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### “Imperial Culture in Countries without Colonies: Africa and Switzerland”

#### Mission Linguistics on the Gold Coast: Use and abuse of the Twi language

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#### *I. Mission linguistics*

##### What interest do missions have in language studies?

- 1. Successful evangelisation:** target people need to be addressed in their own language/s
- 2. Tenet of Protestantism:** people should have access to the Scripture in their own language/s
- 3. Education:** Mother tongue as medium of instruction increases success at school. Thus, primers and other instruction materials have to be produced. “Progress being made lately in our schools has its roots in the availability of books written in the Twi language (David Asante to Christaller in 1873).” Committee of the Basel Mission: “The African language must not be ousted by English.”<sup>1</sup> (Minutes of Committee Meeting in 1844)
- 4. Power & control:** mastering a language also means to be able to control communication.
- 5. Paving the way linguistically for colonialism:** “Not even the worst opponent of mission will deny that research on native languages by missionaries has been an especially meaningful service to the later colony (i.e. Namibia). One should just ask oneself how it would have been possible to go about taking possession of the land without bloodshed.”<sup>2</sup> (Olpp, p. 10)

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<sup>1</sup> “Die Negersprache darf vom Englischen nicht verdrängt werden.”<sup>1</sup> (Minutes of Committee Meeting in 1844)

<sup>2</sup> “Daß die Erforschung der Eingeborenen Sprachen durch die Missionare ein Dienst von ganz besonderer Bedeutung für die spätere Kolonie [Namibia, E.E.] gewesen ist, wird auch der ärgste Missionsgegner nicht bestreiten. Man frage sich nur einmal, wie ohne diese Vorarbeit die Besitzergreifung des Landes ohne Blutvergießen hätte bewerkstelligt werden sollen.” (Olpp, p. 10).

## **Language description – the steps to take**

1. Reducing languages to writing: the Basel Mission first applied an spelling system made up by a CMS missionary called Fenn, and later followed Lepsius' orthography to represent unwritten languages.
2. Grammar: grammatical structures need to be worked out.
3. Production of word lists, lexica, dictionaries.
4. Collection of proverbs, folk tales, etc.
5. Creating Christian terminology for translation purposes.

## ***II. A notable missionary linguist***

### **Johann Gottlieb Christaller**

Johann Gottlieb Christaller was born in Winnenden (Stuttgart) in 1827 and died in Schorndorf (Stuttgart) in 1895. He was the son of a poor family, whose father, a tailor had died at young age. He was apprentice to the town mayor at Winnenden from 1841 to 1844. A sermon by Deacon Josenhans, who would later become the Basel Mission Inspector, inspired young Christaller that much that he applied at the Basel Mission for admission to their 4-year missionary course. In 1848 he got his admission and quite soon his linguistic talent became visible. He was to be sent out to India but later, as progress in the Twi language didn't proceed fast enough in Akropong Akuapem, he was meant to go to the Gold Coast:

"The Inspector believes that a more talented brother than the existing ones is necessary for the scientific description of the Twi language. The best philologist that we have here is Christaller who has already started to learn Twi with Riis. This brother is very capable and was already assigned before to serve in Africa. So Christaller will definitely be meant for Africa, especially for linguistic research on the Twi language at Akropong but he should spend another year in Basel and make very good use of Riis' Twi course." (*The Minutes of the Committee from 27.08.1851*)

Christaller arrived on the Gold Coast, at Osu in 1853. His main tasks were: Writing the necessary instruction books for school and after that translation of the Scripture. Due to poor health, he had to return to Europe in 1858 but continued his language work. Up to 1862, the Basel Mission would not allow him to go for a second term, even though he

kept pleading with them. He became quite depressive, and eventually he was sent out again in 1862 to 1868, when he definitely returned to Europe, even though he would have been allowed to serve in Africa for a third term but he thought it was better to stay with his 10 children and continue his linguistic work on the Twi language by correspondence with his language assistants.

He turned out to be unusually productive, actually “obsessed” with the Twi language but knew many other West African languages Ga, Ewe, Kru, etc. as well. In 1859, the four Gospels and the Acts were ready, by 1863 the rest of the New Testament, 1864 the Gospels were published in a second, improved version, and in 1866 the Proverbs and Psalms were edited as well.

