

# **Sociolinguistic Survey Report of the Zay Language Area**

**Written by: Simon Gardner and Ralph Siebert**

**SIL International  
2001**



# Contents

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Acknowledgments

## 2 Sociolinguistic Information on Zay

### 2.1 Update: name, location, and population estimates

### 2.2 The interviewees

### 2.3 Evaluation of responses to sociolinguistic questionnaires

#### 2.3.1 Language use

#### 2.3.2 Monolingualism/Multilingualism throughout three generations

#### 2.3.3 Other aspects of language use

#### 2.3.4 Language attitudes

#### 2.3.5 Interest in the development of Zay

## Appendix A. Update of the Population Map

## Appendix B. Update of Common Vocabulary Percentages (Swadesh figures)

## 1 Introduction

This report presents findings from the second S.L.L.E. survey trip to the Zway area.<sup>1</sup>

It was carried out between March 28 and April 1, 1994, by Simon Gardner, Ato Awel Mohamed and Ralph Siebert. The S.L.L.E. team member K. Wedekind helped us during the initial stage of the survey. Letters of support for the surveys of the Zway areas had been issued by the Oromiyaa Offices both in A. Ababa as well as Nazareth (cf. S.L.L.E. Linguistic Report 14).

The main purpose of this second trip was to collect sociolinguistic data on bilingualism, language use, and language attitudes. Other purposes included the following:

- recording the word lists on tape (unfortunately this failed, because of some technical problems),
- gaining more insights in the inherent relations between the languages Zay, Silt'e and Aderi (Harari), and
- gathering more data on the Zay vowel system as compared to Silt'e.

### 1.1 Acknowledgments

The survey team gratefully acknowledges the help which was given by the administrative offices concerned.

In addition, we should like to thank:

- Ato Tsegaye Tesemma of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society who rearranged his own work schedule in such a way as to be able to give time to the team, and to be of maximum help to the survey work.
- Ato Bonsa Tola—who is well-known and warmly welcomed in all of the Zway areas—helped the survey team by establishing good contacts with several knowledgeable individuals. Ato Bonsa Tola also helped us with information such as population figures of the Zay speaking areas.

---

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this report appeared as “Second S.L.L.E. Survey of the Zay Language Area”, Survey of Little-known Languages of Ethiopia (S.L.L.E.). Linguistic Report 17, March 1994. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies and Summer Institute of Linguistics.

## **2 Sociolinguistic Information on Zay**

### **2.1 Update: Name, Location, and Population Estimates**

We were informed that the term “Zway” is used to refer to the Lake and to the town, while “Zay” refers to the people and their language (also: Zayiñña). The other name widely used, “Lak'i” or “Lak'iñña”, was mentioned only twice during this trip; it seems to be used by Oromos and other non-Zay people.

All subjects interviewed said that only one variety of Zay is spoken and that there are no dialect variations of any kind.

The map in appendix A (based on the sketch of S.L.L.E. Report 14 p.1) shows the areas where the Zay language is spoken, with the Zay population figures as updated by Ato Bonsa Tola.

### **2.2 The interviewees**

We administered sociolinguistic questionnaires to thirteen people, all of them males. Their ages ranged from seventeen to seventy years. Their educational background varied from no education to 12th grade. Due to various circumstances, it was not possible to interview women as we had planned to do. During the initial survey of the Zway area, the Sociolinguistic Questionnaire had been filled in by one individual from the S/E shores of the lake. These data were included with the set of questionnaires administered on this trip, which makes for a total of fourteen interviewees.

Among the interviewees there were no monolingual speakers of Zay. As far as their professions are concerned, all of them were farmers and/or fishermen. The interviews were conducted in the towns of Zway, Boch'eessa (near Zway), and Mak'della (near Mek'i); one interview from Herera Mendoyo was included.

## 2.3 Evaluation of responses to sociolinguistic questionnaires

### 2.3.1 Language use

**Table 1. Age and educational levels of respondents**

Age Group	Sex		Education*	Literacy and Elementary Sch.	High School	Total
	M	W				
14–30	4	0	1	1	2	4
31–45	3	0	0	1	2	3
46–60	4	0	4	0	0	4
60+	3	0	3	0	0	3
Total	14	0	8	2	4	14
Percentage	100	0	57	14	29	100

\*Those with “some” or “good” education are literate in Amharic.

