Dictionaries and the Standardization of Spelling in Swahili*

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Abstract: The paper discusses the role of the dictionary in standardizing the spelling of Swahili. The discussion begins by defining key terms in this paper: spelling and standardization of spelling. It surveys lexicons written in Swahili between 1811–1990 and records the efforts made to establish spelling conventions for Swahili words in Roman characters, pointing out variant spellings of words written by different authors.

The paper focuses on the role played by different lexicons in setting orthography for Swahili words, viz. Steere (1870), Krapf (1882), Nettelbladt (1891), Madan (1903), Sacleux (1939), etc. It observes how the lexicons established norms for words of a language which was hitherto not written in Roman characters. It also shows how lexicons helped to standardize the spelling of words to its current form especially after a standard dialect had been selected, pointing out lexicons which exclusively recorded words of the standard language with minimal variants. Finally the paper emphasizes the significance of the dictionary to adhere to the standard orthography.

Keywords: STANDARDIZATION OF SPELLING, SPELLING CONVENTIONS, STANDARD ORTHOGRAPHY, SWAHILI ALPHABET, DIALECTICAL VARIATIONS, CATCHWORDS, PHONETIC TRANSCRIPTIONS, STANDARD LANGUAGE, SPELLING SYSTEM, NONSTANDARD ORTHOGRAPHY, STANDARDIZATION PROCESS, WORD-LIST, LEXICON AND DICTIONARY

Opsomming: Woordeboeke en die standaardisering van spelling in Swahili. In hierdie artikel word die rol van die woordeboek in die standaardisering van die spelling van Swahili bespreek. Die bespreking begin met die definiëring van sleutelterme in hierdie artikel: spelling en die standaardisering van spelling. Dit gee 'n oorsig van leksikons wat tussen 1811–1990 in Swahili geskryf is en vermeld die pogings om spellingkonvensies vir Swahili woorde in Latynse letters vas te stel, terwyl spellingvariante van woorde deur verskillende outeurs uitgewys word.

Die artikel fokus op die rol wat deur verskillende leksikons gespeel is om die ortografie vir Swahiliwoorde vas te stel, nl. Steere (1870), Krapf (1882), Nettelbladt (1891), Madan (1903), Sacleux (1939), ens. Dit stel vas hoe die leksikons norme vir woorde van 'n taal wat tot op daardie tydstip nie in Latynse letters geskryf is nie, vasgestel het. Dit wys ook hoe leksikons gehelp het om die spelling van woorde in hulle huidige vorm te standaardiseer, veral nadat 'n standaarddialek gekies is, met vermelding van leksikons wat slegs woorde van die standaardtaal met min variante opge-

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teken het. Ten slotte beklemtoon die artikel die belangrikheid daarvan dat 'n woordeboek by die standaardortografie bly.

Sleutelwoorde: STANDAARDISERING VAN SPELLING, SPELLINGKONVENSIES, STANDAARDORTOGRAFIE, SWAHILIALFABET, DIALEKTIESE VARIASIES, TREFWOORDE, FONETIESE TRANSKRIPSIES, STANDAARDTAAL, SPELLINGSISTEEM, NIESTANDAARD-ORTOGRAFIE, STANDAARDISERINGSPROSES, WOORDELYS, LEKSIKON EN WOORDE-BOEK

Introduction

The observation by Krumm (1940: 3) that "the question of orthography of Swa-hili written in Roman characters is not yet definitely solved", is as valid today as it was more than half a century ago when it was made. Dictionaries com-piled between 1882 and 1991 prove this fact despite the efforts made in 1925 by a Committee for the Standardization of Swahili (better known as the Chiponda Committee (see Mbaabu 1995)) and the Interterritorial Language Committee founded in 1930. The objective of this paper is to discuss the role of dictionaries in standardizing orthography of written Swahili in Roman characters. In this paper we shall (1) examine efforts made to establish spelling conventions in Swahili from the time when Swahili was first written in Roman script, (2) dis-cuss the role of dictionaries in standardizing spelling of Swahili words from 1870 to 1990, and (3) discuss why a dictionary should promote a standard orthography. But first of all let us briefly explicate what spelling and standardi-zation of spelling mean.

