

# Phonological Influences of First Language on Kiswahili: A Case Study of Kenyan Bantu Languages

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**Abstract:** *Kiswahili language has a phonological system which is distinct from other languages. This can be attributed to the fact that even though it is a Bantu language, it has a unique phonological structure which is a universal feature of all languages. It is this uniqueness of specific languages that exhibits itself when other Bantu speakers write or speak Kiswahili erroneously. The correct articulation and orthography of Kiswahili will be discussed. Data for the paper came from analysis of compositions written by student from selected Kenyan secondary schools. The research will benefit Kiswahili students by identifying Kiswahili language usage errors originating from the speakers first Bantu languages. In addition the analysis will benefit Kiswahili teachers as they guide their learners on the correct Kiswahili orthography. The research will be a step forward in Swahili research particularly in error analysis of written texts.*

**Keywords:** Phonology, deletions, insertions, substitutions.

## 1. Introduction

Language contact triggers a plethora of interactional effects which are two way. This work looks at the phonological interchanges of other Bantu languages as exhibited in written Swahili communication. First language proficiency becomes a basis for the ease learning of a second language. This was noted by Richards (1974), who pointed out that learners' experience in first language is transferred to the learning of second language. This transfer is accompanied by errors as the languages are phonologically distinct. The errors occur not only between languages from different families, but also between languages of the same family. This errors can be identified when written texts are analyzed within various linguistic levels. This work investigates this errors based on three phonological processes: Deletion, insertion and phoneme substitution.

## 2. Literature Survey

On the interactions between Kiswahili and Kitigania (Kimeru variety), Mukuthuria (2004) notes that many errors arise when Tigania students learn Swahili ranging from spelling, grammar, code mixing and colloquialism. His research showed that, the errors have a phonological and morphological aspect.

Mangwa (2005) commenting on the effects of Ekegusii on Swahili learning, pointed out that errors in Swahili usage by Abagusii speakers originated from the Ekegusii itself as the first language. He noted that, these errors contributed to poor performance in Kiswahili examinations. He asserts that the errors were both grammatical and lexical. In his error analysis, he used compositions and discussions as his data basis.

Bartoo (2004) in her research on learning of English syntax by Keiyo first language speaker discovered that Keiyo affected English sentence construction. She noted that Keiyo

speakers when learning English, they erroneously transferred the syntactic Keiyo surface structures to English.

Munyua (2002), when researching on Kiswahili and its varieties also noted that first languages cause many errors in second language usage. He coins the term "viswahili" which would appropriately be translated to a Kiswahili idiolect to negatively refer to degrading transfers of errors to Kiswahili from other languages such as Bukusu, Ekegusii, Kimeru, Kalenjin and Dholuo. He emphasized that errors are phonological, morphological, syntactic or semantic. Articulation errors, Munyua (ibid) claims interfere with communication. He recommends that more research be done on Swahili idiolects to inform Kiswahili language curriculum developers on best language teaching practices.

Mudhune (1994) researched on the learning of Swahili morphosyntax by the Luo guided by the Contrastive Analysis Theory. She also discovered that errors that arose in Swahili usage originated from the first language (Dholuo). However, this scholar also noted that some errors in Kiswahili usage originated from the individual and had nothing to do with the first language whatsoever. Mudhune suggested that more research be undertaken to establish the cause of these errors which are not related to the first language.

Hagege (1999) while investigating the effects of first language on second language learning he pointed out that these effects exhibited themselves both in adults and children. He also discovered that the effect is more pronounced in adults than children as the ability of language acquisition decreases with age. He also discovered that when the process of second language acquisition is fast tracked in children, first language interference decreases and may eventually disappear. Hagege noted that the process of second language acquisition is heavily influenced by structural processes of first language that have already been acquired.

Lakkis & Malak (2000), investigated prepositional knowledge transferred by Arabic students from Arabic to English. This discovery helped teachers guide learners on the appropriate instances of using transfer in new language acquisition. They concluded their work by stating that a teacher whose first language was Arabic knew the right time to use Arabic prepositional structures particularly when these structures agreed with those from English. In addition, teachers had the responsibility of showing their students how verbs and other word classes related despite the fact that these relations differed from those of their first language.

