

KISWAHILI INTERJECTIONS REVISITED

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1. INTRODUCTION*

Although interjections have received considerable attention in recent work on routinised speech (see for example the special issue of *Journal of Pragmatics* vol. 18, 1992, and Coulmas 1981), Kiswahili interjections are very poorly documented. In a recent article, Carol Eastman (1992) tries to sketch a general picture of interjections in line with recent pragmatic theory. She suggests that Kiswahili provides evidence of interjections being “elements of culturally specific extra-linguistic systems of communication in context” (1992:273).

She also discusses the implication of gesture contained in interjections. However, Eastman’s description manifests gaps in two important respects. First, Eastman focuses on a sample of 28 forms extracted from the entries in the *Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu* (Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili 1981) (henceforth the KAMUSI), described as *viingizi* and *vielezi*. She discusses the forms within five functional categories ((i) politeness; (ii) dissatisfaction and anger; (iii) wishes and exhortations; (iv) ritual and ceremony; (v) surprise, warning and attention-getting). The KAMUSI itself does not provide the motivation for the labelling of its entries. Secondly, Eastman does not locate the potential interjections she identifies within any conversational context (her view expressed in the above quote notwithstanding), which makes it more difficult to view interjections in the light of the distinction she makes between *talk* and *non-talk*. An examination of the use of interjections within a more holistic perspective on Kiswahili conversation would seem to indicate that interjections must be considered an essential part of the talk exchange.

The present paper is thus intended to widen the discussion on Kiswahili interjections both in terms of providing a characterisation of Kiswahili interjections, and in terms of placing them within a socially placed description, an attempt also made by Goffman (1981) in relation to what he calls “response cries” in English. I intend to examine the significance of contextual features in determining the “interjectionality” of interjectional forms, and how their pragmatic functions can be considered in the light of those features.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Defining criteria for interjections

The approach of accepting a ready-made group of items from the KAMUSI conveniently allows Eastman to bypass the troubled question of their definition, which has been

approached differently in various works (e.g. Ameka (1992a), Evans, Wilkins, Wierzbicka 1992). For instance, Evans (1992:226) uses the following defining criteria for interjections: that they be monomorphemic; capable of making up an independent, non-elliptical utterance; and that they not be used to represent a non-speech sound, i.e. not be onomatopoeic. Similarly, Wilkins (1992:124) defines interjections as those forms which constitute utterances in their own right; do not enter into construction with other word classes; are monomorphemic; and do not take inflectional or derivational morphemes. Ameka (1992a:106) calls forms with these characteristics "primary interjections", in contrast to "secondary interjections", which may belong to other word classes but may be used as interjections, and have therefore independent semantic value. While these characteristics show close similarities, Wierzbicka (1992:164) provides additional new criteria: Interjections have to express a specifiable meaning, must not be homophonous with other lexical items, and must refer to a current mental state or mental act.

Into this definitional maze also enters the question of the double status of interjections. It has long been recognised that interjections constitute both lexemes and utterances (Wilkins 1992:127), or words and utterances (Ameka 1992a:108). All interjectional lexemes are potentially complete utterances, or what I will call "interjectional acts" (IAs for short). The KAMUSI thus lists entries which are potential IAs, and may situationally be used as such, even to a highly routinised degree. However, a lot of those expressions may also be used in other situations to convey propositional content, as parts of longer utterances. For this reason, my focus will be entirely on IAs, as they have been observed to occur in conversation.

The interjections discussed here are based on data in the form of field notes taken in Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam between August and October 1994. For this reason, the interjections included tend of necessity to be those which occur frequently in conversation. I have considered only those expressions which are capable of functioning as IAs, and in addition I have taken account of the following criteria, which appear in most of the literature:

- a) the number of morphemes;
- b) onomatopoeia;
- c) non-homophony with other lexical items;
- d) the possibility of taking inflections or derivations, i.e. changing for person, number, tense, etc.;
- e) the possibility of occurring on their own as utterances, although they may also be co-utterances, but always within their own tone groups;
- f) the absence of addressees, i.e. not being addressed *to* anyone;
- g) the character of being spontaneous reactions, rather than fixed formulae.

It would be obvious that these criteria include both formal and pragmatic components, the latter tied directly to the speaker's intentions and attitudes in particular

contexts. An overriding consideration is that pointed out by Schourop (1985:18), as well as Ameka (1992a:106), that IAs reflect the speaker's internal state at the moment of speaking. I shall elaborate on each of these criteria in Section 4 below.

