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Language Diary - Swahili

Part 1: Your Language in the World

- a. Swahili is a Bantu language widely spoken in Africa. There are three groups of Swahili speakers. The first group includes islands on the coast such as Zanzibar, Pemba, Mafia, and the Comoros as well as some inland towns such as Ujiji (Central Tanzania), and Tabora (West Tanzania). In these places Swahili is considered a “mother tongue.” The second group includes who reside in the mainland of East Africa and use Swahili for social purposes. Thirdly, there are those who use it in schools and speak it as a third language behind their “mother language” (usually another Bantu language) and English (Mohammad Introduction).
- b. In most countries, Swahili is spoken as a second language (English being the primary) and it is estimated that twenty to thirty million people speak it as a second language. There are no more than five million first language speakers of Swahili and most of them are found on the islands along the coast of Africa such as Tanzania (Mohammad Introduction) .
- c. Swahili is used as a Lingua Franca meaning it is used for communicating between vernaculars which are not mutually intelligible. In most countries where it is spoken English is the primary language. Swahili is an official language of Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya (Encyclopedia Britannica).
- d. Swahili is a written language. The extent to which Swahili is taught in schools in Africa varies between countries. Until 2015 in Tanzania grade school students were taught in Swahili with English as part of the curriculum as a language subject. In higher grade levels through University it was reversed and English was the language used for instruction. Since, Tanzania has become the first sub-Saharan African country to use an African language as the medium of instruction throughout the schooling years (Quartz.com).
- e. Due to its influences from Arabic, Portuguese, Persian, and English, there is a lot of literature written in Swahili. Tanzanian and Kenyan standards of Swahili dominate both print and broadcast media in Africa. Swahili is also known for its long standing tradition of poetry (Kelly 100). At first, fiction in Swahili mainly consisted of stories inspired by indigenous oral narrative traditions, Arabic tales, and translations of works by European writers (Encyclopedia Britannica). In 1960 Muhammed Said Abdulla wrote a series of detective adventures. The first titled *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale*, ‘Shrine of the Ancestors,’ started a transition in Swahili fiction toward stories which reflected the East African Experience of industrialization, westernization, and the struggle for self-government and development of the post-independent society (Encyclopedia Britannica).
- f. Relationships can be seen between Swahili and a variety of languages because a large majority of words in Swahili are borrowed from other languages. However, their phonological forms have been altered making them appear strictly Swahili to the language’s speakers. Some of the languages Swahili has borrowed words from are

English, Arabic, Persian, Indian languages, Portuguese, German, and even other Bantu languages (Mohammad Introduction),

2. Swahili is written substantially in the Latin alphabet. However, unlike English Swahili does not use the letters 'Q' and 'X.' In addition, instead of the letter 'C' Swahili uses the letter 'CH.'

Swahili letters and pronunciation (omniglot.com)

A a [a] B a [be] CH ch [tʃ/tʰ] D d [d] E e [ɛ] F f [f] G g [g] H h [h] I i [i] J j [dʒ] K k [k/kʰ]
L l [l] M m [m] N n [n] O o [ɔ] P p [p/pʰ] R r [r] S s [s] T t [t/tʰ] U u [u] V v [v] W w [w] Y y [j]
Z z [z]

Part 2: Semantics

1. Kinship Terms

English	Swahili
Mother	mama
Mother-in-law	mama mkwe
Son	mwana
Son-in-law	mkwe wa kiume
Aunt	shangazi 'father's sister' mama mdogo 'mother's younger sister' mama mkubwa 'mother's elder sister'
Uncle	mjomba 'mother's brother' baba mkubwa 'father's older brother' baba mdogo 'father's younger brother'
Father	baba
Father-in-law	baba mkwe
Daughter	binti
Daughter-in-law	mkamwana
Nephew	mtoto
Niece	mtoto
Sister	dada
Sister-in-law	shemeji
Brother	kaka
Brother-in-law	shemeji
Grandmother	bibi
Grandfather	bubu
Grandparents	bibi na babu 'Grandma and Grandpa'
Grandchild	mjukuu
Parent	mzazi
Parents	wazazi

There does not seem to be any derivational morphology taking place. However, words that refer to similar relationships only differ by a few letters. This can be seen in words like *bibi* (grandmother) and *bubu* (grandfather).

