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# ■ Language Development in Eritrea The Case of Blin

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## The Blin People and Language

### *Background of Blin*

Blin, also called Bilin or Bilen, is a Central Cushitic (or Agaw) language of Eritrea with approximately ninety thousand speakers. The Blin are located in the ‘Anseba Administrative Zone, centered around Keren, which is ninety-one kilometers northwest of the national capital, Asmara. Most Blin are agriculturalists, conducting mixed farming and breeding of goats, sheep, and cattle (Abbebe 2001; Smidt 2003). The Blin comprise only 2.1 percent of the national population, and even in Keren they form no more than 20 percent of the population. Their nearest linguistic relatives (Xamtaja, Kemantney) are in Ethiopia. The Blin are surrounded by a sea of Ethiosemitic speakers, primarily Tigre to the north, spoken by more than 31 percent of the national population, and Tigrinya to the south, spoken by 50 percent (U.S. Dept. of State 2007). Further, they are divided along religious lines, with roughly half or more of the population being Muslim, and the other half Christian, primarily Eritrean Catholic. Because of a fairly large degree of intermarriage, there are very few monolingual Blin; most are bi- or trilingual in Tigrinya and/or Tigre, and many also know such languages as Arabic, English, Amharic, and Italian. Abbebe (2001) reports that at least in urban areas, many Blin are Tigrinya- or Tigre-dominant and use Blin as a second language in limited domains. The language, he notes, “is therefore particularly threatened” (77).

Although Blin was first recorded in the 1850s by the Italian missionary Sapeto, and the first publication in Blin was in 1882 (Reinisch 1882b), Blin has primarily been an oral language with relatively few publications (Kiflemariam 1986, 1996). With the independence of the newest African nation, Eritrea, in 1991, however, Blin has had a certain measure of equality conferred upon it by the Eritrean Constitution, which guarantees mother-tongue education in the primary grades (Chefena, Kroon, and Walters 1999). This chapter examines language development efforts of the Blin language using the framework of Wolff (2000) and archival sources, as well as interviews with Blin speakers during fieldwork conducted for one month in Asmara and Keren, Eritrea, in the summer of 2002.

### ***Language Planning***

Language planning is a huge field with a variety of competing classifications and accompanying terminologies (Clyne 1997; Dadoust 1997; Ferguson 1968; Fishman, Ferguson, and Das Gupta 1968; Haugen 1966; Ricento 2005). Wolff (2000), following Haugen (1966), distinguishes between two major sets of problems and activities: status planning and corpus planning. Status planning establishes and develops the “functional usage of a particular language or languages within a state” (Wolff 2000, 333) and concerns the official language(s), and the educational, cultural, and religious uses of language (Cooper 1989; Ferguson 1968; Fishman 1974; Spolsky 1977; see Bloor and Tamrat 1996; Chefena, Kroon, and Walters 1999, for status planning and policy in Eritrea). The second division of language planning, which is the focus of this chapter, is corpus planning, which is “geared at establishing and developing spelling norms, setting norms of grammar and expanding the lexicon” (Wolff 2000, 333). By language standardization, Wolff means:

1. an approved and accepted *norm* above all vernacular, colloquial and dialectal varieties for *generalized* and *normative* usage in certain domains such as literature, science, higher education, the media, the churches and all public sectors; and
2. a *regularized* and *codified* normative *system of reference* supported by a standard orthography, standard reference grammars and (preferably monolingual) standard dictionaries. (2000, 332).

Language standardization may be broken into several different phases, which will serve as the basis of the analysis of Blin corpus planning. For an overview, see Hornberger (2005). Here, I follow the outline in Wolff (2000).

1. *Determination* “of language status and the norm within a chosen language, which is to serve as [a] standard frame of reference.”
2. *Codification* “of languages or language variants with no writing tradition at all, or choice among or unification of, competing systems already existing in the area.”
3. *Elaboration* “of vocabulary (*modernisation*) and grammar (*normalisation*) to serve as sources for reference and basic tools for the development of pedagogical materials for all levels of formal education.”
4. *Implementation* “of both language status and the norms of standardisation, that is creating and enhancing acceptance in the speech communities.”
5. *Cultivation* “of the so created standard languages by language authorities to ensure continued observance of the norms and control implementation. In Africa in particular, language cultivation would also be concerned with the creation and continuous production of post-literacy materials” (Wolff 2000, 334).

