

## MISUSE OF KISWAHILI NOUN CLASS MARKERS IN KENYA: ILLUSTRATION WITH THE CASE OF THE KISWAHILI OF FORM-THREE STUDENTS OF THE AKIBA SECONDARY SCHOOL IN NAIROBI

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The aim of this paper was to establish the extent of misuse of noun class markers in written Kiswahili in Kenya. It illustrates with the case of the Kiswahili of Form Three students of the Akiba Secondary School in Nairobi. A sample of thirty of them was used in the study: 15 male and 15 female. It tested the following hypotheses: (i) The Form Three students of the Akiba Secondary School will make more mistakes in the use of noun class markers reserved for the the *I-ZI* noun class—as would be used for the pair of nouns *sahani* (plate) in the singular and *sahani* (plates) in the plural—than in the use of those reserved for other noun classes. (ii) The male students will make more mistakes in the use of Kiswahili noun class markers than their female classmates. A questionnaire consisting of sentences testing the respondents' ability to correctly use the various noun class markers was used. The frequency of correct uses of individual noun class markers by all the thirty respondents was reported in a table, as was the total performance on each one of the noun class markers by all the students. The results show that contrary to what the study had hypothesized, it was the *A-WA* noun class markers (as illustrated by the bold-type morphemes in the pair of sentences *Kipepeo anaruka akitua mgombani* (The butterfly is flying and landing on a banana trunk) and *Vipepeo wanaruka wakitua migombani* (The butterflies are flying and landing on a banana trunk), and not the *I-ZI* noun class markers, that turned out to be the most frequently misused by the respondents. The second hypothesis was not statistically confirmed either: although the mean for the female students was indeed higher than that for the male in terms of percentages, a t-test found that the difference was not statistically significant.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. A brief description of Kiswahili noun classes and their class markers

Noun class markers in Kiswahili are agreement morphemes affixed to the stems of verbs, adjectives, determiners and pronouns to represent nouns that have specific morphosyntactic properties that make them be said to belong to specific classes. Three criteria have been used by Kiswahili grammarians to put nouns into classes: the semantic criterion, the morphological criterion and the syntactic criterion (see Mgullu 1999: 149-156 and Habwe and Karanja 2004: 81-91 & 166-173). The semantic criterion classifies nouns by their meanings, for instance in terms of whether the noun is abstract or concrete, countable or uncountable, proper or common, etc. The morphological criterion uses the initial (singular vs. plural) prefixes of the nouns themselves, as in the words *mwaliimu* (teacher) vs *waliimu* (teachers), from which the two words will be said to belong to the *MU-WA* class. The syntactic criterion uses agreement features prefixed to verbs, adjectives and pronouns referring back to the noun. For instance, in *Mwaliimu mbaya amefutwa kazi* (The bad teacher has been sacked), and *Waliimu wabaya wamefutwa kazi* (The bad teachers have been sacked), it is the prefixes *a-* and *wa-* on the verbs *amefutwa* and *wamefutwa* that are used to mark the class. So, while according to the morphological criterion, the noun class to which the words *mwaliimu* and *waliimu* belong will be referred to as the *MU-WA-* class, according to the syntactic criterion it will be referred to as the *A-WA-* class. Another important detail to point out is that grammarians who use the morphological criterion number the various noun classes (from 1 to 18), while those who follow the syntactic criterion do not see the need to do so.<sup>1</sup> For a long exposition of the morphological criterion, see e.g. Habwe and Karanja (2004: pp. 82-91), and for the syntactic criterion, see Kapinga (1983: 38), Mgullu (1999: 150-151), and Habwe and Karanja (2004: 166-172). For a comparison (and actually a combination) of both the syntactic and morphological criteria, see Mohammed (pp. 40-51).

Misuse of Kiswahili noun class markers simply arises when the marker used bears agreement features which are not those reserved for the noun it is referring to in a given construction. The following is a summary of the

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis of noun class markers used in this paper follows a classification based on the syntactic criterion, as used e.g. by Mgullu (1999) and Habwe and Karanja (2004).

various noun classes and the class markers that they require. The summary, including many of the illustrative examples, was taken, and in some places adapted, from Mohammed (2001: 53-68) and Polome (1967: 95-103). All the examples illustrating the types of frequent errors involving the specific classmarkers involved were invented by the authors.

### THE A-WA NOUN CLASSES

These classes take the agreement marker *a-* for all their nouns in the singular form and the marker *wa-* for those in the plural. All the living things are placed in these classes, as in *mzee* (an old person) vs. *wazee* (old people) and *kiwete* (a crippled person) vs. *viwete* (crippled people). The only exception is that of a special type of noun that takes the prefix *ji-* as an augmentative morpheme, in which case the class markers that will be required are those for the *LI-YA* noun classes, as we will see below. The *A-WA* noun class markers have been correctly used in sentences (1) and (2) below but wrongly used in (3):

1. (a) *Mzee ameenda sokoni.* (b) *Wazee wameenda sokoni.*  
(The old person has gone to the market) (The old men have gone to the market)
2. (a) *Kiwete anatembea peke yake.* (b) *Viwete wanatembea peke yao.*  
(The crippled person is walking alone) (The crippled people are walking alone)
3. (a) *\*Ng'ombe hii itauzwa leo.* (b) *\*Ng'ombe hizi zitauszwa leo.*  
(This cow will be sold today) (These cows will be sold today)

The two sentences in (3) are ill-formed because the noun *ng'ombe*, which refers to an animate being, does not agree with the determiners *hii* and *hizi* and with the class markers *i-* and *zi-* on the verbs *itauzwa* and *zitauszwa*. These determiners and class markers refer to the *I-ZI* classes, instead.

