

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

M.Ed. In TESL Program Language Group Specific Informational Reports

Produced by Graduate Students in the M.Ed. In TESL Program
In the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

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Swahili

Language Group Specific Informational Report

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TESL 539

Spring 2010

Why I chose this language?

- I chose this language because I had a peer in my linguistics class last semester whose case-study student spoke Swahili, in addition to several other languages.
- When she spoke about her student I was so intrigued about her student's language capabilities.
- I also do not have much experience working with students of African background and am eager to learn about their language and cultural background.



History of Swahili Language

- Swahili belongs to the Bantu family of languages, which are spoken by most Africans south of a line drawn roughly from Cameroon in the west, eastwards to the north of Lake Victoria; and from the east of Lake Victoria across to Brava in Somalia.
- Swahili is the most important language in East Africa, with at least 60 million speakers.
- Only a minority speak Swahili as their mother tongue: most speak it as a second, third, or even fourth language.

Where is it spoken and where did it come from?

- Swahili is the national language of Tanzania, one of four African national languages of Zaire, and the official language of Kenya.
- It plays an important role as a *lingua franca* in Eastern and to some extent Central Africa, where it is widely used both in local trade and international broadcasting.
- The name Swahili comes from the Arabic word *sawāhil*, meaning coasts, and the language contains a number of words of Arabic origin. However, the language is essentially African.

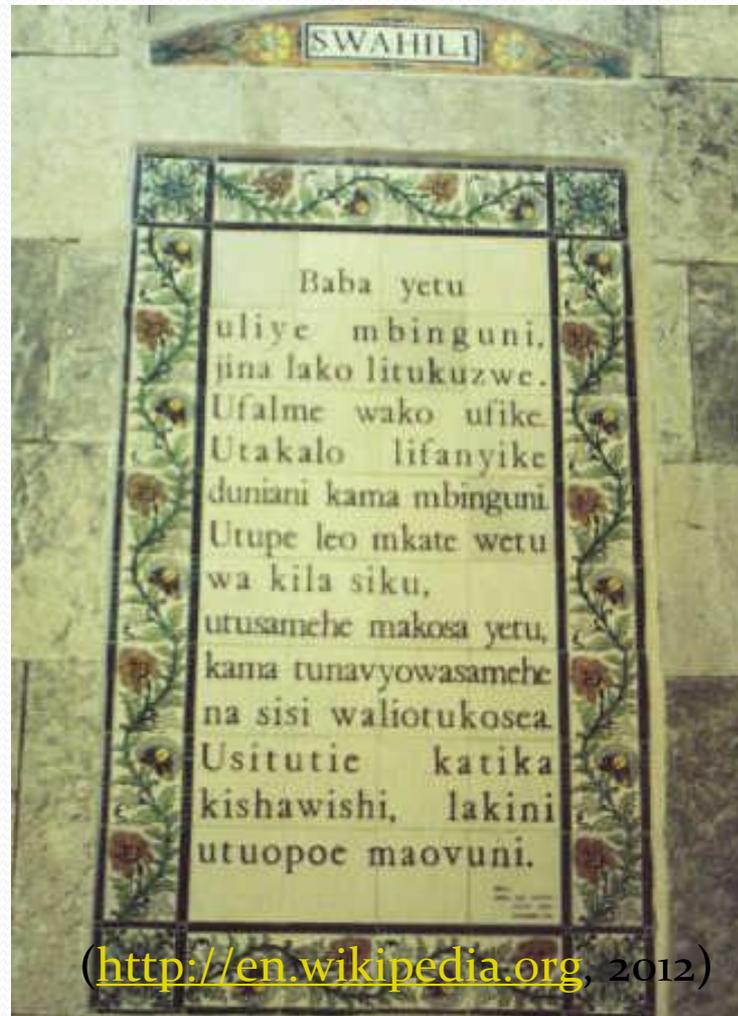
REGIONAL DIALECTS:

- There are about twenty different dialects of Swahili: the most important are Kiunguja, the dialect of Zanibar; Kimvita, the dialect of Mombasa; and Kiamu, the dialect of Lamu Island in Kenya.
- The Kingwana dialect, widespread in Zaire, is based on Kiunguja, which has come to be regarded as the standard form of Swahili.
- There is a certain amount of dialectical variation in Swahili, which may cause problems that are not easily predictable. There may also be influences on the speaker's English from his or her first language, if this is not Swahili.

