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## Proverbs and Sayings of the Swahili Language in Written Discourse

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**Abstract.** Examines the peculiarities of the use of proverbs and sayings of the Swahili language in written discourse, especially in literature and modern media texts. Such a study is being conducted for the first time in Russian bantu studies. The aim to establish the fact of the use or absence of paremiological units in written texts in the Swahili language. The task is to clarify the features of the use of proverbs, as well as their relevance in selected literary works and media texts. The general thesis is put forward that the active use of paremiological units in the Swahili language is typical not only for oral discourse, but also for written. Proverbs and sayings allow the author not only to realize the decorative function of these phraseological units, but also to perform some more difficult, not always obvious tasks, for example, to endow the hero's speech with great authority, which seems especially relevant in the context of the extremely respectful attitude of Swahili people to their ancestors and their statements. The presence of paroemias in literary works of various periods refutes the opinion that proverbs, being part of an archaic folklore stratum, often lose their relevance. Media texts skillfully use the allegorical function of proverbs and thereby make the text of articles and headlines sound even more vividly and accurately, which once again confirms the relevance of the use of paremiological units in modern texts, including in written discourse.

**Keywords:** proverbs, sayings, Swahili, written discourse, paremiology, African languages

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## Пословицы и поговорки языка суахили в письменном дискурсе

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**Аннотация.** Рассматриваются особенности употребления пословиц и поговорок языка суахили в письменном дискурсе, а именно в литературных произведениях и современных медиатекстах. Подобное исследование впервые проводится в российской бантуистике. Цель – установление факта употребления или отсутствия паремиологических единиц в письменных текстах на языке суахили. Задача – прояснить особенности употребления пословиц, а также их актуальность в выбранных литературных произведениях и медиатекстах. Выдвигается общий тезис о том, что активное употребление паремиологических единиц в языке суахили характерно как для устного дискурса, так и для письменного. Пословицы и поговорки позволяют автору не только реализовать орнаментальную функцию данных фразеологических единиц, но и выполнить некоторые более трудные, не всегда очевидные задачи, например наделить речь героя большим авторитетом, что представляется особенно актуальным в контексте крайне уважительного отношения суахилийцев к предкам и их высказываниям. Присутствие паремий в литературных произведениях различных периодов опровергает мнение, что пословицы, будучи частью архаичного фольклорного пласта, часто теряют актуальность. Медийные тексты умело пользуются их иносказательной функцией и тем самым заставляют звучать статьи и заголовки более ярко и точно. Это еще раз подтверждает актуальность употребления паремиологических единиц в современных текстах, в том числе и в письменном дискурсе.

**Ключевые слова:** пословицы, поговорки, суахили, письменный дискурс, паремиология, африканские языки

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### Introduction

One of the overarching diachronic issues in paremiology is the functioning of proverbs and sayings in written discourse. This question is particularly acute in the context of modernity, as the original characterization of paremias as ‘oral’ may argue for positioning such lexical units as ‘outdated’ or folkloric (Mokienko, 2015, p. 9). Some paremiologists, such as the well-known American linguist

J. Spears (1973), predicted over 40 years ago an inevitable decline in the demand for proverbs, labeling them as “linguistic fossils of obsolete folkloric stereotypes” that, due to their rigidity, simply cannot conform to modern realities. Nevertheless, research by contemporary scholars shows that in “speech usage many traditional paremias are not only well recognized but also actively used in transformed forms” (Mokienko, 2015, p. 10). For example, the prominent German paremiologist F. Schindler studied this issue using Czech language material, while Slovakian Germanist P. Dürcho examined the contemporary functioning of German and Slovak proverbs. Proverbs not only adeptly adapt to modern reality but also convincingly demonstrate their multifaceted usage: current research in paremiology highlights the analysis of proverbs functioning not only in literary texts but also in media texts, advertising, social networks, and SMS correspondence. Swahili proverbs are no exception and continue to demonstrate their relevance in contemporary oral and written discourse.

