
Reviewed by Michael Cahill (SIL International)

Many textbooks have been written on historical linguistics (e.g. Bynon 1983, Jeffers & Lehiste 1986, Hock 1991, Crowley 1992, Labov 1994, Hock and Joseph 1996, Campbell 2004, to name a few). Is another needed? Gerrit Dimmendaal (hereafter D) has provided in *Historical Linguistics and the Comparative Study of African Languages* (hereafter HLCSAL) not only a sound introduction to historical and comparative linguistics, but has given it using an abundance of African examples. Most of the primary texts mentioned above concern themselves mainly with well-established facts of Indo-European (though Crowley introduces an abundance of Pacific language examples, and Campbell contains a wealth of material from languages of the Americas). This traditional Indo-European emphasis has the advantage of presenting the novice with principles and examples that are well-tested and largely uncontroversial. However, the predictable disadvantage for those involved in non-Indo-European languages is that there will be some sounds and phenomena that are not addressed. In HLCSAL, for example, the coarticulated labial-velars /kp, gb/ are discussed in several contexts, but are not mentioned in any of these other works. These are fairly common in Africa, occurring in over 600 languages, but are relatively sparse in the rest of the world (the other main concentration is in several dozen languages of the Pacific). Similarly, tone is discussed in HLCSAL, since it is ubiquitous in Africa. It is also common in many other parts of the world, probably occurring in over half the world’s languages (Yip 2002). But mention of it is scarce in other historical textbooks.
Summary of chapters

The book is divided into three main sections which cover the basic current areas of historical and comparative linguistics research: Part I: The Comparative Method, Part II: The Linguistic Manifestation of Contact, and Part III: Studying Language Change in Wider Context.

Part I: "The Comparative method" is, unsurprisingly, about the traditional comparative method, explaining its basic techniques. D does the classroom teacher of historical-comparative linguistics a favor in its first pages by giving a list of other resources which contain data that can be used for exercises.

Chapter 1, on "Explaining Similarities between Languages", begins with a summary of the German missionary Koelle and his extensive collection of words from 156 languages in his 1854 Polyglotta Africana, and the beginning classification of African languages arising from that. D notes that sound similarities of a few words are not enough to establish a relationship (illustrating with similar-sounding words in Hausa and German!), and so lays the foundation for systematic comparisons of languages. Using Gur language family data, D clearly and progressively explains the basic workings of the Comparative Method, and then explains more methodological complexities by using Bantu languages.

Chapter 2, Explaining sound change, is where D first lists some common types of sound changes, including connections to syllable and word structure. He includes specific discussion of tone changes, including tonogenesis, tone splits, origin of downstep, and consonant-tone interaction. Somewhat disappointing is a lack of comparison of one language’s tone to another, though as D notes, such studies are still fairly rare, and this subsection can be considered to be in
its infancy compared to the study of segmental and morphological change. He also discusses what it means to “explain” sound change, invoking the constant production/perception tension.

Chapter 3, on *Classification techniques*, highlights shared innovations as the premium diagnostic for grouping languages, and also reviews the out-of-favor methods of lexicostatistics (invalid in detail, but still used practically for quick-and-dirty comparisons) and mass vocabulary comparison. D notes that Guthrie’s (1967-1971) well-known classification and labeling of Bantu languages has been somewhat invalidated by subsequent researchers. He ends with a summary of the current state of classification of African languages.

Chapter 4, on *Morphosyntactic changes*, delves into the pervasive noun class systems of many African languages, showing how comparison of these also can contribute to classification of languages. For example, the emergence of gender markings on nouns is one of the innovations used to distinguish the Eastern Nilotic subgroup from other Nilotic languages. He also amplifies on analogical leveling. Finally, he very briefly discusses syntactic reconstruction, reviewing why it is “notoriously difficult to reconstruct syntactic properties.” first, word order may vary even in genetically related languages, and this constituent order may change rapidly under the influence of contact situations (p. 112ff).

If syntax has its challenges, one might expect *Semantic Change*, the subject of Chapter 5, to be even more difficult. However, despite the fact that there is no general theory of semantic change that is parallel to the comparative method for sounds, D takes us through developments in metaphorical language and examples of how meaning can drift over the years, particularly with body parts. Grammaticalization also fits into this chapter, with extensive examples. D ends by discussing the relative contributions of culture and native cognition.
The brief Chapter 6 covers the methodology of *Internal reconstruction*, again using African examples. D also notes that Givón’s (1971) slogan “today’s morphology is yesterday’s syntax” has turned out to be incorrect in a number of cases.

Chapter 7, "Language-internal variation", is all about dialects. There are often problems in deciding whether two lects are separate languages or dialects of one language, since various criteria can give conflicting results. D shows that Standard Swahili, based primarily on Zanzibar Swahili, has some forms or features similar to northern Swahili varieties, and some similar to southern Swahili varieties, giving conflicting isogloss maps. D shows that this has parallels in Indo-European, illustrating with Dutch-German. A language does not exist in isolation, and D notes that areal change and Labovian sociolinguistic variation are also factors to be taken into account, calling for research into African languages of the type that Labov has done in North America. D himself has noted specific generational changes in the Tima language of Sudan, e.g. the presence of [ð] for the older generation but not for middle or younger generations (‘eye’ is [c tô] for older people, [cî] for others).