2. Color Terms (Berlin and Kay 40)

English	Swahili
Black	nyeusi
White	nyeupe
Red	nyekundu
Green	kijani

The rest of the Swahili color terms are used as descriptives or loan words and refer to things of that color rather than the color itself. Some are borrowed from other languages.

English	Swahili
Grey	kijivu 'ashes'
Orange (fruit and color)	chungwa 'orange fruit'
Brown	khudhurungi (Arabic) 'brown'
Yellow	kimanjan 'turmeric'
Blue	bulu (English) 'blue'
Purple	urujuani (Persian) 'purple'

Part 3: Phonetics/Phonology (Mohammad 1-11)

- [p] = voiceless bilabial plosive (as in *mpapai* 'pawpaw')

[p^h] = aspirated voiceless bilabial plosive (as in *paka* 'cat')

[b] = voiced bilabial plosive (as in *baba* 'father')

[^mb] = prenasalized voiced bilabial plosive (as in *mbali* 'far')

[t] = voiceless alveolar plosive (as in *tango* 'cucumber')

[d] = voiced alveolar plosive (as in *dola* 'dollar')

[ⁿd] = prenasalized voiced alveolar plosive (as in *muhindi* 'corn')

[k] = voiceless velar stop (as in *kitabu* 'book')

[k^h] = aspirated voiceless velar stop (as in *kapa* 'zero')

[g] = voiced velar stop (as in *goti* 'knee')

[^ŋg] = prenasalized voiced velar stop (as in *ngoma* 'drum')

[tʃ] = voiceless palato-alveolar affricate (as in *chumba* 'room')

[dʒ] = voiced palato-alveolar affricate (as in *jengo* 'building')

[ⁿdʒ] = prenasalized palato-alveolar affricate (as in *injili* 'gospel')

[f] = voiceless labiodental fricative (as in *fimbo* 'stick')

[v] = voiced labiodental fricative (as in *vazi* 'dress')

[θ] = voiceless dental fricative (as in *daharuba* 'storm')

[ð] = voiced dental fricative (as in *thumni* 'fifty cents')

[s] = voiceless alveolar fricative (as in *samaki* 'fish')

[z] = voiced alveolar fricative (as in *zawadi* 'present')
 [nz] = prenasalized voiced alveolar fricative (as in *kwanza* 'to begin')
 [ʃ] = voiceless palato-alveolar fricative (as in *shati* 'shirt')
 [x] = voiceless velar fricative (as in *nuskha* 'duplicate')
 [ɣ] = voiced velar fricative (as in *ghala* 'store')
 [h] = voiceless glottal fricative (as in *hewa* 'air')
 [m] = voiced bilabial nasal (as in *mama* 'mother')
 [n] = voiced alveolar nasal (as in *nazi* 'coconut')
 [ɲ] = voiced palato-alveolar nasal (as in *nyumba* 'house')
 [ŋ] = voiced velar nasal (as in *ng'ombe* 'cow')
 [l] = voiceless alveolar lateral (as in *laana* 'curse')
 [r] = voiced alveolar lateral (as in *radi* 'thunder')
 [w] = voiceless bilabial semivowel (as in *wali* 'rice')
 [j] = voiceless palatal semivowel (as in *yai* 'egg')
 [a] = low front vowel (as in *chama* 'party')
 [i] = front vowel (as in *tii* 'obey')
 [u] = back vowel (as in *fuu* 'husk')
 [e] = mid vowel (as in *pete* 'ring')
 [o] = back vowel (as in *popo* 'bat')
 [ɪ] = high unrounded front vowel (as in *kiti* 'chair')
 [ʊ] = high rounded back vowel (as in *kuku* 'chicken')
 [ɛ] = open mid high front vowel (as in *peremende* 'peppermint')
 [ɔ] = half open mid rounded back vowel (as in *chombo* 'utensil')

2. Like English, Swahili has aspirated sounds. It also has consonants that are prenasalized meaning a nasal and a non-nasal consonant will function as one sound.

