

REVIEW OF BLOOM STRÖM ET AL. (EDS.), (2024),
'MORPHOSYNTACTIC VARIATION IN BANTU'*

ELISABETH J. KERR
GHENT UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT Eva-Marie Bloom Ström, Hannah Gibson, Rozenn Guérois, and Lutz Marten (eds), *Morphosyntactic Variation in Bantu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xix + 444 pp. Hardback. ISBN: 9780198821359 | £108.00. e-Book: ISBN: 9780192554451 | Price variable. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/morphosyntactic-variation-in-bantu-9780198821359>.

1 INTRODUCTION

The book *Morphosyntactic variation in Bantu* is an edited volume comprised of 15 chapters, each authored by different authors (with a small degree of overlap). The book forms one of the main outputs of the Leverhulme Trust project 'Morphosyntactic Variation in Bantu: Typology, contact and change' which ran at SOAS, University of London from 2014-2018 (PI Lutz Marten), and I am happy to see it published. Another output of that project was the book *Morphosyntactic variation in East African Bantu Languages: Descriptive and comparative approaches*, also published in 2024 (Gibson, Guérois, Mapunda & Marten 2024). However, both volumes also include chapters from authors not (originally) involved in the project, and the project has also resulted in various additional journal publications.

This book is focussed on morphosyntactic variation within the Bantu language family. Because of the high number (c.400-600) of closely-related languages spoken across a large geographical region, the Bantu family provides excellent testing ground for anyone interested in morphosyntactic variation and change, and so the chapters in this book will be of interest not just to Bantuists but also to morphosyntacticians and historical linguists more broadly.

* I thank Oxford University Press for providing me with a review copy of the book. This review was written under the project *Modelling Bantu Analytic Morphosyntax (MBAM): The Mbam languages as a case study in morphosyntactic change*, funded by the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO; project nr. 1274225N) and hosted at Ghent University.

As with any edited volume, the chapters vary as a result of the individual authors' interests and idiosyncrasies. I will therefore provide a short chapter-by-chapter summary (section 3), after first picking up on four key points that stood out when viewing the volume as a whole (section 2). In section 4 I will provide concluding remarks about the potential audiences of the book.

2 GENERAL COMMENTS

I highlight here four general points, namely (i) the use of parameters, (ii) the use of data, (iii) the coverage of languages, and (iv) the use of the term 'areal'.

2.1 Parameters

As explained clearly in the book's introduction (**Marten, Guérois, Gibson, and Bloom Ström**), the term *parameter* is used here in the sense of a surface parameter, i.e., a description of linguistic behaviour. This contrasts with the notion of parameter as corresponding to a setting in speakers' grammars that has some cognitive reality, as employed in generative approaches (**Chomsky 1981 et seq.**). Example (1) illustrates the type of parameter used here.

(1) **Parameter 123 (Guérois, Gibson & Marten 2017):**

Is patient inversion (subject-object reversal) attested?

Null unknown/missing

no

yes

Marten, Kula & Thwala (2007) developed a list of 19 such parameters for Bantu languages, which was then considerably expanded in the SOAS project, leading to a 142-parameter list (**Guérois et al. 2017**). 136 of these are morphosyntactic (29 on the nominal domain, 51 on the verbal domain, and 56 on the clausal domain) and 6 are lexical. These parameter lists have been used in many of the contributions in the volume, and have also inspired many other comparative studies (and additional parameter lists) in the last years, as cited by **Edelsten, Guérois, and Marten** in chapter 2. The parametric method has also recently been extended beyond Bantu in **Collins & Fehn's (2025)** work on Khoe-Khwadi languages, who cite **Marten et al.'s (2007)** work on Bantu as inspiration, illustrating the influence of this body of work.

As detailed in chapter 2, the parametric method works by drawing up the parameters and then assigning values (frequently but not necessarily binary 'Yes', 'No') to each parameter based on the available data from sec-

ondary sources, and in some cases from targeted fieldwork. The SOAS project stored their parameter values in a database (Bantu Morphosyntactic Variation (BMV) database) where the values could be analysed via similarity matrices and visualised via maps.

