

Kiswahili: A Fast-spreading Lingua Franca

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Introduction

Kiswahili or Swahili (words which in this small article are used interchangeably) is currently spreading in alarming proportions. Originating on the East African Coast, the house-hold language has spread from Tanzania and Kenya to many regions in the world, including Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia. It has spread to the islands of Comoros and Madagascar, and recently it has spread to Ethiopia, South Sudan, Angola, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Lesotho. It has also spread to other countries in the world like America, Germany, UK as well as China and Japan. The percentage of radio and TV stations with Swahili programs is growing in many countries, increasing the number of Kiswahili speakers around the world. Notable among these radio and TV stations with regular Swahili broadcasts are Radio Deutsche Welle, The BBC, Voice of America, Radio China International, Radio Moscow and Radio Japan. The language is so popular and influential, in role and usage, that it has reached the extent of being included in the curricula of some universities and colleges across the world.

There is a great affiliation between Kiswahili and a number of East African vernaculars such as Kipokomo, Kitaita, Kimijikenda, Kichagga, Kisambaa, Kizigua, Kipare, Kizaramo, etc. Kiswahili has borrowed words from some East African languages and it keeps on borrowing. For instance, the Chagga terms *ndafu* (roasted he-goat) and *mtori* (porridge-like food cooked with bananas and meat) have gained access into Swahili vocabulary. The language has words borrowed from Portuguese, Arabic, German, Hindi, and over the years it has been borrowing extensively from English, through adaptation or modification. Some English words incorporated into Kiswahili by adaptation or modification are *Kemia* (Chemistry), *Fizikia* (Physics), *Biolojia* (Biology), *Jiografia* (Geography) and *Historia* (History). Others are *kaboni* (carbon), *kontinenti* (continent), *eroplani* (aeroplane), *injinia* (engineer), *basi* (bus), *baiskeli* (bicycle), *trekta* (tractor), *kompyuta* (computer), *injini* (engine), *treni* (train), *edita* (editor), *risiti* (receipt) and *kampasi* (campus).

Modern Kiswahili has sprung from many dialects spoken on the East African coast and the nearby islands. These dialects include Kimrima, Kimtang’ata, Kimvita, Kipemba, Kiunguja, Kitumbatu, Kimakunduchi, Kiamu, etc. Over the centuries, these dialects have had a great influence and effect on modern Kiswahili and some words from these particular dialects constitute a big part of different Swahili lexicons.

All in all, Kiswahili is a Bantu tongue, contrary to English which is an Anglo-saxon language. The fact that Kiswahili is Bantu in nature and origin accords it a wider audience, compared with other languages spoken sporadically in East and Central Africa such as English, French and Portuguese.

1. Swahili Texts in Arabic and Latin

Despite the fact that there is no thick corpus of Swahili texts written in Arabic and Latin, these two languages have had a considerable influence on the orthography and usage of Kiswahili. Historical-cultural and lexicographical-orthographical investigations reveal that Kiswahili has a great connection with Arabic and Latin. In terms of Arabic connection, there are many Swahili words with Arabic roots. Swahili words with Arabic orthography are *Korani, kitabu, mwalimu, shukrani, salamu, sala, zaka, idi, shehe, sura, kibla, madarasa, etc.*, – to mention only a few. Even the term Swahili is an African pronunciation of the Arabic word *Sawahili* (a term which means ‘of the coast’). Kiswahili is connected with Latin on the grounds that it is written using the Latin alphabet, but with the exemption of q and x.

One of the first writers to share information on Kiswahili using Arabic was Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan brilliant and adventurous traveller, who visited Kilwa Kisiwani in the 13th century (about 1331 AD). In his writings Battuta gave a very convincing and first-hand account on the Kilwa inhabitants who had a very attractive culture, including the Swahili language.

History has it that the earliest Swahili documents in Arabic were letters written in 1711 in pre-colonial Tanganyika. It is believed that these documents were written at Kilwa Kisiwani where Kiswahili was spoken with great vigor and elegance.

