

# Patterns of Swahili Verbal Derivatives: An Analysis of their Formation

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines Swahili verbal derived forms in order to find out the formative suffixes which they can take and try to establish their pattern. Of interest to us here is to look at the rule governing the formation of Swahili verbal derivatives, and the extent to which such words have been activated by the speakers of the language. A verbal root is the irreducible element of a verb or the primitive radical without prefix, suffix or other inflexion. In a Swahili verbal derivational process, suffixes are inserted between the root and the final vowel. Swahili grammarians categorize productive formative verbal suffixes into applied or prepositional suffix, stative or neuter suffix, reciprocal suffix, causative suffix and passive suffix. The analysis has shown that in Swahili verb derivation it is possible to predict types of verbs that can take all formative suffixes or only some. It has also been revealed that linguistically all verbs adhere to the same rules of word formation by derivational process regardless of the origin or form of the verb. Moreover it has been shown that verbs produce latent derivatives while derivatives of active verbs are usually activated.*

**Keywords:** *verbal derivatives, derived forms, formative suffix, verbal root, irreducible element, prefix, suffix, inflexion, final vowel, verbal suffixes, applied/prepositional suffix, stative or neuter suffix, reciprocalsuffix, causative suffix and passive suffix.*

## VERBAL DERIVATION IN SWAHILI

### Introduction

Verbal derivation in Swahili follows a predictable pattern. A verbal root is followed by a final vowel -a, also known as suffix -a (Chomi: 2013). The final vowel is isolated from the root because it is not an integral part of it. A root is thus defined as the part of a stem of a verb that remains after isolating the final vowel from the basic form. Swahili grammarians (Reichart and Küsters, 1926; Polome, 1967; Kapinga, 1983; Khamis, 1985) agree that a Swahili verbal root is either a Consonant, e.g. **p**-a, a Vowel e.g. **o**-a, a Vowel + Consonant e.g. **on**-a, a Consonant + Vowel + Consonant e.g. **pig**-a, a Consonant + Vowel + Consonant + Vowel + Consonant e.g. **sukum**-a etc.

This discussion divides the Swahili verbs into two categories: transitive verbs and intransitive verbs and examine the suffixes each category can take. The main feature of a transitive verb is its ability to take one or two objects as complements. An intransitive verb does not take an object. However through derivational process, intransitive verbs do produce some transitive verbs too. In the following subsection we examine the verbal formative suffixes as described by Swahili grammarians and show examples of verbs in which the suffixes appear.

### Verbal Derivation In Swahili

Reichart and Küsters (1926), Polome (1967), Kapinga (1983) Khamis (1985) and Kiango (2000), identify the prepositional suffix as either - i - or - e - depending on the form of vowel in the verbal root.

E1 chez-a > chez-e-a      som-a > som-e-a

imb-a > imb-i-a      fung-a > fung-i-a

The allomorphs of these suffixes, -li- and -le- have also been identified by Reichart and Küsters (*ibid.*), Steere/Madan (1913), Polome, Kapinga and Khamis. These are applicable to verbs whose roots end with a vowel.

**E2** le-a > le-le-a      to-a > to-le-a      sog-e-a > sog-e-le-a  
za-a > za-li-a      fu-a > fu-li-a      ti-a > ti-li-a

Polome (*ibid.*) also adds -ele- and -ili-. These forms appear in enlarged verbal roots which have more than one suffix as in E3.

**E3** ach -a > ach-i-a > ach-ili-a,    pig-a > pig-i-a > pig-ili-a

It is obvious from this example that what we are seeing here is not suffix -ele- or -ili- but two suffixes: -i - + -li - or -e - + -le- as we see in E3 presented below as E4

**E4** ach-a > ach-i -a > ach-i-li-a,    pig-a > pig-i -a > pig - i - li - a

This being the case then, Polome does not really offer a different category of suffixes but simply coalesces two suffixes and make one.

Causative suffixes are also represented differently. Reichart *et al.*, Ashton and Kapinga identify -sh- and -z- as causative suffixes. Reichart adds -s- while Kapinga adds -esh- and ish-. Ashton includes also -*isha*, -iza, -fya, -sa and -ya. Kiango has -z- and -esh- as well as -ish-. Steere and Ratcliffe have similar forms: -sha and -za. But Ratcliff adds -*sa* and -*ya* like Ashton s in E5 below.

