ENGLISH FEATURES IN KISWAHILI SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

All languages are transformed to some extent by other languages with which they are regularly in contact. Some languages are regarded as 'developed' insofar as they function as the dominant mode of communication in economically developed countries (e.g. in North America and Europe). The dominant speech communities of rich economies transmit new innovations and discoveries globally, which are then translated into languages described as 'developing' because their use is chiefly restricted to so-called economically developing nations, such as Tanzania. In this respect, English counts among the world's developed languages while Kiswahili is regarded as a developing language. Despite the general tendency to translate new expressions fully into a targeted developing language, there is evidence of foreign structures in Kiswahili when it is used in social media. This article analyses the English syntactic, morphological, phonological and lexical features of Kiswahili appearing in electronic platforms including WhatsApp, personal blogs (e.g. Michuziblogspot) and online social forums (e.g. Jamii Forum). This primary data is then analysed through back translation.

Key Words: *translation features, language, social media, markedness, borrowing*

Introduction

Scientific and technological advancement has exposed the general public to advanced tools and interactive platforms, regardless of the social class of participating users of the world wide web. People of all ages, education levels, and economic status have been brought together and are networking smoothly through e-mail correspondence, Facebook, blogs, online social forums, WhatsApp telephony, and other electronic communication platforms. Furthermore, nearly all the instructions available through the use of these electronic tools media are in a language other than the mother tongues of

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internet end-users who are nonetheless able to follow. Auer and Wei (2007) emphasise how globalisation offers increased opportunities for foreign language contact and multilingualism; and consequently many linguistic communities in Africa and Asia are losing their distinctive identities.

Routinely, innovations are generated globally from economically developed, mono-linguistic countries together with their dominant languages. Most African and some Asian countries learn the *lingua franca* of these economically developed countries and adopt the updated technology using these languages. As a result, in discussions concerning these innovations, they tend to code-switch between their own languages and the foreign language of technological delivery.

In addition and more generally, interactions throughout different social media range from professional to non- professional discourse. When discussing various topics, communicants normally use a language that they assume their correspondents know (e.g. Kiswahili in the context of Tanzania). The elites in these discussions sometimes translate certain information or knowledge from English into Kiswahili to facilitate communication of certain concepts or knowledge from English. In bilingual or multilingual interactions, speakers are tempted to make certain language choices. Some choices are marked while others are unmarked. Gross (2009) maintains that speakers make marked choices to negotiate a change in the expected social distance between the participants in an interaction by either increasing or decreasing that distance. Marked choices are sometimes used to redefine the relationship between speaker and addressee. In other words, marked language choices are used for various reasons, including expression of the speaker's authority or power, expressing veiled anger, or even asserting one's ethnic identity.

In addition, sometimes the speakers may opt to use translation methods in their interactions. The translators surveyed here are neither linguists nor professionals trained in that genre. Their translations, therefore, are marked due to literal translations, grammatical distortions and borrowings; to be discussed later in this article.

Paradis (2007) argues that the increased opportunities to become multilingual and bilingual are among the most significant social changes of postmodern times. Multilingualism prompts society to reconsider the idea of peaceful co-existence among different linguistic and cultural groups. Correlatively, researchers are not left behind in their study of the on-going effects occurring in the structure and vocabulary of the languages involved. The conversations with the most obvious manifestations of multilingualism are those which include the persistent use of more than one language; it is this

persistence which deforms the structure and literal translation of one of the languages in use.

Usually, multilingual speakers belong to social and economic elites; their multilingualism is a result of the recently increasing international mobility of highly skilled labour. In consequence, the interaction among these elites in social media involves certain characteristic kinds of linguistic behaviour such as code-switching, code-mixing and sometimes marked translations. It is not the focus of this article to discuss code-switching and code-mixing; we will focus here instead upon marked translations.

Given that the elites in our focus are not professional translators, in the course of translating certain concepts and expressions, their translations become easily marked in the text. That means they normally deviate from the standard linguistic and stylistic norms of the language in use. This paper analyses these features of translation in Kiswahili social media interactions, with the aim of characterising them.

