

# THE OPTIONALITY PROPERTY OF KISWAHILI APPLICATIVES

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## 1. Introduction

An applicative is a linguistic construction in which a verb bears a morpheme that licenses a non-core argument of the verb (Jeong, 2006). An important characteristic of Kiswahili is its use of applicatives. Example (1) is a Kiswahili applicative, in which the applicative morpheme *-i* attaches to the verb *shindili* “pack”, and licenses *m* “him” which bears the beneficiary thematic role as an applied object of the verb “pack”.

- (1) ni -li -m- shindilil -i a majani  
*1sg. Past-3sg. -pack- Appl FV leaves*  
I packed down the leaves for him. (Port, 1981, p. 75)

In the literature, while there are some studies on applicatives in some Bantu languages, like Kinyarwanda (e.g. Gerds and Whaley, 1991; Kimenyi, 1980) and Chichewa (e.g. Baker 1988), it seems that there are few studies on Kiswahili applicatives.

Ngonyani (1998) examines the properties of Kiswahili applicatives in four respects: the ability to be object-marked, the ability to rise to the subject position in passives, the ability to be expressed in reflexive, and the ability to be expressed by reciprocal. In Ngonyani’s study, the optionality property of Kiswahili applicatives is not investigated. In the present study, I investigate this property: Among the Kiswahili applicatives bearing various thematic roles, which are obligatory, and which are optional? I focus on applied objects of four thematic roles: benefactive, goal, instrument, and locative.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 is literature review. In section 3, I introduce the methodology and data sources of this study. Section 4 is the main part, in which I present the data and report the findings. Section 5 is discussion and reflection. Finally section 6 is the conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The optionality property of applicatives

The optionality property is a commonly studied parameter of applicative variations. Cross- and intra-linguistically, applied objects bearing various thematic roles may vary as to whether their use is obligatory or optional. For example, Peterson (2007) reports that in Hakha Lai, comitative and instrument applicatives are optional, and have alternative non-applicative expressions. In contrast, for other thematic roles, including benefactive, goal, and reason, the applicative constructions are obligatory, and no equivalent non-applicative expressions are possible. Valenzuela (2010) notes that in Shipibo-Konibo, the

benefactive applicatives are obligatory; the associative applicatives, on the other hand, are optional.

## 2.2 Basic facts about Kiswahili applicatives

Ngonyani (1998) provides a typology of applicatives in Kiswahili, in which six types of Kiswahili applicatives are introduced, namely, benefactive, goal, malffective, instrument, reason, and locative. Ngonyani examines properties in four respects: the ability to be object-marked, the ability to be the subject in passives, the ability to be expressed in reflexive, and the ability to be expressed by reciprocal. Briefly speaking, Ngonyani (1998) finds that Kiswahili applicatives bearing different thematic roles demonstrate different properties in these four respects.

In Kiswahili, the pattern of constructing an applicative is to suffix the applicative morpheme /i/ or /e/ to the end of the verb stem (Fort 1981). Whether to use /i/ or /e/ is subject to the phonological rule of vowel harmony. Specifically, /i/ suffixes to the verb stems whose final vowel is /i/, /a/ or /u/, as illustrated in (2). /e/ suffixes to verb stems whose final vowel is /e/ or /o/, as shown in (3).

(2) verb FV gloss applicative form

pig -a strike pig-i-a  
kat -a cut kat-i-a  
chuku-a take chuku-I i-a

(3) verb FV gloss applicative form

end -a go end-e-a  
omb -a pray omb-e-a (Port, 1981)

In this study, my major method to judge whether a construction is an applicative or not is by comparing a clause which contains an adjunct thematic role with the clause which does not contain this thematic role and seeing whether there is /i/ or /e/ attached to the verb stem in the former clause.

## 3. Methodology and data sources

The methodology of this study is data elicitation and analysis. The data analyzed in this study are elicited from a consultant who is a native speaker of Kiswahili. The questions for elicitation are designed in this way: for each verb, first a clause which does not contain any adjunct thematic role is elicited, and then, a clause which contains certain adjunct thematic role, so as to create a pair for comparison. Before the elicitation, the consultant is asked to give all the natural expressions for those clauses, so as to observe whether the applicative construction is optional or obligatory. Both intransitive and transitive verbs are included in the elicitation.

The knowledge about Kiswahili is from two sources. First, basic knowledge about Kiswahili is acquired from analyzing the data elicited in the course “Linguistic Field Methods”. Second, certain knowledge about Kiswahili applicatives, the applicative morphemes, for example, is from the literature.