A sixth category, *harmonization*, the unification of mutually non-intelligible dialects, need not concern us. We turn next to the application and analysis of these principles in Blin corpus planning.

## Blin Corpus Planning

### *Determination*

The Eritrean Constitution guarantees the equality of all languages in Article 4 but declines to name an official language; rather, there are three “working languages” of the country (Simeone-Senelle 2000): English, the language of secondary and higher education as well as an international language of business and diplomacy; Arabic, although spoken natively by fewer than 1 percent of the population, is the religious language of Islam and plays an important role in commercial transactions and regional diplomacy; and Tigrinya, spoken natively by half the population, serves as a unifying national language (Chefena, Kroon, and Walters 1999). Estimates for the degree of bilingualism in Tigrinya cannot be stated “with any confidence” (Chefena, Kroon, and Walters 1999), but according to Tekle (2003), 68 percent of all schools teach in Tigrinya. In a 1997 Eritrean government survey of twelve major towns, 77 percent of the population was Tigrinya speaking, and the language has also become a “symbolic official language” (Chefena, Kroon, and Walters 1999). There remain several other minority languages: Arabic of the Rashaida (0.5 percent); Ethiosemitic Tigre (31.4 percent); the Nilo-Saharan Kunama (2 percent) and Nara (1.5 percent); North Cushitic Beja (2.5 percent); Lowland East Cushitic Saho (5 percent) and Afar (5 percent); and Central Cushitic Blin (2.1 percent). Each of these languages has been guaranteed mother-tongue education. In the case of Blin, determination therefore refers to which norm is to be the basis of literacy materials.

Since Reinisch (1882a), scholars have generally recognized two main dialects of Blin, *Bet Taq<sup>w</sup>e* (or *Tawque*) and *Bet Tarqe* (or *Senhit*; Daniel and Sullus 1997; Hetzron 1976; Kiflemariam 1986)<sup>1</sup>. However, it was not until Eritrean independence, in preparation for implementation of the constitutional guarantee of mother tongue education, that actual research was carried out by Daniel and Sullus (1997). Using several instruments of their own creation, they surveyed six sites, three in each dialect zone; for *Tawque* dialect, they surveyed Halhal, Jengeren, Sit’ur (Brekentya), and for the *Senhit* dialect, Ashera, Bambi, and Feledarb.

In Daniel and Sullus’s (1997) survey of language attitudes of a total of thirty-five parents, with five to seven from each of the six sites, 79 percent of the *Senhit* dialect speakers thought that their dialect was “easily understood by the majority of Blin speakers,” as opposed to 94 percent of *Tawque* speakers; the rest thought that both dialects were easily understood. When asked about the utility of each dialect, 74 percent of *Senhit* Blin speakers and 75 percent of *Tawque* speakers replied that their own dialect “gave more/wider service,” and the remainder responded that both dialects did. Finally, when asked which dialect they preferred the textbooks to be prepared in, 58 percent of the *Senhit* speakers replied in favor of their own language, while 63 percent of *Tawque* speakers desired their own dialect to be the model; the remainder believed that the Ministry of Education should “find out the best and make the choice.”

One instrument, a list of 320 words known to vary between dialects, was given to five to seven parents and ten students at each site. Results indicated that 93 percent of the items were familiar to speakers of both dialect areas, even if they did not use

the term. In a test of lexical, morphological, and phonological differences, they found that “dialect intelligibility is no problem for Blin speakers” (Daniel and Sullus 1997, 11). Most of the problems in a test of listening comprehension involved only names of nonlocal or unfamiliar “trees, people, places, or clans” (13). In a test in which six teachers (four Tawque and two Senhit) were asked to make corrections to a story for a primer by Blin language teachers, there were no syntactic differences, a few had minor grammatical differences involving a verbal suffix, and there were a few vocabulary differences.

Daniel and Sullus (1997) conclude that despite certain phonological and lexical differences, “each dialect is easily understood by, and entirely familiar to, the speakers of the other dialect” (17). The curricular materials are written in the Senhit dialect of Blin but contain a large number of words from Tawque Blin. The authors observed that because of the high degree of awareness among both dialects of “typical Senhit” or “typical Tawque” vocabulary, the choice of words did not affect intelligibility. However, they proposed that the textbook writers should choose synonyms from both dialects “to avoid appearing biased or partial” (11).

