Areal and biological approaches in Khoesan linguistics

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Beyond 'Khoisan': Historical relations in the Kalahari Basin

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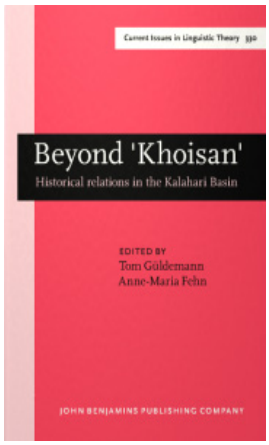

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Areal and biological approaches in Khoesan linguistics

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This well-designed and data-rich book is a most welcome addition to the literature, and will undoubtedly stimulate vibrant debate. It is true that popular misconceptions abound concerning the Khoesan (or Khoisan) languages, and that colleagues in fields such as southern African history, anthropology, archaeology, and even population genetics not uncommonly base their arguments on a mistaken premise, such as the assumption that linguists believe all Khoesan languages are related. In fact, when Joseph Greenberg[1] postulated the notion of a Khoisan family in 1963 (and even earlier), his primary intention was to dismantle the dubious Hamitic category – and in this he succeeded. Historical linguists were quick, though, to reject his method of mass comparison, so that the idea of an actual Khoisan family has never been more than a hypothesis. During the 1960s and 1970s, the doyen of African languages in South Africa was Ernst Westphal, who famously maintained an extreme 'splitter' position throughout his long career. While a handful of foreign linguists have sustained an interest in Khoisan studies for many decades, it was essentially post-1994 that a new generation of linguists from overseas entered the field, to join forces with local scholars such as Jan Snyman, Tony Traill and Patrick Dickens. These linguists continued to use the term Khoesan as a catch-all term for the very diverse click languages of southern and eastern Africa that do not belong to the Bantu family (or in the case of Dahalo, the Cushitic family). It seems then, that in titling the present collection of essays *Beyond 'Khoisan'*, the editors are knocking down a straw man, as the readership is unlikely to extend much beyond the small circle of linguists who have a specialist interest in these languages and are familiar with the history of the field. But this is a small quibble.

The book begins with an overview by Tom Güldemann of the current classification of the Khoesan languages, in which he re-states his steadily unfolding theory that it may be possible to project a hypothetical Khoe-Kwadi language 'spoken by a pastoral population which was a later arrival in the Kalahari Basin area but one which preceded the Bantu expansion' (p. 29). These adventive speakers are suggested to have mingled with a pre-incumbent population ('indigenous foragers') with various consequences, including 'borrowing and shift-induced substrate interference, cultural reorientation and shift, and genetic admixture', while it is further suggested that some local groups 'shifted to a Khoe-Kwadi language', to give rise to those numerous languages of the Khoe family spoken by communities who were traditionally hunter–gatherers. (Despite the wording of the sub-title, the relations implied are not historical in the conventional sense of the word, and readers should be aware that other scenarios are possible.) The thesis that the Kalahari region was an area characterised by considerable linguistic diffusion is the impetus for the main undertaking of the book, which is to demonstrate the occurrence – undeniably extensive – of cross-Khoesan borrowings. (Of course, the mere fact that linguistic relationships cannot be satisfactorily demonstrated is not proof in itself that the languages concerned *are* unrelated; just as evidence of wholesale borrowing does not mean that the languages in question cannot nevertheless still be related.)

The first part offers 'cross-areal perspectives', and includes a paper on Khoisan sibling terminologies by Gertrud Boden, Tom Güldemann and Fiona Jordan, as well as a paper by Ed Elderkin titled 'Clicks, prosodies and Khoisan'. In subsequent parts, a number of authors present generously detailed contributions. Linda Gerlach and Falko Berthold, for example, discuss spatial terms from the N!aqriaxe variety of ǂ'Amkoe, which is closely related to E. ǂHoan, and for which only a scant amount of material has previously been made public. They compare their data with equivalent terms from two very different languages with which speakers of N!aqriaxe are in contact, namely West !Xoon of the Taa group, and G|ui of the G‖ana sub-group of West Kalahari Khoe. Authors such as Tom Güldemann, in his discussion of the 'Lower Nossob varieties of Tuu', and Christfried Naumann, in his paper titled 'Towards a genealogical classification of Taa dialects', add a finer grain to our picture of the internal relations between languages and dialects within specific groups. (Tuu is the name proposed by Güldemann[2] for the group previously labelled Southern Bushman by Dorothea Bleek[3] and subsequently split into !Kwi – later spelled !Ui – and Taa by Westphal[4].) Other contributions are from Wilfrid Haacke on 'Verb serialisation in northern dialects of Khoekhoegowab', from Florian Lionnet on 'Demonstrative and relative constructions in Ju', and from Bonny Sands, with the late Henry Honken, on ǂ'Amkoe terminology for parts of the body.

It is to the credit of the editors that they include a paper by Chris Rapold which brings into question an earlier proposal by Güldemann[5] that verb-compounding in the Khoekhoe branch of the Khoe family reflects the influence of a !Ui substrate in the context of a mooted Cape linguistic area. Rapold uses carefully assembled evidence to reason that the phenomenon is an inherited feature of Khoe languages rather than contact induced.

The more controversial aspects of the book lie in the belief that speakers of the !Ui-Taa (or Tuu) and so-called Kx'a languages were the pristine inhabitants of southern Africa, intruded upon first by speakers of the notional Khoe-Kwadi, and later by speakers of Bantu languages. (The term Kx'a was proposed by Bernd Heine and Henry Honken[6] for the family created by their unification of the Ju languages – Dorothea Bleek's Northern Bushman – with the previously unplaced Eastern ǂHoan. The reader should be aware that both Khoe-Kwadi and Kx'a are debatable entities.) The overarching concept seems to have its origins partly in the elevation of cultural descriptors such as 'forager' and 'pastoralist' to the status of absolute categories that seem disquietingly close to being racial. This impression is heightened by the inclusion of a paper that examines the broad themes of the book from the perspective of molecular anthropology, which is to say, the study of population genetics and models of peopling. Certainly the paper in question is valuable for its pointing out of much that has been quite simply (and obviously) wrong in the assumptions made by geneticists in recent studies of Khoesan populations. It is not clear, though, that this relatively new field has avoided the pitfalls highlighted more than a decade ago in a thoughtful paper by

Jonathan Marks[7], for whom problematic assumptions about biological race are a concern. And in the end it is equally unclear that the book as a whole reflects a sufficient awareness of such issues and the ways in which they can distort our thinking.

Despite the last misgiving, I would urge university librarians to acquire a copy for their African Languages and Linguistics collections, because the book may become a catalyst for a new phase of informed and progressive multidisciplinary research touching on the pre-colonial past of southern Africa.

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