

## African linguistics draws international scholars

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For the first time in its 43-year history, the Annual Conference on African Linguistics chose the Tulane uptown campus for its meeting, attended by 140 scholars and students from around the world. Organized around the theme “Linguistic Interfaces in African Languages,” the conference took place March 15–17.



Olanike Orie, associate professor of anthropology, organized the first Annual Conference on African Linguistics held on the Tulane campus. She wears a traditional Yoruban "gele" headpiece. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

“Everyone was happy, the talks were good, the food was good, the weather was perfect,” quipped conference organizer Olanike Orie in summary of the event. Orie, an associate professor of [anthropology](#), presented the bid to bring the conference to campus.

More seriously, Orie talked about the conference theme. “It had to do with how levels of grammar interact, and how language is arranged in the mind.” These levels include the formation of sounds, words, sentences and meaning. Generally speaking, linguists assume each level operates independently of other levels, she said.

Our facility for language is highly organized, said Orie. “One part is devoted to sounds, another to how sounds are combined and then, moving up the ladder, you have words, sentences and meaning. When these levels are combined, you get the full package of a language.”

The intention of the conference, said Orie, was to invite presentations that examined the interaction of these different levels, using African languages to illustrate how grammar is arranged in the human mind as well as how language interacts with the environment.

“For example,” she said, “there was a talk on evolutionary linguistics and how African languages combined with European languages in the African Diaspora to form pidgin and creole languages.”

For the first time, the conference included presentations on signed languages as well as spoken ones. “Both spoken and signed languages are processed in the same part of the brain,” said Orie.

More than 100 presentations were given during the three-day event, and Orie anticipates publishing peer-reviewed selections from the proceedings.