

**IN MEMORIAM:
ALEXANDRA VYDRINA (1988–2021)**

Maria Konoshenko

Institute of Linguistics RAS
eleiteria@gmail.com



Our dearest colleague and friend, Alexandra (Sasha) Vydrina tragically died on September 16, 2021 at the age of 33. In West Africa, she was also known as Sogolon Condé. Valentin Vydrin, who is both her loving father and the leading specialist in Mande languages, once nicknamed her after the mother of Sundiata, the famous epic hero from the Manding epos. The possible etymological sources of this name are analyzed in the co-authored paper by Segerer & Vydrina (2020).

Alexandra was born in 1988. She grew up in Belogorka (Leningrad Oblast of Russia) and later in Saint Petersburg, sometimes called the cultural capital of Russia, which influenced her a lot in her love for good literature, architecture and art. She got interested in languages and linguistics as a teenager. While in high school, she attended lectures in linguistics held at the Institute for Linguistic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Already in August 2005, after finishing high school, she went on her first linguistic field trip as a member of a research group that documented Urum, a Turkic language spoken in the Donetsk region of Ukraine.

In September 2005, she became a student of the philological faculty of Saint Petersburg State University, where she studied general linguistics. From 2006 to 2008, Alexandra worked on the phonology and the morphosyntax of Kalmyk, a Mongolic language spoken in Southern Russia, as part of a student field project (Vydrina 2007, 2009a).

In 2008, Alexandra first went to Guinea to start working on Kakabe, an underdescribed and endangered Mande language, thus making her debut as an africanist. In that same year, she published her first research paper focussing on Kakabe vowel length in an international peer-reviewed journal “Mandenkan” (Vydrina 2008). In 2010, at the age of just 22, she was awarded the medal of the Russian Academy of Sciences for young researchers for her BA thesis (Vydrina 2009b). In her MA thesis (Vydrina 2011), she explored the tonal and semantic properties of predicative markers in Kakabe. In July 2011, she also took part in a field trip to Bashkortostan (Central Russia), where she worked on passive and reflexive markers in Bashkir (Turkic).

Soon after graduating *cum laude* from Saint Petersburg State University in 2011, Alexandra Vydrina moved to Paris, where she had been mostly living until her tragic decease. In 2017, she defended her PhD thesis at INALCO in Paris. Her thesis provides a unified account of the segmental phonology, the tonal system and the intonational patterns of Kakabe, accompanied by a short grammatical description of the language and based on a corpus containing more than twelve hours of spontaneous Kakabe speech (Vydrina 2017a). The study is

a strong contribution to the typology of tone and intonation in the world's languages. Both empirically grounded and theoretically informed, it is also a source of very insightful observations on the pragmatic phenomena in Kakabe, as well as an excellent example of a corpus-based approach to grammar writing, which is a great inspiration for her fellow Mandeists and other field linguists both working in West Africa and elsewhere. In 2018, she received a thesis award by the Val-de-Marne region.

From 2018 onwards, Alexandra held post-doctoral positions at LACITO (Langues et Civilisation à Tradition Orale) and LPP (Laboratoire de Phonétique et Phonologie) in Paris, as well as at the Linguistic Convergence Laboratory at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. In spring 2021, Alexandra took part in a sociolinguistic field trip to Dagestan, where she collected data on multilingualism between the North Caucasian languages Lak and Tsudakhar Dargwa, as well as recorded texts. In 2021, she obtained a teaching position at the Paris Nanterre University, where she was supposed to start working in September 2021.

First and foremost, we will remember Alexandra as a mature expert in field linguistics and language documentation and especially as a linguist who described the Kakabe language and introduced it both into Mande and cross-linguistic studies. While having experience in the documentation of different languages (Urum, Kalmyk, Bashkir, Kakabe, Lak and Tsudakhar Dargwa), she preferred depth and quality to quantity in her work. At the same time, during her short life, Alexandra managed to publish a lot and to become an influential and a prominent scholar. In particular, the papers that I mention here only represent Alexandra's various interests in linguistics and do not make up an exhaustive list of her publications.

In 2013–2015, she had an individual graduate scholarship “Description and documentation of the Kakabe language” from the Arcadia foundation in the United Kingdom. As a result of this project, which demanded serious training in data collection and archiving, she published a dictionary of Kakabe (Vydrina 2015), a grammar sketch

(Vydrina 2017b), as well as an annotated multimedia corpus of Kakabe speech (Vydrina 2019a), on which her description of the phonology and grammar of Kakabe was based in her PhD thesis (Vydrina 2017a). Moreover, this scholarship helped her to make a film on her fieldwork in Guinea (Vydrina 2019b). All these publications are open source and can be easily accessed by anyone interested in language documentation sources in general and the Kakabe language in particular.

