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Los Angeles

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
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By

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List of Tables.....	v
List of Figures.....	vii
List of Abbreviations and Glosses.....	vii
Acknowledgments.....	viii
Vita.....	x
Abstract.....	xi

Chapter 1.

Introduction.....	1
1.1 The study.....	1
1.2 Early Morphosyntactic Convergence.....	2
1.2.1 The Frequency of Omission.....	2
1.2.2 The Paucity of Agreement Errors.....	3
1.2.3 Root Infinitives.....	4
1.3 Acquisition of Bantu Languages.....	8
1.3.1 Sesotho.....	8
1.3.2 Siswati.....	10
1.4 Other Agglutinative Languages.....	11
1.4.1 Quechua.....	12
1.4.2 Inuktitut.....	13
1.5 Organization of the Dissertation.....	15

Chapter 2.

Morphosyntax of Swahili.....	16
Introduction.....	16
2.1 Basic Facts.....	17
2.2 Phonology.....	18
2.3 Noun Classes.....	20
2.4 Verbal Complex.....	21
2.4.1 Subject Agreement.....	21
2.4.1.1 Nairobi Swahili versus Standard Swahili.....	22
2.4.1.2 SA Omission.....	23
2.4.2 Tense.....	24
2.4.3 Negation.....	25
2.4.4 OA Marking.....	26
2.4.5 Roots.....	27
2.4.6 Suffixes.....	28
2.4.7 Final Vowel.....	30
2.4.8 Imperatives.....	31

The Syntax of Swahili.....	32
2.5 Subject Agreement versus Subject Pronoun.....	32
2.5.1 Keach (1995).....	34
2.5.2 Additional arguments for agreement.....	36
2.6 Tense versus Auxiliary Verb.....	38
2.7 Object Agreement versus Incorporated Pronoun.....	42
2.8 The Tensed Clause.....	46
2.9 Null Subjects – null pro.....	49
2.10 Subject Agreement Omission.....	52
2.10.1 Imperatives.....	53
2.10.2 Infinitives.....	53
2.10.3 Habituals.....	54
2.10.4 Continuative Clauses.....	54
2.10.5 Differences between Habituals and Continuatives.....	54
2.10.5.1 Optionality of SA.....	55
2.10.5.2 Optionality of subjects.....	55
2.10.5.3 Embedding.....	55
2.11 [-SA] Clauses.....	57
2.11.1 Frequency of [-SA] Clauses.....	57
2.11.2 Tense in [-SA] Clauses.....	58
2.11.3 Implicit Reference of [-SA] Clauses.....	58
2.11.4 Overt Subjects in [-SA] Clauses.....	58
2.12 Null Subjects in [-SA] Clauses.....	59
2.13 Rizzi's Null Constant.....	60
2.14 Null Constants in Swahili.....	62
2.14.1 Accounting for [-SA] Characteristics.....	62
2.14.2 Identification in [-SA] Clauses.....	63
2.14.3 Ariel (1990) and Gutman (1999).....	65
2.15 Conclusion.....	69

Chapter 3.

Methodology and Data.....	70
3.0 Swahili data.....	70
3.1 Children.....	70
3.2 Data Collection.....	71
3.3 Linguistic Measures.....	73
3.4 Staging Criteria.....	73
Appendix 3A Adult Similarities.....	78
Appendix 3B Codes used in Transcripts.....	80

