



Borrowing: A case of Arabic and Swahili

Hayder Rasool Salim Almansor MA

Department of Linguistic, Osmania University, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

Abstract

This seminar paper addresses the way Arabic loanwords are treated in Swahili. It is important to mention that when languages come into contact borrowing is likely to take place. In most cases borrowing is due to Need and Prestige. The findings show that when Arabic words are borrowed into Swahili they are nativized, that is, they are made to resemble other native words. It has been found the adjustment takes place phonologically, morphologically as well as semantically. Therefore, this study is very interesting since it involves two languages from very distant geographical locations.

Keywords: Arabic loanwords, Swahili, lexical, semantic

1. Introduction

Borrowing is one of the central and most focused aspects in historical linguistics. To Neogrammarians, regular sound change, analogy and borrowing are the basic types of sound change. Hock (1991) [1] defines borrowing as the adoption of individual words or even of larger sets of vocabulary items from another language or dialect. The present study examines the how Arabic loanwords are treated in Swahili. It important to mention that the languages studied here belong to two distinct language families, Swahili belongs to Bantu family while Arabic belongs to Semitic family. It is surprising that Swahili vocabulary is made up of about 30% of Arabic loanwords. Therefore, borrowing is the result of language contact that is why Swahili was influenced by Arabic because they started to contact in 1840 where **Sultan Seyyid Said** shifted his capital from Muscat, Oman to Zanzibar, Tanzania where Swahili is spoken.

2. Literature Review

Campbell (1999) [3] defines a loanword as a lexical item (a word) which has been 'borrowed' from another language, a word which originally was not part of the vocabulary of the recipient language but was adopted from some other language and made part of the borrowing language's vocabulary. However, it is worth noting that borrowing is not restricted to lexical items since it can involve sounds, morphemes and syntactic rules as well. Studies show that basic vocabulary is more resistant to borrowing. The present study focuses primarily on the way Arabic loanwords are treated in Swahili language.

Since borrowing involves two or more languages in contact, the language from which the linguistic items are borrowed is called donor language and the language that borrows is called recipient language.

3. Methodology

This study collected data through questionnaire technique. A wordlist was given in English and two Swahili speakers were asked to translate into Swahili. Similarly, two Arabic speakers were given the same words to translate into Arabic. More importantly, each speaker was consulted individually

in order to have valid data. Thereafter, the collected data was analyzed as presented in the following sections of this paper.

4. Reasons for Borrowing

4.1 Need

When speakers of a language acquire some new item or concept from abroad, they need a new term to go along with the new acquisition; often a foreign name is borrowed along with the new concept. When Arabic came into contact with Swahili speakers, they brought new concepts that were not there before. Therefore, due to need of expressing these concepts, Swahili speakers had to borrow those words.

Examples:

Table 1

| Arabic | Swahili | English |
|----------------|-----------------|----------|
| <i>Mahkama</i> | <i>Mahakama</i> | court |
| <i>Siasa</i> | <i>Siasa</i> | politics |
| <i>Qahawa</i> | <i>Kahawa</i> | coffee |
| <i>Din</i> | <i>Dini</i> | religion |
| <i>Salat</i> | <i>Sala</i> | prayer |

4.1 Prestige

Foreign term for some reason is considered highly esteemed. Borrowings for prestige are sometimes called 'luxury' loans. In this case, a recipient language borrows the words that already exist so as to show-off. Since Arabic was a foreign language it was considered prestigious and thus borrowing from it was a prestige. So, Swahili found itself having different terms for the same concept.

Examples

Table 2

| Arabic | Swahili Native word | Arabic loanword in Swahili | English |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------|
| <i>sadaka</i> | <i>Matoleo</i> | <i>sadaka</i> | offering |
| <i>amr</i> | <i>Agizo</i> | <i>amri</i> | order |
| <i>adab</i> | <i>Heshima</i> | <i>adabu</i> | Politeness |

5. Treatment of Arabic words in Swahili

5.1 Adaptation (Phoneme Substitution)

This is a process whereby a foreign sound in borrowed words which does not exist in the receiving language will be replaced by the nearest phonetic equivalent to it in the borrowing language. In the case of Swahili some borrowed words were to be adapted because there were no similar sounds like those in Arabic. For example, sound / Y / did not exist so when words like *ghali* 'expensive' and *ghafla* 'sudden' were borrowed, the sound / Y / became /g/ in Swahili, thus the words were pronounced as *gali* and *gafla* respectively but retaining their meaning.

5.2 Phonological accommodation

It is a process whereby loanwords which do not fit to native phonological patterns are modified to fit the phonological combinations which are permitted in the borrowing language. This is usually accomplished by deletion, addition or recombination of certain sounds to fit the structure of the borrowing language.

Most Arabic loan words into Swahili were accommodated by means of vowel insertion to avoid unusual consonant cluster. For example *aql* 'intelligence' became *akili* in Swahili. Therefore, vowel /i/ became inserted to break the cluster.

5.3 Morphological re-analysis

In this case, the word which was originally free word becomes separated in terms of morphemes. This is usually done by analogizing with other word structures in the borrowing language. For example, the Arabic word *kitab* 'book' was borrowed into Swahili and it was reanalyzed as *ki-tabu* 'book' by making *ki-* a prefix marking singular to make it similar with other Swahili words of the same structure *ki-ti* 'chair' *vi-ti* 'chairs'. So the plural form of *kitab* 'book' *vitabu* 'books'.

5.4 Semantic Adjustment

Most of the borrowed words from Arabic to Swahili are semantically adjusted. Some of them retain their original meaning, for example, Arabic word *aib* 'shame' retains the same meaning in Swahili *aibu* 'shame'.

Likewise, some words tend to shift the meaning from their original meaning to new meaning when borrowed from Arabic to Swahili. For example, Arabic word *drs* 'study' has shifted its meaning in Swahili *darasa* 'classroom'.

6. Conclusion

The present study has analyzed the way Arabic loanwords are treated in Swahili. It is interesting that these two languages from distant geographical localities have some commonalities in vocabulary. The contact between these two languages made Swahili language to borrow so many words from Arabic primarily due to need and prestige. However, Swahili was not a passive recipient of linguistic items from Arabic since it had to adjust the borrowed items phonologically, morphologically and semantically as seen above.

7. References

1. Hock HH. Principles of historical Linguistics. Amsterdam, Mouton De Gruyter, 1986.
2. Lehman WP. Historical Linguistics: An Introduction. New York: Jolt, Rinehart; Winston, 1962.
3. Campbell L. Historical Linguistics: An Introduction. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.