Most written Blin has been in the Senhit dialect. In the survey by Daniel and Sullus (1997), most parents who had seen written Blin found it in the Senhit dialect, while most of those who had not seen written Blin were from the Tawque area.

### **Codification**

Blin codification posed an interesting sociolinguistic dilemma in that there were no competing writing systems, yet the existing one was replaced with a government-mandated Roman script. The earliest known writings in Blin are from the work of foreign scholars such as Leo Reinisch, who wrote the first grammar (1882a), transcribed texts (1883), compiled a dictionary of Blin (1887), and who supervised a translation of the Gospel of Mark (1882b). While the more academic work contains a phonetic transcription, the Gospel translation, and several subsequent collections of tales (e.g. Capomazza 1911; Conti Rossini 1907), use the Ethiopic script, or *abugida*. An *abugida* is a script reminiscent of a syllabary in that it usually transcribes consonant-vowel (CV) sequences, but the basic shape contains an inherent vowel, and other vowels (or “orders”) contain relatively consistent modifications of the basic shape. An example of some of the *abugida*, given in traditional order, is shown in Table 10.1.

The sixth order is ambiguous in transcribing either a coda consonant alone or an onset plus the high central vowel /i/. It is thus inadequate to show geminate consonants or long vowels, and it does not show phonological prominence (either stress or pitch accent). Nevertheless, because the *abugida* has a long history as the liturgical language of Ge‘ez and is used to write Amharic and Tigrinya, the major Ethiosemitic languages of the area, it was natural to use it as the basis of writing for Blin, especially since its phonology is similar to that of Tigrinya (Palmer 1960). The script needed only three additional basic graphemes for sounds not found in Ge‘ez (/x<sup>w</sup>, ŋ, ŋ<sup>w</sup>/), which used diacritic modifications of similar symbols.

The second stage of writing in Blin was led by native Blin-speaking clergymen (e.g. Wolde-Yohannes 1939), who translated catechisms, service books, and the

■ Table 10.1.

Partial Sample of the Ethiopic *Abugida*, in Traditional Order

	ə	u	i	a	e	C/Ci	o
h	ሀ	ሁ	ሂ	ሃ	ሄ	ህ	ሆ
l	ለ	ሉ	ሊ	ላ	ሌ	ል	ሎ
ḥ	ሐ	ሑ	ሒ	ሓ	ሔ	ሕ	ሖ
m	መ	ሙ	ሚ	ማ	ሜ	ም	ሞ
s	ሰ	ሱ	ሲ	ሳ	ሴ	ስ	ሶ
r	ረ	ሩ	ሪ	ራ	ሬ	ር	ሮ
ʃ	ሸ	ሹ	ሺ	ሻ	ሼ	ሽ	ሾ

other gospels. The third stage occurred when a critical mass of Blin students and intellectuals began serious language planning efforts, creating grammatical terms, and refining the orthography. Foremost among these is Kiflemariam Hamdé (1986), who also wrote an excellent overview of developments in Blin orthography (1996). Among the greatest achievements of this movement is Kiflemariam and Paulos (1992), the first monolingual dictionary of five thousand words (with English glosses), and the book *Gerbasha* (Committee for Developing Blin Language and Culture in Keren 1997). This movement has continued into the twenty-first century with the acceptance of the extra symbols into the Unicode 4.1.0 standard (Yacob's 2004 proposal, in consultation with Tekie Alibeket; changes documented at [www.unicode.org/versions/Unicode4.1.0/#NotableChanges](http://www.unicode.org/versions/Unicode4.1.0/#NotableChanges)). The abugida is still the only script used among Blin in the diaspora (e.g. Mowes 2003), and is used to help integrate Blin into the larger Eritrean diaspora.

Beginning in 1985, however, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front began a policy of promoting non-Ethiosemitic minority languages in Roman-based scripts, along with their use of Tigrinya, Arabic, and English as working languages. When Eritrea's war of independence from Ethiopia ended in 1991, Eritrea's provisional constitution guaranteed mother-tongue education in primary school in each of the nine ethnic languages. Due to lack of sufficient training and teachers, the Blin Language Panel of the National Curriculum of the Ministry of Education did not begin until the survey by Daniel and Sullus (1997).

