
**Reviewed by Jeff Good (University at Buffalo)**

*An introduction to African languages* is a somewhat atypical work that serves, on the one hand, as a kind of extended scholarly review of a selection of significant linguistic research on African languages from as far back as Koelle (1854) to the present day, while, on the other hand, adopting a tone and format more along the lines of an introductory textbook than a book for specialists.¹ Its general orientation is descriptive and typological, and it covers not only the comparative and grammatical topics that one would expect in a work like this, but also sociolinguistic issues and the history of African linguistics. Though it has a similar title to a volume edited by Heine and Nurse (2000), it is a very different kind of book.² The contributions in Heine and Nurse (2000) are geared to a much more academically advanced audience than the work under review, for example Africanists in need of up-to-date overviews on the scholarship on African language classification and grammar in areas going beyond their specialties or non-Africanist linguists in need of an authoritative introduction to specific topics in African linguistics. This book, however, is intended to be accessible even to beginning students of linguistics—though a seasoned Africanist who reads it is likely to learn more than a few things of interest as well given the scholarly range of C.

The book consists of seven chapters (including an introduction) and three appendices containing reference information on the languages covered in the book as well as a summary of how to interpret the phonetic realization of some of the orthographic symbols found in the presented data. The book is accompanied additionally by a CD-ROM containing audio
recordings of a sample of the material discussed in the text. Apart from the introduction, the chapters are arranged thematically across the areas of language classification, phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, historical linguistics and typology, and sociolinguistics, respectively. The aim of these chapters is not so much to present a comprehensive overview of each of these subjects from the Africanist perspective but, rather, to highlight topics which C considers to be of special interest, either because they reveal typologically interesting features of African languages or—given the broad intended audience of the book—features of African languages which might be expected to pique the interest of those whose linguistic exposure may have been limited to the major languages of Europe. Thus, in the chapter on phonetics and phonology, for example, one finds not only the requisite discussion on clicks and tones, but also a short section on syllabic nasals since the topic lends itself well to exemplifying some of the contrasts that can be found between African and European syllable structures. At the same time, one will not find here general discussion of, say, how African syllabic structures compare to what might be found in a worldwide sample.

The introductory chapter of the book provides important context for the material in the later chapters, laying out different reasons why the study of African languages should be considered important. Such justification, of course, is aimed more at the student or the non-linguist than the linguist, and not only linguistic issues but also social and political concerns are discussed. Of more interest to a linguistic audience in this chapter is discussion of various important features of Africanist linguistics, including differences between American and European academic traditions, the role of missionaries, and notable areas of focus in scholarly research. The chapter concludes with a selective summary of significant early work on African languages, including discussion of three of the C’s scholarly “heroes”, Sigismund Wilhelm Koelle, Diedrich
Westermann, and Clement M. Doke. The decision to emphasize topics following C’s personal interests rather than more objective criteria is, in fact, one of the more remarkable features of the book. Had C been an author with a narrower background in Africanist linguistics (or simply someone writing with a less engaging style), such a direction would probably have been ill-advised. However, here, this approach is generally successful precisely because C has the requisite knowledge to focus on topics which are simultaneously representative and interesting.

Chapter two covers work done on African language classification (though issues of language change are deferred until chapter six). A strength of this chapter is that it does not simply present the grouping of African languages into the standard four major phyla (Afro-Asiatic, Khoisan, Niger-Congo, and Nilo-Saharan) as a kind of fait accompli, as one would find in many introductory linguistics textbooks but also discusses various difficulties that arise in classifying African languages (e.g., lack of data and sociohistorical complications) along with summarizing the various criteria that have been used to create African genealogical classifications, from the utterly discredited (racial) to the clearly problematic (typological) to the merely controversial (Greenbergian mass comparison). Three short case studies at the end of this chapter on languages and language families whose received classifications are associated with various difficulties are particularly commendable in this regard and should probably be required reading for any non-Africanist whose work may rely heavily on the assumption that standard reference classifications of African languages are of similar reliability to those of, say, Indo-European languages or languages of the Americas. A review of classificatory work on Songhay, for example, reveals proposals ranging from its treatment as an isolate, to its being a member alternately of Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, or Nilo-Saharan, to its being a mixed language based of the Berber language Touareg (Afro-Asiatic) with a Mande language (Niger-Congo). Similarly, the evidence
for the proposed Atlantic group of Niger-Congo as well as the Khoisan phylum is reviewed and found lacking. With respect to the former group, for example, the C concludes that a “culture of lumping and inertia are the only factors favoring its continuance” (50).

