



THE PEOPLING OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

- (1) THE EVIDENCE FROM LINGUISTIC CLASSIFICATION SOUTH OF THE ZAMBEZI
- (2) TRADITIONAL EVIDENCE IN THE S. RH. AREA AND THAT FROM EXTERNAL WRITTEN SOURCES

PAPER 1: Evidence from ling. class. south of the Z.

- (1) The nature of languages
- (1) A note of warning

Historians -- and laymen in the field of linguistics -- are sometimes inclined to think that languages are a kind of repository in which we may easily find historical evidence of the past. They, and perhaps the linguists too, do not realise that there is really no science of language history nor that such knowledge as there is of the development of languages has not as yet been satisfactorily related to the speech- or ~~xxxx~~ culture-communities that ~~xxxx~~ speak or spoke them.

All histories of languages and language families in particular are histories of devolution -- and not of evolution. We start from the concept of a "proto-language" which then branched and flowered into many derivatives of the "proto-language". None of these studies in the devolution from a systematic and near-perfect original language to the present-day languages are really studies in linguistic adaptation and development for almost never are the contributing languages and the compromise made between the proto-language and the contributing languages ~~xxxx~~ the subject of analysis.

Para.

The concept of the devolution of a proto-language does not tie in with the sometimes naive theories (often introduced by non-linguists) that primitive man made grunts, snorts, and gestures that gradually developed into speech and into language. If this is indeed what happened there is no evidence for it in the linguistic-historical material at the disposal of linguists. The belief that the pre-"proto-language" stage of speech and language development can be ~~substantiated~~ inferred from child-psychology, animal studies (e.g. Köhler's logical apes), and the studies of primitive speech communities such as the Bushmen, is no more than a pious hope. Although the evolution of languages is not relevant to our purpose at this stage -- because we have enough problems in trying to understand the devolution from various proto-languages in Africa -- it is a nagging thought which we should not entirely push aside.

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Linguists do not really know what a "language" is. ~~They~~ deal in terms of the phonetics of a language, the grammar of a language, the vocabulary of a language but ~~they~~ are just as little able to synthesise these into the language itself as we are able to compare language totalities. (To illustrate this point: Lozi is sometimes classified ~~xxxx~~ apart from the Sotho-group of languages, but it does not take me a few moments of adjustment before I can converse, as a Sotho speaker, with a Lozi speaker. Thus even though Lozi and Sotho belong to two different ~~languages~~ / there is no question but that Lozi and Sotho are related languages.) This is important from the point of view of language history although it may be bad linguistics. It means that there is ~~xxxx~~ an as yet untapped range ~~of facts~~ of facts which, if systematised, may have important results for language history.

In speaking of language contacts and of languages and their aspects, linguists are not really concerned with the speech communities who spoke these languages. To illustrate: In studying Venda I am concerned with certain linguistic forms and shapes and my ~~interest~~ interest as a comparativist is centered in the origins ~~of these forms~~ or occurrence of these forms elsewhere in Africa. It is no immediate concern of mine that the people who introduced some of this characteristic Venda no longer exists and is not represented as a ~~distinct~~ distinct community amongst the Venda. The conquerors have disappeared and some of their speech habits are now the property of the conquered with whom they mixed. Without evidence from elsewhere, from other languages, the linguist cannot reverse the processes of history and isolate the elements which constitute the conglomerate of modern spoken Venda. But there is no doubt that modern Venda is spoken by people from a great number of other language communities.

