2017

Somali Verb Conjugation Paradigms: Present, Past, and Future

Ettien Koffi
St. Cloud State University, enkoffi@stcloudstate.edu

Shukria Omar
St. Cloud State University, sbomar@stcloudstate.edu

Hassan Yussuf
St. Cloud State University, hayussuf@stcloudstate.edu

Dahir Mohamed
St. Cloud State University, damo0101@stcloudstate.edu

SOMALI VERB CONJUGATION PARADIGMS: PRESENT, PAST, AND FUTURE

ETTIEN KOFFI, SHUKRIA OMAR, HASSAN YUSSUF, MOHAMMED DAHIR[1]

ABSTRACT

Somali combines tense, aspect, mood, voice, persons, and number in an extraordinarily complex way to conjugate verbs. Our goal in this paper is simply to give an overview of Somali conjugation system so that teachers can use it as a point of reference in teaching English to Somali learners. Minnesota is home to a large immigrant population. However, there is a paucity of materials on Somali. We hope that to this paper fulfills a pedagogical need by highlighting areas of similarities and differences between Somali and English verb conjugation in the present, past, and future tenses. The paradigms are based on five commonly occurring Somali verbs: <keen> (to bring), <akhri> (to read), <joogso> (to stand), <qabso> (to catch), and <cun> (to eat). Several morphophonological issues are mentioned but not discussed in depth because of their complexity and also because we want this paper to be accessible to a wide audience of school teachers.

1.0 Introduction

According to Koffi (2015:188), to conjugate a verb is to provide six important pieces of information about that verb, namely, person, number, voice, tense, aspect, and mood information. Saeed (1999:85) lists 12 possible verb conjugation paradigms in Somali:

1. Imperative
2. Infinitive
3. Past simple
4. Past progressive
5. Past habitual
6. Present habitual
7. Present progressive
8. Future
9. Conditional
10. Optative
11. Potential
12. Subordinate clause forms

We limit inquiry to verbs conjugated in the declarative mood, in the present, past, and future tenses. We also limit ourselves to the conjugation of verbs in the simple aspect and to the affirmative mood. We have chosen five high frequency verbs to illustrate the conjugation paradigms. The verbs under consideration are:

---

[1]The first author assigned the topic of Somali verb conjugation to the co-authors when they enrolled in his pedagogical grammar course. The first author is not a native speaker of Somali but has an ongoing research interest in Somali. The three remaining authors are native speakers of Somali who are training/have trained to become ESL teachers.

1. *<keen>* (to bring)
2. *<cun>* (to eat)
3. *<akhri>* (to read)
4. *<joogso>* (to stand)
5. *<qabso>* (to catch)

Somali verbal morphology is extremely rich and complicated. We will mention some of the intricacies of verb conjugation but will not dwell on them.

The paper is organized into six major sections. The first two are quick overviews. An overview of the syllable structure of the five conjugated verbs is provided, followed by a quick description of word order in Somali simple sentences. A list of subject pronouns is presented. These pronouns can occur in their full forms or in their reduced forms. Thereafter, morphophonological changes affecting pronouns are described succinctly. These preliminary steps are necessary before the three tenses, present, past, and future, are fully described.

2.0 The Syllable Structure of Somali Verbs

The five verbs under consideration fall into two major categories according to their canonical syllable structures. The verbs *<keen>* (to bring) and *<cun>* (to eat) have a C_1VC_2 syllable structure, where C_1 is any consonant, and C_2 is the nasal consonant [n]. As we will see shortly, the conjugation of these two verbs is regular and predictable. The verbs *<akhri>* (to read), *<joogso>* (to stand), and *<qabso>* (to catch) are disyllabic. The verb *<akhri>* has a C_1VC_2V syllable structure syllable. The <h> between [k] and [r] is an orthographic artifact to represent the voiceless aspirated velar [k]. The verbs *<joogso>* and *<qabso>* have a $C_1VC_2C_3V$ canonical syllable structure. A syllable break occurs between C_2 and C_3. The C_2 of *<joogso>* ends with a voiced velar stop, while that of *<qabso>* ends with a voiced bilabial stop. These phonetic details are important because they affect verb endings in the conjugation.

