

# **HISTORICAL INFERENCES FROM SWAHILI ETYMOLOGIES**

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## **0. INTRODUCTION**

Etymology, the study of the history of words, appears to be one of the few sub-disciplines of linguistics that enjoy spontaneous popular interest. People like to speculate about where their words come from and how they have changed, I would like to suggest that this interest stems from the conviction that in the history of each word, there is hidden a tiny piece of the history of the community that speaks this language today.

In the first section of this talk I list ways in which new words are created. In section Two I address the question why new words are constantly needed. In section Three I present a case study and demonstrate how I would make historical inferences from the etymologies of a set of terms related to playing cards. At this point, I hope it will have become clear why and how etymologies are historical miniatures. In the concluding section Four, I turn to the method of constructing etymologies.

Throughout my presentation, I take my examples from Swahili. Some of these Swahili etymologies are very recent and others involve considerable time depth, some are highly transparent and others more obscure and speculative.

## 1. WHAT ARE NEW WORDS?

A word is new if it is either new in form or new in meaning. Truly new forms always have new meanings. We distinguish three basic types of new words:

- o borrowings
- o new forms
- o new meanings given to existing forms

These three types are not mutually exclusive; a new word may combine several of these features.

BORROWING is a kind of institutionalized code-switching for single words. Borrowed words typically arise within a group of people who share some particular interest as well as some knowledge of a foreign language.

In many societies, at certain times, strong feelings arise regarding borrowing as an inferior kind of expanding the vocabulary. Typically, such feelings stem from an awareness of foreign dominance which is felt to threaten the self-respect or even the identity of the speech community. Linguistically, borrowing seems as universal a method of creating new words as any other.

The invention of totally NEW FORMS is extremely rare. I am not aware of any Swahili examples. Such coinages often occur in the restricted code of a nuclear family, for example when adults imitate baby-talk, but such creations are usually short-lived and seldom adopted by others. Even ideophones are not created on the spur of the moment; solid comparative evidence testifies to the ancientness of many of these words. It is this extreme rarity of totally new forms that makes the search for etymologies a promising one: we can be certain that most words have some history, rather than being created ex nihilo.

In modern bureaucratic and industrialized societies, and particularly in the wake of advertising, a special kind of creating new words has come

into existence. Many product names are new forms but are somehow reminiscent of one or more existing words; e.g., *Fanta*, which is supposed to remind us of *fantasy* and *fantastic*. This kind of derivation does not follow firm, productive rules or strict patterns. The result is that the first-time hearer cannot assign any precise meaning to the new form - which is exactly what the creators need and intend.

A related, fashionable type of almost-new forms are various sorts of acronyms, i.e., words formed from the initial letters or syllables of a phrase. A typical example is *BAKITA*, formed from *BARaza la KISwahili la TAifa* 'National Swahili Council'. Again it should be noted that there are no firm rules for forming such words. For example, the name *Tanzania* is a creation that follows the syllabic template of the earlier name *Tanganyika* from which it takes the first three letters, its next three letters are taken from the name *Zanzibar*, and the final *-ia* recalls the last two syllabic peaks of *Tanganyika* and also reminds us of many other names of countries. (I have also heard the suggestion that the final *-ia* is taken from the name *Azania*, but I do not know any specific evidence for this suggestion.) When J. Nyerere first explained the new word *Tanzania*, he said that the final *-ia* was needed in order not to put the stress on either *Tan-* or *-zan* which would give unfair prominence to one of the members of the new union. Note that the etymological constituents are not syllables; the syllabic partitioning is *Ta.nza.ni.a*.

New words of this type are mnemonic but in most cases not transparent. They are consciously created by individuals and often agreed upon by some institution that has authority in the area of the newly named entity.