This study is theory-neutral. Like Ngonyani (1998), I only report and describe the optionality property of Kiswahili applicatives, and I will not analyze their syntactic properties.

#### 4. Optionality of Kiswahili applicatives: Data and Analysis

In this section, I present and analyze the data, report the findings, and generalize the optionality property of the four types of applicative in Kiswahili.

##### 4.1 Benefactive

The following two points have been observed about benefactives.

First, for some verbs, the benefactive thematic role can be realized in either applicative or prepositional construction. In (4) below, (4a) is a simple intransitive construction; (4b) is an applicative, in which the verb is suffixed with /i/, and the benefactive *mwanamkε huju* “this woman” is licensed as an applied object. (4c) is a prepositional construction, with the benefactive “this woman” introduced by the preposition *kwa aḷ ili ja* “for”.

(4) a. Intransitive construction

[a na 'ʔimb a]  
*3sg. Pres-Prog sing FV*  
 He is singing.

b. Applicative

[a na mu ʔim'b i a mwanamkε huju]  
*3sg. Pres-Prog OM sing Appl FV woman this*  
 He is singing for this woman.

c. Prepositional construction

[a na ʔimb a kwa aḷ ili ja mwanamkε huju]  
*3sg. Pres-Prog sing FV for woman this*  
 He is singing for this woman.

(5) and (6) are more examples which indicate that the benefactive can be expressed with either an applicative (5a, 6a), or a prepositional construction (5b, 6b).

- (5) a. Applicative  
 [ na m pik i a mamajɔŋgu keki]  
*Pres-Prog OM bake Appl FV my mum cake*  
 I am baking a cake for my mum.
- b. Prepositional construction  
 [ na pik a keki kwa'ɟ ilia mamajɔŋgu]  
*Pres-Prog bake FV cake for my mum*  
 I am baking a cake for my mum.
- (6) a. Applicative  
 [ ni na tʃɔr i a magazati pitʃa]  
*Isg. Pres-Prog draw Appl FV newspaper picture*  
 I am drawing a picture for the newspaper.
- b. Prepositional construction  
 [ni na tʃɔr a pitʃa kwa magazati]  
*Isg. Pres-Prog draw FV picture for newspaper*  
 I am drawing a picture for the newspaper.

Second, for other verbs that carry benefactive thematic roles, the consultant provided only the prepositional expression, as shown in (7).

- (7) a. [a na kul a tʃakula kuajilia mkiwaki ]  
*3sg. Pres-Prog eat FV food for his wife*  
 He is eating food for his wife.
- b. [ni na əfɪʃ ə 'tʃimba kwa 'ɟ ilia mama 'jaŋgu]  
*Isg. Pres-Prog clean FV room for mother my*  
 I am cleaning the room for my mother.

In summary, this study finds that for some verbs, the benefactive thematic role they carry can be realized in either applicative or prepositional construction. For other verbs, the benefactive thematic role can only be realized in prepositional construction.

## 4.2 Goal

The following three points have been observed about the goal thematic role.

First, for some verbs, the goal thematic role can be realized in either applicative or prepositional construction. Example (8a) is an intransitive construction. In (8b) the verb is suffixed with the applicative morpheme /lij/<sup>2</sup> and the goal *m.bua* “dog” is licensed as an object, therefore this is an applicative. (8c) is a prepositional construction, in which the goal *m.bua* “dog” is introduced by the preposition *kwa* “for”.

## (8) a. Intransitive construction

[paka a li kimbi a]  
*cat 3sg. Past run FV*  
 The cat ran.

## b. Applicative

[paka 'a li m 'kiŋbi lij a' m.ɓua]  
*cat 3sg. Past OM run Appl FV dog*  
 The cat ran toward the dog.

## c. Prepositional construction

[paka a li kimbi ə kwa mɓwa]  
*cat 3sg. Past run FV to dog*  
 The cat ran toward the dog.

(9) is another example which indicates that the goal can be realized in either applicative (9a) or prepositional construction (9b).

## (9) a. [paka a li kimbi li a ukutani]

*cat 3sg. Past run Appl FV wall*  
 The cat ran toward the wall.

## b. [paka a li kimbi a kuwelekeə ukuta]

*cat 3sg. Past run FV quickly wall*  
 The cat ran toward the wall quickly.

Second, for other verbs, only the prepositional expressions are available, as in (10).

## (10) a. [mwa'limo a li ɾuf ə m'pirə kwa 'm.tʌotʌo]

*teacher 3sg. Past throw FV ball to child*  
 The teacher threw the ball toward the child.

