

# THE THREE RELATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN SWAHILI (KISANIFU)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Swahili has three morphologically distinct relative verb constructions.

- |    |                    |   |   |          |                     |   |               |
|----|--------------------|---|---|----------|---------------------|---|---------------|
| A. | subject<br>concord | — | verb<br>stem  | —        | relative<br>concord |   |               |
| B. | subject<br>concord | — | $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{na PRES} \\ \text{li PAST} \\ \text{taka FUT} \\ \text{si NEG} \end{array} \right\}$ | —        | relative<br>concord | — | verbe<br>stem |
| C. | amba               | — | relative<br>concord   | SENTENCE |                     |   |               |
- (1) A. (wa-tu) wa-sema-o kiswahili (those) who speak Swahili  
           (people) SC speak RC  
               2 2 2 2
- B. (wa-tu) wa-na-o-sema kiswahili (those) who are speaking Swahili
- C. (wa-tu) amba-o (ha-wa-ta-sema) kiswahili (those) who will not speak Swahili

## 2. INTERNAL RECONSTRUCTION

Construction B is historically derived from construction A. The clearest indication for this is the form of the Future Tense Marker *-taká-*, with stress on its final syllable. Since stress, in Swahili, regularly falls on the penultimate syllable, these verb forms are clearly marked as compounds with an (internal) word boundary after the Relative Concord. The first part of these compounds constitutes an A-type relative construction of the verb *-taka* «want» (The non-relative Future Tense Marker *-ta-* is, of course, derived from the same auxiliary, the syllable *ka* being lost in unstressed position).

A similar development is hypothesized for type B constructions with the Tense Markers *-na-*, *-li-*, and *-si-*. However, the symmetry is not complete. These three morphemes do not function as regular verbs in Swahili, and there is no reason to believe they did in pre-Swahili.

Rather, they occur each in its own peculiar set of copulative constructions, amongst which, notably, are type A forms :

- (2a) wa-na-cho (kitabu) they have it (the book)  
 (2b) (kitabu) wa-li-cho na-cho (the book) which they have  
 (2c) (watu) wa-li-o na watoto (those) who have children  
 (2d) (watu) wa-si-o na watoto (those) who have no children

Note that the RC following *na*, as in (2a) and (2b), does not mark the clause as being relative; it simply is the proper morphological form of the bound anaphoric pronoun to be used in this environment, i.e. after *na*. The fact remains that *na*, *li*, and *si* all occur in the environment SC--RC, i.e. in type A constructions.

I suspect further that *-na-*, *-li-*, and *-si-* carry stress in the same way as *-taká-* when used in type B relative constructions. I have noted, that a frequent deviation from standard spelling is to make a break after the RC, e.g. *wanao andika/walio andika/wasio andika* « they who write/wrote/don't write » / The same applies to Swahili written in Arabic script.

We may say, therefore, that all four type B constructions consist of a type A construction plus a verb stem (which may be preceded by an object concord). The verb stem, in turn, can be seen to be derived from an infinitive, of which the nominal prefix *ku* has been deleted when unstressed.

- (3a) (wa-tu) wa -li -o -ya-nunúa (ma-tunda) (those) who bought them (the fruits)  
 NP-people SC-PAST RC -OCbuy NP-fruits  
 2 2 2 6 6

- (3b) (wa-tu) wa-li-o-yá-la (those) who ate them

- (3c) (wa-tu) wa-li-o-kú-la ma-tunda (those) who ate fruits

The inference that type B relative constructions developed out of type A constructions is obvious.

The type C relative construction, too, is nothing but a special case of type A. The verb stem *-amba* is used in modern Swahili mainly in the infinitive *kw-amba* which functions as a complementizer, but the applicative verb *-ambia* « tell » is very common. This alone is enough to hypothesize an older verb *-amba* « say ». The « relative marker » *amba-RC* is very likely to have developed out of the type A construction by loss of the subject concord. The paraphrase would have been « of which/ of whom one says... », « duquel on dit... »<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. COMPARATIVE RECONSTRUCTION

Internal reconstruction leads to the hypothesis that type A relative constructions are the oldest; it does not, as far as I can see, provide arguments bearing on the relative chronology of type B and type C. Still, type C is often assumed to be the most recent one, cf. Perrott (1951 : 64) : « Good Swahili got on for years without these forms, but they are likely to become more common as time goes on » (See also Givón 1972 : 191). Swahili written tradition should belong

1. An alternative hypothesis, proposed by Dammann (1966), derives *amba-RC* from an imperative followed by the RC functioning as an anaphoric object pronoun. Such an imperative construction is, however, quite unknown in Swahili, in northeastern Bantu, and in Bantu in general.

enough to evaluate this claim. If we substitute « Zanzibar Swahili » for Perrott's « good Swahili », Steere (1906 : 121f) confirms that type C is « not used in Zanzibar ». Likewise, Sacleux (1909a, b) does not treat type C in his two Swahili grammars, though the construction is documented in his dictionary (1939). Outside Zanzibar, type C constructions probably have existed for centuries, cf. Miede's (1979) study of the language of the older Swahili poetry. I would like to interpret the more restricted geographical spread of type C within Swahili as an indication of its more recent origin, as compared with type B constructions.