While doing serious empirical research, Alexandra was also able to demonstrate that some Kakabe data are cross-linguistically unusual and relevant for the linguistic theory. In her 2011 paper, Alexandra demonstrated that Mande languages, and Kakabe in particular, have an unusual pattern of P-lability, whereby the same verb can be used transitively and intransitively without overt morphological marking, the intransitive construction having a passive meaning, e.g. literally, *The dog bit Seku* vs. *Seku bit* in a sense of ‘Seku was bitten’ (Vydrina 2011b). In Vydrina (2014), she explored a cross-linguistically uncommon path of grammaticalization of an originally deontic modal marker *ni* to a sequential marker in Kakabe.

In recent years, Alexandra had also published and submitted a number of theoretically oriented studies of information structure and syntax of Kakabe based on first-hand natural discourse data. Vydrina (2020a) explores the relationship between sentence focus and topicality in Kakabe. A common assumption is that in utterances with sentence focus, the default focus marking is realized on the direct object, as in English: (*What happened?*) *The boss gave Kim a RAISE*. In her paper, Alexandra demonstrates that this generalization is not universal, because in Kakabe, when the content of the focus constituent is all-new, the focus marker appears on the subject and not on the direct object. Second, although the focus placement in Kakabe can be modified by topicality or givennes, similarly to what has been shown for other languages, Alexandra further claims that topicality should be taken as a complex, hierarchically structured feature. Finally, she shows that the pragmatic functions of sentence focus in Kakabe far exceed the presentational utterances answering the questions “What happened?”,

but also appear in many other contexts, e.g. the introductory utterances in narratives and the inferential sentence focus by which the speaker indicates their awareness of the listener's inferences about the speech.

Vydrina (2020b) explores the distribution of two perfective auxiliaries *báti* and *ka / -ta* in Kakabe narratives. She demonstrates that the opposition between them is best analyzed in terms of information structure, the former marker having the focus on the aspectual value of accomplishment or on the polarity (operator focus), while the latter is rather used for argument focus. She also shows that in Kakabe discourse, operator focus auxiliary is the default marker in performative utterances.

Alexandra's preference for a corpus-based approach to analyzing linguistic data also resulted in a study of reported speech co-authored with Tatiana Nikitina (Nikitina & Vydrina 2020). Mainstream approaches to reported speech tend to model the typological variation in reported speech structures based on a single scale, i.e. the direct-indirect continuum, whereby the observed structures are compared to the prototypes of direct and indirect speech attested in European languages. The authors argue, however, that two distinct dimensions of variation should be differentiated: first, reported speech constructions ranging from paratactic to subordinate structures, and second, the interpretation of pronouns in reported speech. The authors show that Kakabe reported constructions are characterized by loose syntax and flexible pronominal indexicality.

One of her last projects was a paper on the syntax of pronominal markers in Kakabe, submitted to one of the top linguistic journals (Vydrina submitted). It is a truly original contribution to the theoretical discussion of default anaphoric agreement made within a formal syntactic framework. The author claims that the Kakabe *ì* marker is a lexicalized minimal pronoun, i.e. a default agreement anaphor appearing when the regular transmission of features fails to happen in the course of syntactic derivation.

Apart from exploring purely structural phenomena, Alexandra was also interested in sociolinguistic and anthropological issues, her hands

being busy with many exciting projects. In her newly published paper (Vydrina 2021), she explores patterns of multilingualism in the Fouta-Djallon region of Guinea, where Kakabe is spoken. Her study of structural and sociolinguistic aspects of songs in traditional Kakabe narratives and a questionnaire she was designing promised to become a substantial contribution to anthropological linguistics. She was in a conversation with Language Science Press about publishing a reference grammar of Kakabe.

Alexandra was not only a talented linguist, she also had an eye for classical and contemporary art. Visiting art museums and galleries was always a must for her when coming to new places. In 2019, she published a critical review of Tomás Saraceno's exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris for a web project on Latin American art in Europe (Vydrina 2019c).

Finally, a few words should be said about Alexandra as a personality. She was very thoughtful and curious about everything, never satisfied with simple answers, the depth of her linguistic legacy speaking for itself. She had a delicate artistic taste and a perfect sense of humour. She could be funny and cheerful. While she might have appeared as someone having her head in the clouds at times, she could also be very focussed (quite in line with her interest in information structure) and absolutely fearless.

Her tragic passing leaves us with immense sorrow, and no words can truly express the void in the hearts of all those who knew her. No words can express our deepest condolences to Sasha's mother Oksana Trifonova, to Sasha's father Valentin Vydrin and to other members of Sasha's family she is survived by. Rest in peace, dear friend.

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