

## “SWAHILIZATION” OF ETHNIC LANGUAGES IN TANZANIA: THE CASE OF MATENGO

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**ABSTRACT** The “Swahilization” of ethnic languages, rather than a clear “language shift,” is taking place in Tanzania. This paper reports on the effects Swahilization has had on the Matengo language through examples of Swahili loanwords. The influence of Swahili can be seen in areas such as grammar and phonology in Matengo, one of the middle-sized ethnic languages of Tanzania. The most remarkable influence is in the lexicon. There are many Swahili words in today’s Matengo, especially that spoken by the young people. Some Swahili words are used as a result of unconscious code-mixing, but so far used as new vocabulary loaned from Swahili. This trend points to a language shift that will certainly grow stronger, given the overall impact of Swahili, the national language of Tanzania.

**Key Words:** Swahilization; Tanzania; Swahili; Matengo; Ethnic languages.

### INTRODUCTION

The language situation in Tanzania has changed greatly since the wide diffusion of Swahili, the national language and an official language in Tanzania. As many previous studies have reported, Swahili has come into the domains of ethnic languages and displaced them (Legère, 1992; Mekacha, 1993; Yoneda, 1996). Batibo (1992) described the phases of this language shift:

- Phase I : ethnic language monolingualism
- Phase II : bilingualism with ethnic language predominance
- Phase III : bilingualism with L2 (Swahili) predominating
- Phase IV : restricted use/competence in L1 (ethnic language)
- Phase V : L1 as substratum

Batibo (1992) claimed that the majority of Tanzanian speech communities are in Phase II, where the people, “use their ethnic languages in all family, village and intra-ethnic activities... (1992: 90).” However, Yoneda (1996) has pointed out that Swahili is now penetrating deeply into the speech of ethnic communities and families, and most ethnic groups are presumed to be in Phase III or even ahead.

As a result of expanding domains where Swahili is used, the linguistic influence of Swahili can be easily recognized in ethnic languages throughout Tanzania, even in remote areas.

Matengo<sup>(1)</sup> is a Bantu language spoken in the southwestern corner of Tanzania. Nonetheless, the influence of Swahili can be found even there. If a visitor who

knows Swahili visits a Matengo village and hears people's conversation, s/he may think that they don't use Swahili. While it might be true that Swahili is not used as the everyday tongue in the villages, neither is what could be called the "proper" Matengo. Although Swahili has not yet fully replaced Matengo, Matengo has been undergoing significant changes. What is taking place in the Matengo language is a phenomenon called the "Swahilization of a language," as opposed to a clear "language shift." In this paper I will show what effects Swahilization has had on the Matengo language, in phonology, lexicon, and even grammar.

## PHONOLOGICAL INFLUENCE

One example of Swahilization can be seen in phonology. Matengo has a 7-vowel system with contrastive short and long vowels, thus 14 distinct phonemes (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Matengo and Swahili vowel systems

a. Matengo: 7-vowel system ( )=orthography<sup>(2)</sup>

1. short vowels		2. long vowels	
i	u	i: (ii)	u: (uu)
e (e)	o (o)	e: (ee)	o: (oo)
ɛ (e)	ɔ (o)	ɛ: (ee)	ɔ: (oo)
a		a: (aa)	

b. Swahili: 5-vowel system

i	u
ɛ (e)	ɔ (o)
a	

However, these days many Matengo speakers no longer make the distinction between short and long vowels, reducing their speech to just 7 vowels. Moreover, in much the same way that Swahili distinguishes only 5 vowels, many young people now speak Matengo with only 5 vowels.

- |                             |   |                         |        |              |
|-----------------------------|---|-------------------------|--------|--------------|
| (1) k <u>oo</u> lela        | > | ku <u>o</u> lela        | oo > o | "to wisper"  |
| (2) ku <u>aa</u> gula       | > | ku <u>a</u> gula        | aa > a | "to choose"  |
| (3) ku <u>ɛ</u> m <u>ba</u> | > | ku <u>e</u> m <u>ba</u> | ɛ > e  | "to dig out" |

## LEXICON

The most remarkable influence of Swahili is observable in the lexicon. Many Swahili words have crept into today's Matengo, especially in young people's

speech. Some of these words are used because of unconscious code-mixing, that is, to mix two or more languages in their speech. However, in many cases, the Swahili words come into use as new Matengo vocabulary, as Swahili loanwords. These loanwords from Swahili can be divided into three groups:

1. Loanwords representing completely new objects and concepts;
2. Loanwords describing objects or concepts that may not be completely new, but providing new expressions;
3. Loanwords coexisting and synonymous with Matengo words.

In the following subsections, I explain these groups of loanwords.

