THE APPLIED SUFFIX IN SWAHILI*

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The applied suffix in Swahili poses an analytical problem because
it expresses such a wide variety of semantic relationships. Most
treatments provide either an extremely vague description of its
meaning or else concentrate on a single use thus implicitly post-
ulating many homonymous forms. We shall use distributional and
semantic evidence to demonstrate that there is a single productive
verb suffix which can be distinguished from frozen lexical stems
that look the same or similar. We shall argue that all of the
productive uses of IE can be accounted for with a single ab-
stract meaning from which distinct messages are inferred in par-
ticular contexts. The semantic effect of the suffix is to "add
a role to the lexical verb that is less active than the agent."

0. Introduction

The applied suffix on Swahili verbs has long posed an analytical problem.
For example, in her classic grammar Ashton [1947] made no attempt to provide
a unitary description. She called the form simply "prepositional" since it
could mean to do an action *for* something, *with* something, *to* something, *about*
something, etc. Polomé [1967] says that the basic meaning of this suffix has
to do with "directing the action against something". Both authors, like other
published descriptions [Sacleux 1909], fail to distinguish the truly produc-
tive patterns of distribution and meaning of the applied suffix from the many
lexical relics that resemble the applied suffix but are related to it only
historically.

The goal of this paper is to show that there is, in fact, a freely pro-
ductive applied suffix which has a unitary meaning and that it may be distin-
guished from the many derivationally related homonyms both with respect to its
distribution and meaning.

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ference on African Linguistics, Urbana, Illinois in April, 1979.

1. Morphology

     The base form of the applied suffix in modern Swahili is IE , where E
represents the harmonizing vowel found also in several other Swahili suffixes.[1]
As can be seen in the table below, the vowel is /i/ after stems whose final
vowel is /i,a,u/ and /e/ after stems ending in the mid vowels /e/ or
/o/ . (All verbs end in a final /a/ , an indicative marker). The consonant
/l/ in the applied form only appears after vowel-final verb stems and is de-
leted after consonant-final stems.[2]

(1) pig-a   'strike'   pig-i-a
     end-a   'go'   end-e-a
     omb-a   'pray'   omb-e-a
     chuku-a   'take'   chuku-li-a
     kat-a   'cut'   kat-i-a

2. The Beneficiary/Indirect Object Use

     The structure of a simple Swahili sentence is illustrated below.

(2) a-li-kat-a   nyama   'he cut meat'
     S(he)-Past-cut-Indic meat

The subject prefix, marked S in the literal gloss, is a pronoun. Then comes
the tense marker followed by the verb stem. Since all our verb examples end
in the indicative morpheme -a , we shall no longer separate it with a dash.
In sentence (3) an additional prefix is added:

(3) a-li-i-kata   nyama   'he cut the meat'
     S(he)-Past-O(meat)-cut meat

The object prefix -i- , which is also a pronoun agreeing here with the object
meat, is inserted just before the verb stem. It is used only when the object

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     [1]The suffix in question is represented throughout as IE for reasons of
graphical distinctness even though a phonologist might prefer to write a vowel
harmony rule based on underlying /li/ .

     [2]Stems that contain no vowel may add either i (as in fa – fia 'die')
or e (as in nya – nyea 'rain'). There is also a large class of borrowed
verbs, e.g. husu – husia 'relate to', that follow quite different rules.
See Port and Shepardson [forthcoming] for a complete discussion of the var-
iants of Swahili verb suffixes.

is definitely identified. Thus it appears for most animate objects and some
inanimates.

The most common use of the applied suffix, and the one that has had the
most complete description, is illustrated in (4).

(4) a-li-ni-kat-ia   nyama   'he cut meat for me'
     S(he)-Past-O(me)-cut-IE meat

The subject and object pronouns are 'he' and 'me' respectively, and the verb
is suffixed with IE . Since the meaning of the sentence is 'he cut meat for
me', apparently IE adds the role of a beneficiary or indirect object which,
in this case, is played by the first person singular pronoun in the object
prefix. Notice in example (5) that the beneficiary participant can be shifted
to the subject position by use of the passive suffix w .

