

Research Proposal

Documenting conversational conventions in Swahili

Daniel W. Hieber

This project proposes to describe a portion of the discourse conventions for conversations in Swahili (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Kenya: swh). There are many features of conversational discourse that are language-specific, and part of the linguistic competence of speakers, yet are rarely documented in grammars. These include such phenomena as turn-taking and overlap, self- and other-repair, manners of hesitation, formulaic language (greetings, hedgings, etc.), backchanneling / backstreaming, pre-requests (e.g. *I was wondering if you could...*), methods of selecting the next speaker or returning the floor, and many others. There are also many features of the grammar that do not operate at the level of discourse *per se*, but which only become apparent in conversational or narrative data. Certain linguistic features which would never appear in elicitation occur with regularity in natural discourse (Chelliah & De Reuse 2011:423). This project aims to document the most common means of expressing a specific subset of these conversational features for Swahili: silence, overlap, self-repair, hesitation, and backchanneling. Each of these will be investigated not just in terms of their manner of expression, but also their timing and placement. Fox (1987) shows, for example, that overlap occurs at constituent boundaries or at predictable points within a constituent.

Beyond simply expanding on the descriptive adequacy of our grammatical descriptions, documenting these conversational features is extremely important for language revitalization efforts. Conversational conventions are precisely the linguistic features that new speakers will find most useful (Bower 2008:122; Amery 2009:139). Thus while the immediate goal of this research is to document a small subset of the specific conversational features of a single language, the eventual goal is to show how documentary linguists can apply the principles of discourse transcription to enhance their linguistic descriptions while simultaneously supporting the needs of language revitalization projects. This would be illustrated with data from one or more endangered languages, using a larger data set than the current study, and focusing on a slightly broader range of conversational features.

The present study, however, will be focused narrowly on a 4-minute section of Swahili conversation between two native speakers recorded on reel tape at the UCLA Phonetics Lab in 1980. This recording is a section of one of two Swahili conversations held in the archives, 8 and 12 minutes in length respectively.¹ These recordings have since been digitized and are available under a Creative Commons License on the website of the UCLA Phonetics Lab Archive (2007). The two speakers in the research segment are from neighboring areas of western Kenya, and thus share a very similar dialect. This conversation is their first meeting, and thus contains basic introductions, questions about each other's backgrounds, and shared stories of their travels from Kenya to the U.S. The conversation was also recorded specifically for the purpose of gathering conversational data as part of research at UCLA, and is thus lacking somewhat for naturalness.

¹ The research segment for this project comes from the 8-minute conversation, given the identifier swh_conversation_1980_01 in the archive. The second, 12-minute conversation is labeled swh_conversation_1980_02.

The second conversation in the archive, however, takes place between two female acquaintances who are clearly known to each other before the time of recording. Later research will expand to include the entirety of both these conversations.

In order to study the phenomena of silence, overlap, self-repair, hesitation, and backchanneling, I will rely on a number of notational symbols which I believe are representative of these features in discourse, specifically: pauses of 0.3 seconds or more (duration within parentheses (0.3)); overlap ([brackets]); truncated words (hyphen-), truncated intonation units (double hyphen --), and lengthening (colon:). Pauses may be noted on a separate PAUSES tier of the transcription, or may be embedded in the speech of a specific speaker. Pauses are potentially relevant to the phenomena of silence, overlap, hesitation, and perhaps backchanneling (or lack thereof). Notational overlap is, obviously, indicative of conversational overlap, but also potentially indicative of backchanneling and (non-)silence. Truncated words and intonation units are, for the purposes of this study, investigated as potential manifestations of self-repair. Lastly, lengthening will be investigated as a potential realization of hesitation in speech. I will therefore consistently code for each of these notational symbols throughout the research segment. It will of course be necessary to code for other, lower-level notations as well, such as intonation units and speaker turns. And while other notational symbols and discourse features may certainly be relevant to the phenomena under investigation here, for this pilot project I focus solely on the five just listed. Likewise, each of these five features of discourse may be used to accomplish many other things than the conversational conventions being studied here, but such uses are beyond the scope of the present study.

After having coded for these phenomena, the end result will be to describe if and how each feature is used to realize the discourse functions of silence, overlap, self-repair, hesitation, and backchanneling.

References

- Amery, Rob. 2009. Phoenix or relic? Documentation of languages with revitalization in mind. *Language Documentation & Conservation* 3(2). 138–148.
- Bowern, Claire. 2008. *Linguistic fieldwork: A practical guide*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chelliah, Shobhana L. & Willem J. De Reuse. 2011. *Handbook of descriptive linguistic fieldwork*. Dordrecht: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-90-481-9026-3.
<http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-90-481-9026-3>.
- Fox, Barbara. 1987. *Discourse structure and anaphora: Written and conversational English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- UCLA Department of Linguistics. 2007. The UCLA Phonetics Lab Archive. Los Angeles.
<http://archive.phonetics.ucla.edu/>.