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9/13/23

Amharic Language Study Report

Last summer, I was granted the opportunity to learn the Amharic language virtually with a private tutor for six weeks while living on campus. Amharic is an Afro-Asiatic Semitic language spoken primarily in Ethiopia. Every week, for two hours, I met with my tutor, Tersit, learning an entirely new alphabet, building vocabulary, practicing conversational skills, reading and writing. Over the course of our time together, Tersit evaluated my learning with homework, short pop quizzes (on the alphabet and vocabulary), one midterm, and a final exam. Although my Amharic language abilities remain in their early stages, these six weeks working with Tersit provided me with an essential foundation of tools to continue practicing my language fluency.

Learning Amharic was especially important to me for a number of reasons. The first, being because as a child of Ethiopian-Eritrean immigrants myself, a combination of Amharic, Tigrinya (an Eritrean Semitic language sharing the same alphabet), and English were spoken at home while growing up. Therefore, formally learning Amharic not only allowed me to communicate and connect with my family more intimately, but it also allowed me to strengthen my own relationship to my cultural heritage.

The second, regards my honors thesis in the department of History this year. More specifically, for my senior year at Bowdoin, I will be researching the origins and evolution of the Ethiopian Student Movement leading up to the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. Before commencing my language study this summer, I was also given the opportunity to visit Ethiopia (for the first time) to conduct preliminary research as a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow. In doing so, I explored two archives, met with various scholars, and visited numerous historical sites. These experiences impressed upon me the necessity for me to begin and master my Amharic language skills so as to effectively research Ethiopian history for both current and future works.

This leads me to my final reason for studying Amharic— which is for graduate school, as I am seeking to apply for Ph.D. programs upon graduation. In particular, I hope to research African Studies with a concentration in Ethiopian and Eritrean history and religion. As a result, this work— and my honors — requires extensive archival research capabilities in Amharic and will thus enhance my applications to graduate schools. Therefore, developing my ability to read and write in Amharic provided me with the skills to practice archival research in Amharic— particularly as it relates to the complexities of translation.