

# **The teaching of African languages to European students: the role of linguistic pragmatics illustrated by Swahili<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Goal of the article**

In this article I intend to compare lexical and grammatical features of Swahili in dictionaries and learning grammars with the linguistic facts used in everyday conversations. It will be shown that dictionaries and grammars do not sufficiently represent the language. Most of the extant grammars and dictionaries of African languages are based on material from limited sources, be they verbal or written. From this set of books, you are led to believe there is a standard language, which is not the case.

It is not intended that this article presents a concept of grammar, which would need to include all aspects of the language including its varieties, which are created continuously by the use of sociolects and dialects. Such an enterprise would likely fail because of the variety and enormity of the data. Rather this article suggests to language teachers that they show the student the pragmatic versatility of language and to point out the difficulties the student will face when applying linguistic theory. Ways of developing concepts through which pragmatically motivated varieties can be taken into account in learning materials for African languages will be suggested. This will be particularly useful for European students of African languages, who often don't have the opportunity to study among native speakers for any sustained period. Because of this, many linguistic aspects of African languages remain concealed to them.

## Empirical basis of the comparison

Here, the more popular Swahili learning grammars of Ashton (1944) and Perrott (1950) as well as the dictionaries of Johnson (1939) and of the Institute of Swahili Research, *Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili*, henceforth *Taasisi* (1981) will be compared with Swahili language material I collected in 1989 and 1990 while in Nairobi and Mombasa.

The dictionaries and learning grammars chosen can be regarded as representative, as nearly no changes have taken place in terms of language description since Ashton or Johnson were published. Both grammars start with the presentation of the noun class system, followed by the verbal system with the tenses and the adverbial and verbal derivations. Ashton is, in the main, more comprehensive than Perrott and elaborates, for example, on the intonation rules and the phonetic-phonological aspects of the vowel system. Both grammars are empirically based on so-called 'standard Swahili'. The grammars therefore are derived from a language corpus, which does not really represent everyday use.

The material gathered in Nairobi and Mombasa consists of the dialogues from the Kenyan impromptu theatre group 'Zingatia'. Such amateur groups are very popular in Kenya and are often seen on television. The half-hour programmes normally consist of several scenes, which have a common topic. The actors play ordinary Kenyans. Their dialogues are spontaneous and they are in the Kimvita dialect of Mombasa. The group's use of ordinary language and the choice of popular topics, which mostly deal with social problems, have made them highly esteemed representatives of Swahili verbal art.

For the present study, material from two of the Zingatia programmes has been chosen. The first programme deals with conflicts which arise in a private trading company between a young, career-oriented fellow named Imu and his less successful, but more envious colleagues Bonzu, Sineno, Kasidi and Kivuli. The second programme deals with the problem of corruption. The boss of a private company (Bwana Kivuli) intends to hire two new employees and asks his manager (Imu) to choose two suitable persons out of the mass of applicants. Instead Imu chooses his incompetent brother Tabiazao and, under pressure from his wife Yasmini, her equally unqualified sister, Sineno. The scam is uncovered by Kivuli. Not only are both 'seat warmers' sacked by the company, but so too is Imu, the corrupt manager.

## **Theoretical considerations**

### **'Meaning' and 'actual meaning'**

The investigation belongs empirically and methodologically to the field of linguistic pragmatics. 'Pragmatics' is commonly regarded as complementary to 'semantics'. Pragmatics is understood here as the 'catch-all category covering all aspects of communication that cannot be analysed as literal meaning, including even matters of turn-taking and social interaction.' (Abraham 1988: 621)

Central concepts of pragmatics are 'meaning' and 'actual meaning' as well as 'context', which will be explained briefly here. 'Meaning' and 'actual meaning' are complementary to each other (Morris, 1946). The semantic level corresponds to the level of 'meaning'. The meaning of a linguistic sign derives from the confrontation with the meanings of other signs in a system of signs. The pragmatic level corresponds to the relation between sign and interpreter; on this level one can thus find the 'actual meaning' of what has been said, which has to be interpreted by the participants of a conversation, mainly with the help of different contexts. In the sentence 'you did this well!' meaning and actual meaning are the same if the hearer of the utterance, for example, passed an exam. The situational context allows the hearer to interpret it as praise. But if the hearer broke a precious vase belonging to the speaker it would gain, with the meaning remaining the same, a completely different actual meaning in the sense that the speaker wanted to reprimand the hearer ironically.'

