

Strategies of emphasis and intensity in Swahili

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1. Introduction ¹

Swahili is the lingua franca of more than a hundred and twenty million speakers in eastern Africa. It functions as their working language, school language, church and mosque language, market language etc, but only a few million eastern Africans are traditional native speakers of Swahili, and most of them have a Muslim background.

There is little documentation on strategies of emphasis, intensity or amplifying in Swahili. Ashton (1944:316-8) describes reduplication in a short section which is briefly repeated in almost all Swahili grammars compiled since then, occasionally mentioning emphasis as one of the functions of reduplication, besides showing intensity, distributiveness, etc. Aspiration is seldom mentioned in Swahili grammars or course books.

The few previous studies of the phenomenon of aspiration in Swahili (Panconcelli-Calzia 1911; Tucker and Ashton 1942; Polomé 1967:38-49; Engstrand & Lodhi 1984, 1985a, 1985b) deal mainly with the occurrence of aspiration in nouns of classes 9 and 10 which have lost their initial N-prefix preceding the unvoiced/voiceless /p^h, t^h, k^h, t^h/, and measurements of Voice Onset Time (VOT). The occurrence of aspiration (or explosion) in adjectives and verbs, and syllabuses other than the initial ones in nouns of various classes, has not been treated satisfactorily either in any previous study, ie. as it is evidenced in *nyumb^ha* ‘house’, *t^hund^hu* ‘small hole’, *mtund^hu* ‘mischievous’, *kit^hand^ha*

¹ This paper is partly based on my inaugural lecture “Emfatiska strategier i swahili: aspiration, gemination och reduplikation” (Strategies for emphasis in Swahili: aspiration, gemination and reduplication), held on 23 September 2002, at the Faculty of Languages, Uppsala University, Sweden. Moreover, I am indebted to the Swahili teachers and students at the Institute of Kiswahili and Foreign Languages, Zanzibar, for their many useful comments during the two seminars held on these topics in January 2003.

‘bed’, *ch^hachu~ch^hach^hu* ‘yeast’, *kitend^hawili* ‘riddle’, etc. To date there is only one study, by Lodhi (2003), on aspiration in Swahili adjectives and verbs.

2. Aspiration

The existence of aspiration in Swahili is easily evidenced by contrasting pairs of inherited nouns in all the coastal dialects of Swahili:

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|---------------------------------------|---|
| (1) <i>paa/mapaa</i> ‘roof(s)’ | <i>p^haa/p^haa</i> ‘gazelle(s)’ |
| <i>tando/matando</i> ‘fungus/fungi’ | <i>t^hando/t^hando</i> ‘swarm(s)’ |
| <i>chungu/vyungu</i> ‘cooking pot(s)’ | <i>ch^hungu/ch^hungu</i> ‘black ant(s)’ |
| <i>kaa/makaa</i> ‘coal’ | <i>k^haa/k^haa</i> ‘crab(s)’ |

Voiceless aspirates are generally not aspirated in loans and word classes other than nouns.

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| (2) <i>taa/taa</i> ‘lamp(s)’ | but: | <i>t^haa/t^haa</i> ‘ray(s), a kind of sea fish’ |
| <i>changu</i> ‘my, mine’ | but: | <i>ch^hangu/ch^hangu</i> ‘lethrimus(es), a kind of sea fish’ |
| <i>-taka</i> ‘(to) want/wish’ | but: | <i>t^haka/t^haka</i> ‘garbage’ |
| <i>ali(li)panda paa</i> | but: | <i>ali(m)panda p^haa</i> |
| ‘he climbed (on) the roof’ | | ‘he rode/mounted a (the) gazelle’ |
| <i>anakula kaa/makaa</i> | but: | <i>anakula k^haa</i> |
| ‘he is eating (char)coal’ | | ‘he is eating a crab/crabs’ |

Aspiration is retained in several shortened noun roots, such as, *mt^hu/wat^hu* ‘person(s)’ (< *muntu/*wantu), and *kit^hu/vit^hu* ‘thing(s)’ (< *kintu/*vintu).

Aspiration (explosion ?!) is also found in /b, d, g, dz/ following /n/, eg.