2.2 Illocutionary status of interjections

Eastman points out (1992:278) that many interjections are used to perform illocutionary acts manifesting some attitude or emotion. Such illocutionary acts generally fall within the interpersonal function (Halliday 1978) or the class of expressives (Searle 1976). An interjection can be the sole expression by which a speaker compliments (*shabash!*), dares (*subutu!*), offers sympathy (*tut!*), shows contempt (*lo!*), and so on. If we adopt the distinction that has been made by Searle (1969), between illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) and the propositional content, then it is possible in Kiswahili, as in other languages, for a speaker to specify the illocutionary force without expressing its propositional content directly.¹ Often, within context, the latter would be recognised from the situation, or from what has been said previously in the conversation. For instance, upon wanting to deny something, the speaker may say simply *Hasha!*, assuming that the propositional content is understood. On the other hand, she may say:

[1] (constructed example)

Hasha sijafanya mie enh! [Never! I never did it]

However, there is considerable disagreement on the illocutionary status of the primary interjections. Wierzbicka (1992) takes the position that primary interjections do not contain an illocutionary proposition or dictum, and are therefore not speech acts. Wilkins (1992) on the other hand holds that interjections *do* function as speech acts, and that their illocutionary purpose can be specified as: "I say/do X because...". In other words, he stretches the purpose to include not only verbal expressions, but nonverbal ones, or verbal gestures, as well. Ameka (1992b) takes a middle position, maintaining that interjections have no illocutionary dicta, but their communicative function can be taken to be similar to illocutionary purpose. My own position would be to agree with Wilkins. Although in the report of IAs in Kiswahili speakers tend to use action verbs, such as *shangaa*, *shituka*, *duwaa*, *furahi*, *kejeli*, *shangilia*, in using direct speech, verbs of saying are not precluded. In other instances even an illocutionary verb may be used:

[2] (constructed example)

A: Amesemaje juu ya kitabu changu? [What did he say about my book?]

B: *Ameapa hakuchukua yeye.* [He swore he didn't take it]

where the IA performed may have been "*Wallahi!*".

The point that needs to be emphasised here is that IAs may in some cases be acts of great significance. In the taxonomies of illocutionary acts discussed in the literature, all classes

of illocutionary acts are presented as being a part of the language, of the speech situation. Illocutionary acts which are generally realised by interjections are of the expressive kind, and this needs to be noted, but some of the interjections may be used to perform other classes of acts. For instance, *Ewa*, *Enhe* (agreement), *Aka*, *Hasha* (denial) etc. are not within the expressive group. It is thus valid to see interjections as one means available to the speaker in performing various types of speech acts. These are performed in the expression of attitudes, strong feelings, politeness, etc. Recent studies have indicated that the contextual factors that need to be taken into account in the description and explanation of language behaviour are to be widened rather than narrowed (Carswell and Rommetveit 1971, Brown and Yule 1983, Kress 1990). Eastman (1992:285) herself points this out in relation to the work of Goffman.

Insofar as IAs are responses to other utterances or particular social contexts, they can be considered to be the second part of adjacency pairs. Some of the IAs are clearly of this nature, where a response such as a reply or a denial is expected. Such are exemplified by *wala*, *hasha*, *mavi*, as in:

[3] *M's son is sulking because he can't borrow his dad's bicycle.*

K: Wewe ndo ulomkataza? [Are you the one who forbade him?]

M: La, *hasha*! Mie ata siyajui mambo yenyewe. [Not at all! I don't even know what it's about!]

[4] *H is facing difficulties at work, and believes that one of his colleagues, Salim, has something to do with it.*

R: Salim anasema atakusaidia [Salim says he'll help you]

H: *Mavi*! [Help me, my arse!]

In these examples, although the second speakers are responding to something that has been said, they are at the same time indicating their emotional attitude, in contrast to D's response in [5], which does not have that implication:

[5] *S calls her niece from another room:*

S: Dida!

D: *Naam*! Nakuja! [Yes! Coming!]

Other IAs seem to be responses to non-verbal summonses arising in the situation, rather than anything that is actually said:

[6] B, expecting some dinner guests, switches on the stove to start cooking, and discovers that the electricity has been cut off:

B: *Lahaula!* [Oh, my God!]

Goffman discusses such utterances as a form of self-talk, which is usually heard as odd, unless the explanation for it is immediately obvious. The utterance is not constrained by others taking part in the conversation, but rather by the social situation [1981:88]. On this occasion, B felt the need to explain her production of the IA to those who, sitting in the next room, overheard her, although no one asked her to.

[7] K had been telling her friend B that a garment they had bought together was too small. B would not listen. On getting home and trying it, K is proved right. K then says:

K: *Nyoo!*² *Asosikia la mkuu!* [See! You wouldn't listen!]

The majority of IAs fall into these two categories. They constitute either direct reactions to something that has been said, or they serve as natural responses to abnormal or unusual circumstances. This serves to give them a significant status within ongoing discourse.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conflicting criteria manifested in the various definitions above can be avoided, it seems to me, if interjections are examined in their utterance status, as interjectional acts, and therefore as subject to contextual interpretation. The contribution of both verbal and non-verbal cues to talk-exchanges needs to be accounted for, and also the possibility of the interactants to focus on different aspects of the speech situation. I would suggest that two frameworks/concepts which have already been widely used may add significantly to our understanding of how interjections function. First, work on the ethnography of speaking has at various stages set up the framework for the description of speech events, in which each event is analysed as having several essential components (Hymes 1972, 1974). These components include the participants, the setting of the interaction, the topic, the code, the channel, and so on. In any speech event, the speaker is likely to have an overall focus on one of these factors and to push the others into the background, and the factor which is emphasised then defines the function of the speech event. Thus, for example, the speaker may focus on the topic of the speech event, in which case the function would be referential; or she may focus on the message form, where the function would be poetic. This means that there are some correspondences between particular functions and particular genre types. Alternatively, different segments within an interaction may have different orientations, as when interactants in a conversation shift from greetings to a discussion of the day's work.

