

## FOLKLINGUISTIC PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS KENYAN VARIETIES OF SWAHILI

PETER GITHINJI & MARTIN NJOROGÉ

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This paper examines the perceptions of Kenyans towards the way other Kenyans speak Swahili from a folklinguistic perspective. The study involved two main tasks. In the first task, informants were provided with blank maps of the country and asked to identify areas where they thought there was a distinct way of speaking Swahili. In the second task, they were provided with the same map showing Kenya's eight provinces and asked to rank them in terms of correctness, attractiveness and closeness to the way they speak Swahili. The results show little or no difference between the rankings of correctness versus pleasantness of Swahili varieties. The study also shows that Kenyans do not identify with the normative variety modeled on the standardized or Kenyan coastal Swahili which is used in the schools or mass media. Similar to other studies in perceptual dialectology, the informants' judgments were influenced by their background knowledge and stereotypes about different regions that have little or no relationship with linguistics factors per se. Unlike other studies in perceptual dialectology however, languages that are not the object of study have a strong influence on respondents' perceptions. Beside the ethnic stereotypes that characterize Kenya's multilingual discourse, Kenyans' attitudes towards varieties of Swahili seem to be filtered through the lens of a competitive hegemonic language that has enjoyed historical advantage. As a result, the promotion of an idealized variety of Swahili in light of the dominance of English and the continued use of local languages is not likely to increase its acceptability as a national and official language.

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### Introduction

The majority of language attitude studies in Kenya have mostly focused on the hierarchical ranking of English, Swahili, Sheng and mother tongues in terms of use and preference (e.g., Githiora 2002; Fink 2005; Mukhwana 2008; 2013; Kioko & Muthwii 2010) among others. Migunda-Attyang's (2007) research on attitudes towards Sheng and Mukhwana's (2014) work on attitudes towards Kenyan urban Swahili are rare examples of language attitude research that do not compare one language with another. One common finding in all comparative language attitude studies in Kenya has been the high status of English, followed by Swahili and finally the indigenous languages. These findings are hardly surprising given that English has enjoyed dominance as the sole official language from the colonial period until 2010 when the new Kenyan constitution made Swahili the second official language. Although Swahili has been the National language since 1974 following a presidential decree (Harries 1976), its expanded role following the promulgation of the constitution in 2010 has not been accompanied by a dramatic shift from its subordinate role vis-à-vis that of English in Kenya's national psyche. Although Swahili scholars have consistently argued for the critical contribution of the language to national

integration and the promotion of a national identity (e.g., King'ei 2002; Muaka 2011), English remains the language of instruction, and many official government documents have not been translated into Swahili. It will take some time and interventionist policies before the effect of Swahili's new status as an official language on Kenyan's attitudes can be assessed. It is with this reality in mind that this study was designed, not only to capture this moment in history, but also to examine the possible challenges that the language is likely to face in its new dispensation. This is because the beliefs that Kenyans have about Swahili, how and where it is spoken, as well as self evaluation of the speakers' performance are important in expanding our understanding of Swahili's acceptance in a linguistically competitive environment.

This study is anchored in perceptual dialectology, a sub-field of sociolinguistics that looks at beliefs about language rather than the actual performance data from the non-linguist's perspective (Preston 1989; Benson 2003; Boughton 2006). We believe that a comprehensive picture of perceptions towards Swahili is impossible if we only have an idealized standard which is only mastered by a small fraction; rather the true picture emerges by examining its many varieties spoken across the country, hence our focus on peoples beliefs about the different ways that Swahili is spoken in the country.

Earlier work on Swahili dialectology has touched on different topics ranging from their exact number, distribution, lexicostatistics to their structural properties. The majority of scholars put the number of Swahili dialects at 15 (e.g., Stigand 1915; Chiragdin & Mnyapala 1977; Polome 1967; Karanja 2012). This number varies slightly from the 14 dialects mentioned by Hinnebusch (1996) or the 16 given by Nabhany (1995). Khalid's (1977) count of 20 dialects is perhaps the most controversial due to his deliberate exclusion of *Kiunguja*, the Zanzibar dialect on which Standard Swahili is based, and the puzzling inclusion of *Kimafia* and *Kisokotra*, which are not mentioned by other scholars. The majority of these dialects derive their names from the geographical areas where they are spoken and these areas stretch from Southern Somalia in the north to the Comoros Islands in the south. Somalia has only *Chimiini*, which is also called *Chibarazi* or *Chibarawa* and is spoken around Barawa area, though Polome (1967) claims that Kibajuni mostly identified with northern Kenya was spoken as far north as Kismayu in Somalia. The Kenyan dialects include *Kitikuu (Kibajuni)*, *Kiamu*, *Kisiu*, *Kipate*, *Kimvita*, *Kijomvu*, *Kingare*, *Chichifundi* and *Kivumba*. Nabhany (1995), however, classifies *Kingare* alongside *Kimtang'ata* which is spoken in Tanzania as a border dialect. The main dialect of mainland Tanzania is *Kimrima* while the rest of the dialects are spoken on the islands; i.e., *Kipemba* in Pemba island and *Kiunguja*, *Kitumbatu* and *Kimakunduchi (Kihadimu)* which are all spoken on Zanzibar. The remaining three dialects *Kinzواني (Anjouan)*, *Kingazija (Grande Comoro)* and *Kimwali (Moheli Island)* are spoken on the Comoro islands.

