

Blin Orthography: A History and an Assessment

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1. Introduction¹

Blin² is a Central Cushitic language spoken by an estimated 90,000 in Eritrea, concentrated in the ‘Anseba region around Keren. Blin speakers comprise roughly 2% of the Eritrean population, and Blin is one of nine national languages in Eritrea. Most speakers are bilingual in the Semitic languages Tigrinya or Tigre, and many know Amharic, Arabic, and/or English as well. Abbebe (2001) is an excellent assessment of Blin language vitality and sociolinguistics.

The language policy of the Eritrean government is to encourage mother-tongue education for native speakers of each of its nine ethnolinguistic groups through primary school (Chefena, Kroon and Walters 1999). When this was implemented for the Blin in 1997, the government provided Blin curricular materials in the language using a new Roman-based alphabet. This overturned a 110-year tradition of writing Blin in Ethiopic script. This paper will focus on the history of writing in Blin, and examine the linguistic and sociolinguistic factors of each writing system. For more on language planning in Blin in general, see Fallon (2006).

Before proceeding, I will adopt the following definitions from Daniels (2001). An *alphabet* is a writing system “in which each character stands for a consonant or a vowel” (44). A *syllabary* is a system “in which each character stands for a syllable” (43), in contrast to the system used in Ethiopian Semitic languages, an *abugida*, “in which each character stands for a consonant accompanied by a particular vowel, usually /a/, and other vowels (or no vowel) are indicated by consistent additions to the consonant symbols” (44). An example of the first two characters in the Blin *abugida* are given in (1), in which each *order* (or vowel peak of the syllable) is listed across, and each combining consonant is listed in a column. The sixth order is ambiguous between a coda consonant and onset plus /i/.

(1)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
		ə	u	i	a	e	i	o
h	ሀ	ሁ	ሂ	ሃ	ሄ	ህ	ሆ	= hæ hu hi ha he h/hi ho
l	ለ	ሉ	ሊ	ላ	ሌ	ሎ	ሎ	= læ lu li la le l/i lo

In the examples, it is fairly easy to discern a consistent base shape for each character, to which modifying strokes are added. For example, the second order (/u/) adds a short horizontal stroke to the right of the middle of the character, while the seventh order (/o/) adds a small loop to the right. In other cases, however, as in the third order, the character may be modified to accommodate the vowel stroke, as in the vertical stroke for /hi, ha, he/.

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² The spelling here is the native speaker preference in English, by both supporters of Romanization and the *abugida*, as well as the spelling of the language in the new Roman orthography. In the academic literature, the language is also spelled Bilin, Bilen, Bilin, etc.

2. Blin in Abugida

The earliest published form of Blin may be found in Sapeto (1857), a Catholic mission report which contains a multilingual vocabulary list. The Blin (also called Bogos, after the region) is given in both Ethiopic *abugida* and an Italianized Romanization. A few examples, along with the two modern orthographies, are given below:

- | | | |
|-----|--|---|
| (2) | <i>Dio</i> ‘God’ ገረጽ (<i>zjar</i>) <i>Giar</i> | (modern /dʒar/ ገር (<i>jar</i>)) |
| | <i>Capello</i> ‘hair’ ገጽብክ (<i>ʃjibok</i>) <i>Sciaibok</i> | (modern /ʃibik/ ገብክ (<i>shébék</i>)) |
| | <i>Naso</i> ‘nose’ ቆንባ (<i>k'onba</i>) <i>Qomba</i> | (modern /k'umba, k ^w imba/ ቆምባ (<i>qumba</i>)) |
| | <i>Tre</i> ‘three’ ስኳ (<i>sik^wa</i>) <i>Sekua</i> | (modern /sex ^w a/ ስኳ (<i>sekhwa</i>)) |

As with any first effort, the results were mixed, and obviously there was L1 interference in perception in several cases, while in others, the sounds were captured accurately in the *abugida* but transliterated incorrectly, as in the labialized velar fricative in the last example for Sapeto’s ‘three’.

