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Africa’s endangered languages: Documentary and theoretical approaches brings together contributions from scholars who presented at the 45th Annual Conference on African Linguistics. The editors, Jason Kandybowicz and Harold Torrence, co-organized the conference, whose theme was focused on raising awareness of the interconnectedness between language documentation and linguistic theory, casting aside long-standing views holding the two as largely separate and unrelated ventures. This volume offers perspectives on these approaches and how research programs that combine them ultimately yield stronger and more robust outcomes. Several of the chapters in the volume have been written with this interconnectedness clearly in mind, while a few others appear to have focused on theory first, with only a brief subsection related to documentation added as more of an afterthought.

There are nineteen chapters, all of which, either directly or indirectly, address combined documentary/theoretical approaches to African language research. One is immediately struck by the array of issues covered, from methodological approaches to case studies ranging from phonetics to formal syntax. The contributor list contains many seasoned African linguistics scholars, but also junior faculty, postdoctoral fellows, independent researchers, and students.

In Ch. 1, JASON KANDYBOWICZ and HAROLD TORRENCE provide background on the state of research on endangered African languages compared to analogous work in other world regions. They argue that work on African languages lags behind partly due to a misconception that these languages are not as threatened as others because the linguistic threats against them are ‘internal’ rather than from nonindigenous colonial languages. The editors discuss ‘symbiosis’ between documentary and theoretical approaches, which resurfaces in subsequent chapters.

The rest of the volume is separated into thematic sections, though this is not indicated nor necessarily clear from the table of contents. Ch. 2 is a survey of endangered languages in Africa. Chs. 3–6 stem from one documentation project, and Chs. 7–8 describe community-based approaches to documentation. Chs. 9–12 cover topics more aligned with morphology and syntax, while Chs. 15–19 concern themselves primarily with phonetics and phonology. Chs. 13–14 bridge the gap between the two broader topic areas in focusing on morphophonology.

An overview of often conflicting perspectives on African language endangerment is given by BONNY SANDS (Ch. 2); she illustrates how complexities/conflicts stem from incompatible, in-
complete, or outdated assumptions and terminologies used in categorizing and quantifying a cline of endangerment. Sands’s high-level view shows that agencies/surveys may appeal to a single criterion in making designations of endangerment, while ignoring pressing factors like population marginalization. The topic and related terminology are inherently complex, though the details become more so due to how certain facts are presented. The chapter is informative but requires side-bar searching and clarification to fully understand the terminology and how it relates to the issue at hand.

The following four chapters present research on Nata that grew out of a field methods course at the University of British Columbia. The work of the Nata Working Group centers upon the role of graduate student Joash J. Gambarage as a speaker-linguist. There is significant redundancy between the first of these chapters and those that follow; in my view, the initial overview chapter (Ch. 3) is not necessary. In Ch. 4, Gambarage and Douglas Pulleyblank then discuss alternations arising from competing pressures between root-internal, root-controlled, and suffix-controlled tongue-root harmony, which they tackle within an ‘emergent allomorph’ framework (Archangeli & Pulleyblank 2012). Andrei Anghelescu, Gambarage, Zoe Wai-Man Lam, and Pulleyblank illustrate the close parallels between the morphological structures and tonal behaviors of Nata nouns and verbs in Ch. 5. The data and analysis are clearly and systematically presented, though I found myself curious about how the behavior of Nata’s reflexive prefix might align with that of other object prefixes; it was not mentioned, and Bantu reflexives sometimes behave tonally differently relative to other object prefixes (Marlo 2013). The discussion of Low tone vs. toneless is muddled; it includes Low tone morphemes, Low tone allomorphs, and redundant Low assignment, but then also a ‘default’ Low allomorph. In the Bantu languages with which I am familiar, fleshing out these details is nontrivial. The contributions on Nata close with an analysis of the Nata final vowel by Rose-Marie Déchaine, Dayanqi Si, and Gambarage. They discuss how the final vowel encodes modal distinctions and other derivational properties, though a surprising assertion is that this element is ostensibly the product of a phonotactic constraint, rather than being an obligatory component of the verb’s morphological template. This struck me as odd, since a core component of the authors’ analysis concerns the final vowel’s involvement in proto-role (Dowty 1991) specification, as well as the modal/derivational properties that it contributes.

