"Is this Language Standard?"
A General Survey on Swahili
Computer-Mediated Communication

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Abstract

The written language has preserved its traditional characteristics for centuries. However, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) seems to pose a threat to this longstanding tradition, introducing new styles that challenge the established norms. Consequently, two opposing camps have emerged: the "conservatives" who decry the CMC language for breaking traditional writing rules, and the "liberals" who embrace its evolution. This study analyses the features of Swahili CMC. Data was collected between 2015 and 2023 from three social media platforms, namely Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Data analysis was carried out using a qualitative approach. The results reveal that Swahili online users employ a variety of fashionable Swahili styles, some of which encounter resistance from certain users, sometimes leading to heated debates about the appropriateness of CMC. It is suggested that, as long as the use of CMC is confined to informal communicative settings, it should be regarded as part of youth culture and a distinctive communicative practice.

Keywords: *Online Swahili writing, Computer-Mediated Communication, young people, Facebook, WhatsApp, Tanzania*

Introduction

The written language, traditionally holding undisputed dominance over its spoken counterpart in formal communication, faces a global threat from emerging media writing styles. Youth, in particular, often bear the blame for these changes attributed to the effects of new media. With the pervasive influence and advances of the internet, a narrative has arisen suggesting that young people are crafting their own distinctive writing styles; subsequently influencing and altering the conventions of written language. In computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC), young people engage in a unique form of language that takes on an informal tone influenced by their relationships and the distinctive features of available social media platforms. Consequently, CMC exhibits a significant influence of spoken language features. Scholars have introduced various terms in an attempt to encapsulate the amalgamation of spoken and written traits within this evolving linguistic landscape. Several terms are involved including *silent orality*, *teen-talk*, *textisms*, *textese*, *textspeak*, *netspeak*, *netlingo*, and *weblish*. The list also includes

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Internet-Slang, *Netzslang*, *Webslang*, and *Chattisch* (cf. Androutsopoulos, 2006; Crystal, 2001; Farina and Lyddy, 2011; Soffer, 2010).

CMC is a type of language primarily used when people communicate via short message service (SMS) available on most mobile phones. Its usage has seen a significant expansion since its initial introduction in the 1990s (Farrell & Lyddy, 2012). However, with the advent of smartphones and related electronic devices, there has been a significant shift from using SMS to instant messaging (IM) due to both cost considerations associated with SMS and, more importantly, social factors (Church & de Oliveira, 2013). The question of whether the use of CMC language represents a stylish evolution or a threat to conventional language standards remains a subject of ongoing debate. Some argue that CMC language poses a challenge to traditional writing styles, while others advocate for the acceptance of these linguistic variations (Cameron, 1995; Crystal, 2001, 2008; Thurlow & Bell, 2009; Varnhagen et al., 2010). The debate pits linguists against individuals such as teachers and parents. While linguists may remain indifferent, the opposing side expresses concern about the potential shift in writing styles that could lead to the demise of the standardised written language.

Contrary to these concerns, studies suggest that there is no significant correlation between CMC language and students' writing skills in academic settings (Varnhagen et al., 2010). Instead, it is argued that CMC promotes language development in both children and adults through various creative aspects, including writing, vocabulary, phonology, and the like (Thurlow 2006; Thurlow and Bell, 2009). Of all languages, English has had the greatest impact due to its global reach, the UK's quick adaptation to technology, and thirdly, English was the pioneering language of the internet and introduced SMS users to English styles earlier (Crystal, 2008).

Factors contributing to the use of CMC features include speed, time constraints, small keypads, and, most notably, the limited writing space allowing only 160 characters. Consequently, users compress their SMS to fit within these character limitations to keep SMS costs down. Messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram have somewhat mitigated these challenges by providing comparatively unlimited space for messages. Even if users need to write multiple messages, the service cost remains low (Church & de Oliveira, 2013).

This study seeks to investigate language usage in Swahili CMC using Tanzania as a case study. Specifically, the paper aims to identify Swahili CMC features and explore the reasons that prompt participants to employ them. Tanzania was chosen because the status of the language in the country is unique not only in the region but on the entire African continent. Kiswahili is the only African language that ensures effective communication with almost everyone in Tanzania. Given that Swahili CMC in Tanzania involves not only the Swahili language, it is imperative at this juncture to briefly examine the overall language composition in the country.

