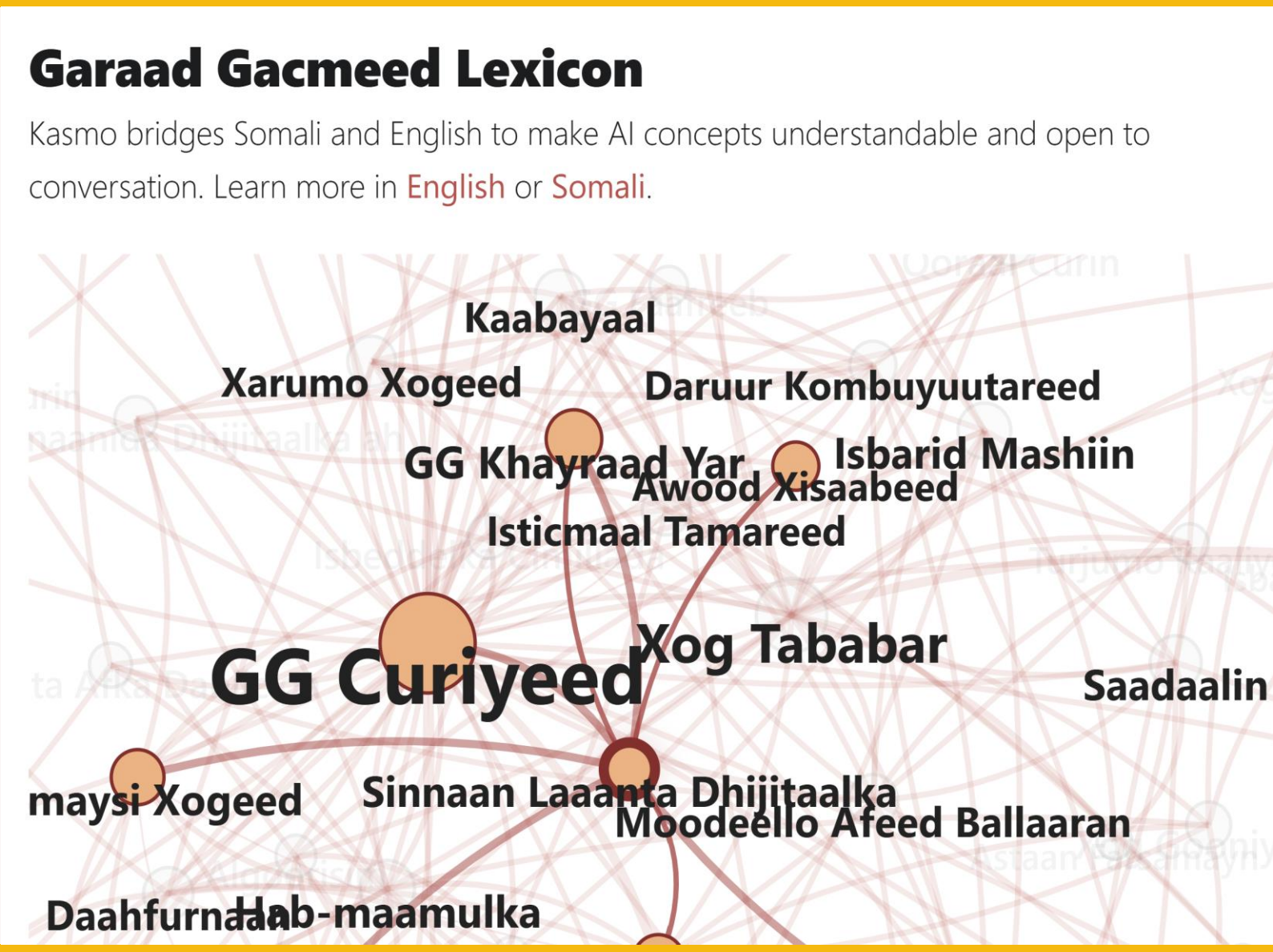
Putting the Somali Digital Rights Lexicon into Practice

Peter Chonka (Department of Digital Humanities) in collaboration with Mohamed Abdimalik (Jaantus, a Somali-based data journalism organisation), and AGA, the Somali Language Academy.



PROJECT SUMMARY

This project explored how digital rights and generative AI concepts can be meaningfully translated, understood and debated in the Somali language. Building on Peter's earlier research that informed the development of a Somali-language digital rights lexicon, the project focused on turning translation into a practical tool for public engagement, journalism and institutional learning in Somalia.

Working closely with journalists, linguists and cultural institutions, the project produced new Somali-language resources on generative AI and its social impacts, including an interactive online network graph that allows users to explore key concepts and their relationships across Somali and English. At a moment when AI tools are rapidly entering everyday life, but regulation and public understanding remain limited, the project sought to strengthen Somali-language capacity for informed debate and knowledge exchange.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

The project grew out of Peter's earlier work on digital rights, data protection and language in Somalia, which had highlighted a lack of accessible Somali-language material on issues such as surveillance, data governance and algorithmic power. While a digital rights lexicon had been published in 2023, the rapid emergence of generative AI tools raised new questions that were not covered by the original work.

