Ongoing change in the grammar of Swahili

Ponsiano Kanijo, Eva-Marie Bloom Ström

Apart from being spoken in countries of Eastern Africa, Swahili is today part of the linguistic repertoire of Gothenburg. There is a vibrant community of Swahili speakers from Tanzania and Kenya. Moreover, many Somalians arrived in Sweden via Kenya and picked up the language there. There is also a growing interest in learning the language across the world and also in Gothenburg, possibly because Swahili is spoken in some of the world’s fastest growing economies. In East Africa, Swahili is spoken by at least 50 million people and rising. The Swahili language has a long history of language contact, which explains for example how speakers of other languages spoken in Gothenburg can understand some of its words although they are of very different language families. In this presentation, we will give some examples of this. But there are not only old borrowings in Swahili. Its spread and popularity means that it is spoken by millions of people who have other first languages. As might be expected from a language with such a spread, the language is also influenced by other languages spoken in East Africa at present. This can be seen to a large extent on the vocabulary, but also in grammatical constructions. For example, second language speakers of Swahili with Nyamwezi as a first language use a suffix -aga to express that an action is done habitually:

\[
\text{a-na-lal-aga} \quad \text{mchana}
\]

3sg-PRES-sleep-HAB afternoon

‘She often sleeps in the afternoon.’

In standard Swahili, this would rather be:

\[
\text{hu-lala mchana}
\]

HAB-sleep afternoon

The multilingual, vibrant setting of East Africa has influence on how Swahili is spoken today by native speakers and learners, even in Gothenburg.

Ponsiano Kanijo, doctoral student in African languages and Swahili lecturer and Eva-Marie Bloom Ström, PhD in African languages, from the Department of Languages and Literatures, University of Gothenburg