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INTRODUCTION

Menán du Plessis

Opening remarks¹

The publication of the specially curated *Bibliography of South African Languages* comes at a moment well-timed for reflection, not only on the past ten years of work on South African languages, but more broadly on developments in South African linguistics since the ending of apartheid, now nearly three decades ago. As Marc Greenberg remarks in his introduction to Brill's *Bibliography of Slavic Linguistics*,² 'capturing even a decadal slice in the manifold directions in which the field is moving is a fool's errand'. Certainly this is true of South African linguistics as well, and only the broadest contemporary themes can be highlighted here. These notes begin with a description of the linguistic landscape of the southern African region as a whole, and includes discussion of officially recognised languages; the status of post-colonial languages; and other languages spoken in the various countries of the region. The second section offers a brief summary of the history of linguistic studies specifically in South Africa, so as to explain the background against which more recent work may be assessed. The third section touches on the overall pattern of post-apartheid publications; while the fourth focuses more particularly on the past ten years up to the present, identifying some of the major trending topics of the moment.

The linguistic landscape of the southern African region

For purposes of this overview, southern Africa is taken to mean more or less the region southward of the latitudinal line that lies 15 degrees south of the equator.

1 Thanks to Bonny Sands for useful comments and additional suggestions for references.

2 <http://bibliographies.brillonline.com/browse/bibliography-of-slavic-linguistics>.

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This immense area includes southern areas of **Angola** and **Mozambique**, and the whole of **Namibia**, **Botswana**, **Zimbabwe**, **South Africa**, **Swaziland** and **Lesotho**. Occasional reference will be made to the southernmost parts of **Zambia** and **Malawi**, and briefly also to **Madagascar** and **Mauritius**.

Three key points to bear in mind throughout the discussion that follows are:

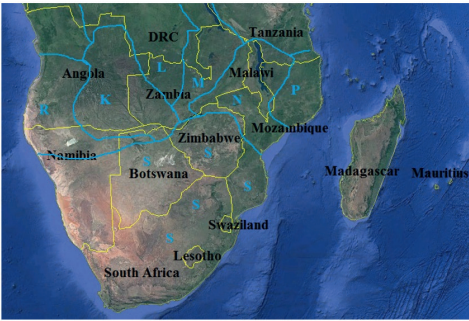
- The transfrontier distributions of most of the region's languages
- The dialectal complexity of individual languages
- The typical multilingualism of individual speakers, particularly in urban centres

The list in the left-hand column in Figure 1 gives some indication of the transfrontier distributions of selected major languages of African origin that are spoken in southern Africa, while the map alongside shows the location of the various countries mentioned in the list or in the course of this introduction. The map also indicates some of the areas used in Guthrie's system of zonal distributions for the NTU (or Bantu)³ languages (Maho 2009).

(i) Officially recognised (and for the most part major) languages of the region

The terms 'official' and 'national' are sometimes used in connection with languages as though they are interchangeable. In the case of the southern African countries that give official (constitutional) recognition to a range of languages, the term 'national' may be invoked in the sense only that a particular language is spoken by a significant section of the nation's citizens – not necessarily by everyone, or as a language of national unity. This recognition may embody a formal obligation on the part of the state to provide for and support the use of the acknowledged languages (at least on a regional basis) in contexts such as basic education and the delivery of social services. At the

3 It was W. H. G. Bleek (for example 1862: 3) who introduced the use of 'Bantu' as the label for a vast sub-group of related African languages. The term much later acquired derogatory connotations, following its use by white South Africans as a misplaced way of referring to black people. Various alternatives have been proposed (such as Kintu, Sintu or Benue-Congo B), but few have gained traction. By way of compromise, the bare root only is used here, and is also (non-conventionally) written in capital letters, to emphasise its status as an abstract label.

| | |
|--|---|
| Selected southern African languages of African origin, with names of the countries where they are predominantly spoken |  |
| NTU languages* | |
| Wambo [R20]; Herero [R30] (Angola, Namibia) | |
| Shona [S10] (Zimbabwe) | |
| Tsonga [S50] (Mozambique, South Africa) | |
| Venda [S20] (South Africa) | |
| Sotho-Tswana [S30] (Tswana, Kgalagadi, N Sotho, S Sotho) (Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa) | |
| Nguni [S40] (Ndebele, Zulu, Xhosa, Swati) (South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe) | |
| *Guthrie zones as per Maho (2009) | |
| KHOE, JU, TUU languages | |
| KHOE (Dama, Nama, Giri, Kora; Naro, Khwe, !Gana, Shua, Tshwa) (Angola, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe) | |
| JU (Ju!'hoan, !Xun) (Angola, Namibia, Botswana) | |
| TUU (!Xam, N!uu, !Xoon) (Botswana, South Africa) | |
| | |

Satellite image from Google Earth (US Dept of State Geographer, Image Landsat/Copernicus, Data SIO, NOAA, US Navy, NGA, GEBCO (c) 2018 AfrIGIS (Pty) Ltd), labelled to show the southern African countries and Guthrie zones referred to alongside or in the body of the text

Fig. 1. Selected African languages of southern Africa, with a broad indication of present distributions.

same time, for most countries of the region, the de facto official language – and sometimes even the formally declared one – is a language of colonial origin.

While they are by no means as rich in linguistic diversity as many other African countries, South Africa and Zimbabwe respectively give official recognition to twelve and sixteen national languages, where the vast majority belong to sub-groups of the immense NTU family (which is itself of course only a sub-division of just one branch of Niger-Congo). The official languages of **South Africa**,⁴ apart from the two post-colonial and locally naturalised languages, English and Afrikaans, are: Tsonga (Shangaan) [S53], Venda [S21], Tswana [S31], Northern Sotho [S32], Sotho [S33], Ndebele [S47], Zulu [S42], Xhosa [S41], and Swati [S43]. In March of this year, South Africa also gave official recognition to South African Sign language (*SA Government News Agency*, 2018).⁵

4 The Constitution of South Africa is available online from: <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996-1>.

5 Online press release (<https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/sign-language-recognised-home-language>), March 4 2018.

