

Swahili, Sabaki, and Beyond: Integrating New Data and Perspectives on the East African Coast

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This workshop aims to bring together scholars working on a region that is historically complex and far more linguistically diverse than is often assumed—the East African coast and its offshore islands. Several Bantu languages in this region are classified within the Sabaki subgroup of Northeast Coast Bantu (Nurse & Philippson 1975; Hinnebusch 1981; Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993; Nurse 1999). Among these languages, Swahili is the most prominent; however, coastal Swahili is far from uniform, encompassing a wide range of varieties.

Notably, despite dedicated investigations, convincing shared innovations have yet to be demonstrated that would indicate the relevant coastal Swahili varieties derive from a common node on the family tree (Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993). Similarly, the Sabaki subgroup has not been supported by compelling evidence that clearly distinguishes the languages in this group from other Northeast Coast Bantu languages. The hypothesis that Sabaki and Swahili languages form a monophyletic group descending from Proto-Swahili and Proto-Sabaki (as introduced by Walsh 2018) remains a matter of ongoing discussion (see also Reusch 1953; Möhlig 1984/85, 1989; Güldemann 1992). The East African coast has long been a zone of dense economic, political, and cultural interaction (LaViolette & Wynne-Jones 2018). This historical context makes it highly plausible that intra-family language contact has contributed to the phenotypical affinities observed in this area, beyond what genetic proximity alone would predict, and may even have obscured the presence of multiple genealogical lineages in the background of Bantu languages in this region (as suggested by Güldemann 2018).

The workshop will create a platform where new descriptive insights can inform broader discussions, rather than focusing exclusively on historical linguistic debates. The discussions and findings from this workshop are expected to build a solid foundation for re-examining the intricate diachrony of the Bantu languages spoken along the Indian Ocean coast and neighbouring islands. In light of this, contributions from descriptive, typological, or interdisciplinary perspectives are highly encouraged, and an interest in historical linguistics is not necessarily required.

We particularly welcome:

- New descriptive data (e.g. phonology, morphosyntax, or lexicon) on under-documented Swahili and Sabaki varieties or neighbouring Bantu languages
- Typological or areal perspectives on language change in this region
- Analyses of contact-induced changes that have occurred across the region (including

influences from non-Bantu languages)

- Comparative studies addressing genealogical relationships within Sabaki and beyond
- Interdisciplinary approaches that combine linguistic research with other areas of study (e.g. anthropology, archaeology, history)

The scope is not limited to coastal Swahili dialects or Sabaki languages (Comorian, Mijikenda, Lower Pokomo, Upper Pokomo, Elwana); presentations on neighbouring and/or other closely related Bantu languages that can meaningfully contribute to these discussions are also welcome. We invite contributions that not only present new data but also challenge existing assumptions and open new avenues for understanding the dynamics of Bantu languages in this region.

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