

**CAL Refugee Fact Sheet #9**

**The Somalis  
Their History and Culture**

**Diana Briton Putman & Mohamood Cabdi Noor**

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## Preface

This booklet is a basic introduction to the people, history, and culture of Somalia. It is designed primarily for service providers and others assisting Somali refugees in their new communities in the United States.

The principal writers are Dr. Diana Briton Putman and Dr. Mohamood Cabdi Noor. Dr. Putman, a foreign service officer for the United States Agency for International Development, conducted doctoral research in the Baay Region of Somalia and also worked on various development projects between 1980 and 1983. Dr. Noor, a refugee from Somalia, works at the World Bank. He served at Somali National University as Vice President and as Dean of the College of Agriculture. He also served in the Somali government as Vice Minister for Agriculture. The opinions expressed in this booklet are those of the authors only, and do not represent USAID or World Bank official views or policy.

The section on the Somali language was written by Dr. David Zorc, a senior linguist at MRM, Inc., and Madina Osman, a Somali language consultant. Dr. Zorc and Ms. Osman are co-authors of a Somali-English dictionary.

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*Donald A. Ranard, Editor*

# The Somali Language

## *The Sound System and Pronunciation*

Somali uses all but three letters (*p*, *v*, and *z*) of the English alphabet. Of the thirty-three sounds, fifteen (*b*, *d*, *f*, *g*, *h*, *j*, *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *s*, *sh*, *t*, *w*, and *y*) are very much like their English counterparts.

Somali has seven consonants (*c*, *dh*, *kh*, *q*, *r*, *x* and ' [glottal stop]) that do not match anything in English. The English sounds most likely to present difficulties for Somalis are those represented by the letters *c*, *q*, *r*, and *x*, since these letters are pronounced quite differently in Somali. For pronunciation of Somali letters, see p. 29.

In Somali, the consonants *b*, *d*, *dh*, *g*, *l*, *m*, *n*, and *r* can be doubled to indicate a sound which is pronounced with much more force than its single counterpart. Thus, Somalis often pronounce the doubled consonants in English words such as "bigger," "middle," "merry," "simmer," and "nibble" with more strength than they would be pronounced by a native speaker of English.

Vowels always have fixed value in Somali; each letter has one sound and each sound has one letter.

<i>a</i>	tart	<i>aa</i>	father
<i>ay</i>	high, pie	<i>ey</i>	say
<i>e</i>	way [but shorter]	<i>ee</i>	payday
<i>i</i>	in, wit	<i>ii</i>	see
<i>o</i>	boat	<i>oo</i>	sew [but drawn a little bit longer]
<i>u</i>	coo	<i>uu</i>	noon [but drawn a little bit longer]

Long vowels (*aa*, *ee*, *ii*, *oo*, *uu*) are used in Somali and pronounced about twice as long as a single counterpart.

English vowels will present some difficulty to Somalis, since English lacks Somali's one-to-one correspondence between vowel letters and sounds; in English, each letter has more than one sound, and each sound has more than one spelling. Typically, Somalis will pronounce English words the way they would pronounce them in Somali. Thus, *boat* might be pronounced "bow-at" with two syllables, and the word *may* might be pronounced "my."

Somalis may draw out English double vowels, as in *noon* or

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*been*, giving them the long sound that doubled vowel letters represent in Somali.

Tone occurs in Somali, but it is not as complex as in Chinese, in which every word has a special tone pattern. In Somali, tone rarely marks a difference in word meaning. This aspect of Somali is not likely to create a problem for Somalis learning English.

## ***The Grammatical System***

### **• Articles**

Somali and English are quite different when it comes to *the* and *a*. The definite article in Somali has gender suffixes; like French, the Somali definite article has a masculine and feminine form.

Somalis can have difficulty mastering the English indefinite article (*a/an*) because their own language has no equivalent. In Somali, the concept of indefiniteness is expressed by the noun alone.

### **• Nouns**

Somali nouns are more highly inflected than are nouns in English. In English, nouns are inflected only for number — that is, they have different forms for singular and plural. In Somali, not only does each noun have number, with eight kinds of plural forms; a noun is also inflected for gender (masculine or feminine) and case (nominative, genitive, absolutive, and vocative).

