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**The Agents (Students, Parents and Teachers)**  
**of Multilingualism in Oromia, Ethiopia**  
**Booklet of the Study**

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Veszprem, 2025

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism has historically played a vital role in the everyday lives and economies of both individuals and communities. Although it is frequently associated with modernization and globalization, its true importance lies not in the fact that it enables diverse human communication-- something that has always existed-- but in its recent recognition as a societal "norm" rather than a rare occurrence, a shift largely influenced by technological progress (Stavans & Jessner, 2022). According to Romaine (2017), multilingualism has been a constant throughout human history because communities-- except for a few isolated groups-- have regularly engaged with others. These interactions, driven by trade, information exchange, marriage, and other forms of social and economic contact, made multilingualism a natural state of human society, likely present since humanity's earliest days. Today, technology has heightened both the visibility and significance of multilingualism. As the demand for communication across nations, languages, and cultures grows, language use—both spoken and written—has become faster and more interconnected. This evolution allows multilingualism to surpass traditional limits of time and space, underscoring its critical role and rising visibility in the modern world.

Ethiopia, well known for its multilingualism that has developed historically over nearly two centuries of remarkable linguistic diversity. Over 80 languages are spoken across the country (Azeb & Zelealem, 2023), most of which belong to the Afroasiatic (Semitic, Cushitic, and Omotic) or Nilo-Saharan (Nilotic) language families (Meyer & Moges, 2023). This diversity contributes to Ethiopia's vibrant multilingual society and presents a valuable context for understanding the relationship between language policy, education, and identity. Modern Ethiopia, a landlocked country in the Horn of Africa, is home to approximately 122 million people (Worldometer, December 11, 2022). This multilingual and multi-ethnic nation speaks over 80 languages and more than 200 dialects. Among these, 41 languages are formally used in various institutions, while around 13 face the threat of extinction. Ethiopia's 86 identified languages belong to two primary families: Afroasiatic (including Semitic, Cushitic, and Omotic languages) and Nilo-Saharan (Nilotic languages) (Ado et al., 2023). Of the Cushitic languages, Afan Oromo has the largest number of speakers. Among the Semitic languages, particularly Amharic, prominent in northern and central Ethiopia, is the working language of Ethiopia's federal government and has the highest

number of speakers. Although Geez is no longer spoken as a native language, it remains an important liturgical language for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

The 1995 Ethiopian constitution grants each ethnic group the right to develop and promote its language. Consequently, Afaan Oromo serves as the working language of the Oromia region, while Amharic functions at the federal level (Araya Zemaryam, 2014). English plays a pivotal role in education and commerce. Despite policies advocating mother-tongue instruction in early education with a transition to English at higher levels, practical challenges persist. Research by Fekede & Tesfaye (2020) examines the linguistic landscape of Oromia towns, revealing discrepancies between language policies and actual practices. Meyer and Moges (2023:122) state that Ethiopia's current language landscape is a result of socio-historical developments that shaped national boundaries and regional divisions. Milkessa (2011:1) refers to Ethiopia as a “common home to diverse groups,” highlighting its long-standing ethnic and linguistic pluralism. Similarly, Bahru (2005:5) describes Ethiopia as “a mosaic of nationalities” with distinct languages and cultural identities which he regards as the modern Ethiopia that took shape following the unification efforts of Emperor Tewodros II in 1855 and Emperor Menelik II in 1889. Tewodros is credited with initiating national modernization (Cooper, 1978; Cohen, 2000). Menelik II expanded Ethiopia's territory, while Haile Selassie (1930–1974) sought to unify Ethiopia linguistically through centralized governance (Záhořík & Wondwosen, 2009). In other words, today's Ethiopia constitutes a unified linguistic repertoire that prior to the unification of the nation, nationalities and peoplehood, was imposed by the rulings of kings and landlords ruling in different territories. As Bahru (2005: 16) stated, “The history of early nineteenth-century Ethiopia would not be complete without a description of the peoples and principalities of the Southern half of the century; [...] It was the unification of these two parts in the second half of the nineteenth century that gave birth to Modern Ethiopia.” However, in such explanation, Bahru does not mention a specific place but rather talks about states and people who were not engaged and incorporated in the imperial politics of Gondor such as Kafa, Wolayta, and Janjaro (pp.16), or the Oromos under the Gada System (pp.18). This situation changed with unification of Ethiopia which discarded almost all these imperial and segregative practices (Merera, 2003) and led to the period of Ethiopianization which among other changes reinforced Amharic's dominance as the imperial language earning the title "yanegus kwankwa" (language of the king) (Záhořík & Wondwosen, 2009:84) while marginalizing other languages and cultures that were portrayed as a threat to national unity

(Mekuria, 1994:27). However, informal multilingualism persisted, particularly in border areas and mobile communities, despite its lack of formal recognition in government and administrative settings. Recent language policy reforms have sought to address this imbalance. In Oromia, students are taught in Afan Oromo and English from early education through grade 12, with Amharic introduced from grade five.

