan**, ‘desert’

n This sound is the same as in English.

nabád, ‘peace’ **mindí**, ‘knife’ **maánta**, ‘today’

r This sound is a rolled **r** like the sound in Italian. In Somali, however, it is often pronounced in quite a breathy manner.

rún, ‘truth’ **wáran**, ‘spear’ **Bár!**, ‘Teach!’

l This sound is essentially the same as in English.

lúg, ‘leg’ **kalé**, ‘other’ **hál**, ‘female camel’

’ The apostrophe is a consonant in Somali. It stands for the glottal stop, which is found in some English dialectal pronunciations of words such as **bu’er** for ‘butter’ or **wa’er** for ‘water’.

go’áan, ‘decision’ **ló’**, ‘cattle’

Gemination

There are a number of consonants in Somali which may be pronounced as doubled consonants. These are called geminate consonants. The following list gives all of the consonants which may generally be found as geminate consonants:

b, d, dh, g, l, m, n, r

The pronunciation of geminate consonants is the same as normal single consonants but they are held for longer and thus are somewhat stronger in their pronunciation. Geminate consonants are written by doubling the letter as shown in the following examples. It is very important to pronounce and write geminate consonants, as they indicate a difference in meaning.

wáran, ‘spear’
wúu qaaday, ‘he took it’

Wárran!, ‘Give news!’
wáy qaadday, ‘she took it’

Vowels

The vowel sounds in Somali are given below:

a This vowel is generally pronounced as the vowel **a** in the English word **bat**, although it is more *open* than the general south of England pronunciation of the word and is more akin to the pronunciation found in the north of England.

e This vowel is generally pronounced as in the English word **red**.

i This vowel is generally pronounced as in the English word **bit**.

o This vowel is generally pronounced as in the English word **top**, although in certain words it is pronounced slightly more *fronted*, similar to the French word **noeud** or the German **öl**.

u This vowel is pronounced in the same way as the **u** vowel in the English word **put**. Note that it is not the same as the sound of the southern English pronunciation of the word **butter**, but is like the northern English pronunciation of that word.

The difference between the two pronunciations of the vowel **o** also occurs in other vowels and is an instance of a phenomenon called *fronting*. This is a matter we shall not address in this book, but listen carefully to the recordings or the pronunciations of Somalis and try and imitate as closely as possible the vowel sounds you hear.

Listen again to the examples given above in the consonant section, specifically concentrating on the vowels.

Long and short vowels

All vowels in Somali may be pronounced long and short. Long vowels are written with double letters and are simply pronounced about twice as long, in terms of time, as a single vowel.

The pronunciation of certain vowels changes a little when they occur as long vowels.

ii When **i** is long it is pronounced like a long version of the vowel found in the English word **feet**.

Nadiífi!, ‘Clean!’

nínkií, ‘the man’

uu When **u** is long it is pronounced like a long version of the English word **fool**.

Dúul!, ‘Fly!’

wúu baxay, ‘he left’

Diphthongs

Diphthongs are vowel sounds in which the vowel changes from one to other such as in the English word **cow**. If you say this word slowly the vowel sound begins like the vowel **a** and ends like the vowel **u**.

The following diphthongs occur in Somali:

ay aw ey oy ow

Note that the diphthongs **ay** and **ey** are generally interchangeable.

ay ey These are generally pronounced like the diphthong sound in the English word **bay**.

wáy tegeen, ‘they went’

sháleyto, ‘yesterday’

aw This is pronounced as the diphthong sound in the English word **cow**.

cáws, ‘grass’

ow This is pronounced as the diphthong sound in the English word **show**.

dhow, ‘near’



Stress-tone in Somali (Audio 1: 14)

The intonation of Somali words and sentences is determined by the placement of what we shall call stress-tone on certain vowels in words. Another term often used for stress-tone, especially in linguistic contexts, is tonal accent. The placement of stress-tone on vowels in particular words follows rules which you will learn as you work through the course. Here it is essential to learn one important point: that the stress-tone is placed on what we may call vowel units. A short vowel is one vowel unit and long vowels and diphthongs are all made up of two vowel units. So the word **Gál**, ‘Enter!’ is made up of one vowel unit and the word **Kéen**, ‘Bring!’ is made up of two vowel units. To make things simpler we shall simply refer to vowel units as vowels.