Language Composition
Tanzania's language composition falls into two main categories. Firstly, there are official languages, namely Swahili and English. Secondly, there are various ethnic groups with distinct language families, including Bantu, Cushitic, Nilotic, and Khoisan (Muzale & Rugemalira, 2008). While English serves as the medium of instruction in secondary and

tertiary education, Kiswahili dominates in public spaces (Bwenge, 2012; Mohr & Ochieng, 2017; Rubagumya, 1990). It is worth noting that a small segment of the population occasionally uses English, particularly those who attended private primary schools where English is the language of instruction (cf. Blommaert 2006; Legère 2006; Mkilifi 1972; Rubagumya 1991; Vavrus 2002). Additionally, there is a growing trend of the government establishing English medium primary schools in the country. Furthermore, there are minority languages such as Arabic, Indian, and Chinese, primarily retained and spoken by individuals of Arabic, Indian and Chinese origins, respectively (Peterson, 2014).

The influence of Kiswahili also extends to social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube posts and their subsequent comments. The existence of two official languages in Tanzania allows those with proficiency in both languages to mix and switch codes in formal and informal conversations. However, this is context-dependent. Native languages are disappearing at an alarming rate as they are increasingly crowded out by Swahili (Brenzinger, 2007; Legère, 2007; Petzell, 2012). They rarely appear in public, except for a few common phrases popularised by artists. Therefore, Swahili is the only dominant language in offline and online communication among Tanzanians. The next section describes the methods used to conduct this study.

Methodology

In this study, Swahili texts from selected social media platforms were analysed. Six thousand (6000) messages were collected for investigation: 1400 messages from WhatsApp[2], 1800 from Facebook, and 2800 from YouTube. Collecting WhatsApp group texts presented challenges, as a significant number of individuals approached were hesitant to provide data; ultimately, only five out of ten people agreed to participate. Those who consented were asked to share texts, and confidentiality was assured throughout the process. The data collection spanned from 2015 to 2023.[3] In contrast, Facebook and YouTube posts and comments were collected with relative ease, given their assumed public nature (Burkell et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016).

WhatsApp group discussions were selected because of their vibrant nature, particularly in engaging topics like politics, football, and controversial social issues, resulting in longer discussions compared to other topics. Collecting such discussions was crucial as participants often respond swiftly to opponents and supporters, adding linguistic richness to CMC research. Meanwhile, Facebook and YouTube posts and comments were included in the study because they attract individuals who actively comment and share news, political and social posts. These platforms often witness the emergence of opposing viewpoints, contributing to lengthy and interesting discussions.

During the analysis, it was observed that many of the texts exhibited various CMC features, with only a handful chosen as a representative sample. Notably, a single message

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[2] I am deeply grateful to Dr Zawadi D Limbe, Dr Gaudensia Emanuel, and Mr Bruno Kapinga for their willingness to export their WhatsApp group discussions from which the examples used in this study were taken.

[3] Initially, the paper was intended to investigate CMC language during the 2015 Tanzanian General Election. However, due to a range of factors, the study faced delays, resulting in the extension of the data collection period up to 2023.

could encompass multiple CMC properties. The subsequent section delves into the discussion of common features observed in Swahili CMC.

Features of Swahili CMC
Like offline communication, online language usage varies from one context to another depending on the composition of group members. In most cases, adopted communication styles reflect the nature of the group in terms of its identity. This section focuses solely on Swahili language features as invented and used in social media. The results of this research have shown that the Swahili CMC is characterised by several features such as spoken language, abbreviations, the omission of sounds and syllables, the use of numbers to represent sounds, the unique use of punctuation marks and the use of emojis and emoticons. Some of these features are common among SMS Swahili users (see Mutembei, 2011).

Spoken Language
Unlike formal written documents, online social networks permit individuals to write in their own chosen styles. Consequently, the lack of adherence to standard Swahili becomes apparent. This strategy manifests at both the word level and beyond, as illustrated by Table 1 from a text extracted from a WhatsApp group.

Table 1: Spoken Features of Swahili CMC

CMC	Ndo maana lipumba kawakimbia
Gloss	That is why Lipumba has run away from you
Standard	Nd**iyo** maana Lipumba **ame**wakimbia

In the word *ndo*, two spoken language features are evident. Firstly, in spoken Swahili, the sounds represented by -i- and -y- are often omitted. Secondly, there is an issue with capitalization, which will be addressed later, where the first letter of the surname "Lipumba" has been written with a lowercase *l*. Lastly, *kawakimbia* – meaning "he has run away from you" – is a written form commonly found in newspaper headlines. As a rule, subject affixes must appear in the verb of a statement. However, in spoken Swahili, the present perfect tense in the third person singular, indicated by *ka-*, may replace *ame-* where *a-* serves as a third-person subject affix for animates. Additional spoken features are illustrated in Table 2 from a Facebook comment.