This policy has promoted broader multilingual competence- a competence that Blackledge and Creese (2010) emphasize as an important field of study, with ongoing debates over its political, social, and cultural significance. Despite Ethiopia's multilingual policies, implementation challenges lead to discrepancies between policy objectives and real-world practices. Studies on the linguistic landscape in Oromia towns reveal how language use in public spaces reflects these tensions, emphasizing the need to examine the roles of parents, teachers, and students in bridging policy and practice. By exploring how people view and interact with the language policy that advocates multilingualism offers important insights into their cultural attitudes, language preferences, and the larger societal factors that shape language use.

The present study examines the agents (Students, Parents and Teachers) of multilingualism in Oromia, Ethiopia. The Role of parents, teachers, and high school graduates in Multilingualism is explored. In their agency towards multilingualism, parents significantly influence the multilingual landscape through their choices of home language use and attitudes toward various languages. A study by Tebo and Arfasa (2018) in Southwest Ethiopia indicates that parental involvement correlates with students' academic performance, suggesting that parents' language choices at home can impact children's language acquisition and educational outcomes. In parallel, teachers as facilitators of multilingual competence, are central to implementing language policies in classrooms, facilitating the acquisition of multiple languages. However, they often encounter challenges such as insufficient training in multilingual pedagogy and limited resources. James (2018) discusses the awareness among teachers and education officials regarding the effectiveness of students learning in different languages of instruction, emphasizing the need for better support and resources. The last agent in the triangle are the 12th graders on the brink of graduating from the formal educational system into the workforce or higher education studies and will navigate the multilingual environment shaped by their schooling experiences and societal expectations. Their language choices reflect practical considerations for education and employment. A study on

language use and cultural identity in Addis Ababa examines how urbanization influences language practices among students, offering insights into the evolving multilingual dynamics faced by 12<sup>th</sup> graders (Heyyi & Mekonnen, 2023).

Therefore, the roles of these agents are interconnected in shaping multilingualism. Parental involvement and teachers' support collectively influence students' academic motivation and language acquisition vis a vis the national and regional de jure declared language policy and the actual – de facto – language policy that is reflected by the people. The sketched background information thus far sets the context for this study. Then, the statement of the problem followed by the research questions, the objectives of the study, concluding with the scope and social significance of the study set the stage for this exploration.

This study aims at profiling of the three major agents of individual and societal multilingualism in the Oromia region of Ethiopia. More specifically, the agency of education as an engine to promote and legitimize multilingualism – de facto— in Ethiopia. The study will explore the outlook on multilingualism (from different perspectives) by students, teachers, and parents of 12<sup>th</sup> graders in public and private schools. The study focuses on pupils, teachers and parents of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who will soon complete their basic schooling and will be “launched” into the professional or vocational training and/or workplace (most likely in Ethiopia initially). Perceptions as well as practices of multilingualism will be assessed using different forms of questionnaires. These tasks aim at gathering different aspects that will construe the agents’ profiles. First, a general multi-section “background questionnaire” will be used to collect information on the individual agent’s language repertoire history, language use, and attitude towards the language(s) and their contribution to multilingualism of the individual as well as the society. The second type of information concern “performative tasks” including a subjective assessment of language proficiency (i.e., the CAN-DO task inspired by Clark, 1978), a questionnaire profiling personality features that are conducive to multilingualism (Dewaele & van Oudenhoven, 2009; Dewaele & Stavans, 2014; Dewaele & Wei, 2013).

