

## **POLITENESS PHENOMENA: A CASE OF KISWAHILI HONORIFICS**

JOHN HAMU HABWE

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This paper discusses Standard Kiswahili honorifics in Nairobi. It used observation as a means of obtaining data in Nairobi where Standard Kiswahili is also spoken. It points out that honorifics are a chief politeness strategy across many discourse domains; Kiswahili honorifics are conspicuously used and seem easy to learn; honorifics complement other politeness strategies; they are used in both formal and informal encounters. This paper also argues that honorifics in expressing face saving ideals in Kiswahili language have both a social and individual appeal. There is, therefore, a strong suggestion for social face and communal based politeness as opposed to individual politeness in Kiswahili. This paper observes that politeness and especially by means of honorifics makes a Kiswahili conversational encounter fruitful. The honorifics also help to define, redefine and sustain social strata that are used as a basis of expressing face-saving ideals and politeness in Kiswahili and hence contributing to less conflict in interaction and strengthening cohesion in society in question.

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### **1. Background**

This discussion of honorifics is based on Standard Kiswahili spoken in Nairobi. It does not include the various Kiswahili dialects like *Kimvita*, *Kiamu*, *Kimtang'ata Kitikuu*, *Kiunguja*, *Kingazija*, etc spoken along the Kenyan, Somali, Tanzanian coast up to Mozambique (Chiraghdin and Mnyampala 1977).

The Standard Kiswahili that is the focus of this paper came into existence in the 1930s as a result of conscious standardization efforts that saw the language modernized and expanded to its present form (Whiteley 1968; Mazrui & Mazrui 1995). The language has related but yet different roles in the East African region where it has most of its speakers ranging from native, near native to even non native speakers. Standard Kiswahili is Tanzania's national and official language. In Uganda, the language growth process has been painstakingly slow over the years. However, despite having no official status it serves as one of the media languages; it is a language that is used in transmitting education on Aids, fighting crime and a preferred language for interethnic unity in Uganda besides being a language for politicians from Eastern Uganda (Mukuthuria 2006: 161; Whiteley 1969; Habwe 2009). In Kenya, it has been and still is a national language, and now a first official language after the new constitution that came into force on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 2010. As a matter of fact it is Kenya's unifying and detribalizing language.

In Africa politeness is preferred. Politeness defines and sustains social hierarchies which are used to show respect and esteem. Conversational encounters in Nairobi may be more polite than the popular belief that they are impolite. We define politeness as a linguistic attempt to uphold an individual's face by avoiding face threatening acts and minimizing conflict and maximizing cost for the speaker in order to have a fruitful encounter that is mutually accept-

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able to all and the society in question (Leech 1983; Levinson 1983; Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987).

The expression of polite behavior is somewhat complex. It involves many strategies. One strategy is related to age. For those speakers who are Muslim, for example, it is the younger person who initiates a greeting to the elderly person.

- (1) *shikamo bibi*  
'I hold your feet, lady (said by younger person)'  
*marahaba mwanangu*  
'thank you, my child (said by an elderly person)'

For those interactants that are not Muslim, the younger person is expected to initiate a greeting as a way of respecting the old. The elderly person is then expected to reply to show appreciation. This is meant to ensure polite behavior in an interaction.

If a conversation were to proceed for some time, it would be impolite for the younger person to interrupt when the elderly person is talking. It is still true that when somebody is talking to his boss, the boss may most time take the lead in the conversational encounter. A junior police or army officer addresses his boss using appropriate honorific terms.

Varied strategies are employed to maintain politeness in Nairobi. Some of these other strategies include indirectness strategies that involve asking questions instead of directly saying something. A direct statement may constitute an imposition and therefore impolite language (Leech 1983).

Other strategies include approbation of other people and self-demeaning to make the listener happy and appreciative. For example:

- (2) *mimi sikufikii katika uimbaji*  
'I am not your match in singing (used to maintain cordial relation)'
- (3) *heko kaka kwa takrima yako kwetu*  
'thanks (elder) brother for your kindness to us'

Most of the interactants also make sure that as they converse they minimize disagreement by using strategies that reduce conflict and enhance agreement and hence politeness.