Table 2: Spoken Features of Swahili CMC

CMC	Banae Fanya Imalizie Kwan Inakoelekea Kuna Ki2 Cha Kujifunza Iko Poa 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 Zaid Ya Sana, 12 13 14
Gloss	Sir/madam make sure you finish it because where it goes next there is something to learn, it's actually very nice!
Standard	(Bwana wewe) fanya hima uimalizie kwani inakoelekea kuna kitu cha kujifunza. Ni nzuri sana.

Table 2 presents several issues, with capitalization being the most prominent. Each first word is capitalized, which could be the result of a deliberate choice by the user, a default setting or it might be an auto-correction feature of the device. Furthermore, the first word

banae is a combination of two words: *bwana* – "mister" or "man" – and the expression *eeeh*! However, although *bwana* is grammatically used to address men, in ordinary conversations, it can also be used to address women. The entire phrase resembles expressions like "hey guy" or "hey man" in the English language. The writer has used *banae*, a currently popular spoken term among the youth. This phrase was previously used to playfully mock Indians in Tanzania, some of whom struggle to pronounce *Bwana eeh.* Between the second and third words, the complete word *hima* has been omitted. In the seventh word, number 2 is combined with letters, a topic to be discussed later. Lastly, the phrase *iko poa* – meaning "it is nice" – is slang that has evolved from the term *poa*, signifying "cool".

Briefly, Swahili CMC is characterised by the omission of words, syllables, and certain sounds. This strategy is employed to minimise writing effort because participants need to type a higher number of characters when writing in the standard language.

Influences from Arabic, for example, have introduced dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ into certain Swahili words, often leading to confusion with the alveolar fricatives /s/ and /z/, respectively. The primary reason for this confusion lies in the absence of dental fricatives in the sound systems of many Bantu languages spoken in Tanzania. Therefore, the confusion is widespread among many Swahili speakers. This challenge extends to the written format. Similarly, the trill /r/ and the lateral approximant /l/ are interchangeably used. In some ethnic languages, these two sounds are employed in free variation, while in others, /r/ is absent from their phonetic systems. Consequently, this impact resonates with other users of the Swahili language, as illustrated below:

Table 3: Spoken Features of Swahili CMC

CMC	Bale mbona hana samani kubwa imekueje madrid dau wametenga kubwa
Gloss	Bale doesn't have much value, why has Madrid set aside a lot of money
Standard	Mbona Bale hana thamani kubwa, imekuwaje Madrid watenge dau kubwa?

In the given context, the writer intended to convey *thamani* [θamani] meaning "value" and not *samani* [samani] which refers to "furniture" in Standard Swahili. This distinction is further illustrated in the following example.

Table 4: Spoken Features of Swahili CMC

CMC	Tunapofanya dhambi tunazani ya kwamba Mungu hatuoni.
Gloss	When we sin, we think God does not see us.
Standard	Tunapofanya dhambi tunadhani kwamba Mungu hatuoni.

The participant intended to say *tunadhani* [tunaðani] "we think" instead of *tunazani* [tunazani], which is not a Swahili word at all. Many Swahili speakers, especially those from upcountry, of course, and some from the coast confuse these phonetic features. For some, such phonetic features function as allophones of the same phoneme.

Table 5: Spoken Features of Swahili CMC

CMC	Munajisumbuwa bure arie kufa musi muwaziee
Gloss	You worry for no reason, never think of a dead person
Standard	Mnajisumbua bure, msimuwazie aliyekufa.

Apart from other technical errors such as the splitting of the words *arie-kufa* and *musi-muwaziee,* the incorrect insertion of *u* in the first part of the word "m**u**si", and also the sound /r/ is used incorrectly. The participant had to write *aliyekufa* [alijekufa] and not *ariyekufa* [arijekufa]. As mentioned earlier, native languages leave a deep impact on speakers, which in turn affects the way they speak and write Kiswahili.

