Morphosyntactic borrowing in closely related varieties: "False cognates" in Swahili

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Abstract
The paper examines contact-induced morphosyntactic change in Swahili, where material which had historically been lost is "reintroduced" through contact with closely related languages which have retained the original feature. The paper discusses three examples of these morphosyntactic "false cognates": diminutive marking, habitual marking and demonstrative forms, and shows that if it were not from the evidence from different diachronic stages and varieties of Swahili, these forms could well be analysed as inherited from the reconstructed Proto-Bantu. The paper contributes to our understanding of the historical development of Swahili, patterns of variation found in Swahili and Bantu languages more widely, as well as the importance of comparative evidence for the unravelling of historical and contemporary relations between closely related linguistic varieties.

1. Introduction

Swahili is a Bantu language spoken by more than 100 million people across a vast area of East Africa where it has long played an important role as a lingua franca (Mugane 2015). Swahili is thought to have originally arisen as a coastal language when speakers of Bantu languages migrating from further west reached the East African coast in present-day Kenya and Tanzania towards the end of the first millennium. Through contact with Arab traders, Swahili communities became part of a wide Indian Ocean trade network, and Swahili developed as language of wider communication along the coast. As the Indian Ocean trade flourished, Swahili grew in prominence in urban coastal centres such as Kilwa, Zanzibar, Mombasa and Lamu. Swahili was also used by traders journeying into the mainland to present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), cementing its role as a regional language of wider communication.

East Africa is an area of high linguistic diversity and is home to languages from the Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan language families. Histories of the area also indicate that there have been high levels of bi- and multilingualism, sustained language contact and shifting power relations between different groups over centuries. The use of Swahili as a language of trade and of wider communication has meant the language has long been in contact with other languages found in the region. We see evidence of structural variation and change which result both from divergence and convergence effects in contact situations. In the case of contact with other Bantu languages however, due to the similarity between the languages involved, the differences are sometimes difficult to identify.

The goal of this paper is to examine three examples of what we term "false cognates" found in Swahili. These are examples showing the "reintroduction" of morphosyntactic forms into Swahili which have existed at an earlier stage in the history of the language. Crucially however, these features that were lost are also present – or retained – in neighbouring Bantu languages, enabling a reintroduction into Swahili grammar through language contact. The three examples we consider in turn are the habitual suffix *-ag-*, the diminutive class 12 prefix *ka-* and the demonstrative form based on *-no*. We show that these examples are innovations in a narrow Swahili context, in that they introduce new forms, but that the forms themselves are old and can be traced back to Proto-Bantu, and so the local innovation can be seen as a reinstatement of morphosyntactic structures which had been lost previously. However, without access to the history of the language, it would be very difficult to distinguish true, inherited forms, and reintroduced forms which have a much more complex history of diachronic loss and contact-induced change.

2. Bantu languages

The Bantu family comprises a group of some 450-500 languages spoken in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. (Eastern) Bantu languages are fairly uniform in terms of a range of broad typological features, e.g. the presence of noun class systems, extensive systems of agreement often reflecting noun class membership, the widespread use of valency-altering verbal extensions, and a dominant SVO word order which also allows for pragmatically motivated word order flexibility. However, Bantu languages also exhibit a high degree of microvariation – that is, more fine-grained differences between closely related languages or varieties. This makes the language family the ideal lens through which to examine processes of language variation, contact and change. Swahili is located within this broader context as a major language of wider communication across East Africa, and is therefore a major contact language. The majority of speakers of Swahili use the language alongside one or more other languages, and often these other languages are also Bantu languages. The specific historical and language contact situation in which Swahili is embedded thus provides an excellent context for examining processes of contact and change amongst closely related languages.

3. Cognacy, reconstruction, borrowing and convergence

There is a long history of comparative work on Bantu languages (e.g. Meinhof 1906, 1932; Meeussen 1967; Guthrie 1967-71). The genetic relatedness of Bantu languages was first noted in Western research in the early 19th century (see Doke and Cole 1961, Maho 1999). A proto-language was reconstructed as early as the 19th century (Bleek 1862/9, Meinhof 1899).

However, while the overall unity and relatedness of the Bantu family has been firmly established, the internal sub-classification of Bantu languages and the relationship between languages within the family – and indeed to some extent its boundaries – remain less clear. Both comparative reconstruction with specific reference to limited innovations (Ehret 1999, Nurse and Philippson 2003) and quantitative methods of language comparison such as lexicostatistics (Heine et al. 1977, Bastin et al. 1999), and later phylogenetic methods (Holden 2002, Holden and Gray 2006, Grollemund et al. 2015) have been employed to address this question, and different models have been developed (cf. Marten 2020).