The verbal transmission of actual meaning is achieved on various levels, which closely interact with each other. Beside verbal measures like the pragmatic use of grammar, morphophonology or syntax, prosodical elements like pauses in speech, talking speed, voice volume, intonation and non-verbal communication (mimicry, gestures) can be employed too. Dictionaries and learning grammars rarely reach beyond the level of meaning.

### **The definition of 'context'**

A second requirement for an adequate description of the pragmatic phenomena of everyday language, is the evaluation of the 'contexts' in which the conversation is embedded. Categories of context identified so far are different kinds of 'frame contexts', 'talk motivation' and 'textual context'.

### **The 'frame contexts'**

Particularly with this kind of context, a certain verbal role behaviour can be explained. The speaker, in planning and executing a verbal or non-verbal action, is constrained by certain social, cultural and psychological circumstances, which he has to take into account.' While taking part in a conversation he is confronted with a situation which is determined by his social role and attitudes toward others, his 'knowledge of the world' and his psychological state. The same components are transferred into the conversation by the other participants in the conversation. All these contexts form a contextual frame valid throughout the talk.

### **The 'talk motivation'**

A further context, which always plays a role, is the 'talk motivation'. In a certain respect, it arises from the social and cultural environment of the acting person and from his psychological condition. 'Talk motivation' comprises things like 'morale' or 'sense of mission'. The aim of a conversation, defined by a speaker for himself, is directly derived from the talk motivation.

### **The 'textual context'**

The textual context consists of what has been said up to the point of the actual utterance and has to be taken into account by the participants of a conversation. In most cases, their subsequent utterances are not only a result of their original plans of action, of frame contexts or motivation, but also of the preceding text. Moreover, the textual context completes and actualises, at least partly, the frame contexts, as the utterances of the talk partners constituting the textual context are also specifications or reappraisals of, for example, social or psychological facts.

## **The analysis of the material**

### **Preliminary remarks**

The analysis of a conversation will confront the researcher with two basic prerequisites of a successful and intelligible contribution to conversation: (a) the transmission of meaningful messages and (b) messages which concern the organisation of conversation by speaker and hearer.

The organisational mechanisms, which concern us here, can be found on various linguistic levels and must be effective throughout the entire conversation. It is

hereby assumed, that the organisation has an immediate influence on the transmission of the actual meaning through verbal or non-verbal measures. Two forms of organisation, which may be called 'macro-organisation' and 'micro-organisation', can be distinguished. Macro-organisation regulates the sequencing of talk to make possible the orderly turns from one speaker to the next. This is close to what Sack et al. call the 'local management system' of a conversation (1974: 725).

In this article a few pragmatic aspects of micro-organisation will be picked out to illustrate the discrepancy between the reality of everyday language and the descriptions supplied by most of the learning materials.

It can be assumed that every contribution of a speaker is a complete 'text'. Such a 'text' has a logical beginning and a logical end, provided it is not interrupted by the hearer. The micro-organisation supports the structuring of such a text from its beginning to its end. In every contribution, the speaker utters thoughts or ideas concerning the topic of the actual conversation. These thoughts have to be presented in a certain order. As he has to follow the principle of clarity he cannot afford to utter his thoughts, even if they belong to the same topic, in an illogical order. He has to mark dividing lines between them, or he may feel the necessity to emphasize certain thoughts, within a constant flow of thoughts or he wants to chain thoughts with a different topic in the same contribution.

