Ku-Support Divergence in Tanzanian and Kenyan Swahili[*]

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1.0 Introduction

The Word Minimality Condition (WMC) stipulates that words in a given language must meet a minimum threshold of syllabic or segmental structure to be recognized as valid lexical items (see Leben 1973; Goldsmith 1976; Inkelas 2004; Orie and Pulleyblank 2002, among others). In many African languages, the WMC plays a crucial role in both phonological and morphological systems, shaping the structure of syllables, morphemes, and words. In Swahili, the WMC interacts with both phonological and morphosyntactic processes. This squib explores the manifestation of the WMC in two dialects of Swahili—Standard Swahili (SS) and Kenyan Swahili (KS)—which exhibit a comparable inventory of monosyllabic verbs, as illustrated in Table 1[1]:

No	Standard Swahili	Kenyan Swahili	Gloss
1.	-ɟa	-ɟa	come
2.	-ɭa	-ɭa	eat
3.	-fa	-ɲwa	die
4.	-ɲwa	-ɲwa	drink
5	-wa	-wa	be

Table 1: Monosyllabic verbs in SS and KS

Notably, monosyllabic verbs in Swahili are subject to a two-syllable minimality constraint. While both dialects utilize the same monosyllabic verb stems in affirmative contexts, they diverge in their treatment of these stems under negation. In Standard Swahili (SS), KU-support is not employed in negative constructions involving monosyllabic stems, (1a). In contrast, Kenyan Swahili (KS) does exhibit KU-support in such contexts, (1b). Importantly, this distinction does not arise with disyllabic or longer stems, which behave similarly in both dialects, as illustrated in (1c)

1)   a)   ha-wa-ɟ-i   [Standard]
                    NEG-3PL-come-FV.NEG
                    'They are not coming'
        b)   ha-wa-ku-j-i   [Kenyan]
                    NEG-3PL-KU.come-FV.NEG
                    'S/he is not coming'
        c)   ha-wa-som-i   [Standard/Kenyan Swahili]
                    NEG-3PL-read-FV.NEG
                    'S/he is not reading'

I propose that the divergence between the two dialects stems from the influence of L2 speakers of Kenyan Swahili, who tend to simplify morphophonological structures to facilitate learnability (cf. McDonough 2015).

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[1] I exclude the verb *-pa* 'give' from the present analysis, as it displays markedly different morphosyntactic behavior. Unlike other monosyllabic verbs, *-pa* does not trigger KU-support. Instead, in Standard Swahili, it obligatorily requires an object marker (e.g., *wa-pa* 'give them'), while in Kenyan Swahili, it appears with the reciprocal marker, yielding forms such as *-p-an-* or *-p-ean-* (see Gambarage 2024 for further discussion). Another relevant monosyllabic verb is *ku-tʃa* 'to rise (of the sun),' which is classified as a weather verb. As such, it does not co-occur with an overt subject, and therefore behaves differently from other monosyllabic verb stems in the language.

This squib is organized into four sections. Section 2 presents the relevant data and introduces the core empirical problem. In Section 3, I address issues of learnability as they relate to the observed patterns. Section 4 outlines a proposed assignment: to develop an Optimality-Theoretic (OT) framework that accounts for the dialectal variation, following McCarthy and Prince (1995).

2.0 Monosyllabic verb stems and ku-support in the affirmative verbs.

While the monosyllabic verbs listed in Table 1 do have a lexical status, do not independently meet the criteria for wordhood in either Standard Swahili (SS) or Kenyan Swahili (KS). As such, in both dialects, these verbs must be augmented with an affix to achieve a word status. One commonly used affix is the infinitival morpheme *ku-*, which also serves a gerundive function in Swahili. This pattern is illustrated in Table 2.

No	Standard/Kenyan Swahili	Gloss
1.	ku-ɟa	to come/coming
2.	ku-ɭa	to eat /eating
3.	ku-fa	to die /dying
4.	ku-ɲwa	to drink /drinking
5	ku-wa	to be /being

Table 2: Monosyllabic verbs and the infinitive/gerundive forms.

Secondly, monosyllabic verb stems can also be prefixed with subject pronouns and tense-aspect (TA) markers, resulting in fully inflected verbal forms that function as complete sentences in English. In such cases, no significant difference is observed between the two dialects, as shown in (3). Notably, variation in subject pronoun choice does not impact this morphological process. I will address the behavior of monosyllabic verbs in the future tense separately in the following section.

