

# **The Implications of the Presence of South-Eastern Bantu Features in Kiswahili**

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## **Abstract**

The paper investigates the reasons for the presence of South-Eastern Bantu words in Kiswahili. Some of these languages are: Zulu, Swati, Xhosa, Ndebele, Shona, Sotho, Tswana, Venda, and Pedi. The speakers of these languages started moving into their current areas of residence between 300 and 500 AD. After careful consideration of the borrowed words, it is concluded that the borrowing that took place resulted from historical contacts which occurred long ago, when Kiswahili was presumably the main language of commerce on the Eastern African coast. During this time, Kiswahili influenced and was in turn influenced by the languages whose speakers were in constant contact with Kiswahili speakers.

## **Introduction**

Kiswahili, which is the most widely spoken language in Africa, south of the Sahara, has been described as having its origins in the Kenyan coast in the Sabaki valley, together with other related languages, such as Digo, Pokomo, Giryama and Ilwana. It is believed to have evolved around the 8th century (Nurse and Spear, 1985; Hinnebusch, 1981; Mochlig, 1981). The language then spread along the eastern coast from Mogadisho, in the north (in present day Somalia), to Sofala in the south (in present day Mozambique) between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Whiteley, 1969; Polome, 1967). The up-country expansion took place mainly during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when Kiswahili became virtually a lingua franca in facilitating Arab trading caravans up-country, the exchange of goods along the coast, the early colonial administration, the spread of Islam and Christianity, the promotion of education and literacy, and later the awakening of nationalistic sentiments in the countries of eastern Africa (Batibo, 1995).

The expansion and empowerment of Kiswahili has traditionally been associated with its contact with foreign traders, sailors and colonial powers, particularly the Arabs from whom it got its name Swahili from the Arabic word sawahil [sawa:hil], plural of sahil [sa:hil] 'coast'. Hence the word in the plural form referred to 'people/settlements of the coast.' The other groups which have enriched Kiswahili linguistically and culturally through various forms

of direct and indirect contacts are the Persians, the Turks, the Chinese, the Indians, the Malayans, the Portuguese and, more recently, the British. The languages of these groups have provided many new lexical items that are used today in the Swahili language<sup>2</sup> as loanwords (Knappert, 1985; Krumm, 1940). However, Swahili language has also adopted some of its vocabulary from the other local languages spoken in eastern Africa, both Bantu and non-Bantu. Some of this vocabulary was acquired much earlier (Nurse, 1988); but the language has experienced an influx of vocabulary from other African languages in more recent years as a result of the elaboration process by the Swahili language promoters so as to increase its functional capacity (Temu, 1982; Batibo, 1992).

### **South Eastern Bantu Influence in Kiswahili**

When tracing the history of Kiswahili, its sources of development have been usually limited to those of eastern Africa, Asia and Europe. In fact, another source of Kiswahili enrichment is to be found in southern Africa, from the languages belonging to south Eastern Bantu, especially the languages of Southern Bantu and Sala-Shona Bantu sub families. The Southern Bantu sub-family of languages comprises languages whose speakers settled in the southern parts of Africa during the Bantu migration between AD 300 and AD 500. The most prominent among these languages are Isizulu, Isixhosa, Isiswati, Isindebele, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi and Tshivenda. Some authors have included Emakhuwa, Elomwe and Chuabo (Janson, 1991/92; Batibo et al. 1997). On the other hand, the Sala-Shona, Bantu sub-family consists of those languages which settled in southern Africa much later during the Bantu languages migration. They include Shona, Ndau, Kalanga and Sena (Janson, 1991/1992).

It is argued in this chapter that some elements of Southern and Sala-Shona Bantu sub- families have been adopted in Kiswahili. These features were presumably borrowed during the long contacts between the north-eastern and the south-eastern trading groups, facilitated by foreign traders and sailors, particularly the Arabs and the Portuguese. Kiswahili, which was presumably used as a lingua franca for most of the trade activities on the eastern coast, must have been influenced by the various linguistic groups in which it was used. Likewise, Kiswahili made a linguistic, and probably cultural, mark on the languages with which it was in contact.

The linguistic influence from the south Eastern Bantu groups was mainly in the adoption of lexical items with special morphological and phonological features. The most prominent are as follows:

a. The adoption of lexical items with the diminutive suffix -ana  
 One of the most conspicuous influences from south Eastern Bantu is the adoption of lexical items with the diminutive suffix —ana. This diminutive form was a typical innovation in Proto-Southern Bantu at the time of its settlement in southern Africa during the second half of the first millenium (Huffman 1989; Batibo et al. 1997). This suffix, which was probably adopted from the lexical item mu-ana ‘child,’ replaced the respective Proto-Bantu prefixes, namely ka-/tu- (cls. 12/13) and ki-/bi- (cl.7/8).<sup>4</sup> Thus the examples in (1) below illustrate the diminutive function of -ana in Setswana, Isizulu and Tshivenda.

