

## **Influence of English on African Languages: A Look at English Loanwords in Kiswahili**

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### **Abstract**

Kiswahili, like all developing languages of wider communication, is continually faced with the challenge of modernizing its lexicon and developing new words to denote new concepts entering into the language from alien cultures. However, in the last 40 or so years, Standard Kiswahili, which is based on the Swahili dialect called Kiunguja, (spoken in Zanzibar Island), has grown and spread so much as to assume its own distinct character. One dominant aspect of this growth is the area of lexical borrowing from the English language. This process has often been carried out in an isolated and uncoordinated manner resulting into many words of English origin being adapted into Kiswahili to duplicate other lexical equivalents already in use. This paper examines the types of lexical borrowing from English into Kiswahili and attempts to advance the rationale for such borrowing. The registers covered include: the sciences; military service, domestic life; sports (eg. Soccer). Examples of unnecessary duplication (over-borrowing) and unnatural adaptation of some of the borrowed words are indicated. In conclusion, it is argued that over-borrowing by Kiswahili from English is largely caused by motivation and not causes, according to the theoretical model on lexical borrowing advanced by Roberts (1994) and Weinreith 1968).

**Key Words:** Lexical Borrowing, Adaptation, Lexical Development, Modernization

### **Introduction**

A Bantu language belonging to the Sabaki Group (Nurse and Heinnebusch (1993) and a mother tongue for Waswahili people of the East African coast, Kiswahili is one of Africa's fastest growing international languages. Today, Kiswahili is spoken as a first or second language by an estimated 140 million people of various communities spread across the African Great Lakes region which includes Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Comoros Islands.

Although only around 20 million people in this region speak Swahili as their mother tongue, Kiswahili is mainly used as a second or third language by most of

the local population. However, it is its historical role as is as a lingua franca in much of East, Central and southern Africa that has seen the growth and spread of the language over the centuries. Currently, Swahili serves as a national or official language of : Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. It is also one of the official languages of the African Union. In addition, there are pockets of Swahili-speaking population in Northern Zambia and Malawi, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Southern Sudan. Kiswahili is Africa's most widely studied and taught languages today with many Universities and research institutes around the world including it on their curricula.

The story of the meteoric growth and spread of Kiswahili both in the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras has been well documented by a number of scholars (see for example, Whiteley, 1969; Polome, 1975; Shihabdin & Mnyampla, 1977; Khamis, 1990; Heine, 1990; Mbaabu, 1991; Heine, 1990; Rigere, 1990; Nurse & Heinnebusch, 1993; Massamba, 2002). This historical account narrates how Kiswahili has developed from a language of a small community to become world renowned (Mulokozi, 2005).

The growth and development of a language is accompanied by expansion of its lexicon. As Polome (1980) states, when a society grows in complexity, its language adopts a variety of methods to create more lexical items through such means as derivational processes and loan transfer, among others. However, although Kiswahili has had a rich tradition in which it has created and maintained a method of borrowing only where necessary and fully nativising such loans words as Mwihaki (1998) has shown, the East African variety of the language has recently been evolving under some influence rooted in its contact with the English language and culture (Ragnarsson, 2011). This is happening as the Swahili speakers communicate with one another in their language while striving to strengthen their cultural and economic ties with the English speaking world. As matters stand now, the cultural influence of English language will continue to deepen given the increasing access to English material culture as well as the use of internet.

### **Borrowing Technique in Kiswahili**

Borrowed lexical items (or loan words) in found in many languages and ordinarily, account for between 10 to 70% of the total vocabulary (Haspelmath & Tadmor, 2009). Often borrowing of lexicon occurs in genetically and typologically different languages such as Swahili (Bantu) and English (Indo-European). The latter has, for instance, borrowed between 35 to 40% of its vocabulary from Arabic, a Semitic language (Johnson, 1939). The concept of borrowing refers to the process of transferring and adapting linguistic

constructions from a source language (SL) also called “donor language” into a receptor language (RL).

This paper examines a random sample of recently borrowed English loanwords in current Kiswahili usage with an aim of assessing their contribution to the ongoing process of expanding and modernizing Kiswahili lexicon. The discussion features prominently on commenting on the motivation for the borrowing and the suitability of the loanwords. The central argument here is that although Kiswahili, like other modernising languages, has used loanwords as a technique for developing its ordinary and technical vocabulary, in the recent years, the process of borrowing from English has been carried out in an inconsistent, rapid, uncontrolled and sporadic manner, often resulting into unnecessary lexical duplication and adaptation of “English-sounding” unassimilated and “unswahilised” words.

