

Swedish contributions to African linguistics, with a focus on Bantu languages

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1. Introduction

According to the nationally well-known Swedish writer and poet of the nineteenth century Esaias Tegnér, Swedes made a significant contribution to African linguistics in the 19th century. He especially honoured the missionaries who have worked with African languages (Tegnér 1884: 122). The following paper brings the contribution up to date in this an account of Swedes, missionaries as well as explorers, who have published material in and about African languages in Sub-Saharan Africa. Missionaries have been ardent in publishing their findings, and therefore the bulk of this paper discusses their work. Doing linguistic work as a prerequisite for translations of the Bible has been a common missionary task.

Because a complete report is not within the scope of this article, this should be regarded as an attempt to describe some of the pioneering work that has been done on Bantu languages by Swedes. Due to fragmentary publication within this area, this paper is far from a complete account. There is presumably more material in archives not available to the general public. Most of the available printed material is about missionaries from the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden. Other denominations have published name lists of missionaries working in Africa but have not made easily available descriptions or publications of their linguistic work.¹ These are therefore not included in this account. This article describes each geographical region in turn, and within each region the events are ordered chronologically.

¹ Various people connected to the different denominations have told me that manuscripts are likely to be found in their archives which are closed to the public.

2. Lower Congo / Belgian Congo / Zaire / Dem. Rep. of the Congo

This is a geographical area in which Swedish missionaries with an interest in African languages have been prominent. At the turn of the 20th century, the Swedish mission was the largest of all missions in the Lower Congo (Axelson 1970: 218). The centre of the Swedish mission was in Mukimbungu. Both Nils Westlind and Karl Edvard Laman contributed to developing this missionary station.

Nils Westlind (1854-1895), was a pioneer who came to the Mukimbungu missionary station in 1882. Westlind was of the opinion that it was necessary for those who devoted themselves to Christian mission work to thoroughly learn the Congolese languages spoken in the mission areas (Axelson 1970: 279). He therefore promptly began linguistic research and by 1888 his magnum opus, *Grammatikaliska anmärkningar över Kongospråket, sådant det talas i mellersta delen av nedre Kongodalen* (Grammatical remarks on the Kongo language, as spoken in the middle part of Lower Kongo), was published. The Congo language Westlind wrote about was in fact a variety called Mazinga which is a dialect of Kikongo. The Mazinga dialect came to influence all other dialects, and it is likewise the dialect Laman used as the central variety in his Kikongo dictionary (Söderberg 1985: 67). Westlind's grammar book was printed in Mukimbungu with the help of J. W. Håkansson. Early on, Westlind started translating parts of the Bible and continued to do so throughout his life. In 1885 the first part of the Bible (the Gospel according to St. John) was printed. He had translated the entire New Testament before his death in 1895. The translations along with the writing of the grammar book made Westlind a groundbreaker whose legacy is indisputable (Widman 1981: 79). In addition, he also wrote songs and textbooks in Kikongo.

During the last years of his stay in the Congo, Westlind came to meet the most well known of all Swedes who have dealt with African languages in Sub-Saharan Africa - Karl Edvard Laman (1867-1944). Laman's list of publications so is extensive that it will not be rendered in full here; however, his most influential linguistic work will be covered. Below is an overview of his life in the Congo followed by a more detailed description of his work.

Laman arrived in the Congo in 1891. He began his work at the Kibunzi missionary station, and six years later, he was transferred to Mukimbungu. During the 1890s, Laman was the head of both stations at different times. He had studied Kikongo before his arrival, and once in the Congo he set out to gather and classify words for a Kikongo word list (Söderberg 1985: 72). Along with the development of the word list and his missionary tasks, Laman also

edited the missionary calendar and the periodical known as *Minsamu Miayenge*. It was printed at the local missionary printing office where Laman also worked as a printer and binder in addition to being a writer. At the same time he translated and edited parts of the Bible.

As a means of gathering data, Laman conducted a number of field visits, most of them along with his wife Selma. Laman brought with him a phonograph and wax rolls and recorded not only speech but also songs and stories. The local people were afraid of the machine at the beginning, but eventually overcame their fear and let Laman record them. During his field visits he collected specimens of several languages, including Kibembe (which is an H1 language according to Mann and Dalby's classification). Laman was interested in finding out whether Kibembe was a dialect of Kikongo or if it belonged to a different language family such as the Bateke people's language (Söderberg 1985: 141). It turned out to be a dialect of Kikongo based on his analysis.

Laman most likely realised that it was difficult for the other missionaries to learn a new language, especially if they were not as keen linguists as he was himself. Nonetheless, he wished to implement a mandatory language test for all missionaries. This turned out to lack viability partly owing to the different dialects spoken in the area. Laman was unwilling to answer the younger missionaries' questions about the languages they were learning. 'Ask the natives; that's what I did' was the answer they often received (Söderberg 1985: 83).

