

## **Swedish contributions to African linguistics, with a focus on Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic languages**

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### **1. Introduction**

This paper aims at presenting an overall picture of early Swedish contributions to Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic linguistics. Works on orthographies and translations are included in the account as they constitute the major part of the pioneering linguistic work of the Swedish missionaries in Africa.

Swedes have contributed to the study of Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic languages from the beginning of the 19th century. They can be divided into two groups. Swedish orientalists worked mainly on the Afro-Asiatic languages and Nubian. The second group, which consists of the missionaries, contributed to the creation of orthographies for languages in north-eastern Africa.

The Nordic missions were related to some particular countries in Africa: the Danes were in central and north-eastern Nigeria, the Finns in Ovamboland in northern Namibia and the Norwegians in Madagascar and Zululand in South Africa. The Swedish Free Churches were in Congo and Zaire, while the Church of Sweden (through its Swedish Evangelical Mission) were in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and later in Zululand, Zimbabwe and Tanzania (Sundkler et al. 2000: 118-119). The Nordic missions mainly worked in countries where Niger-Congo languages are spoken, with the exception of Madagascar, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Below I have listed the Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic languages, on which Swedes have conducted linguistic work in different ways. In order to put the Swedish contributions in their rightful place within the history of linguistics, I have included references by more recent international linguists to the Swedish works concerned.

## **2. Nilo-Saharan languages**

A few Swedes dealt with Nilo-Saharan languages during the 19th century. They are missionaries, who produced material of linguistic relevance, as translations of the Bible and other religious texts, in Ethiopia, and orientalists, who conducted linguistic research on the Nubian language in northern Sudan and southern Egypt.

### **2.1 Kunama**

The Kunama people live in the western part of what is now Eritrea, with the Gash and the Setit Rivers on the north and south and the Sudan border on the west. On the east their villages extend into Tigray Province.

The first Christian mission to the Kunama was the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM), which came to the area in 1866 and (with some interruptions caused mainly by the Fascist Italian regime) is still present. The founder of the mission, Carl Johan Carlsson (1836-1867) wrote a draft for a Kunama grammar and dictionary, but he died and it was not published. His work is, however, probably included in the work *Ett litet prof på Kunama-språket*. It was written by the SEM missionary P. Englund and published in 1873.

The Austrian professor Leo Reinisch, who in 1881 published the most outstanding grammar of the Kunama language, stated that “the small but very useful booklet of P. Englund had been very helpful” in his research (Tegnér 1884: 114). Gerhard Böhm, in his *Grammatik der Kunama-Sprache* published in 1984, lists Englund’s grammar as one of the major sources for the description of the Kunama language. He describes it as an early, short collection of essential linguistic data, but surpassed by later, more extensive works (Böhm 1984: 2).

The two Swedish missionaries J. M. Nilsson and August Andersson worked on Bible translations into the Kunama language from 1898 until the 1910’s. August Andersson also published ethnographical articles on the Kunama people (Andersson 1907: 171-181).

David E. Thompson contributed an article on Kunama phonology and noun phrases in the monograph *Nilo-Saharan Language Studies*, edited by Lionel M. Bender in 1983. Thompson’s investigation of the Kunama language owes much to below mentioned literature translated by Swedish missionaries. He used samples of their texts for an intensive analysis of about 200 sentences.

The Swedish Mission Kunama literature includes revision of previous work and some later publications:

*Koysisa Tama*, the New Testament, 1927;

*Kida Kitaba*, a reader, 1952, by Rev. Olle Hagner;

*Tabbila Leleda* (“Pathway Light”), selections of Bible verses for each day in the year, translated by Maria Nilsson and Olle Hagner, 1955;  
*Anna Aura Fala* (“God’s Word Story”), Bible stories from the Old Testament, 1960, translated or retold by Olle Hagner;  
*Anana Kitaba*, song (hymn) book, translated by August Andersson (1914) and revised by Olle Hagner 1961.