Unlike the article by Schadeberg (2009) entitled “Loanwords in Kiswahili”, which surveys in a historical perspective the documented loanwords in Kiswahili from various source languages, the present paper only takes a synchronic view of Swahili loanwords in current use from the English language only. Also, the current study departs from the earlier ones by a number of sociolinguists who explored all the possible source languages for Kiswahili (Krumm, 1940; Shihabdin & Mnyampala, 1977; Zawawi, 1979; Nurse & Heinnebusch, 1993; King'ei, 1999) by confining itself only to loanwords from English. The discussion focuses on the nature of lexical borrowing from English into Kiswahili with a view to offering a loose thematic categorization of the loanwords while giving a brief justification as to the cause or motivation for the borrowings.

Whereas up to the 1970's Standard Kiswahili was quite loyal to the Kiunguja dialect, which was chosen as the basis for its standardization in the 1930's, lexical development of the language in the latter years has taken a radical departure from that dialect. This, among other reasons, has been due to the fact that Standard Kiswahili now markets itself as modern globalised variety distinct from Kiunguja (Moshi, 2000; Mkude, 2005).

Perhaps another factor that partly accounts for this situation is the lack of a regionally coordinated effort in the development of Swahili lexicon following the collapse of the East African Community in 1977 which led to the Institute of Kiswahili Research (IKR now TATAKI) becoming part of University of Dar es Salaam and ceasing direct and mandatory formal cooperation with Kenyan and Ugandan Universities as the case was before (Mbaabu, 1996).

The resultant individualized approach to the issue of developing Kiswahili lexicon, especially in the technical fields has not only put a disproportionate burden on IKR but it has also meant limited input by Universities from the other member states of the East African Community. As Mbaabu (1996) observes, this

situation is to blame for the inclusion of politically slanted lexicon borrowed mainly from English.

### Source of Data

A corpus of about 350 English loanwords borrowed into Kiswahili obtained from the 2004 version of **Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu** by Oxford University Press, forms the data for the discussion in this paper. Other useful sources consulted for the paper include: Shihabdn and Mnyampala 1977; English-Swahili and Swahili-English Dictionaries by Fredrick Johnson 1939; and Swahili-English Dictionary by TUKI 1981; 1996 and 2001). These words were divided onto the following themes or semantic fields:

- (a) Foods
- (b) Science (including ICT) and sports)
- (c) Education
- (d) Technology
- (e) Ordinary conversation
- (f) Commerce
- (g) Domestic items
- (h) Military

A purposive sample of about 100 lexical items was selected out of the total of 350 sampled initially. Since Kiswahili has borrowed more English words in some of the above themes than from others, thematic balancing was not dully observed. This purposive sample was then subjected to the two criteria stated above.

### Language Contact: Illustrations and Examples

All languages that come into contact with each other for a prolonged period of time do borrow vocabulary and thus inter-lingual borrowing is a permanent feature in human languages. When languages come into contact **geographically, economically, culturally** and **politically** they tend to engage in lexical exchange more than languages that stay far apart. This, in large part, explains the high level of lexical borrowing from English into Kiswahili (Weinreich, 1979).

Apart from the Arabic language, English is the second largest donor language to Kiswahili in terms of loanwords (Shihabdin & Mnyampala, 1977; Schadeberg, 2009). The long contact between the two languages goes back to 1840 when the first Christian missionaries, Dr Krapf and Rev John Rebman established the pioneer churches and schools on the Kenyan coast and elaborated from 1896 following the formal British colonial rule was set up in East Africa. The contact did not start in the 1960's as Schadenberg (2009) asserts. It is also worthy noting that Kiunguja, foundation of Standard Kiswahili was not "formed" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the settlement of Oman Raba dynasty on Zanzibar Island

in 1832 as Schadenberg staaes. Kiunguja was and remains one of the over 18 indigenous dialects of the native Kiswahili speakers (Whiteley, 1969; Shihabdin & Mnyampala, 1977; Polome, 1974).

Although this article does not attempt an in-depth discussion of the adaptability, suitability and typology of English loanwords in Kiswahili, it tries to explore the reasons for such borrowing. Some of the questions that it avoids but which would be pertinent include:

- (a) What cultural aspects necessitates the particular lexical borrowing?
- (b) Why are certain types of words borrowed more often than others?
- (c) Why do languages resort to borrowing yet they have the capacity to create new lexicon or expressions by coining their own words?