Determinants of unnatural translation

In standard theories of translation, there is an emphasis upon what is known as 'translating naturally', with the intention of making the translation read as if it was written in the target language. Makaryk (1993) maintains that translation should not sound like a translation but as an original work written in the target language. The translator should seek to recreate in the target language the closest natural equivalent message with a view towards stimulating receptors to understand the original meaning and to respond to those meanings as the original receptor would (see also Nida and Taber 1969). Porter and Hess (2004) emphasise that while translating, the message should be tailored to the receptor's linguistic needs and expectations. The aim should be geared towards complete 'naturalness' of expression. Especially in the multi-lingual translation of newly encountered ideas and in discussions of technological innovations, the question that arises from these conventional directives is how to determine what makes a translation 'unnatural'.

In handling this issue of what determines the unnaturalness of a translation, it is imperative to begin with what causes unnatural structures in such communication. To begin with, there are certain translation practices that help us determine whether or not a given text is a translation from a different language. These practices include word-for-word rendering, literal translation, borrowing techniques, and applications of naturalisation or transcription when coining new terms or vocabulary. Sometimes transference is used – that is taking the word as it is from the source language and using it in the target language.

Normally the application of these techniques involves copying the source language's linguistic norms into the target language. The resulting text or expression indicates that the text or expression is a translation of a certain source language text because it reads unnaturally in the receptor's language.

Kihore (1989) argues that although the main aim in translation is to produce an equivalent meaning of the original text in another language, sometimes aspects of meaning and structure become affected. This is because natural languages differ in a number of ways, including variations among speakers of the languages involved. Each language is full of its own properties and carries its own peculiar semantic styles. In lexical meanings, for instance, translation of specific words requires various overtones and associations that are affected by the nearest corresponding words in another language. Arguing about the impossibility of total translation, Catford (1965) stresses that in the English language there are distinct units such as sentences, clauses, word groups or phrases, and individual words; and each of these categories is the carrier of a particular kind of meaningful grammatical pattern. From this contention, it is clear that marked structures in translation exist not only linguistically but also culturally and semantically, as not all language communities comprehend the world in the same manner. Apart from semantic losses, gaps or mismatches are also observed in phonological, morphological, syntactic as well as stylistic patterns of text, which become marked in the texts of multilingual internet communicators.

Markedness in interaction

This study has employed the markedness approach in characterising features of translation in social media interaction. The theory of markedness features two key concepts, namely 'marked' and 'unmarked' word choices. Gross (2009) argues that within the markedness model, all code choices fall along a continuum, as more or less marked or unmarked. The unmarked choices refer to the linguistic variety that is generally expected. In contrast, marked choices fall at the other end of this continuum; that is, they are in some sense unusual or unexpected for the particular social interaction. A structure becomes marked when it deviates from the norms of the language (i.e. phonological, lexical, or grammatical norms and patterns). As for unmarked structures, these follow standard linguistic patterns of the language.

The work of Myers-Scotton (1993, 1998) is based on this theory, in order to discuss issues of code choice in the context of code-switching. The main claim of Myers-Scotton is that speakers are rational actors who make code selections for certain purposes. All linguistic choices including code-switching; all are indices of social negotiation of rights and obligations

that exist between participants in a conversational exchange. The rights and obligations referred to here can be derived from any of the situational features present in an interaction, such as (i) the status of the participants, (ii) the topic, and (iii) the setting of their conversation (Coulmas 2013). Any of these three factors can influence code choices.

However, the markedness theory works beyond code-switching. The derivation of this theory dates back to the Prague School and then Generative Grammar, in which issues of grammatical markedness were discussed using the concepts of markedness and unmarkedness. Gafaranga (2007) contends that the idea of markedness originated from the Prague School of Linguistics, and was initially meant to account for phonological opposites of the sort such as voiced *versus* voiceless elements. The element with the feature in question would be referred to as marked while the one without it would be said to be unmarked. It was also noticed that the unmarked member of the pair was the most natural and the most frequently occurring. This idea of markedness was then adopted in other areas of linguistic description including morphology, syntax and semantics. This is why Myers-Scotton extended this idea to sociolinguistics, and especially to code-switching (Garafanga 2012). The linguistics scholar Kamwangalalu (2010) maintains that although Myers-Scotton concentrated on code-switching, she also wanted her model to be applicable for all phenomena reflecting linguistic choices. Subsequently, markedness theory has contributed significantly in the analysis and characterisation of various linguistic choices beyond code-switching.