### THE U-I NOUN CLASSES

The agreement marker for nouns in these classes is *u-* for the singular and *i-* for the plural, as in *mkuki* (spear) vs. *mikuki* (spears) and *mgongo* (back) vs.

*migongo* (backs). The *U-I* noun class markers have been correctly used in sentences (4) and (5) but wrongly used in (6):

4. (a) *Mkuki huu umevunjika.* (This spear is broken) (b) *Mikuki hii imevunjika.* (These spears are broken)
5. (a) *Mgongo wangu unaniuma.* (My back is aching) (b) *Migongo yetu inatuuma.* (Our backs are aching.)
6. (a) *\*Mkuki ile imevunjika.* (That spear is broken) (b) *\*Mikuki zile zimevunjika.* (Those spears are broken)

The sentences in (6) are ill-formed because the nouns *mkuki* and *mikuki* do not agree with the determiners *ile* and *zile* and with the classmarkers *i-* and *zi-* on the verbs *imevunjika* and *zimevunjika*. These determiners and class markers refer to the *I-ZI* classes, instead.

#### THE LI-YA NOUN CLASSES

The agreement marker for nouns in these classes is *li-* for the singular and *ya-* for the plural, as in *jembe* (hoe) vs. *majembe* (hoes) and *nanasi* (pineapple) vs. *mananasi* (pineapples). The *LI-YA* noun class markers have been correctly used in sentences (7) and (8) but wrongly used in (9):

7. (a) *Nanasi hili limeiva.* (This pineapple is ripe) (b) *Mananasi haya yameiva.* (These pineapples are ripe)
8. (a) *Jembe langu limepotea.* (My hoe has been lost) (b) *Majembe yetu yamepotea.* (Our hoes have been lost)
9. (a) *\*Jitu ameingia mwituni.* (The giant has entered the forest) (b) *\*Majitu wameingia mwituni.* (The giants have entered the forests)

The sentences in (9) are ill-formed because the nouns *jitu* and *majitu*, even though they refer to animate beings, do not agree with the classmarkers *a-* and *wa-* on the verbs *ameingia* and *wameingia*. As we have seen, these class markers refer to the *A-WA* noun classes<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Polome (1967: 98-99) the prefix *ji-* in the noun *jitu* has been used augmentatively. It is used in different contexts as a morpheme indicating size: when used alone before a nominal stem in the singular, it gives the noun an augmentative

### THE KI-VI NOUN CLASSES

The agreement marker for nouns in these classes is *ki-* for the singular and *vi-* for the plural, as in *kikombe* (cup) vs. *vikombe* (cups) and *chumba* (room) vs. *vyumba* (rooms). The *KI-VI* noun class markers have been correctly used in sentences (10) and (11) but wrongly used in (12):

10. (a) *Kikombe changu ni kidogo.* (My cup is small.)  
 (b) *Vikombe vyao ni vidogo.* (Their cups are small)
- 11.(a) *Chumba kile ni kikubwa sana.* (That room is very big)  
 (b) *Vyumba vile ni vikubwa sana.* (Those rooms are very big)
12. (a) *\*Kiwete kimepita mtihani.* (The crippled person has passed)  
 (b) *\*Viwete vimepita mtihani.* (The crippled people have passed)

The sentences in (12) are ill-formed because the words *kiwete* and *viwete*, as nouns referring to animate beings, are expected to take the agreement markers that go with the *A-WA* classes, instead of the *ki-* and *vi-* used in (10) and (11) on the verbs *kimepita* and *vimepita*.

### THE I-ZI NOUN CLASSES

The agreement marker for nouns in these classes is *i-* for the singular and *zi-* for the plural, as in *meza* (table) vs. *meza* (tables) and *sahani* (plate) vs. *sahani* (plates). The *I-ZI* noun class markers have been correctly used in sentences (13) and (14) but wrongly used in (15):

13. (a) *Meza ile inavutia.* (That table is attractive.)  
 (b) *Meza zile zinavutia.* (Those tables are attractive.)
14. (a) *Sahani ilinunuliwa jana.*  
 (b) *Sahani zilinunuliwa jana.*

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meaning. So, *ji-tu* means ‘giant’ and *ji-su* means ‘big knife’. The plural of a noun prefixed with the augmentative *ji-* is *ma-*, but with the *ji-* being maintained in this case. So, *majitu* will be the correct plural form. The prefix also appears to be retained as a mere size marker in the formation of Kiswahili diminutives, where *ji-* occurs regularly under its various allomorphs before the nominal stem and is preceded by the class prefix *ki-* in the singular and *vi-* in the plural, as in *ki-ji-tu* (a very small man) vs. *vi-ji-tu* (very small men) and *ki-jo-ka* (a small snake) vs. *vi-jo-ka* (small snakes). Moreover, *ki-* is often added to the form *-ji-* to emphasize the idea of size, where *ji-* would normally be represented by its zero allomorph. This occurs mainly in diminutives, mostly with a derogatory meaning, as in *ki-ji-toto* (a very small child), and *ki-ji-duka* (a very small shop).

