



# Linguistic research in the Horn of Africa: Djibouti

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## Djibouti

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### Brief historical background

The Republic of Djibouti (RD) eponymous of its sea-port capital was established in 1977; it is the smallest state of the Horn of Africa. The French colonization in the area began at the end of the nineteenth century with the settlement in 1883 of a protectorate named *Territoire d'Obock et de ses dépendances* (Territory of Obock and its dependences). It was united as the *Côte française des Somalis* (CFS) in 1896, with Djibouti-city as capital. In 1967 the colony was renamed *Territoire Français des Afars et des Issas* (TFAI).

### Linguistic background

Two main ethno-linguistic groups are living in this area, Somali and ʕAfar in addition to a minority of Arabs settled on the northern coast and in Djibouti-city. Each community speaks its language: Somali (*afsoomaali*), and ʕAfar (*qafaraf*, [ʕafaraf]) (two Cushitic languages) and a specific Arab variety. French has been the only official language of the colony. Presently French and Standard Arabic are the two official languages of the Republic, both are taught in Public schools, but French is the only medium of instruction. Somali and ʕAfar are officially listed as national languages although not taught, while the Djiboutian Arabic is considered a regional variety.

Because of its geo-political situation, RD is a privileged place for contacts. Since 2015 the population influx from Yemen significantly changed the linguistic landscape in the port cities. Now more than ever the capital is a true melting pot. Besides Somali, ʕAfar, Arabic, French, English, many other languages belonging to different genetic families are in contact: Amharic, Oromo, Saho, Wolof, Hindi, Urdu ...

### Linguistic Research

During colonization and until the 2000s studies on Djibouti languages were limited to Somali and ʕAfar (see Nilsson 2016 and Morin 2012: 45-54). Spoken Arabic and French were hardly considered. The impact of contacts and the emergence of new varieties are not yet the object of linguistic research.

Until the late 20th and early 21st century Djibouti had no official institution or Research Center involving linguistic studies. Such studies were essentially carried out by few local scholars, and by scientists belonging to European institutions.

Just before Independence, research on the ʕAfar language began through cultural associations working for literacy such as the *Union pour le développement culturel* (UDC) founded in 1973. In 1976, UDC adopted latine alphabet developed by two scholars Dimis (Hamad b. ʕAbdallah b. Hamad) and Reedo (Gamaladdin Abdoukadir, the then-director of *Afar Language Studies and Enrichment Center* (ALSEC), in Samara, Ethiopia), which enabled

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<sup>1</sup> LLACAN: *Langage, Langues et Cultures d'Afrique Noire*. CNRS: *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*. INALCO: *Institut National des Langues et Cultures Orientales* (Paris).

ʕAfar transliteration and writing and fostered collaboration between Djibouti and Ethiopia<sup>2</sup>. On this basis, glossaries, grammar sketches, literacy textbooks have been elaborated for educational purposes (see references in *Terminologie, pédagogie, and Lexicographie* in Morin 2012: 51).

In 1978, the *Institut Supérieur d'Etudes et de Recherches Scientifiques et Techniques* (ISERST) was founded. It included a Human Sciences section, and between 1978 and 1982 Didier Morin<sup>†</sup> launched linguistic research on Cushitic languages spoken in the Horn of Africa: ʕAfar, Somali, Saho, Beja (cf. Morin 2012: 50-51). In 2002, the *Institut des langues de Djibouti* (ILD) was created within the *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches de Djibouti* (CERD), successor of ISERST. ILD aims at contributing to a better knowledge of the national linguistic heritage, initially Somali and ʕAfar languages, in collecting corpora (linguistics and traditional literature), analyzing and studying them, developing and publishing dictionaries (cf. Carab, Saalax Xaashi 2004; Aadan, Aadan Xasan (ed) 2013, in Nilsson 2016). It organizes national and international meetings and collaborates with several foreign institutions in France (LLACAN, INALCO), in Ethiopia (ALSEC and *Afar Language Academy* in Samara, and the University of Jigjiga), in Somalia (*Somali Language Academy* in Mogadishu), in Somaliland (*Borama University*). In 2004 an agreement of cooperation was signed between ILD and LLACAN. ʕAfar Section of ILD (Hassan Kamil) and LLACAN (Simeone-Senelle) are carrying out a common project concerning a dialectal dictionary of halieutic vocabulary and the study of the Arabic and French influences on ʕAfar spoken on the coast. Data are collected on the Djibouti and Eritrean coast to build up a specific database concerning the halieutic domain: fauna, fishing and navigation techniques, taboos and rites related to the sea.

The *Institut des Sciences et des Nouvelles Technologies de Djibouti* (ISNTD) established in 2001 is working on the automatic Natural Language Processing, the machine-aided translation and speech recognition for poorly endowed languages without written tradition. So far only the Somali language is concerned (cf. Abdellahi, Nimaan & Karouah, Nimaan in Nilsson 2016, and <http://somalital.canalblog.com/tag/Thèse>).

Since 2006, the University of Djibouti (UD) in accordance with national languages policy offers compulsory training courses "Initiation aux langues nationales. Initiation à la linguistique somali et à la linguistique afar" to 3rd year B.A. students. Since there is no Full Professor in linguistics, the Djiboutian postgraduates are obliged to enroll at foreign universities.

The *Centre de recherches de l'Université de Djibouti* (CRUD) opened a linguistics section, including national languages, Somali, ʕAfar and spoken Arabic (vernacular and lingua franca) in addition to French and Standard Arabic. *CRUD* publishes the *Revue Universitaire de Djibouti* (RUD) and each year organizes interdisciplinary scientific days.

The new *Institut de Recherche Indépendant de la Corne de l'Afrique* (IRICA), was founded in Djibouti in June 2016 "to promote indigenous knowledge, provide community for researchers, and conduct applied research in the Horn of Africa" (<https://www.irica-dj.com>). It is a multidisciplinary institute embracing natural sciences, earth and life sciences and human sciences. It publishes a monthly on line bilingual bulletin *Recherche-Newsletter*. The first volume of IRICA's *Annals of the Horn of Africa* is scheduled for fall 2017. Up to now linguistic research concerns exclusively the teaching of mother tongues and the use of English by students in Djibouti.

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<sup>2</sup> Another latine alphabet similar that of Somali is used in the State of Eritrea.

Under the supervision of the Minister of Communication and Culture two Symposia were organized in Djibouti, one on the Somali Language (2002) and the other on the ሩAfar Language (2003, cf. Morin 2012: 52). In December 2012, the *Conference on the 40th Anniversary of Somali Orthography* was held in Djibouti (cf. Nilsson 2016: 95). Since 2006, each year, the *International Day devoted to the Mother Tongues* brings together specialists in didactics.

The first doctoral theses on languages spoken in Djibouti (Somali, ሩAfar, vernacular Arabic) have been defended in France at INALCO/LLACAN between 2011 and 2015. Each one of them has responsibilities in three research centers: Abdirachid Mohamed Ismail is presently vice-president of IRICA, Souad Kassim Mohamed, Senior Lecturer in Linguistics and Didactics at UD and a member of CRUD, and Mohamed Hassan Kamil, Researcher at CERD is Director of ILD. They play a key role in the development of the linguistic research in RD.

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