This ordering of actual meaning in Swahili and other languages is done to a great extent through certain verbal elements. Most important is, however, the logical sequencing of actual meaning, which has to be recognizable on the text surface. The more complex and sophisticated a text is in respect to its content, the higher are the requirements for the micro-organisational abilities of the speaker.

### **Analysis of some examples**

In the conversations of Zingatia, words and morphemes can be identified, which are not only carrying messages of actual meaning, but are used also as vehicles for micro-organising. In the literature those words are labelled 'parenthetic remarks' (Beattie, 1983: 31), 'pragmatic connectives' (Even-Zohar 1982: 179) or 'discourse markers' (Schiffrin, 1987).

A speaker's contribution, which is organized with such words may look like this:

- II IM/a ndiyo ndiyo  
yes, yes
- BK/a na' huyu secretary wangu  
and this my secretary
- b kila siku anataka kwenda transfer(.)  
every day she wants to be transferred
- c sasa naona(.)  
now I see
- d haina haja kumzuiliazulia  
there is no need to hesitate and hesitate  
e ikiwa tunaweza kupata mtu mwingine(.)  
if we can get another person
- IM/a m:(.)
- BK/a nafikiri hapa(.) tafadhali tumpatia ile  
transfer(.)  
I think here, we grant her this transfer, please
- IM/a I see(.)  
I see
- BK/a na pia katika ile ofisi ya mchukuzi  
and apart from that, in the office of the  
reception clerk
- b takatum(.)...patie(.)...jama mmoja akamsaidia  
yule jamaa(.)  
(?)...one helps the other
- c sasa tuchukue watu wawili  
now we take two people
- d kwanza tuangalie  
first we check
- e ikiwa tutuona: bado kazi: ingali yazorota  
vilevile  
if we see, that the work still proceeds slowly

The words of the micro-organisation are, from the perspective of syntax, almost always integrated into a sentence; they are meaningless without a complete sentence. Furthermore, these words are syntactically marked by their position at the edge of a syntactic unit: they are mainly found at the beginning of a sentence, but rather rarely in the middle. In the latter case, its position is after a lexical or non-

lexical expression, which has no immediate influence on the transmission of the actual meaning which follows. The researcher may face some problems in identifying these words as some of the discourse markers may either organize the argumentation of the speaker or they may be part of the transmission of actual meaning, or they may have both functions at the same time.

The following words of the micro-organisation can be identified in the text material so far, whereby the possibility cannot be excluded that there are more of these words in Swahili, which could not be traced in the Zingatia material:

- the 'impetus words' 'sasa' (now) and 'basi' (now).
- the 'concatenation words' 'na' (and), 'pia' (so) and 'au' (or), 'lakini' (but), 'halafu' (then) and the 'concatenation morpheme' '-ka-'.
- the 'résumé words' 'yaani' (that is) and 'maanake' (that means).

Only a few of these words can be presented here.

### **The 'impetus word' 'sasa'**

'sasa: adv. now, at this time, at present, in these days' (Johnson, 1939: 411). '1. Moment, time or period, which is; this time or period; the contrary of "baadaye" or "halafu". 2. the expression which is used to explain more about the verb: 'I arrived just now.' (Taasisi, 1981: 250).

Beyond this purely temporal function of 'sasa', the Zingatia texts yield more functions, which don't belong to the level of semantic meaning. 'Sasa' is the impetus word most widely used in the text.