(The plate was bought yesterday)      (The plates were bought yesterday.)

15. (a) \**Sahani lake limevunjika*      (b) \**Masahani yao yamevunjika*.  
(His/her plate is broken)      (Their plates are broken)

The sentences in (15) are ill-formed because the noun *sahani* does not agree with the possessive determiner *lake* and the classmarker *li-* on the verb *limevunjika*. This possessive determiner *lake* belongs to the *LI-YA* classes. For its part, the plural \**masahani*, although agreeing with *yao* and *ya-* in *yamevunjika*, is not a standard form in the first place: the plural for the singular word *sahani* is supposed to remain invariable, namely *sahani*.

### THE *U-ZI* NOUN CLASSES

The agreement marker for nouns in these classes is *u-* for the singular and *zi-* for the plural, as in *ukoo* (clan) vs. *koo* (clans) and *udevu* (beard) vs. *ndevu* (beards). The *U-ZI* noun class markers have been correctly used in sentences (16) and (17) but wrongly used in (18):

16. (a) *Ukoo huu umelaaniwa.*      (b) *Koo hizi zimelaaniwa.*  
(This clan is cursed)      (These clans are cursed)
17. (a) *Udevu wake ni mrefu.*      (b) *Ndevu zao ni ndefu.*  
(His beard is long)      (Their beards are long)
18. (a) \**Ukoo hii imelaaniwa*      (b) \**Koo hii imelaaniwa.*  
(This clan is cursed)      (These clans are cursed)

The sentences in (18) are ill-formed because the nouns *ukoo* and *koo* do not agree with the demonstrative determiner *hii* and with the class marker *i-* on the verb *imelaaniwa*. This determiner and this class marker refer to nouns belonging to the *I-* noun class.

### THE *U* NOUN CLASS

According to Habwe and Karanja (2004: 171) the agreement marker for nouns in these classes is *u-* for the singular and *u-* for the plural<sup>3</sup>, as in *upendo*

<sup>3</sup> Our opinion is that this class appears only in the singular. This is because the plural of a noun is expected to be marked by a plural morpheme marked on it or by an agreement marker on e.g. a determiner that goes with the noun in question. But in

(love) vs. *upendo* (love) and *umaskini* (poverty) vs. *umaskini* (poverty). The U- noun class markers have been correctly used in sentences (19) and (20) below but wrongly used in (21):

19. (a) *Umaskini wake ulimtia matatani.* (b) *Umaskini wake ulimtia matatani.*  
 (His poverty put him into trouble) (His poverty put him into trouble)
20. (a) *Upendo unaleta amani.* (b) *Upendo unaleta amani.*  
 (Love brings peace.) (Love brings peace.)
21. *\*Upendo inaleta amani*  
 (Love brings peace)

The sentence in (21) is ill-formed because the noun *upendo* does not agree with the class marker *i-* on the verb *inaleta*. This is a marker that would refer to singular nouns in the *I-ZI* or the *I-I* classes.

#### THE U-YA NOUN CLASSES

The agreement marker for nouns in these classes is *u-* for the singular and *ya-* for the plural, as in *uovu* (evil) vs. *maovu* (evils) and *ugonjwa* (disease) vs. *magonjwa* (diseases). The U-YA noun class markers have been correctly used in sentences (22) and (23) but wrongly used in (24):

22. (a) *Ugonjwa hatari umelipuka.* (b) *Magonjwa hatari yamelipuka.*  
 (A dangerous disease has broken out) (Dangerous diseases have broken out)
23. (a) *Uovu wake ulimfanya atiwe gerezani.* (b) *Maovu yao yaliwafanya watiwe gerezani.*  
 (His evil deeds led to his imprisonment) (Their evil deeds led to their imprisonment)
24. (a) *\*Ugonjwa hatari imelipuka.* (b) *\*Magonjwa hatari imelipuka.*  
 (A dangerous disease has broken out) (Dangerous diseases have broken out)

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the case of this particular class, there is no morpheme or agreement marker indicating the plural, as is evident in the (b) sentences in (19) and (20). Note in passing that the TUKI *Kamusi ya Kiswahili-Kiingereza - Swahili English Dictionary (2001)*, which, for each noun, indicates the accompanying noun classes (both the singular and the plural—where appropriate) provides only U- as the class marker for words like *upendo* and *umaskini*.

The sentences in (24) are ill-formed because the nouns *ugonjwa* and *magonjwa* do not agree with the classmarker *i-* on the verb *imelipuka*.