GIVING NEW MEANINGS TO EXISTING FORMS is the most commonly employed and the least understood means of expanding the vocabulary. The meaning of a word is never entirely fixed or static. According to some semantic models, a word may have a focal or core meaning, but in actual usage the word may be employed (and interpreted) differently. Speakers and hearers are always able to associate a word with related ideas and use the word to convey these associated ideas rather than its focal meaning. Such associations may be spontaneous and hold only for a single occasion

in a particular discourse, or they may become permanent for the whole speech community.

You may wonder why I did not name DERIVATION and COMPOSITION as ways of creating new words. These are language-inherent, more or less productive procedures, and in this sense words so created may be considered to have a potential existence even before being used for the first time. Indeed, when such creations are semantically regular, it is impossible to judge whether such a word is "new" or not. Derivation and composition are available to all speakers, though some will use these instruments more frequently and with more complexity than others. New words of this type are, in principle, transparent for other speakers.

## 2. WHY ARE NEW WORDS CREATED?

The best known reason for creating new words is the arrival of NEW THINGS and related techniques. Well known examples are new crops such as maize, imported items such as books and cars, new institutions such as Islam or police - the list could be expanded almost without limits.

Borrowing seems the most spontaneous and dominant way to cope with new things. Examples are plentiful: *muhindi* 'maize'; *kitabu* 'book', *polisi* 'police'. However, the other two methods are also available options. For example, *ukimwi* 'aids' is said to be formed from *Uhāribifu wa Kinga ya MWili* 'destruction of defense of the body'. And examples for giving new meanings to existing forms are also easy to find. Take, for example, *-andika* 'write' and *-soma* 'read' which both appear to be forms of indigenous origin; cf. *-andaa* 'put in order, prepare'; cf. Tswana *-tsoma* 'speak a foreign language (not quite fluently)'.

However, it would be wrong to think that new words are ONLY coined when there is something new which has to be named. Consider the case of *damu* 'blood' and *samaki* 'fish'. Both words are borrowings (from Arabic), and these are the only two borrowings in the Swadesh 100-wordlist. Clearly, neither 'blood' nor 'fish' were new things that the Swahili speakers did

not know about. Consequently, we have to look for other reasons why new words are created. I can suggest at least five additional factors that may lead to the creation of new words:

- o foreign dominance
- o ambiguity
- o avoidance
- o stylistic improvement
- o new semantic target

Our first category, FOREIGN DOMINANCE, must be invoked for those cases where words are borrowed though there can be no question of a new thing or some new idea being linked to it. The Swahili numbers *sita* 'six', *saba* 'seven' and *tisa* 'nine' are good examples; *samaki* 'fish' cited above may be another. The motivation for this kind of borrowing appears to be some kind of communicative cooperation: speakers use words which they hope the hearer will have no trouble in understanding. The examples here given would all be very important words in the initial trade contact between the coastal people and the Arab seafarers.

Avoiding AMBIGUITY is often invoked as the reason for the adoption of a new word, but it is probably a rare case. The word *-nunua* 'buy' may be an example. The stem *\*-gula* is the general Bantu word for 'to buy'. Its Causative *\*-gul-ǰ-a* survives in Swahili *-uza* 'sell'. In Swahili, the voiced obstruents *\*b/d/g* have, in many cases, been replaced by zero, i.e., lost. In this way, and by the additional loss of vowel length and of tonal distinctiveness, the reflex of the verb *\*-gula* 'buy' merged with *-ua* 'kill' which is derived from *\*-búdaga*. (Strong evidence for the derivation of *-ua* from *\*-búdaga* and not from *??\*-búda* comes from the passive form *-uawa* which contains an otherwise unexplained *a*.) At that point, speakers may have avoided ambiguity (or merely awkwardness) by increasing the use of another word with overlapping connotation, i.e., *-nunua*. Cognate forms of this word exist in several East African languages, compare Ganda *-nunula* 'buy back, redeem, ransom', Shona *-nunura* 'redeem, set free by payment'. Thus, the specific Swahili innovation was to generalize the meaning 'buy back' to simply 'buy'. - There is even a third verb which may have been replaced under the threat

of homonymy with *-ua*: Bantu *\*-búuda* 'speak', as preserved in Rundi *-buura* 'say, speak', Ganda *-buulira* 'tell'. Note that its Applicative-Causative has survived in Swahili *-uliza* 'ask'.

