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Implications of Sociolinguistic Variation in Swahili for the Foreign Language Classroom

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the range of sociolinguistic variation in Swahili to call attention to the need for foreign language classrooms to expose students to the array of speech variants that many Africans use in their everyday conversations. While maintaining the stance that standard Swahili should remain the general target variety for students' classroom use and for evaluative purposes, it is important to recognize that the linguistic reality of interacting with Swahili speakers in East Africa often does not correspond to the linguistic code taught in the classroom. Like speakers in all language communities, many people in East Africa speak non-standard or regional varieties (Duran, 1979; LeBreton, 1935; Polome, 1968; Scotton, 1979; Stigand, 1915; *Studies in Swahili Dialect*, 1956-1958). In addition, a majority of Africans live in multicultural and multilingual societies and consequently, language mixing and effects from language contact occur in everyday conversations. In Tanzania, many speakers use English-interfered Swahili (Blommaert, 1992; Kishe, 1994), and in Kenya, many urban youth speak Sheng or Engsh, mixed varieties that are indecipherable to students who are only familiar with the usage and meanings of standard Swahili and English as separate languages (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). Moreover, because many Africans are multilinguals, but not the equivalent of two or more monolinguals, their fluency in all codes is not equally strong; as a result, when their range of vocabulary becomes constrained by register, speakers use lexical items from languages other than Swahili (c.f. Ferguson, 1959; Fishman 1971; Sridhar, 1996).

Though disparities between the language taught in the classroom and the authentic language of the communities of use have always existed, research on language variation has rarely been addressed in the field of foreign language teaching. Only recently has research on sociolinguistic variation in commonly taught languages been published for the sake of informing foreign language pedagogy for Spanish (Stewart, 1999), German (Russ, 1995), and French (Ball, 1997; Valdman, 2000). The impact of bidialectalism and language variation on the teaching of less commonly taught languages such as Greek has also been recently studied (Pavlou & Christodoulou, 2001), but such studies with direct implications for foreign language learning are not common.

This mismatch between the types of language taught in the classroom and the actual speech of 'native speakers'[1] in East Africa can be attributed to multiple factors, including time constraints, a lack of training in sociolinguistics and language variation, and a lack of materials. However, another significant factor is the prevalence of negative attitudes towards non-standard or regional varieties in general. Many foreign language teachers feel that teaching non-standard

By exposing students to the range of Swahili variation, the possibility for them to use natural, everyday language becomes greater, depending on their target language and target community. If they come to speech communities with the knowledge that the Swahili that the community uses is likely to differ from what they have been taught in the classroom, then it will be easier for them to address those differences. Importantly, language teachers can help their students to meet their language goals by educating them about the range of sociolinguistic variation in the languages they are studying. Through discussions of language varieties, students can make decisions about which varieties they need to be familiar with, and teachers can adapt their pedagogy to suit their students' needs, and they can assign projects to the students so that they can enhance their own language learning experience.

Students of upper level classes would probably be the best suited for lessons involving sociolinguistic content, but even lower level classes can benefit. For example, in first-semester Swahili classrooms, students learn noun classes, a grammatical aspect of Swahili which is notorious for exhibiting variation, even among speakers of "standard" Swahili. Although the students would be evaluated on their mastery of the standard usage of noun classes, it is important for them to know that Swahili speakers themselves do not always conform to these noun classes. Consequently, upon interacting with native East Africans, students would better understand the reasons for the variation they hear. In addition, examining the linguistic reasons for usage of non-standard noun classes can serve to teach students what types of errors to be on alert for, and can also serve to expose them to the ways that many native East Africans speak.

Two Types of variation in Swahili

In order to teach students about variation in Swahili, it is crucial to point out the systematicity of language variation. Speakers of all languages often believe that non-standard speech does not follow any organized patterns, and is simply lazy speech, or a way of talking that fails to follow any particular grammar. Teaching students about these language myths, and by demonstrating how these myths are false, is an effective way to debunk these myths.

Noun Classes

Table 1 below is a partial chart of the noun classes in Swahili. In Swahili grammar, many lexical items are grouped into regular noun classes such as (8) and (2) which have pronominal prefixes that are similar to the adjectival prefixes. Pronominal prefixes remain the same across possessives, in verbs, and in demonstratives, and adjectival prefixes are phonologically similar. For example, noun class (8), 'useful objects,' is completely regular since all prefixes occur as *vi-*. In noun class (2), 'people and animals,' all prefixes appear as the morpheme *wa-*, with a small degree of vowel harmony: *wa*ngu, *wa*napatikana, *wa*le, and *we*ngi /wa+engi/ → [wengi]. However, for the irregular noun classes (10) and (5), the pronominal prefix differs more dramatically from the adjectival prefix. For *meza* 'tables,' the morpheme appears as *za* or *zi-* in the pronominal form, but as *ny-* in the adjectival form. The pronominal prefixes in *za*ngu, *zi*napatikana, and *zi*le are quite similar, but the adjective *ny*ingine 'other,' or 'some' displays a dramatic shift from the *zi-* morpheme.