### THE YA- NOUN CLASS

The nouns in these classes take the agreement marker *ya-* as in *maji* (water) and *manukato* (perfume) vs. *manukato* (perfumes). This noun class has no plural marker. The YA- noun class marker has been correctly used in sentences (25) and (26) but wrongly used in (27):

25. *Maji yale yanachemka.*  
(That water is boiling)
26. (a) *Manukato haya hayana harufu.* (b) *Manukato haya hayana harufu.*  
(This perfume is odourless) (These perfumes are odourless)
27. (a) *\*Maziwa ya mtoto imejaa.* (b) *\*Maziwa ya watoto imejaa.*  
(The child's milk is full) (The children's milk is full)

The sentences in (27) are wrong because the noun *maziwa* does not agree with the classmarker *i-* on the verb *imejaa*, which refers to the *I*-noun class (or the *I-ZI* noun classes in the singular).

### THE I- NOUN CLASS

The nouns in this class take the agreement marker *i-*. They are uncountable, and, hence, do not have a plural form. These are nouns like *asali* (honey) and *chumvi* (salt) vs. *chumvi* (salt). The *I-* noun class marker has been correctly used in sentences (28) and (29) but wrongly used in (30):

28. (a) *Asali iliyorinwa ilikuwa nyingi.*  
(The honey that was harvested was plenty)
29. (a) *Chumvi ile ilinunuliwa jana.*  
(That salt was bought yesterday)
30. (a) *Asali iliyorinwa ilikuwa nyingi.* (b) *\*Asali zilizorinwa zilikuwa nyingi.*

Sentence (30b) is wrong because the noun *asali*, for being uncountable, cannot agree with the plural class marker *zi-* on the verbs *zilizorinwa* (were)



harvested) and *ziliikuwa* (were), a plural marker that would refer to the *I-ZI* noun classes.

### THE *KU-* NOUN CLASS

The words belonging to this class are referred to as verbal nouns, or gerunds (see e.g. Mohammed, 2001, p.50). They take the agreement marker *ku-*, as in *kucheza* (to play) and *kuimba* (to sing). They do not have a plural form. The *KU-* noun class marker has been correctly used in sentence (31) below but wrongly used in (33):

31. *Kuimba kwangu kutawafurahisha.*  
(My singing will please them)

32. \**Kucheza kwake ilitushangaza.*  
(His playing surprised us)

Sentence (32) is wrong because the verbal noun *kucheza* does not agree with the class marker *i-* on the verbs *ilitushangaza*; this marker would refer to a noun in the *I-* class.

### THE *PA-KU-MU* NOUN CLASSES

All these three noun classes indicate location, with the agreement markers referring to them being *pa-*, *ku-*, or *mu-*, in both the singular and the plural.<sup>4</sup> About them, Mohammed (2001) says the following: “The morpheme **PA-** implies definiteness; **KU-** indefiniteness and **MU-** ‘withinness’” (p. 51). The *PA-*, *KU-*, and *MU-* class markers have been correctly used in sentences (33), (34), and (35), respectively, but wrongly used in (36), (37) and (38).

33. (a) *Mahali pale palinipendeza sana.* (b) *Mahali pale palitupendeza sana.*  
(That place pleased me very much) (Those places pleased us very much)

34. (a) *Mahali kule kuliteketezwa moto.* (b) *Mahali kule kuliteketezwa moto.*  
(That place was set on fire) (Those places were set on fire.)

35. (a) *Mahali humu mna mahindi.* (b) *Mahali humu mna mahindi.*

<sup>4</sup> Actually, any one of these three class markers usually refers to one of the following two words: *mahali* and *pahali*, both of which mean the same thing, ‘place’. Note, though, that only *mahali* is an entry in many dictionaries.

(In this place there is maize)      (In these places there is maize)

36. \**Mahali pale kulinipendeza sana.*  
(That place pleased me very much)
37. \**Mahali kule paliteketezwa moto.*  
(That place was set on fire)
38. \**Mahali humu pana mahindi.*  
(This place has got maize)

Sentence (36) is ill-formed because the class marker *ku-* on the verb *kulinipendeza* is not the same as that on the preceding demonstrative determiner *pale*. Sentence (37) is ill-formed because the class marker *pa-* on the verb *paliteketezwa* is not the same as that on the preceding demonstrative determiner *kule*. Sentence (38) is ill-formed because the class marker *pa-* on the verb *pana* is not the same as that on the preceding demonstrative determiner *humu*.

## 1.2. A few authentic learner mistakes from the literature

So much so far an illustrated description of noun class markers in Kiswahili. But while there is much literature that describes them (see e.g. Kapinga, 1983; Mbaabu, 1985; Mgullu, 1999; Mohammed, 2001; and Habwe and Karanja, 2004), there does not seem to be much that reports on studies of authentic (i.e. not invented) errors involving them. We were able to lay our hands only on Rapando (2005), a study that discusses the morphosyntactic mistakes made by secondary school students in their Kiswahili compositions. The author collected data from five secondary schools in the City of Nairobi. Below are some of the errors she pointed out from the students' compositions:

39. \**Ndoto lilianza...*  
(The dream began ...)

The construction in (39) is ill-formed because the noun *ndoto* (dream) belongs to the *I-ZI* noun classes, and hence would require the class marker *i-* in the singular, to have *ilianza*. But the student who produced (39) wrongly

used the agreement marker *li-* on the verb *lilianza*, which is reserved for the singular of the *LI-YA* pair of noun classes.

40. \**Usiku ilipofika...*  
(When night fell...)

