

## AFRICA

DEREK NURSE AND GÉRARD PHILIPPSON (eds):

*The Bantu Languages.*

(Routledge Language Family Series.) London: Routledge, 2003.

xvii, 708 pages. £170.

There are approximately 500 Bantu languages, spoken by around 240 million people in 27 sub-Saharan African countries. Of all the African language groups, the Bantu languages have the longest tradition of scholarly linguistic attention and probably the highest degree of description. To put all this into one book—even a very large one—is no mean feat. Yet Derek Nurse and Gérard Philippson are brave enough to aim to provide an up-to-date reference book on the Bantu languages. The 700+ page book achieves its high aims at least in part. It presents an overview of the field of Bantu linguistics, bringing together a set of distinguished Bantu scholars, the majority of whom have been in the field for decades. The book provides an informed discussion of some of the more important areas of Bantu studies, and presents a wealth of case studies of individual Bantu languages, including a plethora of new data.

The book is divided into a thematic section of 12 chapters, and a second part comprising 17 grammatical sketches of selected Bantu languages or language groups. In addition, the book includes an introductory chapter, an updated classification of the Bantu languages, and language and subject indices, and numerous maps and tables. Yet, even though it is in hard covers and the production is of a high standard, the published price of £170 makes libraries the most likely buyers of this book; the pricing may actually prevent the wide circulation a book of this kind deserves, and I hope the publishers will offer a paperback edition soon.

The thematic chapters cover phonetics, phonology, tonology, derivation, tense and aspect, nominal morphology, and syntax on the one hand, and historical linguistics, historical classification, grammaticalization, language contact, and language acquisition on the other. The first three chapters deal with sound structure—including the important topic of tonology, the second three with morphology, probably the most important area of Bantu grammar, including the key aspects of the noun class and agreement systems. This is all as it should be, but strangely all other aspects of Bantu grammatical structure are covered in one chapter entitled ‘Syntax’; the following chapters then turn to historical linguistics. Thomas Bearth, on syntax, does his best at least to mention some of the work in the field, but his real interest is in discourse-pragmatic and information-structure related effects on word-order, and his chapter might better have been called, and focused on, ‘Topic and focus’. This would have allowed for another chapter on syntax, and perhaps also for chapters on semantics or typology; in this way, important work on Bantu languages conducted from a more formal-theoretical perspective, for example within Lexical Functional Grammar or Principles and Parameters, would have received the attention it deserves, and some discussion could have been included on the role of Bantu languages for the formation of linguistic, in particular syntactic, theory.

The following three chapters, on historical linguistics, include Tom Güldemann on grammaticalization, which is of theoretical interest; the other two provide an overview of the state of the art in Bantu historical linguistics

(Schadeberg), and an update on ongoing work on Bantu classification by the editors. The final two thematic chapters provide well-informed and accessible discussions of language contact (Mufwene), and language acquisition (Demuth). Yet this final part of the thematic section of the book is subject to another odd omission—there is no chapter on socio-linguistic aspects of Bantu languages: multilingualism, language and society, language policy and language endangerment are all aspects of a language group which are no longer ignored, and play a significant role in the African discourse on Bantu languages—see, for example, Vic Webb and Kembo-Sure's *African Voices* (Oxford, 2000), an excellent introduction to African linguistics which highlights precisely these socio-linguistic questions, alongside structural aspects. Of course space is limited, but the absence of a discussion of these questions to me is indicative of a slightly narrow conception of the field.

The second part of the book contains descriptions of 17 Bantu languages or language groups, selected according to geographical spread, availability of suitable authors and, in case of doubt, by including 'lesser, rather than better known languages' (p. 11). The authors of the chapters have quite a bit of freedom, and highlight different aspects of the language(s) they describe, although there is often a bias towards morphology, given the importance of this for Bantu on the one hand, and the slightly more difficult task of providing a good description of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics on the other. The sketches are certainly useful, and offer a wealth of new and interesting data, but there are two points which might be raised: first, more coherence—and cross-referencing—between chapters would have made a better book. Thus, for example, all examples in all chapters should have been fully and consistently glossed, translated, and graphically separated. Different concepts mentioned in the thematic articles should have been taken up and cross-referenced in the relevant sketches. For example, in the historical linguistics chapter, reference is made to Katupha's law which can be found in Makhuwa (p. 148), but the law is not referred to in Kisseberth's Makhuwa chapter in the second part (and hence not in the index), even though the relevant data are discussed. Similarly, both Bearth in 'Syntax' and Watters in 'Grassfield Bantu' discuss focus in Aghem, using almost identical examples, without cross-references.

