

Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse (eds.): *A Linguistic Geography of Africa*. Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xviii + 371 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-87611-7.

For a long time, the role of areal factors has been long neglected in African linguistics. The volume under review aspires to correct this imbalance by highlighting the role played by contact-induced phenomena in shaping the current linguistic landscape of Africa. The eight contributions gathered in the volume approach this goal from three different perspectives. Chapter 2, and to some extent, Chapters 3 and 4 consider linguistic features that may warrant singling out the African continent as a separate linguistic area different from the rest of the world. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 attempt a study of some possible convergence areas within Africa. Finally, Chapters 8, and 9 look into one particular linguistic feature as found in the languages of the continent.

In the introductory Chapter 1, the editors, Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse, present the content of the volume and briefly set out the major points in the history of areal studies in African linguistics and their current state. Besides, they discuss several contact-induced phenomena that they consider to be of particular interest in the African context. Thus, they devote particular attention to the so-called “grammatical replication”. This concept stems from several works coauthored by the first editor and Tania Kuteva, such as Heine and Kuteva (2006), where it is defined as “a process whereby a language, called the replica language (R), creates a new grammatical structure (Rx) on the model of some structure (Mx) of another language, called the model language (M)” (Heine and Kuteva 2006: 49). The editors claim grammatical replication to be “a ubiquitous phenomenon in Africa”, even though, as they admit themselves, it is “still ill-understood” (p. 3). It is actually also poorly documented so that the claim of its ubiquitousness is perhaps a bit premature. Further, Heine and Nurse present what they believe to be a case of a

1 contact-induced change which is so profound that, in their view, it merits  
 2 to be qualified as a “change in typological profile”. The change in ques-  
 3 tion concerns the Nilotic language Luo, which arguably has been pro-  
 4 foundly reshaped “on the model of the neighboring Bantu languages”  
 5 (p. 5). Finally, the editors recapitulate Heine’s (1976) classification of  
 6 word-order types in African languages in order to demonstrate that, con-  
 7 trary to what is widely assumed, “syntactic structures are easily trans-  
 8 ferred from one language to another”. In particular, they mention the  
 9 so-called type B languages, which are characterized by GN, NAdp, NA,  
 10 SV and VX word order patterns and which are claimed to be “cross-  
 11 linguistically uncommon” outside of West Africa (p. 8). Heine (1976)  
 12 suggests that the distribution of this word order combination in West Af-  
 13 rica is due to the influence of Mande languages where it is omnipresent.  
 14 I will not comment on the heuristic value of Heine’s typology. However,  
 15 I would like to point out two things. First, a quick check in WALS (Has-  
 16 pelmath et al. 2005) shows that an important number of “type B” lan-  
 17 guages are found outside of Africa as well. Thus, from 24 languages with  
 18 GN, NAdp, NA, SV and VX word-order patterns five (Tupian and Car-  
 19 iban) languages are spoken in Amazonia and three (Chibchan and Choco)  
 20 languages in the area around the border between Central and South  
 21 America, one (Muskogean) in North America and one (Austronesian) in  
 22 Oceania. The remaining fourteen are spoken in Africa and, of those, eight  
 23 belong to one single family — Mande. Second, as argued, for instance, by  
 24 Creissels (2005), the West African languages in question reveal variation  
 25 that is too important to allow their grouping into a single type. Moreover,  
 26 there is sufficient empirical evidence against the hypothesis of an areal dif-  
 27 fusion from Mande languages.

28 In Chapter 2, Bernd Heine and Zelealem Leyew raise the question “Is  
 29 Africa a linguistic area?” Their answer to this question is positive because  
 30 allegedly it is possible to determine a set of eleven linguistic features that  
 31 “is not found at a comparable quantitative magnitude in languages out-  
 32 side the area” (p. 35). The eleven features are: (1) labial-velar stops; (2)  
 33 implosive stops; (3) lexical and/or grammatical tones; (4) ATR-based  
 34 vowel harmony; (5) verbal derivational suffixes (passive, causative, bene-  
 35 factive, etc.); (6) nominal modifiers follow the noun; (7) semantic poly-  
 36 semy ‘drink/pull, smoke’; (8) semantic polysemy ‘hear/see, understand’;  
 37 (9) semantic polysemy ‘animal, meat’; (10) comparative constructions  
 38 based on the schema [X is big defeats/surpasses/passes Y]; and (11) the  
 39 noun ‘child’ used productively to express diminutive meaning. Although  
 40 hardly any of these features is found throughout the continent and at  
 41 the same time, rarely elsewhere, Heine and Leyew argue that they still  
 42 define Africa as a linguistic area because “if there is some language

