Preface

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1. THE ISSUE

The present special issue is developed from a workshop entitled *Bantu Universals and Variation* at the 10th World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL10) held online at Leiden University in June 2021. It includes a selection of papers presented at the workshop, as well as papers submitted in response to an open call for papers. The resultant special issue brings together new perspectives on universals and variation in the Bantu language family, with regards to morphosyntax, semantics/pragmatics, and information structure. The volume has a synchronic focus, aiming to explore variation across present-day Bantu languages. The core research questions are:

1. How do Bantu languages vary and how are they the same? Are there clear typological patterns?
2. How should we investigate Bantu variation, and how should we analyse it?

We believe that this collection of papers can help improve our knowledge and understanding of the linguistic diversity of African languages, with a specific focus on the Bantu subgroup of Niger-Congo.

There are approximately 550 Bantu languages, spoken across sub-Saharan Africa (Hammarström 2019). Comparative work across the language family has mainly comprised of lexicostatistic classifications, with more recent phylogenetic work still mostly using vocabulary lists as the linguistic basis (but see Marten 2020 for an overview). While many Bantu languages are under-documented, in recent years more data have been gathered and more detailed grammatical descriptions have become available, extending our knowledge beyond lexical information to other domains. This increase in descriptions has led Henderson (2011: 23) to suggest that "work on African languages [and especially Bantu languages] has reached the critical mass necessary to make insightful comparative work between African languages possible". While the Bantu family has been characterized as a convergence zone

with an overall high degree of morphosyntactic similarities (agglutinative morphology, SVO canonical word order), there is much microvariation (Marten *et al.* 2007; Marten & Kula 2012; Marten & Van der Wal 2014; Gibson *et al.* 2017, among others). This makes the Bantu languages a perfect testbed for comparative studies on internal variation. This volume therefore presents the newest research from authors conducting comparative work across the language family at a time where the field of Bantu typology is gaining momentum. The articles will be of interest both to descriptive linguists and to Bantuists interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the empirical picture across the family.

2. The papers

The topics addressed by the contributors include word order variation, focus marking strategies, actual clauses, possessive truncation, transitivity, and negative verbs, as well as methodological matters in the study of variation. We first summarize the seven papers in this special issue, and then return to how they address the core questions.

Bernander, Devos & Gibson investigate the use of verbs in the expression of negation across Bantu. The authors studied grammars of 100 Bantu languages and present a detailed study of how markers of negation in the family have developed from verbal sources or else have developed verbal properties. They draw a distinction between verbs with inherent negative meaning (intrinsic negative verbs) and verbs which develop negative meanings in specific constructions (extrinsic negative verbs). Their paper presents a detailed investigation into these phenomena in a variety of clause types. While there is a large amount of variation inventorized between the languages, the authors highlight how important the verb is for expressing negation across the Bantu family, especially within the Eastern Bantu phylogenetic group.

Kerr, Asiimwe, Kanampiu, Li, Nshemezimana & Van der Wal's paper presents the results of a study reconsidering Bantu word order from a discourse-configurational perspective, asking the question to what extent the word order in Bantu can be described without reference to grammatical roles such as "subject" and "object". Using a parametric approach to investigate the influence from discourse and grammatical roles, they present new data collected on nine Bantu languages and show that each language is situated at a different point on a continuum between grammatical role-oriented and discourse role-oriented word order. They therefore argue against a one-size-fits-all account of Bantu word order and advocate for approaches including discourse relations such as "topic" and "focus" in addition to traditional syntactic relations such as "subject" and "object".

Madrid notices that some constructions found in Bantu challenge theoretical analyses on transitivity and syntax, because they present a mismatch between grammatical relations and semantic roles. His paper presents a gradual approach to transitivity inspired by Hopper and Thompson's (1980) semantic parameters such as action, volition, and affectedness, instead of a sharp dichotomy between transitive and intransitive sentences. Madrid further suggests that when features other than the subject-object relation are more prominent in licensing participants in a given construction, the construction is better analyzed as event-oriented (Wichmann 2007). The paper discusses three phenomena in Bantu that might be thought of as event-oriented: inversion constructions, valency-changing extensions, and the verbal expression of properties. He argues that the advantage of approaching these constructions through an event-orientation analysis is that it addresses the relation between participants and events as morphosemantic features instead of strict syntactic valency dichotomies.