Part II: “The linguistic manifestation of contact” turns the focus to language-external factors. These were touched on briefly in Part I, especially in Chapter 7, but here language contact phenomena come into their own. Many African communities and individual speakers are multilingual, and this deeply affects language change.

In Chapter 8,"Borrowing", D first examines three types of borrowing: lexical, grammatical, and other structural features, pointing out that groups of words are often borrowed from a particular semantic field, not just individual words. He also hits the thorny issue of how to tell a borrowing from a genetic sharing if the two languages are already known to be related. The
real-time phenomenon of codeswitching is distinguished from true borrowing, though codeswitching may be seen as a transition to full-scale borrowing, as a word is increasingly seen as part of one’s own language and no longer foreign. He concludes with a detailed discussion of “linguistic area” or *Sprachbund*, where contact over long periods has resulted in a convergence of linguistic features. Besides the standard Balkan example, D illustrates this phenomenon with several African areas.

Chapter 9 deals with "Pidginisation and creolisation", an area of study that has become a major topic in recent decades. These processes happen all over the world, of course, but D gives African as well as the better-known Caribbean examples, and discusses the social conditions typical for such languages to form. How Creoles develop and the role of substrate languages are two major topics. He presents pros and cons of Bickerton’s “bioprogram” ideas, with a conclusion that there is possibly an inherent cognitive principle which manifests itself in the similarities between creoles. D ends this chapter with an assertion that we should speak of a continuum, of languages being pidginised and creolized, rather than a clear trifurcate labeling of “normal” languages, pidgins, and creoles.

Chapter 10 deals with a topic that most historical textbooks don’t mention much: “Syncretistic languages,” sometimes also called “mixed languages.” These are distinct from the borrowing common in many language contact situations. Though found outside Africa, many exemplars in the literature seem to be African, and thus this is one of the more individualistic chapters of this volume. D gives an example of a dialect of Ma’a where syntax evidently comes from one source, but vocabulary from another. A typical claim of a mixed language is where a language has taken not just isolated words, but whole systems, from another language, to the extent that a genetic tree, if reflecting reality, would have to have two distinct mother nodes.
Other languages may be termed syncretistic, but have been more deliberately developed, as in the case of “special-purpose language,” which are used by insiders for social or religious reasons. An example is youth languages, such as the “Sheng” of Nairobi, which combines Swahili affixes with roots drawn from English, Gikuyu, and other languages.

Chapter 11, "Language contraction and language shift," deals with the increasing phenomena of endangered languages, again a topic many texts traditionally do not cover. Urbanization often leads to “subtractive bilingualism,” whereby speakers learn a second language L2, but at the expense of L1, with paradigm leveling and obsolescence of morphological features being symptomatic of the erosion of L1. D makes the point that languages contract and shift because of social identity issues their speakers face, but a people group may maintain a distinct social identity even after switching completely to a different language, such as the Kore of Kenya, who have adopted Somali, but do not identify themselves as Somali ethnically.

In Chapter 12, "Language contact phenomena and genetic classification", D tackles some of the foundational issues and tensions among proposals dealing with genetic descent versus areal, contact, or multi-genetic features. D, despite his extensive presentation of language contact phenomena noted in previous chapters, broadly favors a Neogrammarian approach to language classification, while recognizing the insufficiency of a strictly “tree-only” model. He asserts that at least some proponents of multi-genetic proposals of origins of a language are mixing genetics and typology. The novel NeighbourNet graph approach, exemplified in Schnoebelen (2009) is shown to be simply wrong in some of its instantiations, such as displaying Maasai as being closely related to Southern Nilotic languages such as Nandi and Pákot.
Part III: "Studying language change in a wider context" is where D connects several miscellaneous issues of study that have a connection to comparative linguistics, as seen below.

Chapter 13, "Language typology and reconstruction", discusses the possible application of typology to reconstruction. D shows by way of West African nasals and lenis consonants that using typology can be a helpful heuristic for establishing relatedness in some cases, but solid comparative evidence should take precedence. D provides sections on morphology, particularly gender and noun class systems, and on syntax, where word order typology is a major question. He aptly notes that the danger of using typology to shape a reconstruction is that it leads to the reconstruction of “average types” of languages, which of course can miss the possibility of a typologically unusual proto-language.

Chapter 14 is entitled "Remote relationships and genetic diversity on the African continent". Joseph Greenberg is mentioned multiple times in HLCSAL, but he is perhaps best known by Africanists for his mass comparison method and resultant grouping of African language families. D gives Greenberg credit for establishing the major language phyla of Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan (his “greatest contribution to the classification of African languages”) and Niger-Congo, though Greenberg’s “Khoisan” phylum has not stood the test of time. D devotes a section each to the major phyla and evidence supporting these groupings, and also to smaller phyla and language isolates. He concludes with a few observations on stable and unstable features in languages, e.g. word order being genetically unstable, but areally stable, citing Nichols (2003).