A shortcoming in the texts above is the failure to indicate vowel length, stress and tone, and a consistent system for marking length of consonant. It will be noted that Rev. Olle Hagner (in the late 1960’s a veteran of 40 years’ service among the Kunama) was responsible for much of the revision and the later work. The spelling of Kunama is difficult, thus during the Italian time the missionaries were forced to use Italian spelling which was “a real disaster”, according to Rev. Hagner. When Italian control ended the Swedish Mission tried to go back to a more phonetic variety of spelling (Thompson: 284-286).

## **2. 2 Kony**

Kony is a dialect of a southern Nilotic language called Sabaot (or Mt. Elgon Maasai) spoken in Kenya.

The Swedish ethnographer Gerhard Lindblom (1887-1969) published a vocabulary of Kony in a Swedish Orientalist journal in 1924. Franz Rottland later included it in an overview of Southern Nilotic language studies (Rottland 1983: 214).

## **2. 3 Nubian languages**

Nubian languages are classified as members of the Nilo-Saharan phylum. They are spoken mainly in Sudan. The Nubian languages are divided into four groups: Nile Nubian, Darfur Nubian, Kordofanian Nubian and Haraza. The following Swedish linguists and orientalists conducted research on the Nile Nubian languages.

Herman Napoleon Almqvist (originally Almqvist) (1839 -1904) was a Swedish professor in comparative linguistics and Semitic languages. He published a work in 1875 on the relationship between the Hamitic (in northern and northeastern Africa) and the Semitic languages, which nowadays are called Afro-Asiatic languages. During a trip to Egypt and Sudan in 1877-78 he studied the Nubian language. Meanwhile, without Almqvist’s knowledge, two prominent German linguists, Reinisch and Lepsius, worked on their collections of material about the Nubian language. They published their extensive works on the Nubian language independently of each other, before Almqvist had time to

publish his research (Tegnér 1884: 116, 118).

In 1911 K. V. Zetterstéen (see below) published Almkvist's research under the name *Nubische Studien im Sudan 1877-78*. The work contains a grammar, phrases, narratives and a Nubian-German/German-Nubian lexicon. Material from all the three Nile Nubian dialects, Dongolawi, Kenzi and Mahassi, is included in the work (Jakobi et al 1993: 34).

Almkvist's research trip to Sudan also resulted in linguistic research on Tu-Bedawie (or Beja/Bisharin), a Cushitic language in Sudan and Eritrea, which will be accounted for below.

Karl Vilhelm Zetterstéen (1866-1953) was a Swedish linguist and a professor in oriental languages in Lund 1895-1904 and in Semitic languages in Uppsala 1904-1931. His studies of the Arabic, Turkish and Nubian languages resulted in scientific publications, articles and translations (www. ne. se). Other publications of Zetterstéen are *The Oldest Dictionary of the Nubian language* published in 1906, which deals with Carradori's Nubian dictionary and Nerucci's notes on it, and *Den nubiska språkforskningens historia* published in 1907. These works are listed in an extensive annotated bibliography of the Nubian languages (Jakobi et al 1993: 117).

### **3. Afro-Asiatic languages**

Most Swedes, who were pioneers in linguistic work on Afro-Asiatic languages in Africa, were missionaries in, what is now, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Others, like Almkvist mentioned above, were orientalists.

#### **3.1 Bedawie (or Bisharin/Beja)**

Bedawie is classified as a northern Cushitic language with an estimated number of more than one million speakers in Sudan and Eritrea in 1993 (www. sil. org).

Herman Napoleon Almkvist (see above) was the first one to conduct linguistic research on Bedawie spoken in eastern Sudan and northern Eritrea. His study of the language during a field trip to Sudan in 1877-78 was published in 1881 under the name *Die Bischari-Sprache Tu-Bedawie in Nordost-Afrika*. At that time the language was still classified as Hamitic. The Swedish linguist and professor in Oriental languages, Esaias Tegnér (1843-1928) published a very informative article on Scandinavian authors on and about African languages in 1884. There he pointed out, however, grammatical similarities between Bedawie and Semitic languages (Tegnér 1884: 117). Almkvist never published, as far as I know, any comparative study on Bedawie and neighbouring languages.

