

Bantu in Bloomsbury

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The papers in this special volume of *SOAS Working Papers in Linguistics* result from an international conference entitled 'Bantu Grammar: Description and Theory', held at SOAS from 20th to 22nd April 2006. Despite the long-standing research tradition in Bantu linguistics, the contribution of Bantu languages to general and theoretical linguistics and the active research community, the SOAS conference was the first conference dedicated to all aspects of the study of Bantu languages and linguistics for a long time, in fact for as long as we can remember. We hope that the conference, and the papers in this volume arising from it, provide further evidence for how much Bantu languages have to offer linguistically, and for the wide scope and high quality of current research in Bantu linguistics. We hope that the reader will find new ideas, analyses and data in this volume which will answer old questions, or maybe lead to new ones, and stimulate further discussion about Bantu languages and linguistics.

The papers are arranged thematically and the different topics discussed bear witness to the diversity of themes addressed by the contributors. The first three papers (by Bickmore, Marlo and Odden, and Mtenje) are concerned with phonology, and two of them in particular with the phonology of tone, one of the most important areas in Bantu linguistics, and all papers demonstrate both the descriptive and the theoretical interest in the area. One of the most dynamic research directions in Bantu linguistics is represented in the following two papers (by Cheng and Downing, and Zerbian) on the phonology-syntax interface. The papers show the importance of phonology, and in particular prosody, for the understanding of syntax and information structure in Bantu. The following four papers are in the area of syntax. Aboh's paper provides an outsider's perspective on Bantu by comparing the syntax of topic and focus in Bantu and Kwa languages. Both Buell's and Rugemalira's paper are similarly comparative, and address cross-Bantu typologies of locative inversion, and the structure of noun phrases respectively. Leitch's paper, in contrast, provides an in-depth analysis of relative clauses in Dibo, relating this to current syntactic theory and questions about the necessity for functional projections. Three papers address questions of semantics and pragmatics. Kunkeyani's paper provides a detailed analysis of the semantics of Chichewa derived nouns, while both Nicolle's and Stegen's papers are concerned with meaning beyond the sentence and the structure of texts; the former with the pragmatic and textual functions of demonstratives in Digo, the latter with differences in linguistic structure between spoken and written speech text forms. The final group of papers is concerned with probably the oldest research tradition in Bantu linguistics, namely with comparative and historical linguistics. Four of the five papers in the section result from a special thematic session held at the conference, organised by Larry Hyman and Derek Nurse on the synchrony and diachrony of the Bantu verb, and the papers by Hyman and Nurse address this question directly, approaching the question by looking at Bantu-external and Bantu-internal evidence. Similarly, the papers by Maho and Elders use comparative Bantu evidence and evidence from the non-Bantu language Kulango respectively to discuss the historic structure of Bantu verbal morphology. Finally, our own paper reports results from a comparative study of Bantu morphosyntax, focussing on two specific aspects. As this short survey of the questions addressed, and approaches employed in the different contributions shows,

the collection of papers provides a good overview of the diversity and depth of current research in Bantu linguistics.

The paper by Stefan Elders needs special mention. Stefan presented his paper at the conference and had meant to provide a written-up version for the volume. However, it was with great sadness that we heard during the preparation for the volume that Stefan had passed away during fieldwork in Mali on 19th February 2007, before he had a chance to prepare his paper. We decided to include the handout of his presentation at the conference in this volume, because it includes his main points and data, and also as a further piece of evidence for Stefan's contribution to the field. Although not a Bantu specialist, his contribution to the conference provides an insightful comparison between Kulango, a language he had worked on since 2000, with Bantu, and shows his deep understanding of and wide-ranging interests in African linguistics. In addition, we feel it is important to include Stefan's handout here, in memory of a valuable colleague and a good friend.

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