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted for the study. This study employs a quantitative research approach, which allows for the systematic investigation of relationships between variables and the generalization of findings to a broader population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A survey method was chosen as it facilitates the collection of a large volume of data from diverse participants within a relatively short period and in a remote manner (Fowler, 2013). The study follows a descriptive cross-sectional design, which enables the examination of multilingual perceptions and practices at a single point in time (Saunders et al., 2019). The population was sampled randomly. The study population consists of 12th grade students (n=80), their parents (n=80), and their teachers (n=80), with an equal number from both public and private schools 40 students and parents, and 20 teachers from each school. The focus on 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were soon to complete their basic schooling, assumed that they would soon be at the brink of moving into society either directly to the workforce or to a professional/vocational capacity building training period. The focus on the teachers, both language teachers as well as other subjects matter teachers, was to map out the perceptions and practices of these educational agents who had a pivotal role in motivating and enabling the best outcome of a multilingual individual that would be productive and constructive within the nation and outwards. Focusing on the parents whose children attended either private or public school provided the completion of all the active agents in the process of fostering, enabling and encouraging multilingual practices grounded in ideologies, emotions, aspirations and needs for the family, the community and the individual. To ensure a representative sample, all participants were sampled from public and private schools who consented to take part in the study. The sampling techniques employed for student recruitment was to select high-achieving students based on their academic performance (Cohen et al., 2018) to ensure that the sample consists of the maximal achievement by graduating students. The parents were also sampled from the same schools and conformed with their association to their child's school type. Concomitantly, the teachers were randomly sampled from within the participating schools and consisted of teachers from various subjects, providing a diverse representation of perspectives on multilingualism (Saunders et al., 2019).

The study employed a multiple sections questionnaire. This includes: (i) demographic information; ii) general subjective proficiency assessment and the CAN-DO questionnaire on language-specific

abilities (i.e., speaking, understanding, reading and writing) (Clark 1981); (iii) a questionnaire of language use with different interlocutors and a questionnaire of language use for different purposes (Stavans et al., 2009); (iv) a questionnaire of the attitude toward each language (Stavans et al., 2009); and (v) a questionnaire of multilingual personality traits (MPQ) (Oudenhoven & der Zee, 2000). The collected data were digitized using Google Forms for efficient organization and processing. The data were then exported to Excel and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis included the computation of correlations to examine relationships between variables, t-tests to identify significant differences, and descriptive statistics such as frequencies to summarize the data. Quantitative responses were interpreted and contextualized using scholarly literature to ensure alignment with existing research on multilingualism. Finally, the findings were synthesized to draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the results.

## CHAPTER 3: THE FINDINGS

This section highlights the findings of the study. The findings indicate that there are notable differences in multilingual characteristics and multicultural personality traits among the agent groups (students, teachers, and parents) and that school type (public versus private) plays a meaningful role in these differences. Students in public schools demonstrate higher overall multilingual and multicultural personality scores, particularly in cultural empathy and open-mindedness, suggesting that public school environments may provide richer sociocultural exposure. Teachers, despite exhibiting higher language proficiency across all three languages (Afan Oromo, Amharic, and English), show lower emotional stability, particularly in public schools, pointing to the potential need for targeted emotional support and professional development. Differences are also evident in language use patterns: private school students are more engaged in English and Amharic for business and entertainment purposes, whereas public school students report stronger Afan Oromo use in daily interactions. Parents in public schools tend to have higher cultural empathy and open-mindedness scores than their private school counterparts, which may reflect their children's engagement with more diverse communities. Overall, the results suggest that school type influences not only language use and proficiency but also broader multicultural adaptability and personality traits, highlighting the complex interaction between educational context and multilingual competence.

Moreover, the findings reflect that the population of Oromia exhibits a deeply rooted multilingual reality, characterized by a dynamic interplay between dominant and marginalized languages, social stratification, and educational influences. The high rates of multilingualism reported across students, teachers, and parents suggest that multilingualism is not only a functional necessity in Oromia but also a social and cultural norm. Afan Oromo and Amharic emerge as the dominant languages, with English gaining importance in educational and professional contexts, particularly in private schools. The widespread use of multiple languages across different social and educational contexts indicates that the people of Oromia have adapted to and integrated multilingual practices into their everyday lives.

However, the findings also highlight structural differences tied to school type, which reflect broader socioeconomic and educational disparities. Public school participants demonstrate

stronger multilingual and multicultural adaptability, suggesting that public schools in Oromia may foster more diverse linguistic and cultural interactions, possibly due to their greater accessibility and exposure to a wider range of social and linguistic backgrounds. Private school participants, on the other hand, show higher engagement with English and Amharic, which reflects a more elite, urban, and globally oriented linguistic environment. This division reflects broader patterns of social stratification, where economic and educational privilege align with language use and proficiency in certain high-status languages like English.

