

## **Language Use and Contact Phenomena in the Afar Regional State: The Case of Ab'ala Town, Ethiopia**

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### **Abstract**

This study was initiated to assess the language use pattern (language proficiency; language use in different domain;, using mother tongue languages in different topics and situations; and resultants of language contact phenomena) of the linguistically heterogeneous ethno linguistic groups live together in Ab'ala town. The study was based on a representative sample of 200 respondents selected using random sampling. To analyze the language use pattern of Ab'ala town population language proficiency; language use in different domain;, using mother tongue languages in different topics and situations; and resultants of language contact phenomena, qualitative and quantitative methods were used respectively. The data obtained through questionnaire, interview and observation were analyzed using qualitative technique by using simple statistics tallying, then putting into percentages, mean, and tables. Percentage is used to explain the demographic factors of the respondents. The weighted mean is calculated to identify the significant differences of language proficiency of respondents. This in turn has helped to determine the significant mean differences between the research respondents' attitude for each language. The data gathered by recording, that is, the data which are expected to constitute words, sentences, utterances and dialogues from subjects in different social contexts and narrations were described and analyzed by using qualitative technique. The results certainly imply that respondents' language proficiency in the four language skills, there is varying standards of proficiency among respondents. While respondents were good in listening and speaking Amharic, Tigrigna and Afar-af respectively; they were less proficient (1.2) in listening and speaking Saho and Afan-oromo. However, the responses show the respondents have much more proficiency in Amharic than the rest languages.

**Key Words:** language proficiency, mother tongue, utterances and dialogue. listening etc.,

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The day after the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took place, Ab'ala town is the administrative center of zone two, which is one of the five administrative zones in the Afar regional state. Ab'ala town is situated in the transitional zone between the eastern Tigray escarpments and the northern Afar lowlands. It is located in the north-east of Ethiopia, especially, in the norther part of the capital of the regional state at 638 kms, adjacent to Mekelle-the administrative center of Tigray region at about 55 kms, and 835 kms, north of Addis Ababa. It is encircled by several woreda' of Afar, such as Kunaba, Barhle and Dallol in the north, Irebti and Afdera, in the southeast, Magale in the southwest as well as Quiha and Mekelle in the northwest from the neighboring region (Tigray).

Ab'ala town being a myriad or multi-ethnic and multi-lingual area, it is made up of three major linguistic groups: Afar, the indigenous people of the region with their respective language Afar-af, Tegar, indigenous people of neighboring region with their language Tigrinya (the official language in Tigray), and Amhara people who are indigenous in Amhara region with their respective language Amharic, which is an official language particularly in the town and in the Federal Government of Ethiopia. As a result, people in Ab'ala town are always characterized by contact between members of these different language groups living together and with people in the border areas for various economic and social reasons. For instance, every Thursday (market day) people from the rural settlements and from the neighboring areas, such as the towns of Mekelle and Quiha, including their rural settlements, flow to the market place. On the other hand, the people of Ab'ala town also stream to these places for the same purpose. Consequently, at least Tigrinya, Afar-af, and Amharic come into contact in Ab'ala. Of these languages Afar-af belongs to the Lowland East Cushitic sub-family of Afro-Asiatic which is also named Saho-Afar (<http://www.wikipedia>). Besides, Bender (1976:5)

classified the language as Lowland East Cushitic. Amharic and Tigrinya belong to Ethio-Semitic (Bender 1976:5-13).

According to Loren, Bliese (1967:133) Afar (ፍላፍላ) is the name of the people inhabiting the desert regions of the Red Sea Coast from Djibuti north to Mitsiwwa and extending west to the foothills of the Ethiopian plateau, and of the language they speak. However, to the best of my knowledge, the term "Afar" only refers to the people and the compound or hyphenated word (ፍላፍላ-af) refers to the language. Bender (1976:5) also calls the language Afar af (Afar Mouth). In the course of this study (hereafter) the researcher will use the term Afar to refer to the Afar people and the term Afar-af to their language. In a similar fashion the term Tegarū will consequently be used to refer to the Tigray people and the term Tigrinya to their language, the term Amhara will be used to refer to the people and Amharic to their language. In researches, so far languages in this area have received too little attention. This makes the research area (location) interesting to study language contact (Assebe, Buli. 1981). The major consideration is linguistic heterogeneity. This study makes its focus only on the urban center, as it would be very difficult to observe linguistic diversity in the rural settlements as in most cases societies in the rural settlements are tend to be monolinguals.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Even though there is no clear cut information about when languages of the globe came into contact, it is believed that languages have been in contact ever since the time human beings started dispersing out into independent sub-groups (Smelser, 2000: 8325). According to him, the two principal ways in which languages come into contact:

*[One of which] at an earlier time in human history, some language contacts must have been established when groups met after moving into previously unoccupied territory; now that the world has no unoccupied habitable territory, this mode of contact onset is no longer available. [Another way is] in most recent human history, probably the most common way in which language comes into contact, is the movement of groups of individuals into other people territory (Smelser2000:8325).*

Ab'ala town is a place where groups of people from different ethno-linguistic groups flock for different purposes. As a result, the great majority of the urban dwellers who are the chief concern of this study are bilinguals who are proficient in at least two languages, their ethnic language and one other language. In such urban settings where a lot of minority and majority ethno-linguistic groups co-exist with their respective languages, there is a need to give serious attention. This makes Ab'ala town a convenient location to study language use and contact.

From the ranges of interesting outcomes of language contact phenomena, code-switching and code-mixing, maintenance and shift and borrowing are few examples of language contact outcomes which are the concerns of the present study. In other words, code-switching, code-mixing, maintenance and shift, and borrowing are the very likely phenomena to occur in multilingual setting. These phenomena have drawn a considerable attention and have certainly aroused the curiosity of many researchers in recent years (Cooper, L, R. and Carpenter, S. 1976). So, the people in Ab'ala town tend to display a tendency of these phenomena in their speech while speaking their indigenous languages. Besides, language choice attitude towards languages is another appropriate issue to study in such multilingual society. So, the researcher believes that such facts have great input to the field of study and wants to investigate the forgoing issues in the area mentioned.

Furthermore, the fact that there is no research conducted regarding the socio-linguistic study in general and language use and language contact phenomena in particular in this area, this study can lend support for the necessity of such an investigation.

### Objectives of the Study

The study sets out to meet the following general and specific objectives:

#### General Objective:

To describe the present language use situation and examine contact of languages in the Ab'ala town, more specifically in Wakrigubi and Wuhdet where diversified ethno-linguistic groups coexist.

#### Specific Objectives:

- To know the personal information to make the task of categorizing possible and language skill/proficiency.
- To determine language (s) use patterns in different domains, situations, circumstances and/or communication with different groups.
- To understand Ab'ala town dwellers' language proficiency in each language.

#### Scope of the Study

The field of language contact is analyzed from a variety of perspectives and there is no generally accepted theoretical framework (Sole, Mireia Galindo, 2003). Solé distinguishes two broad phenomena related to language contact. These are:

First, the phenomena that involves code-switching, that is the “juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems” (Gumperze 1982: 59). Second, phenomena traditionally named interferences, i.e. Phonetic, lexical, morph-syntactic or semantic material transferred from one language to another (Sole, Mireia Galindo, and 2003:18).

This research focuses on the populations of two urban kebeles (Wuhdet and Wakrigubi) where diversified ethno-linguistic groups and substantial population size are living together. The reason for the selection of this area is the linguistic heterogeneity or complexity.

### **Significance of the Study**

First of all, the significance of this study lies on the absence of any previous sociolinguistic works in the area in general and on the lack of any study about language use and contact phenomena in particular. The study will have the following significances:

- It may be used by governmental and non-governmental organizations that are making interventions in the various development activities of the society as the linguistic behaviors of the members of the society are points of entry to various social activities;
- Policy makers, curriculum designers, and teaching and learning material producers will benefit from the findings of the study;
- The study will have significant value and could help other researchers who are interested in studying related topics;
- The study could also help as a reference to the students of sociolinguistics at higher educational institutions.

### **III. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE OF THE STUDY**

It consists of discussion on three major techniques used in this study. These are data gathering technique, sampling technique and data analysis technique.

