

# Revisiting the Adjective in Kiswahili\*

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## Abstract

Scholars (e.g. Ashton 1944: 48-52, Welmers 1973: 271-3, Dixon 1977:47-8) have presented data and discussion which suggest that the adjective in Kiswahili is a minor word class. It was assumed to be a minor word class because its members were found to be comparatively few, given the evidence investigated. According to Dixon (whose study is based on Ashton 1944), there were about seventy adjectives in Kiswahili at the time he was writing. It is now over thirty years since Dixon's paper was written, and I think it's high time the issue of the 'adjective in Kiswahili' was revisited. The reasons for revisiting this word class are: (a) the available sources do not support the hypothesis that the adjective in Kiswahili is a minor class, i.e. a closed class; (b) the adjective class in Kiswahili has so far not yet been investigated in the same way the noun or verb has; (c) Kiswahili has undergone an unprecedented expansion, especially in the area of vocabulary, thus increasing the number of adjectives in the language, and it would be interesting to look at the kinds of adjectives that have entered the language; and (d) the language has some adjectivization processes that have been active in the language for a long time; it is these processes that are responsible for the addition of new members to the 'adjective class' including many creations by terminologists or other speakers of the language. The evidence taken from dictionaries, grammars, scholarly papers, etc. shows that the adjective is clearly a major word class in Kiswahili.

## Introduction

The idea that the adjective class<sup>2</sup> in Kiswahili is a minor class was put forward by Dixon (1994, written in 1970) and Welmers (1973). By "minor class" is meant a class whose members are few, and also to which no new members (or not many new members) may be added. Dixon (1994:34) notes that languages of this type have members between "about five and around one hundred". The typological consideration that Niger-Congo languages generally have a small class of adjectives (Welmers 1973:250) lends support to this idea.

However, it turns out that the Ashton (1944) data used in reaching such a conclusion was incomplete. Other data available then, specifically Johnson

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\* I would like to thank Josephat Rugemalira and Bala Masele for comments on some issues raised in this paper. This paper was presented at a LASU Conference held in Maputo, Mozambique, 26-29 November, 2007.

<sup>2</sup>The concept "adjective" used in this paper does not include other noun modifiers such as demonstratives, possessives, quantifiers, numerals, etc.

(1935, 1939), once analyzed, indicate that the adjective class constituted many more members than reported in Ashton's work. Furthermore, it is noted that the openness of the adjective class in Kiswahili is mainly due to adjectivization processes that are responsible for the many adjectives that are being added to the language.

The paper is organized as follows. We begin with the approach adopted in this paper, where we do two things: state our position on classification criteria, and also delineate the issue in relation to the status of the adjective class in Kiswahili. Then we briefly look at Ashton's approach to Kiswahili adjectives – which many linguists have relied on in their discussion of Kiswahili adjectives. Next, we present data mainly from Johnson (1935, 1939) which show that the “adjective class” in Kiswahili is of a different type than that postulated by earlier scholars. We then take a brief look at current adjectivization processes, and report on a test on the productivity of adjectivization, before concluding.

## **Approach**

In dealing with the adjective class, particularly in Bantu languages, three issues need consideration:

1. The classification criteria (how are adjectives identified/classified?)
2. How are adjectives distinguished from nouns? (This is related to 1. but it can also be treated as a separate issue).
3. Does the adjective class constitute a closed or an open class?

The first issue has been the subject of discussion for a long time, and undoubtedly, the debate will continue. Many theoretical approaches, especially those associated with the transformational paradigm, have taken grammatical criteria to be primary, and semantic criteria peripheral. Many linguists also agree that syntactic criteria should take precedence over morphological criteria (e.g. Lyons 1997:427-8, and Baker 2003), although many also agree that morphological criteria may be crucial in some cases.

In the case of Kiswahili, the criteria for identification and classification of adjectives have to take into account the fact that the language has inflected and un-inflected adjective stems. For the sake of systematic treatment, only syntactic criteria can be used in identifying adjectives unambiguously, and thus it is these that should be taken as primary.

The second issue, that of distinguishing adjectives from nouns, has also occupied the attention of linguists. In connection with Kiswahili, one linguist

has noted that:

The sole structural difference between nouns and adjectives is that the nominal stems occurring in nouns only allow a restricted choice of prefixes, whereas those occurring in adjectives can usually appear with any class-prefix, in agreement with a noun or locative (Polomé 1967: 95).