Komunte (2001) investigated the effect of Bantu languages during the English learning process by secondary school students in Tanzania. He noted that the classroom environment was multilingual with learners communicating in different Bantu languages as their first languages. This research shed light on the difficulty experienced by the sampled learners. A large percentage of learners (82.9%) confirmed that whenever they learnt speaking and reading skills, they first think in their first languages and then translated the thoughts into English. He also discovered that due to first the Arabic language interference some students pronounced English words as they were written. He lists down some English phonemes which are normally wrongly pronounced due to first language interference.

Massamba (1986), while researching on the effects of local languages on Kiswahili in the Mara Region of Tanzania, he discovered that Kiswahili and local languages affected one another in varying degrees phonologically and lexically. Massamba (ibid) demonstrated how phonemes are either erroneously inserted or deleted in the use of Swahili words as a result of first language interference. In some instances, vocabulary from local languages of the sampled area is infused into Swahili. This in effect waters down the quality of standard Swahili. Grammatically, affixes from the first language are inserted into Swahili thus altering the morphological structure. This contravenes the rules of standard Swahili and interferes with the communication process.

According to Fromkin et al (2007), second language acquisition for adults depends on the grammar of their first language. The effects of second language competence is revealed at the phonological, morphological and the syntactic levels. They give examples of such effects as:

- i) A Japanese learning English has a problem distinguishing "write" from "light" as "r" and "l" are not phonemes in Japanese.
- ii) A Briton learning Italian finds it difficult to differentiate between long and short consonants that signify different meanings.

Ngugi (2007) suggests that first language affects the second one on the phonological level. During a research on the effects of Kikuyu language on Kiswahili acquisition, this researcher discovered that the effects are more pronounced in the articulation and spelling. Ngugi (ibid) has emphasized that many errors in the language used by secondary school students resulted from insertion, deletion and nasalization processes. He has explained that this phonological processes result from the difference in structure of the two languages.

He recommended that more research be done on grammatical and lexical errors.

Mudhune (2008), while investigating the effects of Dholuo on those learning Kiswahili language discovered that Dholuo caused errors on Kiswahili usage particularly at the phonological level as the speaker usually imported aspects of Dholuo into Kiswahili. The greatest effect was of those sounds found in Kiswahili but not in Dholuo.

Bosha (1993) investigated effects of Arabic on Kiswahili. His research was on Arabic loan words into Kiswahili. He discovered that 44.3 % of words used in Kiswahili have their origins in Arabic. This however does not qualify the language as a hybrid of an Arabic dialect or pidgin. He asserts that no language can exist alone without influences from other languages.

While investigating the interaction between Kiswahili and Kihaya, Rubanza (1979) discovered many Kiswahili influences on Kihaya. Respondents of speech communities of the Kihaya used Kiswahili in communicating certain concepts that could be communicated in Kihaya. The reasons for this scenario were:

- i) They could not remember the Kihaya parallels.
- ii) The Kiswahili words were more popular.
- iii) The Kiswahili words communicated meanings more appropriately.

Mochiwa (1979), investigated the effects of Kiswahili on Kizigua (spoken in Handeni region Tanzania). The research investigated language competence; patterns of language use and social attitudes of Kiswahili and Kizigua. The research found out that Kiswahili influenced Kizigua semantically and lexically.

### 3. Approach and Method

This work is based on the error analysis theory as described by Wilkins (1972). This scholar points out that those errors in articulation, spelling and the lexicon follow specific styles in different speakers. Based on this observation, it becomes possible to identify first language influences on second language learning. Wilkins advises that, the articulation and writing of a student learning a new language will reveal errors triggered by first language interference. (ibid pg. 170)

This was a survey research whose data comprised of compositions written by various Bantu Kiswahili students. These compositions were analyzed to identify the errors. The grammatical and lexical errors were then described and categorized according to three phonological processes of deletion, insertion and phoneme substitution.