While popular and influential, the parametric approach to comparative Bantu morphosyntax has not escaped critique, notably by [Van de Velde \(2023\)](#), who argues that it introduces unavoidable issues of arbitrariness and reductionism and encourages researchers to treat parameter values as data rather than decisions made on the basis of data (cf. [Kerr, Asiiimwe, Kanapiu, Nshemezimana, Li & van der Wal 2023](#): 19-20 for some counterpoints). While the chapters of this book were presumably written before Van de Velde's paper (which was based on a presentation at a 2021 workshop on 'Bantu Universals and Variation' held at the online World Congress of African Languages, Leiden University; [Li, Asiiimwe, Kanapiu, Kerr, Nshemezimana & van der Wal 2023](#)) was published, his criticisms relate to longstanding discussions in the typological literature (see e.g. [Evans 2020](#) on the comparability problem), which I would have liked to see more reflection on. Most chapters in this volume following parametric methods implicitly present the parameters as if fixed, with the exception of [Atenje-Mkochi](#), who proposes slight changes to [Guérois et al. \(2017\)](#)'s nominal marking parameters in order to better capture the variation found in Malawian languages. This latter approach fits more with the autotypologising approach ([Bickel & Nichols 2002](#), [Witzlack-Makarevich, Nichols, Hildebrandt, Zakharko & Bickel 2022](#)) and shows how the use of parameters can evolve over time. Although I think such an approach is what the project team intend, it is worth explicitly stating that researchers should be encouraged to use the current book as inspiration for further studies, with freedom to refine the parameters as our understanding of Bantu comparative morphosyntax advances and in keeping with the needs of the research question at hand.

2.2 *Use of data: Type and transparency*

The contributions in the volume vary significantly in their use of data, firstly in terms of the nature of the data and secondly in terms of the transparency.

The contributions vary from using secondary sources (mainly descriptive grammars, and for [Dom, Goes, and Bosto](#)en some historical texts) to using fieldwork data (var.) and corpus data ([Beermann and Asiiimwe](#), [Bloom Ström and Miestamo](#)). The contributions using fieldwork data give little information about the fieldwork methodology used and generally report data from a single consultant, making some of the conclusions less robust, especially in terms of studying variation. However, given the lack of documenta-

tion on many Bantu languages and the resultant skews in data coverage (to be discussed below), new data from fieldwork studies is certainly valuable.

The second difference in use of data is the transparency. One critique of parametric approaches to morphosyntactic variation is that they can bias people into treating the parameter values as the data, thereafter ignoring the actual linguistic material. This issue is mitigated when authors use parametric comparisons as guidance for where to look at original data, which is facilitated by providing reference to the original data source, and, if possible, providing the data itself. In some of these chapters, this works very well. For example, **Guérois, Gibson, and Marten** and **Bernander, Devos, and Gibson** provide the sources for each of the parameter codings in an appendix to their contributions, which allows the reader to check the codings. **Beer-mann and Asiimwe** provide an archived dataset (in .xml format, with plain-text metadata) for their chapter, in explicit reference to FAIR data principles. In contrast, other chapters do not give the full supporting data or reference the sources consulted. The chapters do however generally give a good degree of illustration of the phenomena in question when discussing the codings in the main text and do not feel constrained by space limitations.

2.3 Coverage of languages

One point to keep in mind when reading the volume is that the authors generally draw on convenience samples of languages. As many of the Bantu languages are not well-documented, this book cannot be taken to represent the entire family (nor does it claim to). While the languages of the Northwest of the Bantu family spoken closest to the Bantu homeland in Cameroon/Nigeria are the most diverse, they are often underrepresented in the samples. This is in part due to the larger amount of work on other Bantu languages, especially those in East Africa, as noted by **Edelsten, Guérois, and Marten** in discussion of the BMV sample. One thing I appreciated about this book was that in opening up the contributions to different authors, studies are included on less well-represented languages, e.g. South-Western languages (**Bostoen**).

The need for more empirical work necessarily means that some contributions focus on a smaller number of languages than others. The editors have chosen to group the chapters into two parts, Part I being across Bantu and Part II looking at micro-variation. The term *microparametric* is used for some of the latter, which refers to parametric approaches to small-scale variation (cf. the use of *microparameter* in the generative literature, as discussed for Bantu languages in [Van der Wal 2020](#)).

2.4 *The term 'areal'*

The final general point to make is on the use of the term 'areal'. In the contributions of this volume, 'areal' is used in the sense of 'geographical', referring to similarities in morphosyntactic behaviour between languages spoken in the same geographical region. This does not necessarily involve languages from outside of the Bantu family, in contrast to the use of the term 'linguistic area' *sensu stricto*, where multiple non-trivial similarities are shared across genealogically unrelated languages (see e.g. [Aikhenvald & Dixon 2002](#), [Muysken 2008](#), cf. [Campbell 2017](#)). **Mtenje-Mkochi** takes this one step further, arguing explicitly that parameter codings can uncover linguistic areas that need not involve unrelated languages. This idea is based on the idea (credited here to Lutz Marten) that convergence effects can arise from Bantu-internal contact (*centripetal effects*), while contact with non-Bantu languages at the peripheries of the Bantu domain can lead to divergence (*centrifugal effects*). One point of caution is that to identify features as areal, one should rule out the alternative options of genetic inheritance or independent developments. There is also a large debate about the borrowability of morphosyntactic features and their potential use in classifying areas, and many contributions here are limited to a few features. Finally, in the contexts of multilingualism found in Bantu speech communities, it is important to consider not just geographical space but also social space and how this influences morphosyntactic change. The present volume includes many interesting observations which may serve as the starting point for such investigations, but they are not the focus of the book. Readers interested in the stricter sense of linguistic areas in Africa are referred to [Güldemann \(2018\)](#) (see also [Dimmendaal 2002](#), [Heine & Kuteva 2002](#), [Heine & Fehn 2017](#), a.o.).