Table 1. Partial list of noun classes in Swahili.

noun class	noun	AGR (pro)	'my' agr + - angu	present tense VP agr + -na- + verb pres. + patikana 'to be available'	demon-strative agr + -le 'those'	AGR (adj)	'long' agr + -refu	'another, others' agr + -ingine
8	vitabu 'books'	vi-	vitabu vy-angu 'my books'	vi-na-patikana '(books) are available'	vi-le those (books)	vi-	vitabu virefu 'long books'	vitabu vingine 'other books'
2	watu ' 'people'	wa-	watu wa-ngu 'my people'	wa-na-patikana '(people) are available'	wa-le those (people)	wa-	watu warefu 'tall people'	watu wengine 'other people'
10	meza 'tables'	zi-	meza z-angu 'my tables'	zi-na-patikana '(tables) are available'	zi-le those (tables)	n-	meza ndefu 'long tables'	meza nyingine 'other or some tables'
5	jambo 'thing'	li-	jambo l-angu 'my thing'	li-na-patikana '(thing) is available'	li-le that (thing)	Ø (or) ji-	jambo Ørefu 'long thing'	jambo jingine 'another thing'

Similarly, noun class (5) shows irregular concord across the pronominal and adjectival prefixes since the pronominal agreement occurs as *li-*, while the adjectival prefixes occur as either a zero prefix if preceding a consonant-initial root such as *–refu*, or as *ji-* if preceding a vowel-initial root such as *–ingine*.

Based on the patterning of pronominal and adjectival prefixes, it is not difficult to understand why speakers might produce the utterances *meza zingi* (instead of *meza nyingi*, in Standard Swahili) or *jambo lingine*, (instead of *jambo jingine*) in concordance with the patterns that occur in classes 8 and 2. In fact, such usage is well-founded on a linguistic basis. These speakers are simply leveling the differences by following the dominant pattern present in the pronominal agreement. Such usage is by no means rare in East Africa, even among the educated elites. In fact, such variation can be found in the speech of Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania after independence. In one of his speeches which was later published, he is shown to exhibit variation between his noun class usage in classes 5 and 10, two classes which contain exceptions in relation to the Swahili concord system.[3]

(standard)   "Wakati huo huo tukaanza kumiliki biashara **nyingi nyingine** ..." (1967, p. 16)
     time   same   we-then-begin to-own business   many   other
     '*At the same time, we began to own many more businesses*'

(non-standard)   "Wasochalisti wanaotoka **nchi zingine** walio   tayari kutusaidia ..." (p. 3)
     pl-socialist   they-pres-rel-hail country other   they-are-rel ready to-us-help
     '*Socialists from other countries are ready to help us*'

(non-standard)   "**Jambo lingine** la maana linalopaswa   kukumbukwa   na viongozi wa TANU ... (p. 27)
     thing   other   of meaning it-pres-rel-obligate-psv to-remember-psv. by pl-leader of TANU
     '*Another important thing which obligates the leaders of TANU to remember us*'

Non-standard or regional pronunciation

One question which students may ask is, 'Why do East Africans "mispronounce" Swahili?,' citing examples such as those below where /T / and /D/ become [s] and [z] and /r/ is pronounced as [l] between vowels:

thelathini 'thirty' → selasini   hereni 'earring' → heleni
fedha 'money' → feza   darasa 'class' → dalasa

With a basic explanation of phonetics involving a phonetics chart for Swahili, however, **students can** better understand the phonetic explanation to these consonant substitutions and will **understand** them as regular, patterned occurrences instead of as 'mistakes.' By examining the places of articulation in the mouth, the production of *thelathini* as [selasini], for example, can be elucidated by demonstrating the proximity of the alveolar ridge to the place of articulation for interdental phones. Additional sound substitutions such as the lack of distinction between /r/ and /l/ among some Swahili speakers in particular lexical items can be identified and understood in the same way. Importantly, comparisons of Swahili with historical phonological change and with dialect variation in English will allow students to see how such variation is quite common with these same phonemes, e.g.:

a. /r/ and /l/: Etymology of the borrowing 'colonel'
   Latin   > Old Italian > French > English
   columna > colonello > coronel > [kr`nl`]

b. /T/ and /D/: African-American Vernacular English
   /tuT/ toot → [tuf]
   /DQt/ that → [dQt]
   /TIN/ thing → [tIN]

