Traditional and Innovative ways of teaching Amharic Fidäl (Script)

At a glance, learning the Amharic *Fidäl* can undoubtedly be a very daunting task for an adult learner. If my experience as an Amharic teacher within a university setting is anything to goes by, probably that is one of their concerns when students join my classes. This is because, unlike English, Amharic has got 233 syllables (as opposed to 'alphabets'). That is to say, every time one of the seven vowels of Amharic (ä, u, i, a, e, ï and o) is added to a consonant, the shape of the *Fidäl* changes to reflect the change. And to make things worse, there are exceptions to the rule (for example the English equivalent of the alphabet 'H' never takes the Amharic vowel 'ä') and 69 of the 233 *Fidäls* have a counterpart that sounds exactly the same but are depicted by different symbols for historical reasons. They are known by the term 'homophonous' and I have highlighted them for the benefit of my readers in the full table of the Amharic *Fidäl* below.

1st order		2nd order		3rd orders		4th order		5th order		6th order		7th order	
ha	ሀ	hu	ሁ	hi	ሂ	ha	ሃ	he	ሄ	h(ï)	ህ	ho	ሆ
lä	ለ	lu	ሉ	li	ሊ	la	ላ	le	ሌ	l(ï)	ል	lo	ሎ
ha	ሐ	hu	ሑ	hi	ሒ	ha	ሓ	he	ሔ	h(ï)	ሕ	ho	ሖ
mä	መ	mu	ሙ	mi	ሚ	ma	ማ	me	ሜ	m(ï)	ም	mo	ሞ
sä	ሠ	su	ሡ	si	ሢ	sa	ሣ	se	ሤ	s(ï)	ሥ	so	ሦ
rä	ረ	ru	ሩ	ri	ሪ	ra	ራ	re	ሬ	r(ï)	ር	ro	ሮ
sä	ሰ	su	ሱ	si	ሲ	sa	ሳ	se	ሴ	s(ï)	ስ	so	ሶ
šä	ሸ	šu	ሹ	ši	ሺ	ša	ሻ	še	ሼ	š(ï)	ሽ	šo	ሾ
qä	ቀ	qu	ቁ	qi	ቂ	qa	ቃ	qe	ቄ	q(ï)	ቅ	qo	ቆ
bä	በ	bu	ቡ	bi	ቢ	ba	ባ	be	ቤ	b(ï)	ብ	bo	ቦ
tä	ተ	tu	ቱ	ti	ቲ	ta	ታ	te	ቴ	t(ï)	ት	to	ቶ
čä	ቸ	ču	ቹ	či	ቺ	ča	ቻ	če	ቼ	č(ï)	ች	čo	ቾ
ha	ኀ	hu	ኁ	hi	ኂ	ha	ኃ	he	ኄ	h(ï)	ኅ	ho	ኆ
nä	ነ	nu	ኑ	ni	ኒ	na	ና	ne	ኔ	n(ï)	ን	no	ኖ
ňä	ኘ	ňu	ኙ	ňi	ኚ	ňa	ኛ	ňe	ኜ	ň(ï)	ኝ	ňo	ኞ
a	አ	u	ኡ	i	ኢ	a	ኣ	e	ኤ	ï	እ	o	ኦ
kä	ከ	ku	ኩ	ki	ኪ	ka	ካ	ke	ኬ	k(ï)	ክ	ko	ኮ
hä	ኸ	hu	ኹ	hi	ኺ	ha	ኻ	he	ኼ	h(ï)	ኽ	ho	ኾ
wä	ወ	wu	ዉ	wi	ዊ	wa	ዋ	we	ዌ	w(ï)	ው	wo	ዎ
a	ዐ	u	ዑ	i	ዒ	a	ዓ	e	ዔ	ï	ዕ	o	ዖ
zä	ዘ	zu	ዙ	zi	ዚ	za	ዛ	ze	ዜ	z(ï)	ዝ	zo	ዞ
žä	ዠ	žu	ዡ	ži	ዢ	ža	ዣ	že	ዤ	ž(ï)	ዥ	žo	ዦ
yä	የ	yu	ዩ	yi	ዪ	ya	ያ	ye	ዬ	y(ï)	ይ	yo	ዮ
dä	ደ	du	ዱ	di	ዲ	da	ዳ	de	ዴ	d(ï)	ድ	do	ዶ
jä	ጀ	ju	ጁ	ji	ጂ	ja	ጃ	je	ጄ	j(ï)	ጅ	jo	ጆ
gä	ገ	gu	ጉ	gi	ጊ	ga	ጋ	ge	ጌ	g(ï)	ግ	go	ጎ
t'ä	ጠ	t'u	ጡ	t'i	ጢ	t'a	ጣ	t'e	ጤ	t'(ï)	ጥ	t'o	ጦ
č'ä	ጨ	č'u	ጩ	č'i	ጪ	č'a	ጫ	č'e	ጬ	č'(ï)	ጭ	č'o	ጮ
p'ä	ጰ	p'u	ጱ	p'i	ጲ	p'a	ጳ	p'e	ጴ	p'(ï)	ጵ	p'o	ጶ
s'ä	ጸ	s'u	ጹ	s'i	ጺ	s'a	ጻ	s'e	ጼ	s'(ï)	ጽ	s'o	ጾ
s'ä	ፀ	s'u	ፁ	s'i	ፂ	s'a	ፃ	s'e	ፄ	s'(ï)	ፅ	s'o	ፆ
fä	ፈ	fu	ፉ	fi	ፊ	fa	ፋ	fe	ፌ	f(ï)	ፍ	fo	ፎ