3 OVERVIEW

After the frontmatter (section 3.1) and a useful introduction chapter (section 3.2), the chapters of the book are divided into two main sections, the first on studies of morphosyntactic variation across the Bantu-speaking region (Part I; section 3.3), and the second on investigation into morphosyntactic variation on specific languages or groups of languages (Part II; section 3.4).

3.1 *Frontmatter*

The book begins with a 1-page acknowledgements section, in which the origins of the book are stated as being a workshop on 'Approaches to morphosyntactic micro-variation in Bantu' at the 6th International Conference on

Bantu Languages (Bantu6) held in 2016 at the University of Helsinki. After the table of contents and list of figures and tables, a list of glossing abbreviations not covered in the Leipzig Glossing Rules is given. Here, there is some variation between abbreviations used between chapters; helpfully, each chapter's abbreviation list is also provided in a footnote at the start of each chapter. Finally, brief biographies of each of the chapter authors are given.

One point to be aware of is that the editors have not enforced homogeneity in glossing practices across chapters. As each chapter is internally consistent and likely to be read separately in any case, this is an understandable decision. Note for readers interested in the augment in particular that this is glossed differently across chapters (e.g. the Runyakore-Rukiga class 3 augmented noun *o-mw-onyo* 'salt' would be 3AUG-3-salt, AUG3-3-salt, AUG-3-salt, and 3-3-salt); there is also cross-chapter variation in glossing of subject markers and the treatment of the final vowels of verb forms.

3.2 Introduction

The introduction by **Marten, Guérois, Gibson and Bloom Ström** provides very useful context to the volume, especially for non-specialists. The choice for a volume exploring morphosyntactic variation within the Bantu family is well-motivated. The term *micro-variation* is introduced, used here both in the sense of variation between closely-related languages and in the sense of small-scale variation. The introduction contextualises the volume within the history of work on Bantu languages and explains some Bantuist traditions, like the alphanumeric Guthrie classification system (e.g. 'G42' for Swahili) that is followed in many of the chapters. The authors highlight how classifications of Bantu languages have mainly been based on lexical comparison, with the parametric approaches to morphosyntax explored in this book possibly able to be applied in future phylogenetic models, an interesting area for further research. With more details on parameters to come in chapter 2, the introduction ends by providing an outline of each chapter.

3.3 Part I: Morphosyntactic variation across Bantu

The first group of chapters contains 6 contributions, grouped together on the basis of covering languages from across the Bantu domain.

Edelsten, Guérois, and Marten's chapter discusses the use of parameters for investigating morphosyntactic variation in Bantu within the SOAS Morphosyntactic Variation in Bantu project. As stated above, the chapter could have engaged more with the drawbacks of parametric methods, although it does give some helpful explanation of the choices made in param-

eter form and database design. The authors discuss how the BMV compares to other comparative-typological databases such as SSWL, WALs, and Gram-Bank, which will be interesting for readers working on similar projects. The chapter ends with two case studies of how the database was used for comparative work; many of the other contributions of the volume can be read as further case studies. While the BMV database is cited as [Marten, Edelsten, Gibson & Guérois \(2018\)](#), there is no mention of whether it will be made available to other researchers (the database is currently hosted at <https://bantu.soas.ac.uk/LanguageData/login> and unavailable to the public). I hope that this does not mean that the project team have decided not to release the database, as the years of work that went into it would surely be of use to other researchers (besides the point about the importance of being able to check data codings).

Yoneda focusses on variation between the use of relative clauses and other constructions to modify nouns, introducing *noun-modifying constructions* as a general term. This chapter in some ways feels closer to those in Part II, as 9 of the 10 languages included are from Eastern Bantu, the other being Herero, spoken in Namibia. The data are taken from work with a single consultant per language, and some languages do not have tonal marking, while this is important for being able to trace changes in relative clause marking. This chapter reads as a study with the main aim of expanding the notion of relative clauses to noun-modifying constructions. I would have liked to see a bit more consideration of previous literature on relative clause constructions in Bantu (e.g. [Nsuka Nkutsi 1982](#)'s seminal study).