2. The Role of Kiswahili

Kiswahili is a very useful lingua franca, not only in East Africa but also in the world at large. The functions of Kiswahili rest on the following factors: it promotes Swahili literature, remembering specifically the intriguing writings of Swahili poets like Shaban Robert, Amri Abeid and Mathias Mnyampala. Kiswahili gets fame and credence in the creative writings of acclaimed Swahili novelists like Shafi Adam Shafi who wrote *Kuli*, Euphrace Kezilahabi who wrote *Rosa Mistika* and Mohamed Said Abdulla who wrote *Duniani Kuna Watu*. The value of Kiswahili is also witnessed in the impressive works of Swahili playwrights like Emmanuel Mbogo who wrote the popular play called *Morani* and Penina Mlama who wrote *Hatia*. Literature expressed in Swahili carries relevance and beauty of its kind.



Kiswahili is a perfect medium for promoting business and trade, culture and economy. It is a language for religion, greatly used as a tool of evangelization by the earliest missionaries to East Africa. It is a language for politics that has been and is still used as a tool for both cultural and political liberation. Kiswahili is a language which consolidates the value of citizens of the regions where it is spoken. It equips or enables social activists in championing or spearheading various campaigns for human rights, including women emancipation. It is an effective medium for communication and administration. Kiswahili promotes tourism through advertisements and films – a good example being the Tanzanian film entitled *The Royal Tour* (launched recently) which has proven to be very successful, making multitudes of tourists from all corners of the world to visit the country.

Another factor that underlies the role or function of Kiswahili is the fact that it is a language which is well-known for its richness in idioms, sayings, comparatives and superlatives. Kiswahili has sayings with great educational value, such as the ones collected by Shaban Saleh Farsi (S.S. Farsi) – a collection (entitled *Swahili Sayings*) that has remained popular and useful decades in and decades out. Kiswahili enhances civilization in different societies and communities. It promotes international relations and Julius K. Nyerere (the first president of Tanzania) used Kiswahili as a language for unification and reconciliation.

Kiswahili brings sustainable development and it attracts foreign scholars like Rajmund Ohly from Poland whose contribution to the growth of Standard Swahili Dictionary (*Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu*) is immeasurable. Another foreigner remembered for his great contribution to the value and importance of Kiswahili is the late Jan Knappert from Netherlands who wrote the famous book called *One Century of Swahili Verse*.

Understanding the socio-cultural and politico-economic role of Kiswahili, countries like South Africa, Ethiopia, Namibia, Botswana, South Sudan, etc., have decided to teach Kiswahili in their schools and colleges and some universities around the world have established Kiswahili Faculties. It is pleasant to note that African Unity, formerly known as Organization of African Unity (OAU), has decided to adopt Kiswahili as a medium of communication. In addition to that, Kiswahili has proven to be so valuable that in 2021 UNESCO designated 7th July of every year to be an International Kiswahili Day. This year (2022) the Day was commemorated in a very successful way and in the future it is expected to be even better.

To avoid the shame and difficulty of using foreign languages which, as Chinua Achebe once stated, no African can master a hundred percent, many countries (including Tanzania) are contemplating using Kiswahili as a medium of instructions, from primary school to university. This is a decision which deserves praise and encouragement.

3. Peculiarities of Kiswahili

Kiswahili is unique in the sense that it has very regular syllables. It has labial syllables that are easy to utter and it has no guttural syllables as it is witnessed in some Bantu languages. These characteristics, among others, make Kiswahili easier to learn as well as giving it more coinage. Furthermore, Kiswahili has no problem in differentiating male and female pronouns. Despite this fact, it is not possible to translate into Swahili phrases like ‘his book’ and ‘her book’ because the translator would only end up saying ‘*kitabu chake*’ – a phrase which makes it difficult for a person to express or identify the male and female pronouns packed therein.

Another peculiarity of Kiswahili lies in the fact that, in some respects, it has expressions that use fewer letters and words. For example, the English sentence “Don’t sing for me” in Kiswahili would simply be ‘*Usiniimbie*’. This means that in Kiswahili, it is very common for the speaker to express the subject, verb, object, tense, mood, etc., in a speech construction which uses only one word.