#### **Data gathering technique**

In the present study, data were collected from the population of two kebeles: Wuhdet and Wakrigubi which are composed of different (age, sex, linguistic groups /ethnic group/, education level, religion, and occupation and intermarriage), using the three-pronged approaches(questionnaire, interview, and participant observation). In addition to the aforementioned methods actual speeches from the subjects have been recorded. Questionnaire was the principal means of data gathering. It allows inclusion of large number of participants and enables the involvement of relatively high degree of variation within the sample in terms of the variables. Besides, the questionnaires were preferred because they were suitable to secure information from a large number of people. The questionnaires were prepared in English and were translated into Amharic. This is because of the simple reason, that this was enabled respondents to grasp the main idea of the given questionnaire and to react to the questions efficiently. Interview and participant observation were the other means of data gathering in the present study. The information gained by these techniques (the two instruments) served as an additional, complementary source of information to cross check the data, that is obtained through other technique. Explicitly, an interview helped to gather information which was not being able to get easily and/or those which were inaccessible through the questionnaire. Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) states that participant observation is a key ingredient in ethnographic research. In line with this, participant observation was employed to verify the actual linguistic behavior in the social domains.

#### **Sampling Technique**

One of the most frequently used methods in sociolinguistics is random sampling, Šabec, N. (1997:139). According to her, this is the appropriate type of sampling to accommodate the different variables prevailing in the whole population in a city. Since, the present study area( Ab'ala town) is a multilingual setting where different languages are at play, to study the present language use situation in different domains, sample population of (200) were randomly selected from different domains such as the social/public services (schools, health centers, workplace, religious and transportation institutions); authorities (the Police station and the court); the market, home, neighborhood, and friendship from the two Kebeles. Dawn (1984:49) states that there are no universal set of domains applicable to all speech communities. Examples of possible domains are the school, the family, employment, the playground, street, government administrations and so on.

#### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The obtained data is analyzed both in quantitative and qualitative methods. In the first step, the data which were gathered through questionnaire, interview and observation were analyzed using qualitative technique by using simple statistics tallying, then putting into percentages, mean, and tables. Percentage is used

to explain the demographic factors of the respondents. The weighted mean is calculated to identify the significant differences of language proficiency and language attitude of respondents. This in turn has helped to determine the significant mean differences between the research respondents' attitude for each language. The second set of data which are gathered by recording, that is, the data which are expected to constitute words, sentences, utterances and dialogues from subjects in different social contexts and narrations were described and analyzed by using qualitative technique.

#### **IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

In this study attempts to appraise the language use patterns in Ab'ala town. The data were collected through questionnaire, interview, participant observation and recording. During data gathering of this research, 200 questionnaires were administered to participants to analyze the patterns of language use in Ab'ala town. The questionnaire has three main parts. The first part is concerned with self-reported questionnaire (respondents' characteristics and self-evaluation of respondents' language skill/proficiency); the second part deals with respondents' language use in different domains and respondents' mother-tongue use in different domains (contexts); the third, concerned with attitude statements. The questionnaire was prepared in English and it was translated into Amharic. This was made because the researcher has observed from the preliminary study that the dwellers have difficulty in (reading and writing) all the languages other than Amharic including their own languages (mother-tongue). As a result of this, hoping that participants could pick any one of the two choices or could choose to use either English or the working language (Amharic) for providing answers to the questions asked by the questionnaire. These languages were utilized in preparing questionnaire for this study.

It is of interest to note that the language selected for responding the questionnaire, a choice that respondents were free to make. Of the total number of 200 questionnaires administered, 190 were returned successfully. However, in 5 questionnaires, respondents were not answered most of the questions and remained unanswered by many respondents. These five questionnaires were discarded for lack of complete information. Therefore, the data analysis of this study relies on the responses of these 190 respondents.

#### **Data Analysis and Discussion on the Demographic Characteristics of Sample Population**

The major characteristics of individuals in the sample are summarized in table (1) below. Respondents in this research involve the use of mother-tongues, Afar-af, Amharic, Tigrinya, Afan Oromo and Saho. In response to the question (7) "What is your first language?" respondents claimed a total of five languages (see table, 1). As the respondents' mother-tongue (hereafter MT) were several and difficult to comprehend, for convenience respondents MTs were categorized as indigenous language(s) of the research area which comprises of (Afar-af and Tigrinya) and non-indigenous language(s) of research area, (Amharic, Afan Oromo, and Saho). The former category involves over 139 (73.1%) of respondents in the research area. On the other hand, the latter one covers 51 (26.7%) of the total respondents. The data obtained from respondents' demonstrate Tigrinya MTs and Afar-af MTs speakers were greater in number. To put these in figure, slightly more than one-third (82 or 43.1%) and two-third (57 or 30%) of respondents were Tigrinya and Afar-af MTs respectively. From this data, one can understand that Tigrinya and Afar-af are the two languages having many first language speakers in the town. This could imply dominance of Tegarü demographically in the town. It also indicates Tigrinya speaker have high ethno-linguistic vitality (EV) in the vicinity of Ab'ala town.