A vowel with a stress-tone placed on it is pronounced at a slightly higher pitch to other vowels and is stressed a little more.

Stress-tone is marked in this book by an acute accent, as shown in the following words. The first three words have the stress-tone placed on the first vowel in the word and the second group of three words have the stress-tone placed on the second vowel. Remember the vowel unit with the stress-tone is pronounced at a slightly higher pitch and is a little more stressed.

| | | |
|---------|-------------|--------|
| Group 1 | ínan | boy |
| | béer | liver |
| | éy | dog |
| Group 2 | inán | girl |
| | beér | garden |
| | eý | dogs |

It is important to get the stress-tone right because, as you can see from this list, a significant difference in meaning can result from the placement of it.

As you can hear from the above examples, long vowels, essentially made up of two vowels, may be pronounced with a stress-tone on the first part, in which case the pitch of the whole long vowel falls. Or, a stress-tone may be placed on the second vowel, in which case the whole long vowel is slightly rising in pitch. In this latter case it may also be that the pitch stays at the same level. Bear this in mind when you hear the dialogues on the tapes or when listening to a Somali speaker.

There are two words you will learn which have what we shall call a see-saw stress-tone pattern. This we shall mark with a circumflex, ^ . The first of these words you will learn in the first lesson: **wâa**; the other is the question word **mâ**. If the following word has a stress-tone, then there is no stress-tone in the word with the see-saw stress tone. If, on the other hand, the following word has no stress-tone, the word with the see-saw stress-tone is pronounced with a stress-tone on the vowel marked with the circumflex.

In this book stress-tones will be marked in the grammar sections and the vocabularies so that the learner may become familiar with the patterns which are invariably predictable from gender, verb form etc. It is important to note, however, that stress-tones are not marked in Somali orthography, thus in the book you will see that in all the reading passages and dialogues, as well as exercise keys, stress-tones are not marked.

Sound changes

There are a number of sound changes in Somali. These will be dealt with in the lessons. However, it is important to bear in mind that some of the Somali sounds are restricted with regard to the position they may occupy in a word. The important ones to remember are that **t** and **k** never occur at the end of syllables. Thus, if a word that incorporates one of these sounds is used and the sound would potentially arise at the end of a syllable then it will change to **d** or **g** respectively. For example, a word for 'to be ill' is **bug**, but in certain verb forms the **g** occurs at the beginning of a syllable and becomes **k**:

wúu bukay

'he was ill'

This is because the sound in **bug** is, strictly speaking a **k**, but, because a **k** cannot occur at the end of a syllable then the **k** changes to a **g**. Another such sound is **m**, which cannot occur at the end of a word and changes to **n**.

Notes

- 1 Note that the Republic of Somaliland is a self-declared republic which seceded from the rest of Somalia in May 1991. It has not received recognition from the international community but is conceived of as a separate state by the majority of the inhabitants of that area. For further details of the matters surrounding the recent history of Somalia and the surrounding areas see *Understanding Somalia* by Prof. Ioan Lewis, published by Haan Associates, London, 1993.
- 2 Note an interesting exception to this rule: **dh** when it is geminate or doubled (see below) is always written **dh** and never **dhdh**.

Further reading

Those interested in pursuing further their study of the Somali language will find the following books of particular interest and use:

John Ibrahim Saeed (1993) *Somali Reference Grammar (second revised edition)* Kensington, MD: Dunwoody Press

R. David Zorc and Abdullaahi A. Issa (1990) *Somali Textbook* Kensington, MD: Dunwoody Press

R. David Zorc (1993) *Somali English Dictionary* Kensington, MD: Dunwoody Press

1 Is ka warran!

How are you?

