

An excerpt from CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTORY. What is language? Essays on this ever-recurring question abound: their number is legion. From the earliest times there have not been wanting speculative minds who have endeavoured to solve this problem. Various theories have been propounded, but not one has led to an absolute certainty as to the true beginnings of human speech. Indeed, such is the mass of conflicting opinions on the subject, and such the obscurity which still envelops it, that a Linguistic Society in France is said to declare in one of its first statutes that it will receive no communication concerning the origin of language. But a resolution like this is evidently premature and unscientific. Is it possible then, in any science or art, to determine beforehand what can be discovered, and what not? And is it not so that comparative philology is a progressive science, and, compared with other branches of human knowledge, still in its infancy? What if, after all, in some obscure part of the globe, a language or family of languages be in existence so primitive that the words can be traced to first elements, and that in it the first laws of universal speech can be discovered? It appears to me that there is good reason for believing that the African Bantu family, and especially Herero, which may be called the Sanskrit of Bantu, has been preserved in such a primitive state as to make it possible to discover certain simple laws that guided the first man in creating the stock of radicals from which universal language has sprung. Let the student for once divest himself of all preconceived notions on the subject, and carefully examine the facts that shall be laid before him. He will then be convinced that the continent of Africa supplies new and wondrous forms, the examination of which will upset many favourite theories, based upon the very limited phenomena supplied by the Aryan and Semitic families (R. N. Cust, Languages of Africa )

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