

Bantu–Khoisan Language Contact in Southern Africa

Rainer Vossen

The languages of southern Africa are divided into two linguistic families which cannot be shown to share genetic relationship: Bantu and Khoisan. When comparing the present-day numbers of languages and speakers, their social prestige and political significance, a rather unbalanced relation between the two groups shows itself. Nearly one hundred Bantu languages spoken by some 75 million people face just around thirty to 35 Khoisan languages with a total of roughly 250,000 speakers. About one third of southern Africa's Bantu languages have official or semi-official status, whereas in Khoisan the same applies to merely one language, i.e. Nama/Damara in the Republic of Namibia. However, today's sociolinguistic situation can, of course, not be assumed to have been the same in southern Africa in the more distant past; rather, it has gradually come into being over a period of roughly two thousand years or more when the first Bantu immigrants from the far north arrived in the region and initiated an enormous expansion that, as a consequence, evoked, and contributed decisively to, the partial destruction, displacement, absorption or – as in more recent times – social marginalisation and stigmatisation of the autochthonous Khoisan-speaking population. Needless to say that from the mid-seventeenth century onwards this situation became even further complicated through the arrival of the European newcomers.

Given the historical time-depth of the Bantu–Khoisan encounter it does not come as a surprise that the event has left traces behind. It seems curious, though, that (1) such traces – unless they go back to recent influence – can normally be found in Bantu only but not in Khoisan languages; that (2) the foreign influence has reach just a few Bantu languages; and that (3) these traces of contact appear to be more or less confined to the phonological and lexical levels. These will be discussed in some detail in the envisaged session.