



Review

Review of ‘The Bantu Languages, second edition’

Mark Van de Velde, Koen Bostoen, Derek Nurse & Gérard Philippson (eds.). 2019. *The Bantu Languages*, second edition. Routledge Language Family Series. London: Routledge. 788 pages. Hardback 175GBP. e-book from 20GBP. online pdf of Part II of the first edition on Routledge site: https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3-euw1-ap-pe-ws4-cws-documents.ri-prod/9781138799677/Bantu_Languages_Part_2.pdf.

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1 Introduction

Reading this new Bantu book made me enthusiastic all over again, and in awe of all the amazing linguistic features and variation within the Bantu language family. To explain my enthusiasm and provide some further information, I will first discuss how this second edition kept the strong points of the first edition and extended beyond it (Section 2), and then address the aims and audience of the book (Section 3). Since the book consists of two parts, I discuss the chapters of Part I individually in Section 4 and evaluate the contributions of Part II in Section 5, highlighting a small selection of interesting features.

2 Second edition: A new book

This is the fourth book in the Routledge language family series to receive a second edition: after the first edition of *The Bantu languages* came out in 2003, Routledge decided in late 2013/early 2014 that a second edition would be in place, resulting in this completely revamped new book coming out early 2019. It actually deserves a new title to distinguish it from the 2003 version, because it is much more than a second edition. Two new editors, Mark Van de Velde and Koen Bostoen, were added to the editorial duo of the first edition, Derek Nurse and Gérard Philippson. The new editors have done a thorough job in rethinking the aims and the chapters,

finding the right authors for each part, and streamlining each contribution as part of a whole.

The second edition maintains the split between Part I, which provides overviews of key linguistic areas (phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.), and Part II with 12 sketch grammars of Bantu languages from across the area. This split works very well. Both parts differ significantly from the first edition. Part II features completely new chapters on different languages. An important improvement, in my view, is the length of the chapters, especially in Part II: where the first edition featured 17 language chapters with an average length of 21 pages, the second edition chose 12 language chapters of 33 pages on average (including references). This makes for much clearer explanations of the phenomena, and more illustrative examples, which help to understand the point being made and understand the actual grammar of the language – something that I miss at times in the first edition, where some descriptions are simply too dense or lack illustration.

Of course, in the first edition, the aim was to cover as much typological ground as possible, resulting not only in more chapters, but also in chapters on larger areas, for example “The Interlacustrine zone”, “Western Savanna”, or “Zone S”. Since the broad descriptions as an introduction to the whole language area are already covered in the first edition, a second edition had the freedom to choose more individual languages, even featuring hitherto undocumented (e.g. Chimpoto) and endangered (e.g. Kami) languages. This choice, to focus on lesser known languages of the family, is on the one hand a good decision because, apart from the obvious value of publishing new language descriptions, it highlights the fact that there are many Bantu languages that remain undescribed or underdescribed. Language documentation and description is still a very important task and it is an essential part of the work currently done by Bantu linguists. Besides, the descriptions of the first edition are now available on the companion website of the second edition (see the link in the general information), so there is no point in repeating them. On the other hand, for chapters on individual languages I expect a certain level of expertise and mastery of the language described. This is borne out for the great majority of the chapters, but a few chapters are a bit disappointing (see further Section 5).

Turning to the changes in Part I, some chapters have not changed much but received an update (e.g. Sands and Maddieson, Hyman), some chapters have been meaningfully revised and extended (e.g. Marlo and Odden; Nurse and Devos; Downing and Marten), some have been restructured under other titles (e.g. much of the content of ‘Historical linguistics’, ‘Grammaticalisation’ and ‘Towards a historical classification of the Bantu languages’ from the first edition comes back in the new chapters ‘Reconstructing Proto-Bantu’ and ‘Classifying Bantu languages’), and some chapters are exchanged for new topics (there are no chapters on acquisition and contact languages in the second edition, but there is

a chapter on language contact – crucially different). All these changes reflect the growth that the field has experienced in the 16 years between the first and the second edition. With the research done in this decade-and-a-half, we witness a move to a next level, being more specific (e.g. Hammarström), broader (e.g. including information structure), and paying attention to crosslinguistic but also language-internal variation (e.g. Crane on Namibian vs. Zambian Totela, and Aunio et al. systematically comparing six languages in the Mara area). See further in Section 4.

