

SWAHILI IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Swahili, an important indigenous language of wider communication in Eastern and Central African countries, has been and continues to be used effectively in specialist communication for almost three decades now. It is widely used in the education domain particularly in Tanzania and Kenya. In Tanzania, the language is the sole medium of instruction in public primary schools and teachers' colleges training primary school teachers. It is also taught at high school and university levels. In Kenya, Swahili is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools and it is also offered in all public universities. The extensive use of the language in academia has led to the evolution of a special style of Swahili academic writing.

The present paper is an attempt to bring to light the evolved linguistic features of the Swahili academic style. The paper looks at the orthographic, lexical, morphological and syntactic features of Swahili academic writing.

Keywords: style, features; Swahili, academic writing

INTRODUCTION

Although the use of Swahili in specialist communication has been going on for almost a century now, it is only during the last three decades that the language has been more seriously used in academic discourse. This is due to the immediately post-independence pro-Swahili language policy in the East African states, particularly in Tanzania and Kenya.

In Tanzania this policy, led to the establishment of the Department of Swahili at the University of Dar es Salaam and the elevation of the East African Swahili Committee to the Institute of Kiswahili Research (henceforth IKR) in 1964. The former teaches linguistics and literature exclusively in Swahili, whereas the latter produces most of its research findings in Swahili.¹

In Kenya, as Musau (2001: 134–135) has submitted, since the first post-independence education report of 1964 was compiled, all subsequent reports have continued to recommend the teaching of Swahili for wider communication and national integration. The Mackay Commission of 1984, for instance, recommended Swahili to become a compulsory and examinable subject in both primary and secondary schools in Kenya. This trend was reinforced by the Koech Commission of 1999 which proposed that Swahili should be one of the

¹ Note that in Tanzanian public primary schools and the Teachers Training Colleges for primary schools (i.e.) Grade A (TTCs) Swahili is the sole medium of teaching.

five compulsory and examinable subjects at the end of the eight of primary education, and one of the three core and examinable subjects at the end of the four years of secondary education. The results of these decisions have been the establishment of many more Departments of Swahili in nearly all public Universities and their Constituent Colleges and the writing and publications of the requisite Swahili text and reference books.

Although in Uganda Swahili tuition at primary and secondary levels is not widespread,² it has, nevertheless, been taught for a long period at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of Makerere University.

This technical use of the language has led to the evolution of a special style of Swahili academic writing (or, more precisely, a Swahili academic style).

The present paper aims at demonstrating how the evolved style of Swahili academic writing looks like. That is, it is an attempt to bring to light the linguistic features of the Swahili academic style. In the course of illustrating these features, we shall use data from recent³ publications which contain a variety of academic papers written in Swahili by different East and Central African scholars. Such publications include, among others, the following:

- *Makala za Kongamano la Kimataifa Kuhusu Matatizo ya Tafsiri Barani Afrika* (Chama cha Wafasiri Tanzania – WAFASIRI, 1989).
- *Kiswahili*, Journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research (various issues).
- *Mulika*, Journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research (various issues).
- *Kioo cha Lugha*, Journal of the Department of Swahili, University of Dar es Salaam.
- *Makala ya Kongamano la Kimataifa “Kiswahili 2000”* (TUKI/IKR, 2001).

1. THE CONCEPT OF ‘ACADEMIC STYLE’

Styles are defined as the “varieties of language that correlate with specific constellations of contextual features” (Enkvist 1973: 67). That is, the varieties of language which are tied to its use in specific contexts or situations. On the basis of the above point of view, we may define academic style as that variety of language which correlates with academic work. In Swahili (the written form of) this style may be found in, for example:

- Text and reference books
- Academic journals

² I understand that from this year (2002) the Uganda government has taken a firm decision to start teaching Swahili as a subject in public primary schools, following the adoption of Swahili as one of the working languages of the Great Lakes Region in April 2002. The adoption was made by the Regional Conference organized by The Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation of Tanzania in collaboration with the Government of Uganda.

³ “Recent” here refers to the publications of the last decade.