Sikuku's chapter considers reflexive and reciprocal marking. He mainly draws upon the database of the Afranaph project (which is publicly available at <https://afanaphproject.afanaphdatabase.com/>), reporting findings for a somewhat small sample of 10 languages. The discussion is clear, well-structured, and grounds itself in the general linguistics literature, showing the strategies found for Bantu languages (different types of noun phrase reflexives and verbal reflexives, in addition to noun phrase and verb phrase reciprocal strategies). For readers interested in historical syntax, there are interesting mentions of the position of affixes and changes from strategies reconstructed to Proto-Bantu. There is also a useful section on some issues with defining 'subject' in Bantu languages. One thing to note is that the author presents Grassfields Bantu languages of Cameroon as being Bantu (i.e., Narrow Bantu), rather than their usual consideration as being non-Bantu Bantoid (i.e., Wide Bantu). While some people may count Grassfields Bantu as Bantu, considering them as Narrow Bantu as written on p.102 ("there is a difference between Grassfields Bantu languages and the rest of the Narrow Bantu languages [...]") is unusual and not consistent with the presentation of

the Bantu family given in the introduction to the volume. Where to make the Bantu/non-Bantu terminological cut is arbitrary, but it affects the conclusions drawn about REFL/RECP marking – rather than finding inter-Bantu variation in marking, the chapter can alternatively be framed as showing variation between Bantu languages and their closest relatives (i.e., Grassfields Bantu languages in the sample use reciprocal bipartite NPs as a reciprocal strategy, while Narrow Bantu languages do not).

Guérois, Gibson, and Marten's chapter looks at variation in the encoding of negation across Bantu languages. This chapter gives an excellent showcase of how the parametric approach can be used to guide research on patterns of morphosyntactic variation across a language family. The authors use a large sample of 76 languages, covering all geographical zones and genealogical groups (if biased towards Eastern Bantu). The data are clearly presented and explained and there is a good discussion of the literature. The parametric method is discussed clearly and limitations are considered by the authors. There is also transparency, in that the authors provide a full list of the parameter codings and sources consulted for each language in the appendix, which allows future researchers to check the original data and evaluate the codings. There are plenty of topics in this chapter relevant to historical syntax, e.g. the discussion of Jespersen's cycle and the position of the negation marker on the verb relating to recency of grammaticalisation. The only criticism I had was that the maps in the print edition are quite hard to read due to the lack of colour/shape distinctions and the size of the dots (e.g. '1' and '4' appear very similarly due to the font choice and size). (There is also a typo in the in-text discussion of Map 5.3 on p.121: "white dots with letters" should be "black dots with letters".)

Bernander, Devos, and Gibson look at existential predication in a large sample of 100 Bantu languages. They show in particular how the use of a comitative construction and locative markers is widespread across Bantu. Like with the previous chapter, the authors draw upon a large sample of Bantu languages, working with a variety of descriptions (which requires handling variation in terminology and data presentation, as well as dealing with incomplete information in many sources). I found it useful that the authors added the Guthrie classification code alongside the language name when presenting data and I appreciated how the chapter discussed the broader typological picture. As with the previous chapter, they can be complimented on providing a full table of codings and sources in the appendix. The authors mention how some variation in the data may be accounted for once contact with non-Bantu languages is taken into account, as discussed for example in section 6.4 for word order variation. This chapter will certainly be of interest

to researchers in historical syntax, as the authors explicitly discuss the relationship between synchronic variation and diachronic pathways of change (e.g. section 6.6).

The final chapter of Part I is by **Creissels**, discussing predicative possession in Bantu. The strength of the chapter is the broad perspective, with Bantu languages compared with other language families, especially other families in sub-Saharan Africa. Creissels modifies **Stassen's** (2009) typology of predicative possession, with a basic distinction between 'possessor-centred' and 'possessee-centred' types, as clearly explained and illustrated in section 7.2. The author then shows how some types are rare in African languages. Here, it seems that a large sample of languages has been considered, but as the languages in the sample and sources consulted are not provided, it is hard to evaluate this. For Bantu languages, the most widespread strategies are shown to be *have possessives* and *comit possessives*. Creissels highlights some ambiguities in differentiating these two types (section 7.4.5). He also discusses diachronic changes such as reanalysis in Cuwabo, where a previously bimorphic construction ('stay, remain' + 'with') is reanalysed as a monomorphemic verb, as evidenced by verbal morphology, and he ends the chapter with a diachronic proposal for some variation in the Sotho-Tswana languages of Southern Africa.

3.4 Part II: Areal and micro-level morphosyntactic variation in Bantu

The second group of chapters contains 8 contributions, which focus on one language or a group of closely-related languages.