The first substantive use of *abugida* for Blin was in Reinisch’s (1882a) translation of the Gospel of Mark, with slight modifications for sounds unique to Blin; for a critique of this translation, see Kiflemariam (1986). This was followed by valuable scholarly work in the form of Reinisch’s grammar (1882b). Texts in Reinisch (1883) are mostly in transcription, but in *abugida* there is the story of Joseph from Genesis and twenty chapters of stories of Jesus, both with facing German translation. Reinisch’s (1887) dictionary is in transcription, but related Tigre and Gǝʿǝz (Ge’ez or Gəʿəz) forms are given in the source script. The last two sources in this period are Conti Rossini (1907), which includes 19 pages of untranslated texts of Blin history and songs or dance-poems. Capomazza (1911) contains a version of Conti Rossini’s first tale, along with an Italian translation.

The first text initiated by a native speaker is the Catholic catechism translated from Tigrinya by Fr. Wolde-Yohannes Habtemariam (1939), highly praised by Kiflemariam Hamde (1986) for its good Blin and phonetic accuracy. Many other religious materials were translated in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, including the four Gospels (from Gǝʿǝz, Amharic, and English), prayer books, the Mass, and special services such as Palm Sunday.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a group of native Blin speakers, many of them students in Asmara, began working towards standardization of the orthography, the compilation of a dictionary, and primers to teach the language to Tigrinya speakers and children growing up in the diaspora. Foremost among these intellectuals is Kiflemariam Hamdé, whose 1986 paper contains a wealth of material, including sociolinguistic analysis, brief grammatical sketch, and a collection of two multi-stanza poems. Kiflemariam’s (1996) paper is a brief annotated bibliography of the development of Blin orthography during this time. In 1992 Kiflemariam and Paulos produced the first monolingual dictionary of Blin using *abugida*, a work of 5,000 words, along with English glosses. In the diaspora, Bogos (1992) produced a brief volume of love poems. In Eritrea, the Committee for Developing Blin Language and Culture (1997) produced a well-regarded volume on various Blin customs which Sulus (1999) describes as an “inspiring” volume that “embraces attractive cultural and traditional values and practices”, and is kept in the home of “practically everyone who speaks Blin at home or abroad”. There have also been a few proposals for minor orthographic changes and refinements. More recently, Daniel Yacob (2004), in collaboration with Blin speaker Tekie Alibeket, has pushed the Blin version of the *abugida* into the computer age with computer encoding now accepted in Unicode 4.1. We turn next to an assessment of this writing system.

UNESCO has proposed the principal that “if possible, the writing of a local language should agree with that of the regional, national, or official language, so as to facilitate transition from one to the other” (1972:704 [1953]). Tigrinya, the unofficial language of the Eritrean government³ is spoken by

³ There is no national language of Eritrea. Its three working languages are Tigrinya, Arabic, and English, the language of higher education. Chefena, Kroon, and Walters (1999:486) point out that Tigrinya is “a symbolic official language in Eritrea; it represents the state of Eritrea in the sense that its revitalisation is associated with the success of the national liberation struggle, which accommodated Tigrigna linguistic nationalism.”

approximately 50% of the population, and it is written in the Ethiopic *abugida*. The use of the Blin *abugida* therefore follows UNESCO's general principal. There are, of course, a few characters in the Tigrinya *abugida* not native to Blin, and a few Blin sounds such as the plain and labialized velar nasals and velar fricatives which have had to be introduced to accommodate Blin phonology in writing. Those few Tigrinya speakers who wish to learn Blin will have little orthographic difficulty. More importantly, Blin who must learn the national language would have an easier time learning the 35 basic characters (each in seven orders, one for each following vowel), along with the six modified character bases for labialized sounds, for a total of 275 character shapes (Mulugeta 2001).

In addition, the only Blin dictionary is written in *abugida*, providing easy standardization. Virtually everything written in Blin before 1996 was written in *abugida*, and thus there is over a century of tradition in writing Blin that way. Finally, another argument in favor of the Blin *abugida* is that it economically represents in one character <ṽ> frequent Blin sounds such as the labialized velar fricative /xʷ/, which is a common inflectional ending.

Nevertheless, some of the shortcomings of this system have been pointed out. The same criticism of the *abugida* for Amharic (Bender, Head and Cowley 1976, Bloor 1995, Getachew 1996) also apply to the Blin *abugida*. First, the sixth order is potentially ambiguous between a consonant and consonant plus /-i/ combination. While Blin syllable structure was an aid to disambiguate certain sequences, language change has created novel consonant clusters in the language, as represented by the name of the language itself, which was usually transliterated from /bi'lin/. With a newer syncope rule, the more typical pronunciation (and hence Romanization) is with an onset cluster: /'blin/ (Fallon 2001). Again, as in Amharic or Tigrinya, there is no overt way of representing gemination of consonants, which can form minimal pairs, as pointed out by Sulus (1999):