At the same time, Somalia was undergoing significant institutional change, including the introduction of its first data protection legislation and the formation of a new Data Protection Authority. These developments underscored the need for locally grounded, Somali-language resources that could support journalists, civil society organisations and cultural institutions in understanding and communicating about digital technologies.

The project was developed in collaboration with Jaantus, a Somali-based data journalism organisation, and later expanded to work with the Somali Language Academy, whose expertise in Somali linguistics and translation played a central role in shaping the final outputs.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Peter and Abdimalik (Jaantus) co-developed a new set of definitions and explanations of generative AI, combining technical descriptions with attention to social, cultural and political context. This work focused on identifying key terms and concepts that journalists, educators and cultural institutions are likely to encounter when engaging with AI-related issues. Attention was paid to the ways in which such systems shape media, labour, language and power, and how concepts such as automation, bias, data extraction and algorithmic decision-making are understood and experienced in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

These concepts were translated into Somali through an iterative process led by the Somali Language Academy. Translation was treated as a collaborative and reflective activity, with careful discussion of meaning, register and context to ensure that terms were appropriate and intelligible within Somali-language public discourse. Rather than treating translation as a straightforward linguistic exercise, the team worked carefully through questions of meaning, register and historical resonance. Discussions focused on how certain terms might carry unintended connotations, reinforce existing anxieties, or obscure social implications if rendered too literally or through automated tools. The AI lexicon was then reviewed and refined with additional input from Somali Public Agenda, Tayo Translations and Digital Shelter.

A central output of the project was an interactive online network graph that maps relationships between AI-related concepts and their social impacts. Users can navigate between interconnected terms and toggle between Somali and English, allowing them to explore concepts such as generative AI, data governance and algorithmic bias. The network graph presents concepts in a relational format rather than as a linear glossary. A static document is also available for people to download and share freely.

Alongside the development of the digital resource, the team facilitated workshops and discussion sessions with journalists, researchers and cultural stakeholders in Somalia. These sessions used the lexicon and network graph as prompts for dialogue about AI, translation practices and public communication. Participants shared their experiences of encountering AI tools in journalism, research and everyday life, and reflected on how language choices shape public understanding.

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The project strengthened Somali-language capacity to engage with debates around generative AI and digital rights among journalists, cultural institutions and researchers in Somalia. By providing accessible, collaboratively developed resources, it supported more informed discussion of emerging technologies in contexts where regulation, public understanding and local-language materials remain limited.

For journalists and media practitioners, the project helped clarify key AI-related concepts and provided language tools that can be used in reporting, training and public communication. Participants highlighted the value of having Somali-language terminology that moves beyond direct or automated translations, enabling clearer explanation of complex technological issues to wider audiences.

The collaboration with the Somali Language Academy had a particularly significant impact, bringing linguistic and cultural expertise into dialogue with debates about AI and digital governance. This created space for early reflection on how generative AI tools may shape Somali language use, translation practices and cultural production in the future.

The project also surfaced critical insights into the risks of relying on automated machine translation in conflict-affected contexts, where certain terms can carry unintended political or security-related connotations. By foregrounding these issues, the project highlighted the importance of locally grounded, Somali-language resources for supporting informed debate and responsible media coverage of emerging technologies.

More broadly, the project showed how arts and humanities approaches, particularly translation and digital cultural methods, can play a vital role in shaping inclusive and context-sensitive conversations about AI, supporting institutions and professionals to engage with technological change on their own terms.

PETER'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. **Invest time in finding the right partners.**
   Impact projects depend on trust, shared values and long-term commitment. Working with partners who have a genuine stake in the work beyond the life of the project makes collaboration more meaningful and sustainable.

2. **Treat translation and communication as collaborative processes, not technical add-ons.**
   Language choices matter. Building in time for discussion, reflection and iteration helps ensure that concepts are understood in context and avoids unintended meanings, especially when working across cultures and political settings.