- Papers presented in various seminars, conferences, symposia, colloquiums, etc.
- Dissertations submitted to the Swahili Departments of various Universities in East and Central Africa.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF ACADEMIC WRITINGS

It is generally agreed that, when writing, the main concern of any specialist “is to define his subject matter precisely and to establish a clear and logical progression of ideas” (Crystal and Davy 1969: 251). In order to reflect these goals the language used in academic writings has become very specialized and, of necessity, acquired a number of distinguishing features. Such features include: a very high degree of abstraction and generalization of concepts; precision of concepts; objectivity of intercourse; multiplicity of impersonal expressions; and rare use of figures of speech and imagery. And, as a result of especially the latter set of features, academic language tends to be less emotional and expressive and, to a certain extent, stringent and rather dry, particularly to the untrained register users. (See Kozhina 1977; Mwansoko 1991).

These features are usually expressed in academic written texts by special linguistic markers (phonological, lexical, etc.) as will be demonstrated below.

3. SWAHILI ACADEMIC WRITING AND ITS FEATURES

Swahili academic writings, as is the case with academic writings of other languages, are permeated with all of the stylistic features mentioned in 3.0 above. There are various levels at which the style of academic writings may be analysed. Crystal and Davy (1969: 15–22), for example, have suggested the following five levels viz. phonetic/graphic, phonological/graphological, grammatical, lexical and semantic levels. However, for the purpose of this discussion, which is concerned only with the written form of the Swahili academic style, we shall use the following levels of analysis: orthographic, lexical, morphological and syntactic levels.

3.1 ORTHOGRAPHY

In order to achieve precision and clarity of academic texts all lexical items in these texts are spelled accurately and full-length.

Examples:

1. redio ‘radio’ (and not radio)
2. mitalaa ‘curricula/studies’ (and not mitaala)

3. mazingira ‘situation, context’ (and not mazingara)
4. Dar es Salaam (and not Dar or DSM)
5. Zanzibar (and not Z’bar)
6. Nairobi (and not NRB).

However, abbreviations of the type ‘DSM’ or ‘NRB’ may sometimes be used provided caution to use them is given following the first appearance in the text of their full-length spelling. For instance: Nairobi (tangu sasa na kuendelea NRB)....

Nevertheless, abbreviations of well established international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, OPEC, ILO, FAO, IMF, as well as internationally recognized political parties like PLO, are normally accepted in academic writing.

To this category of abbreviations, we may also add abbreviations of well known national or regional organs, e.g. RTD, CCM, ITV (for Tanzania). KANU, KBC (for Kenya), UPDF, MNR, MTN (for Uganda) or SADC, PTA (for the Southern African nations).

3.2 LEXICAL ITEMS

The abstraction, objectivity and precision of intercourse characteristic of academic writing are usually expressed through the lexical items (i.e. vocabulary) used in such texts. Abstraction is facilitated by using lexical items which name concepts in general, without particularizing them.

Examples:

7. *Mfasiri* hana budi awe mmilisi wa mipangilio ya lugha anazokusudia kuzifasiri.
“The *translator* needs to be competent in and sensitive to word order of the language he intends to translate.”
8. ... Taswira ya *mwanamke* iliyosheheni sana katika fasihi ya Kiswahili ni ile inayobainisha unyonge na uzinzi wa *mwanamke*.
‘The common image of the *woman* in Swahili literature is that of being weak and a harlot.’

In (7) and (8) above the concepts *mfasiri* ‘translator’ and *mwanamke* ‘woman’ refer to any *mfasiri* and *mwanamke* respectively, and not to specific ones. These are therefore generalized concepts. Such generalizations are very common in academic writing.

The use of terminological vocabulary, on the other hand, renders academic texts precise and highly objective. Technical terminologies, by their nature, do not have (unnecessarily many) synonyms or homonyms. They are also essentially non-polysemous, non-emotional and normally reflect the concepts

they represent very accurately (i.e. unambiguously). The following excerpt is an example of a Swahili academic text with an abundance of technical terms:

ISTILAHU ZA KEMIKALI:

Majina ya kemikali ni mengi sana. Tukianza na elementi za kikemikali hizi ziko zaidi ya mia moja. Mengi ya majina ya elementi na alama zake yanatokana na Kiyunani, k.m. argoni (argon, kutokana na argos); Kilatini, k.m. stibi (antimony, kutokana na stibium); n.k. Tatizo kubwa hapa ni kuunda istilahi kwa kutohoa au kwa kutumia yale maneno ya lugha za asili, Kilatini n.k. Hapa nakubaliana na wazo kuwa tutumie yale maneno ya asili. Hii ndiyo njia pekee inayoweza kutupatia istilahi na pia alama yake kwa kutumia jina hilo, k.m. “gold” inakuwa *Auri* (kutokana na “aurum”) na alama yake ni *Au*; “copper” inakuwa *kupri* (siyo shaba) na alama ni *Cu*:

Majina ya misombo mara nyingi yanatatanisha. K.m. “carbon dioxide” imewahi kufasiriwa kama kaboni dayoksaidi. Hii haifuati utaratibu na muundo wa lugha ya Kiswahili. Jina sahihi litakuwa *dioksidi kaboni*. Kwa hoja hiyo hiyo “sulphuric acid” ni *asidi sulfuriki*, “aqueous sodium chloride” inakuwa *kloridi natiri ya maji* na “dilute calcium hydroxide” ni *hidroksidi kalisi zimilifu*. Vighairi kadhaa vinavyojitokeza, k.m. “calcium hydrogen carbonate” inakuwa *hidrojeni karbonati kalisi* na “chlorofluoro carbon” ni *Kloroflorokaboni*. (See closer in Appendix 1).

As the above text demonstrates the frequent use of terminological vocabulary also makes ‘academic language’ be felt rather dry and stringent, especially to the non-specialists.

It is worth noting that precision in academic writings is also reinforced by citing references within the texts. See, for instance, the following examples:

9. Miongoni mwa mataifa ambayo yamejaribu kutandawazi lugha zao za kitaifa kwa kufufua msamiati wa zamani na kuupanua kimaana kwa matumizi ya kitaaluma ni Japan (Sugito 1989), Israeli (Fellman 1973), Ujerumani (Coulmas 1989), China (Mills 1956) na Korea (Takada 1989).
‘Among the nations which tried to modernize their national languages through reviving their classical tongues and thus extending the languages’ terminological vocabulary are Japan (Sugito 1989), Israel (Fellman 1973), Germany (Coulmas 1989), China (Mills 1956) and Korea (Takada 1989)’
10. Taarifa za kisarufi katika kamusi humpatia mtumiaji ujuzi wa kisarufi kuhusu maneno (Mukama 1995) na ndizo humwezesha kuizungumza lugha.
‘The grammatical information in the dictionary gives the user the grammatical skill regarding the words (Mukama 1995). And it is this skill that enables him/her to speak the language.’

Such references indicate that the information being given in the text may be verified by referring to the cited original sources.

3.3 MORPHOLOGY

We shall consider here only two morphological categories viz. tense and number. Let us begin with tense. Since scientific facts are empirically established and stable, the use of the HU – tense, which expresses habitual or repetitive actions, is very recurrent in Swahili academic writing.

Example:

11. lugha hutofautiana katika... languages differ in...
12. sintaksia huanza kufanya kazi... ‘syntactic processes are set to work...’
13. kiisimu, tafsiri hujihusisha hasa na... ‘linguistically, translation is concerned with...’
14. fasihi simulizi humulika hali ya jamii... ‘oral literature mirrors the society...’

Furthermore, as scientists prefer their writings to remain always up-to-date, they frequently use present tense which, upon deep analysis functions, nevertheless, as past tense. For example:

15. Shaw (1983) anadokeza... ‘Shaw (1983) hints...’
16. Thomson (1984) na Fairclough (1985) wanasisitiza...
‘Thomson (1984) and Fairclough (1985) emphasize...’
17. Buhlmann (1953) anaeleza... ‘Buhlmann (1953) defines...’

That is, they emphasized, defined and hinted in their 1984; 1985; 1953; and 1983, respectively, publications. Alternatively, verb forms expressing immediate past are used to achieve the same ends, i.e. that of ‘up-dating’ scientific information. See examples below:

18. utafiti wa kiisimu jamii umeonyesha... (lit.) ‘research in sociolinguistics has recently shown...’
19. Martins (1988): 37 amependekeza... (lit.) ‘Martins (1988: 37) has recently suggested...’