### 3.2 Berber

The above mentioned H. N. Almkvist also studied the north African Berber languages, particularly their relationship with the Semitic languages. His research was published in *Den semitiska språkstammens pronomen* in 1875.

Another Swede, who conducted linguistic research on the Berber languages, was Jakob Gråberg af Hemsö (1776-1847). He was a writer and consul general in Genoa, Tangier and Tripoli. According to his autobiography he sent an article entitled “*Observations grammaticales et philologiques sur les langues parlés dans le Maghrib-el-Aqssà et principalement sur les dialectes arabe, berbère et cheloe*” in 1818 to the Society of Science in Uppsala. During the same year his *Indigacoes sobre a lingua dos Berberos* was published in Lisbon (Tegnér 1884: 119). A Berber vocabulary by Gråberg af Hemsö is included in Calassanti-Motyliniski’s work *Le dialecte berbère de R’edames* (1904), which has a prominent position in Berber linguistics (Applegate 1970: 613).

### 3.3 Coptic

The Swedish diplomat and orientalist Johan David Åkerblad (1763-1819) was the first European researcher, who succeeded in deciphering and partly also interpreting the Egyptian Demotic alphabet. He also deciphered some hieroglyphs already before Champollion. Åkerblad’s merits within Egyptology were highly recognised by foreign scholars (Tegnér 1884: 19).

Karl Piehl (1853-1904) was another Swedish egyptologist. He published *Petites études égyptologique* in 1881, which contained Egyptian texts with comments and notes on grammar etc. He also wrote an extensive word list in French, *Dictionnaire Papyrus Harris no. 1* (1882). K. Piehl used that papyrus as a source for his investigation on the presence of different Egyptian dialects during the period of the Ramses pharaohs. His findings, which point to a very early division of dialects in Egypt, were published as a special thesis in 1882 (Tegnér 1884: 121).

### 3.4 Arabic

Classical Arabic is not one of the native languages in Africa. The Arabic dialects spoken in Africa, however, ought to be considered as African languages, in my opinion. A few Swedish missionaries have also been active in this field. One of them was Erik Nyström (1842-1907), a missionary, writer, politician and lexicographer, who worked among Jews and Muslims in Algeria 1888-1907. He translated parts of the New Testament into the Arabic dialect spoken in his

mission area. The publication is entitled *Moiceaux choisis du Nouveau testament, traduits en arabe* (1901). Before his death in 1907, he had translated the whole of the New Testament, which was later published by others ([www.lysator.liu.se/runeberg/author/nystreeri.html](http://www.lysator.liu.se/runeberg/author/nystreeri.html)).

### **3.5 Geez (or Ge'ez)**

Geez or Ancient Ethiopic is no longer spoken but has remained the language of the liturgy in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Both Ethiopian and western scholars have published Geez grammars and vocabularies as well as numerous articles dealing with specific problems in phonology, morphology and lexicography.

In the collection *Current Trends in Linguistics* the notes of Pontus Leander (1872-1935) on the history of Geez (1925) and his article "Kurze Bemerkungen zur aetiopischen Formenlehre" (1918) are mentioned as still valid today (Leslau 1970: 467-473).

The Swedish Mission was also active in this field and published a Geez Grammar, edited by Aleqa Tayye in 1897.

### **3.6 Amharic**

Amharic is the national language of Ethiopia. It is spoken as a mother tongue in the central and southern highlands of Ethiopia. As the standard and national language it is used throughout the country. Amharic is the best known language of Ethiopia and there are numerous grammars, dictionaries and editions of texts (Leslau 1970: 482).

Swedish missionaries have translated religious texts into Amharic. At the end of the 19th century the Swedish Evangelical Mission established a school in M'kullo in present Eritrea, where they taught the children in Amharic. The headmaster of the school, P. Lundahl, translated Christian hymns, songs and other religious literature to Amharic in the 1880's (Tegnér 1884: 115).