This is confirmed by comparison of Swahili with its closest relatives in northeastern Bantu. According to Nsuka (1982 : 31f.; map 2), the only Bantu languages employing type A and/or type B relative constructions are all geographically and linguistically close to Swahili : Pokomo, Nyika, Digo, Shambala, Bondei, Hehe (attestation doubtful). The fact that almost all these languages employ both type A and type B constructions, whereas grammars make no mention of type C, can again be taken as an indication of type B's chronological priority over type C.

It would be interesting, but leading too far away from Swahili, to try and trace the development of type A in a comparative Bantu perspective.

#### 4. RESTRICTIONS ON TENSE MARKERS (TM)

Type B constructions occur with four different Tense Markers : -na- PRESENT, -li- PAST, -taka- FUTURE, and -si- NEGATIVE. The question is : why are there no relative tenses (type B) with other Tense Markers, such as -a- AORIST, -ka- SUBSECUTIVE, -ki- SITUATIVE, -nge-, -ngali- CONDITIONAL, and -me- PERFECT. The answer is not the same in each case.

The TMs -a- and -ka- are very old; they have, in fact, been reconstructed for proto-Bantu. At the time when type A constructions of the copular « verbids » and the future auxiliary verb were compounded into type B constructions, -a- and -ka- had long since ceased to be auxiliaries.

The TM -ki- is only usable in subordinated clauses; a SITUATIVE clause is semantically not capable of forming a relative clause on its own. One might even say that -ki- clauses are syntactically embedded just like relative clauses. A similar explanation probably holds for the CONDITIONAL clauses, though the TM's -nge- and -ngali- are used in the conditional as well as in the main clause.

(4a) *ningekuwa na mali ningemwoa* If I had money I would marry her

A relative embedding of this sentence is semantically possible, but no type B construction exists. Type C, however, is acceptable.

(4b) *msichana ambaye ningekuwa na mali ningemwoa* The girl which...<sup>2</sup>

Thus, there seems to be a restriction on Type A and B relatives that excludes such complex sentences, just as relative subjunctives are excluded.

The non-occurrence of the TM -me- in type B constructions demands a different explanation. Semantically, nothing inhibits perfective relative clauses, and -me- is a relatively

2. Some speakers would accept (or admit using) type B relatives with the TM -ngali- (but not -nge-); e.g. *msichana ningaliyemwoa ningalikuwa na mali* « the girl which I would have married if I had had the money ». The reason for this near-acceptability seems to be that -ngali- is a complex TM, and that the RC in such forms follows the formative -li-.



In all three constructions, the RC may also refer to an entity which is neither subject nor (direct) object of the relative clause. In these cases, naturally, the RC and the OC - if present - have different referents.

- (7) A. ny-imbo ni-mw-andikia-zo the songs I write for him  
 B. ma-neno ni-li-yo-ku-ambia the words I told you

Such syntactic constructions are particularly common with RCs of the « autonomous » classes 8 (vyo- MANNER) and 16 (-po- TIME/CONDITION).

- (8) ni-li-vyo-ku-onyesha as I showed you  
 wa-na-po-imba when/if they sing  
 u-ja-po-mw-ambia hasikii even though you tell him, he does not listen

Relative clauses of all three types may also refer to arguments that are morphologically embedded within the relative clause. Such morphological embeddings are the Connective (« genitive »), the Instrumental phrase preceded by *kwa-*, and the Associative/Agentive phrase preceded by *na-*. In such constructions, we find a RC within the verb form as well as a kind of « resumptive pronoun » with the appropriate morphological marker.

- (9a) ndiye ni-li-ye-ku-zungumzia habari za-ke it is he whose stories I told you  
 (9b) ma-neno a-li-yo-wa-danganya wenziwe kwa-yo the words with which he deceived his companions  
 (9c) w-enziwe a-li-o-zungumza na-o her friends with whom she talked

Locatives of classes 16, 17 and 18 (marked by a non-class specific suffix *-ni*) deserve special attention in this connection. The RC has to refer to the class of the head noun. Thus, examples (b) and (c) below are ungrammatical.

- (10a) nyumba-ni ni-na-mo-kaa in-the-house in which I live  
 (10b) \*nyumba ni-na-mo-kaa the house in which I live  
 (10c) \*nyumba-ni wa-taka-yo-i-bomoa in-the-house which they are going to pull down

Sentences (b) and (c) are rectified by using analytic (often : connective) locative constructions.

- (10b') ny-umba ni-na-yo-kaa ndani ya-ke  
 (10c') ndani ya ny-umba wa-taka-yo-i-bomoa  
 (10c'') katika ny-umba wa-taka-yo-i-bomoa

Even greater syntactic accessibility is shown in the following example where a type B relative refers to the object of an embedded sentence. Note that the RC again appears within the main verb to which it has no direct syntactic relation.

