

---

# THE ZULU LANGUAGE.

BY

REV. JAMES C. BRYANT,

MISSIONARY OF THE AMERICAN BOARD AMONG THE ZULUS.

COMMUNICATED TO THE SOCIETY BY REV. DR. ANDERSON.

---

## THE ZULU LANGUAGE.

---

[Mr. Bryant entered the Zulu country in the summer of 1846, and acquired the native dialect with remarkable facility. See Annual Report of the American Board for 1847, p. 75.—R. A.]

---

THE language spoken by the aborigines in the colony of Natal, is the same or nearly the same as that of the Zulus who still inhabit the country north-east of this colony.

The Zulu alphabet, according to the notation of the American missionaries, contains the same letters as the English; but many of the letters are called by different names, and represent different sounds.

The vowels have each one uniform sound, as follows:

*A* has the sound of broad *a* in *father*, or *car*.

*E* has the sound of long *a* in *fate*, or of *ey* in *prey*.

*I* has the sound of *ee* in *meet*, or of the French *i* in *pique*.

*O* has the sound of long *o* in *note*, or *toll*.

*U* has the sound of *oo* in *boot*, or *pool*.

The *g* is always hard. The *r* denotes a deep guttural aspirate similar to the Hebrew ר.\* The other consonants have nearly or quite their usual sounds in English.

---

\* The sound of the English *r* does not exist in this language, and the natives find great difficulty in pronouncing it. [Comp. the Susu *rh*, (p. 365,) which is said by Mr. Brunton to be the deep guttural sound given to *r* by the people of Northumberland.—J. W. G.]

The Zulu, like the Kafir, has three clicks, represented in our books by the letters *c*, *q*, and *x*, the last being precisely the click made in the side of the mouth by which a man urges forward his horse.

The Zulu language is distinguished for euphony. Two or more consonants sometimes come together in the same syllable, but the language is in general characterized by a regular alternation of vowels and consonants. Every noun and adjective must begin with a vowel, and every word must end with a vowel, except a very few which end in *m*; and even these can scarcely be regarded as exceptions, for they are frequently pronounced with a slight vowel sound at the close. There is a strong propensity manifested to make every syllable terminate with a vowel sound. Hence, in spelling such words as *abantu*, *izinkomo*, *ukubamba*, children uniformly divide the syllables thus: *a-ba-ntu*, *i-zi-nko-mo*, *u-ku-ba-mba*, unless by a long course of drilling they have been educated to divide them differently. The Zulus find it impossible to pronounce many English words and Scripture names, unless vowels are first supplied at the beginning, middle and end; for example, the word *stove*, an English monosyllable beginning and ending with consonant sounds, they instinctively pronounce *isitova*, making it a word of four syllables, and adding nearly as much to the melody of the word as to the number of its syllables.

It might be supposed that this language, so smooth and flowing, would be favorable for the composition of poetry; and to poetry like that of the Hebrews, untrammelled by rhyme and modern poetic feet, perhaps it would adapt itself; but let a person attempt to write a few stanzas in this language, and he will soon find himself encompassed with difficulties. Poetic feet require a regular alternation of accented and unaccented syllables; but in this language the accent must, with a few unimportant exceptions, fall on the penultimate syllable. It matters not what is the length of a word, the penult must by invariable laws take the accent; and hence, as this language abounds in long words, it is impossible to make the laws of the language and the laws of metrical harmony coincide. The English language abounds with short words, but in the Zulu such words are very few; here,

every noun and every adjective must contain at least two syllables, and the vast majority contain three or more. The language is good for public speaking, and may be good for almost any kind of prose writing; but, with more than asinine obstinacy, it refuses to assume the drapery and move in the measured gait of modern poetry.