The next three chapters of the book cover phonetics and phonology, morphology, and syntax and semantics respectively. The choice of specific topics within these areas is opportunistic in that, as mentioned above, there is a clear attempt to talk about various “exotic” features of African languages in order to demonstrate to a general audience why they are worthy of study. As such, these chapters are not proper surveys of “African” grammar but rather a kind of selection of grammatical “highlights” that C has encountered over the course of his career. This should not be construed as a criticism, however, since it is clear that C’s goal with these chapters is to offer just such a selection of highlights, not to produce a state-of-the-art summary of linguistic scholarship across these linguistic subfields. (Readers looking for such should probably begin with Clements and Riall and (2008) for phonology and Creissels et al. (2008) for morphosyntax.)

Major topics covered in chapter three on phonetics and phonology include: the phonetics of clicks, vowel nasalization and prenasalized stops, vowel harmony, initial consonant mutation, and, of course, tone, which is the largest single subsection of the chapter. This chapter is the first to reveal a difficult tension found in writing a book like this one. On the one hand, C attempts to present enough data to illustrate a range of interesting phenomena found in African languages, but, on the other hand, this book is intended to serve as an introductory text and, therefore, its readers cannot be assumed to be particularly sophisticated in their ability to handle data from unfamiliar languages. It is not clear to this reviewer that C achieved the ideal balance between these two competing factors. In particular, the presentation of the data seemed too quick in some
places if aimed at a student without either familiarity with the languages in question or with aspects of linguistic theory going beyond “that acquired in a first-year linguistics course” (ix), which is given as the relevant prerequisite for readers of this book in the preface. Some of the problems in this regard are largely editorial and could easily be fixed by simple revisions. For example, in a discussion of vowel harmony in Swahili (Bantu; Niger-Congo) (70), a phonological alternation between -i- and -e- in the form of the language’s Applicative suffix is discussed. In the example data, verb stems are cited without the inflectional Final Vowel typical of Bantu verbs, which most typically has the form -a. Thus, one sees plain stems like -andik- ‘write’ contrasted with applied stems like -andiki- ‘write.APP’. However, in the text, the suffix is cited with the final vowel as having the form -ia or -ea. For someone with a basic knowledge of Bantu verb structure, this sort of discrepancy poses little problem. However, at the same time, it is quite easy to imagine an introductory student not being able to link the description in the prose to the cited data. There are numerous small issues like this throughout this and the subsequent chapters which contain extensive data. They are unlikely to cause grave problems for a professional linguist but may hinder the effectiveness of the book if used in a course aimed at students with only a basic background in the field.

A related kind of problem, though of a somewhat greater degree, relates to the possible difficulties in interpreting the conventions used to code the data. For example, at the beginning of the section on tone (76), a brief introduction to tonal transcription conventions would probably have been warranted. (In my experience, even many graduate students of linguistics are not familiar with common Africanist tone conventions.) Similarly, in an examination of tone spreading (89), a formal representation of spreading is given in a form which, while being completely familiar to those who have been introduced to autosegmental phonology, is likely to
be opaque to some of those who are not familiar with it. While none of these problems are cause for particular concern when taken alone, cumulatively they render the book less suitable for an introductory audience than it might otherwise have been if details regarding presentation of data had been tended to more carefully.