Returning to *-nunua*, it seems that we can trace its history even further back into the past. The verb appears to contain the Separative extension *-u(1)-*. Swahili also attests the unextended verb stem *-nuna*, meaning 'show discontent'. A root of the shape *\*-nyuna* is widely attested in Bantu with the meanings 'be vexed' and 'be old'. The semantic link could be the frailty and consequent suffering linked to old age. The original meaning of the Separative *\*-nyunuda* would then have been 'to redeem someone out of his or her state of suffering'. Given further the equation of 'guilt' and 'debt' as attested in the Bantu word *\*-bánjá* (Grégoire 1976; cf. also German *Schuld*), and also accepting the hypothetical historical inference that objects as well as people were held for ransom, it becomes clear that 'payment' or 'buying back' was the most appropriate redemption of this kind of suffering. The hypothesis that *-nunua* originally referred to some kind of 'liberation' is strengthened by the existence of an Applicative-Causative verb stem *-nunuzá*, meaning 'help a child to teeth by rubbing its gums or by applying some medicine'; in this verb, the meaning of 'setting free' has been restricted as applying only to a baby's first teeth.

Another frequently cited impetus for the adoption of new words is AVOIDANCE. While Swahili does not seem to have had anything as drastic as the well-described Nguni "hlonipha", some likely examples can be found. Consider, for example, *simba* 'lion'. The same root occurs in many languages but refers to a variety of feline and similar carnivores: Shambala *shimba* 'lion', Gweno *thimba* 'leopard', Kamba *nthimba* 'wild-cat', Kikuyu *dhimba* 'black mongoose', Ganda *kasimba* 'genet'. The question is, can we establish the direction of the semantic shifts that are necessary to link these items? Now, modern ethnographical evidence attests a common practice of avoiding the names of dangerous animals. Hence we conclude that the word *\*-cǐmbá* originally referred to one of the less dangerous species, and was then, quasi euphemistically, applied to the more ferocious ones such as the leopard and the lion. It is not without irony that such semantic shifts only temporarily serve the

intended protective purpose. For example, speakers of Nyamwezi feel it wise not to mention the name of the lion, *nshiímbá*, after dark, when they replace it by the word for 'bull'. - It is possible that the adoption of the Arabic-based word *damu* for 'blood' was also motivated by some kind of avoidance.

STYLISTIC IMPROVEMENT can also motivate the adoption of a new word for a well-established referent. It is often applied to things that are felt to be important, and to words expressing values or degrees. It can work in two directions. First, words get replaced when they become too ordinary; the new word highlights the meaning better because of its connotation and also simply by being new. This shows us that words, too, are subject to inflation. The process appears to be almost unavoidable with titles; compare Swahili *bwana*, English *mister* and German *Herr*, which have all come along the same path. This process also explains why extremely common and semantically salient words such as *sana* 'very', *-kubwa* 'big', *-dogo* 'small', *-zuri* 'nice' are, on comparative evidence, all relatively recent innovations. *Sana* is said to be a borrowing from Arabic *sanaa*?, meaning 'brilliance, splendour, eminence'; *-kubwa* and *-dogo* seem to contain the common Bantu roots *\*-kúdí* and *\*-doó/-toó* plus some unidentified expansions; I have no knowledge about the origin of *-zuri*.