/p/ > [p]
 > [p^h] when syllable-initial

/k/ > [k]
 > [k^h] when syllable-initial

/b/ > [b]
 > [m^b] when preceded by nasal [m]

/d/ > [d]
 > [n^d] when preceded by nasal [n]

/g/ > [g]
 > [ŋ^g] when preceded by nasal [ŋ]

/dʒ/ > [dʒ]
 > [n^{dʒ}] when preceded by nasal [n]

/z/ > [z]
 > [nz] when preceded by nasal [n]

These prenasalized consonants are an example of assimilation.

3.

Consonants

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato- alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosives	p b			t d			k g	
Affricates					tʃ dʒ			
Fricatives		f v	ð θ	s z	ʃ		x ɣ	h
Nasals	m			n	ɲ		ŋ	
Laterals				l r				
Semi-vowels	w					j		

Vowels

	Front		Central		Back	
	unrnd.	rnd.	unrnd.	rnd.	unrnd.	rnd.
High	i				u	U
Mid	ɪ		e		o	ɔ
Low	a					

Part 4: Syntax

1. mkulima mnene = a farmer fat 'a fat farmer'
 noun + ADJ

kikombe kidogo = a cup small 'a small cup'
 noun + ADJ

Conclusion: Adjectives follow nouns (Mohammad 63)

2. Mojawapo ya vitabu vya John. 'A book of John's'
Head + Possessor

Rafiki ya John 'A friend of John's'
Head + Possessor

Conclusion: Swahili has Head-Poss

3. kwa (preposition) + basi (noun phrase) = kwa basi 'by bus'

na (preposition) + mkalimani (noun phrase) = na mkalimani 'by an interpreter'

Conclusion: Swahili has prepositions (Mohammad 100)

4. The way in which you negate a sentence in Swahili is dependent on the verb and the tense. There are some general rules but also a lot of special cases.

The negative present has no tense sign. The last vowel of the affirmative verb is changed from -a to -i in order to construct the negative present form (Mohammad 142).

Positive: Sipika 'I do cook.'

Negative: Sipiki 'I do not cook.'

The present negative tense of the verb 'to have' is created by attaching a negative marker to the na (Mohammad 143).

Sina 'I have not.'

Huna 'You have not.'

For the negative future the verbal marker is -ta (Mohammad 145).

Kuanguka 'to fall' **sita**anguka 'I will not fall.'

KA Tense is used to give narrative meaning to single observations that are recounted (Mohammad 159).

Positive: Tulimtazama hapa na pale tu**ka**mwona.

'We looked for him here and there and found him.'

Negative: Tulimtazama hapa na pale tu**si**wone.

'We looked for him here and there but did not find him.'

Positive: Watafanya kazi hapa na pale wakafanye pia?
'How can they work here and also work there?'

Negative: Watafanya kazi hapa na pale wasifanye?
'How can they work only here without working there?'

For the KI conditional tense there are two ways to change the sentence to the negative conditional tense (Mohammad 156).

1. Use the word kama and the present negative

Kama hupiki chakula, mama yako atakasirika.
'If you don't cook the food, your mother will get angry.'

2. Use the negative participle -sipo- preceded by a positive or an affirmative subject prefix

Usipopika chakula, mama yako atakasirika.
'If you don't cook the food, your mother will get angry.'

With monosyllabic verbs, the infinitive KU is used to give stress to the verb stem.

Usipokuja kesho, mwalimu wako atakuadhibu.
'If you do not come tomorrow, your teacher will punish you.'

5. (a). Swahili has many auxiliary verbs which all have different uses and are accompanied by tense markers (Mohammad 80-84).

Kuwa 'to be'

Weza 'can'

Pata 'get'

Kwenda 'to go'

Kwisha 'to finish' when functioning as an auxiliary it refers to a state of existing or action completed before the point of time indicated in the context.

Kuja this is used to refer to an action that will take place at an implied time in the near or distant future

Taka this suggests the meaning of assurance that a desire or purpose will definitely or most probably be fulfilled

Mchezaji alikuwa akifunga goli.

'The player was scoring a goal.'

The prefix 'li' modifies the tense and the prefix 'a' agrees with the marker for who is doing the verb.