(1) The diminutive function of —ana

i. Setswana

podi [pudi] ‘goat’> potsana [putsana] ‘kid’

kgosi [q<sup>h</sup>osi] ‘chief’> kgosana [q<sup>h</sup>osana] ‘sub-chief, village head-man’

motse [mutsi] ‘village’> motsana [mutsana] ‘small village’

tau [tau] ‘lion’> tawana [tawana] ‘lion cub’

ii. Isizulu

into [into] ‘thing’> intwana [intwana] ‘little thing’

imbuzi [imbuzi] ‘goat’> imbuzana [imbuzana] ‘kid’

umlomo [umlomo] ‘mouth’> umlonyana [umlonyana] ‘little mouth’

iii. Tshivenda

khali [khali] ‘pot’> khalana [khalana] ‘small pot’

mvuvhelo [mvuvhelo] ‘water jar’> mvuvhelwana [mvuvhelwana] ‘small water jar’

This process of diminutive formation by the use of the suffix —ana was adopted by some of the other languages in south Eastern Bantu, such as Shona and Ndaou, although it did not become particularly productive. It was practically unknown in north Eastern Bantu.<sup>5</sup> However, Kiswahili has words which have endings in —ana, which could be said to have originated from the Southern Bantu suffixation process. An example is given in (2) below:

(2) Kiswahili words with ending in —ana.

mtwana [mtwana] ‘slave’

msichana [msitjana] ‘girl’

mvulana [mvulana] ‘boy’

mwungwana [mwungwana] ‘civilized, well-mannered person’

It could be shown that the ending —ana has been fossilized from a suffix which must have functioned as a diminutive form as shown in (3) below.

(3) The element of —ana in Kiswahili loans.

mtu [mtu] 'person' + -ana (diminutive form) > mtwana [mtwana] 'slave'<sup>6</sup>  
msiki [msiki]<sup>7</sup> 'unmarried young woman' + -ana (diminutive form) > msichana [msitʃana] 'girl'

mvuli [mvuli]<sup>8</sup> 'man' + ana (diminutive form) > [mvulana] 'boy'  
mlungu [mlungu]<sup>9</sup> (white man) + -ana (diminutive form) > mlungwana [mlungwana] or [mwungwana] 'civilized, well mannered person'.

One common feature, identifiable in the lexical items in (3), is the fact that all the four lexical items denote categories of human beings. Although some of these categories are common in all languages (like boy and girl), they have various roots in the present-day Bantu languages. This is a sign that they have resulted from different sources including borrowing, semantic shift and new creation.

Moreover, one other evidence of south Eastern Bantu origin of these words is their resemblance with the forms found in some of the south Eastern Bantu languages like Setswana, Shona, Sesotho, Elomwe, Chuabo and Emakhuwa, as shown in (4) below:

(4) The term 'girl' in some Sala-Shona and Southern Bantu languages.

msichana [msitʃana] 'girl' (Kiswahili)

mosetsana [musitsana] 'girl' (Setswana)

mosetsana [musitsana] 'girl' (Sesotho)

muthiyana [muthiyana] 'young woman' (Elomwe)

muthiyana [muthiyana] 'young woman' (Emakhuwa)

mwiwana [mwiwana] 'young woman' (Chuabo)

musikana [musikana] 'girl' (Shona).

It could be assumed therefore that words, like msichana [msitʃana] 'girl,' mvulana [mvulana] 'boy,' mtwana [mtwana] 'slave,' mwungwana [mwungwana] 'civilized person', were adopted in Kiswahili as well as the other languages along the eastern coast during the time of intensified contacts between the trading groups.

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(b) South Eastern Bantu Lexical items

Some south Eastern Bantu lexical items have also diffused into Kiswahili. The most obvious adoption is the term *mzungu* 'European, white-man.' This term is described by Sacloux (1941/1949) as originating from the verb *ku-zungu-a* 'turn round.' This, however, is an unlikely origin. Other scholars have associated it with the root *mu-dungu* 'God, Creator.' The root from which *m-zungu* has originated is common in the south eastern Bantu languages, as evidenced in (5) below:

(5) The term for 'white-man, European' in some of the south Eastern Bantu languages:

- mu-rungu [murungu] 'white-man' (Shona)
- m-lungu [mlungu] 'whiteman' (Ndebele)
- mu-lungu [mulungu] 'white-man' (Isizulu)
- mu-lungu [mulungu] 'white-man' (IsiXhosa)

In fact, the term was first used to call the Portuguese traders in the south Eastern coast who began to interact with the local people on the coast and the interior. These traders were invariably called *Abelungu* by the Nguni. The name spread northwards to the other groups like the Tsonga, the Ndau, the Shona and the Emakhuwa. It must have been adopted in Kiswahili when the Portuguese traders moved into the northern areas of the eastern coast. The initial consonant in the *—lungu* may have undergone spirantization ( $l > z$ ) as it has happened to such consonants in Kiswahili when followed by high vowels.