This may be illustrated by comparing the prefixes allowed by a noun (e.g. *-tu* 'person') and those allowed by an adjective (e.g. *-zuri* 'good'). The noun is seen to occur with the following prefixes:

(1)

Prefix		Gloss
m-	m-tu	person
wa-	wa-tu	persons
ji-	ji-tu	giant
ma-	ma-jitu	giants
ki-ji-	ki-ji-tu	very small person/being
vi-ji-	vi-ji-tu	very small persons/beings
u-	u-tu	humaneness; humanity

As can be seen here, the noun occurs with a restricted number of prefixes. The adjective, however, may occur with all noun classes, as can be seen below:

(2)

Class	Noun + Adjective	Gloss
1	mtu m-zuri	big person
2	watu wa-zuri	big persons
3	mti m-zuri	big tree
4	miti mi-zuri	big trees
5	ji-cho Øzuri	big eye
6	ma-cho ma-zuri	big eyes
7	ki-ti ki-zuri	big chair
8	vi-ti vi-zuri	big chairs
9	Ømeza Øzuri	<i>big table</i>
10	Ømeza Øzuri	<i>big tables</i>
11	u-bao m-zuri	<i>big board</i>
12	u-huru m-zuri	good independence
13	ku-cheza ku-zuri	good playing
14	mahali pa-zuri	good place
15	mahali ku-zuri	good place

Another linguist has noted that nouns differ from adjectives in that the latter are “not restricted in class membership, but take concords determined by the class of the noun referred to” (Welmers 1973:271-3).

As already noted above, the morphological criterion ascribed to here only covers inflected adjectives, leaving out the un-inflected ones. Here, again, it is evident that only syntactic criteria can systematically distinguish nouns from adjectives.

The third issue of whether the adjective class constitutes a closed or an open class has also been discussed. Linguists investigating Niger-Congo languages found that adjectives were not many in these languages (e.g. Welmers 1973:250). These languages possessed a closed class of adjectives, numbering “anything between about five and around one hundred. Languages of this type are found in southern and eastern India, over a large part of Africa...” (Dixon 1994:34). This position is also echoed in a recent paper by Rugemalira (2008).

We will counter this position as far as Kiswahili is concerned by first inspecting the data presented in Ashton (1944) which led to the conclusion that the adjective class in Kiswahili is closed, and then look at data in Johnson (1935, 1939) which lead to the conclusion that the class is open.

### **The Adjective in Ashton (1944)**

Ashton divides adjectives into those that are inflected (about 50) and those that are not inflected (number unspecified - but certainly assumed to be not many, mainly borrowings from Arabic). Examples of inflected adjectives are:

(3)

<b>Mwana</b> <b>mkubwa</b>	<i>a big child</i>
<b>Kiti</b> <b>kikubwa</b>	<i>a big chair</i>

The identity of the nominal and adjectival prefixes points to the partial contextual neutralization of the morphological distinction between noun and adjective stems. The only classes where such distinction is maintained are 11 and 14, e.g.

(4)

<b>Ubao</b> <b>mkubwa</b>	<i>a big plank</i>
<b>Ukali</b> <b>mbaya</b>	<i>bad fierceness</i>

Examples of un-inflected adjectives are

(5)

Mwana bora	<i>a better child</i>
Kiti bora	<i>a better chair</i>

An important characteristic of Kiswahili adjectives noted by Ashton (1944:52) involves a textual function; Ashton notes that adjectives "...may stand alone, when the noun to which they refer is known:

Lete vikubwa.      *Bring the big ones.*"

As clearly seen here, even when the adjective is alone, it is still *dependent* on the noun; the agreement affix will change depending on the noun referred to, e.g. *Lete wakubwa, Lete makubwa*, etc.

Inspection of the adjectives listed by Ashton reveals that the list does not include any derived adjective<sup>3</sup>. In fact, it does not include the many adjectives recorded in the available dictionaries (including the earlier ones: Madan 1903, Velten 1910 and Sacleux 1939). The picture one gets (from Ashton 1944) is that of a list that is static and closed; it does not reveal any language-internal dynamism that would be reflected by adjectival derivation. No wonder all linguists who have referred to Ashton as the authority on Kiswahili adjectives conclude that adjectives in Kiswahili constitute a closed class.

