

Morphosyntactic variation in Swahili: Tracing descriptions past and present

Swahili is a Bantu language spoken by some 100 million people across East Africa. In addition to its high speaker numbers and geographic spread, Swahili is one of the few African languages for which we have written materials from over a century ago. There are Swahili manuscripts dating from the 18th century – many of which record text and language which is likely to be older. Interest in this written tradition in part gave rise to descriptions of Swahili by European linguists, missionaries and grammarians towards the end of the 19th century. Another key feature of the descriptive accounts of Swahili from this period was the interest in (dialectal) variation in the language, with Swahili spoken along the coast from Southern Somalia to northern Mozambique, on a number of islands and into the ‘mainland interior’ of East Africa.

Many of these early accounts focused on lexical and phonological differences. However, there are also descriptions of grammatical differences on which the present talk focuses. We revisit a number of these earlier sources with a view to examining the variation described, compare these accounts to present-day variation, and to develop a more comprehensive picture of morphosyntactic variation and change in Swahili (cf. Nurse and Hinnebusch 1993). Morphosyntactic variation remains an under-examined aspect of Swahili, and the talk aims to show how the study of this variation in the early sources contributes to a better understanding of the interacting processes of language change, dialect contact and convergence, and effects of standardisation in the history of Swahili.

Early materials are taken from a number of key sources. We consider the data in Steere’s (1870) seminal *Handbook of the Swahili Language* which is based primarily on the Zanzibari dialect Kiunguja - the dialect on which ‘Standard Swahili’ was based and developed in the twentieth century. We also examine also Velten’s (1901) *Safari za Wasuahili* ‘Travels of the Swahili people’, which is a key reference for this time period, Sacleux (1909) which draws on descriptions of ten Swahili dialects (although focusing on Kiunguja), and Stigand’s (1915) comparative study which provides a more explicit account of dialectal variation in Swahili, primarily in phonology and the lexicon. Finally we consider a set of more recent sources in Lambert (1957, 1958a,b) which examine the Chijomvu, Kingare, Chifundi and Vumba dialects of the southern Kenyan coast. We examine the following domains of variation in these sources:

- Verbal morphology – e.g. subject and object agreement, plural marking; behaviour of monosyllabic verb stems such as the retention of infinitive *ku-* prefix
- Nominal domain and nominal dependents - e.g. variation in class 1/2 prefixes *m-* ~ *mu-*; variation in class 1/2 possessive agreement *y-ake* ~ *w-ake*, noun class membership, personal pronouns *mimi* ~ *mie*;
- Tense-aspect-mood distinctions – e.g. near and distant past tense *-li-/-liki-*;
- Negation strategies – e.g. the use of the negative word *hapana*
- Locative formation – e.g. noun class prefixes, *vahali* ~ *mahali*, class 16 concord *va-*

We use these sources and examples of variation to contribute to the discussion on the historical development of Swahili, and pathways of grammatical change more broadly, including in contexts of high linguistic diversity, language contact and multilingualism. The talk aims to provide a better understanding of morphosyntactic variation in Swahili, Swahili dialects, and how the dialects have changed over time. We show that many of the areas in which this earlier variation was described are similar to those found in present day Swahili, or in Bantu languages more widely. We also pay attention to issues of authorship and voice, as well as how processes of standardisation have impacted on the Swahili seen in the present day.

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