A small but crucial change has occurred in the references: whereas the first edition gathered the references for all the chapters in one bibliography, thankfully the second edition provides references for each chapter at the end of the actual chapter. This makes it much easier to use the individual chapters in the classroom and in reading groups, for example. Another small change is the consistent reference to languages throughout the book: languages are always referred to by one consistent name,¹ followed by their Guthrie code – “Bantuists make use of a referential classification, devised by Malcolm Guthrie, in which every language is identified by means of a so-called Guthrie code, which gives an indication of the language’s geographical location” (Van de Velde and Bostoen, page 2). The use of these codes avoids confusion, and is of great help to readers who are familiar with the Guthrie numbering.

The new authors that have been brought on board for the second edition are a younger and more diverse group, each one an expert in the area they created a chapter on. Nevertheless, these authors still reflect the origin of the study of Bantu languages: 18 are based in Europe, nine in the USA and seven in Africa (of all authors, only three are native speakers of a Bantu language, to my knowledge, and six are consultants with SIL). I am hopeful that a next edition, should one be published, will feature more Africa-based scholars (as Marten 2005 already suggested), and that the current generation of Bantu scholars will do their best to make that happen.

At the start of the book, before getting into the content chapters in Parts I and II, the introduction by the editors sketches in a very precise way the start of the research field and the growing definition of what a Bantu language is. In this introduction, the editors shift gears easily between the big picture and the specific details, and I feel that it forms a necessary and welcome overview against which to place the study of Bantu languages as in the rest of the chapters.

¹ Bantu languages are often known by multiple names, the most frequent variation being between the name as in English, without a prefix (e.g. Swahili, Ganda), and the name as referred to by the speakers, including a prefix appropriate for languages (e.g. Kiswahili, Luganda).

3 The aim of the book

Parts I and II together aim to “provide a thorough introduction to the grammatical structure of the Bantu languages and to the historical evolutions that have shaped them” (Introduction, p. 1). This is an ambitious goal for a whole language family, especially considering that the inventory in chapter 2 lists 555 languages, but the authors and editors manage well, I think, in providing new descriptions, a general background to those unfamiliar with the Bantu languages, and a state of the art overview.

In the introduction, the editors explicitly mention that the book is not meant to “give an exhaustive overview of contemporary Bantu studies. Such an overview would have to include work on documentation, orthography creation, lexicography, youth languages, and so on” (Introduction, p. 1). Theoretical work on Bantu languages, computational linguistics, language policy etc. thus also fall outside the scope of the book, which on the one hand is fair enough because *some* selection needs to be made, though one may on the other hand wonder why historical linguistics received the quite prominent place that it has – probably reflecting the history of the field, and the interests of the four editors.

The book succeeds in being accessible enough for students and linguists just getting familiar with the Bantu language family, while also providing relevant information for advanced Bantu researchers. Typologists as well as theoretical linguists would do well to read the book, or at least some chapters, to find jewels of data that will inspire analyses. Students of general and African linguistics are encouraged to consult any of the chapters (in either Part I or Part II) to find plenty of topics for papers and dissertations, as almost all authors indicate explicitly what further research questions remain and which areas are in need of investigation.

4 Part 1: The growth of the field

Part I provides general overviews of the main areas of linguistics (plus some), and consists of the following chapters:

1. An inventory of Bantu languages – Harald Hammarström
2. The sounds of the Bantu languages – Ian Maddieson and Bonny Sands
3. Segmental phonology – Larry M. Hyman
4. Tone – Michael R. Marlo and David Odden
5. Word formation – Thilo C. Schadeberg and Koen Bostoen
6. Aspect, tense and mood – Derek Nurse and Maud Devos
7. Nominal morphology and syntax – Mark Van de Velde

8. Clausal morphosyntax and information structure – Laura J. Downing and Lutz Marten
9. Reconstructing Proto-Bantu – Koen Bostoen
10. Classifying Bantu languages – Gérard Philippon and Rebecca Grollemund
11. Language contact – Maarten Mous

