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SWAHILI AND ITS SPEAKERS 2020: REVIEW AND OUTLOOK[1]

GUDRUN MIEHE

No other African language experienced such changes as Swahili after its first appearance on the stage of printed grammar books. That happened 170 years ago, in 1850. Although his book was compiled within the terminological framework of a Latin grammar, Johann Ludwig Krapf opened the door to a better comprehension of the logic of Bantu morphology and syntax, wider than all his other missionary brothers had hitherto done for Bantu languages in southern Africa. And, from the very beginning of linguistic research on Swahili (which at that time was restricted to missionaries), the dialect issue played an immense role. With Edward Steere's arrival in Zanzibar in 1864, at the latest, there began competition over linguistic hegemony on the coast between 'Northern' dialects like Kimvita, the variety of Mombasa which Krapf had worked on, and Kiunguja, the language of Zanzibar town. It was a question of hegemony between carriers of the old culture, with its long literary tradition, and representatives of the new economic and political power, spearheaded by the Zanzibar-Omani empire, which had just started to explore the hinterland by expanding commerce and trade into the territory of today's Congo.

No other African speech community since then has attracted such immense interest by historians, sociologists, literary, religious and cultural specialists, and, last but not least, linguists of all kinds. Today, examples taken from Swahili appear in every serious linguistic compendium that treats general comparative or typological topics.

No other African language has spread as extensively as Swahili, which expanded from a small coastal strip to a vast territory in the hinterland, thanks to its role as a general medium of communication between traders (and their caravans) and the indigenous peoples; and many of the 'invaders' also spoke another mother tongue in addition to Swahili. Swahili spread not only to its immediate hinterland but also to other shores of the Indian Ocean, as has been put in a nutshell by William H. Ingrams (1967: 6) in a quote from 1931:

> Swahili is one of the principal languages of the world, and it has been spread far and wide from Zanzibar. From Port Said to Durban, from Zanzibar across the Congo to the west coast, in Southern Arabia, Western India and in Madagascar, there will be found men who speak it. Many of the Creoles of Mauritius and

[1] The editors of the present volume invited me to write an afterword which – in the end – became a rough (and certainly incomplete) outline of all that appears important to me about Swahili studies in the past and the future. My thanks go to Gerlind Scheckenbach and Clarissa Vierke for their critical comments, as well as to Ruth Schubert for polishing my English.

> Réunion are of Zanzibar origin, and the Creole language, though French in its vocabulary, is Bantu in its grammar. You may hear in the Creole of Mauritius the folk-lore that you have heard in the Swahili of Zanzibar.

Similar to Hausa, today's most important West African lingua franca (and to a lesser extent Bambara/Dyula), Swahili did not emerge from the speech of an ethnic community, but from different urban centres along the coast, from Kilwa in the south to Lamu or the Barawa coast in the north. In addition to other factors, like the different colonial history of Kenya and Tanzania, this may explain the still perceptible gap between the northern dialects and the other Swahili varieties. In any case, what had started in the middle of the 19th century as more or less peaceful trade routes, increasingly became routes for displaying and spreading political power, always related to, and accompanied by, the speech of the invaders from the coast. Later on, during the colonial period, the role of Swahili as the medium of communication in eastern Africa became fully established, a role that was strongly promoted by all Tanzanian governments after independence. This kind of language policy inevitably led to today's typical triglossic African language hierarchy of a former colonial language (here: English), a locally based lingua franca (here: Swahili, today defined as 'national language' in Tanzania and Kenya), and local languages.

No other African lingua franca has been subject to such standardisation processes as Swahili. Not just since the foundation of the 'Inter-Territorial Language (Swahili) Committee' in 1930, but long before, under German colonial rule, efforts had been started to develop Swahili as the '*Einheitssprache Ostafrikas*'. The dialect issue between 'the north' and 'the others' became more critical through the decision taken in 1928, during a conference in Mombasa, to choose Kiunguja as the basis for a standardised Swahili. After independence, the legacies of the Swahili Committee were transferred seamlessly to the academic responsibility of the University of Dar es Salaam, which became the centre of all standardisation issues concerning what was now the official national language in Tanzania.

There is no other African lingua franca with such a wide sphere of influence as Swahili. In this, it can be compared to English, which has the status of a global language. Another similarity between Swahili and English is that in both languages a large amount of cultural vocabulary stems from the non-related languages of foreign invaders. Today, Swahili is promoted as a lingua franca by the African Union (AU), and in particular by the East African Community (EAC), and it plays a role in academic linguistic institutions worldwide. Many curriculums of West African universities list Swahili as a regular course. The same is true all over the world, from the Americas to Asia (except Australia), not to mention the many Swahili centres in European universities and other academic institutions. In addition, there are many native Swahili-speaking communities all over the world, which have come into existence in recent decades as result of emigration from the home countries.

This status of Swahili as one of the most important African languages is paralleled by the size of the academic literature devoted to Swahili. Today, literary and linguistic research on Swahili is based on three corpora that can be roughly classified in chronological terms:

The first period, up to the end of World War I, comprises traditional poems, chronicles (both often written in Arabic characters), tales, reports of traditional social events, and so on, as well as pioneer works on the grammar and the lexicon.