	Past (SS/KS)	Perfect (SS/KS)	Present (SS/KS)
1.	wali**ku**la 'They ate'	wame**ku**la 'I just ate'	wana**ku**la 'They are eating'
2.	wali**ku**nywa 'They drank'	wame**ku**nywa 'They just drank'	wana**ku**nywa 'They are drinking'
3.	wali**ku**fa 'They died'	wame**ku**fa 'They just died'	wana**ku**fa 'They are dying'
4.	wali**ku**ja 'They came'	wame**ku**ja 'They just came'	wana**ku**ja 'They are coming'
5	wali**ku**wa 'They were'	wame**ku**wa 'They've been'	wana**ku**wa 'They are being'

Table 3: Monosyllabic verbs and the infinitive/gerundive forms.

3.0 Monosyllabic verb stems and ku-support in the negative verbs.

When negation is introduced, the verb form undergoes changes, and the two dialects diverge in their treatment of the KU-form. This is illustrated in Tables (4) for Standard Swahili (SS) and (5) for Kenyan Swahili (KS). Notice further that the following morphological changes occur:

a) For all pronouns, the negative prefix *ha-* is employed.
b) In the past tense, the present tense marker *-na-* is deleted.
c) The perfect aspect marker *-me* is replaced by *-ja-*, while the past tense marker *-li-* changes to *-ku-*.

	Aff/Neg.Past	Aff/Neg.Perfect	Aff/Neg.Present	Aff/Neg.Future	Gloss
1	wali**ku**la hawaku▮la	wame**ku**la hawaja▮la	wana**ku**la hawa▮li	wata**ku**la hawata**ku**la	Affirm: They ate/have eaten/ are eating/will eat.
2	wali**ku**nywa hawaku▮nywa	wame**ku**nywa hawaja▮nywa	wana**ku**nywa hawa▮nywi	wata**ku**nywa hawata**ku**nywa	Affirm: They drunk/have drank/ are drinking/will drink.
3	wali**ku**fa hawaku▮fa	wame**ku**fa hawaja▮fa	wana**ku**fa hawa▮fi	wata**ku**fa hawata**ku**fa	Affirm: They died/just died/ are dying/will die.
4	wali**ku**ja hawaku▮ja	wame**ku**ja hawaja▮ja	wana**ku**ja hawa▮ji	wata**ku**ja hawata**ku**ja	Affirm: They came/have come/ are coming/will come.
5	wali**ku**wa hawaku▮wa	wame**ku**wa hawaja▮wa	wana**ku**wa hawa▮wi	wata**ku**wa hawata**ku**wa	Affirm: They were/have been/ are being/will be.

Table 4: KU in Standard Swahili monosyllabic verbs.

	Aff/Neg.Past	Aff/Neg.Perfect	Aff/Neg.Present	Aff/Neg.Future	Gloss
1	wali**ku**la hawaku**ku**la	wame**ku**la hawaja**ku**la	wana**ku**la hawa**ku**li	wata**ku**la hawata**ku**la	Affirm: They ate/have eaten/ are eating/will eat.
2	wali**ku**nywa hawaku**ku**nywa	wame**ku**nywa hawaja**ku**nywa	wana**ku**nywa hawa**ku**nywi	wata**ku**nywa hawata**ku**nywa	Affirm: They drunk/have drank/ are drinking/will drink.
3	wali**ku**fa hawaku**ku**fa	wame**ku**fa hawaja**ku**fa	wana**ku**fa hawa**ku**fi	wata**ku**fa hawata**ku**fa	Affirm: They died/just died/ are dying/will die.
4	wali**ku**ja hawaku**ku**ja	wame**ku**ja hawaja**ku**ja	wana**ku**ja hawa**ku**ji	wata**ku**ja hawata**ku**ja	Affirm: They came/have come/ are coming/will come.
5	wali**ku**wa hawaku**ku**wa	wame**ku**wa hawaja**ku**wa	wana**ku**wa hawa**ku**wi	wata**ku**wa hawata**ku**wa	Affirm: They were/have been/ are being/will be.

Table 5: KU in Kenyan Swahili monosyllabic verbs.

One might argue that Standard Swahili (SS), as the first language of Tanzanians, shows inconsistency in the application of the KU-support morpheme. Specifically, in the future tense (as seen in the last column of Table 4), KU is not deleted, whereas in other tenses, it is. In contrast, Kenyan Swahili (KS), which is spoken as a second language by Kenyans, maintains a consistent pattern of KU usage across all negative tenses. While this variation represents a key difference between Standard and Kenyan Swahili, the underlying reasons for these differences remain unclear. In the next section, I will explore possible explanations to address this issue.