The construction in (40) is ill-formed because it has used the singular marker *i-*, on the verb *ilipofika*, which refers to the singular of the *I-ZI* pair of noun classes. The noun *usiku* (night) would require the class marker *u-* on the following verb, to get *ulipofika*.

41. \**Vita ilipoanza...*  
(When the war began...)

The construction in (40) is ill-formed because it has used the singular class marker *i-* on the verb *ilipoanza*, where the plural word *vita* (despite it being translated by the word *war* in the singular) would require the plural marker *vi-* reserved for the *KI-VI* noun classes.

Overall, the types of mistakes reported in Rapando (2005) suggest that the Kiswahili learners whose compositions were studied would make more mistakes involving noun class markers reserved for the *I-ZI* noun class than those reserved for other classes. It is this type of observation that served as the basis for the key hypothesis of the present study, which was the following:

(i) *The Form Three students of the Akiba Secondary School will make more mistakes in the use of noun class markers reserved for the the I-ZI noun class than in the use of those reserved for other noun classes.*

Then we decided to add the following, as a kind of secondary hypothesis:

(ii) *The male students will make more mistakes in the use of Kiswahili noun class markers than their female classmates.*

This latter hypothesis was based not directly on research findings on errors in Kiswahili, but on somewhat distant literature, that on the sociolinguistics of language and gender. This literature reports that female speakers of language tend to use more correct language forms than their

male counterparts (see e.g. Coates, 2004, chapters 4 to 6; Trudgill, 2000, chapter 4; and Wardhaugh, 2006, chapter 13)<sup>5</sup>. For instance, here is what Trudgill (2000: 70) says:

Much of the evidence we have for gender differences in English has come from some of the sociolinguistic research carried out in Britain and America... but we also have evidence from Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. The sets of data these surveys have provided have one extremely striking feature in common. In all the cases examined, it has been shown that, allowing for other factors such as social class, ethnic group and age, women on average use forms which more closely approach those of the standard variety or the prestige accent than those used by men.... In other words, female speakers of English ... tend to use linguistic forms which are considered to be "better" than male forms.

Although this quotation specifically refers to the English language, it would definitely be interesting to test the claim made in it in other languages as well, including second language varieties. Small though the present study may be in scope, it is a good beginning.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. The respondents**

The sample of respondents consisted of thirty Form Three students of the Akiba secondary School, fifteen of whom were female and fifteen male. They were selected from a class of forty-one students in total (of whom fifteen were female and twenty-six male). To have an equal number of male and female students, fifteen male students were selected from the twenty-six through random sampling: by numbering small pieces of paper from 1 to 15 and leaving eleven pieces blank. The numbered and non-numbered pieces were then put into a box and the male students were to pick up one each. It is those those who picked up a small piece of paper that was labelled who were included in the sample. That was on 19 January 2009.

### **2.2. The questionnaire**

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that the sociolinguistic literature in question reports on cases from languages spoken as first languages, while in the case of the present study Kiswahili is a second language.

A questionnaire was used to test the students' use of the various noun class markers. It consisted of written sentences containing blank spaces which were to be filled in with the appropriate noun class markers, after which the now-complete sentences were to be transformed from the singular into the plural. Although the questionnaire contained seventeen sentences, these contained thirty-one blank spaces that tested the use of the various noun class markers. So, after the sentences were put into the plural, the total number of uses to be analysed was sixty-two. Here is what the questionnaire looked like (but of course without the information between square brackets to the right of each item):

**MAAGIZO (Instructions)**

*Kamilisha sentensi zifuatazo kwa kutumia viambishi vifaavyo kisha uziandike katika wingi. (Fill in the blank spaces in the sentences below with the appropriate noun class markers and then put the sentences into the plural.)<sup>6</sup>*

- I. *Uuaji \_\_litekelezwa jijini Nairobi bila ufahamu wa polisi.* [the U-YA noun classes]
- II. *Sahani \_\_etu ni \_\_zuri kuliko \_\_ao.* [the I-ZI noun classes]
- III. *Asali \_\_liyorinwa \_\_likuwa nyingi.* [the I-Ø class]
- IV. *Ubavu \_\_ke mmoja \_\_livunjika.* [the U-ZI noun classes]
- V. *Uroho \_\_naweza kumfanya mtu apaliwe.* [the U-Ø class]
- VI. *Kipepeo \_\_naruka \_\_kitua mgombani.* [the A-WA noun classes]
- VII. *Mtazamo \_\_le \_\_mependekezwa na wengi.* [the U-I noun classes]
- VIII. *Nzi \_\_mesababisha maradhi ya kipindupindu.* [the A-WA noun classes]
- IX. *Chuo \_\_kuu \_\_a walimu \_\_tajengwa mjini.* [the KI-VI noun classes]
- X. *Jizi \_\_mehukumiwa kifungo cha miaka kumi.* [the LI-YA noun classes]
- XI. *Mate \_\_limdondoka alipoona mchuzi.* [the YA-Ø noun class]
- XII. *Kitoto \_\_le \_\_zuri \_\_mevaa viatu vinavyopendeza.* [the KI-VI noun classes]
- XIII. *Humu \_\_na watu wengi.* [the MU-Ø noun class]
- XIV. *Soko \_\_le \_\_na wachuuzi wengi.* [the LI-YA noun classes]

<sup>6</sup> Through oversight, no item was included to test the use of the class marker associated with the gerund class *KU-*.

