

The nature and origin of acronyms in Kiswahili and Setswana

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Abstract

The African Academy of languages (ACALAN) was officially launched in 2006 in Bamako, Mali. Since then, it has carried out a number of projects, one of which being the preparation of a set of guidelines for the creation of terms in the African languages (ACALAN, 2008b; Bamgbose, 2001). One of the most commonly used mechanisms in lexical expansion is acronymy, in which the first letters or syllables of words are combined together to form a word (Yule, 1996, p. 68).

This study examines how this mechanism has been used in two major regional languages, namely Kiswahili, spoken in eastern Africa, and Setswana, extensively used in southern Africa. The main aim of the article is to investigate how these two regional languages have dealt with the influx of acronyms which have become important word forms in African languages, as the use of these languages expands to higher domains. The study uses primary and secondary data to demonstrate the efforts which have been made in the development of acronyms in both languages, and the challenges which have been experienced. The study findings are very revealing in that they show that, although most African dictionaries do not include acronyms as part of their entries, they are found most often in the higher domains and appear in many forms. The main conclusion of the paper is that African countries need full-fledged language institutions and supportive language policies in order to spearhead the process of lexical expansion and intellectualization of the indigenous African languages by using all strategies of term development.

Key words: acronyms, acronymy, lexical expansion, formal domains, technical domains, regional language.

Introduction

Kiswahili and Setswana are two among the major Bantu languages in eastern and southern Africa respectively. While Kiswahili is spoken by at least 80 million people in 12 African countries, namely

Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Comoros, Malawi, Zambia and Madagascar, Setswana is spoken by at least 5 million people in four countries, namely Botswana, South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe (ACALAN, 2008a). Both languages have not only attracted second language speakers, but also been adopted as national, and even, in some cases, official languages, in some of the countries where they are spoken. Both of them are among the 15 African languages which have been selected by the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) as vehicular cross-border languages to serve as instruments of communication and development in their respective regions. Thus, because of their extended domains of use, these languages have absorbed a substantial stock of new lexical items from other languages and through various methods of lexical expansion. The extent to which they have accommodated the new vocabulary to their phonological and morphological norms has depended on both linguistic and socio-linguistic factors.

This study investigates the acronymic words in Kiswahili and Setswana by examining their nature and origin. The main argument of the study is that, given the different perceptions and mechanisms in which these languages are being developed in their respective regions, the type of acronyms would develop differently. The paper discusses the acronyms in terms of their phonological composition, spelling system, morphological behavior and domains in which they are used.

Acronymy as a strategy in lexical expansion

According to Matthews (1997, p. 6), an acronym is a word formed from the initial letters or syllables of two or more successive words. The components of an acronym may be individual letters, as in *NATO* (standing for *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*) or syllables (as in the Kiswahili form *BAKITA* (standing for *Baraza la Kiswahili Tanzania* (Kiswahili Council of Tanzania))). Where acronyms are made up of letters, two types have been distinguished, namely those pronounced by spelling out the individual letters, as in *FIB* (*Federal Investigation Bureau*) and those pronounced as single words, as in *NATO* (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization*) (Yule, 1996, p. 68).

In many cases, the speakers of a language may not be aware of the original longer form of the expression. For example, many people use the word *radar* without knowing that it is an acronym for the longer form

receiver of antenna downed in rooms. It has become a word of its own. In fact, acronymy is one of the strategies, which human languages employ in term or vocabulary enrichment. The other, more commonly used methods, include derivation, expansion of meaning, compounding and borrowing. Acronymy is usually one of the much rarer strategies, together with coinage, blending, back-formation and clipping (Yule, 1996). Usually acronymy, as a method of term development, is used in cases where long and cumbersome expressions are shortened for ease of writing, pronunciation and memory or where words are eclipsed for exclusion reasons (Batibo, 1992, p. 98).

Acronyms are therefore considered as words in their own right. According to Matthews (1997, p. 1), acronymy differs from abbreviation, in that abbreviation refers to words which have resulted from the process of shortening long words or phrases. Such a process would include acronymy, blending or clipping. According to a study conducted by Mathangwane (2015), most dictionaries, which have been compiled on African languages, have not included acronyms as part of the lexical entries. This may be because of their peculiarity of form which often does not conform to the canonical word structure. But one other reason could be because many of them have foreign origins and continue being pronounced with foreign spelling and syllabicity.