The limited and inconsistent use of marginalized languages like Tigrinya and Guragigna suggests that while multilingualism is widespread, the linguistic landscape is stratified. Afan Oromo and Amharic dominate communication and proficiency, while other regional languages are less central to daily life, pointing to possible language shift and uneven language maintenance. The positive attitudes toward multilingualism across all agent groups, regardless of school type, reflect a strong societal acceptance of linguistic diversity, which contrasts with the low support for monolingualism. This suggests that the people of Oromia recognize the social and economic benefits of multilingualism and value its role in social mobility and cultural identity.

Overall, the findings depict Oromia as a complex multilingual society where dominant languages reflect both historical and political influences, and where the educational system serves as a key site for shaping language use, proficiency, and attitudes. The differences between public and private school participants highlight how access to different educational and social opportunities shapes the multilingual profiles of individuals, reinforcing the role of schooling and socioeconomic background in sustaining or transforming linguistic diversity.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the perceptions and practices of multilingualism among 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, their parents, and teachers in both public and private schools in Ambo town, Oromia, Ethiopia. The study was guided by five basic research questions, and the data were collected by different forms of questionnaires. Accordingly, the findings of the study provides a comprehensive profiling of multilingualism agents in educational contexts in Oromia, Ethiopia, depicting the significant multilingual abilities, language use patterns, attitudes, and personality traits of students, teachers, and parents. The findings underscore the widespread prevalence of multilingualism, with most participants proficient in multiple languages, particularly Afan Oromo and Amharic. These languages serve as dominant linguistic mediums in both formal and informal settings, reflecting their sociocultural and economic significance. The study reveals the complex dynamics of language choice, where Afan Oromo is widely used across various contexts, while Amharic plays a complementary role, particularly in formal and business interactions. English, on the other hand, maintains prominence in professional domain. Despite the strong presence of these languages, the marginalization of minority languages such as Tigrigna and Guragigna raises concerns about linguistic inclusivity, echoing broader global discussions on language shift and maintenance. These findings emphasize the necessity of educational policies that foster the preservation and equitable treatment of all languages. Attitudinal analysis suggests a strong consensus in favor of multilingualism, with participants overwhelmingly rejecting monolingualism. The study portrays the cognitive, social, and cultural benefits of being multilingual, reinforcing its perceived value in both educational and social contexts. Additionally, language attitudes are shown to significantly influence language acquisition, with positive perceptions of multilingualism correlating with higher proficiency levels.

The study also identifies a strong link between language proficiency and multicultural personality traits, particularly cultural empathy and open-mindedness. This connection is further reflected in variations in the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) scores, demonstrating how educational environments shape cultural adaptability. Public school students exhibit higher cultural empathy and open-mindedness due to their diverse social interactions, whereas private school students show variability influenced by structured language instruction and institutional

settings. Comparative analysis of students, parents, and teachers in public and private schools further illustrates distinct patterns in language use and attitudes, reinforcing the role of exposure, educational background, and occupational demands in shaping linguistic experiences. Moreover, the study spotlight the sociocultural and economic importance of Afan Oromo, Amharic, and English in business and entertainment contexts. The observed sociolinguistic hierarchy--where Afan Oromo dominates intimate and cultural domains, Amharic exhibits variability in social interactions, and English remains central to formal and economic settings--aligns with broader linguistic capital theories, suggesting that language choice is shaped by sociocultural and institutional factors.

Overall, this study underscores the complex interplay between language proficiency, sociocultural exposure, and personality development in multilingual settings. The findings advocate for educational policies that promote multilingual competence, cultural empathy, and adaptive communication skills, ensuring that learners are well-equipped to navigate diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes. Addressing disparities in language use, attitudes, and personality traits requires targeted interventions, particularly in teacher training and language policy, to ensure that all languages and cultural identities are valued within Ethiopia's multilingual landscape. Future research could explore longitudinal trends in multilingualism, the evolving role of global languages in different educational and social contexts, and the impact of digital globalization on language use patterns. By fostering inclusive linguistic policies and culturally responsive teaching, stakeholders can contribute to a more equitable and sustainable multilingual environment.

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