The value of this approach for the analysis of IAs is that it allows us to explain their occurrence in terms of the particular speech function they manifest. For example, Eastman mentions that Kiswahili interjections may allow speakers to communicate what is going on around them in addition to what they actually may be talking about pp (1992:274).

We would thus explain the use of such interjections as being within the performance of the *contextual* function, which serves to allow the speaker to delineate the situation in which the speech event is taking place. They allow the speaker to indicate the organisation of the conversation, for instance what is going to happen next, what attention should be paid to certain content, who is expected to speak next, and so on. Such are the "gambits" discussed by Keller (1981:94). Other interjections may realise the *phatic* function, through which interpersonal relations are facilitated and smoothed. These are exemplified by what Eastman calls the 'politeness' interjections (1992:278). Yet others may comment on the language being used, which would make them functionally *metalinguistic* (Yahya-Othman 1986). The placement of IAs within the framework of speech functions would thus allow us to treat them as very much part of the talk exchange, but with various functional foci.

Additionally, using such a framework would allow us to avoid the unmotivated categorisations made by Eastman, in which interjections of seemingly very different functions are assigned to the same group, and others which are very similar are separated. Eastman's categories are vaguely tagged as "politeness", "dissatisfaction and anger", "wishes and exhortations", and "rituals". In terms of the use of interjections by speakers in establishing, maintaining and "servicing" social relations, there would not seem to be any motivation for separating "politeness" interjections from those used for the expression of "dissatisfaction and anger". This is especially so in the light of work which points to there being two sides to politeness, the negative and the positive (Brown and Levinson 1987).

The second concept that may be useful in situating interjections within talk proper is that of 'discourse' (Fairclough 1989, Kress 1990). If we view IAs as part of the discursive processes in Kiswahili, then they cannot be marginalised. The notion of 'discourse' is a useful one for several reasons: it includes within it the idea of extended language instances. Since IAs are always reactions to particular aspects of the speech event, be it the content or the setting or the code, they can usually be studied only within extended discourse. Secondly, discourse covers contextualised language practices. An examination of IAs within their context - textual, situational, and cultural - would bring to light not only where interjections are used, but also why, why not, and to whom. Thirdly, discourse places itself firmly within social practice, and taking account of this may allow us to explain what in Kiswahili IAs is special to the Swahili society, and the factors which account for the kinds, varieties and frequencies of interjections, the social relations that need to exist between the interactants for particular interjections to be used, the ways in which the use of interjections says something about the relations of dominance or equality, etc. I do not intend to deal with the latter questions here, but

clearly they are worth investigating. Since the matter of context is the most significant in a discursive perspective, I shall deal specifically with this in Section 4.1 below.

4. CHARACTERISTICS AND CLASSIFICATION OF INTERJECTIONS

4.1 Characteristics of interjections

The criteria discussed in Section 2.1 constitute the central means for the identification of interjections, and I shall now elaborate on each of those criteria by giving examples, and consider to what extent each applies to Kiswahili interjectional expressions.

(a) *The number of morphemes*

Although the majority of Kiswahili interjections are monomorphemic, quite a few are polymorphemic. These latter meet all the other criteria, and are exemplified in [8] and [9] below:

[8] H enters kitchen, opens one of the containers:

Salaala! Mmemaliza haluwa yote! [*Wow!* You've finished all the haluwa!]

[9] Children playing in the street:

C1: Nitakupiga mimi wewe! [I'm gonna beat you!]

C2: *Subutu* unipige! [*You wouldn't dare* beat me!]

b) *Onomatopoeia*

I have not come across Kiswahili interjections which are onomatopoeic. Onomatopoeic expressions almost always occur as parts of other utterances. The closest to an exception are the expressions *us!* [quiet!] or *shhhh*, which may be seen to simulate silence.

c) *Non-homophony with other lexical items*

Most Kiswahili interjectional acts are realised by forms which only have this function and no other. There are very few exceptions, which I include because they appear to meet the other criteria. I am thinking of expressions such as *mama*, *bwana*, *mtume*, which, interestingly, as lexical items all refer to animate referents. Additionally, *mavi*, *mawe*, *wapi*, fall into this category. Intonational and kinesic features play a significant role in these instances, in distinguishing the interjectional function from the lexeme status. Consider [10] to [14]:

[10] M is due to travel on that day:

F: Umeshamaliza kufungafunga? [Have you finished packing?]

M: *Wapi!* Huko chumbani kama kumepita kimbunga. [*Hunh!* My room looks like it's been hit by a hurricane]

(*wapi* spoken with middle pitch, first syllable dragged, falling to low in second syllable)

[11] (constructed example)

A: Ule mkasi umeuweka *wapi* vile? [Where have you put the scissors?]

