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SOMALI

A MINIMAL GRAMMAR

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This is work in progress. Read it critically!

Feel free to contact me with comments.

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§ 1. The Somali Speaking Areas

Somali is spoken in several states in the Horn of Africa:

<i>State</i>	<i>No of speakers</i>	<i>Official language</i>	<i>Previous colonial power</i>
Djibouti	ca 0.5 mill.	French, Arabic	France
Ethiopia	ca 6.5 mill.	national: Amharic; regional: Somali	
Kenya	ca 2.5 mill.	English, Swahili	Great Britain
Somalia	ca 9-11 mill.	Somali	Italy
Somaliland ¹	ca 4 mill.	Somali	Great Britain

§ 2. Regional Variation within Standard Somali

There are certain differences in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation between the individual Somali regions. These differences in grammar and pronunciation are quite small, but the differences in the vocabulary are more noticeable. To a certain degree one could compare the different varieties of Somali with English, Spanish or French in various countries around the world, with German in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Luxemburg, or with Swedish in Sweden and Finland.

§ 3. Variation in the Pronunciation

The largest difference in the pronunciation concerns the phoneme /dh/, a voiced retroflex stop² (cf. § 18). This phoneme is not used to the same extent in the whole Somali speaking area. In the north-western parts of the area (slightly simplified: Somaliland, Djibouti and the northern part of the Somali region of Ethiopia) /dh/ may occur in any position in a word. In the rest of the area /dh/ normally doesn't occur after a vowel. After a vowel

¹ Somaliland declared itself independent from Somalia in 1991, but no other country has recognised Somaliland so far. In practice, Somaliland however functions as an independent state with its own parliament, currency, army etc.

² Approximately like Swedish and Norwegian /rd/, similar to /d/, but pronounced with the tip of the tongue touching a point higher up (farther back) on the roof of the mouth.

/r/ is used instead of /dh/. Both ways of pronouncing and spelling are considered equally correct in standard Somali.

After a vowel there is a regional variation between /dh/ and /r/.

gabádh^N or **gabár^S** *girl*

ádhi^N or **ári^S** *goats and sheep*

In the beginning of words /dh/ is used in all regions.

dhálo *bottle, glass (as material)*

Also after a consonant /dh/ is used in all regions.

gabdhó *girls*

§ 4. Variation in the Grammar

A few nouns which often end in /o/ in the middle and the southern parts of the Somali speaking area have a tendency to end in /a/ in the northern parts. This happens, e.g., in the numbers **lábo/lába** *two* and **toddóbo/toddóba** *seven*, but this variation is especially frequent in the end of women's names.

Sáhra^N / **Sáhro^S**, **Faadúma^N** / **Faadúmo^S**, **Caásha^N** / **Caásho^S**

Personal preferences in combination with geographic factor influence the choice of form. The forms which end in /o/ may by some speakers be perceived as more typically Somali, but both forms have an equal status in the standard language.

§ 5. Variation in the Vocabulary

The differences between regions are easiest to notice in the vocabulary.

qáre^S or **xábxab^N** *watermelon*

jaálle^S or **húrdi^N** *yellow*

ukún^S or **béed^N** *egg*

With respect to loanwords, middle and southern Somalia was influenced by Italian, whereas Somaliland is influenced from English. In Ethiopia

there is also some influence from Amharic, and in Djibouti from French. All Somali areas are also heavily influenced by Arabic.

usbúuc (from Ar. ʾusbuu^c), **wíig^N** (from En. week), **sitimáan^S** (from It. settimana) or **toddobáad** (purely Somali) all meaning *week*

shukumáan^S (from It. asciugamano) or **tuwáal^N** (from En. towel) both meaning *towel*

§ 6. The Script

Somali was introduced as the official language of Somalia on 1 January 1973 after a decision announced by the government on 21 October 1972. It was decided that Somali was to be written with the Latin script. Earlier, Arabic script as well as a few scripts especially invented for Somali had also been used to some extent. The choice of the Latin script was mainly due to economical considerations as most of the typewriters and printing presses in the country had been used to write the previous colonial languages, i.e. Italian in the south and English in the north.

§ 7. The Alphabet

The traditional order of the letters in the Somali alphabet is

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

This is the order of the letters in the Arabic alphabet, and it should probably be regarded a symbolic remedy to those who in the 1950's and 1960's wanted to establish the Arabic script for Somali.

The traditional order isn't, however, used very much for practical purposes, e.g., when arranging the words in a dictionary or a list of names in alphabetical order.

The only situation in which the traditional order is applied regularly is when the letters of the alphabet are used for numbering sub-sections in a numbered list.

1. b) Muqdisho
t) Hargeysa
j) Boosaaso
2. b) Jabbuuti
t) Jigjiga
j) Kismaayo
x) Garoowe

§ 8. Orthography

Somali spelling and the use of punctuation marks has never been thoroughly regulated by any institution or in any reference book. There are however quite a few rules scattered throughout different schoolbooks as well as a fifty year old tradition to fall back on. The spelling in printed texts is after all relatively homogenous, and when it is not, there is most often possible to find a consensus regarding which spelling of a specific word should be considered "better" than other ones.