The discussion focuses on examining examples of English loanwords that have recently found their way into Kiswahili and comments on whether or not the language had to borrow new words even when other equivalents already exist denoting the same concepts? The problem of duplicating words by borrowing new lexicon even where equivalents already exists has been discussed by a number of linguists including Gower (1952). The latter stated that new loans borrowed where is an existing one form pairs of synonyms to be used concurrently whether the words differ in shades of meaning or not. He gives the following examples from Arabic and English loans in Kiswahili:

<b>Arabic</b>	<b>Kiswahili</b>	<b>English</b>
Taarifa	ripoti	report
Rehani	pauni	pawn
Stakabadhi	risiti	receipt
Juma	wiki	week
Chuo	shule/skuli	school

The last example derives from “*chuo*” which means a Muslim Koran school. This word has now been generalized to include college or university. Similar duplicative pairs in modern Kiswahili and where the new word was only recently added for unclear reasons include:

<b>Existing</b>	<b>New</b>
Televisheni	runinga
Kompyuta	tarakilishi

It is generally agreed that, African languages such as Kiswahili, normally borrow words from foreign languages like English to express concepts that are alien to the foreign languages but for which the African languages lack appropriate lexical equivalents (Roberts, 1994; Weinreith, 1968; Roberts, et al., 1994). However, inter-lingual borrowing is also often largely dependent on the following factors:

(i) Ideology and attitude of the speakers of the recipient language (RL)

English has influenced Kiswahili right from the Pre-colonial era 1848 to 1920; Colonial rule 1920 to 1963 and post-colonial and globalization era (1963 to present). The inter-lingual lexical borrowing between the two languages and cultures has been mainly skewed in favour of English. Swahili has therefore borrowed more from English than vice versa. (English has borrowed only a handful of words such as *panga, safari, shamba, simba, matatu, sukumawiki, etc*)

(ii) The power and prestige attached to the source language (SL)

During the debate on the issue of lexical borrowing into Kiswahili following the standardisation of the language, Canon Broomfield (1930/31 (55 and 517) advised that Kiswahili should only borrow loan words from Latin and Greek and avoid borrowing from English. This is because its words are difficult to pronounce and spell according to Swahili spelling rules. He said when swahilised, English loans appear “grotesque”. Our position here is that the wide lexical borrowing from English by Kiswahili is a reflection of the need and aspiration by Kiswahili speakers to attain the standards and values of the English culture as well as approximate its political and economic progress (Wa Thiong’o, 1985).

(iii) Length and intensity of the linguistic contact

As argued above, the cultural, political and economic contact between the English and Kiswahili cultures has been long, intensive and sustained, running from mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. This is evidenced by the presence of socio-political and economic institutions of the East African nations and also the values, attitudes and practices inherent in their everyday life. This influence surpasses the Arab and Oriental one although the latter had a much longer contact with the Kiswahili speaking East African coast.

It is evident that to some degree, the borrowing of words from English into Kiswahili has been motivated by ideology and prestige rather than dire need for such words given that in such instances, relevant words already have been in use. Therefore, perhaps such borrowings reflect the attitude of the speakers toward the SL, English, as a symbol of economic and cultural supremacy and hence the need to approximate to it.

The above view is supported by Moshi (2000) who discusses the globalised nature of modern Kiswahili. He clearly points out that Kiswahili is globalizing

not just as a bridge that connects speakers and allows people to share cultural values diverse views and knowledge as a way of promoting global understanding and the building of a polycentric society. On the other hand, Kiswahili is also developing into a world status language as an encounter ideological tool against the hegemony of English that seeks to impose its cultural and economic power in African languages in order to secure a competitive edge and thus diminish the importance of local and regional languages. In our view, the great effort by Kiswahili to obtain English even for concepts already being expressed by existing Kiswahili words, is a reflection of this ideological counter-attack. The tendency is also a pointer to the fact that modern Kiswahili is fast drifting away from its original Kiunguja dialect base as Mkude (2005) points out above. In the case of Kiswahili borrowing lexical items from English, one may also add the following factors:

- (i) Availability of capacity by the RL to invent or create new terminology.
- (ii) Nature and frequency of inter-cultural, educational, scientific and technical exchange between SL and RL.