Sikuku, Mulalu & Safir's paper reports on the existence of the actual clause in selected eastern Bantu languages. Essentially, they treat the actual clause as an embedded assertion whereby the utterer is committed not only to the truth described by the clause but that the event in the proposition cannot be unrealized at the time of the utterance. The Bantu languages in their sample mark the actual clause by a verbal prefix in a typical tense position on the lower verb. The actual clause is also semantically distinct from other clause types such as the infinitive and the subjunctive, and functions mainly as the complement of non-factive verbs. The paper argues that the source of the speaker's commitment arises from the way actual clauses are licensed by the clauses they are dependent on. They propose that actual clauses are licensed by a "contingent antecedent clause". Their approach generalizes to explain other non-complement uses of actual/narrative clause types identified by the exact same morphology.

Shinagawa & Marten's paper discusses typological tendencies of focus marking strategies from a cross-Bantu perspective based on the Bantu Morphosyntactic Variation Database, which covers an entire range of the major morphosyntactic components. The paper mainly concerns the inter-parametric correlation of three major focus marking strategies — the use of a morphological focus marker, the conjoint/disjoint alternation, and verb doubling — in relation to logically independent parameters pertaining to negation, syntactic object symmetry, and inversion constructions. Based on such inter-parametric correlations observed, they discuss a developmental process of different negation strategies in relation to the types of focus marking strategies. They also propose possible generalizations about the interrelation between focus marking strategies and the syntactic object symmetry on the one hand, and the different inversion constructions, on the other.

Batchelder-Schwab's paper aims to give a detailed account of the phonological and discourse properties of a post-syntactic truncation in IsiXhosa, Setswana, and TshiVenḓa which is used to show affection towards kinship and pain in body parts. Using original data, the paper shows the truncation of possessor phrases involving deletion of the rightmost intervocalic sonorant of the phrase, typically the class concord. Batchelder-Schwab observes that the phonological and pragmatic conditions for the Reduced Possession Form are similar across the languages examined, but eligible possessors and possessees vary significantly. The paper finally observes that the current distribution across the wider Bantu language family is unknown, but there are promising leads in languages like Cuwabo and Kiswahili.

Van de Velde focuses on the methodology of investigating variation in Bantu languages. He observes that studies on most domains of comparative Bantu grammar are typically confronted with a huge amount of data and complex, interacting dimensions of variation. These studies tend to involve an initial methodological step of reducing this variation by classifying constructions, grammatical properties or entire languages into a finite set of types. Van de Velde then argues against such reductionist approaches to linguistic evidence and illustrates several methodological alternatives, one of which is here introduced as the scenario-based approach. He contends that these alternative approaches are at least as good in managing data and finding generalizations as the reductionist approach, but that they give more reliable results and are better at discovering variation.

3. THE GENERALIZATIONS

We started the workshop with the two general research questions introduced in Section 1 above. Looking now at the papers in this special issue, five of the seven address the first research question: How do Bantu languages vary and how are they the same? These papers are based on the analysis of new data, varying in the number of languages covered in their sample, ranging from a narrow subset of languages (Batchelder-Schwab for three southern languages, Sikuku *et al.* for nine eastern languages, Kerr *et al.* for nine languages spread throughout the area), to a larger linguistic sample across the Bantu-speaking area (Bernander *et al.* for 100 languages; Shinagawa & Marten for 140). Each paper brings to light new generalizations, on the basis of which predictions for future research may be derived. We highlight a number of potential typological generalizations from each of these five papers.

Bernander *et al.*:

– Bantu languages are verb-centered: the verb can express many different functions, and many functions (including negation) are often expressed by means of a verb.
– If a Bantu language has a negative verb, it is much more likely to be an intrinsic negative verb than an extrinsic negative verb (although the latter is also possible).
– If a Bantu language adopts a negative marker that is non-verbal, the marker may acquire verbal properties over time in order to better fit the typical negative verb profile (so-called "false verbs").
– In non-standard synthetic negation contexts in Bantu, such as negation of non-declarative clauses, negation strategies are most commonly derived from negative verbs.
– When a negative verb is found in a main clause context, it is unlikely to function as the standard marker of negation; such negative verbs are used for functions related to phasal polarity, contrastive focus, and emphasis or reinforcement of negation.

