

UBUNTU: LINGUISTIC EXPLORATIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I aim to present an etymology or the history of the term “ubuntu” as it is currently used in social, religious and philosophical discourses especially in Southern Africa.

Etymological analysis is a linguistic endeavour. Ultimately, my paper is on the linguistics of Ubuntu. Since the paper is intended for a multidisciplinary publication and because some of the readers of the publication will not be familiar with linguistics terminology, I have considered it prudent to build a bridge to facilitate communication. This, I do by way of presenting a set of linguistic terms that I use in the paper.

I note the presence of the terms “abantu” and “ubuntu” and other terms that are similar to them in form and meaning in a wide range of Bantu languages outside the Republic of South Africa. I argue that, wherever and whenever those terms appear, they are related to the equivalent terms in Southern Africa.

I trace “ubuntu” and “abantu” to the cradle of Bantu speaking peoples in West Africa¹. I then show the movement that part of Africa to the various parts of the continent where Bantu languages are currently spoken.

Using the comparative method of historical and comparative linguistics, I establish Proto-bantu forms which have given rise to “ubuntu” and “abantu” and show the phonological and morphological changes that account for the current form of “ubuntu”. Furthermore, I point out that starting with the meaning of the proto-form that give rise to “ubuntu” to the meaning of the term as currently used especially in Southern Africa, some semantic modification has taken place. I argue that “ubuntu” as currently used in Southern Africa has shades of meaning and nuances that might not have in the semantics of the proto-form from which the current term has emerged.

2. SOME LINGUISTIC TERMS

Bantu languages: A group of related languages belonging to the Niger-Congo language family which are spoken in the area between the southerly most part of South Africa to the south and a line extending from western Cameroon, through the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Kenya and Southern Somalia into the Indian Ocean. The languages are spoken by about a third of all Africans (Nurse, 2006).

Cognate: A word related in form and meaning to a word in another language of the same language family. The IsiKhosha and IsiZulu “umntu”, the Kiswahili “mtu”, the Kitharaka “muntu” and the Luhya “Omundu” all mean “a human being”. Consequently, they are cognates (or “cognate words”, Hartmann,1973).

Noun classes: Groups or categories into which nouns are divided in Bantu languages. For instance, nouns denoting human beings are generally grouped in Class 1 in singular and in Class 2 in plural. Unlike in many other language families, noun classification bantu does not indicate the gender of the noun.

Reflex: A form in a current language which is derived from an earlier form in a parent language. For instance, the German “gut” and the English “good” are reflexes. They are current forms of an earlier form in the Proto-Germanic language. The same is true of the German “morgen” and the English “morning”.

Morpheme: The smallest meaningful unit in a language. “Nationality” has three morphemes, that is, “nation- al-ity”. “Boyhood” has two, that is, “boy-hood”.

Root: The morpheme that bears the central meaning in a word. “Africa” is the root in the “unafrikan” (un-africa-an) and “colony” is the root in “de-colon-ize”

Prefix: The morpheme that precedes the root; for example “un” in “un-god-ly”

Pre-prefix: The morpheme that, in Bantu linguistics literature, precedes the prefix. “a” is a pre-prefix in “a-ba-ntu” because “ba” is the prefix. Likewise, “u” is the pre-prefix in “u-bu-ntu” because it precedes the prefix “bu”

Morpheme boundary: A boundary at either the beginning or the end of a morpheme. “Decongesting” has four morpheme boundaries as indicated by the hyphens: -de-congest-ing-

Sound change: A process that leads to a language sound manifesting itself in a different form. The “f” of “fafana” is a latter day manifestation of “b”. At some point in the evolution of Zulu language, the word was “babana” meaning children. The “w” in Kiswahili “waana” is similarly evolved from “b” of an earlier “bana” also meaning children.