1 that possesses more than five of these eleven properties then this must  
 2 be an African language” (p. 34). However, I venture to suggest that  
 3 such an African language would also most likely be geographically con-  
 4 fined to Sub-Saharan Africa and more specifically to the region that  
 5 Tom Güldemann refers to in Chapter 5 as the “Macro-Sudan belt” (espe-  
 6 cially, to the “hotbed” of the latter; see below). Heine and Leyew are also  
 7 clearly aware of this fact as they mention *passim* that among different  
 8 parts of the continent “it is sub-Saharan Africa that stands out typologi-  
 9 cally” (p. 29) and within Sub-Saharan Africa the languages having the  
 10 largest number of the features in question are spoken in Central Africa  
 11 and the eastern part of West Africa (p. 30). Still, these essential details  
 12 do not find their way into the overall conclusion of Heine and Leyew’s  
 13 contribution. To substantiate their claims quantitatively, Heine and  
 14 Leyew recur to a convenience sample of 99 African languages compared  
 15 against a background of 50 non-African languages (or rather 47,  
 16 because 3 of the 50 languages are creoles and pidgins spoken in Africa).  
 17 Unfortunately, they do not provide a list of these languages. The distribu-  
 18 tion of the non-African languages between the continents given on p. 30  
 19 reveals a somewhat high proportion of the languages of Europe (10 out  
 20 of 47).

21 Chapter 3, “Africa as a phonological area”, by Nick Clements and An-  
 22 nie Rialland tackles the issue of the areal distribution of several phono-  
 23 logical properties among African languages. The authors argue that, phono-  
 24 logically, the continent should be subdivided into “six major zones”,  
 25 viz. North, Sudanic, East, Rift, Center, and South, “each of which is de-  
 26 fined by a number of phonological properties that occur commonly with-  
 27 in it but much less often outside it” (p. 37). They also conclude that  
 28 Africa does not form a single phonological area, so that the title of the  
 29 chapter is rather misleading. The chapter is composed of two major sec-  
 30 tions, the first on segmental properties (labial flaps, labial-velar stops,  
 31 nasal vowels and consonants, vowel harmony, implosives, ejectives, aspi-  
 32 rated stops, clicks, lack of voiceless labial stops) and the second on pros-  
 33 odic properties (tone, question markers). The analysis presented in the  
 34 chapter is based on a sample of 150 African languages (listed in an ap-  
 35 pendix at the end of the chapter), compared to 345 non-African lan-  
 36 guages. Most data on the phonological inventories in the sample comes  
 37 from the UCLA Phonological Segment Inventory Database by Maddieson  
 38 and Precoda (1989). The chapter is rich in data and offers interest-  
 39 ing analyses. The authors draw attention to the “typologically unusual  
 40 feature of ‘lax’ question intonation” (p. 80) widespread in the lan-  
 41 guages of the Sudanic zone. The “lax” question markers can take the  
 42 form of “open vowels, L[ow] tones, sentence-final falling intonation, and

lengthening, often in combination” (p. 79). Although interesting, this generalization appears to me as inherently flawed because it lumps together segmental and suprasegmental question markers, lexical tones of such question markers in tone languages and clause-level intonation patterns,<sup>1</sup> as well as the fundamental frequency of vowels. I do not see in which respect an open vowel /a/ and a falling tone contour in a question marker of the form /bâ/ in one tone language are typologically more unusual than a closed vowel /i/ and a rising tone contour in a question marker of the form /bĩ/ in another tone language.