XV. *Mahali \_\_le \_\_na wanyama* [the *KU- Ø* noun class]

XVI. *Gari \_\_ake \_\_meegeshwa kando ya barabara.* [the *LI-YA* noun classes]

XVII. *Pahali \_\_kubwa \_\_mebomoka.* [the *PA* noun class]

The expected correct answers are the following. The (a) sentences are in the singular, while the (b) ones are their plural equivalents. The expected noun class markers have been put in bold type.

- i. (a) *Uuaji **u**litekelezwa jijini Nairobi bila ufahamu wa polisi.*  
(The killing was made in Nairobi without the knowledge of the police.)  
(b) *Mauaji **ya**litekelezwa jijini Nairobi bila ufahamu wa polisi.*
- ii. (a) *Sahani yetu ni nzuri kuliko yao.*  
(Our plate is better than theirs)  
(b) *Sahani zetu ni nzuri kuliko zao.*
- iii. (a) *Asali iliyorinwa ilikuwa nyingi.*  
(The honey that was harvested was a lot.)  
(b) *Asali iliyorinwa ilikuwa nyingi.*
- iv. (a) *Ubavu wake mmoja ulivunjika.*  
(One of his ribs was broken)  
(b) *Mbavu zake zote zilivunjika.*
- v. (a) *Uroho unaweza kumfanya mtu apaliwe.*  
(Greed can make a person to be choked.)  
(b) *Uroho unaweza kuwafanya watu wapaliwe.*
- vi. (a) *Kipepeo anaruka akitua mgombani.*  
(The butterfly is flying and landing on a banana trunk.)  
(b) *Vipepeo wanaruka wakitua migombani.*
- vii. (a) *Mtazamo ule umependekezwa na wengi.*  
(That approach has been proposed by many people.)  
(b) *Mitazamo ile imependekezwa na wengi.*
- viii. (a) *Nzi amesababisha maradhi ya kipindupindu.*  
(The housefly has caused cholera.)  
(b) *Nzi wamesababisha maradhi ya kipindupindu.*
- ix. (a) *Chuo kikuu cha walimu kitajengwa mjini.*  
(A teacher's training college will be built in the city.)  
(b) *Vyuo vikuu vya walimu vitajengwa mijini.*
- x. (a) *Jizi limehukumiwa kifungo cha miaka kumi.*  
(The big thief has been imprisoned for ten years.)  
(b) *Majizi yamehukumiwa vifungo vya miaka kumi.*

- xi. (a) *Mate yalimdondoka alipoona mchuzi.*  
(She salivated when she saw the stew.)  
(b) *Mate yaliwadondoka walipoona mchuzi.*
- xii. (a) *Kitoto kile kizuri kimevaa viatu vinavyopendeza.*  
(That beautiful child has put on attractive shoes.)  
(b) *Vitoto vile vizuri vimevaa viatu vinavyopendeza.*
- xiii. (a) *Humu mna watu wengi.*  
(There are many people in here.)  
(b) *Humu mna watu wengi.*
- xiv. (a) *Soko lile lina wachuuzi wengi.*  
(That market has many hawkers.)  
(b) *Masoko yule yana wachuuzi wengi.*
- xv. (a) *Mahali pale/kule pana/kuna wanyama wengi.*  
(That place has many animals.)  
(b) *Mahali pale/kule pana/kuna wanyama wengi.*
- xvi. (a) *Gari lake limeegeshwa kando ya barabara.*  
(His car is parked beside the road.)  
(b) *Magari yao yameegeshwa kando ya barabara.*
- xvii. (a) *Pahali pakubwa pamebomoka.*  
(A big place has been demolished.)

### 3. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

#### 3.1. Presentation of the results

The results are summarized in the three tables below. Table 1 shows the correct uses of the different noun class markers by the sub-sample of fifteen female students, Table 2 the correct uses of the same by the fifteen male students, and Table 3 the correct uses by the two sub-samples put together. The columns show how many times each noun class marker was correctly used. So, the totals in the columns are frequency counts for each class marker per sub-sample (in the case of Table 1 and Table 2) or for the entire sample (in the case of Table 3). It is from such totals that we can determine which noun class markers were more misused than which. As for the totals in the rows, they indicate how each respondent performed on all the class

markers, on the assumption that each correct use was assigned a score of one point. It is from them that we can check the hypothesis that the female respondents would do better than their male counterparts.