Sometimes polite terms like *tafadhali* 'please', *pole* 'sorry', *kwa hisani yako* 'at your will', are used to enhance meaningful talk and politeness between Nairobi interactants.

Most of the above cited strategies are often used in Nairobi Kiswahili. When they are used, they make the interactions more polite. Two or more strategies may be combined hence making the encounter even more polite. Honorifics are, however, a more central and conspicuous means of enhancing politeness and making sure that polite behavior is shown or expressed.

It is assumed face threatening to refer to somebody who has a higher status, familial or professional or otherwise merely by his name. Such a reference could amount to a face threat-

ening act and meet out impoliteness. It is with this understanding the present paper is conceived. The paper seeks to understand the honorific system in Kiswahili and how it functions in redressing impolite encounters.

## 2. Data and methodology

Data for this study was collected over a period of six months in Nairobi. Being a permanent resident of Nairobi I observed contextual use of honorifics in the Nairobi city and its environs.

Nairobi is Kenya's capital city and its economic centre with a hub of economic and political activity and therefore intense linguistic interaction. It is arguably Kenya's point of convergence for most speakers of different cultures, languages and dialects. For the speakers who come from varied native linguistic backgrounds e.g. Nilotic, Bantu and Cushitic and non native backgrounds to communicate, they need a language common to all of them. One option for these speakers is English, which is Kenya's second official language. The other option is Standard Kiswahili which is Kenya's national and official language. We were strongly concerned with polite language forms and especially honorific usage in Nairobi. We focussed on honorifics because they are commonly used in Nairobi yet very little research has been conducted on them to establish how they work as politeness strategies and the extent of their use.

Most of the commonly used honorifics were *bibi* 'lady', *bwana* 'gentleman/sir' and *mzee* 'old man'. On the other hand, other honorific terms like *sheikh* 'muslim leader', *mtume* 'prophet', *ustadh* 'muslim teacher' were fairly uncommon, occurring in particular contexts only.

It was also noted that use and meaning of particular honorifics was to be understood within some specific contexts. Change of context for some honorific terms yielded different results. For example, the use of *bwana* 'sir' among boys of the same age group yielded no or very little honorific results and did not have politeness implications. In some cases it only sounded comical. But usage of the same honorific term with people who had a status difference yielded honorific effect with attendant politeness results. An example would be for instance a prison officer and his boss or a clerk and his manager or director.

In our investigation we specifically focused on employees and their employers, students with their educators, children with their parents, the ruled with their rulers, the young and the old. We found out that there was recourse to honorific use that fostered politeness which was meant to establish good social bonding and politeness by their junior members of society showing respect for their senior members. Conversely, people in higher hierarchies occasionally needed honorific references to address their juniors to avoid face threatening acts that might ruin a good conversational encounter.

### 3. Honorifics defined

Most researchers agree that an honorific is a term used to refer to linguistic expressions like *bibi* ‘lady’ and *bwana* ‘sir/gentleman’ that denote respect, honor, friendship and social esteem and are therefore crucial for politeness needs. These linguistic expressions can be syntactic or morphological as it is the case with Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean languages. But again, they could be lexical like as is the case in Standard Kiswahili (Brown and Levinson 1987, Levinson 1997, Crystal 2003, Habwe 1999, Msanjila 1989).

However, Mathew’s (1997) definition of honorifics is the most revealing. From him an honorific is a pronoun form or a verb etc. used in expressing respect for someone, e.g. of higher status. He makes a distinction between a subject honorific and an object honorific. The former is an honorific used in subject position and the latter is an honorific used in object position.

Richards et al. (1985:131) concur with Matthews. However they are even more illustrious in their definition. They say honorifics are:

“... politeness formula in a particular language, which may be specific affixes, words or sentence structures. Languages which have a complex system of honorifics are for instance, Japanese, Madurese [a language of Eastern Java] and Hindi. Although English has no complex system of honorifics, expressions such as, would you ..., may I ..., and polite addresser forms fulfill similar functions.”