(5) ni-li-kat-i-wa   nyama (na-ye)   'I had meat cut for me (by him)'
     S(I)-Past-cut-IE-Pass meat (by-him)

In this case the agent noun or pronoun can either be left out entirely or add-
ed after the marker na , equivalent here to English *by*. Thus (5) is some-
thing like 'I was cut-for meat'.

Sentences (4) and (5) represent the most basic use of the applied form
when it occurs in a main verb: the indirect object added by the IE suffix
is animate and represented as a pronoun in the object prefix; alternatively it
appears in the subject prefix with a passive marker.

Thus far, the applied form does not pose a serious analytical problem.
Semantically the suffix resembles the Latin dative in adding an indirect ob-
ject to the event, but, unlike the dative, it does not indicate which noun
plays the role—only that the role is played. Yet the applied form can be
used for a wide variety of other messages as well: instrument, purpose,
place-to-which, etc. This uncertainty about the meaning of IE has resulted
in confusion about when the applied suffix is really present. That is, most
analyses are unclear about when we are actually looking at an example of the
applied form as part of the synchronic grammar and when we are looking at a
frozen relic of a similar ancestral form that may have been productive in the
proto-language.

2.1 <u>Lexical relics</u>. That such frozen relics exist is shown by examples like
those in (6) where we see forms that look like an applied form and whose mean-
ing seems generally coherent with the meanings characteristic of the applied
but for which the necessary base forms without IE do not exist.

(6) *inga   ingia   'enter'
     *kimba   kimbia   'run'
     *poka   pokea   'accept'
     *sika   sikia   'hear'

Thus, for example, there is kimbia 'to run' or 'to run from' but no
*kimba in the language. Further evidence that these words with apparent IE
suffixes are simply lexical stems is found in (7) where we find that a regular
applied suffix for the indirect object can also be added to these "pseudoap-
plied" stems when an indirect object is needed.

(7) ni-ta-ku-poke-lea   zawadi   'I will accept the gift for you'
     S(I)-Fut-O(you)-accept-IE gift

This is what we would expect if they are independent lexical stems.

Many descriptions of the applied form in Swahili discuss cases of apparent
reduplication of the suffix, as in the examples in (8), with the suggestion
that they are somehow emphatic versions of the simple suffix [Polomé 1967:85].

(8) shinda   'surpass'   shindilia   'pack down'
     enda   'go'   endelea   'progress'
     penda   'like'   pendelea   'favor'
     oga   'bathe'   ogelea   'swim'

I propose that they actually represent a frozen lexical suffix. There may be
some vague common meaning to examples of the double-IE or double-applied,
and there is undoubtedly a historical connection between these examples and
the IE under discussion. But it should be noted first that these examples
cannot be interpreted as having an indirect object and second that this double
suffix is not generally productive and has only a handful of examples—maybe
only 10 or 15. Thirdly, these verbs, too, can add still another IE that
acts like the normally productive one, as shown in (9).

(9) ni-li-m-shindili-lia   majani   'I packed down the leaves for him'
     S(I)-past-O(him)-pack-IE leaves

Here shindilia 'to press down' (historically related to shinda) appears in
its own applied form shindili-lia , 'to press down for someone'. This is evi-
dence that shindili- is a lexical stem. If it contained a productive IE
then we could not add another (see (24) below).

      There is a third kind of lexical relic of the IE suffix illustrated in
(10):

(10) nuka   'smell bad'   nukia   'smell good'
      hama   'move from'   hamia   'move to'
      angaa   'be bright'   angalia   'look at'

There seem to be a few such lexical pairs that may appear to be differentiated
by presence of the applied suffix, but which cannot plausibly be so analyzed.
These very few exceptional examples, however, throw sand in the eyes of the
investigator. Thus, for example, the relation between nuka 'smell bad' and
nukia 'smell good' is a completely idiosyncratic semantic contrast not dupli-
cated anywhere else in the language.

      The existence of a number of words in the language that look like they
contain an applied suffix but do not has made it more difficult to identify
just the productive patterns. In fact the beneficiary or indirect object use
that we presented earlier is not the only productive use of this suffix.

2.2. Instrument. The second important use is to add the role of an *instru-
ment*. But the instrument use raises a special problem. Although beneficiar-
ies and instruments are both roles added by the applied suffix, they do not
behave the same syntactically and further, informants disagree with each other
on what is acceptable. In particular, it is very difficult to make the ob-
ject prefix agree with the instrument noun, whereas the indirect object, as we
saw in example (4) normally occurs there (cf. similar effects in closely re-
lated Chi-Mwini discussed in Kisseberth and Abasheikh [1975]).

