

Title: Early language documentation by Herero missionaries

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Early language documentation by Herero missionaries

Johannes Rath (1816-1903) from Vienna, Austria was among the first Rhenish Herero missionaries and worked in central Namibia until 1861. During the course of his linguistic activities, Rath collected Herero fables, compiled a Nama grammar booklet and translated several Christian texts, for which he introduced numerous new words into the Herero lexicon. He recorded the results of his linguistic research in comprehensive manuscripts which, although they remained unpublished, served as the basis for the work of several of his colleagues and successors. In 1857, missionary Carl Hugo Hahn (1818-1895) published a Herero grammar and dictionary, and missionary Friedrich Wilhelm Kolbe (1821-1899) published several pioneering linguistic articles and an English-Herero dictionary in the 1880s. Brincker, Viehe, Büttner and Irle were all Rhenish missionaries and drew on Rath's very first research of the Herero language.

Although European missionaries usually standardized and codified the respective indigenous languages and issued prescriptive texts, I argue that Rath strived to document the status quo of the Herero language in a descriptive way. His main goal was to communicate with the population and to spread the Gospel, not to prescribe language usage among the locals. The Herero missionaries certainly actively controlled the development of the lexicon, but they did not do so at the expense of linguistic variety. In order to expand on the significance of Rath's language planning for the Herero community, I analyzed his journals and letters (*Archiv der Vereinten Evangelischen Mission*, Wuppertal, Germany) as well as his linguistic manuscripts and further relevant documents (archive of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Namibia, Windhoek; National Library of South Africa, Cape Town). Rath and his colleagues did not deliberately manipulate the Herero language to their advantage, yet research indicates that their work had considerable long-term effects on the language itself and on group solidarity among the Herero.

One can assume that Rath greatly influenced the way in which the Herero were portrayed and perceived in Europe in the pre- and proto-colonial era. Especially with his collection of fables, he contributed to the Herero being seen as a homogenous, independent community which deserved to be supported in their struggle against neighboring groups. By making the Herero language and culture available to a wider European audience, Rath significantly contributed to the formation of a distinct Herero identity up until the present day.