Concerning the data on ethnic group distribution of respondents, the data in table (1) shows that different language speakers were residing in Ab'ala town. Of the various ethno-linguistic groups living together, the striking feature reveals that the dominance of Tegarü, Afar and Amhara respectively in the research area (Ab'ala town). As opposed to this, Oromo and Saho live in a lesser extent in the town.

Occupation is one of the important factors that determine language use behaviors in a multilingual setting. It accelerates contact among ethno-linguistic groups. As a result of this, participants of this research were characterized by different occupations. This inevitably leads people to operate different languages in their daily interactions with people having the same occupation. Subsequently, participants of this research in the area entail occupations such as farmers, government employees, traders (merchants), students, teachers, public workers, and shopkeepers (see table 1). One unique occupation probably that sets out, this research area from other urban areas in the region, is the existence of farming. Respondents' occupation in this study was dichotomized into governmental (employee, public workers, teachers, and students) and non-governmental (farmers, merchants, and shopkeepers) for convenience. Of these immense numbers of occupations, most of the participants were students followed by employees.

It is assumed that religion plays a significant role in influencing language use behavior among different religion followers while carrying on their religious activities. Hence, the numbers of those people who adhere to different religion were displayed in (table 2). As designated numerically in the above table, there were significance differences between religions. Concerning their religion, most of the respondents were Muslim religion followers. Among the respondents, nearly half of the total population i.e. 49.494 percent of the

respondents was Muslims. This implies that Muslim religion followers exceed the rest of religions in the research area this is mainly because the Afar are exclusively Muslim religion followers while other ethnic groups were composed of all the existing religions.

Generally speaking, the respondents of this research were dwellers of Ab'ala town. According to the administration of the woreda, two kebeles were mixed up and form one. As a result of this, the two kebeles are unevenly distributed in terms of ethnic composition. However, as mentioned in the background section, the Afar predominantly resided in (Wakrigubi) kebele. Consequently, Afar-af is the presumably language to be used extensively in the said kebele. Likewise, in Wuhdet the dwellers are principally Tegar speakers who tend to speak Tigrinya. Therefore, in order to account this, participants for this study were composed of these two kebeles. The respondents' residence profile is put as in table (1) below.

Intermarriage or cross marriage is one of the internal stratification of community that can extremely affect the language use pattern in a community. Concerning intermarriage, elderly people asserted that intermarriage with Afar is less frequent than other ethnic groups. It is one directional (i.e., men can marry to outside their ethnic whereas women are not). This is because of two reasons which emanated from culture and religion influences. In the Afar ethnic group two peculiar factors seem to influence intermarriage. These factors are originated from cultural and religious issues. In relation to the former factor, men are permissible to marry from other ethnic group (outside their ethnic group), whereas females are not. The second factor which is also common for other ethnic group members of Muslim religion followers, emanated from religion. It is a determinant factor that obstructs intermarriage among ethnic groups having diversified religions. Besides, even in the case of men inter-marriage is conditioned by the sameness in religion. Therefore, as a result of the above stated facts, in the present study, language use of only Afar men with other ethnic groups' partners are the object of this research. The data shows there is no intermarriage of Afar with Irob. This could have to do with the two ethnic groups (Afar and Saho) are solely followers of two distinct religions Muslim and Orthodox Christian. According to the respondents, intermarriage is occurred between ethnic groups of same religion. See the characters of participants' presented in following table.

