

## PART I

### Tigrinya and its Alphabet

Tigrinya uses a special writing system called the “Ge‘ez” (or “Ethiopic”) alphabet (or syllabary). The earliest inscription in Ge‘ez is without vowels. However, at some point in the distant past, the vowels of the language began to be written by way of small additions or modifications to the consonants preceding them. Thus, although Arabic and Hebrew are usually written without vowels (or “unpointed”), languages that use the Ge‘ez alphabet are always vowelled.

The normal syllable in Tigrinya is considered to be a consonant followed by a vowel. If a consonant ends a syllable, the sixth, neutral vowel is used with it. Most consonants are written in seven slightly different forms corresponding to the traditional seven vowels. The next table shows the vowels, including their traditional names. The system of vowels applied to all the consonants is exhibited in the alphabet chart, commonly called “ha hu” after the first two letters.

name	order	sound	transliteration	example
ገዕዝ	1st	ě as in <i>den</i> (or <i>ǎ</i> )	e (or a)	ሀ ha/he
ካዕብ	2nd	ū as in <i>lute</i>	u	ሀሁ hu
ገላሳ	3rd	ē as in <i>sea</i>	i	ሀሁ hi
ራሳይ	4th	ǎ as in <i>father</i>	a	ሀሁ ha
ኢየሱስ	5th	ie as in <i>Vietnam</i>	ie	ሀሁ hie
ህይደት	6th	(neutral or null)	(not fixed)	ሀ h
ሳይን	7th	ō as in <i>vote</i>	o	ሀሀ ho

The alphabet chart shows the Ge'ez letters including some that are rarely seen. The column of pronunciations is given as a help for using the chart and memorizing the letters. The actual sounds of the letters, not to mention how to read them in context, can only be learned from an informant.

The traditional sound of the first vowel is *ě*, but for a few letters the first vowel was sounded *ǎ*, the same as the 4th vowel. These exceptions were notably **ሀ**, **ሐ**, and **አ**. Recently in Eritrea, and in the field especially, the alphabet has been written in a more consistent way, so that in the 1st form these three characters are given the vowel *ě*, like the other letters. This means that the letter **አ** is now being displaced by the 4th form **አ** in many words. The pronunciation of the words is the same in the old spelling and in the new. For example, **አሎ** and **አሎ** are the same word pronounced the same way, but the spelling with **አ** is preferred.

The letters as normally printed conform closely to those produced in handwriting done by scribes with calligraphic pens that vary the width of the strokes according to their direction. Vertical strokes are wide and horizontal ones are narrow. Handwriting done with other pens or pencils does not reproduce this feature and is not standardized.



ጠ	ጡ	ጢ	ጣ	ጤ	ጥ	ጦ	ፐ plosive
ጨ	ጨፍ	ጨሊ	ጨጌ	ጨፍፍ	ጨፎ	ጨፎ	ch plosive
ጳ	ጳ'	ጳፊ	ጳፊ	ጳፊ	ጳፊ	ጳፊ	p
ጸ	ጸ'	ጸፊ	ጸፊ	ጸፊ	ጸፊ	ጸፊ	ts plosive
ፀ	ፀ'	ፀፊ	ፀፊ	ፀፊ	ፀፊ	ፀፊ	ጸ old style
ፈ	ፈ'	ፈፊ	ፈፊ	ፈፊ	ፈፊ	ፈፊ	f
ፐ	ፐ'	ፐፊ	ፐፊ	ፐፊ	ፐፊ	ፐፊ	p
ፕ	ፕ'	ፕፊ	ፕፊ	ፕፊ	ፕፊ	ፕፊ	v
ከ		ከፊ	ከፊ	ከፊ	ከፊ	ከፊ	k <sup>w</sup>
ኸ		ኸፊ	ኸፊ	ኸፊ	ኸፊ	ኸፊ	kh <sup>w</sup>
ቂ		ቂፊ	ቂፊ	ቂፊ	ቂፊ	ቂፊ	q <sup>w</sup>
ቋ		ቋፊ	ቋፊ	ቋፊ	ቋፊ	ቋፊ	q <sup>w</sup> laryngeal
ገ		ገፊ	ገፊ	ገፊ	ገፊ	ገፊ	g <sup>w</sup>
ገ		ገፊ	ገፊ	ገፊ	ገፊ	ገፊ	h <sup>w</sup>

ሷ	ሸ	ሹ	ሺ	ሻ	ሼ	other forms
ሽ	ሾ	ሿ	ሺ	ሻ	ሼ	
ሽ	ሾ	ሿ	ሺ	ሻ	ሼ	

፩	፪	፫	፬	፭	፮	፯	፰	፱	፲	numerals
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
፲	፳	፵	፶	፷	፸	፹	፺	፻	፻	
10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	

:	:-	::	⋮	÷	≡	punctuation
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ሰዋሰው ትግርኛ  
TIGRINYA GRAMMAR



Edited by  
John Mason



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