The three basic colour terms are another common set of words that are formed in this way. The term *-eupe* 'white' is composed of the older adjective *-eu* and the ideophone *pe*, both meaning 'white'. The ideophonic origin of *pe* is not just attested from comparative evidence, it is also still audible in Swahili when the final syllable of this word can be lengthened to express that something is very, very white: *nyeupééé*. (This kind of lengthening is not possible with just any word; you cannot say *??kubwááá* meaning 'very big'.) In Comorian, *-eu* meaning 'white' still exists next to *-eupe* meaning 'very white'. The creation of *-eusi* 'black' is a more recent analogical formation. The older and shorter form *-eu* still occurs in the Song of Liongo; again Comorian attests two forms: *-dzidu* 'black' and *-dzidu tsi* 'very black'. (The words for 'white' and 'black' are adjectives derived from the verb roots *\*-jéd-* 'be bright' and *\*-jíd-* 'be dark'; their vowels became alike by a process

of paradigmatic levelling.) Finally, the word *-ekundu* 'red' is derived from *\*-kúndú* for which the attested meanings are 'red colour, red soil' and - another example for "stylistic improvement" - 'anus'. The addition of the initial *e* creates a neat paradigm for the three basic colour terms in Swahili. We now have an explanation for the curious fact that these three words are all non-canonical in several ways: they all start with *e* (which is rare for Swahili words), they are tri-syllabic without containing a verbal extension, and 'red' even contains a prenasalized consonant in C3-position.

Stylistic improvement can also take place in the opposite direction. This is the case when the replacement comes from a more colloquial style or from slang. An example (which was suggested to me by Derek Nurse) is the word *kichwa* 'head', which has the same root as *mchwa* 'termite'. With the prefix *ki-*, the word formerly probably referred to the structure erected by these animals, the head sticking out above the shoulders just as the ant-hill sticks out above the ground.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, there is always a language-internal dynamism which compels speakers to shift the focal point or SEMANTIC TARGET of words. I have already referred to this process in describing the third way to form new words, i.e., giving new meanings to existing words (which in my view include derivations and compounds). Many examples could be cited; but let us just look at a small set of related words that have drifted apart in this way: *-tua* 'put down, go down, halt, rest, encamp'; *-tulia* 'be calm, be quiet'; *-twaa* 'take'; *-twika* 'lift load on head and shoulder'. The verb *-tua* is remarkable in that it has both transitive and intransitive meanings; in most cases, these are in Swahili morphologically distinguished. What has happened is that the original focal meaning changed from the action of putting a load down to the experience of the human actor: you put down your load when you want to sit down and rest. The importance of travel and caravans in the history of Swahili speakers is attested by the specific shift to the meaning 'stop for the night, encamp'. In the verb *-tulia*, the focal meaning has again be slightly shifted; the link with the load-carrying has been lost and the meaning concentrates fully on the calmness and quietness which comes with resting. The historical primacy of the load-



carrying is attested by the related verbs *-twika* 'lift load on head or shoulder' as well as *-twaa* 'take' which can also be glossed as 'carry away'. All these verbs contain a root *\*-tú-* which is not, however, attested as such but always occurs with one or the other extension. Nevertheless, the link with the stem *\*-túe* 'head' seems clear enough, thus providing evidence for the ancientness of carrying things on the head (rather than on the back, on the shoulder, or with a sling).

### 3. A CASE STUDY: PLAYING CARDS

Let us consider the etymology of a set of terms related to playing cards.

Table 1:

Portuguese	Swahili 1	Swahili 2	English
<i>espada</i>	<i>shupaza</i>	<i>jembe</i>	<i>Spades</i>
<i>copa</i>	<i>kopa</i>	<i>moyo</i>	<i>Hearts</i>
<i>ouro</i>	<i>uru</i>	<i>kisu</i>	<i>Diamonds</i>
<i>pau</i>	<i>pau</i>	<i>karanga</i>	<i>Clubs</i>
<i>trunfo</i>	<i>turufu</i>	<i>turufu</i>	<i>Trumps</i>
<i>(ás)</i>	<i>ree</i>	<i>dume</i>	<i>Ace</i>
<i>rei</i>	<i>mzungu wa nne</i>	<i>mzungu wa kwanza</i>	<i>King</i>
<i>(dama)</i>	<i>mzungu wa pili</i>	<i>mzungu wa tatu</i>	<i>Queen</i>
<i>(valete)</i>	<i>mzungu wa tatu</i>	<i>mzungu wa pili</i>	<i>Jack</i>
<i>sete</i>	<i>seti</i>	<i>jike</i>	<i>Seven</i>

