

From African languages to an African perspective on language: The work and research of Prof. Marianna W. Visser

Alexander Andrason

Department of Ancient Studies | Department of African Languages, Stellenbosch University, South Africa
E-mail: andrason@sun.ac.za

Abstract

This paper discusses the contribution of Prof. Marianna W. Visser to African linguistics. I present the academic and professional trajectory of Prof. Visser and her research achievements, focusing on publications in three branches of language science: formal linguistics (morpho-syntax and semantics), applied linguistics (language policy and multilingual education), and text-linguistics (appraisal theory and discourse analysis). These three areas and their respective themes are subsequently reflected in the selection of articles included in the volume, which this article also introduces.

Keywords: Marianna W. Visser; African linguistics; formal linguistics; applied linguistics; text-linguistics.

1. Introduction

In a world dominated by the global North and its ideology, the presence of voices originating from the South, especially from Africa, is crucial. This presence is particularly relevant in studies devoted to the essence of the African continent – African languages. Few African scholars have contributed to the study of African languages to the extent comparable to that of Professor Marianna W. Visser. She has centered her entire career and research on African languages and gradually developed a genuine African, *ubuntu*, perspective on linguistics: inclusive, collaborative, and non-dogmatic. This perspective fully harmonizes with Prof. Visser's kind nature and her considerate and deeply empathetic interaction with students and colleagues alike.

The present paper and the entire volume which it introduces pay tribute to Prof. Visser on the occasion of her 60th birthday, presenting her invaluable contribution to African linguistics both as teacher and researcher. To meet this goal, I will first describe the professional trajectory of Prof. Visser (section 2) and her research achievements (section 3). Subsequently, I will present the articles included in the volume (section 4), whose selection and combination reflect Prof. Visser's main lines of research.

2. An exemplary career

Prof. Visser received all of her tertiary education at Stellenbosch University, including a Bachelor's (1978), Honors (1979), and Master's (1981) degree, as well as a Doctorate in African languages earned in 1987. During her PhD studies, she worked at Rhodes University in Grahamstown as a lecturer in the department of African Languages. After completing her doctorate, Prof. Visser received a position at the department of African Languages at Stellenbosch University; first as a lecturer (1987), then senior lecturer (1988), next associate professor (1999), and lastly full professor (2012). During all that time, she held various administrative and academic positions at Stellenbosch University, culminating in her appointment as the Vice-Dean for Languages in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (2006-2011). Prof. Visser has been a member of several professional associations, such as the Linguistic Society of Southern Africa and the African Language Association of Southern Africa, of which she also acted as a vice chair. She has furthermore performed the duties of an external moderator and examiner for undergraduate and postgraduate modules as well as PhD dissertations in African Languages at various South African universities: University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of Botswana, University of Venda, Rhodes University, University of Limpopo, University of Cape Town, and the University of the Western Cape. She has sat on the editorial boards of two leading South African journals dedicated to African languages: *South African Journal of African Languages* and *Journal of the African Languages Association of Southern Africa*. She has received research grants from the National Research Foundation, Stellenbosch University, the Pan South African Language Board for Textlinguistics of African Languages, and the Human Sciences Research Council. Gradually, Prof. Visser has established a wide network connecting scholars from many countries and continents across the globe. Her participation as a speaker at nearly sixty national and international conferences has certainly contributed to the development and the maintenance of this web of academic connections.

During her academic career Prof. Visser has presented a variety of courses. At an undergraduate level, she has taught isiXhosa language courses, e.g. courses in second language communicative proficiency and communicative grammar, as well as general courses in isiXhosa syntax, introduction to text-linguistics, and media discourse analysis. At a postgraduate level, she has taught the formal syntax, morphology, and semantics of isiXhosa, advanced isiXhosa text-linguistics and written discourse analysis, as well as academic writing and literacy development, cognitive and linguistic complexity, and metaphor theory. Her pedagogy extends beyond Stellenbosch as she has been a guest lecturer at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London, the University of Leiden, and the Centre for Advanced Theoretical Linguistics of the University of Tromsø. Later in her career, Prof. Visser has devoted herself to Master's and PhD supervision. Overall, she has successfully guided one hundred and twenty MA theses and nearly forty PhD dissertations.

3. Contribution to scholarship

As can be deduced from the above discussion, African languages have always been the focus of Prof. Visser's research activities. She has primarily worked on Nguni languages, in particular, isiXhosa and isiZulu, although other African languages of South Africa, such as Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga have also attracted her interest. The research she has conducted has been both language specific and comparative.