## Results and Discussion

### *Proverbs and sayings in early literature*

As examples of the use of Swahili proverbs in literary texts, we selected several works from various periods. The epic *Liyongo Fumo*, dated to the 12th–13th centuries and regarded as a classic of early Swahili literature, showcases the richness of the paremiological fund of the language. The material for this study comes from a modern literary adaptation of this epic (Matundura, 2006). For instance, in the first chapter of this work, the dying ruler Fumo utters the phrase: *Za sakafuni wasemavyo wahenga huishia ukingoni*, which means ‘Running on the roof, as the ancestors say, ends at the edge’ (~ No matter how long the rope twists, the end is clear). With this brief yet profound proverb, the character clearly conveys his awareness of his impending death, and the lack of further commentary adds to the poignancy of the situation. The phrase “as the ancestors said” serves as a canonical introduction to Swahili proverbs in various types of discourse and acts as a signal marker. Here are a few more examples of the use of paremias in this same work:

*Chochote kingaacho si dhahabu.* – Not everything that glitters is gold.

*Si wahenga walisema kiendacho ugangani hakirudi?* – Did not the ancestors say: what is given to witchcraft does not return?

*Mimi ni mjumbe na mjumbe hauawi, alianza mjumbe.* – I am a messenger, and messengers are not killed, began the messenger (proverb).

### *Proverbs and sayings in postcolonial literature*

In the work from the post-independence period, *Mazungumzo ya usiku* (*Evening Conversation*) by Msuya (1978), a proverb was discovered:

*Ama kweli, mtakwa asitake, akitaka hatakiwi!* – Is it not true that one who is needed should desire nothing, and if he desires, he is not needed?

This saying serves as a summary of a passage describing a scene before the main character recounts his story of unsuccessful migration from the village to the city. ***Duka la kaya*** (*Village Shop*), written by N. Tegambwage (1985), also features various forms of folklore. For instance, the author attributes to the elderly protagonist Milingo a silent debate with established beliefs expressed through proverbs:

*Hasira ni hasara.* – Anger is harmful or Anger is a bad advisor.

*Fimbo ya mbali haui nyoka* – A stick that is far away does not kill a snake.

His internal rejection of these absolute truths sharpens his confrontation with the village community even further. Here are some additional examples found in this work:

*Aliyekushika tumbo si ndiye anastahili shikamoo.* – The one who grabs your stomach (i.e., forces you to go hungry) is not the one who deserves respect.

*Nani atamfunga paka kengele?* – Who will tie a bell on the cat? – about the futility of actions.

*Kilema ni cha siku nyingi.* – Injury lasts a long time.

These proverbs are absent from the paremiological dictionaries used in the research (Kingei, Ndalul, 2008; Salla, 2017). Nonetheless, the imagery and figurative nature of these expressions, along with their concise yet substantial grammatical structure and lexicosemantic techniques (such as the use of relatives in verbs, emphatic linkage with *ndi-*, and elision of the head noun when a possessive construction is present), suggest that they indeed qualify as proverbs that were either unrecorded or underrepresented, thus not included in the collections utilized for this study.

An example of a proverb appears in the deeply philosophical, futuristic novel ***Nagona*** by the renowned Tanzanian writer E. Kezilahabi (1990):

*Wengine walisema: 'Aibu ya maiti aijuaye mwosha'.* Some said: 'The shame of the dead is known to the one who washes him'.

In the contemporary novel ***Nguvu ya sala*** (*The Power of Prayer*) by the famous Kenyan writer K.V. Wamitila (1999), proverbs are also frequently voiced by characters of various ages and by the author himself. Here are a few:

*Mficha uke hazai.* – She who hides her nakedness does not bear children.

*Uchungu wa mwana anaujua mzazi.* – The sorrow of a child is known to the parent.

*Ukilima pantosha utavuna pankwisha.* – If you sow and say it is enough, you will reap and say it's all over. Similar to 'You reap what you sow'.

*Mungu humsaidia anayejisaidia.* – God helps those who help themselves. Similar to 'Hope in God, but do not slack off'.

It is interesting that the last proverb could not be found in the lists utilized in the paremiological dictionaries, possibly indicating the emergence of new paremiological units during the literary creativity of contemporary authors.

### ***Proverbs and sayings in media texts***

Swahili proverbs remain relevant in the media. The analysis focused on *Instagram* pages of the *BBC*, the official *Deutsche Welle Idhaa ya Kiswahili* website, and its *Facebook* page. Both full articles and brief posts were used, along with links to videos from these outlets, including on *YouTube* and materials from live broadcasts of *Deutsche Welle* radio.