### I. Loanwords for New Objects or Concepts

As a natural result of larger changes taking place in Matengo society, new objects and concepts are being introduced into the Matengo community with new words to express them, for example, paper, newspapers, cars, and driving. (Original Swahili words are shown in parentheses.)

(4) likalatasi	“paper”	(<karatasi)
(5) ligaseti	“newspaper”	(<gazeti)
(6) sule	“school”	(<shule)
(7) ligali	“motorcar”	(<gari)
(8) kuhendesha	“to drive”	(<kuendesha)
(9) lisungwa	“orange”	(<chungwa)
(10) sembe	“mango”	(<embe)
(11) ndoa	“marriage”	(<ndoa)
(12) kipalu	“rhinoceros”	(<kifaru)

The number of loanwords in this group is huge, and according to the modernization of Matengo society, one can assume the accelerated increase of these loanwords.

### II. Loanwords for New Expressions

Sometimes the people use loanwords for new expressions where the described object or concept itself is not new to Matengo society. For example, Matengo has words for distinct actions, “sweeping” and “wiping,” but no general term meaning “to clean.” So, the loanword *kusapisa* “to clean” has been borrowed from the Swahili word *kusafisha*. Another example is “to curse.” To cast a curse is a common action in Matengo society, and there are many kinds of curses, according to purpose, situation, etc. So, in Matengo, distinct verbs are used when a person wants to describe, “casting a curse,” depending on the type of the curse intended. While these distinct verbs are still used today, the Swahili loanword *kutega*<sup>(3)</sup> is becoming popular as a general term, “to cast a curse.”

- (13) kusapisa                    “to clean”                    (<kusafisha)  
 (14) kutega                    “to cast a curse”            (<kutega “to trap”)

There are also cases where the opposite is true, where there had been only a general term in Matengo until loanwords were introduced to draw new distinctions. For example, *mponga* is the general term in Matengo for “rice.” Originally *mponga* was used to denote a number of meanings: rice plants, rice grains, and cooked rice. However, these days the Swahili loanwords *nsele* for “rice grains,” and *hwali* for “cooked rice,” have come into common parlance.

- (15) Matengo  
       *mponga*                    “rice plant, rice grain, cooked rice”  
 (16) Loanword  
       a. *nsele*                    “rice grain”                    (<mchele)  
       b. *hwali*                    “cooked rice”                    (<wali)

There are other new categorizations. In Matengo, the word *mbeli* is used to refer to older siblings of the same sex, while *unung’una* is used for younger siblings of the same sex. However, no distinction of seniority is made for siblings of the opposite sex. The word *nhasa* means simply “brother” when used by girls, and *ndombu* is “sister” when used by boys. Swahili has words to designate the concept of older brothers for both girls and boys and older sisters for both girls and boys, and these have started to appear in Matengo.

- (17) Original Matengo grouping of brothers and sisters  
       a. *mbeli*                    “older siblings of the same sex, used by boys and girls”  
       b. *unung’una*            “younger siblings of the same sex, used by boys and girls”  
       c. *ndombu*                “sister for boys”  
       d. *nhasa*                 “brother for girls”  
 (18) Loanwords  
       a. *kaka*                    “older brother”                (<kaka)  
       b. *dada*                    “older sister”                 (<dada)

### III. Loanwords with Matengo Synonyms

In the previous subsection dealing with cases of loanwords for new expression, the original Matengo words and the Swahili loanwords are both used more or less independently of one another. Such use is also relatively stable, and does not appear as one is in the process of replacing the other, because the relationship between original Matengo words and Swahili loanwords are “complementary distribution.”

However, there are examples where Swahili loanwords are causing word replacement. That is the case of loanwords with Matengo synonyms.

Today, it is very common for people in Matengo communities to use Swahili words, where genuine words exist in Matengo. The speakers simply alter the sounds of the Swahili words to match the Matengo phonological system:

Matengo	Loanword		
(19) kutonda	kusoka	(<kuchoka)	“to be tired”
(20) kuhotola	kuhweza	(<kuweza)	“to be able to”
(21) kupaaha	kukosela	(<kukosea)	“to be wrong”
(22) ling’ahi	asabu	(<adhabu)	“punishment”

Although older people tend to reject these words, young people show more acceptance. They consider the words to be Matengo, borrowed from Swahili. And even elders, who claim that these loanwords are not Matengo, sometimes use them without much thought.

Some loanwords and the Matengo equivalents are differentiated by meaning, as in the case of, for example, “to teach.” To describe teaching traditional matters or housework, the original Matengo word *kuboola* is used. On the other hand, to describe formal teaching at school or other public situations, the Swahili loanword *kupundisa* (<kufundisha) is now used. Another example is the case of “to pray.” For praying at church, the loanword *kusalila* is used. However, for praying to the traditional god, the original Matengo word *kulooba* is used.

