

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 2756-1224

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,
vol 17. Editor: Peter K. Austin

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Cite this article: Barzilai, Maya L. & Nubantood Khalil. 2020. Nobiin (Egypt, Sudan) – Language Snapshot. In Peter K. Austin (ed.) *Language Documentation and Description* 17, 118-125. London: EL Publishing.

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/187>

This electronic version first published: July 2020



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Nobiin (Egypt, Sudan) – Language Snapshot

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|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Language Name:</i> | Nobiin (also Mahas-Fadichcha, Mahas-Fadicca, Mahas-Fiadikka, Mahas-Fadija) |
| <i>Language Family:</i> | Nubian, Northern Eastern Sudanic, Nilo-Saharan |
| <i>ISO 639-3 Code:</i> | fia |
| <i>Glottolog Code:</i> | nobi1240 |
| <i>Population:</i> | 669,000 |
| <i>Location:</i> | Egypt, Sudan |
| <i>Vitality rating:</i> | EGIDS 6b |

Summary

Nobiin is a Nile-Nubian language originally spoken along the Nile River in Egypt and Sudan. Rilly & de Voogt (2012) estimate that the Nobiin community today consists of about 545,000 members. Of those, about 500,000 are in Egypt and Sudan, and the rest live as refugees in Europe, the United States (US), and the Arabian Gulf (Rilly & de Voogt, 2012), due to the coerced displacement of much of the Nobiin community in the 1960s. Nobiin is currently considered to be an endangered language. Several members of the Nobiin communities in the US and elsewhere are currently engaged in revitalization programs, including literacy projects for native Nobiin-speaking adults and children of the Nobiin community.

1. Overview

Nobiin is classified as a member of the Nubian language family along with Mattokki/Andaandi in lower Nubia, Meidob in North Darfur, and the Hill Nubian languages in Southern Kordofan. Nubian is a Nile-Nubian language that is a member of the North Eastern Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan language phylum (Rilly, 2010). Nobiin descends from Old Nubian¹ (Browne, 2002:1) and is spoken along the Nile in northern Sudan and southern Egypt, as well as by thousands of refugees in other parts of Egypt and Sudan, Europe, the US, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf countries.

The Islamization of Nubia began in the Middle Ages, as early as the 11th century CE (Werner, 2013) and continued with the collapse of Dongola, the capital of the Northern Nubian Christian kingdom, in 1323 CE (Lobban 2003:148). As a result of this Islamization, Arab culture and the Arabic language influenced Nubia and the Nobiin community. Today's members of the Nobiin community who grew up in Egypt and Sudan are native Arabic speakers; this situation is a result not only of Arabic education but also labour-related migration and urbanization beginning around the 1960s (Kronenberg & Kronenberg, 1963). In modern history, the Nubian people have been divided between two Arab countries, Egypt and Sudan, which are both characterized by a mostly monolingual Arabic education system that denies cultural diversity and has historically disallowed multilingualism. Therefore, the Nubian communities in both countries suffer cultural marginalization and cultural cleansing, along with other non-Arab ethnic groups. Public use of the Nobiin language is restricted in both countries. In Northern Sudan, Nobiin-speaking students were harshly punished when speaking Nobiin in school until recently.

Due to the construction of the High Dam near Aswan in the 1960s, large numbers of Nobiin speakers were coerced to move from their historical land in the Nile Valley in both Egypt and Sudan. Prior to this displacement, Nobiin was primarily spoken in the region beginning 180km south of the first cataract of the Nile in southern Egypt, and Kerma, in the north of Sudan. Figure 1 shows areas in southern Egypt and Sudan in which Nobiin speakers have historically resided (from Thelwall & Schadeberg 1983: 228).

¹ Old Nubian is the written archaic Nubian language which was dominant during the Nubian Christian Kingdoms (400 CE- 1500 CE). Old Nubian was written in a Greek-Coptic uncial alphabetic script with three domestic letters attributed to the Meroitic script.



