

Emerging dialect areas of Swahili: Evidence from structural variation, speaker perceptions and language attitudes

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Swahili is a major East African lingua franca spoken by more than 100 million people across a large geographical area and several international borders. As a result, Swahili is spoken by diverse communities in a wide range of socio-cultural contexts. Dialectal variation in Swahili, particularly in relation to phonology and morphology, has long been noted (e.g. Steer 1870, Stigand 1915, Bakari 1985, King'ei 2000, Rugemalira 2010). However, little attention has been paid to structural variation and to the emergence of new varieties such as urban youth languages or dialectal differences linked to more recent projects of nation building. In addition, the effects of multilingualism and language contact, both structural and sociolinguistic, in the emergence of new dialects has only recently begun to be analysed.

More generally, variationist sociolinguistics has had a 'long-standing bias towards speech communities in Western and especially Anglophone societies' (Kasstan 2017, Adli & Guy 2022: 10) and Ebongue & Hurst (2017: 2) argue that the study of African languages could make a substantial contribution to the development of sociolinguistic theory.

Addressing some of these challenges, we draw on structural and sociolinguistic data from a comparative study on Swahili variation. Data were gathered via a combination of elicitation, interviews and observation from speakers in four locations in Kenya (Kilifi, Kisumu, Lamu, Nairobi) and four locations in Tanzania (Dar es Salaam, Iringa, Moshi, Mtwara). In terms of morphosyntactic variation, we focus on three variables: Habitual marking, locatives, and noun classes and agreement. The morphosyntactic data are linked to results from perceptual and attitude surveys, showing varying attitudes towards Swahili, and different perceptions of this variation. Together the data suggest a broad emerging dialectal division into four main areas: Kenya Mainland, Tanzania Mainland, Coastal Dialects, and Western Swahili. In addition, urban centres, in particular Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, display separate dynamics, showing influence from several dialectal regions, and the emergence of urban varieties such as the youth language Sheng in Nairobi. Our data also show that while larger geographical dialect groupings are emerging, micro- and macro-variation is also found within and across these zones.

Results reported in the talk help to better understand the emerging dialectal variation in Swahili while at the same time providing novel and complex evidence for dialectology and variationist theory and methodology. We show how the study of dialectology and variation linguistics stands to derive considerable benefits from the study of African languages.

Keywords

Swahili, East Africa, morphosyntactic variation, multilingual linguistic ecologies, urban youth languages

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