3. Data collection methods

Although the two languages have several varieties and levels of development in the different countries where they are spoken, the Kiswahili data used in this study is based on Tanzanian variety of Kiswahili, commonly known as *kisanifu*, which is usually considered the standard form. In the case of Setswana, the variety used is that of Botswana, where the language is used extensively as national medium.

The study is based on samples of data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources involved observation and recording by the authors of acronyms used in speech and writing, especially newspapers and other print materials. The secondary sources included dictionaries and glossaries in which acronyms are included as lexical entries. All together there were 197 acronyms for Kiswahili and 102 acronyms for Setswana in our sample. Most of them were found in formal or technical register. There were a few

acronyms which were found in informal or non-technical usage. A loose transcription system was adopted, which corresponded roughly to the way the sounds were pronounced in the two languages. The IPA notation was used for the consonants, but only eleven vowel sounds were used, namely (a, e, ε, i, o, u, ai, al, au, ei, ou). Long vowels were indicated by a colon (i:) or doubling the vowel (ii).

The data were categorized according to domains of use and transcribed the way the speakers pronounce them, by using broad transcription. Also, the longer original forms were indicated in order to indicate their origins. Where necessary, the English equivalent was given. Table 1 below shows the domains in which the words in our sample belonged. The figures are given in percentages.

Table 1: The domains to which the acronyms in our sample belonged

	Domains of use	% of No of occurrence in Kiswahili	% of No of occurrence in Setswana
1	Commercial institutions (e. g. banks, corporations, insurance companies, etc.)	11.5	18.4
2	Political organizations (e.g. political parties, political groups, activist organizations, etc.)	19.3	17.5
3	Government institutions (e.g. ministries, departments, parastatals, etc.)	26.9	21.1
4	International organizations (e.g. countries, agencies, regional bodies, etc.)	10.7	13.6
5	Public institutions (e.g. learning institutions, religious organizations, societies, etc.)	15.8	12.1
6	Social affairs (e.g. social welfare, medicines, diseases, security, well-being, etc.)	6.4	4.6
7	Technical objects (e.g. instruments, devices, machines, etc.)	5.9	5.7
8	Others (e.g. locations, foods, utilities, slang, euphemisms, NGOs, etc.)	3.5	7.0
	TOTAL	100%	100%

As it can be seen from Table 1, in both languages most acronyms belong to formal or technical domains, particularly in the domains of government bodies, commercial enterprises, international organizations, political parties and public institutions. The few acronyms which denoted village or cultural life were usually used as euphemisms or slang words, such as *KK* in colloquial Kiswahili standing for *Kinywaji Kikali* (i. e. *Hard drink*), used commonly by some educated youth.

Discussion of data

When the data were analyzed, the following facts emerged for each of the two languages.

(a) *Kiswahili acronyms*

When the Kiswahili data were examined, it was discovered that the language has two types of acronyms, namely the pre-Arusha Declaration and the post-Arusha Declaration. Before the Arusha Declaration in 1967, Tanzania (which had emerged as a United Republic after the union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1964) had largely kept not only its institutions, but also their nomenclature since its independence in 1961 (for Tanganyika) and 1964 (for Zanzibar) (Whiteley, 1969). The country retained not only the acronyms left behind after the colonial era, but also the mechanisms of creating acronyms. There were three types of acronyms. These were:

- i) Those of English origin with English pronunciation
This type included names of international organizations and terms created locally mainly during colonial days when English was used extensively as official language. An example of these acronyms is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Acronyms of English origin with English pronunciation

	Item	adapted English pronunciation	Full form
1	ASP	ei.es.pi:	Afro-Shiraz Party
2	UWT	yu.uu.ti:	Union of Women of Tanzania
3	NBC	en.bi.:si:	National Bank of Commerce
4	TEC	ti:.i.:si:	Tanzania Episcopal Conference

