

# CONCEPTUALIZING AND DOCUMENTING DERIVATIONS FROM “STANDARD SWAHILI”

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In the course of my research this summer I traveled to mainland Tanzania and the main island of the archipelago called Zanzibar (Unguja in Swahili) to make recordings of the speech of everyday native and non-native speakers of Swahili. My broad research goal was to document authentic speech patterns to serve as data for further phonological and phonetic analysis, as well as a glimpse into the sociolinguistic role of Swahili along the coast of East Africa.

My travels and studies began in the inland city of Arusha, where Swahili is employed universally as a lingua franca but is not traditionally spoken as a native language by the indigenous populations. As such, manifold influences from the various L1s (native languages) of the region are

present in the Swahili employed in and around Arusha, as in any linguistic context in Swahili-speaking East Africa.

My recordings in Arusha, and later Dar es Salaam, aimed to pinpoint the status of l/r variation, a phenomenon whereby many L2 (non-native) speakers use the two sounds interchangeably per influences from their mother tongue. Reinforcing the conclusions of my Master's thesis, I found, per a series of perception tests and interviews, that the phenomenon is pervasive yet principally serves as an indicator of one's native language, but does not carry any notion of prestige.

On the island of Zanzibar I found no instances of l/r switching, indicating a standard within the pronunciation of these two sounds. However, my travels through the island served as a strong and intriguing

repudiation to the notion of Zanzibari Swahili as a monolith, as I encountered intense variation in the dialects of Swahili present on this relatively small island of 950 square miles.

Per the political and economic hegemony of the capital, Stone Town, and history of movement of the people living around it, a standard “Stone Town” Swahili has emerged and I found little variation in the area around the capital.

However, the extremes of the island, mainly Nungwi in the north, the island of Tumbatu, and the villages of the southeastern coast demonstrated an incredible range of diversity and divergence from the alleged “standard,” in sounds used, intonation, and word and sentence formation.

The gold mine of my entire trip was a short field trip to Makunduchi, whose local dialect, Kimakunduchi, is popularly considered on the island to entail a distinct language. My future plans entail complementing existing documentation of this interesting dialect (if not indeed a separate language altogether) and seeking to implement a printing press or story telling collective that could serve as an inadvertent language revitalization project.

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