§ 9. Capitalisation

In Somali, capital letters are used in almost the same way as in English, i.e., in proper names, in the names of the months and the days of the week, as well as in words denoting nationality and languages. It is also quite common to write the names of the seasons and the four cardinal directions with a capital letter.

Soomáaliya	<i>Somalia</i>
Soomaáli	<i>a Somali</i>
af Soomaáli	<i>Somali (language)</i>
Sábtí	<i>Saturday</i>
Abríil	<i>April</i>

Jiiláal / jiiláal	<i>winter/summer (warm and dry season, Dec.–Feb.)</i>
Koonfúr / koonfúr	<i>south</i>

§ 10. Double letters

Double letters are used in Somali to represent longer vowels (**aa**, **ee**, **ii**, **oo**, **uu**) and more intense consonants, namely the three stops **bb**, **dd**, **gg** and the four sonorants **ll**, **mm**, **nn**, **rr**. The rest of the consonants are never doubled, even though some speakers pronounce them as slightly longer or more intense in certain words.

The following rules are particularly important.

§ 11. -gg-/-dd- in forms with a determiner suffix

If a masculine noun ends in **-g**, all forms with a determiner suffix will be written (and pronounced) with a double (intense) **-gg-** due to assimilation of the /k/ in the suffix with the /g/ in the stem.

búug <i>book</i>	búugga	<i>the book</i>	< *búug–ka
	búuggayga	<i>my book</i>	< *búug–kayga
	búuggaaga	<i>your book</i>	< *búug–kaaga

If a feminine noun ends in **-d**, all forms with a determiner suffix will be written (and pronounced) with a double (intense) **-dd-** due to assimilation of the /t/ in the suffix with the /d/ in the stem.

bisád <i>cat</i>	bisádda	<i>the cat</i>	< *bisád–ta
	bisáddayda	<i>my cat</i>	< *bisád–tayda
	bisáddaada	<i>your cat</i>	< *bisád–taada

§ 12. -nn- in the first and second person plural

The verb endings in the 1st person plural (**–naa**, **–nay**, **–no**), the possessive endings in the 1st and 2nd person plural (**–eenna** *our*, **–iinna** *your*), as well

as the long personal pronouns in the 1st person plural (**annaga**, **innaga** *we*) and the short subject pronoun (**aannu** *we*) contain a double **-nn-** in all instances where the **-nn-** occurs between two vowels.

Waa in aynu ilaalinnaa nadaafadda ilaha biyaheenna.

We have to look after the hygiene in our sources of water.

Cuntada kama maaranno. *We can't manage without food.*

§ 13. The sound system

The Somali spelling reflects the pronunciation in a very simple and straightforward way, compared to many other languages.

§ 14. Vowels

Somali has five letters representing vowels: **i, e, a, o, u**. The most frequent way of pronouncing each of these vowels is approximately the same as in many other languages that have five vowels, e.g., Spanish or Czech. One could also compare them to the pronunciation of the vowels in the English words *swim, map, car, more, shoe*.

§ 15. Light and heavy vowels

The Somali vowel system is however more complex as each vowel letter may be pronounced in two different ways. There is also a second, somewhat less frequent way of pronouncing each letter, and these sounds are produced with a kind of larger tension in the throat. These sounds are traditionally referred to as **HEAVY** vowels and they occur in specific words.

<u>Somali letter</u>	<u>ordinary sound</u>	<u>heavy sound</u>
i approximately as in	<i>sit</i>	<i>police</i>
e	<i>less</i>	<i>convey</i>
a	<i>arm</i>	<i>apple</i>
o	<i>hot</i>	French <i>sœur</i>
u	<i>soup</i>	French <i>sur</i>

It is however important to stress that these are only approximations regarding how the sounds sound and are perceived. The sounds are actually produced in quite different ways. The European "heavy" vowels are simply pronounced by positioning the tongue somewhat further

towards the front of the mouth, whereas the Somali heavy vowels are rather produced by means of a tension in the throat.

Unfortunately the research into the Somali heavy vowels is quite limited, and therefore it is not possible to present any exact principles for the use of the heavy vowels. It is also not noted systematically in existing dictionaries which type of vowels is pronounced in the individual words. Therefore, the best advice is simply to listen carefully to Somali speakers and imitate their pronunciation.

It is however extremely seldom the case that only the difference between ordinary and heavy pronunciation of a vowel is the only thing that make two words differ from each other. The pronunciation also seems to differ slightly between regions and possibly also between individual speakers.

In order to note the heavy vowels in writing, several different systems have been proposed: a comma, a cedilla, or a "tail" under the vowel letter, e.g., *ı̣, ẹ, ạ, ọ, ụ*, or two dots above the letter, i.e., *ï, ë, ä, ö, ü*. If there is a need for marking the ordinary pronunciation of a vowel, it sometimes happens that the vowel is underlined, i.e., *a, e, i, o, u*.

§ 16. Short and long vowels

All the Somali vowels, both the ordinary ones and the heavy ones, occur both as short and long. The long vowels are written as double.

