

# Translating Swahili language and knowledge in colonial and post-colonial Tanzania

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In the 1940s, a student from Kenya named James Gekonyo applied to the Chemistry Department of Makerere University in Uganda. When his admissions interviewers asked him to explain the difference between a

solid, liquid, and gas, Gekonyo said, "I can hold a solid in my hand and it will stay there; a liquid will run to the floor, and I cannot hold a gas at all." Gekonyo was denied admission—his answer was deemed "silly" by the interviewers.

Gekonyo's interview is just one example of how both interlinguistic and intralinguistic [translation](#) can falter and succeed, writes Morgan J. Robinson. In the article "When a Wonder Is Not a Wonder: Swahili, Translation, and the Communication of Knowledge," published in *Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society*, Robinson explores these questions within the context of the translation of Swahili language and knowledge during the colonial and postcolonial periods in Tanganyika/Tanzania.

Swahili has been a recorded written language for centuries and traces its roots back over 1,200 years, but colonial-era European academics became interested in the language because they inaccurately believed it represented an early stage of linguistic development. Despite this perception, when British missionaries began working on Zanzibar, they soon set to learning Swahili.

They devised a way to write it in Latin script and produced dictionaries and a language handbook, learning the language from—among others—an eminent Islamic jurist, his associates, and the mission's students. Translation occurred through this web of interlocutors who suggested, affirmed, and revised word lists until all understood.

Yet even as missionaries attempted to codify Swahili, their students shaped it to fit their needs. Robinson cites, for example, the word "kuchenja"—a hybrid the students created of the English word "to change" and the Swahili verb prefix "ku-." This "linguistic flexibility and creativity," Robinson writes, demonstrates "that translation was rarely as simple as moving between a source and a target language—both of

which were perpetually in flux."

As Britain consolidated its colonial rule in the 1920s, the administration formed a committee to standardize written Swahili into a "developed" language. It sought to insert the language of science into Swahili (deemed impossible by some) while creating dictionaries and coining new words. The committee was occasionally "confronted by the fact that not only is language a moving target, but so, too, is knowledge."

With the dawn of the independence era, translation problems and solutions began to be framed differently, Robinson writes. Tanzania's first president Julius Nyerere used Swahili as an anti-colonial rallying cry and symbol, stressing the connection between the language and the nascent nation. Swahili proved to be a potent national symbol and provided some solutions to translation problems experienced during the missionary and colonial eras.

The author of a science column published in the newspaper Mambo Leo shortly before independence wrote effusively about new technology, clearly demonstrating that the colonial concern that Swahili couldn't convey such complexity was a moot point. Yet a later column confronted the issue of knowledge translation, describing how nature can still astonish the experts, sometimes anticipating the wonders and amazement of technological change.

In the paper's conclusion Robinson emphasizes the role power plays in translation, setting the parameters for what language and expertise was accepted. Writing of ongoing efforts to translate scientific research into African languages and to bring research conducted in Africa onto an equal playing field with the rest of the world, Robinson writes: "Such initiatives are at once hopeful signs of progress and frank reminders that certain communicators of knowledge continue to confront familiar and damaging barriers and that stark inequalities persist in the current global

landscape of knowledge production and communication."

**More information:** Morgan J. Robinson, When a Wonder Is Not a Wonder: Swahili, Translation, and the Communication of Knowledge, *Isis* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/724869](https://doi.org/10.1086/724869)

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