The rapidly expanding Dutch Cape Colony founded in 1652 brought Europeans into closer contact with Khoesan languages (popularly also known as “the click languages”)¹ and – from the 1770s onward – also with Bantu languages, more specifically with Isi-Xhosa and Se-Tswana.

Since the Cape settlement was founded in, and for over a century was expanding into, Khoesan territory it is not surprising that Cape colonial linguistics of the VOC period was almost exclusively Khoesan linguistics – in fact almost exclusively Khoekhoe linguistics. After all, Khoekhoe (‘Hottentot’) was the language of the indigenous people the colony and its settlers had to deal with on a day to day basis: the Khoekhoen (‘Hottentots’), while for many decades the San (or ‘Bushmen’) were successful in trying to stay out of the reach of the colony.

It should be noted, though, that the VOC was not really interested in ‘Cape colonial linguistics’. Furthermore – as the Lords XVII (the VOC Directorate) expressed on at least one occasion – they felt that the Khoekhoen should learn Dutch rather than the Dutch learning Khoekhoe. And so no money was spent on linguistics, while botanical studies were actively promoted.

Consequently, Cape colonial linguistics was work done by linguistic laymen, who followed their own agendas and who sometimes made

¹ The grapheme <oe> in Khoesan represents a diphthong [œː]. Since Europeans usually perceive this as [œi] Khoesan is often written Khoisan. Similarly for kho(e)khoe (‘Hottentot’, the language) and kho(e)khoe(n) (‘Hottentots’, the people). [I have a preference for the reduplicated stem and the common plural marker -n.] Also note that the name Khoesan is a hybrid ‘compound’ invented by outsiders. This juxtaposition of Khoekhoen and San (a Khoekhoe word for Bushmen) may make sense from an anthropological point of view, it does not from a linguistic point of view, since Khoekhoe is just one of the Central Khoesan languages.
use of the postal services of the VOC to get their data to Europe. One of those men was Johannes Wilhelmus de or van Grevenbroek (henceforth Grevenbroek), who is supposed to have sent two vocabularies and three texts translated into Khoekhoe to the gentleman-scholar Nicolaas Witsen in Amsterdam. The latter forwarded these fruits of Grevenbroek’s research to the German scholars Job Ludolf and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

This may sound exciting for an historian of ideas or an historian of linguistics but here the story more or less ends: we owe Leibniz and Ludolf’s biographer Christian Juncker the publication of Grevenbroek’s Khoekhoe materials but that is about it. We don’t know of any publication by Ludolf or Leibniz (or a contemporary) on the linguistic properties of Khoekhoe. Therefore – and because more people were involved – the present paper will deal on the one hand with the descriptive properties of the various documents that have come down to us and on the other hand with certain mysteries surrounding some of these documents. As will become clear in the course of this paper Grevenbroek’s authorship of the documents published by Juncker and Leibniz is an interpretation of the facts. The actual documents are anonymous.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that a language is more than its lexis: words may have a morphological structure and words may combine into phrases and sentences – even though there are also one word sentences such as Go! and one word phrases such as elephants. Therefore, we need morphological and/or grammatical remarks (level 3); and if these are absent at least a couple of sentences and/or phrases (level 2), and if these are absent at least some words that consist of more than one morpheme (level 1). And if even such data are absent we are at level 0 in so far as grammar is concerned. As we will see below, level 3 data are restricted to exactly one remark, while level 1 data are presented in an unsystematic way and level 2 data can hardly be found in the various glossaries that have come down to us, which changed a bit in the course of the 18th century. Fortunately, there are the anonymous 1697 texts (which we will attribute to J.W. Grevenbroek)\(^2\) as well as the sentences in Kolb’s 1719 ethnographic

\(^2\) Leibniz G.W., Collectanea etymologica, illustrationi linguarum, veteris Celticae, Germanicae, Gallicae aliarumque inservientia (Hannover, Nicolaus Förster: 1717) 375–384.