THE MASAI LANGUAGE
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GRAMMATICAL NOTES
TOGETHER WITH A
VOCABULARY

COMPILED BY
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PREFACE.

The following small work on the Masai language was compiled by me during two years spent among the Masai people. What I learnt was learnt directly from the Masai, and with no middleman in the way of Swahili or other native interpreters. My excuse for undertaking a work of this description, without the special philological qualifications, is that I could converse freely with, and be fully understood by, any Masai; and that I could also well understand any Masai either talking to me or among themselves.

As my methods of learning and construing the language were not scientific but natural (if the contradistinction may be used), they may perhaps prove of some interest. During the first few weeks among the Masai I could not even hear sufficiently what they said to be able to write down anything intelligible, and my own attempts at saying a few words were equally unintelligible to them. Since I was familiar with Swahili at the time it is improbable that this inability to hear or pronounce Masai should be ascribed to the fact that it is an African language. It is far more likely that the real difficulties of the language, intonation and accentuation, were hindering me, as Masai is undoubtedly difficult of pronunciation, construction and expression. When I was able to say a few words or sentences fairly correctly, I used them to every Masai I saw; and when they were said so that they were understood by a variety of people without hesitation I considered them correct. What one individual told
I told the next, and *vice versa*, thus correcting and recorrecting what I had originally written. The difficulties of forming rules—since it was, of course, impossible to convey any idea of grammar to the Masai themselves—I solved by making a large number of sentences all similarly constructed: if the Masai construction of these sentences proved similar (after having taken sufficient examples, say twenty or thirty) I concluded that I had the necessary evidence on which to base a rule. It will be readily understood that the deductions arrived at by these methods were adequate to supply the small number of grammatical rules contained in the following pages.

Two attempts only have previously been made at classifying Masai. The first is Ehrhardt’s vocabulary (Württemburg, 1857), which contains some 1000 words. To this no grammatical rules are appended; and since Krapf states in the preface to the vocabulary that Ehrhardt learnt all he knew of Masai from Swahilis at the coast, it is natural he should have fallen into the error of treating and writing Masai as a Bantu language, *i.e.* a language of prefixes. Sir H. H. Johnston’s vocabulary and notes on the Masai language, contained in the *Kitima Njaro Expedition*, are more ambitious than Ehrhardt’s small volume, though he has evidently based his theories of the formation of the language on Ehrhardt’s work. That Sir H. H. Johnston had also no opportunity of conversing directly with wild Masai he himself testifies. The few Masai warriors whom he encountered at Mandara’s court, and while he was actually travelling, he could only speak with through an interpreter, and the Wa-kwavi—from whom he learnt what he knew of the language—are not recognized by the wild Masai as members of their community. Sir H. H. Johnston states that the Wa-kwavi (their very name has been made Bantu) have intermarried with Bantus of all sorts; and it therefore
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follows that their language will probably have adopted many words other than Masai, and that the construction is likely to have been altered to that of the peoples among whom they live. I must take exception to the writing of Masai as employed both by Ehrhardt and Sir H. H. Johnston. Though it is quite possible that originally the first syllables of Masai words denoted the gender, it is now equally impossible to write or treat of these words as separable from the first syllable. By so doing the language is converted into a language of prefixes, and a wrong interpretation is put on the words, since they are senseless and unintelligible if used without the first syllables. As inanimate objects are all neuter, and all animals (with the exception of cow, sheep, goat and donkey—the domestic animals of the Masai) are both masculine and feminine, the theory that ol is representative of the masculine gender and n or en of the feminine, can hardly hold good: for example, orldia is equally dog or bitch, orrynoss is equally a male or female crocodile, wparnass is equally a male or female duckyer, nottorrangi is either a male or a female chameleon. What further bears out the theory that the current signification, of these first syllables, at any rate, is not denominative of gender, is the fact that “father” in Masai is baba, and “mother” geyu, neither of these important words commencing with the gender prefix.

It seems, for various reasons, improbable that the Masai first syllables can be regarded by the Masai themselves as indicative of gender. Their distinction between male and female is very marked, the female being regarded as quite inferior; and bearing out this hypothesis Sir H. H. Johnston says:—“masculine ol may be taken as meaning strong, big, masculine...... The article en is mainly feminine in its significance, but it also gives a diminutive, depreciatory, weakened, playful, or affectionate character to the word it
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precedes” (the Kilima Njaro Expedition, pages 455, 456). It is unlikely that such important words as \( \text{God} \) = ngai, rain = ngai, fire = ngima, food = nda, country = ngop, day or sun = ngolong, forest = endim, gun = endiul, meat = engeringu, game = ngwess, grass = engojeta, etc., etc. should denote the feminine gender. But according to Sir H. H. Johnston’s theory this follows unless they can be considered as representative of the characteristics enumerated. The examples indicated should sufficiently prove that the Masai significance of these first syllables is not that suggested by Sir H. H. Johnston.

I therefore consider the spelling of words as follows: foot = ngaju, en (instead of engeju); donkey = sigiria, os; elephant = dome, ol; arm = gaina, en; — is wrong, and in no way descriptive of the language, or indicated by it.

Since the first syllable of Masai words must therefore be regarded as almost invariably unchangeable, and as forming part of the word itself, it seems inaccurate even to call it a prefix. In Bantu languages one word is capable of having a variety of prefixes attached to it, as for example: good = -zuri, mzuri, mazuri, wazuri, vizuri, kizuri. Here, in the first instance, the root of the word is given with a dash preceding it, since it is impossible to indicate the necessary prefix unless the noun qualified is known. But the writing of Masai words in this manner is alien to the structure of the language. For example the word “good” (sidai) in Masai is used for nouns of all denominations:

- sidai orlaiyon = a good boy,
- sidai engitok = a good woman,
- sidai ngishu = good cattle,
- sidai ngaji = a good house,
- sidai nda = good food,
- sidai orldia = a good dog.

The verbs should surely be written in the infinitive or
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the imperative. The roots, as given by Sir H. H. Johnston, convey little idea of the words intended to be represented by them, and can never be used conversationally in these forms. I must also disagree with his placing the personal pronoun before the verbs when they are conjugated. I have carefully conjugated and studied over 70 verbs, and in one case only—the verb "to bring"—do the personal pronouns precede the verb all through. In a great many verbs the abbreviations of "I" and "thou"—α or ι—are used preceding the verbs, but the rest of the verb is usually conjugated with the pronouns following the verb. Most frequently only the first person singular takes the abbreviation and precedes the verb.

Since Joseph Thompson made us acquainted with the Masai the word has invariably been pronounced with a hissing s. This is incorrect: the accent is very markedly on the first syllable—Másai—and the s is not sharp.

The difficulty of giving the right value to words in an unknown language has compelled me to adopt the long and the short accents. I have, however, done so as sparingly as possible, and only with regard to those words where the emphasis is so great that they would be unintelligible to the Masai if unaccented.

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EDITOR'S NOTE.

Owing to Mrs Hinde's absence in Africa it was necessary to leave the revision of her proofs in other hands. Any inaccuracies occurring in the text must, therefore, be ascribed to this fact.

E. C. M.