Another reason that students should become familiar with the basic range of sociolinguistic variation in Swahili is that these sound substitutions occur in texts which students are exposed to, and they get used to depict certain characteristics such as level of education, ethnicity, and honesty. Figure 1 below is an excerpt from a Kenyan comic book that shows the type of Swahili spoken by Indian Kenyans (IndS) (Olande, p. 28). The IndS is characterized by interference from Hindi as in 'veve' instead of 'wewe,' (/w/→ [v],) and 'msuri' instead of 'mzuri' (/z/→ [s]). It is a common belief among Swahili speakers that Indians who were born and raised in East Africa, yet who do not do not speak Swahili 'correctly,' is some type of evidence that they are outsiders, i.e., they are not included in the category 'Swahili' despite being natives to Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda; rather, they are always identified as *Wahindi*, 'Indians,' and their behavior, including their speech, is often commented upon with disdain by Black East Africans. Popular texts such as magazines from which the example was taken below are easily obtainable, and because they are so widespread and widely read by native East Africans, they provide a practical rationale for discussing sociolinguistic variation in the classroom.

Figure 1. Indian Swahili as depicted in *Gitonga*, a comic book published in Nairobi in 1996.

Ushikwapo shikamana – reprinted with permission of Sasa Sema Publications Inc.

Because language embodies social categories such as ethnicity, by focusing on the ways that linguistic variation is employed in texts, students can be more critical of the ways that social identities are presented in texts and can engage in discourse analyses in their language classrooms. In popular Swahili literature, for example, the /l/ and /r/ distinction is often employed to index the identity of policemen and soldiers. This lack of distinction is considered non-standard, and it is often used by authors to attribute brutish or unsympathetic characteristics to their characters. For example, the novel *Zawadi ya Ushindi* ('Gift of Triumph') offers numerous examples of up-country Swahili spoken by the Ugandan soldiers at the time of the invasion of Idi Amin's forces into Tanzania. In the novel, one Ugandan soldier produces [l] word initially (e.g. *labda*, 'maybe') and after [+low] vowels as in *kuzaliwa* 'to be born'; however, he produces [r] where [l] would occur in Standard Swahili after [-low] vowels, as in *kura* 'to eat,' *mbere* 'in front,' and *chakura*, 'food' (Mtobwa, p. 74):

"Sijuti," Mganda alimjibu. "**Labda** nijute **kuzaliwa**."
1sg-regret.neg Ugandan 3psg-obj-answer maybe 1sg.-regret infin-be born
'*I don't regret, the Ugandan told him. Maybe I should regret being born.*'

"Kwa nini?" Sikamona alisita   kumpiga na kumwuliza kwa mshangao.
for   what   Sikamona   3psg.-hesitate   infin-hit   with infin-obj-ask for   surprise
'*Why? ' Out of great surprise, Sikamona held back his desire to hit him.*'

"Nahitaji **kura**, nahitaji kuishi. Nisingesaliwa nisingehitaji fyote hifyo."
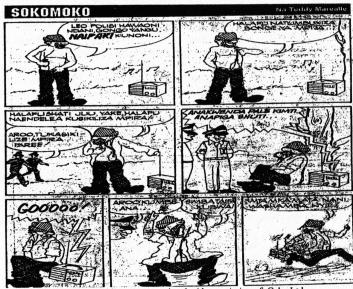1sg-need   infin-eat 1sg-need infin-live 1sg-neg-cond-be born 1sg-neg-cond-need all   these.things
'*I need to eat, I need to live. If I hadn't been born I wouldn't need all of these things*'

...."Utu utanisaidia nini **mbere** ya maisha? Haya itanipa   **chakura**?
compassion pro.agr-me-help what in.front part. life   this.agr pro.agr-me-give food
'*How will compassion help me in life? Will it give me food?*'

Like the voices of soldiers, writers frequently substitute [r] in places where [l] occurs in standard Swahili to animate the voices of policemen in Tanzania, thus emphasizing the way they speak as different from the ways that the civilians speak. In Figure 2, the carton "Sokomoko," taken from the magazine *Kingo* (1994, p. 32) shows that the police exhibit this substitution in the words *Aroo*, an expression of surprise (*ala* in standard Swahili) and *pare* 'there' while the protagonist exhibits standard /l/ and /r/ phonetic distribution. The cartoon depicts a man relaxing, listening to the soccer match on the radio, and trying to enjoy an alcoholic beverage while keeping it hidden from the police who come by to listen to the game. Despite having revealed his secret after a goal is scored (in the second to last frame), the man makes off without any penalty for his illicit alcohol, calling the police *washamba*, 'hillbillies' as he scampers off. The policemen's use of non-standard Swahili, together with the protagonist's appraisal of them as 'hillbillies' links language to non-linguistic social categories, categories which merit discussion in a language classroom.

