SocioBaGS Workshop
26-28 June 2025
Laboratoire Parole et langage, CNRS – Aix-Marseille Université

The SocioBaGs project investigates variation and change in the nominal classification systems of the Bantu languages, one of the world's largest language families. At each of the borders of the Bantu spread zone – northwestern, northeastern, and southern – Bantu languages are in contact with other language families, ranging from distantly related branches of the Niger-Congo family to genealogically unrelated groupings. We want to understand how Bantu nominal classification systems vary and change in languages spoken at the border with non-Bantu or other Bantu languages. The ultimate goal of the project is to use this wealth of empirical data – stemming from large-scale comparative research and fieldwork – to develop a general model of language evolution dynamics and their sociohistorical correlates.

The present workshop will bring together members of the SocioBaGS scientific committee as well as researchers from outside the project core team to exchange ideas and findings on the latest research about the typology of Bantu and non-Bantu nominal classification systems and the population history and contact dynamics of sub-Saharan Africa. Variation and change in Bantu languages in contact with other language families are especially in focus. The workshop will feature one and a half day of presentations from the members of our scientific committee and a poster session, followed by one day of discussions and data collection sessions.

The presentations, joint discussions, and data collection sessions are open to the LPL and Aix-Marseille community upon registration. The talks on June 26th-27th will be also streamed via Zoom (the link will be sent closer to the event).

More information about our project can be found here.

To register in the workshop, please fill in this form before May 28th.

SCHEDULE

June 26th

8:45 – 9:00	Welcome words from the organizers
9:00 – 9:40	**Koen Bostoen, Jean-Pierre Donzo Bunza Yugia and Sara Pacchiarotti** The historical impact of Ubangi language shifters on Bantu gender systems: the case of Ngombe (Bantu, C41)
9:40 – 10:20	**Lutz Marten, Hannah Gibson and Daisuke Shinagawa** Co-variation in Bantu noun classes: Insights from the Bantu Morphosyntactic Variation database
10:20 – 11:00	Coffee break
11.00 – 11.40	**Maarten Mous** Noun class prefixes and early Bantu borrowing in East Africa
11.40 – 12.20	**Sara Pacchiarotti, Paulin Baraka Bose and Koen Bostoen** The gender system of Gezon, a poorly known variety of Pagibete (Bantu C401)
12:20 – 13:30	Lunch break
13:30 – 14:10	**Rasmus Bernander, Antti Laine and Nina van der Vlugt** On the status of Bantu class 19 in Eastern Bantu
14:10 – 14:50	**Hilde Gunnink** Noun class assignment of loanwords in Bantu: comparing European and African donor languages
14:50 – 15:30	Coffee break
15:30 – 16:10	**Mark Van de Velde** Types of semantic agreement and their internal competition in the Bantu languages
16:10 – 16:50	Closing discussion
19:00	Dinner

June 27th

9:00 – 9:40	**Tom Güldemann** Gender typology, the multi-dimensional dynamics of Bantu gender-number systems, and language contact
9:40 – 10:20	**Kaius Sinnemäki** Optionality, soft constraints, and grammatical gender
10:20 – 11:30	Tea break and poster session **Francesca Di Garbo, Antti Laine, Rita Popova and Annemarie Verkerk.** SocioBaGS progress report **Stefan Savić.** Gender 5/6 human referents in isiXhosa **Éliane Bailly.** Classification nominale dans les langues bantoues du sud **Antti Laine and Rita Popova.** Gender agreement and gender assignment in Northeast Savanna Bantu
11.30 – 12.30	Presentation of the SocioBaGS questionnaires
12.30 – 14.00	Lunch
14.00 – 14.30	Data collection instructions
14.30 – 15.30	Data collection session I
15.30 – 16.00	Coffee break
16.00 – 17.00	Data collection session II
17.00 –17.30	Data session running off
19:00	Dinner

June 28th

9:00 – 9.30	**Presentation of the themes for the discussion groups**
9.30 – 10:30	Discussion groups I
10:30 – 11:30	Discussion groups II
11.30 – 12:30	Final discussion and closing of the workshop

Abstracts

TALKS

On the status of Bantu class 19 in Eastern Bantu

Rasmus Bernander
University of Gothenburg

Antti Laine
Aix-Marseille Université

Nina van der Vlugt
Ghent University

In this study, we examine the contemporary role and historical development of the class 19 diminutive noun class in the Eastern Bantu subgroup, including its relation to other evaluative noun classes and its place within the broader paradigm of the Bantu noun class system.

