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Introduction

This text is mainly inspired on the experiences through my years as a student of Swahili and lecturer at the Centre of Asian and African Studies, in Mexico City. Firstly, I must say that unfortunately the references about African topics in Latin America are highly biased, scarce and stereotyped. Thus, when I began studying Swahili under the supervision of a Congolese teacher from Bukavu, I had no idea of the huge regional differences among the diverse Swahili dialects found in the several countries where this language is spoken. Neither did I know that not many of these Swahili speakers possess the language as their mother tongue and that the vocabulary of each area is highly influenced by local languages. Then, the dialect known as *Kingwana* was presented to us as a major and widely used dialect while coastal Swahili was defined as “an arabized” version of the language which apparently tended to fade away in front of the expansion of the more bantuisied and “African” Swahili that he promoted.

It was not until my first trip to Kenya and Tanzania when I figured out that for people of these countries *Kingwana* was a strange version of the language; I also became aware of the concept called “standard Swahili” or *kiswahili sanifu*. Certainly, it is expected that people consider their own dialect as the most correct and appropriate. But it is also true that contemporary regional differences together with vocabulary changes brought by new generations have made of standard Swahili a questionable concept as a norm or model for the proper and correct use of the language.

Thus, the main aim of this paper is to review the origins and history of standard Swahili and also to give a sample of the big differences between some dialects, in order to see how little influence standard Swahili has in dialects such as *kingwana*. It also reviews the significant vocabulary changes in Swahili spoken in East Africa. Also, it tries to

rethink about the current function of the *Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili* (Institute of Kiswahili Research) as heir of the East African Swahili Committee that created and implemented the concept. Finally, it throws the question about if it is still valid talking about standard Swahili as the model for correct and appropriate Swahili use and for the implementation of textbooks for teaching this language.

Origins and Goals of *Standard Swahili*.

As all scholars concerned with Swahili studies know, the origin of Swahili standardisation comes from the British colonial policy of implementing an African *lingua franca*, useful for educational purposes in the three East African territories. Swahili was chosen for this role and authorities saw the need of formulating unified criteria about spelling, orthography, word division and basic vocabulary due to the wide differences among coastal dialects and those found inland. In 1928, after bitter discussions about which dialect must be chosen for standardisation, the dialect of Zanzibar, known as *Kiunguja*, was selected as the basis for the Swahili model to be used in the whole British East Africa (Whiteley, 1969, pp. 79-81). Afterwards, in 1930, the Inter-territorial Language Committee was created, later known as the East African Swahili Committee. Among its many objectives we can find the following:

- a) Securing, as far as possible, uniformity in the use of existing and new words by the implementation of controls over the publication of school texts and dictionaries.
- b) Securing uniformity of grammar and syntax throughout the publication of standard books on the subject.
- c) Procuring a revision of the language in approved Swahili textbooks and books of a general nature already published.
- d) Examining and correcting Swahili in textbooks and general literature, before publication.
- e) Adoption of new words and adaptation of vocabulary of foreign origin.

The most remarkable result of the Committee was the publication of the Standard Swahili-English Dictionary, by Frederick Johnson, representing an undeniable contribution to Swahili studies in Western Scholarship. However, since its beginnings the Committee faced two main problems. The first one was that the standardisation process created a kind of Swahili planned and designed by outsiders and not by Swahili speakers. As an early report published in the Bulletin of the Inter-territorial Language Committee and titled "Modern Swahili" indicates, one

member of the Kenyan Education Department made a comment on this regard,

(...) While, doubtless, all are ready to admit that Swahili, like any other language is bound to develop and grow, (...) yet surely *the development must come from the Swahili mind, and must not be superimposed on them from without*. But that is just what we have tried, and are still trying to do, with the result that we are in the somewhat ludicrous position of teaching Swahilis their own language through the medium of books, (...) whose language has but little resemblance to the spoken tongue. We are perhaps too apt to overlook the fact that *the people themselves are not only capable of adapting their language to modern needs, but are doing so with amazing rapidity*. (...) (Whiteley, 1969, p. 85).¹

That is a big problem that, in my humble opinion, has been present all the time in the matter of standardisation: the wide gap between Swahili speakers and those who decide the characteristics of the Swahili chosen to be taught in schools. The second problem was that the extent of the Committee's area of influence was limited to areas belonging to the East African colonial administration. Thus, other African regions where Swahili is spoken, such as the Belgian Congo, Somaliland, Northern Rhodesia, Mozambique and Comoro Islands, escaped from the influence and supervision of the Committee.² On the other hand, the Committee was only able to supervise textbooks and other literary materials which were directly sent to their offices. These two problems continued through the diverse stages of the Committee and persisted after its transformation in the Institute of Kiswahili Research *Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili* which took place in 1964 when Tanzania emerged as new African nation.