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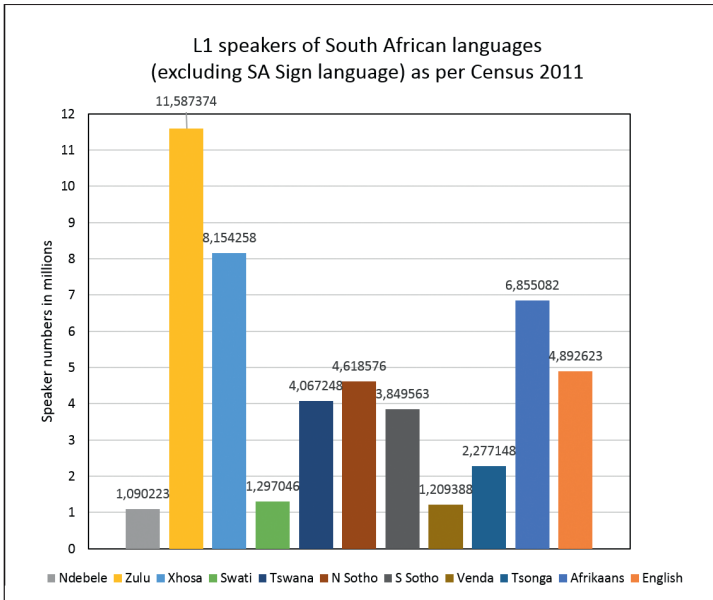


Fig. 2. Numbers of first language speakers of the official languages of South Africa, excluding SA Sign language. The total population of South Africa recorded in 2011 was 51,770,560.

The chart in Figure 2, based on the most recent census figures (*SA Census 2011, Census in Brief: 23*),⁶ gives an indication of the numbers of first language speakers for each of the official languages of South Africa, except for SA Sign language.⁷ As mentioned at the outset, though, most inhabitants of southern African countries – particularly those who live in urban centres – are multilingual, and

6 Latest census reports for South Africa are available online from: <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

7 Users of SA Sign language were enumerated in the 2011 census at 234,655, which may be an under-reporting, however, given controversies around the use of signing. The number of deaf people in the country is about 600,000 (pers. comm. from Jaba Mohamed, Provincial Director, DeafSA Western Cape, April 5 2018).

typically speak one or more of the other languages as additional languages, with a variable degree of personal proficiency (Lanham 1978: 17).

Clause 6 of the constitution of **Zimbabwe**,⁸ declares that the officially recognised languages of that country include the following, where the symbols in square brackets allude to Guthrie's distributional zones (as updated Maho 2009):⁹ Shona [S11–S14], Ndaou [S15], Kalanga [S16A], Nambya [S16B], Tonga [M64], Chewa (Cewa) [N30], Chibarwe [N45], Shangani [S53], Venda [S20], Tswana [S31], Sotho [S33], Ndebele (of Zimbabwe) [S44], and Xhosa [S41]. Further languages given official recognition in Zimbabwe are English, 'Koisian' [so-spelled], and Zimbabwean Sign language.

Article 3 of the constitution of **Namibia**¹⁰ explicitly declares that English is the official language of the country, even though the most recent census figures indicate that it is spoken as a first language in only 3.4 percent of households. The Namibian document goes on to state that nothing contained in the constitution 'shall prohibit the use of any other language as a medium of instruction'. This means in effect that entry-level schooling may be (and indeed is) offered in Namibian Khoekhoe in the southern part of the country, with English being introduced to young learners a few grades later. In the most recent census (*Namibia Census 2011, Main Report: 172*),¹¹ the languages enumerated – in addition to English, Afrikaans, German, 'other European', and 'other African' – included: Wambo [R21, R22], Herero [R31], Kavango (various NTU languages), Caprivi (various NTU languages), San (probably varieties of JU and TUU, plus some western Kalahari KHOE),¹² Namibian Khoekhoe (KHOE) and Tswana [S31]. The labels 'Kavango' and 'Caprivi' are rather non-specific, but since they are contrasted with the equally vague term 'San', it is probable that they refer to various NTU languages spoken in the eastward-pointing arm of northern Namibian territory known as the Caprivi Strip. Languages spoken in

8 The Constitution of Zimbabwe is available online from: <http://www.zim.gov.zw/constitution>

9 The names of individual languages are given in their commonly accepted Anglicised forms.

10 The Constitution of Namibia is available online from: <https://laws.parliament.na/namibian-constitution/>

11 Latest census reports for Namibia are available online from: <https://nsa.org.na/>

12 The different families subsumed under the label 'Khoisan' are discussed in sub-section (iii).

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the Strip – sections of which are contiguous with Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana – include: Yeyi [R41A], the Botatwe languages [M60] formerly Subiya-Totela [K40]: Fwe [K402], Totela [K41] and Subiya [K40]; (possibly) some varieties of Luyana [K31]; Kavango languages such as Kwangali [K33] and Gciriku (or Manyo) [K331/2]; and Mbukushu [K43].

While the constitution of **Botswana**¹³ does not include a language clause, the report for the 2011 census (*Statistics Botswana 2014*: 261)¹⁴ shows that in addition to English and Afrikaans, the languages enumerated included among others: Tswana [S31], Kgalagadi [S311], Herero [R31], Yeyi (of Ngamiland) [R41B], Subiya [K40], Mbukushu [K43], Zezuru [S12], Kalanga (of Botswana) [S16] and Ndebele [S408].

(ii) A note on the status of post-colonial languages

As remarked above, for most countries of the region, the effective official language of government (and sometimes even the formally declared one) is a language of colonial origin. Throughout the region, access to tertiary education is entirely dependent on competence in one of the former colonial languages, such as English, Portuguese or French.

While English is perhaps most often still acquired only as a second language, other former colonial languages, such as Dutch and French, have long been established as naturalised local languages, with their daughters – in such forms, for example, as Afrikaans and Morisien (the French of **Mauritius**) – widely spoken as first languages by a sizeable proportion of the population in their respective countries. It is probable that some varieties of the Portuguese spoken in **Angola** and **Mozambique**, as well as the French spoken in countries such as **Madagascar**, the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** (DRC) and the **Central African Republic** (CAR) are similarly naturalised, although detailed information is not readily available.

At the same time there are ongoing shifts, as in the case of South African English, which seems, at least on anecdotal evidence, to be favoured increasingly as a first language by families whose most recent ancestors spoke Afrikaans or

13 The Constitution of Botswana is available online from: <http://www.gov.bw/en/Tools--Services/Constitution-and-Laws-of-Botswana/>.

