

Verbal Inflectional Morphology in ‘Ugandan Swahili’: A Parametric Approach

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Abstract

This study examines the verbal inflectional morphology of the emerging Ugandan Swahili variety and shows how it differs from Standard Swahili. Although Swahili varieties share many features, recent research has noted clear grammatical differences among them. Based on data collected between March and December 2023 from five Swahili-speaking communities in western, midwestern, central, and northern Uganda, the study finds that Ugandan Swahili uses both independent words and verbal morphemes to express grammatical features such as negation, subject and object agreement, and aspect. In contrast, Standard Swahili relies mainly on verbal affixes. These results suggest that Ugandan Swahili leans towards patterns typical of isolating languages, which is atypical for Bantu languages. The findings provide evidence of a distinctive Swahili variety developing in Uganda’s informal settings.

Keywords: language variation, inflectional morphology, speech communities, Standard Swahili, Ugandan Swahili

Introduction

This paper describes how the emerging Swahili variety spoken in Uganda (henceforth UgSw) expresses grammatical information using Standard Swahili (StSw) as a point of reference. Specifically, the study examines how negation, gender, person, and aspect are realised. Linguistic variation examines systematic differences in a language across speakers, social groups, and contexts, challenging structuralist notions that language systems are similar. Scholars in the field of language variation (such as Labov, 1963, 1966, 1972; Hazen, 2007) emphasise that variation is neither random nor peripheral. Rather, it is patterned and socially significant, playing an essential role in understanding language change and social dynamics. Furthermore, Eckert (2012) frames the evolution of variation studies into three waves: the first correlates linguistic features with broad social categories, the second examines language use within local communities of practice, and the third focuses on how linguistic variation constructs social meaning and identity. This progression reflects a deepening appreciation for the complex interplay between language and society, recognising both the agency of speakers

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and the nuanced meanings embedded in variation. Such interplay is demonstrated in Matsumoto’s (2019) study on Japanese, where it is shown that language variation is shaped by unique cultural, historical, and social influences, in addition to broader processes such as language contact and shifting norms. Together, these perspectives clarify that linguistic variation is not an anomaly but rather a central feature of language that offers critical insights into the ways in which language reflects and shapes human experience.

Studies on language variation have gained traction in Bantu languages, including Swahili. Marten et al. (2024) investigated micro-variations among Bantu languages that were previously regarded as similar based on broader typological features. Furumoto and Gibson (2022) and Hamad (2024) examined micro-variations between standard Swahili and coastal Swahili dialects of Kimakunduchi and Kipemba, respectively. Whereas these studies focused on Swahili and its dialects that are spoken along the East African coast, there are other studies that have investigated micro-variations in the Swahili varieties spoken in the western periphery¹. For example, Bose and Nassenstein (2016), Bose (2019) studied Kivu Swahili; Nassenstein (2019) examined Bujumbura Swahili; while Nassenstein and Dimmendaal (2019) explored Bukavu Swahili. The results indicate that Swahili varieties spoken in the western periphery do not only vary structurally from StSw but also exhibit distinct features among themselves.

In the Ugandan context, Swahili was introduced by Arab traders at the turn of the nineteenth century (Mukama, 1995). Since then, it has continued to be used in both formal and informal domains. The Swahili acquired informally has resulted in the creation of speech communities² such as the Nubian community in Bombo, the Swahili speaking communities in Kabango, Bweyale, Kakoba, and Arua. The structure of the Swahili acquired informally is yet to be formally studied to establish whether it differs from the already established varieties. This study is part of a larger study exploring the linguistic structure of the Swahili spoken informally in Uganda. This paper focuses on the inflectional morphology of what appears to be a distinct variety of Swahili unique to the Ugandan context. Results from this study are envisaged to contribute to the ongoing debate on whether the Swahili spoken informally in Uganda is a distinct variety or dialect of Swahili, or whether it is simply ‘wrong Swahili.’