Slang
Like many other informal contexts, social media allowed local, national and international media houses easy access through their Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts. This has permitted some participants to comment on posted news. In such situations, the use of slang is no exception. Below is an example of slang used in a WhatsApp chat:

Table 6: Slang Usage in Swahili CMC

CMC	jamaa n xheeedah - literal translation "This guy is a problem"
Gloss	This person is extraordinary (in whatever actions referred)
Standard	Jamaa ni shida

The final word *xheeedah* is a special online encoding of the word *shiiida.* This is the emphatic spoken way of the Swahili standard word *shida* – "problem." From the Swahili regular writing *shida*, the participants change its encoding to *sheeedah* or *xheeedah* and lengthen the vowel *i* from *shida* [ʃida] to *shiiida* [ʃiːda] for emphasis, all the more so as it has a new nuance of meaning, rather than denoting a mere problem, it signifies something extraordinary. For example, one participant wrote, "Mo Salah *ni sheedah*" to appreciate the player's ability to score goals. Other words more or less similarly affected are *hatari* [hatari] "danger" or "dangerous" to *hatareee* or *hatareeh* [hatarɛː]. In both words, the number of *e*'s or the addition of an *h* at the end of the word is a matter of individual preference. However, it seems that the level of astonishment and appreciation determines the number of *e's*.

Writing Style
One of the most striking features of online CMC is its special encoding. While keyboard constraints may contribute to certain writing errors, other unique writing styles are invented to facilitate communication contexts. In other words, sometimes, online writing styles are purely for entertainment purposes.

Omission of Letters
People unfamiliar with the CMC language may initially be surprised by the CMC writing style, especially the omission of some letters. Of course, there are different levels of letter omissions, from fairly simple encodings, which most Swahili readers can easily understand, to the most complicated. The main problem is that the decision to omit letters is at the discretion of the writers themselves. There are no agreed forms of abbreviations. Nevertheless, the usual abbreviation pattern involves omitting vowels in the middle and

final positions. Another letter that is often omitted is an *h* at the beginning of a word. However, the omission of the letter may be associated with the inability to write Standard Swahili as shown below:

Table 7: Letters Omitted from Swahili CMC

No	CMC	Omitted Slot	Standard Swahili (omitted sounds in bold)	Gloss
A	awafai ni mabeber	_awafai ni mabeber_	**H**awafai ni mabeber**u**	They are not good, they are imperialists
B	siyo vizur hvo lakn	siyo vizur_ h_v_o lak_n_	siyo vizur**i** h**i**v**y**o lak**ini**	That's rather unfair
c	India sa ngapi saiv?	India __ sa_ ngapi sa_ _iv	India **ni** sa**a** ngapi sa**sa** hivi?	What time is it in India now?
D	Najua insta tu	_najua insta__ tu	**Ni**najua Insta**gram** tu	I only know Instagram
E	Nk hoi hp	N_k_ hoi h_p_	Ni**k**o hoi ha**pa**	I am absolutely tired
F	hdth nzr	h_d_th_ nz_r_	ha**di**thi nz**u**ri	A good story
G	jmn salma mbn hvy	j_m_n_ sal_ma mb_n_ h_vy_	ja**m**a**ni** s**a**lama mb**ona** hivyo	How are you guys, why is the situation like this

Not only vowels and consonants, as long as they do not seem to confuse the reader, even entire words can be omitted. For example, the *ni* – "is" in (c) is a word, specifically a linking verb of the sentence, but it is also omitted. Online participants are likely to even skip words considered insignificant, focusing only on keywords or letters that can convey a message. Overall, consonants are commonly used as word identifiers. Because of this, vowels are dropped more often than consonants.

Using Numbers to Represent Sounds

To simplify CMC, some numbers are sometimes used to represent sounds. In this communication strategy, there are two main ways of using numbers: First, using number pronunciation without paying much attention to the letters used to write a particular number. For instance, when emphasis is placed on pronunciation such as the English number 1 [wʌn], [mɔɟa] in Swahili, their orthographies (*one* and *moja*) are irrelevant. This works perfectly when exploiting English numbers. Second, they take numbers and use both pronunciation and orthographic representations (having in mind its orthography) and put them adjacent to letters. Interestingly, the latter works best when using Swahili numbers. Therefore, both features were taken into account. However, only a few numbers are commonly used, namely the English number 2 [tuː] and Swahili numbers 1 [mɔɟa], 7 [saba] and 8 [nanɛ].