Spelling, according to Gove (1961), is the art and technique of forming words by letters according to accepted usage or standard spelling as formu-lated by language planners. Standardization of spelling is concerned with uni-fying underlying linguistic diversity in order to make the standard language fit to be a national language. Standard orthography is the chosen spelling of a word out of the competing variants. This is the spelling that will be put into use in schools, government offices, the press and other areas. Standardization of a language has basically two steps: (1) creation of a model for imitation and (2) promotion of this model over rival models (Ray 1968). Having put into per-spective what standardization of spelling means, we shall now examine how Swahili was introduced into writing systems.

Writing Systems in Swahili

Swahili[1] was already a written language in Arabic script in the 13th century (Eastman 1983: 21). For almost five centuries this script dominated Swahili writings which were mainly songs and poetry, e.g. the work of Fumo Liyongo, Aidarus bin Uthman, Binti Lembe, Mwengo bin Athuman, Muyaka Haji, etc.

By the beginning of the 19th century, Roman script was introduced by European travellers and missionaries who visited East Africa and began to learn Swahili. They prepared Swahili word-lists, conversation books, grammar books, teaching manuals and dictionaries. In this paper we shall confine our discussions to spelling conventions in Roman script because it has a considerable literature from which we can draw examples for illustration. Let us now look at how Swahili was first written in Roman characters.

Transcription of Swahili in Roman Characters

When a hitherto unwritten language is chosen as a standard language, a spelling system is developed for it and conventions are set up on how it is to be written (Eastman 1983). First attempts to establish orthography of Swahili words were made by European visitors, explorers and adventurers between 1811–1849. This involved (1) the transcription of Swahili phones in order to determine the Swahili phonetic alphabet and (2) establish spelling conventions for Swahili words as in Table I below, with examples taken from Whiteley (1969: 50ff):

Table I   Early Swahili Word-lists in Roman Script

English	Smee (1811-12)	Ross and Brown (1843)	Gullain and Vignard (1846-48)	Burton (1845-49)
fire	moto	-	moto	moto
house	-	youm ba	nioum ba	nyumba
fish	summakee	soo-ma-ke	soumaki	somba
wind	paepo	-	phepo	-
cow	gnombai	-	m gom be	ngombe
smoke	-	mo-she	mouchi	-
sun	toowar	-	djou	juwa
firewood	-	cooney	kouni	-
oil	-	ma-foo-ta	mafouta	-
teeth	-	ma-no	mino	menu
die	koofa	-	koukoufa	-

Orthography of most of the words in Table I differs from the current spelling of the same words because the authors used the phonetic alphabet of their native languages to establish spelling of Swahili words. From the data given above it is obvious Ross and Brown, and Burton, and perhaps also Smee, were Englishmen, and Guillain and Vignard were Frenchmen. We shall therefore have to refer to English and French when discussing how the authors' languages influ-

enced Swahili orthography. Let us first look at the vowels. Swahili has five open vowels *a, e, i, o* and *u*, but our data shows the same vowels being used to represent different phonological values. The early word-lists show that the English *a* which is sometimes pronounced as /e/ was used to represent the Swahili vowel *e* as we see in Ross and Brown's list, e.g. *mano* instead of *meno*. The same applies to the English *e* (pronounced as /i/) which is used to represent the Swahili vowel *i*, e.g. *moshe* (instead of *moshi*) or *m-we-ve* (instead of *mwivi*), and *oo* (pronounced as /u/) which is used to represent *u*, e.g. *mafoota* (instead of *mafuta*). In the same list we see the consonant *c* used for /k/, a common feature in English also, e.g. *cattle* [kætl] and *kettle* [kɛtl], hence *kuni* was transcribed as *cooney* and *mkuki* as *m'coo-ke*. Other influences of the authors' languages can be observed in Gullain and Vignard who write the Swahili *u* as the French *ou*, e.g. *kouni* (instead of *kuni*), *koufa* (instead of *kufa*) and *mafouta* (instead of *mafuta*). Likewise *j* was written as the French *dj*, e.g. *djou* for *jua*.