Bloom Ström and Miestamo discuss the augment (also known as the 'initial vowel' or 'pre-prefix'), a morpheme that can appear at the beginning of nouns and their modifiers (e.g. Xhosa *umsebenzi* 'work' vs augmentless form *msebenzi*). This chapter focuses on the presence versus absence of the augment on nouns in the Nguni subgroup of Southern Bantu languages (mainly considering Xhosa, Zulu, Swati, and Southern Ndebele). The augment is a well-trodden research topic in Bantu linguistics, with various analyses in the literature, partly due to early work's over-reliance on translation equivalents, which often resulted in the augment being assumed to be a marker of definiteness paralleling the use of definite versus indefinite articles in Germanic and Romance languages. This chapter gives a new contribution on two grounds. Firstly, the authors draw upon naturalistic corpus data, which shows how modern-day speakers use the augment in casual speech (in contrast to previous work which used more elicitation data). Secondly, the authors highlight interesting variation in judgements from what was reported in other sources and propose a potential diachronic account of how the augment is evolving.

They argue that an earlier system in which the augment encoded referentiality distinctions has become eroded, opening up the possibility for younger generations to use the augment for stylistic purposes (e.g. marking informal register). Here, the fact that previous work on the augment in Bantu spans decades (even centuries) allows for consideration of how Bantu languages have changed in recent generations. This chapter therefore shows there is more to say about the augment in Bantu.

Mtenje-Mkochi investigates nominal class marking in a sample of 6 Malawian languages. She takes 8 parameters related to nominal class marking from the [Guérois et al. \(2017\)](#) list and investigates them in the languages of the sample. The author presents the parameter coding results as evidence for linguistic areas and sub-areas. As discussed above, I find this use of the term ‘linguistic area’ somewhat premature; more data from different features together with an understanding of the language contact situation would be needed in order to convincingly show a linguistic area, rather than chance resemblance or inheritance. Some useful sociolinguistic information is provided about the language context which could help develop such an account. What was good to see was that the author discusses how some parameters might be revised in order to better capture micro-variation within the family, such as the discussion of multiple versus single prefixation in diminutive noun classes (section 6.3.9), showing how the parametric method can be developed by critically applying it to new languages/phenomena.

Beermann and Asiimwe consider a single language, Runyakore-Rukiga, looking at locatives. I found the presentation or internal versus outer agreement clear, but other parts of the text were on the vague side, and the formal representation is not adequately explained in order to be clear to the non-expert reader (e.g. it is not clear to me whether it is intentional that the demonstrative node is represented as DEM in Figure 10.3 but as SPEC in Figure 10.4). Potentially due to the descriptive focus of this volume, the authors sometimes refer to a structural analysis of the language without providing supporting argumentation, e.g. in discussion of the “fronted underlying object of the verb” (p.280) and “left dislocated locative phrases” (p.282). While focussed on a sole language, the authors do a thorough job in providing a 325-sentence dataset in a publicly-available database accompanying this chapter (see <https://dataverse.no/dataverse/root/?q=Beermann> and https://typecraft.org/tc2wiki/Runyankore-Rukiga_Corpus).

Lusekelo also focuses on a single language – namely Nyakyusa – although makes some comparison to nearby Bantu languages. An interesting point highlighted here is how predicate type affects object marking in Bantu, which is increasingly a topic of interest (see e.g. [Marten & Ramadhani 2001](#)

on Luguru and [Kanampiu & van der Wal 2025](#) on Kĩĩtharaka). The chapter also shows interesting cases where both a verbal object marker (OM) and a post-stem object enclitic appear on the verb, where the former marks recipients/beneficiaries and the latter markers themes/patients. As with the previous chapter, it would have been stronger if constituency were evidenced for the classification of Nyakyusa as OM doubling. The discussion of object marking in conjoined nouns (section 11.2.3) is very welcome, although it would have been better to use conjoined objects not from class 7 in order to show that this is a case of noun class agreement ($7+7=8$) rather than use of a class 8 default (as is common for inanimate nouns in Bantu languages). I also wished that the wording choice of “requires an optional object prefix” was changed for clarity (the intended reading being “optionally takes an object prefix”), and there are a few uses of “In contrast” and “But” that are actually not contradictory.

Dom, Goes, and Bostoen’s chapter looks at morphologically complex markers used to encode reciprocity, in contrast to the morphologically simple *-an* RECIP form found across the family and previously reconstructed to Proto-Bantu (**-an*). They study this for languages of the Kikongo Language Cluster (Gabon/Republic of Congo/Democratic Republic of Congo), with a corpus analysis of Bible texts conducted for 4 varieties (Fiote, Kindibu, Kisikongo, and Kiyombe). The end of the chapter gives a detailed discussion of how various sound laws affect the form of the suffix, highlighting the importance of phonological considerations, something possible to do for Bantu languages due to the extensive prior work in historical phonology (see [Bostoen, Pacchiarotti, Guérois & de Schryver 2022](#) for a recent overview, with discussion of the relation to grammatical reconstructions).

