

The state of documentation of Kalahari Basin languages

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The Kalahari Basin is a linguistic macro-area in the south of the African continent. It has been in a protracted process of disintegration that started with the arrival of Bantu peoples from the north and accelerated dramatically with the European colonization emanating from the southwest. Before these major changes, the area hosted, and still hosts, three independent linguistic lineages, Tuu, Kx'a, and Khoe-Kwadi, that were traditionally subsumed under the spurious linguistic concept “Khoisan” but are better viewed as forming a “Sprachbund”. The languages have been known for their quirky and complex sound systems, notably involving click phonemes, but they also display many other rare linguistic features—a profile that until recently was documented and described very insufficiently. At the same time, spoken predominantly by relatively small and socially marginalized forager groups, known under the term “San”, most languages are today, if not on the verge of extinction, at least latently endangered. This contribution gives an overview of their current state of documentation, which has improved considerably within the last 20 years.

1. The picture 20 years ago¹ The languages under discussion, formerly known simply as “click” languages, had been commonly subsumed until recently under the so-called “Khoisan” family, following Greenberg (1963). Today specialists no longer follow this premature genealogical proposal and increasingly work with an areal hypothesis called

¹I am grateful to Hiroshi Nakagawa and Bonny Sands for furnishing information on relevant research in Japan and the USA, respectively. The abbreviations below are: AF Arcadia Fund; DASTI Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation; DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft; ESF European Science Foundation; FFAF Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research; GMF Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; JSPS Japan Society for the Promotion of Science; NSF National Science Foundation; NWO Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek; Ph.D. doctoral dissertation; VWF Volkswagen Foundation.

“Kalahari Basin” (see Güldemann (2014) and Güldemann and Fehn (2017) for the most recent discussion on language classification and areal linguistics, respectively).

Shortly after the appearance of Himmelmann (1998), a survey of the languages by Güldemann and Vossen (2000) drew an alarming picture, this not only about the precarious sociolinguistic situation but also the deficient state of documentation of the languages in question. The information given in that article is repeated in Table 1, disregarding both extinct languages and languages spoken in eastern Africa outside the Kalahari Basin. It shows that at that time only three out of about 20 languages were sufficiently documented and described by means of publicly available material, namely Kxoe aka Caprivi Khwe, Nama-Damara aka (mainstream) Namibian Khoekhoe, and the Jul’hoan dialect of Ju.

No.	Language	Phonetics/ phonology	Lexicon	Grammar	Raw texts	Glossed texts
3	Hiecho		(S)	(S)	(S)	
5	Kxoe		S U	M	M	M
	Buga, !Ani	S	S U	S	U	U
6	G!ui, G!lana	S	S			
7	Naro	S	M M	S		
9	!Ora	M	(S)	(M S)	(M S)	
11	Nama-Damara	M S	U (M S)	M T (M)	U (M)	
12/3	Hailom-†Aakhoe		U	U	U	(S)
14	!Xūū	S	S	M	(S U)	S U
	Jul’hoan	M S	M M	M M M	S U	
15	†Hōā		S	S		
16	!Xōō	M S	M	S (U)		U

Table 1: Documentation state of major languages of the Kalahari Basin area around 2000 (after Güldemann and Vossen 2000: 103). **Note:** No. = language key to Table 2; M = monograph; S = short treatment; T = thesis; U = unpublished manuscript; (...) = outdated; Shading = good description

Since the time of this publication the situation has changed considerably. While this can unfortunately not be said concerning language vitality, it certainly holds for the state of documentation, as discussed in the following.

2. The task One reflex of the problems existing 20 years ago is that Güldemann and Vossen (2000: 99) still operated with the largely unclear issue of language classification and, in speaking of “thirty or so” living “languages and dialects”, with an indeterminate language inventory. Today, the overall situation enjoys more clarity, as discussed by Güldemann (2014). For one thing, Greenberg’s idea of a single language family has been widely abandoned. Moreover, the number of relevant languages and language complexes that are attested or can be assumed to have still been spoken in the Kalahari Basin in the second half of the last century can be established at around 20, as given in the updated list of Table 2 and shown in Figure 1.

Unfortunately, a number of languages are by now extinct or at least moribund. These are Kwadi; !Ora-Xiri and Eini of Khoekhoe (all of Khoe-Kwadi); †Amkoe (of Kx’a); as well

as N!ng, !Xegwi and the Lower Nossob group (all of Tuu), although †Amkoe and N!ng are still subject to fieldwork. This reduces the languages that can be analyzed today with the help of native speakers to about 15, as to be discussed in the following (see Table 3 for a full list). The different inventory compared to other studies, for example, Brenzinger (2013) with 10 languages, is mostly due to persisting problems concerning the notorious language-dialect distinction, particularly in the Khoe family (cf. Güldemann 2014: 6-9).