Semantic narrowing: The shrinking of the scope of meaning. If in a language there is a word that means “animal” and, with time the meaning changes to “domestic animal”, the meaning of the word is said to have undergone semantic narrowing. We would arrive at a similar conclusion if a word that means “to drink” is modified to mean “to drink alcohol”

Semantic broadening: The expansion of the meaning of a word in a language. If in a language a word means “a baby girl” but with time its meaning changes to mean “a baby”, the word will be said to have undergone semantic broadening.

Semantic shift: The shift in meaning whereby a word that denoted a concept changes to denote a different concept especially in the same or related fields. In proto-Bantu and in many Bantu languages today, the word “tata/taata” or its cognates means “father”. However, in Kitharaka, my mother tongue, it means “mother”.

3. DEFININATION OF “UBUNTU”

Mapadimeg (2009) observes that the first attempt at an intellectual level to define and describe the ubuntu culture was made by Jordan K. Ngubane in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Mapadimeg (2009) observes that:

Ngubane (1963) defined ubuntu/botho as a philosophy of life and practice of being humane which gave content to life for African people long before the arrival of white settlers, and that it rests on the supreme ethical code which attaches primacy to human personality as a sacred being.

Elsewhere, commenting on Ubuntu, Oppenheim (2012) comments that:

The word Ubuntu comes from the Xhosa/Zulu culture, the community into which Nelson Mandela was born, and has been summarized in the phrase, “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” in the Nguni language of Xhosa, Zulu, or Ndebele. The concept of this phrase can be translated to mean, “A person is a person through other persons,” or “I am because we are”

The essence of Ubuntu that emerges from the above definitions constitute the essential meaning of “ubuntu”. It is that meaning that, in this paper, I will be referring to when I say: “Ubuntu as used in Southern Africa”. It is a meaning that embodies certain real and assumed functions at the cultural, political and spiritual spheres of live in Southern Africa

4. GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF “UBUNTU” AND ITS COGNATES

The term “ubuntu” (humanity; Bantu Noun Class 14) as found in the Bantu languages of Southern African such as isiZulu and isiXhosa has the same nominal stem as “abantu” (people; Bantu Noun Class 2)². Whereas the “abantu” has cognates in virtually all Bantu languages extending from Nyahururu and Kitale regions in Kenya, the Buganda territory in Uganda and the northern part of Rwanda, to the most southerly part of South Africa, the term “ubuntu” seems not to have cognates in some of the languages. Below, are eleven Languages showing the form of the words for “person”, “people” and “humanness/humanity”.³

Language	Person	People	Humanity
isiZulu	umntu	abantu	ubuntu
isiXhosa	umntu	abantu	ubuntu
Kiswahili	mtu	watu	utu
Ekegusii	omonto	abanto	obonyabanto
Luhya (Lubukusu)	omundu	babandu	bubundu
Luhya (Lunyala)	omundu	abandu	obundu
Luganda	muntu	bantu	ubuntu ubumuntu
Kinyarwanda	umuntu	abantu	ubuntu ubumuntu
Kitharaka	munto	antu	_____
Kikuyu	mondo	ando	_____
Shona	munhu/munu	vanhu	unhu

As I have pointed out above, Kitharaka (which happens my mother tongue) and Kikuyu as well as other languages of the central Kenya Bantu group appear not have the word for a cognate for “Ubuntu” When you ask for a word for “humanness/humanity” in their languages they do not readily provide it. When a Kikuyu speaker is pressed to think of the word, they come up with “umuntu” which is a recreation from “muntu” (person) rather than a cognate of “ubuntu”.

Later in the paper, I will subject above forms to the comparative method determine Proto-Bantu word for “humanness/humanity”

AFRICA'S LANGUAGE FAMILIES

All the languages indigenous to Africa, estimated at 2,300, are divided into four language families, namely:

- i) Niger-Congo family;
- ii) Nilo-Saharan family;
- iii) Afro-Asiatic family; and
- iv) Khoisan family.