Amina **alikuwa** amelala.
'Amina was sleeping'

Conclusion: Swahili auxiliaries precede the main verb.

6. The basic word order in a sentence in Swahili is subject, object, verb

Ng'ombe	hula	nyasi.	'Cows eat grass'
Subject	verb	object	

7.

1. Noun-ADJ
2. Head-Poss
3. Preposition
4. Negation is dependant on the verb and the tense
5. AUX-verb
6. Subject, verb, object

These findings are consistent with the word order universals discovered by Joseph Greenberg because his findings indicate that verb medial languages place the possessor after the possessed which is true of Swahili. This is also consistent with his data that in SVO languages auxiliaries are more likely to come before the verb.

Part 5: Morphosyntax

1. In Swahili, articles function differently than they do in English. There is no 'the' or 'a' which precede nouns however, there are different prefixes which are added to indicate how many. What prefix is added depends on the class of the noun.

Some examples:

M-WA Class (Living class: refers to humans usually)

mtu = The 'm' indicates there is only one. This could mean 'a person' or 'the person'

watu = The 'w' indicates more than one. This could mean 'persons' or 'the persons'

M-MI Class (refers to non-human living things)

mnazi = The 'm' indicates there is only one. This could mean 'a coconut tree' or 'the coconut tree'

Minazi = The 'mi' indicates more than one. This could mean 'coconut trees' or 'the coconut trees'

JI-MA Class (small class referring to a variety of different nouns)

jiwe = 'a stone' or 'the stone'

mawe = 'stones' or 'the stones'

Some nouns in this class don't take any prefix for the singular

gari = 'a car' or 'the car'

magari = 'cars' or 'the cars'

KI-VI Class (refers to names of inanimate things)

kilima = 'a hill' or 'the hill'

vilima = 'hills' or 'the hills'

Some nouns in this class take the prefix 'ch' for the singular and 'vy' for the plural

cheti = 'a note' or 'the note'

vyeti = 'notes' or 'the notes'

2. Like English, Swahili differentiates between past present and future. Different prefixes are used to determine tense. These prefixes depend on the verb.

Kupika 'to cook'

Present: **Ninapika** 'I am cooking'

Past: **Nilipika** 'I cooked'

Future: **Nitapika** 'I will cook'

The prefix 'ni' corresponds to the noun 'I' and the other prefix indicates tense.

Swahili also uses the present perfect or -ME- tense. This is used to express the completion of an action and the result (Mohammad 131).

Kufika 'to arrive'

Amefika. 'He has arrived.'

Swahili also has the Habitual -HU- tense. This tense marks customary actions without distinction of time.

Kucheza 'to play'

Hucheza mpira kila siku.

Because the HU takes no subject prefix, it can have a variety of meanings.

'I usually play football everyday.'

'You usually play football everyday.'

'He/she usually plays football everyday.'

'We usually play football everyday.'

'You (pl) usually play football everyday.'

'They usually play football everyday.'

Sometimes it is necessary to define the subject so a self-standing pronoun is used.

Mimi huchoza mpira kila siku. 'I usually play football everyday.'

Swahili also includes several negative tenses which are outlined in part 4 question 4.

2. Swahili is a classifier language meaning there are different noun classes which determine the different variations of that noun. Like English, nouns don't change based on gender.

M-WA Class (generally humans)

mtu = 'person'

watu = 'persons'

M-MI Class (non-human living things)

mnazi = 'coconut tree'

Minazi = 'coconut trees'

JI-MA (small class referring to a variety of nouns)

jiwe = 'stone'

mawe = 'stones'

Some nouns in this class take 'J' for their singular.

jani = 'leaf'

majani = 'leaves'

Some have no prefix in the singular, usually those referring to fruits or produce of plants, relationships, occupation, or status

chungwa = 'an orange'
machungwa = 'oranges'

Shangazi = 'aunt'
mashangazi = 'aunts'

Nouns which are uncountable only have a plural form

maji = 'water'

Nouns used as augmentatives stressing size or importance are also in this noun class

Jitu = giant
majitu =giants

KI-VI (inanimate things)

kilima = 'hill'
vilima = 'hills'