5	BOT	bi:.ou.ti:	Bank of Tanzania
6	TRC	ti:.ar.si:	Tanzania Railway Corporation
7	ATC	ei.ti:.si:	Air Tanzania Corporation
8	THA	ti:.eh.ei	Tanzania Harbours Authority
9	TTC	ti:.ti:.si:	Teacher Training College
10	DMT	di:.em.ti:	Dar-es-Salaam Motor Transport
11	EAC	i:.ei.si:	East African Community
12	EARH	i:.ei.ar.eh	East African Railways and Harbours
13	TEC	ti:.i:.si:	Tanzania Episcopal Conference
14	PWD	pi:.uu.di:	Public Works Department
15	FFU	ef.ef.ju	Field Force Unit
16	AIC	ei.ai.si:	African Inland Church

ii) Those of English origin, but pronounced according to Kiswahili syllabification

This type of comprises acronyms which were created in English during the colonial era or immediately after independence in 1961. These acronyms are pronounced according to Kiswahili syllabification mainly because of their CVCV structure, which equals that of Kiswahili. An example of this type is given in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Kiswahili acronyms of English origin, but pronounced according to Kiswahili syllabification

	Item	Adapted Kiswahili pronunciation	Full form
1	TANU	ta-nu	Tanganyika African National Union
2	NUTA	nu-ta	National Union of Tanzania Workers
3	NEC	ne-kii	National Executive Council
4	TAA	ta-a	Tanganyika African Association
5	UDASA	u-da-sa	University of Dar-es-Salaam Academic Staff Assembly

6	DUSO	du-so	Dar-es-Salaam University Students Organisation
7	DARUSO	da-ru-so	Dar-es-salaam University Students' Union
8	SHIRECU	Si-re-ku	Shinyanga Region Cooperative Union
9	MWADECO	mwa-de-ko	Mwanza Development Corporation
10	MOSICO	mo-si-ko	Morogoro Sisal Company

- (iii) Those of Kiswahili origin, but with adapted English spelling
The third category was of those acronyms which had been created before the 1967 Aruch Declaration. However, these forms were pronounced with an adapted English spelling that is in Tanzanized English. An example of such cases is given in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Kiswahili acronyms of Kiswahili origin, but pronounced in adapted English

	Item	Adapted English pronunciation	Full form
1	CCM	si:.si:.em	Chama Cha Mapinduzi (Revolutionary Party)
2	JKT	dZej.kej.tii	Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa (National Service Squad)
3	JWT	dZei.uu.ti:	Jeshi la Wananchi Tanzania (People's Defense Force)
4	UWT	ju.uu.ti:	Umoja wa Wawawaki Tanzania (Union of Tanzanian Women)
5	SMZ	es.em.zed	Serkali ya Mapinduzi Zanzibar (Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar)
6	KKKT	kej.kej.kej.ti:	Kanisa la Kiinjili la Kiluteri Tanzania (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania)

All the three cases had one thing in common, namely that of English characteristics. This was seen either in the origin of the acronyms or in the way they were pronounced or spelt. Thus the

items were not wholly localized phonologically or morphologically. Even their prosodic features (stress and tone) remained largely English. Hence, they could be regarded as English forms and that the Kiswahili speakers code-switched when using them, particularly those of category (i).

After the Arusha Declaration in 1967, not only a political era was born in Tanzania, but also all national sentiments and orientation were changed to those of socialist's mind-set, in which English was seen as an imperialist medium and a remnant of colonialism. Kiswahili was promoted to become not only national language but also an effective official language. Hence, every effort was directed towards the creation of new formal and technical terms in Kiswahili (Batibo, 1992; Massamba, 1989). The Institute of Kiswahili Research was mandated with the task of spearheading this process. Many institutions and units were put in place in every ministry to enhance the effective use of Kiswahili in all offices. The whole process was coordinated by *BAKITA* (*Bariza la Kiswahili la Taifa* (National Council of Kiswahili)). New acronyms were created to replace the English-based ones. Only terms denoting international or regional organizations were retained. These included names like *NATO*, *UNESCO*, *WHO*, *ILO* or *SADC* (TUKI, 1980).