I find that the editors have made logical and appropriate decisions in structuring Part I into these chapters, considering what the reader might expect to find in such overviews, and considering the developments in the field. It makes a lot of sense to place the inventory of languages right at the start of the book (rather than as almost an afterthought chapter, as in the first edition). However, there are at least two chapters that are absent, one rightly so, and one sorely missed. The former is the chapter on acquisition, which was present in the first edition (Demuth 2003). Since that edition, there has not been a substantial amount of further research conducted on the acquisition of Bantu languages, and therefore the omission from this edition reflects the state of this research topic (It is unfortunate that this has not received much attention, and there is a wonderful opportunity here for anyone interested, but the editors have, in my opinion, made the right choice in not repeating the previous chapter.). The other chapter that is absent would have been one on discourse structure. This is an area where progress has indeed been made (for example, the work by Crane 2015; Devos 2014; Eaton 2015a, 2015b; Leach 2015; Masatu 2015; Nicolle 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Njejimana 1990; Odom 2015; Pyle & Robinson 2015; Seidel 2015; van der Wal 2010; van Otterloo 2015) and interesting findings have been reported on the use of especially tense/aspect and demonstratives in structuring Bantu narratives. Devoting a chapter to this topic and its progress would have been appropriate and also very interesting, especially from a typological perspective.

The content of the chapters in Part I is otherwise well divided; there is hardly any overlap, and references to other chapters are present in helpful places throughout the chapters. The chapters contain really fruitful combinations of authors with different strengths (see discussion below), and for those chapters with more than one author, it was always clearly indicated who contributed what. The phenomena described in the chapters seem to me to be better illustrated than in the first edition, too, providing more helpful examples. This makes the chapters more suitable to use in courses on Bantu languages, typology, or any comparative linguistics (the chapters from the first edition were judged “too dense” by students).

Below I briefly comment on the chapters in Part I, and illustrate some of the phenomena.

Hammarström provides a very helpful inventory of all the Bantu languages, with a clear explanation of definitions used. His chapter builds upon, but is more extensive and better referenced than, Maho's (2003) chapter. Whether this is the definitive inventory of course remains to be seen, as Hammarström also indicates.

Maddieson and Sands indicate the main traits of Bantu sound systems, also giving detailed attention to variation and providing concrete examples in formant measurements. They link these data and observations to research questions, for example whether the distinctions illustrate ATR or height differences. This was also the case in the same chapter in the first edition (written by Maddieson); this edition is updated with again more variation and detail (e.g. in variability of pronunciation of clicks in Fwe), and references to newer work, including to the use of ultrasound and MRI to trace precise articulatory properties.

Hyman's overview of segmental phonology has not changed much since the first edition; it remains an excellent guide into Bantu phonology and typical phonological processes such as Meinhof's Law (the assimilation of NC as NN when followed by a second nasal). These processes are often also described from a historical perspective, tracking phonological changes from Proto-Bantu to the current reflexes.

Marlo and Odden have revised the structure of the earlier chapter on tone (written by Kisseberth and Odden), focussing on the relevant debates for Bantu tone and referring to the 2003 edition for more detail on tonal processes. The last decade has seen much research on so-called melodic tone (using tone patterns for inflection), and as a result the phenomenon is now more familiar and better understood; see for example the special edition by Odden and Bickmore (2014). Phrasal tone is another area that has received more attention, where tone spread and boundary tones indicate phonological phrase boundaries (which may in turn map to syntactic boundaries). This better understanding is reflected in some chapters in Part II, but also in the tone chapter. To illustrate melodic tone, in Nkore (JE13), "the melodic H [which is only present in a subset of tenses, JW] appears on the second syllable with toneless roots [as in (1), but it appears] word-finally with H-toned stems [as in (1b), and] H retracts to the penult pre-pausally" (p. 162).

Nkore (JE13)

- (1) a. *ba-barìran-a* + H > *ba[bárìran-a]* L-toned stem
 'they count for each other'
 b. *ba-bóneran-a* + H > *ba[boneran-á...]* H-toned stem
 'they see for each other'

Importantly, Marlo and Odden do not simply describe the state of the art, but also take into account the diachronic developments and larger research questions, noting that (p. 167) "[t]he ultimate goal of the study of linguistic systems is to understand how a

child learns such systems automatically by virtue of being a human being born into these linguistic communities". This is a question many more of us should be asking ourselves when trying to interpret the systems we are researching.