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

Swahili dialectologists have not been spared by the old sociolinguistic conundrum of distinguishing languages from dialects or dialects from sub-dialects as pointed out by Dixon (2002) and Wolfram (2008). Since these decisions are not normally based on linguistic criteria, it is mostly left to the scholar's discretion to determine what counts as languages or dialects. Stigand's (1915) list, for instance, includes names like *Kingao*, *Kishela* and *Kingovi* which are usually excluded by other scholars. Similarly, Polome's (1967) list excludes *Kingare* and *Kijomvu* opting to list them as sub dialects under *Kimvita*, the Mombasa dialect. This dilemma is complicated by the mention of Swahili varieties that have received little attention from scholars. On the periphery of Polome's list of major dialects, for instance, non-coastal varieties such as *Kishamba* (up-country Swahili) and *Kingwana* (spoken in Democratic Republic of Congo) are also mentioned, though he does not recognize them as dialects. The same goes for sociolects like *Kisettla* (settlers' speech); e.g., Whiteley (1969), Nurse (1997), Vitale (1980) and Muthiani (1979) which has been attributed to colonial settlers and their servants, in addition to *Kihindi* (Whiteley 1969), the Indian shopkeepers' Swahili, and *Kivita*, the army jargon (Polome 1967). Contemporary scholarship of Swahili in Congo has, however, pointed out the shortfalls of the use of *Kingwana* as a blanket term for the constellation of Swahili varieties spoken in Congo, instead opting for more localized varieties like *Bukavu Swahili* (e.g., Goyvaerts 2007), *Lumbubashi Swahili* (e.g., Schicho 1992), *Kisangani Swahili* (e.g., Nassenstein 2015) or *Kivu Swahili* (e.g., Nassenstein & Baraka Bose 2016) among others. The exit of colonialism seems to have prevented further study of *Kisettla* and *Kihindi* varieties.

Recent studies in Swahili scholarship are broadening the paradigms in Swahili dialectology by highlighting varieties sidelined in traditional Swahili dialectology. Nico Nassenstein is one such prolific author whose work covers linguistic practices in East And central Africa. He has written on *Bunia Swahili* (Nassenstein 2016) *Kisangani Swahili* (Nassentein 2015), *Kivu Swahili* (Nassenstein & Baraka Bose 2016) among others. Besides his work on Congolese varieties, Nassentein has also worked on Mombasa Swahili-based '*Coasti slang*' (Nassenstein 2016) and Ugandan Urban Swahili (Nassenstein 2016). Mutonya and Parson's (2004) description of *KiKAR* — a variety of Swahili used by the King African's Rifle during the colonial period, and Kipacha's (2005) description of *Kingome*, a dialect spoken in Mafia island, are expanding the field of Swahili dialectology in terms of both social dialects and regional dialects. Also to be included in this area are urban varieties of Swahili such as *Sheng* in Kenya (Githiora 2002) and Reuster-Jahn and Kießling's (2006) description of *Lugha ya Mtaani* in Tanzania which must be viewed along the Swahili dialect continuum. All these studies provide interesting paradigms of Swahili dialectology. Our study contributes to scholarship in this interesting field.

Recognizing that Swahili is no longer confined to coastal Swahili ethnic group, this study shifts the focus from traditional coastal dialects to contemporary varieties of Swahili spoken throughout the country. As aforementioned, previous studies on Swahili dialectology have mainly focused on the coastal dialects; but since Swahili is used widely across the country as an additional language, there are various influences from the speakers' first languages that have had an impact on the way it is spoken. In addition, there are shared stereotypes about the way Kenyans from different ethnic groups pronounce certain phonemes when speaking English or Swahili. Dholuo L1 speakers are known to substitute /š/ with /s/ while Kisii and Meru speakers are stereotyped with the overuse of prenasalization of /b/ and /g/. Similarly, the Kamba are known for word-initial drop or addition of /h/. Amongst the Luhya speakers, word initial /p/ and /b/ are freely interchanged. Next, free variation in the pronunciation of /t/ and /d/ and /k/ and /g/ among the Kalenjins is a common stereotype. Meanwhile, the Kikuyu speakers are caricatured by their replacement of all instances of /l/ with /r/ while Somalis are said to disregard grammatical agreements. These stereotypes provide fodder for Kenyan humor and have been heavily exploited by comedians in their portrayal of different ethnic groups. From a variationist's perspective, realization of these variables can constitute some of the defining features for ethnic based varieties of Swahili which broadens our definition of Swahili dialects.

### **Perceptual dialectology**

This study is inspired by Preston's work in Folk linguistics. Folk dialectology or folk linguistics differs from traditional dialectology in that traditional dialectology relies on production data where the presence or absence of linguistic features in a certain area is used to determine the dialect boundary. Perceptual dialectology or Folk linguistics, on the other hand, relies on subjective perception about language from the folk, or those not trained in formal linguistics (Preston 1996, 1999; Boughton 2006, Iannàccaro & Dell'Aquila 2001, Benson 2003). The folk linguists or "[n]on-linguists can pass judgment on a language variety without justifying that judgment phonologically, syntactically or lexically, or adhering to the precept that all varieties are linguistically equal' (Kuiper 2005:29). Surprisingly though, one comes across interesting parallels on boundary mapping in findings from folk dialectology and those of production dialectology. Preston's 1996 study for instance, shows that raters in the USA identify the South, North, and Midwest as recognizable dialect areas in the US — a characterization also captured in production tasks like the TELSUR project by Labov, Ash & Boberg (2006). Similarly, Benson's (2003) study of the perceptual maps of Ohio dialects provides some striking similarities with Flanigan's (2000) proposal for a dialect map of Ohio. While such similarities can be dismissed as coincidental, they cannot be ignored either given that folklinguistics is more than just the mapping of dialect boundaries. It uncovers attitudes and ideologies that guide the evaluations of