Swahili Alphabet

The alphabet used for writing Swahili is the same as the international Roman alphabet, with letters chosen to represent the Swahili phones. It also uses digraphs i.e. a sequence of two letters to represent single sounds. According to Steere (1870) the Swahili alphabet has five vowels: *a, e, i, o* and *u*, and sixteen consonants: *b, ch, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y* and *z*. The vowels are pronounced as in Italian, and the consonants as in English. He also included the following digraphs:

> *gh* is pronounced as the Dutch *g*,
> *kh* is pronounced as the German *ch*,
> *th* is pronounced as the English *th* in *thing*,
> *kw* is pronounced as the English *qu* in *queer*,
> *ny* has the sound of French *ni* or English *ni* as in *companion*,
> *ng'* resembles English *ng* when it occurs at the end of a word, e.g. *bang*, *king*, etc.,
> *ng* resembles English *ng* as in *engage*, and
> *sh* resembles the English *sh*.

Steere also notes the emphatic feature in the plosive *k*: *khabari, kheri* etc. Krapf (1882), another pioneer of written Swahili, also recorded five vowels like Steere, and twenty consonants: *b, ch, d, dz, f, g, gh, gn, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, sh, t, th, v, w, y* and *z*. Krapf adds *dz, gn* and *q*, which are lacking in Steere. The alphabet as used in written Swahili today owes much to Steere. It has both single letters and digraphs : *a, b, ch, d, dh, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, mb, n, nd, ng, ng', nj, ny, o, p, r, s, sh, t, th, u, v, w, y* and *z*.

Efforts to set up Spelling Conventions for Swahili

An examination of Swahili texts and lexicons written after the second half of the 19th century until the first half of the 20th century shows efforts made by some Swahili linguists to set up spelling conventions for Swahili words. Serious attempts were made by Steere (1870), Krapf (1882), Illaire (1890), Nettelbladt (1891), Velten (1903), Madan (1903) Sacleux (1939) Seidel (1941), etc. In Table II below we present a sample of lexical items from some of these lexicons and then discuss important developments in setting the spelling for Swahili.

Table II   **Spelling of Words in Swahili Lexicons 1870–1939**

Steere (1870)	Krapf (1882)	Nettelbladt (1891)	Madan (1903)	Sacleux (1939)	Current Spelling
afathali	*afathali*	*afasali*	*afathali*	*afazali/ afuzali/ afzali*	*afadhali*
afya	*afia/afya*	*afia*	*afia/afya*	*afya*	*afya*
assubui/ ussubui	*assubukhi/ ussubukhi/ essubukhi*	*assubui/ ussubui*	*assubuhi/ subuhi/ ussubui*	*asubuhi/ usubuhi*	*asubuhi*
athuuri	-	*asuuri*	*athuuri*	*azuhuri/ aduhuri*	*adhuhuri*
burre	*burre*	*bure*	*burre*	*bure*	*bure*
chosha	*chosha*	*tchoscha*	*chosha*	*čoša*	*chosha*

Compare also the spelling of words in other lexicons and their current orthography in brackets: In Velten (1903), *muungu* (*mungu*), *maradi* (*maradhi*), *qabla* (*kabla*), *tawalli* (*tawala*), *qissa* (*kisa*), *radi* (*radhi*), *afadali* (*afadhali*), *zayidi* (*zaidi*), *assubuhi* (*asubuhi*), *el-jumaa* (*ijumaa*), *barza* (*baraza*), *chinsha* (*chinja*), *billa* (*bila*), and in Seidel (1941), *mudda* (*muda*), *fezza* (*fedha*), *ruddisha* (*rudisha*), *waqati* (*wakati*), *qasirika* (*kasirika*), *soqo* (*soko*), *gora* (*jora*), *boonde* (*bonde*), *qoodi* (*kodi*), *nakhoda* (*nahodha*).