The English number 2 is the only English number whose sound is used extensively by online participants to represent the Swahili word *tu* - "only" or a verbal personal pronoun affix *tu* - "we" or "us," it plays both lexical and grammatical functions. As a word, *tu* means

"only" or "just." Swahili online users place it in all possible slots occupied by the word *tu*. Of the three numbers, the English number 2 is used more than the numbers 1, 7 and 8. Table 8 shows how social media communicators make use of numbers when chatting.

Table 8: The Use of Numbers instead of Letters

No	CMC	Standard	Gloss
A	Mwanzo 2 hivyo je mwendelezo utakuaje	Mwanzo tu hivyo je, mwendelezo utakuwaje?	This is just a start, what's next?
B	ww ni kiazi2	Wewe ni kiazi tu	You are just a potato (an insult)
C	unapo2kana ndo 2jue kuwa unajua	Unapotukana ndipo tujue kuwa unajua?	Does your insult mean you're more knowledgeable?
D	Kuna Ki2 Cha Kujifunza	Kuna kitu cha kujifunza	There is something to learn
E	Hapa ni mkataba2	Hapa ni mkataba tu	The solution in this context is only a contract.
F	unaweza kununua kila kitu kasoro uhai2	Unaweza kununua kila kitu kasoro uhai tu	You can buy everything except life

The English number 2 has been used in a variety of ways in the Swahili CMC. Some retain the traditional writing format in which the number is written separately from other words when representing a word, recognising that it is an independent word and should be separated by space. Others combine the numeral with other words, even if they represent a word. There are several reasons for this strategy. First, perhaps participants place a high value on a message, so spacing and other technical writing rules are not given the attention they deserve. Some face writing challenges when on small writing devices (e.g. mobile phones, smartphones, and even tablets), resulting in messages that are sent not being written in a style they would otherwise like.

The use of the Swahili numbers 1, 7 and 8 indicates that all numbers, including their orthography, represent sounds that adjoin other sounds to form complete words. In Swahili, the numbers 1, 7 and 8 are orthographically written as *moja* [mɔja], *saba* [saba] and *nane* [nanɛ] respectively. Possible cases in which these numbers can be used therefore only concern those words that are written with the above orthography. The following are some examples written by online users using the Swahili numbers 1 and 7 instead of the letters *moja* and *saba*.

Table 9: The Use of Numbers Instead of Letters

No	CMC	Standard	Gloss
A	ila kasahau kitu ki1	ila amesahau kitu ki**moja**	But he forgot one thing
B	2po pa1...	**tu**po pamoja	We are together
C	chama k1 cha upinzan	chama ki**moja** cha upinzani	one oppositional (political) party
D	kwa7bu kaomba msamaha	Kwa **saba**bu ameomba msamaha	Because s/he asked for forgiveness

No	CMC	Standard	Gloss
E	7bu ya umri	**saba**bu ya umri	Due to age/Because of age
F	kw 7babu gani?	Kwa **saba**bu gani?	For which reason(s)?
G	Kwani unahitaj Tuo8?	Kwani unahitaji Tuo**nane**?	Do you need us to meet?
H	Mukilima Secondary School 'tuo8' hapa	Mukilima Secondary School 'tuo**nane**' hapa	Mukilima Secondary School, let's meet here
I	Kama una shida saana inafaa 2o8	Kama una shida sana inafaa **tuo**nane.	If you have a serious problem, we should meet

Table 9 shows that the orthographic representation of the Swahili number 1 is most often used to represent the same concept of the number one. It is oddly written by placing a number next to a letter, which is unusual in the formally accepted writing system. It may take some time for unfamiliar readers to decipher the message. Unlike number 1, the orthographic representation of number 7 has nothing to do with the concept of number; instead, the number is exploited to stand in the place of part of the word *saba-*. Surprisingly, some use the number 7 [saba] instead of the letters "saba" but do not omit the "ba", which if readers rely solely on what is written, could add *ba* to the word resulting in a meaningless word, as exemplified in (f). So, instead of "sababu" one could read "sabababu". Unlike number 1, number 7 plays an instrumental rather than notional role as shown in Table 9 (*d*, *e*, and *f*). As such, numbers in the Swahili CMC play varied roles as hinted above.

