

Phonetic and phonological documentation: the role of Bantu in establishing new standards for the discipline

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In *The Sounds of the World's Languages*, Ladefoged & Maddieson (1996) famously suggested that “enough is now known to attempt a description of the sounds in all the languages of the world. Professional linguists have some knowledge of the great majority of the languages now spoken”. Unfortunately, this statement does not capture the rapidly evolving global situation. Not only are we hurtling towards an unprecedented “pandemic of linguicide” with around 90% of linguistic diversity projected to disappear by 2100 (Koffi 2021), but, even among languages that are already documented, phonetic knowledge remains very uneven (Whalen & McDonough 2019).

As a matter of fact, sound, among the most ephemeral features of language (Ladefoged 2003), has historically received little systematic attention in documentation, and a scarcity of detailed phonetic description has long been acknowledged (Maddieson 2002, Ghio et al. 2024). While this posture stems partly from structuralist assumptions that phonetics is merely ancillary to general linguistics (Bloomfield 1933, Trubetzkoy 1939), it is increasingly recognised that fine-grained phonetic knowledge is indispensable for phonological theory (Demolin 2002), and that instrumental approaches, i.e. any including acoustics, aerodynamics, articulation, and/or perception, are of particular importance (Bhaskararao 2004). Nevertheless, consensus is lacking as to what constitutes minimally adequate phonetic documentation, and a comprehensive reference framework is still needed (Whalen et al. 2022). These concerns were recently echoed in the context of the concluding symposium for Bruce Connell's International Francqui Chair (Antwerp, 2022), where scholars emphasised the urgent need for agreed-upon standards, particularly in African language documentation.

In this workshop, we aim to address the current state and desirable future developments of phonetic and phonological documentation focusing on Bantu languages. We invite, among others, contributions that match the following:

- Empirical studies providing new phonetic and phonological documentation of Bantu languages (especially underdescribed varieties);
- Instrumental phonetic studies (acoustics, aerodynamics, articulation, perception, etc.) of any Bantu language;
- Critical assessments of the adequacy of existing phonetic descriptions and proposals for standards in phonetic and phonological documentation;
- Studies of the theoretical implications of fine-grained phonetic data for phonological analysis;
- Reports of methodological innovations in phonetic fieldwork and their application to Bantu languages.

Studies highlighting little-known or novel aspects of phonetic and phonological documentation in Bantu are particularly welcome. Contributions are welcome in any of the conference's languages.

References

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