The terms in the column "Swahili 1" are the traditional Swahili terms; they are the terms given by Sacleux, and they can still be found in the "Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu". The terms in the column "Swahili 2" are those that are presently the most commonly used ones in Dar es Salaam.

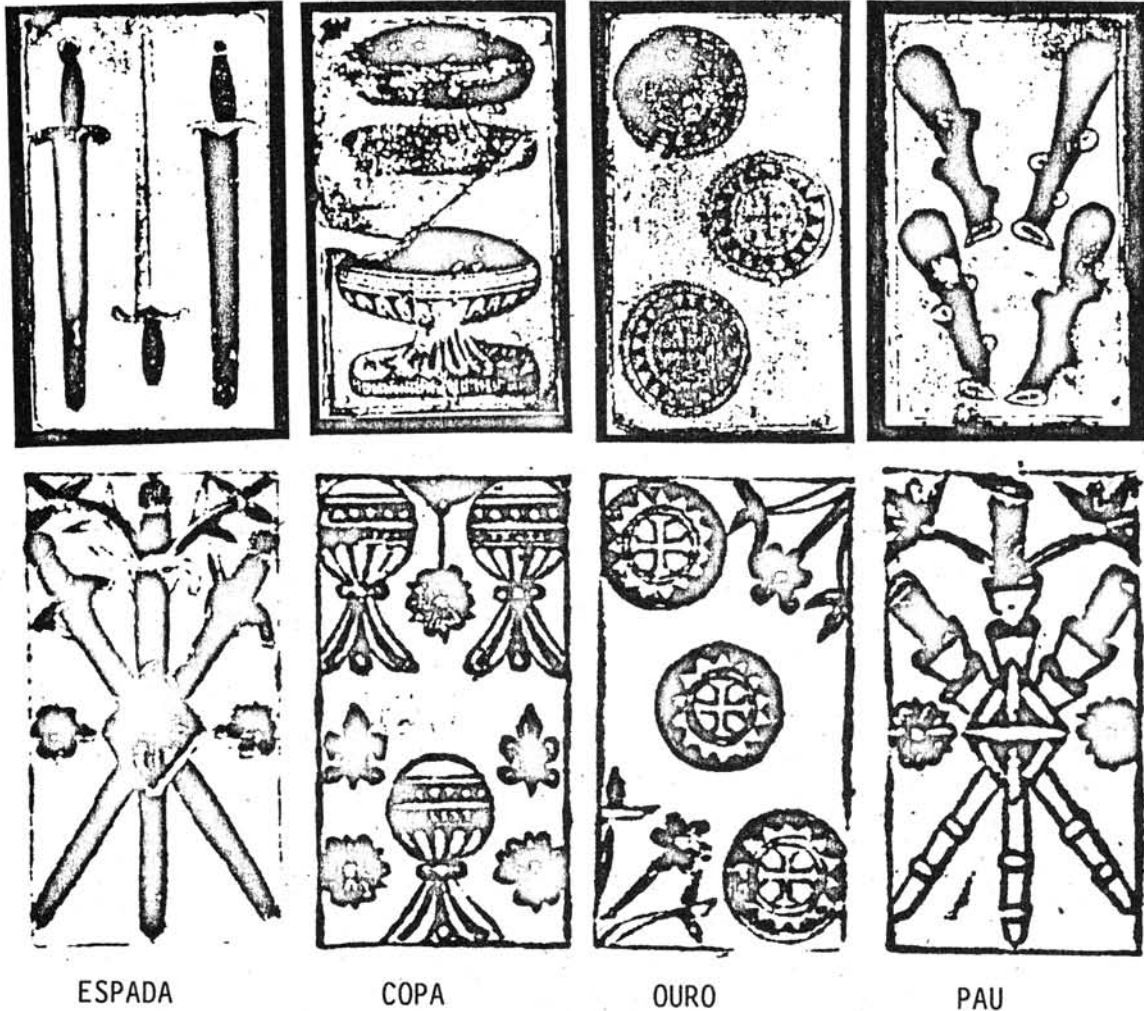
In the column "Portuguese", the terms in parentheses are the modern terms but probably not the ones that were used with the original Portuguese playing cards. (The reason for this hypothesis will soon become clear.) What can we conclude from this table of terms?

