

# **Amharic Language and Culture Manual**

## **National Language of Ethiopia**



*Image from CIA World Factbook*

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## About Ethiopia

Ethiopia's total population is 88,013,491, making it the world's 14<sup>th</sup> most populous country. Ethiopia is located in eastern Africa, just west of Somalia. It is a landlocked country with a central mountain range divided by the Great Rift Valley. With a history of over 3000 years, Ethiopia is the only African country that was never colonized. The country was ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie from 1930 to 1973. Selassie was overthrown in 1973 by military personnel that formed a repressive Marxist military regime. Since this repression Ethiopia has struggled with drought and famine.

Prior to the 1973 military coup few Ethiopians lived in the west. However, since the coup many families have left Ethiopia as refugees as a result of the internal wars and ethnic conflicts. Leaving Ethiopia is dangerous and many people do not survive the journey. The greatest number of Ethiopian refugees coming to the United States occurred from 1983 to 1993. Most refugees came from urban backgrounds and have obtained college degrees. Areas of the United States with greatest population of Ethiopians include the East and West coasts, Dallas, and Houston.

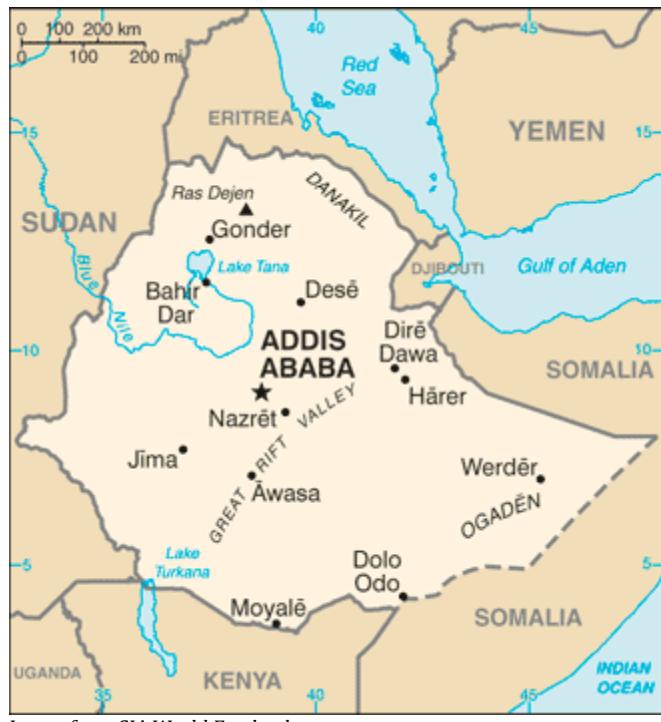


Image from CIA World Factbook

## **Demographics and language**

Amharic (also known as Abyssinian, Amarinya, Amarigna, and Ethiopian) is the national language of Ethiopia. Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century it has been the language of the court and dominant population in Highland Ethiopia. The language of Amharic is spoken in the Ethiopian government, court system, and on all official documents. Amharic is predominately spoken by upper and middle class Ethiopians. According to the 1994 census Amharic is the most commonly spoken language in Ethiopia. It is spoken by over 17 million people in Ethiopia. Amharic speakers encompass 32.7% of Ethiopia's population. Amharic is also spoken by 40,000 people in Israel as well as people in Egypt and Sweden.

Other languages in Ethiopia are spoken in rural areas throughout Ethiopia. Of the other 85 languages spoken in Ethiopia the following are most prevalent: Oromigna 31.6%, Tigrigna 6.1%, Somaligna 6%, Guaragigna 3.5%, Sidamigna 3.5%, and Hadiyigna 1.7%. [Ethnologue](#) provides information about all languages spoken in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is also home to more than 200 dialects.

In 1991 a new constitution gave all ethnic groups the right to develop their own languages and use their language as method for instruction in primary schools. Primary schools are taught in Amharic and other local languages. Secondary schools and universities utilize English for education. English is the most popular foreign language spoken in Ethiopia.

According to the United States census (2000) African languages (including Amharic, Ibo, Twi, Yoruba, Bantu, Swahili, and Somali) were spoken by 418,505 persons living within the US. A Community Survey (2006) reported 696,607 speakers of African languages in the US.

