

## Aspiration in Swahili adjectives and verbs \*

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### 1. Introduction

Little research has been done hitherto on the occurrence and frequency of aspiration in Swahili. It is neither marked in Swahili orthography nor given any importance in Swahili courses both in and outside Eastern Africa. When mentioned, it is described as a curiosity, or a rare dialect feature or an increasingly disappearing phenomenon belonging to the northern dialects of Swahili. This short paper is an attempt to partly redress the issue and also raise the question of the occurrence of aspiration in Swahili adjectives and verbs.

### 2. Previous research

The few earlier studies of aspiration in Swahili, conducted at long intervals (Panconcelli-Calzia 1911, Tucker & Ashton 1942, Polomé 1967, Engstrand & Lodhi 1984, 1985ab) deal mainly with aspiration in nouns of classes 9/10 (the N-N classes), which have lost the initial *n*- preceding unvoiced /p, t, k, č/, and measurements of voice onset time (VOT).

The following contrasting pairs illustrate well the semantic value of aspiration in Swahili nouns, in which un-aspirated consonants are unmarked, whereas aspiration is marked with a superscript “<sup>h</sup>”. (The general word-accent pattern in Swahili is penultimate.)

- (1) *paa/mapaa* (roof) 5/6 <sup>1</sup>                      *p<sup>h</sup>aa/p<sup>h</sup>aa* (gazelle) 9/10

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers refer to noun classes, singular and plural, respectively.

<i>tando/matando</i> (fungus) 5/6	<i>t<sup>h</sup>ando/t<sup>h</sup>ando</i> (swarm) 9/10
<i>chungu/vyungu</i> (cooking pot) 7/8	<i>ch<sup>h</sup>ungu/ch<sup>h</sup>ungu</i> (black ants) 9//10
<i>kaa/makaa</i> (coal) 5/6	<i>k<sup>h</sup>aa/k<sup>h</sup>aa</i> (crab) 9/10

Voiceless aspirates are generally not aspirated in loans and word classes other than nouns.

(2) <i>taa</i> (lamp) 9/10, <i>taa/mataa</i> 5/6	<i>t<sup>h</sup>aa/t<sup>h</sup>aa</i> (a kind of fish) 9/10
<i>changu</i> (my, mine) poss. pron.	<i>ch<sup>h</sup>angu/ch<sup>h</sup>angu</i> (scavenger fish) 9/10
<i>-taka</i> (to want/wish) verb	<i>t<sup>h</sup>aka/t<sup>h</sup>aka</i> (garbage) 9/10

In the usage of L1-speakers, especially on the coast, aspiration distinguishes semantically lexemes which are assumed by others to be homophonous with un-aspirated consonants, e.g.

(3a) <i>Ali(li)panda paa.</i>	but	<i>Ali(m)panda p<sup>h</sup>aa.</i>
He climbed on a (the) roof.		He rode/mounted a (the) gazelle.
(b) <i>Anakula kaa/makaa.</i>	but	<i>Anakula k<sup>h</sup>aa.</i>
He is eating (char)coal.		He is eating a crab.

Aspiration is retained in several shortened noun roots in which the n- preceding unvoiced /p, t, k, tʃ/ is lost, e.g. *mt<sup>h</sup>u/wat<sup>h</sup>u* (person/persons) 1/2, and *kit<sup>h</sup>u/vit<sup>h</sup>u* (thing/things) 7/8, which are derived from Proto-Bantu *\*muntu/\*wantu* and *\*kintu/\*vintu*, respectively.

### 3. Aspiration as voicing or explosion

Aspiration is also found in initial /b, d, g, dz/ and it may perhaps be described as a somewhat “exaggerated” explosion as it contrasts with implosion (which is unmarked here in the illustrations), e.g.