English Letter C Representing Swahili Sounds /si/ and /s/

The use of English letters to represent Swahili sounds is common in Swahili CMC communication. So far, only one letter seems to be common. This is the English consonant *c*. The English letter *c* [si:] is frequently used wherever it appears in online Swahili communication to represent a Swahili and sometimes English syllable, affix and sound *s* /s/ or *si* [si]. Note that, in standard Swahili, the letter *c* can only be used when embedded with an *h* to form a *ch* [ʧ] sound. Example 10 shows how the letter c surfaces in the Swahili CMC:

Table 10: Swahili Sounds Represented by the English Letter 'C'

No	CMC	Standard	Gloss
A	**c**jui ungeji**c**kiaje	**si**jui ungeji**si**kiaje	I don't know how you would feel
B	u**c**ku **c**talala	u**si**ku **si**talala	I won't sleep at night
C	kaz iko vzur songa nayo ba**c**	kazi iko vizuri songa nayo ba**si**	the work is good keep it up
D	**C**elew lkn iv kunatatzo gn	**Si**elew**i** lakini hivi kuna tatizo gani	I don't understand what a problem is
E	**C**o kwa sasa	**Si**o kwa sasa	Not now
f	- **c**tory tamu	**s**tori tamu	A beautiful story
g	Sho**c**t punda kahusikaje humu?	Sho**s**t, punda kahusikaje humu?	My dear: how was a donkey associated with this context?

Interestingly, sometimes using unusual letters is just for fun. For example, placing the English letter c to occupy the place of the standard and non-standard Swahili s as illustrated in (f) and (g) above, has nothing to do with saving space or time since the letter c does nothing but to replace s. Therefore, the use of the letter c might involve an identity construction, to be discussed later.

Substitution of Letters

Recently for unknown reasons, there has been a dramatic increase in the replacement of some standard Swahili letters with x a letter that does not exist in Kiswahili. They use x, in the places of s and z. Replacing x with z can only be excused for one reason: some smartphones use the QWERTY keyboard where the letters x and x are next to each other. Therefore, the substitution can also be made by mistake; instead of pressing a z key, a writer may hit an x key. The following are a few texts showing the s and z substituted by an x.

Table 11: Substitution in Swahili CMC

No	CMC	Standard	Gloss
a	*hapo **xax**a huyo jamaa afungwe mai**x**ha mana alku**x**udia kuua je**xh***	*hapo **s**a**s**a huyo jamaa afungwe mai**s**ha mana aliku**s**udia kuua je**s**hi*	As such, this person should be imprisoned for life for aiming to kill the army.
b	*U**x**i**x**ahau ulipotoka*	*U**s**i**s**ahau ulipotoka*	Don't forget where you come from
c	X**h**war	**s**hwari	Cool
d	Hatari **x**n huyo mu2!!.	Hatari **s**ana huyo mtu	That person is very dangerous
e	wanapenda **x**n ku2mia majina ya kike	wanapenda **sa**na kutumia majina ya kike	They like to use female names
f	m**x**katee tamaaa **x**kuu za mwi**x**ho **x**io mbali	m**si**kate tamaa **si**ku za mwisho **si**o mbali	Don't be discouraged, the last days are not far off
g	kwa ajili ya mpen**x** wake	kwa ajili ya mpen**zi** wake	for his/her lover
	MNAONAJE NINYI WEN**X**ANGU?	Mnaonaje ninyi wen**z**angu?	My colleagues, how do you see?

Had the substitution resulted in the creation of new words, a different assumption might have been made. As already mentioned, since the letter has no grammatical function, the substitution is probably linked to identity formation. This is particularly evident when young people struggle to establish their identity as a distinct group (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009).

Punctuation Marks

Aside from ignoring some writing rules, especially punctuation marks, from time to time, online participants use them in unique ways to achieve their intended goals. However, few of them are often employed because they seem easier to use than others. In addition, the inability to write correctly causes Facebook and WhatsApp messages to violate writing rules. Therefore, it is common to re-read some messages from time to time to clearly understand them. One of the few regularly used punctuation marks is the question mark. This marker seems more useful and relatively easy to use to indicate question intents.

Perhaps the desire for answers underscores its use in online texts. Below are some unique examples of how punctuation marks are used by Swahili online users:

Table 12: Punctuation Marks in Swahili CMC

No	CMC	Gloss
a	Account yangu kwa nini haifunguki????????	Why isn't my account opening????????
b	Kwamba nae kapiga kitovu nje?????	That she also dressed in a way that exposed her navel.?????

c	P1: Chama cha mageuzi na ujenzi wa taifa
	P2: ????????
	P3: jamani kwa mwenye kujua kirefu cha NCCR
	    anisaidiee!!!
	P4: ?
		P1: A reformation party and national building
		P2: ????????
		P3: Folks, for those who know the long form of
		    NCCR, let him/her help me!!!
		P4: ?

