

8 - Somali: some information

Aim: To provide a brief overview of one of the languages spoken by large numbers of refugees.

Having an insight into how the Somali language works may be helpful in understanding the challenges Somali speakers face when learning a new language and what, on the other hand, might be relatively easy for them. Also, refugees may appreciate it if you ask them to help you to pronounce the names of persons and places correctly and if you at least try to use some words or phrases of their languages (see "[Language of Origin](#)").

Where the language is spoken

Somali is spoken in the Horn of Africa. It is common in Somalia, and since 1991 in the de facto independent (but not internationally recognised) Republic of Somaliland, in Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia. The division of Somali speakers across five countries and the current border situation is a legacy of the colonial era. In the so-called Congo Conference of 1884/1885, the Somali speaking areas were divided into five parts: British East Africa (Kenya), British Somaliland (Somaliland), Italian Somaliland (Somalia), French Somaliland (Djibouti) and Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

In addition to these African countries, Somali is also the language of Somali minorities in other countries. These minorities moved mainly to the US and Europe after the fall of President Siad Barre in 1991 and during the subsequent civil war. There are about 12 million Somali speakers. But estimates are difficult because of the unstable situation in Somalia and the extensive diaspora.

Somali has a large number of loan words from the former colonial languages (especially Italian and English) as well as Arabic and other "oriental" languages. The Kingdom of Aksum (1st to 7th century AD) extended to the north-west of present-day Somalia. During this period the Somali language came into contact with Arabic and Persian influences through maritime trade.

Some features of Somali script

In 1972 a committee of international linguists decided, mainly for practical reasons, on the use of Latin script for written Somali. However, it contains no special characters except the apostrophe. The order of the letters is based on those of the Arabic alphabet.

Some expressions in Somali

Good morning!	Subax wanaagsan!
Hello! (literally: Is it peace?)	Ma nabad baa?
Hello! (literally: It is peace. As an answer)	Waa nabad
Yes	Haa
No	Maya

Alphabet and pronunciation

The 26 letters of the Somali alphabet are:

B, T, J, X, KH, D, R, S, SH, DH, C, G, F, Q, K, H, L, M, N, W, H, Y, A, E, I, O, U

Some features of pronunciation:

X – /h

C – /a

Q – /k (deep from the throat)

For speakers of English the letter X (pronounced as "H") and the letter C (short "a") are particularly confusing. For example, the name Mohamed is written in Somali as *Maxamed* and Ali as *Cali*.

Numbers

1	kow
2	laba
3	saddex
4	afar
5	shan
6	lix
7	todoba
8	sideed
9	sagal
10	toban

Source: "Sprachensteckbrief Somali", Schule Mehrsprachig, Eine Information des Bundesministeriums für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur – © Fuad Ali Mohamed (translated into English and adapted).