- (11) ny-imbo ni-li-zo-wa-sikia wa-zee wa-o wa-ki-zi-imba  
 the songs which I heard their elders sing (them)

In terms of frequency or stylistic preference, however, it is probably true that the more complex the syntactic structure of the relative clause and the function of the relativized argument in it, the more likely becomes the use of type C constructions. Thus, Ashton (1944 : 310) describes (12a) as normal, and (12b) as « very heavy Swahili ».

- (12a) (masanduku) ambayo sisi watu wawili au watatu hatuwezi kuyainua (boxes) which two or even three of us could not lift  
 (12b) (masanduku) tusiyoweza sisi watu wawili au watatu kuyainua.

Ashton furthermore observes that type C constructions are required for non-restrictive relative clauses (1944 : 310). I have not been able to find out how strict a rule this is.

(13) Hapo kale nchi ya Uganda haikuwa na watu ila mmoja, ambaye aliitwa Kintu

Long ago the country of Uganda had no inhabitants except one, who was called Kintu

Finally, a type C relative construction is the only possible choice when « tenses » other than the simple AOR/PRES/PAST/FUT/NEG are desired (see also (4b) and (6/C) above).

(14a) (vitabu) ambavyo sitavisoma (books) which I am not going to read

(14b) (vitabu) ambavyo u(si)visome (books) which you should (not) read

We may conclude that the spread of type C relative constructions is less due to superior syntactic accessibility than has sometimes been assumed. Its main advantages lie in its morphological and word order versatility.

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## CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION

I would like to profit from the discussion which followed the presentation of this paper (and continued outside the official session) and add the following remarks :

(1) The non-occurrence of type C relative constructions in 19th century Kiunguja is supported by the absence of such forms from the autobiography of Tippu Tip (Gudrun Miehe, personal communication). Various other — though sometimes conflicting — views on use, frequency, and chronology of type C relative constructions are assembled and quoted in Van 't Veld 1966.

(2) I think the stress on -ná-, -lí-, -sí- and -taká- in type B constructions should not be described as « secondary stress », and thus there is no need to assign Swahili different degrees

of distinctive stress. There is only a general rule which reduces non-phrase final stress; the two examples below are identical as far as stress (levels) are concerned :

a.na.sò.ma	ki.tá.bu	he is reading a book
a.nà.ye.a.ndí.ka		he who writes

(3) The attestation of type C relative constructions in old Swahili poetry rules out any possibility of their being a borrowing from English. Generally, type C constructions have more syllables than those of type A or B, thus the former are unlikely to be modern substitutes for older (type A or B) constructions in poetic texts. However, it is not at all unlikely that the recent spread of type C has been favoured by its structural similarity to the relative construction in English.

(4) The suggestion was made that the form *amba-RC* might never have had a subject concord — which would mean that it did not develop out of the type A construction. The suggested « parallel » (from Sanga L. 35) did not convince me because it concerned a complementizer, not a « relative pronoun ». On the other hand, the loss of a subject concord is attested in Swahili by forms such as (i)japo « although ». Even more direct evidence has since come to my attention : Van 't Veld (1966 : 97) cites Giriyama forms (from Westen, 1903) where the subject concord is still present : (mimi) nambaye, (kitu) chambacho. If such forms are indeed the source of type C relative constructions, the original paraphrase would have been « (I) who say », « (the thing) which says », etc.

(5) An interesting hypothesis was put forward concerning the (pre-Swahili) origin of type A relative constructions. In the following two examples the formative PP-o (PP = pronominal prefix) appears in postfinal position in non-relative verb forms.

Ngazija (example provided by M. LAFON) :

tsi-m-nika-šo	I give it to him
SC OC give RC	
1sg 1 7	

Tikuu (example from D. NURSE, 1982 : 101) :

v - enda - vo	they are going
SC go RC	
2 2	

The Ngazija example shows that the « relative concord » is but a special instance of the more general « referential concord » (RC), which is also true for Standard Swahili (Kisanifu); see, for instance, its use in demonstratives and after *-ingine-*. The suggestion now is that either one of these two constructions could somehow have transformed (« il y avait un passage ») into Swahili type A relative constructions. I think this is very unlikely.

The Ngazija example — and parallels could be cited from a wide range of Bantu languages — shows the use of the RC (PP-o) as an anaphoric (second) object pronoun. It can only occur with (bi-)transitive verbs, and how exactly it could have changed into a general relative remains unclear. The Tikuu example looks more promising because it is not limited to transitive verbs, and it appears to be a construction particular for this specific northeastern Bantu area. The closest parallel I know of exists in Rimi (or : Nyaturu) where certain non relative verb forms have a tone-copy of the subject concord in postfinal position (Schadeberg, 1978/79). There is good comparative evidence that these and similar verb forms were originally relative verb forms (cf. Nsuka, 1982). I therefore suggest that the Tikuu form above (as well as equivalent forms in other Northern Swahili dialects) have their historical source in relative verb forms, and that they changed into absolute forms by way of topicalized cleft sentences such as « it is they who go ».

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