Modern linguists studying the paremiological layer of various languages show significant interest in the use of proverbs in media discourse (Antonova, 2012; Konstantinova, 2012). A.A. Konstantinova, for instance, who researched the use of English proverbs in political speeches, TV texts, and media texts, concludes that “proverbs are not static semantic entities; their meanings emerge in discourse... The ‘popular meaning’ contained in proverbs is also merely conventional and undoubtedly subject to change. Language ‘comes alive’ in discourse... proverbs and proverbial categories are very dynamic: they constantly change and restructure as proverbs are used in new contexts” (Konstantinova, 2012, p. 10). Konstantinova refers to this phenomenon as “occasional modification”, arguing that “the communication process is conditioned, among other things, by hidden factors, such as the personalities of the interacting individuals and the cognitive content being conveyed and perceived” (Konstantinova, 2012, p. 9). Regarding the use of Swahili proverbs in media discourse, they are often presented in their original form without undergoing occasional transformation. O.N. Antonova, examining the variability of English proverbs in journalistic texts, refers to them as “usual paremiological units” (Antonova, 2012, p. 7).

Swahili journalists actively use proverbs both as catchy headlines and within article texts. For example: *Kama wahenga wanavyosema “Hakuna marefu yasiyokuwa na ncha”*. (‘As the ancestors say, there is no length without an end’ – similar to “No matter how long a rope twists, its end will still be seen”). This proverb was used as a conclusion, encapsulating the idea of one of the recently published articles.

Another article titled *Mtoto wangu, mlinzi wangu* (‘My child is my guardian’) discusses President Yoweri Museveni’s first son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who leads the presidential protection unit. Although we could not find this proverb in collections, its bold and effective use as a headline demonstrates its paremiological potential, suggesting it may soon enter common usage.

In a piece celebrating International Women's Day regarding the wisdom of spending money and risking health for beauty, the proverb *Ukitaka uzuri lazima udhurike* ('If you want beauty, you must suffer') perfectly captures the essence.

For Valentine's Day, an engaging piece prompted young people to reflect on whether to display feelings publicly, including sharing photos of couples online, and what true love entails. Striking proverbs woven skillfully by journalists added depth to this sensitive discussion:

*Mapenzi ni majani, huota popote.* – Love is like grass; it grows everywhere.

Young people assert this, while others counter with *Mapenzi ni ya wawili hatupaswi kutangazia dunia* ('Love is for two; we shouldn't announce it to the world'), which is an expanded version of the classic proverb *Mapenzi ni ya (watu) wawili* ('Love is for two').

It is interesting that even seemingly canonical proverbs with a religious subtext can be harmoniously integrated into contemporary articles. For example, this phrase was noted on the official *BBC* page on *Instagram*:

*Wahenga walisema ukishangaa ya Musa utayaona ya Firauni.* – The ancestors said: if you are amazed by the words of Moses, you will experience the troubles of Pharaoh.

The following well-known proverb was quoted in one of the *BBC* videos on *YouTube*:

*Hakuna kula ugali kwa mikono miwili.* – You cannot eat ugali with two hands.

Meaning you can't sit on two chairs.

Proverbs also feature prominently in modern cinema. For instance, in the series *Siri ya Mtungi* (*The Secret of Mtungi*), one character confidently tells a young man who has chosen to earn a living through crime: *Samaki ikioza huoza yote* ('If the fish rots, it rots completely').

### **Conclusion**

Several reasons can explain the productive use of proverbs in various forms of written discourse, from the earliest literary works in Swahili to scripts for contemporary television series. First and foremost is the authority inherent in proverbs: they embody life wisdom and reliably affirm the correctness of the ideas they introduce or summarize in the text. For the Swahili language, this fundamental characteristic of proverbs is particularly relevant due to society's emphasized respect for ancestors. Dialogicity is another advantageous feature of proverbs that can engage readers, as they subconsciously stimulate a certain mental activity, prompting a dialogue between the reader and the author or characters. Overall, Swahili speakers can



be described as talented orators, and in written texts, they do not miss the opportunity to employ all rhetorical techniques. In this case, proverbs serve as an excellent tool. One should also not forget one of the primary textual functions of proverbs, identified by G.L. Permyakov, which is ornamental; a proverb, being a miniature work, can adorn any text. The Swahili language, inclined toward metaphorical expressions, skillfully uses proverbs and sayings that simultaneously serve as embellishments in various types of written discourse while allowing the avoidance of direct statements and smoothing over sharp edges, which is particularly relevant in both literature and media texts.

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