THE BASIS FOR A COMPARATIVE GRAMMAR OF THE BANTU LANGUAGES.

EVER since Bleek died in the 'seventies of the last century, leaving unfinished his Comparative Grammar of the South African languages, one philologist after another has aspired to complete the task begun, and so ably outlined, by this remarkable man who was the first to apply to the South African languages the name "Bantu." Perhaps the only writers who have come anywhere near Bleek in profundity of study and perspicacity are Carl Meinhof, the German pastor, and Jacottet, the French missionary, who has written such a remarkable study of the Subiya and "Barotse" languages of the upper Zambesi. Steere (Bishop of Zanzibar) left a great name behind him for the compilation of East African vocabularies and handbooks, but he has of course long since been distanced by workers in the same field. Torrend has produced a good monograph of the Tonga language, but his theories in his "Comparative Grammar of the South African Bantu Languages" are needlessly eccentric and insufficiently supported by his array of facts, valuable as is this last. No recent writer, however, other than Meinhof, has attempted much *comparative* work (*i.e.* with other African language groups). Lepsius is perhaps the only philologist of distinction who has as yet discussed with cogency and discrimination the relations of the Bantu languages with other African groups of speech. Meinhof, in the work under review, and Jacottet in his Subiya Grammar confine themselves to comparing the

¹ *Grundzüge einer vergleichenden Grammatik der Bantu-sprachen.* VON CARL MEINHOF. Dietrich Reimer (E. Vohsen), Berlin, 1906.

Bantu languages one with the other. Meinhof has, however, in some of his ablest and most successful work dealt with the non-Bantu dialects of East Africa, defining with great correctness the exact extent of their relations with the Bantu family.

In the work under review, Herr Meinhof deals first of all with the prefixes which play such a prominent part in the Bantu languages. With his conclusions the writer of this review cannot in all cases agree, and indeed it would be well that he should state at this juncture that although he has the greatest respect for the results of Herr Meinhof's own personal research in his numerous studies of Bantu dialects, he cannot agree with him as to many of the conclusions drawn from this study, the reason for this being in the opinion of the reviewer that by ill fortune Herr Meinhof has not yet been able to grapple with certain Bantu languages of the north-east, north, and south-centre, which offer in their prefixes, in the forms of their nouns and the composition of their verb-tenses, solutions of several of the riddles that puzzle the student of Kafir, of Suto, Swahili, Ganda, and the languages of the Congo and Cameroons. As the reviewer hopes before long to treat of this matter both in an article in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and in a further grammatical study, he does not wish to forestall the presentation of his own reasons, but he would venture to give some of the conclusions at which he has himself arrived, in conjunction with those set forth by Herr Meinhof.

In the opening passages, Meinhof, referring to a former list of prefixes (the conventional sixteen, to which he had added three or four others), desires to add to this list a *Gu*-prefix, which he believes he has found in the Sango language to the north-east of Lake Nyasa. He makes no reference to the Luganda language, which really does possess an augmentative *Gu*-prefix, to which the corresponding plural prefix is *Aga*-. These two prefixes in Luganda as yet remain unexplained. The full forms are *ogu*- and *Aga*-. But it would be rash to assume in the absence of fuller information that we have here the vestiges of an

18th and 19th prefix. Some of the parallels cited by Meinhof and others of a *gu-* or *ju-* prefix in North Nyasaland or South Zambesia seem to be little else than a derivation from the *Ku-* prefix (the 15th in Bleek's classical list). Whether the *gu-* found by Meinhof in Sango is related to the augmentative prefix in Luganda is doubtful.

In the more southern Bantu tongues it seems—like *ku-*—to be associated (according to Meinhof) with the body or members of the body, which is one of the few senses in which *ku-* is used other than as a verbal infinitive. (There is a note on the *ogu-*, *aga-* prefixes in Luganda in the second volume of my work on the Uganda Protectorate.)¹

Another Bantu prefix not known to Bleek, and which has only recently come under the notice of Meinhof himself, is *fi-*. This may, in fact, be called the 17th prefix. It was first revealed by Bentley in his *Grammar of the Congo Language*. It is almost entirely restricted to the western Equatorial forms of Bantu speech, is in the singular, and is used as a diminutive. It has been practically ignored by authorities on the Bantu languages, with the exception of Bentley, Meinhof, and the present writer. The latter has traced this prefix as far east as Manyema (to the west of Tanganyika, in the valley of the upper Congo). Meinhof assigns to this prefix the original form of *pi*. The present writer cannot agree with him in this particular, but is not able to offer at present an alternative suggestion. This prefix is most commonly met with in the Congo and Cameroons languages of the West Coast as *fi-* or *vi-*, but in the island of Fernando Pô it becomes *si*; elsewhere it is *hi-*, *yi-*, and *i-*. No one has yet recorded it in Meinhof's hypothetical form of *pi-*. The plural of the 17th prefix in all these languages is invariably the 12th (*tu-*). And, moreover, the 17th prefix (*fi-*) always used in the *singular*, must not be confounded with the 6th or *bi-* prefix (which is invariably used in a *plural* sense).