(Joseph Greenberg, 1970)

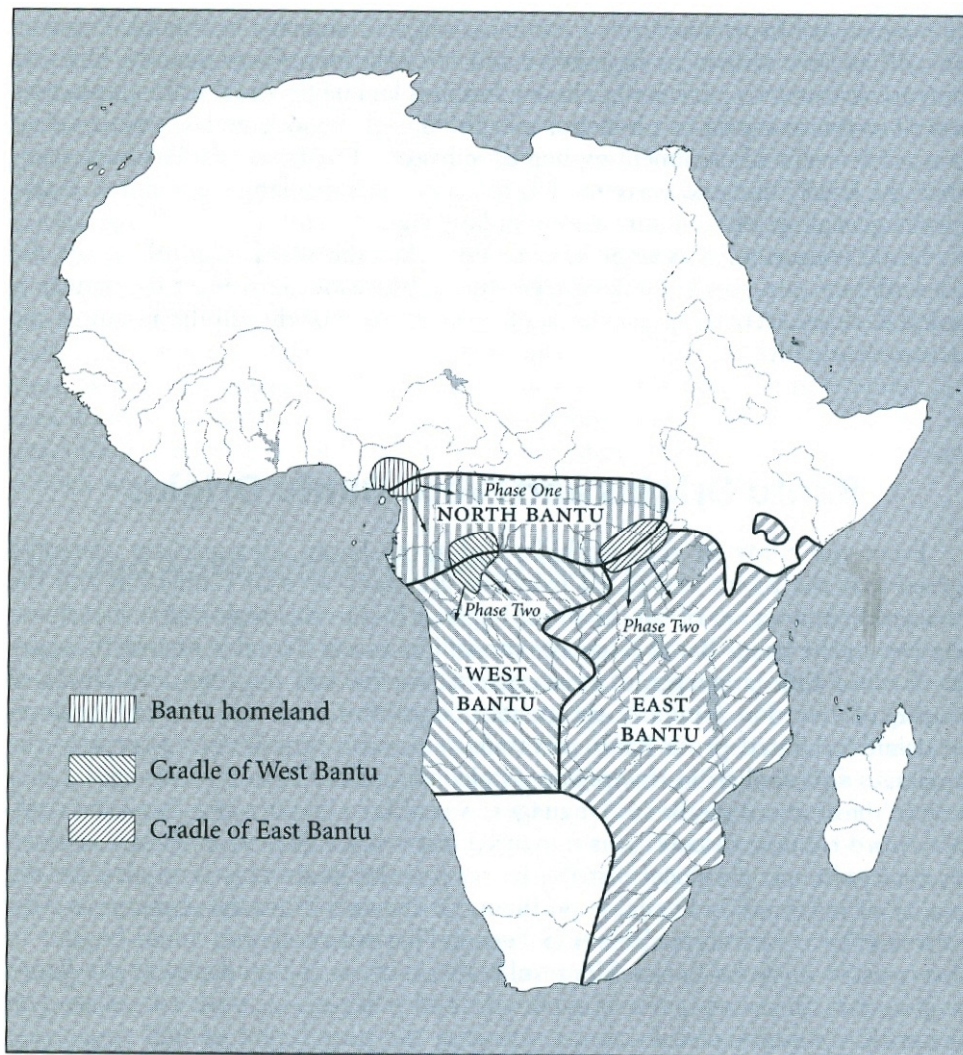


(Barnett in Afolayan, 2000)

5. ORIGINS OF BANTU-SPEAKING PEOPLES

It is not a coincidence that isiZulu, isiXhosa, Luhya (Lubukusu, Lunyala), Luganda, Kinyarwanda, Ekegusii have basically the same word for “humanity”. The word for “humanity” is each of the language is similar to all the other words in form and meaning. The similarity is not a coincidence just as much as similarity in body build, facial features of elevation of ears between two or more siblings is not unusual. It does not surprise us. The resemblance stems from having common parentage. Likewise, the resemblance in form and meaning of the words from IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Luhya, Luganda, Kinyarwanda and Ekegusii results from the common parentage of the languages. They are all Bantu languages.

