

## **Contributions of African Languages to Linguistic Theory**

Laura J. Downing, SPL

An explicit goal of the generative linguistics research paradigm is to develop a theory of linguistic universals. It is clear that a theoretical framework with such an ambitious typological aim necessarily bases hypotheses on data taken from as broad a sample of human languages as possible. Since over a third of the world's languages (roughly 2,000) are spoken in Africa, no linguistic theory can afford to ignore them. Indeed, work in most areas of linguistics since Chomsky & Halle (1968) includes data from African languages.

In this talk I briefly survey some contributions of African languages to linguistic theory, concentrating on recent research in three areas:

1- possible word formation systems. It is said to be typologically unusual for languages to non-concatenative morphology (changes in stress or tone, ablaut, reduplication, etc.). Most morphological theories, therefore, assume a 'concatenative ideal' (Trommer 2011). African languages, however, are rife with non-concatenative morphology, like tonal morphemes and reduplicative morphemes which pose challenges for these theoretical models.

2- possible interface between prosodic and syntactic structure. Bantu languages have played a role in the development of theories of the phonology-syntax interface since the mid-1970s. Their role in current debates about how well prosodic domains match syntactic spell-out domains will be presented (Cheng & Downing 2012, Downing 2010).

3- possible expressions of focus. It is widely assumed that all languages mark focus prosodically. However, recent research on focus prosody in a range of African languages shows that this assumption is false and should not be put forward as a language universal. (Downing & Pompino-Marschall, in press; Zerbian 2006).