While further detailed work on smaller subgroups, as well as advances in methodologies for large scale comparison, are prone to lead to more reliable results about the internal relation between members of the family, there remain principal challenges related to the internal sub-classification and position within Niger-Congo of the Bantu languages. In particular, the question of the relationship between the Bantu languages needs to take into account that Bantu languages exhibit many of the features of a dialect continuum or a linguistic area. There is a high degree of structural and typological similarity between the languages and there are widespread patterns of multilingualism with attendant processes of language contact and borrowing. As Bastin et al. (1999), in a major landmark study of Bantu classification note, the continuous and ongoing language contact between different Bantu languages, and the overlapping circles of divergence and alignment, create a problem for the application of tree-based models of language relatedness and evolution, since these models assume that languages become more different over time. Yet, in the context of Bantu languages, due to language contact in multilingual situations, different languages have histories of both becoming more different and becoming more similar at different stages of their evolution – this then leads to the "confusion of the tree model" (Bastin et al. 1999: 2).

Building on work by Guthrie (1962) and Möhlig (1981), Marten (2013) explores how language contact can have two different effects on language relationships. Contact between related languages may lead to increased structural similarity not only between the languages involved in the contact situation, but also with respect to other related languages – i.e. "centripetal convergence" – while

contact between unrelated languages may lead to decreased structural similarity between languages involved in the contact situation and those which are not – i.e. "centrifugal convergence".

(1) **Centripetal convergence**
     Structural convergence effects which lead to increased similarity of the languages involved in the contact situation, and also to increased similarity with related languages outside of the contact situation

(2) **Centrifugal convergence**
     Structural convergence effects which lead to increased similarity of the languages involved in the contact situation, but to decreased similarity with related languages outside of the contact situation

Centrifugal convergence effects typically result in the emergence of differences at the periphery of the Bantu area, while centripetal convergence result in the emergence of similarities at the centre of the Bantu area.

In this paper, we are particularly concerned with centripetal convergence. We look at instances of language contact in Swahili which can be seen as resulting in these centripetal convergence effects. These examples concern linguistic features which may look like a direct development from the protolanguage (cognates) but which in fact result from family-internal borrowing. A good example of such a process at the lexical level is provided by Schadeberg (2003), who discusses "real" and "fake" sound correspondences due to borrowing. The Tanzanian community language Ha has two words which on the surface look like they are in an identical relation to corresponding words in Swahili – the words for 'charcoal' (Ha *umu-kára* and Swahili *makaa*) in (3) and for 'lamp' (Ha *i-tára* and Swahili *taa*) in (4):

	Ha	Swahili	
(3)	a. umu-kára	b. ma-kaa	'charcoal'
(4)	a. i-tára	b. taa	'lamp'

The words are assigned different noun classes in the two languages, as can be seen by the different prefixes, but we are concerned here with the lexical roots *-kára* vs. *-kaa* and *-tára* vs. *-taa*. The forms may well be thought of as illustrating the same historical process, likely the intervocalic loss of /r/ in Swahili, and so we could reconstruct hypothetical proto-forms as *-kara* and *-tara*, leaving aside the question of tone. However, this analysis is only correct for the word for charcoal, which is regularly related in both languages to the Proto-Bantu form *-kádà*. In contrast, the word *taa* is actually a loanword which was borrowed into Swahili (probably from Hindi, Schadeberg 2009), and then from Swahili into Ha. As part of loanword adaptation, Ha speakers then inserted an intervocalic /r/ into the new word, maybe by analogy with words like *umu-kára*. While (3) shows the loss of intervocalic /r/ in Swahili (divergence through change), (4) shows the insertion of /r/ in Ha loanword adaptation: A false cognate. In this example, the evidence from the Swahili loan helped to distinguish the true from the false cognate, but it was only knowledge of the source form which provides evidence of borrowing which revealed the difference. In practice, it is often very difficult to distinguish between real and false cognates.

In the following sections we discuss examples like this from the domain of morphosyntax, with a focus on Swahili.