**E5** chez-a > chez-**esh**-a, /chez-**esha** /    imb-a > imb-**ish**-a, /imb-**isha** /  
ingi-a > ingi-**z**-a, /ingi-**za** /    pita > p**isha**    takata > takasa,  
on-a > on-**ya**,    pon-a > pon-**ya**, wak-a > was**ha**

With an exception of causative -ya or -sha derived from -ka e.g. on-a > onya or wa-ka > washa, the variant forms have one basic form each, i.e. -sh- or -z-. The suffix -ya and -sa have limited combinations hence we shall not discuss them further.

Passive suffix is identified by the scholars as -w- except Ratcliffe who has -iwa, -wa, and -lew-/-liw-. Ashton has -wa and -ewa/-iwa. Suffix -an is identified as the reciprocal form by all except Reichart et al., Ratcliffe and Ashton who have -na. Ratcliffe and Steere have also -ana.

Stative suffix is marked -k- by Reichart and Khamis, -ka by Steere and Ratcliffe, -eka/-ika by Ratcliffe and Ashton who also adds -ekana/-ikana. Stative is also identified as -ek-/-ik- by Polome, Kapinga, Khamis and Kiango

An analysis of the suffixes above shows three categories of suffixes:

1. suffixes with suffix -a or better known as the final vowel, e.g. -ia /-i-a/, -sha /-sh-a/, -ana /-an-a /, -wa /-w-a/, and -ka /k-a/.
2. suffixes without the final vowel, e.g. -k-, -sh-, -i-, -an- and -w-. and
3. double or treble suffixes or more grouped as one affix with or without the final vowel, e.g. -ili- /-i-li-/, -eka /-e-k-a/, -isha /i-sh-a/, -ekana./-e-k-an-a/.

The final vowel in verbs of Bantu origin has been identified as a separate affix by Ashton who classifies it as a simple suffix and is usually isolated from the verbal root during a derivational process because it is not an integral part of a root. The same view is held by Chomi (2013). A Swahili verbal root can take one or more suffixes to form a verbal derivative. Whenever more than one suffix is added to the root the meaning of each suffix has to be read into the root. For example:

**E6** fik-a > fik-i-a; fik-w-a.  
 fik-i-a > fik-i-sh-a; fik-i-k-a; fik-i-an-a.  
 pat-a > pat-i-a, pat-an-a, pat-w-a.  
 pat-i-a > pat-i-k-a,; pat-i-sh-a  
 end-a > end-e-a, end-w-a; end-an-a  
 end-e-a > end-e-sh-a, end-e-k-a,  
 tembe-a > tembe-le-a, tembe-z-a, tembe-k-a.  
 tembe-le-a > tembe-le-an-a, tembe-le-w-a, tembe-le-k-a  
 l-a > l-i-a,  
 l-i-a > l-i-sh-a, l-i-k-a, l-i-w-a, l-i-an-a  
 li-a > li-li-a, li-z-a  
 li-li-a > li-li-an-a, li-li-k-a, li-li-w-a.

It is obvious from examples in E5 that Swahili formative suffixes are the single affixes without a final -a.: A causative suffix is -sh- or -z-, e.g. fik-i-**sh**-a or tembe-**z**-a. A passive suffix is -w-, e.g. pik-**w**-a, pat-i-**w**-a, or tembe-le-**w**-a. A prepositional suffix is either -i-/-e- or -li-/-le as in pat-**i**-a, end-**e**-a or tembe-**le**-a anda-**li**-a. A reciprocal suffix is -an- as in pat-**an**-a, li-li-**an**-a, tembe-le-**an**-a, and a stative suffix is -k-, e.g. fik-i-**k**-a, end-e-**k**-a, l-i-**k**-a, li-li-**k**-a etc. This is the classification done largely by Reichart and Küsters : causative, passive, prepositional and stative, Kiango and Polome especially for prepositional, passive and reciprocal, and Khamis for prepositional, and reciprocal. Steere, Ratcliffe and Ashton did not isolate the final-a, hence they showed not a single suffix but two suffixes which are separable. See E5 above.