- | | | | | |
|-----|--------|--------------------|---------|----------------|
| (3) | awet | 'where' | awwet | 'above' |
| | qwali | 'see!' | qwalli | 'I didn't see' |
| | defena | 'bury this! (pl.)' | defenna | 'to bury' |

As Zeraghiorghis (1999:16) notes, this ambiguity creates greater homonymy of certain words in the *abugida*, which are disambiguated in the Roman orthography:

- | | | | |
|-----|------|---------------------|-------------|
| (4) | ሸረብና | 'to hide or banish' | <sherebbna> |
| | ሸረብና | 'carpentry' | <sherrebna> |
| | ሸረብና | 'mat making' | <sherebna> |

There have been proposals for disambiguating diacritics in *abugida*, but they are not widely used.

Another argument against the *abugida* is the claim that it is harder to learn than an alphabet. Kiflemariam and Paulos' system, for example, contains 186 symbols for Blin, versus the Roman alphabet for Blin, which, as we shall see, contains 25 letters (plus digraphs and trigraphs). However, I have seen no citation in the literature that *abugidas* make literacy more difficult than alphabets.

A more compelling objection to the *abugida* is a sociolinguistic one. Zeraghiorghis (1999) pointed out that Muslim Blin refuse to accept the *abugida* to write Blin because they associate it with the Christian religion. (Most speakers of Tigrinya are Christian, and their liturgical language is usually Giʽiz, which is also written in *abugida*). Eritrea is roughly 50% Christian and 50% Muslim. The Blin are 30-50% Christian, and 50-70% Muslim, though those most interested in the language seem to be predominantly Christian. Chefena et al. (1999:483) also note that the *abugida* is received "with less enthusiasm by some Tigre speakers on religious and sociocultural grounds rather than because of its phonological inadequacy".

3. Blin in the Roman Alphabet

Upon its independence in 1993, Eritrea's constitution provided for a policy of mother-tongue education in primary school for each of its nine ethnic groups, from three major language families: the Semitic languages Tigrinya (50%), Tigre (31.4%) and Rashaida (Hijazi) Arabic (0.5%); Cushitic languages Saho (5%), Afar (5%), Beja (2.5%), Blin (2.1%); and Nilo-Saharan languages Kunama (2%)

and Nara (1.5%) (percentage figures from U.S. Department of State 2005). A policy decision by the Eritrean government required all non-Semitic languages to use a Roman-based alphabet. The use of such an alphabet is said to make an easier transition to English-language education, which is used exclusively in secondary and higher education. The alphabet also represents a compromise between those who associate the Arabic script with Islam and the *abugida* with Christianity (Zeraghiorghis 1999). Nevertheless, this decision was a blow to those who had invested much intellectual energy refining the representation of Blin in *abugida*. However, according to a relatively small survey of 100 Blin from different walks of life, the Roman script was preferred by 64%, the *abugida* by 28%, and Arabic script by 8% (Zeraghiorghis 1999).

After a few years of delay in implementing a primary curriculum for Blin, in part because of a lack of trained personnel, in 1996 the Eritrean Ministry of Education formed the Blin panel in the Department of General Education. In 1996-1997 a dialect survey was conducted (Daniel and Sullus 1997) in order to determine intelligibility between various dialects, and the report concluded that there was a high degree of mutual intelligibility to permit one set of curricular materials, but that care should be taken to include dialect terms from the two main dialects. The following year, a pilot program with six teachers and 230 children began mother tongue instruction in Blin in the village of Ajerbeeb. Sulus (1999) reports that in elementary schools in Blin areas in which instruction was in Tigrinya or Arabic, the pass rate was 60%, with a substantial dropout rate. In Ajerbeeb, however, 83% of the children passed, and only 2% dropped out. This was rightly deemed a success, and instruction quickly expanded in 1998-1999, when Blin was used as the medium of instruction in 27 primary schools, about half of which are run by the Catholic Church. Language, math, and science texts are available in grades 1-5, along with civics and geography for upper elementary students.