The language, however, is not destitute of that higher kind of poetic beauty which consists in the thought, and not in the mere form of expression. Take, for example, the word *umsebelanga*, twilight, literally, the eyelashes of the sun; what conception can be more beautiful! the gleams of morning light are but the eyelashes of that great orb which is just ready to open on the world. Perfectly parallel is the well known Hebrew expression עֵפְפַי־שָׁרָר, eyelashes of the dawn.

The people here use in conversation many strong and bold figures. A man comes to ask a favor, and he will probably preface his request by saying "you are rich, you are great, you are a chief, and *I am only a dog.*" A man thinking himself defrauded in a bargain, says of the cheater *he has eaten me up.* One of the highest compliments that can be paid, even to a white man, is to say *you are black.*

Compared with the languages of civilized nations the Zulu is of course much limited in the number of its words; and yet for all practical purposes it is sufficiently copious and expressive. One Zulu word will often express a complex idea which can be conveyed in English only by two words or more, thus: *umne*, a brother; *umkuluwe*, an elder brother; *umninawe*, a younger brother; *izilemani*, brothers by the same mother. In some passages of the New Testament we are in doubt whether the phrase "the love of Christ" means our love to Him, or His love to us, but a Zulu can express either sense without ambiguity, simply by changing one letter; for *ukutanda kuka Kristu* means our love to Him, and *ukutandua kuka Kristu* means the love which He exercises towards us.\*

---

\* *Ukutanda* here appears to be the active form, love, and *ukutandua*, the passive form, the being loved; see p. 392.

The Zulu language has no article definite or indefinite, the place of the article being supplied in part by demonstrative adjective pronouns.

Nouns are divided into twelve classes, the class of each noun being determined by its prefix,\* or the initial part of the word. I give here a table of the prefixes, and examples of the classes of nouns.

Class.	Prefixes.	Nouns.	Signification.
1.	Um, U	<i>umfana, udade</i>	boy, sister.
2.	Im, In	<i>imvu, into</i>	sheep, thing.
3.	I, Ili	<i>ihashi, ilitye</i>	horse, stone.
4.	Isi	<i>isibonda</i>	pole.
5.	U, Ulu	<i>udaka, uluti</i>	mud, stick.
6.	Um	<i>umuti</i>	tree.
7.	Ubu	<i>ubumnyama</i>	darkness.
8.	Uku	<i>ukuhla</i>	food.
9.	Aba, O	<i>abafana, odade</i>	boys, sisters.
10.	Ama	<i>amahashi</i>	horses.
11.	Izi, Izim, Izin	<i>izibonda, izimvu, izinto</i>	poles, sheep, things.
12.	Imi	<i>imati</i>	trees.

The difference between nouns of the first and of the sixth class, which have the same prefix, *um*, is this: the former relate to persons, the latter to inanimate things. The plurals of these two classes are formed differently; compare classes first and ninth with sixth and twelfth.

Nouns of the first six classes are always singular; nouns of the seventh and eighth classes may be either singular or plural; and those of the remaining classes are always plural.

One important peculiarity of this language is what has been termed the principle of *alliteration* or *euphonic concord*. By this principle, the prefix of any noun determines the prefix of adjectives and pronouns connected with it. The nouns of each class have what may be called their *euphonic letter*, which is placed before nouns and pronouns governed by

\* The word *prefix* may require a little explanation. What we call the prefix in the Zulu is not something extraneous to the word and placed before it, but a part of the word itself. By prefix we mean the initial syllable or syllables of a word. The term, as thus explained, is in common use both here and in Kafirland.

them in the genitive case, and generally before adjectives agreeing with them. The following table will exhibit this peculiarity more clearly than any mere verbal description; the nouns, it will be observed, are the same as in the preceding.