Christian terminology for Twi

The methods he used to describe African languages are still up to date. In his unpublished manuscript “Thoughts about language learning of missionaries and transforming pagan languages into Christian ones”<sup>3</sup>, he gives advice on how create new lexical items from existing ones by morphological derivation – he was reluctant at introducing loan words, he’d rather expand the meaning of a lexical item, find a similar concept, or “resemanticise” it. For if we look at the Christian terminology that was coined for Twi, we find that only very little was directly borrowed from other languages.

Key concepts	Twi term	Source (language) & original meaning	Expansion of meaning / re-interpretation	Derivation / Composition	Borrowing from other languages
1. God	Onyame, Onyankopɔn, Tweduampɔn, etc.	Names which refer to Akan traditional religion	X		
2. Jehowa	Yehowa	Hebrew			X
3. Jesus Christ	Yesu Kristo	Latin/Greek			X
4. Redeemer	I. Ogyefo, II. Agyenkwa	I. verb “gye” (to receive) II. gye nkwa (receive life)		X	
5. Satan	ɔbonsam	wizard, sorcerer	X		
6. Holy Spirit	Honhom	Honhom (Spirit),		X	

<sup>3</sup> “Gedanken über Sprachenlernen der Missionare und Umbildung heidnischer Landessprachen in christliche”.

	Kronkron	kronkron (pure)			
7. Heaven	Ɔsoro	the above	<b>X</b>		
8. Hell	Ɔbonsam gyam	Lit. "in Satan's fire"		<b>X</b>	
9. Sin	Asemɔne	bad matter	<b>X</b>		
10. Church	Asɔre	worshipping; Nominalisation, > verb "sɔre" (worship traditionally)			
11. Pastor, priest	Ɔsɔfo	fetish priest, also derived from "sɔre" (worship traditionally)	<b>X</b>		
12. Baptise, baptism	Bɔ asu Asubɔ	> verb "bɔ asu" (dive in water, cleanse)	<b>X</b>		
13. Pray, prayer	Bɔ/yi mpae Mpaebɔ/mpae yi	> verb "bɔ/yi mpae" (make an invocation, a vow), cf. yi apae "pour libation"	<b>X</b>		
14. Preach, sermon	Ka asem Asenka	> verb "ka asem" (tell matter)	<b>X</b>		
15. Gospel	Asempa	"asem pa" (good matter)	<b>X</b>		
16. Bible	Kyerɛw kronkron	"kyerɛw kronkron" (pure = holy writing)		<b>X</b>	
17. Conversion, repentance	Adwenesakra	mind changing	<b>X</b>		
18. Temptation	Nsɔhwe	examination	<b>X</b>		
19. Forgiveness	Bɔnefɔfiri, Bɔnefakye	nominalisation of "fa firi bɔne" or "fa kye bɔne" (take remove bad; take give bad resp.)	<b>X</b>		
20. Bless, blessing	Hyira, Nhyira	Verb "hyira" (bless)	<b>X</b>		

In the same document he advises his missionary colleagues on how to produce a good dictionary, even when there is no printed literature available of that language:

"One has to write down the accounts of as many individual people and regions of the country as possible: folk tales and stories, explanations and descriptions of traditions and things, of the country and of the people. Literature has to be created by collecting all that is already in the mouth and spirit of the people on the one hand

and expresses new thoughts and ideas in the language of the people on the other. The pioneering missionaries have to collect all that language material that is with the people but, of course, they have to render the new message they bring them by means of the recorded language material. Later coming missionaries will have to achieve more in the latter but must never consider the former stage, namely collecting material as over but have to continue in doing so. Advice on how to go about it: The missionary should have his students and assistants write down as much as possible in the language of the country or he should write it down himself, especially from old people and from those who are believed to be good speakers and knowledgeable people.”

In order to collect his 3,600 proverbs, e.g. he sent his assistants to the local court in order to write down whole court transactions, as he knew that proverbs were often used in judicial discourse.

***His scientific publications:***

1875. A Grammar of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Chwee, Twi). Basel. [Repr. The Gregg Press Inc., Ridgemont, N.J.]