Methods

This study used data collected through elicitation from speakers selected in inland Swahili communities, namely Kakoba in Mbarara and Kabango in Masindi both sites found in western Uganda, Bweyale in Kiryandogo in midwestern Uganda; Arua central in Arua in the north-west, and Bombo town in Luweero in central Uganda. Two participants aged 18-75 years were randomly selected from each of the study sites, giving a total of 10. Swahili speaking inland communities were selected for their use of Swahili in daily communication yet with minimal influence from border regions where Swahili is predominantly spoken. To further minimise the influence of interaction between the participants and formal users of Swahili, any target participant who had either resided

1 In this paper, the term western periphery, is used to refer to the Swahili varieties spoken mainly in the DRC and Uganda, most of which have been partly described or are yet to be described (Bose & Nassenstein, 2016).

2 A speech community is a group of people who share a set of norms and expectations about how language should be used, regardless of whether they all use the same language or dialect.

in Swahili-speaking countries such as Kenya or Tanzania or acquired Swahili through formal instruction were excluded. Twenty-five sentences in English with tokens for negation, subject marking, object marking, relative marking and tense and aspect marking, and mood were read to the participants, and they were requested to render them into Swahili. Each participant was further asked to narrate an event in Swahili uninterruptedly for a duration of 30 minutes to capture their natural Swahili speech as suggested by Labov (1972). Where the participants were not competent in English, translations into the local languages were made.

This study adopted a parametric approach by Guérois et al. (2017) to analyse the data. The parametric approach is used to systematically examine the structural variation in related languages through a detailed typological analysis that begins with a question followed by possible answers. The values of the answers vary depending on the nature of the parameter. The master list presented by Guérois et al. (2017) consists of 142 parameters categorised into 12 thematic groups (https://bantu.soas.ac.uk/img/Guerois_et_al_2017_Parameters.pdf). Eleven parameters derived from theme 6 of verbal inflection were used (see Table 10). The parameters were applied to the StSw verbal word as presented in Goyvaerts (2007). The verbal word in Swahili similar to other Bantu languages consists of the obligatory verb root with affixes. The prefixes are typically inflectional morphemes, including negative markers, the subject marker, tense and aspect markers, and the object marker (Polomé, 1967; Goyvaerts, 2007, Taji 2025). The Swahili verb template contains the relative marker as well as the reflexive marker in the pre-root position. To the right of the verb root are typically derivational suffixes such as the applicative, causative, passive commonly known as verb extensions. The final position on the Swahili verb schema is a final vowel that encodes mood. The example in (1) illustrates a Swahili verbal word. This study examines the encoding of grammatical information in Uganda Swahili demonstrating that negation, person, gender, and aspect are not always expressed through affixes.

StSw (Hamad, 2024, p. 149)

(1) *A-li-ye-ni-pik-i-a.*

SM3SG-PST-I.REL-IOM-COOK-APPL-FV

‘The one who cooked for me!’

Findings

Negation in UgSw

In StSw, negation is marked in the pre-initial and post-initial positions (Goyvaerts, 2007). In UgSw, however, all forms of negation i.e., negation in all tense and aspectual forms is realised by the use of two independent particles, *hapana* or *pana* ‘not’ and *bado* ‘no or not yet’.

Hapana and *pana* ‘not’ are used interchangeably in UgSw to express negation, as shown in Examples (2a) and (3a). *Hapana* and *pana* typically appear immediately before the verb. UgSw does not express tense morphologically when the sentence is in the negative. Adverbs of time are used to indicate time reference as illustrated with *sa yii*

‘now’ in (2a) and *jana* ‘yesterday’ in (3a). In addition, the verb in UgSw occurs without the subject marker, atypical of Bantu languages which generally take an obligatory subject marker agreeing with the subject head in gender and number.

UgSw (field data).¹

- (2) a. *Ye hapana pik-a sa.yii*
 SM3SG not cook-FV now
 ‘He/she is not cooking now.’

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 142)

- b. *Ha-pik-i*
 NEG-cook-NEG.PRS.FV
 ‘He/she is not cooking.’