**Table 01 - Demographic Characteristics of respondents by their mother-tongue, ethnic group, occupation, religion, residence, and intermarriage**

Items	No	Percent %	Total No	Percent %
Mother-tongue:				
Indigenous local language(s)				
Afar-af	57	30		
Tigrinya	82	43.1		
Non-indigenous language(s)				
Amharic	33	17.3		
Afan Oromo	10	5.2	190	100%
Saho	8	4.2		
Ethnic group:				
Afar	57	30		
Tegar	82	43.1		
Amhara	33	17.3		
Oromo	10	8.4	190	100%
Irob	8	4.8		
Occupation:				
Farms	13	6.8		
Merchant	32	16.8		
Student	59	31		
Teacher	18	9.4		
Shopkeeper	72	3.7	190	100%
Public worker	1	11		
Employee	40	21		
Religion:				
Muslim	94	49.4		
O. Christian	73	38.4		
Protestant	17	91.1	190	100%
Catholic	24	2.1		
No response				
Residence:				

Wuhdet	105	55.2	190	100%
Wakrigubi	85	44.7		
Marital status: unmarried	120	63.1		
married	70	36.8	190	100%
Married:				
Intra	52	74.2		
Inter:				
-Afar with Tegar	5			
-Afar with Amhara	11	7.1		
-Afar with Oromo	2	2.8		

Source: *Field study*

### Respondents' Language Skill/Proficiency

Under this section items were asked the subjects to rate their language skill/proficiency. Respondents' language proficiency are categorized into four integrated language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) by using three point scales. Table (3) presents data on language proficiency of respondents. According to David, et al. (203: 10) language proficiency self assessment could best predict the levels of LM and LS.

**Table 02 - Respondents' self-rated proficiency in each language**

	Language (s)	Proficiency						Total	
		Good		Fair		Poor			
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Listening	Afar-af	67	45.2	41	27.7	40	27.0	148	100
	Tigrinya	70	37.8	84	45.4	31	16.7	185	100
	Amharic	86	45.7	90	47.8	12	6.3	188	100
	Afan Oromo	9	8.1	12	10.8	85	76.5	111	100
	Saho	60	32.4	66	35.6	59	31.8	185	100
Speaking	Afar-af	63	34.0	72	38.9	50	27.0	185	100
	Tigrinya	57	30.8	81	43.7	47	25.4	185	100
	Amharic	79	41.5	91	47.8	20	10.5	190	100
	Afan Oromo	6	9.3	8	12.5	50	78.1	64	100
	Saho	42	30	54	38.5	44	31.4	140	100
Reading	Afar-af	44	29.5	65	43.6	40	26.8	149	100
	Tigrinya	10	8.5	46	39.3	61	52.1	117	100
	Amharic	80	42.1	99	52.1	11	5.7	190	100
	Afan Oromo	2	2.0	17	17.1	80	80.8	99	100
	Saho	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Writing	Afar-af	22	16.5	60	45.1	51	38.3	133	100
	Tigrinya	8	6.3	34	26.9	84	66.6	126	100
	Amharic	111	58.4	76	40	3	1.5	190	100
	Afan Oromo	1	1.3	20	27.3	52	71.2	73	100
	Saho	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: *Field study*

In spite of the fact that respondents of this research were vary in their language skills, they provide language skill/proficiency for each language presented in the above table (2) thus far is described below.

-Regarding their speaking skill/proficiency in each language respondents rate themselves as follows: Here the respondents' proficiency is measured by three scale points: G=3; F=2; P=1.

Scale: 3= Good                                      2= Fair                                      1= Poor

This can be arithmetically expresses as follows:

$$\mu = \text{Expected Mean Score} = 1.5$$

**Respondents' mean scores of the four language skill/proficiency in each language:**

Afar-af: listening (2.3)	speaking (2.1)	reading (2.1)	writing (1.7)
Tigrinya: listening (2.2)	speaking (2.1)	reading (1.6)	writing (1.4)
Amharic: listening (2.5)	speaking (2.3)	reading (2.4)	writing (2.6)
Afan Oromo: listening (1.2)	speaking (1.5)	reading (1.2)	writing (1.3)
Saho: listening (-2)	speaking (2)	reading (-)	writing (0 % or null) (-)

**☞ Respondents' Listening Proficiency in Each Language**

The obtained mean score calculated for the respondents' listening proficiency in Afar-af, Tigrinya, and Saho, 2.3, 2.2 and 2 are nearly equal and significantly exceed the expected mean score, 1.5. The respondents do have relatively equal proficiency in listening skill of all the languages. Besides, the mean score calculated for the respondents in listening proficiency in Amharic, 2.5 is greatly exceeded the expected mean score, 1.5. On the other hand, the mean score calculated for the respondents' in the same skill in Afan Oromo, 1.2 is lesser than the expected mean score. This indicates respondents' have good proficiency in listening for all the stated languages in varying levels.