2.1 Laman's work

Laman's linguistic work can be divided into three categories: textbooks/primers, dictionaries and phonologies. Apart from his purely linguistic publications, he also translated the Bible. A few years after his arrival in the Congo, Laman wrote his first school textbooks in Kikongo. The books covered mathematics, geography and science. In 1899 Laman published his first primer in Kikongo, *Nzailu andinga akikongo kivovulwanga mu Kongo diabanda* which only had 17 pages. It was expanded in 1910 to cover 27 pages, including French translations of the grammatical terminology (Laman 1910), probably to help other missionaries. Laman's major grammatical textbook was written in Swedish *Lärobok i kongospråket* (Textbook in the Kongo language) (Laman 1912a) and also translated into English. J. W. Håkansson and Ruth Walfridsson contributed to this grammar book, and the preface was written by Carl Meinhof, who was already an authority on Bantu linguistics in those years. It is likely that Laman was slightly influenced by Westlind's grammar from 1888.

2.1.2 Dictionaries

Laman's interest in dictionaries commenced before he left Sweden. He started gathering words in a large book and left big gaps to be filled in with new words. His first dictionary the *English-Kikongo Dictionary*, was hand-written and covered only the letters A-C. It was never finished, probably because French was made the official language in the Congo. The first printed dictionary formed a part of a French primer for the Congolese (Laman 1911). Another missionary, Martin Westling, was working on this alongside Laman. A revised version by Ragnar Widman was published in 1950. In order to gather words in a more methodical way, Laman developed the habit of writing the words on separate cards and then arranging them alphabetically. At a conference in 1913 he was asked to prepare a Swedish-Kikongo dictionary which he did with the help of local assistants who spoke diverse dialects. This dictionary was written by two Swedish missionaries, John Petersson and Anna Phillips, and distributed in five copies only. When the dictionary had become popular among the missionaries, it was decided it should be printed. Prior to the printing Laman wanted to edit some parts and add others, for instance a chapter on the Kibembe dialect. Apparently, this was not viable and Laman accepted the printing of the manuscript after it had been proofread by the same missionaries who wrote the first edition. The *Svensk-kikongo ordbok* (Swedish-Kikongo Dictionary) was published in 1931.

During his last period in the Congo, Laman travelled with his wife through the French Congo towards what is nowadays Gabon. They were accompanied by a young man, a Kuta speaker. Despite being illiterate, the man became Laman's interpreter and right-hand man in the work on two new dictionaries, namely the *Teke-kuta-ngunu-svensk ordbok* (Teke-Kuta-Ngunu-Swedish Dictionary) in 1929 and the *Svensk-teke-kuta-ngunu ordbok* (Swedish-Teke-Kuta-Ngunu Dictionary) in 1930 (Teke is a B7 language in Mann and Dalby's classification; Kuta and Ngunu have not been identified so far). Both were very extensive and even contained phonetic transcriptions. Unfortunately, this made them too costly to print, and they exist only as xeroxed copies today.

The Kikongo-French dictionary was published in 1936. In this considerable work (1183 pages), Laman dealt with the question of tone, which is a frequent phenomenon in Bantu languages (Söderberg 1985: 79). He was the first to do so in Kikongo. The dictionary is "a composite wordlist of some 50,000 items from up to twelve dialects. The entries are adequately transcribed, both tone and vowel-length being marked, and the whole work is prefaced by an outline of the principal features of each of the dialects" (Guthrie 1971: 361). This mighty work

took years to compile and turned out to be far more time-consuming and costly than Laman anticipated. He managed to get time off from other chores to work full-time on the dictionary during the few years he spent in Sweden. He was also granted money to go to France and work on the dictionary there. Laman worked with a member of the French clergy in Stockholm who assisted him with the translation into French. Since Laman himself was in Europe at the time, when in need of more information about the different dialects, he sent out a questionnaire to the missionaries in the Congo. He requested that local co-workers and scribes write articles following the template in the questionnaires so that he would get data within different chosen subjects, such as religion. Laman used these data not only for the dictionary but also for his ethnographic work. Apart from the data collected via the questionnaires, some missionaries supplied him with words. Laman also used H. Bentley's dictionary from San Salvador in Angola as a model (Söderberg 1985: 86). Laman's dictionary was printed in Belgium by l'Institut Royal Colonial Belge in 1936.

Even after independence in the Congo and long after Laman had passed away, his dictionary was reprinted in 1972 as *Vocabulaire kikongo-français, français-kikongo* (Kikongo-French, French-Kikongo Dictionary) (Laman & Westling 1972).