4. Swahili

Historically, the homeland of the Swahili-speakers is a narrow strip stretching approximately 2,500 kilometres along the East African coast, often referred to as the "Swahili Coast". This covers an area from southern Somalia, down through Kenya and Tanzania to the northern-most part of Mozambique, incorporating the islands of Zanzibar, Pemba and the Comoros. The last 200 years have seen Swahili become established throughout East Africa (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995, Blommaert 2014, Mugane 2015). In the 19th and first half of the 20th century, Swahili was used as a language of administration by German and British colonial administrations in Tanzania and Kenya. The language was also strongly promoted after the independence of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and it is now a national language in all three countries. In more recent years, ongoing widespread rural-urban migration and increased regional mobility, along with forced dispersals, have meant that in the present day, Swahili is also spoken in Mozambique, Uganda, DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and north-eastern Zambia (Eberhard et al. 2023). The majority of speakers of Swahili are bilingual or multilingual and have Swahili as an additional language.

Variation in Swahili, particularly in phonology and the lexicon, has long been noted (e.g. Stigand 1915, Steere 1919, Bakari 1985). There is evidence that language contact has also had an impact on the morphosyntax of Swahili varieties (Gibson et al. 2023).

In terms of morphosyntactic structure, Edelsten et al. (2022) show the high structural similarity of Swahili with other Bantu languages of East Africa. Based on 142 morphosyntactic features and a sample of 17 East African Bantu languages (including Nyolo (E35), Gikuyu (E51), Rombo (E623), Digo (E73), Bende (F12), Rangi (F33), Mbugu ("normal", G221KK), Chindamba (G52), Kinyarwanda (JD61), Kifuliiru (JD63), Ha (JD66), Nyoro (JE11), Ganda (JE15), Matengo (N13), Sena (N44), Yao (P21), Makhuwa (P31), and Cuwabo (P34)), the study shows that Swahili exhibits between 49% and 67% similarity in structural terms with the languages of the region.

As we will see in our discussion below, the combination of wide-spread multilingualism and close structural similarity has important ramifications for identifying features of structural transfer, convergence and divergence.

5. Morphosyntactic "reintroduction"

In this section we focus on three case studies which illustrate instances of the reintroduction of morphosyntactic material into Swahili. That is, these are forms that are assumed to have existed in earlier versions of the language (or indeed in Proto-Bantu), have otherwise been lost in present-day (Standard) Swahili but have been reintroduced through contact with other Bantu languages spoken in East Africa. We examine the habitual suffix *-ag-,* the diminutive class prefix *ka-* and the demonstrative form *-no.*

5.1. The habitual -ag-

The habitual/iterative suffix *-ag-* is widespread across Bantu and has been reconstructed for Proto-Bantu as an imperfective, repetitive, or habitual suffix *-ag-* (Meeussen 1967: 110). In Standard Swahili, the historic Proto-Bantu form has been lost, and a new habitual formative *hu-* has developed from the first person subject marker *ni-* and an infinitive marker *ku-*, with some loss of phonological boundaries and substance (Schadeberg 1992: 25; Nurse and Hinnebusch 1993: 405, 414/5). The use of the formative in a habitual construction is shown in (5) below.[1]

(5)   Wewe   **hu**-la   wapi?
        You   HAB-eat   where
        'Where do you (usually) eat?'

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[1] Abbreviations in the glosses follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules, with the following additions: 1, 2, 3, … = noun class, CD = concord agreement marker, FV = final vowel, HAB = habitual marker, NUM = numeral marker, PRE = verbal prefix, SM = subject marker, STM = stem marker, REF = referential marker.

The loss of the habitual suffix is restricted to Swahili and closely related Sabaki languages, and many other Tanzanian and Kenyan Bantu languages retain imperfective or habitual -*ag*-. This is the case, for example, in Kagulu (Petzell 2008: 118) and Ciruri (Massamba 2000: 122), as exemplified below.

(6) Ha-ka-ij-**ag**-a   ka-mwendu   kwa wiki
     PST-SM1.PST-come-IPFV-FV   NUM-one   per week
     'S/he came once per week' (Kagulu, Petzell 2008: 118)

(7) E-ni-gur-**ag**-a
     PRE-SM1SG-buy-HAB-FV
     'I buy (regularly)' (Ciruri, Massamba 2000: 122)

Moreover, habitual -*ag*- is found in colloquial varieties of Swahili spoken in Tanzania and Kenya, in Congo Swahili (Bostoen 1999) and in the Kenyan urban youth language Sheng (Gibson et al. 2023). The form may even be in the process of being reintroduced into Standard Swahili: "Standard Swahili may be reclaiming productive inflection -*ag*- and its wide occurrence in colloquial Swahili seems to be unstoppable" (Rugemalira 2010: 232). An example from colloquial Swahili is provided in (8).