1879. Twi Mmɛbusɛm mpɛnsã-ahansã mmoaano - A Collection of Three Thousand and Six Hundred Tshi Proverbs in Use Among the Negroes of the Gold Coast Speaking the Asante and Fante Language. Basel: The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society.

1881. A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Chwee, Twi). Basel: Basler Mission. [2nd ed. 1933.]

1892. *Die Sprachen Afrikas*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer. [= Separate printing taken from the 9th and 10th annual reports of the "Württembergischer Verein für Handelsgeographie".]

1893. *Die Töne der Neger-Sprachen*. Basel: Verlag der Missionsbuchhandlung.

He was awarded the “Volney Prize” (a prize for philological studies) of the “Institut de France” in 1875 for his Twi grammar.

Apart from all that he was aware of the fact that if literacy in African languages should become widespread, people should have interesting texts to read. So he encouraged his language assistants and other people having a good command of the Twi language to produce texts. In 1883 he founded the journal *The Christian Messenger* which was to

serve as a platform for Akan and Gã writers to establish an indigenous literature of its own.

In the editorial of the revived "The Christian Reporter" Christaller wrote to his readers:

"If the Tshi people shall be received among the Christian civilized nations, their language also must be cultivated, developed and refined, so that every thing worth to be known by educated men may be duly and fitly expressed in their own tongue, (...) proper expressions must be coined for many notions and ideas not occurring in daily life, but brought in by the knowledge of foreign thoughts, observances, objects and facts. Civilization chiefly depends on the communication of new ideas and increase of knowledge borrowed from the great store of wisdom and learning accumulated in the literature of the leading civilized nations." (1893, Vol. 1, No. 5&6, p. 51-52)

### ***III. The misrepresentation of the African „other“ by language:***

#### **Use – and abuse – of the Twi language in mission magazines**

Missionaries, when writing their work reports to be published in the "Evangelisches Missionsmagazin" or the "Evangelische Heidenbote", often enriched them with Twi words or whole phrases. A phenomenon which is commonly called "codeswitching". What are the functions of this codeswitching to Twi? We have to ask ourselves what image of the "Goldcoasters" or "the" African in general is created in the average Swiss or German reader who was subscribed on the mentioned journals.

#### *Reasons for codeswitching:*

- Create authenticity
- Attempt to show (the audience/the reader) that work/language learning is progressing
- Being familiar with the other culture/s, boastful attitude (see how well versed I am!)
- Target people are willing to listen, show an interest (the Word of God is getting rooted)
- Justification for working there by misrepresenting people and their actions (see how low their moral is)
- *etc.*

Examples:

1. **"Broken Twi I"** by Missionary Widmann (from the „Evang. Heidenbote“: 1844, No. 3, p. 20)

„... they were laughing and said: **O nim kora!** i.e. he knows it all. When I told them: **Mi ko Akvapim mi ko asy Akvapim fo Jankupongasem**, i.e. I go to Aquapim to teach the Aquapim people the Word of God, they were very amazed: **Ampa!** Very well! – It will take us quite some time until we'll be able to express ourselves with ease in this language that hasn't been written yet.

In 1844 Widmann hadn't spent a long time on the Gold Coast yet, nevertheless he's bold enough to use the Twi language. (The point is here not the orthography that hadn't been established yet but the syntax and semantics).

In "proper" Twi:

„Onim koraa“ doesn't mean „he knows it all“ but „he even knows (probably Twi)“

„Mekɔ Akuapem - mekosua Akuapemfo Nyankopɔn asem“ = “I go to Akuapem, I go to “learn” the Akuapem people the word of God.

To put it into that shape which he wanted to use, this phrase should have looked like this:

„Mekɔ Akuapem akɔkyere Akuapemfo Nyankopɔn asem/Nyamesem“.

Ampa! is an adverb meaning “truly, really, indeed, ‘is that so’”, can be used as a statement or a question. In the given context it should rather be followed by a question than by an exclamation mark.

Widmann's audience can't really have understood what he wanted to tell but they were surely fascinated how he was trying to speak the language. And so he interpreted their reaction very much in his favour and less in what was really being said.