It is obvious that standard Swahili was created under the perspective of scholars who used the criteria of linguistics in order to define grammatical rules, syntax and morphology of the language. But it is also evident that the exhaustive research, made first by the Committee and then by the Institute of Kiswahili Research, failed in following the fast changes in vocabulary use by people of different regions, whose dialectal differences were big and also where Swahili had a second or third language role.

¹ W. Whiteley, *Swahili: The Rise of a National Language*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1969, p. 85.

² *Op.cit.*, p. 89.

With the arrival of nationalism, brought by the independent era, the differences among Swahili speaking regions increased. While the Institute of Kiswahili Research became more Tanzanian and less East African — as J.W.T. Allen suggested — Kenya created its own councils for regulation of the language and Uganda dropped the use of Swahili in favour of English and Luganda. At the same time, while Swahili became the official and national language of Tanzania, in Kenya it shared a not defined duality with English, which gradually was preferred for official and commercial issues.³ Outside the East African area dialectal differences became more dramatic. In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo whose Belgian colonial past prevented it of any influence of the Swahili Committee, the teaching and use of Swahili acquired significant peculiarities which placed it far from the rules established by standard Swahili as we shall see.

Regional differences of Swahili: the case of *Kiswahili Kingwana*.

Similarly to all languages, Swahili developed significant differences since precolonial times, when there were around fourteen main dialects along the East African coast.⁴ By the eve of colonisation the Swahili language spread and expanded inland following the caravan's routes established by coastal merchants. Then, new dialects appeared combining elements of regional languages, above all, vocabularies with more bantuized words and less influence of words related to Arabic and Islamic culture, the distinctive feature of coastal Swahili.

Among the inland dialects, *Kingwana* Swahili is probably the one presenting more differences in relation to the “standard Swahili” sponsored by the East African Swahili Committee. According to Whiteley⁵ Tippu Tip, the famous coastal trader, brought Swahili to the Eastern part of Congo, around the 1870's. Along with Tippu Tip, many Swahili traders came to settle in the area and a few years later, when the Congo Free State was established by the Belgians, the coastal traders remained established in little Swahili speaking communities of Bangwana or “free men”, whose language was known as *kingwana*. During the Belgian rule several factors contributed to the consolidation of Swahili in Eastern Congo as the recruitment of Zanzibari soldiers, the use of this language in missionary education and as a means of communication for the local administration. Swahili became the *lingua franca* of this region. However, the rich and complex variety of languages existing in the area facilitated the creation of important differences between the Northern dialects of Swahili, affected by

³ H. A. Marshad, *Kiswahili an Kiingereza? (Nchini Kenya)*, Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, Nairobi, 1993.

⁴ W. Whiteley, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

⁵ *Op.cit.*

non-Bantu speaking peoples and the Katanga and Kasai ones, influenced by the Bantu Luba speaking milieu.

Although colonial authorities made efforts to achieve some standardization of the East Congolese Swahili they were fruitless and in the end *Kingwana* dialect became a term used to denominate all East Congolese dialects, even when there were wide variations among them. These dialects became a part of the process of standardization undertaken by the East African Swahili Committee. Scholars of this region began to consider it as a distinctive and peculiar dialect quite different from Coastal, Kenyan and Tanzanian ones. Polomé defined *kingwana* as a dialect spoken by Swahili communities created by coastal traders left in Maniema after the departure of Tippu Tip.⁶ Lyndon Harries⁷ considered that the Swahili dialect known as *Kingwana* corresponded in fact to the *lingua franca* as spoken by the Congo peoples. This author thought that there was a wide distinction between this dialect and Swahili spoken in settlements of Swahili origin, whose language was much closer to standard East African Swahili than the one spoken by Africans who used it only as a trade language. Furthermore, G. Van Der Kerken,⁸ concluded that *Kingwana* could not be considered as a dialect of Swahili but only as a simplified version derived from this language.