## b. [ni li let ə kitabu kwaɟ ilia 'm.tʌotʌo ]

*Isg. Past bring FV book for child*  
 I brought a book for the child.

## c. [malamɔɟ ə mkulimə a li ruʃ a 'ɟiwɛ kwɛn jo'guta]

*immediately farmer 3sg. Past throw FV stone toward wall*  
 The farmer threw the stone toward the wall immediately.

Besides the two points above, another point that the data strongly suggest is that when the goal object appears in a pre-verbal position, the applicative construction seems to be preferred or even obligatory, as indicated by the following data.

First, for some sentences in which the goal object surfaces in a post-verbal position, the consultant provides both applicatives and prepositional constructions, as in (8b-c) above. However, when converting these sentences to emphasizing constructions in which the goal object is emphasized and extracted to a pre-verbal position, the consultant only provided the applicative, as in (11), which corresponds to (8b-c).

- (11) [huju ndiɔ mbwa ambajɛ paka a li m kimbi li a]  
*this be dog to which cat 3sg. past OM run Appl FV*  
 This is the dog toward which the cat ran.

Second, for the sentences in which the goal object appears in a post-verbal position and for which the consultant provided only the prepositional construction, as in (10a-c) above, the consultant provides only the applicative form when converting them to emphasizing constructions in which the goal object appears in a pre-verbal position, as shown in (12a-c), which correspond to (10a-c) respectively.

- (12) a. [hujoni'm.tɔtɔ am'bajɛ mwa'limɔ wa li mumʃ ɛ ə pirə]  
*this is child to which teacher 3sg. Past throw Appl FV ball*  
 This is the child that the teacher threw the ball toward.
- b. [hujoni'm.tɔtɔ am'bajɛ ni li mu lɛt ɛ ə kitabu]  
*this is child for whom 1sg.Past OM bring Appl FV book*  
 This is the child that I brought a book for.
- c. [hunju guta ambaɔ mkulimə a li u ruʃ i a'ʒiwɛ]  
*this wall to which farmer 3sg. Past OM throw Appl FV stone*  
 This is the wall that the farmer threw the stone toward.

In summary, for some verbs in Kiswahili, the goal thematic role can be expressed either in applicative or in prepositional construction. For other verbs, it can only be realized as prepositional construction. Especially, when the goal object appears in a pre-verbal position, the applicative construction is more preferable or even obligatory.

### 4.3 Instrument

This study finds that the instrument thematic role, when realized in applicative, demonstrates different optionality property. I show the findings in two subsections.

#### 4.3.1 Ngonyani's (1998) observation

Ngonyani (1998) observes that when a clause contains two post-verbal objects, one being the canonical object of a transitive verb, and the other being an instrument object, the instrument object cannot be realized in applicative. Ngonyani attributes this to the

existence of the canonical object in a post-verbal position. He claims that when there is another object in a post-verbal position, a post-verbal instrument object cannot be realized in applicative. Data elicited in this study support this observation. Moreover, our data indicate that in a sentence which contains two post-verbal objects as described above, the instrument object, which cannot be realized in applicative, is instead realized in the following three patterns.

(i). The prepositional construction (13)

- (13) [m.tʌhujʊ' a li k<sup>h</sup>t<sup>h</sup> a njama' *kwa* k<sup>h</sup>isu]  
*person 3sg. Past cut FV meet with knife*  
 The person chopped the meat with a knife.

(ii). The construction of *tumi* “to use” plus instrument DP, as in (14).

- (14) [ a li tumi a maik ku ? imba]  
*3sg. Past use FV mike to sing*  
 He was singing with the mike. (Lit: He was using a mike to sing.)

(iii). The construction of *kwa* “by” plus *ku tumi* “to use”, as in (15).

- (15) [ na kat a niama kwa ku tumi a kisu]  
*Pre-Prog cut FV meat by to use FV knife*  
 I am chopping the meat with a knife.  
 (Lit: I am chopping the meat by using a knife.)

#### 4.3.2 A larger picture than Ngonyani’s (1998) observation

While Ngonyani’s (1998) observation is evidenced in this study, it seems that he only describes one case of a general situation. Data of this study indicate that the reason that the instrument object appearing in a post-verbal position cannot be realized in applicative is not because of the existence of another post-verbal object, but is related to where the instrument object appears, pre-verbal or post-verbal. In this study, I suggest this hypothesis: In Kiswahili, when an instrument object surfaces in a post-verbal position, it cannot be realized in applicative; on the other hand, when it appears in a pre-verbal position, it can, maybe even must, be realized in applicative. The limitation of Ngonyani’s observation and the plausibility of my hypothesis are demonstrated by the following facts.