14 Latest census reports for Botswana are available online from: <http://botswana.opendataforafrica.org/thpzhqb/botswana-census-data>.

one of the other South African languages. The great majority of South Africans who can speak English still have it, however, only as a second or third language.¹⁵

(iii) **Other languages (for the most part minor ones) spoken in the region**

Apart from the languages mentioned above, a number of other languages are spoken in southern African countries today, where most (but not all) are languages of African origin, with present-day distributions that sometimes reflect a long-established status quo of great historical complexity, and at other times reflect migrations of either a recent or not too distant past. Many (but certainly not all) of these are minority languages, in the twin sense of having not only relatively low speaker numbers, but also a generally marginal status in the countries where they are spoken.

The most remarkable of these other languages is perhaps Malagasy, the Austronesian language that functions as one of the official languages of **Madagascar**, along with French. This is one example of a language that is by no means minor, given that varieties of it are spoken as a first language by almost all 18 million Madagascans (*SIL Ethnologue*).¹⁶ Questions such as when, how and why early maritime traders from South-east Asia first settled the island remain the subject of ongoing archaeological, historical and linguistic investigation.

Another intriguing case involves the great diaspora from South Africa that occurred in the second and third decades of the 19th century. The reasons for this voluntary exodus are complex, although aggressive colonial incursion is acknowledged to have been a primary impetus. The outcomes of these migrations include the presence today of Ndebele speakers in the Matabeleland region of southern **Zimbabwe**. While it is closely related to varieties of South African Ndebele, the Zimbabwean variety has some features of its own. In **Malawi**, the minor language known as Ngoni [N12] is thought to have had a similar origin in the migration of Nguni-speaking people from South Africa. On the other hand, a further group of people known as the Kololo, who spoke a Sotho-like language, migrated to the Barotseland region of the country known

15 Although the term 'Black South African English' is occasionally used to describe the English used as a second language by black South Africans, it does not connote any homogeneous 'variety'. There does not seem to be any single variety of English spoken uniquely by black South Africans who use it as a first language.

16 All references to the *SIL Ethnologue* are to the online edition (<https://www.ethnologue.com>), at April 6 2018.

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today as **Zambia**, where they conquered local inhabitants who were known as the Lozi (Rozwi or Rotse). The language referred to today as Lozi [K20] reflects a strong Sotho influence. It is now found as a minor language also in Zimbabwe and Botswana (*SIL Ethnologue*). The Luyana dialects [K31] of south-western Zambia may have been part of an original (non-Sotho) Lozi group, but the picture is far from clear.

In more recent times, the situation has begun to reverse, and more and more people from other African countries now migrate to **South Africa**, whether to study, seek work, operate as traders, or buy goods for retailing back at home. Figures in general are unreliable, since immigrants may be uncertain of their legal status and hence reluctant to declare themselves, while many may simply come and go on a regular basis. It is sometimes suggested, however, that the number of expatriate Zimbabweans currently living in South Africa may be over a million. While most are probably speakers of a Ndebele variety, the *SIL Ethnologue* gives a figure of 18,000 for immigrant speakers of Shona in South Africa. Raj Mesthrie (2002:12) mentions the existence in Durban of somewhat older enclaves of people who trace their presence in South Africa back to the 1870s, and who still speak some Makhuwa (Makua) [P30] and Yao [P20]. These are both languages primarily of Mozambique, although they also have cross-border distributions into neighbouring countries.

The diverse Khoisan languages of southern Africa constitute an important section of the region's minority African languages. As most readers are probably aware, the terms 'Khoi' (also 'Khoikhoi' or 'Khoekhoen') and 'San' refer to traditional ethnological rather than any linguistic distinctions. The Khoi, who typically spoke varieties of Khoekhoe KHOE,¹⁷ were herders; while the San, who spoke a wide range of languages, including some that in fact belong to the KHOE family,¹⁸ were mostly restricted to an economic lifestyle

17 The use of capital letters for the names of these different families is not a standard convention, but is adopted here in the interest of clarity. In writing the names of individual languages, it is occasionally necessary to use the current IPA symbol for a click. Although it is generally undesirable to introduce 'exotic' symbols in this way, the languages in question never acquired commonly accepted English versions of their names.

18 Languages belonging to the Kalahari branch of the KHOE family were referred to by Dorothea Bleek (1927) as 'Central Bushman'. Westphal (1963) re-named them the Tshu-Khwe languages, after the terms commonly used for 'person' in different sub-groups. Vossen (1997) referred

based on hunting and gathering.¹⁹ There are three long-recognised divisions of the Khoisan languages of southern Africa, where these are commonly referred to – in the terms devised by Ernst Westphal (1963) – as KHOE, JU and !Ui-Taa. For the latter, the alternative name TUU has more recently been suggested by Tom Güldemann (2004a). A few re-groupings have been proposed by one or two linguists in recent years, but these remain controversial.²⁰ The question of a common ancestry for the three families also continues to be debated, and the blanket term ‘Khoisan’ is currently used only as a general term of convenience.

Representatives of the different families, KHOE, JU and TUU, are today found mainly in **Namibia** and **Botswana**, but to a limited extent also in southern **Angola**, south-western **Zimbabwe**, and **South Africa**. Two unrelated click languages, Hadza and Sandawe, are spoken further afield, in **Tanzania**. (The last two appear to be isolates, however, and no strong evidence has been found to suggest a relation between either of them and any of the Khoisan languages of southern Africa.)

The Khoisan languages spoken in southern **Angola** are varieties of !Xun (JU), and varieties of Khwe (western Kalahari KHOE). In the case of these Angolan languages, it is difficult to obtain a clear sense of speaker numbers. In **Namibia**, the most recent census figures (*Namibia Census 2011 Main Report: 172*) reveal that varieties of Namibian Khoekhoe are spoken in 11 percent of households, out of a total population of just over two million. The number of households where ‘San’ was spoken amounted to 0.8 percent – where the generic term ‘San’ probably encompasses languages belonging to the KHOE family, such as Khwe and Naro (both Kalahari branch), as well as varieties from the TUU and JU families.

to them as ‘non-Khoekhoe Khoe’, but this was later replaced by ‘Kalahari Khoe’ (Güldemann and Vossen 2000).

- 19 Cruder distinctions between Khoi and San based on colonial perceptions of supposed biological differences are sometimes still alluded to by foreign scholars, but approaches of this kind – even when re-cast as ‘genetic studies’ – are offensive to South Africans, who view them as the uncritical perpetuation of an older ideology.
- 20 A link between the JU group and †Amkoe (also known as Eastern †Hoan) has been proposed by Heine and Honken (2010), who offer the name KXA for the unified group. A connection between the KHOE family and the Angolan isolate Kwadi has been proposed by Güldemann (2004b).