<i>u to, for</i>	versus	<i>uu he, it</i>
<i>i me</i>	versus	<i>ii to me, for me</i>
<i>ku in, on; you</i>	versus	<i>kuu to you, for you</i>

§ 17. Diphthongs

Somali has three **DIFTONGER**. Their spelling and pronunciation may vary a bit: *ey/ay, ow/aw, oy*. It has never been regulated for standard Somali

whether one should write <ey> and <ow>, which often might be closer to the pronunciation, or <ay> and <aw>. In the 1970's the spelling with <ey> and <ow> was a little more frequent than it is nowadays. At present, especially <ay> has become evidently more common than <ey>.

§ 18. Consonants

More than half of the 22 Somali consonants are pronounced in almost the same way as in English. Detta gäller **b, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, s, sh, t, w, y**. The sounds /t/ and /k/ are followed by a distinct burst of breath (aspiration), just like in English

Somali has three **DIGRAPHS**, i.e., combinations of two letters representing a single sound: <dh>, <kh> and <sh>.

The sound <dh> is very similar to Swedish and Norwegian /rd/. It is similar to /d/, but pronounced with the tip of the tongue touching a point higher up (farther back) on the roof of the mouth.

The sound /j/ is pronounced differently in different regions, either as voiced (eng. *jam*) or as voiceless (<ch> i eng. *cheese*). In today's standard Somali, it seems to have become common to pronounce /j/ as almost voiceless in the north and as more voiced in the south. Listen carefully to native speakers!

A single <**b, d, g**> between two vowels is pronounced as somewhat "softer" or "slacker", like the sounds [β, ð, γ] which are characteristic for, e.g., Modern Greek and Spanish in words such as *adiós, saber, pagar*. The [ð] is of course similar to English <th> in *this*.

Hibo[♀], **Liibaan**[♂], **Hodan**[♀], **Idil**[♀], **Ladan**[♀], **Faadumo**[♀], **Magan**[♂], ...

Double <**bb, dd, gg**> are however pronounced more distinctly and with some extra energy, very similar to the corresponding English consonants in words like *hobby, sudden, beggar*.

The /r/ often sounds a bit differently from the way it is pronounced in English and most other European languages. There is often a larger number of flaps with the tip of the tongue and the stream of expired air is stronger, so that more noise is created through friction or turbulence. Sometimes this sound also becomes voiceless at the end of words. Listen to native speakers and imitate them!

Also double <ll, mm, nn, rr> are pronounced with some extra energy and duration.

The letters <c, kh, q, x, ' > represent sounds that are similar to their Arabic counterparts: c = ع, kh = خ, q = ق, x = ح, ' = ء.

The <c> is rather similar to a very voiced /h/. Pronouncing /h/ the air flow is given a free passage through the throat, but when pronouncing /c/ the tongue root is pushed backwards against the back of the throat in order to constrict the air flow into a narrow channel, thereby causing turbulence. This sound is often perceived by Europeans as a "creaky" /a/. For Somalis, however, there is no doubt that this sound is a consonant.

Cali[♂], Cumar[♂], Cabdi[♂], Jaamac[♂], Sacdiya[♀], Nimco[♀]

The <kh> is similar to <ch> in German *Bach* or Scottish *Loch Ness*.

Khadra[♀], Sheekh[♂], Khaalid[♂], Kheyre[♂], Khadiijo[♀]

The sound /kh/ is a bit exotic in Somali. It almost exclusively occurs in words of Arabic origin. Therefore, some speakers have a tendency to replace it with /q/.

The <q> is rather similar to /k/ or /g/, but the tongue is pushed backwards towards the so called uvula instead of up towards the hard palate. Voiced pronunciation (similar to /g/) is more common between vowels, whereas voiceless pronunciation (similar to /k/) is more common at the beginning and end of words.

Muqdisho, Qarshi[♀], Ruqiya[♀], Cabdiqani[♂], Qaali[♀]

The <x> is rather similar to a voiceless /h/, but in order to pronounce /x/ the tongue root needs to be pushed backwards against the back of the throat (the pharynx), in order to constrict the air flow into a narrow channel, causing friction or turbulence. This sound is often perceived by European as a "breathier" /h/.

Farxiyo[♀], **Xasan**[♂], **Maxamed**[♂], **Maxamuud**[♂], **Xamdi**[♀], **Xaddiyo**[♀],
Axmed[♂]

The letter <'> is pronounced as a so called "glottal stop", as in the Cockney pronunciation *bu'er* for *butter*. It is produced by a rapid closure, bringing the vocal folds together, as when holding one's breath. When the air flow is then released again, this sound emerges.

Israa'iil, **Sa'iir**; **Daa'uud**[♂], **Faa'iso**[♀]

The letters <p, v, z> are not used in Somali since the corresponding sounds are not phonemes, i.e., used to differentiate between Somali words. However, the sound [p] sometimes occurs as a voiceless version of /b/ at the end of words and before another voiceless consonant, as in **kab** *sko*, **kabta** *skon*. The letter <z> and the sound [z] is sometimes encountered in words of Arabic origin, such as the woman's name **Zamzam**. Some speakers prefer to pronounce it with a voiced [z], but the purely Somali pronunciation [samsam] is more frequent, and the purely Somali spelling is of course **Samsam**.