Figure 1. Map of historical Nobiin-speaking region

There are two major dialects of Nobiin: Mahas and Fadija. The Mahas dialect is spoken in the Nile Valley of northern Sudan, in an area that begins approximately forty-five kilometers north of the contemporary city of Dongola and extends northward to about sixty-five kilometers downstream of the third cataract. The Fadija dialect is spoken in the area of Wadi Halfa in Northern Sudan and Southern Egypt around Kom Ombo city in the resettlement villages, and in New Halfa in Eastern Sudan after the exodus of the Nubians to Khashm El Qirba in 1964. There also exists a hybrid dialect spoken in the area of Sukkot, which is located between the Mahas-speaking and Fadija-speaking regions. All of these dialects are mutually intelligible.

The largest diaspora community of Nobiin speakers in the United States is in the mid-Atlantic region including Washington, D.C., Northern Virginia, Maryland, and Philadelphia. There are also smaller Nobiin communities in Boston, New York, and Los Angeles.

During the ancient period of the Kingdoms of Kush (750 BCE - 350 CE), the hieroglyphic writing system was used for writing Nobiin. During the time of the empire of Meroe (270 BCE - 340 CE), Meroitic was written both using hieroglyphics, as in the ancient period, as well as in a cursive script. A new writing style known as the ‘Old Nubian Script’ appeared in Nubia beginning in of the 8th century CE (Werner, 2013), following the rise of the three medieval Christian Nubian Kingdoms: Alodia, Makuria, and Nobatia. This new script uses primarily Greek letters with the addition of some Coptic and Meroitic letters. Through the Christian Nubian era, the Old Nubian script prevailed as the main writing system for around seven centuries. The collapse of the last Nubian kingdom, Alodia, in the sixteenth century and the dominance of Islam in Nubia caused the gradual extinction of the Old Nubian script.

In the last approximately 65 years many Nobiin writing methods have come into being as a response to the strong will of the local community to preserve its endangered language. In the 1990s, Dr. Mokhtar Khalil Kabbara, a Nubian professor who worked in the Department of Antiquities at Cairo University, began to revitalize the writing of Nobiin using the Old Nubian script (Mokhtar 1996:8). His orthography remains popular among many Nubians in Egypt and Sudan. Motivated by the work of Dr. Kabbara, the *Nubian Language Society* (NLS) developed a phonemic orthography known as *nobiin agii*, which literally means ‘Nobiin letters’, to write Nobiin, based on the Old Nubian script. *Nobiin agii* is an uncial script which does not distinguish upper and lower case characters, and includes twenty-four letters: seventeen for consonants, five for vowels, and two for semivowels. The *nobiin agii* alphabet is currently being taught and learned by members of the Nobiin diaspora communities in Washington, D.C., Virginia, Maryland, and Philadelphia. Table 1 lists all the letters contained in the orthography.

Table 1. Nobiin graphemes

| Letter | IPA transliteration |
|----------------|---------------------|
| ᐃ | /a/ |
| ᐅ | /b/ |
| ᐆ | /c/ |
| ᐇ | /d/ |
| ᐈ | /e/ |
| ᐉ | /f/ |
| ᐊ | /g/ |
| ᐋ | /h/ |
| ᐌ | /i/ |
| ᐍ | /j/ |
| ᐎ | /k/ |
| ᐏ | /l/ |
| ᐐ | /m/ |
| ᐑ | /n/ |
| ᐒ | /o/ |
| ᐓ | /ŋ/ |
| ᐔ | /ɲ/ |
| ᐕ | /r/ |
| ᐖ | /s/ |
| ᐗ | /ʃ/ |
| ᐘ | /t/ |
| ᐙ | /u/ |
| ᐚ ² | /w/ |
| ᐛ. | /y/ |

² ‘ᐚ’ is used in other Nobiin orthographic systems to represent the /w/ phoneme.