Appendix 3C	Staging Data for each Child.....	82
Chapter 4.		
Omission of Prefixes.....		85
4.1	Introduction.....	85
4.2	Theories of language acquisition.....	86
4.2.1	Metrical Omission Model (Gerken 1991)	86
4.2.2	Truncation (Rizzi 1994)	89
4.2.3	Underspecification of Tense (Wexler 1994)..	90
4.2.4	Underspecification of Agr (Clahsen <i>et al.</i> 1996.....)	90
4.2.5	ATOM (Schütze & Wexler, 1996; Schütze 1997)....	92
4.3	Predictions for Swahili.....	93
4.3.1	Metrical Omission Model.....	93
4.3.2	Truncation Hypothesis.....	95
4.3.3	Underspecification Theories.....	97
4.4	Results.....	99
4.4.1	Attested Clause Types in child Swahili – Overview.....	99
4.4.2	A note about Object Agreement.....	102
4.4.3	Full Clauses.....	104
4.4.4	[-SA] Clauses.....	105
4.4.5	[-T] Clauses.....	107
4.4.6	Bare Stems.....	110
4.4.7	Tense Omission versus SA omission.....	112
4.4.8	Summary.....	113
4.5	Revisiting Acquisition Theories.....	114
4.5.1	Metrical Omission Model.....	114
4.5.2	Truncation Hypothesis.....	115
4.5.3	Underspecification of T.....	115
4.5.4.	Underspecification of Agr.....	115
4.5.5	ATOM.....	116
4.6	Remaining questions.....	116
4.7	Conclusion.....	118
Appendix 4A	Missing Mood Vowel Utterances.....	119
Appendix 4B	Root Infinitives.....	120
Appendix 4C	Monthly numbers of omissions by child	122
Appendix 4D	Subjunctives and their Interpretation.....	123

Chapter 5.

Subject Omission and [-SA] clauses.....		126
5.0	Introduction.....	127
5.1	Null Subject Accounts.....	128
5.1.1	Processing Limitations.....	128
5.1.2	Null subjects as PRO.....	129
5.1.3	Topic-drop.....	131
5.1.4	Valian (1991).....	134
5.1.5	Wang <i>et al.</i> (1992).....	135
5.2	Adult Swahili.....	137
5.2.1	Swahili is a null subject language.....	138
5.2.2	[-SA] clauses for adults.....	140
5.2.3	Other clause types.....	142
5.2.4	Subjects in different adult clause types.....	144
5.2.5	Topics or Subjects.....	144
5.3	Subject use by children.....	145
5.3.1	Full clauses.....	146
5.3.2	[-SA] clauses	147
5.3.3	[-T] clauses.....	148
5.3.4	Bare Stems.....	152
5.3.5	Summary.....	152
5.4	Processing Revisited.....	153
5.4.1	Measuring Processing Load.....	153
5.4.2	Utterance length in words/morphemes.....	154
5.4.3	Null Subjects as a result of Processing Limitations....	155
5.4.4	SA Omission as a result of Processing Limitations....	155
5.4.5	Child Null Subjects as PRO.....	156
5.4.6	Topic-Drop.....	157
5.5	Summary of the Chapter.....	157
5.6	Conclusion and Future Research.....	159

References.....	162
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List of Tables

Chapter 1

Table 1.1	Summary of languages that allow RIs, disallow RIs and allow bare verbs.....	1
Table 1.2	Proportion of bare verbs in child English (Sano & Hyams, 1994).....	3
Table 1.3	Agreement errors in various languages (Sano & Hyams, 1994).....	3
Table 1.4	Frequency of verbs in first person singular contexts (Harris & Wexler, 1996)	3
Table 1.5	Frequencies of RIs in French and Swedish (Sano & Hyams, 1994).....	4
Table 1.6	RIs and finite verbs in the files of Simone (Behrens, 1993).....	5
Table 1.7	Finiteness versus verb position in German (Poeppel & Wexler, 1993)	5
Table 1.8	Finiteness versus verb position in French (Pierce, 1989).....	6
Table 1.9	Null subjects in finite and non-finite clauses in several child languages (Rasetti, 2000).....	6
Table 1.10	Proportion of RIs in some non-RI languages (Sano & Hyams, 1994)	7
Table 1.11	Inflection dropping by Inuit children and adults.....	13
Table 1.12	Summary of languages that allow RIs, disallow RIs and allow bare verbs.....	14