Family	No.	Language (complex)	Language name in Ethnologue	ISO
Khoe-Kwadi	1	Kwadi [°]	Kwadi	kwz
	2	<i>Shua</i>	Shua	shg
	3	<i>Tshwa</i>	Kua	tyu
			Tsoa	hio
	4	Ts'ixa	under !Ani	–
	5	<i>Khwe</i>	Khwe	xuu
			!Ani	hnh
	6	<i>G!ana</i>	!Gana	gnk
			!Gui	gwj
	7	<i>Naro</i>	Naro	nhr
	8	<i>!Ora-Xiri</i> [°]	Korana	kqz
			Xiri	xii
	9	<i>Eini</i> †	–	–
	10	<i>Nama-Damara</i> *	Khoekhoe	naq
	11	Hai!lom*	Hai!lom	hgm
	12	†Aakhoe*	under Hai!lom	–
Kx'a	13	<i>Ju</i>	Jul'hoan	ktz
			Kung-Ekoka	knw
			Northwestern !Kung	vaj
	14	†Amkoe [°]	†Hua	huc
Tuu	15	<i>Taa</i>	!Xóõ	nmn
	16	!Auni†	–	–
	17	!Haasi†	–	–
	18	<i>N!ng</i> [°]	N!u	ngn
	19	!Xegwi†	!Xegwi	xeg

Table 2: Languages and language complexes of the Kalahari Basin area spoken in the second half of the 20th century (after Güldemann 2014). **Note:** *italic* = language complex/dialect cluster, † = extinct, ° = moribund, * = subsumed under Standard Namibian Khoekhoe aka 'Khoekhoegowab'

3. The advances Compared to the detrimental state of research around 20 years ago represented in Table 1, the situation has improved immensely, which is due to various factors. For one thing, since the late 1990s the community involved in so-called “Khoisan” research has been meeting at a regular conference series, initiated and organized for many years by Rainer Voßen and Bernd Heine, notably in 1997, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2014,

