

# ‘I PLUNGED HEAD FIRST INTO THE GERMAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE’

**Yared Dibaba** is not only a multitalented artist, but a multitalented linguist, too. Born in Ethiopia, he plunged into the German language and culture at the age of four – and learnt German via immersion. He is a fan of ‘Plattdeutsch’ and speaks not only German and English, but also Oromo, Swahili, Amharic and French

*Yared, you have a fascinating life story and language background. Where did it all begin?*

**Yared Dibaba:** In the southern Ethiopian region of Oromia, to be precise. As this is where I was born, the first language I learnt was Oromo, a Cushitic language.

*You speak perfect German. Is Oromo still your mother tongue?*

Absolutely. German didn’t come until later. Although I speak German like a native speaker (maybe even better than some people who were born here), the language given to me by my mother is Oromo.

*Are there any linguistic similarities between German and Oromo?*

There are a few similar words that mean completely different things. Gaby, for example, is a common name in Germany, but in Oromo it means ‘woollen blanket’. In Oromo, the name Anna means ‘I’.



***What brought you to Germany?***

My parents had previously studied here and my dad wanted to continue his studies in Osnabrück. In 1973, my brother and sister and I came to Germany for the first time.

***What was the first German word you learnt?***

The German word 'Boot' ('boat'). When we came to Germany, we arrived in Frankfurt. As we drove past the harbour, my dad pointed to the boats and said 'Schau mal, ganz viele Boote' ('Look at all the boats'). In Ethiopian, the word 'botti' means 'boot'. I thought to myself, 'where on earth are all these swimming boots?'

***You were four years old when you came to Germany. Can you still remember your first day at nursery school?***

Of course! It was awful (laughs). We came from an idyllic village in Ethiopia, where it was always warm. We suddenly found ourselves in Osnabrück in autumn; it was cold, it got dark early, no one else looked like us, and they all spoke a language we didn't understand. It was terrible.

***You were very much thrown in at the deep end.***

Yes. And as children still do on their first day of school, we started to cry. My little brother and I stood at the window and wailed for hours on end. My brother is a year younger than me. At least there were two of us – and we still laugh about it. We soon settled in and, most import-

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antly, picked up German quickly. We even only spoke German at home. After three years in Germany, we had to return to Ethiopia, so it was a shame that we had completely forgotten Oromo, our mother tongue.

## *Did you carry on speaking German when you were back in Ethiopia?*

First of all, I had to relearn Oromo. Fortunately, it was stored away somewhere in my brain and soon came back to me. We attended a German school in Ethiopia, which meant that we spoke German at school and Oromo at home.

## *But you learnt plenty of other languages, too.*

Yes, at one point we switched to an Ethiopian school where Amharic was spoken. Therefore, we had to learn it from scratch. In year 4, we started learning English and, later on in Kenya, Swahili. It’s fascinating how many languages you can absorb as a child. Even though I’m now 46, I still notice how much I enjoy languages. Whenever I visit a new country, I learn a few basic greetings straight away and try to make small talk.

## *In 1976, you and your family were forced to flee from Ethiopia due to the Civil War and came back to Germany.*

### *How did you feel about coming back?*

On the one hand, our thoughts and feelings were dominated by the war, but – on the other – we wanted to return to Germany. We were safe and had arrived in a peaceful country – and that mattered above all else.

## *You can also speak ‘Plattdeutsch’. How did that come about?*

When we came back in 1976, we ended up in a small village in Lower Saxony where people spoke ‘Plattdeutsch’. As a result, it became my native language.

## *People can hear you speaking ‘Plattdeutsch’ on the NDR morning talk show Hör mal’n beten to (‘Have a listen’).*

Yes, I find regional character extremely important. I say that because I love my home and my native language and I think it’s really important to be in touch with your roots. Only then are you open to other cultures and able to appreciate their value. There are no right and wrong answers, and you can’t say that one culture is better than another – that would be nonsense.

## *Looking back, would you say that you learnt German by immersion?*

Yes, absolutely. I plunged head first into the German language and culture. When you’re in command of the language, you can immediately make contact with people – this is a lesson I learnt as a child. But my initial contact with German wasn’t hard. Children are very pragmatic in that respect. They want to play with other children and pick up one word after another. Children don’t have any reservations and are very open in the way they approach language. This has stuck with me, as I still don’t have any inhibitions when learning a new language. ●

## **Yared Dibaba**

Presenter, author, singer and actor Yared Dibaba travelled around the world with Julia Westlake for the 2006 programme *De Welt Op Platt* (The world in ‘Plattdeutsch’) and hosted *Talk mit Tietjen* (Talking with Tietjen). He now lives with his family in Hamburg and presents the factual afternoon programme *Mein Nachmittag* (My afternoon) on NDR television and various radio shows on NDR 90.3. Alongside his books *Mien Welt blifft Platt* (Platt’ is still my world), *Platt is mien Welt* (Platt’ is my world) and *Moin tosomen* (Hello, everyone), the 46-year-old also sings in ‘Plattdeutsch’. His new album is due for release in spring 2016.