Chapter 4, on morphology, covers non-concatenative morphology (of the kind most famously associated with Semitic languages like Arabic), noun class systems in Niger-Congo, and verbal inflectional morphology. The last topic forms the bulk of the chapter, and it is divided into two subtopics, the overall structure of the verbal complex and the use of valence-changing derivational suffixes. The data on these points is taken exclusively from Niger-Congo languages with a bias towards Bantu languages because of the extensive work done on these topics within that family. Some of the issues regarding unclear presentation of data mentioned above recur here such as when a particular morpheme in Kisi (South Atlantic; Niger-Congo) is described as “a high-toned mora with its features unspecified” (110) without further elaboration as to what is meant by that description or when (following the original source) complex Chichewa verb stems are not fully glossed (113), making the examples less clear than they otherwise might have been.

Chapter 5, on syntax and semantics, covers a wide range of typologically interesting phenomena found in African languages including ideophones (sound symbolic words comprising a special lexical class in many African languages), double object constructions, coding of negation, predicate focus/clefting, serial verbs, and logophoricity. While ideophones have not been the subject of extensive theoretical treatments, they clearly fall into the category of “exotic” from the perspective of Western European languages and the ease with which they can be presented and possible idiosyncrasies in their meanings (consider, e.g., the Zulu (Bantu; Niger-Congo) ideophone voshovosho ‘running of a chicken’ (120)) make them a good topic for a work
like this one. The other topics, of course, have been important to work in syntax over the last half century or more and in many cases (e.g., double object constructions, predicate clefts, serial verbs, and logophoricity) data from African languages has featured prominently in the theoretical literature, making them quite appropriate for inclusion here.

Chapter 6 covers a number historical and typological issues, with an emphasis on the application of diachronic typology and work on grammaticalization to the comparative analysis of African languages and the use of language data to reconstruct African prehistory. There is discussion, for example, of the use of grammaticalization chains (e.g., the development of noun class markers from demonstratives) to arrive at analyses of the diachronic processes that might have influenced the development of a particular language as well as an extended discussion of the reconstruction of Niger-Congo word order, which has proven particularly problematic over the years. The chapter then turns to the role of linguistic data in reconstructing African prehistory— an area of inquiry where comparative linguistics has been especially valuable due to the lack of old written records in Subsaharan Africa. Perhaps the most well-accepted use of linguistics in this regard has been positing a location around the Nigeria-Cameroon border for the proto-Bantu homeland on the basis of the presence of the most extensive linguistic diversity within the family around that region. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of relatively recent work involving the relationship between genes and language. C is critical of Cavalli-Sforza et al. (1994)— probably the best known work on genetic variation among human populations—as applied to African languages but is, nonetheless, hopeful that this general line of research will yield interesting results for linguists in the coming years.

The final chapter of the book covers sociolinguistic issues in Africa, or more specifically “how social factors determine or change the forms of African languages” (174). Its main sections
discuss special language registers, language contact, and pidgins and creoles. The section on special registers contains an extended discussion of hlonipha, a set of behavioral patterns indicating respect among speakers of Nguni languages of southern Africa (Bantu; Niger-Congo), which, among other things, may require a newly married woman not to pronounce any syllable found in her husband’s name, which obviously must result in radical alterations to her speech. This is followed by a discussion of secret/play languages in Africa. The section on language contact looks at the importation of clicks into southern Bantu languages, including an examination of the possibility that the presence of clicks may be connected to the practice of hlonipha, discusses the mixed language Ma’á (see Mous 2003), and finishes with an analysis of the linguistic effects of the Mande (Niger-Congo) expansion in West Africa. The section on pidgins and creoles focuses on a set of interesting cases, like Fanagalo, a unique instance of a pidgin arising from African-European contact where the primary lexifier language (Zulu) was not European but African, and Afrikaans (possibly better classified as a semi-creole than a creole), along with associated language varieties spoken by non-whites like Tsotsitaal and Isicamtho, which derive historically from Afrikaans in sociolinguistically complex ways. This is one of the more successful chapters of the book, presumably largely due to the extent of C’s own firsthand knowledge of the language dynamics of different regions of Africa, and it is a reminder of how much sociolinguistic work remains to be done on the world’s most linguistically diverse continent.