The cradle of Bantu languages has been established to be “the grassland area of Cameroun and the adjacent Benue region of southeastern Nigeria” (Afolayan, 2000) The area is shown on the map below. Also shown in the map, are parts of the Africa continent that are occupied by three branches of Bantu, namely, Western Bantu, Eastern Bantu and Northern Bantu.



(Afolayan, 2000)

The big question is: Why this region? Two reasons have been advanced in the choice of the area as cradle of Bantu languages:

- a) It is in this area that the closest relatives of the Proto-Bantu can be found, notably, Tive and Efik of southeastern Nigeria and the Ekoi and Duala of southern Cameroon; and
- b) The languages of the area have the greatest concentration of validated proto-Bantu words.

6. 'UBUNTU' AS A REFLEX OF THE PROTO-BANTU WORD */bubuntu/

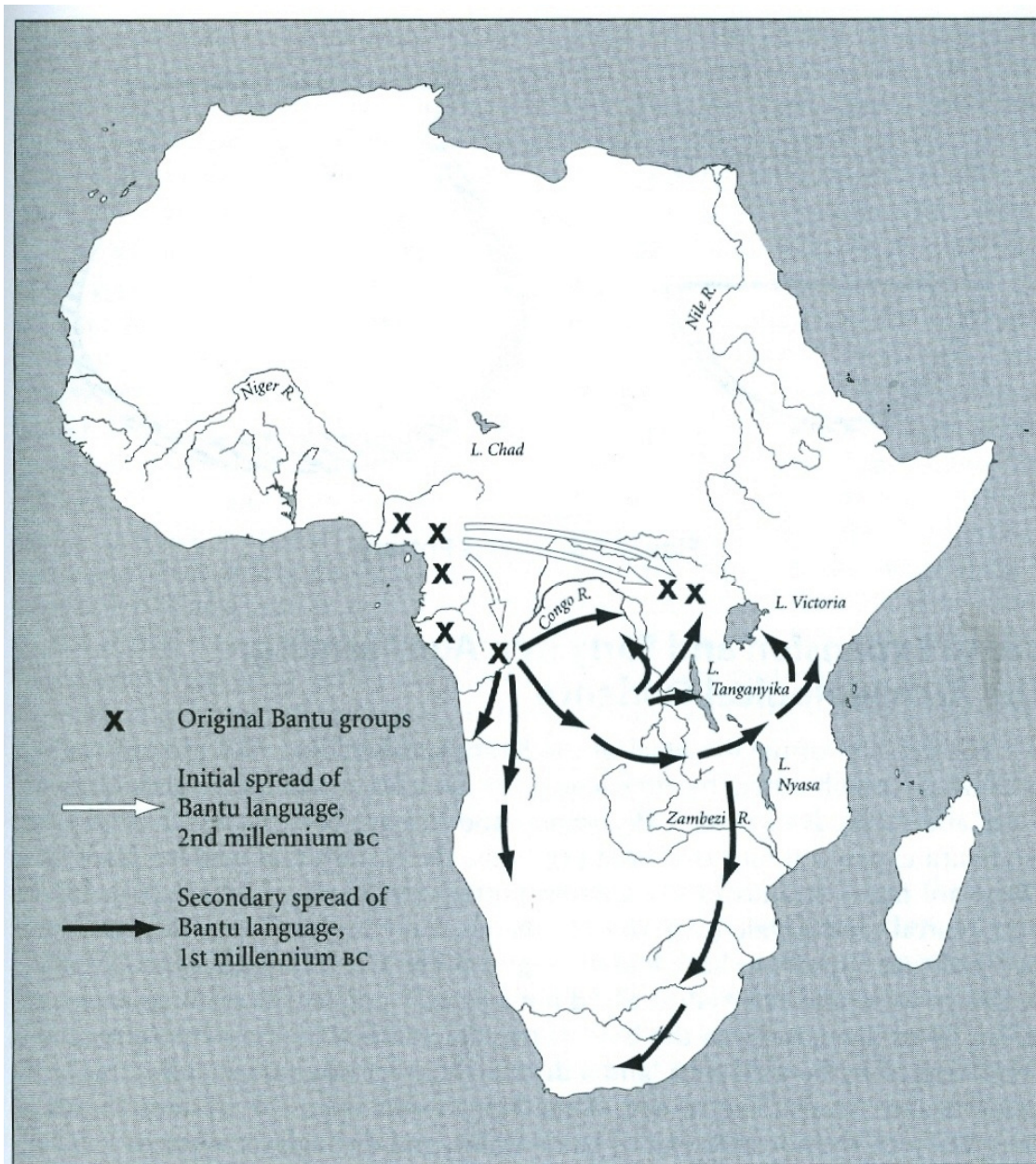
As we have seen above, there are cognates of "ubuntu" in many areas of Bantu-speaking Africa. Furthermore, the cognates of "abantu" which contains the same nominal root with "ubuntu" are found in all Bantu languages. By inference, "ubuntu" as currently found in isiZulu and isiXhosa are reflexes of a form that was already in existence in proto-Bantu as spoken in its original home in Cameroon. Using glottochronology and lexicostatistics, it has been established that Bantu-speaking people were in their cradle in Cameroon around 3000 BC. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the word "ubuntu" has been in existence for about 5,000 years; that is, from 3000 BC to 2014 AD.