### 4. Discussion

The data analysis revealed phonological influences of other Bantu languages on Kiswahili. This is based on the fact that languages differ in their phonological structure. When Bantu speakers learn Kiswahili, there is a tendency of importing their first language patterns erroneously. The errors have been found to follow three phonological processes: deletion, insertion and phoneme substitution.

#### 4.1 Deletion

Deletion is the removal of phonological segments. From the sampled compositions, the most frequently deleted sounds were nasals particularly those which are part of phoneme compounds. This process has been described by Mukuthuria (2004) and Ngugi (2007) who confirm that phoneme compounds are cumbersome and usually account for most spelling errors where such sounds are used. Words showing these errors are:

Deleted form	correct form
ji^abi	- jimbi
kuvu^ja moyo	- kuvunja moyo
majo^zi - kajonzi	
u^gedhani	- kngedhani
yakanido^doka	- kakanidondoka
ukwe^asi	- ukwensi
g^amu	- ghamu
kus^takiwa	- kushtakiwa

In these examples except the last two, nasal consonants have been deleted from phoneme compounds /mb/, /nj/, /ng/, /nd/ and /ns/. As Ngugi (2006: 46) asserts, when Kikuyu sound structure is imported into Kiswahili this nasal deletion occurs. This is erroneous use of Kiswahili resulting from first language interference. The words 'ghamu' and 'kushtakiwa' have the phoneme /h/ deleted effectively changing the /o/ to /g/ and /j/ to /s/ respectively.

Kamba speakers also exhibited the same deletive process when using Kiswahili. This can be discerned from the following examples:

pu <sup>de</sup> si pu <sup>de</sup>	- punde is punde
we <sup>z</sup> etu	- wenzetu
kiwa <sup>ja</sup>	- kiwanja

In these examples, the nasal /n/ has been deleted causing errors in those words. Phoneme compounds affected are: /nd/, /nz/, and /nj/. The speaker fails to establish where to place the nasal and finally simply deletes it.

Abagusii speakers usually delete the phoneme /h/. This deletion occurs where the breaking of the vowel sequences by a consonant is required. This is realized in the following words:

asubu <sup>i</sup>	- asubuhi
wamea <sup>ri</sup> bu	- wameharibu
wata <sup>ini</sup> wa	- watahiniwa

This process results from the absence of the /h/ phoneme in Ekegusii.

#### 4.2 Insertion

This is a phonological process which refers to cases where a phoneme is inserted into a given environment of a word. This process bequeaths a word with phonetic features which were initially not there. Kikuyu speakers learning Kiswahili normally insert phonemes /n/ and /m/. However some words

exhibited the insertion of the vowel /u/ or /i/. Examples of words showing this process are:

Wrong forms	Correct forms
inje	- nje
kumu <sup>w</sup> acha	- kumwacha
amuka	- amka
umewa <sup>nd</sup> ia	- umewadia
njanga la njaa	- janga la njaa
mbumbu <sup>a</sup> zi	- bumbuazi

In the first example, vowel /i/ has been inserted at the initial word environment. According to Ngugi (2007:44), Kikuyu speakers usually insert vowel sounds at the initial environments of most words. The resultant phoneme compound is usually realized as a syllable. The speakers feel that the original form is incomplete unless some sound is inserted. Kikuyu syllables have the form CV... and the insertion of sound /u/ in 'kumu<sup>w</sup>acha' and 'amuka' is intended to achieve this structure. Kiswahili differs from Kikuyu in that it can have a syllable comprising of only /m/ as in amka. The inserted sound can be realized between a nasal or other consonants. The compound phonemes /nd/, /nj/, and /mb/ are used instead of /d/, /j/ and /b/ erroneously. (Mukuthuria 2004:102) discovered that Kitigania speakers used /nd/ instead of /d/ as the language lacks the /d/ which does not follow an /n/. He also explains that the /nd/ is caused by the assimilative process of the homorganic nasal which is a reserve assimilative process. In this process the nasal is articulated simultaneously with the accompanying consonant. The nasal is articulated at the place where the consonant is articulated.