Documentation methodology is the focus of the next two chapters. G. Tucker Childs discusses successes and shortcomings of a learner-focused ‘Busy intersections’ model (Reeder 2015) in revitalizing Mani, with a comparison given to a related outcome-oriented ‘Parking lot’ approach. Discussion concerning the implementation of literacy-building efforts for Mani was enlightening, and their challenges and potential adjustments to be made in the future were clearly explicated. Carlos M. Nash reports successful outcomes for Ekegusii documentation, which stand in stark contrast to those for Mani where revitalization efforts have encountered fewer successes despite their best-laid plans and intentions. Nash’s empowerment approach details instances where practical and analytical choices based on linguistic training were at odds with the wishes of the community and how these conflicts were resolved.

The next several chapters (Chs. 9–12) cover topics in theoretical syntax and morphology. Kandybowicz and Torrence raise an important and often overlooked point: one should be concerned not only with what patterns do occur in a given language, but also with what patterns do not, as establishing this dichotomy can better inform typological and theoretical lines of inquiry. Their chapter discusses the distribution of wh-elements in main vs. embedded clauses in Krachi and the behavior of so-called interveners; the chapter expands and refines the typology of what is known about interveners more broadly. Peter Jenks and Sharon Rose offer an accessible introduction to Moro, showing systematic correlations between Moro’s morphology, syntax, and semantics and the type of control/raising observed in the language.

Chris Collins discusses the behavior of linkers in five Khoisan languages. It is difficult to situate oneself at the beginning of this chapter, as a single sentence sets the stage as to what linkers are and where they are expected to be found. The reader is told that a linker elsewhere ‘would be called’ a preposition or oblique case marker (238), but this might appear odd to the uninitiated upon seeing that the first set of examples contains both a linker and another postposition. After a
range of the types of postverbal constituents that the linker can proceed is shown, the equivalence between it and prepositions is still not elucidated (at least to my reading). An intriguing contribution is the typological and historical discussion concerning the presence vs. absence of inversion between a linker and other postverbal constituents.

The final paper in this section, from Mamadou Bassene and Ken Safir, discusses the place and behavior of Eegimaa object markers alongside other verbal suffixes, and especially the reflexive and reciprocal markers. A question arises in Eegimaa concerning the distribution of verbal suffixes relative to the root as they correspond to a scopal hierarchy (Cinque 1999, Rice 2000). The authors motivate deviations from the hierarchy by appealing to leftward inner stem movement to the left outer stem boundary; object markers are treated as clitics. I pass high praise to the authors for making an elegant syntactic analysis accessible to this phonologist.

The next two chapters move into the realm of morphophonology, beginning with Laura McPherson’s chapter on (ir)realis in Seenku, an underdescribed Mande language (though the coeditors erroneously attribute the language to the Dogon family on p. 6, likely due to McPherson’s well-known work on Dogon, particularly Tommo So, e.g. McPherson 2013). McPherson reports on the behavior of two allomorphs of Seenku verb stems shown to be found in grammatical contexts related to different modalities. We learn that there are consistent distinctions in the tonal behavior of ‘stem 1’ vs. ‘stem 2’, but also that an additional distinction is made between palatalizing vs. nonpalatalizing stems. McPherson first presents data on the use of stem 1 vs. stem 2 in seven verbal contexts, with a second set of data collected/presented that further test her hypothesis about the distribution of the two stem allomorphs. An interesting discovery concerns conditionals, which, contrary to what one might expect, behave in a typologically unusual way by patterning with other realis contexts.

Michael R. Marlo discusses the merits of microcomparative research in Bantu. He takes issue with cautionary words from Chelliah and de Reuse (2010), who suggest that narrower, language family-specific descriptive traditions may inadvertently lead to a lack of innovation in analysis, implying that this view is perhaps short-sighted. Marlo describes ways in which earlier contributions on particular Luyia languages have influenced his own cross-Luyia work on three topics. He illustrates how the morphophonology of Luyia tone related to object markers (namely the first-person singular and reflexive) can be brought to bear on a long-standing analytical conundrum in Mozambican Yao, which is outside of Luyia. Thus, traditions established for Luyia are put to use in an innovative way in the study of other Bantu languages.