A methodological remark also needs to be made on the way the label ATR (advanced tongue root) and ATR harmony are applied to various languages in Chapter 3.<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, for some of the languages which the authors appear to classify as having ATR, no articulatory phonetic studies have been conducted yet to demonstrate that it is indeed the position of the tongue root that is relevant.<sup>3</sup> The statements in the literature that such languages use the ATR feature appear to be simply due to the fact that they have a large vowel inventory (e.g., /i ɪ ɛ ɛ a o ɔ u u/) and the widely held assumption that for an African language this somehow must imply the presence of ATR. Thus, to the best of my knowledge, no articulatory study has been conducted for any Southeastern Mande language to confirm the putative presence of ATR. Furthermore, probably with the single exception of Bisa (Bettie Vanhoudt p.c.), these languages do not manifest any productive (ATR-like) vowel harmony between morphemes either. Finally, since we are talking about Mande, I would also like to point out that Baule is not a Mande language as is repeatedly stated in the chapter (e.g., on p. 77 and p. 85). Its classification as a Kwa language has never been questioned.

Chapter 4, “Africa as a morphosyntactic area”, written by Denis Creisels, Gerrit J. Dimmendaal, Zygmunt Frajzyngier, and Christa König presents a very informative collection of data on the morphosyntactic features found throughout the languages of the continent. However, there is very little discussion of possible contact phenomena, nor of any kind of major morphosyntactic zones that could be comparable to the phonological zones proposed by Clements and Rialland in Chapter 3. In fact, just as with Chapter 3, the title of Chapter 4 is somewhat misleading because here too the authors come to the conclusion that Africa cannot be defined as a linguistic area. The chapter is very solid in its factual coverage, but it could have profited from a bit more thorough editing. Thus, I stumbled across a few disturbing typos, often in the examples (e.g., on pp. 94, 98, 99, 100, 123). At certain places, the chapter also feels rather collage-like in that the discussion of the data contributed by different authors is not well integrated. It is possible to tell where the next author steps in and it

1 is not always immediately clear what the added value of the extra infor-  
 2 mation is for the overall discussion.

3 Chapter 5, “The Macro-Sudan belt: towards identifying a linguistic  
 4 area in northern sub-Saharan Africa”, by Tom Güldemann offers a con-  
 5 vincing account of the structural similarities between the languages of the  
 6 northern part of Sub-Saharan Africa, which are argued to form a single  
 7 “linguistic macro-area”. This macro-area must have been shaped “by  
 8 geographical factors which have been relevant for a sufficiently long time  
 9 period” (p. 180). Güldemann uses six linguistic features to delimit the  
 10 Macro-Sudan belt, viz. the presence of logophoricity markers, labiovelar  
 11 consonants, labial flaps, ATR vowel harmony, S-(AUX)-O-V-X and V-  
 12 O-NEG word order patterns. Language families<sup>4</sup> which “are affected by  
 13 virtually all features [...] and mostly in a regular fashion” form the “hot-  
 14 bed” of the Macro-Sudan belt and are concentrated in northern Central  
 15 Africa and the adjacent regions of West Africa, viz. Benue-Congo (ex-  
 16 cluding Narrow Bantu), Adamawa-Ubangi, Bongo-Bagirmi, and Moru-  
 17 Mangbetu (p. 167). The hotbed is surrounded by the “core”, which  
 18 “comprises families that regularly possess at least three properties with in-  
 19 termediate or high frequency”, viz. Mande, Kru, Gur and Kwa in addi-  
 20 tion to the families of the hotbed. Dogon, Songhay and Ijoid form the  
 21 periphery of the Macro-Sudan belt, whereas Chadic, Nilotic and Narrow  
 22 Bantu “do not really belong to the area, as the features are mostly un-  
 23 typical for them; but they occur recurrently in member languages which  
 24 border on the area and which thus could be viewed as participating in  
 25 it” (p. 167). Atlantic languages are characterized as peripheral to the  
 26 macro-area on p. 152, but as part of its core elsewhere.

27 As I am most familiar with Mande languages, I would like to comment  
 28 briefly on some of Güldemann’s Mande data. First, contrary to what is  
 29 stated on pp. 155–156, logophoric markers are relatively common in  
 30 Mande and are found in all of its major sub-branches, probably with the  
 31 exception of the Central-Southwestern languages. Second, as already  
 32 noted when discussing Chapter 3, for the time being, the level of the em-  
 33 pirical evidence available warrants more reservation in the use of the label  
 34 ATR (as well as ATR harmony). Finally, unless a language allows for  
 35 both a VO and OV order, the second of the two syntactic features used  
 36 by Güldemann, viz. V-O-NEG, is logically incompatible with the first  
 37 one, S-(AUX)-O-V-X. Thus, given that Mande languages are rigidly  
 38 OV, they score negatively on the feature V-O-NEG by definition, which  
 39 may be problematic methodologically. This could have been avoided by  
 40 confining the latter feature just to the relative order of V and NEG. Al-  
 41 though V-NEG alone may be typologically less striking than the combi-  
 42 nation V-O&V-NEG (cf. Dryer forthcoming), being more inclusive it

1 would increase the overall coherence of the Macro-Sudan belt. Unlike V-  
 2 O-NEG, V-NEG also applies to several Mande languages (and more Gur  
 3 languages).