Figure 2. 'Hillbilly' /r/ and /l/ pronunciation, as spoken by Tanzanian police (*Kingo*, 1994).

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This phonological distinction is also recognized and employed in popular literature in Kenya, where non-standard forms are arguably more common than in Tanzania. In the following excerpt from *Gitonga* (Olande, 1996, p. 15), the author aligns the 'bad guy' characters who have taken Gitonga's wife hostage with non-standard Swahili; meanwhile, Gitonga speaks perfectly standard Swahili. The differences in their speech below are represented by the use of *mbalua* 'letter' and *barua* (the standard variety). The kidnapper's pronunciation of 'letter,' as *mbalua* displays incorrect usage of noun class and contains [l] substitution for [r]. In contrast, the hero, Gitonga, is adept with noun classes and does not make these consonant substitutions. His identity as someone from a town near the border of Tanzania, together with his pronunciation, contribute to his construction as a good-hearted individual who has been victimized by the villains in the story who have kidnapped his wife. As the second frame of figure 3 illustrates, non-linguistic characteristics associated with the villains in the story are poor dental hygiene, crossed eyes, and low intelligence, qualities that become synonymous with non-standard Swahili through association. In contrast, Gitonga and his family are well-dressed, attractive individuals, qualities combine with their use of standard Swahili to construct their characters as responsible, trustworthy, and sympathetic to the reader.

Figure 3. Noun class and /l/ and /r/ variation amongst thieves and kidnappers (*Gitonga*, 1996).

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English-influenced varieties

Just as standard Swahili sounds alien to many 'up-country' speakers because of its strict adherence to noun classes and use of agglutinative morphology, the use of monolingual Swahili speech by students staying in urban centers often comes across as unnatural to members of those communities. It is important to expose students to the types of urban speech that occur, and more significantly, to point out how variation in urban speech is dependent upon factors such as social class, age, and access to education. Exposure to the types of codeswitching in the language classroom can inform students about the nature of multilingual societies, and can bring about discussions of what it means to be a member of a multilingual community.

Two examples that illustrate this variation quite clearly are the two distinct types of codeswitching in urban Tanzania, varieties that contrast significantly with the monolingual Swahili that students have learned. Examples taken from Blommaert's (1992, 1999) work can be cited and discussed in class. Differences in the ways that particular social classes in Tanzania can be compared by looking at the ways different groups mix and switch Swahili and English, e.g.:

Campus Kiswahili (Blommaert, 1999, p. 166, translation taken from original)

A1: Kana kwamba private schools zote baada ya kupata uhuru au baada ya Azimio la Arusha zilikuwa nationalized?
[as if all private schools after independence or after the Arusha declaration were nationalized].

B1:   Shule zilikuwa nationalized
        [The schools were nationalized]
A2:   zote? Hapakuwa na private schools zozote?
        [all of them? Were there no private schools at all?]
B2:   I say, shule zilikuwa nationalized karibu zote . . .
        [I say, almost all schools were nationalized.]

Campus Kiswahili (CK), or the language used by elites at the University of Dar es Salaam, differs dramatically in the ways English is employed in Swahili in terms of phonology, morphology, and pragmatics. For many of the uneducated, urban youth (UYS) who employ English in their Swahili, semantic shifts are much more dramatic, and English and Swahili are morphologically integrated more deeply than in Campus Kiswahili. Moreover, the borrowings in UYS are often very register-specific, and typically unintelligible to speakers of CK.:

Urban Youth Speech
Example 1: (Blommaert, 1999, p. 173, original translation)
        "Nitachecki kwamba toto iko fresh."
        [I will see if there are good-looking girls]

Example 2: (Mwananchi, Aug. 5 2001)
        Kijiwe Shega
        "Ai nou machizi wangu hapo kistoni lazima mtakuwa mmebayi pepa la Mwananchi
        I know pl-buddies my   here stone-in necessary you.pl-fut-be you.pl.pfct.-buy paper of *Mwananchi*
        'I know my buddies here in the hangout you have to have bought the paper Mwananchi'
        ili   mkicheki   kijiwe chenu. No ploblemu, Zee lenu   nipo kamili gado ili
        in-order-to you.pl-obj-check dim-stone our   No problem   elder you   I-am.here perfect good in-order
        'in order to check out our hangout. No problem. I am your guy and I am here doing well in order
        kuwamwagia ishu mpya. . ."
        to-you..pl-distribute issue new
        to get you all the new issue . . .