3.0 Basic Somali Word Order in Simple Sentences

A quick overview of the word order of simple sentences in Somali is necessary before proceeding further because it helps us highlight an important difference between Somali and English. Whereas the typical word order of English sentences is SVO, that of Somali is SOV. This means that both the subject and the object in a Somali sentence precede the main verb. In other words, the verb is the last element in a simple sentence, as illustrated below:

Sentence 1:	Anigaa	alaab	ta	keen	aa
English gloss:	I	equipment	the	bring	Present tense suffix
English translation:	I bring the equipment				

Linguists use sentence diagrams to provide a pictorial representation of sentences. We do the same with Sentence 1. Normally, according to tree diagram conventions the terminal elements under each node should be a Somali word since it is the language in focus. However, we are breaking with this tradition here. We are ending every node with an English word because we want the transliteration to be obvious to the reader.
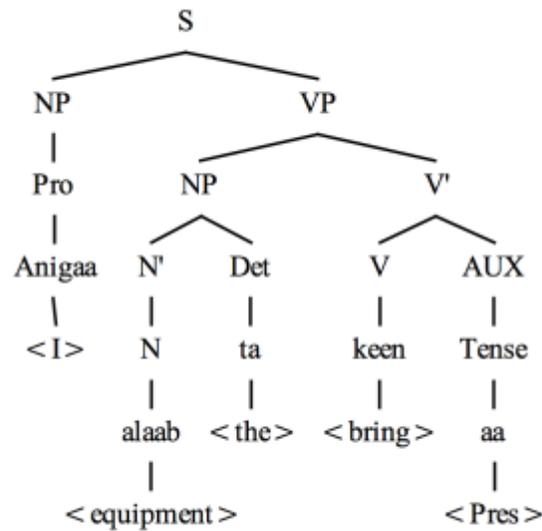
The subject of this sentence is the pronoun *<anigaa>*, the object is *<alaab ta>*, and the verb is *<keen>*. The suffix <-aa> indicates that the sentence is in the present tense.

4.0 An Overview of Somali Subject Pronouns
        Pronouns are words that replace head nouns. When a pronoun is used, various types of information are embedded and reflected in the form of that pronoun. Some of the information has to do with the grammatical "person" of the pronoun. In English, there are three pronominal persons: the first person (the one speaking), the second person (the one spoken to), and the third person (the one spoken about). Number information is also amalgamated on pronouns. In English, there are two pronominal numbers: the singular and the plural. The same is true for Somali. The combination of persons and numbers gives six possible patterns of subject pronouns in most languages except Somali where we have nine subject pronouns because it distinguishes between two types of *<we>*s: an inclusive *<we>* and an exclusive *<we>* (Saeed 1999:80).   The meanings associated with the two *<we>*s can be illustrated by Sentences 2 and 3:

Sentence 2: *We* are the world (inclusive).
Sentence 3: How are *we* doing today? (exclusive)

In Sentence 2, <we> includes the speaker. Sentence 3 illustrates a typical conversation that takes place in a doctor's office. When a healthcare professional asks a patient, "How are *we* doing today," he/she does not include himself/herself in *<we>*.   Additionally, Somali has an "impersonal pronoun" *<-la>* that can be loosely translated into English as "one" or "someone." The paradigms of Somali subject pronouns are illustrated by Table 1:

Persons and Numbers	Full Forms[2]	Clitic Forms	English Equivalent
1st Person singular	Anigaa	<-aan>	I
2nd Person singular	Adigaa	<-aad>	You
3rd Person singular masculine	Isagaa	<-uu>	He
3rd Person singular feminine	Iyadaa	<-ay>	She
3rd Impersonal		<-la>	One
1st Person plural inclusive	Annagaa	<-aynu>	We
1st Person plural exclusive		<-aannu (aan)>	Not applicable
2nd Person plural	Idinkaa	<-aydin>	You (plural)
3rd Person plural	Iyagaa	<-ay>	They

Table 1: Somali Subject Pronouns

Somali pronouns can either occur in their full forms as in Columns 2 or in their clitic forms as in Column 3. The forms in Column 3 are called clitics because these pronouns have to attach themselves to another lexical item to be fully realized. Both pronouns need not occur in the same sentence, but both can and do occur. *<Anigaa>* may precede the verb. However, it can also be omitted. Somali has a morpheme *<waa>* that occurs together with pronouns, as seen in Sentence 4:

Sentence 4:   Anigaa   *waa*   cunaay   aa
**English gloss:**   I   Pronoun   eat   Present
English Translation: I'm eating

This *<waa>* has been referred to as a "pronoun helper." However, Saeed (1999:73) contends that it is "a declarative marker" even though it behaves in many respects like a pronoun. ESL teachers who have Somali students in their classes should not be surprised if they hear them say or see them write *<My mother, she is strong>*. Placing a pronoun right after a head noun is a very common syntactic construction in Somali and in many African languages. The pronoun that occurs after the head noun is called a "resumptive pronoun."