If 'sasa' is placed at the beginning of a sentence or at the beginning of a speaker's contribution, it has only very rarely the function of transmitting meaning, i.e. it hasn't this kind of temporal character as described in Johnson and the Taasisi. With the help of the discourse marker 'sasa' the speaker wants to express his intention to lead the conversation into a different direction of his own choice under the same topic. This means that he could not agree to what has been said immediately before by his partner(s). The sentence which follows after 'sasa' thus receives his impetus out of the preceding utterance of the partner. An example for this use of 'sasa' is the following:

- II     IM/i   halafu wangu utamrudisha kwangu baadaye  
          then you will send mine back to me
- BK/a   sasa(.)  
              now
- b     yaani wewe utakuwa mwalimu wa kufundisha watu  
              hapa(.)  
              that means, you will be the teacher to teach  
              the people there

This characterization of this kind of 'sasa' is supported by the nature of its textual environment: it occurs only in disputes or conflict talks and, as already stated, it is preceded in most cases by a contribution of the partner the utterer of the 'sasa' disagrees with. Of 28 examples found in the corpus, 20 occurred in a conflict talk. In seven cases the actual meaning could not be traced, and in only one of these 'sasa' did not occur in a dispute.

The use of 'sasa' within a speaker's contribution, however, bears a different pragmatic character. Here a speaker tries to bring to an end the utterance produced by him immediately before, and to introduce a new thought which very often is a consequence of the old one. Moreover, 'sasa' pushes the verbal action, i.e. the speaker accelerates his discourse in respect to conveying his message of actual meaning. This is 'announced' through 'sasa'. In 18 cases out of 20 analysed, 'sasa' is in fact followed by a verb, through which the speaker announces his intention to 'do' something, which is mostly derived from the preceding thought. In any case, 'sasa' is followed by a new thought:

- I       KA/c   neshatia donge hapa(.)  
          I have the money here
- d     sasa  
              now
- e     rafiki yangu(.)  
              my friend
- f     nitakwenda hapo(.)  
              I will go there
- g     tukaonane bar(.)  
              we meet each other in the bar

In summary, it can be claimed that 'sasa' fulfills several text-organisational tasks in Zingatia Swahili. It marks a temporal sequence of thoughts. In addition, it is used as a boundary post between a thought of one's own and that of a partner as well as between two own thoughts, which refer to each other.

**The 'concatenation word' 'na' and the 'concatenation morpheme' '-ka-'**

'Na' is the most widely used concatenation word in the use of Zingatia Swahili. The semantic meaning, which is commonly found in dictionaries can be exemplified in the following passages:

Enumeration:

I       IM/e   kama mambo haya ya ulevi na mambo haya kuelekeza  
                  wanawake achana nayo  
                  as of these habits of boozing and these habits of  
                  chasing after women, let it be

Possessive:

I       IM/a   nyumba hii wewe umehifadhiwa na ndugu yako  
                  this house you have kept for your brother

These are the ways of use to which Johnson and the Taasisi refer: 'Morpheme which is used to link words in a sentence' (Taasisi, 1981:208). Johnson (1939:326) states: 'na qualifies, and corrects, "and yet, withal, even" — connexion suggesting some difference — whether with nouns or verbs. Na tungoje basi, let us even wait. Akala na nguruwe, he ate even pork. Na is thus commonly used with pronouns, after a verb, with an idiomatic force qualifying the verb rather than the pronoun, e.g. njoo nawe, do come along, I wish you would come, lit. come even you. Kafa naye, he is actually dead.'

In these works there is no hint as to the pragmatic use of 'na'. When analysing 'na' in this respect, there is the suspicion that the range of pragmatic application is so manifold that it appears impossible to cover all of its aspects by the material available.

Generally speaking 'na' has the pragmatic function to link thoughts (not sentences or parts of syntactic clauses); in this function it is always placed at the beginning of a sentence or a prosodic clause.

Following pragmatic functions of 'na' could be determined:

(a) Joining together two thoughts, which belong to the same topic (like e.g. chapters or episodes following each other), but are nevertheless independent of each other. This can be illustrated by a passage, in which Bwana Kivuli enumerates Imu's 'offences' against the company. Kivuli's accusations can be subsumed under one pragmatic topic: he defends himself against Imu, who, he thinks, threatens Kivuli's position in the company because of his economic abilities.