The above examples contain language that have processes quite similar to the linguistic modifications apparent in Sheng and Engsh in Nairobi (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997), and these examples are indicative of the way many younger, urban people who have not graduated from higher education speak, at least to some degree. It is important to expose students to these varieties so that they might be more capable of understanding the role of such language variation in the lives of East Africans. In addition, since this type of language often makes its way into the writing that students may encounter, knowledge of such language mixing can only be beneficial.

Conclusion
    The inclusion of sociolinguistic variation such as codeswitching, non-standard phonology, lexicon, and grammar, and the discussion of regional varieties has been largely neglected in the foreign language classroom. The argument presented in this paper is that foreign language pedagogy in African languages such as Swahili should include discussion of such forms of variation in the classroom in order to offer students access to a wider range of authentic speech from the target community. Since communication with speakers of the target community is typically students' primary goal in foreign language learning, the treatment of variation in the classroom is highly relevant. Moreover, students will benefit if they are familiar with variation in the language when they interact with speakers in the TL community who do not

speak standard forms, or who speak regional varieties. Even though class time is limited, the inclusion of these topics is important enough to find ways to incorporate them into lessons. Several strategies for doing so in the Swahili language classroom which do not require much time include offering students variants for vocabulary items in list form, spending a few minutes discussing the various ways speakers pronounce certain phonemes in Swahili, and demonstrating the alternant noun classes that speakers in East Africa use on a regular basis. Such tasks do not require that teachers develop separate units just for the discussion of variation, but rather that they incorporate aspects of variation into their existing lessons.
    In addition, knowledge of language varieties can serve as a subject matter on its own. The study of how Swahili variation is employed in texts of all kinds can become part of the curriculum of more advanced Swahili courses where students can examine how variation is used in newspapers, magazines, and novels. As has been demonstrated by the examples in this paper, writers often employ variation to depict certain characters in negative or stereotypical ways, and the meanings these language varieties impart should be included in classroom discussions of texts. In fact, texts containing non-standard and regional varieties are difficult to avoid, particularly in authentic texts, so it is important to address the types of language that occur in them and the meanings that such usage imparts.
    More generally, though, the discussion of these topics in the foreign language classroom can serve as a means by which language attitudes and language myths regarding non-standard varieties can be explored. Because many students who take a foreign language do not have any background in linguistics, incorporating the study of language variation into the foreign language curriculum will expose more students to such knowledge, which can only serve to benefit them in multiple other domains. In this way, the foreign language classroom can act as a venue for not only the acquisition of a foreign language, but also as an environment for educating students about the role of language in society.

Notes:
1. The term 'native speaker' is a difficult one, particularly when used to refer to multilinguals. This term is particularly complicated for Swahili speakers. There is a tremendous range of ways East Africans acquire Swahili. For some, it is the language of the home, for others, it is acquired as a result of inter-ethnic communication, and for others, it is learned at school. For many East Africans, it is difficult to say which language is their 'first,' 'second,' 'mother tongue,' and so on, particularly since many East Africans' ability to speak their 'mother tongue' declines after they begin schooling, where either Swahili or English is the medium of instruction and Swahili is the medium of interethnic communication. This paper considers multilingualism the basis for linguistic norms in East Africa, and uses the term 'native speaker' broadly to refer to people who are born and raised in East Africa, and who have acquired Swahili as a consequence of living in that context.

2. The author is well aware that Quirk's argument has many weaknesses and avoids the issue of teaching non-standard to standard speakers to extend their awareness of such language forms for the purposes of debunking language myths such as beliefs in the inferiority of non-standard speech, but the length of this paper does not allow room for discussion of this topic.

3. While Swahili scholars might debate the status of *zingi* or *lingine* as non-standard forms, instead of as alternative forms, it is important to note that students in Swahili classes in contexts such as the United States are taught to use the forms *nyingi* and *jingine*, and that Swahili textbooks emphasize the use of these forms, not the alternative forms.

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