A transformation (movement rule) can take place that causes the pronoun <waa> to be moved at the beginning of the sentence and <aniga> to appear at the end of the sentence. Such constructions disrupt the SOV sentence pattern, but they are perfectly grammatical in Somali. We see this in Sentence 5:

Sentence 5:   Waa   cunay   aa   anigaa
English gloss: Pronoun   eat   present   I
English Translation: I'm eating

---

[2] There is a spelling discrepancy in the full form of pronouns. Some of the native speakers in this study spell the final <a> with two <a>s, others with only one <a>. The discrepancies in spelling may be traced to dialectal differences between the co-authors or to the fact that the official orthography of 1972 has not fully stabilized (Laitin 1992:108). For the sake of consistency, we have chosen to spell the final [a] as <aa>.
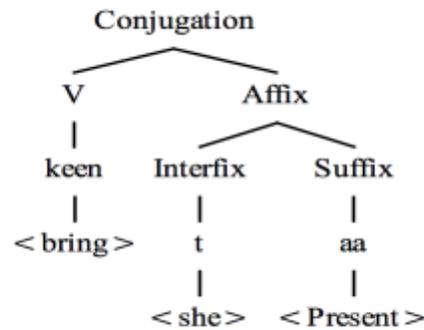
Sentence 5 can be diagrammed as follows:
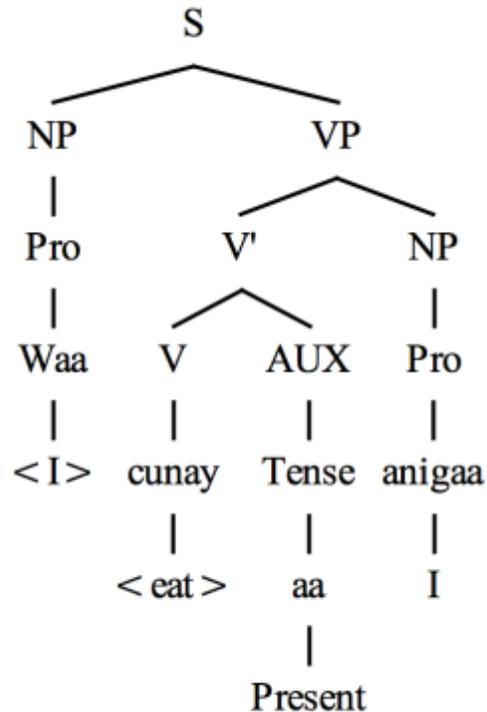
It should be noted in passing that *<waa>* assumes different forms. It changes to *<wuu>* in the second person singular, and to *<way>* in the third person plural.

5.0 Morphophonological Changes in the Pronominal System
    The sheer number of morphophonological changes that occur in the conjugation of Somali verbs is astounding. The changes affect both pronouns and verbs. Changes in verbal forms will be discussed each time we consider a specific tense. Suffice it for now to focus on one pronominal change that is pervasive. This has to do with inserting a pronominal morpheme inside the verb.   The technical term for this process is called "interfixation," which Koffi (2015:110) defines as the insertion of a morpheme between a root and a suffix. This occurs systematically with the Somali equivalent of the pronoun <she>.   Even though *<iyada>* designates <she>, when a verb is conjugated in the third person singular, the interix *<-t->* is also inserted between the verb and the tense marker.   The diagram of the word *<keentaa>* exemplifies this morphological construction:
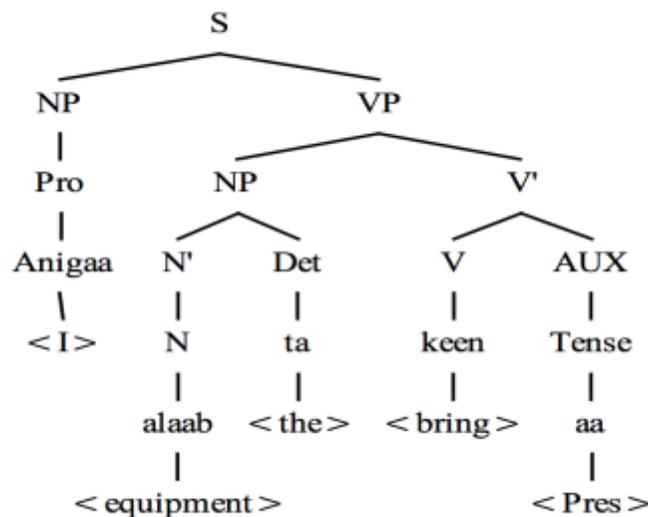
```
                    Conjugation
                   /          \
                  V            Affix
                  |           /     \
                keen      Interfix  Suffix
                  |           |        |
              < bring >       t       aa
                              |        |
                          < she >  < Present >
```