Even a cursory inspection shows that the traditional Swahili terms, with the exception of those referring to the face cards or Courts, are borrowings from Portuguese. Note that the Swahili forms are closer to the Portuguese pronunciation than the Portuguese spelling suggests: [*ʃpaða*], [*uru*], etc. The obvious historical inference is that playing cards were brought to East Africa by the Portuguese. The Portuguese arrived in Swahili-speaking East Africa towards the middle of the 16th century and were driven out by the end of the 17th century.

We might even go a step further and suggest that playing cards was first taken up not by the socially leading class of the old Swahili-speaking towns but by more recently arrived members of the work force. The sound [*ð*] in *espada* is substituted by [*z*] in *shupaza*; even Sacleux gives no alternative form ??*shupadha*. This kind of substitution would be expected from second language speakers (and from second generation mother tongue speakers), but not from Muslims who have attended Koran school; compare such modern variations as *dhahabu* and *zahabu*.

Next, we might try finding out something about the cards that were used when these terms were borrowed. They were obviously different from present-day playing cards in East Africa, which are the same ones that are predominant in the U.S., England, France and in many other countries - even in Portugal. However, the Portuguese names of the four suits mean 'sword', 'cup', 'gold' and 'stick'; the easy historical inference is that such symbols were once depicted on Portuguese playing cards. This is not difficult to verify from the literature, and indeed, cards of this type are still commonly used in Spain and in countries which inherited their playing cards from Spain. Figure 1 shows the symbols of these four suits as they appear in two Spanish packs from the 16th century. In fact, the lower set of four cards, with the interlacing patterns of Swords and Clubs, is typical for the Portuguese rather than the Spanish pattern.

Figure 1: Four suits from two sets of Spanish cards (16C)



Let us now turn to the three *wazungu* and their remarkable numbering. In Table 2, the Courts are listed according to their rank and trick values.

Table 2:

rank	Port.	Spanish	French	Swahili 1	Swahili 2	value
1	king	king	king	K = mzungu wa 4	K = mzungu wa 1	4
2	knight	knight	queen	J = mzungu wa 3	J = mzungu wa 2	3
3	maid	knave	knave	Q = mzungu wa 2	Q = mzungu wa 3	2

In the four types of cards here compared, the king invariably has the highest rank. The second ranking card is a knight on horseback on Spanish and on Portuguese cards; it were the French who changed this figure into a queen. The third face card is a servant, often female on Portuguese cards but male in the Spanish and French tradition. The Portuguese cards follow the Italian model, which appears to be the oldest in Europe. The old Portuguese names for the face cards were *rei* 'king', *cavallo* 'knight on horseback', and *sota* 'respice, subaltern'. (English cards closely follow the French type; German and Eastern European cards follow the Spanish model.) Figure 2 shows the face cards in an old Portuguese, a Japanese, a Spanish, a Czech and an English pack. Note the close parallel between the Portuguese and the Japanese cards: interlacing patterns for Swords/Clubs, the female Jack battling with a snake or dragon, the Ace with a dragon and the male figure appearing with the number Two.