Ratcliffe and to a lesser extent Khamis and Kiango included also double suffixes excluding -a. For example -iwa, -lew-, or -eka (Ratcliffe) implies the following suffixes for each: prepositional suffix-i-, -le- or -e-, passive suffix -w- and stative suffix -k-. This means in -iwa there are: -i- +w-+ -a, in -lew- there are -le- +w-, and in -eka, there are -e-+k-+ -a.. Double or treble suffixation is done by adding a suffix to an already enlarged root. Cf. fikia < fika, endea < enda, tembelea < tembea and lia < la in E5 are prepositional derivatives of their simple verbal forms we present below as E6 and analyze them further and create a secondary derivative.

**E7** fik-a > fik-i-a > fik-i-sh-a, fik-i-k-a, fik-i-w-a and fik-i-an-a.

Affix -i- in causative, stative, passive and reciprocal verbal forms above is the prepositional suffix in *fik-i-a* on which the other derivatives have been based and hence recur in every form. Derivational suffixes of fikia have same features like all verbs whose roots end with a vowel.

**E8** a) li-a > li-li-a, li-z-a,  
 li-li-a > li-li-an-a, li-li-w-a  
 b) tembe-a > tembe-le-a, tembe-z-a  
 tembe-le-a > tembe-le-k-a, tembe-le-w-a, tembe-le-an-a

In E8 a) above only lilia and liza are derived from lia while *liliana* and *liliwa* are derived from **lilia** - a primary derivative of **lia**. Likewise tembeza and tembelea are based on tembea while tembeleka, tembelewa and tembeleana are derivatives of tembelea.

### Stages of Swahili Verb Derivation

E8 above shows that Swahili verbs can undergo three stages of derivation: primary derivation, secondary derivation and tertiary derivation. to form various verbal derivatives. The first derivation is based on the simple verbal form, the second is based on the primary derived form and the tertiary form is based on the secondary derived form.

Primary verbal derivative is formed by attaching formative suffixes to the simple root of the verb.

**E9**chez-a > chez-e -a  
pig-a > pig-i-a

Secondary verbal derivative is formed by adding formative suffixes to the extended verb stem of the primary derived form.

**E10**chez- e -a > chez-e-sh -a (chezesha)  
pig-i-a > pig-i-sh-a (pigisha)

Tertiary verbal derivative is derived from an extended verb stem of the secondary derivative and added formative suffixes.

**E11**chez-e-sh-a > chez-e-sh-w-a (chezeshwa)  
pig-i-sh--a > pig-i-sh-an-a (pigishana)

From these levels of derivation it is obvious that Swahili verbs can produce many words some of which may not be in active usage but are plausible derivatives.

### Swahili Verbs And Their Derivatives

In Table 1 a sample of Swahili verbs is presented and their derivatives formed by affixing different formative suffixes. We shall then examine the data and deduce items which take all or specific suffixes and attempt to establish characteristics of each.

**Table 1: Swahili verbal derivatives**

verb	applied/prepositional	causative	reciprocal	stative	passive
tet-a	tet-e-a	-	tet-an-a	-	tet-w-a
jibu	jib-i-a	-	-	-	-
jib-i-a	-	jib-i-sh-a	jib-i-an-a	jib-i-k-a	jib-i-w-a
sahau	sahau-li-a	-	-	-	-
sahau-li-a	-	sahau-li-sh-a	sahau-li-an-a	sahau-li-k-a	sahau-li-w-a
f-a	f-i-a	-	-	-	-
f-i-a	f-i-li-a	f-i-sh-a	f-i-an-a	-	f-i-w-a
tembe-a	tembe-le-a	tembe-z-a	-	-	-
tembe-le-a	-	-	tembe-le-an-a	tembe-le-k-a	tembe-le-w-a
za-a	za-li-a	-	za-an-a	-	-
zali-a	-	za-li-sh-a	za-li-an-a	za-li-k-a	za-li-w-a
reje.a	reje.le.a	reje.sh.a	reje.an.a	reje.k.a	reje.w.a
teg.a	teg.e.a	-	teg.an.a	-	teg.w.a
teg-e-a	-	teg-e.sh.a	teg-e.an.a	teg-e.k.a	teg-e.w.a
tosh-a	tosh-e-a	-	-	-	-
udhi	udh-i-a	-	-	-	-
udh-i-a	-	-	udh-i-an.a	udh.-i-k.-a	udh-i-.w.a
rithi	rith.i.a	-	-	-	-
rith-i-a	-	rith-i-sh-a	rith-i-an-a	rith-i-k-a	rith-i-w-a
li-a	li-li-a	li-z-a	-	-	-
li-li-a	-	-	li-li-an-a	li-li-k-a	li-li-w-a
starehe	stareh.e.a	-	-	-	-