Starting from a broad comparative-historical perspective, we draw on extensive secondary data from Eastern Bantu, as well as general comparative and reconstructional work (e.g., Kadima 1969, Kähler-Meyer 1971, Maho 1999). To gain a deeper understanding of class 19 and the development and organization of diminutives in Eastern Bantu and Bantu as a whole, we enhance our investigation by zooming in on two key areas presenting detailed insights into the use of class 19 morphology in Easter Bantu, viz. the Mara subgroup of Great Lakes Bantu (JE40 minus JE41) and the Shona language cluster (S10).

Whereas the Mara language data fills a critical gap by offering detailed evidence from language varieties attesting class 19 morphology, Karanga Shona is interesting as a geographical and genealogical outlier among Eastern Bantu languages that has retained class 19. Moreover, it differs functionally from most of these languages in that class 19 referring to singular rather than plural entities.

Bringing these different strands of research together, we aim to show that the class 19 is a retention, reflecting an instance of archaic heterogeneity both within the specific groups under investigation and across Eastern Bantu.

By resurrecting Kadima's (1969: 147) characterization of class 19 as an "une classe en dehors du système", we argue that class 19 can be understood as a transnumeral gender category, variably integrated into a singular or plural class depending on the overall noun class system, and as such, also a class that is easily reinterpreted and/or lost.

Through this investigation, our study may shed further light on broader historical discussions concerning Eastern Bantu, including Mara's position at the Bantu fringes and its contact with non-Bantu varieties, as well as Shona's role as a "buffer" between East-Eastern Bantu and Southern Bantu (Doke 1954: 205).

References
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The historical impact of Ubangi language shifters on Bantu gender systems: the case of Ngombe (Bantu, C41)

Koen Bostoen, Jean-Pierre Donzo Bunza Yugia and Sara Pacchiarotti
Ghent University

Ngombe (Bantu, C41) is a Central-Western Bantu language whose speech communities are dispersed in the northern periphery of the Congo rainforest, more specifically in the north- western part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Starting out from historical- comparative research on labial-velar stops, Bostoen & Donzo (2013) claim that Ngombe underwent significant substrate interference as the outcome of advanced bilingualism involving shifting Ubangi speakers. Recent population genetic research confirms this hypothesis. A substantial portion of modern Congolese who identify as Ngombe have Ubangi ancestry, i.e., 34% of those sampled. They share a distinctive genetic component which occurs in the highest proportions among modern Ubangi-speaking populations (67-78%) from the Central African Republic (CAR) (Fortes-Lima *et al.* 2025).

Ngombe thus represents an ideal case study for testing the effect of language shift on gender restructuring postulated by Verkerk & Di Garbo (2022) for several languages in the northern Bantu borderland. In this talk, we examine whether the noun class system of Ngombe manifests substrate effects similar to those observed in Ngombe phonology (Bostoen & Donzo 2013). We provide a comparative analysis of the gender system of several Ngombe varieties scattered across the north-western DRC: Yumba spoken by fishermen in Bongandanga territory in the Mongala province (fieldwork Donzo 2015), Bobo from the Kungu territory, Sud Ubangi Province (fieldwork data 2015), Ngbondo from the Budjala territory, Sud Ubangi Province (fieldwork Donzo 2015), Monengbe from the Libenge territory, Sud Ubangi Province (fieldwork Donzo 2024 as part of the CongUbangi project), Mowea from the Equateur Province (Rood 1958), and Lingbele from the Lisala territory, Mongala Province (fieldwork Donzo 2024 as part of the CongUbangi project).

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Noun class assignment of loanwords in Bantu: comparing European and African donor languages

Hilde Gunnink
Ghent University/Leiden University

Nouns borrowed in Bantu languages with noun classes need to be assigned to a noun class. Previous literature has described a number of strategies that underlie noun class assignment: default assignment, usually to a noun class that has a zero noun class prefix; phonological reanalysis, where the initial syllable of the source word is (re)interpreted as a noun class prefix in the recipient language; and semantic assignment, where a loan is assigned to the semantically appropriate noun class (Mous 2019). The last strategy is relatively uncommon, and has been linked to paralexification, the addition of word forms to existing lexical entries while copying their semantic and, crucially, morphological information (Mous 2001). This has also been used to diagnose (past) cases of paralexification (Bostoen and Donzo 2013; Gunnink et al. 2015).