pä	ፐ	pu	ፑ	pi	ፒ	pa	ፓ	pe	ፔ	p(ï)	ፕ	po	ፖ
vä	ቨ	vu	ቩ	vi	ቪ	va	ቫ	ve	ቬ	v(ï)	ቭ	vo	ቮ

The question, then, is in these days of information overload how do you teach the Amharic *Fidäl* in such a way that the learners will find it easy to learn and remember? In this short article, I will try briefly show the traditional and innovative ways the *Fidäl* was taught .

Traditional Method

Traditionally, the priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (singular= *Qes*; plural= *Qesočč*) were responsible for teaching the *Fidäl* as a way of supplementing their otherwise meagre income whilst making a very positive contribution of preparing the preschool children in preparation for their subsequent formal education. Hence the priest-led pre-schools are known in Amharic as *Qes Timihïrt Bet* (=The school of the priests). The priests teach the *Fidäl* through a rhyme. That's how most Ethiopians, now in their middle ages, learn reading and writing. The method is outdated as it is creative. Children are expected to look into the *Fidäl* table in front of them as they are singing them. Probably in two or three months' time, all the *Fidäls* are well memorised and the rhyme would be imprinted in memory of the students for the rest of their lives.

Innovative Methods

National Literacy Campaign of Ethiopia

During the National Literacy Campaign of Ethiopia in the 70s and 80s, a new method of teaching the *Fidäl* to the vast majority of Ethiopians was invented. The target learners of this literacy campaign were adults who could not write or read. The officials of the Literacy Campaign organised the Amharic *Fidäls* mostly around the *Fidäls* 'bä' (በ) and some after 'nä' (ነ) and 'dä (ደ). What doesn't naturally come under these *Fidäls* were classified as 'Others'. Since the 6th order *Fidäls* are generally irregular and do not easily lend themselves to systematisation, they were left out initially to be introduced only after the remaining *Fidäls* were mastered. For the sake of illustration, let's see how some three *Fidäls* were derived from 'bä' (በ). The same can be done for other *Fidäls*.

bä	በ	bu	ቡ	bi	ቢ	ba	ባ	be	ቤ	bo	ቦ

Teaching 'Sä' (ሰ) is after 'bä' (በ) is a question of adding a 'horn'. If a horizontal bar is added to 'Sä' (ሰ), the result would be 'šä' (ሸ). Care should be taken not to confuse vä (ቨ) with 'šä' (ሸ). The former doesn't have the vertical line ('horn') before the horizontal bar ('hat').

sä	ሰ	su	ሱ	si	ሲ	sa	ሳ	se	ሴ	so	ሶ
šä	ሸ	šu	ሹ	ši	ሺ	ša	ሻ	še	ሼ	šo	ሾ

| vä | ሷ̄ | vu | ሷ̄ | vi | ሷ̄ | va | ሿ̄ | ve | ሷ̄ | vo | ሷ̄ |

'T'ä' (ጠ) is treated as two 'bä's joining together (i.e. በ+በ=ጠ). And, obviously, č' (ጨ) is derived from 'T'ä' (ጠ). The same logic was applied with respect to 'ha' (ሐ)፡ two 'bä's, joining together, say, as if, as they were leaning against a wall (በ+ⵑ+በ= ሐ). Hence,

| t'ä | ጠ | t'u | ጡ | t'i | ጢ | t'a | ጣ | t'e | ጤ | t'o | ጦ |
| č'ä | ጨ | č'u | ጩ | č'i | ጪ | č'a | ጫ | č'e | ጬ | č'o | ጮ |

| Ha | ሐ | hu | ሑ | hi | ሒ | ha | ሓ | he | ሔ | ho | ሐ |

The other 'ha's (ሀ) was treated as derivatives of 'bä' (በ) albeit upside down. Ha (ኀ), however, is linked to 'nä' (ነ) as is ñä (ኘ). The same logic can be extended to the other *Fidäls*.

Colloquial Amharic

The method I'm currently using is the one used by Professor David Appleyard in his book *Colloquial Amharic* (London: Routledge, 1995). I'm not sure if the idea originates from Appleyard but it is very useful and easy to remember at the same time. Accordingly, all the Amharic *Fidäls* are classified in five groups based on their shapes. First order *Fidäls* are taught first. That reduces the 233 characters to a manageable number of 33. Then slight modifications will be made for the other orders except the 6th. The sixth order *Fidäls* are taught separately.