B: Hapo hapo [There]

A: *Wapi*? [Where?]

(*wapi* with level middle pitch, short syllable)

Wapi in [11] is a locative interrogative, inquiring as to the location of something. In [3], *wapi* has no such semantic content.³

[12] R has been desperately looking for Ahmed, who is visiting from abroad, but has been unable to see him. Their last rendezvous had also failed.

S: *Enhe!* Nasikia ukamkosa Ahmed tena! [*So, I hear you missed Ahmed after all!*]

R: *Bwana!* [*What can I say!*]

(*bwana* spoken with fairly low pitch, long syllable, with a narrow downturn)

[13] (constructed example)

Bwana hajambo? [Is your *husband* well?]

[14] (constructed example)

Haya *bwana*. [Yes, *sir*]

(*bwana* in [13] and [14] are likely to be spoken in a similar way, with very low, level pitch, short syllable)

In [12] *bwana* has no reference to any male individual (Z is a woman), or even to any individual. It serves as an expression of F's disappointment at what had occurred.

d) The possibility of taking inflections or derivations, i.e. changing for person, number, tense, etc.

Kiswahili interjections always occur in the same form. Even those expressions which are discussed under criterion (c) above do not change their form when they function as IAs. For instance, *subutu* does occur as a verbal form, in which case it takes on a variety of inflectional affixes, such as those in *anasubutu*, *nitasubutu*, *sisubutu*, *usubutu*, etc.; but in the form of an interjection, it remains constant. I believe that this condition is related to criterion (f): most of the inflectional affixes have to do with tense, aspect, mood, and person and number. Interjections are timeless, and if they have no addressees, then the need for the person morphemes is obviated. This criterion thus disqualifies forms such as *pole*, *kelele*, *ahsante*, which are entered in the KAMUSI as *viingizi*.

e) The possibility of occurring on their own as utterances, although they may also be co-utterances, but always within their own tone groups

Most Kiswahili interjections may occur as single word utterances, but sometimes they may occur as co-utterances in a string. However, they never enter into construction with

the sentence content, as Fraser (1990:391) notes of English interjections. The co-utterances are exemplified in [8] and [9] above, and in [15], and are more common; the single utterances occur as in [16] and [17]:

[15] F and M are talking about a mutual friend, with whom F has fallen out:

M: Lakini akikuomba si utakwenda? [If he asks you, will you go?]

F: *Lo!* Labda sijazaliwa na Bit Salim. [*Never!* Unless I'm not Bit Salim's daughter].

[16] Talk about mutual friends:

S: Kwani wameachana ati! [They're divorced, don't you know!]

A: *Alaa!* [*You don't say!*]

S: *He!* Mbona siku nyingi! [*Oh, for quite a while now.*]

[17] Talk about a recent burglary in the neighbourhood:

R: Naskiya walipoingia waliwakuta watoto tu. [I hear when they broke in they found only the children.]

A: *Mtume!*

Thus, lexemes such as *pu*, *keche*, and *ng'o* would be disqualified. These, if they were to occur alone, would have to be elliptical utterances, but generally they occur as parts of other utterances, as in the examples provided in the KAMUSI:

[18] kuvunjika *keche!* (1981:105) [to be broken]

[19] sikupi *ng'o!* (1981:214) [I'll never give it to you]

f) *The absence of addressees, i.e. not being addressed to anyone*

Kiswahili IAs have no addressees, in the sense that although they may be directed at particular persons, they are not addressed to those people. For instance, vocatives and imperatives would be excluded, although some forms may function as both vocatives and IAs. *We!* is of this type:

[20] (constructed example)

We! Mbona hivi hapa umeacha! [*Hey you!* Why have you left these!]

(*we likely to be spoken with abrupt, short syllable, slightly high pitch falling to low*)

[21] The family at table:

A: Hiyo pilipili kali enh? [The chillie, it's hot hunh?]

S: *We!* [*Phew!*]

(*we spoken with very high, level pitch, very short syllable*)

In [20] *We* is a vocative which is used to draw someone's attention to the speaker. In [21], S is giving her reaction to the quality of the chillie. It is a vocalisation of a thought

process, or a response to the social situation, and this explains why IAs are quite often produced even in the absence of a hearer, as Goffman (1981) notes.

This criterion is tied to that in (d). Forms which have addressees tend also to take inflections. Thus, the KAMUSI lists as interjections forms such as *kumradhi*, *pole*, *karibu*, *kelele*, etc. in the production of which the speaker clearly has an addressee in mind. Such forms can thus be inflected to account for plural addressees, for example:

[22] - [24] (constructed examples)

[22] *Poleni jamani* [*My condolences to you all*]

[23] *Karibuni, karibuni wageni wetu.* [*Welcome, welcome, our guests*]

[24] *Kumradhini, nilikuwa nazungumza kwenye simu.* [*Apologies to you all, I was on the phone*]

These forms appear to fall under the category of formulae, as characterised below.

g) The character of being spontaneous reactions, rather than fixed formulae

Because IAs constitute a reflection of the speaker's state of mind at the time of speaking, they cannot be predicted, and have to be seen as spontaneous reactions. They have to be distinguished from formulae, which are socially expected responses in particular situations (Ameka 1992a:109). Expressions such as *pole*, *kumradhi*, *paukwa* etc. are all formulae. It is predictable to a certain extent among Kiswahili speakers that given a situation where the speaker needs to apologise, she may use the expression *kumradhi*; or she may use *pole* given that she wants to console or condole someone. Such prediction is not possible with IAs.