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

language varieties by the users who experience the language in their daily lives. As Preston (2000:136) notes,

“... the study of folk behavior is dynamic as well as static. In a modern folk linguistics, it will be important to observe the routes folks follow in thinking through problems about language as well as the content of their prepackaged items and traditional structures of beliefs. Whatever role these latter may play in more active processes.”

Kuiper (2005:29) further argues that perceptual dialectology and production dialectology can complement each other in providing a holistic picture when he claims that “[t]o supplement data on the extent to which subjects can say ‘speak to me and maybe I’ll tell you where you’re from,’ researchers also need to know to what extent the same subjects can say ‘[t]ell me where you’re from, and maybe I’ll tell you how you speak.’” Language users may stereotype an area based on their perceived notions of how people from that area speak a language, but they can also stereotype a language spoken in a certain region based on their perceived notions of the inhabitants of that region. These perceptions are not uniform across the speech community and are to a large extent influenced by individual informant’s knowledge of the area surveyed.

Standard languages are normally associated with power and prestige, while non standard languages are valued for their affective attributes. In the majority of instances, standard languages are rated higher on status attributes such as correctness while non-standard varieties of language are ranked highly in affective attributes like pleasantness and attractiveness. Speakers who speak standard languages or varieties associated with power tend to look down upon other competing languages that may alter the status quo. This may lead speakers of stigmatized non-standard languages to have low confidence or linguistic insecurity (Labov 1966; Macaulay 1975; Baron 1976) in their varieties. This motivates them to attempt to minimize, erase or downplay the differences between their varieties and the varieties associated with power while emphasizing the affective attributes of their local variety. The dynamics between status and solidarity languages has also been captured in Trudgill’s (1972) characterization of overt versus covert prestige. Overt prestige is associated with identified power and dominance while covert prestige is normally associated with working class values, masculinity and local solidarity.

In order to find out if the same arguments about power and solidarity mentioned in previous literature can be extended to a widely spoken language that is not associated with power and status, we adapted Preston’s (1999) map drawing methodology in our study. We chose Swahili, the regional lingua franca in East and Central Africa as well as the national and official language of Kenya and Tanzania. We sought to find out if the empowerment of Swahili, following its elevation to co-official status after 2010 changed Kenyans’ perceptions towards it. Since attitudes

toward the language or a speech variety normally influence the way it is perceived in society (Dittmar and Schlobinski 1988), would Swahili's new status alter the way it is perceived by different groups of speakers? Moreover, given that the advocacy for Swahili's elevation as a national and official language revolves around its power to unify Kenyans, to what extent will its new status accomplish this goal? In addition, every language displays different forms of variation; how are these variations perceived by Swahili speakers and what are the implications with respect to acceptability of Swahili as a viable competitor with English and ethnic languages in Kenya's linguistic marketplace?

### **The methodology**

This study was conducted in two locations in Kenya—Kenyatta University's (KU) main campus in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, and its branch campus in Mombasa, at the Kenyan coast. These locations were chosen for three reasons: 1) We expected that the Nairobi location would be diverse, reflecting the convergence of respondents from different linguistic backgrounds. We also expected that the respondents from Nairobi would be influenced or at least be aware of the linguistic practices in the city. We also hoped that the location of Mombasa in the Swahili speaking region would bring in respondents mostly drawn from the region, or at least familiar with the linguistic practices in the coastal areas. 2) It was also going to be easy to process the research permit to serve the two locations from the research office at the head office and finally, 3) one of the researchers was a faculty member at the Nairobi campus.

The respondents were asked to perform three tasks. The first part dealt with demographic information such as place of origin, sex, age, languages and languages spoken and some few open ended questions. The second part of the questionnaire involved drawing and labeling of maps. The respondents were presented with a blank map and asked to subdivide it indicating where they thought there are distinct accents<sup>1</sup> of Swahili. They were also asked to give qualitative labels or identify some of the characteristics of the accents of areas that they had identified. In the third task, the respondents were provided with another map with 8 regions and they were asked to rank the regions in terms of correctness, attractiveness and degree of similarities or differences to the way they spoke Swahili. All respondents were asked to write down their self given aliases, county of origin and gender, on each page.

Once the process had received the Ohio University IRB approval, research clearance was sought from Kenyatta University. Assistance was sought from professors to distribute questionnaires to the students in the presence of one of the researchers. Although the study

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<sup>1</sup> We opted for the term 'accent' rather than 'dialect' out of realization that up-country varieties of Swahili exhibit L1 influence. Moreover, using the term 'dialect' would have been problematic because Kenyans' sense of 'dialect' only applies to the traditional coastal varieties.