Influence of Foreign Languages on Swahili Orthography

A critical examination of the data in Table II shows (1) variant spellings for the same words and (2) variant representations of a phoneme. Variants of a word reflect the existence of more than one dialect in use in one speech community: Cf. (1) *afadali, afadhali, afasali, afathali, afazali* and *afzali*, or (2) *asubuhi, assubui, assubukhi, essubukhi, subuhi, ussubui, ussubukhi*, etc. The variants cannot be said to belong to the various Swahili dialects because they are loanwords. In this

case we are obliged to concur with Krumm's point of view (Krumm 1940: 50ff.) that the different Arabic variants we see in these word-lists originated from different Arabic dialects whose speakers came to East Africa and introduced them in Swahili:

> It seems natural that some Arabian words have penetrated into Swahili not in their classical but in their dialectic or foreign form ... Often we find in Swahili besides the usual form of the Arabic or Persian word a dialect form, for instance, *dhaifu* and *daifu; dhoruba, doruba* and *zoruba; rejea* and *regea, jambia* and *gambia* — which prove that these words have found their way into Swahili from different Arabian sources.

However, we should also note that some of the variants are creations of the authors whose languages influenced the spelling of the words. For example, the German *ß* or *ss* which is pronounced as /s/ may have influenced German authors to use a double *s* instead of a single *s* which is pronounced as /z/. Thus in order to articulate *kisa* correctly, they wrote the word with a double *s*, i.e. *qissa*. One could also argue that *afasali* in Nettelbladt's list was his creation to suit his German Swahili learners so that they could pronounce [afazali]. We note the same for all Nettelbladt's words with *s*, e.g. *asuuri* for *azuuri*. The influence of foreign languages as a source of variants in Swahili is also seen in *j* or *dj* pronounced as /dʒ/ in French as in *ngoja, ngodja*. We observe the same for *ch* and *sh* each of which has three variant representations of the same phoneme: *ch, č* and *tch* (French) for /tʃ/, e.g. *cheka, čeka* and *tcheka*, and *sh, š* and *sch* (German) for /ʃ/, e.g. *ishirini, iširini* and *ischirini*.

Another influence of foreign languages on Swahili as evident in early writings is the double consonance in Arabic which has phonological and semantic signification in that language but has no bearing on Swahili. For example:

> *katala* he killed
> *kattala* he caused to kill
> *alima* he knew
> *allama* he caused to know
> *salim* he was well
> *sallam* he made or wished somebody to be well

The double consonant in *kattala* above has caused the meaning to change and differ from that of *katala*. Phonologically a double consonant in Arabic signifies an emphatic consonant. These features are not found in Swahili. Unfortunately they have been introduced in Swahili. For example:

> *bure* and *burre*
> *hata* and *hatta*

tena and *tenna*
mwalimu and *mwallimu*
tayari and *tayyari*
feza and *fezza*

Vowel Harmonization of Loanwords

Swahili syllables are open and their structure is basically C + V. Some Arabic words adopted in Swahili consist of group consonants (which are not double consonants) and lack the C + V structure. For example:

bakhti, barza, arbain, ashrini, hutba, etc.

These words were entered in some of the early lexicons and also appear in some Swahili literature from this time. However, in course of time the group consonants were separated by vowels whose selection was based on the rules of vowel assimilation by the same vowel that precedes the consonant (progressive assimilation) or by the same vowel that follows the consonant (retrogressive assimilation). For example:

Progressive assimilation
    bahti > bahati
    barza > baraza
    kufli > kufuli
    hutba > hutuba
    ahdi > ahadi
    kahwa > kahawa
    wakti > wakati
    bikra > bikira

Retrogressive assimilation
    kadri > kadiri
    akli > akili
    ashrini > ashirini