The interfix *<-t->* changes to *<-s->* when in the conjugation of *<akhri>*. This happens probably because the word ends with the high front vowel [i]. Additional data is needed to confirm this claim. Another interfix, *<-n->*, is added when verbs are conjugated in the first person plural. All these morphophonological changes are illustrated in the paradigms in Table 2.

6.0 Verb Paradigms in the Present Tense

When a Somali verb is conjugated in the present tense, it can be translated into English by the simple present, the habitual present, or the present progressive (Saeed 1999:84). The present tense is characterized by the suffix *<-aa>*, as shown below:

Sentence 6:	Anigaa	alaab	ta	keen	*aa*
English gloss:	I	equipment	the	bring	Present tense suffix
English translation:	I bring the equipment				

```
                              S
                          /       \
                       NP          VP
                        |        /     \
                       Pro     NP       V'
                        |     /   \    /   \
                     Anigaa N'   Det  V    AUX
                        \   |     |   |     |
                       <I>  N    ta  keen  Tense
                             |    |   |     |
                           alaab <the> <bring> aa
                             |               |
                        < equipment >     < Pres >
```

Sentence 6 also exemplifies the typical SOV pattern. The verb <*keen*> occurs at the end of the sentence, while the subject <Anigaa> and the direct object <*alaab*> occur at the beginning. The paradigms of verbs conjugated in the present tense are found in Table 2:

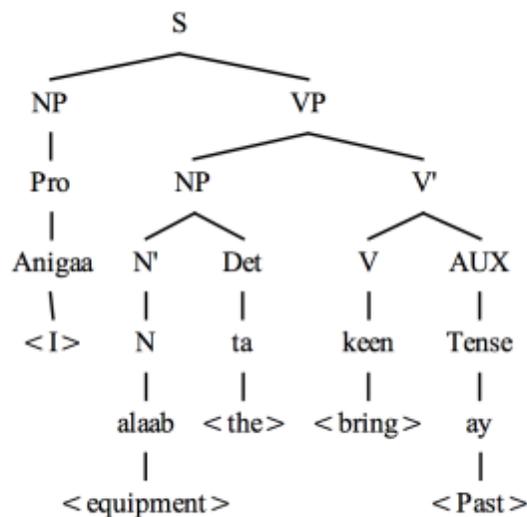| Pronouns	<keen> (bring)	<cun> (eat)	<akhri> (read)	<joogso> (stand)	<qabso> (catch)
Anigaa (I)	keenaa	cunaa	akhriyaa	joogsadaa	qabtaa
Adigaa (You)	keenaa	cunaa	akhriyaa	joogsataa	qabataa
Isagaa (He)	keenaa	cunaa	akhriyaa	Joogsadaa	qabtaa
Iyadaa (She)	keentaa	cuntaa	akhrisaa	joogsataa	qabataa
Anagaa (We)	keennaa	cunnaa	akhrinnaa	joogsannaa	qabannaa
Idinkaa (You)	keenaa	cunaa	akhriyaa	joogsadaa	qabtaa
Iyagaa (They)	keenaa	cunaa	akhriyaa	joogsadaa	qabtaa

Table 2: Conjugation Paradigms for the Present Tense

Orthographically, because <*akhri*> ends with <*i*>. This is most likely the reason why the interfix <*-y-*> is inserted between the root verb and the <*-aa*> suffix. Otherwise, a sequence of three vowels <*iaa*> would be created. Such a sequence probably violates a phonotactic constraint in Somali.