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

targeted respondents with no background in linguistics, we were aware that the students had taken classes in Swahili and English and that at both primary and secondary schools rudimentary linguistics topics are taught but we did not regard these to be serious issues. At KU Nairobi campus, we collected 65 questionnaires with participants drawn from undergraduate majoring in Education and Nursing and Graduate students from Immunology Department. From KU Mombasa campus, we collected 47 questionnaires with respondents drawn from different majors. In all, we had 114 participants exceeding our target of 100.

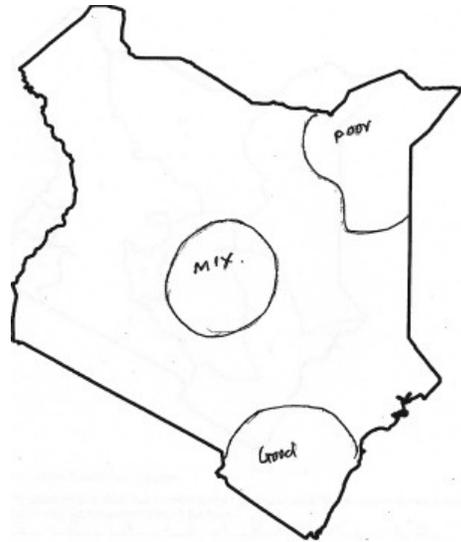
### **The Results**

#### *Mapping the areas where different varieties of Swahili are spoken*

In the dialect area identification task, the majority of the respondents' maps displayed either a lack of understanding of the task at hand or a limited grasp of Kenyan geography. Although the respondents were asked to assume that everyone in Kenya could speak Swahili, only 51 maps had significant information while the rest were left blank or had drawings that did not display any understanding of the task at hand. This is one of the shortfalls of this kind of perceptual dialectology research. Nevertheless, some common patterns and some peculiarities arose from the maps that were demarcated and labeled. Map 1 drawn by Respondent A7 below, for example, provides a clear understanding of the well known distinction between coastal Swahili and Swahili as spoken in the rest of the country. Obviously, the respondent is aware that Swahili is natively spoken in the coastal areas whereas the majority of the upcountry speakers speak Swahili as a second language. Hence, the coastal Kenyans are viewed as speaking 'pure Swahili' while the Swahili spoken upcountry is characterized by mother tongue influence and other 'distortions'. Map 2 also identifies the coastal region and labels it as the area where "good" Swahili is spoken while the variety spoken in the central areas is labeled as mixed. The respondent is perhaps alluding to the use of Sheng — an urban variety of Swahili (Githinji, 2006, 2008), as well as the widespread codeswitching by the city inhabitants who come from different linguistic backgrounds (Myers-Scotton, 1993). It is interesting that the respondent who drew map 2 labels his home region as a place with "poor" Swahili, an opinion shared by many respondents in this task. The feeling of linguistic insecurity mentioned earlier (Labov, 1966; Macaulay, 1975; Baron, 1976) cannot be ruled out here.



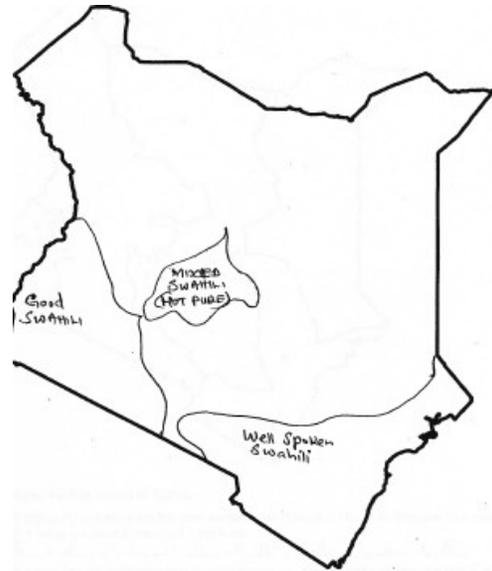
Map 1: Respondent A7 from Makueni



Map 2: Respondent A17 from Wajir



Map 3: Respondent A20 from Machakos



Map 4: Respondent B29 from Nyeri

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

The next set of maps is more detailed than the first. Like map 1 and 2, the coastal Swahili continues to be labeled as the “Well-spoken Swahili” or “Kiswahili Sanifu” or standard Swahili. Similarly, the central area is labeled as “Sheng: mchanganyiko wa Kiswahili na English” (Sheng: the mixture of Swahili and English, PG) and “Mixed Swahili (Not pure)” Again we find the recognition of the coastal region as the home of pure Swahili while Nairobi and the surrounding areas are viewed as speaking a mixed variety of Swahili. Map 3 introduces the ethnic dimension in identification of Swahili dialects with the area around Lake Victoria labeled as the “Dholuo Swahili” while the mid-southern area is labeled “Kiswahili Kimaasai” as a reflection of the major ethnic groups who live there (Luo and Maasai). It is not clear why the respondent in Map 4 think the area around Lake Vitoria has “good Swahili”. It is obvious that this respondent does not have the Luo speakers in mind since the Swahili spoken by the Luos is considered the worst by the majority of the respondents. It is likely that this label applies to the neighboring Luhya and Kisii speakers who are considered to be good speakers of Swahili.