An honorific term from the available literature (Msanjila 1989; Nwoye 1992; Mathews 1997) is to be viewed as different from a rank or just a title which is not associated with social esteem like *askari* ‘soldier’, *mhadhiri* ‘lecturer’. An honorific term must of necessity show that the person, to whom it is used, is shown respect and consequently politeness. In Kiswahili honorifics are used whether the referee is present or not in the discourse situation. Indeed, honorifics are not just meant to show politeness to the individual in question but also to the society which makes such demands when certain references are used. For example in a case where reference is made to a person not present in a discourse situation, one may say:

- (4) *msalimie mwalimu ukifika nyumbani*  
 ‘greet the teacher, when you arrive home’

### 4. Kiswahili honorifics.

Honorifics abound in Kiswahili language. These honorifics could perhaps fall into four main categories.

#### 4.1 Age category

The first main category is the age category. It has relatively few honorifics. This type of honorific is defined against the backdrop of age difference. The category includes honorifics like *kaka* ‘elder brother’, *dada* ‘elder sister’, and *mzee* ‘a generally elderly person’.

## 4.2 Familial category

This second category includes honorifics which are familial. These are honorifics that are based on family hierarchies. In a sense they have a relationship with the age honorifics yet they are a little different in that the familial honorifics do not necessarily signal an age hierarchy. Such familial honorifics are *baba* ‘father’, *mama* ‘mother’, *shangazi* ‘aunt’, *mjomba* ‘uncle’, *ami* ‘father’s brother’, or *baba mdogo* ‘young uncle’, *mama mdogo* ‘young aunt’, *baba mkubwa* ‘elderly uncle’, *mama mkubwa* ‘elderly aunt’, etc.

## 4.3 Occupational category

This third category consists of occupational honorifics. These are honorifics that relate to job or occupational hierarchies and sometimes even known societal positions. These occupational honorifics can further be divided into smaller groups that are used in specific sites. Some of these are religious honorifics for example: *askofu* ‘bishop’, *maalim* ‘religious teacher’, *mtume* ‘prophet’, *mchungaji* ‘pastor’, *sheikh* ‘muslim sheikh, leader’. Academic honorifics include *mwalimu* ‘teacher’, *profesa* ‘professor’, *mhandisi* ‘engineer’, *ustadhi* ‘teacher’. The following examples are political honorifics: *mheshimiwa* ‘honourable’, *waziri* ‘minister’, *mtukufu* ‘his excellency’.

In most cases, an occupational rank can be used as an honorific. This is the case for *ustadhi* ‘teacher’, *imam* ‘muslim leader’ or even *askofu* ‘bishop’. However, in a number of cases this is not true. Job titles like *mhadhiri* ‘lecturer’, *mbunge* ‘member of parliament’ are not used as honorifics. Whereas *askari* ‘soldier’ is non-honorific, the term *afande* ‘soldier of higher rank’ is generally used to show respect and consequently politeness in the army and police force. It is generally observed that ranks of white-collar jobs and even blue collar jobs are easily used as honorifics.

However, many terms that refer to low paying jobs which are socially ranked low are hardly ever used for saving face. Terms that refer to low paying jobs are *mpishi* ‘cook’, *mfa-giaji* ‘sweeper’, *mkwezi* ‘climber’, etc. In any case, in the Kiswahili society, it is the people with low social ranking occupationally that refer to their seniors with honorific terms. Of course, these people could enjoy honorific reference if in familial circles if they are in such positions that would make them be referred to with honour, as *mama*, ‘mother’ *baba*, ‘father’, *mjomba* ‘uncle’, etc.

## 4.4 Homily category

This category is made up of homily references. It comprises the fewest honorifics in comparison to the other categories (see appendix). They include *marehemu* ‘the late’ *hayati* ‘the late (reserved for dignitaries)’ and *mwenda zake* ‘the departed’, etc.

We must concede here that these categories are not hard and fast. Sometimes these categories are collapsed, for example; age honorifics could be used as familial honorifics.

