

# Somali Syntax in USSR, RF and USA

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The book *Somali Syntax* by Alexander Zholkovsky was published by the Moscow publishing house “Science” in 1971. It was the time of the Cold War, when the political, diplomatic and military confrontation between the USSR and the USA, which had peaked during the Caribbean crisis of 1962, had still not shown any signs of decline. The Somali Republic, which gained independence in 1960, was already following the path of “scientific socialism” under General Mohammed Siyad Barre, who had come to power in a military coup in 1969. Relations between the USSR and Somalia in all areas, including military, expanded and became stronger. Thousands of Somalis came to study in the USSR, many of them became cadets at military academies and schools. Moscow Radio started broadcasting in the Somali language. It was in this era that A. Zholkovsky became a pioneer in the study of this language in the USSR. Here is what he said about it in an interview:

In the 1960s, thanks to the opportunities provided, on the one hand, by Khrushchev’s imperialism, and on the other, by the achievements of American structural linguistics (Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf and others) that focused on the study of “exotic” (mostly American Indian) languages, and, thirdly, by the need for the study of Russian for the purposes of automatic translation, my long-time friend and co-author Yuri Shcheglov (1937-2009), and I thought it would be interesting to learn some “other”, completely different language.

Thus, for me, Somali became a novel experience of learning a language very different from Russian (or English)<sup>1</sup>. It belongs to the Semito-Hamitic group; its basic, ancient core is of Semitic origin, which relates Somali to Arabic and Hebrew<sup>2</sup>, but there are also many other things. They had their own writing invented by a Somali man named Cismaan – the “Cismaaniya” alphabet. After the military coup that brought to power a pro-Soviet dictator, the Latin script was introduced, and it has been used ever since.

This language turned out to feature a lot of interesting things. Remarkably, in Somali, nouns cannot govern prepositions and cases of other nouns. You can't say “a talk about something”, you can only say “a talk, we/they are talking about something.” Government by verbs is highly developed; in lieu of prepositions there is a set of pre-verbal particles: they stick to the verb and can govern up to four dependent words at once. That was my first modest discovery in Somali syntax.<sup>3</sup>

*Somali Syntax* was written on the basis of the Ph.D. thesis defended by A. Zholkovsky in 1969, which, in turn, drew on his experience teaching Somali to the students of Amharic at the Institute of Oriental Languages (IOL) of Lomonosov Moscow State University and his work in the Somali section of Moscow Radio – first as an editor, then as the first Russian broadcaster and translator of the Somali language. (The author of this article was brought to Moscow Radio by A.Zholkovsky and became the second broadcaster in Somali. Talking to the head the Africa Broadcasting Department, A.Zholkovsky expressed his doubts about the productivity of the political propaganda which his new protégé would have to deal with, while emphasizing, nevertheless, that, in his opinion, there was some value in this ideological institution: like the medieval monasteries of Europe, which preserved tradition of the older high culture and study of the “dead” classical languages, Moscow Radio ensured the preservation, development and study of African languages.)

Regarding his experience of broadcasting in the Somali language, A.Zholkovsky, with his habitual humor (the level of which the reader has just had the opportunity to appreciate) said:

I mastered Somali to a limited degree – within the confines of my work for Moscow Radio. I could claim I knew how to express in Somali every one of the two hundred messages (actually, sentences) it likes to address to its Somali listeners. Since then I have almost forgotten the language. And I have never been to Somalia.<sup>4</sup>

The Annotation to the published version of *Somali Syntax* goes:

The monograph offers the first (whether among Russian or foreign African studies publications) rigorous scientific analysis of the syntax of the Somali language. Based on the application of modern methods of linguistic research, the author discovers the laws of the structure of complex and simple sentences, dividing for this purpose the Somali syntax into two levels – deep and surface.

A. Zholkovsky's book consists of five chapters: The Surface Patterns of Positive Declarative Sentences; Adjectivization, Adverbialization and Nominalization Processes; The Use of Surface Patterns to Express Deep-Structure Relationships; Synonymous Transformations of Deep Structures; The Use of Specific Syntactic and Lexical Means to Express Particular Meanings.

The book concludes with appendices containing descriptions of some specific parts of Somali surface syntax: The Rules for Inserting Short-Form Subject Pronouns; Morphological Indicators of the Subject; Types of Subject-Predicate Agreement; Omissions of Sentence Particles from a Sentence; The Problem of the Particle *waxaa*; Word Classes; Preverbal Particles; One Regular Synonymous Transformation and Related Vocabulary Requirements. The last Appendix contains a fragment of The Russian-Somali dictionary.<sup>5</sup>

In his Preface to *Somali Syntax*, the author expressed his gratitude to a large group of Somalis, including Abdi Haji Gobdon and Ahmed Abdi Hashi 'Hasharo', who later became famous political and public figures in Somalia, "for their help in the study of their language and for reviewing the Somali examples used in this work."