- (3) a. *We pana chez-a jana.*
 SM2 not play-FV yesterday
 ‘You did not play yesterday.’

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 142)

- b. *Hu-ku-chez-a*
 2SG-NEG.PST-play-FV
 ‘You did not play.’

Bado ‘still’ or ‘not yet,’ is used to encode negation, especially in the perfect aspect in UgSw. Like (*ha*)*pana*, *bado* occurs preverbally as an independent morpheme. The verb it precedes appears in its base form, as shown in (4a). In contrast, StSw uses prefix *-si-* to mark negation in the perfective aspect as shown in Example (4b).

- (4) a. *Mi bado lal.a*
 SM1SG not.yet sleep-FV
 ‘I have not yet slept.’

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Unless stated, all data with no citation are field data for the Swahili variety spoken in Uganda

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 151)

- b. *Si-ja-lal-a.*
 ISG-NEG.PERF-sleep-FV
 ‘I have not yet slept.’

In (5a), the infinitive *ku-* in UgSw is retained in monosyllabic verbs, while it is dropped in StSw (5b).

- (5) a. *Mi bado ku-l-a*
 SMISG not.yet INF-eat-FV
 ‘I have not (yet) eaten.’

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 152)

- b. *Si-ja-l-a*
 ISG-NEG.PERF-eat-FV
 ‘I have not yet eaten.’

The use of *bado* is not limited to the negative perfective aspect in UgSw. It can also be used interchangeably with *hapana/pana* to encode negation in other tense or aspectual forms. For instance, statements like ‘*Ye bado pika sa yi,*’ meaning ‘He/she is not cooking now,’ are common.

Guérois et al. (2017) list several parameters for negation. In this study, three parameters, namely parameters 49, 52, and 58 are particularly relevant¹ as presented in (6-8).

- (6) Parameter 49. Negation in independent tenses: What are the formal means of expressing negation in independent tenses?

- null unknown
- 1 by morphological modification of the verb
- 2 by a participle
- 3 by a periphrastic construction
- 4 multiple strategies

Parameter 52 seeks to establish the positioning of negation in independent tenses. Thus, this parameter and its possible values are provided in (7) below.

- (7) Parameter 52—Place of negation in independent tenses: Where is negation expressed in independent tenses?

¹ This study only focused on negation in independent tenses.

- null unknown
- n.a. negation is achieved using a periphrastic construction
- 1 in the pre-initial position only? (NEG-SM-...)
- 2 in the post-initial position only? (SM-NEG-...)
- 3 in the final vowel position of the inflected verb? (See parameter (80))
- 4 in the post-final position of the inflected verb? (i.e., as an enclitic)
- 5 two (or more) of the above (either 1 or 2 + 3)?
- 6 in a pre-verbal independent negative particle only
- 7 in a post-verbal independent negative particle only
- 8 two (or more) of the strategies above

(8) Parameter 58: Negative imperative: Is there a negative imperative that is formally distinct from the negative subjunctive?

- null unknown
- n.a. there is no negation (or means to express negation) in the language
- no
- yes

Regarding parameter 49, negation in UgSw independent tenses is expressed periphrastically (value 3), and its place as per parameter 52 is (value n.a) because UgSw does not express negation by use of an inflectional marker. Moreover, Parameter 58 seeks to establish whether negative imperative and negative subjunctive are marked differently. The answer value to Parameter 58 in regard to UgSw is ‘no.’ This is because UgSw uses (*hapana*) and *bado* as a strategy for encoding negative imperative and negative subjunctive (9a), while the negative subjunctive in StSw is expressed with *-si-* as shown in (9b).

- (9) a. *We hapana som-a*
 SM2SG no read-SBJV
 ‘Do not read.’

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 142)

- b. *M-si-som-e.*
 2SM-NEG-read-SUBJ
 ‘You (pl) do not read.’

The independent negative markers *hapana* and *bado* are borrowed from StSw. In StSw, *bado* is used to express the sense of ‘not yet’, what Mohammed (2001, p. 152) has termed the ‘*-ja-* tense’, as illustrated in (10). *Hapana* too originates from StSw where it functions as a negative existential marker, as illustrated in (11).