§ 19. Intense consonants

Some Somali consonants exhibit a "double", more "intense" version alongside the simple consonant. These more intense consonants are pronounced more distinctly, with more energy, and with a slightly longer duration. There is variation between regions as well as speakers. Listen carefully to native speakers!

Only seven intense consonants are spelled as double: <**bb, dd, gg, mm, nn, rr, ll**>. Also some of the other consonants are in some regions pronounced intensely in certain words, but they are never written with a double consonant in standard Somali.

§ 20. Stress or high tone

The realisation of word stress in Somali differs from the way stress is realised in most European languages, where it is mainly a question of realising a certain vowel louder or with more energy. In Somali the main feature of a stressed vowel is that it is pronounced with a higher pitch or tone than the rest of the word.

The Somali stress gives the word a "melody", and the position of the high tone in the word can sometimes serve to differentiate between words that are otherwise identical. In English there are often stress differences between nouns and verbs as in *We're going to **record** a **record***. Also in Somali stress often serves to distinguish between grammatical categories.

ínan *boy*

áfartan *these four*

héés *sing!*

mádow *darkness*

bád wéyn *a big sea*

inán *girl*

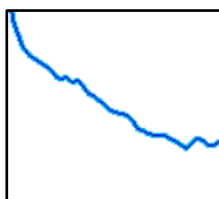
afártan *forty*

heés *song*

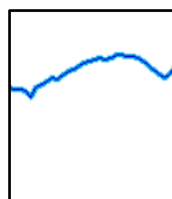
madów *dark (adj.)*

badwéyn *ocean*

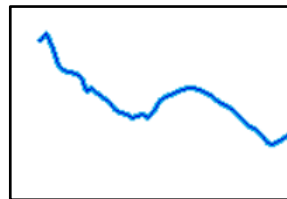
The pitch tracks below show the pitch level in some of these words. (The pitch is measured by the speed of the vibrations creating the sound.)



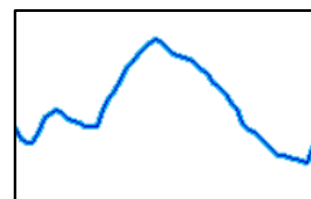
ínan
boy



inán
girl



bád wéyn
a big sea



badwéyn
ocean

§ 21. Phonotactics

The phonotactics describes the general principles that govern the ways sounds may be combined into words in a certain language.

§ 22. Limitations in syllable structure

Many European languages allow syllables that begin or end with two, three, or occasionally even more consonants, as in the English plural form *scripts*.

The Somali syllable structure is heavily limited. As a rule, there may not be more than **one** consonant + **one** vowel + **one** consonant in a Somali syllable. This means that Somali words can only begin and end with a single consonant, and inside words there may not be more than two consonants next to each other between vowels.

These limitations have a large impact on loanwords, as their syllable structure often needs to be adjusted, either by insertion of vowels, or by deletion of consonants.

gram > Somali: **garaam**
ambulance > Somali: **ambalaas**

§ 23. Restrictions on /m/, /t/, /k/

Another restriction in the Somali sound system is the fact that Somali syllables normally do not end with an /m/, /k/ or /t/. Instead /n/, /g/ and /d/ are used as replacements.

Aádan *Adam*, **filin** *film*, **macállin** *teacher* (from Arabic *mucallim*)
tágsi *taxi*,
buskud *biscuit, cookie*

This may lead to sound changes between different forms.

macállin *teacher*, but **macallimád** *female teacher*

tártan *competition*, but **tartámayaa** *is competing*

Exceptions however occur in a small number of newer loanwords, e.g., **átam** *atom*, **garáam** *gram*, and in certain older, but very common borrowings from Arabic, e.g., **muhiim** *something important*, **nidáam** *system, plan* **Isláam** *Islam*, **ixtiráam** *respect, affection*, as well as in a few proper names, e.g., **Ibraáhim** (m.), **Sámsam** (f.).

Another exception to the principle is that /m/, and not /n/, is pronounced before /b/, because that is much easier to say. In today's Somali people usually write **-mb-**, but in the 1970's it was common to write **-nb-**, probably because that is a spelling rule in Arabic.

cámbe (cánbe) *mango*

There are however a few words where **-nb-** is the totally predominant spelling, above all **balanbaális** *butterfly* and **baranbáro** *cockroach*.

§ 24. Morphophonology

Morphophonology deals with sound changes that occur when endings are added to words, either to derive (i.e. create) new words, or to inflect words (i.e. create different grammatical forms of words).

§ 25. Alternations of /k/ and /t/

The morphemes /k/ and /t/ frequently serve to mark masculine and feminine gender in Somali. In verb forms /t/ also marks the 2nd person.

Both these consonants are altered in different way after certain sounds.

