

Descriptive materials of
morphosyntactic microvariation in
Bantu

edited by

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Foreword

Lutz Marten (SOAS, University of London and Research Fellow, ILCAA)

The present volume on ‘Descriptive materials of morphosyntactic microvariation in Bantu’ is a collection of original morphosyntactic data from twelve East African Bantu languages. It is the result of extensive fieldwork with consultants in East Africa conducted by members of the ILCAA research project on ‘Typological study of microvariation in Bantu (Phase 1)’. It constitutes a rich resource and a landmark in the study of the morphology and syntax of Bantu languages.

The publication of the materials is both topical and timely. The research behind the data draws on and is a continuation of several research strands of the 1990s and 2000s, and the present volume is unlikely to have come about in this form ten or twenty years ago. This is because of its focus on morphosyntax, rather than phonology or the lexicon, and on systematic, large-scale comparison, rather than on a specific construction type or the description of one language. By adopting this perspective, the volume is embedded in a wider development of comparative Bantu which employs a set of surface-level parameters or features.

Large-scale comparison in Bantu has largely focused on lexical comparison, often in the context of interest in the internal classification and reconstruction of Bantu. Based on comparative work going back to the earliest Western studies of Bantu such as Bleek (1862) and Meinhof (1899, 1905), key Bantu researchers such as Guthrie (1967-71) and Meeussen (1980) developed large lexical databases on which to base comparative studies. From the 1970s onwards, linguists at Tervuren and Leiden developed ‘Bantu Lexical Reconstructions’ (BLR) to synthesise and extend previous results. Since the 1990s the data are available online, currently in the third edition (Bastin and Schadeberg n.d.). A related project was launched in the mid-1990s by Larry Hyman and John Lowe at the University of California at Berkeley: The ‘Comparative Bantu Online Dictionary’ (CBOLD), which by the end of the project in 1999 contained 445,000 lexical items from 200 languages. The data are currently hosted at the University of Lyon (CBOLD n.d.). Databases like BLR and CBOLD provide a rich resource for lexical comparison of Bantu languages, and it is only very recently that researchers have turned their attention to approaching morphosyntactic variation from a similar comparative perspective.

There is a strong research tradition in Bantu morphosyntax, which includes in-depth studies of particular languages (e.g. Mchombo 2004 for Chichewa), as well as comparative research on

specific construction types, such as, for example, applicative constructions (e.g. Ngonyani 1996, Bresnan and Moshi 1990, Pacchiarotti 2017). Edited volumes such as Mchombo (1993) or Downing et al. (2006) bring together papers on a variety of languages and construction types, analysed from a range of theoretical perspectives. With specific reference to Tanzanian Bantu languages, the ‘Languages of Tanzania’ (LoT) project, conducted at the University of Dar es Salaam from the early 2000s onwards, produced a range of grammatical and lexical materials in the form of published grammars and dictionaries (Muzale and Rugemalira 2008), as well as the Language Atlas of Tanzania (Languages of Tanzania Project 2009). However, until recently work on morphosyntax in Bantu has not been conducted within the context of large-scale comparison similar to lexical comparison.

It was only the increased availability of grammatical descriptions, as well as the emergence of well-documented key aspects of Bantu grammar, which has allowed researchers to approach Bantu morphosyntactic variation from a more systematic point of view. In an early paper, Marten et al. (2007) propose 19 descriptive parameters for comparing Bantu languages, and use this for the comparison of ten south-eastern Bantu languages. Subsequent work adopting a similar methodology has addressed a wider range of languages while at the same time refining the set of parameters for particular aspects of variation (e.g. Bax and Diercks 2012, Petzell and Hammarström 2013, Marten and van der Wal 2014, Zeller and Ngoboka 2015, Mtenje 2016, Chavula 2017, van der Wal 2017).

The present volume is embedded in this research tradition and develops it further. The project on which the papers in the volume are based is closely linked to a sister project hosted at SOAS, University of London, from 2014 to 2018: ‘Morphosyntactic variation in Bantu: typology, contact and change’. As part of this project, Guérois et al. (2017) develop a set of 142 parameters which underlie the materials in the volume. The ILCAA and the SOAS projects have collaborated closely over the past five years, as well as with the LoT project at the University of Dar es Salaam, the KongoKing project at Ghent University, and the Xhosa dialect project at the Universities of Gothenburg and Rhodes. The present volume is also a result of this successful international collaboration.

Materials such as those provided in the present volume are essential for progress in comparative Bantu: for our knowledge of the morphosyntax of individual languages, for charting the distribution and co-occurrence of individual features, and for large-scale typological and historical-comparative studies. By making these materials available to the public, the authors generously share the results of their work and support fellow researchers, colleagues and students of Bantu morphosyntactic variation. Through this, the volume will occupy an important place in the description and analysis of East African Bantu languages.

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