Table 1: Comparison between StSw and UgSw subject prefixes and independent pronouns

Persons		Independent ronouns in UgSw	Independent pronouns of StSw	StSw subject prefix	Gloss
1 st	Singular	<i>mi-</i>	<i>mimi</i>	<i>ni-</i>	I
2 nd		<i>we-</i>	<i>wewe</i>	<i>u-</i>	You
3 rd		<i>ye-</i>	<i>yeye</i>	<i>a-</i>	He/she/it
1 st	Plural	<i>sisi-</i>	<i>sisi</i>	<i>tu-</i>	We
2 nd		<i>nyinyi,</i>	<i>ninyi</i>	<i>m-</i>	You
3 rd		<i>hawa,</i>	<i>wao</i>	<i>wa-</i>	They

Source: StSw data is from Mohammed (2001), and UgSw data is field data

UgSw also uses concordial prefix *i-* for singular and plural class 4/9 as a default subject marker, mainly in the progressive aspect. The class 4/9 concordial prefix is attached to the auxiliary *-ko* and used together with an infinitive verb, as demonstrated in (13a-c). In (13a), *i-* functions as 3rd person singular subject marker while in (14b) *i-* semantically functions as a concordial marker for class 2 even when it is morphologically class 4/9.

- (13) a. *Mu-toto* *i-ko* *ku-liy-a*
 CLI-child 9-COP INF-cry-FV
 ‘The child is crying.’
- b. *Wa-gonjwa* *i-ko* *mi-ngi* *sana*
 CL2-patient 9-COP 4-many sana
 ‘The patients are very many.’
- c. *Mi-fuko* *i-ko* *ku-anguk-a*
 CL4-bags CL4-COP INF-fall-FV
 ‘The bags are falling.’

In StSw, *-ko* is a locative marker for general or indefinite location according to Ashton (1944). It is used with subject prefixes to form copular verbs and locative constructions (14). UgSw speakers prefer to use class 4 and 9 concordial markers as subject prefixes for most nouns.

Ashton (1944, p.19).

- (14) *Ki-su* *ki-ko* *wapi*
 CL7-knife 7-be Where

‘Where is the knife?’

UgSw also uses independent pronouns to realise subject marking with no subject prefix on the verb. This strategy is only possible with verbs containing the progressive aspect marker *-na-*, as shown by Example (15a). In comparison, the subject marker in StSw is obligatorily positioned at the initial position in the verb schema as in (15b).

- (15) a. *Yeye* *na-pik-a.*
 He/she PROG-cook-FV

‘He/she is cooking.’

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 122)

- b. *A-na-pik-a.*
 SM3SG-PROG-cook-FV

‘He/she is cooking.’

The formulation of the relevant parameter as well as the range of possible answers is provided in (16) below.

- (16) Parameter 60: Subject-verb agreement: Is there subject-verb agreement?

- | | |
|------|--|
| null | unknown |
| no | there is no subject marking on the verb in the language. |
| yes | |

The answer from the possible values from parameter 60 for UgSw is ‘yes,’ that there is a subject-verb agreement. However, UgSw uses concords of class 4 and 9 for singular and class 10 for plural as default concords for subject-verb agreement. We have also shown that in the progressive aspect, subject marking is realised through an independent personal pronoun with no subject marker on the verb. In summary, subject marking in StSw is realised by a prefix, while in UgSw, independent personal pronouns are either used as free morphemes or shortened and used as verbal proclitics.

Tense and Aspect in UgSw

Tense and aspect markers in Swahili typically occur as prefixes following the subject marker (Goyvaerts, 2007). In this paper, we focus on the variation in aspect marking because UgSw uses the same tense markers as those in StSw. These are *-ta-* for

the future (17a-b) and *-li-* for the past (18a-b).

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 134)

- (17) a. *Wa-ta-chez-a.*
 SM2PL-FUT-play-FV
 ‘They will play.’