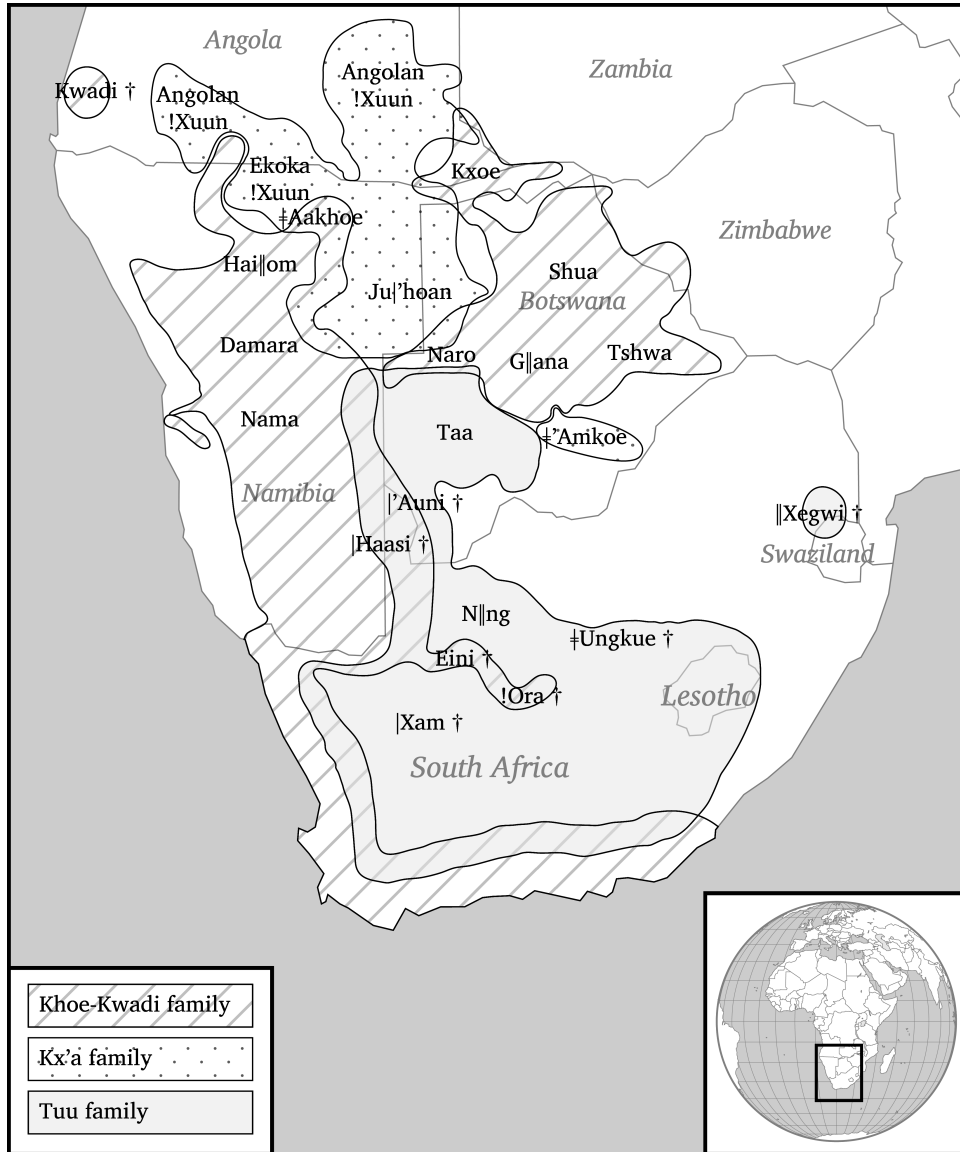


Figure 1: Map of the approximate distribution of the Kalahari Basin languages.

2017. This has intensified academic exchange and helped to define and coordinate research agendas, among them language documentation.

In terms of publications, these events have until now resulted in six volumes of proceedings, Schladt (1998), Ermisch (2008), Brenzinger and König (2010), Witzlack-Makarevich and Ernszt (2013), Shah and Brenzinger (2016), and Fehn (2017). These and a number of monographs have contributed to the fact that the previously established book series “Research in Khoisan Studies,” published today by Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, has increased by 20 new volumes since 2000.

Another major publication achievement is the long-awaited “Khoesan” handbook edited by Vossen (2013). Although the volume appeared with a great delay, resulting in its contents not reflecting the current state of research at its publication date, and it has a series of other shortcomings (see McGregor 2016a), it provides for the first time a comprehensive overview of all relevant languages except Hailom and Nǀng (cf. Table 3).

Intensified research, including that from southern African scholars, increased the knowledge about the sociolinguistic and demographic status of the languages, which also contributed to a better understanding of their dialectological complexity (cf., e.g., Hasselbring 2000; Hasselbring, Segathle and Munch 2000; Crawhall 2004; Haacke 2005; Nakagawa 2006b; Rapold & Widlok 2008; Killian 2009; Gerlach and Berthold 2011; Brenzinger 2013; Naumann 2014; Güldemann 2017).

The major impetus for the greatly intensified documentation activities was given without doubt by the growing recognition of language endangerment on a global scale and specifically in the Kalahari Basin area. This resulted in various initiatives by larger funding bodies to provide financial opportunities for the scientific rescuing of some amount of this dwindling linguistic diversity. This will be discussed in the rest of this section.

Two major projects on †Aakhoe (Khoe-Kwadi) and Taa (Tuu) were carried out within the German VWF-funded program “Documentation of Endangered Languages (DOBES)” (see <http://dobes.mpi.nl/>). The “Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP)” in London (see <http://www.eldp.net/en/our+projects/projects+list/>) has so far funded or still funds major research projects on Nǀng (Tuu), Jul’hoan (Kx’a), and Tshwa (Khoe-Kwadi) as well as minor projects on Mangetti Dune !Xung (Kx’a) and !Ora (Khoe-Kwadi). Four languages, Taa (Tuu), †Amkoe (Kx’a), Shua, and !Ora (both Khoe-Kwadi), received major attention within the “Kalahari Basin area (KBA)” project (see <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/kba/projects.html>) as part of the program “Better Analyses Based on Endangered Languages (EuroBABEL)” funded by the ESF and four national agencies. US American funding bodies like the NSF, GMF, and FFAF supported research on Jul’hoan (Kx’a) and Nǀng (Tuu) as well as Khoisan phonetics encompassing various languages. Finally, the JSPS in Japan has been funding detailed documentation on Gǀana and Naro (both Khoe-Kwadi) as well as research on Khoisan phonetics.

