

# The Acquisition of Clitics in Swahili

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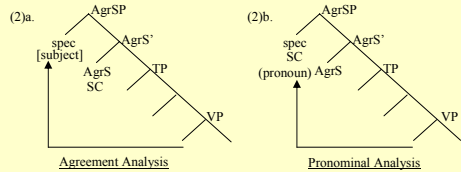
## Background

### Subject Clitic (SC)

Is the Subject Clitic an Agreement Marker or a Subject Pronoun?

Subject/topic? Agreement marker / subject pronoun?

(1) Juma a - na - kimbi - a  
Juma SA<sub>3s</sub>- pres- run - IND  
'Juma is running.'



➢ Bresnan & Mchombo (1987) → In Chichewa, SC = ambiguous agr/pronoun  
➢ Keach (1995) → Same is the case for Standard Swahili.

However:

→ Nairobi Swahili is different from Standard: Subject clitic is AGREEMENT.

### Evidence

#### I. Subject wh-questions are possible in Swahili (unlike Chichewa)

(3) nani, a - me - end-a ?  
who SA<sub>3s</sub>-pr.prf-go-IND  
who has gone?

Preverbal  
DP=subject

#### II. Idiom subjects resist topicalization:

(4) \*Mtindi ni - li - fikir - i kuwa [t] u - me - va - a Asha  
Brew SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-think-IND that SA<sub>3s</sub>-pr.prf.-wear-IND Asha  
(lit: (As for) the brew, I thought that it has covered Asha)

Preverbal  
DP ≠ Topic

#### III. Preverbal DP can be a quantifier (therefore not a topic)

(5) kila mtoto a - li - nunu - a ki - tabu  
every child SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-buy-IND 7-book  
'Every child bought a book.'

Topics  
cannot be  
quantifiers

Compare to:

(6) \*kila kitabu, a - li - (ki-)nunu - a [t]  
every thing SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-(OA<sub>7</sub>)-buy-IND [t]  
'Every book, she bought'

#### IV. Answers to questions

(7) Question: nani a - li - fik - a mapema  
who SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-arrive-IND early  
'Who arrived early?'

Topics  
cannot be  
answers to  
wh-  
questions

Answer: ?? Juma, a - li - fik - a mapema  
Juma, SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-arrive-IND early  
'Juma, he arrived early.'

Answer: Juma a - li - fik - a mapema  
Juma SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-arrive-IND early  
'Juma arrived early.'

Preverbal  
DP ≠ Topic

#### V. Typological Evidence

Agreement markers tend to remain close to the verb, in the same configuration with verb. Pronominal clitics may move, or other elements may intervene with the verb. See Steele 1995; Schachter, 1995.

(8) a. [a - na - m - pend - a] Mariam, Juma  
SA<sub>3s</sub>-Pres-OA<sub>3s</sub>-like - IND Mariam Juma  
'Juma likes Mariam'

b. Mariam, Juma [a - na - m - pend - a]  
Mariam Juma SA<sub>3s</sub>-Pres-OA<sub>3s</sub>-like - IND  
'(as for) Mariam, Juma likes (her)'

Entire  
verbal  
complex  
remains a  
unit

**Conclusion:** The subject clitic in Nairobi Swahili (unlike Standard Swahili) is a true agreement marker (henceforth SA).

### Object Clitic

Is the Object Clitic an Agreement Marker or a Subject Pronoun?

#### Evidence

Idiomatic objects do not lose their idiomatic interpretation when clitic occurs:

(9) a. ni - li - pig-a pasi ni - li - i - pig-a pasi  
SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-hit-IND iron SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-OA<sub>3s</sub>-hit-IND iron  
'I ironed' 'I ironed it'  
(lit.: 'I hit iron.') (lit.: 'I hit it (with) iron.')

**Conclusion:** The object clitic in Nairobi Swahili is a true agreement marker (henceforth OA).

#### Important Property of Object Agreement:

**Specificity Condition** If object is specific, OA is obligatory (10a), and if object is non-specific, OA is obligatorily absent (10b; Ashton, 1947).

(10) a. Juma a - li - mw - on - a m - tu [+OA] → Obligatory  
Juma SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-OA<sub>3s</sub>-see-IND 1-person Specific  
'Juma saw the person / \*a person.'

b. Juma a - li - on - a m - tu [-OA] → Obligatory  
Juma SA<sub>3s</sub>-past-see-IND 1-person Non-specific  
'Juma saw a person / \*the person.'

## Summary

1. Subject Clitic is AGREEMENT
2. Object Clitic is AGREEMENT
3. Specificity Condition applies to Object agreement.

## The Study

### Research Questions

1. When is SA acquired?
2. When is OA acquired?
3. When do children acquire the Specificity Condition on OA?

### The Data

- Naturalistic data
- 4 children of varying ages
- Data collected in Nairobi, Kenya
- Transcribed, coded, verified by three native speakers.