Schadeberg and Bostoen's chapter on word formation is very Proto-Bantu oriented, as indeed the corresponding chapter in the first edition was (then called 'Derivation', written by Schadeberg). The chapter discusses in turn the various derivational processes typical for Bantu: verb > verb (causative, applicative, passive etc. as morphological extensions to the verb stem), verb > noun, noun > noun (featuring the famous Bantu locative noun phrases, as well as diminutive and augmentative derivations), and noun > verb, as well as other word formation strategies such as reduplication. Fortunately, the chapter contains more illustrations than in the first edition, so that the described patterns can be understood more easily.

Unlike in the first edition (written by Nurse), *Nurse and Devos* can now refer to Nurse's (2008) book, which is an extensive study on aspect and tense across the Bantu languages. Nurse's research is based on a 100-language sample, which allows the chapter to truly draw generalisations over the language family (even if one may argue about the sampling: 85 languages from each area, plus 15 for percentual convenience). Some Bantu universals are that all have a perfective, all have an opposition between a perfective and some imperfective, 63% have a (often transparently grammaticalised) progressive aspect, and the languages generally show more pasts than futures (in line with crosslinguistic tendencies). The authors indicate at the beginning of the chapter why Bantu is interesting in the area of aspect, tense, and mood: "the multiple time divisions, the attempt to quantify aspect, the encoding of these categories, which is often different from how other languages in the world encode, the intensity and rapidity of grammaticalisation in Bantu ATM [Aspect-Tense-Mood, JW], and the first formal view of mood and modality in Bantu" (p. 204). The last point is an important one: mood and modality is a relatively understudied area for the Bantu languages, but Devos adds a whole section on the topic, much of which was simply not investigated at the time of the first edition. All types of modality are very clearly illustrated, and throughout the chapter, terms are explained more extensively than in the first edition.

There are too many topics in this area that are underexplored, and Nurse and Devos are only able to discuss a subset. The typical 'narrative' conjugation is missing from the overview, but the discussion of the various occurrences of the inflectional final vowel *-e* make up for this (a subjunctive basis, with extended non-modal use in optatives, conditionals, futures, narratives). The overview basically serves as a starting point for a PhD project, and the same can be said for the overview of the morpheme *-nga-* (potential/conditional).

Van de Velde brings together interesting observations in the nominal domain. This is a complete revision of the chapter on nominal morphology by Katamba in the first edition, with a different focus, extending beyond morphology into

nominal syntax. Van de Velde of course provides an introduction to the Bantu noun class system, but then concentrates on the structure of the noun phrase, specifically semantic agreement and the augment (an initial vowel, which some languages have lost; in others it can be present or absent, with different functions). It is clear that Van de Velde has his own persuasions and opinions, as he sounds argumentative at times, but he presents analyses and (diachronic) explanations in a way that helps to sketch the current state of knowledge. In fact, his determination to ‘clear up’ this area makes the chapter very illuminating! What I did miss in a chapter on the syntax of the nominal domain, are references to what formal syntactic research has yielded – a reference to the work of Vicki Carstens in this area, for example, would have been in place (Carstens 1991, 1997, 2008).

Continuing into clausal morphosyntax, *Downing and Marten* start with an overview of the history of the field, which is always helpful for a handbook chapter. They cover a much broader selection of topics than the syntax chapter in the first edition (written by Bearth), discussing the interfaces between syntax and morphology as well as phonology. And, as the title reflects, they pay due attention to the influence of information structure on Bantu morphosyntax. For example, there is a hot debate on whether ‘subject agreement’ on the verb should really be analysed as ‘topic agreement’ (cf. Morimoto 2006), considering the subject inversion constructions as in (2).

Herero (R30, Möhlig et al. 2002: 102)

- (2) *Mô-ngândá* *mw-á-hití* *é-rùngà*
 18-9.house 18SM-PST-enter 5-thief
 ‘Into the house entered a/the thief.’