Class.	Prefixes.	Euphonic letters.	Nouns.	Pronouns.			
				<i>ami</i> , my	<i>ako</i> , thy	<i>etu</i> , our	<i>abo</i> , their.
1.	Um, U	w	umfana	<i>wami</i>	<i>wako</i>	<i>wetu</i>	<i>wabo</i> .
2.	Im, In	y	imvu	<i>yami</i>	<i>yako</i>	<i>yetu</i>	<i>yabo</i> .
3.	Ili, I	l	ihashi	<i>lami</i>	<i>lako</i>	<i>letu</i>	<i>labo</i> .
4.	Isi	s	isibonda	<i>sami</i>	<i>sako</i>	<i>setu</i>	<i>sabo</i> .
5.	U, ulu	lu	uluti	<i>luami</i>	<i>luako</i>	<i>luetu</i>	<i>luabo</i> .
6.	Um	w	umuti	<i>wami</i>	<i>wako</i>	<i>wetu</i>	<i>wabo</i> .
7.	Ubu	b	ubumnyama	<i>bami</i>	<i>bako</i>	<i>betu</i>	<i>babo</i> .
8.	Uku	ku	ukuhla	<i>kuami</i>	<i>kuako</i>	<i>kuetu</i>	<i>kuabo</i> .
9.	Aba, O	b	abafana	<i>bami</i>	<i>bako</i>	<i>betu</i>	<i>babo</i> .
10.	Ama		amahashi	<i>ami</i>	<i>ako</i>	<i>etu</i>	<i>abo</i> .
11.	Izim	z	izimvu	<i>zami</i>	<i>zako</i>	<i>zetu</i>	<i>zabo</i> .
12.	Imi	y	imiti	<i>yami</i>	<i>yako</i>	<i>yetu</i>	<i>yabo</i> .

The last four columns of this table show the manner in which the euphonic letter of a noun unites with the genitive case of a pronoun governed by it. Thus it is proper to say *umfana wami*, *umfana wako*, etc., but this form of the pronoun could not be connected with a noun of another class; *imvu*, for example, has *y* for its euphonic letter, and this letter must be prefixed to all pronouns which are governed by *imvu* in the genitive case, thus: *imvu yako*, *imvu yetu*, etc. The genitive case of nouns is formed in the same way, namely, by placing the euphonic letter or syllable of the governing word before the word which is governed, thus: *ukuhla kuamahashi*, food of the horses; *izimvu zabafana*, sheep of the boys.\*

\* A few days ago an English missionary suggested an idea which may be worthy of consideration. What we and others call the euphonic letter, he regards as simply the pronoun contracted, and he would analyze a sentence thus: *abantu bami*, my people=*abantu ba ami*, people they mine; *ihashi lako*, thy horse=*ihashi li ako*, horse it thine, *li ako* being contracted into *lako*; *izimvu zabafana*=*izimvu zi abafana*, the sheep they (of) the boys.

The following table will show what influence the prefixes of nouns exert on the forms of adjectives :

Nouns.	Adjectives.		Nouns.	Adjectives.	
	Great.	Bad.		Great.	Bad.
Umfana	omkulu	ombi	Ubumnyama	obukulu	obubi.
Into	enkulu	embi	Ukuhla	okukulu	okubi.
Ihashi	elikulu	elibi	Abafana	abakulu	ababi.
Isibonda	esikulu	esibi	Amahashi	amakulu	amabi.
Uluti	olukulu	olubi	Izinto	ezinkulu	ezimbi.
Umuti	omkulu	ombi	Imiti	emikulu	emibi.

From this table it will be seen that the inflections of nouns and adjectives have their place at the beginning, and not at the end ; and that the forms of adjectives depend not on the number or the gender, or the case of nouns, but simply on their prefixes.

Of adjectives there are but few in this language, but the place of an adjective may be supplied in different ways : (1.) by a participial form of the verb, thus : *umuntu o bongayo*, a thankful person, literally, a person who (is) thanking ; (2.) by using a pronoun and a noun expressing the name of a quality, thus : *usuku o lu namakaza*, a cold day, literally, a day that has coldness ; (3.) by a noun expressing both the name and the quality of an object, thus : *ubuhlalu*, beads, in general ; *umgazi*, red beads ; *itambo*, white beads ; *ibuma*, green beads ; *isipofu*, brown beads.