**Table 2. Native language of the respondent**

Languages	Zay	Total
Number	14	14
Percentage	100	100

**Table 3. Parents’ language of the respondent**

Languages	Father:		Mother:	
	Zay	Total	Zay	Total
Number	14	14	13*	13
Percentage	100	100	100	100

\*One respondent did not answer this question.

**Table 4. First language of the respondent’s spouse/s and children**

Languages	Spouse/s*			Children**			Total
	Zay	Oromo	Total	Zay	Oromo	Oromo/Amharic	
Number	9	3	12	5	5	1	11
Percentage	75	25	100	45.5	45.5	9	100

\* Two respondents are not married.

\*\*Three respondents have no children.

**Comments on tables 2–4:**

The use of Zay as a native language is dominant only in the generation of the interviewees (though 29 percent are younger than thirty years and 50 percent are younger than forty-five). As a language to be passed on to the children, Orominya is nowadays of equal importance to Zay.

**Table 5. Languages within the family (father, mother, husband/wife, siblings)\***

	with father**:			with mother:			
Languages	Zay	Z/O	Z/A	Z	Z/O/A	O	O/A
Number	8	5	1	13		1	
Percentage	57	36	7	93		7	

	with siblings:				with spouse***:			
Languages	Zay	Z/O**	Z/O/A	O	Z	Z/O/A	O	O/A
Number	6	4	2	2	6	3	2	1
Percentage	43	29	14	14	50	25	17	8

\* Abbreviations: A Amharic, O Oromo, Z Zay

\*\* One respondent said he switches to Zay when he wants to keep something secret.

\*\*\*Only twelve of the respondents are married.

**Table 6. Languages used with the children\***

Languages	Zay	Z/A/O	Z/O	Z/A	A	Total
Number	2	5	2	1	1	11
Percentage	18	45	18	9	9	99

\*Three respondents have no children.

**Comments on tables 5–6:**

These tables reveal a gradual language shift which is of interest: While Zay is the language predominantly used when communicating with the parents, Orominya is used, in addition, when communicating with siblings and spouses; but almost 50 percent of the interviewees' children learn three languages: Zay, Oromo and Amharic.

**Table 7. Languages used with friends**

Languages	Zay	Z/A	O	Z/O/A	Total
Number	1	1	3	9	14
Percentage	7	7	21	64	99

**Table 8. Languages used in the village**

Languages	Zay	Z/O	O	Z/A/O	A	Total
Number	3	2	4	4	1	14
Percentage	21	14	29	29	7	100

**Table 9. Languages used with the elders of the village**

Languages	Zay	Z/A	Z/O	Z/O/A	Total
Number	10	1	2	1	14
Percentage	71	7	14	7	99

**Comments on tables 7–9:**

The tables on language use in communal life confirm that elderly Zay people (especially in the countryside) are primarily addressed in Zay, while language use in the village and with friends reflect the mixed population in the villages.

**Table 10. Languages used in town and with the administrators of the district**

Languages	Amharic	Oromo	Oromo/Amharic	Total
Number	3	2	9	14
Percentage	21	14	64	99

**Comments on table 10:**

In town, where matters of administration are concerned, the use of Oromo and Amharic is dominant.

**2.3.2 Monolingualism/Multilingualism throughout three generations**

To get some insights in the diachronic (historical) perspective of mono-/multilingualism it is helpful to list the language(s) mastered (A) by the respondents' parents (first generation), (B) by the siblings (second

generation), and (C) by the children (third generation), where each group is evaluated by the respondent himself:

**Table 11. Languages spoken by the parents/siblings/children of the respondents—as evaluated by the respondents (number of individuals in brackets)**

	by fathers:	mothers:	siblings:	children:
(very) good:	Or.(10) Amh.(4)	Or.(6) Amh.(5)	Or.(9) Amh.(6)	Amh.(6) Or.(5)
fair:	Amharic (2)	Oromo (3)		
low:	Amharic (1)	Oromo (1)		
no other language:	(3)	(3)		

**Comments on table 11:**

Only three respondents come from a monolingual family. Despite this fact, two of them have learned to speak Oromo well, despite lack of any formal education. However, the siblings of all three respondents are monolingual.

The tradition of acquiring only one language is rapidly disappearing among Zay children. In other words: multilingualism in the Zway area has become very common nowadays.