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The country with the greatest diversity of Khoisan languages (if not numbers of speakers) is certainly **Botswana**. Despite this, the report for the most recent census in Botswana (*Statistics Botswana 2014: 261*) indicates that in addition to the various other languages enumerated, there was just a single category provided for 'Sesarwa'. As Andy Chebanne (2008) pointed out concerning the previous census of 2001, the term 'Sesarwa' is merely a catch-all label for numerous different languages spoken by people from those communities formerly referred to collectively (and disparagingly) as 'Masarwa'. These languages include several that belong to the KHOE family, such as varieties of Khwe, Naro, !Gana-!Gui, Shua and Tshwa (all divisions of Kalahari KHOE), as well as Jul'hoan (JU) and !Xoon (Taa TUU). In the latest census, the total number of speakers of 'Sesarwa' amounted to just over 31,700, or 1.6 percent of the total Botswana population, which, much like that of Namibia, is a little over two million people.

Khoisan languages in **South Africa** are formally acknowledged in the country's new constitution, where they are mentioned in a sub-clause as minority languages entitled to official support (although the principle is rather undermined by the muddled reference to 'the Khoi, Nama and San languages'). In reality, the only viable Khoisan language still found in South Africa today is the Nama variety (Khoekhoe KHOE) of the far Northern Cape. The exact number of speakers is not known, but is unlikely to be more than 5,000, and is probably far less. It is spoken in addition to Afrikaans and with varying degrees of fluency by only one in four or five elderly people, mainly in Riemvasmaak and the Richtersveld (Witzlack-Makarevich 2006: 12). In recent years, in an attempt to revitalise it, the language has been introduced as a subject at selected junior schools in the area. There were also still (as of April 2018) one or two elderly rememberers of another Khoekhoe variety, namely Kora (Korana or !Ora); as well as three elderly speakers of Nluu (!Ui TUU).

With the ending in 1990 of the Border War, members of various San communities originally from southern Angola had to be relocated to South Africa. This was necessary because some of them had served with the SA military (that is, on the side of the apartheid regime) in the Kavango and Caprivi areas. These refugees include speakers of Khwe dialects (Kalahari KHOE) as well as !Xun dialects (JU) – none of which are indigenous to South Africa.

The constitution of **Zimbabwe** makes a concession to a vaguely denoted 'Koisan language', although the only relevant language still spoken in that country is a variety known as Tcua'o (Tjwao, Tshwao or Tcoao), which belongs to the KHOE family (eastern Kalahari), and had only eight remaining speakers as of March 2018.

A small fraction of the additional minor languages found in southern African countries today are of foreign but non-colonial origin, where these are generally spoken only by recent immigrants.²¹ The *SIL Ethnologue* entry for South Africa, for example, includes the following in its list of immigrant languages, with speaker numbers in parentheses: Anglo-Romani (7,900), Arabic (5,000), Dutch (30,000), Mandarin Chinese (10,000), German (45,000) and Yue Chinese (15,000).

Historical background to linguistic studies in South Africa, 1960 to 1990

From this point onward, the focus of this overview will be limited largely to **South Africa**. There are several comprehensive older surveys (Doke 1945; Doke 1961a; Doke 1961b; Cole 1960; Cole 1971) that more than adequately recount the early history of language studies and linguistics in South Africa, and there is no need to recapitulate them here. The following notes pick up the story from the early 1960s, from the period just over a century after the arrival of Wilhelm Bleek in South Africa in the middle of the 19th century and the commencement of his pioneering work on both NTU and Khoisan languages.

One of the most striking aspects of the work of the earlier South African linguists of the 20th century, exemplified in the work of Clement Doke, is the wide-ranging focus of their work, not merely on languages of their own country, but on languages of the southern African region as a whole. On the whole, this breadth of vision seems to have become steadily narrowed from the 1960s up until the end of the 1980s – in step with the hardening of apartheid, and the increasing ostracism of South Africa by the international community. Nonetheless, there were certainly some notable exceptions to this general trend.

Although the policy of apartheid was officially inaugurated in 1948, the roll-out of the various laws intended to implement it took some time. Beginning in the 1960s, these laws began to bite ever more viciously into society, so that the minority white government found itself increasingly confronted with popular

21 The indentured labourers who were shipped by the British to Natal from India between 1860 and 1911 brought with them various Indic and Dravidian languages, such as Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati and Konkani; and Tamil and Telugu respectively (Mesthrie 2002: 12). These languages are on the wane, if they are still spoken at all. Descendants of these communities speak what is sometimes referred to as ‘Indian South African English’.

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resistance and, from 1966 onwards, outright military conflict beyond its borders, with the allied liberation movements of South Africa, Namibia and Angola. It is remarkable that Ernst Westphal was able to carry on conducting fieldwork as freely as he did during the 1960s, travelling throughout countries in the southern African region, and documenting a wide range of languages, both NTU and Khoisan.²²

Despite the manifest inequities entrenched by apartheid, it was part of the inexorable logic of 'separate but equal development' that African languages should be given full support as languages of education, at least in the early years, during which stage mother-tongue education was believed to be in the best interest of the child.²³ This meant that there should be at very least pedagogic and reference grammars as well as dictionaries available for all of the major African languages spoken in the country; and it may be for this reason that one contemporary survey (Lanham 1978: 16) reported so positively on the development of these languages. R. A. Paroz published one of several revisions and enlargements of the older *Southern Sotho-English Dictionary* of Adolphe Mabile and H. Dieterlin (1961); while a revised and transliterated edition of the *Xhosa-English Dictionary* of J. McLaren (1963) was prepared by W. G. Bennie and J. J. R. Jolobe. Westphal's graduate student Jan Snyman (1970) delivered the first full-length grammatical description of Jul'hoan (JU), and went on to publish a dictionary (Jul'hoan-Afrikaans) in about 1975. Dirk Ziervogel and Enos Mabuza (1976) gave us a reference grammar for Swati; and J. A. Louw and J. B. Jubase (1978) delivered one for Xhosa, written in Afrikaans. Meanwhile, Gabriel Nienaber and P. E. Raper (1977, 1980), with admirable disregard for the prejudices of the time, laboured to produce a three-volume work on the Khoekhoe origins of more than 4,000 place-names of South Africa and Namibia.

