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A brief lexico-semantic study of French and Kiswahili

Lester Mtwana Jao

Abstract

Languages are influenced and enriched by others all over the world. Today, there is hardly any “pure” language in the world, devoid of borrowed words from other languages. In this paper, we are going to examine the lexical influence of French to Kiswahili, spoken and taught in Kenya. This language is spoken in the whole country and is a compulsory subject in the country’s primary and secondary schools. Kiswahili is very present in East Africa and parts of Central Africa: it is spoken in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). However, it is mainly in Tanzania and Kenya that the importance of Standard Kiswahili is highly emphasized. Arguably, Kiswahili could easily be considered as the *lingua franca* of East Africa. People from some Indian Ocean islands such as Comoros Island and Mayotte also use this language. As is the case with many languages all over the world, different dialects of Kiswahili are spoken. Among these are ki-mvita, ki-amu, ki-ngozi and ki-ngwana.

Introduction

A “composite” language, Kiswahili has its origins in Bantu languages spoken along the East African Coast. To these, were incorporated words from Arabic, Portuguese, English, Persian, Indian and even Chinese. All these are well documented, for example words such as *peni* (from the English word *penny*), *chapati* (an Indian word), *meza* (a Portuguese word meaning “table”) and *kitab* (from the Arabic word *al-kitab*, which means “a book”) among

many others. Interestingly, no comprehensive study has been conducted on French words found in Kiswahili. As we ponder over the French lexical legacy to Kiswahili, we find one hypothesis irresistibly convincing: contacts and interactions between French speakers, Kenyans and Tanzanians most likely contributed to the linguistic enrichment of Kiswahili with words of French origin. It is noteworthy that Kenya and Tanzania, both regarded as Kiswahili “strongholds” in Africa, were never colonised by the French nor by Belgians, who bequeathed French [as an official language] to their former colonies. We are going to briefly look at some Kiswahili words that were inherited from the French language.

Some French lexical contributions to Kiswahili

Among the words found in Standard Kiswahili that originate from French are: *divai*, *shamba*, *sinema*, *disko*, *menyu*, *bajeti* and *shampeni*. These words were brought into Kiswahili directly from French speakers or indirectly through English (the English language having borrowed them from French), the language of the former colonial masters of Kenya and Tanzania. However, from the onset there is need to point out the fact that some of these words were originally English words even though today they are considered to be French words, for example the word *budget*. Most of these words, if not all of them, are found in the classical Kiswahili dictionary: *Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu* (Standard Kiswahili Dictionary).

Divai

We would like to start with the word *divai* [divai] (wine). According to the renowned French lexicologist and

¹ « Peace returns to the Beirut of Africa 16 years after », The East African, 26 avril 2009.

missionary, Charles Sacleux (1939: 169), who researched extensively on the Swahili language, notably the dialect that is spoken in the Comoros Islands, indeed *divai* has French origins. This word happens to be a contraction of two French words “du” and “vin” (Whiteley, 1969: 50). The resulting words “du vin” [dyvɛ̃] were “swahilified” by Kiswahili speakers and became *divai* [divai]. It is important to note that in Kiswahili there are no nasal sounds like [ɛ̃], which is found in the French word *vin* [vɛ̃]. Besides, all Kiswahili words necessarily end in an oral vowel, such as *i* in *divai*. The French word *vin* is itself of Latin origin and was first used in the French language in the 10th Century (A. Rey and J. Rey-Debove, 1991: 2095). Interestingly, the word *divai* is found in the first Kiswahili Bible, which was published in the 18th Century. It is worth mentioning that *divai* has a synonym in Kiswahili, *mvinyo*, which originates from the Portuguese word *vinho* (wine). Seemingly, the alcoholic drink in question did not exist on the East African Coast prior to the arrival of European explorers and missionaries.

An example of the use of the word *divai* is found in:

- Divai safi. (Kiswahili)
- Du bon vin. (French)¹
- Good wine. (English)

Shamba

Shamba [ʃãba], another word used in Kiswahili was probably derived from the French word *champ* [ʃã] (Whiteley, *ibid.*) and was first used in the French language in 1080 (A. Rey and J. Rey-Debove, *ibid.*: 283). It originates from the Latin word *campus*, meaning a “plain or a cultivated field”. In contemporary French, the word is used with the same meaning. *Champ* ended up being *shamba* in Kiswahili, most likely in conformity with a morpho-phonological rule in the Kiswahili language. The morpheme “sha-” [ʃa] did not change but “mp” became “-mb”; the nasal sound [m] combining with the voiced consonant [b], which is then followed by the vowel [a]. In short, the French word “champ” ended up being: “sha-” + “-mb” + “a” → *shamba*. In the Kiswahili language, this word is polysemic.

This can be seen in the following two examples.