In Swahili card playing, the Queen is ranked lower than the Jack. However, this most likely is not a male chauvinistic innovation but an identification of the English/French female *mzungu* with the earlier Portuguese female *mzungu*; consequently, the Knave or Jack moved up into the place of the Knight. (The same is true of present-day card playing in Portugal where the French/English type cards are used.) We now see that the modern Swahili numbering of the *wazungu* refers to their rank in the game, and the traditional numbering refers to their value (when counting the value of a trick). Note that the Swahili expressions of the type *wa nne* / *wa tatu* / *wa pili* do not just render the ordinal meanings 'fourth / third / second' but can also be literally translated as 'of four / of three / of two'. Note further that Sacleux gives the variants *nne mzungu* / *tatu mzungu* / *mbili mzungu* for 'King / Jack / Queen'. These are not regular noun phrases in Swahili but have to be interpreted as compounds meaning something like 'the white man Four', etc.

We have still not fully exploited our data. It appears that it is even possible to reach conclusions about the game or games that were played at the time of the Portuguese impact. A conspicuous feature of the set of terms is that the word *ás* has not been borrowed. Instead, the term *ree* has been transferred from the King to the Ace. The inference is not

Figure 2: Courts and sample cards

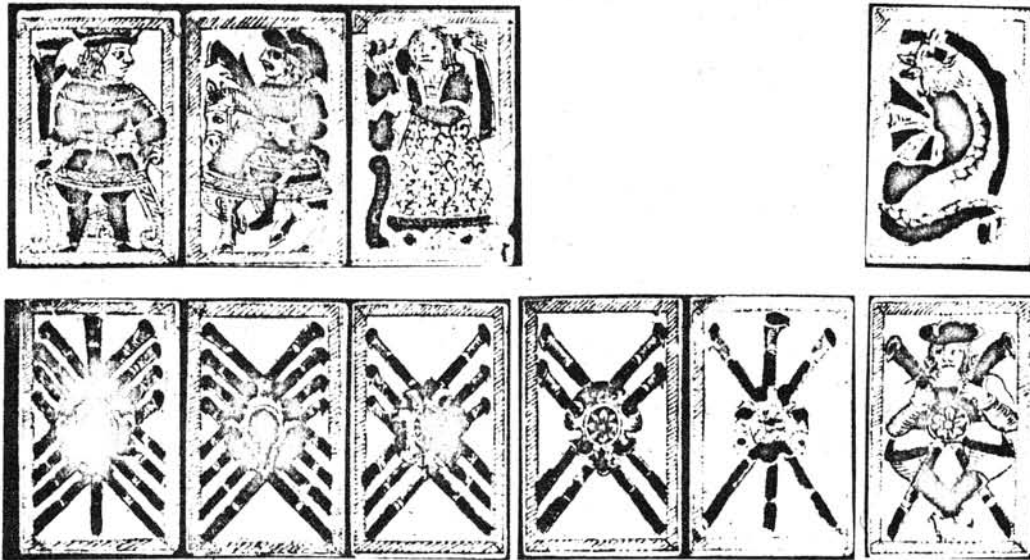


Figure 2.a: Portuguese cards (probably ca. 1650)