Zulu adjectives have no forms to express the degrees of comparison, but one thing is said to be great or small to another, that is, in comparison with it. The verb *hlula*, to surpass, and the preposition *pezu*, above,\* are often used to express degrees of comparison.

Another peculiarity of this language is the great number and variety of its personal pronouns. Not only has each class of nouns its own appropriate pronoun, but for the nominative and accusative case each pronoun has two different forms, a monosyllabic and a dissyllabic. Take, for instance, the first person singular "I" ; the two forms are *gi* (in Kafirland *di*) and *mina*, and these forms are the same for the accusative as for the nominative. For the expres-

\* Comp. Susu *pisa*, more ; see p. 369.

sion "a person loves me," a Zulu would naturally say *umuntu u ya gi tanda*, placing the monosyllabic pronoun before the verb ; or, taking the dissyllabic form and placing it after the verb, he might say *umuntu u ya tanda mina*. Sometimes both forms of the pronoun are used in the same sentence, thus: *umuntu u ya gi tanda mina*. This mode of expression is more emphatic than either of the preceding ; it signifies, that he loves *me* in distinction from, or more than others. The dissyllabic form of the nominative case is never used as the direct subject of the verb, but, when it is introduced, the monosyllabic form must also be employed. The two forms are used where emphasis is required ; thus, go to a house and ask " who is the sick person ?" the answer will be : *yena u ya gula*, he, he is sick ; so : *kodua mina gi ya tyo kuni*, but I, I say unto you. These remarks and illustrations, relative to the first person singular, apply to all the pronouns corresponding to the twelve classes of nouns.

Another peculiarity of the Zulu is that the three generic divisions of time, as past, present, and future, are expressed by changes in the form of the pronoun, and not in the form of the verb, thus :

Present *gi ya hamba*, I walk.  
 Past *ga hamba*, I walked.  
 Future *go hamba*, I will walk.

Other tenses are formed either by changing the termination of the verb, or, more commonly, by employing as auxiliaries the verbs "to be," "to go," "to come." Most of the tenses have several different forms, all conveying a similar but not precisely the same shade of meaning.

Zulu verbs, with four or five exceptions, terminate in *a*.

In many cases where, in English, the present tense of the verb "to be" is used as a copula, the substantive verb is understood in the Zulu, thus : *ihashi li hle*, the horse it (is) handsome ; *ba kona*, they (are) there ; *u pina ?* you (are) where ?

It is a singular defect, that there is no verb in this language corresponding to the English "to have." The idea of having or possessing is expressed by the preposition *na*, with, thus : *gi n'amahashi*, I with horses, i. e. I have horses ; *ba n'ezinkomo*, they with cattle, i. e. they have cattle.



The substantive verb, as in most other languages, is very irregular, being made up of fragments of three different roots. The proper verb "to be" is *ukuba*; this is used in most of the modes and tenses, but never in the indicative present, where *ngu* is used with certain classes of nouns, and *yi* with other classes, thus: *ku ngu umfana*, (contracted orally *ku ng'umfana*,) it is a boy; *ku yi isibonda*, (contracted *ku y'isibonda*,) it is a pole.

By a few simple rules of derivation, several nouns may be formed from almost any verb, the signification of each as an abstract or a concrete, or as implying activity or passivity, being settled by its prefix and termination, thus:

*Ukubusa*, to rule, to govern.

*Umbusi*, a ruler, governor.

*Umbuso*, a kingdom.

*Ukubusa*, a ruling, i. e. administration.

*Ukubusua*, a being ruled.

The last two forms, *ukubusa* and *ukubusua*, are in fact verbs, the former an infinitive active, and the latter an infinitive passive; but they are employed to perform all the offices of nouns. In this respect the Zulu language resembles the Greek, in which the infinitive mode often takes the article, and subserves the purposes appropriate to nouns.