It is possible that there are other south Eastern Bantu lexical items in Kiswahili which can only be detected after rigorous phonological and morphological studies. As rightly pointed out by Nurse (1988), the many lexical items in Kiswahili whose sources have not been accounted for are probably loans from other Bantu and non Bantu languages from the interior. Some of these loans could have originated from far afield.

### **Kiswahili Loans in south Eastern Bantu**

The south Eastern Bantu influence on Kiswahili was not only one-way. In fact, Kiswahili has also had influence on south Eastern Bantu. The most obvious loans are as follows:

- a. *mali* [mali] 'wealth' (Kiswahili)

The Kiswahili word *mali* [mali] 'wealth' originated in Persian *maal* [maal] 'piece of silver.' It was diffused into Kiswahili through Arabic. The word must then have spread in south Eastern Bantu where it shifted semantically to mean 'money.' Hence the word has various forms, such as *madi* [madi] (Setswana), *mari* [mari]

(Shona) and *imari* [imari] (Isizulu/Isixhosa). It was probably introduced when money became the means for exchange of wealth.

b. *matata* [matata] 'problems, difficulties' (Kiswahili)

This word is relatively recent in south Eastern Bantu, as it does not conform to the expected sound changes in many of the languages in the region. For example, it is *mathata* 'problems, difficulties' in Setswana, where the Proto-Bantu sound \*t has changed to [r]. The expected form should, therefore, have been *marara* [marara] (not *mathata*). In fact, we have the word *marara* in Setswana, meaning 'complex situation.' The form *mathata* (in Setswana), *matata* (in some of the Shona varieties) and perhaps many other examples would point to the fact that the term was a later diffusion in the region.

c. *pima* [pima] 'measure' (Kiswahili)

This word is one of the typical Proto-Bantu roots, and is quite widespread. However, its phonological peculiarity in the south Eastern Bantu languages points to its foreign origin. It is —*pima* [pima] in Shona, where the Proto-Bantu \*p has changed to [v]. It is also —*pima* [pima] and —*phima* [p<sup>h</sup>ima] in Chuabo and Emakhuwa respectively, where, again, the Proto-Bantu \*p has changed to [v]. In fact, in these languages the traditional term for 'measure' is —*lika*.

d. *ng'ombe* [ŋombe] 'cow' (Kiswahili)

This word has diffused in a number of south Eastern Bantu languages such as Chuabo and Elomwe where it has kept its Kiswahili form *ng'ombe* [ŋombe]. In fact, the original forms of this word in these languages were *mope* [mope] and *nyope* [ope] respectively. The original forms, also still in existence, are regarded as archaic, but, in fact, conform to the expected historical phonological changes in the language (Janson, 1991/1992; Batibo et al., 1997).

There are other lexical items in Kiswahili which have diffused in south Eastern Bantu languages, and can be recognized by their phonological and morphological peculiarities. These include paka [paka] 'cat' in Chuabo and Emakhuwa (presumably from Kiswahili paka [paka] 'cat'); kunguni [kunguni] 'flea, bedbug' in Elomwe and Chuabo (presumably from Kiswahili, kunguni [kunguni] 'bedbug'); bibi [bibi] 'grand parent' in Chuabo (presumably from Kiswahili bibi [bibi] 'grandmother'); munyani [muani] 'monkey' in Elomwe (presumably from Kiswahili nyani [ani] 'baboon.' The traditional Elomwe word for 'monkey' is mareko [mareko]); mpuka [mpuka] 'rice' in Elomwe (presumably from the the Kiswahili word mpunga [mpunga] 'rice with husks' The traditional Elomwe words for 'rice' are ncoro [ncoro] and mmuka [mmuka]).

Moreover, the word ndege [ndege] 'acroplane' has been adopted more recently in Shona from the Kiswahili word ndege [ndege] 'bird, aeroplane.' The Shona word for 'bird' is shiri [jiri]. The other possible adoptions in Shona from Kiswahili include dhochi [d<sup>h</sup>otʃi] 'a piece of cloth' (from Hindi via Kiswahili doti 'piece of cloth worn as loin -cloth') usanga [usanga] 'beads' (from Kiswahili. ushanga [uʃanga] 'bead'; chuma [tʃuma] 'gold from Kiswahili chuma [tʃuma] 'iron.' Here there was probably a semantic shift, as while iron was a traditional source of wealth in eastern Africa, gold was the source of wealth in southern Africa, particularly in present day Zimbabwe. Moreover, the archaic Kiswahili word ndarama 'money, was adopted in south-eastern Bantu, particularly in Shona, with a shifted meaning of 'precious stone'.

