

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.

The origin of clicks in Southern Sotho

Click phonemes are a clear hallmark of Khoisan languages, and their occurrence in Bantu languages are therefore a clear sign of Khoisan contact. In the eastern half of Southern Africa, clicks occur in the languages of the close-knit Nguni cluster, where they were already present in Proto-Nguni. They also occur in Southern Sotho, the only language of the Sotho-Tswana cluster to use clicks, where they have been argued to be the result of influence from Nguni rather than Khoisan. A potential thesis topic would be to evaluate this critically, collecting Southern Sotho words with click phonemes from existing dictionaries, comparing them to potential cognates in other Sotho-Tswana languages as well as to potential source words in Nguni and Khoisan.

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.

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.