I take the view that the production and interpretation of interjections are directly tied to the communicative event taking place. As Ameka notes, interjections are produced in reaction to linguistic or extra-linguistic factors, and are therefore context-bound (1992a:108). The interest here then, is in interjectional acts, rather than the class of words "interjections". IAs in discourse are subject to situational and social constraints operating on the interactants. We can say of them, though, that they constitute that part of language use which does not impart referential information. This does not mean that they have no meaning, as Ameka (1992b:246), Wilkins (1992:120) and Wierzbicka (1992:163) point out. They are meaningful and they form an essential part of the conversation.

Since interjections are used almost exclusively in conversation, it would be useful to consider their place in Kiswahili conversation. In lively everyday conversation, the verbal/non-verbal divide is greatly blurred. Common illocutionary acts such as greetings and goodbyes are often performed through bodily gestures. Greetings, for instance, can often be made by a gesture of the hand or face, including a handshake, a wave, a hand kiss, a smile, without words being uttered. Surprise and shock can be expressed by holding the head with the two hands, as Eastman points out, or by opening one's mouth wide and then covering it with the right hand. Other non-verbal acts may or may not be accompanied by an utterance. Eastman (1992) is thus quite right in pointing

out that interjections mark an area where the distinction between the two tends to be blurred. However, while there is this continuum between the use of a verbal expression and the use of gesture alone, when a verbal expression *is* used, the processes involved do not gain clarity by the verbal expression being marginalised, and explained away as non-talk. An interesting example relating to this has to do with toddlers appearing naked in front of other people. This is something that is treated with amusement usually, but measures have to be taken as soon as possible to get the child dressed. In several cases the adults would simply shout:

[25] *A! A! A! A!*

and the baby would realise his/her folly and scuttle off inside. But I also witnessed an instance where the adult simply looked at the child with her mouth and eyes opened wide, and this facial expression had exactly the same effect on the child.

In another instance, B was recounting her first meeting after two years with her former employee, who had been very sick. Her two interactants both wanted to express sympathy to B's distress, and one's Interjectional Act was matched by the other's gesture: :

[26]

B: *Nimemkuta hali yake taabani; amekwisha amekwisha.* [I found her very sick, she's completely finished]

K: *tut! tut! tut! tut! tut!*

A: (slow shake of the head)

Such examples demonstrate how close IAs are to not speaking, to the use of gesture. Wilkins notes that interjections "are the most reduced form an utterance can possibly take" (1992:129), and even talks of "interjectional gestures" (1992:134).⁴ Leech et al express the view that

Interjections are rather peripheral to language. Words like *ugh*, *phew*... are linguistically somewhat primitive expressions of feeling, only loosely integrated into the linguistic system (1982:53).

The blurring of the boundaries between talk and gesture (assuming that the latter can ever be extracted from the former), is precisely the subject of Eastman's discussion. She directly raises the question of the dividing line between "real talk" and non-talk, making various remarks about interjections which highlight this problem, such as:

"(interjections) allow people to communicate what is going on around them in addition to what they actually may be talking about" (p. 274)

"extra-conversational conventionalised forms" (p. 275)

"These (pragmatic particles) clearly stand apart from the actual talk involved in the ritual or ceremony yet they frame it and refer to the language use context" (p. 279).

"They are components of extra-lingual reality...." (p. 284)

All these comments underline the delicate position that IAs occupy between words and gestures. Gestures often constitute a significant interpretative resource for hearers (Fairclough 1989:27), and their centrality has particularly been noted in the interpretation of ‘indirect speech acts’ such as jokes, sarcasm and irony, and in turn-taking manoeuvres, for instance (Schegloff 1984).

4.2 Interjections and context

It has been noted that the context not only of conversations but of other types of discourse as well, is added on to continuously, not only by more conversation, but also by new extralinguistic (situational) happenings (Brown and Yule 1983). For example if two people are talking in a room whose door is closed, and someone suddenly comes and opens the door for an instant, then closes it again without coming in, this event may well be taken as an ‘extra’ to the conversation. But not when its effect is to slow down the talking, to initiate an exchange of glances between the interactants, and even to make them lose the thread of their talking. And yet no word needed to have been spoken by the third party. With Kiswahili IAs, we are concerned with linguistic expressions which are produced within an interaction, in the course of a conversation, in the performance of a speech act. Eastman takes the view that interjections are one type of “culturally loaded” vocabulary whose interpretation “integrates the language and its context of use” (1983:157).