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Msanjila (1989), in a sociolinguistic survey, attempts class-based honorific classification. He, for instance, argues that in the Tanzania before *ujamaa* ‘socialism’ certain honorifics like *mtukufu* ‘holy one or majesty’, *mheshimiwa* ‘honourable’ and *bwana/bibi* ‘gentleman’/ ‘lady’ were used in referring to presidents, upper class, and middle class people, respectively. He further reveals that after *ujamaa* ‘socialism’ all the honorifics of political power changed to *ndugu* ‘brother’ or perhaps ‘comrade’ – something that was later to be contested by members of parliament asking for a more dignifying reference system. The class-based classification by Msanjila is not productive though. Before or after *ujamaa* the categories Msanjila identifies could fit neatly in our classifications above (see the appendix). Even more interestingly, *ndugu* came to be associated with many meanings; ‘brother’, ‘associate’, ‘sister’, ‘fellow country men’; ‘fellow poor’ so that the exact intent of the honorific became blurred.

Kiswahili honorifics normally precede the surname of the subject in formal situations. In informal situations like in a home environment, the honorifics may be used before the first name or even a family name. For example, *mama Alice* ‘mother Alice’ *baba Jimmy* ‘father Jimmy’ etc. In a sentential context, the honorifics may come at the beginning or at the end of a sentence as the example below shows with differing effect. Only rarely does the honorific come in the middle of a sentence.

- (5) *mwalimu Kazungu* ‘teacher Kazungu’
- (6) *askofu Ngozi* ‘Bishop Ngozi’
- (7) *nitakuja kukuona, mwalimu*  
‘I will come to see you, teacher’
- (8) *mwalimu, nitakuja kukuona*  
‘teacher, I will come to see you’

It seems that when an honorific reference comes at the beginning of a sentence it is more focused than when it comes at the end. Sometimes Kiswahili may use a number of honorifics in a cluster to enhance politeness concerns. Sometimes the tone, emphasis, with which the honorifics is said could increase and maximize politeness. When it so happens such a cluster is meant to show intensity or increased politeness. For example:

- (9) *mtukufu mheshimiwa mzee Moi*  
‘his excellency, honourable, elder Moi’
- (10) *ndugu mwalimu*  
‘brother teacher’
- (11) *ndugu mchungaji*  
‘brother pastor’
- (12) *ndugu mwenyekiti*  
‘brother chairman’

#### 4.5 Combinations

It appears that combinations of honorific references are a bit rare. When they occur, they combine familial and occupational honorifics as a way of reinforcing politeness.

In some contexts these clusters may be used pejoratively. They are then used to make fun of honorific titles. In Kenya, during the rule of President Daniel arap Moi, for example, there was so much emphasis on honorific use to the extent that allegiance to the dictatorial rule of the President was to be measured through the use of honorifics. Most politicians, seeking to show awe and allegiance were forced to cluster together honorifics, something that sometimes caused amusement in some contexts. Sometimes Moi would be referred to by using honorific terms that were traditionally reserved for God like *mtukufu* ‘the holy one’. This was a circus or language game that regarded honorific use very highly.

Another form of cluster is to be seen in Tanzanian usage where expressions like the following are common.

- (13) *ndugu rais* ‘brother president’
- (14) *ndugu waziri Mkuu* ‘brother prime minister’
- (15) *ndugu mkuu wa mkoa* ‘brother provincial commissioner’
- (16) *ndugu mwenyekiti* ‘brother Mr. chairman’

When such honorifics are used in a cluster, the honorifics have a sense of focus – the most preferred honorific preceding the rest. The other honorifics follow in their order of importance and focus.

Kiswahili honorifics appear to be easily learned during language acquisition or learning. Most speakers use honorifics a lot more easily than other strategies which need a high level of communicative competence. However, more research on this claim needs to be conducted. In this research most users of Kiswahili displayed enormous competence and application of this particular strategy-which led us to this conclusion albeit tentative.

When interactants use other politeness strategies, for example, tact, sometimes they use these strategies alongside honorifics. Honorifics complementing other strategies possibly strengthen the esteem and politeness being expressed.

- (17) *mchungaji, naweza kukuuliza jambo?*  
‘pastor, could I ask you something?’

In example (17) a politeness strategy (i.e. the use of a question) is accompanied by an honorific to attenuate impoliteness because there is a direct intrusion on somebody’s rights and privacy and therefore the need is felt for a question and an honorific reference.

