

Potential thesis topics Hilde Gunnink

General

My research focuses on Bantu languages of Southern Africa, and particularly their ongoing and historical contact with Khoisan languages. I am willing to supervise any research on Bantu or Khoisan language description, historical linguistics and language contact, whether based on fieldwork or existing data.

Some specific topics and research ideas:

Archival sources

Old colonial or even precolonial archival sources often contain language data, which are valuable in their age, providing information on languages that are now extinct or have since changed. Collecting these data and making them accessible can lead to any kind of research question. A particularly challenging and interesting issue is the **orthographic representation of clicks in older sources**. Before the introduction and adoption of the IPA symbols for clicks, writers used a wide variety of symbols drawn from the orthographies of their native languages or based on their own creativity to represent these sounds. Their choices tell us something about their interpretation of these sounds and possibly also about their realization.

Khoisan loanwords in Bantu database

As part of my ongoing project, I am collecting a database of Khoisan loanwords in Bantu languages of Southern Africa, as previously proposed in the literature. Anyone who is willing is welcome to contribute to the database, either by entering more data, or by critically evaluating previously proposed loanwords.

Bantu loanwords in Khoisan

Khoisan languages have also adopted loanwords from Bantu languages. These are often thought to result from recent contact with dominant Bantu languages, such as Tswana in Botswana, but some Khoisan languages exhibit loanwords that appear to be older and do not trace back to the Bantu languages they are currently in contact with. Identifying such loanwords and identifying their potential source languages, including Bantu languages not or no longer spoken in the direct vicinity, would make for an excellent thesis topic.

Linguistic reconstruction of (aspects of) Southern Bantu languages

Historical linguistic approaches to Southern African Bantu languages are almost invariably top-down, linking Proto-Bantu reconstructions to reflexes in individual Bantu languages. A different and potentially more fruitful approach would be to use a bottom-up methodology, reconstructing intermediate stages on the basis of languages known to be (closely) related.

Noun class assignment of non-Bantu loans

Given the pervasive but unique noun class system of Bantu languages, borrowed nouns from non-Bantu languages need to be assigned to a noun class. Previous studies have identified three noun class assignment strategies: default assignment, usually to a noun class with no or a minimal noun class prefix; re-analysis, when a noun contains an initial sequence that resembles a noun class prefix, which is then re-analyzed as a prefix rather than as part of the root; and semantic assignment, where the noun is assigned to a noun class based on its semantic properties. Semantic assignment is typically thought to be rare, but this appears to be based on the study of loanwords from Arabic and European languages. A more comprehensive study, focusing on loanwords from other language families, could possibly revise this typology of noun class assignment, and might find a bigger role for semantic assignment.

Noun class assignment of Bantu loans

Bantu languages also borrow words from each other. Very little research has looked at the noun class assignment of loans between Bantu languages. Given the use of a historically similar noun class system in both the donor and recipient, the expectation may be that borrowed nouns are incorporated into cognate noun classes. This has never been empirically been tested, however. A possible thesis topic would be to investigate noun class assignment of loans from Bantu languages in a particular Bantu language. It would focus on any Bantu language, either based on previous documentation or on new fieldwork. It would involve first identifying loans from one or more other Bantu languages, and then investigate their noun class assignment and the possible patterns and strategies that may explain this.

Tonal adaptation of borrowings

Many African languages make use of phonemic tone. Borrowings from non-tone languages, such as the ex-colonial languages English, French and Portuguese, would therefore have to be adapted to the tone system of the recipient language. Whereas the phonological and morphological adaptation of such loans into African languages is relatively well-researched, very little is known about the way tones were assigned to these loanwords. A possible thesis project would be to investigate this for a particular African tone language. Data can come from published sources, provided they contain loanwords and are reliably and consistently tone marked. Otherwise data can be collected through fieldwork.

Tonal depression in South African English

Tonal depression, the correlation between low tones and certain classes of consonants, is found in many South African Bantu languages, e.g. those of the Nguni cluster, as well as Tsonga and Venda. Impressionistically, it seems that tonal depression has also made

its way into South African English. A possible thesis topic would be to investigate if and how tonal depression is present in South African English, either using existing data or by collecting new data, from South African English speakers in the diaspora or by fieldwork in South Africa. This would entail measuring pitch variations in syllables with different classes of consonants in their onset.

Auxiliaries in Southern Bantu

In contrast to Bantu languages spoken further north, Bantu languages of zone S, also known as Southern Bantu, have very large inventories of auxiliary verbs, with up to 50 different auxiliaries attested in some languages. Grammars are usually limited to describing their semantics in terms of their English translation equivalents, which hint that aspect, information structure, mirativity or evidentiality may play a role in their use. A potential thesis topic would be to do a more in-depth, methodologically principled study of the semantics of auxiliaries in Southern Bantu languages, focusing on one or more languages, and using existing data sources or collecting new data.

Verb reduplication as pluractionality in Bantu

Many Bantu languages exhibit verb reduplication, the reduplication of the verb stem, or part of it. While the formal properties of verb reduplication are well-described, its semantics is often not yet well understood. Gunnink (2022) analyzes verb reduplication in Fwe as pluractionality, a type of verbal plurality. One of the arguments for this analysis is that the interpretation of verb reduplication depends on the valency of the verb. Pluractionality is a wide-spread grammatical phenomenon that has not yet been investigated in detail for Bantu languages. Using the Fwe analysis as a starting point, a possible thesis topic would be to investigate whether verb reduplication in specific Bantu languages can be analyzed as a marker of pluractionality. This can be done on the basis of existing data or on new fieldwork, either in Africa or working with diaspora speakers in Europe.

Crosslinguistic diversity in academic research

Academia struggles with a lack of diversity, not only in the backgrounds of researchers, but also in the choice of topics, which is skewed strongly towards WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) societies and languages. A potential research topic would be to investigate and quantify this effect for a particular linguistic topic, as done by Kidd and Garcia (2022) for child language acquisition research. Kidd and Garcia (2022) show language acquisition research to be strongly biased towards towards Indo-European languages. Their methodology can also be applied to other subdomains of linguistics, such as historical linguistics, language contact, sociolinguistics, etc.

“Affective” vocabulary in diachronic perspective

It is well-known that reconstructing words such as *papa and *mama to proto-languages is not a meaningful exercise, as these words tend to show similarities in related and unrelated languages for reasons other than inheritance. But which words and semantic or even syntactic domains fall outside the scope of regular sound change? A possible thesis topic would be to investigate this for a particular language (sub)family. Specifically, the **diachronic behaviour of ideophones** is hardly understood. Bantu languages, which form a clear family and which are rich in ideophones, would form an ideal test case for identifying whether ideophones also show regular sound change.