¹ See p. 992. This prefix may perhaps be traced in the augmentative *chi* of Nyanja (*chiŋama* = "a big dog"), which has now lost its separate identity, coinciding in form with the fourth (seventh) class-prefix. The pronoun *gw* used in Luganda as the concord of the third (*asesa*) class is discussed by Sir Harry Johnston on pp. 891-2 of the same work.—ED.

According to Meinhof, the first 16 prefixes of the Bantu languages were as follows in their fullest forms:—1. *umu*; 2. *ava*; 3. *umu*; 4. *imi*; 5. *ili*; 6. *ama*; 7. *iki*; 8. *ivi*; 9. *ini*; 10. *ilini*; 11. *ulu*; 12. *utu*; 13. *aka*; 14. *uvu*; 15. *uku*; 16. *apa*. In their short (and simplest) forms Herr Meinhof would cite these as 1. *mu*; 2. *va*; 3. *mu*; 4. *mi*; 5. *li*; 6. *ma*; 7. *ki*; 8. *vi*; 9. *ni*; 10. *lini*; 11. *lu*; 12. *tu*; 13. *ka*; 14. *bu*; 15. *ku*; 16. *pa*.

The present writer from his own researches ventures to differ strongly from Herr Meinhof, not only as regards the original full form of these prefixes, but to some extent as to their simple monosyllabic type. According to him (the reviewer), the prefixes, which were of very much the same origin and character as the suffixes in Fula,¹ were originally 1. *ngumu*; 2. *mbaba* [*ngaba*]; 3. *ngumu*; 4. *ngimi*; 5. *ndindi*; 6. *ngama*; 7. *nkiki*; 8. *mbibi*; 9. *ini*; 10. *isini*; 11. *ndundu*; 12. *niutu*; 13. *nkaka*; 14. *mbubu*; 15. *kuku*; 16. *mpapa*. (The present writer does not feel quite certain as to the original form of the 9th and 10th, of the 13th or the 15th.) As to the composition of these prefixes, he believes them to have been in some cases composed of two or even three distinct elements relating to place and number. Thus, *ngu-mu* would be composed of two particles meaning "this" and "one," and *nga-ba* or *mbaba*, "these and "two". (*ngu* was probably a demonstrative adjective originally applied to upright objects like human beings and trees; *mu*=one or one man; the *n* (*m* before labials) which preceded most of the first syllables of the prefixes is probably a further detachable element—a definite article originally.) Another prefix in its second syllable may have indicated mass, another length, and so on. When these prefixes were followed by a *concord* or *pronominal particle*, sometimes the first and sometimes the second syllable was used. This would explain why the plural prefix *ma* has the puzzling concord of *ga*—in so many Bantu tongues when we realise that the original full form of the 6th prefix was *ngama*, or *gama* (*nga-ma*), in which shape it still exists in the archaic dialects of Mount Elgon.

¹ Which like the Bantu languages and not a few other forms of African speech has a concord.

The particle *ka-* (13th prefix) was essentially feminine, almost amounting to a gender distinction. It also indicated weakness and diminutive size. A plural prefix of the same diminutive signification (*tu-*) was possibly allied to an old root in Bantu and other African language groups indicating children, little ones, dwarfs, &c., &c. In short, the Bantu prefixes seem to have been either a doubled demonstrative pronoun preceded by an article—*n-*; or a demonstrative combined with a numeral, a noun of multitude or an adjective.