This language has one peculiarity in common with the Hebrew. In addition to the usual division into active, passive and neuter, Zulu verbs admit another classification, corresponding in part to the Hebrew conjugations, thus:

1. Radical form *ukubona*, to see, Kal.
2. Objective form " *bonela*, to see for,
3. Causative form " *bonisa*, to cause to see, show, Hiphil.
4. Reciprocal form " *bonana*, to see one another, } Hith-
5. Reflexive form " *zibona*, to see one's self, } pael.
6. . . . " *boneka*, to be seeable, liable to be seen.

These forms admit of regular inflection through the different modes and tenses. The last form has not yet received a grammatical cognomen, but it expresses nearly the same idea as the Latin terminations *bilis* and *dus*, as: *boneka*, *visibilis*, *videndus*.\*

---

\* Why not Potential form? Comp. the use of the Hebrew Niphal.  
J. W. G.

The Zulu language has but few prepositions and conjunctions. The want of prepositions is in part supplied by the ablative case of nouns, a case that always conveys a reference to some locality, or to time, denoting "at," "from," "by," "towards," "in" a place or time.

Verbs are sometimes connected by changing the termination of the latter verb, thus: *go hamba gi bone*, I will go and see.

The expressions *wa ti*, he said, *kua ti*, it said, *ba ti*, they said, are often used at the beginning of a paragraph merely as connectives.

The Zulu language has no disjunctive "or." To express a disjunctive idea we sometimes employ *na*, and, though in a sense very different from its original import, and hence liable to be misunderstood; and sometimes we find it difficult to express such an idea correctly, even by a tedious circumlocution.

Interrogatory sentences, whether the question be direct or indirect, all close with the falling inflection. A question is indicated by the particle *na* placed at the end of a sentence, and spoken with some emphasis, thus: *u ya gula na*, are you sick?

Many proper names among the Zulus are intelligibly significant. People here have usually only one name, sometimes two or three, but never a surname, like the English. The following are names of men: *Umpandi*, a root; *Umlomo*, a mouth; *Inkabi Endala*, an old ox; *Untabana*, a little mountain; *Unyokana*, a little serpent.

I give below the Lord's Prayer, with an interlinear translation, and a few explanatory notes.

Father	our	who	(art)	in	heaven,	let	it	be	hal-
<i>Ubaba</i>	<i>wetu</i> <sup>(1)</sup>	<i>o</i>		<i>s'ezuluini</i> ,	<i>ma</i>	<i>li</i> <sup>(2)</sup>	<i>dun-</i>		
lowed	name	thy.	Kingdom	thy	let	it	come	;	
<i>ysisue</i>	<i>igama</i>	<i>lako</i> .	<i>Umbuso</i>	<i>wako</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>u</i> <sup>(2)</sup>	<i>ze</i> ;		
will	thy	let	it	be	done	on	earth	here	as
<i>intando</i>	<i>yako</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>y'enziwe</i>	<i>emhlabeni</i>	<i>apa</i>	<i>jenga</i>			

in heaven. Us give to-day bread daily our ;  
*s'ezuluini. Si pe namhla isinkua semihla setu ;*  
 us forgive sins our, like as we we them forgive  
*si yekele izono zetu, jengokuba tina si ba yekela*  
 those who sin against us. Thou not us lead into  
*bona abonayo ku ti. U nga si zisi eku-*  
 temptation, but us deliver from evil ; for kingdom  
*lingueni, kodua si kulule ekuoneni ; gokuba umbuso*  
 it is thine, and power it is thine, and glory it is  
*u nga wako,<sup>(3)</sup> n'amanhla a nga ako,<sup>(3)</sup> n'obukosi bu ngo*  
 thine forever. Amen.  
*bako<sup>(3)</sup> kubengunapakade.<sup>(4)</sup> Amen.*

NOTES.—(1.) Pronouns in the genitive case almost invariably follow the nouns by which they are governed.