#### 4.6 Honorifics in context

Kiswahili honorifics work in varied contexts. *Baba* ‘father’, for example, besides being a familiar honorific is a religious honorific referring to both God and religious leaders like *baba matakatifu* ‘the holy father’. Besides, *baba* ‘father’ is used in politics to refer to the president as *baba Moi* ‘father Moi’ intended to mean a caring president. *Mama* ‘mother’ can be used in a number of contexts like *mama John* ‘the mother of John’, *mama mchungaji* ‘pastor’s wife’, *mama wa taifa* ‘the president’s wife’.

Another honorific with varied uses is *mzee* ‘older person’. It is used in occupational circles to refer to a boss, a rich person or an older person deserving respect for his good behavior. In the family, it is used to refer to both father and grandfather. *Mzee* could be used by a loving wife to refer to her husband. Other times it could be used by members of the community to refer to somebody’s husband. It is also used to refer to a mother and grandmother. In all these cases, *mzee* is used to show respect. It is commonly used alone in the subject position, as in *wazee wangu wote wamefarika* ‘all my parents are dead’. When used alone it is thought to be more polite.

*Bibi* ‘lady’ is another Kiswahili honorific with varied usage. Whereas it is commonly used to refer to a married woman even in cases where *mke* ‘wife’ would be more appropriate like in family domains, it is also used to refer to grandmother in family circles. Besides, it is used to refer to young women, as in *bibi mdogo* ‘young woman’. The honorific *bibi* ‘lady’ is also widely used in political circles to refer to women of higher ranking and women in general (see Habwe 1999).

*Bwana* ‘sir’ like the antonym *bibi* ‘lady’ has an unusually high and varied usage in many discourse domains. *Bwana* could be used to refer to a husband in family circles. Besides, it could also be used to refer to a boss, or an employer. In family circles it could be used to refer to young men affectively, as in *bwana mdogo* ‘young man’. In church, *bwana Yesu* is used to refer to Jesus Christ more politely. In political domains, *bwana* could be used to refer to men of high ranking or just men who are honoured. Note the common expression: *mabibi na mabwana* ‘ladies and gentlemen’ (Habwe 1999).

*Ndugu* ‘brother’ is another heavily loaded honorific term in the Nairobi usage. Ordinarily it is used to refer to brother or sister in family circles. It could also be used to refer to fellow country man. Furthermore, it could be used to refer to close relatives and close associates. In church discourse and Islamic discourse, it is used to refer to fellow Muslim or fellow Christians. *Ndugu* has attracted many meanings which are not initially associated with the honorific term, but popular, all the same.

*Mheshimiwa* ‘honourable’ is used in political circles to refer to presidents, ministers, assistant ministers and members of parliament. It is also used to refer to men and women of high ranking like ambassadors, and permanent secretaries. Sometimes it is used to refer to the rich, as in the saying *wale ni waheshimiwa* ‘those are the rich and mighty’.

*Shangazi* ‘aunt’ refers to father’s sister. But there are many incidents in which it is used to refer to respectable and caring people. There was a popular programme on the then voice of Kenya programme called *Shangazi Dolly*. The honorific reference meant an elderly caring person.

*Shemeji* ‘in-law’ has a comparatively restricted usage in Nairobi as opposed to its usage in Tanzania. In Nairobi, *shemeji* is used affectively to refer to wife’s brother or sister or husband’s brother or sister. It is mostly used in familial circles. Only rarely is it used to refer affectively to ‘wife’s’ or ‘husband’s’ tribesmen. In Tanzania, any person, friend or associate of your husband or wife could pass as *shemeji* ‘in-law’. It is an honorific, which, according to my view, is meant to show bonding and cohesion of members who may not otherwise have a clear affective term to use. It is used alone in the subject position, as in *shemeji, karibu nyumbani* ‘in-law, welcome at home’.

It is interesting to note that even when honorifics are used in different contexts and domains, the speakers are able to understand their usage with minimal effort expended.

### 5. 1. Formal and informal situations

Unlike the English honorifics that are mainly limited to formal situations, Kiswahili honorifics cut across formal and informal situations. It could possibly be argued that Kiswahili honorifics are as high in formal situations as they are in informal ones.