**☞ Respondents' Speaking Skill/Proficiency in Each Language**

Regarding the respondents speaking proficiency, while the obtained calculated mean score in Afar-af and Tigrinya, is exactly the same, that is, 2.1 relatively equal proficient in Saho, 2. This shows that the respondents skill is significantly exceeded the expected mean score (i.e., 1.5) in the three languages. Respondents' proficiency in Amharic is much greater than other languages, that is, 2.3. In Afan Oromo respondents' proficiency, the obtained mean calculated is exactly equal to the expected mean score (1.5). This shows respondents are not proficient. From the above discussion, it is possible to infer that regardless of the respondents are proficient in Afar-af and Tigrinya; respondents are more proficient in Amharic than the two languages. This indicates that respondents are bilinguals with diversified speaking proficiency of languages.

**☞ Respondents' Reading Skill/Proficiency in Each Language**

Concerning respondents proficiency in reading skill the mean score for Amharic and Afar-af, is (2.4 and 2.1) respectively. This denotes the respondents proficiency in reading is significantly exceeded the expected mean score. On the other hand, the mean score of respondents' proficiency in Tigrinya and Afan Oromo refers (1.6 and 1.2) respectively. While respondents' reading proficiency in Tigrinya is relatively equal to the expected mean score, their proficiency in Afan Oromo is less than the expected mean. This indicates the respondents have a good reading skill in both Afar-af and Amharic; however, they are more proficient in reading Amharic than Afar-af. This has to do with the fact that those languages in which respondents respond having less proficiency are said to be languages having no role in education whereas those languages in which respondents respond having good proficiency are said to be used in education system in schools.

**☞ Respondents' Writing Skill/Proficiency in Each Language**

With respect to respondents' writing proficiency in Amharic, (2.6) is significantly exceeded the expected mean score (1.5). However, the obtained mean score calculated for respondents' writing proficiency in Afar-af, (1.7) is relatively equal to the expected mean score whereas respondents' proficiency in Tigrinya and Afan Oromo (1.3 and 1.4) are relatively equal and it is less than the expected mean score. Therefore, respondents' language proficiency shows that respondents are shifting to the use of Amharic.

To summarize, from the above discussion it is evident that respondents have better proficiency in the first two skills in the majority of languages in question whereas they have lesser proficiency in the two latter languages skills (in reading and writing). This is due to the reason that the languages have in significant role in the education system. While Afar-af is only given as school subject in elementary school, Tigrinya, Afan Oromo and Saho have no role to play in the education system of the region in general and the research area in particular. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that these two skills are the first two skills in which respondents are proficient. Besides, the figure on table (3) shows knowledge of Amharic is much more common in the town; there is also substantial bilingualism between the three main languages (Amharic, Afar-af and Tigrinya). The consistent good proficiency of respondents' shown for the majority of participants both in Amharic and Afar-af are mainly emanated from educational role of the two languages.

In general, from the above description/analysis, it is possible to draw two main findings: first, nearly all of the respondents were bilinguals in all the languages; second, there is a shift of respondents towards Amharic. Generally, this finding can be concluded by the idea of Macnamara cited in Appel and muysken (1987: 02), somebody should be called a bilingual if he has some second language skill in one of the four modals (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

## V. CONCLUSION

The respondents' proficiency in the four language skills, there is varying standards of proficiency among respondents. While respondents were good (ranging from 2 to 2.5) in listening and speaking Amharic, Tigrigna and Afar-af respectively; they were less proficient (1.2) in listening and speaking Saho and Afan-Oromo. However, their responses shows, they are much more proficient in Amharic than the rest languages. The patterns of language use were analyzed in Ab'ala town. Despite of considerable differences in the language use behavior of population in the town, as the current data indicated the difference in respondents' proficiency in each language in the four language skills reveals that there is varying standards of proficiency among respondents. While respondents were good in listening and speaking Amharic, Tigrigna and Afar-af respectively; they were less proficient in listening and speaking Saho and Afan-oromo. However, they were good in reading and writing Amharic and Afar-af respectively; But they were less proficient in Tigrigna, Afan-oromo and Saho respectively. Generally, while in listening and speaking majority of respondents have better skill, in reading and writing they have slight skill. This is emanated from the two languages(Amharic and Afar-af) have role in education at varying levels.

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