Table 1. Frequency of correct uses of individual Kiswahili noun class markers by female students

	A- WA- 6 times	U- I- 4 times	LI- YA- 10 times	KI- VI- 12 times	I- ZI- 6 times	U- ZI- 4 times	U- YA- 2 times	U- - 2 times	YA- - 2 times	I- - 4 times	PA- - 4 times	KU- - 4 times	MU- - 2 times	All 62 times	%
G1	6	2	6	12	6	4	1	2	0	4	4	4	2	53	85
G2	6	2	6	12	6	2	1	1	1	2	4	4	2	49	56
G3	0	4	7	12	6	4	2	1	2	4	4	4	2	52	84
G4	2	2	6	12	6	4	1	0	1	4	4	4	2	48	77
G5	0	4	10	12	6	4	2	2	2	4	4	4	2	56	90
G6	4	0	10	9	3	2	2	1	2	4	4	4	0	45	73
G7	0	4	6	12	0	4	2	2	2	2	4	4	2	44	71
G8	2	4	4	9	3	4	2	2	2	2	4	4	1	43	69
G9	6	0	10	12	6	0	2	2	2	0	4	4	2	50	81
G10	0	4	4	12	6	4	2	1	1	2	4	4	2	46	74
G11	6	4	8	12	6	4	2	1	2	2	4	4	2	57	92
G12	2	0	7	12	6	2	1	2	2	2	4	4	2	46	74
G13	6	4	9	12	6	4	2	2	2	4	4	4	2	61	98
G14	4	2	10	12	0	0	2	2	2	4	4	4	2	48	77
G15	0	2	8	12	6	4	2	2	1	0	4	2	2	45	73
Tot.	44 /90	38 /60	111 /150	174 /180	72 /90	46 /60	26 /30	23 /30	24 /30	40 /60	60 /60	58 /60	27 /30	743 /930	80
%	49	63	74	97	80	77	87	77	80	67	100	97	90		

G: girl; the mean for the female sub-sample:  $(743/15) = 49.53$  (out of 62); the standard deviation = 5.13

Table2. Frequency of correct uses of individual Kiswahili noun class markers by male students

	A- WA- 6 times	U- I- 4 times	LI- YA- 10 times	KI- VI- 12 times	I- ZI- 6 times	U- ZI- 4 times	U- YA- 2 times	U- - 2 times	YA- - 2 times	I- - 4 times	PA- - 4 times	KU- - 4 times	MU- - 2 times	All 62 times	%
B1	6	4	6	12	6	4	2	2	2	4	4	4	2	58	94
B2	0	2	6	9	6	4	2	2	2	4	4	0	2	43	69
B3	1	4	4	9	3	4	1	1	2	4	4	0	2	39	63
B4	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	1	0	2	2	0	2	11	18
B5	6	4	4	6	3	4	2	1	0	4	4	4	2	44	71
B6	0	2	0	6	3	0	0	1	1	2	4	0	0	19	31
B7	0	4	3	12	3	4	2	2	2	4	4	4	2	46	74
B8	2	4	5	12	6	2	2	2	2	4	4	4	2	51	82
B9	2	4	5	12	6	4	2	2	2	4	4	4	2	53	85
B10	6	2	4	9	6	4	2	2	2	4	4	4	0	49	79
B11	4	2	8	12	6	4	2	1	2	0	4	4	2	51	82
B12	0	2	9	12	3	2	2	1	1	2	4	4	1	43	69
B13	0	4	6	12	6	4	2	1	2	2	4	2	2	47	76
B14	6	4	10	12	6	2	2	1	0	2	4	0	1	54	87
B15	6	4	10	12	6	4	2	1	1	4	4	4	2	60	97
Tot.	39 /90	46 /60	80 /150	150 /180	69 /90	46 /60	26 /30	21 /30	21 /30	46 /60	58 /60	38 /60	24 /30	668 /930	72
%	43	77	53	83	77	77	87	70	70	77	97	63	80		

B: boy; the mean for the male sub-sample:  $(668/15) = 44.53$  (out of 62); its standard deviation= 12.93

Table 3. Total frequency of correct uses of individual Kiswahili noun class markers by male and female students

	A- WA- 6 times	U- I- 4 times	LI- YA- 10 times	KI- VI- 12 times	I- ZI- 6 times	U- ZI- 4 times	U- YA- 2 times	U- 2 times	YA- 2 times	I- 4 times	PA- 4 times	KU- 4 times	MU- 2 times	All 930 times	%
Female students N= 15	44 /90	38 /60	111 /150	174 /180	72 /90	46 /60	26 /30	23 /30	24 /30	40 /60	60 /60	58 /60	27 /30	743 /930	<b>80</b>
Male Students N= 15	39 /90	46 /60	80 /150	150 /180	69 /90	46 /60	26 /30	21 /30	21 /30	46 /60	58 /60	38 /60	24 /30	668 /930	<b>72</b>
<b>Tot. for Male + female</b>	83 /180	84 /120	191 /300	324 /360	141 /180	92 /120	52 /60	44 /60	45 /60	86 /120	118 /120	96 /120	51 /60	1411 /1860	<b>76</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>46.1</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>63.7</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>78.3</b>	<b>76.7</b>	<b>86.7</b>	<b>73.3</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>71.7</b>	<b>98.3</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>85</b>		

### 3.2. Discussion of the results

The first observation to make is that, contrary to what the present study had hypothesized, it was not the class markers referring to the *I-ZI* noun classes that turned out to be the biggest source of difficulty, that is, in terms of filling in the blank spaces in the sentence *Sahani \_\_etu ni \_\_zuri kuliko \_\_ao*, so as to produce *Sahani yetu ni nzuri kuliko yao* ('Our plate is better than theirs'), and its plural version (b) *Sahani zetu ni nzuri kuliko zao* ('Our plates are better than theirs'). As Table 3 shows in its third row, the rate of success in inserting the correct *I-ZI* class markers into the relevant gaps was 78.3, which is above the average rate of 76% (in the rightmost column). If we look at the figures in the bottom two rows of Table 3, we will see that what one would say are the noun classes whose class markers were the most difficult to deal with, in the sense that they recorded rates below the 76% average, are the following: *A-WA* (46.1%), *LI-YA* (63.7%), *U-I* (70%), *I-* (71.7%), *U-* (73.3%), and *YA-* (75%).