Chapter 2

Table 2.1	Meinhoff's Noun Classification System.....	21
Table 2.2	Standard Swahili and Nairobi Swahili SA morphology.....	23
Table 2.3	Tense/aspect morphemes in Swahili.....	24
Table 2.4	Swahili Negation Paradigm.....	25
Table 2.5	Standard and Nairobi Swahili Object Agreement Paradigm for noun classes.....	26
Table 2.6	Personal pronoun Object Agreement.....	26
Table 2.7	Some root structures for Swahili verb roots.....	27
Table 2.8	Monosyllabic verb roots and their citation forms.....	27
Table 2.9	Common Verbal Suffixes in Swahili.....	28

Table 2.10	Types of Applicative sentences in Swahili.....	29
Table 2.11	Contexts for use of final vowel.....	30
Table 2.12	Summary of characteristics of habitual and continuative clauses.....	56
Table 2.13	Proportions of different clause types in adult Swahili...	57
Table 2.14	Person reference in [-SA] clauses with Overt and Null Subjects.....	68

Chapter 3.

Table 3.1	Age ranges and number of recordings for each child.....	70
Table 3.2	Codes used in example (1)	72
Table 3.3	Starting and Ending MLUs for all four children.....	73
Table 3.4	Starting and Ending V ratios for the four children.....	73
Table 3.5	Development of MPHs across time.....	74
Table 3.6	Proportion of MPHs on verbs.....	76
Table 3.7	Criteria for stages.....	76
Table 3.8	Criteria for assigning scores for the purpose of staging children.....	77
Table 3.9	Composite scores for the purpose of staging children.....	77
Table 3.10	Composite scores for sections of Mustafa's corpus.....	77
Table 3.11	Division of the Swahili Corpus by stage.....	77

Appendix 3A

Table 3A.1	Adult statistics from various files.....	78
Table 3A.2	Correlation Coefficients for adults.....	79

Appendix 3B

Table 3B.1	Table of codes.....	80
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Appendix 3C

Table 3C.1	Age, MLU, V Ratio and %MPH for Hawa.....	84
Table 3C.2	Age, MLU, V Ratio and %MPH for Mustafa.....	84
Table 3C.3	Age, MLU, V Ratio and %MPH for Fauzia.....	84
Table 3C.4	Age, MLU, V Ratio and %MPH for Hassan.....	84

Chapter 4.

Table 1.12	Summary of languages that allow RIs, disallow RIs and allow bare verbs.....	85
Table 4.1	Summary of possible INFL features for ATOM.....	93
Table 4.2	Summary of Predictions.....	98
Table 4.3	Clause types in Hawa's files.....	100
Table 4.4	Clause types in Mustafa's files.....	100
Table 4.5	Clause types in Fauzia's files.....	100
Table 4.6	Clause types in Hassan's files.....	100
Table 4.7	Frequencies of clause types, by stage.....	101
Table 4.8	Proportions of clause types, by stage.....	101
Table 4.9	Number of OA in each child's files.....	102
Table 4.10	Total number of transitive clauses.....	102
Table 4.11	Total number of intransitive clauses.....	102
Table 4.12	Types/tokens of verbs expressing irrealis mood.....	116
Table 4.13	Proportion of subjunctives to indicative verbs in early stages and late	117

Appendix 4C

Table 4C.1	Monthly data for Hawa.....	122
Table 4C.2	Monthly data for Mustafa.....	122
Table 4C.3	Monthly data for Fauzia.....	122
Table 4C.4	Monthly data for Hassan.....	122

Appendix 4D

Table 4D.1	Total indicative, subjunctive and negative (final vowel) utterances by stage.....	123
Table 4D.2	Subjunctives by stage.....	123
Table 4D.3	Interpretation of children's indicative verbs.....	123
Table 4D.4	Interpretation of bare indicative stems.....	124
Table 4D.5	Interpretation of subjunctive verbs.....	124
Table 4D.6	Summary of Swahili mood marking.....	125
Table 4D.7	Form-meaning contingencies.....	125

Chapter 5

Table 5.1	Omission in obligatory contexts of subjects and objects (P. Bloom, 1991)	129
Table 5.2	Null and Overt subjects in non-finite contexts (Phillips, 1995).....	130