By the end of this lesson you should be able to:

- use and reply to some simple greetings
- give commands and instructions using the imperative
- know about the third person object pronouns (it, him, her, them) in Somali
- ask some basic questions
- use the simple past tense (e.g. 'I went')
- understand the use of the mood classifiers **wâa** and **mâ** with the verbal subject pronouns



Dialogue (Audio 1: 15)

A meeting between two friends

The following dialogue is typical of an exchange of greetings between two men

Vocabulary

| | |
|-----------|---|
| waryáa | hey!, hi! |
| subáx | morning |
| wanaagsán | good |
| mâ | positive interrogative mood classifier |
| nabád | peace |
| báa | a focus marker |
| wâa | it is; positive declarative mood classifier |
| is | oneself |
| ká | about, from |
| wárran | give news |
| la | one (impersonal pronoun) |

| | |
|---------------|---------------|
| fiicán | well, good |
| yahay | he/it (m.) is |

Bill is learning Somali in London in preparation for a trip to the Horn of Africa. He meets a Somali friend called Yoonis

YOONIS: Waryaa Bill, subax wanaagsan.

BILL: Waryaa Yoonis, subax wanaagsan, ma nabad baa?

YOONIS: Waa nabad. Is ka warran!

BILL: Waa la fiicanyahay.

YOONIS: *Hi, Bill. Good morning.*

BILL: *Hi, Yoonis! Good morning. Are things well? (lit.: is it peace?)*

YOONIS: *Things are well. (lit.: it is peace) How are you?*

BILL: *I am well. (lit.: one is well)*

Language in use

Using greetings and replying to them

There are quite a few greetings and responses to greetings in Somali. The ones given above are very commonly used, especially:

Is ká wárran!

We shall learn other greetings during the course.

There is no distinction in Somali between informal and formal address. This means that you greet and address all people in the same way whether they are young or old, prime minister or cleaner.

The word **waryáa** is not used to address women. If you know a woman's name you use that in the vocative (or address) form given below. If you do not know her name you simply use the greetings straight away.

The vocative form in Somali is formed by the addition of:

-áy on female names and nouns

-ów on male names and nouns

Canabáy! Anab!

Faadumáy! Faadumo!

Yoonisów! Yoonis!

Maxamedów! Mohamed!

As you can see from the **Faadumo** example, if the word ends in a

vowel then that vowel is deleted and the vocative ending added straight after the final consonant.

The use of the impersonal pronoun **la** in the greetings context is much more frequent than the use of the first person pronoun which we shall come to later.

Always use these greetings, as well as the other ones you will come to learn, when you meet Somali friends.

Exercises

1 Reply to the following greetings:

- 1 Ma nabad baa?
- 2 Is ka warran!

2 Give the vocative forms of the following names:

- 1 Women: Maryan, Zaynab, Jawaahir.
- 2 Men: Cartan, Maxmuud, Cabdinuur.

The imperative

Example: **Wárran!** 'Give news!'

The singular imperative (or order form) in Somali is the basic form of the verb. This means that it is the form found in dictionary entries. Also, it is the form we need to know in order to build any other mood or tense of the verb.

We mentioned above the lack of formality distinction in Somali. This is also reflected in the use of the imperative. Whereas in English we might use a form such as 'Would you please . . .?' when speaking to somebody whom we feel we need to address formally, in Somali the imperative is used when speaking to everybody. Thus, to translate the phrase 'Would you please . . .?' into Somali you would use the imperative. This widespread use of the imperative does not imply being blunt or rude. A further point to mention with regard to this is that there is no word for 'please' in Somali. Although some speakers of English, as well as other languages, may feel uncomfortable about not using a word for 'please', you are by no means being rude. It is simply a fact of the Somali language.

