

## Morphosyntactic borrowing in closely related varieties: ‘False cognates’ in Swahili

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The present talk examines instances of contact-induced morphosyntactic change in the East African language Swahili, where material which had historically been lost is ‘reintroduced’ through contact with closely related languages, which have retained the original feature.

Swahili is a Bantu language spoken by some 100 million people across East Africa where it has long played a central role as a regional lingua franca. Historically Swahili was the first language of communities of speakers living along the East African coast. Today however Swahili is also used as a language of wider communication, often by speakers who have other Bantu languages in their repertoire. Variation in Swahili, particularly in phonology and the lexicon, has long been noted (e.g. Stigand 1915, Steere 1919, Bakari 1985). There is evidence that language contact has also had an impact on the morphosyntax of Swahili varieties. This talk explores instances of language contact which result in the reintroduction of morphology which had previously been lost in Swahili. These effects occur against the background of the close genetic relation and structural similarity of Swahili and neighbouring Bantu languages, which facilitates morphological transfer.

For example, coastal and Standard Swahili have lost the historical class 12/13 diminutive markers *\*ka-/\*tu-*, which have been replaced by class 7/8 with prefixes *ki-/vi-*. However, in Swahili varieties spoken in the East African Mainland (‘Mainland Colloquial Swahili’) these diminutive prefixes have been reintroduced, due to second-language Swahili-speakers who have similar features in their first language (Kihore et al. 2001, King’ei 2000).

### Standard Swahili (Mohamed 2001: 43)

a. m-toto	‘child’	(class 1)
b. wa-toto	‘children’	(class 2)
c. ki-toto	‘small child’	(class 7)
d. vi-toto	‘small children’	(class 8)

### Colloquial Swahili (King’ei 2000: 86)

a. m-toto	‘child’	(class 1)
b. wa-toto	‘children’	(class 2)
c. ka-toto	‘small child’	(class 12)
d. tu-toto	‘small children’	(class 13)

Similarly, the reconstructed habitual aspectual suffix *\*-ag* has been lost in Swahili, where habitual is instead encoded through the innovative prefix *hu-*. However, Colloquial Mainland Swahili employs the suffix *-ag*, as the result of contact with other languages spoken in the region which have retained this marker (Rugemalira 2010, Gibson and Marten 2015).

- (1) Wewe      **hu**-l-a      wapi?      [Standard Swahili]  
2SG.PRO    HAB-eat-FV    where  
‘Where do you (usually) eat?’

- (2) U-na-ku-l-**ag**-a      wapi?      [Colloquial Swahili]  
SM2SG-PRS-STM-eat-HAB-FV    where  
‘Where do you (usually) eat?’ (Rugemalira 2010: 232)

These examples in some sense reconstitute a historical situation which has been lost diachronically. In fact, if it were not from the descriptive evidence from different stages and varieties of Swahili, these forms could well be analysed as inherited from the reconstructed Proto-Bantu, or as ‘false cognates’. This talk furthers our understanding of variation in Swahili and the role of contact-induced change in variation. It also shows the type of material which can be impacted as a result of contact – i.e. evaluative morphology and tense-aspect-marking. The talk also sheds light on the role of typological constraints in contact-induced change, in this case between closely related languages.

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