### **The Adjective in Johnson's dictionaries (1935, 1939)**

The dictionaries used are *Kamusi ya Kiswahili* (1935) and *A Standard Swahili-English Dictionary* (1939). We have used Johnson's dictionaries because they were published before Ashton (1944) and well before Welmers (1973) and Dixon (1977). More importantly, Johnson 1939 represents the best recording of the Kiswahili lexicon at that time. We managed to collect 266 adjectives in all from the two dictionaries. Interestingly, the number of adjective entries differ in the two dictionaries; Johnson 1935 has 228 adjectives, while Johnson 1939 has about 250. We shall investigate the adjectives recorded in these two dictionaries by grouping them as follows:

- a. Original adjectives
- b. Borrowed adjectives
- c. Derived adjectives
- d. Reduplications

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<sup>3</sup>In Johnson (1935) and (1939) there are 46 "fu/vu" derived adjectives for native words; 27 "fu/vu" derived adjectives for borrowed words; and 23 "-i" derived adjectives for native words.

The aim is to show that the adjective class is a robust multi-layered class, and that it is the derivation processes that have contributed most to the expansion of the class.

### **Original adjectives**

These are those whose roots/stems are reconstructible to a proto-form (e.g. Proto-Bantu, Proto-Sabaki, Proto-Swahili, etc (Guthrie 1969-1971; Nurse and Hinnebusch 1993). These include all native descriptive adjectives included in Ashton (1944:48-9): -dogo (small), -gumu (hard), -geni (foreign), -vivu (idle), -eupe (white), -cusi (black), -ema (good), -crevu (cunning), -epesi (easy, light), -embamba (narrow, slender), -ekundu (red), -pana (broad), -tupu (bare, empty, mere), -zee (old), -zima (sound, whole), zito (heavy), -baya (bad), -bichi (raw, unripe), -bivu (ripe), -bovu (rotten), -ume (male), -anana (gentle), -ororo (soft), -ovu (evil), -angavu (bright), -fupi (short), -nene (fat – of people), -nono (fat – of animals), -chungu (bitter), -kuu (great), -kubwa (big), -kali (fierce, sharp), kuukuu (old, worn-out), -kavu (dry), -pya (new), -ke (female), -refu (tall, long), -tasa (barren – of living creature), kame (dry, barren – of land), -kongwe (very old), -oga (timid, cowardly), -pevu (full-grown, adult), -wi (bad), tovu (lacking), -pumbavu (stupid, foolish), -wazi (open, clear), -vungu (hollow, concave), -zazi (productive), -zuzu (foolish, inexperienced), dugi (blunt), -pweke (alone, lonely), -lonjo (tall – of people only), -tindi (half-grown, unripe – of maize and millet), -butu (blunt), -chafu (dirty), -chache (few), -ingi (many), -changa (undeveloped, unripe, immature), fufutende (lukewarm), -kwasi (rich), -kuza (well-grown), m-buai (savagely, wild), -nyonge (weak), -ongo (deceitful, false), -pasi (ambitious, acquisitive), -pana (wide).

### **Borrowed adjectives**

These are mainly from Arabic. There are about 79 such adjectives recorded in the Johnson dictionaries. Three groups may be distinguished: (i) those that are used without a suffix (e.g. -fu/-vu or -i), (ii) those that become adjectives through suffixation, and (iii) a few cases which use both forms – the unsuffixed form and the suffixed form.

Examples of borrowed adjectives (unsuffixed) are: aali (good, superior), adhimu (great, exalted), akali (few), anisi (pleasing, luxurious), azizi (precious, valuable), arifu (well-informed), bahili (misery, mean), barabara (exactly), bayana (clear, straightforward), bora (of good quality, good), madhubuti (strong), etc.

Examples of borrowed adjectives used with the productive suffixes are: badilifu (changeable), bainifu (explicit), dhihirifu (clear, plain), dhilifu (poor,

mean, insignificant), haribifu (destructive), kadirifu (gradable; considerate), kinaifu (self-controlled, self-sufficient, moderate), etc. There are many more such adjectives.

There are also a few cases of borrowed adjectives that use both the unsuffixed and the suffixed form. Examples: amini/ aminifu (honest), badhiri/ badhirifu (wasteful), batili/ batilifu (empty, void, null and void), kamili/kamilifu (complete), sahihi/sahihifu (correct, accurate), shau/shaufu (showy, affected), laini/lainifu (soft, smooth, flexible).

### Derived adjectives

Apart from borrowing, derivation has been an important language-internal means for increasing the number of adjectives in Kiswahili. The Johnson data show that there are over one hundred members that have been added to the adjective class through derivation. Here, there is need to distinguish between active processes and those that are either of limited productivity or fossilized. The active processes involve the -fu/-vu and -i suffixes; a process of limited productivity involves the -e suffix; and a fossilized process involves the -u suffix.