(8) u-na-ku-l-**ag**-a   wapi?
     SM2SG-PRS-STM-eat-HAB-FV   where
     'Where do you (usually) eat?' (Rugemalira 2010: 232)

The example in (8) is in contrast with Standard Swahili, which uses the habitual prefix *hu*- (repeated from (5) above):

(9) Wewe   **hu**-l-a   wapi?
     You   HAB-eat-FV   where
     'Where do you (usually) eat?'

As noted above, Swahili has a high number of second language speakers and the majority of Swahili speakers are bi-/multilingual in Swahili and another language – often a Bantu language – as their home/first/other language. It is likely therefore that the process results from structural influence from community languages, and that second language speakers of colloquial and mainland varieties of Swahili have reintroduced the form on the model of their first languages. Furthermore, it appears that the use of -*ag*- in Swahili is associated with mainland speakers and identities to which this is linked. The suffix -*ag*- has become an indexical marker of non-standard Swahili and is used, for example, in popular culture and music to express linguistic identity (Marten 2013).

This contact effect has resulted in Swahili becoming more similar to other Bantu languages, and so illustrates centripetal convergence. The use of -*ag*- in colloquial varieties of Swahili can be seen as a "reintroduction" of morphology which had previously been lost. However, crucially, without this comparative evidence, we would not know this, and we could be led to assume that colloquial Swahili -*ag*- is simply a straightforward reflex of the Proto-Bantu form.

5.2. The diminutive ka-

Colloquial Swahili shows another effect of intra-Bantu contact, namely the reintroduction of the diminutive noun classes 12 and 13. Of the 25 or so noun classes which have been reconstructed for Proto-Bantu (Maho 1999) several are no longer widely attested in contemporary Bantu languages (see Marten 2021).

Among the classes which are unevenly distributed across Bantu languages are classes 12 and 13, which often fulfil a derivational function with nouns from other classes, when moved to class 12/13, acquiring diminutive meaning (Gibson et al. 2017). Meeussen (1967) reconstructs the classes with this meaning: "A stem normally appearing in a given pair of classes could be used in cl. 12 and 13 with diminutive meaning" (Meeussen 1967: 103), while Maho (1999) assumes that classes 12/13 were present in some, but not all dialects of Proto-Bantu, and were subsequently diffused. This situation is maintained in many present-day Bantu languages, e.g. Bemba:

(10) Bemba
    a. umu-ntu 'person'   (class 1)
    b. aba-ntu 'people'   (class 2)
    c. **aka**-ntu 'small person'   (class 12)
    d. **utu**-ntu 'small people'   (class 13)

In Coastal and Standard Swahili, the diminutive noun classes 12 and 13 have been lost, and instead classes 7/8 (sometimes in addition to class 5) are used for the formation of diminutives:

(11) Standard Swahili
    a. n-dege   'bird'   (class 9)
    b. **ki**-dege 'small bird'   (class 7)

However, outside of Swahili, many Tanzanian Bantu languages retain classes 12/13, including, for example, Kinyamwezi and Chindamba:

(12) Kinyamwezi (Maganga and Schadeberg 1992: 63)
    a. ŋgwa-aná   'child'   (class 1)
    b. **ka**-aná   'small child' (class 12)

(13) Chindamba (Edelsten and Lijongwa 2010: 36-38)
    a. li-piki   'tree'   (class 5)
    b. **ka**-piki   'small tree'   (class 12)

Similar to the example of *-ag-* discussed in the previous section, for diminutive marking as well, colloquial varieties of Swahili differ from Standard Swahili, since here class 11 and 12 are found, which are no longer used in Standard Swahili (Kihore et al. 2001, King'ei 2000: 85/86).

(14)   Standard Swahili   Colloquial Swahili
    a. m-toto (class 1)   e. m-toto (class 1)   'child'
    b. wa-toto (class 2)   f. wa-toto (class 2)   'children'
    c. **ki**-toto (class 7)   g. **ka**-toto (class 12)   'small child'
    d. **vi**-toto (class 8)   h. **tu**-toto (class 13)   'small children'

(15) a. Standard Swahili
    Kila   m-tu   a-na-hitaji   **ki**-shamba **ch**-ake
    Every 1-person SM1-PRS-need   7-field   7-his/her

    b. Colloquial Swahili
    Kila   m-tu   a-na-hitaji   **ka**-shamba **k**-ake.
    Every 1-person SM1-PRS-need   12-field   12-his/her
    'Everyone needs his own small field.' (King'ei 2000: 86)

The examples show the difference between the two Swahili varieties. Standard Swahili uses the (innovative) diminutive strategy with classes 7/8, while in colloquial Swahili varieties the use of classes 12/13 is found. From the perspective of Swahili, the use of classes 12/13 is an innovation – replacing the earlier innovation of using classes 7/8. However, from a wider cross-Bantu perspective, this innovation is merely a reinstatement of an older system. Colloquial Swahili varieties reintroduce Bantu features which had been lost in Coastal and Standard Swahili. However, again, without this wider contextual knowledge about the history of Swahili, the colloquial Swahili forms with classes 12/13 could easily be taken to be reflexes of the original Proto-Bantu situation.

