

Book Review

The Promise of Linguistics and Language Studies in Africa (Eds. Mugumya, L., Asimwe, A., Ssentanda, M. E., Wagaba, W. G., & Bayiga, F. T., 2024)

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Recent African linguistics debates emphasise decolonisation, indigenous language revitalisation, and epistemic justice (Bamgbose, 2011; Lüpke & Storch, 2013; Prah, 2009). *The Promise of Linguistics and Language Studies in Africa* responds to these issues, reflecting on Makerere University's contributions and outlining a forward-looking research agenda. Covering historical, theoretical, and applied domains, it highlights indigenous language revitalisation, gendered linguistic agency, and the evolving landscape of African language studies, making it a significant resource for scholars engaged in decolonising African linguistic research.

The volume brings together a diverse set of voices in African linguistics to interrogate the potential of language studies in shaping social, cultural, and academic futures on the continent. The editors as well as all the authors of the chapters are some of the scholars working on African indigenous languages today. Moreover, their ideological orientation bears a critical perspective that has been largely absent from research on the continent, particularly in eastern Africa. The chapters in this volume reflect a deliberate attempt to re-centre African indigenous languages and linguistic knowledge within the academy, particularly in light of local realities, policy developments, and intellectual traditions. The volume offers empirical, theoretical, and reflexive insights into the relevance of language studies in African contexts.

The introductory chapter positions Makerere University as a central hub for linguistic scholarship in East Africa, highlighting the shift from English-language dominance to the promotion of African languages with the 1970 establishment of the Department of African Languages. Pioneers such as Pio Zirimu and Livingstone Walusimbi shaped the institutional ethos, reflecting Makerere's role in intellectual decolonisation (Mazrui, 2004). The chapter emphasises African linguistics as both technical and emancipatory, contributing to development, decolonisation, and educational reform, while foregrounding the African context as a source of theoretical innovation. It clearly links the chapters to the book's overarching themes, although space limits preclude a chapter-by-chapter review; the discussion focuses on key thematic insights and an overall critique.

Chapter one examines the institutionalisation of Runyakitara, a constructed language unifying four closely related Bantu languages – Runyankore, Rukiga, Runyoro, and Rutooro. The chapter situates this project within a wider framework of linguistic pride, cultural reclamation, and pan-African unity, portraying Runyakitara as both a practical linguistic solution and a symbol of regional solidarity and resistance to colonial language hierarchies. Muranga highlights Makerere University's role in legitimising the language through curriculum, research, and public discourse. The chapter also addresses tensions in standardising a composite language, including questions of authenticity, representation, and the politics of linguistic planning, showing how language can foster cultural empowerment and regional integration.

Chapters 2-4 offer a compelling examination of how language functions as a site of gender negotiation and resistance, particularly through feminist discourse analysis of Lugwere and Kiswahili, and the literary voices of emerging African women writers. These contributions illuminate the ways African women use language to assert identity and challenge patriarchal norms, enriching our understanding of gendered communication in localised contexts. However, the chapters are limited by their narrow theoretical framing, which overlooks intersectional and queer perspectives, and by a linguistic and literary scope that may not fully represent Africa's vast diversity. The reliance on interpretive methods without triangulation also raises questions about generalisability. Still, the work lays a strong foundation for future research that could broaden its cultural, methodological, and theoretical horizons.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore language's role in food culture in East Africa. Chapter 5 links food endangerment among the Baganda to linguistic personification, using Relevance Theory to show how language embeds cultural knowledge. Chapter 6 examines Kiswahili food neologisms via the PEGITOSCA criterion, revealing gaps between planning and use. While insights are limited by narrow scope and lack of ethnographic data, both chapters demonstrate the potential of linguistics to support cultural sustainability and inform public health and development policy.

Chapters 7 and 8 address language documentation and metaphor in African linguistics. Chapter 7 details creating a documentary corpus for the endangered So language, highlighting collaborative fieldwork, technology, and community engagement in preservation. Chapter 8 examines metaphors in African languages, showing how figurative language reflects cultural values, cognition, and social realities, emphasising its significance for broader linguistic theory.

The two chapters emphasise preserving linguistic diversity and interpreting cultural meaning. Chapter 7 addresses the urgent task of documenting the endangered So language, while Chapter 8 explores how metaphors encode worldviews. Both face challenges – sustainability for the corpus project and limited cross-linguistic comparison for the metaphor analysis – but together they highlight African languages as vital repositories of knowledge and identity.