#### *Adjectives formed by the adjectival suffixes -fu/-vu*

These apply to all words – whether borrowed or original. In the data there are 71 adjectives formed with the suffixes -fu/-vu. Most derived adjectives belong here. Examples are given in (4):

(6)

pumbavu	stupid	sumbufu	troublesome
tulivu	calm	Takatifu	holy
wekevu	economical	tangulifu	preceding
tegemevu	dependent	Tukufu	exalted
nyevu	wet	Vunjifu	destructive
legevu	loose	angalifu	careful
fahamivu	well-informed	changamfu	cheerful
nyamavu	quite	linganifu	harmonious

#### *Adjectives formed with suffix -i*

The Johnson data show that only verbs of Bantu origin are involved here. There are 25 adjectives in -i in the data. Examples:

(7)

tambazi	<i>creeping</i>		patanishi	<i>conciliatory</i>
tambuzi	<i>knowing</i>		Cheshi	<i>humorous</i>
teuzi	<i>fastidious</i>		Choshi	<i>tiresome</i>
pingani	<i>contradictory</i>		tunduizi	<i>well-informed</i>

#### *Adjectives formed by the suffix -e*

Some of the words that take this suffix are: -pole *gentle* (< \*-pola), -teule *select, choice, chosen* (<\*-teula), -zcc *old* (<\*-zala), -kame *dry* (<\*-kama). As we will see below this suffix is still active, though not as active as the -fu/-vu and -i suffixes.

#### *Adjectives using the fossilized suffix -u*

This is an ancient suffix which is reflected in only a few words in Kiswahili. Examples are: -fu *dead* (< -fa *die*), -gumu *hard* (\*<-guma *be hard*), kuu *great, important* (\*<-kula *be big*).

#### *Reduplications*

There are also a few reduplicated adjectives. Examples of these are: chepechepe *wet*, goigoi *very weak*, jivujivu *grayish*, tifutifu *soft - of soil*, tipwatipwa *very fat*, etc.

### **Active Trends in Forming Adjectives**

Since 1970, intellectualization efforts (terminology creation and translation) have increased in Universities and language promotion institutions in Tanzania and other East African countries. These efforts have given rise to new words (especially nouns, verbs and adjectives). To investigate the adjectives that have been created, we gleaned over 230 adjectives from the technical lists and dictionaries (e.g. Ohly 1987; TUKI 1990a, 1990b, 2001; Idara ya Kiswahili 2005, and other sources). These adjectives were inspected to identify the active adjectivizing suffixes. The suffixes identified were -i, -fu/-vu, -e and the passive -wa.

It is interesting to note that the -i adjectives are the predominant type of derived adjectives, followed by the -fu/-vu adjectives, while we have only a few -e and -wa adjectives. In the collected data, there are 133 -i adjectives, 73 -fu/-vu adjectives, and about 10 -e adjectives. Examples of i-adjectives are shown in (8) below:



(6)

sawazishi	equalizing, synchronizing	<-sawazisha	equalize, synchronize
lingishi	sizing	< -linga	Size
kutanishi	converging	<-kutanisha	cause to meet
onyeshi	demonstrative	<-onyesha	show, demonstrate
linganishi	comparative	<-linganisha	compare
fulizi	continuous	<-fuliza	continue
nururishi	radioactive	<-nururisha	cause radiation
sisimuzi	stimulating	<-sisimua	stimulate
kuzi	magnifying	<-kuza	magnify
tawanyishi	dispersive	<-tawanyisha	cause to disperse

Examples of -fu/-vu adjectives are:

(9)

lipufu	explosive	<-lipuka	explode
kingamifu	transverse	< -kingama	lie across
nyumbufu	elastic	<-nyumbua	pull length-wise
kinzanifu	resistant	<-kinzana	resist
chacharifu	excited	<-chacharika	be excited
tanuvu	expansive	<-tanuka	expand (v.i.)
vutifu	tensile	<-vuta	pull
ng'arifu	luminous	<-ng'aa	Shine
sogevu	moveable	<-sogea	Move
ning'inivu	hanging	<-ning'inia	Hang

Examples of -e adjectives include:

(10)

fiche	latent, hidden	<-ficha	hide
finye	closed	< -finya	cause to become narrow
funge	Blocked, bound	<-funga	close
unde	artificial	<-unda	create, form
unge	linked	<-unga	link
fingize	disabled	<-fingiza	disable
vunde	rotten	<-vunda	rote
pinde	curved, bent	<-pinda	bend
kaze	tensile	<-kaza	tighten
viringe	round	<-viringa	round

Examples of adjectives in -wa are: -lengwa (targeted), -pendwa (loved, beloved, popular), -kopwa (borrowed), -katizwa (discontinuous), -pachikwa (embedded), etc.