After	/k/ becomes	/t/ becomes
/g/	g	
/d/		d
/a/, /u/, /w/	g	d
/i/, /y/	g	d / s ⁱ
/e/, /o/	h	d
/c/, /h/, /x/, /kh/, /q/, /' /	∅ ⁱⁱ	d
/dh/		∅ ⁱⁱ
/l/ ⁱⁱⁱ		sh

i) /s/ in verbs; ii) ∅ means that /k/ or /t/ disappears; iii) /l/ disappears;

These alternations are very important for the definite article as well as the demonstrative and possessive endings, but they also occur in certain verb endings as well as in some other morphemes.

§ 26. The adjectives **jecel**, **nool**

The Somali adjectives **jecél** *fond* (of something), **nóol** *living, alive* end in /l/. When such adjectives are followed by a verb form that begins with /t/, e.g., **tahay** *is* (feminine) the alternation mentioned above occurs: /l+/t/ > /sh/.

wáa uu jecél yahay *he is fond of it, he likes it*
wáa ay jecéshahay *she is fond of it, she likes it*
 < jecél + tahay

Since this consonant alternation **affects** both the adjective and the verb, the two words have to be written as one in the feminine.

§ 27. **Distal** assimilation

Assimilation means that one sound is influenced by another so that they become (more) similar. In some cases a vowel in the stem of a word is **affected** by a vowel in an ending that is added to it. This is especially common when the ending contains an /i/ or a /u/.

§ 28. **Distal** assimilation across -h-

The most frequent type of distal assimilation is triggered by endings that begin with an /h/. If the ending, after the /h/, contains the vowel /i/ or /u/, then an /a/ that precedes the ending is replaced by the same vowel as the one in the ending, i.e., /i/ or /u/.

aábbe <i>father</i>	aabbá-ha <i>the father</i>	aabbú-hu <i>the father (subj.)</i>
		aabbí-hiis <i>his father</i>
shimbiró <i>birds</i>	shimbirá-ha <i>the birds</i>	shimbirú-hu <i>the birds (subj.)</i>
		shimbirí-hiisa <i>his birds</i>
ilkó <i>teeth</i>	ilká-ha <i>the teeth</i>	ilkú-hu <i>the teeth (subj.)</i>
		ilkí-hiisa <i>his teeth</i>

In the spoken form of words, one can often also hear the influence of a following /e/ or /o/, but such sound changes are usually not reflected by the orthography. The most frequent spelling is, e.g., **ilká-hooda** *their teeth*, **ilká-heeda** *her teeth*, but some people sometimes reflect this type of assimilation in writing, especially in certain expressions, e.g.

aabbáha *the father*

aabbá-heed (**aabbé-heed**) *her father*

aabbá-hood (**aabbó-hood**) *their father*

Sometimes some people also apply this type of assimilation in the stem of masculine nouns when the stem ends in /x/ or /c/ and the definite, possessive and demonstrative suffixes are realised without any initial consonant.

mágac *name*

mágac-a

the name **mágac-iisa**

(mágic-iisa) *his name*

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§ 41. The gender of nouns

Somali nouns are divided into two groups or genders. They are either masculine or feminine. This is not a biologically motivated division; it's a purely grammatical division. For example, the words **xáas** *wife* and **sác** *cow* are grammatically masculine.

In most cases, however, nouns that denote female creatures are feminine, while nouns that denote male creatures are masculine.

Nouns that end in **-o** or **-ad** are practically always feminine, e.g., **qaáddo** *spoon*, **bisád** *cat*.

Nouns that end in **-e** are masculine, e.g., **dúbbe** *hammer*, **fúre** *key*.

For other nouns the written form unfortunately doesn't reveal the word's gender. The position of the high tone (realising the stress) does however, in most nouns, reflect the gender of the word. This means that you would in most cases be able to hear the gender of a Somali noun.

§ 42. Stress in nouns

When discussing the position of the high tone (the realisation of Somalis stress), it is important to understand that long vowels consist of two vowel positions, whereas a short vowel only consists of one vowel position. This is straight-forwardly reflected by the Somali spelling.

The vast majority of masculine nouns have the high tone on the second last vowel position, while the vast majority of feminine nouns have their high tone on the last vowel position. Exceptions are mainly the nouns ending in **-e/-o/-a** in the singular. See § 43.

Among nouns having a short final vowel, feminine words therefore have their high tone on the last syllable, whereas masculine nouns have the high tone on the second last syllable.

MASK.

ínan

boy

FEM.

inán

girl

kúrsi	<i>chair</i>	bisád	<i>cat</i>
áqal	<i>house</i>	gabádh	<i>girl</i>

In the type of nouns that have a long vowel in the final syllable, both masculine and feminine words have their high tone on that final syllable, but in different ways. The reason for that is that only one of the two vowel positions in the long vowel is pronounced with higher tone than the rest of the word.

In masculine nouns, the first part of the long vowel carries the high tone, and then the tone falls through the long vowel up until the end of the word.

In feminine nouns only the last part of the long vowel carries the high tone, resulting in a rising tone through the long vowel until the tone reaches its peak at the end of the word.