It was also during the apartheid period that some of the first professional associations representing branches of linguistics in South Africa were

22 The bulk of Westphal's field material was never published, but his manuscript notes and recordings have been digitised and are now available online (<http://www.digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za>).

23 The policy was then (as it is today) that children should be introduced to either English or Afrikaans from about the third or fourth grade, and that their other subjects should be taught increasingly from then onward in one of those languages. When the apartheid government did away with the choice and made the medium of instruction obligatorily Afrikaans, the resulting fury led to the famous Soweto uprising of 1976.

established. These included, in 1966, SAALT, the South African Association for Language Teaching (publishing the *Journal for Language Teaching*); in 1979, ALASA, the African Language Association of Southern Africa (publishing the *South African Journal of African Languages*); and in 1980, SAALA, the Southern African Applied Linguistics Association, and LSSA, the Linguistics Society of South Africa (publishing *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*).²⁴

The 1980s were a paradoxical time for South African linguistics. On one hand, some breakthrough scholarly work appeared. For example, D. K. Rycroft (1981) published a dictionary for Swati; Alan Barnard (1985) published his wordlist for Naro (Kalahari KHOE); and Anthony Traill (1985) published his landmark study of the phonetics and phonology of !Xoon (Taa TUU family). E. J. M. Baumbach (1987) published his *Analytical Tsonga Grammar*; and Nienaber (1989) continued to produce encyclopaedic work on aspects of the old Cape Khoekhoe dialects.

On the other hand, it was only now, at the very late date of 1983, that one of the country's leading universities finally established a department of linguistics. Throughout the country, linguists at the better universities (which were typically those reserved for 'white people') tended to focus almost exclusively on varieties of English or Afrikaans. This somewhat self-absorbed approach was perhaps partly in response to the growing exclusion of South Africa at this time from the international academic community. What is more, and reflecting a similar parochialism, almost every grandly styled 'department of African languages' of this period typically offered only one or two languages! (As most linguists are aware, Africa is home to perhaps as many as 2000 languages.)

And it was all at this very same time that mass resistance to apartheid was swelling within the country into a hugely dynamic movement. Rallies with thousands upon thousands of participants became regular events, and there can hardly have been a university that did not experience tear gas drifting across its lawns, or did not have to cope with violent clashes between its own students and invading police in full riot gear. Towards the close of the decade, it was clear that the end of apartheid was in sight; and suddenly it seemed possible to start imagining a transformed academia in South Africa – one that would be less turned in on itself, and more reflective of a greater, African identity.

24 First published in 1980 – but as volume 18, since it represented the amalgamation of two older journals, *South African Journal of Linguistics* (LSSA) and *Southern African Journal of Applied Language Studies* (SAALA).

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South African linguistics in the post-apartheid era

There have undoubtedly been some high points in the study of southern African languages over the past two or three decades. The level of academic productivity is even high enough that it becomes invidious to single out any particular authors while overlooking others! It is unlikely, though, that anyone will begrudge the special mention of a few selected publications. Work on South African languages that particularly springs to mind include the reference grammar for Venda (Poulos 1990); the first combined version of the older English–Zulu and Zulu–English dictionaries (Doke, Malcolm, Sikakana, Vilakazi 1990); and the study by L. J. Louwrens (1991) of Northern Sotho grammar. The dictionary of !Xoon (TUU family, Taa branch) compiled by Traill (1994) also appeared at this time. George Poulos and Christian Msimang (1998) gave us a new reference grammar for Zulu; and the monumental three volumes of the *Greater Dictionary of Xhosa*, which was many years in the making, steadily appeared between 1989 and 2006 (Tshabe, Shoba, Mini and others).

An exciting development of a different kind occurred in the early 1990s, with the unexpected discovery (Crawhall 2003) of about two dozen elderly people who still spoke one of the !Ui languages (TUU) of South Africa. A call for linguists to assist with its documentation drew swift responses from overseas, and the main work on this language over the next decade and a half was conducted largely by scholars from Germany and America.

The chart presented in Figure 3 is based on data extracted from Brills's *Linguistic Bibliography*, and gives a picture of linguistic publications from **South Africa** over the past three decades. While it is not possible to make a direct comparison with the linguistic output of the immediately preceding decades, certainly the overall number of publications is cause for some celebration; and it is particularly gratifying that work on SA Sign language reflects a steady uptick throughout the three decades shown.

At the same time, sheer quantity of publications is by no means the only or even necessarily the best indicator of the health of a field. Departments of linguistics remain marginalised at most universities throughout South Africa today, and most are underfunded and understaffed. Why linguistics should have this status is not clear, but it may in part reflect a global trend.²⁵ The genuine

25 The period of South Africa's transition to the post-apartheid era coincided with the worldwide economic recession of 1990 to 1991, while the middle decade of the new era coincided with a second great recession from 2007 to 2009. South African universities responded to these economic crises

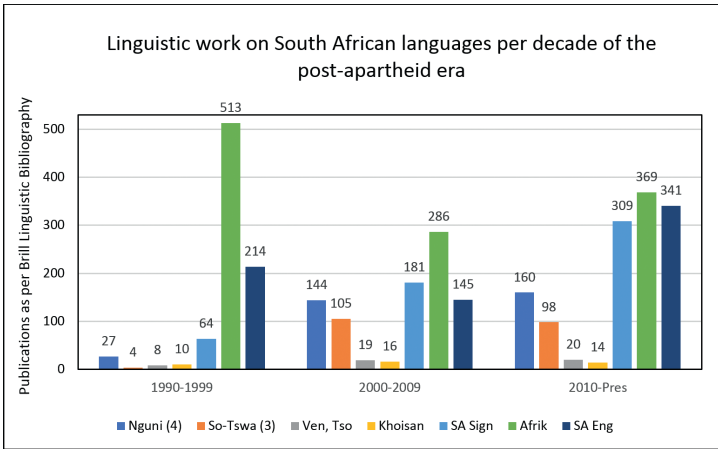


Fig. 3. Linguistic publications on languages of South Africa, including SA Sign language, for each decade of the post-apartheid period. (Figures used to draw the chart were extracted from the *Linguistic Bibliography*.) Note that Venda and Tsonga are grouped together not because of any particularly close relationship, but purely because they both have relatively few speaker numbers. For purposes of this chart, the term 'Khoisan' covers only South African Khoisan languages – effectively Khoekhoe varieties of the KHOE family, and Nluu, from the !Ui branch of the TUU family. There is a minor dip in academic output in the middle decade of this period, but this may simply reflect natural fluctuation – if it was not a response to the economic recession of the same period.

struggle of linguistics departments to survive may at least partly explain the most worrisome aspect of the publications profile charted in Figure 3 – namely,

by imitating the managerialist approaches adopted by academic institutions elsewhere in the world. It was suddenly demanded of academics that they should prove their worth by pushing up their publications rate, even if this meant sacrificing quality; while departments with low student enrolments (which typically included departments of linguistics) found themselves in the firing line, and if they could not adapt expediently – for example, by devising offerings with greater mass appeal – faced incorporation into other departments, or attrition of their already few posts.