## Linguistic Features

### Writing System

Amharic has its own writing system, a semi-syllabic system. There is no agreed translation of Amharic symbols to Roman characters (used in English). There are 33 consonant symbols that have seven variations. Variations are according to the vowel that is coupled with the consonant. About one quarter of Ethiopia's population is literate in the written form of Amharic.

	ä	u	i	a	e	ī	o		ä	u	i	a	e	ī	o
h	ሀ	ሁ	ሂ	ሁ	ሃ	ህ	ሇ	ሁ	ኩ	ኻ	ኼ	ኻ	ኵ	኶	኷
l	ለ	ሉ	ሉ	ለ	ሉ	ሉ	ለ	ሉ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ
h	ሐ	ሐ	ሐ	ሐ	ሐ	ሐ	ሐ	ሐ	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ
m	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ
s	ወ	ወ	ሂ	ሂ	ሂ	ሂ	ሂ	ሂ	ዝ	ዝ	ዝ	ዝ	ዝ	ዝ	ዝ
r	ሩ	ሩ	ሩ	ሩ	ሩ	ሩ	ሩ	ሩ	የ	የ	የ	የ	የ	የ	የ
s	ሳ	ሳ	ሳ	ሳ	ሳ	ሳ	ሳ	ሳ	ድ	ድ	ድ	ድ	ድ	ድ	ድ
sh	ሻ	ሻ	ሻ	ሻ	ሻ	ሻ	ሻ	ሻ	ጅ	ጅ	ጅ	ጅ	ጅ	ጅ	ጅ
q	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ቁ	ጋ	ጋ	ጋ	ጋ	ጋ	ጋ	ጋ
b	በ	በ	በ	በ	በ	በ	በ	በ	ተ'						
t	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ተ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ
ch	ቊ	ቊ	ቊ	ቊ	ቊ	ቊ	ቊ	ቊ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ	ጠ
h	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ
n	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ	ሸ
ñ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	ኔ	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳
a	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳
k	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	ኩ	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳	፳

Image from <http://www.amharicmachine.com/default/alphabet>

### Phonology

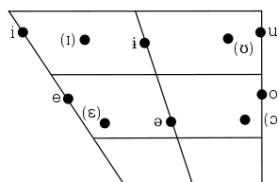
IPA translation of Amharic sounds. Symbols in parentheses represent deviations from standard IPA symbols.

Amharic includes glottalized series of consonant phonemes, which is characteristic of the sound system. Syllable structure is represented as CVCC. Consonant clusters will not appear in initial position. Stress may occur on each syllable, but the last syllable tends to be unstressed.

	Bilabial	Dental	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
<b>Nasal</b>	m	n	ɲ (ñ)		
<b>Plosive</b>	voiceless	p	t		k
	voiced	b	d		g
	ejective	p' (p', p)	t' (t', t)		k' (q, k)
<b>Affricate</b>	voiceless			tʃ (č)	
	voiced			dʒ (ѓ)	
	ejective		ts' (s')	tʃ' (č', č)	
<b>Fricative</b>	voiceless	f	s	ʃ (š)	
	voiced		z	ʒ (ž)	
<b>Approximant</b>		l	j (y)	w	
<b>Rhotic</b>		r			

**Consonants** Image from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amharic>

	Front	Central	Back
<b>High</b>	i	ɨ (ə)	u
<b>Mid</b>	e	ə (ä)	o
<b>Low</b>	a		



**Vowels** Images from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amharic>

### Errors in English common for native speakers of Amharic

In Amharic, there is an absence of combinations. An example of a combination would be an s- cluster. Also, the presence of ejectives in the Amharic language and the absence of this feature in the English language is an observable difference. Voiceless stops, affricates, or sibilant fricatives can become ejectives. In Amharic, the consonant sounds /p/, /t/, /k/, and /s/ can be produced as ejectives. Another distinct feature is that Amharic speakers will demonstrate epenthesis vowel sounds before an s- cluster or in the middle of pl- or kl- cluster because these clusters do not exist in Amharic. Additionally some predictable patterns of Amharic speakers are that final consonants are often devoiced or deleted, fricatives may become stops, stops may become fricatives, and vowels are often shortened, lowered, or raised.

### Morphology

The typical clause order in Amharic is noun + object + verb.