The stress-tone pattern of the imperative is stress-tone on the penultimate vowel, or the only vowel, if there is only one.

To form the plural imperative is very easy in Somali: you just add **-a** to the singular imperative. If the verb ends in **-i** then **y** is inserted. Note that the stress-tone in plural imperatives is also on the penultimate vowel, but on the plural form.

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Wárran! | Give news (sg.)! |
| Warráma! | Give news (pl.)! ¹ |
| Kéen! | Bring it (sg.)! |
| Keéna! | Bring it (pl.)! |

Exercise

3 Practise saying the following imperative verbs. Don't forget to pay attention to the stress-tone pattern; convert the singular imperatives into plural imperatives.

- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 1 Keen! | Bring it! |
| 2 Tag! | Go! |
| 3 Cun! | Eat it! |
| 4 Jooji! | Stop! |
| 5 Sug! | Wait! |

Third person object pronouns

The third person object pronouns in English (it/him/her/them) do not have any overt translation in Somali. This means that there are no actual words which are the Somali equivalents of 'it', 'him', 'her' or 'them'. The English sentences 'Bring it!', 'Bring him!', 'Bring her!' and 'Bring them!' are therefore all translated in the same way in Somali: **Kéen!**. It is important to remember this as, although you do not actually hear the pronouns, they are implied when a verb which takes a direct object is used (i.e. when a transitive verb is used).

It is important to note also that this implication of pronouns applies not just to the imperative but to all forms of verbs, as well as to other types of words such as prepositions, as we shall see later.

You might think that this state of affairs would lead to ambiguity and confusion but it doesn't. The context invariably provides the means to understanding which pronoun is meant or, if an ambiguity is possible, then you may use a certain type of pronoun (the independent pronoun), which we shall come to later in the course.

Exercise

4 Write down all the possible English translations of the following Somali sentences. The meanings of the verbs are given in brackets:

- 1 Akhri! (read)
- 2 Cun! (eat)
- 3 Eeg! (look at)
- 4 Qor! (write)
- 5 Fur! (open)

Asking the question 'Is it . . .?'

In the dialogue we learnt the sentence **Ma nabád baa?**, literally 'Is it peace?'. This type of construction may be used to ask any question of the form 'Is it . . .?'.

| | |
|----------------------|--------------|
| Ma sháah baa? | Is it tea? |
| Ma éy baa? | Is it a dog? |

To answer a question of this sort we use the word **waa**. This translates the phrase 'It is . . .'.

| | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Waa sháah. | It is tea. |
| Waa éy. | It is a dog. |

Exercise

5 Fill in the blanks in the following sentences:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| 1 Ma shaah _____? | Is it tea? |
| 2 _____ shaah. | It is tea. |
| 3 Ma _____? | Is it peace? |
| 4 _____ nabad. | It is peace. |
| 5 _____ sonkor _____? | Is it sugar? |
| 6 _____. | It is sugar. |



Dialogue (Audio 1: 16)

Some shopping

Vocabulary

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| dukáanka | the shop | laybreérigase | the library + but |
| tagtay | you went | laybreériga | the library |
| háa | yes | -se | but |
| wáan | positive declarative mood classifier + I | búug | book |
| tegey | I went | -na | and (joins phrases) |
| caleén | leaves | wáa yahay | right, OK (lit.: it is) |
| sháah | tea | ímminka | now |
| ká | from | gúriga | the house |
| keentay | you brought | tag | to go to ² |
| iyo | and (joins noun phrases) | kóob | cup |
| caáno | milk | áh | which is |
| sonkórba | as well as sugar (sonkór + ba) | samee | to make |
| sonkór | sugar | búuggiina | and the book (lit.: the book + and) |
| -ba | emphasizing suffix | búuggií | the book |
| wáx | thing | -na | and |
| kalé | other | akhri | to read |
| máya | no | nabád gelyo | goodbye |

Yoonis sees that Bill has some shopping.