20. Mazrui (1981) katika Kilio cha Haki ametuonyesha... (lit.) ‘Mazrui (1981) in Kilio cha Haki has recently shown us...’

In addition, the ME – tense also expresses completion or resultant state, which serves to emphasize objectivity in academic texts, because it implies that the completed action or state may be verified.

As far as the category of number is concerned, the use of 1st person plural in place of 1st person singular is the main feature of Swahili academic writing. See for instance the following examples:

21. tumeweza kuhaulisha dhana... ‘we succeeded to transfer the basic concepts...’
22. hapa tunasisitiza kuwa... ‘our main emphasis here, is...’
23. kwa kutumia mifano ya hisabati tumeona kuwa... ‘by using examples from mathematical terms we have seen that...’
24. matarajio yetu ni kwamba... ‘our expectation is that...’
25. hivyo tunaweza kuhitimisha kuwa... ‘therefore we can conclude that...’

It is believed that the use of 1st person plural brings about objectivity in academic writings because it makes them seem to belong to the whole academic community rather than being personalized (Kozhina 1977: 165; Mwansoko 1991: 19–).

However, verb forms of 1st person singular may sometimes be found in academic writings. These are only being tolerated in such texts and should therefore be seen as exceptions. Examples:

26. tatizo la tatu ni lile ninalopenda kuliita... ‘the third problem is the one prefer to call...’
27. matumaini yangu ni kwamba... ‘my hope is that...’
28. nimefanya hivyo kwa kuonyesha mifano kadhaa sahili...’ I have done so through provision of several simple examples...’
29. lakini sijapata kusikia mjadala unaohusu hadithi fupi... ‘but have not heard of discussions about short stories...’

Occasionally, authors may use 3rd person forms to avoid ‘personalization’ of academic information, as when Dr. Zubeida Tumbo–Masabo of the IKR referred to her publicaion thus:

30. Tumbo-Masabo (1989) aligundua pia kwamba msingi mkuu wa matumizi ya viambishi hivyo ni maana na wala sio muundo...’ Also Tumbo-Masabo (1989) found that the choices of some of the affixes were mainly semantic based...’

It should also be noted that verb forms of 2nd person singular or plural are rarely used in academic writing⁴. And, when used they are usually associated with interrogative constructions. For example:

31. Hebu tuchunguze kitomeo hicho katika mswada huo (kiambatisho – 1). Je, wewe ukiwa mfasiri unahitaji maelezo yote hayo? ‘Let us now examine one entry as an example from the said manuscript (see Appendix 1). As a translator, do you think you require all those explanations?’

3.4 SYNTAX

At syntactic level a number of features characteristic of Swahili academic writing have evolved. In the first place, most of the sentences used in academic writing are complex, usually consisting of a subject and a predicate. Elliptical constructions are almost non-existent. Secondly, academic writing is abound with passive constructions:

32. mnyambuliko-z-ulioongezwa... ‘the derivational suffix-z- which has been added...’
33. matamshi yote katika (8a-c) ni mafungu ya maneno yenye kutawaliwa na mipangilio fulani... ‘all utterances in (8a-c) are phrases which are governed by specific word order...’
34. Kwamba matamshi kama haya yamo kaika lugha ya Kiswahili na yanaendelea kuyengwayengwa ni ushahidi wa kutosha kuonyesha kuwa... ‘That such utterances abound in Swahili and that they continue to be entertained is sufficient evidence to demonstrate the fact that...’
35. mikakati mbalimbali imependekezwa kuhusu... ‘various strategies have been proposed concerning...’

Thirdly, there is a very high rate of impersonality in Swahili academic writing. Impersonal constructions are preferable in academic texts because they emphasize on the research findings themselves and not on the personalities who

⁴ They are however quite common in manuals designated for distant learners, e.g. those of the Open University of Tanzania.

report on these findings. And this seems to be a more objective way of presenting scientific data. Examples:

36. kama ilivyokwishaajwa hapo juu... ‘as it has been mentioned above...’
37. imegunduliwa katika uchunguzi... ‘it has been discovered in research...’
38. ilidaiwa kwamba... ‘it was claimed that...’
39. katika makala haya imependekezwa... ‘it has been suggested in the present paper...’

In (38), for example, the emphasis is on the fact that something has been discovered and not on the person (s) who made the discovery.

