

African languages: An introduction. BERND HEINE AND DEREK NURSE (Eds).
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. 1, 347.

It has become cliché to state that Africa is the forgotten continent. Whether one refers to the lack of humanitarian aid¹, international response to tragedy², or the denial of a bid for the World Cup³, this continent, which boasts approximately 12 million square miles⁴, 54 different countries⁵, and over 700 million people⁶, is largely ignored by the rest of the world. Fortunately, there are a gifted few who have not succumbed to the trend, and recognize not only the rich research field that is Africa, but also the urgency with which this field must be explored.

Heine and Nurse's *African Languages: An Introduction* (AL) includes 11 articles of relevance to African linguistics written by specialists who have pursued knowledge on their respective topics for decades (4), and an introduction written by the editors that outlines the tome's purpose and contents, in addition to sparking readers' interest. The first four sections discuss the four major: Niger-Congo (Kay Williamson and Roger Blench), Nilo-Saharan (Lionel M. Bender), Afroasiatic (Richard J. Hayward), and Khoisan (Tom Güldemann and Rainer Vossen). These articles offer tables of linguistic features and "family trees" to illustrate genetic relationships and language evolution, as well as to indicate the different classifications that have been more or less popular over time. These sections are brilliantly constructed to give as much detail as possible in an introductory volume, and succeed not only in conveying broad generalizations about each of the numerous language families, but in dangling tantalizing facts before the reader, spurring one on to the next page. There is not a comprehensive study of any particular language, as must be expected in a text that covers (by some estimates) as many as 2000 languages (1), but at the end of each section there is a list of references that one interested in deeper or more particular research can explore.

The remaining seven sections address all African languages as a group, and are focused by topic, rather than language phylum. These consist of articles on phonology (G. N. Clements), morphology (Gerrit J. Dimmendaal), syntax (John R. Watters), typology (Denis Creissels), comparative linguistics (Paul Newman), language and history (Christopher Ehret), and language and society (H. Ekkehard Wolff). Of these, I found the phonology section to be the most superbly organized and well written. Clements' article begins with a summary of common and rare phonemes, comparing their distribution in African languages to their distribution in other languages around the world. C gives a brief description of implosives, clicks, initial nasal clusters, lower high vowels (like /ɪ, u/), and labial-velar stops, such as /kp, gb/, as common phonemes. Rarer phonemes include uvular and retroflex consonants, diphthongs, front rounded vowels, and barred "i" (125). C frames his discussion with the principle of economy (124), using this idea to contrast phonemic distributions. The article mentions features of consonants, places of articulation, sibilant harmony, laryngeal features, etc. via numerous examples, allowing the reader to derive the rule from the samples given before they are described by the author in detail. Although C deserves the highest praise for this article, I believe the beginning linguist (for whom this text was intended) would benefit more from a description of how to produce implosives than a mere comparison of them to standard sonorants. Most speakers of Indo-European languages have not been exposed to this type of sound, and must become acquainted with it on a physical, tangible level before the quality of sound is compared with others.

Overall, AL is clear, concise, and as detailed as can be reasonably expected. The organization of the volume, as well as that within each article, is precise, and frequent use is made of charts, tables, maps, and other beneficial learning tools. Heine and Nurse have much of which to be proud. Much more than a mere collection of informative prose, AL is a beacon in a

sea of ignorance and misinformation regarding the African continent. In the introduction, H and N note that, “there is no up-to-date, reasonably comprehensive, basic introduction to African languages in English... it is the gap which this book aims to fill” (3). The authors accomplish this beautifully. Thus, while politicians, athletic organizations, and business people may ignore the vast land-mass that sits to the south of Europe, let those in our field emulate these authors instead and refuse to neglect this place where there is always something new.⁷

¹ “It seems that Africa is the forgotten continent where millions of people keep losing their lives while the world watches.- Jordan Times, 1 June 2003.

² “It so often appears that Africa is the forgotten continent when it comes to the international community’s response.”- Mr. John Redwood (MP)

³ South Africa was denied 2006 bid. "for the time being the forgotten continent can expect no signals of acceptance from sport"- BBC News, 7 July 2000. South Africa was accepted, however, 2010 bid.

⁴ Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

⁵ www.afsc.org, 2004

⁶ www.worldbank.org, 2004

⁷ *Unde etiam vulgare Graeciae dictum ‘semper aliquid novi Africam adferre’.* “Whence it is commonly said among the Greeks that ‘Africa always offers something new’.”- *Historia Naturalis*, II. viii. 42

RYAN C. JACKSON
California State University, Fullerton