Although Map 5 below identifies two dialect areas similar to Map 1, there is no hint of the coastal versus the rest of the country. The separation of the Northern part of Kenya from the rest of the country is a clear indication of the respondent’s awareness of the long history of marginalization of the region from the mainstream socioeconomic order. The area’s remoteness from the mainstream economic activities and low participation in the education system prevents the region from sharing many national norms with other Kenyans thus marking their speech as different. A more detailed description is provided in Map 6 that displays 6 distinct regions. The respondent’s key to the numbered regions is as follows; 1) pure and mixed; 2) sheng; 3) affected by mother tongue influence and inability to pronounce some letters; 4) Somali accent; 5) distorted i.e., “chai wangu” instead if “chai yangu”; and 6) not sure whether they speak any Swahili. The respondent’s region 1 recognizes the coastal variety as ‘pure’ but is also aware that language mixing takes place as well, perhaps because of the historical relevance of Mombasa, the second largest city whose economic contribution to the national economy attracts migrants from other parts of the country. It is also possible that ‘mixed’ here refers to traces of Arabic in the coastal varieties of Swahili. Region 2 clearly refers to Nairobi whose language mixing has already been mentioned. Regions 4-6 references the influence of indigenous languages with specific reference to the Somali accent (region 4), and the caricatured Dholuo Swahili around Lake Victoria (Region 5) which ignores the rules of Swahili noun class agreement. The Turkana people, one of the most marginalized communities are not regarded as speaking Swahili at all, at least from the perspective of this respondent who hails from an area that speaks ‘pure’ Swahili.



Map 5: Respondent D69 from Taita Taveta



Map 6: Respondent D78 from Taita Taveta

The sentiments from the respondent D78 (Map 6) are echoed in maps 7 and 8. In Map 7, The Turkana people from the Northwestern regions are perceived as “don’t even know Swahili” while the Somali people “hardly speak Swahili”. Similar to map 6, respondent C53 in Map 7 characterizes the Coast as speaking “Good Swahili” with “tone variation in accent”. It is interesting that the term accent would be used when referring to coastal Swahili given that the majority of coastal inhabitants are native or near native speakers of Swahili. The respondent might not be aware that “accent” and “tone” are value laden linguistic terms, however, the intonation in coastal Swahili is generally admired by Kenyan. Again the Swahili spoken around Lake Victoria is viewed as marked by its failure to follow grammatical rules “no articles in language use” referring to nominal class agreement in Swahili grammar. The Swahili spoken in the Rift valley region where the majority of inhabitants belong to the Nilo-Saharan language group is regarded as having “acute mother tongue influence” probably in reference to the voicing feature swapping between sounds [t] and [d] and [k] and [g] among the Kalenjin. Interestingly, the respondent who hails from Kakamega labels his region as the area with worst pronunciation, perhaps a reference to the stereotyped interchanging of sounds [p] and [b] among the Luhya. Nairobi Swahili is considered the “worst Swahili” by this respondent, again a reference to Sheng and other form of language mixing mentioned earlier. Map 8 is equally detailed with different varieties of Swahili identified with the ethnic communities found in areas where those varieties are spoken. However, the respondent pinpoints how each variety deviates from Standard Swahili (the respondents hails from Mombasa, a region associated with pure Swahili). North Eastern

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

Swahili and Kalenjin Swahili are labeled as having “poor vocabulary”, the Luo Swahili “poor subject verb agreement” and “wrong tenses” while Kamba and Kikuyu Swahili have “mother tongue interference”. Coastal Swahili is labeled as having a “unique intonation” with “borrowing from English” while nothing is said of the Luhya Swahili in this map.



Map 7: Respondent C53 from Kakamega

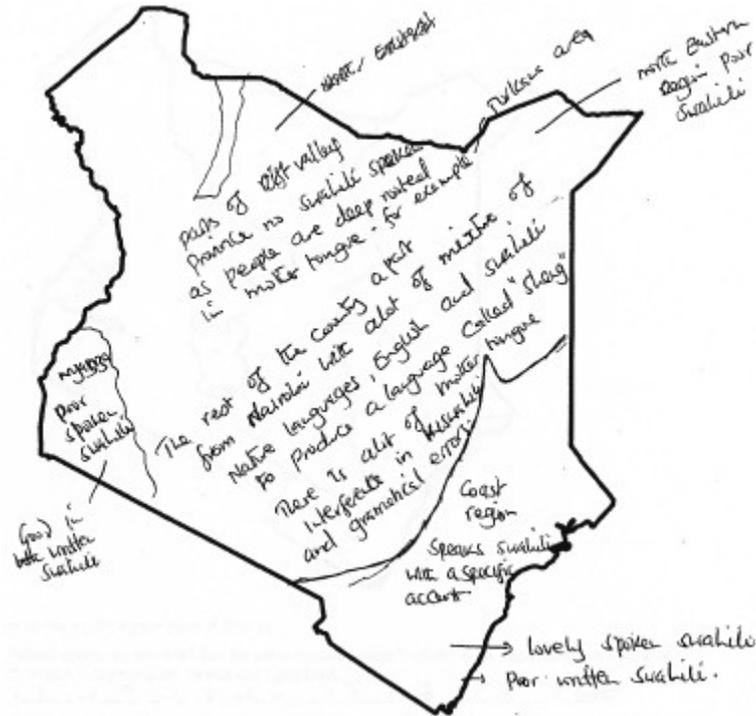


Map 8: Respondent D76 from Mombasa

Map 9 adds another interesting dimension on the way Swahili is viewed in Kenya. The respondent claims that the use of ethnic languages is deeply rooted in parts of the rift valley and cites Turkana as an example, something alluded to in maps 5, 6 and 7. Though the North Eastern region is regarded as a “poor Swahili” region, the rest of the country is regarded as speaking Swahili with influence from their mother tongues which results in “grammatical errors”. The respondent’s commentary also mentions “Sheng” in Nairobi as a mixture of “Swahili, English” and “native languages”. Map 9 contrasts the Coastal Swahili and the Nyanza Swahili. While the coastal region has a “lovely spoken Swahili”, it is characterized by “poor written Swahili”; something that baffles the examiners in National Swahili exams (these exams are all written and Coastal students who are native Swahili speakers normally perform poorly). The “poor spoken Swahili” in Nyanza has been mentioned earlier, but the respondent points out that the region is