4 As Güldemann points out himself, his Macro-Sudan belt is not a radi-  
 5 cally novel concept in the history of African linguistics. Many of the simi-  
 6 larities he mentions have long been known. However, the way he ap-  
 7 proaches this old idea in his contribution is definitely innovative. One of  
 8 the most interesting outcomes of Güldemann's research is that West Af-  
 9 rica, which "has, implicitly or explicitly, been conceived as a viable re-  
 10 search object of areal linguistics on the continent," actually does not ap-  
 11 pear to form a "well-defined linguistic area" (pp. 184–185).

12 In Chapter 6, Roland Kießling, Maarten Mous, and Derek Nurse ar-  
 13 gue for the existence of a Tanzanian Rift Valley convergence area com-  
 14 prising some West Rift Cushitic languages, several Bantu languages of  
 15 zone F and two presumed isolates, Hadza and Sandawe. The argumenta-  
 16 tion is based on a survey of some 20 linguistic features in these languages.  
 17 The features pertain to all major linguistic levels. "In order to make the  
 18 case stronger", the authors prefer "to concentrate on non-universal and  
 19 non-trivial features" (p. 190). However, some of these presumably "non-  
 20 universal and non-trivial" features are in fact typologically quite com-  
 21 mon, such as the absence of voiced fricatives. Thus, according to Maddie-  
 22 son (2005) 65.5% of the 566 languages of his worldwide sample lack a  
 23 voicing contrast in fricatives. The authors conclude that the Tanzanian  
 24 Rift Valley "might be a secondary contact zone and area of retreat where  
 25 linguistic groups from genetically different backgrounds came together at  
 26 various points in time, converging in various aspects of their structures,  
 27 while part of these convergences might also be traced back to primary  
 28 contacts at places outside the contemporary scene of contact" (p. 227).  
 29 A minor editing remark concerns the endnotes, which are misnumbered  
 30 starting from number 14.

31 In Chapter 7, Joachim Crass and Ronny Meyer discuss the hypothesis  
 32 of the so-called Ethiopian linguistic area, long-debated in the literature.  
 33 This area is supposed to comprise mostly Afroasiatic languages of the Se-  
 34 mitic, Cushitic and Omotic families and some families of the presumed  
 35 Nilo-Saharan phylum spoken in Ethiopia, Eritrea and some neighboring  
 36 regions. The chapter offers a critical overview of the features proposed in  
 37 the literature as defining this area and discusses a number of new mor-  
 38 phological and syntactic features. Unfortunately, in the latter endeavor,  
 39 the authors confine themselves to languages of two Afroasiatic families  
 40 only, viz. Ethio-Semitic and East Cushitic. In fact, similarly, very little is  
 41 said about Nilo-Saharan and Omotic languages in their overview of the  
 42 features proposed in the literature. On the whole, the authors appear to

1 favor the hypothesis of the Ethiopian linguistic area, although they admit  
 2 that “the current number of investigated languages and features is too  
 3 small to propose a definite conclusion” (p. 250).