Table 1. Subject Information

Child	Haw	Mus	Fau	Has
Age range	2;2 – 2;6	2;0 – 2;11	1;8 – 2;2	2;10 – 3;1
No. of recordings	7	23	10	5
MLU	1.54–2.46	1.52–3.57	2.97–3.93	3.15–4.23
V Ratio	.07-.14	.05-.17	.20-.36	.30-.40

Data grouped according to three related measures of grammatical development:

1. Mean Length of Utterance (Brown, 1973) – in morphemes.
2. Proportion of verbs to total utterances (Valian, 1991).
3. Proportion of filler syllables (Peters, 2001; Bottari et al. 1993/94).

Table 2. Division of files into stages

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Files from	Hawa 2;2-2;6, Mus 2;0-2;3	Mus 2;4-2;8	Fau 1;8-2;2, Mus 2;9-2;10	Has 2;10-2;11

### Research Question 1: When is SA acquired?

- Lots of Omission! (see figure 1)

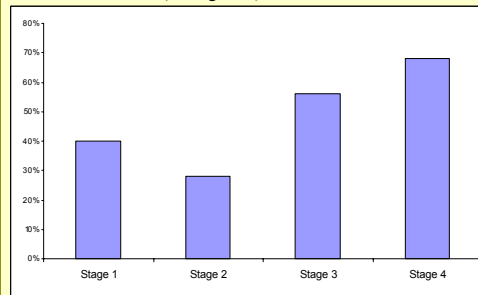


Figure 1. Rate of SA in obligatory contexts.

### Answer to Research Question 1:

SA is acquired relatively late – even by stage 4, children are only providing SA in about 70% of obligatory contexts.

### Research Question 2: When is OA acquired?

The overall rate of OA in the corpora is relatively low, ranging from 5% to 16%:

Table 3. Rates of OA in each stage

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Tokens of OA	38 (6%)	27 (5%)	102 (16%)	66 (13%)
Total Verbs	639	535	638	519

→ But this is meaningless, because these are not obligatory contexts.

### Problem

How do you tell when specificity and OA are obligatory?

Context: a toy is on the bed near the child, and child says: "I want toy."

Possible Meanings:

- I want *the* toy
- I want *that* toy
- I want *a* toy
- I want *any* toy (just give me one!)
- I want *a different* toy.

→ Specificity is hard to determine from naturalistic contexts.

### Answer to Research Question 2:

Because OA is dependent on specificity, we can't tell when OA is acquired (not from this data). But..

### Solution

Look only at contexts when the object is:

- a personal name
- topicalized objects
- 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> person objects

→ These are contexts in which the object is obligatorily specific.

### Research Question 3: When do children acquire the Specificity Condition?

Table 4. Occurrence of OA in **obligatory contexts** (personal names, topics, 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> person objects).

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
+OA in oblig. Context	21 (78%)	20 (83%)	90 (97%)	49 (100%)
-OA in oblig. Context	6	4	3	0
Total	27	24	93	49

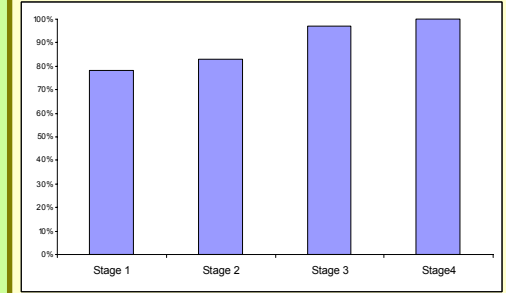


Figure 2. Rate of OA in obligatory contexts.

### Answer to Research Question 3:

OA is acquired relatively *early*, unlike SA.

#### Alternative analysis of these results:

1. Swahili children may know that the preverbal position has a slot where a filler syllable occurs (Bottari et al. 1993/94; Peters, 2001).
2. They may insert filler syllables indiscriminately without knowing what OA is.
3. Thus it *appears* as if OA is used correctly in obligatory context, but this is just a filler-syllable strategy.

But, if that were the case, we might expect  
(i) object agreement errors,  
(ii) OA (filler syllables) in intransitive clauses.

Table 5. Object Agreement Error Rate

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Correct Agreement	38	27	102	66
Incorrect Agreement	0	0	0	0
Tokens of OA	38	27	102	66

→ NOT A SINGLE AGREEMENT ERROR!

Additionally, OA very rarely occurs in intransitive clauses, so children are not simply inserting syllables in preverbal position.

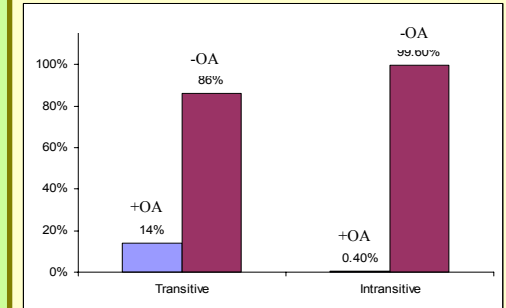


Figure 3. Rate of OA in Transitive and Intransitive Clauses

## Conclusion

**Conclusion 1:** OA is acquired before SA (contra previous studies, e.g., Basque, Meisel & Ezeizabarrena 1996).

**Conclusion 2:** Specificity Condition acquired very early (arguably stage 2) (contra Schaeffer 2000, for Dutch)

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