verb	applied/prepositional	causative	reciprocal	stative	passive
stareh-e-a	-	stareh.e-sh-a	-	stareh-e-k-a	-
end-a	end-e-a	-	-	-	-
end-e-a	-	end-e-sh-a	end-e-an-a	end-e-k-a	end-e-w-a
zim.a	zim-i-a	-	zim-an-.a	-	zim-w-a
zim-i.-a	-	zim-i-sh-a	zim-i-an-a	zim-i-k-a	zim-i-w.a
tengan-a	tengan.-i.-a				
tengan-i-a	-	tengan-i-sh.a	-	tengan-i-k-a	-
lal-a	lal-i-a	-	-	-	-
lal-i-a	-	lal-i-sh-a	lal-i-an-a	lal-i-k-a	lal-i-w-a
p-a	p-e-a	-	-	-	-
p-e-a	-	-	p-e-an-a	-	p-e-w-a
pal-i-a	pal-i-li-a	-	-	pal-i-k-a	pal-i-w-a
pal-i-li-a	-	-	pal-i-li-an-a	pal-i-li-k-a	pal-i-li-w-a
fik-a	fik-i-a				

Many of the Swahili verbs take the simple suffix *-a*, except verbs of non-Bantu origin which end with either *-e,-i* or *-u*. Cf. *samehe, saha, starehe, rithi, udhi, jibu, rufu* etc. However after undergoing a derivational process whereby formative suffixes were attached to every verb, all derived forms attained the simple suffix *-a*.

A critical examination of the given data shows that not every verb can take all formative suffixes and form new verbs. Cf the following:

- E12** pig-a > pig-i-a, pig-an-a and pig-w-a.  
sem-a > sem-ea, sem-an-a and sem-w-a  
pik-a > pik-i-a and pik-w-a  
teg-a > teg-e-a, teg-an-a, and teg-w-a  
pali-a, > pali-li-a, pali-k-a pali-w-a  
vumili-a > vumili-an-a, vumili-k-a, vumili-w-a  
p-a > p-e-a  
p-e-a > p-e-an-a, p-e-w-a  
lal-i-a > lal-i-an-a, lal-i-k-a, lal-i-sh-a, lal-i-w-a

Although *palika, paliza and paliana* in principle are plausible derivatives of *palia* they are hardly used. Likewise for *vumililia* and *vumilisha* (< *vumilia*) or *pikana* (< *pika*) It is therefore important to note here that when dealing with lexical items to be entered in a dictionary, we should consider items that are in language usage, hence have a meaning and can be entered in a dictionary. Word formation rules should not be the guiding principle only lest forms which are latent can be formed simply because they are plausible. Compare the following reciprocal forms: *pikana* (< *pika* = cook) e.g. *pika chakula* (cook food), *paliana* (< *palia* = weed) e.g. *palia shamba*(weed a garden) etc. These words can hardly be used because there can never be a mutual relationship between man and food whereby man cooks food and food cooks man or between man and garden whereby man weeds the garden and the garden weeds man etc. because it is in this regard that a mutual relationship can take place. What is obvious here is that there are verbal derivatives that are activated in the language, others are plausible because they can be activated and others may be regarded as implausible because they may not be activated as is the case with *pikana, paliana* etc.

The verbs in E11 are transitive and yet do not show a consistent pattern of suffixes that verbal roots of transitive verbs can take. For example:

- E13** i) pig- [a] takes *-i-*, *-an-* and *-w-* / pigia, pigana, pigwa /  
(ii) pali-[a] takes *-li-* and *-w-* / palilia, paliwa /  
(ii) vumili-[a] takes *-an-*, *-w-* and *-k-* / vumiliana, vumiliwa, vumilika/

- (iii) za-[a] takes -li- and -an- / zalia, zaana /
- (iv) p-[a] takes -e- / pea /
- (v) to-[a] takes -le-, -an- and -k- / tolea, toana, toka /  
zo-[a] takes -le- and -an- / zolea / zoana /.

