

# Case in Selected Grammars of Swahili

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From antiquity onwards, case related notions have formed part of linguistic terminology and description. An often-quoted, basic definition of case reads as follows:

Case is a system of marking dependent nouns for the type of relationship they bear to their heads. Traditionally the term refers to inflectional marking, and, typically, case marks the relationship of a noun to a verb at the clause level or of a noun to a preposition, postposition or another noun at the phrase level (BARRY J. BLAKE: *Case*, Cambridge: CUP, 1994)

The presentation will discuss some results of an analysis concerning the use and application of case-related notions in a number of Swahili-grammars written during the German colonial rule in Eastern Africa, i.e. roughly around the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. The authors of the grammars were only in part missionaries and/or church-affiliated, their works, though, were used for teaching both prospective missionaries and colonial staff.

All these grammars make ample use of constructs such as nominative, accusative, dative and so forth which – from a modern perspective – may seem somewhat surprising considering that Swahili does not exhibit any overt case marking. This raises the question of how the respective authors understood these terms.

A comparison of said grammars shows that although case notions were not employed consistently by the various authors, they all show a certain accord in identifying case not with primarily formal, inflectional criteria but aspects of the underlying semantic system.

These observations interface with comparable topics of missionary linguistics within the framework of linguistic historiography and also address the question of whether and how the use at the time is commensurable with contemporary approaches. To the extent that grammars of colonial times are considered to form part of linguistic tradition, another point needs addressing. This is the question of what 'linguistic tradition' actually means and whether definitions such as the one cited above, which explicitly refer to this tradition, need to be clarified.