2.1.2 Phonetics

As tones and suprasegmental features are important in Bantu languages, Laman discovered that it was a prerequisite to comprehend them. As a result, he developed an interest in phonetics. Laman was granted funds from the Mission Covenant Church to visit Professor Carl Meinhof in Hamburg in 1908 (Söderberg 1985: 88). Laman was shown around and introduced to different researchers and he also received the aforementioned phonograph for recording sounds. Laman brought this with him on his fourth trip to the Congo. This was only the beginning of an exchange between Laman and Meinhof. During another one of his visits to Berlin, Laman came up with the idea of studying tone in Kikongo. He found out that tones are distinctive elements and thus crucial for both pronunciation and meaning. Laman successfully worked on tone despite the fact that he did not have perfect pitch (Söderberg 1985: 88).

It was the matter of tone that delayed the grand dictionary. Laman revised the entries and added tone according to Meinhof's suggestions. This was done with the help of a local man named Kionga. Kionga repeated over and over the words for which Laman wanted to find the right tone. In order to verify his findings, Laman also recorded some other dialects and had the recordings transcribed in Hamburg. He turned out to be precise in his phonetic descriptions.

Some of the findings were published under the title *The Musical Accent or Intonation in the Kongo Language* (Laman 1922b). This work received a lot of attention and appreciation from linguists in general and Meinhof in particular. Laman even got an opportunity to work with Meinhof in the preparation of “An Essay in Kongo Phonology”, which was published in 1928 (Söderberg 1985: 90). It was not only Kikongo phonology that Laman studied; he also produced an essay called “The musical tone of the Teke language” for the Festschrift dedicated to Meinhof (Laman 1927). Apart from the above-mentioned books on phonetics, Laman also wrote a textbook on phonetics for missionaries (Laman 1922a).

As mentioned earlier, Laman’s work was greatly appreciated by the well-known linguist Meinhof. Another famous linguist, Westermann, writes that Laman’s dictionary is ‘monumentum aere perennius’ (a monument more durable than brass) in the periodical *Africa* (Laman 1937: 102). In Doke (1961: 121) it is written that “[t]he labours of Westlind and Laman in connection with the (ki)Kongo Bible will ever be honoured”.

2.1.3 Bible translations

Laman’s version of the Kikongo Bible, including a new translation of the Old Testament and a revised version of the New Testament was published in 1905. This was not entirely his work; he was assisted by several different people. As mentioned earlier, Nils Westlind had already translated the New Testament. He now continued to revise it, with some help from Laman. This whetted Laman’s appetite and he embarked on translating major parts of the Old Testament. Some parts were already translated by other Swedish missionaries, such as the Book of Ruth, the Book of Jonah and the Book of Psalms. Despite a serious bout of fever in 1899 that paralysed half of his face, Laman managed to complete the Old Testament. He recovered completely from his illness and in 1903 and finished revising the New Testament.

Laman did not have any knowledge of Hebrew and very little knowledge of Greek. His translations were therefore indirect via Swedish, English and German. Notwithstanding Laman’s fluency in Kikongo, he experienced some translational difficulties. Because of the lack of Christian tradition among the Kikongo speakers, he was forced to reinvent old heathen words. The word for ‘God’ derived from a word originally meaning evil spirit among some people (Söderberg 1985: 95). The word for joy in connection to the drinking of palm wine came to mean the joy Christ brings to people. The Bible was printed in 10,000 copies and distributed through the different missionary stations (Söderberg 1985: 97).

At the last stage of revision of the Bible in June 1903, a language conference for missionaries was held at the Mukimbungu station. Aside from Laman, two other Swedish missionaries participated, namely C. N. Börrisson and S. A. Flodén. The British linguistic pioneer and missionary Holman Bentley was also among the participants. The missionaries discussed 500 words with the intention of standardising the different dialects in the area and creating some precedents for translation of some biblical concepts.

In 1892, the illustrated monthly magazine called *Minsamu Miayenge* began to be distributed by the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden in the Congo. The editors throughout the 1890's were Wilhelm Sjöholm, K. J. Pettersson and K. E. Laman. The magazine contained Bible passages and interpretations, letters and essays (Axelson 1970: 282). This periodical also contributed to making the Mukimbungu dialect, Mazinga, the standard variety of the Lower Congo.

There were other missionaries from the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden who worked with translations in the Lower Congo as well, such as S. A. Flodén, Ivar Johansson, Edv. Karlman, O. Nordblad, C. Palmquist, John Petersson, Oscar Stenström, and Karl Walfridsson. See *Publications en Kikongo: bibliographie relative aux contributions suédoises entre 1885 et 1970* for further information about the missionaries from the Mission Covenant Church involved in language studies.