Secondly, I am not convinced it was wise not to include better-known languages in the second part. It is true that there is a need to describe more Bantu languages, but how much can you say about a whole language in 25 or so pages? It seems to me that for grammatical descriptions of lesser-known languages a separate publication (e.g. Köppe's series of grammatical sketches) might be more appropriate. And since we know more about languages like Swahili and Chichewa, typological statements made about them in a short space are likely to be more accurate and more poignant.

The book, then, provides a good summary of the results of work on Bantu language over the second part of the twentieth century, as well as an impressive collection of grammatical summaries of a variety of Bantu languages. However, as noted above, there are at least two major thematic omissions: there is insufficient discussion of theoretically informed work on Bantu, in particular on Bantu syntax and semantics, and of sociolinguistic and anthropological aspects of Bantu languages. I think that these omissions are not accidental. Rather, they seem to follow from an editorial decision essentially to restrict the scope of the book to, alongside descriptive work, work in the historical-comparative tradition, which, of course, is the context in which the editors work. This is a pity, as this narrow scope does no service to the study of Bantu languages. Work in the historical-comparative tradition has been

extremely important in Bantu studies for a long time. It is, in a way, the foundation on which all of our work on Bantu rests. But it is also true that most practitioners of the historical-comparative framework are based in Europe and the USA, and are academically quite mature: of the 27 contributors to the book, only two are from an African university, and only two are native speakers of a Bantu language; seven authors are from a North American university, three from the (American-based) organization SIL, thirteen from Europe, and quite a number are retired. It seems to me that a fair number of younger Bantuists (judged, for example, by recent theses) are interested in theoretically informed work on Bantu, and that, especially in Africa, linguistic discourse includes 'applied' questions such as language policy, language and identity, or computational linguistics. One may deplore this, but I believe that a book such as this would have benefited from a wider perspective, not least to make the field of Bantu linguistics more transparent and attractive to the general linguist, and to the general linguistics student.

In sum, *The Bantu Languages* is an important resource for the study of Bantu languages, and a valuable summary of the state of the art in the field, with special emphasis on historical-comparative work. The short language descriptions are a rich primary source of data, which will ensure the book's longevity. Although the book would have benefited from a slightly wider perspective, so as to present a more comprehensive picture of current research in Bantu, it is nevertheless a very welcome and important contribution to Bantu linguistics.

LUTZ MARTEN

RUTH WATSON:

*'Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan': Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Yoruba City.*

(Western African Studies.) xii, 180 pp. Oxford, Athens, and Ibadan: James Currey, Ohio University Press, and Heinemann Educational Books, 2003. £45.00 (cloth); £16.95 (paper).

This historical monograph examines the making of a civic political culture in West Africa's largest city during the period 1829–1939. The author's principal concern is to explicate the relationship between chieftaincy and city politics, and how debates over Ibadan's *Olubadan* and lesser chiefs constitute the substance and boundaries of urban political discourse. The book's method, practically speaking, is also its argument—to challenge normative views of Ibadan politics 'as a fixed set of political attitudes', and to reveal instead civic cultures 'as a contentious historical process' (p. 9).

This approach yields a number of important conclusions. Watson shows that it is Ibadan's history of militarism, and not any typological model of urbanism, that forms the major contours of the city's political culture in the nineteenth century. The core unit of Yoruba urbanism, the *ile* (household or compound), were in Ibadan neither spatialized patrilineages nor firmly-rooted residences but constantly shifting military retinues which could absorb new refugees as clients and soldiers according to merit. By extension, chiefly titles were neither reserved for particular *ile* nor hereditary in nature, but earned through military fitness. Far from generating money, titles in fact created enormous expenses for the holder, and were regarded above all as public recognition of a chief's achievement of *ola* (honour). Ibadan's infamous