      For example the simplest way to add an instrument (shown in (11)) is sim-
ply to leave the verb unmodified and add a prepositional phrase with kwa .

(11) a-li-kata   nyama kwa kisu   'he cut meat with a knife'
      S(he)-Past-cut meat with knife

The problems begin in (12) where we also insert the applied suffix on the verb.

(12) ?a-li-kat-ia   nyama (kwa) kisu 'he cut meat with a knife'
      S(he)-Past-cut-IE meat (with) knife

My informants agree that katia rather than kata is all right here but dif-
fer as to whether the "redundant" preposition kwa should also be there. Some
say the sentence is not very clear without kwa , while others dislike the re-
dundancy of the preposition. (Incidentally, the order of nouns and preposi-
tional phrases in this sentence, as elsewhere, has virtually no effect on ac-
ceptability.)

   Similar vacillation and disagreements between informants was found for
sentences like (13) where the instrument is put in the object prefix.

(13) ?a-li-ki-kat-ia   kisu hiki nyama
      S(he)-Past-O(knife)-cut-IE knife this meat

      'he used this knife to cut meat'

This "ought" to be comparable to placing the indirect object in the object
prefix. Some speakers say it sounds fine and quite appropriate while others
report that it is impossible not to interpret (13) as somehow meaning 'he cut
meat for the knife'. Furthermore, several other syntactic arrangements yield
variable responses from native or highly experienced speakers of the language.[3]
One might be tempted to conclude from this that the applied suffix cannot have
a productive instrumental meaning and that these examples are awkward for this
reason. But the difficulties with examples (12) and (13) seem to be due pri-
marily to using an instrumental message for IE in a main verb. For some
reason, the instrumental use of IE occurs most frequently and most unambig-
uously in verbal infinitives used as relative clauses, such as those in (14).

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   [3]It is significant that speakers of northern (Kenyan) dialects of Swahili
(Mombasa and Lamu) are much happier with sentences like (11) than are speakers
from Tanzania and Zanzibar or speakers of the "Standard" dialect taught in
schools. There is no reason for positing different analyses for the two dia-
lects. They differ only in the extent to which they exploit the range of mes-
sages transmittable with this form.

(14) a. kisu ch-a ku-kaṭ-ia   'a knife for cutting with'
         knife of   Inf-cut-IE

     b. kalamu y-a ku-andik-ia   'a pen for writing with'
         pen   of Inf-write-IE

     c. kiko ch-a ku-vuṭ-ia   'a pipe for smoking with'
         pipe of   Inf-smoke-IE

Here we find 'a knife for cutting with' represented as *knife* plus the subordin-
ating associative particle -a followed by the applied form of the verb infin-
itive. The other examples follow the same pattern. This very common construc-
tion shows that the instrumental message is not at all "forced" for the ap-
plied form.[4] It is rather that, for reasons not yet understood, the instru-
mental use is not easily exploited in a main clause verb. It is my position,
however, that this complexity does not stand in the way of an analysis of the
semantic contribution of all the productive uses of the applied suffix. These
syntactic asymmetries between beneficiaries and instruments should not obscure
the unity of meaning of the applied form.

3. Analysis

It is my analysis that the function of the applied form of the verb in
Swahili is to modify the lexical description of the occurrence by adding an
additional role to those implied by the basic lexical verb. This role is al-
ways a weaker contributor to the lexically described activity than the agent
role implied in the lexical meaning.[5] There are basically four classes of
messages that can be transmitted with this suffix. First, the additional role
may provide a *motive* for the agent to perform the action, as in the case of an
indirect object or beneficiary. Second, it may *assist* performance of the ac-
tion by serving, for example, as an instrument. Third, the role may describe
a participant who is involved as a *respondent* to the lexically described ac-
tion. Lastly, the role added may not even involve activity of any sort in the

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[4]The indirect object message can also be employed in such phrases but only
for a noun other than the head. Thus, for example, pesa za ku-leṭ-ea Hamisi ,
money of Inf-bring-IE Hamisi, 'money to take to Hamisi'.