Among the kamba speakers, erroneous phonemes insertion occurred in various word environments as shown in examples below:

Wrong forms	Correct forms
ndukani	- dukani
uchanguzi mkuu	- uchaguzi mkuu
sembuleni	- sebuleni
hili tupate	- ili tupate
sitahisahau	- sitaisahau

In the first 3 examples, the respondents inserted nasals where they were not required. This results in the erroneous creation of phoneme components /nd/, /ng/ and /mb/ in various environments. Kamba speakers fail to determine the correct usage of the nasal, a situation which was observed that where a vowel is supposed to occur alone as a syllable, the Kamba had the tendency of inserting an /h/ in front of it as in the words 'hili' and 'sitahisahau'. This 'h' is not supposed to be there. Abagusii speakers also did the same as in the examples below:

Inserted forms	Correct forms
inchi ya Kenya	- nchi ya Kenya
hule	- ule
huamuzi	- uamuzi
masikini	- maskini

The insertion of an initial /i/ in the first example is based on the fact that many Ekegusii nouns begins with a vowel. Very

few begin with consonants. In Ekegusii the word “Country” is “ense” which follows the Kiswahili word structural forms. The insertion of the initial vowel allows ease of articulations. Other examples show the erroneous insertion of /h/ at the initial environments of words beginning with vowels. Kiswahili compositions of many Ekegusii speakers showed this tendency. The last example shows the insertion of an /i/ between the /s/ and /k/. This results from the fact that the sequence CC in Ekegusii syllable structure is not allowed in its phonology and an /i/ has to be inserted to revert to CV... syllabic structure. In Kiswahili the word ‘masikini’ is erroneous.

#### 4.3 Phoneme Substitution

Errors arising from this process involve the replacement of a phoneme erroneously due to a speakers first language influence on a new language usage. Kikuyu speakers for example while writing Kiswahili compositions normally substituted the /l/ with /r/. This was observed in the following examples:

Forms with substitutes	Correct forms
kukabiriana	- kukabiliana
ilibadirisha	- ilibadilisha
serikari	- serikali
tuliripoti	- tulilipoti
kuzilai	- kuzirai
turijaribu	- tulijaribu

The substitution of the /l/ with /r/ in the examples above is erroneous and results from the fact that Kikuyu phonology does not have the phoneme /l/. As a result another neighboring liquid sound which is articulated at the same place is used.

Ekegusii speakers also exhibited substitution in the following words:

Forms with substitutes	Correct forms
msindo	- mshindo
kushugulika	- kushughulika
anayechincha	- anayechinjwa
nikiwapungia	- nikiwapungia
kilichohusunisha	- kilichohuzunisha
siwani	- ziwani

In the first example the learners substituted /j/ with /s/ as Ekegusii does not have the phoneme /j/ thus giving wrong spelling. Kiswahili differs with Ekegusii as the phoneme /h/ can combine with other phonemes to form the phoneme composites /hj/, /hθ/ and /hð/. These formations are not there in Ekegusii. This is the reason why Ekegusii speakers learning Swahili wrongly substituted /ð/ with /g/ which is found in Ekegusii. In the third example the composite /j/ was substituted with /tj/ which also is not present in Ekegusii phonology. This substitution results in the creation of a phoneme composite (nchw) which replaces (njw) in the affected word. The fourth example shows wrong usage of /b/ instead of /p/. In Ekegusii both sounds are articulated as /β/. It is a substitution process of neutralization of two sounds to form another due to first language interference. Both sounds are realized as /b/ in Ekegusii.

In the last two examples, there are erroneous substitutions of /z/ with the /s/. This results from lack of /z/ in Ekegusii phonology. Wherever /z/ appears in Kiswahili the /s/ is used instead as it is the one found in Ekegusii.

#### 5. Conclusion

This work has looked at the first language influences on second language learning. It has been demonstrated that other Bantu speakers export phonological structures from their first languages into Kiswahili. Three phonological processes have been discussed. These are insertion, deletion and phoneme substitutions. These processes occur as speakers seek to ease the learning of Kiswahili language by using their first language structures. This results in word formations that contravene the rules of standard Kiswahili.

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