In addition to these, we also have two examples of reduplications: penyipenyi (semi-permeable), pitishipitishi (semi-conducting).

One remarkable aspect of current adjectivization processes is the fact that causative verb forms from original or borrowed adjectives also get adjectivized as follows:

(11)

-dogo	small, little	-dogesha	cause to be small	-dogeshi	causing to be small or diminutive
-fupi	short	-fupisha	Shorten	-fupishi	causing to be short
-refu	long, tall	-refusha	lengthen, cause to be tall	-refushi	causing to be long/tall
-nene	fat	-nenepa	become fat	-nenepeshi	causing to be fat
-dhalili	weak	-dhalilisha	weaken, disparage	-dhalilishi	disparaging
-halali	valid	-halalisha	Validate	-halalishi	validating
-rahisi	simple	-rahisisha	cause to be simple	-rahisishi	causing to be simple
-jasiri	brave	-jasirisha	cause to be brave	-jasirishi	causing to be brave
-sahihi	correct	-sahihisha	Correct	-sahihishi	correcting, proofing

This shows that such adjectivization is quite active and applies to any form that meets its conditions.

A particularly interesting development concerns the formation of opposites. This type of opposite is formed by attaching the negative form *si-* or *so-* to adjective stems, e.g. *sifiche* (non-covert), *siunde* (non-artificial), *sifunge* (unbound), *sielekezi* (intransitive), *siviringe* (unround), *sing'ong'o* (non-nasal), *sighuna* (voiceless), *sihesabifu* (non-count), *sinyumbufu* (inelastic), *siachanifu* (inalienable), etc.

### The Productivity of Adjectivization

To find out whether some of the seemingly pervasive adjectivization processes are indeed active, we decided to carry out a test. Over 2900 adjective stems based on *-fu/-vu* and *-i* were coined using verb roots and their derived forms in Johnson 1939 and KKS 2004. **Examples of such creations from one verb**

root are: *-fung-*: *-fungifu*, *-fungi*, *-fungishi*, *fungizi*, *-funganishi*, *-funganifu*, *-fungani*, *-funganyi*, *-funganyifu*, *-funganyishi*, *-fungami*, *-fungamani*, *-fungamanishi*, *-fungamanifu*, *-funguzi*, *-fungushi*, *-fungulifu*, etc. These were tested on selected native speakers of Kiswahili who were also University students. They were required to indicate whether a coined adjectival form was **in use**, **acceptable though not in use**, or **completely unacceptable**.

The results of the test were interesting. Out of the 2900 coined adjectives, about 750 were indicated as being *in use*, while a little more than 400 were indicated as *acceptable though not in use*. Of these only 300 were actually found in the recent *Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu* (2004). Some of those indicated as being **in use** or **acceptable** were among the scientific terms found in the special language dictionaries. This shows that the adjectivization processes involving *-fu/-vu* and *-i* are quite productive, and it appears the dictionary-makers are lagging behind the users in recording what is in use.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have presented data which show that the adjective in Kiswahili is not a minor word class. Our considerations have led to the following conclusions:

- The data on which the “minor class” hypothesis was based were incomplete.
- The adjective is clearly an open class in the language and has been so for a long time due to active adjectivization processes and borrowings.
- In view of the on-going intellectualization processes, the adjective class will continue to expand.

These conclusions contradict the long-standing view held by some scholars of Bantu and African languages (e.g. Ashton 1944, Welmers 1973 and Dixon 1977). The conclusions, however, do not close the issue; there are still some related issues that need further investigation. First, there is the issue of the apparent fuzziness between nouns and adjectives which is reflected in the suffix *i*, which is both a nominalizing and adjectivizing suffix. This needs to be investigated fully. Second, there is the issue of the status of the adjective in other Bantu languages. Evidently, the adjective is a minor class in the type of Bantu languages investigated by Rugemalira (2008). But an inspection of the lexicons of some other languages, e.g. Kisukuma (cf. Richardson 1966), Kinyamwezi (Dahl 1915, Maganga and Schadeberg 1992) and Sisumbwa (Kahigi 2008), show that there are some productive adjectivization processes

that have produced many adjectives. Evidently, further investigation is needed to ascertain the status of the adjective in all Bantu languages.

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