- I BK/c wewe jaribu parking m... ma... mahali pengine(.)  
try to park somewhere else
- d na kuanzia kesho(.) ukija asubuhi(.) kwanza piga  
repoti ofisini mwangu(.)  
and from tomorrow on, when you come in the  
morning, first report at my office
- e kwishasikia?  
did you listen?
- f na wala huna ruhusu kupaka katika parking yangu  
and you also don't have the permission to park  
on my parking plot

(b) Linking a thought with the thought uttered immediately before, whereby the former is based on the latter:

- I MA/d halafu twaharibu jina la mtu  
afterwards we destroy the name of the person
- e itakuwa ni makosa vile(.)  
it will be a mistake in the same way
- f na ikiwa Bwana Meneja(.)  
and if the Mr. Manager
- g wewe ni mtu wa Meneja(.)  
you are the person, who is the manager
- h msimamizi jicho la hii kampuni  
the supervisor, eye of the company

(c) Linking two antitheses:

- I BO/e mtu ikiwa umejaliwa na kuendelea(.) utaendelea  
if you are blessed to progress, you will make  
progress  
f na ikiwa hukujaliwa:(.)  
and if you are not blessed  
g mzee(.)  
old man  
h hata ukaenda mbio namna gani(.) wewe huendelei  
huendelei(.)  
however hard you are pushing, you will not  
achieve any progress, you will not progress

(d) Connecting and completing the content of a thought uttered by a partner immediately before. Here the 'na' has a separating function at the same time. In the following example it separates Imu's reaction ('Oh God') to Yasmine's remark from Imu's own verbal action. This use, however, appears very rarely in the talks analysed. This is the only example in the texts, where the text-organising 'na' is not placed at the beginning of a sentence or prosodic clause. The reason may be, that the reaction 'oh God', which is just an expression of surprise, does not belong directly to the following verbal action:

- I YA/c sasa akachukua muda mrefu ili kurudisha(.)  
fedha(.)  
now he takes a long time to refund the money  
IM/a oh God(.)  
oh God  
b na ile gari nyingine ulipiga simu kuuliza kama  
iko tayari(.)  
and that other vehicle, did you phone to ask  
whether it is ready?

(e) To convey a new thought in the same speaker contribution to a second partner, after having finished with the first one. In the following example, Bwana Kivuli first turns to Sineno and then immediately to the auditor Makuta:

- I BK/b bila kuwa: na tashwishi yote(.)  
without there being any doubt  
c na:(.) Bwana Auditor(.)  
and, Mr Auditor  
d wacha mimi nende around kidogo  
let me go around a bit

The morpheme '-ka-' is described in the grammars as follows: 'Wherever it occurs, it expresses an action or state which follows another action.' 'It also expresses action or state resultant from or consequent upon that mentioned in the preceding sentence' (Ashton, 1944: 133). Perrott makes the same statement in abridged form (1950: 51). Ashton's second remark certainly points into the right direction, but its too vague in respect to the pragmatic content of '-ka-'. This pragmatic content will be discussed in more detail below.

First, it can be observed that the morpheme '-ka-' described in the grammars can never be found in a word which is placed at the beginning of a speaker's contribution:

- I IM/a hebu nenda katengeneze:(.) photostat copies  
mbili(.)  
well then, go and make two photocopies

Here '-ka-' is indeed used for expressing a temporal succession of actions to be carried out.

The '-ka-', which is employed for the organisation of a talk, is different from the purely temporal use in the example above through the syntactic position. The verb, which incorporates the '-ka-', is always placed in the front part of the sentence or prosodic clause; very often it is the first word. In those cases, where 'ka-' can definitely be identified as a pragmatic signal, it always marks a further development of a 'story' or a basic thought, as Ashton has already indicated:

- I BO/a hata mimi nashangaa ne...(.)  
I am astonished, too...  
b nikawaulizé nilipoona bei(.)  
and I asked them, when I saw the price

- c wameandika hivyo  
they wrote this way
- d wakaniambia kuwa bidhaa safari hii zime...  
zimekuwa juu(.)  
and they told me, that the goods this time will  
be very expensive

**The 'resumé words' 'yaani' and 'maana'/'maanake'/'maana yake'**

'Yaani conj. that is, that is to say, I mean' (Johnson, 1939: 533). 'Yaani is an expression, which is used to give an example or to increase the understanding of a matter(...)' (Taasisi, 1981: 320).