N-N (most of these nouns are borrowed from other languages)
Many of these don't change from singular to plural. There are a lot of birds, insects, and a majority of species of animals in this category.

paka = 'cat'
paka = 'cats'

U-U (this includes nouns of various types with singular and plural forms, abstract nouns, uncontrollable nouns, and nouns that indicate the names of countries)

ukuta = 'wall'
kuta = 'walls'

The U becomes W when the stem starts with a vowel

wakati = 'period'
nyakati 'periods'

Some nouns in this class don't have plural forms

wino = 'ink'

4. In Swahili other parts of speech such as adjectives and verbs agree with nouns. These relationships are shown using prefixes. The prefix that is used also depends on the noun Class (Mohammad 53).

Some examples:

M-WA Class

Singular: **mtu** mzuri 'a good person'

Plural: **watu** **wazuri** 'good people'

M-MI Class

Singular: **mti** **mkubwa** 'a big tree'

Plural: **miti** **mikubwa** 'big trees'

KI-VI

Singular: **kiti** **kikubwa** 'a big chair'

Plural: **viti** **vikubwa** 'big chairs'

5. In Swahili verbs show agreement with their subject and their object.

The subject prefix is assigned to the affix which occurs in the initial position in the verb stem in a sentence. The prefix relates to the noun which is the subject of the verb in the sentence. The following chart illustrates the subject prefixes (Mohammad 59).

Noun Class	Class Prefix	Subject Prefix
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M-WA (1)	m-	a-
M-WA (2)	wa-	wa-
M-MI (3)	m- or mw-	u-
M-MI (4)	mi-	i-
JI-MA (5)	ji- or j-	li-
JA-MA (6)	ma-	ya-
KI-VI (7)	ki- or ch-	ki-
KI-VI (8)	vi- or vy-	vi
N-N (9)	n- or stays the same	i-
N-N (10)	n- or stays the same	zi-
U-U (11-14)	u- or w-	u-
U-U (11-14)	ny- or stays the same	zi-
U-U (11-14)	u-	u-
KU (15)	ku-	ku-
PA (16)	pa-	pa-
KU (17)	ku-	ku-
MU (18)	mu-	mu-

Examples:

Walimu wawili wanasafiri leo. 'Two teachers are traveling today.'

Vikombe wimeanguka chini. 'The cups have fallen down.'

The object prefix is defined as a non-initial pronominal prefix immediately preceding the

stem of a verb. The object prefix is used to indicate that the object of a sentence has a definite reference. There are also distinctions between the direct object prefix and the indirect object prefix (Mohammad 60).

Noun Class	Class Prefix	Object Prefix
M-WA (1)	m-	-m-, -mw-, -mu-
M-WA (2)	wa-	wa-
M-MI (3)	m- or mw-	u-
M-MI (4)	mi-	i-
JI-MA (5)	ji- or j-	li-
JA-MA (6)	ma-	ya-
KI-VI (7)	ki- or ch-	ki-
KI-VI (8)	vi- or vy-	vi-
N-N (9)	n- or stays the same	i-
N-N (10)	n- or stays the same	zi-
U-U (11-14)	u- or w-	u-
U-U (11-14)	ny- or stays the same	zi-
KU (15)	ku-	
PA (16)	pa-	po-
KU (17)	ku-	ko-
MU (18)	mu-	mo-

Examples:

Mwanamke aliipiga ngoma. 'The woman beat the drum.'

The prefix 'i' refers to the drum.

Mwizi aliviba vikapu vyangu. 'A thief stole my baskets.'

The prefix 'vi' refers to the baskets.

Sometimes a verb may occur with a second object as a direct object which may be

related to the verb.

Waziri amempa **m**wanafunzi zawadi. 'The Minister has given the student a prize.'
The 'm' in the verb 'to give' corresponds with 'the student.'

6. In swahili bound morphemes are used to show tense as well as who is going the action.

Nisipike 'I shouldn't cook.'

Usipike 'You shouldn't cook'

Asipike 'He/she shouldn't cook'

Tusipike 'We shouldn't cook.'

In this case the prefix changes each time to show who is doing the action at that point in Time (Mohammad 76).

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