In this paper, I will re-evaluate the use of semantic assignment of borrowed nouns in Bantu languages. Specifically, I will test the hypothesis that previous research on noun class assignment strategies in Bantu languages depended mostly on loans from non-African languages (English, French, Portuguese, Afrikaans, Arabic), and that loans from African non-Bantu languages may follow different patterns. Through a comparison of loans from European and Khoisan languages in four Southern African Bantu languages, I will show that nouns borrowed from European languages tend to cluster in zero-marked noun classes, or are assigned on the basis of phonological criteria, usually by reanalyzing a s + consonant cluster as a class 7 prefix. Khoisan loans, on the other hand, tend to be more evenly distributed across noun classes. Default assignment does not appear to be used often, but rather phonological assignment to class 9 if the original initial root consonant contained a nasal element; otherwise, semantic criteria govern the noun class assignment of Khoisan loans. These findings will be used to reconsider the role of semantic assignment of borrowed nouns in Bantu languages, and the sociolinguistic circumstances of contact situations that trigger different morphological adaptation strategies.

References
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Gender typology, the multi-dimensional dynamics of Bantu gender-number systems, and language contact

Tom Güldemann

Humboldt University of Berlin

The Bantu family is characterized by a complex gender-number system, which is described commonly by means of the philological concept "noun class" entailing both agreement and adnominal marking. The system reconstructed to the proto-language has a typologically exceptionally large number of more than ten number-sensitive or transnumeral genders, a principal semantic distinction based on humanness, and agreement affecting multiple targets in the noun phrase and beyond (cf., e.g., Meeussen 1967). While such a system is held intact by most modern languages, a considerable number of other languages have experienced different types of change, and at least in some cases these are clearly associated with language contact (cf., e.g., Verkerk and Di Garbo 2022, Güldemann 2023). The presentation discusses the multi-dimensionality of the changes, the acknowledgement of which is a prerequisite for analyzing their historical mechanisms and causes.

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Co-variation in Bantu noun classes: Insights from the Bantu Morphosyntactic Variation database

Lutz Marten
SOAS University of London

Hannah Gibson
University of Essex

Daisuke Shinagawa
ILCAA, TUFS (Tokyo)

Noun classes are one of the most salient features of Bantu languages and there is a long research tradition dedicated to the topic (see e.g. Maho 2003, Marten 2021, Rugemalira forthcoming.). This well described aspect of grammar allows for the systematic comparison of noun class systems and their relation to other morphosyntactic features. A particular approach in this area is based on the 142 parameters of morphosyntactic variation developed in Guérois et al. (2017), and the associated Bantu Morphosyntactic Variation (BMV) database (Marten et al. 2018), which can be used for studies of morphosyntactic co-variation (e.g. Marten and Kula 2007, Zeller and Ngoboka 2015, Shinagawa and Marten 2021, 2023).

In this talk we use the BMV database to compare the noun class inventories of 47 Bantu languages, focusing on patterns of co-variation with other selected morphosyntactic features. The BMV database contains data from languages with between 9 and 21 noun classes. Each of these values can be correlated with the values of the other 141 parameters to identify correlations. We focus here on co-variation between the number of noun classes and other morphosyntactic features, in particular marking of locatives, diminutives and animate agreement.

For example, as Table 1 shows, there is a correlation between the number of noun classes and locative noun class markers. Languages with 12 or less classes do not have locative classes, while all languages in our database with 19 or more classes have locatives. However, for languages in between these two groups – with 13–18 noun classes – the situation is more complex as they may or may not have locative classes.

By building up a multi-faceted picture of correlations between different features, we develop a more fine-grained picture of variation in Bantu noun classes, and morphosyntactic variation in Bantu more widely.

