

Researching morphosyntactic variation in Swahili: dialects, change and identity

This talk explores issues involved in investigating dialectal variation in Swahili. We report on a new collaborative project entitled ‘Grammatical variation in Swahili: contact, change and identity’ which seeks to explore factors involved in present-day variation in Swahili. Swahili has long been a crucial lingua franca across East Africa where it is spoken by more than 100 million people. A long-standing language of wider communication along the East African coast, the last 200 years have seen Swahili become further established throughout the region. Swahili was used by both German and British colonial administrations in Tanzania and Kenya, leading in the twentieth century to the development of ‘Standard Swahili’ based on a southern urban dialect of Zanzibar. Increased regional mobility has meant Swahili is now spoken in Mozambique, Uganda, DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and north-eastern Zambia.

Dialectal variation in Swahili, particularly in relation to phonology and morphology, has long been noted. However, much of the early descriptive work of Swahili focused on the higher prestige varieties which were associated with coastal communities. There has also been little attention paid to structural variation. The project examines Swahili as spoken in Tanzania and Kenya with a focus on the domains of morphology and syntax. We ask: 1) What is the present-day morphosyntactic variation found in Swahili? 2) What role does language contact play in this variation? 3) What is the relationship between structural variation in Swahili and speaker identity?

We present preliminary observations relating to areas in which there is evidence for variation in Swahili or for which there is observed variation within Bantu languages, such as:

- Agreement patterns – noun class assignment and agreement, plural formation, agreement with conjoined nouns, animate concord (Marten 2000)
- Tense-aspect-mood systems (Drolc 1992, King’ei 2000, Rugemalira 2010)
- Evaluative morphology – diminutive systems, augmentation, politeness
- Clausal syntax – relative clauses (Shinagawa 2019), object marking (Gibson et al. 2019) and patterns in locative marking (Marten 2010)

Against the backdrop of our current understanding of variation in Swahili, we also explore methodological issues involved in examining structural variation in Swahili, considering the role played by contact with both Bantu and non-Bantu languages. We also discuss ways of exploring speaker attitudes and the link between dialectal variation in Swahili and speaker identity. The talk contributes to our understanding of Swahili, the role of contact-induced language change, microvariation and dialect syntax more broadly.

References

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