All this intensive engagement has resulted in around ten Ph.D. theses (Crawhall 2004, Nakagawa 2006, Exter 2008, Brugman 2009, Killian 2009, Mathes 2015, Fehn 2016, Gerlach 2016, Pratchett 2017) some of whose authors are rejuvenating the research community.

Another positive development is that anthropological research, which traditionally has been very active in the area yet not very attentive to language-related topics, has now also started to contribute more to such documentation. This is evident from studies like Boden and Michels (2000) and Boden (2001) on Caprivi Khwe (Khoe-Kwadi), Tanaka and Sugawara (2010) on Gǀana-Gǀui (Khoe-Kwadi), and Barnard and Boden (2014) on kinship systems of the entire area.

All the progress mentioned above is summarized in Table 3, which presents the current documentation status of Kalahari Basin languages and can be directly compared with Table 1, which reflects the situation 20 years ago. Table 3 records the recent research projects dedicated to individual languages as well as the publications and archival or database deposits that have become available through them. The latter material is separated according to Himmelmann's (1998) trilogy of lexicon, grammar, and (raw vs. linguistically annotated) texts but additionally singles out phonetics-phonology, involving in particular experimental phonetics. This is because the languages are so complex in this last area that they cannot be viewed as fully analyzed without such a dedicated treatment. This becomes evident by the fact that the first appropriate analyses of solely the phonetics-phonology of such languages as Ju'hoan, East !Xoon, and G!ui by Snyman (1975), Traill (1985), and Nakagawa (2006), respectively, involved research periods of ten years and more. The complexity does not only concern the typologically quirky clicks but also other rare consonants and suprasegmental vowel features, leading to some of the most complex phoneme systems on a global scale (see Güldemann and Nakagawa (2018) for a recent discussion on some typological issues).

If a subdomain is treated for an individual language by one or more published monographs or an accessible database, it can be considered to be well documented and described (marked by shading in Table 3). This situation is normally accompanied by the availability of additional detailed articles on special topics, which is not exhaustively reflected in the table. Where a monograph on grammatical or phonetic-phonological description is not yet available, I give sample articles; this list is normally not exhaustive but only shows that the language is in the process of being analyzed. It should also be recognized that the equally growing published outcome of comparative research also contains a good amount of language-specific data not yet accessible in larger language-specific studies.

In general, Table 3 clearly demonstrates the major progress compared to a mere three languages that were reasonably described 20 years ago. Of the 14 relevant languages and language complexes, six are by now well known, namely Khwe and Nama-Damara of Khoe-Kwadi, Ju and moribund †Amkoe of Kx'a, and Taa and moribund N!ng of Tuu. Another six, namely Shua, Tshwa, Ts'ixa, G!ana, Naro, and †Aakhoe, all members of Khoe-Kwadi, range from extensively to at least reasonably well documented by recent research, although the results are not yet fully published and/or archived, thus remaining publicly inaccessible. The only language units where modern scholarship is very deficient still today are Hailom and !Ora-Xiri (both from Khoe-Kwadi); for the latter, this is beyond remedy, as the work with remaining (semi)speakers started too late.

4. The future Against the background of the present state of documentation and description sketched in §3, a few points can be made regarding the future work that is ahead of the specialists studying the languages of the Kalahari Basin area.