Predictable problems if Swahili is not their first language

- /l/ and /r/ are often confused by those who speak Swahili as a second or third language: *load* for *road*.
- /s/ replaces /ʃ/ in some dialects of Swahili, which can carry over into English: *sew* for *show*.
- /h/ is sometimes dropped: *eat* for *heat*.
- /ə/ and /ð/ occur in Swahili words derived from Arabic, but not in other Bantu languages.
 - Ex. Some sounds and words that are avoided in some dialects: the sounds /t/ or /s/ may be used for /ə/, and /d/ or /z/ for /ð/: *useful* for *youthful* and *breeze* for *breathe*.

Although originally written in Arabic script, Swahili orthography is now based on the Latin alphabet that was introduced by Christian missionaries and colonial administrators. The text shown here is the catholic version of the Lord's Prayer.



Main differences between Swahili and English

- Swahili has only five vowel sounds, in contrast to the 22 of English. /i/, /e/, /u/, /a/, /o/
- English has 24 consonants; Swahili has 28.
- Swahili speech alternates vowels with consonants, and contains basically no consonant clusters.
- In Swahili, all utterances and syllables end in a vowel sound.
- The two languages have very different systems of word stress.
- The intonation patterns are also a little different.
 - In Swahili the typical intonation pattern is a low fall, which is carried over into English even where English uses a rise. Therefore, it is not always clear if the speaker is asking a question in English.

Aspects of Swahili

- Uses different markers to indicate the way an action is visualised.
 - -me- This infix indicates an action that has been completed, the results of which are still relevant, and therefore may be seen as the present perfect use in English.
Ex. Wanangu wamefika. = My children have arrived.
 - -ki- In contrast with the -me- infix, the -ki- infix indicates an action happening simultaneously with another action, but not completed. Ex. Tuliwaona watoto wakisoma. = literally- We saw them the children they reading.
 - Also may be used as a conditional marker:
 - Mangu akipenda. =If God wills.
 - Since there is no equivalent in English, Swahili speakers may use a different tenses in a conditional clause.

Characteristics of Swahili Language & Challenges

Swahili does not have anything like the English auxiliary verb system for asking questions, indicating tense and modality.

There are no articles, and there is no gender marking.

English prepositions have no exact equivalent in Swahili, which uses locative forms attached to the nouns.

The vowel sounds represent the **biggest** single problem area for Swahili speakers learning English.

Five vowels of Swahili are:

/i/, /e/, /u/ These are slightly higher than their nearest equivalents in English.

/a/ This sound is shorter, higher, and further forward than its nearest English equivalent.

/o/ This sound is somewhere between the English sound as in cot and as in coat.

Most English vowel and diphthong sounds may cause difficulty.

The Swahili speaker will try to match the Swahili sound to what they think sounds nearest to the English sound, but this can cause a difficulty because it may mislead the correct spelling in English.

Characteristics of African Language Phonology

- Rhythm and Stress
 - Swahili is a syllable-timed language, whereas English is a stress-timed language. Therefore, Swahili speakers tend to give every syllable in English almost equal stress. Like the example of soldiers marching.
 - Weak forms in English tend to be overstressed, and may be given their strong pronunciation.

Influence of spelling on pronunciation

There is a regular correspondence between sound and orthographic symbol in Swahili.

1. Silent letters may be pronounced, ex. in *honour* and *sign*.
2. Incorrect sound values will be assigned to words that are oddly spelt, ex. *biskwit* for *biscuit*.

Communication Styles & Values

Indirect communication is considered much more polite than being direct and specific, especially when talking to superiors or your elders.

You may find that people address problems differently. For example, instead of asking for help and then explaining specifically their reasons, they may tell you a 5 minute story about a problem they are having and only then begin to hint at the assistance you can give.

Humor plays a big role in communicating. Most Tanzanians enjoy a good joke.

When two people of the same sex are talking, touching is acceptable. It is common to touch the hands, legs, and shoulders. When two people of the opposite sex talk there is very little to no touching. The only appropriate touch is a handshake.

When talking to an elder, many people tend to look down out of respect.

How students can preserve or learn this language?

- For 15 years, African languages have been offered at the k-12 level in the United States.
- To date, no teachers of African languages have participated in the preparation of generic standards at these levels. However, Africanists are in the process of developing proficiency guidelines for Hausa, Swahili, and Yoruba.
- On the Center for Applied Linguistics website, there is a list of private and public schools and organizations that teach Arabic/Swahili.



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