

African Historical Linguistics (A005309)

Course size *(nominal values; actual values may depend on programme)*

Credits 5.0

Study time 150 h

Course offerings in academic year 2025-2026

A (semester 2)

Dutch, English

Gent

Lecturers in academic year 2025-2026

Goes, Heidi

LW21

staff member

Bostoen, Koen

LW21

lecturer-in-charge

Gunnink, Hilde

LW21

co-lecturer

Kerr, Elisabeth

LW21

co-lecturer

Pacchiarotti, Sara

LW21

co-lecturer

Offered in the following programmes in 2025-2026

[Bachelor of Arts in African Languages and Cultures](#)

crdts 5

offering A

[Exchange Programme African Languages and Cultures](#)

5

A

[Linking Course Master of Arts in African Studies](#)

5

A

[Preparatory Course Master of Arts in African Studies](#)

5

A

[Elective Set African Studies](#)

5

A

[Elective Set Linguistics](#)

5

A

Teaching languages

English, Dutch

Keywords

Historical-comparative linguistics, African languages, Bantu, language and history in Africa, interdisciplinarity

Position of the course

This course aims at introducing students to the fundamentals of historical-comparative linguistics and her principal methods by means of examples from African languages, especially Bantu languages. It is also explained how historical-comparative linguistics can be used for the reconstruction of precolonial African history.

Contents

1. Words as history
2. How to explain similarities between languages
3. Sound change
4. Morphological and syntactic change
5. Historical language classification
6. Quantitative approaches to language evolution
7. Lexical and grammatical reconstruction
8. Semantic change
9. Language contact

Initial competences

This course builds upon the linguistic knowledge students have already acquired through the African Languages and Cultures program. It also puts the program's two languages, i.e. Lingala and Swahili, in a wider historical and comparative perspective. Having followed the courses "Introduction to African Linguistics" and "Language Documentation and Description in Africa" is recommendable, but not a

prerequisite. This course can also be followed by students having another linguistic training.

Final competences

- 1 Having insight in African linguistics;
- 2 Having an understanding of the interaction between language, culture and society in Africa and the Diaspora;
- 3 Acquiring the capacity of critically and creatively reflecting on the multidisciplinary nature of the Africa study
- 4 Being able to gather and critically analyse sources and studies on African languages, literatures, history and cultures
- 5 Thinking critically and having academic independence in acquiring knowledge about Africa and the African diaspora
- 6 Testifying to an attitude of intellectual curiosity and lifelong learning
- 7 Knowing how previously acquired linguistic knowledge can be applied in a comparative way to better understand historical relationships among African languages
- 8 Having an understanding of how historical-comparative linguistic research can contribute to a better understanding of Africa's history

Conditions for credit contract

Access to this course unit via a credit contract is unrestricted: the student takes into consideration the conditions mentioned in 'Starting Competences'

Conditions for exam contract

Access to this course unit via an exam contract is unrestricted

Teaching methods

Seminar, Lecture, Independent work

Study material

Type: Handbook

Name: Historical Linguistics and the Comparative Study of African Languages

Indicative price: Free or paid by faculty

Optional: no

Language : English

Author : Gerrit Dimmendaal

Alternative : <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unigent-ebooks/detail.action?docID=711404>

Online Available : Yes

Available in the Library : Yes

Available through Student Association : Yes

Usability and Lifetime within the Course Unit : intensive

Usability and Lifetime within the Study Programme : one-time

Usability and Lifetime after the Study Programme : occasionally

Type: Slides

Name: African Historical Linguistics

Indicative price: Free or paid by faculty

Optional: no

References

- Campbell, Lyle. 2004. Historical Linguistics: An Introduction (second edition). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Crowley, Terry and Claire Bower. 2010. An Introduction to Historical Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dimmendaal, Gerrit. 2011. Historical Linguistics and the Comparative Study of African Languages. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Vansina, Jan. 1990. Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Vansina, J. 2004. How societies are born: governance in West Central Africa before 1600. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Course content-related study coaching

Assessment moments

end-of-term assessment

Examination methods in case of periodic assessment during the first examination period

Written assessment

Examination methods in case of periodic assessment during the second examination period

Written assessment

Examination methods in case of permanent assessment**Possibilities of retake in case of permanent assessment**

not applicable

Extra information on the examination methods

Given that this class is not taught in 2026-2027 students who took it in 2025-2026 and did not succeed can request the titular for an alternative task which will replace the written exam.

Calculation of the examination mark

Written exam

Facilities for Working Students

1. Possible exemption from educational activities requiring student attendance.
 2. Possible rescheduling of the examination to a different time in the same academic year
 3. Feedback can be given by email, telephone or during an appointment during or after office hours
- For more information concerning flexible learning: contact the monitoring service of the faculty of Arts and philosophy