To the disappointment of many of those backing a modified form of abugida, government policy chose to write Blin in Roman letters. Since the abugida was first used to write Ge'ez, the liturgical language, and since most speakers of Tigrinya, one of the official working languages of the country (and spoken by half the population), are Eritrean Orthodox Christian, many of the Muslim Blin (about 50 percent of ethnic Blin) associated the script with the Christian religion. Conversely, the Arabic script is intimately bound with Islam. The choice of Roman script was therefore seen by the government as a unifying compromise, and as an aid in learning English, the

language of secondary and higher education (Tekle 2003; Zeraghiorghis 1999). For an assessment of each script, see Fallon (2006).

The Roman-based alphabet for Blin uses a combination of diacritics, digraphs, and trigraphs. A mapping between grapheme (in angled brackets) and phoneme (in slashes) is shown in (1) below, with single graphemes shown in (1a), and digraphs in (1b):

- (1) a. <a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, ñ, o, q, r, s,  
/ a, b, ʔ, d, ə, f, g, h, i, dʒ, k, l, m, n, ŋ, o, k', r, s,  
t, u, w, x, y, é >  
t, u, w, ħ, j, i /
- b. < ñw, kw, qw, gw ch, qh, th kh, sh,  
/ ŋ<sup>w</sup>, k<sup>w</sup>, k<sup>w</sup>, g<sup>w</sup> tʃ, k', t' x, ʃ,  
ee khw, qhw >  
e x<sup>w</sup>, k<sup>w</sup> /

In the codification of the writing system, the alphabetical order has undergone several shifts. A chart published by the Eritrean Ministry of Education (1997a) titled “The Alphabets” contains the Blin alphabetical order, along with a basic Ge‘ez form, and a modified IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) form. With the exception of the labialized velar nasal, it follows standard alphabetical order, then letters with diacritics, then digraphs in groups, and then trigraphs, though the digraphic labialized voiced velar stop is inexplicably last. The order is shown in (2):

(2) Ministry of Education Chart “The Alphabets”

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 Blin alphabet (“Blina Xaleget”) in the first grade primer (Eritrean Ministry of Education 1997b) gives the vowels first, in traditional abugida order, and then the consonants. It includes consonants for borrowed letters such as <p> and <z>, and then gives the digraphs in fairly random order, and excludes trigraphs. The order is shown in (3):

(3) “Blina Xaleget”

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.

Since 2002 (Sulus personal communication), the revised alphabetical order is strictly alphabetical, with quasi-ligature status (Rogers 2005, 12) for digraphs or trigraphs, as in traditional Spanish. The quasi-ligatures are treated as separate letters and placed after the basic letter. The two letters with diacritics, é and ñ, are alphabetized after their graphically simpler counterparts. A sample of the revised order may be seen in (4):

## (4) Revised Alphabetical Order

a, b, c, ch, d, e, é, f, g, gw, etc.

One unfortunate gap is that there is not yet a dictionary of the new Romanized Blin orthography; for more on this, see the conclusion.

In addition to flux in alphabetical order, certain lexical items have had their spelling changed as teachers become used to the system and as Blin educators get more experience. Differences in spelling usually involve different speaker perceptions of vowel or consonant length, and different ideas concerning shallow or deep orthography, that is, whether the orthography should be closer to surface phonemics or whether it should more closely reflect underlying representations. For example, should the underlying vowel /i/ next to a labialized consonant be represented as /i/ or as /u/, its surface pronunciation?

For now, there is a relatively bumpy transition during this period of sequential digraphia, “the use of two or more different systems of writing the same language” (DeFrancis 1984). For example, Blin speakers in their twenties and older, unless they are teachers, are generally unfamiliar with the newer writing system. Thus some of the radio announcers must have their scripts retranscribed into abugida. Many of those involved in the creation of a dictionary still use the abugida. The transition to the new orthography will clearly be a fairly lengthy process, unlike the transition to the Roman-based Somali orthography. The reason for this is that relatively little is at stake outside the domain of education, as the language is not a full-fledged standard. Little is written in the Roman orthography, and no standards have been published yet.

***Elaboration***

As we saw from the survey by Daniel and Sullus (1997), there is substantial agreement in the grammar among the two dialects; there is, therefore, no real need for normalization. There is, however, a desperate need for the elaboration (or modernization, to use Ferguson’s 1968 term) of the language. As noted above, the Blin are historically agriculturalists, with a historic background in cattle breeding. However, their language must be modernized or elaborated in order to talk about the current needs of the twenty-first century nation-state (Sulus 1999).