Sometimes a vowel inserted is chosen in relation to the place of articulation of the preceding consonant, especially bilabials and dentolabials. For example:

    arbaini > arubaini
    kibri > kiburi
    nafs > nafusi

The voiceless plosive velar in Arabic words is pronounced with an emphatic /h/ sound, hence represented as *kh*. Many Swahili words of Arabic origin with

the voiceless plosive velar have always retained the /h/ sound especially among Swahilis under Arabic influence. We find words with the voiceless velar *k* with emphatic *h* > *kh* in many of the early Swahili books and lexicons. For example:

> *khabari, khadaa, kheri, khofu, khutuba, nakhota, alkhamissi, bakhti, assubukhi,* etc.

But because the emphatic sound had no semantic signification and was articulated by Swahilis under Arabic influence only, it was later assimilated, and the stop dropped, hence leaving *h* to represent *kh*. For example:

> *khabari* > *habari*
> *khadaa* > *hadaa*
> *khofu* > *hofu*
> *khutuba* > *hutuba*

When lexicons were compiled during this time, Swahili had no standard dialect to which to refer for the standard spelling of words. Consequently, the compilers of these lexicons recorded every sound they heard, because it represented a lexical item. Sometimes they could not give a good transcription of the words pronounced for them either because they failed to capture the sounds correctly, or because their resource persons failed to articulate the words clearly. Cf. *youmba* (instead of *nyumba*), or *che-mo-je, mouya, moya* (instead of *moja*).

Creation of a Model to Follow

So far we have seen the beginning of writing Swahili in Roman characters and noted the reasons for variant spellings of the same words. Efforts were therefore made to standardize the language and hence harmonize the spelling of its words. In 1925 an education conference attended by members from Tanganyika and Zanzibar was held at Dar es Salaam and the Zanzibar dialect was selected as Standard Swahili for the two dependencies. Among other things it also proposed how to standardize the spelling of Swahili words. It gave a list of words which had variant spellings and recommended the standard orthography to be adopted (Mbaabu 1995: 47). For example:

Standard	Nonstandard
dhoruba	*dharuba*
heshima	*hishima*
hekima	*hikima*
ishirini	*asharini*
lakini	*ilakini*

After the Dar es Salaam meeting, an Interterritorial Conference attended by members from Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda and Zanzibar was held in June 1928 at Mombasa, and the Dar es Salaam recommendations were endorsed. Swahili orthography as a model to follow was therefore set in 1925 and endorsed in 1928. Two years later, in 1930, an Interterritorial Language Committee was founded and was given the responsibility to ensure that the standard orthography was upheld. The objective of the committee was among other things to standardize the orthography of Swahili words, as Sheikh Amri Abedi, Minister for Justice to the Republic of Tanganyika, rightly recapitulated it at the Annual Meeting of the East African Language Committee on 30 September 1963:

> Your committee came into being on 1st January 1930. Its terms of reference were to standardize the orthography and the grammar of the Swahili language, to write a new standard dictionary and to scrutinize the books in use in schools and to certify that they conformed with the standards laid down.

A new dictionary was necessary because the dictionaries which were already compiled had not aimed at standardizing the language. This is why each had a different orthography for the same words. For example:

> *assubui, assubuhi, assubukhi, as-subuhi, ussubui, usubukhi, usubuhi, subuhi* and *asubuhi*
> *nakhotha, nakhoza, nakhoda, nahoza* and *nahodha*

This was understandable because their objective was to record Swahili words as used by its speakers and/or as they perceived them to be the representation of the Swahili sounds. A new dictionary would have corrected this. Dictionaries which were compiled under the supervision of or certified by the Language Committee were those by F. Johnson: *Swahili-Swahili Dictionary* (1935) and *Swahili-English Dictionary* (1939). The following is a sample of catchwords from these two dictionaries:

> *adhana, afadhali, afya, ahera, asante/ahsante, asubuhi, bara, basi, huba, abedari* etc. (Johnson 1935)
> *adhana, afadhali, afya, ahera, asante, asubuhi, bara, basi/bas, huba, abedari/ habedari* (Johnson 1939)