UgSw

- b. *Ba-ta-chez-a.*
 SM2PL-FUT-play-FV
 ‘They will play.’

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 128)

- (18) a. *Ni-li-chez-a.*
 SMISG-PST-play-FV
 ‘I played.’

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 128)

- b. *Mi-li-chez-a.* *mu-pira*
 SMISG-PST-play-FV 4-ball
 ‘I played football.’

Aspect Marking in UgSw

Comrie (1985) defines aspect as the representation of the internal temporal constituency of the situation. According to Nurse and Devos (2019), aspect describes how the situation is distributed within the time framework established in tense. It describes how an event or action takes place within a specific time scale. Nurse and Devos (2019) identify six aspects, namely, perfective contrasting with imperfective, perfect (also known as anterior or retrospective), progressive, persistive, and habitual/iterative, as widespread in Bantu languages. In this section, we present data on the progressive, habitual, and perfective aspects in UgSw, as these were the only aspects clearly attested in the dataset.

Progressive Aspect

The progressive aspect, according to Nurse and Devos (2019), is a focused imperfective that narrows attention to the temporal space surrounding the time of reference during speaking and for a brief preceding period. In StSw, the progressive aspect is encoded by the prefix *-na-* (19a). In UgSw, two options are available to mark the progressive aspect, namely using the prefix *-na-* (19b) as in StSw or using the copula *-ko* as illustrated in (19c). Copula *-ko* is used together with class 9 concordial marker *i-* regardless of the noun class (19c-d).

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 122)

- (19) a. *A-na-pik-a*
 SM3SG-PROG-COOK-FV
 ‘He/she is cooking now.’

UgSw

- b. *Mu-toto na-pik-a sa yi*
 CL1-child PROG-COOK-FV time this
 ‘The child is cooking (now).’

UgSw

- c. *Mu-toto i-ko na-pik-a*
 SMI-child 9-COP PROG-COOK-FV
 ‘The child is cooking.’

UgSw

- d. *Mu-ti i-ko ku-anguk-a*
 CL3-tree 9-COP INF-fall-FV
 ‘The tree is falling.’

The Habitual Aspect

According to Nurse and Devos (2019), the habitual aspect describes situations that happen repeatedly, regularly or frequently. StSw uses prefix *hu-* to express habituality (20a and 21a). In contrast, the habitual aspect in UgSw is marked with suffix *-ang-* as shown in (20b & 21b).

StSw (Marten et al., 2024, p. 18)

- (20) a. *Wewe* *bu-l-a* *wapi?*
 you HAB-eat-FV where?
 ‘Where do you (usually) eat?’

UgSw

- b. *Wewe* *na-ku-l-ang-a* *fasi* *gani?*
 you PROG-INF-eat-HAB-FV place which
 ‘Where do you usually eat from?’

StSw (Mohammed, 2011, p. 138)

- (21) a. *Mzee* *bu-fik-a* *hapa* *kila* *Ijumaa.*
 SM1.old man HAB-arrive DEM every Friday
 ‘The old man arrives here every Friday.’

UgSw

- b. *Muzeyi* *na-fik-ang-a* *apa* *kila* *Jumaa.*
 SM1.old man PROG-reach-HAB-FV DEM every Friday
 ‘The old man arrives here every Friday.’

According to Marten et al. (2024), StSw may have lost the habitual suffix *-ag-* and over time replaced it with the prefix *bu-*. Bose and Nassenstein (2016) note that the suffixes *-ag-* and *-ak-* are present in most western Swahili varieties¹ spoken in the DRC, Kenya, and Tanzania. Furthermore, Marten et al. (2024) have suggested that the suffix *-ag-* may be re-emerging in StSw through colloquial Swahili. It is plausible that the suffix *-ang-* observed in UgSw is related to the colloquial Swahili *-ag-*, although it manifests differently in different Swahili varieties such as *-ak-* that is used together with *-na-*, as in *-na-... -ak-* in Kivu and Bukavu Swahili (Goyvaerts, 2007; Bose & Nassenstein, 2016); *zi-* in Bunia Swahili (Nassenstein & Dimmendaal, 2019), and *-ang-* in Sheng (Ferrari, 2014). The habitual suffix *-ang-* could have entered UgSw in two ways: one, through contact between speakers of UgSw and speakers of colloquial Swahili via migration and social interactions; and two, through interaction with certain Bantu languages spoken in Uganda, where *-ang-* functions as a habitual marker, as in Luganda (22).