2. **"Broken Twi II"** by Missionary Schiedt (from the „Evang. Heidenbote“: 1846, No. 5)

“... and then he (Tetteh) told me deeply moved in his mothertongue: **“Massa mi pä ko yamässa** (Massa, I want to go to Heaven). Tears started coming out of my eyes...”

The context of this episode is: Missionary Schiedt on his sick-bed is looked after by Tetteh, a man of 34 years. He takes this opportunity to tell him about the marvels of Heaven: no more quarrels, no more toil for pisang or palm wine...

Obviously, Tetteh is a Ga who speaks Twi as his second or third language, which can be seen in the wrong syntax which seems to be directly borrowed from Ga – so he's by no means speaking his mothertongue which Schiedt doesn't seem to realise.

In correct Twi, it should be:

Mεε σε μεκο nyameso (or: ɔsoro [the common word for "Heaven"], Nyame nkyɛn – "to God")

I-want that I\_will-go Heaven

Why is "Massa" left untranslated? Is this expression really common stock for German-speaking readers?

**3. "Distorsion through literal meaning"** by Missionary Widmann (from the „Evang. Missionsmagazin“: 1855, No. 3. pp. 27-28)

"... Missionary Widmann recently asked an African woman who as he noticed took delight in watching those children whom the mission had saved from being killed (*children who had e.g. six fingers or other deformations and who were killed usually by drowning them soon after birth*): 'Wouldn't it have been awfully wicked to kill these beautiful children?' And she replied: '**O yes, Moayæ ade, mo yam yie**', i.e. 'You have done something, your intestines are good'."

The reader here is just left with the literal meaning of this Twi phrase and doesn't get any help how to interpret this rather opaque sentence. The first part,

**Mo -a -yɛ ade** (in modern orthography)

you\_pl-have-do thing

"You have done a thing" = Well done

is used to praise someone for a good deed, or for trying to speak Twi, giving of a gift, etc.

The second part **mo yam yie** just means that "you are nice". All in all, the woman praised the missionaries for having saved those unfortunate children.

The reader, however, knowing that atrocious practice and also that other Goldcoasters, namely the Krobos, were once suspected of being man-eaters, might fear for the worst. What is the woman up to?

**4. "Unequal relationship I",** Report by Mrs. Bauer-Nothwang, (the „Evang. Heidenbote“: 1901, No. 2)

p. 12: "... **misusuw ha** (I will think about it)"

p. 13: "... **mate, mate, Owura** (the teacher changed his tune [I heard it])"

A local teacher had wanted to receive the missionary couple well, so he made his pupils clean the streets. Missionary Bauer, however, saw it and wasn't pleased about it and reprimanded the teacher that it was not the pupils task to do so. The teacher realised that he had made a mistake.

The writer assumes that "Owura" (Master) has become part of the reader's vocabulary, as he doesn't translate it anymore. If someone replies by "mate" if he's reproached or asked to do someone a favour, there is the implication that he has the duty to fulfil his promise.

This scene evokes the feeling in the reader that to accept to gospel must really be very difficult for Goldcoasters but still at least they realise their mistakes and want to make up for it. By codeswitching the teacher appears in a more humble position than necessary. The missionary not only has the power to reproach him but has also power over his language.

**5. "Nice but simple-minded"**, Mission's feast at Asakakra (from the „Evang. Heidenbote“: 1901, No. 11)

p. 84: "...Everybody was happy and was able to say from the bottom of his heart **nne de yeame kora** (today we have become more than satisfied)"

This again can create the image in the European reader: "These Africans are quite nice but rather simple-minded. Why does the missionary quote this particular phrase? To me, it's unnecessary to do so, as it doesn't provide us with more information.

## **Conclusion**

In this presentation I tried on the one hand to show the chief factors that make missions engage in language studies, on the other hand I presented one of the most famous missionary linguists, namely Johann Gottlieb Christaller, who is hailed to be the founder of scientific linguistic research in West Africa. Studying languages is imperative, if one is to understand the world view of a people, especially of those one wants to convert. Language, however, can also be used in a manipulative way, here under the guise of (false) authenticity. The German-speaking reader of those two magazines was presented a distorted image of Goldcoasters: sometimes naïve, simple-minded, silly, accepting the missionaries as their masters up to being still very savage but ready for the Gospel, whereas the missionaries appear boastful and paternalistic.

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