Documenting Luyia Together

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Documenting Luyia Together will give students practical experience carrying out professional research in linguistics, by studying underdocumented varieties of the Luyia language cluster of western Kenya and eastern Uganda. ASH Scholars will work primarily with original data collected by Prof. Marlo and fellow ASH Scholars through fieldwork in Kenya and Uganda. The linguistic materials that students may work with include audio recordings and transcriptions of words and phrases in the languages, which are used to better understand the vocabulary and grammar of the languages. The materials also include folk tales and other types of oral literature narrated by Luyia language speakers. Another option that students have is to study the historical development of the Luyia languages, working in collaboration with Prof. Grollemund. An individual student may contribute to one or more developing publications on Luyia languages that include dictionaries, book chapters, or text collections.

After the team is selected, students will learn about different project options and will choose the languages and topics that they intend to study. Depending on the choice of language and topic, students may be assigned to smaller working groups within the larger team. After these decisions are made, students will receive appropriate training that will allow them to begin carrying out their research tasks. This may include learning to use acoustic editing software (Audacity) or the software that is used to store our corpora of linguistic texts (Fieldworks Language Explorer). The training might also include reading background literature on Luyia languages, the Bantu language family, or general linguistics.

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 may be beneficial, but is not required. Students who have an interest in folklore and oral literature are also especially welcome to apply.

There are approximately 7000 languages spoken around the world. However, based on the criteria defined by UNESCO, more than half are threatened with extinction in the next century. Like the loss of bio-diversity, the global loss of cultural and linguistic diversity is a threat to human society. When a language dies, the knowledge, concepts, and traditions encoded by the language die with it, and a possible window into the workings of the human mind is forever lost. Language loss threatens the science of linguistics, since linguistic theory is developed mainly through the observation of existing languages. As most languages of the world are currently underdescribed, language documentation is more important than ever. Luyia is part of the vast Bantu family, with over 500 languages, spanning from Cameroon to southern Somalia to South Africa. Luyia itself is quite diversified and includes over 20 language varieties in western Kenya and eastern Uganda. Luyia is not currently endangered, but there are threats to its long-term stability. Cultural and environmental changes are resulting in significant changes to the lexicon of all Luyia varieties, as flora and fauna terms are being rapidly lost. In addition, Luyia children raised in urban, multiethnic, and diasporic communities tend not to learn their mother tongue, and instead shift early in life to Swahili and English. Young Luyias tend to give up their language when they go to urban areas, even when they are competent speakers of the language.

Linguists can contribute to the preservation and revitalization of languages by documenting, describing, and analyzing them and by working with communities who are eager to participate in the study of their language. There are three main types of works that linguists typically produce in language documentation efforts: (1) dictionaries, (2) grammars, and (3) collections of texts. Linguistic documentation of this type is essential for the creation of pedagogical materials; it also supports various types of community- and government-based language programs, including literacy development. Despite the fact that Luyia is such a large community within Kenya, there are very few materials available for teaching Luyia, and no professional dictionary, grammar, or text collection for any Luyia variety to base such materials on. Marlo's collaborative research project, *Structure and tone in Luyia*, funded by the National Science

Foundation seeks to fill this gap, by producing a dictionary, grammar, and text collection for Bukusu, Tiriki, Wanga, and one other Luyia variety, Logooli. Such materials can be a source of pride for each community, and can accelerate other programs to support the learning and transmission of the languages. ASH Scholars will have the opportunity to contribute to developing professional research on these languages that includes a number of product goals, including the first talking dictionaries, the first grammatical sketches, and the first comprehensive published studies of tone for several languages

Team members will have varied roles depending on the language and topic they investigate. This work may involve processing audio sound files, using Audacity audio-editing software to extract the speaker's pronunciations of the words and phrases so they can be played back later. Scholars may also check transcriptions of words and phrases against the processed sound clips. Students may organize data in the dictionaries for study of specific linguistic properties, such as the tonal patterns of nouns. Students may work with data on aspects of the grammar of a language in order to better develop sections of the grammar sketch of the language. This work would be done in consultation with the available literature on the topic and is more appropriate for students who have some background in linguistics. Students may also work with the text collections on various tasks such as importing new texts into the database, editing English translations, and improving the linguistic analyses of lines of the texts. These are all areas of the project that Prof. Marlo will supervise, and they are also aspects of the project that other ASH team members have gained experience in in 2016-2017. New team members in 2017-2018 will have ample support from supervisors and fellow ASH Scholars. In addition, team members might focus on comparing data from the Luyia varieties against each other against and against what is reconstructed to Proto-Bantu in order to study the historical development of aspects of the Luyia languages, an area where Prof. Grollemund will take the lead, as she is an expert in Bantu historical linguistics. One area where new discoveries are possible is in tonal history. By comparing tonal data from Bukusu, Tiriki, and Wanga, and data from other Bantu languages spoken in the region, we hope to eventually be able to reconstruct what the Proto-Luyia tone system was like and how each of the daughter languages has diverged from the earlier system. We would like to extend the use of the 'Phylogenetic Comparative Method' to a new area—the evolutionary history of tone—by applying this method to data from the Luyia languages. Studying such questions in depth will be a good topic for an individual research project or honors thesis completed after the current project period.

Students will present their research on campus and there is the possibility of attending the *Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, to be held at Michigan State University in Spring 2018 and/or the BANTU conference to be held in Cape Town, South Africa in Summer 2018. Students will be exposed to cross-linguistic diversity and the importance of language, while gaining research experience in linguistics and language documentation, and technical expertise in audio-editing and analysis software and linguistic databases, all of which can be built on in future coursework, honors theses, or graduate school.