Another Swede who worked in the Lower Congo was Lieutenant Juhlin-Dannfelt. He is said to have worked on a dictionary but it has never been retrieved. In his correspondence with Nils Westlind, he discussed the linguistic problems of Kikongo (Axelson 1970: 280).

3. Kenya and Tanzania

Gerhard Lindblom (1887-1969), was an ethnographer who spent some time in what was then British East Africa, now Kenya. His work focused on the Kamba but also on the Kikuyu, both which are Bantu language groups. Since his objective was anthropological and ethnographic, he learned the language (Linné 1969: 7) and eventually published his preliminary linguistic findings in *Kamba Folklore*, vols. 1-3. Furthermore, he recorded legends, riddles and proverbs which he depicted in *Negerhistorier vid lägerelden: afrikanska folkberättelser* (Negro stories by the camp fire: African folk lore). Lindblom produced four language-related works, the first one on the Tharaka language, the second and third on the Kamba language and the fourth of which was an article called "Some Words of the Language Spoken by the Elgoni People on the East Side of Mount Elgon, Kenya Colony, East Africa" (Lindblom 1924).

There was a Swedish missionary from the Swedish Pentecostal Mission

who lived and worked in what was to become Tanzania. His name was Erland Jonsson (1910-2000). His comprehensive grammar book on the Kinyamwezi language called *Kinyang'wezi grammatik* was printed in Tabora in 1949. Jonsson used the same spelling that was used for the Sukuma language, since the two languages are close, and as he stated, “we strive to bring these two dialects together” (Jonsson 1949: 1). His work is used as a reference in Maganga and Schadeberg’s work entitled *Kinyamwezi: Grammar, Texts, Vocabulary* (1992). Though extensive at the time, Jonsson’s grammar lacks description of tone, distinguishes only five vowels and marks vowel lengths only sporadically (Schadeberg pers.com. Oct. 2002). In addition, it displays only a few original texts.

4. South Africa and Namibia

This is another area where Swedes became known for collecting data on African languages. The most notable among them were travellers or explorers, not missionaries as was the case in other areas. There were Swedish missionaries in this area, but they did not publish much language-related material.

Andrew Sparrman (1747-1820), was a naturalist and a traveller who recorded his travels in *The country of the Hottentots and the Caffres* (Doke 1961: 28). Sparrman was the disciple of the renowned botanist Carl von Linné and got to travel with Captain Cook. His book contained a small word list, namely sixty-three words, of Xhosa (the name for the language the Europeans then called ‘Caffre’) which apparently contained some inconsistencies. Sparrman noticed that the language of the ‘Caffres’ did not contain the same sounds of the tongue against the roof of the mouth (i.e. clicks) as the language of the Hottentots. Sparrman also used musical notation to write down a song “Air, sung by Hottentot-Caffres, near Little Sunday-River” (Doke 1961: 28). Despite the incorrectness of the word list dated 1776, it is highly valuable, being the world’s earliest record of any South African Bantu language.

Another naturalist who travelled to the same area was C. P. Thunberg (1743-1828). He wrote a few pages describing the language of the Hottentots in his travel book *Resa* (Travel). Thunberg describes the clicking sounds as noise that resembles “the cackling of geese” (Tegnér 1884: 106)

Charles Andersson (1827-1867) was born in Sweden, son of a Swedish maid and a British adventurer (Johansson 1996: 7). He specialised in ornithology and developed an early interest in travel. In his book *Lake Ngami* he gave a brief description of the language situation around the lake. His major contribution to linguistics is in an article published in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*. The article included a word list of the thitherto unknown

language Bajeje which is most likely the language today known as Chiyeyi, an R4 language. The language supposedly resembles Herero but it has the addition of clicks.

Yet another Swede worked with translations in this area; O. H. Witt, a missionary with a talent for languages. Witt is less known since he did not name his work *Svenska Kyrkohandboken öfversatt på Zuluspråket* (The Swedish church handbook translated into Zulu) dated 1879 (Tegnér 1884: 110).

Hedvig Posse (1861-1927), was a missionary with the Church of Sweden Mission who documented Zulu stories and poetry and translated them into Swedish (Axelson pers.com. Sept. 2002). She also translated numerous Swedish hymns into Zulu. Posse was the most capable and outstanding of the female missionaries in the area (Winquist 1978: 146).

5. Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to provide preliminary description of the linguistic work done by Swedes in Sub-Saharan Africa between the 18th and the 20th centuries. As demonstrated, the Swede who published the most on Bantu linguistics was Laman, and therefore a great part of this paper was about him. Although it is not complete, this paper may be the most detailed review available of what Swedes have done on Bantu languages so far, since it includes explorers and travellers as well as missionaries.

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