“good in written Swahili”. The respondents also specifically identifies Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu as regions with “good spoken Swahili with a Swahili accent” while Nyanza is also labeled as “very poor Swahili with many errors’. These three coastal cities are home to the majority of Swahili dialects mentioned in Swahili traditional dialectology discussed above.

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES



Map 9: Respondent D73<sup>2</sup>

In summary, although each of the 51 respondents who completed this task had their own criteria for identifying varieties of Swahili, these nine maps represent a common trend. The Somali accent seem to be the prototype accent of the North Eastern region, Luo speakers is the prototype of the Western accent, obscuring Kisii, Kuria and sometimes Luhya accents. In the rift valley, Turkana accents seem to be the most stigmatized Swahili, while the whole region is viewed within the lens of the Kalenjin ethnic group. Nairobi is constantly associated with Sheng and language mixing while other regions are all viewed as speaking an ethnic-influenced Swahili. Finally, coast Swahili was identified by almost every respondent who completed this task. We shall come back to this later in the discussion.

<sup>2</sup> The respondent probably confuses county with country.

### The most correct Swahili

In map drawing tasks in perceptual dialectology, it is common to give as few clues as possible. Eight different regions (formally called provinces) were used but instead of using their actual names, numbers were assigned randomly in the questionnaire. Respondents are almost unanimous in singling out the coast region as speaking the most correct Swahili followed by Nairobi and Eastern regions, while Speakers from Nyanza are considered as speakers of the worst Swahili followed by speakers from North Eastern and Rift Valley regions. These results are hardly surprising, given the fact that Swahili is natively spoken amongst some communities at the coast. Kiamu (spoken in Lamu island and its environs), Kibajuni (around Malindi and its surroundings), and Kimvita (Mombasa island), are the major Swahili dialects noted by many respondents. Coastal people who speak other languages are conflated with native Swahili speakers — an expected outcome given the shared culture of coastal inhabitants. Table (1) shows the ranking of different Kenyan provinces in terms of correctness.

Variety	N <sup>3</sup>	Mean
Coast	71	4.4507
Nairobi	58	2.9828
Eastern	62	2.8710
Central	60	2.7667
Western	61	2.6066
R.Valley	61	2.4918
N.Eastern	60	2.1000
Nyanza	65	1.9692

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<sup>3</sup> N stands for number of respondents. Mean is the average ranking with 5 as the highest and 1 the lowest.

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

Table 1: Ranking of Swahili varieties in terms of correctness

Nairobi is ranked second in terms of correctness, though significantly lower than the coast while Eastern comes third. The bottom three regions, Rift Valley, North Eastern and Nyanza, are ranked below the median rank of 2.5. There is roughly a one point variance between Nairobi, the second ranked region and Nyanza, the lowest ranked region which indicates that the respondents perception of these varieties in terms of correctness differ only minimally. Perceptions towards Swahili spoken in the 7 regions however differ significantly compared to the coastal variety of Swahili. The difference between the perceptions of Swahili varieties outside the coastal region only differ minimally as was expressed in Map 1 above. Language mixing and mother tongue influence seem to be the main reasons behind their lower ranking in terms of correctness.

### **The most liked variety of Swahili**

Unlike many studies in perceptual dialectology that show an asymmetry between correctness and attractiveness (e.g., Preston 1996), there was no distinction between the two in our survey. Coastal Swahili was also perceived as the most pleasant and well liked followed by Nairobi and Eastern, while the Nyanza variety of Swahili is the least liked as was indicated in the hand drawn maps. Similarly the least liked varieties are Nyanza, followed by North Eastern and Rift Valley as shown in Table (2).

Variety	N	Mean
Coast	68	4.7059
Nairobi	60	2.6500
Eastern	59	2.6441
Central	59	2.4746
Western	62	2.2903
R.Valley	60	2.2667

N.Eastern	54	2.1667
Nyanza	62	1.8548

Table 2: Most attractive variety of Swahili

Unlike the ranking for correctness, only the three regions whose Swahili is perceived as the most correct score above the midpoint mean average. Still, the second most liked variety and the least liked Swahili are only separated by less than one point whereas the region with the most liked Swahili and the region with the second most liked Swahili are separated by more than two points. This again alludes to significant perceived differences between Coastal Swahili and up-country Swahili according to the majority of the respondents.

#### **Identification with responders' accents**

Finally, we come to the variety that the respondents perceive as identical to their own. Unlike the ranking of correctness and attractiveness, the respondents identify more with the variety spoken in Nairobi, followed by the Central province Swahili while the coastal Swahili comes third. Swahili spoken in North Eastern displaces that of Nyanza in terms of identification. Unlike the ranking of correctness and the attractiveness, there is a larger difference between the variety that the majority of the respondents most identify with and the one they least identify with as we see in Table (3).