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P009	no	yes	total
# P004 / P009			
9	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)
10	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)
12	5 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (100.0%)
13	1 (33.33%)	2 (66.67%)	3 (100.0%)
14	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)
15	2 (66.67%)	1 (33.33%)	3 (100.0%)
16	0 (0.0%)	4 (100.0%)	4 (100.0%)
17	4 (50.0%)	4 (50.0%)	8 (100.0%)
18	1 (6.67%)	14 (93.33%)	15 (100.0%)
19	0 (0.0%)	3 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)
20	0 (0.0%)	2 (100.0%)	2 (100.0%)
21	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)	1 (100.0%)
total	16 (34.04%)	31 (65.96%)	47 (100.0%)

Table 1: Correlation between number of noun classes (P004) and locative noun class markers (P009)

Noun class prefixes and early Bantu borrowing in East Africa

Maarten Mous
Leiden Universuty

Loans from non-Bantu language into Bantu are assigned to the noun class that has zero (or a single vowel) as allomorph. An alternative strategy is the reinterpretation of the first syllable as noun class prefix, ki-tabu in Swahili from Arabic kitab, (i.a., Mous 2019). However, early Cushitic loans in the East African Bantu languages, particularly those in the area of domestic animals, show addition of a nasal, characteristic of class 9/10, Mous and Van der Vlugt (2023). I try to reconstruct (1) whether this an indication for a different borrowing strategy in the past in a different socio- and linguistic context, (2) whether the addition of the nasal is a sign of a longer period of nativization, or (3) whether this is due to borrowing mechanism in subsequent horizontal spread from Bantu language to Bantu language.

References

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The gender system of Gezon, a poorly known variety of Pagibete (Bantu C401)

Sara Pacchiarotti, Paulin Baraka Bose and Koen Bostoen
Ghent University

Gezon (a.k.a. Egezo, Egezon or Ndundusana) is a variety of Pagibete (C401) spoken by some 28.000 people in the Mongala and Nord Ubangi provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Eberhard et al. 2024). Based on first-hand data collected in Gbadolite (Nord Ubangi) by the second author in June 2024 as part of the ERC-funded CongUBangi project led by the first author, in this talk we offer a first account of the Gezon gender system and compare it to that of the Monveda variety of Pagibete (Reeder 1998). We devote particular attention to features identified by Di Garbo and Verkerk (2022) as diagnostic for highly eroded gender systems in the northern Bantu borderland, such as the neutralization of gender distinctions in grammatical paradigms and the development of generalized animacy-based agreement (see also Güldemann 2023).

As observed by Di Garbo and Verkerk (2022: 1189), a highly peculiar feature of Pagibete, shared with other Bwa languages (C44) and Lika (D201) (De Wit 2015), is that some noun roots show both prefixal and suffixal nominal class forms, to use the terminology of Güldemann and Fiedler (2019). In the Monveda and Gezon varieties of Pagibete, this appears to be the case for most nouns. This configuration is not unique to this subset of Forest Bantu languages, but also common in other Niger-Congo subgroups (Greenberg 1977). Based on language-internal and historical-comparative evidence, we investigate possible historical origins for the development of suffixal nominal class forms in Pagibete.

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Optionality, soft constraints, and grammatical gender

Kaius Sinnemäki
University of Helsinki

In my presentation, I build on the common idea in language typology that biases in typological distributions reflect preferences in language use, sometimes also referred to as soft vs. hard constraints (e.g., Bresnan et al. 2000; Hawkins 2014). I discuss the consequences that these ideas have on analyzing grammatical gender and problematize what optionality and obligatoriness mean in this domain. Obligatoriness is usually a part of the definition of grammatical gender. However, this definition may exclude incipient and evolving systems or systems that are on the way of being lost that are nevertheless optional. Such still unstable systems may also be developing under contact. The purpose of my talk is to highlight the need for addressing optionality and making clear analytical choices in variable design in this domain. Drawing data from several languages, including Finnish traditional dialects, I argue that preferences found in corpora on optional number agreement seem to align with animacy hierarchy and thus mirror observed preferences in categorical gender systems.

References

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Types of semantic agreement and their internal competition in the Bantu languages

Mark Van de Velde
CNRS LLACAN (Paris)

The most commonly recognised type of semantic agreement in the Bantu languages is animate agreement, where an animate controller triggers agreement of class 1/2 on most agreement targets, irrespective of its overt class marker. Depending on the language, some targets low on the agreement hierarchy may show formal agreement.

The aims of this talk are (i) to remind of the existence of other types of semantic agreement, such as evaluative agreement and basic level term agreement, (ii) to argue that agreement in the locative classes is also a type of semantic agreement and (iii) to point out that different types of semantic agreement can be in competition with each other. The outcomes of this competition are still very poorly known, but they may shed light on the relative age of the different types and on the origin of their related morphology.