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| (3) IMPLOSIVE | EXPLOSIVE |
| <i>mlango mbaya</i> ‘bad door’ | <i>nyumb^ha mb^haya</i> ‘bad house’ |
| <i>mlango mdogo</i> ‘small door’ | <i>nyumb^ha nd^hogo</i> ‘small house’ |
| <i>gani?</i> ‘which?’, <i>gari</i> ‘car’ | <i>ng^hapi?</i> ‘how many/much?’, <i>ng^homa</i> ‘drum’ |
| <i>jana</i> ‘yesterday’ | <i>nj^haa</i> ‘hunger’ |
| <i>jambo</i> ‘matter/affair’ | <i>nj^hama</i> ‘conspiration’ |

In *nyumb^ha mb^haya* ‘bad house’, the initial *n-* is regressively assimilated to *m-* and its loss is compensated by aspiration to form *mb^haya*, which in turn assimilates the final syllable *-mba* in *nyumb^ha* to aspirate.

2.1 Aspiration as intensifier

Aspiration is used in many nouns for intensity, as in the following examples:

- (4) a. *alikhwenda mwituni* ‘he went (in)to the forest’
 b. *alikhwenda mwit^huni* ‘he went deep into the forest’
 c. *akaupanda ule ukuta* ‘he climbed that wall’ (cl. 11, sing.)
 d. *akazipanda zile k^huta* ‘he climbed those walls’ (cl. 10, pl.)
 e. *akazipanda zile k^huta (ndefu)* ‘he climbed those (great/high) walls’
 (cl. 10 pl.), same as 4d
 f. *akalipanda lile kuta* ‘he climbed that great/high wall’ (cl. 5 sing.),
 application w/o aspiration
 g. *akayapanda yale makuta* ‘he climbed those great/high walls’
 (cl. 6 pl.), application w/o aspiration
 h. *akaipanda ile k^huta (ndefu)* ‘he climbed that great (high) wall’
 (cl. 9 sing.), same as 4f, but archaic

2.2 Aspiration in adjectives and numbers

Some adjectives expressing some kind of force, strength, greater effort, intensity etc., have aspiration in their initial consonants. Aspiration is transferred to initial voiceless stops in adjectives qualifying nouns having aspiration. It may also be transferred to other voiceless stops in the same words through assimilation, either remote or contact assimilation. In some rare cases, adjectives qualifying nouns of classes other than 9 and 10 may also have aspirated voiceless stops for intensity, eg.:

- (5) *nyumb^ha t^hano* ‘five houses’ (cl. 10)
nyumb^ha t^hat^hu ‘three houses’ (cl. 10)

milango mitano ‘five doors’ (cl. 4)

milango mitatu ‘three doors’ (cl. 4)

milango mit^hano ‘five doors’ (cl. 4)

milango mit^hat^hu ‘three doors’ (cl. 4)

This is a common variant in the Zanzibari usage, in the Lamu archipelago and the coast of southern Somalia where exaggerated aspiration is met with. It seems the aspirated forms of the numerals *tatu* ‘three’ and *tano* ‘five’ have been lexicalised in Swahili and many other Bantu languages both along the coast of East Africa (eg. Digo) and in the interior (eg. Nyihanzu).

However, /t/ in *tisa* ‘nine’, which is an Arabic loan, is not aspirated; and /k/ is (rarely) aspirated in *kumi* (ten) when contrasted with ‘only one’, eg.

- (6) *hakujenga nyumba moja tu, bali alizijenga zote k^humi*
 ‘he did not build only one house but all the TEN of them’

nyumb^ha t^hupu ‘empty house/houses’

sakafu k^havu ‘dry floor/floors’

sakafu ch^hepech^hepe ‘wet floor/floors’

nazi hii ni ch^hapwa ‘this coconut has flat taste, ie. it is not sweet’

nazi hizi ni ch^hapwa ‘these coconuts have flat taste, ie. they are not sweet’

chungwa hili ni chapwa ‘this orange has flat taste, ie. it is not sweet’

machungwa haya ni machapwa ‘these oranges have flat taste, ie. the
 are not sweet’

But the following variation is also possible in the the Kikae and Kiunguja dialects of Zanzibar and in the Lamu archipelago where aspiration is used with some adjectives in noun class 6 with the *ma*-prefix:

- (7) *chungwa hili ni ch^hapwa*
 ‘his orange has VERY flat taste, ie. it is not sweet AT ALL’

machungwa haya ni mach^hapwa

‘these oranges have VERY flat taste, ie. they are not sweet AT ALL’

Aspiration is not met with to the same extent in the two major dialects of Swahili, ie. Kiunguja (western Zanzibar) and Kimvita (Mombasa), eg. /^hp^homb^he/ ‘beer’ with aspiration in Zanzibar, while /^hpombe/ without aspiration in Mombasa.