MASK.		FEM.	
géed	<i>tree, plant</i>	beér	<i>garden, field, plantation</i>
dukáan	<i>shop</i>	khudaár	<i>vegetables and fruit</i>
míis	<i>table</i>	lín	<i>citrus fruit</i>

In words with only one short vowel, it is however impossible to hear the gender. You simply have to memorise it.

MASK.		FEM.	
nál	<i>lamp, electric light</i>	káb	<i>shoe</i>

§ 43. Nouns in -e/-o/-a

The nouns that in the singular end in **-o/-a** (feminines) or **-e** (masculines) follow different rules. When these words are pronounced in isolation, without any context, they are most often pronounced with the high tone on the second last vowel position. However, if the word is part of a phrase or a sentence, it is most often pronounced with the high tone on the last vowel position.

magaálo *town, city*

magaaló yar *a small town*

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§ 45. The indefinite form

Somali doesn't have any indefinite article, just an indefinite form of nouns. Words like **kúrsi** or **bisád** can therefore be translated either as *chair, cat* or *a chair, a cat*, whichever is more suitable in the English context.

§ 46. The singular definite form

The Somali definite article is not a word, it is an ending.

–**ka** for masculine nouns: **más** *snake* **máska** *the snake*

–**ta** for feminine nouns: **káb** *shoe* **kábta** *the shoe*

The initial consonant of the definite article suffix changes its shape according to the immediately preceding sound. See **Fel! Hittar inte referenskälla.**

After the sounds /g, aa, i, y, w/ the masculine article becomes –**ga**.

gúri, gúriga *house, the house*

After the sounds /e, o/ the masculine article becomes –**ha**.

At the same time /e, o/ are replaced by /a/. The high tone is on this /a/.

aábbe, aabbáha *father, the father*

After the sounds /c, h, x, kh, q, ' / the masculine article becomes just –**a**.

libáax, libáaxa *lion, the lion*

After the sounds /d, i, y, w, o, c, h, x, kh, q, ' / the feminine article becomes **-da**.

mindí, mindída *knife, the knife*

After /dh/ the feminine article becomes just **-a** in writing, but /dh/ is pronounced more intensely.

gabádh, gabádha *girl, the girl*

After /l/ the feminine article becomes **-sha**, and the /l/ disappears.

bíl, bísha *month/moon, the month/moon*

The high tone is generally not affected by the addition of the definite article suffix.

macállin, macállinka; macallimád, macallimáda *(the) teacher*

Only in words that end in /o/ or /e/ the high tone is "shifted" to the final vowel position before the definite article suffix. At the same time, both /o/ and /e/ also change into /a/.

fúre, furáha *(the) key* **sheéko, sheekáda** *(the) story*

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§ 59. Counting form of nouns

After numbers larger than **hál** *one* as well as after certain other words that express quantification Somali nouns are not used in their plural form, but in a special COUNTING FORM. Only feminine nouns with the plural ending **-ó** have a separate counting form that ends in **-ood**. All other nouns are used in the same form as the singular.

Masculine		Feminine	
búug – buugaág	<i>book – books</i>	bisád – bisadó	<i>cat – cats</i>
hál buug	<i>one book</i>	hál bisad	<i>one cat</i>
labá buug	<i>two books</i>	labá bisadood	<i>two cats</i>
baabúur – baabuurró	<i>car – cars</i>	hoóyo – hooyoóyin	<i>mother -s</i>
hál baabuur	<i>one car</i>	hál hooyo	<i>one mother</i>
labá baabuur	<i>two cars</i>	labá hooyo	<i>two mothers</i>

The numeral and the following noun constitute a noun phrase. The end of a noun phrase is often marked by a high tone, but to do so is not obligatory.

labá hooyó	or	labá hooyo	<i>two mothers</i>
labá bisadoód	or	labá bisadood	<i>two cats</i>

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§ 74. Numeric nouns

In Somali, numerals are not a separate word class. They are simply nouns, just like *pair*, *trio* or *dozen* are nouns in English. When an ending is added

to a noun phrase containing a numeral, the ending is added to the numeral, not the following noun. The noun after the numeral has to be in the counting form (see § 59), which does not permit the addition of any further endings.

labáda wiil *the two boys*
labádiisi wiil *his two sons/boys, you know*

The Somali numbers 2–8 are feminine nouns, whereas all higher numbers are masculine. **Ków** (1) is feminine, whereas **hál** (1) and **éber** (0) are masculine. Most numbers up to 10 have a high tone that is exceptional with respect to the gender of the word.

0	éber (m.)		
1	ków (f.) / hál (m.)	10	tobán (m.)
2	lábo / lába (f.)	20	labaátan (m.)
3	sáddex (f.)	30	sóddon (m.)
4	áfar (f.)	40	afártan (m.)
5	shán (f.) <- !! ->	50	kónton (m.)
6	líp (f.)	60	líxdan (m.)
7	toddóbo / toddóba (f.)	70	toddobaátan (m.)
8	siddéed (f.)	80	siddeétan (m.)
9	sagaál (m.)	90	sagaáshan (m.) /l/+/t/ > /sh/
		100	boqól (m.)
		200	labá boqol
		300	sáddex boqol ...