IAs in Kiswahili are both context-creating and context-affected. In their framing function, for example, they contribute to the organisational and goal-directional orderliness of conversation. Such would be the “gambit” interjections mentioned above. Eastman (1992:279) mentions the framing role of particles in ritual ceremonies, but interjections such as *je* [so] (signalling that a question is to follow), *basi* [to continue] (signalling that the speaker is continuing with his/her turn after an interruption), *enhe* [go on] (indicating that the addressee can take the next turn), *haya* [OK, so], are very common in ordinary everyday speech. These will be discussed in Section 4.3 below.

As we have seen in Section 4.1, the context not only serves to distinguish the interjections proper from their homophonous lexemes (as with *wapi* and *bwana* above), but it also specifies the meanings of different homophonous interjections. The situation narrows down the interactional force of the interjection. The difference is shown by *basi* in [27], contrasted to [31] below.

[27] A little girl has been stung by a wasp under a guava tree that she and her mates were shaking. She comes screaming to her mother, K.

K: *Basi, basi*. Nyie mkiambiwa msiuchezee ule mpera hamsikii (louder crying) *Basi*, njoo nikutie barafu. [*There, there*. You don’t listen when you are told not to play with that guava tree. *There*, I’ll put some ice on that]

(In all three instances here, the second syllable is elided. The first *basi* is spoken with a

short rounded syllable, middle pitch, with a fall; the second with lower pitch, also short rounded syllable, slight fall; the third slightly lower pitch, but level, with a longer syllable).

Aka also shows similar intonational differences:

[28] L has been sent on an errand. Her mother wants her to take her little sister with her:

L: *Aaka!* Mye sfatani na watoto wadogo. [No! I'm not walking with little girls]

(aaka spoken with middle pitch, rising to high with a rounded syllable).

[29] Following a brief absence from the room, A gets back to find her diary is not where she had put it moments ago:

A: *Aaka!* [That's funny!]

S: Nini tena! [What now!]

A: Dairi yangu nimeiwacha hapa ssa hivi! [My diary was here just this minute]

S: Kaichukua Nuru huyo. [Nuru has taken it]

(This is the only case where the second syllable is the stressed syllable; the first is spoken with low pitch, is level, and the second is at a higher point).

Whereas K is rejecting her mother's request in [28], A in [29] is puzzled by the sudden disappearance.

These examples serve to bear out the observation made by various writers that interjections are context dependent; their full interpretation can only be reached within the situation of utterance (Evans 1992, Goffman 1981, Wilkins 1992). Hence, the "deictic" nature of interjections. According to Wilkins all interjections are deictic, or indexical, in that they are all context-bound, and they index elements in the extralinguistic context, which fill in the missing arguments in the propositions which underlie the interjections (1992:132).

4.3 Classification of Kiswahili interjections

As mentioned above many interjections stand alone, in the sense of not only occurring within their own tone groups and having different intonation patterns from the rest of the turn, but also as complete utterances, as turns. This property of interjections is used by Evans (1992:226), Wierzbicka (1992:164), and Wilkins (1992:128) as part of their definitions of interjections. The occurrence of interjections on their own as utterances has implications on their speech act status, as discussed above. There is no functional difference between these expressions, when they occur alone, and as co-utterances. The difference, as I have suggested above, is that in the latter case the other propositional content is specified. But as 'pragmatic particles' these expressions are expected to behave very differently from their functional specification in the lexicon.

I will now look at some IAs while taking account of some of the issues raised above. The four most common interjection types will be examined to demonstrate that their function as the expression of cultural identity can only be better understood if they are placed within a socio-cultural context, and are viewed as part of discursive and social practice.

The interjections that a speaker uses have to be in conformity with the behaviour expected from her within the occurring situation type. Interjections may be produced either in response to a situation, or in response to text, to something that has been said. They may be discourse initiators or ongoing. Whether or not they are accompanied by gesture will depend on the emotional impact of the stimulus, whether there are conventional gestures for the response, whether the speaker is responding willingly or under duress, and so on.

4.3.1 The expressive interjections

The use of interjections in the manifestation of the speaker's feelings and attitudes is perhaps the best documented. Such attitudes and feelings are often triggered by what is said in the discourse, but they may also arise from some event or action in the situation. Examples include:

- shabash, mashalla, heko* (approval, admiration)⁵
- ati, basi, bwana, lahaula, maskini, ole, tut tut tut*, (sympathy)
- ebo, nyo, ng'o, mawe, mavi, wapi* (scorn)
- ala, salaala, lahaula, lo* (surprise)
- ebo, kha* (anger)

The attitudes expressed by these interjections range from admiration to sympathy to surprise to extreme scorn. While the latter, such as *nyoo, mavi, ebo*, would usually have the consequence of the violation of the other's *heshima*, it has to be noted that they would rarely be used with reference to the addressee, but rather to some third party who is not present in the interaction. Alternatively, they may be used between very intimate interactants, or between ones who are socially so far apart that the risk of damage is worth taking.