Here, too, we see the growth of the field: as more and more languages are described to a certain depth, Bantu morphosyntactic typology has now become possible. An important publication was Marten et al. (2007) ‘Parameters of morphosyntactic variation in Bantu’, after which other comparative overviews were published (e.g. Devos and van der Auwera 2013; Gibson et al. 2017, 2019; Marten and Kula 2012; Marten and van der Wal 2014). Some references are missing (e.g. to Zeller on object marking, to Halpert on hyperraising and conjoint/disjoint, or to Pacchiarotti on applicatives), and more crossreferences could have been made to other chapters in this volume. Also, content question formation is missing as a topic between the otherwise impressive overview of subtopics in Bantu morphosyntax. It is clear from this chapter, however, that ‘Bantu syntax’ is necessarily *morphosyntax*, and that it cannot be described or understood without information structure.

Bostoen’s task in the chapter on reconstruction is to discuss results as well as methodology, and he does so in a very accessible way. He clearly illustrates the comparative method using the same five languages and providing comparative

tables from Meinhof and van Warmelo (1932). The chapter is nicely built up, first discussing phonological reconstruction, then lexical, and finally grammatical reconstruction. The latter is basically under-researched since Meeussen's (1967) Bantu grammatical reconstructions, but gaining more interest in recent years. Bostoen indicates why grammatical reconstruction is trickier: grammaticalisation processes involve meaning change, as well as morphologisation and erosion of forms. He then picks out one debate in the area, on TAM markers and the question whether Proto-Bantu was already agglutinative (and north-western languages have since become analytic; Hyman's view, e.g. 2011) or morphologisation of verbal elements happened at a later stage and Proto-Bantu had S O V X order (Güldemann's view, e.g. 2011).

Philippson and Grollemund provide a historical overview of the research in the classification of Bantu languages. The chapter gives a valuable insight into the development of the field, even if at times it feels a bit like one of the authors needs to get some complaints off their chest. They restrict themselves to the internal classification (which Bantu languages form which subgroups?), leaving the unsettled debate of external classification aside (which languages belong to the Bantu language family; where is the boundary of Bantu?). Much work has been done since 2003, particularly in combination with genetics and archaeology, but not much is said about the connections with these fields. Other than that, the chapter explains the methods sufficiently (which is quite an accomplishment for a short chapter), mentioning the shortcomings of each method, and drawing careful conclusions. It gives a true state-of-the-art, helpful overview.

Finally, *Mous'* chapter on language contact aims to be complementary to Mufwene's chapter in the first edition by focussing on contact-induced change and less on contact-languages. Mous indicates the consequences for contact for various areas: phonology, tone, morphological, and structural transfer. He indicates difficulties in the methodology, and points towards the disturbing influence of contact and the resulting convergence on classification and reconstruction. Some sections in the chapter go through many cases of language contact without exemplifying what happens, which sometimes left me confused. The discussion of borrowings in the noun class system overlaps a bit with Van de Velde's chapter. Throughout the chapter, Mous very helpfully indicates specific research questions, and closes by remarking that

What we need is comparative studies of language contact in the Bantu domain. A lot can easily be done with the influence of the European languages of wider communication on Bantu, provided that the base studies are analytical in outlook and comprehensive, which until now is only the case for a selected number of languages. The massive number of Bantu languages makes them a unique area for developing and testing general theories (p. 373).

5 Part II: The language treasure chest

Part II consists of 12 “short grammatical analyses of individual Bantu languages for which no book-size grammar is available” (Introduction, p. 1), spread across the continent (with Eastern Bantu languages being overrepresented). The following are covered:

1. Kwakum A91 – Elisabeth Njantcho Kouagang and Mark Van de Velde
2. Nsong B85d – Joseph Koni Muluwa and Koen Bostoen
3. Pagibete C401 – JeDene Reeder
4. Zimba D26 – Constance Kutsch Lojenga
5. The Mara languages JE40 – Lotta Aunio, Holly Robinson, Tim Roth, Oliver Stegen and John B. Walker
6. Mbugwe F34 – Vera Wilhelmsen
7. Kami G36 – Malin Petzell and Lotta Aunio
8. Ngazidja G44a – Cédric Patin, Kassim Mohamed-Soyir and Charles Kisseberth
9. Vwanji G66 – Helen Eaton
10. Totela K41 – Thera Crane
11. Chimpoto N14 – Robert Botne
12. Cuwabo P34 – Rozenn Guérois

All chapters begin by providing in the same way the necessary historical, geographic and demographic information (including – sometimes detailed – maps), and all indicate which dialect the description is based on, as well as which other sources are available on the language. This is helpful, and generates an overall sense of coherence in Part II, improving on the first edition.