There are a number of ways in which the vocabulary has been elaborated: derivation, derivation with semantic extension, compounding, reintroduction of obsolescent vocabulary, calques, borrowing, and semantic extension (Sulus 2003). These will be discussed in turn, using examples drawn mostly from Sulus (2003). The author is unaware of any particular preference hierarchy of the following strategies, except that there is a general avoidance of borrowed terms. Although there is a Committee for Developing Blin Language and Culture (discussed under implementation later), the head of the Blin language curriculum has direct influence on these neologisms, along with the radio announcers.

**Derivation.** Derivation is a common way of increasing the vocabulary in a language, and Blin is no exception. In many cases, deverbal nouns are formed through the addition of a suffix. The suffix *-na* is both an infinitival marker and a deverbal nominal

suffix, in some cases (such as “conclusion” below) yielding what appears to be zero-derivation.

(5)

<i>la-</i>	“one”	<i>laréñ</i>	“unit”
<i>lakhw</i>	“one” (adj.)	<i>lakhunnar</i>	“unity”
<i>kémna</i>	“to own; contain”	<i>kémana</i>	“content”
<i>déñwna</i>	“to finish, conclude”	<i>déñwna</i>	“conclusion”

**Derivation with Semantic Extension.** It is also common for new derivations to contain some semantic extension, as shown in (6) (data from Sulus 2003):

(6)

<i>geb-na</i>	“resist”	<i>geb-ana</i>	“defence or military force”
<i>jéléw-na</i>	“to rotate, move around”	<i>jéléw-ana</i>	“circumference”
<i>berhéd-na</i>	“to illuminate”	<i>berhéd-isena</i>	“explanation”
<i>tekken-na</i>	“to stick together”	<i>ték-na</i>	“appendix”
<i>sid-na</i>	“to separate”	<i>sid-a</i>	“characteristic; feature”
<i>wellem-na</i>	“to talk much”	<i>wellam-a</i>	“journalist”
<i>ékéb-na</i>	“to gather s.t.”	<i>ékb-o</i>	“meeting”

**Compounding.** Compounding is the combination of two independent elements into a complex word. Blin makes use of a variety of compounds, though most contain a nominal head, modified by either an adjective or participle or by a noun. Examples are in (7):

(7)

<i>gab</i>	“speech”	+	<i>terrebew</i>	“mocking”	<i>gab terrebew</i>	“fiction”
<i>kida</i>	“good”	+	<i>teeyas</i>	“accomplishment”	<i>kida teeyas</i>	“efficiency”
<i>yegna</i>	“best”	+	<i>deréb</i>	“way”	<i>yegna deréb</i>	“skillful”
<i>luwér</i>	“knowledge”	+	<i>deréb</i>	“way”	<i>luwér deréb</i>	“science”
<i>kewa</i>	“people”	+	<i>dibba</i>	“group”	<i>kewa dibba</i>	“community”
<i>kwara</i>	“sun”	+	<i>leb</i>	“setting”	<i>kwara leb</i>	“west”
<i>baxar</i>	“sea”	+	<i>gena</i>	“mother”	<i>bexargena</i>	“ocean”
<i>tika</i>	“exact”	+	<i>ketaba</i>	“writer”	<i>tikerketaba</i>	“secretary”

The last two examples are from Zeraghiorghis (1999,11).

**Revival of Forgotten Words.** Through language planning efforts, the Blin language planners discovered many words used by elders that had not been transmitted to a younger generation who had experienced thirty years of civil war, life in refugee camps, exile, and disruption. It became conscious policy to attempt to revive these authentic Blin words which had fallen into disuse.