Sometimes, Swahili online users write it in an unfamiliar style to achieve their goals. For example, the juxtaposition of question marks may either highlight emphasis or express a desperate need to obtain answers. It might also display a sense of dissatisfaction or disappointment over the question or given statement. In (a), the repetition of the question mark emphasises the question of why his or her account does not open; (b) illustrates not a question but also denotes a sense of astonishment, not believing in what s/he reads; (c) is a dialogue in a WhatsApp group in which the first series of question marks might mean two things: first, surprised by the name of a political party which does not exist in Tanzania, and second, perhaps the writer scorns the whole idea in the posted statement. The last single question mark supports the question which requires someone to explain the acronym NCCR.

Another aspect that requires special attention in CMC is capitalisation. In standard Swahili, capital letters indicate proper nouns, the beginning of a new sentence, a letter after a period and a question mark to name but a few. As noted, social network users are reluctant to adhere to the rule of writing capital letters. However, in special cases, capital letters are employed to convey special meaning as shown in Example 13.

Table 13: Capital Letters Showing Special Meaning

No	CMC	Gloss
a	Habari leo ni gazeti la SERIKALI	Habari Leo is a government newspaper.
	GAZETI L A SERIKALI HUWA NASOMA MATANGAZO TU	(In) a government newspaper, I read only advertisements
	Angalieni vizuri hyo video👇 hivyo ndivyo KALAMU ya GOLI LA MKONO inavyofanya kazi.	Watch this video carefully, this is how a **ballpoint pen** works to score hand goals. (Context)- Watch carefully this video, that is how a pen designed for rigging election results works

Capital letters play various roles in the example given. In the first sentence (a) the word SERIKALI – "government" was deliberately highlighted to distinguish it from the rest of

the newspapers, most likely privately owned. The second sentence (b) places considerable emphasis on and expresses a strong dislike for public newspapers. In the third sentence (c), two noun phrases are written in capital letters to urge their colleagues in a WhatsApp group to watch a video that supposedly shows a special pen that can be used to manipulate ballot papers. The pen is compared to *goli la mkono* – "a goal scored by hand" in soccer because it is illegal. Generally, despite ignoring its standard use, capital letters are employed stylistically to highlight the writer's intention.

Emojis and Emoticons

Since CMC was strictly limited to scripts, efforts were made to add emotional aspects to soften messages; and ultimately emoticons and emojis were invented (Gajadhar & Green, 2005; Lo, 2008; Park et al., 2013; Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998). While emoticons were widely used in the Western world, especially in Europe and the United States, emojis were later developed and used in Japan in the 1990s (Guibon et al., 2016; Katsuno & Yano, 2002; Sugimoto & Levin, 2000; Yuki et al., 2007). Unlike emoticons, emojis are not limited to emotions. Instead, they represent many more characters. Emojis are becoming comparatively more popular than emoticons because their pictorial and sometimes coloured features make them easy to interpret. Emoticons are not easy to decipher, especially in communities that have recently started sending SMS and instant messaging. There is a great need for extensive research on the use of emojis and emoticons in the Swahili CMC as emojis and emoticons are widely used in Swahili online communication. A general survey of their use suggests that emoticons and emojis are popular on social media as well as WhatsApp and Facebook. Between the two, emojis are more common on WhatsApp than on Facebook.

Due to their simplicity, it is sometimes not uncommon for emojis to stand alone and give a reaction like sad (pensive face) 😔, (loudly crying face emoji) 😭, congratulations (clapping hands emoji) 👏, saying thank you (folded hands emoji) 🙏, surprise (flushed face emoji) 😳, and laughter (face with tears of joy) 😂. Table 14 shows several ways in which emojis are used in Swahili CMC. (a)

Table 14: Emojis and Emoticons in Swahili CMC

No	CMC	Gloss
a	😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂	😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂
b	😂😂😂😂 Mbavu zangu ;Shughuli ipo	😂😂😂😂 My goodness! It's very tight indeed
c	Hahahaaa shem hii kal nimech,eka kama mwehu walai sio kwa kuvurugwa huku 😂😂😂	Hahahaaa my in-laws, that's funny. I laughed like crazy, totally confused 😂😂😂
d	Au jibu halitoshi unataka mpka tuonyeshe njia 🤣🤣	Does the answer not satisfy you? Would you like us to demonstrate how to do it?
e	🙏🙏🙏🤣	🙏🙏🙏🤣
	🙏🙏Asante sana 🙏🙏	🙏🙏Thank you very much 🙏🙏
	😭😭😭😭Janga hili	😭😭😭😭This is a disaster

Most emojis appear at the beginning and end of sentences. A few, however, appear at both ends. However, a few also appear at both ends. In general, it can be argued that emojis serve to express emotions, regardless of whether they appear before or next to regular writing. They complement what the written texts cannot express in terms of emotions. All examples from (b) to (g) have a similar function of expressing emotions.