¹ We use the term ‘western varieties’ in the sense of Nassenstein & Shinagawa (2019), who collectively use the term ‘western periphery’ as an umbrella term for the Swahili varieties spoken in DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and parts of Uganda.

Luganda (Ashton et al., 1954, p. 447)

- (22) *Fumb-ang-a* *o-mu-punga* *bulijjo*
 cook-HAB-FV AUG-3-rice everyday
 ‘Cook rice every day.’

According to Marten et al. (2024), Old Swahili is more similar to neighbouring Bantu languages than StSw. They attribute this tendency to StSw’s standardisation process that made the StSw variety distinct from other dialects of Swahili. This variation possibly explains why *-ag-* for habitual is found in colloquial Swahili and in most varieties of Swahili spoken in Tanzania, DRC, and Kenya. Parameter 67 stated in (23) asks whether there is suffix *-ag-* as a habitual aspect marker or if there is a similar form in the language (UgSw for this study).

- (23) Parameter 67: Is there a tense/aspect (pre-final) suffix *-ag-* or a similar form used with an imperfective meaning (expressing for instance habituality/ itelativity/pluralactionality/intensity)?
- | | |
|------|--|
| null | unknown |
| no | habituality/itelativity/pluralactionality/intensity are expressed through another strategy |
| yes | specify which meanings |

For UgSw, the answer value is ‘yes’ because in UgSw, the suffix *-ang-*, close to *-ag-*, is used to mark habituality. In contrast, StSw uses the prefix *hu-* to encode habituality and therefore, the value is no.

Perfective Aspect

According to Nurse and Devos (2019, p. 209), the perfective aspect presents “an event as an undifferentiated and time-bounded whole without regard to the internal constituency of the event.” It takes an exterior view of the event as a whole. It typically answers questions such as “When did you X?,” to which the answer could be “We X-ed this morning/yesterday/last week.” The X could take a longer or a shorter time. According to Furumoto and Gibson (2022), the StSw verb forms marked with *-me-* denote completed events i.e., events that are no longer ongoing at reference time, as illustrated in (24a-b).

StSw (Mohammed, 2001, p. 132)

- (24) a. *Ni-me-pik-a*
 SMISG-PERF-cook-FV
 ‘I have cooked.’

- b. *M-me-pik-a*
 SM2PL-PERF-COOK-FV
 ‘You have cooked.’

UgSw employs two verbs interchangeably, *kwisha* ‘to finish’ and *maliza* which also means ‘to finish,’ to encode the perfective aspect. When used in a sentence, *kwisha* or *maliza* expresses the idea that X has finished doing activity Y, and the main verb is used in its basic form. Examples (25a-b) show the use of *kwisha* while (25c) demonstrates the use of *maliza* in UgSw. The use of verbs for perfective marking contrasts with StSw, where the perfective is expressed by the prefix *-me-* on the verb, as shown in (24a-b).

- (25) a. *Mimi* *kwisha* *pik-a*
 I finish cook- FV
 ‘I have cooked.’
- b. *We* *kwisha* *pik-a*
 SM2SG finish cook- FV
 ‘You (singular) have cooked.’
- c. *Mimi* *na-maliza* *pik-a*
 I PROG-finish cook- FV
 I have cooked.’