YOONIS: Dukaanka ma tagtay?

BILL: Haa, waan tegey.

YOONIS: Caleen shaah ma ka keentay?

BILL: Haa, caleen shaah iyo caano iyo sonkorba waan ka keenay.

YOONIS: Wax kale ma ka keentay?

BILL: Maya; laybreerigase waan tegey buugna waan ka keenay.

YOONIS: Waa yahay. Imminka guriga tag, koob shaah ah samee buuggiina akhri.

BILL: Waa yahay. Nabad gelyo.

YOONIS: Nabad gelyo.

- YOONIS: *Did you go to the shop?*
 BILL: *Yes, I went to it.*
 YOONIS: *Did you bring tea leaves from it?*
 BILL: *Yes, I brought tea leaves, milk and sugar from it.*
 YOONIS: *Did you bring anything else from it?*
 BILL: *No; but I went to the library and I brought a book from there.*
 YOONIS: *Right. Now go home, make a cup of tea and read the book.*
 BILL: *Right. Goodbye.*
 YOONIS: *Goodbye.*

Language in use

The general past tense of conjugation 1

Before going on to look at verb forms let us look at some terms used in describing verbs:

Moods: The mood of a verb indicates the attitude the speaker has about what he or she is saying. The indicative mood is used when the speaker is making general factual statements, the interrogative mood is used for asking questions and the imperative mood is used for making requests and giving orders. We shall meet other moods later in the course.

Tenses: The tense of a verb indicates the time when the action described by the verb takes place.

Conjugation: The conjugation of a verb is the group of verbs to which it belongs. The members of conjugations share certain characteristics, so if you know the pattern of one verb in a particular conjugation, then you will know the forms of other verbs in that conjugation.

There are three conjugations in Somali, of which conjugation 1 is the most basic. Of the two basic tenses in Somali (the general past and the general present) the general past tense tends to be used more often and so we shall look at this one first. The tense is used for actions that have been completed in the past.

The tense is formed by adding the general past tense endings to the imperative form of the verb. Note that the stress-tone of the

imperative is deleted when it is used as the base from which to construct another verb form. Each verb tense and mood has its own stress-tone pattern, and the pattern for the general past tense in main clauses is no stress-tone on any of the vowels. The verb forms are given below, using the verb **keen**, meaning 'to bring', as an example. The forms mean, therefore, 'I brought', 'you brought' etc.

| | <i>verb stem</i> | <i>ending</i> | <i>verb form</i> |
|--------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|
| I | keen | ay | keenay |
| you (sg.) | keen | tay | keentay |
| he, it (m.) | keen | ay | keenay |
| she, it (f.) | keen | tay | keentay |
| we | keen | nay | keennay |
| you (pl.) | keen | teen | keenteen |
| they | keen | een | keeneen |

Another example verb is **dhis** meaning 'to build'; the following forms therefore mean 'I built', 'you built' etc.:

| | <i>verb stem</i> | <i>ending</i> | <i>verb form</i> |
|--------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|
| I | dhis | ay | dhisay |
| you (sg.) | dhis | tay | dhistay |
| he, it (m.) | dhis | ay | dhisay |
| she, it (f.) | dhis | tay | dhistay |
| we | dhis | nay | dhisnay |
| you (pl.) | dhis | teen | dhisteen |
| they | dhis | een | dhiseen |

There are a number of sound changes which occur in verb forms. Some of these are given below. Others will be given later.

(a) **t** changes to **d** when it follows the following Somali sounds:

- **q, kh, c, x, h,** and **'** (i.e. all of the guttural consonants),
- **d,**
- **w, y** or any vowel.

| | | |
|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Wáad ká baxday. | (from: bax-tay) | You left from there. |
| Wáy qaadday. | (from: qaad-tay) | She took it. |
| Wáad akhriday. | (from: akhri-tay) | You read it. ³ |

(b) **t** changes to **dh** when it follows **dh**.