7.0 Verb Paradigms in the Past Tense
The past tense suffix for regular English verbs is <-ed>. Somali has a similar past tense suffix <*-ay*> that is added to the roots of regular verbs, as shown in Table 3:

Sentence 7:	Anigaa	alaab		ta	keen	*ay*.
English gloss:	I	equipment		the	bring	Past
English translation:	I brought the equipment.					

The paradigms for verb conjugation in the past tense are displayed in Table 3.

| Pronouns	<keen> (bring)	<cun> (eat)	<akhri> (read)	<joogso> (stand)	<qabso> (catch)
Anigaa (I)	keenay	cunay	akhriyay	joogsaday	qabtay
Adigaa (You)	keenay	cunay	akhriyay	joogsatay	qabtay
Isagaa (He)	keenay	cunay	akhriyay	joogsaday	qabtay
Iyadaa (She)	keentay	cuntay	akhrisay	joogsatay	qabatay
Anagaa (We)	keennay	cunnay	akhrinnay	joogsannay	qabannay
Idinkaa (You)	keenay	cunay	akhriyay	joogsaday	qabtay
Iyagaa (They)	keenay	cunay	akhriyay	joogsaday	qabtay

Table 3: Conjugation Paradigms for the Past Tense

A few cursory observations can be made. First, the conjugations of *<keen>* and *<cun>* are regular and predictable, as mentioned in 2.0. The interfix *<-t->* that is characteristic of the third person feminine subject is changed to *<-s>* in the past tense of *<akhri>*.

Another important change worthy of attention is the one that takes place between the root and the past tense suffix when $C_1VC_2C_3V$ verbs are involved. In both *<joogso>* and *qabso>*, C_3 corresponds to /s/. The addition of the past tense suffix *<-ay>* to /s/ causes the latter to change to /t/, /d/, or /n/. There is probably an archiphoneme at play in the underlying representation. This archiphoneme has the feature [+alveolar] because all four segments form a natural class. However, since morphophonology is not the focus on this paper, we will set these considerations aside.

8.0 Verb Paradigms in the Future Tense
The future tense expresses an action or an event that has not yet taken place. Both Somali and English use an auxiliary to conjugate verbs in the future tense. The auxiliary verb in English is <will>. Its counterpart in Somali is *<doon>* according to Saaed (1999:90). When used as a main verb, it means "wish" or "want." Just like the English "will," the Somali *<doon>* expresses an intention or desire not yet realized. In the conjugation, *<doon>* appears as *<doonaa>*. Etymologically, it can be construed as consisting of a root plus the present tense suffix *<-aa>*, as depicted in the word diagram below:
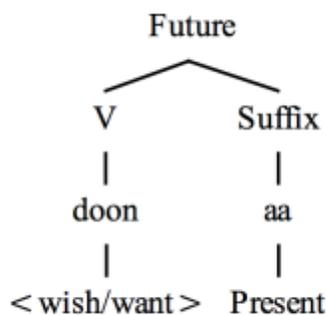
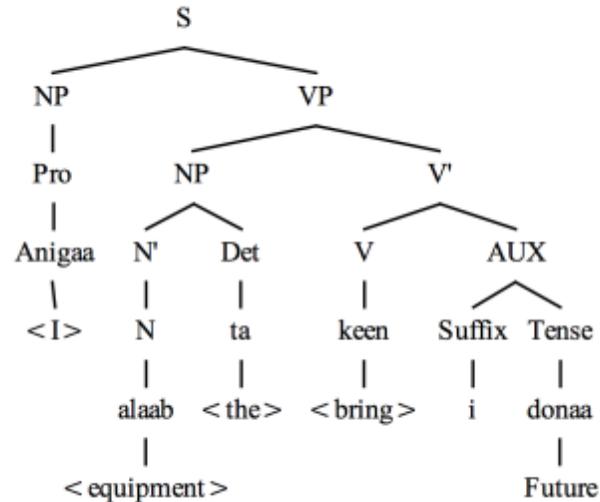Sentence 7 illustrates the use of the future:

Sentence 7:   Anigaa   alaab   ta   keen   *i*   *doonaa*
English gloss: I   equipment   the   bring Suffix   Future
English meaning: I will bring the equipment

When we examine Sentence 7 and the tree diagram, we see that in addition to *<doon>* or *<doonaa>*, an *<i>* is suffixed to *<keen>*. The paradigms in Table 4 also show that an *<-i>*, an *<-n>* or *<-an>* is added to the roots of verbs:

Pronouns	<keen> (bring)	<cun> (eat)	<akhri> (read)	<joogso> (stand)	<qabso> (catch)
Anigaa (I)	keeni doonaa	cuni doonaa	akhrin doonaa	joogsan doonaa	qaban doonaa
Adigaa (You)	keeni doonaa	cuni doonaa	akhrin doonaa	joogsan doonaa	qaban doonaa
Isagaa (He)	keeni doonaa	cuni doonaa	akhrin doonaa	joogsan doonaa	qaban doonaa
Iyadaa (She)	keeni doontaa	cuni doontaa	akhrin doontaa	joogsan doontaa	qaban doontaa
Anagaa (We)	keeni doonnaa	cuni doonnaa	akhrin doonnaa	joogsan doonnaa	qaban doonnaa
Idinkaa (You)	keeni doonaa	cuni doonaa	akhrin doonaa	joogsan doonaa	qaban doonaa
Iyagaa (They)	keeni doonaa	cuni doonaan	akhrin doonaa	joogsan doonaa	qaban doonaa

Table 4: Conjugation Paradigms for the Past Tense

When we pursue the analysis further, we see that the second syllable in *<qabso>* is deleted entirely and replaced by *<-an>*. This suggests that the future tense is a discontinuous morpheme. We therefore posit that the first element has four allomorphs, *<-i>, <-in>, <-n>* and *<-an>*. It is unclear at this point what the underlying morpheme is. We are not necessarily interested in finding out in this paper. Suffice it to posit that the morpheme structure formula that helps conjugate Somali verbs in the future tense is the following:

Future Tense $\rightarrow$ Verb + {-i, -in, -a, -n, -an} … doonaa

Finally, we note that the auxiliary *<doonaa>* agrees in gender with the third person singular female subject and changes into *<doontaa>*.

9.0 Summary

There are important similarities between English and Somali that ESL teachers can use as a launching pad to teach English conjugation to Somali students. First, the broad grammatical category of tense exists in both languages. Semantically, they express similar ideas. Morphologically, Somali and English have similar conjugations in the past tense and the future tense. For the past tense, both languages use an inflectional suffix. English uses *<-ed>* for regular verbs, while Somali used *<-ay>*. For the future tense, both resort to auxiliary verbs. English relies on *<will>* to encode future events, while Somali uses *<doon>* to do the same. There are also many differences, which are due to the richness of Somali morphophonological rules. Since English has a fairly straightforward conjugation system, Somali learners of English would find it relatively easy to learn to conjugate verbs in the present, the past, and the future. The future is the easiest of the three because *<will>* is invariable and goes with every verb in English.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Ettien Koffi, Ph.D. in linguistics from Indiana University, teaches linguistics at Saint Cloud State University, MN. Author of many peer-reviewed articles on various topics in linguistics and of four books: *Language Society in Biblical Times* (1996), *Paradigm Shift in Language Planning and Policy: Game Theoretic Solutions* (2012), *Applied English Syntax* (2010, 2015), and the *New Testament in Anyi Morofu* (2017), a task which took over 25 years. Specializing in acoustic phonetics, dialect variation, and emergent orthographies, his current research centers on speech acoustics of L2 English (within the Speech Intelligibility Framework), Central Minnesota English, and Anyi. He can be reached at enkoffi@stcloudstate.edu.

Shukria Omar graduated from St. Cloud State University with an MA in TESL. She is originally from Baladweyne in Somalia. She grew up in Yemen and came to the USA in 2001. She can be reached via email at: sbomar@stcloudstate.edu.

Hassan Yussuf is currently enrolled in the MA TESL program at St. Cloud State University. He grew up in Kenya. He is also a Somali-English and English-Somali interpreter in Central Minnesota. He can be reached via email at: hayussuf@stcloudstate.edu.

Dahir Mohamed is currently enrolled in the MA TESL program at St. Cloud State University. He grew up in Somalia and spent a considerable amount of time in Saudi Arabia before moving to the USA. He can be reached via email at: damo0101@stcloudstate.edu.

References

Koffi, Ettien. 2015. *Applied English Syntax: Foundations for Word, Phrase, and Sentence Analysis*. Second Edition. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

Laitin, David. 1992. *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Saeed, John. I. 1999. *Somali*. Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company.