4. Simplification and Learnability

The use of KU-support in all negative contexts in Kenyan Swahili can be understood in terms of simplification and learnability (cf. McDonough 2015; Akinbo 2021; Orie and Pulleyblank 2002). McDonough (2015) posits two key assumptions regarding the "shrinking" of verbs in Dene, an Athabaskan language, which appear to be applicable to the variation observed in these dialects. First, he claims that speaker-driven simplification of forms is a driving force behind language change and variation. Second, he asserts that word formation is shaped by principles of learnability. It is reasonable to argue that Kenyan L2 Swahili speakers generalized the application of KU-support, initially limited to affirmative and future-tense negative contexts, to all other negative contexts as a means of simplifying the learning process.

This hypothesis is further supported by evidence from the internal structure of Kenyan Swahili, particularly through the oversimplification of the agreement system. In Kenyan Swahili, noun class markers—specifically for classes 9 and 10—are used as verbal agreement prefixes across all 18 genders, a feature not present in the Standard dialect (see Beck 2015). As McDonough (2015: 51) convincingly argues, the principle of language change is driven by such forms of simplification and the need for ease in language acquisition.

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> *"Speakers will tend to simplify overly complex or opaque underlying-to-surface representations of sound forms, and to reorganize and make use of more emergent and transparent versions of these forms; this simplicity impulse overrides morphosyntactic complexity".*

In a similar vein, I argue that while this simplification process operates primarily at the phonological level in Dene, in Kenyan Swahili it occurs at both morphophonological and morphosyntactic levels. Specifically, L2 Swahili speakers in Kenya appear to treat Standard Swahili forms as underlying representations, to which they apply a reanalyzed constraint—namely, the consistent application of KU-support in all negative contexts. This reinterpretation reflects a broader drive toward structural transparency and learnability in the grammar of Kenyan Swahili.

The insights supporting the argument presented in this squib align with observations made by Orie and Pulleyblank (2002), who examined the phonological behavior of monosyllabic roots in Yoruba. Their study revealed that certain vowel features—particularly high vowels—exhibit distinctive behavior in assimilation and deletion processes. These patterns are especially salient in monosyllabic roots, where high vowels often trigger or resist specific phonological rules. Similarly, Akinbo (2021) investigates monosyllabic nominal roots in Fungwa, demonstrating that these roots behave differently when undergoing diminutive and augmentative derivation. With the exception of vowel-only syllables, which remain unchanged, such derivations typically involve root reduplication in a consonant-vowel (CV) structure.

While phonological constraints drive the behavior of monosyllabic forms in both Yoruba and Fungwa, the situation in Kenyan Swahili is notably different. Here, morphosyntactic restructuring appears to be motivated by an impulse toward simplification, with learnability playing a central role. In this case, the resistance to morphosyntactic complexity—rather than phonological markedness—guides the regularization patterns observed in L2 Kenyan Swahili.

While the Kenyan variety is often highly stigmatized by speakers of Standard Swahili, it nonetheless offers valuable insights into processes of language change. It is therefore incumbent upon us, as linguists, to investigate why L2 speakers prefer forms that diverge from those used by native speakers. Such inquiry can inform the development of models that account for both language change and learnability, even though the precise direction of change in any given language remains inherently unpredictable.

4.0 Accounting for the differences: an assignment

It is uncontroversial to claim that speakers' grammatical knowledge is constrained by principles of language change and the cognitive demands of learnability. In the case of Kenyan L2 speakers of Swahili, Standard Swahili is often internalized as a system composed of abstract underlying structures. The challenge, then, is to develop a theoretical model that can explain why these speakers adopt forms that diverge from the standard variety, and how such forms become regularized within the L2 grammar.

This question is left as an assignment for further research: to construct a morphophonological analysis—ideally within the framework of Optimality Theory (OT; McCarthy & Prince 1995)—that accounts for the dialectal variation described in this squib. One constraint that may be relevant is the **Swahili Two-Syllable Constraint**, paralleling the proposal by Carstens (2008) for monomoraic nouns:

(2) Swahili Two-Syllable Constraint: *[V σ_n], n < 2*

This constraint effectively excludes monosyllabic verb forms such as *ɟa, ɭa, fa, ɲwa,* and *wa,* thereby triggering the need for KU-support. While KU-support is variably applied in Standard Swahili—dropping in some negative contexts—it is consistently retained in Kenyan Swahili.

A comprehensive OT analysis would need to identify the relevant ranked constraints that explain these patterns across both dialects, accounting for the interplay between syllable minimality, morphosyntactic marking, and learnability-driven simplification. The comparative analysis of these two systems offers a promising path for understanding how L2 speaker grammars adapt and reshape input in systematic and theoretically insightful ways.

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