Elizabeth C. Zsiga and One Tlale Boyer tackle an unnatural alternation involving postnasal stop devoicing that exists synchronically in Setswana but is reportedly absent in Sebirwa. At issue is whether such an alternation can be acquired and remain productive. One might compare this to the acquisition of irregular past tense in English. Though it is unnatural, it is ultimately acquired by most speakers, yet it fails to remain productive. The authors show that an unnatural phonological alternation can indeed be acquired and remain productive despite its unusual nature. With a focus on p ~ b alternations, the authors confirm neutralization in favor of postnasal [p] in Setswana. They discover that Sebirwa speakers have acquired this typologically unusual alternation, but only between p ~ b and not the other voiced/voiceless pairs in the language. They attribute this result to language contact and higher-frequency p ~ b exposure. Michal Temkin Martín and Vanessa Rosenbaum later explore properties of oral and nasal stops, as well as nasal-oral stop sequences in Chizigula, focusing on prenasalized voiceless stops. Acoustic data illustrate that Chizigula is typologically unusual in that underlying sequences of nasal and voiceless stop appear to result in regressive nasal devoicing, but they wonder if the nasal is instead entirely effaced. To better understand devoicing vs. effacement, the authors explore the aerodynamics of these sequences, ultimately determining that the nasals are indeed present but devoiced.

The final chapter of the book is somewhat surprising, since it is about methodology, orthography, and (morpho)phonology all at once; this may explain why it occurs last in the volume as it does not quite fit into another thematic category. The chapter covers masking, which involves the obscuration of characteristics (and sometimes even contrasts) due to transcription and/or orthographic practices. Gambarage discusses masking in reference to tense vs. lax mid vowels in
Bantu languages and their behavior in contexts involving vowel harmony. He asserts that masking arises when researchers rely on data that are impressionistically transcribed or otherwise incorrect for a variety of reasons. He offers methodologies to improve the accuracy of vowel transcription, and he closes with a case study on Swahili vowels and whether and to what extent available materials and the well-established Swahili orthography are guilty of masking.

With the anomaly of the final chapter’s place in the volume aside, there are two back-to-back chapters that seem unbalanced in their polish and contribution compared to the others. TIMOTHY M. STIRZ’ chapter on Caning provides many (often redundant) pages of data that reveal similar alternations in slightly different morphological contexts which reveal the same outcomes and arrive at the same point. He entertains three analyses but settles on none of them as a worthwhile option to frame his data. Endnotes are also off throughout the entire paper, and data formatting is inconsistent, which puts a burden on the reader.

KATHERINE HOUT’S short chapter briefly discusses three resolutions to vowel hiatus in Mushunguli; at issue are fairly predictable instances of blocked fusion that she transparently analyzes by appealing to a lexical stem-initial glide.

Without a doubt, the coeditors and authors of this volume should be commended for their contributions and for the strides that they continue to make in forging connections between documentary and descriptive linguistic research in the African context.

REFERENCES


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The great diversity of contemporary linguistic theories is well known and has been illustrated by a number of publications showcasing the various approaches. A few of the most recent volumes of this kind are Kiss & Alexiadou 2015, Bond et al. 2016, Müller 2016, and Stewart 2016. However, the similarly wide-ranging assessments and evaluations of the individual theories have not so far been given a comprehensive overview in the literature. The present volume does just this for the family of approaches known as Noam Chomsky’s GENERATIVE GRAMMAR. Gleaning from the literature of the last forty years, András Kertész presents a broad spectrum of the diverging evaluations of this theory and suggests a novel interpretation of the historical process that has given rise to its different versions.

Bookended by an introduction and a concluding chapter, the volume consists of two main parts. The introduction defines the central problem of the book: ‘What historiographical framework, central hypothesis and basic terms can account for the history of generative linguistics?’