We need to address the issue of how the word "ubuntu" travelled from its original home in Western Cameroon to the Republic of South Africa as well as to other areas of the African continent. The answer is in the expansion of Bantu speakers. The expansion started after 3000 BC. It has been observed that the expansion was in stages. The first stage involved the separation of the original Bantu language (sometimes referred to as Narrow Bantu) from other Bantoid languages.⁴ After the separation, it expanded eastward and became established on the fringes of savanna north of River Congo about 500 BC. (Afolayan, 2000).

Once in this area, the language split into a number of language clusters two of which were the proto-West Bantu cluster and the proto-East Bantu cluster. We will ignore the movement of proto-Western Bantu cluster as well as a northwest cluster which separated itself from the proto-Western Bantu and concentrate on proto-Eastern Bantu from which, eventually, Nguni languages sprang.

7. THE SPREAD OF 'UBUNTU' AND ITS COGNATES

From the original home in Cameroon, Proto-Eastern Bantu speakers moved southeastwards to the middle of the River Zambezi. From there they spread to northern Mozambique, Northeast Tanzania and the Great Lakes region. Between the third and the seventh centuries, Bantu speakers had settled in the Lake Nyasa region. From the west of the lake, some of them moved southwards until they reached Zululand, Natal and Transkei. They arrived in these areas with some of the proto-Bantu words. Among these words, were 'abantu' and "ubuntu". The map shows the suggested movement of Bantu-speaking people from their original home to populate most of sub-Saharan Africa.



(Afolayan, 2000)

8. THE PHONOLOGY AND MORPHOLOGY OF /ubuntu/

What phonological shape, we may ask, did “ubuntu” have in the cradle of Bantu languages? In other words, how did the word look long before the birth of languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, Kiswahili, Ekegusii, Luhya, Luganda and Kinyarwanda? To get an answer to this question, we need to use comparative method which is a linguistic tool for reconstructing earlier shared forms. Let us compare the words for “person”, “people” and “humanness/ humanity” from the languages we used above to demonstrate the occurrence of “ubuntu” and its cognates in various languages.