- *Nouns* may denote gender, number, definiteness, case, and direct object status by affixes prefixes and suffixes, predominately suffixes. Amharic nouns may have a masculine or feminine gender. Suffixes are added to denote a masculine or feminine noun gender. Some nouns may have both masculine and feminine gender, while other nouns may only have one gender. The feminine gender is used to indicate female as well as smallness. Plurals are indicated by the suffix *-očč*. Affixes are added in the following order: gender, number, definiteness, case, and direct object status.
- *Pronouns*: Amharic is a pro-drop language. Sentences with no emphasized element do not require independent pronouns. The verb denotes the person, number, and gender. Object pronoun suffixes are affixed to verbs and indicate person, number, and gender of the object of a verb. Possessive suffixes are affixed to nouns to indicate possession.

English	Independent	Object pronoun suffixes			Possessive suffixes	
		Direct	Prepositional			
			Benefactive	Locative/Adversative		
I	እኔ እና ane	-(ä/a)ñ	-(ä)llæñ	-(ä)bbæñ	-(y)e	
you (m. sg.)	እኔን ከዚ antä	-(ä)h	-(ä)llæh	-(ä)bbæh	-(ä)h	
you (f. sg.)	እኔን እና anči	-(ä)š	-(ä)llæš	-(ä)bbæš	-(ä)š	
he	እኔን assu	-(ä)w, -t	-(ä)llät	-(ä)bbät	-(w)u	
she	እኔን asswa	-at	-(ä)llat	-(ä)bbat	-wa	
we	እኔን ənnä	-(ä/a)n	-(ä)llän	-(ä)bbən	-aččən	
you (pl.)	እኔን ንዑስ ənnantä	-aččəhu	-(ä)llaččəhu	-(ä)bbəččəhu	-aččəhu	
they	እኔን ənnässu	-aččaw	-(ä)llaččaw	-(ä)bbəččaw	-aččaw	

**Personal Pronouns** Images from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amharic>

- *Verbs* are derived from roots and affixes to inflect person, number, gender, aspect, mood, voice, and polarity are added. Verbs agree with their subjects. Verb agreement with objects is optional. Verbs are placed at the end of the sentence.
- *Adjectives* are predominately derived from nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech.

## Pragmatics

Communication tends to be direct, with most people usually speaking softly. Finger beckoning should be directed at children only. To beckon an adult point and extend the arm and hand, then hold hand out with palm down and repeatedly close hand. Prolonged eye contact may be considered disrespectful. When gesturing for silence

use one finger over the lips for children and four fingers for an adult. To gesture “no” Ethiopians shake their from side to side for both children and adults. Little emotion or affect is shown to strangers, but physical affection is common between friends.

Fellman (1976) describes the Amhara as very talkative and loquacious. Greetings are lengthy as well as their responses. Responses pay tribute to God. Phrases and sentences are often long and complex. (In written form there is limited punctuation.) Riddle games are shared between children and adults alike. In addition to being loquacious, the Amhara are often sarcastic in their speech. Fellman describes backbiting, insulting, arguing, and litigating as common characteristics of speech. The surface structure of a sentence may be innocuous, but the core may be biting.

### **Geographical distribution of the language**

Amharic is the official language of the country of Ethiopia. Ethiopia includes many ethnic groups with nearly 80 languages and approximately 200 dialects. Major groups include the Amhara, Oromo and Tigre. Smaller groups include Afad-Isa, Somali, Wolaita, Sidama, Kimbata and Hadiya. The language of Amharic is spoken in the Ethiopian government, court system, and on all official documents. The language spoken at the secondary and university education level is English. Amharic is the language spoken by the wealthier upper and middle classes in Ethiopia. The rural areas throughout the country speak the many other languages and dialects previously mentioned.

### **Possible Errors and Reasons**

There are sounds in the Amharic and English phonetic inventories that overlap but there are differences in the inventories also. Consonant sounds that do not occur in Amharic will be deleted or replaced when speaking English. Charts were included previously that show the consonants and vowels present in the language of Amharic.