2.3 Aspiration in verbs

There are about a dozen verbs in Swahili in which the initial voiceless aspirate is aspirated. These verbs express some kind of force, strength, greater effort,

intensity etc. From the noun *ch^hapa* ‘brand/print/model’, several verbs are derived. Aspiration in these is retained in the borrowed root from the Indic/Cutchi original /ch^hāp/ ‘print’, as it is also with /bak^h/ ‘embrace’.

- (8) -*ch^hapa* ‘(to) press/stamp/slap; (to) hit hard’
 -*ch^hapia* ‘(to) press/stamp/slap with/for/on/by etc’ = applicative
 -*ch^hapisha* ‘(to) print, to cause to be printed, = causative
 -*ch^hapua* ‘(to) press/stamp/slap hard/severly’ = reversive, used as intensive
- bak^ha* ‘(to) catch/arrest someone by embracing’
 -*ch^hupa* ‘(to) jump over something’
 -*k^hata* ‘(to) cut, chop off’
 -*ruk^ha* ‘(to) fly’, -*ruk^hia* ‘(to) fly over’
- piga* ‘(to) hit/strike’ but -*p^higa* ‘(to) hit/strike hard’ = rarely used
 -*kanyaga* ‘(to) tramp(le)’ but -*k^hanyaga* ‘(to) tramp(le) hard’ = rare
- pumua* ‘(to) breath; (to) breath out’
 -*p^humua* ‘(to) breathe heavily’ (cfr *p^humuzi* ‘breath’ and *p^humu* ‘asthma’)
- p^hamba* ‘(to) decorate’
 -*p^hambaza* ‘(to) decorate carefully, in detail’ = causative, used as intensive
pambo ‘decoration’, *mapambo* ‘decorations’
p^hambo ‘many/beautiful decorations’ = archaic
 -*p^hambazuka* ‘(to) dawn, spreading of sunlight everywhere’

3. Gemination

Gemination or lengthening of consonants is a not a characteristic feature of Bantu languages, though it is found in East Africa. In Swahili, it has been transferred from Arabic and Indic, and is a feature noticed contextually in the usage of those Swahili speakers who are conversant with Arabic and/or Indic. In some Arabic loans (nouns, verbs, adjectives), emphasis or intensity is expressed by reproducing the original “emphatic” (or, pharyngaelized) consonants /s^ʕ, t^ʕ, d^ʕ, z^ʕ/ and the velar /q/. The Arabic “emphatic” /s^ʕ/ and /t^ʕ/ are frequently replaced by gemination of the Swahili /s/ and /t/, eg.

- (9) *katili* /ka^ʔti:li~ka^ʔti:li/ ‘cruel’, /^ʔqa:til~^ʔqattil/ ‘very cruel’
tajiri /ta^ʔji:ri~ta^ʔji:ri/ ‘wealthy’, /^ʔta:jjir~^ʔta:jjiri/ ‘very wealthy’

hasa /'ha:sa/ 'specially', /ha'ssa~ha'ssa:/ emphatic

hata /'ha:ta/ 'even, until', /ha'tta:~ha'tta:/ emphatic

tafadhali! /tafa'da:li~tafa'da:li/ 'please!', /tafa'da:li~tafa'ddali:/ emphatic

kila /'ki:la/ 'every', /ki'lla:~ku'lla:/ emphatic

Gemination for emphasis in borrowed Indic adjectives, adverbs and nouns occurs in a few cases where it is transferred from the Indic source language, or it is produced by analogy, eg.:

(10) *chakari* 'full to the brim'

alilewa 'he was drunk'

alilewa chakari 'he was very drunk'

alilewa chakkar(i) 'he was extremely drunk'

(from Cutchi /ča'kkar/, Gujarati /či'kkar/)

bepari 'capitalist'

beppar(i) 'greedy/avaricious capitalist'

chakram(u) 'mad'

chakkram(u) 'completely mad'

In *beppar* and *chakkram*, gemination is most probably by analogy of *chakkar*, and their final syllabising *-i* and *-u* respectively, which are Bantu, are dropped in the geminised forms.