Figure 2 presents a sample text written in *nobiin agii* extracted from the Nobiin translation of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 (Khalil, 2017). Note that the macrons over vowel graphemes are used to denote that the vowel is phonologically long. The sentence translates to ‘As long as a soul can breathe and an eye can see, you will live,’ corresponding to the final lines of the original sonnet.

**Ω̄Ο̄ΡΤΙ Ξ̄Ε̄ ᾹΓ̄ C̄Ε̄ῙΝΔΟ, Μ̄ᾹΨ̄ Ξ̄Ε̄Λ̄ Ε̄C̄ΚΑ ΝΑΒ̄ΒῙΝΔΟ,
ῙΡΤΑ Φ̄Ᾱ ᾹΨ̄ᾹΦῙΝΑΜΕ**

Figure 2. Example of modern Nobiin orthography

Other Nobiin orthographic systems have been developed in parallel to this one by speakers in other Nobiin communities. These include the *Katharevousa* orthography, developed by Muhammad Jalal Hashim and practiced in London Nubian clubs. Additionally, at the International University of Africa in Khartoum, a script using Arabic characters is used for writing Nobiin. For a discussion and analysis of the specific challenges associated with developing Nobiin orthographies, see Hāshim (2004).

Ongoing language revitalization programs are organized and conducted by the *Nubian Language Society* (NLS), a registered US organization with the mission of teaching native Nobiin speakers to read and write in Nubian script. These revitalization programs of the NLS also involve two major language learning projects, launched in 2017, which aim to teach Nobiin to new generations of Nubians in the US who were not raised with Nobiin as a native or heritage language. The first project specializes in the education of children from the ages of five to twelve years, and includes teaching through language textbooks, storybooks, children’s songs, folk games, and a simplified grammar curriculum. The second project is composed of courses for teaching Nobiin to learners above 12 years of age at three different proficiency levels. The latter project is not exclusively directed to Nobiin community members, but rather is more broadly available to anyone in the US interested in learning Nobiin, especially scholars such as archeologists, linguists, historians, and anthropologists who are interested in Nubian studies. The Nubian Studies and Documentation Centre in Cairo is also involved in similar revitalization efforts. Relatedly, Nobiin language courses are currently being offered in the Egyptian cities of Cairo and Alexandria.

2. Current Research

Nobiin was the subject of study in a one-semester field methods course at Georgetown University led by Professor Hannah Sande during the 2018 Spring semester. Work from this course led to presentations of linguistic

analyses of Nobiin at international linguistics conferences including the 2019 Annual Conference on African Linguistics (Barzilai & Khalil 2019) and the 2020 Linguistics Society of America annual meeting (Barzilai 2020). Also as a result of this work, the *African Language Materials Archive* at Michigan State University currently contains a description of the phonology, morphology, and basic word order properties of the Nobiin language, as well as recordings (.wav files) of collected texts and translation-based elicitation sessions. All recorded material is accompanied by transcriptions in IPA, glosses, and English translations (.pdf files). Similar Nobiin recordings were made available in the SOAS ELAR archive (Bell & Rowan 2016).

The first author is a freelance linguist who is engaged in several linguistic projects related to the NLS. He has published three books for teaching Nobiin to children and adults. In addition, he has published several academic papers related to Nobiin grammar (e.g. Khalil 2015), Nobiin literary translations (e.g. Khalil 2017), and Nubian sociolinguistics (e.g. Khalil 2018).

The second author conducts ongoing language elicitation with Nobiin speakers in the Washington, D.C. area. This work has focused on morphophonological phenomena, especially examining phonological alternations that may only occur in certain morphological environments (Barzilai & Khalil 2019; Barzilai 2019, 2020). The goals of this ongoing work are to add to the existing description and documentation of Nobiin, and to contribute to the theoretical literature on how phonological processes interact with morphological structure.

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