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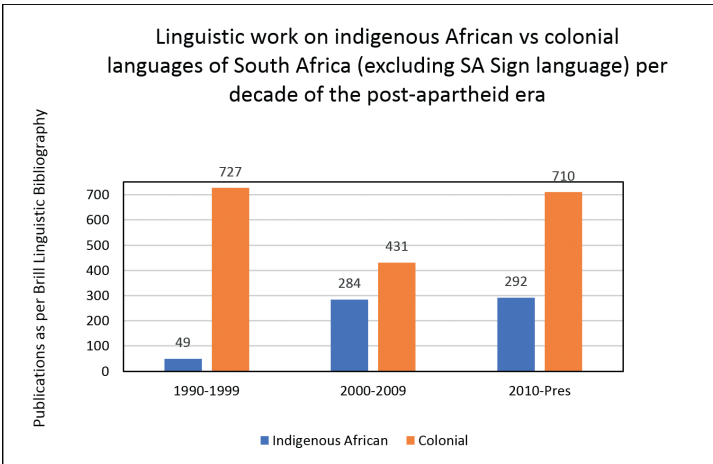


Fig. 4. Comparison in terms of publications output between linguistic work on languages of African origin and post-colonial languages of South Africa. For purposes of this chart, only work on Khoisan languages of South Africa is included in the columns for indigenous African languages – effectively Khoekhoe varieties of the KHOE family, and Nluu, from the !Ui branch of the TUU family. (Figures used to draw the chart were extracted from the *Linguistic Bibliography*.)

the stark disparity between linguistic work on the two post-colonial languages, and work on the nine official languages of African origin. This imbalance – the first of three that are noticed in this overview – is depicted more clearly in Figure 4.

To put it bluntly, what seems to have occurred is the persistence of an old order that privileged the study, on the part of largely white academics, of the two post-colonial languages.

This is not at all to disparage the work that focuses on varieties of South African English and Afrikaans. These are by no means exclusively ‘white’ languages, and some of the studies in fact examine precisely the complex issues of social identity that can arise as a consequence. The linguistic work on these languages reflects a range of contemporary approaches, and is sometimes even at the leading edge of particular theoretical frameworks, such as generative syntax. The fact that English and Afrikaans are both West Germanic languages

also means that there is greater scope for international collaboration, which further enhances the quality and reach of some of this work. Most emphatically, no-one would want to wish any of this away. On the other hand, equally, there are most certainly examples of fine recent work on local African languages – some of it produced by linguists who are themselves speakers of indigenous African languages. The issue is simply that there is so much less of the latter.

The reasons for this imbalance are no doubt complex, but surely include the reality that departments of African languages at South African universities (with Unisa a notable exception) continue to focus – just as they did during the apartheid era – on only one or two languages, and continue to be understaffed,²⁶ with faculty being tasked mainly with teaching the languages in question, along with their associated literatures.

With the cessation of the Border War in 1990, the door was suddenly opened for many more linguists to return to areas of southern Africa that had been largely inaccessible for many decades. A number of foreign scholars were quick to take advantage of the opportunity, and the Khoisan languages rapidly became a particular focus of renewed attention. The resulting steady surge in publications is reflected in Figure 5.

One aspect of the Khoisan work not directly evident from the chart is the predominance of authorship by linguists from overseas countries as opposed to Namibia or South Africa. This is a second worrying imbalance in the overall picture of contemporary South African linguistics,²⁷ and seems in part to reflect the general contraction of local scholarly interest in countries beyond South Africa itself.

26 It is not unusual, even at some of the country's leading universities, to find a department for a single European language that has a larger complement of faculty than the department for the languages of an entire continent.

27 There is nothing wrong with having so many foreign linguists working in this particular sub-field: quite to the contrary, international collaboration is always greatly to be desired. In a field as small as this one, however, differences between foreign and local linguists in respect of mindset and historical awareness may lead to irreconcilable differences of approach that inhibit rather than promote international collaboration.

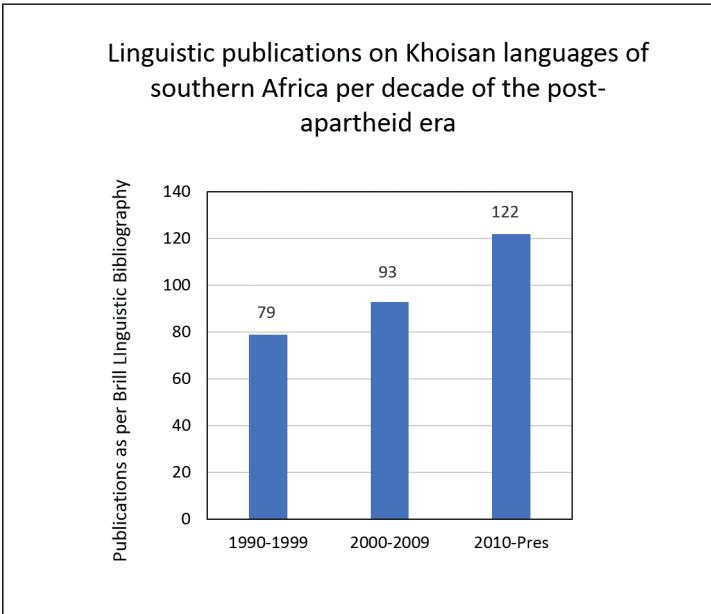


Fig. 5. Growth in the number of linguistic publications on Khoisan languages throughout southern Africa since the end of the apartheid era. The figures used to draw this chart have been extracted from the *Linguistic Bibliography*, and reflect work carried out for the most part by foreign scholars, although the chart does not indicate this specifically.