In the same way, all chapters cover the basics of phonology, nominal and verbal morphology and syntax, as one might expect, but fortunately – and this makes Part II and the book especially worthwhile – the editors have left the authors free to include whatever they, as experts on the language, deem noteworthy. This results in not a standard checklist, but insights into the special points of interest of each individual language, doing justice to the wealth of variation found in the Bantu language family.

As the different authors have different strengths and interests themselves, this is also reflected in the various chapters. Given their backgrounds, we are not surprised to find an extensive and precise discussion of the various shades of TAM meaning for Totela by Thera Crane, or detailed information on pronouns and the nominal domain in Kwakum by Njantcho Kouagang and Van de Velde. Without taking away from the great value of these descriptions, unfortunately discourse and semantics are largely underrepresented in Part II, as the descriptions take the formal properties

as their starting point. Furthermore, there is still not as much syntax as one (well, I as a syntactician anyway) would have hoped for: the descriptions of Kwakum, Mbugwe, Kami all admit to being very limited in the amount of information provided on the syntax. For example, for Kami, the shape of interrogatives is given, but no information is provided on the position in which they may occur, or whether there is a difference between subject and object questions. This shows that Bantu grammatical descriptions are still very much oriented towards phonology and morphology. In contrast, it made me happy to see how often information structure is mentioned as an influence on the grammar – a fact that is recognised more and more, which allows a better understanding of the grammar of Bantu languages.

As briefly touched upon in Section 2, the chapters overall show great quality, with special mention for Njantcho Kouagang and Van de Velde (Kwakum) and Bostoen and Koni Muluwa (Nsong), who manage to provide well-written and detailed descriptions of the respective languages in relatively little space – a true accomplishment. A couple of chapters reporting on undescribed languages were somewhat disappointing in depth, but one might reason that any description is better than no description. And then there were little annoyances, such as the use of 3SG/PL in glosses (Wilhelmsen), which does not make sense for a Bantu language in which the “3rd person” consists of a series of noun classes, and instead class 1/2 should be indicated. The use of tables could probably have benefited from editorial suggestions too, as some chapters neatly combine the overviews for subject marking, object marking, and demonstratives, as Eaton shows for Vwanji, for example, whereas others show (too) many separate tables, which are not necessarily more helpful, and do take up space (e.g. Botne for Chimpototo).

Many of the chapters indicate the typological and historical relevance of the phenomena mentioned, for example Guérois (p. 738) pointing out that the lexical tone contrast on verbs in Cuwabo is common for Bantu in general, but unique in that all the other languages in Guthrie's group P have lost the tonal contrast for verbs. Proto-Bantu segmental phonology is brought into the picture, the reanalysis of tone is sometimes indicated, and reflexes of Proto-Bantu morphology are mentioned where relevant – all very welcome extra information.

What was already of much value in the first edition, has remained in practically all the chapters in this second edition: many pointers are mentioned to interesting phenomena in the various languages, which hopefully other scholars will pick up on. A handful of examples that are interesting for typologists concern the microvariation in the Mara languages (Aunio et al.), bringing up the question of identity and diversification, as well as contact; the grammaticalisation to dual pronouns in Kwakum (Van de Velde), a property that is highly unusual for Bantu; the 37 adjectives in Mbugwe (Wilhelmsen), where Bantu is generally known for very small inventories of true adjectives; and Zimba flexible word order of

numerals and possessives to indicate contrastive emphasis (Kutsch-Lojenga). I could easily continue mentioning interesting phenomena, as there are hundreds of further little nuggets of fascinating data and observations in Part II, showing once again that the Bantu languages form an impressive linguistic treasure chest.

6 Finally...

I agree with the publisher, who states that “This unique resource remains the ideal reference for advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students of Bantu linguistics and languages. It will be of interest to researchers and anyone with an interest in historical linguistics, linguistic typology and grammatical analysis”.

Abbreviations

PST	past
SM	subject marker

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