Wáy gaadhay. (from: gaadh-tay) She reached there.

Note that although the form is written with one **dh** it is in fact a geminate or doubled consonant.

(c) **n** changes to **l** when it follows **l** and changes to **r** when it follows **r**.

Wáannu hellay. (from: hel-nay) We found it.

Wáannu dirray. (from: dir-nay) We sent it.

Note that this is an optional sound change and thus the forms **helnay** and **dirnay** are also correct.

(d) When **t** follows **l** the **lt** sequence is replaced by **sh**.

Wáydin gasheen. (from: gal-teen) You (pl.) entered.

Wáad heshay. (from: hel-tay) You found it.

(e) When the imperative form ends in **i** and the endings beginning with a vowel are added, the letter **y** is inserted between the **i** and the vowel.

Wáan akhriyay. (from: akhri-ay) I read it.

Wáy akhriyeen. (from: akhri-een) They read it.

(f) When a verb ends in the short vowel **a** plus a guttural consonant, the vowel changes to **e** when the **een** ending is added. This is a case of assimilation across a guttural consonant.

Wáy bexeen. (from: bax-een) They left.

(g) **Tag:** When the endings **-ay** and **-een** are added to this verb the resulting form is often pronounced and written in the following way: **tegey** and **tegeen**.

There are some verbs in which the final consonant of the verb alternates. One such example is **bug**, 'to be ill'. When an ending beginning with a vowel is added, the **g** changes to a **k**.

Wúu bukay. (from: bug-ay) He was ill.

Wáy bukeen. (from: bug-een) They were ill.

but

Wáy bugtay. (from: bug-tay) She was ill.

The reason for this change is given in the pronunciation guide. There are only a few verbs that behave in this way, and they are marked in the glossary.

It is important to know that the final **-ay** ending of the past tense may equally be written **-ey**. Somali spelling is not standardized in the same way as English is, and both these spellings are correct.

Exercise

6 Write out all the forms of the general past tense of the following verbs:

- | | |
|---------|-------------|
| 1 diid | refuse |
| 2 baaq | announce |
| 3 go' | cut (intr.) |
| 4 akhri | read |
| 5 dil | kill, hit |
| 6 tag | go |

Mood classifiers: the positive declarative classifier **wâa**

The verb moods in Somali are marked in the form of the verb. In addition to this, in many cases, words we shall call mood classifiers also show the mood of the verb, in combination with the verb form. We have already met one positive mood: the positive imperative. This is an example of a mood without a classifier. **Tág!**, 'Go!' is a correct sentence which needs no classifiers to make it a correct sentence.

The positive declarative mood is used for making positive declarative statements, for example, the English sentence 'They played football yesterday' is a positive declarative sentence. The classifier for this mood in Somali is **wâa**. This may be replaced by a focus marker, which will be discussed later. The stress-tone pattern for **wâa** is the see-saw pattern.

The use of either the positive declarative mood classifier or a focus marker is obligatory in a positive declarative sentence in Somali. If you say a positive declarative sentence without **wâa** or a focus marker then it is incorrect, so don't forget it!

The verbal subject pronouns

The verbal subject pronouns are very often used if there is no specific subject noun in the sentence. The verbal subject pronouns

do not stand on their own in main clauses (a main clause is a clause that may stand on its own as a sentence). You must use them in conjunction with a mood classifier (or a focus marker). The forms of these pronouns are as follows (the hyphens show that they must be attached to a mood classifier or a focus marker):

| | | | |
|--------------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| I | -aan | we (incl.) | -aynu |
| you (sg.) | -aad | we (excl.) | -aannu |
| he, it (m.) | -uu | you (pl.) | -aydin |
| she, it (f.) | -ay | they | -ay |

There are two ways of saying 'we' in Somali. The inclusive (incl.) pronoun is used when you are saying 'we' and including the person to whom you are speaking. The exclusive (excl.) pronoun is used when you are saying 'we' but not including the person to whom you are speaking.