4 In Chapter 8, Christa König provides an overview of the marked-  
 5 nominative languages of Eastern and Northern Africa, with the main  
 6 emphasis on the former. The general discussion is accompanied by two  
 7 case studies of the East African languages Turkana (East Nilotic) and  
 8 Dhaasanac (East Cushitic). The defining property of the marked-  
 9 nominative languages is that “in such systems the nominative case is  
 10 functionally marked vis-à-vis the accusative case” (p. 251), where “‘func-  
 11 tionally marked’ means being used in a few functions only” (p. 253). In a  
 12 marked-nominative language, “[p]rototypically, the accusative covers  
 13 functions such as citation form, nominal predicate, and O” (p. 255). On  
 14 formal grounds, König distinguishes two types of marked nominative-  
 15 languages. In type 1 (the most common one), the accusative is morpho-  
 16 logically unmarked, whereas in type 2, it is morphologically marked on  
 17 a par with the nominative and not derived from the latter. There is a con-  
 18 fusing typo on p. 254 in the definition of the two types, viz. “unmarked”  
 19 should have been used instead of “marked” and vice versa. Marked-  
 20 nominative languages are rare outside Africa and in Africa they are  
 21 confined to two phyla, viz. Afroasiatic (Berber, Cushitic and Omotic  
 22 branches), and the Eastern Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan phylum  
 23 (Nilotic and Surmic subbranches). König argues that the marked-  
 24 nominative systems of the Nilo-Saharan languages are likely to be due  
 25 to areal diffusion from East Cushitic languages.

26 In Chapter 9, Gerrit J. Dimmendaal focuses “on the question of wheth-  
 27 er verb-final languages on the African continent manifest a degree of ty-  
 28 pological consistency that would justify classifying them as exponents of a  
 29 specific language type” (p. 273). He addresses this question by compar-  
 30 ing, first, genetically related languages with a presumed verb-final order,  
 31 followed by a comparison of different genetic groupings. Dimmendaal  
 32 convincingly argues that the answer to this question is negative: “where  
 33 typological similarities can be observed between Africa’s verb-final  
 34 languages, these are due [...] to genetic inheritance on one hand and  
 35 to areal diffusion on the other” (p. 308). The example of areal diffusion  
 36 advanced by Dimmendaal concerns the observed typological similarities  
 37 between Nilo-Saharan languages in the eastern Sahel region and Afroasiatic  
 38 languages of Ethiopia. Dimmendaal cautiously takes an agnostic  
 39 position on the question of directionality of this presumed case of areal  
 40 diffusion.

41 The volume is concluded by the endnotes to all contributions, the list  
 42 of references and an index. Footnotes, I feel, would have been a more

1 reader-friendly solution. The index is helpful, even though it is rather  
 2 incomplete in its coverage. For instance, many languages discussed in  
 3 the text do not figure in the index and for those languages that do, many  
 4 occurrences are not included in the index.

5 There is no doubt that the volume is a very welcome contribution to  
 6 our knowledge of African languages. It is data rich and it offers a number  
 7 of interesting analyses. However, in my opinion, it is less successful in  
 8 reaching the general aims proclaimed by the editors in the abstract (p. i)  
 9 and the Introduction (Chapter 1). Thus, on the whole, the volume ap-  
 10 pears to be more geared towards presenting extensive data on various lin-  
 11 guistic features found in African languages of various regions (especially  
 12 south of the Sahara) rather than towards elucidating the role of contact-  
 13 induced relationships between these languages. Furthermore, the conclu-  
 14 sion that comes to the fore upon reading the volume is that linguistically,  
 15 Africa does not form a single area. Instead, we should distinguish several  
 16 smaller linguistic areas within Africa, such as the six “major zones” dis-  
 17 cussed in Chapter 3 by Nick Clements and Annie Rialland. However,  
 18 even these more compact areas can hardly be described as Sprachbunds,  
 19 comparable for instance to the ones found in the Balkans or Meso-  
 20 America. It is illustrative in this respect that, for instance, Clements and  
 21 Rialland explicitly opt for “the neutral term ‘phonological zone’” (p. 37),  
 22 whereas Güldemann in Chapter 5 uses the term “linguistic macro-area”.  
 23 As it appears from Güldemann’s contribution, the distinctive nature of  
 24 such zones or macro-areas is primarily due to their considerable time  
 25 depth and the importance of geographical factors for their formation.

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 31 **Notes**

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- 35 1. For instance, Clements and Rialland speak of a “marker [that] consists of a *final L tone*  
 36 *or falling intonation*” (p. 76; [italics used in the original]).  
 37 2. In fact, this remark applies to all the contributions in the volume mentioning this  
 38 property.  
 39 3. According to John Ohala and Larry Hyman (p.c.), acoustic data alone are not sufficient  
 40 to determine this with certainty.  
 41 4. Unlike many other contributors to the volume, Güldemann explicitly prefers to consider  
 42 well-established low-level genealogical units, such as Mande or Kwa, rather than the  
 four super groups of Greenberg’s classification.



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