Chapters 9-12 examine the morphosyntax of Rukiga, Rutooro, Luganda, and Ruruuli-Lunyala, providing comparative insights. Notably, the analysis of evidentiality in Luganda enriches understanding of information encoding and Bantu typology, showcasing both shared patterns and language-specific innovations.

However, while the linguistic analyses are rigorous, the chapters could have benefited from broader contextualisation, such as sociolinguistic factors influencing morphosyntactic variation or diachronic perspectives on grammatical change. Additionally, the focus on structural description may limit engagement with applied dimensions, such as implications for language teaching or documentation. Still, these chapters make a valuable scholarly contribution by reinforcing the importance of indigenous grammatical systems in typological and theoretical linguistics.

Chapters 13 and 14 explore youth identity and orthographic reform. Chapter 13 examines urban Luganda, showing how young speakers creatively manipulate language to express identity, belonging, and generational distinction (Kießling & Mous, 2004). Chapter 14 critiques the revised Leblano orthography, highlighting challenges in symbol design, logistics, and policy, and raising questions about community involvement and sustainability. Together, they reveal the tension between grassroots linguistic creativity and top-down planning.

Chapters 15-17 address language as a tool for professional, social, and philosophical development. Chapter 15 critiques Makerere University's Translation and Interpreting curriculum, advocating market- and community-responsive models. Chapter 16 examines Runyaruguru, a conflict- and migration-influenced dialect blending Runyankore, Luganda, and Rutooro. Chapter 17 analyses Runyakitara proverbs, revealing a culturally grounded and philosophically rich concept of time.

Together, these chapters underscore the dynamic interplay between language, identity, and societal change. They demonstrate how linguistic inquiry can inform curriculum reform, trace the evolution of dialects in response to historical forces, and reclaim indigenous epistemologies. While each chapter offers valuable contributions, they also share limitations such as a need for broader empirical data, cross-regional comparisons, and deeper engagement with long-term impact. Nonetheless, they collectively affirm the promise of African linguistics as a field deeply attuned to both local realities and global conversations.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The book as a whole is recommended to everyone's library, but especially to students of African languages. The volume's strongest asset is its interdisciplinarity, bridging sociolinguistics, formal linguistics, gender studies, and ethnolinguistics, while foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems. The methodological diversity, from corpus-based documentation to philosophical analysis, enriches its appeal.

This work makes three notable contributions. First, the volume explores the historical documentation of Makerere University's role in shaping African linguistic scholarship, providing insights into indigenous language revitalisation, standardisation as well as policy. Second, the book offers a compelling reimagining of African linguistic scholarship by centring indigenous voices, interdisciplinary inquiry, and language preservation. The volume challenges Eurocentric paradigms by amplifying African epistemologies and showcasing research rooted in local languages and sociocultural realities. Third, the book also provides theoretical value for typology, variation studies, and sociolinguistics, through chapters that explore gendered discourse, language and identity, and the socio-political dimensions of communication, demonstrating how

linguistic analysis can illuminate broader societal dynamics. Its relevance extends beyond Africa, contributing to global debates on language endangerment, contact, and revitalisation by offering data and perspectives grounded in African realities.

Nonetheless, depth varies across chapters, and the comparative scope is largely limited to Bantu languages, leaving other African language families under-explored. The thematic cohesion could also have been strengthened. While the chapters are all valuable in their own right, the links between them are sometimes implicit rather than explicit. More explicit cross-referencing between chapters could have enhanced thematic integration. And a stronger editorial conclusion might have clarified how the varied contributions collectively fulfil the book's titular "promise."

This book is, however, a landmark contribution that documents the evolution of linguistic scholarship at Makerere University while setting a robust agenda for future research. It is essential reading for linguists, language planners, educators, and scholars interested in African languages and their sociocultural contexts. The volume not only celebrates past achievements but also inspires new directions in African linguistic inquiry, asserting that linguistic work in Africa is not only about documenting what is disappearing, but also about reimagining what is possible. It invites African scholars and institutions to see language not just as an object of study but as a means of transformation, that is to say, academic, cultural, and societal.

This volume will be particularly relevant to linguists, language educators, anthropologists, and policy-makers interested in the intersection of language, society, and development. For scholars based in Africa or working on African languages, it offers both data and direction – affirming that the future of linguistics on the continent is as promising as it is urgent.

References

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