The factors that account for lexical borrowing between languages can be summarized as:

- (1) **Causes:** Linguistic circumstances that justify or prevent borrowing.
- (2) **Motivation:** Non-linguistic reasons that induce lexical borrowing irrespective of necessity.

It is the interest of this article to demonstrate that in justifying the recent borrowings from English into Kiswahili that result into duplication of such loanwords, the process is, more often than not, driven by *Motivation* rather than *Causes*. Below are examples that provide evidence for this assertion.

### A Deeper Look at The English Loanwords

As observed above, Kiswahili has continued to enrich its lexicon from a variety of languages and especially from English. Most of the English loanwords have been so naturally adapted into Kiswahili that few of its speakers ever realize their true origin. One could conclude such words have been successfully absorbed and nativised into Kiswahili. Examples here include:

#### Names of the Month:

<b>Kiswahili</b>	<b>English</b>
Januari	January
Juni	June
Julai	July
Novemba	November
Desemba	December

### Sciences

Atomu	atom (s)
Daktari	doctor
Hospitali	hospital
Protini	protein
Kemikali	chemical (s)
Milimita	millimeter (s)
Vitamini	vitamin (s)
Malaria	malaria
Kliniki	clinic (s)

### Military Service

Kopro	Corporal
Sajenti	Sergeant
Kapteni	Captain
Luteni	Lieutenant
Meja	Major
Kanali	Colonel
Brigedia	Brigadier
Jenerali	General

But, Kiswahili is yet to come up with appropriate equivalents for the ranks of: *Private* and *Field Marshall*

### Sports, especially, Soccer

Examples of aptly adapted English loanwords in this register include:

Kipa	Keeper
Goli	Goal
Difenda	Defender
Fainali	Finals
Fowadi	Forward
Refa	Referee
Kona	corner
Kiki	kick
Penati	penalty
Kwota	quarters
Ligi	league
Kilabu	club
Krosi	cross
Pasi	pass
Fauli	foul
Ofusaidi	off-side



However, in some few cases, Kiswahili has created some equivalents through lexical and metaphorical descriptions. Thus we get:

Mlinzi	defender, defender of the goal post
Ngome	goal-mouth
Adhabu	penalty
Mshambuliaji	striker
Mkwaju	kick
Mpira wa banana/mnazi	high kick
Mpira wa kimo cha nyoka/nyasi	carpet-level kick
Mchuano/dimba	competition

### **Domestic Register**

Examples of naturally adapted English loanwords here include:

Boi	Boy: male house help
Bia	beer
Saladi	salad
Chokoleti	chocolate
Juisi	juice
Soda	soda
Chizi	cheese
Macaroni	macaron
Biskuti	biscuit
Sofa seti	sofa set
Redio	radio
Kaseti	cassette
Tepu rekoda	tape recorder
Friji	fridge
Pilo	pillow
Blanketi	blanket
Soksi	socks
Shati	shirt

### **“Unnecessary” Duplication or Over-Borrowing?**

A critical look at English loanwords in Kiswahili reviews a pattern of unnecessary borrowing where new English words are borrowed and added to already existing Swahili words, often of Arabic origin. This situation creates a sense of competition between users as to which one to choose. The question is whether such additions lately borrowed from English are necessary. Here are some examples of such “competing” words:

<b>English loanword</b>	<b>Existing Swahili Word: English Original</b>	
Albino	zeluzelu	albino
Briji	daraja	bridge
Cheki	hundi	cheque
Dampo	jaa, jalala	damp
<i>Deski</i>	meza	table; desk
Dipu	joshu	cattle dip
Diskaunti	bakshishi	discount
Edita	mhariri	editor
Feli	anguka, shindwa, noa	fail
Geti	lango	gate
Gadi	mlinzi au bawabu	guard
<i>Gaidi</i>	mwelekezi	tour guide
<i>Hafukasti</i>	chotara	half-caste
<i>Haikamishina</i>	Balozi	High Commissioner
<i>Hedikota</i>	Makao Makuu	headquarters
<i>Injini</i>	mhandisi	Engineer
<i>Kondakta</i>	Utingo	Conductor
<i>Kontena</i>	kasha	container
<i>Kondrati</i>	mkataba; kandarasi	contract
Lebu	maabara	laboratory
<i>Lizi</i>	pangisha au kodisha	lease
<i>Maksi</i>	alama; tuzo	marks
<i>Mesenja</i>	tarishi	messenger
<i>Morali</i>	motisha	motivation
<i>Notisi</i>	makataa	notice
<i>Paragrafu</i>	aya	paragraph
<i>Parishi</i>	parokia	Parish
<i>Pasi</i>	shinda, faulu	pass; succeed
<i>Plani</i>	mpango	plan
<i>Presha</i>	shinikizo	pressure
<i>Programu</i>	muradi, mpango	programme
Protokali	itifaki	protocol
<i>Prozi</i>	nathari	prose)
<i>Vokali</i>	irabu	vowel (s)