The table in the appendix reveals more honorifics for the occupational category than any other. Many times in conversational encounters honorifics could replace the subjects, when honorifics in Kiswahili replace the subject they become highly deictic requiring a context of situation for interpretation. For example:

(18) *sheikh anakuja kwetu nyumbani*  
‘sheikh is coming to our home’

(19) *mwalimu ni mzuri*  
‘the teacher is good’

(20) *shangazi atafika leo*  
‘aunt will come today’

*Sheikh* is an honorific term referring to a Muslim teacher and leader. The honorific term is normally used alone when the context is such that the intended hearer can derive the meaning.

In most cases, Kiswahili honorifics trade off. If the context is informal say, in the home, familial honorifics get a higher rating vis-à-vis the formal ones. The same is true for formal situations where originally familial honorifics are seldom used and in their place occupational honorifics like *bwana* ‘sir’, *bibi* ‘madam’, *mheshimiwa* ‘honorable’ etc. are favored. A few familial honorifics denote gender. They include, amongst others, *bibi* ‘lady’, *bwana* ‘sir’, *shangazi* ‘aunt’, *mjomba* ‘uncle’, *jami* ‘brother to father’ and *khalati* ‘sister to mother’. It is

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interesting to observe that these honorifics do mark gender although Kiswahili is not a gender marking language per se

### 5.2 Honorifics in reference the dead

It is interesting to note that Kiswahili language extends honorific references to the dead. The language has a few honorifics which are used to show esteem to the dead and therefore politeness for the dead, family members and the society that knew them. The following are the examples:

(21) *marehemu Herman*  
'the late Herman'

(22) *hayati Herman*  
'the late Herman'

(23) *mwenda zake Herman*  
'the departed Herman'

*Marehemu* and *hayati* are regularly used as honorifics for the dead. Such honorifics are understood because Standard Kiswahili is used by people who feel the dead need to have their faces saved as well as that of their relatives.

The use of honorifics to refer to the dead serves to reinforce the social character of Kiswahili honorifics. This is because the dead are not present in the politeness bargain but it is the society which is putting a demand on such references. The dead need to be treated with decency before and after burial. The dead, though gone, are regarded as active members of the Kiswahili society who need to be referred to affectively. When the dead are not being referred to with politeness factors in mind one could refer to them as *kimba* 'dead body', *maiti* 'dead', *mfu* 'dead one', *mwili* 'dead body', etc. This would be the case when, for example, there is a body which you are not obliged to refer to in a way to show emotional respect, like a body by the roadside unknown to the interlocutors.

### 5.3. Honorifics and deities

Even more interesting, sometimes the honorifics for human beings could be used for deities. Such honorifics are like *Bwana*, *Mtukufu*, and *Baba* as in the following examples:

(24) *Baba Mungu ametujaalia*  
'God the Father has blessed us'

(25) *Bwana Mungu ni mzuri*  
'the Lord God is good'

(26) *Mola Mtukufu atambariki*  
'the Holy God will bless him'

It must be strongly emphasized that many other honorifics are used to refer to God like *Mwenyezi* ‘the caring One’, *Mwadhama* ‘the holy One’ and they could vary with religions like Islam and Christianity etc. The reference to God with honorifics used for men seems interesting. However, it must be emphasized that this is not an attempt to equate God with human beings but rather a human way of showing awe to their God as well as respect, honour and hence politeness in matters regarding religion.

#### 5.4. Honorifics in Reference to Parents

Kiswahili honorifics are sometimes used to address parents. These honorifics are used when referring to somebody as a father or a mother. They are a special sub-class of familial honorifics. References like *baba Kamau*, ‘father Kamau’ *mama Kamau* ‘mother Kamau’ are not uncommon. These are references that denote some familial status. Standard Kiswahili in Nairobi is spoken by people who have a high respect for parents who need to be referred to using polite forms revealing the esteem and honour for them.

Sometimes, instead of full forms like *baba Kamau* ‘father Kamau’ and *mama Kamau* ‘mother Kamau’, shorter forms have been developed over time. These are *ma Kamau* and *ba Kamau* respectively. The latter forms are more economical and therefore preferred.