The principle of acronymy creations was that: The full forms had to be in Kiswahili and then the acronyms were developed by using the first syllables of each word. Table 5 below lists some of the terms created in this way.

Table 5: Kiswahili acronyms formed after the Arusha Declaration

	Item	Broad transcription	Full form
1	BAKITA	ba-ki-ta	Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa (National Kiswahili Council)
2	TAKILUKI	ta-ki-lu-ki	Taasisi ya Kiswahili na Lugha za Kigeni (Institute of Kiswahili and Foreign Languages)
3	UKIMWI	u-ki-mwi	Uharibifu/Ukosefu wa Kinga Mwilini (HIV/AIDS)

4	BAKWATA	ba-kwa-ta	Baraza Kuu la Waislam Tanzania (National Muslim Council)
5	WAWATA	wa-wa-ta	a) Wanawake Wakatoliki Tanzania (Catholic Women of Tanzania) b) Watoto Walemavu Tanzania (Tanzania Disabled Children)
6	UDA	u-da	Usafiri Dar-es-Salaam (Dar-es-Salaam Transport)
7	JUWATA	dZu-wa-ta	Jumuia ya Wafanyakazi Tanzania (Association of Tanzania Workers)
8	CHADEMA	tSa-de-ma	Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (Party for Democracy and Development)
9	UVITA	u-vi-ta	Umoja wa Vijana Tanzania (Tanzania Youth League)
10	KIKURU	ki-ku-ru	Kikosi cha Kuznia Rushwa (Anti-Corruption Squad)
11	BAKIZA	ba-ki-za	Baraza la Kiswahili Zanzibar (Kiswahili Council, Zanzibar)
12	TAKIWAWA	ta-ki-wa-wa	Taasisi ya Kisomo cha Watu Wazima (Institute of Adult Education)

Since 1967, after the Arusha Declaration, many acronymic words have mushroomed in Kiswahili. In fact, Kiswahili has acquired more terms of this type than the acronyms which existed before the Arusha Declaration. It is important to mention, though, that this approach has met with a number of challenges, such as multiple homonyms where common prefixes like *WA* – (Noun class 2), *MA*- (Noun Class 6) and *U*- (Noun Class 11/14) are used. Thus *WAWATA* is ambiguous, since it could stand for Wanawake Wakatoliki Tanzania (Catholic Women of Tanzania) or Watoto Walemavu Tanzania (Tanzania Disabled Children). Equally, in the case of *UKIMWI* (*HIV/AIDS*), the initial syllable *U*- has been invariably interpreted as standing for *U-kosefu* (Loss) or *U-halifu* (Destruction) (i.e. of immunity in the body).

The acronyms formed after the Arusha Declaration are generally considered as authentic not only because of their Kiswahili origin, but also because of their phonemic and morphological structures. They are usually nouns which belong to the noun classes designated by the first syllables, such as *UKIMWI u-mevuma Tanga* (HIV/AIDS has erupted in Tanga) or *WAWATA wa-likuwa na Mkutano jana* (The Catholic Women Association of Tanzania had a meeting yesterday).

In a few cases, one finds acronyms formed after 1967, but which have English origins. Usually these acronyms were formed for specific reasons, such as political ends. Typical of these acronyms are political party names, such as *TADEA* (Tanzania Democratic Alliance), *CUF* (Civic United Front) and *UMD* (Union for Multiparty Democracy), most of which were formed after 1992 when Tanzania became a multiparty state.

One needs to mention here that Kiswahili based acronyms are mainly found in Tanzania. In the other countries where Kiswahili is used, the tendency has remained that of using English or French origin acronyms with an adapted pronunciation.

b) **Setswana acronyms**

Botswana obtained its independence in 1966 and promoted its majority language, Setswana, to the status of national language (Janson & Tsonope, 1991). English, which had served as official language during the colonial era, retained that function. Hence, the acronyms remained with their English structure and pronunciation, as demonstrated in Table 6 below.