*Note:* However, the word **desk** has been rendered in italics because the borrowing may be justified on the ground that the shape and function of desk and **meza** are deemed slightly different. Not only are some of the above additions hard to justify but, in some cases, they cause some confusion to the speakers of Kiswahili. For instance, how can one distinguish between:

Peni as                      English *pen* or *pence*?

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Kaukau as	<i>cacao</i> or potato <i>crisps</i> ?
Bodi as	<i>vehicle body; living in a hostel or hotel and boarding a vehicle or airplane</i> ?
Globu as	English <i>glob and glopu</i> as in an eclectic glob?

### Difficulties in Spelling and Pronunciation

One of the guiding principles in developing new words in a language is that such words should be easy to spell and pronounce as naturally as possible. This is not the case as some of the examples of English loanwords in Kiswahili shown below will indicate:

	<b>Suggested Spelling</b>		<b>Natural Spelling</b>	
			<b>Kiswahili</b>	<b>English</b>
Afisa			ofisa	(officer)
Disii			diisii	(District Commissioner)
Ekzibiti			eksibiti	(exhibit)
Erieli			erioo	(aerial)
Feni			fani	(fan)
Gita			gitaa	(guitar)
Hanchifu			hangachifu	(handkerchief)
Hedimistress			hedimistresi	(Headmistress)
Hedikota			hedikwota	(Headquarters)
Jemu			jamu	(fruit jam)
Kabohidrati			kabohairaiti	(carbohydrates)
Keshia			kashia	(cashier)
Kabichi			kabeji	(cabbage)
Koki (verb, cork eg ...a gun)			koku	(cork)
Lebu			labu	(label)
Operesheni			opareseni	(operation)
Pesheni			pashoni	(passion fruit)
Puchini			pudini	(pudding)

### Conclusion

This paper focused only on the published corpus of commonly used English loanwords in Kiswahili. However, there is need to extend this survey to other horizons. For instance, further work could examine corpuses of such words appearing in other dictionaries or even from unpublished sources such as that in

circulation in **Sheng'** and Kiswahili cha **Mitaani. (Informal street register)**. Secondly, it will be interesting to find out how far Kiswahili is borrowing from English to express concepts in words that co-occur such as: **Soft loan, Credit card, Air-time, Health hazard, chain smoking, Call Centre, Social worker.**

Although historically, Kiswahili has borrowed lexicon from many different languages including Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindu and Bantu, it is from English that most of its borrowed lexicon comes (Gower, 1952). Most borrowings from English are nouns that the Swahili speakers use to express new concepts occasioned by cultural contacts between the speakers of the two languages. According to Quershie, in her authoritative article, "English in Contact with Swahili: Enrichment or Threat?", in **Letunk** (2010/14), this process helps to strengthen and modernize the Swahili lexicon as more and more new concepts enter the Swahili culture via the English language and culture. Additionally, Kiswahili, will, for the foreseeable future, continue to enrich and expand its scientific and ordinary lexicon through English loanwords, thus proving wrong the view held by Canon Broomfield (1931) that, "English words are difficult for Africans to pronounce and if spelt according to Swahili rules of spelling their appearance is grotesque."

Thirdly, English loanwords in Kiswahili must be seen as an element of modernization of the language and, as Schadenber (2009) recons, this process does not in anyway delute the Africanness of the language. However, although Kiswahili has often borrowed from English for prestige purposes as shown in this paper, there is need to rationalize each loanword through a formal mechanism before it is adopted, especially for official register usage.

As Mkude (2005) quoting Ohly observes, Kiswahili needs a careful nurturing and cultivation and, in our considered view, this process calls for a regional mechanism for planning, adopting, standardizing and dissemination of all loan words and other new lexicon entering the formal sector of Kiswahili. Only such a measure can ensure a productive and systematic growth and development of the language.

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