4. Local Languages, Kiswahili and English

A local language in Tanzania means the language a person learns from the native speakers of his/her locality of origin. Also known as ‘mother tongues’, local languages in East Africa include Kichagga, Kisukuma, Kimaasai, Kinyakyusa, Kiganda, Kiacholi, Kitaita, Kiluo, Kimeru, Kigogo, Kinyaturu, Kimakonde, Kisambaa, Kinyamwezi, Kinandi, and so and so forth. In these local languages there are also dialects, just as it is the case in Kiswahili. For instance, in Kichagga (spoken in the communities that live on the southern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro), there are about seven distinct dialects, namely, Kyirombo, Kyiunjo, Kyimochi, Kyiuru, Kyikiwoso, Kyimashami and Kyisiha. Existence of local languages makes Swahili a second language to most East Africans, Tanzanians in particular, and it is on these grounds European languages like English, French and Portuguese are considered third languages.

For some people, local languages sometimes stand as barriers to both spoken and written Swahili. For example, there are people from certain ethnic groups in Tanzania who fail to differentiate l and r. These people write and pronounce *lala* (sleep) as *rara*. Others do not have the letter h in the alphabet of their local language and because of that they write and pronounce the word *hapa* (here) as *apa*. In some areas of northern Tanzania, people pronounce s as *th*, hence pronounce *sasa* (now) as *thatha*. There is an ethnic group members of which pronounce p as *b*, and as a result they pronounce *Paulo* (Paul) as *Baulo*. Also in the northern part of the country (the location is kept anonymous), there are people who pronounce the syllable *gha* as *nga*, hence pronounce *magharibi* as *mangaribi*. All these influences and barriers of the local languages make it difficult, if not impossible, for some Kiswahili speakers to speak or write Standard Swahili as they are supposed to.



Allowing Kiswahili to exist parallel or hand in hand with English is a phenomenon or culture which, from the lingual perspective, stands as a contradiction in terms. It is rather funny and being dishonest to popularize Kiswahili while even Kiswahili instructors send their children to English-medium schools. It is even funnier to hear Kiswahili teachers and people like MPs who are supposed to speak good Swahili expressing themselves in what is nowadays looked upon as Swahi-English – that is, speaking Swahili crammed with numerous English words, some of them uttered carelessly and wrongly. It is indeed saddening to see that even platforms like National Radio, National Newspapers, National Television, etc., are no longer Standard Swahili media. Lamentably, during the era of Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, the Parliament and the national broadcasting organs (including radio, newspapers and news firms) were among the front-line propagators of Standard Swahili.

5. Standard Swahili versus Colloquial Swahili

Like any other language, Kiswahili grows but it must be guarded against growing awkwardly. For example, in Tanzania – a country which took pride at being the place where the best Swahili is spoken – is about to be overtaken by other countries, as far as Standard Swahili is concerned. In the light of this pathetic reality, Kiswahili would keep on growing, but it must not grow or expand with deformation(s). A candid observer remarked sarcastically and regrettably that nowadays, in many parts of the country, even the people supposed to be Swahili experts speak *Kiswahili chenye matege* (Swahili suffering from rickets). Some examples of non-Standard Swahili or ‘*Kiswahili Mamboleo*’ as some people would label it are remarks like “*makusudically*” (intentionally), “*majina yangu ni*” (my names are), “*haujui njia ya kwenda mjini*” (you don’t know the way to town), *kusensabiwa* (to be counted); “*njaa imepelekea watu wengi kufa*” (hunger has made many people to die); “*Sofia ametafunwa na nyoka*” (Sofia has been chewed by a snake); “*Rashidi anatembea na mguu*” (Rashidi is walking on foot), etc. Other equally disappointing and shocking non-Standard Swahili statements are remarks like “*kalamu iko kwa kichwa*” (the pen is on the head); “*huu ni wakati wa kukula*” (this is time for eating); “*Luka alioa mke jana*” (Luke married a wife yesterday); “*chui ameua umbwa*” (a leopard has killed a dog), etc.

Conclusion

Kiswahili has evolved over the centuries and it is there to stay. It is a mighty tide and an irresistible tongue spreading like fire in harmattan wind. For its fast growth and positive effect, Swahili lovers are supposed to give thanks and glory to God. All Kiswahili researchers are people whose time and effort are well spent. Sincere congratulations to all people who wholeheartedly value and utilize this grand language. Undeniably, Kiswahili has now become an African language among world languages and an African commodity among global commodities, with a great attraction – witnessed near and far. That is something each one of us should be proud of. However, the quality of Kiswahili should not be compromised by its rapid growth or expansion. Let us maintain Standard Swahili because by so doing the future generations will get a lasting heritage from us, a legacy beyond compare.