Table 5.3	Null subjects in inflected <i>be</i> contexts (Sano & Hyams, 1994)	130
Table 5.4	Overall proportion of Null subjects (Sano & Hyams, 1994).....	130
Table 5.5	Null and Overt subjects in finite contexts (Phillips, 1995).....	131
Table 5.6	Proportion of null subjects in declarative and wh- utterances at early stages from Adam and Eve (Bromberg & Wexler, 1995).....	132
Table 5.7	Null and pronominal subjects in finite/non-finite wh- questions for Adam (Bromberg & Wexler, 1995).....	132
Table 5.8	Null and pronominal subjects in finite/non-finite wh- questions for Eve (Bromberg & Wexler, 1995).....	132
Table 5.9	Proportion of null subjects in declaratives and wh- utterances at later stages from Adam and Eve (Bromberg & Wexler, 1995).....	133
Table 5.10	MLU, age, proportion of verbs and proportion of overt subjects for Valian's American children (Valian, 1991).....	134
Table 5.11	Proportion of verbal utterances and overt subjects for Valian's Italian children (Valian, 1991).....	135
Table 5.12	Chinese and American Children's proportions of null arguments.....	136
Table 5.13	Overt and Null subjects in the speech of adults.....	139
Table 5.14	Proportions of different clause types in adult Swahili...	143
Table 5.15	Overt subjects in [-T] clauses.....	146
Table 5.16	Summary of clause types and "subject" options.....	146
Table 5.17	Overt and null subjects in child and adult Swahili.....	150
Table 5.18	TP length in morphemes of full clauses with overt and null subjects.....	156
Table 5.19	Utterance length in [-SA] and full clauses.....	156
Table 5.20	Summary of overt and null subject possibilities in the four clause types.....	157
Table 5.21	Possible subjects with the four inflectional possibilities.....	158
Table 5.22	Summary of compatibility of null elements and inflectional prefixes.....	158

List of Figures

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1	Clause types in Adult Swahili.....	57
Figure 2.2	Overt subjects in adult full clauses and [-SA] clauses...	59

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1	Development of MPHs by age (developed from Veneziano & Sinclair, 2000)	75
------------	--	----

Appendix 3C

Figure 3C.1	MLU by child.....	82
Figure 3C.2	V Ratio by child.....	83
Figure 3C.3	%MPH by child.....	83

Chapter 4

Figure 4.1	Overall proportions of clause types for each child.....	100
Figure 4.2	Proportions of the four clause types in child stages and adults.....	102
Figure 4.3	OA in transitive and intransitive clauses in Child Swahili.....	103
Figure 4.4	OA in transitive and intransitive clauses in Adult Swahili.....	103
Figure 4.5	Tense Omission and SA Omission across stages.....	113
Figure 4.6	Overall frequency of subjunctives in early and late stages.....	117

Appendix 4D

Figure 4D.1	Subjunctives as a proportion of non-imperative verbs...	123
-------------	---	-----

Chapter 5

Figure 5.1	Null subject proportions in Chinese children, American children and Chinese adults (from Wang <i>et al.</i> 1992).....	136
Figure 5.2	Overt subjects in Swahili adult full clauses and [-SA] clauses.	144
Figure 5.3	Overt subjects in child and adult Swahili.....	146
Figure 5.4	Subjects in child full clauses and all adult verbal utterances.....	147
Figure 5.5	Overt Subjects in Full Forms and [-SA] Forms.....	147
Figure 5.6	Adult and child subjects and topics.....	148

Figure 5.7	Overt subjects in child Full clauses, [-SA] clauses and [-T] clauses.....	149
Figure 5.8	Overt subjects by Clause type.....	152

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 noun suffix
nc.....	Null constant
NEG.....	Negative final vowel
OA.....	Object Agreement prefix
OP.....	Operator
Past.....	Past Tense prefix
Perf.comp.....	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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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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

by

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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.