POSTER SESSION

Classification nominale dans les langues bantoues du sud

Éliane Bailly

Aix-Marserille Université – CNRS Laboratoire Parole et Langage

Dans le cadre du projet SocioBaGS (Di Garbo & Verkerk, 2022), cette étude explore la classification nominale des langues bantoues du sud, qui sont au nombre de 27 (Hammarström, Forkel & Haspelmath, Glottolog 5.1, 2024). Maho (1999, p.123) relève une inconsistance dans la description de l'usage de l'accord d'animéité en swati et souligne que les descriptions des langues bantoues du sud négligent l'étude de ce phénomène. Ces affirmations constituent le point de départ pour cette enquête, qui étudie de façon systématique la présence de l'accord d'animéité dans les langues bantoues du sud. Notre hypothèse est que des regroupements généalogiques ou aréaux peuvent être opérés pour expliquer les ressemblances au niveau de l'utilisation de l'accord d'animéité dans ces langues. Une étude préliminaire sur une dizaine de langues bantoues du sud nous permet d'affirmer la présence d'accord d'animéité dans notre échantillon. Ce phénomène est attesté sur l'ensemble de l'échantillon de la branche nguni, bien que ces langues ne soient pas forcément en contact géographiquement. Dans le poster, nous mettons en avant nos résultats préliminaires sur la typologie des systèmes de classification nominale attestés dans les langues bantoues du sud. Nous présentons nos résultats à l'aide d'exemples ainsi que de cartes montrant la distribution des systèmes d'accord attestés dans les langues étudiées.

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SocioBaGS progress report

Francesca Di Garbo	Antti Laine	Rita Popova	Annemarie Verkerk
amU –LPL	amU –LPL	Saarland University	Saarland University

This poster will provide an overview of recent and ongoing research by the members of the SocioBaGS team, from fieldwork to typological data collection and analysis. An outline of future goals will also be featured.

Animacy-based agreement in Northeast Savanna languages

Antti Laine   Rita Popova
amU –LPL   Saarland University

We present preliminary findings from a study of semantic animacy-based agreement in Northeast Savanna languages. While well-documented in Swahili and other coastal languages (Wald 1975), our results show that this phenomenon also occurs further inland. We identify different types of animacy-based agreement and discuss potential motivations underlying their distribution.

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Gender 5/6 human referents in isiXhosa
Stefan Savić
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In isiXhosa, nouns denoting human referents can be found in all noun classes except 14 and 15. The present study focuses on the semantic features, etymology and morphological properties (e.g. derivation) of human referent nouns primarily in gender 5/6 due to its high number of nouns classifying humans according to age group, gender, ethnic identity, profession or other social characteristics, e.g. *ibhinqa* "woman", *iluphala* "old person", *igqwetha* "attorney", *ijoni* "soldier", *ityeba* "rich person" or *iBhulu* "Afrikaans person". Although it contains some borrowed nouns (e.g. ‖Xegwi ‖kxexo > *ixhego* "old man", English *police* > *ipolisa* "police officer", unlike isiZulu (cf. Ngcobo 2013) in isiXhosa new loanwords are normally not adopted into 5/6. This gender does not exhibit a productive agent noun derivation pattern either and most new human referents belong to genders 1/2 and 9/10.

However, class 6 seems to have established as a plural class for human group identities outside class 5. Besides some class 9 human referents, such as *indoda* (9) "man" vs. *amadoda* (6) "men", ethnic identities that have entered the language more recently seem to follow the endonymic pattern, assigning class 6 plural to class 1 singular nouns, e.g. *umXhosa* (1) "Xhosa person" vs. amaXhosa (6) "the Xhosa", cf. *umRashiya* "Russian (person)" vs. *amaRashiya* (6) "Russians", instead of the older pattern in gender 5/6 for non-Bantu speaking groups, e.g. *iNgesi* "English (person)" vs. *amaNgesi* "(the) English".

Despite the high number of human classification nouns in 5/6, this gender seems to no longer be an open class. At the same time, class 6 seems to have developed into a class denoting groups identities (especially ethnicities) for nouns from various classes.

References

Ngcobo, M. 2013. Loan words classification in isiZulu: The need for a sociolinguistic approach. *Language Matters: Studies in the Languages of Africa* 44(1), 21-38, DOI: 10.1080/10228195.2012.706317.