Kerr *et al.*:

– If a language allows preverbal unmarked focus, it is likely to be in the central Bantu area.
– Bantu languages are predicted to lie neither at the fully discourse role-oriented nor at the fully grammatical-role oriented end of a continuum of factors influencing word order.
– If a focused non-argument can appear in its canonical position as the answer to a content question, it will likely be able to be modified by the exhaustive focus-sensitive particle 'only' in that same position.
– If a Bantu language is in the Northwest, it likely lacks inversion constructions and a morphological passive.

Shinagawa & Marten:

– If a language has the conjoint/disjoint (CJ/DJ) alternation, then it will likely not use external negation.
– If a language has morphological focus marking (MFM), then it will likely have external negation.
– If a language has patient inversion (PI), then it likely has no MFM, no CJ/DJ, and no verbal doubling (VD); vice versa, if a language has either MFM, CJ/DJ, or VD, then it is not likely to have PI.
– If a language has the CJ/DJ alternation, it is more likely to have asymmetric word order in ditransitives.

Batchelder-Schwab:

– Reduced forms of a possessive construction (RPF)
  • are only allowed when the possessive concord is phonologically weak (*w*, *y*, glottal stop);
  • occur with possessors in an implicational way: if RPF is accepted for one type of possessor, it is also accepted for the possessors to its right: 1st person > 2nd person > 3rd person pronouns
  • occur with possessees in an implicational way: if RPF is accepted for one type of possessee, it is also accepted for the possessees to its right (though within a category there may still be restrictions): mother, child > kinship terms > affective human/animal > body parts
  • occur with an affective interpretation.

Sikuku *et al.*:

– The same morphology is used in actual clauses and in narrative clause chaining.
– If a language has the actual complement effect, it also has the narrative usage.
– Actual clauses are incompatible with matrix clauses predicates expressing future events or factivity.

We are looking forward to seeing the future studies that will pick up these topics and test the generalizability of these points on the basis of new data.

With regards to the second core question, How should we investigate Bantu variation, and how should we analyse it?, the papers in this volume provide a critical discussion of methodology used in recent typological work on the Bantu family, as well as critical reflections on the western-based perspective in linguistic analysis. We discuss these in turn.

Many recent works in Bantu linguistics approach comparison by setting up parameters of variation, specifically in this issue the Morphosyntactic Variation Database used by Shinagawa & Marten and the parameters concerning information structure drawn up by Kerr *et al.* Parametrizing these grammatical features has two motivations: firstly, to provide a clear picture of the observable variation, and secondly, to uncover possible inter-parametric covariations (see above) that can help to better understand the particular position of certain formal properties in the grammar and their correlation with other independent grammatical means (e.g. the implicational relations between negation strategies

and devices of focus marking in Shinagawa & Marten). The parametric approach is therefore used as a tool for cross-linguistic comparison. Nevertheless, Van de Velde explicitly addresses the question of how appropriate the methods are that are used in recent typological work on the Bantu family, and what alternative methods are available, in order to arrive at best practices for comparative research on Bantu languages. Questions discussed in his contribution include: What variation are we potentially missing by forcing the variation into specific parameters? How valid are universals proposed on the basis of these parameters? He argues that the parametric approach is too reductionist in nature and advocates for alternative approaches such as the scenario-based method, which he argues is particularly well-suited for the study of variation in a genealogically related set of languages like the Bantu family.

A similar type of reframing question is asked in the papers by Madrid and Kerr *et al.*: Can we understand the variation and similarity across Bantu better if we analyze the language patterns in a different way from the traditional approach? Both papers argue against a "western" analysis in terms of fixed grammatical roles and categories of transitivity, instead showing that pragmatic-semantic aspects may play a more fundamental role, e.g. topic and focus for word order (Kerr *et al.*), and semantic aspects of verbs for transitivity, inversion (Madrid) and, as Sikuku *et al.* show, for actual clauses. This also highlights another important methodological lesson: the semantic/pragmatic context should always be taken into account when analyzing words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs, as it may contain crucial information about not only interpretation but also structure.

Finally, all the papers in this volume once again show both that there is an enormous amount of microvariation to be discovered in the Bantu languages and at the same time that interesting generalizations can be found. While these generalizations can in turn can shed light on inherited versus borrowed features, and thereby on the history of the Bantu languages, they equally tell us more about the nature of language in general, and so about the applicability of universal models of language. We thus hope that the volume may contribute to our knowledge and understanding of how the Bantu languages vary, which generalizations can be drawn, and what this means for broader linguistics.

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