The sympathy and apology interjections are at the other end of the politeness scale. They are used for a wide variety of situations in which sympathy and comfort are called for, as in example [27] above. These do not have to be ritualistic contexts, but in the exchange of sentiments which go a long way in making others feel that they are important members of the community, and that their sorrow is shared by others. I would say that this is a central function in the life of the community, and also central to any interaction in which the giving of sympathy and support is called for. The description given by members of the society for the whole process of condoling, for instance, points to this centrality.

4.3.2 The phatic interjections

These interjections occur extremely often in the day-to-day personal interactions of the Kiswahili speaking community.⁶ They form part of the speaker's attempts to maintain the

social networks to which she belongs, and to assure others of her goodwill and concern for them. They include the following:

- ahlan*, (greetings)
- afya, ati, aisee, enhe, ewaa, naam, tayib* (agreement)
- aka, hasha, la* (denial)
- shabash* (congratulations)
- audhu billahi, wallahi, inshallah, mtume* (religious 'punctuations')

In a society which is closely-knit, with very dense social networks, and in which there is very frequent interaction between members, there is usually strong concern on acceptance by others in the society, and this acceptance is judged largely on: a) the amount of interaction a member establishes with other members; a person who eschews inclusive activity and communal interaction will very quickly be marginalised, and b) the effort a member makes in maintaining her place and acting according to the recognised practices that accompany her position. In such a society, the individual's wants are subsumed by the demands made by others in the society, and the requirement by these others that the individual conforms to what is expected of her, and what would be considered acceptable from her in relation to others. Thus the choices that the Swahili speaker makes are justified by the extent to which she wants to retain her place in the social structure.

Wishing others well and indicating that one has time for them is an essential component of *heshima* (deference/respect). *Heshima* is to be observed at all times, unless the circumstances are of such an unusual nature that it can be suspended for a time. Most of these interjections can be replaced by other expressions or by gestures.

The interjections in this category serve the first purpose mentioned above, the maximisation of contact with other members of the community. For example, not only must greetings be exchanged, but they must be appropriate to the social relationship between the participants. Moreover, Kiswahili greetings very often consist of several turns, five or more, before the interactants can move on to other business (Omar 1991:60).

The "agreement" interjections are used in offering support and encouragement to what the other is saying, and in indicating simply that one is listening. Some of them, for example *aisee* (from English 'I say') and *ati*, have only recently taken on this function. They have the added implication of sympathy for the other. For instance:

[30] (constructed example)

A: Said ameondoka bila ya kunambia. [Said left without telling me]

B: *Aisee*.

A: Anafura kichwa siku hizi [He's getting big-headed these days]

B: *Ati*

They are thus used in the realisation of (b) above, the conforming to the society's

behavioural expectations. So do the religious 'affirmations', which seem to be used more as a confirmation of 'belonging', and doing the expected thing, than as a manifestation of one's belief.

4.3.3 *The directive interjections*

These are exemplified by the following:

kelele, shup (silencing)

chap chap (request to hurry)

sumile (request to make way)

habi (quietening a possessed person)

This constitutes the third largest group, used in getting others to do the speaker's bidding. It has been argued elsewhere that requests in Swahili society are not necessarily impositions, not necessarily face-threatening, since the high degree of reciprocity means that each member expects to benefit from others' actions at some time. However, this is not to say that requests are not generally expressed in as polite a way as possible. It is generally expected that members of the community would be deferential towards each other, as part of their attempts to contribute towards good understanding in the society. When one fails to be deferential, therefore, it is assumed that there is a reason for it, which is recognised by other members as such. The interjectional requests, however, are all performed 'bald-on-record' (Brown and Levinson 1987), without any linguistic means of mitigation. However, the situation in which such interjections are used can provide an excuse for deference to be suspended for a time. There are two situations in which this might happen: a) where the addressee is considered a powerless member in all community relations, both verbal and non-verbal. Children, for instance, have their interventions consistently edited, blocked or dismissed by adults. Talk addressed to them also tends to deny their full membership in the community. Thus, *kelele, shup, chap chap* are often used to children. b) where a high degree of urgency, or a sense of danger, is understood to be affecting the speaker's actions and talk. For instance, *sumile* is used when the speaker has to go through a crowd very fast either so she can attend to an urgent matter beyond, or so she can reach her destination and lay down a heavy burden. *Basi* can occur in a situation which calls for the immediate halting of a particular action, such as the pouring of a drink or the impending disclosure of some secret. A gesture of a raised hand would serve equally well here, as it too would be brief and get the required effect in the shortest possible time. *Habi* is even more of an emergency directive. Since there is a danger of the addressee hurting herself, deferential niceties can be dispensed with. The discourse used in spirit possession and spirit exorcising is not available to all members of the community. The roles of addresser and addressee in those situations take on additional perspectives, since the one possessed with the spirit is not addressed as herself but rather as the spirit.