How do linguists define this dialect? Ileri Mbaabu⁹ asserts that pronunciation between average Swahili (*wastani*) and *kingwana* dialect is significantly different, specially with the phonemes /g/, /sh/, /v/, /w/ and /b/. There is also another important difference:

(...) Pia katika lahaja ya Kingwana kuhesabu huwa tofauti na kuhesabu katika Kiswahili wastani. Kwa mfano, wao husema “makumi matatu” au “makumi manne” badala ya “thelatini” na “arobaini”.(...)¹⁰

There are also significant differences in other vocabulary items, such as the days of the week and the way in which some verbs have different meaning or usage in standard Swahili and *Kingwana* dialect:

⁶ E. Polomé, “Cultural Languages and Contact Vernaculars in the Republic of the Congo”, *Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. IV, No. 4, University of Texas, 1963, p. 503.

⁷ L. Harries, “Swahili in the Belgian Congo”, *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, (39), 1945, p. 13.

⁸ G. Van Der Kerken, “Le Swahili, langue de grande expansion”, B.I.R.C.B., XXV, (2) 1944, pp. 260-261.

⁹ I. Mbaabu, *Kiswahili, Lugha ya Taifa*, Kenya Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1978, p. 26

¹⁰ “Also numeration in the Kingwana dialect is different from the average Swahili. For example, they say for thirty and forty ‘makumi matatu’ or ‘makumi manne’ instead of ‘thelatini’ or ‘arobaini’.

Standard Swahili		Kingwana Dialect
Monday	<i>Jumatatu</i>	<i>Siku ya kwanza</i>
Tuesday	<i>Jumanne</i>	<i>Siku ya pili</i>
Wednesday	<i>Jumatano</i>	<i>Siku ya tatu</i>
Thursday	<i>Alhamisi</i>	<i>Siku ya nne</i>
Friday	<i>Ijumaa</i>	<i>Siku ya tano</i>
Saturday	<i>Jumamosi</i>	<i>Siku ya posho</i>
Sunday	<i>Jumapili</i>	<i>Siku ya Mungu</i>

These differences were a direct result of the history of *Kingwana*, the absence of a policy of standardisation of Congolese Swahili by the Belgian authorities and the lack of communication between Swahili promoters in Eastern Congo and the East African Swahili Committee which operated in British East Africa. Then, Congolese writers on Swahili teaching, elaborated their own grammar rules which had no connection with those established for standard Swahili. A clear example is the book *Initiation à la Culture Ntu: Grammaire Swahili* written by G. Kajiga¹¹ acknowledged as an important contribution for the textbooks devoted to teaching Swahili in the eastern Congo, as wrote Edmund N. Mujynya, scholar of L'Institut pédagogique St. J. Bosco of Jomba and Inspector of secondary level in the North Kivu region. In this book Kajiga gives a detailed explanation of Swahili characteristics from the perspective of Bantu languages. Thus, he speaks of the role of Swahili as a *lingua franca* in East Africa but he never mentions the differences among dialects and shows a grammar far aside of the manuals written in the area. Probably, the most significant case is the classification of pronominal nouns, one basic feature to be learned in Swahili. Irene Mbaabu,¹² tells us that in the standard form there are two ways to classify the pronominal classes. The first way is classifying the nouns according to the singular and plural forms in order to establish several groups for all the nouns (e.g.) M-WA, M-MI, KI-VI, etc. The second one is to set numbers which correspond to any single singular and plural prefixes used to concord with the nouns. Then, there is number 1 for M, number 2 for WA, number 4 for MI and number 7 for KI. There are in total 18 classes in this classification. These classifications are commonly found in numerous manuals around East Africa. However, Kagija by his side proposes his own classification which is a mixture of the systems that we mentioned above and that consist in six classes labelled by numbers: first class M-WA; second class M-MI; third class N-N; fourth class KI-VI; fifth class LI-MA and sixth class U or W-N. This classification omits infinitive verbs used as nouns, locative nouns and those pronouns used for

¹¹ G. Kajiga, *Société Missionnaire de Saint Paul*, Kinshasa, 1967.

¹² I. Mbaabu, *Sarufiya Kiswahili*, Longman Kenya, Nairobi, 1992, p. 84-85.

diminutives: KU, PA-MA and KA-TU.¹³ This textbook shows how different the teaching of Swahili in the Eastern Congo region and in countries influenced by the East African Swahili Committee can be. In this case the concept of Standard Swahili is inexistent and probably meaningless for people involved in teaching the language in Congo. But this situation is quite confusing for non-African students who ignore the existence of important differences between “standard Swahili” and *Kingwana*. We could find a similar case in *Ngazija* dialect spoken in the Comores Islands. This dialect is so different from the standard kind that even some scholars dare to say it is not a Swahili dialect but another language. All these varieties are spoken by significant numbers of people, being their way of communicating and transmitting of ideas. Thus, we can not disqualify them for not following the delimitations of standard Swahili.

