

Blin Language Registered in the Unicode Standard

(By Tekie Alibekit)

The **ISO 639-2 Joint Advisory Committee**, which advises registration authorities and guides coding rule applications, has some established criterion, supplemented by its resolutions, for defining new languages in ISO 639-2. One of the main criteria for defining new languages in ISO 639-2 is presenting evidence, which proves that one agency holds at least 50 different documents in that language.

The Blin Language has fulfilled the criteria for defining new languages in ISO 639-2. The acting chairman of the ISO 639 Registration Authority's Joint Advisory Committee, **Mr. Håvard Hjulstad**, confirmed the approval of Blin, on his letter of October 27, 2003 to the different organs of the ISO 639, to include Blin on their lists.

This is a great victory for the Blin language, because it has gained recognition as one of the interesting languages of the world, which deserves support by computer software. It is also very good news for all Blin language speakers and others who are interested in the development of Blin and its writing system.

In addition to achieving recognition of Blin language in an international standard, recognition and support has also been accomplished for the Blin writing system. The Blin letters, or two characters of the Ge'ez alphabet, which are very crucial for the writing of distinct Blin sounds, are now included in the **International Unicode Standard System**. The Unicode Standard is a character coding system designed to support the worldwide interchange, processing and display of the written texts of diverse languages and technical disciplines of the modern world.

The two Blin letters of Ge'ez alphabet, which are now registered at the Unicode Standard, are the velar nasal stop "nge" (which has 7 forms) and its labialized sibling "ngwe" (which has 5 forms). In English, the sound of the nasal stop [ŋ] is written by combining two letters, n and g as in bang, sing, long etc. These two Blin letters were well documented as part of the Ge'ez alphabet in **Leo Reinisch's** 1882-1887 Blin books, and the present computer designed letters are copied from these old Blin documents. The regular "nge" letters were included in the Unicode 3.0 standard, but had the wrong shapes. The "ngwe" letters were not included however, so we undertook the effort to include the labialized letters and correct the shapes of the others.

The draft work for proposing and submitting Blin to be encoded in the Unicode Standard has started at the beginning of 2001, and the final proposal was submitted to the **ISO 10646 Working Group** in May 2004. The results we can now expect to see in the **Unicode 4.1** standard coming early next year.

Parallel with the drafting of the proposal, the work of computer design of the Blin letters according to their original shapes has been going on, and the letters are now perfectly designed as the original ones.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Daniel Yacob, who is a devoted researcher with the objective, as he put it, “to get Ge’ez on as many computers as possible, before the lack of Ge’ez causes English and other languages to corrode language and culture”. The computer design of the Blin letters was carried out by Daniel, who did it with my close co-operation, whereby I helped him by providing the original shapes of the Blin letters, from old Blin documents, and from time to time recommended to him to make the necessary changes until the letters were at last refined and polished to their original shape. Daniel also contributed greatly on drafting the proposal for encoding Blin for which we were both co-authors.

I would also like to thank Dr. Kiflemariam Hamde, for his encouragement of our work of designing the Blin letters, and joining us to submit the proposal for encoding Blin in the Unicode Standard.

The success of Blin, in fulfilling the criteria for defining new languages primarily depended on the availability of over 50 Blin documents. These Blin documents were collections of Blin literature, starting from the year 1857 up to 2001. Thus, my praise and admiration goes to everybody, who contributed to producing Blin literature. Especially I would like to mention the name of **Professor Leo Reinisch**, who laid the foundation of pioneering works in Blin literature, by writing four Blin books, including a Blin dictionary, from 1882 up to 1887. I would also like to mention the name of **Fr. Kiflemariam Fadega**, who initially inspired and encouraged the present Blin generation, to be aware in developing their own language, even though his poor health condition did not give him the opportunity to put his ambitious plans about Blin in action.

Blin is now registered on the **Register of codes for Representation of names of languages (library of Congress)**. The registry of codes can be viewed at the following web address: -

<http://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/englangn.html#ab>

A Blin translation of “What Is Unicode?”, “Unicode Wreni Gin?” is available at the Unicode Home Page, at the following web address:-
(Present Blin translation may be updated for some corrections.)

<http://www.unicode.org/standard/translations/blin.html>

Hopefully, the Blin letters will gradually be included in many Ge'ez software programs, and until that time, I will be at the disposal of every one who wants to write in Blin. Please, contact me by the following e-mail address:- tekie.al@online.no