The next period, up to the beginning of the 1960s, is characterised by texts produced under the auspices of the Swahili Committee, such as the poems and novels by Shaaban Robert or Matthias Mnyampala, translations into Swahili, grammars, textbooks and dictionaries of different kinds, and some dialect studies.

The last period may be roughly defined as the time from independence to the present day. Future specialists of modern Swahili literature will certainly sub-classify this period into several sub-periods. It marks the beginning of new genres and styles in Swahili literature that have fascinated an increasing number of experts all over the world, not to mention the large number of Swahili novels that have been translated into other languages.

A large number of critical editions and overviews have been produced for all three periods (see, for instance, Harries [1962], or the numerous publications by Jan Knappert, for instance [1967], [1971] on traditional poems,[2] or Elena Bertoncini's [1989] and Bertoncini *et al.*'s [2009] overview of modern literature). There have recently been suggestions that the poems by the famous Swahili hero Liyongo should be included in the canon of world literature (Clarissa Vierke, p.c., April 2019). With regard to the documents written in Arabic characters, time is pressing, since there is still a lot of editorial work to do, and the number of experts on traditional poetry has diminished dramatically in recent years. We mourn the loss of Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo, Ahmed Nabahany, Yahya Ali Omar and Zeina Mahmoud Fadhil Al-Bakary, who were all members of the Liyongo Working Group in 2003-2004.

As one of the results of increasing literary production in recent times, a division of labour has emerged among Swahilists, with a larger literary section and a smaller linguistic section. However, during the first 150 years of Swahili studies, linguistic research prevailed, due to the needs of missionaries (who because of their religious purpose often promoted local languages in the areas where they worked), the needs of the colonial administrations, and, last but not least, the various standardisation efforts. Thus, a broad lexical and grammatical corpus developed, which provides a basis for the study of internal cultural and language developments and opens up an internal historical perspective on Swahili studies. We may

[2] Does anybody have access to, or information about, the papers left by Jan Knappert? According to remarks in his publications, he must have had in his possession important Swahili manuscripts or copies of them. It would certainly be a worthwhile project to make this archive accessible to a wider audience.

think here of the treasury of cultural knowledge that is hidden in Krapf's dictionary of 1882 (cf. Miehe 2009). The same is true of the language use in Steere's tales (1870). In particular, the work of Charles Sacleux deserves our special consideration in this respect. There is no study by Thilo Schadeberg on individual grammatical phenomena that does not explicitly refer to Sacleux's grammar of 1909 (see for instance Schadeberg 1973, 1989 or 2006). Although there are good grammatical descriptions available today, what is urgently needed is a comprehensive reference grammar of Swahili that includes comparative-historical considerations. In the same way, Sacleux's dictionary, which appeared in 1939, set a clear benchmark in the field of Swahili lexicology. His special approach, which was to include examples from traditional poems, riddles and proverbs, as well as examples from various dialects, not to mention remarks on the etymological origin of the lemmas, make this dictionary an indispensable instrument for any Swahilist. In particular, it can serve as a model for a mono-lingual etymological dictionary of Swahili, which is likewise urgently needed. The most modest requirement would be to make it available to East African users by translating its French parts into English.

We may conclude with the field of contact-induced variations in Swahili, which is the topic of the present volume, and which has received much attention among Swahili linguists in recent decades. This field of study is a natural continuation of former 'dialect' studies. The articles in this volume use recent linguistic approaches (micro-parametric analysis), as well as 'older' ones (lexicostatistics, dialectometrical analysis, and the good old descriptive method), and also include more socio-linguistically oriented studies. The articles make us aware of changes in the language which are evidently occurring today more rapidly than in earlier times. They also provide information about little known inland varieties. However, these multi-faceted approaches do not allow us to draw general conclusions on a more comparative-typological level. Such a typological comparison could be fruitful, and could be important for the more general level of comparative Bantu studies. Interestingly, some authors discuss changes induced by Swahili in local languages. This also opens up a field for further research. One topic is rarely discussed in the papers: what happens to borrowed Swahili items in local tone languages? Are they given tones? Or is there a perceptible intonation influence in inland Swahili varieties when they are surrounded by tone languages? Only Bose, in his detailed study of different styles and registers of Kivu Swahili, mentions "the ludic employment of accents" and "strategic adaption … on the phonological level with tonal shifts, downdrift and vocalic adaption" (p. 273). One can only accept his conclusion that "the broad variability in the Kivus could bring a new perspective to the consideration of variation in Swahili" (p. 274). Moreover, it is useful to distinguish between internal and external dialects or varieties (whatever terminological paths one may follow). The terms proposed in the article by Shinagawa appear suitable in this respect: 'East Coast Swahili (ECS)' vs 'Contact Swahili varieties (CS)' (p. 123). In future research, the latter group will certainly be sub-specified, for instance with regard to their use as first or second language. As Samarin (2014) shows, the

study of old colonial sources can provide fruitful insights into the history of the emergence of inland varieties.

To sum up, in view of today's unceasing flows of migrants, and the extensive use of digital media all over the world, Swahili is constantly changing, but always remains creative. The chances are good that it will maintain its place as the preferred medium of communication in eastern Africa and beyond.

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