Matengo	Loanword		
(23) <i>kub<u>o</u>ola</i>	kupundisa	(<kufundisha)	“to teach”
(24) ikakala	upipu	(<uvivu)	“laziness”
(25) <i>kul<u>o</u>oba</i>	kusalila	(<kusali)	“to pray”
(26) lihengu	kasi	(<kazi)	“work”

These distinctions show a clear tendency: while original Matengo words refer to traditional and/or informal matters, loanwords from Swahili have been adopted to talk about introduced objects and concepts in modern life and/or formal matters. At first glance this phenomenon would seem to resemble the loanwords for completely new things and concepts. In fact, however, there is a clear difference: completely new things that enter Matengo culture cause no confusion, because such new things were simply not known before.

But when the concept of school entered the Matengo community, for example, initially the concept of the original Matengo word *kuboola* “to teach” was simply enlarged to include this action of “to formally teach at school.” Only later was the word *kupundisa* borrowed from Swahili, to draw a distinction between traditional learning, *kuboola*, and formal schooling, *kupundisa*. In this case, although the Matengo word was used initially to describe a new concept, a “second phase” followed where the original Matengo word and the Swahili loanword were gradually assigned different meanings.

Importantly, such gradual differentiations are often unclear, and highly unstable. For example, the loanword *kasi*, meaning “work,” used to refer only to work performed in an actual work place. On the other hand, the original Matengo word *lihengu*, encompassed all “works,” whether housework, fieldwork, or any other work. However, such distinctions are no longer made, and the loanword from Swahili tends to dominate.

Where loanwords from Swahili and their equivalents in Matengo are both used

without differentiation, the one that dominates is always the loanword. As a result, the original Matengo words naturally fade away. It is apparent that such a phase, where both the original word and the loanword are differentiated but used together, is merely a transition before the use of the Matengo word is abandoned.

#### IV. Functional Words

The above examples were all content words. However, not only content words, but also function words, are being borrowed from Swahili. These loaned function words are becoming even more deeply rooted in the Matengo language than content words. The prepositions, conjunctions or adverbs listed from (27) to (33) do not exist in original Matengo. In this sense, loaned function words are categorised in “loanwords for new expressions.”

(27) balala ja	“instead of”	(<badala ya)
(28) bila	“without”	(<bila)
(29) kabula	“before”	(<kabla)
(30) tangu	“from”	(<tangu)
(31) mpaka	“until”	(<mpaka)
(32) alapu	“and then”	(<halafu)
(33) tajali	“already”	(<tayari)

#### GRAMMATICAL INFLUENCE

Loaned function words sometimes cause changes to the basic Matengo sentence structure.

##### (34) Original Matengo construction

Maria a-a-n-longul-iti ku-belakeka.  
 Maria she-PAST-me-precede-PERFCT INF-be born  
 “Maria precedes me to be born (Maria was born before me).”

##### (35) New construction, using the Swahili loanword

Maria a-a-belakek-iti kabula nenga.  
 Maria she-PAST-be born-PERFECT before me  
 “Maria was born before me.”

Content loanwords can change grammar as well, for example, as seen in the use of the passive voice in Matengo. Fundamentally, Matengo grammar does not have the passive construction. So, in order to say “Mr. Kapenga has been cursed,” the action is expressed in active sentence construction, with an unknown subject “someone” as shown in (36). However, by borrowing from Swahili a passive verb such as *kutegwa* “to be trapped,” Matengo speakers have started constructing their own passive voice shown in (37).

- (36) Original Matengo construction  
 Mundu                      ju-m-teg-iti                      Kapenga.  
 Someone                    he-him-curse-PERFECT                      Mr. Kapenga  
 “Someone has cursed Mr. Kapenga.”
- (37) New construction, using the Swahili loanword  
 Kapenga                      ju-tend-iti                      ku-teg-w-a.  
 Mr. Kapenga                      he-do-PERFECT                      INF-curse-PASSIVE-F  
 “Mr. Kapenga has been cursed.” (<“He has done to be cursed.”)
- (38) Swahili sentence  
 Kinunda                      a-me-teg-w-a.  
 Mr. Kinunda                      he-PERFECT-trap-PASSIVE-F  
 “Mr. Kinunda has been trapped.”

### LOANWORDS AND PRONUNCIATION

As shown in examples from (3) to (16), when Swahili words come into Matengo, generally the pronunciation of those words changes to conform to the Matengo phonological system.