Fidäls with one leg

qä	ቀ	qu	ቁ	qi	ቂ	qa	ቃ	qe	ቄ	q(ï)	ቅ	qo	ቆ
tä	ተ	tu	ቱ	ti	ቲ	ta	ታ	te	ቴ	t(ï)	ት	to	ቶ
čä	ቸ	ču	ቹ	či	ቺ	ča	ቻ	če	ቼ	č(ï)	ች	čo	ቾ
ha	ሀ	hu	ሁ	hi	ሂ	ha	ሃ	he	ሄ	h(ï)	ህ	ho	ሆ
nä	ነ	nu	ኑ	ni	ኒ	na	ና	ne	ኔ	n(ï)	ን	no	ኖ
ñä	ኘ	ñu	ኙ	ñi	ኚ	ña	ኛ	ñe	ኜ	ñ(ï)	ኝ	ño	ኞ
yä	የ	yu	ዩ	yi	ዪ	ya	ያ	ye	ዬ	y(ï)	ይ	yo	ዮ
gä	ገ	gu	ጉ	gi	ጊ	ga	ጋ	ge	ጌ	g(ï)	ግ	go	ጎ
pä	ፐ	pu	ፑ	pi	ፒ	pa	ፓ	pe	ፔ	p(ï)	ፕ	po	ፖ

Fidäls with two legs

lä	ለ	lu	ሉ	li	ሊ	la	ላ	le	ሌ	l(ï)	ል	lo	ሎ
sä	ሰ	su	ሱ	si	ሲ	sa	ሳ	se	ሴ	s(ï)	ስ	so	ሶ
šä	ሸ	šu	ሹ	ši	ሺ	ša	ሻ	še	ሼ	š(ï)	ሽ	šo	ሾ
bä	በ	bu	ቡ	bi	ቢ	ba	ባ	be	ቤ	b(ï)	ብ	bo	ቦ
a	አ	u	ኡ	i	ኢ	a	ኣ	e	ኤ	ï	እ	o	ኦ

kä	ħ	ku	ħ⁺	ki	ħ.	ka	ħ	ke	ħ	k(ï)	ħ	ko	ħ
hä	ሽ	hu	ሹ	hi	ሺ.	ha	ሻ	he	ሼ	h(ï)	ሽ	ho	ሾ
zä	ዘ	zu	ዙ	zi	ዚ	za	ዛ	ze	ዜ	z(ï)	ዝ	zo	ዞ
žä	ዠ	žu	ዡ	ži	ዢ	ža	ዣ	že	ዤ	ž(ï)	ዥ	žo	ዦ
dä	ደ	du	ዱ	di	ዲ	da	ዳ	de	ዴ	d(ï)	ድ	do	ዶ
jä	ጀ	ju	ጁ	ji	ጂ	ja	ጃ	je	ጄ	j(ï)	ጅ	jo	ጆ
p'ä	ጰ	p'u	ጱ	p'i	ጲ	p'a	ጳ	p'e	ጴ	p'(ï)	ጵ	p'o	ጶ
s'ä	ጸ	s'u	ጹ	s'i	ጺ	s'a	ጻ	s'e	ጼ	s'(ï)	ጽ	s'o	ጾ
vä	ቨ	vu	ቩ	vi	ቪ	va	ቫ	ve	ቬ	v(ï)	ቭ	vo	ቮ

Fidäls with three legs

ha	ሐ	hu	ሑ	hi	ሒ	ha	ሓ	he	ሔ	h(ï)	ሕ	ho	ሖ
t'ä	ጠ	t'u	ጡ	t'i	ጢ	t'a	ጣ	t'e	ጤ	t'(ï)	ጥ	t'o	ጦ
č'ä	ጨ	č'u	ጩ	č'i	ጪ	č'a	ጫ	č'e	ጬ	č'(ï)	ጭ	č'o	ጮ

Fidäls with round bottoms

1ˢᵗ order		2ⁿᵈ order		3ʳᵈ orders		4ᵗʰ order		5ᵗʰ order		6ᵗʰ order		7ᵗʰ order	
ha	ህ	hu	ሁ	hi	ሂ	ha	ሃ	he	ሄ	h(ï)	ህ	ho	ሆ
mä	መ	mu	ሙ	mi	ሚ	ma	ማ	me	ሜ	m(ï)	ም	mo	ሞ
sä	ሠ	su	ሡ	si	ሢ	sa	ሣ	se	ሤ	s(ï)	ሥ	so	ሦ
wä	ወ	wu	ዉ	wi	ዊ	wa	ዋ	we	ዌ	w(ï)	ው	wo	ዎ
a	አ	u	ኡ	i	ኢ	a	ኣ	e	ኤ	ï	እ	o	ኦ
s'ä	ፀ	s'u	ፁ	s'i	ፂ	s'a	ፃ	s'e	ፄ	s'(ï)	ፅ	s'o	ፆ

Fidäls with flat bottoms

1ˢᵗ order		2ⁿᵈ order		3ʳᵈ orders		4ᵗʰ order		5ᵗʰ order		6ᵗʰ order		7ᵗʰ order	
rä	ረ	ru	ሩ	ri	ሪ	ra	ራ	re	ሬ	r(ï)	ር	ro	ሮ
fä	ፈ	fu	ፉ	fi	ፊ	fa	ፋ	fe	ፌ	f(ï)	ፍ	fo	ፎ