4.3.4 The organisational/framing interjections

These IAs, as Evans remarks, serve in the organisation of discourse, suggesting what activity should or should not take place next, and marking transitions to new topics of conversation (1992:229). They affect the sequential organisation of the talk exchange, and have to do with turn taking decisions by the interactants. They may also be used to indicate an interactant's "state of consciousness" (Keller 1982:94), that she is ready to receive information or not; and they may be used to control the flow of conversation. They are exemplified by:

enhe, haya, je, basi, a a,

The following examples provide brief contexts for such IAs in Kiswahili:

[31] K and B are talking. N, K's daughter, interrupts

K: Tena tulishafika mbali, lakini hatuku... [And we had gone quite far, but we hadn't...]

N: Mama, niweke meza? [Mother, shall I lay the table?]

K: Kwani wenzako wamesharudi? [Why, have the others returned?]

N: Mbona zamani Mama [Quite a while ago, Mother]

K: Haya endelea. (To B) Watoto hawa, wamerudi nyumbani hata mama chechei hamna.
Basi, tukawa ... [OK, go ahead then. These children, they come back home without even a greeting to their mother. So, we were....]

(basi spoken with fairly high pitch, rounded syllable, falling to middle).

Basi serves as K's indication that she is now returning to the topic they were on before they were interrupted.

[32] M visits a friend, Z, and tells her that his father has been taken ill; their talk is then interrupted by a child asking for ice. When the child leaves, Z resumes by saying:

Z: *Haya*, nieleze, ilikuwaje? [*So* tell me, what happened?]

(haya spoken with short rounded syllable, starting at just below middle and rising to middle).

As Evans notes in relation to Mayali interjections, some of them are organisational not only in terms of discourse structure, but also in terms of non-verbal interaction (1992:227). The following interactions exemplify similar situations in Kiswahili:

[33] A is pouring out coffee for K, a guest:

K: *Basi, basi*. Mie kahawa inanipa tabu usiku. [*Enough, enough*. I get problems when I drink coffee at night].

A: *Alaa!* Wee kunywa unayoweza tu, *basi* [*Is that so?* You drink what you can then]

(The first basi spoken with middle pitch, level, long syllable; the second starts at the same level, with a short downturn).

K is using *basi* to make A stop pouring; it is thus A's non-verbal action that is being controlled by the IA. *Haya* can function in a similar way:

[34] M's family is visiting the neighbours. After a lengthy conversation, M moves to the edge of her chair, and says:

M: *Haya* [So!]

S: (M's husband): Twende enh? [Shall we go?]

M: Naona naam [I think so]

(*haya* spoken with low, level pitch, with slight drop to second syllable).

M's *haya* serves to indicate what should follow next in the series of actions the group had been carrying out.

Enhe often occurs where the speaker wants to start a new topic, or a new conversation, as in example [5] above, or encourage her interactant to continue with the turn, particularly after an interruption, as in:

[35] S and R are in the car driving:

R: barua kaipeleka kwake A na kwa kaka yake. Naskia anamchamba humo ndani!
[...She sent the letter to A and to her brother. I hear she tore her apart in that letter]

[S has to brake suddenly to avoid a cyclist]

S: Hawa wenye baskeli jamani! *Enhe!* [These cyclists! Yes, go on!]

R: Ndo hivo, kwa hiyo ikabidi kuitishwe kikao..... [That's it, so they had to call a family council]

Aa occurs where the speaker wants to constrain the form of the next utterance, or sometimes, the next action. It would serve to indicate that she is not prepared to accept a particular action, verbal or not:

[36] K with her children; K has come back from a wedding with some goodies for them:

Child: [extends hand to take a piece of cake] Mama mie bado sjapata [Mother I haven't got any]

F: Aa! Kwanza umenawa mikono! Toka, kakoshe mkono! [Hold it! Have you washed your hands? Off you go, go wash]

5. CONCLUSION

This article has been an attempt at extending the discussion of Swahili interjections by Eastman (1992), and suggesting additional considerations in the classification of interjections. While it is not disputed that interjections offer a good example of the interface between verbal and gestural expressions, it is argued here that the functions that speakers use interjections for point very much to their being central in the expression, processing and structure of conversation. It is suggested that using a speech function framework, and viewing interjections as acts, and therefore closely bound by context, may offer better insights on the centrality of interjections in conversation.

Interjections do not easily fit into a grammatical descriptive framework, and even their label points to their being within and between other stretches of discourse. They are

single word utterances which are definable wholly in terms of their functions in talk, and not in a phrase or a sentence. These functions are best seen within the framework of ethnography of communication, I argue. This framework allows us to focus on those sociocultural practices which inform the use of interjections.

NOTES

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- 1 Some may want to assert that the IFID itself is not without propositional content. An expression such as “I apologise”, or “I’m sorry” has both an argument and a predicate.
- 2 *Nyoo* has a slightly disrespectful ring to it. It would never be used to someone much older, for instance.
- 3 The interjectional forms which have homophones appear to have some idiomatic properties. The whole has nothing to do with the combination of its constituent morphemes.
- 4 The Tanzanian practice of extending the hand for one’s interactant to clap on may be seen as an example of an interjectional gesture.
- 5 These should be taken to be abbreviations for “may be used to express.....”.
- 6 Ameka (1992b) discusses in detail the meanings of two phatic interjections used in greeting and welcoming.

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