Trending themes

Work in South African linguistics over the past decade reflects a wide range of academic pre-occupations and approaches, where some are emerging, and others reflect the rapid development and expansion of established areas of research. As far as research preoccupations are concerned, one that stands out, and has already been commented on, is the burgeoning field of SA Sign language research. Most of the currently dominant themes, however, emerge almost inevitably from the multilingual character of the South African linguistic landscape, and for the most part build on foundations laid down in a previous era. The languages investigated are in many cases still only local, but

are slowly beginning once again to include languages spoken by people from neighbouring countries.

One of the broad themes that emerges from the characteristic multilingualism of the country concerns aspects of language acquisition. A *psycholinguistic* approach is typically adopted in studies that focus on aspects of acquisition in bilingual or multilingual environments, where this can include natural acquisition in early childhood, as well as formal or informal secondary acquisition both at school and later on in adulthood. Ongoing attention is also being paid to aspects of language in education, such as the complexities of the multilingual classroom, the role of the child's mother tongue in early learning, and best strategies for the introduction of a second language intended to be used as the primary language of learning.

In the context of education, work in psycholinguistics and *applied linguistics* has taken on a grave urgency, with the alarming findings of a recent international survey that 78 per cent of Grade 4 children in South Africa cannot read for meaning in *any* language, including their own mother tongue, where the South African results were the lowest out of 50 countries surveyed (Spaull 2017).²⁸ Recently presented preliminary evidence (Spaull, Pretorius and Mohohlwane 2018) suggests that the disjunctive system of writing used for the Sotho-Tswana languages may be a factor contributing to the slow acquisition of reading skills.

A further factor contributing to the problem (apart from the poor training of teachers) is the general lack of a reading culture in most sectors of South African society. This is in no small part because of the lack of a wide range of appealing reading material, including books for children, in languages other than English and Afrikaans (Aitchison 2018).²⁹ The equal development of all South African languages is viewed as a national priority,³⁰ and a number of research chairs

28 "The unfolding reading crisis: the new PIRLS 2016 results," commentary published online, December 5 2017, at: <https://nicspaull.com/2017/12/05/the-unfolding-reading-crisis-the-new-pirls-2016-results/>.

29 "South Africa's reading crisis is a cognitive catastrophe," commentary published online, February 26 2018, at: <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-reading-crisis-is-a-cognitive-catastrophe-89052>.

30 The Pan-South African Language Board (PANSALB) is constitutionally mandated to oversee the equal development of all South African languages.

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have recently been endowed, in the hope that ways will be found to foster this.³¹ Until more original material is produced, there is a world of literature waiting to be translated, and a welcome initiative over the past few decades has been the inauguration at several universities of postgraduate programs in *translation studies*. Equally helpful has been the publication of new dictionaries, some of them intended specifically for use in schools, such as the *Oxford Bilingual School Dictionaries* series published between 2007 and 2014 for each of the South African languages. These have been prepared by *lexicographic units* based at universities around the country. (The African Association for Lexicography (Afrilex), which was established in 1995, publishes *Lexikos*, an open access (free to read) journal.)³²

It is difficult, however – even without undertaking a formal bibliometric analysis – not to form an impression that current research interests in South African linguistics overwhelmingly reflect a *sociolinguistic* bias. This focus is brought to bear on such topics as the negotiation of multilingual environments, whether in a permanent neighbourhood or at a border crossing; or whether in the workplace,³³ at a hospital or clinic, or even in a court of law. Attention is also commonly given to the broad theme of language and identity, sometimes in sociophonetic studies of accent and class, but particularly in studies of new and often ephemeral urban varieties, such as Sepitori (Pretoria Sotho or Tswana) and Isicamtho, which feature agile code-switching, and are perhaps most often used as a kind of insider register by members of a young and ‘hip’ generation. Possible contact effects and the influence on these varieties of more recent immigrants is another area of investigation.

31 It would be remiss not to mention that the national broadcaster provides programming in all South African languages, for both radio and television. One of the informal ways in which the country’s indigenous languages are being promoted is through the popular ‘soaps’, which not uncommonly reflect spontaneous (character-appropriate) switching between two or three different languages. Popular music also plays a role.

32 *Lexikos* is found at: <http://lexikos.journals.ac.za/pub>.

33 The Zulu-lexified pidgin known as Fanakolo was at one time used on South African mines at the insistence of white bosses who were unable to cope with the diversity of languages spoken by the workers. Its use was always considered demeaning, and it has now been phased out (*Chamber of Mines Annual Report 2011: 72*).

The issue of identity is also addressed in current studies of Afrikaaps, a variety of Cape Afrikaans similarly characterised by code-switching. It is possible, however, that the latter falls rather into the spectrum of Afrikaans dialects and that this kind of research effectively comes under the heading of *dialectology* or variation studies. The recognition of different varieties of Afrikaans goes back several decades (Van Rensburg 1983), but is an area of study that continues to grow. Hans den Besten (2012) contributed pioneering work in which he postulated the existence of an early Cape Pidgin, some form of which he believed could have contributed to the development of Afrikaans. Research continues into the possible substrate role of Cape Khoekhoe languages in the emergence of Afrikaans.

Work on varieties of the African languages spoken in southern Africa has a long history. For example, Doke's report (1931) on the *Unification of the Shona Dialects* necessarily included discussion of the numerous dialects constituting each of the six languages (Korekore, Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Ndau, Kalanga) that ideally needed to be reconciled for the creation of a standardised 'Shona language'. D. F. van der Merwe and Isaac Schapera (1943) contributed a comparative study of Kgalagadi, and Kwena and other dialects of Tswana; while Cole (1955: xv–xx) supplied further information about the Tswana dialects. Philippus van Dyk (1960) presented a dissertation on the Nguni dialect, Lala; while Ngubane (1992) presented one on another Nguni dialect, the Tembe-Thonga of KwaZulu-Natal. Simon Donnelly (2007) gave us a dissertation on Phuthi, which is evidently a variety of Nguni that has undergone extensive Sotho influence. Useful discussion of the subject is included in an overview of the Bantu languages by Robert Herbert and Richard Bailey (2002).

Another class of varieties previously much studied in South Africa was associated with members of certain social tiers, and could involve the use of lexical substitutions as well as alterations in syntax (Kunene 1971: 144, fn 2). Special registers (or 'auxiliary codes') of this kind were in fact once widely used throughout much of older Africa (Storch 2011). In South Africa, the term for the custom as formerly observed by wives or young male initiates meant 'to show respect' (Zulu *ukuhlonipha* and Sotho *ho hlonepha*). Similar codes were used, however, by a range of other groups, such as hunters, herbalists, soldiers or courtiers. The waning use of such registers in modern South Africa (Finlayson 2004) probably accounts for a corresponding decline in research on the topic.