In Chapter 15, "Language and history", D shows that historical linguistics can be a valuable tool not only for reconstructing proto-languages, but also for the pre-literacy history of language groups and their cultures, once the methodologies and issues previously discussed have
been applied. The fact that a particular item can be reconstructed for a proto-language is good evidence that people speaking that language in fact had that particular item or practice, such as has been done for blacksmithing terms in Bantu, for example (Vansina 2006). However, the absence of such a term does not prove that the proto language group didn’t have it; it could have been replaced in all daughter languages. The “principle of least effort” says that the area with greatest linguistic diversity usually represents the homeland of a particular language family, and D shows in some detail how this has been applied to Bantu family spread.

The final Chapter 16 is "Some ecological properties of language development". It is fashionable to compare language evolution with biological evolution, though as D points out, the analogy breaks down at several points; for example, there is no evidence of simple languages developing into more complex ones, as is posited for living organisms. Conversely, the claims of Bichakjian (1988) of increasing language simplicity over time also seem to be without sufficient empirical motivation. Gradualism as a path for biological evolution has been challenged by the “punctuated equilibrium” model, and D discusses Dixon’s (1997) attempt to apply this to language evolution, applying it to Bantu periods of rapid genetic differentiation followed by relative stability. Language variation has been linked to geographical features, and D notes the great typological variation among languages in the Nuba mountains. (This is to be distinguished from the great genetic speciation that developed in areas where a language family originated, in which typological variation is not so great.)

D concludes with calls for research into areas which are still in their infancy in African languages and in some cases in linguistics in general. These include development of African sign languages, computer-aided searches (one presumes a tie to corpus linguistics here), cultural
encoding in semantics and morphosyntax, connections between linguistic relationships and genetics, and especially longitudinal studies.

**Evaluation**

This volume is listed as an “advanced” course book. A mere glance at the Table of Contents may not be illuminating as to why this is so, but digging into the actual chapters, we see that D does not content himself with general principles, but often weighs in on specifics of many current controversies, especially in the latter two sections. His decades of primary research as well as other cross-linguistic studies have given him a credible background to do so (the references list 39 of his publications).

Part I could possibly be used in an introductory class; the writing is clear enough, and principles are expounded systematically. But this would be even more useful for a more in-depth graduate-level class, a class taught in an African context, or even a pair of classes having to do with language classification and issues of language contact and how multilingual situations affect the development of languages.

HLCSAL deliberately contains no exercises, which some may see as a drawback for a classroom text. D explains that these were omitted for reasons of space, and since the book stands at 417 pages as is, the point is well-taken. To somewhat compensate for this, a number of references which do contain systematic data are given at the beginning of Part I, as previously noted. A supplementary website with suitable exercises would be a welcome addition.

A strength of this volume is its breadth and depth of coverage. Abundant references are given to particular data for those who would like to follow a particular point. This review cannot begin to give justice to the many specific examples D provides in presenting historical principles.
The Language and Language Family Index, at 8 ½ pages, gives some idea of the variety of individual languages and language families covered. The Subject Index, on the other hand, at 2½ pages, is rather general, a weak point of the book, and could have greatly increased its usefulness by more entries and more specificity. One looks in vain, for example, for a reference to Grimm’s Law or Dahl’s Law, both of which are discussed in the text.

My main personal disappointment with HLCSAL was noted in comments on Chapter 2: a discussion of reconstruction of tone would have been good to include. D had many tables of data comparing various consonants and vowel relations among languages; it is an unfortunate gap not to have such for tone. Granted that such studies are in their infancy compared to consonant and vowel studies, but such phenomena as the Bantu “tone reversal,” in which High and Low evidently switched places historically (e.g. Maddieson 1976), would have been of interest. A discussion of the special challenges inherent in comparative tone studies would have been in order. For example, comparing the sparse elements of H, L (and perhaps M) is quite a different task than comparing consonants in a much richer system of dozens of elements. Suprasegmentals are not a major emphasis in other historical linguistic texts, and while it is good to have some discussion, this was a missed opportunity to expound on this in more detail.

In spite of the deliberate African emphasis, not all languages that illustrate the point are African. D uses several branches of standard Indo-European languages and families, and includes several Austronesian examples. However, he makes his point clear that language change can be amply illustrated from African examples.

HLCSAL seems well-edited; so far I have noticed only one typo and two missing references (including Vansina 2006) in the general reading of the book.
For historical linguists with even a passing interest in Africa, or even a desire to see how historical linguistics applies outside of Indo-European, this is a recommended book.

References


**Reviewer’s address:**

Michael Cahill

7500 W. Camp Wisdom Rd.

Dallas, TX 75236

mike_cahill *at* sil.org