## Historical Implications

The many loans which have involved Kiswahili, on the one hand, and the south Eastern Bantu languages, on the other, cannot be taken to imply casual or sporadic contacts, but rather long and extensive interaction between the parties concerned. In fact, the expansion of Kiswahili along the eastern coast between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries coincides with the expansion of trade along the south eastern coast of Africa and the immediate interior. As early as AD 915, the traveller al-mas'udi heard in East Africa of a Zanj Kingdom near Sofala, where a great ruler possessed many cattle and was able to trade much ivory and some gold (Sousa, 1710). This could have referred to a budding trading industry in the Zimbabwe plateau. Trade between the Shona in Zimbabwe and the trading groups from eastern Africa and beyond must have developed steadily. The Shona, in return, acted as intermediaries with the other trading groups in the region. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, reef mining was in progress in Zimbabwe. This must have continued to the 19<sup>th</sup>



century (Beach, 1980:25). For the great deal of the period, gold must have constituted the most important single export. However, it must have been overtaken by other valuable items like ivory, copper and hides. The other items which might have been exchanged include beads and cloth. Not many Kiswahili loans were found among these items. It is possible that most of the loanwords were replaced by English and Afrikaans words when modern processing of these items was introduced.<sup>10</sup> It is during this protracted trade period that a number of trading posts were established, the most important being Sofala, Kilwa and Quelimane."<sup>11</sup> The first foreign traders were probably the Arabs who were then replaced by the Portuguese. It was during this period that words associated with trade like mali 'wealth, money,' ndarama 'money, precious stone', pima 'measure' and matata 'difficulties, problems,' may have been introduced from Kiswahili. Kiswahili, likewise, adopted some words from the south Eastern Bantu languages.

## **Conclusion**

The linguistic data presented above provides evidence of the historical links between eastern and southern Africa. This link was particularly forged from the 12<sup>th</sup> century when eastern coastal trade was enhanced by the presence of Arab, Persian and Portuguese traders and sailors. The traders were involved mainly in gold, copper, hides, ivory and some slaves in the southern African region. In return, they brought beads, ornaments and cloth. These trade contracts must have lasted for many centuries. It is assumed that a lingua franca was used to facilitate these interactions. Kiswahili, which was not only widespread along the eastern coast but also heavily used as a trading language, was probably the language which was the most dominant in the region. It must, therefore, have influenced the languages with which it came into contact; but, in return, it was also influenced by these languages. This would explain the existence of the loans discussed above.

The existence of south Eastern Bantu loans in Kiswahili, as a result of historical contacts, would be comparable to the existence of loans in Kiswahili from the other languages with which it has come into contact like Arabic, Turkish, Portuguese, Persian and the other African languages spoken in north Eastern Africa. Kiswahili, like English, can be said to have accommodated many foreign elements due to its expanded use.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank G Philippon, D, Nurse, A. Campbell and A Pongweni for their useful hints regarding some of the points in this paper.
2. The terms 'Kiswahili' and 'Swahili language' will be used interchangeably in this paper, since the prefix ki- stands for 'the speech of'
3. The Southern Bantu languages are traditionally classified into five groups, namely, Nguni, Sotho-Tswana, Venda, Nhambane and Tsonga. While the term Sala-Shona was proposed recently by Ehret (1996) to refer to the languages of the Shona cluster as well as those of the other related languages.
4. The prefixes ka-/tu- were probably used, in Proto-Bantu, for diminutives and the prefixes ki-/bi- for objects or phenomena with marked characteristics (Batibo, 1987).
5. North Eastern Bantu comprises, roughly, all the Bantu languages in eastern Africa, with the exception of Emakhuwa.
6. The suffix —ana may have been used pejoratively or metaphorically in this case, to mean 'small in social standing'
7. The form msiki is no longer in existence in Kiswahili. But it is still found in a number of languages, such as Kichagga (mshiki [mʃiki] 'sister'); Kisukuma (nshiki [nʃiki] 'daughter'); Kihaya (mwisiki [mwisiki] 'unmarried woman'); Shona (musiki [musiki] 'progenitor, creator').
8. The word mvuli [mvuli] is now restricted to northern Kiswahili dialects, particularly Kiamu and Kitikuu (Sacleux, 1941/1949).
9. The word mlungu was the earlier form of mzungu 'white man, European'. Hence mwungwana was literally 'a small whiteman.'
10. Except for the words for 'gold' and 'beads'
11. The name Quelimane was a Portuguese version for the Kiswahili word kilimani 'on the hill or mountain'

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