Bostoen’s chapter also discusses reflexive and reciprocal marking in Bantu. He looks at polysemy between reflexives and reciprocals in South-Western Bantu, drawing largely on fieldwork data on Kwamashi and then comparing this to surrounding South-Western languages from Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, and Namibia. The final section proposes an account of successive cycles of innovation of reciprocal marking, based on a plausible contact scenario. Readers interested in this topic may like to read this chapter and the previous one together with the chapter on reflexive-reciprocal polysemy from the Language Science Press book ([Ngwasi & Mreta 2024](#)), which looks at Hehe, arguing that the reflexive prefix *i-* has been recruited as a reciprocal marker replacing the *-an* suffix.

Abe’s chapter investigates variation in reflexes of the **kí-* verbal marker, which is reconstructed in [Meeussen \(1967: 109\)](#) as a marker of persistive aspect but has since developed new meanings such as encoding simultaneity

or imperfectivity. Abe studies this for 9 languages spoken around Lake Tanganyika in East Africa, considering various parameters (here referred to as ‘features’) and drawing upon and summarising prior work on the grammaticalisation of **kí-* by [Güldemann \(1998\)](#). I have some reservations about the reliability of the data in this chapter for the 4 languages on which fieldwork was conducted, as no details are given about the length of fieldwork, number of speakers consulted, or their sociolinguistic background. What is puzzling is that the author states that there was less data available for the languages besides Bende, yet the table of features (Table 14.5) gives codings for all cells across all languages. It is therefore possible that ‘no’ in this table should be interpreted as ‘no supporting evidence found in the available data’ rather than as ‘not possible’. On a positive note, the discussion is well-structured and the tables provided are useful; Table 14.2 gives a clear visual summary of the diachronic proposal.

The final chapter is by [Shinagawa](#), who investigates variation in focus marking with the morpheme *ní* in 2 Kilimanjaro Bantu languages of Tanzania. This chapter has the tough task of making sense of quite a complicated set of data. Discourse contexts are sometimes (although unfortunately not consistently) provided, which is important for showing the information-structural context. The author introduces some terminological inexactitudes in the discussion of truth focus, suggesting that truth focus stands apart from assertive focus and contrastive focus, even though it is possible to distinguish between assertive/new information focus (as in the answer to a neutral polar question, e.g. ‘Did you do it?’ / ‘I did do it’) and contrastive focus (as in a correction of a previous incorrect statement, e.g. ‘You didn’t do it.’ / ‘I DID do it!’) – see [Kerr & van der Wal \(2023\)](#) for explanation and discussion for Bantu languages. This distinction is important for some of the data presented, e.g. the discourse context for example (17) (“Did s/he buy bananas?”) suggests new information focus, while the discussion in text presents it as contrastive focus (and as example (16) lacks discourse context, the difference in interpretation between the examples is not clear; Shinagawa simply says “pragmatic emphasis”). Another point is that declaratives are used in (9) to show focus in one language while the other language data in (8) is taken from interrogatives, which is non-trivial as focus marking is known to vary between declaratives and interrogatives (see e.g. [Kerr et al. 2023](#) for discussion for Bantu). However, my main question was the validity of the analysis whereby so-called *ni*-less high-toned forms are considered focus marking and glossed as *FOC*. This is hard to evaluate without knowing tonal patterns in the TAMP system more broadly (no mean feat, given the high functional load of tone in marking TAMP contrasts in Bantu) – could the H tone be something independent,

in which case the examples presented do not actually violate a constraint on having multiple focus markers per clause? Here, diachronic variation in stage of development of **ní* from copula→focus marker presents a recurrent challenge in evaluating data on *ni* in East African Bantu, namely whether it should be glossed as FOC or something else. What this paper contributes is data from two under-studied languages of Tanzania, which is interesting for the comparative perspective as previous work on *ni* forms — especially in the formal syntax literature — has focussed more on Kenyan languages (e.g. [Bergvall 1987](#), [Schwarz 2007](#) on Kikuyu, [Abels & Muriungi 2008](#), [Kanampiu & van der Wal 2025](#) on Kĩtharaka, and [Landman & Ranero 2018](#) on Kuria).

3.5 Endmatter

As is now standard for Oxford University Press, the references for the entire book are printed together at the end, as opposed to after each individual chapter, a move which reduces the size of the book at the expense of facilitating the use of individual chapters for purposes such as teaching or reading groups. There are a couple of minor issues with the references, indicative of different chapters' bibliographies not being merged correctly. For example, some non-distinct references appear two times within the references list, e.g. with and without the author's middle initial, or as 'Author (YEARa)' and 'Author (YEARb)' (e.g. there are two instances of Nurse (2008)). In other cases, chapters cite 'Author (YEAR)' but multiple references are found in the references list (e.g. the two non-differentiated instances of Marlo (2015) and van der Wal (2020)), meaning that the reader may occasionally need to check two sources. A small number of sources cited in the text do not appear in the reference list, e.g. 'Creissels et al. (1997)' (cited on p.205) and 'Zeller (2018)' (cited on p.280 fn11), which I believe should be [Creissels, Chebanne & Nkhwa \(1997\)](#) and [Zeller \(2017\)](#) (since published as [Zeller 2025](#)) respectively.