In the material analysed, 'yaani' is exclusively used for the organisational management of a contribution and has not the function of conveying contents of thoughts or ideas. If 'yaani' is placed at the beginning of a contribution, it is always used to 'consolidate' the utterances of the predecessor. This can be achieved in different ways. First, 'yaani' can signal that the utterances produced immediately before by the partner will be paraphrased, (e.g. with an ironical repetition, placing of the utterances before into another textual context). In the following example, Imu tries to prevent the discovery of the professional deficits of his relative Sineno, but Kivuli had already found out what was going on:

- II IM/f huyu secretary wangu atakuja kwako(.)  
this my secretary will come to you
- g halafu huyu wako atakuja kwangu kwa muda kidogo  
then yours will come to me for a short period  
of time
- h wa ku:(.)rakibisha kazi(.)  
that she may be introduced to the job
- i halafu wangu utamrudisha kwangu baadaye(.)  
then you will send me mine back afterwards
- 9 BK/a sasa(.)  
now
- b yaani wewe utakuwa mwalimu wa kufundisha watu  
hapa(.)  
that means, you will be the teacher, to teach  
the people there



- b     bado(.)  
      not yet
- c     maanake: juzijuzi ndiyo namaliza college  
      yangu(.)  
      that means, I finished my college a few days  
      ago

A further function, which is inherent in both 'yaani' and 'maanake', relates to the effects, which the speaker intends to generate. The use of such a word always informs the hearer, that a piece of information follows, which will be most important for the interpretation of the whole utterance through the hearer.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to show that dictionaries and learning grammars by no means mirror the many-sidedness of language. The variety and the enormity of the data, however, make it impossible to include all pragmatic phenomena into one grammar or dictionary. Nevertheless it is necessary to acquaint students of African languages with these phenomena. As a compromise, it may be possible to present in grammars only the most important grammatical categories and in dictionaries, only selected lexical examples. These can be drawn from texts, which must be determined by their frame contexts. This may help to develop the student's sense of the complexity of language in general and African languages in particular. In this way he may be prevented from developing the feeling that, after having studied thoroughly the linguistic rules conveyed by the published learning materials, there will be no gap between the material learned so far and the practical use of the language among native speakers. While students, for example, of the more important European languages have access to a more or less comprehensive corpus of pragmatic studies, there is nearly no such corpus for any African language.

## Notes

1. The present article is based partly on the empirical material of my Ph.D. thesis, *Gesprächsstrategien im Swahili (Conversational Strategies in Swahili)*, Cologne: 1992
2. The actual meaning cannot be deduced with certainty by the analysis alone. This can only be done through a specific speaker interview, in which a speaker can explain what he meant with his verbal actions. The impromptu theatre groups were chosen, because such interviews were possible here; to conduct a speaker interview to find out the actual meanings expressed in a fully 'natural' conversation (especially a conflict talk) is nearly impossible due to obvious socio-psychological reasons.
3. For the categorization of 'context' see e.g. Grimshaw, 1990.
4. 'I' or 'II' refers to programme I or programme II. The persons speaking are indicated with their initials only. IM = Imu, BK = Bwana Kivuli, BO = Bonzu, SI = Sineno, MA = Makuta, YA = Yasmini, KA = Kasidi.
5. Discourse markers are always underlined in the examples.
6. (.) marks speech pauses while the colon marks the lengthening of a vowel or consonant.

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