

Kevin Martín
University of California, Berkeley, USA

“*Ai bravi soldati d’Africa*”: Language Ideologies and Colonial Pedagogies in Italian-occupied East Africa (1887-1905)

My present study locates and examines the language ideologies that permeated the East African ex-colonies of Italy during its first twenty years of colonial rule (1887-1905) from within seven language manuals meant to teach Italian colonial soldiers and transplants Amharic, Tigrinya, Arabic and Tigrè. By drawing specific examples from these materials—materials which appear to remain largely unacknowledged in existing scholarship of this period—I demonstrate precisely how the colonial officials who created these manuals "located, identified and rationalized (the) sociolinguistic complexities" (Gal & Irvine 2000) that surrounded them. I identify examples of iconization, erasure and fractal recursivity within the prefaces, grammar lessons, and translation-based vocabulary sets to underscore how language and language education were key tools for Italy’s eventual colonial expansion in the Horn of Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, one that led to subsequent Italian colonies in Somalia (1908), Libya (1912), and Ethiopia (1936). I use this three-pronged semiotic framework to make visible the ways in which language was used as an insidious tool to exert power in Italy’s ex-colonies; I also aim to highlight the importance of language-related materials in studies of a nation’s colonial past.