**Table 12. Self-evaluation of the respondents concerning their proficiency in those languages:**

very good:	Oromo (13 respondents), Amharic (10)
fair:	Oromo (1), Amharic (2)
low:	Amharic (2), English (1)

**2.3.3 Other aspects of language use**

- All of the subjects were adherents of the Orthodox Church. The languages of religious issues, for both intimate and public occasions, are Amharic and Zay.
- Emotions (e.g., dreams, anger) are expressed in Zay and Oromo.
- Most subjects use Zay or Amharic for counting. Two of them use Amharic when counting money, but Oromo when counting other things.

- As already mentioned above, one respondent said that, when speaking to his brother he will switch to Zay if he wants to keep things secret.

#### **2.3.4 Language attitudes**

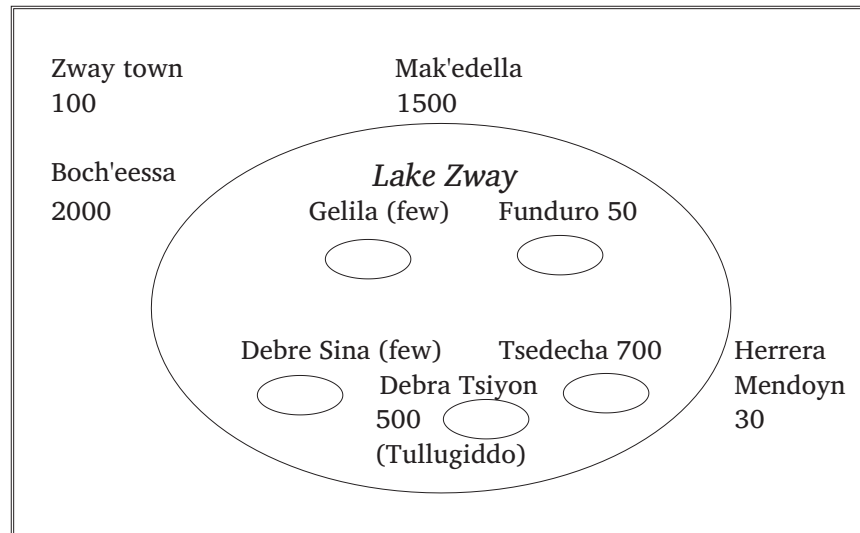
- Mother tongue: The Zay people have a positive attitude towards their mother tongue. They state that their language will be used for many generations and that it will not be forgotten. Still, the question whether young people now speak Zay less and less was disputed by only one (!) subject, while seven interviewees confirmed that some children, even though they “hear and understand” Zay, will not use it.
- Amharic/Oromo: The attitude towards both languages is positive. Living together with Amhara and Oromo people is considered a matter of course; intermarriage is accepted widely. Amharic has a positive image as language of instruction in the schools.

#### **2.3.5 Interest in the development of Zay**

All interviewees expressed a high interest in the development of their language and said they would eventually buy publications in the Zay language, although only one subject specified areas he was particularly interested in: religion and music.

A Zay radio program would be welcomed very much. All interviewees, except two men, declared to be willing to attend literacy classes themselves and to send their children to such classes in order for them to learn how to read and write Zay. In addition to Zay, the parents said they would like their children to learn Amharic, Oromo, and English.

**Appendix A**  
**Update of the Population Map**



Zay Speaking Areas and Population Estimates  
based on the sketch by Beriso Sado Bedecha (Report, Jan. 1994)  
updated by Ato Tsegaye Tesemma (Interview, April 1994)

**Appendix B**  
**Update of Common Vocabulary Percentages (Swadesh figures)**

The percentage of basic vocabulary which the closely related languages Harari, Silt'e, and Zay have in common with each other and with Amharic, is displayed in the following chart. According to the short survey of January 1994 (as presented in the S.L.L.E. Report No. 14), Zay shares 60 percent of its basic vocabulary with Harari (Adere), and 59 percent with Silt'e. According to M. L. Bender 1971, the figures are higher: 61 percent and 70 percent respectively. To some extent this is explained by the increasing number of loans from Oromo (especially in Herera Mendoyo, where the 1994 Zay list was taken), and by the differences in the word lists (98 items vs. 320).

**Percentage Matrix**

Amharic				
49	Harari			
38	55	Silt'e		
42	60	59	Zay 1994	
51	61	70	89	Zay 1971

Note that the percentage figures are based on a small number of comparisons (cf. the tally matrix: between forty-seven and 179 pairs of words).

**Tally Matrix**

Amharic				
47	Harari			
120	52	Silt'e		
126	54	179	Zay 1994	
49	58	67	81	Zay 1997