(2.) The nominative case of a pronoun must always precede the verb, even when the subject of the verb, to which the pronoun refers, is a noun expressed. Other illustrations of this remark occur towards the close of the prayer.

(3.) It will be seen that the expression, "it is thine," is repeated in connexion with each of the nouns "kingdom," "power," and "glory;" and it will also be observed that the Zulu verbs and pronouns differ from each other respectively in each of these propositions. In English, we can say "thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, and"—as many other things as we choose to add. Not so in the Zulu. The prefixes of nouns exert a stern control over the forms of adjectives, pronouns, and some verbs. There are laws of caste, here, as unyielding as in the society of India, and nouns of different classes will not consent to be grouped together under one common predicate, but each noun must have its own pronoun, and adjective, and sometimes its own verb.

(4.) This is not a simple word, but a union of several short words, and signifies "for a long time." There is no word in this language which expresses the full meaning of the English "forever."

*Cognate Dialects.*

The Zulu language is only one member of a numerous group of dialects, all more or less immediately connected. So far as investigation has yet gone, and it has extended from the Great Orange river to Delagoa bay, it appears that all the native tribes of this part of Africa speak only different dialects of one and the same original language. The same grammatical principles form the common basis of them all; and it is said that a familiarity with the different dialects furnishes a ready solution of some anomalies which are found in each. So similar are these dialects that the Zulus find but little difficulty in understanding the Kafirs, the Amasuzi, and the natives of other tribes. An English missionary has told me he thinks, that the natives of different tribes here understand one another about as well as the peasantry of different counties of England.

These different dialects comprise in the aggregate a much more perfect language than that now in use by any one tribe. The Kafirs, for instance, have a word to express "king," in distinction from "chief," which the Zulus have not; and another tribe has a word for "concubine," which is found neither among the Zulus nor Kafirs. Such words, having the native form and prefix, could be easily transferred from one tribe to another; and this transfer would seem vastly better than to introduce from the Hebrew or Greek, the English or Dutch, words which must have a prefix added, perhaps a vowel added at the end, and two or three other vowels inserted, in order to separate what would otherwise be, to a native, unpronounceable consonants. A word thus introduced is at best but a barbarous intruder, more ugly, less intelligible, and far less expressive, than a native word would be, even though a visitant from another tribe.

The Hottentot language, which is now nearly extinct, being supplanted by a grossly corrupt and ungrammatical Dutch, is said to be very inharmonious, abounding in clicks and rough gutturals. In the Kafir and Zulu dialects, the clicks and gutturals are much less numerous; in the Amasuzi dialect, the clicks are fewer still, *c* being more common than the others; and among the Bechuanas, the clicks

are not used at all. It is generally true that *the farther north we go, the less common are the clicks.*

Among the Kafirs and Zulus, the ablative case of nouns terminates in *eni* and *ini*; in the Sechuana dialect, the ablative is said to terminate in a nasal *ng*.

Some tribes use *t* where others have *z*, and *h* where others have *k*. Thus a Zulu says *izinkomo*, cattle, which a Kafir frequently shortens into *inkomo*; another tribe makes it *tinkomo*; and a fourth *tihomo*.

Some are sanguine in the belief that a system of orthography might be introduced, which would be intelligible to all the native tribes of Southern Africa. The thing is exceedingly desirable, but cannot be accomplished without much time and labor. The American missionaries at Natal have adopted nearly the same orthography which is used in Kafirland by the English, Scottish and German missionaries; while the French missionaries, followed by a few English Wesleyans, have adopted a different system. There is no doubt that we should derive much profit from the study of the cognate dialects; and we hear with pleasure that a new Kafir Grammar is being printed at Graham's Town, in which this subject is extensively discussed.

Port Natal. March, 1848.