

Optimal Domains Theory and Bantu Tonology: A Case Study from Isixhosa and Shingazidja,
Farida Cassimjee & Charles W. Kisseberth--Review

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Field Methods 2
29 March 1999

This article attempts to use Optimality Theory, and in particular the Optimal Domains version of Optimality Theory, to account for the tonology of two Bantu languages Isixhosa and Shingazidja. The article begins with a brief introduction to Optimality Theory, followed by an introduction to the generalities of Optimal Domains Theory before diving into the data. The authors introduce a small number of constraints and begin analyzing data, not only from the two languages they wish to focus on, but also other languages that differ from these minimally. As the article progresses, they continue to introduce constraints that are needed to analyze still more data and continue the process, adding constraints and comparing Bantu languages, to the end of the article.

The authors conclude that Optimality Theory, with Optimal Domains Theory, is far better than rule-based analyses to capture the tonal systems of Isixhosa and Shingazidja in particular, and Bantu languages more generally, because of two over-arching factors: it eliminates the need to postulate several rules to account for fundamentally related phenomena; and because it can capture the differences between Bantu languages by postulating minimal re-ranking of constraints rather than by needing an entirely new set of rules.

On the advantages of Optimality Theory, I have no doubt. I have seen repeatedly in many accounts that constraint-based approaches like Optimality Theory have a number of advantages over rule-based approaches. The ability to unite fundamentally related phenomena in a single constraint-ranking, and associating related languages with minimal re-ranking are just two of the most-commonly cited reasons. However, I have had no previous encounters with Optimal Domains Theory, and I found their introduction to it quite difficult to follow. By reading through the article more than once I was able to piece together some of what I think they meant; however, the article was one hundred pages, and it was excruciating to read through for someone not familiar with Bantu or particularly interested in tone.

For the reader not familiar with Bantu languages, the frequent comparisons to other Bantu languages got in the way of the point the authors were trying to make, and made their exposition all the more confusion. Something that would have been extremely helpful would be to provide some more background information on how the Bantu languages related to each other and a list of what they were so that the reader could refer back to them. In a book on Bantu tone, this was probably not seen as important, but it would have made their comparisons across languages more meaningful.

The article could also have been broken up better. A one hundred-page article on an unfamiliar topic is impossible to read in one sitting. Clearer and more frequent section

breaks would have helped the read-through process somewhat. I also found that, given the length of the article as is, it would perhaps have been better off published as a stand-alone book or monograph. In that format the authors might have taken the time and space to spend more time on fleshing out Optimal Domains Theory in a more familiar, and simpler context. Such a format would also have encouraged an explanation of languages in the Bantu family, as well.

Overall, the article might prove to be a good reference for those in the field, but I found it dense and unenjoyable. The article was too long to be a chapter of a book or for an introduction to the subject of Optimal Domains and tone. It was too short for what I believe the authors intended. I would encourage them to rewrite.