- Shamba la mahindi.
- Champ de maïs. (French)²
- Maize field. (English)

In this example, *shamba* refers to a “field” where a crop is cultivated. It is however noteworthy that Zanzibaris tend to use another word, *konde*, to refer to a cultivated field.

Another example of its use is illustrated in the Kiswahili proverb below:

- Jogoo la shamba haliwiki mjini.
- Un coq de la campagne ne chante pas en ville. (Literal French translation)
- A cock from the countryside does not crow in the city. (Literal English translation)

In this context, *shamba* refers to “rural areas”.

Sinema

For a long time, the word *cinema* was a byword for entertainment. It is interesting to note that the English language got this word from the French word *cinématographe*, which itself has Hellenic origins (it is derived from the Greek words *kinêma* and *kinêmatos*, both of which refer to movement or motion). It is no wonder then that cinema or films are sometimes referred to as “motion pictures”. *Cinema*, an abbreviated form of *cinématographe*, was invented by the French, precisely by the Lumière brothers (Louis and Auguste Lumière) in the 19th Century. Through colonization, the British passed this word to Kiswahili. In this language, *sinema* means “the showing of events in films” (maonyesho ya matukio kwa picha za filamu). It also refers to the place or building where films are shown (jengo maalumu ambamo ndani yake huonyeshwa matukio fulani kwa picha za filamu – *a building in which some events are shown in moving pictures*). In Kiswahili, *sinema* has at least two different meanings, as the following examples show:

- Tutakwenda sinema leo jioni.
- Nous irons au cinéma ce soir. (French)
- We are going to the cinema this evening. (English)

In this example, the word *sinema* is used to mean “a building in which films are shown” (Hornby, 1998: 199).

The word can also be used with a different meaning, as in the following sentence:

- J’aime le cinéma. (French)
- Napenda filamu.
- I love films/movies. (English)

In this particular context, *cinéma* (rendered *filamu* in Kiswahili) refers to films, movies or moving pictures. In Kenya, the word *sinema* features in the vocabulary of movie-goers. One can also hear it on the radio or read it in the local Kiswahili daily, *Taifa Leo*.

Disko

In the 70s and 80s, disco was *en vogue* as a form of entertainment. This is the time when the word disco was on the lips of many young people, having being popularized mainly in Europe and North America. It is through English that Kiswahili got the word (in Kiswahili

¹« CREDU/TUKI/FIL, Dictionnaire Français-Kiswahili, p.308.

²« *ibid.*, p.55.

it is written with a 'k': *disko*). The word is actually an abbreviation of the French word *discothèque* and it was first used in this language way back in 1932 (A. Rey and J. Rey-Debove, *ibid.*: 549) meaning “a place where discs (records made of vinyl) were sold and kept” or “a collection of discs”. According to the same source, it is from 1960 that the word *discothèque* has been used with its current meaning: “a place where people dance to pop music”. In Kiswahili, *disko* refers to both the “equipment that produces the sound and lighting effects of a disco” and “a club, party, etc., usually with flashing lights, where people dance to pop music” (Hornby, *ibid.*: 329). An example of its use is as follows:

- Wakati wa likizo nilikuwa nikienda disko.
- Pendant les vacances j'allais à la discothèque. (French)
- I used to go to the disco [thèque] during the holidays. (English)

In this example, the word *disko* refers to the venue or place where people dance to pop music.

Menu

When we go to different eating places such as hotels, restaurants and cafés we are normally given a list of dishes, known as a *menu*. Even though this word is widely used in the English language, it has French origins. It is found in English, French, Kiswahili and other languages. In Kiswahili, the word changes slightly phonetically: it is pronounced *menyu* [mɛnyu] as opposed to the English pronunciation [menju:] and the French one [mɛny]. For a long time, it has been used in eating places such as hotels, restaurants and cafeterias. The example below illustrates this fact:

- Kuna mlo gani kwenye menyu?
- Qu'y-a-t-il au menu? (French)
- What do we have on the menu? (English)

In recent years however, just like in English and French, Kiswahili uses the word *menyu* to equally refer to “the list of actions from which a [computer] user can choose, displayed on a computer screen” (Hornby, *ibid.*: 731). This definition is not different from the one given by *Dictionnaire Hachette Encyclopédique* (1998: 1201): “liste des opérations qu'un logiciel est capable d'effectuer, et qui s'affiche sur l'écran” (a list of actions that can be effected by computer software, displayed on a computer screen). The word *menu* is therefore also used in computer jargon.

An example of this particular use of the word would be:

- Menyua inakupa orodha ya mambo unayoweza kutekeleza kwenye komyuta.