The earliest, the most extensive, and most pervasive research activities carried out by Prof. Visser concern formal linguistics, especially theoretical syntax, morpho-syntax, and lexical semantics – usually developed within the frame of generative grammar. These types of interests have led to the publication of several books dedicated to the syntax of African languages: Xhosa (Du Plessis and Visser 1992, 1998), Sesotho (ibid. 1995), Tsonga (Du Plessis, Nxumalo and Visser 1995), Venda (Du Plessis, Musehane and Visser 1995), and Sepedi (Du Plessis and Visser 1996), as well as the influential chapter on the Xhosa language structure in the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (Visser 2005). Further adopting a generative perspective, Prof. Visser has analyzed the phenomena of causation, unaccusativity, definiteness, and case, and the categories of motion verbs, verbal complements, determiners, clitics, and infinitives (1983, 1984, 1986, 1989, 2001, 2002a, 2008a, 2010). She has also conducted research on lexical semantics and thematic structure (1981, 1997), as well clausal structures whether as relative, coordinated, or subordinated (1993, 1995). Recently, working within a cognitive paradigm, Prof. Visser has analyzed left dislocation (Andrason and Visser 2016), weather verbs (ibid. 2017), and precipitation constructions (ibid. 2019). Currently, she continues her research on unaccusative motion verbs, aspectual distinctions, and lexical semantics in Xhosa and other African languages, additionally studying expletive constructions and inverse thematic role assignment.

Although formal linguistics has constituted the invariant component of her research activities, Prof. Visser has gradually expanded her interest to two sub-fields of language science: applied linguistics (language policy and multilingual education) and text-linguistics (discourse analysis, argumentation theory, and appraisal theory).

Certainly, her interest in language policy and multilingual education was present earlier, in 1992, when Prof. Visser studied formal syntax in second language acquisition. However, it greatly intensified in the twenty-first century as she has conducted research on academic writing and literacy, second language learning and instruction, bilingualism and multilingualism, and the use of African languages in tertiary education, as well as affordances theory more broadly (Visser and Venter 2004a, 2004b, Visser 2007, 2008b; Steenkamp and Visser 2011; Jjingo & Visser 2017, Andrason & Visser 2015). She has also authored several teaching manuals in isiXhosa for grades 8-12 at secondary schools (Dlali, Du Plessis and Visser 1995).

Prof. Visser's most recent research interest is related to text-linguistics. This includes the study of oral poetry and songs (Musiyiwa and Visser 2015; John and Visser 2017, Visser and John 2017) and the analysis of written discourses – e.g. political and parliamentary discourses (Jakaza and Visser 2014a; Jakaza and Visser 2015a; Musiyiwa and Visser 2016), newspaper discourses (Sabao and Visser 2013, 2015; Jakaza and Visser 2015b), and business discourses – and the work on argumentation and appraisal theory (Mugumya and Visser 2015; Jakaza and Visser 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Sabao and Visser 2016).

4. This volume

The three areas discussed above (i.e. formal, applied, and text-linguistics) and their respective themes are reflected in the selection of articles included in this volume.

4.1 Formal linguistics

The first group of articles studies formal aspects of linguistics: syntax, morpho-syntax, and semantics. The analysis presented in these papers may concern isiXhosa, the Bantu linguistic family, or other languages phyla in Africa.

IsiXhosa formal linguistics is the object of study of Andrason and Matutu, Mletshe, and Taraldsen. **Andrason** and **Matutu** examine the syntactic properties of interjections in isiXhosa in comics and their compliance with the extra-systematicity of an interjectional prototype postulated in linguistic typology. They propose that the category of interjections is diversified, containing members of varying degrees of syntactic extra-systematicity. Crucially, although many interjections comply with the interjectional prototype and are extra-systematic, this is not universal as many others are less canonical and less extra-systematic. Working within a generative paradigm and a de-compositional approach to lexical semantics, **Mletshe** studies the manner with which deverbal nominals derived from verbs related to bodily processes are lexically manifested in isiXhosa (as well as in Setswana and proto-Bantu). He defends the idea that devices found in a lexical semantic structure are highly suitable for explaining the different interpretations of deverbal nominals. **Taraldsen** centers his formal analysis of isiXhosa on augment-less noun phrases. He proposes that the use and/or absence of the augment in noun phrases can, to a large extent, be explained by drawing on similarities with the use of the definite article – or its absence – in French.