The Changing Times: Regional and Generational Differences in the Use of Swahili

Beside the problem of regional varieties of Swahili, there is another factor that demands a revision of standard Swahili's validity, the change of the language in the years after the constitution of the Swahili Committee. Constant changes in vocabulary are a common feature in all languages and the decades after the standardisation of Swahili witnessed a series of transformations and changes that affected the vocabulary and the use of specific terms. In the 1960's, the duties of the East African Swahili Committee were continued by the Institute of Kiswahili Research (IKR) which became a part of the University of Dar es Salaam. However, this council had influence mainly and almost exclusively in Tanzania while Kenya created its own organism for study and supervision of Swahili, and Uganda distanced from Swahili and also separated from any influence of the IKR. Thus, the IKR has continued in some extent the purposes and goals established by the East African Swahili Committee.

The Institute has devoted efforts in producing a Standard Swahili-Swahili dictionary and a series of dictionaries regarding specific items, such as law, medicine, biology and computing vocabulary. This labor, as remarkable as it could be, has an important limitation. It mainly has a sphere of influence in Tanzania more than in any other East African country. Compared with the East African Swahili Committee, the institute has little or no influence at all in the planning of Swahili courses in Kenya; while in Tanzania it only reaches specialised scholars on linguistics and Swahili literature.

¹³ G. Kajiga, *op.ci.*, p. 42.

This Tanzanian institute is also complemented by the National Council of Swahili (NCS), *Baraza ya Kiswahili ya Taifa*. This council supervises the correct use of Swahili in the media network, the revision of textbooks and the organization of an annual event, the “Swahili Day” that gathers scholars, politicians related to education and other personalities in order to discuss the development of the use of Swahili in the country. The efficiency of this council has been limited through the years due to financial problems and the recent policy led by current president Benjamin Mkapa, which consists in giving priority to English over Swahili as the language to be used in secondary and high school levels. These factors have limited the effective control of the Council in supervising the vocabulary used in TV, radio, newspapers and magazines. Beside the spread of numerous magazines designed for young people, such as *Tabasamu* or *Bongo*, even wide known newspapers such as *Nipashe* and *Alasiri* employ many neologisms and words adapted from other languages, African or European, which are used out of the grammar rules of standard Swahili and that are completely outside of the influence of both, the IKR and NCS.¹⁴ Furthermore, young generations following new cultural influences like the Afro-American Rap have developed a lexicon that is not only composed by slang words but also adapts a wide vocabulary coming from other Tanzanian languages, such as Chagga, Massai, Digo, along with neologisms and adaptations from English. The IKR and the NCS have been covering only the academic and educated sectors of society, distributing among them their dictionaries and supervising the proper use of Swahili. But what happens with rap artists and mass media journalists who, in fact, are the most direct contributors for Swahili’s incredibly rapid transformation? The institutions designed to preserve and develop Swahili in Tanzania are incapable to follow these changes. If this situation takes place in a country whose official language for political and educational matters is Swahili, it is obvious that in countries like Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo the problem is much worse than in Tanzania.

We can offer an example of the conditions in Kenya’s current linguistic context. For everyone who has lived in both, Kenya and Tanzania, the wide gap that exist between the Swahili spoken in Nairobi and the average Swahili spoken in the whole of Tanzania is evident. *Sheng* is the name used for the urban Swahili spoken in Nairobi. Its main feature is the evident mixture of Swahili and English words and the constant combination of English and Swahili syntax. In recent years this dialect has incorporated many words from important Kenyan languages such as Kikuyu, Luo, Kaledjin, Luhya and Kamba, among others. It also includes an important stock of neologisms and slang words. In a country where

¹⁴ Currently, it is possible to access *Nipashe* and *Alasiri* via internet: www.ippmedia.com.

each ethnic group gives priority to its own language, Swahili normally has a limited use among Kenyans. Even if Swahili is included as a compulsory subject in secondary and high school education, proficiency in this language and its vocabulary use is quite limited compared with the Swahili spoken in Kenya. With the obvious exception of coastal communities whose first language is Swahili, in Kenya few people really know the rules of standard Swahili and use the huge vocabulary that come from the original dialects of the coast. Thus, outside specialized groups close to literary and linguistic fields, the use of Swahili is overcome by English and other ethnic languages. Besides, the most relevant Kenyan writers like Vasanji and I. Adhiambo, are producing their masterworks in English relegating Swahili for coastal writers and literary scholars.