The book ends with a 2-page subject index and an index of languages referred to. These are fairly useful; as a Bantuist, I would have appreciated addition of Guthrie codes to the language names in the index. Something for non-specialists to be aware of (as explained well in the book's introduction) is that it is common in Bantu studies for there to be multiple names used for the same language, e.g. the use of *Kiswahili* and *Swahili* (with and without a noun class prefix).

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, this book is a welcome addition to a growing field of comparative Bantu morphosyntax, showing how the language family provides many

interesting case studies of fine-grained variation which can be used to test hypotheses about diachronic syntax. The chapters are united by this general theme, but vary in method, scope, and topic, and so are most likely to be read separately by researchers interested in a specific topic or by teachers looking to illustrate topics in Bantu grammar in their classes. I can also imagine one of the chapters serving as a useful starting point for a BA or MA dissertation project, which could for example investigate whether the patterns found in the chapter are found in fieldwork on a new language, or alternatively consider a wider sample of languages using descriptive grammars. I am therefore sure that this book will inspire many further interesting studies on Bantu morphosyntax.

REFERENCES

- Abels, Klaus & Peter Muriungi. 2008. The focus marker in Kĩtharaka: Syntax and semantics. *Lingua* 118. 687–731.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. & R. M. W. Dixon. 2002. Introduction. In Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald & R. M. W. Dixon (eds.), *Areal diffusion and genetic inheritance: Problems in comparative linguistics*, 1–26. Oxford University Press.
- Bergvall, Victoria Lee. 1987. *Focus in Kikuyu and Universal Grammar*. Harvard University dissertation.
- Bickel, Balthasar & Johanna Nichols. 2002. Autotypologizing databases and their use in fieldwork. In Peter Austin, Helen Dry & Peter Witternburg (eds.), *Proceedings of the International LREC Workshop on Resources and Tools in Field Linguistics, Las Palmas, 26 - 27 May 2002*, Nijmegen: ISLE and DOBES.
- Bostoen, Koen, Sara Pacchiarotti, Rozenn Guérois & Gilles-Maurice de Schryver (eds.). 2022. *On reconstructing Proto-Bantu grammar*. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Campbell, Lyle. 2017. Why is it so hard to define a linguistic area? In Raymond Hickey (ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of areal linguistics*, 19–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1981. *Lectures on Government and Binding: The Pisa lectures*. Foris.
- Collins, Chris & Anne-Maria Fehn. 2025. Parameters of morphosyntactic variation in Khoe-Kwadi. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 123(2). 246–279. doi:10.1111/1467-968X.12315.
- Creissels, Denis, Anderson M. Chebanne & Heather W. Nkhwa. 1997. *Tonal morphology of the Setswana verb*. LINCOM Studies in African Linguistics.
- Dimmendaal, Gerrit J. 2002. Areal diffusion versus genetic inheritance: An African perspective. In Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald & R. M. W. Dixon (eds.),

- Areal diffusion and genetic inheritance: Problems in comparative linguistics*, 358–392. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans, Nicholas. 2020. Introduction: Why the comparability problem is central in typology. *Linguistic Typology* 24(3). 417–425.
- Gibson, Hannah, Rozenn Guérois, Gastor Mapunda & Lutz Marten (eds.). 2024. *Morphosyntactic variation in East African Bantu languages* (Contemporary African Linguistics 8). Berlin: Language Science Press. doi:10.5281/zenodo.10453704.
- Guérois, Rozenn, Hannah Gibson & Lutz Marten. 2017. Parameters of Bantu morphosyntactic variation: draft master list. Alpha version, last amended 28 December 2017. *Leverhulme Project 'Morphosyntactic Variation in Bantu: Typology, contact and change'*. SOAS, University of London.
- Güldemann, Tom. 1998. The relation between imperfective and simultaneous taxis in Bantu: late stages of grammaticalization. In Ines Fiedler, Catherine Griefenow-Mewis & Brigitte Reineek (eds.), *Afrikanische Sprachen im Brennpunkt der Forschung*, 157–177. Rüdiger Köppe.
- Güldemann, Tom. 2018. Areal linguistics beyond contact, and linguistic areas of Afrabia. In Hans Henrich Hock (ed.), *The Languages and Linguistics of Africa*, 448–545. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Heine, Bernd & Anne-Maria Fehn. 2017. An areal view of Africa. In Raymond Hickey (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Areal Linguistics*, 424–445. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heine, Bernd & Tania Kuteva. 2002. Convergence and divergence in the development of African languages. In Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald & R. M. W. Dixon (eds.), *Areal diffusion and genetic inheritance: Problems in comparative linguistics*, 393–411. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kanampiu, Patrick & Jenneke van der Wal. 2025. The expression of information structure in Kĩĩtharaka. In Jenneke van der Wal (ed.), *The expression of information structure in Bantu*, 199–270. Language Science Press.
- Kerr, Elisabeth J., Allen Asimwe, Patrick Kanampiu, Ernest Nshemezimana, Zhen Li & Jenneke van der Wal. 2023. Bantu word order between discourse and syntactic relations. *Linguistique et Langues Africaines* 9(1). 1–29. doi:10.4000/lla.9496.
- Kerr, Elisabeth J. & Jenneke van der Wal. 2023. Indirect truth marking via backgrounding: Evidence from Bantu. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 42(3). 443–492. doi:10.1515/zfs-2023-2010.
- Landman, Meredith & Rodrigo Ranero. 2018. Focus marking in Kuria. In Jason Kandybowicz, Travis Major, Harold Torrence & Philip T. Duncan (eds.), *African linguistics on the prairie: Selected papers from the 45th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, 393–412. Language Science Press.