Overall, this book represents a valuable contribution as an introductory text on African languages, occupying what appears to be an otherwise unfilled gap as a text suitable for an audience without a strong background in linguistics. Particularly welcome in this case is C’s informal, easy-to-read prose, which makes this an appropriate book not only for students whose
attention span for more advanced scholarly linguistic literature may be limited but also for professional linguists looking to become more familiar with African linguistics who would also appreciate if the task could be more entertaining than they might otherwise expect.

Anyone in this latter category, however, will unfortunately have to put up with many flaws of varying degrees of seriousness. Some of those, regarding the clarity of the presentation of the data were already mentioned above. In addition, I would like to mention a few others. First, it would have been useful had a consistent convention been adopted for reference to a language’s genealogical affiliation whenever the language is introduced since it is likely that many readers will not know this automatically from the language name. It would also have been helpful had more consistent standards for glossing been used. A very wide range of conventions can be found, from the use only of free translations to full morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, and, when morpheme-by-morpheme glosses are found, the conventions for coding grammatical categories are not always the same nor is the use of hyphens. Some of this variation is attributable to the range of sources that were drawn on in the text, and it is clear that complete standardization may have been near impossible. However, more than what is found at present would probably have been in order. In addition, it seems necessary to remark on the fact that the overall quality of the editing seems fairly low. Though no systematic check was made, this reviewer counted several missing references (e.g., Childs (2002b) on page 115 and McHugh (1982) on page 122). Additionally, there were a number of typos and formatting issues in the text, for example: on page 108, the glosses of a word were given in italics without quotation marks and, therefore, were typographically indistinguishable from language data; also on page 108, the language data in one example was bolded but in the next example italicized (italics is the more usual convention); and, on page 148, the final word of example data is missing an interlinear gloss.
Some problems like this are, of course, inevitable in a book-length work. However, impressionistically, they seemed to be on the high side here. (Of course, at least some of the blame, in this case, most certainly lies with the publisher not the author.)

On the factual side, the book generally holds up much better, though some problems could be found here and there. For example, on page 92, Dagaare (Gur; Niger-Congo), based on the description of Bodomo (1997:17), is described as not exhibiting downstep, even though Bodomo does in fact indicate that downstep is present in the language. Similarly, on page 167, a link between the spread of Bantu speakers and the spread of iron technology is discussed, and it is implied that Bantu migrants brought iron working with them as they migrated into southern Africa, but this claim is actually controversial among historians (see, e.g., Vansina (1990:58–61) for an interpretation where iron technology diffused after the Bantu expansion had begun). On the whole, however, despite occasional minor issues like these, the content of the book struck this reviewer as reasonably accurate. And, in the end, it seems important to keep in mind that this book is intended to be an introductory text and, as such, is not a substitute for an advanced scholarly reference work, for which purpose a volume like Heine and Nurse (2000) is much better suited.

And, keeping this last point in mind, it seems clear that a book like this one should probably not be judged too harshly on account of shortcomings like those just mentioned above. C writes in his preface that one of the main goals of this book is to make readers interested in African languages by introducing them to “some of the fascination and even some of the controversy involved in African linguistics” (ix). Whatever its flaws, by that criterion, this work would seem to be a clear success.
Notes

1. Readers of this review may also be interested in Nurse’s (2007) review of the same work.

2. Two other recent introductory texts with an African focus are Mutaka (2000) and Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000). The former is aimed at students pursuing advanced study in the linguistic analysis of African (and especially Bantu) languages. The latter was written specifically for an African audience.
References


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