Academic writing, as was noted earlier, requires also a logical progression of ideas and arguments. This, in Swahili academic texts, is facilitated through the use of parenthetical words and clauses.

Examples:

40. (i) hivyo/kwa hiyo/kwa hali hiyo/kwa hivyo ‘therefore’ aidha, vivyo hivyo,
(ii) hivyohivyo ‘also, too, likewise’
(iii) kwanza, pili, tatu... mwisho ‘firstly, secondly, thirdly...lastly’
(iv) ingawa, japo, hata hivyo ‘although, nevertheless’
(v) kulingana na/kufuatana na/kwa mujibu wa ‘according to’
(vi) hapana shaka ‘no doubt’
(vii) kwa maneno mengine ‘in other words’
(viii) basi ‘hence, then’ etc. (See also Mwansoko 1991: 22).

The following excerpt demonstrates the practical use of parenthetical words in Swahili academic writing:

41. Kwa hivyo, inaelekea kuwa pale ambapo muundo unagongana na maana, basi maana hutiliwa maanani zaidi. Basi, ingekuwa vyema kama msingi wa kuunda viambishi vya kisayansi ungezingatia maana. ‘Therefore, it seems that when there is conflict between form and semantic consideration, then semantic consideration will supersede that of form. Hence, it would be advisable to coin scientific affixes based on meaning’.

Furthermore, most of the sentences in academic writing are declarative. This is due to the informative nature of academic texts. Only on very rare occasions are interrogative sentences used, usually with the aim of drawing attention of readers to particular issues in the texts (see e.g. (31) above). Alternatively the questions may be merely rhetorical, as is exemplified below:

42. Halafu kuna tabia ya watu kuogopa vyombo vya habari; na maafisa wengi nchini hudhani kinga ni kugonga karatasi “siri.” Lakini siyo karatasi zote zilizogongwa “siri” zina siri za nchi au siri za aina nyingine. Vema, siri zipo, je, hotuba nazo ni siri? Na tufanyeje sasa?.....

‘Then there is a phobia about the press which in the officials’ thinking, has to be countered by stamping papers “confidential.” Again not all papers so stamped contain state secrets or other forms of secrets. Of course we agree that secrets do exist, but are speeches also secrets? And what is the way out?’

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have demonstrated in the present discussion that academic writing in Swahili is not done haphazardly, but follows an established style. The following are some of the salient features of Swahili academic writing: (i) lexical items appearing in academic texts are normally spelled accurately and full length; (ii) the vocabulary is very abstract and highly terminological, (iii) the sentences, most of which are declarative, are usually complex; (iv) impersonal and passive constructions abound; (v) parenthetical words and clauses are frequently used; (vi) metaphorical expressions are rarely used; and (viii) morphologically, the use of the Hu – tense and 1st person plural predominates.

It is our hope that the stylistic features of Swahili academic writing discussed in this paper will continue to be used by Swahilists (both students as well as accomplished scholars) as a vital input in streamlining technical Swahili.

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Appendix 1. *Names of Chemicals.*

There are numerous chemical names. Starting with the chemical elements, there are over one hundred of these. Many of the names of elements and their symbols originate from Greek, e.g. argoni (argon, from argos); Latin, e.g. stibi (antimony, from stibium); etc. The important point here is to get the Swahili equivalent by deriving from the original language e.g. Latin, rather than from the English word. This is perhaps the only way we can get the name of the chemical element as well as its symbol from the same word, e.g., “gold” becomes auri (from the word “aurum”) and the symbol is Au; “copper” becomes kupri (not shaba) and the symbol is Cu!

Names of compounds are often very confusing. Eg. “carbon dioxide” is sometimes translated to be karbon dayoksaidi. This does not strictly follow Swahili construction. I would consider a more appropriate term would be dioksidi karbon. Using the same argument, “sulphuric acid” will be asidi sulfuriki, “aqueous sodium chloride” is kloridi natiri ya maji and “dilute calcium hydroxide” will be hidroksidi kalisi zimulifu. Some exceptions do occur here and there, e.g. “calcium hydrogen carbonate” becomes hidrojeni-karbonati kalisi and “chlorofluoro carbon” is kloroflorokarboni.