Language	Person	People	Humanity
isiZulu		abantu	ubuntu
isiXhosa	umntu	abantu	ubuntu
Kiswahili	mtu	watu	utu
Ekegusii	omonto	abanto	obonyabanto
Luhya (Lubukusu)	omundu	babandu	bubundu
Luhya (Lunyala)	omundu	abandu	obundu
Luganda	muntu	bantu	obuntu ubumuntu
Kinyarwanda	umuntu	abantu	ubuntu Ubumuntu
Kitharaka	munto	anto	_____
Kikuyu	mondo	ando	_____
Shona	munhu/munu	vanhu	unhu

As can be seen from the data above, the root morphemes in the words in nominal classes 1, 2 and 14, have five alternates. The alternates are:

/ntu/	(isiZulu, isiXhosa, Luganda, Kinyarwanda)
/ndu/	(Luhya)
/ndo/	(Kikuyu)
/tu/	(Kiswahili)
/nto/	(Kitharaka, Ekegusii)
/nhu /and /nu/	(Shona)

We need to determine which of the six alternates would, if taken as the original form, evolve into the other four alternates through logical and preferably predictable diachronic sound changes. Let us take the route of choice through elimination.

We begin by eliminating /tu/ as in Kiswahili. If we posit it as a proto-form, we would have problems arguing for the diachronic introduction of /n/ in the emerging languages. Such introduction of a nasal before an obstruent would change the syllable structure from CV to NCV. The former is a more preferred syllable structure than the later. It would be difficult to see the motivation for such a change.

The Shona /nhu/ as well /nu/ would also give problems if any of them is posited as the proto-form. To derive /t/ or /d/ in all the languages (except Shona) would require diachronic consonant hardening for the change */nhu/ > /ntu/ and consonant insertion for the change */nu/ > /ntu/. None of the two changes is likely before a syllable final syllable. In other words, none of the two changes would have a good motivation; at any rate not a phonetic motivation.

The same argument we have used against positing /nhu/ as a proto-form is applicable to the positing of /ndo/ as a proto-form. The change */ndo/ > /nto/ would, among other things, require consonant hardening in a weak position within the word. After these eliminations, we are left with two candidates for the proto-form, namely, /ntu/ and /nto/. We have to determine whether the proto-form had a high back vowel or a tense mid-high back vowel.

As can be seen even from the limited data, /u/ is attested in more Bantu languages than /o/ as the final vowel in the morpheme under discussion. Of course, it is important to admit that frequency alone is not sufficient evidence to guide one on matters of reconstruction. However, when supported by other arguments, it is a useful variable. Such an argument comes in the form of the fact, the change */o/ > /u/ would involve vowel heightening.

The change /u/ > /o/ would be vowel lowering. The weak syllable-final position, vowel lowering is more tenable than vowel heightening. It is my view that the vowel in the proto-form was */u/ and not */o/. Consequently, the form of the morpheme for “person”, “people” and “humanity” was */ntu/.

Let us now try to determine the pre-root part of “ubuntu”. We have three alternates:

- /u/ (Kiswahili and Shona)
- /bubu/ (Luhya)
- /obu/ (Luganda)
- ubu – (all the other languages represented in the data).

Once again, we can get to the proto-form through elimination.

If we take *u- to have been the pre-root proto-form, one would be required to argue for a diachronic word-initial insertion of ubu- in languages with /bubuntu/, /bubundu/, /ubuntu/ and /ubundu/. Likewise taking ubu- to have been the pre-root part of the original form of “ubuntu” would require a diachronic insertion of b- in the word-initial position in languages where the cognates of “ubuntu” begin with bubu-. It is difficult to see any motivation for such historic sound changes. The tenable position is to argue that the pre-root part of the original word for “ubuntu” was */bubu/. Consequently, it is our contention that the proto-form for the “ubuntu” was */bububntu/.

In the last part of my discussion I have used “pre-root part” rather the conventional linguistic term “prefix”. I have do so deliberately. In the proto-form, *bubu was not a prefix. It was a pre-prefix and a prefix whereby the former was a copy of the later. In other words, prefix */bu/ was reduplicated before itself. Having said that, let me add that, today, speakers may not perceive /bubu/ (and ubu-) as a pre-prefix and prefix. It is more likely, through morphological reanalysis, the morpheme boundary between the two have been erased /bubu/ and /ubu-/ as the prefix in the respectively languages where the two variants are used.