Variety	Region	N	Mean
Nairobi	5	61	3.2459
Central	4	59	3.2373
Coast	8	61	3.1475
Eastern	6	62	2.7742

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

R.Valley	3	61	2.7049
Western	2	60	2.7000
Nyanza	1	61	2.4262
N.Eastern	7	61	2.0984

Table 3: Identification with respondents' accents

A possible reason for this ranking might be attributed to the number of participants who come from the regions under survey. More participants from a given region would mean that they would be loyal to the kind of Swahili spoken in their home region. This is however not supported by data. Out of 114 participants, the Eastern region had the highest representation with 24.6% followed by Nyanza with 22%. The Coast had 17.5%, Central: 15.8%, Rift Valley: 8.8%; Western: 5.3%, Nairobi: 1.8% and North Eastern: 0.8%. Besides North Eastern region, Nairobi was the other region with the low representation; hence, loyalty to the home region's variety is not the explanation behind its high ranking. We should note here that although data was collected from 114 participants, those who performed the map drawing task ranged between 54 and 71.

### Discussion

What does the convergence of the ranking of correctness and attractiveness and the lack of identification with the much admired Coastal Swahili tell us about the folk perception of Swahili variation in Kenya? The hierarchical order of language functions in Kenya's 'triglossia' (Abdulaziz, 1972) seems to be rigidly entrenched in the respondents' minds and in their evaluations. The sometimes overlapping functions between indigenous languages, Swahili and English and the subordinate role that Swahili has played in light of English hegemony prevents the strict judgment of Swahili alongside the status-solidarity dimensions mentioned earlier. A speaker from Nyanza, for instance, is unapologetic for his/her poor mastery of Swahili as long as he or she is a good speaker of English—the language that bears status and prestige.

On the other hand, a competent speaker of Swahili does not enjoy any status advantage since its function has always been associated with the social interactions. Besides being utilized in language teaching or broadcasting, there is hardly any other context where high skills in Swahili are valued. Furthermore, the native speakers of Swahili in Kenya are a minority and do not have

either political or economic clout. There is thus a perception that Swahili is dispensable since its status roles can be accomplished through English. When a language does not accord its user status or prestige, the user is likely to be less concerned with its correctness. It is in this context that the respondents' blurring of the boundary between correctness and attractiveness should be understood. The same argument can be extended to the failure of the respondents to identify with the coastal Swahili.

The respondents are aware of the clear distinction between the Swahili spoken at the coast where Swahili is natively spoken and the rest of the country. There is also the recognition that Swahili spoken in the up-country varies according to the ethnic communities that inhabit different regions. Although intonation was cited as one level of variation, mother tongue interference was mostly perceived in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation of certain sounds and failure to observe grammatical rules. The 'poor vocabulary' label on Map 8 can be attributed to the marginalization of the Somali community whose participation in the education system is quite low hence preventing them from learning Swahili in school. According to the 2008–09 *Kenya Demographic and Health Survey* by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 78% of women and 41% of men in the North Eastern province have no formal education. Poor education participation essentially leads to poor Swahili mastery since majority of up-country Kenyans learn standard Swahili in schools. Furthermore, Swahili is the national language used in interethnic interactions and the remoteness of the region, coupled with the fact that it is overwhelmingly mono-ethnic prevents the inhabitants from interacting with other Kenyans thus denying them the opportunity of using Swahili in inter-ethnic interactions. The respondents seem to be responding to this fact.

It is also interesting that the respondents mostly identify Rift valley with the Kalenjin, the largest ethnic group in the Rift valley, ignoring other inhabitants of the region such as the Maasai, Kikuyu, Luhya amongst others. Besides their numerical strength in the region, the fact that Kenya's second president hailed from the community enabled the community to secure prominent opportunities in Kenya's public sectors. As a result, their Swahili accent became exposed to Kenyans throughout the country. The second factor is that the majority of the world's renowned long distance runners come from this community and their prominence at the national stage has exposed other Kenyan to the kind of Swahili that they speak. It is also worth noting that the Kalenjin language is a Nilo-Saharan language which has no mutual intelligibility or other similarities with Swahili, a Bantu language.

Nyanza region was cited as having the worst Swahili, with comments such as their geographic position as the westernmost region; i.e., further away from the Swahili speaking regions. They are also said to look down on Swahili preferring their mother tongue. The perceived lack of interest in Swahili amongst the people from Nyanza is also attributed to their pride in intellectual

## FOLKINGUISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

display which is expressed through English rather than Swahili. Some respondents claimed that the structural differences between the dominant language Dholuo which is a Nilo-Saharan language and Swahili, a Bantu language makes it harder for people from Nyanza to master Swahili. Similar reasons might explain why the North Eastern Province which is inhabited exclusively by Somali Speakers (Afro-Asiatic) is the second worst rated province. The same argument extends to the Rift Valley province where the majority of inhabitants speak Nilo-Saharan Languages. That said, we should be cautious in accepting such simplistic explanations since Nyanza itself is also home to the Suba, Kuria and Kisii communities who belong to the Bantu language family and should somehow neutralize the influence of Non-Bantu Dholuo.