Finally, it is important to note that even in East African sectors who claim for themselves a conscious and regular use of Swahili, there are significant differences regarding to what they consider the authentic Swahili language. Initially, focusing on the rivalry between traditional and modern Swahili poetry, Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Shariff¹⁵ have shown the debate between those who claim that only coastal Swahili is the one to be considered as the adequate language to use, in contrast with Swahili spoken by inland groups. Opposing this view, we can find the opinion of intellectuals who associated coastal Swahili — whose vocabulary contains a lot of loans from the Arabic language — with non-African and “feudalistic” reminiscences. These ideological postures regarding Swahili language have also different perceptions about the vocabulary which has to be used in what they consider “proper” Swahili. The traditionalist group thinks that inland writers use a very limited language highly, influenced by their mother tongues which are different to Swahili.¹⁶ On the other hand, anti-Arabic intellectuals think that Arabic influence gives an archaic vocabulary, outdated and difficult to follow for those whose mother tongue is not Swahili. In this case there is not any clear reference about a standard form of the language.¹⁷ Thus, the idea that a standard model of Swahili language is still in use, find serious contradictions as we have seen in this section. This matter obviously demands a deep reflection and revision among Swahili scholars around the world.

Conclusion: Is It Still Valid to Talk About a Standard Swahili?

¹⁵ A. Mazrui and I. N. Shariff, *The Swahili, Idiom and Identity of an African People*, African World Press, Trenton, 1994, chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁶ E. Bertocini, “In land Tanzania: Swahili Literature or Literature in Swahili?”, in David Parkin (ed.), *Continuity and Autonomy in Swahili Communities*, SOAS University of London, London, 1994, pp. 210-213.

¹⁷ A. Mazrui and I. N. Shariff, *op.cit.*, pp. 94-97.

The creation of a Committee for the implementation of a standard form of Swahili language responded to the needs of the British East African territory in order to establish an African *lingua franca* which could facilitate the administrative, military and educational duties of colonial authorities. It chose one among fourteen coastal dialects and unfortunately established many of the textbooks without a close supervision of the Swahili spoken in the diverse parts of the colony. Furthermore, it had no influence over those Swahili speaking territories outside the British sphere of power. As I pointed out above, the divorce between those European Scholars who originally designed standard Swahili and Africans who spoke the language has continued up to the present times.

The IKR, institution which continues the work of the East African Swahili Committee has a limited scope outside Tanzania and is surpassed by fast changes of the language provoked by the media, modern music and young generations. Kenya has a more limited use of Swahili and its own councils of Swahili, which are not directly related to the Tanzanian IKR. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the use of Swahili's *Kingwana* dialect has significant differences as it was shown through Kagija's textbook. Then, is it appropriate to talk of a standard Swahili that is still in use after revising the current situation of the language?

It is well known that Swahili is the most studied African language in the world, with available courses in European, Asian and American universities, from Moscow to Mexico and from Tokyo to Helsinki. However, there is not uniformity among the textbooks for learning Swahili written in different regions of the world. They normally use the Swahili that is familiar to the author of the book. This fact is also evident if we compare the grammar and the vocabulary contents of Swahili textbooks written in the UK¹⁸ or in the USA¹⁹ with those written by Kenyan or Tanzanian authors.²⁰ The IKR does not have the same presence in America as in Europe and my personal experience is that a few Swahili textbooks written in recent years have passed under the supervision of this institute. Thus, who must perform the task of revising and putting on date the materials which originally were the basis of standard Swahili? It would be unfair to say that nothing has been done on this regard. The production of numerous Swahili dictionaries around the world, have included revisions

¹⁸ J. Maw, *Twendel! A Practical Swahili Course*, Oxford University Press, 1985.

¹⁹ T. Hinnebush and S. M. Mirza, *Kiswahili msingi wa Kusema Kusama na Kuandika*, University Press of America, 1979.

²⁰ I. Mbaabu, *Sarufi ya Kiswahili*, *op.cit.*; S. Zawai, *Kiswahil kwa Kitendo*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1988; J. F. Safari, *Swahili Made Easy*, Tanzania Publishing House, 1980.

of the vocabulary currently in use in the Swahili speaking zones.²¹ But how to cope with the significant differences among regions? And how to avoid the confusion for non-African students who are normally unfamiliar with Bantu languages and the abundant dialectal variety existing in the African continent? The need for a revision of the term “standard” is a priority which has to be developed by Swahili scholars, writers and teachers. When and how can this be done? It is a question that is still in the air.

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²¹ Mulokozi, personal communication, 2001; C. Githiora. *Diccionario Swahili-Español*, El Colegio de México, CEAA, México, 2002.

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