The Acquisition of Nairobi Swahili:  
The Morphosyntax of Inflectional Prefixes and Subjects

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Applied Linguistics

By

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**List of Abbreviations and Glosses**

| Appl. | Applicative suffix |
| Cond. | Conditional Tense prefix |
| Cont. | Continuative Tense prefix |
| Fut. | Future Tense prefix |
| Hab. | Habitual Tense prefix |
| Ind. | Indicative final vowel |
| Inf. | Infinitive prefix |
| Loc. | Locative final vowel |
| nc | Null constant |
| NEG. | Negative final vowel |
| OA | Object Agreement prefix |
| OP | Operator |
| Past. | Past Tense prefix |
| Perf.com. | Perfect Completive Tense prefix |
| Pr.prf. | Present perfect Tense prefix |
| Pres. | Present Tense prefix |
| Recip. | Reciprocal suffix |
| SA | Subject Agreement prefix |
| State. | Stative suffix |
| Subj. | Subjunctive final vowel |
| T | Tense prefix |

- **Full Clause**: A verbal complex containing at least SA and T
- **[-SA] Clause**: A verbal complex in which only SA is missing
- **[-T] Clause**: A verbal complex in which only T is missing
- **Bare Stem**: A verbal complex in which both SA and T are missing
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**VITA**

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**PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS**


ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Acquisition of Nairobi Swahili: The Morphosyntax of Inflectional Prefixes and Subjects

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics
University of California, Los Angeles, 2002
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This study investigates the acquisition of inflectional prefixes in Swahili, an eastern Bantu language. The order of morphemes in adult Swahili is: Subject Agreement – Tense – (Object Agreement) – Verb Root – (derivational suffixes) – Mood Vowel. I present data from an original corpus of 4 Swahili-speaking children (ages 1;8-3;0) who were recorded in Nairobi, Kenya. An analysis of the children’s verbal utterances reveals that four clause types occur in the speech of all four children, with omissions diminishing with maturity:

a. Agr – T – Verb Stem  Full Clause
b. Ø – T – Verb Stem  [-SA] Clause
c. Agr – Ø – Verb Stem  [-T] Clause
d. Ø – Ø – Verb Stem  Bare Verb Stem

Of these four, only full clauses and [-SA] clauses are permitted by adults in this non-standard dialect of Swahili (Deen, 2002). Furthermore, tense becomes obligatory earlier than subject agreement, the omission of which persists until the latest data points. The data support the Agr-Tense Omission Model (Schütze & Wexler, 1996) in showing that agreement and tense may be optionally and independently underspecified.

Interestingly, the omission of Agr and T has effects on the occurrence of overt subjects, suggesting that the omission is not purely phonological, but rather is of a syntactic nature. When full clauses occur, children allow overt subjects at approximately adult rates (Swahili being a null subject language, this rate is approximately 17%). In [-SA] clauses, overt subjects occur at significantly higher rates in both child and adult Swahili (~40%). In [-T] clauses, overt subjects are entirely unattested. This is expected if we assume that in the absence of T, children allow PRO subjects, as in adult infinitives. Surprisingly however, in bare stems (which are also missing T), overt subjects occur at approximately 12%. I provide an analysis that makes use of a null constant-anaphoric topic operator construction (Rizzi, 1992; 1997). I show that in both adult and child Swahili, this construction occurs in the absence of agreement. It is this anaphoric topic operator (and not a true subject) that occurs in both [-SA] clauses (adult and child) as well as child bare stems.