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*Somali Syntax* was reissued in 2007, already in the "new" Russia, i.e. RF (Russian Federation). It was brought out by the Moscow publishing house URSS, whose name unequivocally refers to the USSR, which had long since, in 1991, broken up and ceased to exist. The URSS, in addition to publishing new books, specializes in reprinting scientific books that were produced mainly during the "late years" of the USSR. By the time of the second release of *Somali Syntax*, Somalia, which had experienced a protracted civil war, had disintegrated, too. By then A. Zholkovsky had moved to the United States and distanced himself

from Somali studies. In 1980, he became a professor of Russian literature at Cornell University, and in 1983 moved to a similar department at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

In the Preface to the second edition, A. Zholkovsky says:

The book... was published in 1971 with a circulation of 800 copies and was sold out in a matter of days, due to the interest in its exotic material and, partly, to its use of “new methods” (the linguistic “Meaning → Text” model). A special flavor was added to [this book] by the use, as linguistic examples, of fragments from the Moscow Radio propaganda texts in Somali (mainly about the war in Vietnam), which sounded like a forerunner of the future “soc-art”<sup>6</sup>... In its time, the book earned the grateful attention of Somali studies specialists and other Africanists (B.Andrzejewski, A.Dolgopol’sky, G.Kapchits) as well as theoretical linguists (A.Zaliznyak, I.Mel’chuk, B.Comrie).<sup>7</sup> Despite being written in Russian, it entered the international linguistic scene.

The 2007 version of *Somali Syntax*, is concluded with “The Afterword” that I wrote at the request of the publisher:

My teacher, A. Zholkovsky, thank God, is alive and well, rides a bicycle, is in the prime of his creative life and, according to L.Rubinshtein<sup>8</sup>, is a cult figure in Russian philological circles. Small wonder: the maestro wrote not only two dozen books and hundreds of articles on linguistics and poetics, but also authored many non-fictional stories (*vignettes*) that brought him almost as much fame as his scholarly research.

A. Zholkovsky studied Somali many years ago, and now few people know that he was the founder of Russian studies of this language, and that *Somali Syntax* is their cornerstone. This first (and only) book on Somali in Russian was a new word in the world of African studies. It not only gives a strictly scientific analysis of Somali syntax, but also sets the goal of solving instructional tasks. It is not surprising, therefore, that two-thirds of the foreigners who have learned to speak the language of the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa fluently owe it to *Somali Syntax*. A. Zholkovsky himself learned how to form complex Somali constructions in the process of working on this book, and I did the same after a careful study of it.

The patriarch of the Somali studies worldwide Bogumil Andrzejewski mastered the exotic Cushitic language in the course of long communication with nomads. However, he carefully read *Somali Syntax* and spoke highly of it. During our meeting in London in 1990, the venerable Professor of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) said that

he especially appreciated in the book what he had not figured out himself. For instance, that the paradigm of Somali sentence particles implementing various types of logical focus consists not of two, as previously thought, but of three forms (including the particle *waxaa*).

In one of his memoiristic vignettes<sup>9</sup>, A. Zholkovsky recalls a meeting with Vladimir Propp<sup>10</sup> and quotes Dmitry Segal<sup>11</sup>, who told the story of how, in the mid-1960s, he was bringing the discoverer of Russian folk-tales' narrative functions to the "Science" publishing house, where he was to sign the contract for republishing his *Morphology of the Folk-Tale*. Segal told V. Propp that this was at last Propp's finest hour so that he could make any corrections, changes and expansions, including the additional materials that he had kept from the original 1928 version. In response, V. Propp shook his head and said: "Can't be touched: a classic!"

A. Zholkovsky, recognizing the presence of "gaps and shortcomings" in his *Somali Syntax*, did not want to correct them for the reprint. And he was right. His book should not be touched either. It is a classic.

Judging by the fact that the publishing house URSS printed some additional copies of *Somali Syntax* again in 2012, the book is still in demand.

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In June of this year (2020), I found a letter from the city of Achinsk (Eastern Siberia) on my mail server, written by my longtime correspondent Vasily Klimenko. This remarkable man belongs to the ineradicable tribe of Russian cranks, to the Siberian breed of which V. Shukshin<sup>12</sup> devoted a series of short stories. One day V. Klimenko said the following about himself: "I am a historian and a lawyer by training. As a student, I became interested in the history of teaching and learning of African languages. I wanted to become a teacher, but because of my poor hearing, I could not do it. I work as a storekeeper. I am interested in Somali. I am also learning the Malagasy language."

V. Klimenko's letter contained two questions: "Who initiated the translation of A. Zholkovsky's *Somali Syntax* into English?" and "Did you like the translation?"

I always wanted this book to be translated into a European language and did not doubt that I would have been the first to be notified by A. Zholkovsky if and when that finally happened. Therefore, his reaction to V. Klimenko's message, resent to him by me: "I don't know anything. Who translated? Where? When?" did not surprise me. However,

the next e-mail from Achinsk, which read: “Click [https://archive.org/details/DTIC\\_ADA091302](https://archive.org/details/DTIC_ADA091302)” dotted some i’s and crossed some t’s of this case.