[5]The meaning of IE , then, probably contrasts with the productive causa-
tive suffix IEsh which adds a role to the event that is a *stronger* contribu-
tor than the agent (see Port [1972]).

event, but simply be the *location* (in space or time) where the event occurs.

3.1. Motive. The contribution of the animate beneficiary as in sentence (4)
as a *motivation* for the agent is fairly obvious. In sentence (15) we now have
an inanimate book providing the motive for the agent: 'he comes-for book'.

(15) a-me-ki-j-ia   kitabu hiki   'he has come for this book'
      S(he)-Compl-O(book)-come-IE book   this

In (16) the message of goal is quite clear.

(16) a-me-end-ea   Nairobi   'he has gone to/toward Nairobi'
      S(he)-Compl-go-IE Nairobi

The sentence strongly implies that he is still on the way and could not be
used to mean, for example, 'he has moved to Nairobi'. That is, Nairobi re-
mains a goal for the action of going, and thus a motive for the agent.

3.2. Assistance. The second kind of contribution to the event is the role of
something that *assists* or facilitates the occurrence. In (17) are several ex-
amples of verbs with instruments commonly associated with them.

(17) katia kisu   'cut with a knife'
      pikia jiko-ni   'cook on a stove'
      andikia kalamu   'write with a pen'

     Sentence (18), taken from a short story, is an unusual example. The sen-
tence is 'he gets the money-IE without trouble'. The IE here adds an in-
strumental role as if it were 'he gets money by means of no trouble'.

(18) a-na-zi-pat-ia   pesa bila   taabu
      S(he)-Pres-O(money)-get-IE money without trouble

      'he can get money without difficulty

The minimal pair of sentences in (19a) and (19b) illustrates the subtle border-
line between a place that provides assistance to precipitation of the occur-
rence and a place that is simply the location of the event.

(19) a. a-li-kufa   bahari-ni   'he died at sea'
         S(he)-Past-die sea-Loc

     b. a-li-f-ia   bahari-ni   'he perished at sea'
         S(he)-Past-die-IE sea-Loc

In (19a) we find 'my father died sea-place' and in (19b) we find 'my father died IE sea-place'. The second sentence is best translated into English as 'he perished at sea'. But notice that one only perishes in dangerous places—at sea, in wars or in plagues—not, for example, in a bed. That is, the contribution of IE here is to imply that the sea bears some responsibility for the death of the father.[6]

3.3. Respondent. The third class of participant roles signified by the applied form is that of a *respondent,* that is, a party that responds to the lexically defined action and is influenced significantly by it. For example, in (20) 'he has been died-to by his father' might also be coarsely glossed as 'he is responding to his father's death'.

(20)   a-me-f-i-wa   na babake
       S(he)-Compl-die-IE-Pass by his-father

       Lit: 'he has been died-to by his father'
       'he's in grief over his father's death'

The applied suffix claims there is an additional participant in the dying. It is inferred to be the grieving relative. Of course, the sentence could also be interpreted in the appropriate context as 'his father died for him' where the son is now a beneficiary. The morphology will not distinguish these two, only the context in which the utterance occurs. The IE suffix is coherent with both interpretations. Sentence (21) is interesting because 'stealing' can have two very different kinds of additional roles besides the necessarily implied role of the stealer and the stolen.

(21)   a-li-wa-ib-ia   watoto   chakula
       S(he)-past-O(children)-steal-IE children food

       'he stole the children's food' or 'he stole food for the children'

IE can be used to add either the aggrieved party that is robbed (a respondent) or a beneficiary that one might steal for. Again only context will de-

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[6]Notice that the 'sea' in examples like (19a) plays a double role in the sentence: it is both a locative and an implied participant in the action (similarly also examples (22) and (23)). This calculated duplicity would not be possible in a case language like Latin or Russian where one must choose

termine the interpretation of the role in such a sentence. The ambiguity is
not in the meaning of IE , but rather in the lexical meaning of 'steal'. It
is a kind of event that invites several roles beyond those of the thief and
the loot.

3.4. Location. The final class of messages for the applied suffix are cases
where the additional role is not in any sense a contributor to the activity
in the event. It is simply the *place* or time when it occurred. Of course,
places would not normally be thought of as playing a role in an event. But a
place can be said to play a role if it is particularly prominent in the mes-
sage. For example the sentence in (22) is taken from a story about man-eating
lions.