First, in an intransitive clause which contains no post-verbal canonical object, the instrument object, if appearing in the post-verbal position, still cannot be realized in applicative. In (16), there is just one post-verbal object, the instrument *kisu* “knife”, however, it is introduced by the preposition *kua* “by”, not realized in applicative.

- (16) [m.tɔu huju' a li kat a 'kua kisu]  
*man this 3sg. Past chop FV by knife*  
 The man chopped with a knife.

Second, when the canonical object of a transitive verb is fronted to a pre-verbal position and only the instrument object is left post-verbal, still this instrument object cannot be realized in applicative. In (17), the canonical object “the meat” appears in a pre-verbal position; however, the instrument object “knife” still cannot be realized in applicative, but is introduced by the preposition *kua* “with”.

- (17) [hi' ni ɟ iama ambajɔ m.ɸuhuju a li kat a kua kisu]  
*this is meat that man 3sg. Past cut FV with knife*  
 This is the meat that the man chopped with a knife.

In our elicitation, I have not found any example in which a post-verbal instrument object is realized in applicative, either with or without another post-verbal object.

Third, while a post-verbal instrument object cannot be realized in applicative (18a), it can, or even must, be realized in applicative when it appears in a pre-verbal position (18b).

- (18) a. Instrument object in post-verbal position: prepositional construction  
 [Jianxun huw end ə ɸuleni kwa baisikeli]  
*Jianxun 3sg. go FV school by bike*  
 Jianxun goes to school by bike.
- b. Instrument object in pre-verbal position: applicative  
 [hini baisikaili a na ɟɔ end ε ə ɸuleni]  
*this is bike 3sg. Present OM go Appl FV school*  
 This is the bike that he goes to school by.

(19) provides two more examples which demonstrate that when an instrument object appears in a pre-verbal position, it is realized in applicative. In (19a), the instrument object is extracted to a pre-verbal position in relativization, and is realized in applicative. In (19b), the instrument object appears in front of the verb in an emphasizing construction, and it is also realized in applicative.

- (19) a. [kalamu aliɔkua a na andik i a ikɔ mɛzani]  
*pen with which 3sg. Past write Appl FV on table*  
 The pen he was writing with is on the table.
- b. [hik<sup>h</sup>i ni k<sup>h</sup>isu ambatɕɔ mɸuhuju a li k<sup>h</sup>at<sup>h</sup> i a anijama]  
*this is knife with which man 3sg. Past cut Appl FV meat*  
 This is the knife with which the man chopped the meat.

In summary, this study finds that in Kiswahili, when an instrument object surfaces in a post-verbal position, it can never be realized in applicative. However, when it appears in a pre-verbal position, it can, maybe even must, be realized in applicative.

#### 4.4 Locative

Ngonyani (1998) reports that Kiswahili has locative applicatives as in (20); however, data elicited in this study indicate a different picture.

- (20) wa-teja wa-li-I-i-a ch-akula ofisi-ni (Locative)  
 2-customer 2-PST-eat-APP-FV 7-food 9.office-LOC  
 The customers ate food in the office. (Ngonyani, 1998, p. 83)

First, in my elicitation, I have not found any example in which the locative thematic role, when appearing in a post-verbal position, is realized in applicative. The defining characteristic of applicatives in Kiswahili is that the applied object is licensed by an overt applicative morpheme suffixed on the verb stem. The contrast of the following examples indicates that in the (b) examples which contain locatives, the verb stems are not suffixed with applicative morphemes, I therefore assume that these sentences are not applicative constructions.

- (21) a. [a na 'ʔimb a]  
 3sg. Pre-Prog sing FV  
 He is singing
- b. [a ta ʔimb a New York]  
 3sg. Pre-Prog sing FV New York  
 He is singing in New York.
- (22) a. [ na 'fani a kazi]  
 Pre-Prog do FV work  
 I am working.
- b. [ na fani a kazi mdania njumba jɔŋgu]  
 Pre-Prog do FV work in (?) house my  
 I am working in my house.
- (23) a. [a na tembe ə kilasiku ]  
 3sg. Pre walk FV everyday  
 He walks everyday.

- b. [a na tembe ə wenjiani kilasiku]  
*3sg. Pre walk FV on the playground everyday*  
 He walks on the playground everyday.

Second, when the locative object appears in a pre-verbal position, I find two examples in which the locative object is realized in applicative, as in (24) and (25); while in the other examples, the locative object is expressed by prepositional construction, as in (26).