In Ethiopia Olle Eriksson was the most prominent of the SEM missionaries in literary and literacy work. His publications attracted a lot of attention from Ethiopian universities (Tafvelin et al 1974: 215). Among his works is an article entitled "Education in Abyssinia" published in 1932 and mentioned in *Language of Ethiopia* (Bender et al 1976: 321).

### **3.7 Tigre**

Tigre is spoken in the eastern, western and northern lowlands of Eritrea including the Massawa region and the Dahlaq islands in the east. The only

writings are some religious texts published by Protestant (some of them Swedish) missionaries (Leslau 1970: 475).

The Swedish missionaries K. G. Rodén and Gustaf Richard Sandström conducted linguistic research on Tigre in the beginning of the 20th century with the help of modern technique (of those days) and a welltrained team of assistants. The spoken language was recorded on a phonograph and the assistants noted down the words, which later were analysed at seminars and systematically put in order (Tafvelin et al 1974: 96). Leslau, in an article on Ethiopic and south Arabian, also mentions the works of Rodén and Sandström as being interesting texts. His objection to them is, however, that they are printed in the Ethiopic alphabet only, without a special sign for the gemination of the consonants and can therefore hardly be used in a study of Tigre (Leslau 1970: 476).

### **3.8 Tigrinya**

Tigrinya is spoken in the Ethiopian province of Tigre and in Eritrea. Missionaries have to a large extent contributed to the knowledge of Tigrinya. They have, for religious purposes, edited different texts and vocabularies. Tigrinya is relatively well known.

Johannes A. Kolmodin (1884-1933) was a diplomat, orientalist and adviser to the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. He was also the son of the famous Swedish missionary Adolf Kolmodin. Johannes Kolmodin published an abundant collection of Tigrinya texts (in the speech of Hamasen) of historical character. They were written in the Ethiopic alphabet with a special sign for gemination and translated into French in 1912-15. That collection, entitled *Traditions de Tsazzegga et Hazzegga*, together with general observations and other texts, constituted the basis for the present opinion on the presence of dialects in Tigrinya (Leslau 1970: 479-481).

The missionary Karl Winqvist (d. 1909) and his wife Elsie Winqvist (1863-1957) published a translation of the New Testament into Tigrinya in 1909. The entire Bible, translated by the missionary couple into Tigrinya, was published in Eritrea in the 1950's.

### **3.9 Galla (or Oromo)**

Galla (Oromo) is spoken in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. It is classified as an eastern Cushitic language.

Swedish missionaries have worked in the Galla speaking area since 1865. A Galla clergyman, Onesimus Nesib, was brought to Sweden in 1873 by the Swedish Evangelical Mission and trained. He edited a reader and a Galla

spelling book and translated the Lutheran catechism and the entire Bible into Galla in 1884-1897. He also translated more than 6000 Galla words into Swedish (Tafvelin et al 1974: 77).

The works of Onesimus Nesib were of great value and practical utility for the Swedish missionary, Martin Nordfeldt, who published *A Galla Grammar* in 1939. Apart for M. M. Moreno's Galla grammar also published in 1939, Martin Nordfeldt's work was the only major grammatical work on Galla before the World War II (Palmer 1970: 578).

#### **4. Ethiopic languages in general**

Ethiopic studies deal with subjects that are not limited to one specific Ethiopian language, but concern at least two languages. The Swedish linguist Frithiof Rundgren (1921-) published in 1959 his research on specific problems of grammar, namely the verbal system and the derived stems, in *Intensiv und Aspektkorrelation* (Leslau 1970: 503-4).

#### **5. Summary**

We can observe a substantial contribution by Swedish orientalists and missionaries in the field of African linguistics. They established a tradition of work on languages especially in the north-eastern parts of Africa. In the 1970's the Swedish linguist Björn Jernudd (1942-) continued this tradition by conducting sociolinguistic studies in the Republic of Sudan. The most extensive one was *The Language Survey of Sudan in 1972-73* (Jernudd 1979: 13). It is so far the only sociolinguistic study conducted on the national level in Sudan.

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