In complex numbers, **ków** is used, but when reading a sequence of figures, such as a phone number, **hál** is used. Also when telling the number of objects, i.e., when there is only one object of some kind, **hál** is used.

kow iyo toban *eleven*
saddex, hal, afar, siddeed *three, one, four, eight* (e.g., a PIN code)
hal buug *one book*

Tens from 20 to 90 contain the suffix **-tan/-ton**, a contraction of the word **toban** *ten*. The initial /t/ of the suffix is adapted to the preceding consonant in the same way as in the definite article, but it remains unchanged after a vowel. The preceding vowel, however, always becomes long.

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§ 82. Demonstrative pronouns

The Somali demonstrative pronouns have two different gender forms in the singular and a single common form in the plural.

There are two different pronouns depending on the distance to the intended object. The morpheme **-an** is used to refer to objects close by, while **-aas** refers to objects at a distance. A third morpheme **-ii** is used to refer to objects that are not present, but are instead considered to be known from before.

	MASC.SING.	FEM.SING	PLURAL	
<i>this</i>	kán	tán	kúwan	<i>these</i>
<i>that</i>	kaás	taás	kúwaas	<i>those</i>
<i>that one you know</i>	kií	tií	kúwii	<i>those you know</i>

These pronouns can be used as independent words or as suffixes added to nouns. When they are used as suffixes, the initial /k/ and /t/ are adjusted to the final sound in the stem of the noun in exactly the same way as in the definite article suffix. See § 25 and § 46.

In the suffixed forms, a variation is at hand between **-an^N**/**-aas^S** to indicate objects close by.

kábtan^N	<i>this shoe</i>	mindídan^N	<i>this knife</i>
báskan^N	<i>this bus</i>	gúri^Ngan	<i>this house</i>
kábtan^S	<i>this shoe</i>	mindídaan^S	<i>this knife</i>
báskaan^S	<i>this bus</i>	gúri^Sgaan	<i>this house</i>
kábtas	<i>that shoe</i>	mindídaas	<i>that knife</i>
báskaas	<i>that bus</i>	gúri^Sgaas	<i>that house</i>
kábtii	<i>that shoe, you know</i>	mindí^Sdii	<i>that knife, you know</i>
báskii	<i>that bus, you know</i>	gúri^Sgii	<i>that house, you know</i>

§ 83. Possessive pronouns

The Somali possessive pronouns have two different gender forms in the singular and a single common form in the plural.

The owner is:	The owned object is:			
	masc.sing.	fem.sing.	plural	
1 sg.	káyga	táyda	kúwayga	<i>mine</i>
2 sg.	káaga	táada	kúwaaga	<i>yours</i>
3 sg. m.	kíisa	tíisa	kúwiisa	<i>his, its</i>
3 sg. f.	kéeda	téeda	kúweeda	<i>hers, its</i>
1 pl. excl.	kaayága	taayáda	kúwayāga	<i>ours</i>
1 pl. incl.	keénna	teénna	kúweenna	<i>ours</i>
2 pl.	kiinna	tiinna	kúwiinna	<i>yours</i>
3 pl.	koóda	toóda	kúwooda	<i>theirs</i>

Functioning as a subject, these possessive pronouns end in **-u**. See § 142.

These pronouns can be used as independent words or as suffixes added to nouns. When they are used as suffixes, the initial /k/ and /t/ are adjusted to the final sound in the stem of the noun in exactly the same way as in the definite article suffix. See § 25 and § 46.

kábta	<i>the shoe</i>	mindída	<i>the knife</i>
kábtayda	<i>my shoe</i>	mindídaayda	<i>my knife</i>
kábtaada	<i>your shoe</i>	mindídaaada	<i>your knife</i>
kábteeda	<i>her shoe</i>	mindídaeeda	<i>her knife</i>
kábtooda	<i>their shoe</i>	mindídaooda	<i>their knife</i>
báska	<i>the bus</i>	gúriga	<i>the house</i>
báskayga	<i>my bus</i>	gúrigayga	<i>my house</i>
báskaaga	<i>your bus</i>	gúrigaaga	<i>your house</i>
báskiisa	<i>his bus</i>	gúrigiisa	<i>his house</i>
báskooda	<i>their bus</i>	gúrigooda	<i>their house</i>

Notice that at the end of the possessive pronouns and endings, there is a definite article, e.g., **gúrigayga** *my house*. Also in many other languages the possessive pronouns are used together with the definite article, e.g., Italian *la mia casa* = **gúrigayga** *my house*.

§ 84. Short possessive endings

After a small number of nouns that denote family and friend relationships between two persons, special shorter forms of the possessive endings are used, without the final definite article.