(22)   simba wa-li-m-l-ia   karibu na kambi
       lions S(they)-Past-O(him)-eat-IE nearby to camp

       'the lions ate him near the camp'

Under normal circumstances the applied form of la 'eat' would not be used
just to introduce the place of eating. This is a special case, however, be-
cause people were listening to the lions crunch the bones of a comrade. Al-
though (22) might still be interpreted instrumentally (since they use the
place for eating), the next example shows clearly that the place need not
contribute to the event either as a means or goal in order to be marked with
IE .

(23)   babake   a-li-f-ia   mikono-ni mwake
       his-father S(he)-Past-die-IE arms-Loc   his

       'his father died in his arms'

The place of dying is, of course, highly significant to the message, but the
son's arms are neither a goal nor a "reason why". Thus they do not contri-
bute to the dying at all. Instead, this role-adding suffix seems to be em-
ployed here on an intransitive verb (where misinterpretation is less likely)
primarily for comment on the relevance of the location to the events occurring
there.

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either a locative case or a participant case for each noun. In Swahili, the
verb suffix only adds a role to the event without indicating which noun plays
that role.

4.   Distributional Constraints

A survey of texts reveals that all of the productive instances of the applied form seem to be sortable (but not always uniquely) into one of these four classes of messages: a motivation for the agent, an instrument of the agent, a respondent to the action, or a prominent place of the action.   One reason for going a step further and postulating a single underlying abstract meaning for these four "uses" is the distributional fact that productively a given verb can only take a single applied suffix.   Thus, sentences like (24) are universally rejected.

(24)   *a-li-m-kat-i-lia   Juma nyama (kwa) kisu
       S(he)-Past-O(him)-cut-IE-IE Juma meat   (with) knife

      'he cut Juma meat with a knife'

Here, I tried to combine two IE suffixes, one for the indirect object and one for the instrument.   If these two were grammatically distinct but homophonous suffixes, we might expect that they could be combined just like the applied suffix and the causative suffix -lisha combine to form -lishia as in (25).

(25)   Juma a-li-m-pik-ish-ia   Hassan chakula kwa jiko lile
       S(Juma)-past-O(Hassan)-cook-causative-IE Hassan food   with stove that

      'Juma had Hassan cook food on that stove'[7]

The impossibility of (24) in the face of (25) further suggests that both the instrumental and beneficiary messages are interpretations of a single IE form.   The only cases in which multiple suffixes resembling IE can occur (in (6) to (10) above) are those where one or both are actually lexical relics, an analysis further supported by the generally idiosyncratic meanings of the relic suffixes.

Yet if there is only a single abstract meaning for the productive uses of this suffix, how do listeners know whether the message should be one of, say, a goal, instrument, or beneficiary? The answer has to be that the lexical meanings of the nouns and verbs in the sentence as well as the context of

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[7]This sentence sounds much better to northern coastal speakers, of course, than to Tanzanians. See footnote 3.

communication lead listeners to jump to a coherent (and normally correct) in-
terpretation (see García [1975]). In general, there is only one possible in-
terpretation, but whenever the additional role could be interpreted in two
different ways (due, perhaps, to minimal context), then the sentence will be
"ambiguous" just as several of our examples have been.

5. Conclusions

    It has been proposed that there are both distributional and semantic rea-
sons for postulating a single productive applied suffix in Swahili. It is
possible to distinguish the grammatical form from the many competing homo-
phones with respect to both the meaning and the possibility of adding the IE
suffix. Our analysis stems from the assumption that much of the character of
languages is determined by the fact that they are communication devices for
which invariant signal-meaning correspondences would be highly functional.
Although a number of lexicalized and derivational exceptions muddy the waters,
a search for productive and invariant correspondence permitted isolation of
the exceptions on principled grounds.

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This section is for short remarks on articles dealing with African languages which have appeared in *Studies in African Linguistics* or elsewhere and for contributions which are too short to constitute full articles. These may be short descriptive or historical statements of interesting phenomena in African languages or theoretical comments utilizing African language data.

Contributions to "Notes and Queries" should be less than 1000 words, including examples. No footnotes should be used, but references may be listed at the end.