(4) IMPLOSIVE	EXPLOSIVE
<i>mlango mbaya</i> (bad door)	<i>nyumb<sup>h</sup>a mb<sup>h</sup>aya</i> (bad house)
<i>mlango mdogo</i> (small door)	<i>nyumb<sup>h</sup>a nd<sup>h</sup>ogo</i> (small house)
<i>gani?</i> (which?), <i>gari</i> (car/wagon)	<i>ng<sup>h</sup>api?</i> (how many/much?), <i>ng<sup>h</sup>oma</i> (drum/music)
<i>jana</i> (yesterday), <i>jambo</i> (matter/affair)	<i>nj<sup>h</sup>aa</i> (hunger), <i>nj<sup>h</sup>ama</i> (conspiration)

#### 4. Aspiration as intensifier

Occasionally, aspiration is used also as a strategy of intensifying, e.g.

- (5) *Alikwenda mweituni.*                      but                      *Alikwenda mweit<sup>h</sup>uni.*  
 He went (in) to the forest.                      He went deep into the forest.

#### 5. Emphasis or intensity in Arabic loans

Aspiration does not occur in loan words in Swahili, except for a few Indic loans where it is transferred from the source language (see § 7 below). However, in some Arabic loans (nouns, verbs, adjectives) emphasis or intensity is expressed by reproducing the original emphatic consonants /d<sup>ʕ</sup>, s<sup>ʕ</sup>, t<sup>ʕ</sup>, z<sup>ʕ</sup>/ and the uvular /q/, or lengthening a vowel, where aspiration would be used in inherited Bantu words. The Arabic emphatics /s<sup>ʕ</sup>/ and /t<sup>ʕ</sup>/ are at times replaced by gemination of the Swahili alveolar /s/ and /t/, or the dental /ṣ/ and /ṭ/ of the northern dialects, in native usage and to some extent even by non-native speakers of Swahili, e.g.

- (6) *katili* (cruel) /ka'ti:li/ but /'ka:ṭil ~ 'qa:ṭil/ (very cruel)  
*tajiri* (wealthy) /ta'jiri/ but /'ṭa:jir/ (very wealthy)  
*hasa* (specially) /'ha:sa/ and /ha'ssa ~ ha'ssa:/ (emphatic forms)  
*hata* (even, until) /'ha:ta/ and /ha'tta: ~ ha'tṭa ~ ha'tṭa/ (emphatic forms)  
*Tafadhali!* (Please!) /ṭafa'ḏa:li/ and /tafa'ḏali ~ tafa'ḏali: ~  
 ṭafa'dḏali:/ (emphatic forms)

#### 6. Aspiration in adjectives and numbers

Some adjectives expressing some kind of emphasis, force, strength, greater effort and/or intensity have aspiration in their initial consonants. Aspiration is transferred to initial voiceless aspirates in adjectives qualifying nouns having aspiration; it may also be transferred to other voiceless aspirates in the same words through assimilation, either remote or contact assimilation; in some rare cases adjectives qualifying nouns of classes other than 9/10 have aspirated voiceless aspirates for intensity, e.g.

- (7) *nyumb<sup>h</sup>a t<sup>h</sup>ano* (five houses), *nyumb<sup>h</sup>a t<sup>h</sup>at<sup>h</sup>u* (three houses) 9-10  
*milango mitano* (five doors), *milango mitatu* (three doors) 3-4  
*milango mit<sup>h</sup>ano* (five doors), *milango mit<sup>h</sup>at<sup>h</sup>u* (three doors) 3-4

(The last two examples are common lexicalised variants in Zanzibari usage and they carry no intensity.)

However, /t/ in *tisa* (nine), which is an Arabic loan, is not aspirated; and /k/ is (rarely) aspirated in *kumi* (ten) when contrasted with ‘only one’, e.g.

(8) *Alijenga nyumba kumi.*

He built ten houses.

but

*Hakujenga nyumba moja tu, bali alizijenga zote k<sup>h</sup>umi.*

He did not build only one house but all the ten of them.

and

(9) *nyumb<sup>h</sup>a t<sup>h</sup>upu* (empty house/houses) 9/10

*sakafu k<sup>h</sup>avu* (dry floor/floors) 9/10

*sakafu ch<sup>h</sup>epech<sup>h</sup>epe* (wet floor/floors) 9/10

*nazi hii ni ch<sup>h</sup>apwa* (this coconut has flat taste, i.e. it is not sweet) 9 sing.