To avoid misidentification of a difference as a disorder, the speech-language pathologist should give credit for changes that are expected to occur. In Amharic, there is an absence of combinations. An example of a combination would be an s-cluster. Also, the presence of ejectives in the Amharic language and the absence of this feature in the English language is an observable difference. Voiceless stops, affricates, or sibilant fricatives can become ejectives. In Amharic, the consonant sounds /p/, /t/, /k/, and /s/ can be produced as ejectives. Another distinct feature is that Amharic speakers will demonstrate epenthesis vowel sounds before an s-cluster or in the middle of pl- or kl- cluster because these clusters do not exist in Amharic.

Additionally some predictable patterns of Amharic speakers are that final consonants are often devoiced or deleted, fricatives may become stops, stops may become fricatives, and vowels are often shortened, lowered, or raised.

## Social Aspects

### Family

Family is an important part of the Ethiopian society. Family includes members of the extended family and these members help each other with financial, health, or social problems in times of crisis. Families are large with households including from one to six persons, half of whom are children under age 10. Women are subordinate to their husbands. Girls receive less education than boys in school. Elders are respected in the Ethiopian society and they are used to settle disputes in the community.

### Religion

There are two dominant religions: The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Christian) and Islam. Some estimates put the Orthodox at just over half the population, while other estimates suggest that the Muslims are in the majority.

### Medical Care

Ethiopians treat illnesses with traditional healers who utilize local herbal and animal remedies. Spiritual healing, which relies on prayer, is the most preferred method for treatment of many diseases. Illnesses is considered a punishment from God for a person's sins and mental illnesses are seen as the result of evil spirits and are treated with prayer especially.

Doctors in the United States are a contrast to the interpersonal approach used by Ethiopian doctors. In Ethiopia, a doctor will never inform a patient of a terminal diagnosis. A close relative will be informed in order to protect a patient from being discouraged. Then encouragement can be given by close relatives to the patient to give hope and to protect him or her from despair. Additionally language can be an issue when Ethiopians receive care in the U.S. Rural Ethiopians will have limited English language skills. There are specific issues to be considered when utilizing interpreters. Gender differences can make interpreters inappropriate. Women prefer female interpreters and males prefer male interpreters. Political and ethnic differences could also be issues in an interpreter being unwanted. An example is of this would be, some Amharic speaking Ethiopians are not comfortable with Oromo interpreters, and some Oromos with Tigreans. These issues with interpreters could affect the quality of care given to the patients and not allow them to express all their needs to medical professionals.

### Food

The staple foods in Ethiopia are mainly their grains, which are Tef, Barley, and Emmer Wheat. Grains are grinded in the home or in a local mill, with the latter option being more and more common. These grains are made into a bread called

injera. Injera is a thin, pancake-like, sour, leavened bread. Which grain is used depends on which is the main crop in a specific area. Injera has been made by the people of Ethiopia since at least 100 B.C. This bread is usually accompanied by a sauce called wot. Some common types of wat are geyy wat, dorro wat and allichawat. Pictured below is Doro Wat. This is the national dish of Ethiopia.



Teff Injera *photo by Rachel Wynn*



Doro Wat with Teff Injera *photo by Rachel Wynn*



Doro Wat with Teff & Wheat Injera *photo by Rachel Wynn*

Food items of plant origin are cereals, legumes, vegetables, tubers, spices, oilseeds, and fruit. Cereals consist of teff, corn, sorghum, barley wheat and millet. The most common legumes are chickpeas, field peas, lentils, and broad beans. The most common vegetables are onions, kale, pumpkins, and green chickpeas. The most common tubers are potatoes, sweet potatoes, galla potatoes. Spices are extremely important and the most important are chili and bird's-eye chili. These spices are used in the spice mixtures berberre and mitmitta. Additionally the oilseeds of niger flax, sunflowers, and safflowers are and important cash crop and fruit is not grown in large quantities. The most common fruits are lemons and bananas.

Food items of animal origin consist of milk, cow, sheep, or goat, chicken, fish. Ethiopian people do not consume pork. Milk is mainly given to small children and it is used to make sour milk, butter and low-fat sour-milk cheese. The wealthy class can afford meats but the majority of the population only can serve meat at ceremonial occasions.