The formal aspects of other languages of the Bantu family are the topic of papers authored by Hlungwani, Mojapelo, Mallya, Assimwe, and Nakijoba. **Hlungwani** analyzes the relationship between the anticausative and the passive in Xitsonga. He aims to determine the possible modification of the passive by the phrases expressing agents, instruments, and causing events. He observes that passives of intransitive clauses can be modified by such phrases if the verb used in those clauses is a reduplicated motion verb and a weather verb, or if the passive morpheme co-occurs with the causative one. **Mojapelo** turns her attention to Sepedi (Northern Sotho). She discusses the meaning of physical discomfort and illness expressed by verbs combined with the associative copulative construction, and proposes that such verbs occupy distinct positions in the hierarchical scheme. Verbs that select both body-part and affliction arguments occupy a higher position, while those that select only one of the two meanings occupy a lower position. **Mallya** studies the semantics-syntax interface of argument alternations in Kiwoso. Drawing on the premise that alternations are constrained by selectional properties of a root and its combination with different functional heads, she determines syntactic and semantic differences, as well as similarities, between the external arguments of anticausative, passive and middle alternations. **Asiimwe** contributes to studies on Runyankore-Rukiga. She analyzes the morphosyntactic properties of a sub-type of relative clauses, namely clauses containing a relative object marker. She concludes that this relative object marker is not a pronoun or a demonstrative element, but rather an agreement-bearing complementizer. **Nakijoba** describes the properties of the causal marker *kubanga* ‘because’ in bilingual Luganda-English discourses. She observes that *kubanga* operates in four domains (content, epistemic, speech act, and metalinguistic), is positionally mobile appearing in a clause-initial, medial and final position, and occurs in a variety of bilingual constructions (it can either be inserted in an entirely English frame or occur in mixed constituents).

Lastly, non-Bantu African languages constitute the object of research of **Andrason** and **Karani**. These authors analyze the degree of the argumenthood – or adjuncthood – of elements licensed by the dative applicative construction in a Maasai variety, Arusa. After testing DA elements for the various criteria and diagnostics associated with the typologically-driven prototype of arguments and adjuncts, Andrason and Karani conclude that, in most cases, DA elements behave as canonical arguments. Therefore, within a canonical approach to the argument-adjunct distinction, which they use, DA elements can be located close to the argumenthood pole of the argument-adjunct continuum.

4.2 Applied linguistics

The second group of articles focuses on applied linguistic issues, specifically language policy and multilingual education. **Madadzhe** centers the ideas of decolonization and Afrocentricity in his study on the use of African languages at universities in South Africa. He determines a number of causes of the absence or limited use of African languages in higher education: globalization, unfavorable economy, negative attitudes, and the lack of will of university officials. He further argues that in times of #RhodesMustFall and decolonization movements, we must stop debating the aptness of African languages in education and the manner thereof. What is needed now is implementation. In light of the dire situation of the Khoisan languages of Botswana, **Chebanne** and **Dlali** examine the state's language policy. They courageously characterize it as one of the factors contributing to the marginalization and disempowerment of Khoisan minorities and the endangerment and subsequent death of their languages. In turn, **Aronin** studies the challenges of multilingual education from the perspective of affordances and complexity theories. She argues that the concept of Dominant Language Constellations is instrumental to make better sense of innumerable affordances that are present in multilingual educational settings as it enhances their appropriate selection and management. Crucially, it enables one to quickly detect and efficiently categorize the affordances that reduce problems in the context of multilingual education.

4.3 Text-linguistics

The last group of articles concerns textlinguistics, specifically argumentation and appraisal theory. **Mugumya** explores the discursive practice of editorial texts writing in Runyankore-Rukiga newspapers, in particular their generic structure and rhetorical devices. He demonstrates that, while the structure of Runyankore-Rukiga editorials conforms to that typical of English newspapers, it exhibits distinct rhetorical moves and argumentation principles. He observes that due to commercial reasons and the apprehension of possible consequences when defending freedom of speech, editorial writing in Runyankore-Rukiga has been discontinued – a fact that Mugumya deplors. He argues that editorials are relevant, and their publication should resume. **Kabugo** discusses the manifestations and patterns of participation and decision-making that emerge through evaluation and appraisal in the context of participatory community development processes. To be exact, he studies how participants use Luganda to express assessment and make decisions during interactive discourse. **Jakaza** analyzes the role of sensationalism in argumentation in debates in the Zimbabwean parliament. He proposes that the main function of sensationalist language in legislative argumentation is rhetorical rather than dialectic. Arguers utilize sensationalist language to convince and win the debate in their favor. However, his critical observation is that the use of sensationalism as an argumentative move is often misused and abused.

Each of the seventeen contributors of this volume has at some point been closely associated with Prof. Marianna Visser either as her student, colleague, or research associate. Although to a varying extent, the academic careers of all of us have thus been influenced by Prof. Visser's ideas on language and linguistics – perhaps even on life, more generally. We offer this special issue of *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics PLUS* as an acknowledgement of Prof. Visser's scholarly achievements and her contribution to the studies of African languages in South Africa. No less significantly, may this *festschrift* be an expression of our most sincere gratitude for the professional and personal generosity with which Prof. Visser has treated us.

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