The new dictionaries attempted to standardize the language. (1) The double consonant feature which was dominant in many loanwords was abandoned. Cf. *bara, basi, huba, asubuhi* etc. in Johnson (1935 and 1939) on the one hand and Steere (1870), Krapf (1882) and Velten (1910) on the other. (2) One variant was selected out of the competing ones and was adopted as the standard orthogra-

phy except if it was felt that more than one form had wide usage. Dialectal forms were reduced substantially but not eliminated completely, as shown in Table III below:

Table III   Catchwords with Variant Orthography in Swahili Lexicons (1870-1939) for the Letter A

	Steere (1870)	Krapf (1882)	Velten (1910)	Johnson (1935)	Johnson (1939)
Number of catchwords	243	383	265	293	281
Number of catchwords with variants	13	52	42	4	27
Number of variants in %	5	13	16	1	10

Lexicons compiled before Swahili was standardized have more variants than those written thereafter. This explains why Johnson (1935) with 293 catchwords had only 1% while Velten with 265 catchwords had 16% with variant spelling. Unfortunately Johnson (1939) increased the number of catchwords with variant spelling which undermines the notion of standardizing orthography, especially so because both these dictionaries by Johnson were compiled at about the same time, with the same number of catchwords (293 vs 281) and the same objectives.

Contribution of Swahili Lexicons towards the Standardization of Swahili Orthography

The first Swahili lexicons, though fragmented, were compiled between 1811 and 1848 (see Whiteley 1967: 50). By the time the Zanzibar dialect (Kiunguja) was selected as Standard Swahili in 1928, Swahili had ten lexicons: Steere (1870), Detrieux (1880), Krapf (1882), Delaunay (1888), Seidal (1890), Nettelbladt (1891), Büttner (1890), Velten (1910), Madan (1903) and Brutel (1928). Coincidentally all except Krapf (1882) were in Kiunguja, the dialect which later became Standard Swahili. Krapf was aware of Kiunguja and entered some words from this dialect and marked them. Despite the discrepancies we noted above, e.g. double consonants and superfluous variants, the lexicons laid a good foundation for the standardization of Swahili. One of the criteria used to

select a language or dialect to be a standard language is the availability of published literary works, grammar and lexicons in that language. Kiunguja had all these. The lexicons greatly influenced the standardization of spelling because the language planners could use them to select the forms with a higher degree of occurrence and simple spelling i.e. without double consonant or aspiration. Therefore, although it is agreed that the pre-Johnson dictionaries did not endeavour to standardize Swahili and that their contents reflected that fact, they laid the base for the standardization process to take place. Let us now examine the role of the dictionary in standardizing orthography.

The Role of the Dictionary in Standardizing Orthography

A dictionary whose objective is to describe the standard dialect has to record the standard orthography of a lexical item where there are competing forms (Mdee 1990). A lexicographer should therefore decide which form is considered standard and which is not. In this regard a standard dictionary has only one mission: *to propagate the standard orthography.*

A dictionary is regarded as the authority on spelling, grammar, meaning and usage of a language. It records the standard orthography of the norm, and if it includes items of another norm or other dialects of the same language, the social and geographical areas where each is spoken, are marked accordingly. A dictionary shall command authority over its users if it convinces them that it is adhering to the standard. Otherwise it will lose credibility as an authoritative reference of the standard language.