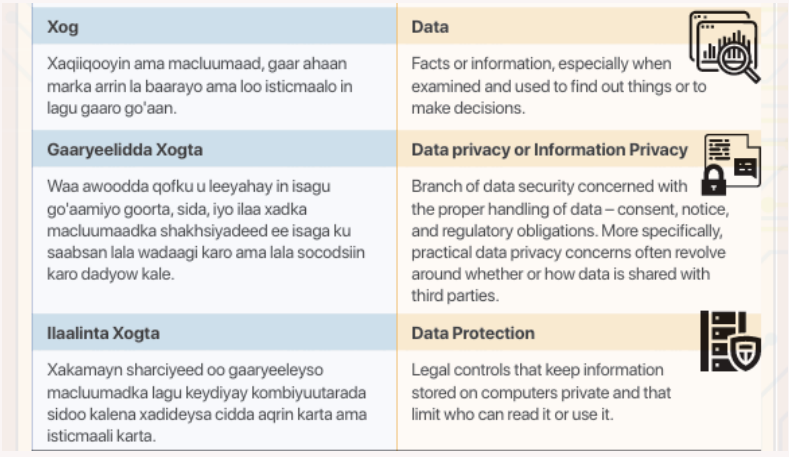
3. **Be flexible and responsive to changing contexts.**
   Political, institutional and technological landscapes can shift quickly. Designing projects with enough flexibility to adapt focus, partners or outputs allows impact work to remain relevant and productive rather than stalled by change.

FURTHER READING

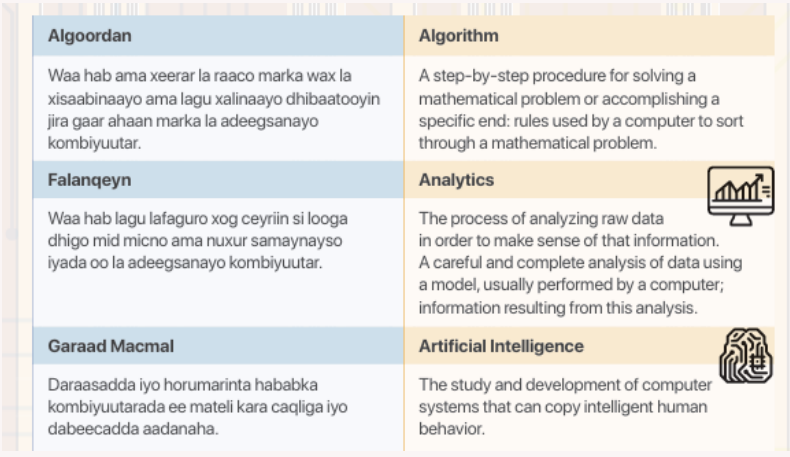
- **Kasmo — Somali AI Terms:** Interactive digital lexicon and network graph developed through the project to support Somali-language engagement with generative AI concepts. https://kasmo.so/#id=gg%20curiyeed

- Photo credit: Akadeemiya Goboleedka Af Soomaaliga (AGA), the Intergovernmental Academy of Somali Language.

- Excerpt below from the Digital Rights Lexicon booklet, presenting Somali-language definitions of terms related to the social impact of technology and questions of digital rights. Read the full Digital Rights Lexicon booklet here: https://assets.jaantus.org/somali_digital_rights_lexicon_final.pdf



Xog	Data
Xaqiiqooyin ama macluumaad, gaar ahaan marka arrin la baarayo ama loo isticmaalo in lagu gaaro go'aan.	Facts or information, especially when examined and used to find out things or to make decisions.
Gaaryeelidda Xogta	**Data privacy or Information Privacy**
Waa awoodda qofku u leeyahay in isagu go'aamiyo goorta, sida, iyo ilaa xadka macluumaadka shakhsiyadeed ee isaga ku saabsan lala wadaagi karo ama lala socodsiin karo dadyow kale.	Branch of data security concerned with the proper handling of data – consent, notice, and regulatory obligations. More specifically, practical data privacy concerns often revolve around whether or how data is shared with third parties.
Ilaalinta Xogta	**Data Protection**
Xakamayn sharciyeed oo gaaryeeleyso macluumadka lagu keydiyay kombiyuutarada sidoo kalena xadideysa cidda aqrin karta ama isticmaali karta.	Legal controls that keep information stored on computers private and that limit who can read it or use it.



Algoordan	Algorithm
Waa hab ama xeerar la raaco marka wax la xisaabinaayo ama lagu xalinaayo dhibaatooyin jira gaar ahaan marka la adeegsanayo kombiyuutar.	A step-by-step procedure for solving a mathematical problem or accomplishing a specific end: rules used by a computer to sort through a mathematical problem.
Falanqeyn	**Analytics**
Waa hab lagu lafaguro xog ceyriin si looga dhigo mid micno ama nuxur samaynayso iyada oo la adeegsanayo kombiyuutar.	The process of analyzing raw data in order to make sense of that information. A careful and complete analysis of data using a model, usually performed by a computer; information resulting from this analysis.
Garaad Macmal	**Artificial Intelligence**
Daraasadda iyo horumarinta hababka kombiyuutarada ee mateli kara caqliga iyo dabeecadda aadanaha.	The study and development of computer systems that can copy intelligent human behavior.

This project was funded by an AHRC Impact Acceleration Account hosted by the Faculty of Arts & Humanities at King's College London, and supported by the Faculty's Impact & Knowledge Exchange team

For further information:
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