It would sound impolite if, instead of using *baba Kamau*, in case of a male parent, one used the father’s name, say, *Kamangu wa Maina*. Such a highly respected familial honorific can always be used for redress when a face threatening act is likely and as such it helps to facilitate a polite conversational encounter. Consider the following example:

- (27) *baba Kamau, tutajiunga naye baadaye*  
‘father Kamau, we shall join him later’

This context would have paved way for impoliteness of exclusion. However, the impoliteness has been attenuated by the honorific reference, *baba Kamau*. The references to parents are mostly used by people living in the same neighborhood. Children use these honorific references more than adults in Nairobi.

#### 5.5. Truth violation strategy

The Kiswahili honorifics are many times used in violation of the truth maxim of the cooperative principle by the philosopher Paul Grice. Nurses could be referred to as *daktari* ‘doctor’, and an ordinary lecturer at university could be referred to as *profesa* ‘professor’. It is also common for an assistant minister to be referred to as *waziri* ‘minister’. Most speakers feel that in a case where there is no appropriate honorific one could use one which is close by to show social elevation and empathy and hence politeness. *Chifu* ‘chief’ could be used to refer to an assistant chief and *mwanangu* ‘my child’ could be used to refer to somebody not one’s own child. Again a driver of a vehicle is normally referred to as ‘pilot’ instead of *dereva* ‘driver’ as a means of relating affectively.

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The use of honorifics in violation of the truth Gricean maxim and other uses lend a lot of support to the Hymian idea of communicative competence as compared to the Chomskyan concept of linguistic competence. This therefore means that, besides mastering how Kiswahili language is grammatically organized, Nairobi language learners also have to master rules of its use, especially rules governed by politeness.

It is generally to be understood that politeness is a social requirement in Standard Kiswahili. Sometimes, if someone does not show politeness, people would gossip about him. They may even reprimand him openly. Standard Kiswahili then seems to have features which Yahya-Othman (1995) discusses for the Zanzibar dialect of Kiswahili. Perhaps an important question in this regard is how then is it polite if it has a social demand to it? The Tanzanian case that Msanjila refers to is quite revealing (see section 4). Tanzania members of parliament argued that *ndugu* 'comrade' in the quasi socialist republic was not good enough as an honorific reference for them. They needed something more serious in politeness terms like *mheshimiwa* 'honourable' or *mtukufu* 'his holiness' as they are used in neighbouring capitalist Kenya.

### 6. Areas of further investigation

Kiswahili honorifics in the Nairobi Standard Kiswahili raise a number of questions which are of profound interest to pragmatic investigation and discourse in general.

Some honorifics like the ones pointed out belong to certain categories. However, they show decay in those contexts as honorifics and move to other contexts where they then are used more for politeness reasons. Honorifics like *dada* 'elder sister', *kaka* 'elder brother' are cases in point. They no longer function effectively as honorific terms in familial circles marking age-related hierarchies. The honorific *dada* 'elder sister' now is a term in Christian religious circles. It means a female member who is born again and very much committed to salvation therefore deserving affective reference. *Kaka* and even *mzee* signal a breakdown in age related honorifics as politeness negotiating strategies. Is age becoming a less and less important factor in politeness? More research needs to be done possibly taking into consideration a larger sample, which also includes honorifics used by native speakers of Kiswahili.

Further research could also determine whether men in Nairobi are more polite than women in the use of honorifics in Kiswahili language.

### 7. Conclusion.

This paper set out to understand Standard Kiswahili honorifics in Nairobi. It found out that honorifics are an essential means of expressing politeness among people of Nairobi. The centrality of honorifics in Standard Kiswahili was shown as the honorifics are used in reference to senior members of society, people who have a higher social ranking, deities and even the dead. Besides arguing for social politeness as what defines the nature of Kiswahili honorifics, the study found out that there were more honorifics in the occupational category than in the

other categories we distinguished. This means that more emphasis is laid on the use of honorifics in formal situations although the honorifics cut across both formal and informal settings. The study also revealed that Kiswahili honorifics often complement other politeness strategies in order to reinforce politeness values which are a major individual and social concern in Nairobi. The assumption by Brown and Levinson (1987) that interlocutors are potentially aggressive is not necessarily true in regard to Standard Kiswahili society since honorific usage and politeness etiquette is expected in most encounters where interlocutors are defined socially.