Just as I differ from Meinhof over the *origin* of the prefixes, I cannot find myself in agreement with him over the pronouns. The original forms of the first pronoun (according to my researches, but I hesitate to be dogmatic) seem to be traceable to several co-existing types: *ngi* or *ngu*; *mi* or *mbi*. The second person singular was *ku*; third person, *ngu* and *ya*; first person plural—one of the most marked features of the Bantu languages—*tu* or *su*; second person plural, *nu*, *nyu*, or *nyi*; third person plural, *ba* or *bo*. In course of time these forms were subjected to many variations. These started perhaps before the Bantu family differentiated markedly from sister groups by being in duplicate variations, according to whether they were "absolute" pronouns in a long or extended shape or short particles for conjugation, even throwing off a third type in the genitive. Thus, *ngi*, I, might become *ngu*, *nga*, *ndi*, *n-*, *m-*, *ni*, *nje*, *nse*, or *mimi*, *mnna* (in the possessive form, *angu*, *ambi*, *am*, *angi*, *ani*, *anse*), and so on, while the second person singular might develop into *kuku*, *kukwe*, *ugwe*, *ako*, *uwe*, *ave*, *o*, &c.; and the third person into *u*, *a*, *yu*, *gwe*, *kwe*, *yandi*, &c. As to the first person plural, it can pass rapidly through such stages as *twe*, *swe*, *hwe*, *fwe*, and *fe*. Dialects on the Victoria Nyanza closely allied to one another may yet differ, the one in preserving the first person plural in its archaic form *itwe*, while the other has reduced it to *ife* or *fe*. The second person plural sometimes resolves *nu* (the oldest type) into *lu*, or sometimes into *mu*, *ni*, *nyi* and even *bu*. Gradations between all these types are so numerous, and the range of my examples so wide, that I cannot take up the space of the JOURNAL by giving all my reasons for arriving at the above

deductions as to the *original* type of the Bantu personal pronouns; but when I am able to print my studies on the subject I think Herr Meinhof will be ready to agree with the deductions drawn from the evidence collected, some of which is from material not yet published.

With much that Herr Meinhof has to say about the verbal forms in the Bantu languages I am in agreement. In general, I think that the value of his studies would be enhanced if he obtained more information from, laid more stress upon, the very important Bantu languages round the northern shores of the Victoria Nyanza, especially Luganda and Runyoro, besides the remarkable and very distinct dialect of the Bakonjo people on the slopes of Ruwenzori. He will find most of these sufficiently illustrated by the Uganda missionaries, and outlined in my own work on the Uganda Protectorate. A great deal of valuable literature has been published on this subject by the agents of the Church Missionary Society.

Perhaps I might commit myself to one more small criticism, not so much in reference to the work under review as to the general linguistic studies which Herr Meinhof has contributed to African literature. I should like to protest against his over-great anxiety to discriminate between closely allied consonants and vowel sounds. This is a fault shared by not a few philologists at the present day and in past times. It is one against which I maintain a constant protest, as it introduces an annoying pedantry into comparative philology. We all remember how in our youth Greek and Latin studies were rendered hateful by ridiculous insistence on "quantity" (often a purely artificial invention of the schools), or on the exact—and generally false—pronunciation of Greek vowels and consonants. In the same way, when Herr Meinhof tries to distinguish by diacritical marks, accents, or the addition of aspirates, ever so many different kinds of *t* in the East African Bantu, or different types of *b* or *v*, *r* or *n*, *d* or *s*, he is giving himself and his readers a great deal of trouble quite needlessly. Let it be agreed, once and for all, that there *are* a great many shades of pronunciation as regards most vowels and consonants in all African

languages, and that these variations are not worth noticing (as a rule) when the structure of the language is being discussed. Of course, some writers confuse the very different sounds of τ and of γ (the French τ *grasseyé*, exhibited in recent developments of European pronunciation emanating from Germany, not yet acknowledged in official grammars and dictionaries). Nowhere to my own knowledge does the lingual τ change in African languages into the guttural γ . The last-named in the Semitic tongues as well as in African and Ugro-Altaic speech is invariably of guttural origin, related to the g , just as χ is closely related to k . On the other hand, in the Bantu tongues, as in many other African families of speech, the lingual τ is constantly developed from the t or d , in which case it is better written as τ , and not expressed by a fussy arrangement of d or t with irritating accents or dots. It must always be given as a premise in any essay on the Bantu forms of speech that d , t , τ , l , s , and even n are easily interchangeable. Sometimes an n changes to an l , and *vice-versâ*. It is often difficult to be sure whether a Bantu Negro is saying *tato* or *tato*.

I hope if these words come under the notice of Herr Meinhof he will not imagine that my differing from his conclusions ranks me any the less an admirer of his frequently profound researches into the structure of hitherto unstudied forms of Bantu speech. All African philologists at the present day have cause to be grateful to him.

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