FULL FORMS			SHORT FORMS		
MASC.	FEM.		MASC.	FEM.	
-kayga	-tayda	<i>my</i>	-kay	-tay	
-kaaga	-taada	<i>your</i>	-kaa	-taa	
-kiisa	-tiisa	<i>his, its</i>	-kiis	-tiis	
-keeda	-teeda	<i>her, its</i>	-keed	-teed	
-kayaga	-tayada	<i>our (excl.)</i>	-kayo	-tayo	
-keenna	-teenna	<i>our (incl.)</i>	-keen	-teen	
-kiinna	-tiinna	<i>your</i>	-kiin	-tiin	
-kooda	-tooda	<i>their</i>	-kood	-tood	

Words that should be used with the short possessive endings are above all **hoóyo** *mother*, **aábbe** *father*, **waálid** *parents*, **walaál** *sibling*, **habaryár** *maternal aunt*, **abtí** *maternal uncle*, **eédde** *paternal aunt*, **adeér** *paternal uncle*, **ayeéyo** *grandmother*, **awoówe** *grandfather*, **saaxíib** *male friend*, **saaxiibád** *female friend*.

hooyáday	<i>my mother</i>	aabbáhay	<i>m father</i>
hooyádaa	<i>your mother</i>	aabbáhaa	<i>your father</i>
hooyádiis	<i>his mother</i>	aabbáheed	<i>her father</i>
hooyádood	<i>their mother</i>	aabbáhood	<i>their father</i>

Also in Italian there is a similar distinction between *la mia casa* ‘my house’ and *mia sorella* ‘my sister’.

The full possessive endings are however used with nouns that do not exclusively denote relationships between two persons, such as **nín** *man* (*husband*), **wíil** *boy* (*son*), **gabádh/gabár** *girl* (*daughter*), as well as the collective noun **carruúr** *children*. You can be a man without having a wife, or a child without having parents.

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§ 118. The use of the verb *is*

a) If the predicative complement is a noun, no verb is used corresponding to English *is*. The particle **waa** only tells us that the clause is a statement.

Aamina waa macallimad. *Amina is a teacher.*

Gacantu waa wasakh. (literally: *hand-the STATEMENT dirty-thing*)

The hand is dirty.

b) If the predicative complement is an adjective the verb **yahay** *is* is used.

Gacantu waa yar tahay. (literally: *hand-the STATEMENT small is*)

Handen är liten.

c) The reduced verb form **ah** is omitted when the subject is focused and the predicative complement is an adjective. (Ø symbolises the omitted verb.)

Wáx baa ká maqán Ø. (ordagrant: *thing FOCUS from missing*)

Something is missing.

Eraygeé baa kú habboón Ø sáwirka?

(literally: *word-which FOCUS in suitable picture-the*)

Which word is suitable for the picture?

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§ 131. Statements without focus

In a statement with no focused noun or noun phrase, the particle **waa** must be present in the particle phrase. Normally there is also a short subject pronoun. The particle phrase normally goes right before the verb phrase.

Ardaydu **waa ay** **akhrinayaan.** *The students are reading.*

If the predicate contains an adjective as a predicative complement, there is often no subject pronoun, utan only the particle **waa**.

Maroodigu **waa** **wéyn yahay.** *The elephant is big.*

(**Maroodigu** **waa uu** **wéyn yahay.**)

When the predicate contains no verb, but only a non (phrase) as a predicative complement, there cannot be any short subject pronoun.

Sáhro **waa** **macallimád.** *Sahra is a teacher.*

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§ 143. Nouns as modifiers to nouns

a) In Somali the owner of an object may simply be placed after the owned object. This is so because the owner is a grammatical modifier of the owned object, and in Somali **all** modifiers follow after the noun that they modify. The owned object is generally in the definite form. The end of the phrase is often marked by a high tone on the final vowel position of the modifier. Due to this optional phrase final tone, nouns that do not have a definite article suffix often shift their tone from the second last to the last vowel position, but the modifier may also be pronounced without any high tone.

dúgsiga Sahrá / dúgsiga Sahra	<i>Sahra's school</i>
gúriga Axmé /gúriga Axmed	<i>Ahmed's house</i>
baaskíilka Muusé / baaskíilka Muuse	<i>Musa's bike</i>

b) Women's names that do not end in **-o/-a** often have their high tone on the second last vowel position. Such an "irregular" feminine tone generally remains unchanged also as a modifier.

dukáanka Máryan	<i>Maryans affär</i>
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c) If the owner is in the definite form, the high tone remains in its original position, but sometimes an additional high tone may be heard at the end of the phrase.

baabúurka macállinka ~ baabúurka macállinká	<i>lärarens bil</i>
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d) Also other types of phrases where one noun functions as a determiner of another noun have the same structure and word order. In the vast majority of cases both nouns occur in their definite form.

khatárta jídka	<i>faran med vägen, en. the danger of the road</i>
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e) This kind of constructions may also be expressed in another manner. It is possible to first mention the owner and then introduce the owned object, which then needs to have a possessive ending added to it.

Áxmed gúrigiisa *Ahmed's house (lit. Ahmed, his house)*
or **gúriga Axmed** *Ahmed's house (lit. house-the (of) Ahmed)*

f) When the construction describes a close family or friend relation, only the construction with a possessive ending can be used.

Sahrá hooyádeed *Sahra's mother*

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