Gafaranga (2007) argues that markedness features are observed in certain morphological characteristics of words. For example, for verbs with stem alterations between present and past tense, the present is unmarked while the past is marked. Likewise for nouns with alteration between singular and plural, the singular is supposedly the unmarked while the plural is a relatively marked pattern. Markedness is also discussed as frequency or repetition of forms or patterns in language structures. Mental representation of forms gets reinforced through repeated exposure or use. The most frequent forms have the strongest representation and therefore they are unmarked, while those which occur infrequently are marked.

Yan-qiun and Feng-Juan (2015) discuss three types of markedness in linguistics, namely: formal, distributional, and semantic markedness. Formal markedness refers to the presence or absence of formal features; and in words, formal markedness is reflected through derivation and inflection. Formal markedness refers to grammatical markedness (i.e. phonological, morphological and syntactic markedness). Formal markedness describes

linguistic structure through altering structural characteristics of a language, but only within formal or structural frameworks, independent of pragmatics. Generally, these marked and unmarked structures do not enjoy the same level of scale. The other two types of markedness are distributional and semantic markedness; these are somehow related. Distributional markedness refers to structures with general and specific meanings, whereby those structures with more general meaning are considered as unmarked while those with specific meanings are marked. With semantic markedness, Yan-qiun and Feng-Juan maintain that semantic marked words are more specific than semantic unmarked words.

This study is chiefly concerned with the first category of markedness, that is, the formal or structural markedness in the features of translation under study. It is not the aim of this study to characterise which structures are marked and which ones are unmarked, but rather to study and analyse marked structures in social media interactions. That is to say, all Kiswahili texts or translations with English features are defined as marked structures in social media interactions; and they signal translation practices that are characteristic of such interactions. As Yan-Qiun and Feng-Juan (2015) argue, markedness theory can be applied to the study of a range of linguistic fields, providing a new perspective to the study of language structure which illuminates certain linguistic phenomena.

Methodology

The data for this study was collected through the documentary review method. A review of various conversations was obtained from various Kiswahili blogs, WhatsApp interactions and from social forums. The aim was to capture thirty strings with English structural features from WhatsApp groups, Michuzi blogspots and Jamii Forum. The study employed both random and purposive sampling techniques. Three WhatsApp groups, Michuzi blogspots and Jamii Forum were purposely selected to represent all social media in the Kiswahili speaking community that use written text for interactions. These social media interactions attract many people from different social and economic categories (including both elites and non-elites, young and old, urban and rural residents). Generally, the interactions observed in these social media forums are open for anyone to read and to contribute, as long as the individual is a member or registered in the group. In addition, the themes of interactions here are unlimited; they are used for teaching and learning about various issues as well as for exchanging ideas openly. In that regard, themes from both specialised and non-specialised fields are presented and discussed for the aim of learning as well as informal socialising.

While reviewing WhatsApp interactions, three WhatsApp groups (of which the researcher is a member) were selected purposely in the sense that there was a group for specialized field (Medical Group) that has been established by a group of health practitioners to discuss and advice issues related to health. The other group that was used involves university students, which also are more likely to have translations in their discussion, apart from code-mixing or code-switching. The last group had members from different social classes and economic status. From the three WhatsApp groups, a total of ten strings were selected. From Michuzi blogspot and Jamii Forum, a number of interactions were randomly reviewed and a total of ten strings were selected from each platform. These strings have been presented thematically by grouping them according to types of phonological, morphological/lexical, syntactic, and stylistic features. In addition, to make the analysis more illuminating, back translation also has been employed; i.e. the data has been translated into English (in brackets) and the marked features italicised in the discussion and in the strings of the data presented.

