

Interdisciplinary perspectives on Bantu language history

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The history of Bantu speakers dates back further than the written record we have of it. Given the lack of written early documentation, we have to rely on different strands of evidence to inform us about what this past looked like. Linguistics offers one such window into the past. In this workshop, we focus on how we can use linguistic data to better understand Bantu language history and how we can and cannot correlate it with work from other disciplines such as archaeology, history and genetics.

Recently, more projects have started adopting such approaches, such as [BantuFirst](#), [Bantu Rivers](#), [CongUbangi](#), [KongoKing](#), [LHEAf](#) and [OriKunda](#). Although it is famously stated that “pots don’t speak languages or carry genes”, carefully executed interdisciplinary approaches have greatly advanced our understanding of Bantu language history. In Southern Africa, interdisciplinary approaches have helped to uncover the different layers of settlement of Kx’a and Tuu, Khoe-Kwadi and Bantu speakers, corresponding to different linguistic strata and differences in genetic ancestry (Fehn, Amorim & Rocha 2022). This has also made it possible to compare the degree of genetic admixture between resident Khoisan speakers and migrating Bantu farmers to the presence of clicks in Bantu languages (Pakendorf et al. 2017; Gunnink 2022; Gunnink, Chousou-Polydouri & Bostoen 2022). Additionally, the apparent mismatch between the archaeological and linguistic record in Southern Africa has been interpreted as a “spread-over-spread” scenario, involving multiple waves of migrating Bantu speakers (Gunnink et al. 2022). This could account for the archaeological evidence of multiple migrations in contrast with the linguistic evidence for a monophyletic origin of Southern Bantu languages.

Interdisciplinary research has also made it possible to uncover similarly complex migrations in the western part of the Bantu-speaking domain. For West-Coastal Bantu, the oldest pots associated with Bantu speakers are found along the coast. However, based on phylogenetic research, the high linguistic diversity further inland suggests that this is the homeland of the languages (Pacchiarotti, Chousou-Polydouri & Bostoen 2019). Seidensticker et. al (2021) suggest an early expansion along the coast followed by a population collapse and language shift to account for this.

Juxtaposing linguistic and historical data also yields valuable insights on the more recent history of Bantu speakers. In the Zambezi Valley’s 18th-20th century history, recent historical and linguistic accounts (Rodrigues 2025; Zahran, Devos & Guérois, Submitted) reveal how shifting power dynamics, migration waves, expansive trade networks and the movement of enslaved workers have shaped cultural and linguistic identities - exemplified by the Chikunda, a group of armed slaves renowned for both their military prowess and their supposedly linguistic and cultural assimilation (Isaacman & Isaacman 2004; Guérois 2025).

In this workshop, we aim to bring together recent insights and ongoing work on understanding the history of Bantu-speaking communities by drawing together linguistic data with data from other scientific disciplines. We welcome case studies of specific areas and historical episodes as well as contributions on methodological issues. We are interested in any approach that

juxtaposes linguistic data and insights with work on other disciplines, e.g. genetics, archaeology, history (oral and written), anthropology. Examples of possible topics are:

- Linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives on past and present contact between Bantu and non-Bantu languages, or between different (layers of) Bantu languages;
- New and old methods in linguistic classification and how they inform on Bantu language and population history;
- Areal approaches to language diversity and their interpretation in terms of concrete historical scenarios;
- Methodological issues in interdisciplinary research (e.g., relative and absolute dating in historical linguistics; matches and mismatches between different bodies of evidence).

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