Despite this, some of them appear between texts and carry functional roles such as index pointing up to make writing easier, "look up" ☝️ or "it is down here"; 👇 in rare cases they are intended to warn and draw attention to something, such as "Please read the rule up there or look down here". Emojis can be used in individual or group communication, depending on the intensity of the emotion expressed, as explained above (Algharabali and Taqi, 2018). Owing to their unique features on social media, Swahili CMC has led to the emergence of metalinguistic discussions presented in the next section.

Metalinguistic Discussions on Online Swahili Writing

While some view young people's Swahili CMC writing as a key aspect that contributes to their distinctiveness, opponents argue that such writing styles distort language. The latter, "conservatives" advocate maintaining traditional writing rules in social media communication. On the other hand, the supporters of Swahili CMC, "liberals", defend their decision resulting in antagonism between the two perspectives. Debates on this topic often take place on social media platforms like Facebook, blogs, and WhatsApp groups.

For instance, one participant commented on his Facebook page that people who write stylish Swahili on social media are comparable to unintelligent students. This claim sparked a fierce debate between the two groups, with each vigorously defending its position. Sometimes, these debates escalate to the point where insults break out between opposing sides. Proponents of CMC language argue that the essence of communication lies in the ability to interpret characters encoded by others. Furthermore, they claim that this style is a form of expression embraced by young people, and is evident in various aspects of their lives. They contend that no one has the authority to dictate the writing system as long as young people understand it. Conversely, opponents argue that the CMC language distorts the standard language and will ultimately impact traditional writing forms. They criticize their opponents for their supposedly youthful and childish behaviour, labelling them as clumsy.

The misunderstanding between the two sides could potentially be resolved by applying anthropological and sociolinguistic concepts to understand the situation. One such concept is the notion of speech community, which considers several languages under the broader umbrella of a single known language. This concept has evolved from Bloomfield's idea which was confined to the language spoken by society to encompass languages spoken by smaller groups of people who use one or two languages (Bloomfield, 1933; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Gumperz, 1964, 1968; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1962, 1964; Salzmann, Stanlaw & Adachi, 2012). The scope of analysis of the concept has been further broadened to include CMC language which is also analysed based on the social profile of its users (Androutsopoulos & Ziegler, 2004; Morgan, 2009, 2014). Accordingly, the Swahili CMC has all the necessary features to be considered a speech community. It comprises young people who construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their social identities as can also

be found in other languages (Kataoka, 2003; Wilson & Leighton, 2002). Therefore, using unique features is a strategy to stand out as "Look, we are here!" in the community. Of course, struggles for recognition in society come in a variety of forms including the construction of their own idioms and proverbs and the "Swahilisation" of English verbs (cf. Mnenuka, 2012, 2013). All of them are visible on online social networks. It is, therefore, incorrect to assume that the Swahili CMC style is an extension of the formal usage of written Swahili. The fact that it is a language used primarily by people who understand each other; there are no legitimate reasons to prohibit young people from using it. As noted, in some cases, the media dictate their users to adopt new ways of writing.

Conclusion

This article aimed to explain salient features that surface in CMC language use. As mentioned, young people use uncommon language features, which may appear strange to some people. Some factors such as speed, time, pressure and small keyboards contribute to some degree to factors responsible for such "unfamiliar" writing. Of course, not all participants are satisfied with some features, consequently, two antagonistic sides have emerged: supporters of stylish coding and anti-Swahili CMC. Based on anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches, the use of CMC language features in Swahili written forms can be associated with the speech community and youth identity. Young people identify as different from other people in diverse ways; writing in their own style is one of them. It is therefore hoped that the Swahili CMC will continue to change as young people continue to invent new features and adapt to the inventions of new technologies. However, it must be noted that these styles are highly influenced by peer groups within their own circles. Not everyone can be messaged with such stylish texts. The signs represent group identity.

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