Marked features in Kiswahili social media interactions

In studying thirty Kiswahili strings from the three purposely selected social media interactions, phonological, morphological/lexical, syntactic and stylistic features were observed to be easily marked due to the presence of English patterns or features.

Phonological features.

Markedness of phonological systems features in the majority of interactions in social media. These are usually affected in the course of translating certain foreign language terms or expressions, especially borrowed words where there are deviations in certain phonological patterns. In the online conversations studied, here are examples of marked words which turned up with phonological patterns that are not common in Kiswahili:

1. **Data A:** *Presha* kuelekea mechi ya Simba na Yanga . . .

   (Pressure towards the match between Simba and Young …)

   Data B: Tasnifu za *kukopi na kupesti* Chuo Kikuu ni hatari kwa elimu nchini.

   (Copy and paste dissertations at University endangers education in the country.)

Data C: *Nimeprinti* ripoti ya fedha nitamwachia mama P

(I have printed out the financial report and will leave it with P's mother.)

The unmarked phonological patterns in Kiswahili usage revealed here is that of CVCV. In the data above, the patterns in *presha*, *pesti* and *printi* are marked. It is uncommon to find a word in natural Kiswahili with /n/ and /t/ occurring together without a vowel between the two. Likewise, there could be a vowel separating sound /p/ and /r/ as well as /s/ and /t/. In other words, there is always a vowel between these consonants.

Paradis (2007) argues that bilingualism and multilingualism causes some shifts in certain accepted phonological patterns of one's language. There may be shifts from certain patterns characteristic of one language to those of other languages, and these become marked in conversations or texts. There also may be inventory of individual word forms without certain sound or phonemic systems, as observed in the data below:

1. Data D: Ulikumbuka kunizimia *kompyuta* yangu *besti angu*?

(Did you remember to switch off my computer for me my dear best friend?)

Data E: Mimi nawafahamu, ni *makomredi* hasa.

(I know them, they are comrades indeed.)

Data F: Jamani naomba tusiwe tunatuma *klipu* za video zisizohusiana na grupu hili, tunajaziana data na kumalizia na MB bure.

(Guys, please let's not share irrelevant clips to this group, they are consuming our MBs and space unnecessarily.)

Apart from English acronyms (i.e. 'grp' and 'MB') used in this interaction, the word *klipu* is marked in the conversation. The markedness results from failure to match with Kiswahili phonological pattern. Paradis (2007) asserts that language contact can display crossover effects from one phonological system to the other. The presence of such linguistic crossover effects may be predicted by whether the target language structure or linguistic system is marked or deformed. The presence of words like *kompyuta, besti, makomredi* and *klipu* deforms the Kiswahili phonological system which requires CVCV pattern and, therefore, features or characterises them as marked structures.

Morphological/lexical features

In Kiswahili social media interactions, morphological and/or lexical translation features were also observed as marked, through terminological variations or varied representations for a single concept/English term:

2. Data A: Mashine ya kutotoleshea mayai /Mashine ya kutotoleshea vifaranga/Mashine ya kuangulia mayai.

(Poultry egg incubator / Incubator for hatching chicks/ Incubator for hatching eggs)

Data B: … Inawezekana *kompyuta/ngamizi/tarakilishi* yako ilikuwa na matatizo.

(… Maybe your computer had some problems.)

In the three alternative translations in Data 2A above, the speakers were discussing about incubators but failed to have a Swahili equivalent to capture the concept 'incubator' and therefore ended up with three different equivalents. Similarly, the word 'computer' has a number of Kiswahili equivalents. In the above sample string 2B, the speaker used three alternative terms in making the point clear in the target language.

While messaging in some cases, speakers were adding English terms in brackets to show that the Kiswahili word is a translation of a certain English word/term. Thus:

Data C: Serikali imefuta posho ya kusahihisha mitihani ya *Utamirifu* (*Mock exams*) na *mitihani ya taifa* (*national exams*) kwa walimu.

(The Government has cancelled allowances for teachers marking Mock and National examinations.)