Insights arrived at from studies of synchronic variation as well as the effects of contact and other social phenomena (including the use of auxiliary codes) undoubtedly have the capacity to add depth and a texture of realism to diachronic studies. This makes it regrettable that the emerging field of

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sociohistorical linguistics so seldom features as an area of current research interest in South African linguistics.³⁴

There are certainly some fine South African scholars working on core aspects of *fundamental linguistic description*. Their work is typically presented during the annual South African Microlinguistics Workshops (SAMWOP), and is often later published in *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics (SPIL)*.³⁵ Unfortunately, these linguists constitute a rather small minority, while those who are applying such approaches to African languages, as opposed to post-colonial ones, form an even smaller sub-set. A further worrisome detail that may not be immediately apparent, but which becomes evident on a closer look at the literature itself, is that much of the leading edge research – such as work that uses a generative framework to investigate aspects of the syntax of an African language – has not been contributed by South African linguists at all, but rather by foreign scholars.

The overall disproportion in the distribution of research effort is the third imbalance observed in this overview. In short, there appears – at least on the face of things – to be an unduly great emphasis placed on sociolinguistics,³⁶ with rather less emphasis on psycholinguistics, and still less on the fundamentals of linguistic description. Diminished attention to core aspects of descriptive linguistics may well be another factor playing into the decline of capacity that has largely excluded South African linguists from playing their part in efforts to document the numerous minority and threatened languages of southern Africa. (Much like sociohistorical linguistics, the specialised branch of documentary linguistics is effectively non-existent in South Africa today.)

When it comes to entirely new approaches, it is safe to say that most reflect the possibilities steadily opening up for linguistics in the digital age. Locally developed *lexicographic software* such as TshwaneLex,³⁷ for example, has been

34 This branch of linguistics has much to offer to scholars from entirely different fields, such as history and archaeology. South African historians show regrettably little inclination to take advantage of this, however.

35 *SPIL* is published online (<http://spil.journals.ac.za/pub>) and is fully open access (free to publish, free to read).

36 No-one would want to do away altogether with the sociolinguistic work, which has the capacity to reward us with occasionally rich insights into the complexities of current social dynamics.

37 The TshwaneLex software was developed by David Joffe and Gilles-Maurice de Schryver.

used in the compilation of some of the dictionaries mentioned earlier; while scholars working in the domain of *computational linguistics* are developing software with the capacity to recognise local languages, as well as automatically parse and translate them. Digital databases of tagged and searchable corpora have already begun to serve as the basis for research; and it is likely that social media and messaging platforms will increasingly be mined for data on the range of languages, varieties, registers, and shorthand conventions used by South Africans in different contexts.

The establishment of electronic data repositories at universities around the country has been identified as a national priority, and, in a most welcome development, a repository specifically for the storage of language data (SADiLAR) has now been created at North- West University. Those linguists (almost all of them foreign) who have been working to document threatened and minority languages in southern Africa have long been in search of an acceptable regional archive for their data. The new repository is a possible solution, even though it was envisaged as a home for linguistic corpora, and is not primarily designed to function as an archive.³⁸ Fortunately, the linguists engaged in setting up SADiLAR have been open to communications and suggestions, so that it may yet come to serve as a greatly needed archive for endangered languages of the southern African region.

Conclusion

While South African linguistics has been slow to recover from the general crimping that occurred during the apartheid era, there have nevertheless been some encouraging and even exciting developments, particularly in the areas of research focusing on local sign languages, and computational linguistics. Three troubling imbalances have been observed, however, in the course of this overview. Recapitulated, they are:

- The stark disparity between the amount of linguistic work on the two post-colonial languages, and work on the nine official languages of African origin
- The near absence of recent work by local (as opposed to foreign) linguists on languages of the broader southern African region, and Khoisan languages in particular

38 It is also not specifically structured to accommodate the kinds of access (or restrictions) that may be required by communities; and in addition is currently limited to the official languages of South Africa.

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- The unduly great emphasis seemingly placed on sociolinguistics, and the lesser emphasis placed on psycholinguistics and applied linguistics, as well as core aspects of fundamental descriptive linguistics

Linguistics is of course a 'broad church', and it is unwise to place too much emphasis on one branch of the field at the expense of others. Psycholinguistics and applied linguistics undoubtedly have a key role to play in the continuing reconstruction of the country, for example in helping to address the dire crisis in South African education. Given the urgency, there is at good reason to hope that more funding will be channelled in future to those researchers engaged in this critical work.³⁹

It is also encouraging to note that since about 2010, the different professional bodies have increasingly held joint conferences, while in a further welcome development, early in 2018, the LSSA and SAALA were merged. The draft constitution⁴⁰ of the amalgamated body defines the association's field of focus as the 'promotion and co-ordination of the research, study and teaching, in southern Africa, of linguistics, applied linguistics, and applied language studies.' The statement of objectives includes the following:

Bearing in mind the historical legacies of apartheid and colonialism in southern Africa, to promote transformation of the Society and its area of focus at least in terms of research, curriculum, practice and range of languages covered, in ways which promote equity of participation and access, strengthen the linguistic disciplines and empower practitioners, researchers, teachers and learners of these disciplines to develop tools to explore the full range of linguistic environments that they find themselves in.

Lastly, one of the new research chairs mentioned earlier is at Rhodes University, and it was from the African Language Studies Section in the School of Languages and Literatures at that university that the equally encouraging impetus came

39 It was found during the 2011 census (*Census in Brief*: 48) that, of about 31 million South Africans aged 20 years and older, more than 10 million had only 'some secondary level' schooling, while another 6,5 million had either 'some primary' or no schooling at all. Only 8,8 million had completed secondary school.

40 At April 2018 the draft document was still open for comment and had yet to be ratified.

for CLASA 2017, or the Conference of the Language Associations of Southern Africa, which constituted a joint gathering of all the professional bodies. Since indabas of this kind typically attract colleagues from neighbouring countries, the promise exists that South African linguists will in future enter more and more into transfrontier collaborations, and will return to work once again on languages of the greater southern region of Africa, with renewed attention to languages of African origin.

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