4. Reduplication

Reduplication is a very common characteristic feature of Bantu languages, and it has several functions (Ashton 1944:316-318; Lodhi 2002:8,11,20-21). It affects syllables in initial position, whole verb stems, nouns and pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and whole phrases too. Reduplication is used to express different types of intensiveness. Ashton (idem) recognises four main types of use:

- To express various phases of intensiveness, ie to emphasize, to increase or extend the idea contained in the word, to express abundance or diversity.
- To lessen or modify the force of a word.
- To express continuous action, or state.
- To express a distributive idea.

Examples:

- (11) *kikombe kimevunjika* ‘the cup has broken down/the cup is broken’
kikombe kimevunjika vipande vitatu ‘the cup has broken down
into THREE pieces’
kikombe kimevunjika vipande-vipande ‘the cup has broken down
into MANY PIECES’
kikombe kimevunjika-vunjika ‘the cup has broken down into MANY
PIECES/the cup has got MANY CRACKS’
basi ilivunjika-vunjika ‘the bus was broken HERE AND THERE/the bus
was THOROUGHLY broken’

Even L1 speakers are sometimes uncertain as to the correct use of the reduplicated verb. Generally, reduplication of the verb diminishes intensity or has a distributive idea only, and the verb root has a secondary accent in the first occurrence and primary accent in the second occurrence, eg.

- (12) /ki'kombe kimevu'njika-vu'njika/
‘the cup has got MANY CRACKS’ (only one primary stress)
- /'basi ilivu'njika-'vunjika/
‘the bus was broken HERE AND THERE’

But when the verb-root is pronounced with initial accent in both occurrences, it has the meaning of ‘thoroughly’, eg.

- (13) /ki'kombe kime'vunjika-'vunjika/
‘the cup has broken down into MANY PIECES’
- /'basi ili'vunjika-'vunjika/
‘the bus was THOROUGHLY damaged/broken’

Complex reduplicated forms for expressing intensity are found in the southern dialects of Swahili, eg. ²

² The below items *rovurovu* and *vuruvuru* were collected during fieldwork in southern Unguja/Zanzibar in January 2003.

(14) *-rovurovu* ‘wet’ (adj.), *rovurovu* ‘utterly wet’ (adv.)

< *-rovu* ‘humid, wet’ < *kurowa* ‘(to) become wet’

kitabu hiki kilirowa ‘this book became wet’

kitabu hiki ni kirovu ‘this book is wet’ (archaic)

kitabu hiki ni kirovurovu ‘this book is wet’

kitabu hiki kilirowa rovurovu ‘this book was completely/utterly wet’

(15) *-vuruvuru* (adj.), *vuruvuru* (adv.) ‘thoroughly messed up’

< *-vuru* ‘messed up’ < *kuvuruga* ‘(to) mess things up’

amevuruga mambo ‘he has messed up things’

mambo yake yote ni mavuruvuru ‘all his affairs are a great mess’ (uncommon)

amevuruga mambo vuruvuru ‘he has thoroughly messed up things; he has made a real mess of everything’

The archaic adjective *-vuru* is derived from the dormant infinitive *-vura* (currently the extended form *-vuruga*) and then it is reduplicated.

Ideophones and onomatopoeic words and phrases are commonly used in Swahili. They function as adverbs and some verbs and nouns are derived from them (Ashton 1944:313-315), and are uttered with a descending pitch contour. Frequently, these are reduplicated as syllables or words. In the derivation process, initial or final syllables of verbs are reduplicated to form ideophonic particles, eg.

(16) *-teketea teke-teke* ‘(to)be burnt to cinders’

-mwagika mwa ‘rushing out/spilling of a liquid’

-katika ka-ka-ka ‘falling of a tree by breaking/cracking noise’

-bweta bwe ‘(to) trickle constantly’

-bwata bwa ‘(to) bark continuously’

-gonga go ‘(to) knock/hammer heavily’

-gongomelea ngo-ngo-ngo ‘(to) drive in a nail, to hammer repeatedly’

kikombe kilivunjika ‘the cup broke down’

kikombe kilivunjika ka ‘the cup broke down suddenly/unexpectedly’

alifunga mlango ‘he closed the door’

alifunga mlango nga ‘he slammed the door’

5. In conclusion

Several strategies are employed by first language (L1) speakers of Swahili to express emphasis, intensity or amplicativeness, whereas 2nd (L2) or 3rd (L3) language speakers of Swahili resort only to simple reduplication or paraphrasing as Polome (1967:40) observed four decades ago. L1 speakers resort also to more sophisticated forms of reduplication. Word accent in the speech of L1 Swahili-speakers carries a semantic value which needs to be investigated properly.

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