5.3. The fourth demonstrative series -no

Our final example relates to the formation of demonstratives, and in particular to a fourth demonstrative series which is constructed using the form -*no*, which is reintroduced into varieties of colloquial Swahili.

Standard Swahili has a three-way distinction of demonstratives, based on a combination of a concord morpheme agreeing in noun class (CD), a harmonic vowel (V), and the formatives *h-*, -*le*, and -*o* (Schadeberg 1992):

(16) Standard Swahili demonstratives
      Proximal demonstratives (*h* + V + CD):
      a. m-tu   **hu-yu**
         1-person   PROX-CD1
         'this person'
      Distal demonstratives (CD + *le*):
      b. m-tu   **yu-le**
         1-person   CD1-DIST
         'that person'
      Referential demonstrative (*h* + V + CD + *o*):
      c. m-tu   **hu-y-o**
         1-person   PROX-CD1-REF
         'this person (already referred to)'

The situation reflects partly the system reconstructed for Proto-Bantu demonstratives, which distinguishes five forms (cf. Meeussen 1967: 107) illustrated in (17) (with the reconstructed class 1 concord **ju-* as example).

(17) Proto-Bantu demonstratives
      a. CD   (ju)   'that, the'
      b. V-CD   (u-ju)   'this'
      c. CD-nóo   (ju-nóo)   'this (near me)'
      d. V-CD-o   (u-ju-o)   'that (near you)' or 'that (mentioned)'
      e. CD-dia   (ju-dia (> ju-le))   'that (over there)'

The Standard Swahili system can be analysed as reflexes of three forms: (17b, d, and e), with the remaining two forms absent.

However, as in the previous examples, colloquial Swahili has forms which reflect the Proto-Bantu situation more closely, in this case, the use of the demonstrative form in -*no*, as seen in the Proto-Bantu form in (17c).

(18) Colloquial Swahili (Taveta, Kenya)
      Kaa   ku-**no**
      stand   16-DEM

'Stand near here (close to me)'

Here, then, as well, we see how colloquial varieties of Swahili have structures which result from the reintroduction of morphosyntactic forms which had been lost at an earlier stage of the language, in this case the fourth series of proximate demonstrative forms.

6. Conclusions

This paper has shown the centrality of comparative evidence in understanding the historical development of Swahili as well as better understanding the variation attested today. We have discussed three examples of "false cognates" in the domain of morphosyntax. The processes of language contact which underly the presence of false cognates occur against the background of the close genetic relation and structural similarity of Swahili and neighbouring Bantu languages, which we argue facilitates morphological transfer. Specifically, we have examined three areas of the morphosyntax of Swahili which appear to show the effects of structural transfer: i) tense-aspect-mood marking with specific reference to habitual marking, ii) evaluative morphology, particularly in relation to diminutive marking, and iii) a fourth demonstrative series based on *-no*.

These examples in some sense reconstitute a historical situation which has been lost diachronically and "reintroduce" structures which had been lost. Crucially, if it were not from the descriptive evidence and knowledge of the different historical stages and varieties of Swahili, these forms could well be analysed as inherited from the reconstructed Proto-Bantu. One wider effect of these processes is that the colloquial Swahili varieties discussed here have become more similar (again) to the typical Bantu structures which reflect the historical situation more faithfully. The examples illustrate centripetal convergence effects and it is this interplay between shared linguistic history and language contact which underlies the linguistic area-type effects of Bantu languages.

The examples and analyses discussed here further our understanding of variation in Swahili and the role of contact-induced change in variation. They also show the type of material which can be impacted as a result of contact – i.e. tense-aspect-marking, evaluative morphology, and the nominal domain. The paper therefore contributes to our understanding of the history and historical development of Swahili, patterns of variation found both within Swahili and within the Bantu languages more widely, as well as the importance of comparative evidence for the unravelling of historical and contemporary linguistic relations between closely related languages.

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