We have seen how the standard dictionaries compiled by the Interterritorial Language Committee (Johnson 1935 and 1939) attempted to standardize orthography of Standard Swahili. It was therefore expected that subsequent compilers of Swahili dictionaries would adhere to the standard. In what follows we shall examine dictionaries compiled between 1960 and 1990, namely Rechenbach (1968), TUKI (1981) and Feeley (1990), i.e. thirty years after Swahili had been standardized. Rechenbach is a 641 page dictionary with 401 catchwords under letter A, TUKI, a dictionary of 325 pages, has 528 catchwords under letter A, and Feeley with its 179 pages has 298 catchwords under letter A. All three dictionaries describe Standard Swahili and owe much to their predecessors, especially to Johnson (1935 and 1939). Above we noted the double consonant and variant spellings as main features found in pre-Johnson dictionaries. Johnson (1935) eliminated both of these. The post-Johnson dictionaries adhered to the noninclusion of double consonants in Swahili words but not to the exclusion of variant forms. As can be seen from Table IV, Rechenbach (1968) has 77 catchwords with variant spellings out of 401 catchwords under letter A, while TUKI (1981) has 53 words with variant spellings out of 528 and Feeley (1990) 5 words out of 298 catchwords under letter A.

Table IV   Catchwords with Variant Spellings in post-Johnson Diction-
aries (1968-1990) for the Letter A

	Rechenbach (1968)	TUKI (1981)	Feeley (1990)
Number of catchwords	401	528	298
Number of catchwords with variants	77	53	5
Number of variants in %	19	10	2

Rechenbach (1968) has the highest number of variant forms, higher even than
the pre-Johnson dictionaries as was shown in Table III. The author adopted a
retrogressive approach to dictionary making by recording every plausible
variant that Swahili speakers could form. Rechenbach was not interested in
continuing the process of standardizing Swahili started by Johnson (1935).
TUKI's 10% is equally large for a dictionary of Standard Swahili. Feeley's num-
ber is acceptable if one bears in mind that in any language there are some
words with variant spellings which are all accepted as standard. Rechenbach
and TUKI picked most of the variants from the pre-Johnson dictionaries which
Johnson (1935) had dropped in his effort to standardize Swahili. Both of them
undermined the role of the dictionary in standardizing a language and eroded
the whole concept of Standard Swahili as Table V below shows.

Table V   Variant Spellings in Rechenbach (1968) and TUKI (1981)

Rechenbach (1968)
aheri, akheri
ahiri, akhiri
ahsante, asante
asubuhi, asubui, asubukhi
atamia, tamia, latamia

TUKI (1981)
afandi, afande, afendi
agenda, ajenda
aghlabu, aghalabu
alimradi, alimuradi, ilimuradi, mradi, muradi
angalau, angalao, angaa, ngaa

The above sample upholds Krumm's observation made in 1940 and quoted in the introduction of this paper: "The question of the orthography of Swahili written in Roman characters is not yet definitely solved." It shows the following: (1) Both dictionaries seem undecided on what is more accepted and widely used (i.e. the standard form) to such an extent that every sound is recorded. See *atamia* and *asubuhi* in Rechenbach (1968), and *angalau* and *alimradi* in TUKI (1981). (2) Both of them record a loanword in two forms: (a) as it is pronounced in the source language and (b) as it is written in and adapted to the Swahili alphabet. Cf. *eksidenti* and *aksidenti*; *ateri* and *arteri*; *ajenda* and *agenda*. (3) Both dictionaries record Arabic loanwords first as they are pronounced in Arabic (with group consonant or aspirated *kh*), and then adapt it according to the syllabic law of Bantu languages, i.e. a consonant is always followed by a vowel. Cf. *akrabu, akarabu; abwabu, abuwabu; aghlabu, aghalabu; arbaini, arubaini* etc. and the deletion of the aspiration and the stop /k/, e.g. *akhera, ahera; akheri, aheri* etc.

Relevance and Realities of the Decisions of the Interterritorial Conference of 1928

The adoption of the Zanzibar dialect as Standard Swahili for East Africa and all the resolutions of the Dar es Salaam Conference implied that the Mombasa dialect (Kimvita), which had already literary works written in it, would be confined to spoken and informal communication. In literary works it was to be abandoned in favour of the standard dialect. It was for this reason that the East African Literature Bureau was established in order to publish Swahili works which had been certified by the Interterritorial Language Committee as written in Standard Swahili. However, some writers continued writing literature in Kimvita and as a result of this, dialectal forms continued to find their way in both literary works and dictionaries. This seems to explain why Johnson (1939) failed to adhere to the standard orthography as he attempted in his previous dictionary (Johnson 1935). Consequently he recorded more variants, as can be seen from Table III above which shows that 10% of the catchwords under letter A in Johnson (1939) were variants in contrast with Johnson (1935) which had only 1%. Likewise, the editors of TUKI (1981) who endeavoured to compile a standard Swahili dictionary, *Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu*, recorded 10% dialectal forms.