Data D: Jukwaa la Elimu (Education Forum)

Data E: Mshubiri (Aloe vera)

Data F: Maendeleo ya Elimu, Sayansi na Technolojia (Science &Technology)

(Education, Science and Technology developments)

The Kiswahili data in 2C-2F contain some English words in brackets. Although the brackets may have different interpretations, in these interactions they are making reference to the source language term or expression that has

been translated into Kiswahili. They all become marked when reading such texts. More examples are observed in the data below:

2. Data G: Unapomkubatia mkeo mkiwa mmelala husaidia kuzalisha *kichecheo (hormone)* cha furaha.

(Hugging your wife while on bed increases secretion of hormone for happy mood)

Generally, the use of brackets here explicitly signals translation. In monolingual communication, this is very common in most contexts where translation is used to enhance communication.

The presence of translation equivalents marks the fact that the speakers are bilingual or multilingual. In a bilingual or multilingual group, there is a simultaneous translation of vocabulary by looking for second language (L2) equivalents in first language (L1) (Lanza, 2007 and Paradis, 2007). In this case, English is L2 while Kiswahili is L1. The common trend observed here is that although there are efforts to look for Kiswahili equivalents for the English words or expressions, speakers are mostly interested in naturalisation (transcription) or borrowing techniques in rendering their message. Where they managed to get a Kiswahili equivalent, they are always tempted to put the English word or expression into brackets and therefore to mark them explicitly as translations from English into Kiswahili.

Syntactic features

Every language has its own distinctive syntactic patterns or features. In the Kiswahili social media conversations observed, certain syntactic structures are identifiable by their English patterns:

3. Data A: (i) *Salamu kwenu mabesti* zangu wote

(Greetings to you all my friends)

(ii) Pole sana. *Upone haraka*

(So sorry. Get well soon)

(iii) *Katika Jina la Yesu pokea uponyaji*

(In the Name of Jesus, get healed)

The syntactic structures of these phrases are pure translations of their English equivalent. In Data 3A (i-ii), the italicised expressions in the greetings are the literal translations of their English equivalents. The natural Kiswahili greetings and the commonly used constructions in this context would be 3A (i-ii) *Habari zenu rafiki zangu wote* and *Pole sana. Tunakuombea upone*

mapema. The expression *Salaam kwenu ...* is an English word-for-word or literal translation of *Greetings to you all ...* In the last string 3A (iii), it is a religious expression in English that has been translated literally into Kiswahili, and therefore does not follow the Kiswahili syntactic pattern. The acceptable Kiswahili pattern would be *Nakuombea upone katika Jina la Yesu*. Here are some more examples of this kind:

3. Data B: (1) Napendekeza tutoe *Kumi elfu*

(I suggest we contribute ten thousand)

(2) Mimi naona tutoe *Kumi na tano elfu* kila mmoja

(I suggest we contribute fifteen thousand each)

(3) Mpaka sasa tumefikisha jumla *Sabini elfu* tu

(We have seventy thousand only so far)

In these italicised strings, there is a complete alteration of the Kiswahili syntactic structure of the noun phrases. Here the structure in Kiswahili has followed closely the English structure. The common Kiswahili pattern would be *elfu kumi*, *elfu kumi na tano* and *elfu sabini*, respectively. Kiswahili noun phrases have a structure of noun followed by qualifiers such as adjectives. The word *elfu* here acts as a noun and the numbers or specific figures like *kumi na tano*, *sabini*, *kumi* are qualifiers; and so in Kiswahili they should come after the noun. As for Lanza (2007), bilingual or multilingual speakers are more likely to affect the syntactic patterns of their languages in a monolingual conversation; and this is what was observed in these Kiswahili conversations and texts. In most cases, speakers usually reverted to using English patterns to describe figures.