The Blin alphabet contains 25 letters, two of which involve diacritics: <ñ> is for the velar nasal /ŋ/ (unlike the palatal nasal in Spanish) and <é> represents the high central vowel /i/. The 25 letters used are a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, ñ, o, q, r, s, t, u, w, x, y, é. The values of these are related to the IPA except for:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| (5) <c> = [ʧ], as in Somali | <j> = [dʒ], as in English |
| <x> = [ħ], as in Somali | <y> = [j], as in English |
| <ñ> = [ŋ] (unique) | <é> = [i] (unique) |

There are 9 digraphs, which are used to represent labials, ejectives, and fricatives:

- (6) labialization: ñw [ŋ^w], kw [k^w], qw [k^{wʷ}], gw [g^w]
 ejection: ch [tʃ̥], qh [k̥], th [t̥]
 frication: kh [x], sh [ʃ]

The letter <h> is an independent letter representing the glottal fricative /h/, but as the second element in diacritics, it represents ejection after stops, except for after <k>, when it represents a velar fricative, and, as in English, after /s/ it represents the alveopalatal fricative /ʃ/. Again, with possible English influence, the digraph <ch> represents /tʃ̥/, but bears no regular relation to <c> /ʧ/. There are two trigraphs, derived compositionally: the labialized velar fricative: <khw> [x^w] and the labialized velar ejective: <qhw> [k^{wʷ}].

The canonical alphabetical order appears to have undergone some flux during its brief development. In the Eritrean Ministry of Education (n.d.) chart “The Alphabets”, most but not all digraphs and trigraphs are placed at the end, after single letters:

- (7) a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, ñw, o, q, r, s, t, u, w, x, y, é, ñ, ch, kh, qh,
 sh, th, kw, qw, khw, qhw, gw.

The order of the “Blina Xaleget” (alphabet in the first grade primer Eritrean Ministry of Education 1997b) is:

(8) vowels: e, u, i, a, é, o

consonants: b, c, d, f, g, h,j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, z, ñ, ñw, th, ch, sh, kh, kw, hw, qw, gw.

The revised order (Sulus p.c.) does not treat digraphs as separate letters, as in traditional Spanish <ll>, but integrates them fully into alphabetical order letter by letter, not phoneme by phoneme: a, b, c, ch, d, e, é, f, g, gw, etc.

Transcription is overall close to surface phonemics, not morphophonemics. For example, as mentioned above, Blin at least traditionally did not permit branching onsets. Through a syncope rule, most unstressed vowels between a stop and liquid are syncopated, thereby creating onset consonant clusters. The language reflects this possible restructuring: /bilin/ → [blin] <Blin> ‘Blin’. Occasionally, however, an earlier spelling like <suñw> ‘name’, reflecting the pronunciation /suŋ^w/, is changed to something like <séñw> /sɨŋ^w/, which reflects a factoring away of the process of labial spread, by which labialized consonants spread rounding to adjacent vowels (Fallon 2001).

4. Conclusion

Digraphia, according to DeFrancis, is “the use of two or more different systems of writing the same language” (1984:59; see Grivelet 2001 for current work). Dale (1980) notes that during the transition period between writing systems, “a period of synchronic digraphia may be expected”. Indeed, although there is a half-hour daily Blin radio show, its announcers read their scripts in *abugida*. Only the teachers and educational personnel, and children under 13 are truly familiar with this writing system. Thus in practice, Blin is in a digraphic situation. In addition, Blin abroad, especially in Scandinavia and Britain (e.g. Mowes 2003), use the *abugida*, in part to better integrate their children into the general culture of the Tigrinya-dominated Eritrean diaspora.

Dale also observes that “if a new script is introduced for purposes of efficiency or modernization, the older script may continue for some time in more traditional uses.” Thus we might expect the Catholic mass, services, and Gospels to resist being cast in the Roman alphabet, for some time, especially since new transliterations take time. Furthermore, due to lack of resources, the Ministry of Education has not yet produced a Roman script dictionary, which would help standardize spelling, and give added authority to the new script. The current situation is therefore balanced between an older system using *abugida* with over a century of tradition, and with a standard dictionary, and a newer, Roman script with official backing, being taught in elementary schools, but still lacking a lexicographic standard and many adult users.

Cases of digraphia are particularly interesting since “they indicate situations of competition between forces, no one of which has been able to prevail against the others” (Dale 1980). Another generation will help determine whether Blin develops synchronic digraphia, or whether it was simply diachronic digraphia, a period of transition. But the most important thing, however, is that the language is being taught, and literacy is being promoted. It remains to be seen whether native speakers will begin developing postliteracy materials and literary works in the new script, or whether they will continue the modest corpus in *abugida*.

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