(8)

<i>héjjam</i>	“history”	<i>gula</i>	“south”
<i>sexe</i>	“north”	<i>tantarwa</i>	“town”
<i>fered</i>	“natural”	<i>ébéd qur</i>	“foreigners”
<i>fédi gudi</i>	“discussion”	<i>qurtha</i>	“drama”
<i>falay</i>	“imitation”	<i>shéngareeb</i>	“criticism”
<i>méb</i>	“grade”		

**Calques (Loan Translation).** Calques involve the use of native vocabulary elements to encode the meaning of foreign words or phrases. Examples are given in (9):

(9)

<i>cado téttax</i>	“antibiotics”	“against” + “tiny creatures”
<i>késakhw</i>	“administrator”	“be in service of; spend the night” cf. Tigrinya <i>amahadari</i> , Amharic <i>astedadaí</i>
<i>gikh afriqikhw</i>	“Horn of Africa”	“horn” + “African”
<i>selfa ella</i>	“first aid”	“first” + “aid”
<i>séqwa séffet</i>	“infrastructure”	“below” + “something which can hold any material”
<i>seqeer</i>	“network”	“net” + word derived from a material that is used to handle traditional basket of water
<i>kédemukhw</i>		
<i>shur gérés</i>	“self-reliance”	“self” + “ability”

**Borrowing.** If a language does not use native morphemes to express a concept, it may simply use the morphemes or words of another language, often adapting the loan to fit its phonology. Zeraghiorghis provides several examples of borrowing, shown in (10):

(10)	Loanword	Gloss	Source
	<i>hikumet</i>	government	Arabic
	<i>kortelora</i>	small knife	Italian
	<i>metro kubo</i>	cubic meter	Italian
	<i>boletika</i>	politics	English

**Semantic Extension.** Perhaps the most interesting of word formation processes are those which involve metaphoric extension of meaning to expand native vocabulary. Recent Blin words display a playful creativity of language in their application to novel referents or concepts, as shown in (11) (from Sulus 2003):

(11)	<i>gésset baxarukhw</i>	“style of children’s haircut in which the sides of the head are shaved and a small tuft of hair is left on the crown of the head” + “of the sea”	>	“island”
	<i>wesheqđenta</i>	“one who makes his bed or who makes smooth pavements”	>	“minister, coordinator”
	<i>bejjakhdéna</i>	“to increase in quantity”	>	“multiplication”
	<i>keleeb</i>	“round pen for cattle or goats”	>	“circle” (in math)
	<i>wechem</i>	“group of something”	>	“set”
	<i>gaba gug</i>	“road to a language”	>	“grammar”
	<i>fikhwen mekettey</i>	“sign of a pause”	>	“punctuation”
	<i>chercherna</i>	“to make smooth the thatched leaves of the hut” >	>	“to calculate mathematical problems”

Processes common in English that have not (yet) been recorded in Blin include blending and acronymy. In short, Blin displays a variety of word formation processes to form new words to expand, modernize, and codify its native vocabulary to meet new semantic demands.

### ***Implementation***

There are several entities to implement Blin language planning. Foremost among these is the thirty-member Committee for Developing Blin Language and Culture. The committee contains some members in the national capital, Asmara, while others are in or around the Blin cultural capital (and capital of ‘Anseba region), Keren, some 91 kilometers to the northwest. Some members focus on language, while others focus on artistic and cultural events. There is, of course, close contact between the Ministry of Education’s Blin Language Panel and members of the aforementioned committee. In addition, there are close ties between the Blin Language Panel and the daily radio program, *Dehai Gebaylakh* “Voice of the Masses” (Zeraghiorghis 1999).

In its first broadcast, the radio program stated three main objectives:

1. To provide for Blin speakers current, truthful and clear information in their mother tongue.
2. To provide a suitable atmosphere for Blin people for knowing and developing their culture, language and its people in particular and the nation at large.
3. To make the people active participants in the process of developing Eritrea politically, economically, and socially (after Zeraghiorghis’s translation, 1999,10).

The radio program, broadcast for thirty minutes daily, is the primary means for dissemination and explanation of neologisms. It has been well received (Abbebe

2001, 86) and, based on observations during the author's fieldwork, it was often listened to by members of the community. Zeraghiorghis's (1999) survey of one hundred Blin found that 38 percent "always" listened, 35 percent listened "once a week," and 27 percent listened less frequently. However, at present, there is no documentation for how successful the transmission of neologisms to the public has been, though according to Zeraghiorghis's survey, 80 percent of the listeners liked the new words used on the program, and only 10 percent didn't like them.

### ***Cultivation***

The Eritrean government has cultivated the use of Blin primarily through its support of mother-tongue education in elementary grades. The Blin Language Panel has created primary school materials in Blin language, mathematics, science, and history/geography. Furthermore, it conducts periodic teacher training, and has trained more than three hundred teachers in twenty-seven schools.

