Documenting Luyia Together: 2019-2020

Short description of the purpose/goals of the project

The Documenting Luyia Together team, which launched in Fall 2016, conducts original research on the Luyia language cluster of western Kenya and eastern Uganda under the direction of Michael Marlo and Rebecca Grollemund from the Linguistics Program. Luyia is a large and diverse cluster of closely related language varieties within the Bantu language family, spoken by the second-largest ethnic community in Kenya. Despite the relatively large size of the Luyia community, all Luyia languages suffer from a relative lack of prior linguistic documentation: there are few materials available for teaching Luyia, and no professional dictionary, grammar, or text collection for any Luyia variety to base such materials on. Our project seeks to fill these gaps.

The primary goals of the project are to contribute to the documentation and description of three Luyia language varieties – Bukusu, Tiriki, and Wanga – by developing talking dictionaries, collections of oral literature, and written descriptions of the grammars of each language that we plan to publish in the near future. Secondary goals of the project include (1) the study of Luyia language history through the classification and comparison of modern-day languages in western Kenya and eastern Uganda and (2) completing an assessment of Luyia language vitality.

Short description of what new students will do, skills they will gain, opportunities they will have if they are selected to join the team

The general plan for new team members is that they are assigned a language (Bukusu, Tiriki, or Wanga), and then they familiarize themselves with background information about the language. New scholars are also assigned a few texts from the oral literature collection of that language to begin analyzing, using our team’s dictionary and the background materials about the grammar of the language as references. The analysis of each text will involve identifying the parts of each word, e.g. the prefixes on nouns and adjectives, and the prefixes and suffixes on verbs. This initial phase will contribute to the development of the language’s text collection, will give the student some specific knowledge of the structure of the language, and may identify some topics in the grammar of the language to explore further, opening up new possibilities for research on the team, such as drafting new chapters in our descriptions of the grammar of each language.

As scholars gain more experience and develop specific interests, other possibilities for individual research may become available. Several former and current members of our ASH team have presented their research at professional conferences, such as the Annual Conference of African Linguistics, co-authored publications, collected original linguistic data in Kenya and Uganda, and won funding for related research opportunities including the Cherng Summer Scholars program, the Undergraduate Research Mentorship Program, and the Boren Fellowship. Former members of our team have studied abroad (or are currently studying abroad) in Belgium, Japan, and Tanzania; one taught English in Spain; another is beginning an internship in Spain; and several
others are in graduate programs in diverse fields: applied linguistics, computer science, law, linguistics, and clinical psychology. Another former team member is an artist-in-residence at a German museum; another teaches Spanish at a high school in Chicago; another is a loan officer.

**Short description of required and preferred skills of new students**

The main qualities we are looking for in students are (1) eagerness to learn about a language the student knows nothing about and (2) strong analytical abilities. Some background in foreign languages, computer languages, or linguistics is desirable. Experience with a tone language (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Yoruba) or musical training is also a plus (but there is no expectation that students have this background). Students who have an interest in folklore, oral literature, and digital storytelling are welcome to apply.