On taking a look at his book in English, A.Zholkovsky was initially disappointed: “It was vilely published – a long time ago, in 1979, and no one asked me for copyright. But I’ll probably post it on my webpage anyway.”

On the cover of this mysterious book I found – in addition to the year of its release – the name and the surname of the translator, Emery W. Tetrault, and the name of the office, MRM, Inc. (which may have ordered the work) – and, boy, was I astonished! Simple searches on the Internet allowed me to put everything in its place. The first to show up was – alas! – the obituary of the translator, published by the American newspaper “The Baltimore Sun” (below I quote it with small omissions):

EMERY W. (TED) TETRAULT, son of Emery and Flora Tetrault, died after a long illness at age 75 on February 8, 2006, at Lewes Convalescent Center, Lewes, Delaware.

Ted was born September 27, 1930 in Worcester, Massachusetts. He graduated from Assumption College in 1952 and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force that year. He served in the Korean War and was honorably discharged in 1956. He later received his Master’s degree in linguistics from American University. Ted and Joan married in 1955 and moved to Washington, DC in 1955 where he began a 40-year career with the National Security Agency. He was instrumental in developing many of the federal government’s foreign language teaching programs at the National Cryptologic School. He was nationally recognized as an expert in adult language learning, teaching methodologies and translation. Teaching was his love, and he taught unprecedented numbers of cryptologic language analysts in his language, linguistics, and methodology programs. His work influenced virtually every National Cryptologic School foreign language instructor and language course. Due to the nature of his work only his colleagues know fully his service to his country.

It remains to add a little. The National Security Agency (NSA), in which Mr. Tetrault made his career, is a division of the US Department of Defense and is part of the Intelligence Community as an independent intelligence body. Having realized that *Somali Syntax* was translated for the NSA, A. Zholkovsky said: “Wow!”

The translation of the book was completed in 1979 and most likely started a year earlier. It was then that Somalia was defeated in the war with Ethiopia over Ogaden – the eastern part of that country populated by Somalis. In that conflict, the USSR supported Ethiopia, which resulted in a sharp cooling of Soviet-Somali relations. This probably enhanced the interest of the American special services in Somalia and prompted their employees to start mastering the language of that country.

One has to appreciate NSA's choosing the best (and, in my opinion, still unsurpassed) manual for studying the syntax of the Somali language and the best possible translator (judging by his biography and results of his work) to do the job. MRM, Inc. positions itself on the Internet as a regional company providing risk management programs and services. As for its links with the National Security Agency, I know nothing about them.

According to the search by V. Klimenko, the translation of *Somali Syntax* into English, posted on the above mentioned site, was printed for internal use only. It is not listed as a publication in the catalogue of the Library of Congress.

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The American part of the *Somali Syntax* story reminded me of a Somali tale about the blind man Ina Ali Qablah. One day his guide seated him near a termite hill. The blind man touched the hill and asked: "What's this?" The guide explained: "It's a house of termites. They built it at night with their saliva."

Ina Ali Qablax said: "It's a wonder that such a big house has been built by small insects. It's an even greater wonder that they did it in the dark. But it's a real miracle that they clamped it together with saliva!"

Well, it's a wonder that A.Zholkovsky's *Somali Syntax* has been translated into English by the most secret division of the American intelligence. It's an even greater wonder that the service made a clean breast of it forty years later. But it's a real miracle that this canonical book has finally become available to the Somalis who can read in English!

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**Notes**

1. Yu.Shcheglov mastered the Hausa language, which he taught at the Institute of Oriental languages of Moscow State University prior to his emigration to the USA.
2. Today Somali is classified as a Cushitic, not as a Semito-Hamitic (Afrasian) language.
3. The electronic literary journal "LiTERRatura", N160. May 2020.
4. Ibid.
5. On the requirements for any Foreign Language-Somali dictionary see also: G.Kapchits "Towards the Lexicographical Description of Somali Nouns with the Word "Road" as an Example" in *Bildhaan*, vol.17, 2017. "The Russian-Somali dictionary" the principles of which had been elaborated by A.Zholkovsky has not been compiled yet.
6. One of the directions of postmodern art that developed in the USSR in the 1970s as part of the so-called alternative culture, opposed to the state ideology of that period.
7. Bogumił Andrzejewski (1922-1994), Aaron Dolgopól'ski (1930-2012), Anderej Zal-iznyak (1935-2017), Igor Mel'chuk (born in 1932), Bernard Comrie (born in 1947) – at different times, professors at universities in the UK, Israel, Russia, Canada and the USA.
8. Lev Rubinshtein (born in 1947) – a Russian poet, bibliographer and essayist.
9. Alexander Zholkovsky. *Erosiped and other vignettes*. M.: Aquarius Publishers, 2003. P. 194-196.
10. Vladimir Propp (1885-1970) – a famous Russian philologist and folklorist, one of the founders of the structural-typological study of narrative.
11. Dmitry Segal (born in 1938) – a Russian and Israeli literary scholar, Professor (emeritus) at Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
12. Vasily Shukshin (1929-1974) – a Russian actor, film director, screenwriter and writer.