To combine these pronoun forms with **wâa** simply add **w-** to the beginning of the pronoun form as listed above. The long vowel **-aa** of **wâa** is deleted. Note that the stress-tone pattern in these combinations is also the see-saw pattern, that is, if the following word does not have stress-tone then stress-tone is placed on the vowel marked in the **wâa** + pronoun word. If the following word has a stress-tone the **wâa** + pronoun word has no stress-tone. The forms are given below:

| | | |
|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| I | wâa + aan | wâan |
| you (sg.) | wâa + aad | wâad |
| he, it (m.) | wâa + uu | wûu |
| she, it (f.) | wâa + ay | wây |
| we (incl.) | wâa + aynu | wâynu |
| we (excl.) | wâa + aanu | wâannu |
| you (pl.) | wâa + aydin | wâydin |
| they | wâa + ay | wây |

Note that **wâa** does not have to go with a subject pronoun. It may equally stand on its own in a sentence. In these cases it tends to imply the third person subject pronoun, according to the verb ending. Compare the following sentences which are all correct.

Wáy cuntay.

She ate it.

Wáa cuntay.

She ate it.

Wúu cunay.

He ate it.

Wáa cunay.

He ate it.

Note, however, that the forms with the pronouns are used more often, and thus you are encouraged to use these, especially when there is no explicit subject word.

Exercise

7 Translate the following sentences into Somali; think carefully about the different aspects of grammar you must use to translate these sentences correctly:

- 1 They found it.
- 2 She sent them.
- 3 You (sg.) brought her.
- 4 You (pl.) took them.
- 5 He left.
- 6 We (excl.) entered.

Mood classifiers: the positive interrogative classifier *mâ*

We have already met this word on p. 15. Here is another of its uses.

The mood classifier **mâ** is used in positive yes–no questions. These are questions to which the answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ may be given. It does not include ‘wh- questions’ (those involving words such as ‘which’, ‘who’ or ‘what’ etc.). For example, the question ‘Did you cook it?’ can be answered ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. The question ‘Who cooked it?’, on the other hand, cannot be answered in this way. It requires some specific new information to be given.

Like **wâa**, **mâ** also has the see-saw stress-tone pattern.

Similarly, as with **wâa**, the verbal subject pronouns combine with this positive interrogative classifier. They do this in the following way: the **a** in **mâ** is replaced by **iy** and the verbal subject pronoun added. The stress-tone pattern on these combined forms is assigned to the penultimate vowel. You will see in a later lesson that when this particular form is used it often focuses a noun phrase. It may, however, also be used in the general way as described here.

| | | |
|--------------|------------|-----------------|
| I | ma + aan | miyáan |
| you (sg.) | ma + aad | miyáad |
| he, it (m.) | ma + uu | miyúu |
| she, it (f.) | ma + ay | miyáy |
| we (incl.) | ma + aynu | miyáynu |
| we (excl.) | ma + aannu | miyáannu |
| you (pl.) | ma + aydin | miyáydin |
| they | ma + ay | miyáy |

Exercises

8 Reply to the following questions positively:



Example: Dukaanka ma tagtay? Did you go to the shop?
 Haa, waan tegey. Yes, I went to it.

- 1 Buuggii miyaad akhriday?
- 2 Guriga miyay heshay?
- 3 Guriga miyaydin ka baxdeen? (**ká** means 'from')
- 4 Dukaanka miyay heleen?
- 5 Laybreeriga miyuu galay?

9 Write questions to which the following sentences could be the answers:

Example: Waan baxay. I left.
 Miyaad baxday? Did you leave?

- 1 Way direen.
- 2 Waannu hellay.
- 3 Wuu keenay.
- 4 Way gashay.
- 5 Waan ka baxay.

10 Think up some questions of your own, write them down and use them the next time you meet a Somali friend.