These figures show that it was actually the class markers associated with the *A-WA* noun classes that recorded, by far the biggest number of mistakes, reflected in the lowest rate of correct uses of only 46.1%, the lowest. As if to test the words "by far", a chi-square test was carried out to test whether the difference between this lowest frequency (corresponding to 83/180 in raw figures) of correct uses and the second lowest, 63.7% (corresponding to 191/300 in raw figures) was statistically significant. The chi-square test yielded a value of 14.12, one that was significant both at the  $p < .05$  and the  $p < .01$  levels (with  $df = 1$ ). This means that the difference between the two frequencies was indeed statistically significant. This further suggests that the level of significance was even greater between the frequency of "misuse" of the *A-WA* noun classes and that of any one of the other noun classes tested taken individually or as a group.

It is not clear to us why the respondents did much better than we had expected on correctly using the noun class markers referring to the *I-ZI* noun class: we had thought that a considerable number of them would wrongly use *masahani* (instead of *sahani*) as the plural for *sahani*, but our prediction did

not materialize. On why the majority of the respondents failed to correctly use the class markers referring to the *A-WA* classes, we can speculate that that might have been due to the fact that in the two sentences that tested them, only words referring to insects (and none referring to a person) were used as the referents: *kipepeo* (butterfly) and *nzi* (fly). Typically, in Bantu languages (but with Kiswahili being an exception), noun class markers referring to people are different from those referring to animals and insects. In this respect, one could reasonably expect a good number of Kiswahili learners whose first languages are Bantu to be tempted to use different noun class markers for insects and say, in the singular: \**Kipepeo kinaruka kikitua mgombani* (instead of *Kipepeo anaruka akitua mgombani*) and \**Nzi imesababisha maradhi ya kipindupindu* (instead of *Nzi amesababisha maradhi ya kipindupindu*). This is indeed what seems to have happened, even though we did not control for the variable “first language”.

Turning now to the hypothesis that the female respondents would do better than their male counterparts, at face value the figures in the tables above tend to support this: compare, for instance, the percentages in the rightmost column of Table 3: 80%, as the rate of correct uses for the female sub-sample, against 72%, as the rate for the male one. However, this apparently big difference between the two percentages did not turn out to be soild enough, statistically speaking: a t-test for independent-samples with equal sample sizes which was carried out to compare the means of the two sub-samples (that is, a mean of 49.53 for the female sub-sample, with a standard deviation of 5.13, and that of 44.53 for the male sub-sample, with a standard deviation of 12.93) did not yield a significant value. The test yielded a value of 1.39, which was not significant either at the  $p < .05$  level of significance or the  $p < .01$  level (with  $df=28$ ) for a one-tailed hypothesis.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to investigate which noun class markers in Kiswahili would be more misused than which by the sample of respondents used in the study. It started from a specific hypothesis, namely that the class markers referring

to the noun classes *I-* (for the singular) and *ZI-* (for the plural) would be the most misused, as seemed to suggest student errors reported in a study by Rapando (2005). The study added a secondary hypothesis, namely that the female respondents would do better on the test used to test the use of the various noun class markers than their male counterparts.

The test used was a written grammar one, consisting of sentences which contained gaps to be filled in by affixes in the form of class markers referring back to specific nouns used as the subjects of the sentences in question. The results of the test show that it was the class markers referring to the noun classes *A-* (in the singular) and *WA-* (in the plural), that were the most difficult to use. The same results showed that the class markers for the *I-* and *ZI-* nouns did not even rank in the top fifty percent most difficult class markers.

Further research, using more, and, where possible, bigger, samples, should be necessitated by the conflicting results from this study and those from another study (by W. O. Makokha) on the same topic, and also published in this volume: while the present study found the class markers for the *A-* and *WA-* nouns to be by far the most difficult to use, the other study found that they were actually the least difficult of the five pairs of noun classes studied. In a similarly astonishing vein, the class markers associated with the *U-* and *ZI-* nouns, which were found by the latter study to be the most difficult to use (of the five studied), ranked only seventh (out of thirteen) in the present study. Whatever differences there are in the methodologies used, specifically the nature of the tests, and which may have led to the conflicting results, they should be the first thing to address in future research on the topic.

But from the two studies transpired one common, and equally interesting observation: the term “difficult” repeatedly used in this conclusion is quite relative: for instance, in the present study the average rate of correct uses of the various noun class markers turned to be as high as 76%. In the other study, the rate of correctly corrected mistakes (because that was what the study was about) was as high as 69%. These two high percentages, from two different, but both written, tests seem to suggest that the apparently

pervasive misuse of noun class markers in the Kiswahili of Kenya is much more a feature of spoken than that of written Kiswahili. And this is another topic for further research.

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