

EDITORS' DEDICATORY NOTE

This issue of the “Language in Africa” journal is dedicated to Valentin Vydrin, who is a well-recognized specialist in African linguistics, Mande languages and cultures both in Russia and worldwide. He celebrates his 60th anniversary on February 6, 2021. This is only the fourth issue of the journal, but the fact that it is dedicated to Valentin Vydrin is well motivated and very important for us.

The “Language in Africa” journal was established as a result of the collaboration between the two leading centers of African studies in Russia, Moscow and St. Petersburg. It has two primary goals. The first is to make a platform for the international cooperation in the field of African languages, and the second is to provide international access to the Russian tradition of African studies. With this in mind, it is hardly possible to find anyone who could better represent these purposes and the background of the journal than Valentin.

In the personality of Valentin Vydrin, all these points are brightly combined. He is the most influential leader of the Russian academic community in the field of African linguistics. He is undoubtedly one of the world leaders in the field of Mande studies. He made a huge effort to develop cooperation between St. Petersburg and Moscow in these fields, as well as to make Russian studies in African linguistics part of international research. Last but not least, Valentin was the key person who paved the way for systematic fieldwork in Africa among

Russian linguists. Without his efforts in all these directions, the very appearance of this journal would have not been possible.

Valentin graduated from Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) State University in 1983. At that time, doing fieldwork in Africa was rather a dream than a reality and, more generally, travelling abroad to almost any country was almost impossible for Soviet scholars. It was a serious problem for African studies in the USSR. Facing this difficulty, Valentin organized his research eliciting linguistic data from African students he could find around. At the same time, he tried to combine the traditions of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) African studies with Moscow school of general linguistics, which made him very well trained theoretically. No wonder that when the Iron Curtain fell, he did his best to find the ways to organize fieldwork in Africa, although political restrictions were replaced by financial ones.

Since 2001 and up to now, Valentin has been leading linguistic teams working in West Africa. He made it possible for Russian Africanists to make a breakthrough in collecting first-hand data on African languages. Quite a few linguists from both St. Petersburg and Moscow had their first field experience in Africa due to his efforts and, sometimes, expenses. Valentin Vydrin was a student of Svetlana Tomchina, the founder of systematic Mande studies in Russia. Still, it was Valentin who turned Mande studies in St. Petersburg into a proper linguistic school recognized all over the world.

Well aware of the importance of international contacts and cooperation, Valentin established “St. Petersburg Journal of African Studies” in 1993, a very ideologically optimistic but financially tough time in Russia. It was the first regular journal that published the papers of Russian scholars in the field of African studies in English and in French. The editors of “Language in Africa” consider the present journal as the heir of that earlier project. Unfortunately, the old journal could not last for long due to many objective reasons but it was nevertheless important for the development of African studies in Russia. Today, Valentin Vydrin is not only the member of the editorial board of “Language in Africa”, but also the person who encouraged this initiative.

Still working in Russia, Valentin Vydrin became an important member of the international community of African linguists. His publications in Russian, French and English have always been internationally influential. After moving to Paris, he became a professor at INALCO and a researcher at LLACAN. Later in 2015, Valentin Vydrin became a senior member of the *Institut universitaire de France* (IUF), which is the highest recognition for a professor and a researcher in France. At the same time, he still plays a very important role in Russian African linguistics, both academically and practically. He is currently the supervisor of four students' research papers at the Department of African Studies in St. Petersburg. He regularly visits large Africanist events and working seminars both in St. Petersburg and Moscow. At the same time, his home in Paris is always an important and pleasant shelter for his Russian colleagues coming there for academic events. The harmonious combination of academic and personal advantages is the characteristic feature of Valentin.

This brief outline cannot even mention all Valentin's academic achievements, positions and publications. Even if we briefly mention his papers on lexicography and proto-Mande reconstruction, his descriptions of understudied Mande languages, language corpora projects, research in the grammar of Bamana, all that clearly shows how much he has contributed to the better understanding of what African languages are and how to work with them. It is also worth mentioning that Valentin Vydrin is the editor-in-chief of "Mandenkan", the journal without which we cannot imagine modern Mande studies.

We hope that this introduction makes it clear why the opportunity to dedicate this issue to Valentin Vydrin is an honour for the journal and all the authors of this volume. The genre of *Festschriften* seems to be losing its popularity nowadays, but it clearly represents what is called the "academic school", i.e. younger and older colleagues, teachers, students working in the same field and forming a community. It is also worth mentioning that "Language in Africa" is a double blind peer reviewed journal, and this procedure was strictly followed in the case of this issue as well. Hence, all the papers were anonymously

reviewed and passed through regular editing process. Importantly, it is Valentin who encourages us to take reviewing policy of the journal very seriously and to work hard on the high academic quality of the journal's content. We hope that he finds this issue at least satisfactory.

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