Table 6: A sample of Setswana acronyms

	Item	Broad transcription	Full form
1	FNB	ɛf.ɛn.bi:	First National Bank
2	BMC	bi:.ɛm.si:	Botswana Meat Corporation
3	BHC	bi:.eif.si:	Botswana Housing Corporation
4	BSB	bi:.ɛs.bi:	Botswana Savings Bank
5	UB	ju.bi:	University of Botswana
6	BDP	bi:.dii.pii	Botswana Democratic Party
7	BCP	bi:.si:.pi:	Botswana Congress Party

8	IDM	al.di:.ɛm	Institute if Development and Management
9	CEO	si:.i:.ou	Chief Executive Officer
10	GPH	dZi:.pi:.eitf	Gaborone Private Hospital
11	DRC	di:.ar.si:	Democratic Republic of Congo
12	USA	ju.es.ei	United States of America
13	DNA	di:.en.ei	DeoxyriboNucleic Acid
14	BTV	bi:.ti:.vi:	Botswana Television
15	MC	ɛm.si:	Master of Ceremony

As one can see from Table 6 above, the acronyms in Setswana have remained English in structure and also largely in pronunciation. It is only the pronunciation of vowels which has been adapted to the Setswana way of pronouncing English. Hence, it is clear that any use of such words is a case of code-switching between Setswana and English.

Thus, the type of acronyms shown in Table 6 can be considered as un-nativized forms, given that the phonemic inventory and structures are typically English, so is the prosody. Moreover, morphologically, they behave as English words. Thus, one cannot say in Setswana: *Ke ya kwa FNB-ng* (I am going to FNB), although here FNB is a location. Instead, one has to say: *Ke ya kwa FNB*, because *FNB* is regarded as alien form.

Use of acronyms as euphemistic expressions

In some instances, acronyms are created to serve as euphemistic expressions, especially in informal speech. This often happens in closed societies, like schools, prisons or special work places. Thus, in some East African universities, the following acronyms have been identified (Batibo & Kopi, 2004). Some of these cases are exemplified in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Acronyms used in some East African Universities as euphemistic expressions (based on Batibo & Kopi, 2004)

	Item	Long form	Description
1	CD	Condom	Usually mentioning “condom” in public is considered improper
2	VG	Vegetarian	A guy who does not indulge in sex

3	VD	Venereal Disease	Usually such diseases are associated with careless or promiscuous behavior, a form of embarrassment
4	MD	Modern Disease	Standing for HIV/AIDS, which is considered a taboo
5	ICU	Intensive Care Unit	Considered a taboo, as it is associated with terminal stage of life

In fact, some of the examples in Table 7 could be considered as abbreviations, as they involve the shortening of one word.

Conclusion

The study has made a number of theoretical and conceptual revelations about acronyms as one of the mechanisms in term development. Although it is highly productive in most African languages, it is not as commonly used as the methods of derivation, extension of meaning, compounding or borrowing. It is a useful process where speakers want to establish economy and simplicity in the creation and use of terms. However, as shown in the article, the use of acronymy as a mechanism in term expansion has its challenges. First, since such forms are usually used for higher domains, there is a tendency to retain the pre-colonial forms, especially where they existed in the ex-colonial language. Hence, there is a need to institute policies and put in place new processes to motivate change, as Kiswahili language has done. Second, where the non-local forms have been maintained, the tendency has been to code-switch, when using the acronyms in indigenous languages with a locally adapted pronunciation. Third, in languages where the first letters or syllables of words are similar because of the prevalence of noun class prefix system, there is often an ambiguity or homonymic occurrence due to the similarity of forms.

One of ACALAN's pan-African projects is to enhance formal and technical discourse through the expansion of the higher domain lexical stock in the African languages (ACALAN, 2015). Thus, ACALAN has prepared a set of guidelines which could be used by the African states for lexical expansion. Although ACALAN included acronymy as one of the mechanisms of word formation, this has not been applied extensively enough.

African countries need to put in place institutions to spearhead this process. Tanzania has made great strides thanks to its active language promotion bodies, such as the Institute of Kiswahili Research (TUKI) and the National Kiswahili Council (BAKITA) (Irra, 1991, Whiteley, 1969). This can only be done if the future value of indigenous languages is recognized by the African leaders.

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