

Plenary 2: Hannah Gibson (University of Essex)

From varieties to variation: Contact, change and identity in Swahili

Swahili is a Bantu language spoken by more than 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 living along the East African coast. Today, however, Swahili is also used as a language of wider communication, often by people who have other languages in their dynamic, multilingual repertoires.

Variation in Swahili, particularly in phonology and the lexicon, has long been noted (e.g. Sacleux 1909, 1939, Stigand 1915, Steere 1919, Bakari 1985). However, the domain of morphosyntax remains the subject of less examination and there is no comprehensive account of the present-day syntax of Swahili. This talk examines variation in Swahili, drawing on data and insights from an ongoing collaborative project which seeks to further our understanding of the role of language contact in the variation found and the link between this and the speaker identity. Ongoing research shows that variation is found in a number of domains. This includes in noun class assignment, agreement, clausal syntax and tense-aspect-mood marking. For example, the use of the suffix *-ag-* is considered an innovation in mainland, colloquial Swahili and has been linked to contact with other Bantu languages spoken in the area (Abe 2009, Rugemalira 2010). However, the distribution of *-ag-*, in Swahili has not been systematically examined and its usage (1) and associated interpretations remain underexplored.

- (1) u-na-ku-l-**ag**-a wapi?
SM2SG-PRES-STM-eat-HAB-FV where
'Where do you (usually) eat?'
[Colloquial Swahili, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania Rugemalira 2010: 232]

Evaluative morphology has also been identified as an area of variation, including in the formation of Swahili diminutives (King'ei 2000). Data from Iringa (Tanzania) show the prefix *gu-* – not present in Standard Swahili – on both the nominal form and the modifier, (2).

- (2) gu-nyumba gu-kubwa
20(?)-house 20(?)-big
'a big house' [Iringa, Tanzania]

An emergent theme also relates to perceptions of variation. There is a feeling amongst some speakers that variation only relates to named dialects found along the so-called 'Swahili coast'. However, given the vast geographic area in which the language is now found, it is unsurprising that there is evidence of difference across East African. This talk highlights some of the areas in which morphosyntactic variation in Swahili can be found and shares insights from examining variation in highly multilingual contexts. Attention is also paid to methodological considerations – and opportunities – involved in conducting research on this major world language.

References

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