

The grammaticalization of Swahili through the study of four missionary grammars from 1885 to 1944

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In our presentation, we will discuss the specificities of four Swahili grammars written by missionaries in French between 1885 and 1944. Among these grammars three were written by White Fathers (officially called *Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique*): Delaunay, Brutel and Van den Eynde; and one – the most complete and erudite – was written by a Spiritan: Sacleux. These pioneering works are representative of the first linguistic descriptions of Swahili in French.

This corpus is remarkable for many reasons:

- None of these authors were linguists, they all wrote their grammars based on data collected during their journeys without any linguistic knowledge. They were “field linguists” (“linguistes de terrain”, AUROUX, 1994).
- Most of them worked for other missionaries, and not for a wide readership. The grammars were often very quickly written, and in few exemplars.
- Writing grammars implied to make choices and analyses such as the selection of the variety, the codification in Latin script, the description using familiar grammatical categories, the compilation of some vocabulary etc.
- They are all written in order to speak the language of the natives – more precisely a language understood by most of the natives –, to spread the word, but also to have authority on the populations: “in descriptions of Swahili (and of other African languages, of course) ‘communication and control’ were inseparable motives (FABIAN, 1984: 14).

After presenting this corpus, and the particularity of each grammar – the authors, their implicit and explicit scientific references, their didactic preoccupations, the variety chosen, the grammatical categories and term used –, we will examine their normative aspects in details. We project to present the normative dimension of these grammars, as it is explicitly exposed in the prefaces, the notes and through the choice of some examples. These normative considerations will of course be put into prospect with the grammatical tradition of the time, and with the missionary and colonial projects.

Corpus

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