

Obituary of Dr William André Auquier Wilson
(known as André Wilson) 16th April 1927 - 23rd March 2015

André Wilson was a well-known, well-respected and well-loved linguist, who was personally multilingual. He specialised in languages of the Atlantic group in West Africa. He later became a consultant for the United Bible Societies, especially helping translators in West Africa. Being a practical rather than a theoretical linguist, his sometimes brief but very insightful researches into many of the languages of West Africa stood the test of time and were of great help to both some linguists and translators, who otherwise had very little previous analysis to base their work on.

André Wilson was the son of William Proctor Wilson and Evelynne Cornet-Auquier, who was French, and so André was always bilingual. Even at primary school he was learning Latin and Greek. From 1940 to 1945 he attended Sedbergh School in Yorkshire (now Cumbria) where he did well. German was one of his subjects. He was then offered a place at Trinity College, Cambridge, but postponed it to do 3 years' National Service in the RAF, latterly as a military interpreter in Japan following initial study at SOAS University of London.

In 1948 he took up his offer to study at Cambridge, where he took the Modern and Mediaeval Languages Tripos, and gained a First Class degree.

It was at Cambridge University that he became a believing and practising Christian, and remained so the rest of his life. At a CSSM house party in 1954 at Portrush in Northern Ireland he met Yvonne Benington. After a long courtship, and much linguistic work in between, he married her in 1960 at her home town of Ballymoney in N.Ireland. They remained happily married till his death.

Because of his success at Cambridge he had been awarded a Treasury Studentship in African Studies in 1951. So from 1951-54 he was a graduate student at SOAS University of London, and did fieldwork in Gambia, Sierra Leone, and parts of French West Africa. The results of his researches were not published in book form until as late as 2007. Extracted here is a part of Keir Hansford's review of the book: (Hansford 2007) :

'The very useful Introduction by the author himself gives a fascinating insight into how his early career, starting from SOAS, London, whence he was sent to Gambia to learn Mandinka fluently, developed as he travelled about collecting data. In 1953 linguist Maurice Houis introduced him to the local variety of consonant mutation, a subject which had interested Wilson since he had studied Celtic consonant mutation whilst reading Indo-European philology as an undergraduate.

In 1958 he took ship to Bissau, aiming to collect a 600-word list, devised by Professor Guthrie, intended to bring out the details of a class concord system. At that time he was not concerned with tones and verbs. Immediately consonant mutations were found, and far more complex than thitherto expected. He sought to acquire a command of Crioulo (Kiriol), then tackled word lists in Papel and Bijagó. His travels took him to investigate Cassanga and Cobiana, then Nalu and the Temne-Baga cluster, later Pajadinca (Pajade), Koyagi. He sought to acquire some fluency in Balanta, meantime investigating Sua (Mansoanca) and Biafada.

In tackling Felupe, a Diola language, he stumbled upon ATR vowels even before John Stewart made ATR into a major area of research.'

From 1954 to 1961 he was a Lecturer in West African Languages at SOAS University of London. He took a Portuguese course in Lisbon in 1957, and so was thus equipped to do fieldwork in Portuguese Guinea and Senegal 1958-59.

From 1961 to 1965 he was a Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana. This time he was joined by his wife Yvonne. In 1962 she was with him as he collected language samples in northern Ghana. It was 1961 when he helped John Bendor-Samuel assess the language situation in northern Ghana. The next year he was invited to a United Bible Societies' workshop in Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). In 1963 he was invited, with Yvonne, to another UBS workshop, this time in Cameroon.

In July 1965 André left the University of Ghana, and joined United Bible Societies. Requiring a Ph.D to be a full translation consultant, he spent a year of linguistics at the University of Texas, Austin, before returning to Ghana with permission to write his dissertation there. From his base in the north he covered projects in Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso and northern parts of Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin during the years 1966 to 1972.

For several months during 1968-9 André mentored a young UBS trainee from Scotland, who recollects their travels together: "I was impressed by how at ease he was moving around West Africa, able to support translators from initial encouragement and training all the way through to final manuscript and proofreading."

André's doctorate was awarded in 1970 for his dissertation on 'Verbal sequences and case markers in Dagbani'. In 1972 he and his family moved to Cameroon, where he continued to work as a UBS translation consultant, responsible also for Chad and Central African Republic.

Dr Philip A. Noss of the American Bible Society recalls: "My wife Cecilia and I first got to know André when he was translation consultant covering much of West Africa, then later Cameroon ... In 1971 we launched the Gbaya Old Testament project, and he would have been our first UBS consultant."

It was in 1976 that André and family moved back to the UK, where the search for suitable employment was difficult. Finally he got a job as guard/motorman/train operator on the London Underground's Bakerloo Line. He worked there until his retirement in 1991.

In 1992 André made a brief visit to Guinea-Bissau to help a translation-assigned expatriate couple analyse and describe the Biafada language. His quick and clear understanding of how the language worked stood the test of time, and laid a firm foundation for the later translation.

Similarly he was able to help another ex-pat analyse the Balanta language. The result became her standard reference for the next 10 years.

He was also a reviewer for the Mandinka Bible, which was published in 2013.

Apart from his understanding of many languages of West Africa, he was fluent in or able to converse in French, German, Portuguese, Mandinka and Crioulo. As a linguist he was able to quickly analyse and understand any language of West Africa that he began to research, without claiming to be a theoretician. He was much appreciated by expatriate researchers and translators, and was able to relate to and empathise with local translation

teams, some of whom had minimal education. In later years the JWAL Editor relied on him to be an insightful referee/reviewer of any article written in French, or on the subject of a language in the Atlantic area of West Africa.

In his last few years ill health put an end to his linguistic activities, but his love for language and the peoples of West Africa and his Christian faith never diminished. He was greatly respected by linguists, and beloved of his family and friends.

He is survived by his wife Yvonne, 2 daughters and 4 grandchildren.

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I am greatly indebted to Yvonne Wilson for making all this information available, and to John Binnington for passing it on to me, and adding his own recollections and researches.

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