9. ON THE SEMANTICS OF /ubuntu/

As we have seen above, it is 5,000 years since proto-Bantu emerged from the Bantoid languages. One of the language’s words was */bubuntu/. As words go through a span of time and especially a long span, they may undergo semantic modification. They can experience a number of possibilities, especially:

- i) Semantic broadening;
- ii) Semantic narrowing;
- iii) Semantic shift;
- iv) Semantic merger;
- v) Semantic shift; and
- vi) Disappearance.

Some languages including Kitharaka, Kikuyu and Ekigusii do show any reflexes of */bubuntu/. The reflexes in some languages have undergone semantic narrowing. Such is the case with Kinyarwanda where the word refers to “generosity” rather than “humanness/humanity”. In Nguni languages, the reflex “ubuntu” seems to have a wider semantic scope than what was in the original word.

The semantic field of “ubuntu” in South Africa has expanded transforming it from an ordinary word to an idea, an ideal, a philosophy and a potential political, social and economic tool. The semantic expansion and especially the direction it has taken has come about due to the unique and momentous challenges that people in Southern Africa, and especially the have faced both as individuals ad as communities. That is the nature of language: it is affected by and adjusts to its environment.

As Anttila (1972) points out, there are not exact rules in semantics for handling change. Consequently, whereas we can suggest with confidence the phonological rules and morphological processes that have produced the cognates in the various Bantu languages that we have used to arrive at the reconstruction */bubuntu/, we are not in a position to indicate semantic changes in the form of rule statements.

10. CONCLUSION

In the preceding sections, I have thrown some light on the origins of the term “ubuntu”. Using the cognates of /ubuntu/ from a number of Bantu languages, and employing the comparative method, I have reconstructed */bubuntu/ as the Class 14 Proto-Bantu term for “humanness/humanity” and argued that that original form existed right at the cradle of Bantu languages in the area where current Cameroon borders the Benue-Congo area of southeastern Nigeria.

I have observed that */bubuntu/, underwent phonological, morphological and semantic changes eventually resulting in /ubuntu/ in isiZulu and isiXhosa, /unhu/ in Shona, /bubundu/and /ubundu/ in Luhya, /utu/ in Kiswahili, /obuntu/ in Luganda and “ubuntu” in Kinyarwanda.⁵ Since there are differences in the historical changes through which */bubuntu/ has undergone in various Bantu languages, the cognates of “ubuntu” may differ shades of meaning and nuances while sharing the core meaning of “humanness/humanity”.

ENDNOTES

1. The term Bantu was formed by William Bleek in 1962 when, on a trip to East Africa, he recognized a group of related languages in Africa that belong to the same language family. He called the language family Bantu. The name derived from the fact that in these languages the word for “people” is either “bantu” or a form very close to it (Afolayan, 2000).
2. Bantu are categorized in terms of classes as opposed to languages that categorise nouns in terms of gender. Indeed, in Bantu languages you can never tell by listening to a sentence whether it refers to a man and women. For example, Class 1 is for all animate things in singular whereas Class 2 is for animate things in plural.
3. IsiXhosa and IsiZulu words are obtained from R. Kiogori (undated) and an anonymous document titled “Appendix: Zulu Nouns” respectively. Kitharaka and Kiswahili are from self whereas data from all the other languages is from informants
4. I use the word “Proto-Bantu” in this paper for want of a more appropriate term. Ideally, “proto-X” should be used when all languages of X family have been used in the reconstruction of the earlier form, (Anttila, 1972)
5. In Luganda, “obuntu” is a shorter form of “obuntu bulamu” meaning “human behavior” whereas in Kinyarwanda “ubuntu” means generosity. These changes have come about as a result of semantic shift. The word for “humanness/humanity” in Kinyarwanda it is “ubumuntu”. It has been created from the Class 1 prefix and nominal root.

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