- (26) Parameter 68 examines the use of *-ile* as a perfective marker: Is there a tense/aspect *-ile* or a similar form (as a reflex of **-ide*)?

null unknown
 no indicate how perfect/perfective verb forms are formed
 yes

Both UgSw and StSw do not encode tense or aspect using suffix *-ile* (value no). Instead, the perfective aspect in UgSw is realised periphrastically (P073 value n.a) by use of the verbs *kwisha* ‘finish’ and *maliza* ‘finish’. In StSw, the perfective aspect occurs as prefix *‘me-’* on the verb. Note that StSw also uses *kwisha* for perfective aspect marking, which is usually shortened as *-isha* ‘finish’ (27a & c) or simply *-sha* (see Marten, 1998, pp. 141, 143). In Some cases, *kwisha* or *-sha* may be used with the perfective affix *‘-me-’* for the same aspect (27b).

StSw (Marten 1998, p. 141)

- (27) a. *u-ki-sha-fika* *Mombasa*
 SM2SG-COND-COMPL-arrive Mombasa (PN)
 ‘if/when/once you have arrived in Mombasa, ...’
- b. *A-me-sha-imb-a.*
 SMI-PFV-COMPL-sing-FV
 ‘S/he has already sung.’
- c. *Ni-sha-fahamu.*
 SMISG-COMPL-understand
 ‘I have already understood.’

To summarise, the use of *kwisha* in UgSw has its origin in StSw. While StSw may maintain the aspect marker *-me-*, it is dropped in UgSw and the main verb appears in its stem form. Overall, aspect marking in UgSw is generally realised periphrastically while in StSw prefixes are used.

Object Marking

Bantu languages, including StSw, typically allow at least one object marker within the verb frame that co-references the object. For UgSw, a stand-alone independent personal pronoun is used as a strategy for objects marking. In (28a), the independent personal pronoun *yeye* ‘him/her’ is used together with the main verb either in its applicative or indicative form to trigger object marking. StSw marks the object by use of a prefix, which is obligatory if the object is animate (28c). When the object is inanimate, UgSw does not use an object marker but retains the object noun (28b).

- (28) a. *Mi-li-pat-iy-a* *yeye*
 SMI-PST-give-APPL-FV him/her
 ‘I gave them to him.’
- b. *A-li-let-a* *ki-tabu*
 SM3SG-PST-FV CL7-book
 ‘He/she brought a book.’

StSw (Marten & Kula, 2012, p. 244)

- c. *Ni-li-m-p-a*
 SMISG-PST-3SG.OM-give-FV
 ‘I gave (them) to him/her.’

Parameter 75 stated in (29) is about whether there are object markers on the verbs of the language being analysed.

(29) Parameter 75: Object marking: Are there object markers on the verb (excluding locative object markers)?

null unknown

no there is no slot for object marking in the language (i.e., only independent pronouns).

1 yes, there are only pre-stem object markers.

2 yes, there are only post-stem object markers.

3 yes, there are both pre-stem and post-stem object markers.

UgSw lacks the pre-stem slot for object marking but employs independent object pronouns that follow the verb (value ‘no’). StSw allows one object marker (value 1), which is obligatory if the object is animate. In other western varieties such as Kivu Swahili, two object markers are allowed, as Bose and Nassenstein (2016) report, as illustrated in (30).

Kivu Swahili (Bose & Nassenstein, 2016, p. 18)

- (30) *ni-li-i-mu-tum-iy-a* *juzi.*
 ISG-PST-CL9OM-CLIOM-send-APPL-IND day.before.yesterday
 ‘I sent it [*kinga yake* ‘his bicycle’] to him the day before yesterday.’

Table 2 summarises the variation in the encoding of grammatical information in StSw and UgSw based on parameters presented in Guérois et al. (2017). The study focused on strategies for encoding negation, subject and object concord, aspect, and object marking.

