

Swahili

Information provided by:

National African Language Resource Center (NALRC)

A). Why study Swahili?

Swahili (or Kiswahili as it is called when one is speaking the language) is the most important and widely studied indigenous language of Africa, the National and official language of Kenya and Tanzania. It is spoken as a native language on the East coast of Africa and the islands adjacent to the coast from Southern Somalia in the north down through the Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts.

It is also a Lingua franca of the African Continent spoken as a second language by millions of people mainly in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and East Zaire. There are also speakers in Mozambique, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Malawi, Southern Arabian countries such as Yemen and Oman, as well as other parts of the world.

It is aired in radio broadcasts such as the British Broadcast Corporation, Voice of America, and Deutsche Welle. It is heard in songs of famous singers such as Miriam Makeba and in popular films like the Lion King. African-Americans refer to their annual cultural festival as Kwanzaa, which is derived from the Swahili word kwanza or 'first.'

Swahili is taught in academic institutions from Japan in the East to Mexico in the west. It can be used to fulfill language requirements. The study of Swahili also provides interesting issues regarding language policies and language planning. Whatever the area of research one is in, be it linguistics, anthropology, geography, archaeology, or even sociology, knowledge of Swahili and its many varieties is essential if one is working in the East African region. There are many benefits of knowing the Swahili language, including the fact that it serves as a good vehicle to accessing Swahili culture. Swahili has a long written tradition and remarkable history. Finally, knowing Swahili enhances the credibility of researchers interested in East Africa.

B). Who speaks Swahili?

People and History

Over 50 million people in eastern and central African speak Swahili. It is widely used in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. A little over one million people speak it as their first language. Most others speak Swahili fluently as a second, third or fourth language. Those who speak it as a first language are found along the coast of east Africa stretching from southern Somalia to the border between Tanzania and Mozambique. There are also many native Swahili speakers on the Indian Ocean islands of Unguja and Pemba (which together make up Zanzibar), Lamu, the Comoro Islands and the northwestern part of Madagascar. Many Swahili speakers like to refer to themselves in terms of where they come from. So Swahili speakers from Unguja, for example, will refer to themselves as Waunguja or Wazanzibari, those from Kenya as Wakenya and those from Tanzania as Watanzania.

The East African coast was visited by Arabs and Persians as early as the second century A.D. These visitors settled in Africa and married local people. Many local people modified and adopted the visitors' traditions. On the island of Unguja, for example, the traditional New Year, Mwaka Kogwa, is celebrated during the month of June. This celebration is similar to the Persian New Year of Neiruz. Later visits by Arabs to the area also introduced the Islamic religion, and today many Swahili speakers throughout East Africa are Muslim. Travelers from Portugal, Germany, England and various Asian countries also went to East Africa. Each group left its mark on both the culture and the language. Lamu as a center of Swahili Language and Cultures, would be a place of interest to students.

C). Language and Culture

Swahili is a Bantu language of the Niger-Congo family and has a typical, complicated Bantu structure. For example, Swahili utilizes over 13 noun classes, the equivalence of a romance language having 13 genders. Three full noun classes are devoted to different aspects of space and time. Swahili represents an African World view quite different from that of a European language.

Nouns are grouped into different classes according to their meaning. Human beings, for example, belong to one class: mtu 'person'/watu 'people.' Trees, on the other hand, belong to another class: mti 'tree'/miti 'trees'. Diminutive and augmentative meanings are also expressed using the noun class system. The following forms of the word ndege 'bird' indicate different sizes: ndege (regular size bird); kidege (small bird); dege (big bird).

The word Kiswahili is a general term for many varieties of the language spoken along the East African coast. It comes from the Arabic word sahel, meaning 'coast.' Ki- is a prefix referring to language. In some varieties of Swahili, the language prefix appears as chi-, as in Chimiini, which is spoken in Somalia, or shi-, as in Shingazija, a variant spoken on the Ngazija island of Comoro.

Swahili language has been influenced by a variety of other languages, including Arabic, Portuguese and German. There are many Swahili words with foreign origins, including the following: sita 'six' (Arabic), saba 'seven' (Arabic), shule 'school' (German), bendera 'flag' (Portuguese), kitabu 'book' (Arabic) and pesa 'money' (Hindi).

All Swahili speakers share a unique way of expressing time, day or night. Sunrise or sunset are the two focal points used to tell time. The first hour of the day, therefore, comes after sunrise, not after midnight, and the first hour of the night comes after sunset. Also unique to Swahili speakers is the way they communicate with each other indirectly by use of the popular language, also known as lesa. This multi-purpose cloth usually has a caption that conveys a proverbial message to its target audience.

Lamu is an ancient Swahili city-state in the Indian Ocean off the north coast of Kenya. It is the main town to the traditional swahilini--the original crucible of Swahili culture. In December 2001, UNESCO granted World heritage status to Lamu's Old town citing the fact that the old town had retained its traditional functions for over 1000 years.

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