Roots of intransitive verbs can take only applied suffixes except those with a vowel ending which take also causative suffix. Cf E13

- E14** a) wak-a > wak-i-a  
tosh-a > tosh-e-a  
f-a > f-i-a  
fan-a > fan-i-a  
fik-a > fik-i-a  
end-a, > end-e-a  
b) li-a > li-li-a, li-z-a  
tembe-a > tembe-le-a, tembe-z-a

However it is important to note some intransitive verbs which take other suffixes. Verbal derivatives formed from these verbs have a special sense that deviates from that of the basic form. For example from lala (sleep) we can derive lalia (sleep for) lalana (have sex intercourse with somebody) and lalwa (be sexed). The meanings of lalana and lalwa deviate from that of lala.

### Predictable Verbal Derivatives

A critical examination of the Swahili verbs reveals two major categories: transitive and intransitive verbs. There are also subcategories such as verbs of non Bantu origin which end with -e, -i and -u, monosyllabic verbs and verbs with monosyllabic roots. A derivational process for all verbs irrespective of their category or form, are governed by a common linguistic rule: [verbal root + formative suffix] = [V-root + f-suffixes]. In the case of verbs which have no root such as the non Bantu verbs, formative suffixes are attached to the verbal stem after deleting the final vowel. An analysis of the data shows that;

1. All Swahili verbs take the prepositional suffix -i- or -e- / -li- or -le-
2. Verbs of non Bantu origin whose final vowel is either e, i or u takes a prepositional suffix only after the final vowel has been deleted. During the suffixation process, the vowel is deleted and a prepositional suffix plus the final vowel -a are attached to the rootlike form. Cf. jaribu > jarib- + i + a > jari b-i -a. As a consequence of the derivational process the non Bantu verbs adopt the Bantu derivational character and all derived forms of this category fit to the derivational process of all other Swahili verbs. Cf. jaribia > jaribiana, jaribika, jaribisha and jaribiwa.
3. A transitive verb whose verbal root ends with a consonant takes a prepositional, reciprocal and passive suffix, e.g tet-a > tet-e-a, tet-an-a and tet-w-a.
4. A monosyllabic verb takes only prepositional suffix, e.g. f-a > f-i-a, p-a > p-e-a
5. A transitive verb whose verbal root ends with a vowel takes all formative suffixes except passive, e.g. chomo-a > chomo-le-a, chomo-z-a, chomo-an-a, chomo-k-a. Verbs with a root that ends with -li, takes all formative suffixes except a causative and prepositional suffix. Cf. vumili-a > vumili-an-a, vumili-k-a and vumili-w-a

6. A transitive verb with a monosyllabic root takes a prepositional and reciprocal suffix: za-a > za-li-a, za-an-a; to-a > to-le-a and to-an-a; ju-a > ju-li-a, ju-an-a
7. An intransitive verb with a monosyllabic root takes a prepositional (and a causative suffix), e.g. ka-a > ka-li-a, li-a > lil-i-a (and li-z-a).
8. All prepositional forms for all verbs irrespective of their origin, category or form, take all suffixes except a prepositional suffix, e.g. zalia > zaliana, zalika, zalisha and zaliwa
9. Many Swahili verbs which do not take all formative suffixes undergo further derivational process from the prepositional derived form. See E14 below.

E14 **teg-a** > **teg-e-a** > **teg-e-sh-a**, **teg-e-an-a**, **teg-e-k-a**, **teg-e-w-a**

This means that although the derived forms are traced back to their basic form /tega/, they are not derived directly from it but from an intermediary form /tegea/.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have shown that it is possible to predict types of verbs that can take all formative suffixes or only some. It is also possible to tell a variant of a suffix that fits a given form of a root. Cf. *to-a* > *to-le-a*, *to-z-a* etc. and *toka.* > *tok-e a*, *tok-e-z-a* etc. It has also been revealed that linguistically all verbs adhere to the same rules of word formation by derivational process regardless of the origin or form of the verb. However derivatives of some verbs have been very much activated in the language while others are latent. We have noted that latent verbs produce latent derivatives while derivatives of active verbs are usually activated. It is important to note however that there is a tendency of certain formative suffixes to form verbs which are easily activated even from latent verbs. Cf -i- and -sh- / -z-

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