Githiora (2008) has claimed that the spoken Swahili in Kenya is influenced by Kenya coastal norms, specifically Mombasa dialect (Kimvita); however, the standard Swahili taught in Kenyan schools is based on Kiunguja, the Zanzibar dialect chosen during the Interterritorial Language Committee meeting in 1928 (Mbaabu, 2007). In 1964, the Interterritorial Language Committee transformed into the Institute of Kiswahili Research based at the University of Dar es Salaam. Consequently, the norms of standard Swahili in Kenya and the region have been dictated by Tanzania which has made the greatest investment toward the development of Swahili. These Tanzania led Standard Swahili norms have prevented Kenya's coastal varieties from having a major influence in the way Swahili is spoken in Kenya. This explains why the efforts to link Swahili with national identity, at least as far as the coastal Swahili is concerned have not been successful. The identification with the Nairobi variety in spite of recognizing that it is a mixture of Swahili, English and local languages in the hand drawn maps reflects the respondents understanding of Kenya's multilingual identity that cannot be accommodated by one idealized variety. In addition, the unexpected high ranking of Central province Swahili which the respondents claimed is highly influenced by Kikuyu highlights the numerical dominance of the Kikuyu ethnic community in Nairobi. The Central region Swahili speakers are also in close proximity with Nairobi which provides numerous opportunities of contact resulting in identification with that variety. The lack of identification with the Coastal Swahili in favor of Nairobi and Central Swahili suggests that Kenyans prefer flexibility in Swahili that is not too constrained by formal norms. However, the stigmatization of the Nyanza and the North Eastern Swahili also suggests that this flexibility cannot be pushed too far.

### **Conclusions**

One of the major shortcomings in Swahili dialectology has been its almost exclusive focus on Coastal Swahili. Yet as we have argued, majority of the Kenyans speak a variety that is very different from Coastal Swahili. Failure to recognize these varieties have an implication on scholarship in Swahili dialectology and the future of Swahili as well. The speakers of traditional

Swahili dialects along the coast are on the decrease as their speakers abandon these dialects in favor of Standard Swahili to avoid stigmatization. We do not claim that they are going to vanish completely, but we are proposing that the inclusion of new varieties of Swahili from those who have learned or acquired it as an additional language can only enrich the field of Swahili studies. It was shown in the maps that Kenyans are aware of the different ways that Swahili is spoken in Kenya. The over-emphasis on coastal Swahili or standard Swahili will only serve to alienate speakers of other varieties of Swahili who will feel that the idealized variety does not reflect their values. Furthermore, study of variation within Swahili will be very useful in the teaching of Swahili at both primary and secondary school levels. Since different regions have been shown to be defined by different features, each area will require a different pedagogical approach.

A number of limitations may have impacted the outcome of this study. Ethnographic data could have unearthed the underlying reasons behind the respondent's perception and attitudes towards various varieties of Swahili spoken in Kenya. In the hand drawn maps for instance, a follow up interview asking the respondents to substantiate their maps could have provided more insights. Unfortunately, no previous study that we are aware of has looked at Swahili dialectology beyond the coastal varieties. Although age and gender were not shown to have any significant difference, we believe a more controlled selection of participants might have yielded different results. In future, we hope to conduct this study among participants from ethnically homogeneous settings in order to better control factors such as age, gender and ethnicity. Finally, there is a need to test the identification of different varieties by providing the participants with recorded voice samples to see if they will be able to identify where those varieties are spoken. This will go a long way in providing a more comprehensive picture of folk perception of geographical variation in Swahili.

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PETER GITHINJI & MARTIN NJOROGE

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### Appendix

Map 1: cost (sic) pure Swahili

Map 2: poor; mix; good

Map 3: No accent; No accent; Kiswahili Dholuo; SHENG Mchanganyiko wa Kiswahili na English; Kiswahili Kimaasai; Kiswahili Sanifu

Map 4: Good Swahili; Mixed Swahili not pure; well spoken Swahili

Map 5: no labels

Map 6: 1) pure and mixed; 2) sheng; 3) affected by mother tongue influence and inability to pronounce some letters; 4) Somali accent; 5) distorted i.e., “chai wangu” instead if “chai yangu”; and 6) not sure whether they speak any Swahili.

Map 7: don't even know Swahili; worst pronunciation; no articles in language use; am not sure; acute mother tongue interference; worst Swahili; bad rhythm in their Swahili; fair Swahili; Hardly Speak Swahili; good Swahili; tone variation in Accent

Map 8: Kalenjin Swahili (Poor Vocabulary); Luhya Swahili; Luo Swahili (poor subject verb agreement, wrong tense); Kamba Swahili (Mother Tongue influence), Nairobi Sheng; Kikuyu Swahili (Mother Tongue interference); North Eastern (poor vocabulary of Swahili words); coastal Swahili (unique intonation, borrowing from English); North Eastern Swahili (poor vocabulary of Swahili words); Coastal Swahili (Unique intonation, borrowing from English)

Map 9: Parts of the Rift Valley province (no Swahili speakers as people are deeply rooted in mother tongue for example Turkana); Nyanza (poor Swahili, good in written Swahili); north eastern region (poor Swahili); Coast region (speaks Swahili with a specific accent, lovely spoken Swahili poor written Swahili); the rest of the country apart from Nairobi with a lot of mixture of native languages, English and Swahili to produce a language called “Sheng”. There is a lot of mother tongue interference in Kiswahili and grammatical errors.