As mentioned earlier, the government also supports the daily radio program, which many Blin listen to. Materials include news, interviews, songs, and other cultural information. In addition, the Committee for Developing Blin Language and Culture (1997) has published (in abugida) a highly regarded volume, *Gerbasha*. Furthermore, this committee organizes popular and well-attended oral poetry competitions, and tests of cultural knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

Eritrea has supported minority languages in many concrete ways. However, it is unfortunate that just after Blin mother-tongue education began in 1997, a terrible border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea broke out from 1998 to 2000. Although hostilities have ceased and the United Nations has recommended border demarcation, Ethiopia does not accept the United Nations' terms, thus raising tensions. In response to these tensions, the Eritrean government has suspended scheduled presidential and parliamentary elections, which would have formally implemented the constitution, and has prohibited the publication of private newspapers (U.S. Dept. of State 2007). Blin speakers reported to the author that Blin-language newspapers had been published previously (confirmed independently in Abbebe 2001, 86), but he never saw any during the course of fieldwork and archival research in the University of Asmara library in Eritrea in 2002.

The biggest need for language planning is the creation of a standard dictionary in the new orthography. Members of the Committee for Developing Blin Language and Culture told the author that plans for such a dictionary were underway, and that twenty thousand words had been collected but that they were on thousands of different scraps of paper. Clearly, resources must be dedicated to recording and collecting the standard vocabulary and the neologisms that have been coined. Such a dictionary might also be a multilingual dictionary, covering Tigre and Tigrinya, either or both of which languages the Blin people are also fluent in, and possibly also English, the language of secondary and higher education. Furthermore, as an aid to those in the diaspora and to those who did not have the benefit of mother-tongue education in the Roman script, such a dictionary might include the abugida orthography.

If Blin is to thrive, there should also be a number of post-literacy materials. Once a Blin speaker graduates from fifth grade, there is literally nothing else to read in the language. In the abugida script, aside from various grammars, there is only a book of love poems published abroad (Bogos 1992) and the *Gerbasha* volume. Elders should be encouraged to tell their stories, which literate speakers could transcribe and collect in published volumes. The poetry contests of the young should be recorded, transcribed, and published. Literate speakers have a rich history and life stories full of dramatic and traumatic events, the raw materials for the development of a promising literature. For example, one Blin whom the author interviewed desired to write a play about the wartime period but was frustrated by a lack of time, training, and literary models.

In the assessment of Eritrean anthropologist Abbebe (2001), “Bilin is ... a symbol of the persistence of a ‘small’ people against all odds in a world which seems to favour ‘big’ peoples, cultural standardization and linguistic hegemonization.” Yet he believes that Bilin has “enough positive symbolism to justify [a] lot of optimism for its survival” based on mother-tongue education in Blin, institutional support such as the radio program and literary competitions, and the “nostalgic reintroduction of traditional Bilin customs, belief systems, herbal medicinal practices, and aesthetic estates” (86). Mother-tongue education will certainly be crucial for re-establishing the language after a generation and a half was disrupted and displaced into refugee camps by thirty years of upheaval during the war of independence. But even after independence, the tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea divert resources from nation building into national defense, from cultural flourishing to daily survival.

Unlike the situation of many endangered languages with very small numbers of elderly speakers (see, e.g., the studies in Brenzinger 2002), Blin does not face immediate obsolescence. With speakers numbering around ninety thousand, the number of Blin speakers is one of its strengths. But the study by Abbebe (2001), confirmed by the author’s own field observations, shows that many young speakers are “opting out of their native speech community” (74), drifting to Tigre in rural areas and Tigrinya in urban areas. They are unable to use Blin in a wide range of domains, and they do not interact with the oldest generation of speakers and are not familiar with traditional Blin greetings, blessings, or even counting. These are clearly threatening signs to the language’s vitality. The future lies with the 44 percent of the population which is under the age of 15 (CIA 2007), a generation now receiving its primary education in Blin. What they do with their language after primary school, and whether they will develop the language, create literature, and pass Blin on to their children will determine if language drift becomes language shift. ■

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## NOTE

1. In keeping with Eritrean and Ethiopian custom, authors are cited by their given name. In the references, they are cited by given name followed by their patronymic, with no comma separating them. This practice is used by Bender et. al. (1976) and Unseth (1990) among others.

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