In addition, Coffee is another food staple in Ethiopia. Drinking coffee is the most important social function among the women in a village and in some institutions. Women should not be disturbed during their coffee drinking hours. Coffee is usually served with a small snack, such as toasted cereals, legumes, or a piece injera. The beverage for weekdays is the local beer called tella and for feasts it is honey wine called tejji. It is considered polite to serve a beverage glass so full that it overflows, and also to serve a second glass as soon as the first is finished.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Christians participate in fasts. The fasting rules dictate that food should not include any animal origin, with the exception of fish. Therefore, the main ingredient in the wot has to be of vegetable origin. Fish is generally too expensive for the majority of people in Ethiopia; therefore they eat food mainly based of vegetable origins.

## Holidays

Ethiopia has its own ancient calendar which is similar to the Coptic Egyptian Calendar. These calendars have 13 months, 12 of 30 days each and an intercalary month at the end of the year of 5 or 6 days depending whether the year is a leap year or not. Their calendar is influenced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which follows its ancient calendar rules and beliefs. The year starts on 11 September in the Gregorian calendar or on the 12th in (Gregorian) Leap Years. The Coptic Leap Year follows the same rules as the Gregorian so that the extra month always has 6 days in a Gregorian Leap Year. The Ethiopian Calendar is seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar. This affects dates of historical events, such as the birth of Jesus and therefore holidays fall on different dates.

These are the major public holidays:

Date (in Western Calendar)	Ethiopian public holiday
January 7	Ethiopian Christmas (Genna)
January 19	Ethiopian Epiphany (Timkat)
March 2	Victory of Adwa Day
March 13	Id Al Fitir (End of Ramadan)
April 6	Patriots Victory Day
April 17	Id Al Adha (Arafa)
April 25	Ethiopian Good Friday
April 27	Ethiopian Easter (Fasika)
May 28	Downfall of the Dergue (Since 1991)
July 17	Birth of Prophet Mohammed (Moulid)
Sepember 11	Ethiopian New Year (Enqutatash)
September 27	Feast of the True Cross (Meskal)

Images from <http://www.selamta.net/Ethiopian%20Calendar.htm>

## Resources

### Websites

- Microsoft Language Interface Pack for Amharic  
[www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?FamilyID=0e21eb7b-e01a-4fcc-b7f1-30e419da7f5b&displaylang=am#](http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?FamilyID=0e21eb7b-e01a-4fcc-b7f1-30e419da7f5b&displaylang=am#)
- CT Scan Instructions in Amharic  
<http://ethnomed.org/patient-education/tests-procedures-radiology/ct-scan/ct-scan-amharic.pdf/view?searchterm=amharic>
- Ethiopian News (in English and Amharic)  
[www.ena.gov.et](http://www.ena.gov.et) (Official Government News Agency)
- Ethiopian Community Mutual Association, 464 12th Ave, Suite 201, Seattle, WA 98122 (206) 325-0304. [www.ecmaseattle.org](http://www.ecmaseattle.org)
- Oromo Community Organization, 2718 S. Jackson St., Seattle, WA 98122, (206) 324-7039. [www.oneoromo.org](http://www.oneoromo.org)
- Tigray Community Center, 1902 E. Yesler, Seattle, WA 98122, (206) 328-8307.
- Horn of Africa Services, 7500 Greenwood Ave N, Seattle, WA 98103 (206) 784-4144. [www.hoas.org](http://www.hoas.org)

### Video clips

- Movie Trailer in Amharic  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jQEo1xq2T0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jQEo1xq2T0)
- Native Amharic Speaker speaking English  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFnLYdpfAL8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFnLYdpfAL8)
- "I Need Africa More than Africa Needs Me" (Western misconceptions)  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAB-zJPsjjs&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAB-zJPsjjs&feature=player_embedded)

### Research articles

- *Predicted Influences of Amharic on Spoken English: Clinical Implications*, Helen Dowtin. Washington, D.C.; Kay T. Payne, Howard University
- *Amharic verb morphology : a generative approach*. Bender, M. Lionel (Marvin Lionel), 1934-. 1978. Language and linguistics ; no. 1

### SLPs with Amharic background

- Alexia Galakatos, M.A. CCC- SLP  
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Ms. Galakatos is an SLP in South Carolina but has experience developing a therapy program for infants and children in Ethiopia.

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages\\_of\\_Ethiopia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Ethiopia)

Yimam, B. (1997). The pragmatics of greeting, felicitation and condolence expressions in four Ethiopian languages. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 10: 2, pp.103 -128.