Stylistic features

These are related to idioms and other cultural expressions. Chen (2009) explains that idiom is a special kind of expression which has developed within a language and is part of the general vocabulary of that language. *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English* (1988) defines an 'idiom' as an artefact of language peculiar to a people, district, community or class. Certain English stylistic features were observed to be idiosyncratic to the Kiswahili social media interactions sampled:

4. Data A: Naomba *mniazime masikio yenu*

(Please, lend me your ears)

Data B: Namheshimu sana na *ninaomba kutambua uwepo wake*

(I highly respect him and may I acknowledge his presence)

Data C: Mashine za kunyolea *hupelekea* maambukizi kutoka kwa mtu mmoja kwenda kwa mwingine

(Shaving machines transmit infectious diseases from one person to another)

Data D: *Imenichukua miaka 10* kuwaelewa wanaume

(It has taken me 10 years to understand men)

Data E: *Mwisho wa siku* unaweza kuumbuka

(At the end of the day you may be ashamed)

In these examples, the italicised expressions are purely literal translations from English expressions or sayings. Swahili speakers have been borrowing certain stylistic expressions in different contexts and using them as if they were natural expressions from Kiswahili. Idioms are the most difficult part of conversation to render. Chen (2009) lists three methods to translate idioms: (i) translating literally, (ii) rendering the sense of the idioms (descriptive translation), and (iii) using equivalent idioms in the receptor language. However, among the three, literal translation is the most commonly used tactic for translating idioms or sayings and is also the primary means of cultural exchange. This indicates that certain translations sometimes follow closely the forms of the source language, and therefore these become marked. For technical and cultural expressions, the techniques of naturalisation, description, and borrowing or transference are used to solve the problems of non-equivalence (Malangwa 2014, Ping 1996). Literal translation enriches the receptor language in terms of expressions, sayings, and idioms. It is through this tactic that we find certain idioms in more than one language mirroring each other.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, several issues can be drawn from this discussion. First, the use of translation in Kiswahili social media interactions may signal social distance or status among the participants. In fact, translation is used as a tactic to avoid code-switching with the aim of making effective communication. Since social media platforms involve people with radically varying social and economic backgrounds, translation is inevitable in their conversation in order

to enable the non-elites to follow the conversation, or to avoid leaving them behind. However, as useful as it is, a close analysis shows that some words and strings become marked in the texts and these attract investigation.

Heine and Kuteva (2005) argue that due to language contact, any part of a language's structure can be transferred from one language to another. Some of the ways this happens is through code-switching, code-mixing, and translation. In social media interactions, one can discover that some people translate because they are bilingual and they wish sometimes to use expressions familiar in another language in order to signal their bilingualism. It can also be noted that in certain social media platforms, there are those who write using brackets to mark explicitly that they are using the translation of an expression from a different language. Lastly, one can observe that people sometimes translate because they are communicating something already published in another language. This is very common in Kiswahili social media interactions, especially in conversations that involve professional knowledge that involves specialised jargon.

In general, the transfer of certain lexical and grammatical features across languages is very common, not only in Kiswahili but also in many languages around the world. In the Kiswahili social media interactions analysed here, these clearly observable common features ranged from linguistic to idiomatic, falling into recognisably distinct categories of phonology, lexicality, syntax, and stylistics.

It can be concluded that translation in Kiswahili social media interactions occurs both consciously and unconsciously. It is consciously done through the inclusion of idioms (i.e. stylistic features) and through the use of technical jargon (i.e. terminologies); and it is unconsciously deployed in new concepts or themes and in some syntactic elements. When people interact online about scientific and technological innovations, for example, the translation is done consciously because the speakers know that they are communicating new information, and they assume it will also be new to the target language community. The innovation is presented as generating from a certain foreign language community.

Secondly, the transferred structures from a certain foreign language are marked as weeds which can be uprooted or left to grow with other structures in the language system. This suggests that some weeds enrich the receptor language while others distort it. Sometimes, when speakers fail to translate, they may decide to use a foreign word without indicating that they are doing so. This is what they call code-switching in sociolinguistics.

Lastly, it should be noted here that translation has any number of players or actors. There are many people in the background who are translating incessantly, either consciously or unconsciously. Their contributions should be recognised and appreciated. They are playing an important role in the transfer of knowledge and information from one language to another. In social media interactions, for instance, there are informed elites and non-elites interacting about social, political, technological, and economic issues. These successful communications of knowledge transfer are achieved through translation and interpretation. An important component in the study of social epistemology and the global knowledge society, therefore, is to continue describing and analysing the characteristics of these translations.

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