- Le menu vous propose une liste des opérations que vous pouvez effectuer sur ordinateur. (French)
- The menu gives you a list of actions that you can do on a computer. (English)

Bajeti

In life, it is common practice for one to budget for things one needs to buy. Countries equally have their national budgets that are debated and approved by their respective parliaments or senates. The word *budget* therefore features in the vocabulary of most people. First used in the French language around 1764 (A. Rey and J. Rey-Debove, *ibid.*: 225), the word *budget* is believed to have its origin in English (treasurer's bag or treasury) and in another word, *bougette*, used in Old French. According to Rey and Rey-Debove (*id.*), *bougette* was the diminutive of the word *bouge*, which meant bag or suitcase. The English then “borrowed” the word *budget* [bydʒɛ] from French and used it with the meaning it has today. Kiswahili got it from the English word *budget* [bʌdʒɪt] and swahilified it to *bajeti* [badʒeti]. One may come across the following words in a Kiswahili newspaper, such as *Taifa Leo*:

- Waziri wa fedha amewasilisha bajeti bungeni.
- Le ministre des Finances a présenté le budget au Parlement. (French)
- The Minister for Finance presented the budget in Parliament. (English)

Other than the national budget, one can have his/her personal budget. The following sentence illustrates this particular use of the word:

- Fanya bajeti yako ya kibinafsi. (Kiswahili)
- Faites votre propre budget. (French)
- Prepare your personal budget. (English)

In short, *bajeti* is used with the same meaning as in English and even French. It basically refers to an “estimate or plan of the money available to an individual, an institution, an organization or a state and how it will be spent over a given period of time”. Again, here we can see that Kiswahili faithfully retains the English meanings of the word.

Shampeni

It is not uncommon during wedding parties and other important occasions to hear a pop when champagne bottles are uncorked. Ritually, during such ceremonies champagne happens to be the chosen or favourite drink and it's usually taken in very small quantities. It is interesting to note that *champagne*, pronounced [ʃæm'peɪn] in English and [ʃɑ̃paɲ] in French derives from the Latin words *campania* and *campus*. Officially, in the French language, it was first used in 1695 (cf. A. Rey and J. Rey-Debove, *ibid.*: 283) with the meaning that

we know today: a kind of wine from a region known as Champagne, in France. The Kiswahili pronunciation of the word, *shampeni* [ʃampeni] comes from the English word *champagne*, through colonization. An example of its use in Kiswahili could be:

- *Shampeni* hunywewa kwenye karamu.
- Le champagne se boit lors des fêtes. (French)
- Champagne is drunk at parties. (English)

All the words discussed above fall under the category of “loan words”. Such words end up being part of the lexicon of the language that borrows them and can be classified in different categories, as we shall see in the following rubric.

Categorization of loan words

In categorizing loan words, we refer to the taxonomy of the French lexicologist, Jean Tournier. In his book, titled *Les mots anglais du français* (1998), based on form and meaning, he distinguishes different types of loan words, namely: morpho-semantic loan words (emprunts morpho-sémantiques), semantic loan words (emprunts sémantiques) and morphological loan words (emprunts morphologiques).

Morpho-semantic loan words

In this category, both the form (and almost similar form) and meaning of a word are borrowed by a language from another. For example, the French language borrowed *basket-ball* from English without changing its form (spelling) or meaning. This kind of borrowing happens to be the most common in many languages.

Semantic Loan Words

In this case only the meaning of a word is borrowed. A concrete example is the French verb *réaliser* (to carry out, to do) which has virtually the same form as the English verb *to realize* (to become aware of something, to understand). There is a tendency of incorporating the English meaning in contemporary French (cf. J. Tournier, 1998: 9). Thus, it can be said that French has given a second meaning to the verb *réaliser*. In fact, according to J. Tournier, only the meaning would have been borrowed, even though *réaliser* and *realize* are very close, orthographically speaking.

Morphological Loan Words

These words are quite rare. A language only borrows the form (the morphology) of a word but gives it a completely different meaning. To illustrate this fact, Tournier (id.) gives the example of the English word *slip*. In English one of its

meanings is “loose undergarment without sleeves worn under a dress”. The French borrowed it without changing its form but gave it a different meaning: “undergarments, pants that are worn by men or women”.

Most of the words that we have looked at in this paper, if not all, fall under the first category (morpho-semantic loan words). For instance, morphologically words such as *sinema*, *menu* and *disco* resemble *cinema*, *menu* and *disco* respectively. They also have the same meanings. Tournier (ibid.: 11) goes on to talk about another category of loan words: *direct vs. indirect loan words*. Explaining what an indirect loan word would be, this lexicologist gives the example of the word French *kangourou* borrowed from English (*kangaroo*). It so happens that the English themselves borrowed the word from Aborigines, found in Australia. The majority of the Kiswahili loan words of French origin that we have examined in this paper are indirect loan words, most of them transiting through English. More research, however, needs to be done. It is our belief that the findings would be interesting, not only to lexicographers but also to speakers and lovers of the French language in East Africa and the Francophone world at large.

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