- (24) [hiki ni tʃ imba anatʃə a ŋge'li zi ə TV]  
*this is room in which 3sg. watch Appl FV TV*  
 This is the room in which he is watching TV.

- (25) [hunjo wuə ndʒ ni na mə tʃɛ'z ε ə]  
*this playground 1sg. Pre-Prog OM play Appl FV*  
 This is the playground that I am playing on.

- (26) a. [niŋba ambamə m.k<sup>h</sup>lima a li kul a ʃuŋgua lilik<sup>h</sup>ua uzuri]  
*house in which farmer 3sg.Past eat FV orange to be nice*  
 The house that the farmer ate the orange in was nice.

- b. [hu:ni'mj i ambamə ni na fani a kazi]  
*this is city in which 1sg. Pre-Prog do FV work*  
 This is the city in which I am working.

Based on the data and the communication with the consultant, I hypothesize that in Kiswahili, using applicatives to express locatives is not a common case, and is subject to some conditions. First, the locative object needs to appear in a pre-verbal position; second, whether a locative can be realized in applicative or not might be related to the properties of the main verb.

## 5. Discussion, reflection, and future research

Besides the optionality properties of the four types of applicatives just discussed, some other phenomena discovered in this study also deserve discussion and reflection.

First, most studies on applicatives in the literature seem to assume that an applicative and the corresponding non-applicative construction have the same semantic meaning, as Valenzuela (2010) puts it, “Although not explicitly mentioned, the prototypical applicative construction is commonly viewed as an alternative to a non-applicative one” (p. 103). However, this study finds this is not the case, at least in Kiswahili. The two clauses in (27), repeated from (6), are corresponding applicative and non-applicative constructions.

- (27) a. [ni na tʃɔr i a magazati pitʃa]  
*Isg. Pres-Prog draw Appl FV newspaper picture*  
 I am drawing a picture for the newspaper.
- b. [ni na tʃɔr a pitʃa kwa magazati]  
*Isg. Pres-Prog draw FV picture for newspaper*  
 I am drawing a picture for the newspaper.

According to the consultant, these two expressions have different semantic connotations and are used in different context. Specifically, the applicative construction carries the sense that “I am drawing a picture for the newspaper because this is my job”; the prepositional construction, on the other hand, implies that “I am drawing the picture for the newspaper, but this is not my job, it just happens that I need to do it for some reason.”

Likewise, while both (28a) and (28b) below are translated as “The girl was singing for her mother”, the prepositional construction (28b), according to the consultant, carries the sense that the girl was singing for her mother on a special occasion or for special reasons, such as her mother’s birthday or graduation; the applicative construction (28a), on the other hand, does not carry this sense.

- (28) a. [m.usitʃana' a li mu iŋ ɓ ij a' mama jaki]  
*girl 3sg. Past OM sing Appl FV her mother*  
 The girl was singing for her mother.
- b. [m.usitʃana' a li ʔimb a kwa aʃ ili ja mama jaki]  
*girl 3sg. Past sing FV for her mother*  
 The girl was singing for her mother.

Second, previous studies (e.g. Ngonyani, 1998) seem to assume that while applicatives bearing different thematic roles might demonstrate different properties, applicatives bearing the same thematic role possess the same properties. However, this might be an oversimplification. This study finds that for the same thematic role, different verbs might demonstrate different properties in whether or not the thematic role they carry can be realized in applicative. Due to limited data, this study does not pursue the relation between properties of verbs and their ability to construct applicatives in Kiswahili, and this might be an interesting research topic in future studies.

Third, unexpectedly, this study finds that in Kiswahili whether certain thematic role can be realized in applicative is related to where it appears, pre-verbal or post-verbal. This property, so far as I know, is not reported in previous studies. How to account for this within the current minimalist framework might be another interesting research topic.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has investigated the optionality property of four types of Kiswahili applicatives, namely, benefactive, goal, instrument, and locative. This study finds that these four types of applicatives demonstrate different optionality property. Specifically, in the case of the benefactive or the goal thematic role, for some verbs, this benefactive or goal object can be introduced in either applicative or prepositional construction, and for other verbs, it can only be introduced in prepositional construction. Especially, when the goal object appears in a pre-verbal position, the applicative construction is preferable. Second, in the case of instrument thematic role, if the instrument object appears in post-verbal position, it cannot be realized in applicative; on the other hand, if it appears in a pre-verbal position, it can (or must) be realized in applicative. Finally, in the case of locative thematic role, if the locative object appears in post-verbal position, it cannot be realized in applicative. If the locative object appears in a pre-verbal position, for some verbs, it is realized in applicative, and for other verbs, it is realized in prepositional construction.

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