- doi:10.5281/zenodo.1251754.
- Li, Zhen, Allen Asimwe, Patrick Kanapiu, Elisabeth J. Kerr, Ernest Nshemezimana & Jenneke van der Wal. 2023. Preface to the special issue: Bantu universals and variation. *Linguistique et Langues Africaines* 9(1). 1–6. doi:10.4000/lla.5970.
- Marten, Lutz, Peter Edelsten, Hannah Gibson & Rozenn Guérois. 2018. Bantu morphosyntactic variation database (BMV). London: SOAS. Available online at bantu.soas.ac.uk, retrieved on 15-4-2020.
- Marten, Lutz, Nancy C. Kula & Nhlanhla Thwala. 2007. Parameters of morphosyntactic variation in Bantu. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 105(3). 253–338.
- Marten, Lutz & Deo Ramadhani. 2001. An overview of object marking in Kiluguru. *SOAS Working Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics* 11. 259–275.
- Meeussen, Achille Emile. 1967. Bantu grammatical reconstructions. *Africana linguistica* 3(1). 79–121.
- Muysken, Pieter. 2008. Introduction: Conceptual and methodological issues in areal linguistics. In Pieter Muysken (ed.), *From linguistic areas to areal linguistics*, John Benjamins.
- Ngwasi, Lenson & Abel Mreta. 2024. The historical development of the reflexive-reciprocal polysemy in Hehe. In Hannah Gibson, Rozenn Guérois, Gastor Mapunda & Lutz Marten (eds.), *Morphosyntactic variation in East African Bantu languages*, 351–371. Language Science Press. doi:10.5281/zenodo.10663783.
- Nsuka Nkutsi, Francois. 1982. *Les structures fondamentales du relatif dans les langues bantoues*. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale.
- Schwarz, Florian. 2007. Ex-situ focus in Kikuyu. In Enoch Oladé Aboh, Katharina Hartmann & Malte Zimmermann (eds.), *Focus strategies in African languages: The interaction of focus, grammar in Niger-Congo & Afro-Asiatic*, 139–159. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Stassen, Leon. 2009. *Predicative possession*. Oxford University Press.
- Van de Velde, Mark L. O. 2023. Alternatives for reductionist approaches to comparative Bantu grammar. *Linguistique et Langues Africaines* 9(1). 1–26. doi:10.4000/lla.9824.
- Van der Wal, Jenneke. 2020. From macroparameters to nanoparameters – a comparative Bantu case study. In András Bányi, Theresa Biberauer, Jamie Douglas & Sten Vikner (eds.), *Syntactic architecture and its consequences I: Syntax inside the grammar*, 25–60. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Witzlack-Makarevich, Alena, Johanna Nichols, Kristine Hildebrandt, Taras Zakharko & Balthasar Bickel. 2022. Managing AUTOTYP Data: Design Principles and Implementation. In Andrea L Berez-Kroeker, Bradley

Review of Bloom Ström et al. (2024)

- McDonnell, Eve Koller & Lauren B Collister (eds.), *The open handbook of linguistic data management*, 632–642. Cambridge: MIT Press. doi:10.7551/mitpress/12200.003.0061.
- Zeller, Jochen. 2017. Locatives in Bantu. Available at: <http://www.jzeller.de/pdf/Loc.pdf> [Retrieved on 01 Oct 2025].
- Zeller, Jochen. 2025. Locatives. In Lutz Marten, Ellen Hurst-Harosh, Nancy C. Kula & Jochen Zeller (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to the Bantu Languages*, 319–339. Oxford University Press.

Elisabeth J. Kerr
Centre for Bantu Studies (BantUGent)
Ghent University
Blandijnberg 2
9000 Gent
Belgium
Elisabeth.Kerr@UGent.be