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### A TABLE SHOWING COMMON HONORIFICS IN NAIROBI – APPENDIX<sup>1</sup>

Honorifics	Gloss	Occupatio- nal	Familial	Age	Homily	Reli- gious
1. <i>Afande</i>		soldier of higher rank				
2. <i>Askofu</i>	bishop					church leader
3. <i>Baba</i>	father		father	elderly man		God/ church elder
4. <i>Baba Juma</i>	the father of X		male par- ent			
5. <i>Baba wa Taifa</i>	president	president				
6. <i>Babu</i>	grandfather		grandfa- ther	elderly man		
7. <i>Balozi</i>	ambassador	diplomat				
8. <i>Bibi</i>	lady	female boss	grandmo- ther/wife	elderly woman		

<sup>1</sup> It needs to be understood that the above table shows original categories of honorifics but it does not discount crossover usage in different contexts other than the original ones.

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Honorifics	Gloss	Occupatio- nal	Familial	Age	Homily	Reli- gious
9. <i>Brigedia</i>	brigadier	army leader				church leader
10. <i>Bwana</i>	gentleman	male boss/sir	male member/ husband			
11. <i>Chifu</i>	chief	administra- tive leader				
12. <i>Dada</i>	sister		elder sister	older woman		
13. <i>Daktari</i>	doctor	PhD holder physician				
14. <i>Diwani</i>	counselor	civic leader				
15. <i>Hakimu</i>	magistrate					
16. <i>Hayati</i>	the late				the late	
17. <i>Kadhi</i>	judge	muslim judge				
18. <i>Kaka</i>	brother		elder brother	older		
19. <i>Kanali</i>	colonel	army leader				
20. <i>Maalim</i>	teacher					muslim teacher
21. <i>Malkia</i>	queen	female po- litical leader				
22. <i>Mama</i>	mother		mother	elderly		church leader
23. <i>Mama wa Taifa</i>	first lady	wife to the president				
24. <i>Mama X</i>	the mother of X		female parent			
25. <i>Mare-</i>	the late				departed	

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Honorifics	Gloss	Occupatio- nal	Familial	Age	Homily	Reli- gious
<i>hemu</i>						
26. <i>Meneja</i>	manager	administra- tive leader				
27. <i>Meya</i>	mayor	civic leader				
28. <i>Mfalme</i>	king	political leader				
29. <i>Mhandisi</i>	engineer	engineer				
30. <i>Mheshimiwa</i>	honorable	political leader				
31. <i>Mhubiri</i>	pastor					church leader
32. <i>Mjomba</i>	uncle		maternal uncle			
33. <i>Mkuru- genzi</i>	director	company director				
34. <i>Mtukufu</i>	holy one	president				
35. <i>Mtume</i>	prophet					spiritual leader
36. <i>Muad- hama</i>	revered	religious leader				church leader
37. <i>Musta- hiki</i>	highness	leader of high rank- ing				spiritual leader
38. <i>Mwalimu</i>	teacher	educatio- nist				church leader
39. <i>Mwen- dazake</i>	departed				departed	
40. <i>Mwen- yekiti</i>	chairman	leader				church Leader
41. <i>Mwinjil- isti</i>	evangelist					religious leader

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Honorifics	Gloss	Occupatio- nal	Familial	Age	Homily	Reli- gious
42. <i>Mzee</i>	elder	father		old		church elder
43. <i>Ndugu</i>	brother		brother			
44. <i>Profesa</i>	professor	university academic leader				
45. <i>Rais</i>	president	president				
46. <i>Shangazi</i>	aunt		aunt			
47. <i>Ustaadh</i>	teacher	teacher				
48. <i>Wakili</i>	advocate	legal leader				
50. <i>Waziri</i>	minister	political Leader				
51. <i>Shemeji</i>	in-law		in-law			