Table 2: Variation in the encoding of the grammatical information in StSw and UgSw based on specific parameters from Guérois et al. (2017)

No.	Topic	Key characteristics (Possible answer values)	
		UgSw	StSw
Parameter 49	Negation in independent tenses	by a periphrastic construction (Value 3)	by a particle (value 2)
Parameter 52	Place of negation in independent tenses:	Negation is achieved using a periphrastic construction (value n.a).	two or more of the above either (1 or 2+3) (value 5)
Parameter 58	Negative imperative: Is there a negative imperative which is formally distinct from the negative subjunctive?	The answer value is 'no'. Both negative imperative and negative subjunctive use lexical elements <i>hapana</i> and <i>bado</i> to encode negative in UgSw.	The answer value is 'no'. Both negative imperative and negative subjunctive use similar marker <i>si-e</i> for the negative.
Parameter 60	Subject-verb agreement: Is there subject-verb agreement?	yes	yes
Parameter 67	Suffix <i>-ag-</i> : Is there a tense/aspect (pre-final) suffix <i>-ag-</i> or a similar form used with an imperfective meaning (expressing for instance habituality/iterativity/pluractionality/intensity)?	'yes' <i>-ang-</i> expresses habituality is UgSw	'no' habituality is marked by prefix <i>hu-</i> .
Parameter 68	suffix <i>-ile</i> : Is there a tense/aspect suffix <i>-ile</i> or a similar form (as a reflex of * <i>-ide</i>)?	'no' perfect form is expressed with lexical element ' <i>kwisha</i> ' finish.	'no' tense is marked by aspectual marker ' <i>me-</i> ' on the verb.
Parameter 71	Imperatives: Is the basic imperative formally identical to the verb stem (root-ext-FV)?	'no'	'no'
Parameter 72	Plural imperatives	Value 3	value 1 plural is expressed by a post-verbal marker <i>-eni</i> .

Parameter 73	TAM slots: In an inflected verb form, is preverbal marking of tense/aspect/mood typically restricted to one slot?	no	yes
Parameter 75	Object marking: Are there object markers on the verb (excluding locative object markers)?	no	Value 1
Parameter 89	Relativisor agreement: When the relative marker is a separate word or a preverbal clitic, does it agree with the head noun?	yes, root <i>-enye</i> agrees with the head noun value 1	value 1

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to describe inflectional morphology of UgSw using morphosyntactic parameters as outlined in Guérois et al. (2017). The study demonstrates that, unlike the agglutinative verbal morphological structure of StSw, UgSw exhibits a more isolating verbal morphology. This shift, based on Nassenstein and Shinagawa (2025), mirrors a process of grammatical simplification which they refer to as stripping. Indeed, there is an observable reduction of inflectional markers. For instance, we demonstrated that UgSw does not make use of negative morphological affixes. Data further indicate that UgSw employs alternative strategies for expressing the same grammatical categories, as for example, observed in subject marking, suggesting a high degree of variability and adaptation in its morphosyntactic system. The findings substantiate the broader argument that UgSw is not merely a deficient or broken form of StSw, but a structurally innovative and socially embedded variety in its own way. The observed grammatical simplification and increased reliance on periphrastic rather than inflectional strategies reflect not only internal linguistic restructuring but also the influence of social and contact-induced factors. By demonstrating how UgSw diverges from normative grammatical expectations while still maintaining functional expressiveness, the paper challenges prescriptive views of Swahili uniformity and standardisation. The groundwork laid here sets the stage for examining more data on UgSw in order to fully describe the language variety.

Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Symbols Used

1, 2, 3, etc.	noun class numbers	OM	object (marker)
1SG, 2PL, etc.	person and number	PFV	perfective (aspect)
*	ungrammatical construction	PL	plural
APPL	applicative	PRS	present
ASP	aspect	PROG	progressive (aspect)
CL	noun class	REFL	reflexive
COP	copula	REL.PRON	relative pronoun
COMPL	completive	PASS	passive
DEM	demonstrative	PST	past tense
FV	final vowel	SBJV	subjunctive
HAB	habitual (aspect)	SM	subject marker
INF	infinitive	SG	singular
IND	indicative	StSw.	Standard Swahili
IPFV	imperfective (aspect)	TAM	tense, aspect, mood
LOC	locative	UgSw	Ugandan Swahili
NEG	negative		

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