Swahili	Matengo			
ʃ (sh)	→ s	sheria	> selia	“law”
tʃ (ch)	→ s	kuchoka	> kusoka	“to be tired”
z	→ s	kazi	> kasi	“work”
ð (dh)	→ s	adhabu	> asabu	“punishment”
f	→ p	safi	> sapi	“clean”
j (y)	→ dʒ (j)	tayari	> tajali	“already”
d	→ l	duka	> liluka	“shop”
r	→ l	habari	> habali	“news”
w	→ hw	kuweza	> kuhweza	“to be able”

As the use of Swahili becomes more widespread, many Swahili loanwords are increasingly used with no change in pronunciation. It is difficult to say whether Matengo speakers are unconsciously code-mixing Swahili words, or are consciously using them as loanwords. Whatever the case, many Swahili words in Matengo are pronounced just as they are.

For example, Matengo has no non-prenasalized /d/ sound of its own. Therefore, the non-pre-nasalized /d/ sound in Swahili words has been often pronounced /l/ when used in Matengo. Neither is there any /j/ sound in Matengo, so the Swahili pronunciation /j/ becomes /s/ in Matengo. Thus, the Swahili word *kubadilisha* “to change” becomes *kubalilisa* in Matengo. However, among young people recently, this alteration of pronunciation is less apparent. (See 18b)

In yet another example, there is no /f/ sound in Matengo, and the Swahili sound /f/ changes to /p/. Thus, *safi* “clean” in Swahili becomes *sapi* in Matengo. However, the pronunciation *safi* is now heard in the speech of Matengo young

people, as much as, if not more than, *sapi*.

## PROFICIENCY IN MATENGO

The significant influence of Swahili is apparent foremost in the Matengo spoken by young people. In my research, I asked one question to young people, “What language do you use when you speak to your grandparents?” I asked their grandparents another question, “What language do your grandchildren use when they speak to you?” (Table 2).

In Table 2, 75% of the grandchildren interviewed believed that they used Matengo with their grandparents. However, in contrast, only 30% of the grandparents agreed. This gap is an indication of the extent to which young people mix Swahili words into their spoken Matengo, either as code-mixing or as loanwords. Obviously, the speech of the young people no longer sounds like Matengo to the grandparents.

In the second part of the same research, I interviewed 25 parents with children under 20 years of age. In their response to the question “How would you evaluate your children’s proficiency in Matengo?” half of the parents in town responded that their children didn’t know Matengo “very well” (Table 3).

The answer, the young people “don’t know Matengo very well,” means that, essentially, parents think that the children understand Matengo, but cannot speak it properly. Thus, today, half of the Matengo young people who live in town

**Table 2.** Language use between grandchildren and grandparents (%)

	Grandchildren	Grandparents
Matengo	75	30
Swahili	15	20
Both	10	50
Total	100	100

**Table 3.** Evaluation of Matengo proficiency of young people by their parents (%)

	Town	Village	Average
Know very well	30	45	38
Know well	20	37	28
Don’t know well	50	18	34
Total	100	100	100



cannot use Matengo properly, or at least their Matengo does not sound like “proper” Matengo to their elders. The root of this phenomenon is unquestionably Swahilization.

#### “DEEP” MATENGO & “MODERN” MATENGO

Even when synonymous words exist, it is now very common to use Swahili words in Matengo. The pronunciation of those Swahili loanwords may first be altered according to the Matengo phonological system. However, the loanwords are increasingly used with no changes to the pronunciation. Although the older people do not accept these words as being Matengo, the younger people readily accept and use them, albeit with the understanding that the words have been borrowed from Swahili.

The Matengo people refer to this new Matengo language augmented by Swahili loanwords as *Samatengo sa kisasa*, meaning “modern Matengo.” This is distinguished from *Samatengo sa ndani*, meaning “deep Matengo,” which is considered the “real” Matengo. Ironically, the words *kisasa* and *ndani* are themselves loanwords borrowed from Swahili.

Although parents and grandparents recognize the declining Matengo proficiency of their young people, and despite the fact that the use of Swahili has clearly increased, the majority of the Matengo people are still convinced that *Samatengo sa ndani* continues to be used within their own communities, especially in the rural villages. However, as I have shown, although complete language replacement has not yet occurred within Matengo communities, Swahilization of Matengo, the slow, almost surreptitious replacement of the language, is definitely taking place. I have little doubt that the use of modern Matengo, that is, Swahilized Matengo, will only increase, both rapidly and broadly. Moreover, this phenomenon is not unique to Matengo, but observed in most of the ethnic languages throughout Tanzania.

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#### NOTES

- (1) According to Ethnologue (Lewis, 2009), there are roughly 160,000 speakers of Matengo, making it one of the ethnic languages with a moderate-sized speaking population in Tanzania.
- (2) Matengo does not have an official orthography. In this paper, Matengo examples are

written in the orthography proposed by Yoneda (2006). Swahili examples are written in its official orthography.

- (3) The Swahili word *kutega* means “to trap.” However, in Matengo, this word is used to mean, “to curse.” To mean, “to trap,” the original Matengo word *kupendakela* is used.

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