In terms of basic language coverage, a somewhat unexpected result is that the Khoekhoe variety of the Hailom, a generally well-known group of earlier foragers around the Etosha Pan (see Friederich 2009), remains all but unknown, whereby its linguistic status as a dialect or language is still unclear (cf. Haacke, Eiseb and Namaseb 1997). It may be confusing in this respect that linguistic publications referring to this language name do exist; in fact, they are on the yet different †Aakhoe variety of Khoekhoe, which has been researched intensively by Terttu Heikkinen and subsequently by a major DOBES project.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
No.	Language (complex)	Documentation Project	Phonetics/Phonology	Lexicon	Grammar	Raw texts	Glossed texts
2	<i>Shua</i>	ESF DASTI			McGregor (2014, 2015, 2017)		
3	<i>Tshwa</i>	Ph.D., AF, GMF	Snyman (2000), Chebanne (2000, 2013), MATHES (2015)		Chebanne (2008, 2013), Chebanne & Collins (2017), Fehn & Phiri (2017)	MAD	MAD
4	Ts'ixa	Ph.D.			FEHN (2016)		
5	<i>Khwe</i>	DFG		KILLIAN-HATZ (2003)	M. KILLIAN-HATZ (2008)	M	M, HEINE (2010), BODEN (2014)
6	<i>Glana</i>	Ph.D., JSPS	NAKAGAWA (2006a)		Ono (2010), Nakagawa (2013, 2016)		
7	<i>Naro</i>	JSPS	Nakagawa (2017)	M, VISSER (2001)	Haacke (2010), Visser (2010)	M	
8	<i>'Ora-Xiri</i> *	ESF NWO, AF	M			M	
10	<i>Nama-</i>	Ph.D.	M, BRUGMAN (2009)	HAACKE & EISEB (2002)		M	
11	<i>Damara</i> *						
12	<i>!Aakhoë</i> *	VWF					
13	<i>Ju</i>	Ph.D., AF, NSF, FFAR	M, MILLER-OCKHUIZEN (2003)	M, KÖNIG & HEINE (2008)	Widlok, Rapold & Hoymann (2008), Widlok (2008, 2016), Hoymann (2010), Rapold (2012), Haacke (2013)	MAD, Schmidt (2011)	MAD
14	<i>f'Amkoe</i> *	Ph.D., ESF DFG, GMF	GERLACH (2016)		M, DICKENS (2005), KÖNIG & HEINE (2001), HEINE & KÖNIG (2015), PRATCHETT (2017)	BIESELE (2009), Schmidt (2011)	MAD
15	<i>Taa</i>	VWF, ESF DFG	M, Naumann (2008, 2017)	M, MAD, TRAILL (2018)	COLLINS & GRUBER (2014)	MAD	MAD
18	<i>Ning</i> *	NSF, AF	Miller et al. (2007), EXTER (2008)	MAD	Kiefling (2008, 2013, 2017) COLLINS & NAMASEB (2011), Ernszt, Witzlack-Makarevich & Güldemann (2015)	MAD	MAD

Table 3: Documentation state of spoken languages and language complexes of the Kalahari Basin area. **Note:** No. = language key to Table 2; *italic* = language complex; **bold** in column 1 = not treated in Vossen (2013); **bold** in column 2 = more than 1 project; Columns 3-7: CAPITALS = MONOGRAPH, M = monograph(s) before 2000, MAD = modern archival deposit, Shading = good and publicly available documentation/description, ° = moribund, * = subsumed under Standard Namibian Khoekhoe.

This open problem of dialectal diversity points to a more general persisting deficit in the field. As pointed out above, among the 14 units of Table 3, there are a number of language complexes in terms of Hockett (1958), some of which display an internal heterogeneity amounting at times to mutual unintelligibility that is far from being understood fully. Thus, a better coverage of dialect diversity is imperative for a conclusive assessment of the language distinctions in the area.

Given the relatively recent and thus still restricted linguistic engagement with the Kalahari Basin languages, it goes without saying that scholarship needs to broaden the range of linguistic topics studied. To give just one example, studies on lexical semantics or on language and cognition are still limited in the field (for a few exceptions, see Brenzinger (2008), Widlok (2008) and McGregor (2016b) on spatial language; Nakagawa (2012) and Brenzinger and Fehn (2013) on the domain of perception verbs; and McGregor (2014) on numeral conceptualization).

Regarding future tasks concerning the research that has been achieved already, two points come to mind in particular. For one thing, there is a considerable amount of material that was collected in the past but which requires (more complete) archiving, especially data that were not produced in the framework of a major documentation initiative with the necessary infrastructure, including legacy material of scholars no longer active and/or alive. Moreover, we must not be content with collecting data and storing them in archival deposits but continue to analyze and annotate them in depth, so that they can be used effectively once speakers can no longer be consulted, which is imminent for some of the languages.

Finally, for the benefit of both effective academic exchange and practical issues of speech communities, it is necessary to strive for better and, if possible, unified description and representation standards. In particular, this holds a) for similar grammatical phenomena across closely related dialects and languages, which is first of all relevant for the Khoe family (cf., e.g., the discussion revolving around multi-verb constructions), and b) for the complex features of the sound systems that recur across all three lineages of the area (see, e.g., the ongoing controversies revolving around practical orthographies discussed in such works as Güldemann 1998, Snyman 1998, Miller-Ockhuizen 2000, Schladt 2000, Visser 2000, and Namaseb et al. 2008).

Last but not least, one of the central problems in the field is that still too little scholarship comes from researchers from southern Africa itself, and almost none from mother tongue speakers, which is due to their overall low formal education level even for African standards. To support developing local southern African and native speaker scholarship of high quality is thus one of the priorities for our academic community.

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