

19th century approaches to Bantu languages. Examples from East Africa and South West Africa

Karsten Legère

Department of Languages and Literatures, University of Gothenburg

The early analysis and linguistic description of African languages in structural sketches was always made against the background of Indo-European languages. In this respect, the language the missionary was familiar with played a particular role. As WHITELEY (1957) noted, the translation of linguistic items of the target language into English or another language used in missionary work (e.g. German in what is now Namibia) was instrumental in i.a. determining word categories (parts of speech). If at all, the missionary was instructed in and exposed to the Latin school grammar way. This school grammar approach was transferred to typologically different African languages. Further, the 19th century focus of what is now linguistics was on comparative issues, with minor attention paid to the adequate elicitation of structural aspects of individual languages. Again, grammatical concepts that were relevant in comparativism were imposed on African languages. Similarly, mother tongue specific criteria were applied in designing orthographies for reducing African languages to writing that were indispensable for producing religious texts. Thus, early scripture translations into the Namibian Herero language reflected the German background of the missionary in charge that ultimately resulted in a (complicated) disjunctive writing system widely ignoring structural peculiarities of Herero and other Namibian Bantu languages which is in use up to date. Thus, the verb structure is broken up into some constituents, which were written as if they were words of their own. The classical tradition (as labelled by WHITELEY 1957) resulted further in the attempt of identifying Indo-European features such as article, declension or cases in languages of a different grammatical structure.

Missionaries were in the forefront of studying Bantu languages outside the Kongo region that witnessed the first grammatical sketches of Bantu languages as demonstrated in DOKE AND COLE (1969), recently summarized by ZWARTJES (2011). The paper will deal with East Africa (esp. KRAPP) and South West Africa (HAHN).