In Somali, differences in gender, number, or case are marked by grammatical tone:

ínan	‘boy’	inán	‘girl’	[gender]
díbi	‘ox’	dibí	‘oxen’	[number]
Múuse	‘Moses’	Mùuse	‘Hey, Moses’	[vocative case]

The system of case marking is so different between the two languages that mistakes are unavoidable. Typically, a Somali will drop the apostrophe-*s* possessive in favor of a tone change, e.g., “Mary book”, with a rising intonation on the first syllable of “Mary”.

### **• Adjectives**

In Somali, most adjectives are formed by adding *-an* or *-san* to a verb or noun. Thus, *gaab* ‘shortness’ becomes *gaaban* ‘short’, and *qurux* ‘beauty’ becomes *quruxsan* ‘beautiful’. Somalis may coin some interesting English adjectives by a similar process.

Somali adjectives often occur with a short form of the verb *to*

*The system of case marking is so different between the two languages that mistakes are unavoidable.*

*be* suffixed to them. For example, *yar* 'small' becomes *yaraa* 'he was small'. As a result, Somali speakers of English tend to add *aa* to adjectives. Thus, instead of saying "small", they might say something that sounds like "small-ah". This may cause confusion, particularly among British speakers of English, who may think the speaker is saying "smaller".

### • Prepositions

English prepositions can cause great difficulty for Somalis. Whereas English has a great variety of prepositions, Somali has only four, and they come before the verb rather than before the noun. Because they are so few, Somali prepositions have a wide range of meanings:

*ka* 'from, away from, out of' and 'about, concerning'

*ku* 'in, into, on, at' and 'with, by means of, using'

*la* 'with, together with, in the company of'

*u* 'to, towards' and 'for, on behalf of'

For example:

*Isaga u sheeg.*

Tell it to him.

*Isaga ka sheeg.*

Tell about him.

*Isaga ku sheeg.*

Call him (a name).

*Qori ka samee!*

Make it of wood!

*Guriga ku samee!*

Do it at home!

*Isaga la samee!*

Do it with him!

### • Verbs

Verbs usually come last in Somali sentences. As a result, Somali speakers of English may tend to put the verb at the end of a sentence.

Somali lacks a passive voice. Instead of the passive, Somali uses the indefinite pronoun *la* 'someone', as in *Goormaa la dhisey?* "When was it built?" (literally, "When someone built?"). Using English passives correctly can be a major challenge for Somali students of English.

Somali has a present habitual and a present progressive tense, but they are not used in the same contexts in which these tenses are used in English. Somali uses the present progressive tense where the simple present tense would be used in English, and this feature of Somali may carry over into the English speech of Somalis. Somali speakers of English often make use of the present

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*Verbs usually come last in Somali sentences.*

progressive tense (“I am going to work every day”) where English speakers would use the simple present (“I go to work every day”).

### ***The Importance of Proverbs***

Somali has a rich tradition of proverbs, passed on from previous generations and embellished by individual speakers. Proverbs play a very important role in everyday speech.

*Aqoon la' aani waa iftiin la' aan.*

Being without knowledge is to be without light.

*Ilko wada jir bey wax ku gooyaan.*

Unity is power. (literally, “Together the teeth can cut.”)

*Intaadan falin ka fiirso.*

Look before you leap. (literally, “Think before you do.”)

*Nabar doogi ma haro.*

An old wound will not go away.

This is one area where Somalis find English impoverished. Some will go to great effort to learn English sayings and use them far too frequently; others may translate literally from the Somali and hope for the best.

*Proverbs play a very important role in everyday speech.*

### ***The Writing System***

Somali has had a written form only since 1972. Because only a small segment of Somali society—young adults who studied Somali spelling in school—has thoroughly mastered Somali orthography, spelling mistakes are frequent.

Spelling errors occur frequently in the Somali press and in government reports. Most errors involve using single, rather than doubled, vowels or consonants.