In essence, the Chiponda Committee created words that did not exist when it selected forms of the standard dialect which were alien to speakers of other dialects. For example: *asili* (instead of *asli*), *ishirini* (*ashirini*), *tisini* (*tisaini*), *sheria* (*sharia*), *lakini* (*ilakini*), *hasa* (*haswa*) etc. Since the later spelling was preferred to Swahili under Arabic influence, the former were resisted in favour of the latter.

Dialectal variations are still generated in Swahili, even for words which entered the language in recent years. Cf. *ateri* and *arteri*, *eproni* and *aproni*, *edita*

and *editori, pension* and *pencheni, hospitali* and *spitali* etc. The variants reflect different sections of the speech community using the different forms. The essence of these variants is that the loanwords are adopted in two different ways, namely as they are pronounced e.g. *edita, eproni, ateri, pensheni,* etc. and as they are written in their original language with some adjustments to conform to Swahili structure, e.g. *editori* (from the English word *editor*), *aproni* (*apron*), *arteri* (*artery*), *hospitali* (*hospital*) etc. There is also the problem that the loanwords are not pronounced correctly. For example, *pencheni* (*pension*) or *spitali* (*hospital*).

Indeed one could argue that we are not yet to see the end of dialectal words in Swahili dictionaries because many of these are found in contemporary literature read in schools. Cf. A. Abdala's *Sauti ya Dhiki,* or A. Nassir's *Malenga wa Mvita.* All these show that the exercise of standardizing orthography is an ongoing process and lexicographers and writers have to be active participants in promoting the standard.

What dictionaries should do to promote the Standard Orthography

We noted in the introduction that a standard language is a medium of communication in government administration, education, the press and all forums where a degree of formal communication is needed. In order to ensure that communication is not hampered, a standard language and indeed the standard orthography have to be adopted and consistently used so that it can spread within and even without the speech community. Standardization of a language is an arbitrary decision made by language planners (1) to choose a language or dialect of a language as the norm, (2) to simplify spelling of words of the norm and (3) to adopt one form where a word has variant forms, and popularize it.

For the dictionary to be able to execute this responsibility, it is recommended that lexicographers should record only the form that is considered to be standard or accepted by the majority of the Swahili speakers. It is however possible for a dictionary to include words of other social and regional dialects provided that (1) it states that objective unambiguously, and (2) it marks geographical and social status of the dialectal words. Contrary to this, the dictionary would confuse and mislead the users, and would be condemned by the readers and the reviewers. This is what befell Gove and his dictionary, Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* in 1961 when the critics called the dictionary "a calamity, an exponent of anarchy in language and a disaster" (Lodwig and Barrett 1967: 56). The readers and reviewers criticized the dictionary because according to them it failed in its responsibility to set forth and maintain standards of usage for the language.

Such criticisms could be made against Rechenbach (1968) and TUKI (1981) because of the superfluous variant spellings of catchwords. See Tables IV and V. It is important for dictionaries to adhere to the standard language and what

is considered to be the most accepted spellings of words because it has a role of standardizing, disseminating and teaching the norm.

Conclusion

In this paper we endeavoured to examine the contribution of Swahili dictionaries in setting an orthography for Swahili words which culminated in standardizing the orthography of Standard Swahili. In doing so, we traced the beginnings of writing Swahili in Roman characters and noted (1) the variant spellings in different dictionaries, (2) the creation of the norm and (3) how the standard orthography was realized. Finally we examined the role of the Swahili dictionaries over the last 100 years in setting Standard Swahili and standard orthography and why it is important for dictionaries to uphold standard orthography.

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