*nazi hizi ni ch<sup>h</sup>apwa* (these coconuts have flat taste, i.e. they are not sweet) 10 pl.

but

*chungwa hili ni chapwa* (this orange has flat taste, i.e. it is not sweet) 5 sing.

*machungwa haya ni machapwa* (these oranges have flat taste, i.e. they are not sweet) 6 pl.

However, the following variation is also possible in the Kikae and Kiunguja dialects of Zanzibar and in the Lamu archipelago where aspiration is more commonly heard:

(10) *chungwa hili ni ch<sup>h</sup>apwa* (this orange has VERY flat taste, i.e. it is not sweet AT ALL) 5 sing.

*machungwa haya ni mach<sup>h</sup>apwa* (these oranges have VERY flat taste, i.e. they are not sweet AT ALL) 6 pl.

Aspiration is not met with to the same extent in the two major dialects of Swahili, i.e. Kiunguja (western Zanzibar) and Kimvita (Mombasa), e.g. /<sup>h</sup>p<sup>h</sup>omb<sup>h</sup>e/ (beer) in Zanzibar while /<sup>h</sup>pombe/ in Mombasa.

## 7. Aspiration in verbs

There are about a dozen verbs in Swahili in which the initial voiceless aspirate is aspirated. These verbs express some kind of emphasis, force, strength, greater effort and/or intensity. From the noun *ch<sup>h</sup>apa* (brand/print/model) 9/10, several verbs are derived. Aspiration in these is borrowed from the Indic original *ch<sup>h</sup>āp*.

(11) *-ch<sup>h</sup>apa* (to press/stamp/slap)

*-ch<sup>h</sup>apia* (to press/stamp/slap with/for/on/by etc), applied form

*-ch<sup>h</sup>apisha* (to print, to cause to be printed), causative form

*-ch<sup>h</sup>apua* (to press/stamp/slap hard/severely), reversive form used as intensive

*-ch<sup>h</sup>upa* (to jump over something)

*-k<sup>h</sup>ata* (to cut, chop off)

*-ruk<sup>h</sup>a* (to fly), *-ruk<sup>h</sup>ia* (to fly over)

*-piga* (to hit/strike) but *-p<sup>h</sup>iga* (to hit/strike hard), rare

*-kanyaga* (to tramp/trample) but *-k<sup>h</sup>anyaga* (to tramp/trample hard), rare

*-p<sup>h</sup>umua* (to breathe heavily), cf. *p<sup>h</sup>umuzi* (breath) and *p<sup>h</sup>umu*

(asthma) 9 sing.

*-p<sup>h</sup>amba* (to decorate), *(ma)pambo* (decorations), *p<sup>h</sup>ambo* (many/beautiful decorations), rare

*-p<sup>h</sup>ambaza* (to decorate minutely, in detail, carefully), causative used as intensive

*-p<sup>h</sup>ambazuka* (to dawn)

## 8. Concluding remarks

In this short presentation, further attention is drawn to the complex features of aspiration in Swahili. Evidence to substantiate it is based on field observations during several visits to Tanzania and Kenya, and it is also verified by the present author himself who is a traditional 7th generation native Swahili speaker from Zanzibar, with extensive experience from eastern Africa.

Contrary to what is encountered with in the speech of L1-speakers, aspiration in general in Swahili is assumed by many to be a diminishing phenomenon, and the occurrence of aspiration in adjectives and verbs has not been acknowledged. In the foregoing, contrary claims are made with some illustrations from the usage of traditional L1-speakers of Swahili from different parts of the East African coast; however, a quantitative and instrumental analysis of the data collected for adjectives and verbs remains to be undertaken.

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