

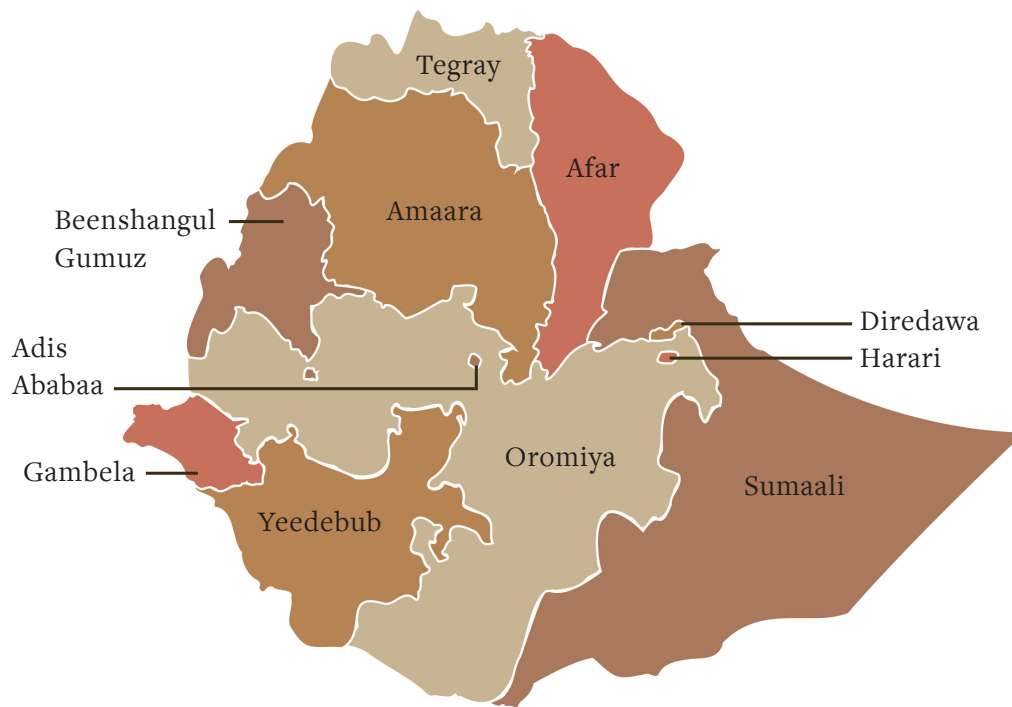
The Signs of Ethiopian Identity

By Alex Bellos

SOLUTIONS

Puzzle 1

- a. 10
- b. 4
- c. 8
- d. 7
- e. 5
- f. 9
- g. 2
- h. 1
- i. 11
- j. 3
- k. 6



This is a code-breaking problem. We're going to look for patterns in the Ge'ez, and for similar patterns in the transliterations. There are two names that are each made up of two words: Adis Ababaa, and Beenshangul Gumuz. It's likely these are b) and h), which are the only two Amharic names with two words. It's a good bet that Adis Ababaa is h), since both Amharic words start with the same syllable. (And that helps us deduce that the script reads left to right.) It is also clear that each symbol is not a letter, but rather a single sound or syllable.

If አዲስ አበባ is Adis Ababaa, then we might interpret አዲስ as "a-di-s," and thus አ is "a." This means that g) and j) are Afar and Amaara, but we don't know which is which. Note that c) does not begin with a አ, but with a ኦ, which is very similar and probably has a similar sound. A likely candidate is the "o" in Oromiya.

Let's look at Beenshangul Gumuz. The symbol ግ appears twice, once as the penultimate symbol of Beenshangul, and once as the first symbol in Gumuz. That is likely to be a "g" sound, possibly "gu," which is repeated in both words. We see that another name, Gambela, begins with a "g." No other word begins with ግ, but ግ is close, and is the first symbol in k). Let's run with it.

Now we are getting a sense of how the script might work. The symbols are syllables (or sounds), in which each consonant has a particular shape and vowels are represented by small elements tweaked onto that shape.

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Another repeated element is ሞ, which is the middle symbol of both f) and j). We know that j) is either Afar or Amaara. We're then looking for another word that contains that middle symbol and the middle part of Afar or Amaara. There's only one candidate, Sumaali. This means that Sumaali is f), Amaara is j), and Afar is g).

Amaara ends with ረ, a symbol that also appears in d). This must be "ra," and thus d) is Harari. Our hypothesis about symbols expressing consonants, with small modifications changing the vowel sounds, is being confirmed. For example, we can see that "ra" and "ri" are ረ are ሪ. Also, we assumed that ሞ is "maa," so therefore it is likely that ሞጊ is the only other "m" sound left, "mi." This makes Oromiya c), just as we suspected!

This leaves us with Diredawa, Tegray, and Yeedeubub—and a), e), and i). The "ra" appears in a), which must be Tegray. The first and third symbols are similar in e), which makes it likely it is the repeating "d" sound in Diredawa, leaving i) to be Yeedeubub.

Puzzle 2

On to the names of European countries: Once we know the sounds from the European regions, we can phonetically deduce each of these. The first (አይርላንድ) would produce a sound like a-y-r-l-n-de: Ireland.

- i. Ireland
- ii. Germany
- iii. Russia
- iv. Britain
- v. Switzerland