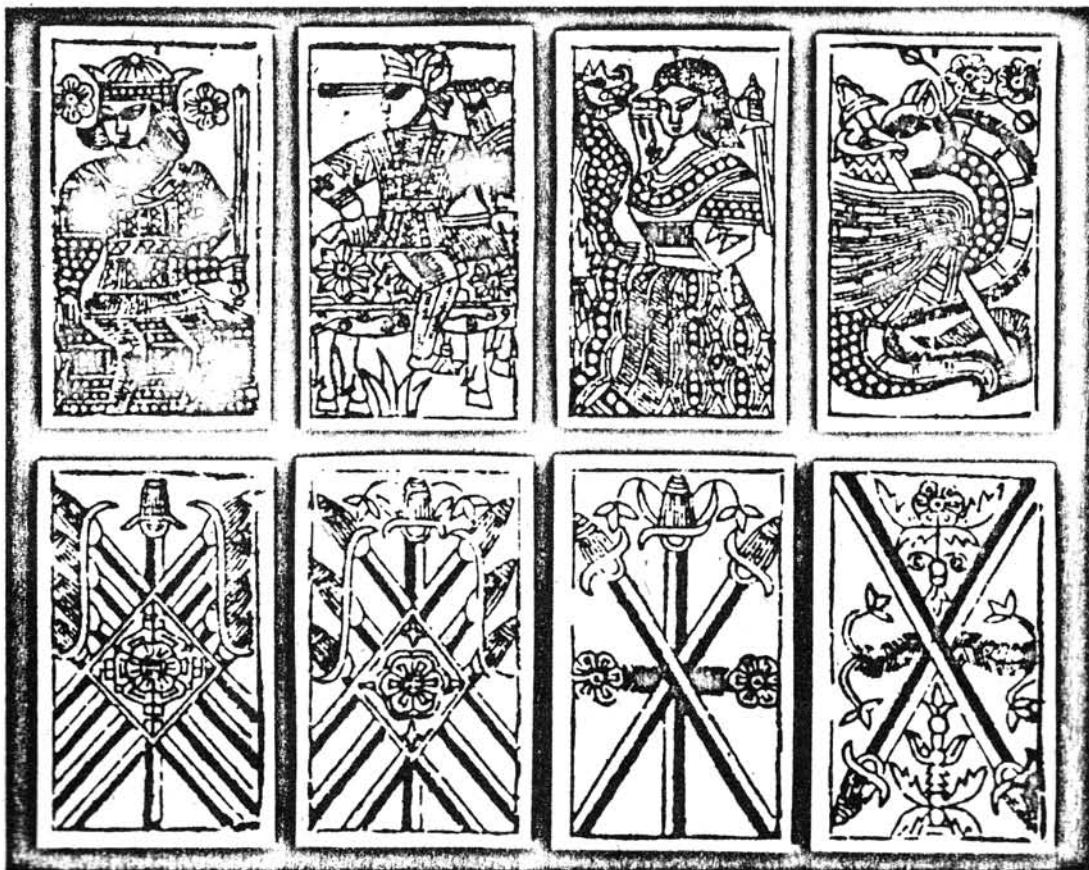


Figure 2.b: Japanese cards of the Tensho period (1573-1592)



Figure 2.c: The archaic Spanish pattern (17th century)



Figure 2.d: Czechoslovakian cards depicting national heroes



Figure 2.e: Modern English type cards

that the Portuguese word *ás* was not used in the 17C (this may or may not be the case), but that the Ace was not an important card in the game. Most likely, the Ace was just the lowest of the numbers, i.e., one. If we also assume that the King was originally the highest ranking card, than we can understand that its name *ree* (not meaning 'king' in Swahili) was transferred to the Ace in later games where the Ace was the highest ranking card. - On the other hand, the fact that the word *seti* was the only numeral card-name that was borrowed would indicate that the Seven had an outstanding rank in the game or games played. In fact, from the little I have learned about modern card playing in Tanzania, it seems that in one of the most popular games, which is called *robo-s(i)tini* 'quarter-sixty', the rank order of the cards is A 7 K J Q 6 5 4 3. In Portugal, the most popular game today is *suéca* 'Swedish', and in this game the rank order is the same (with an additional Two at the lower end of the scale).

The prominence of and relation between the Ace and the Seven is also apparent in the modern substitutions for *ree* and *seti*: *dume* 'male' and *jike* 'female'. The modern suit names are indigenous reinterpretations of the symbols appearing on the French type cards: *jembe* 'hoe' and *moyo* 'heart' are not difficult to understand, more creativity enters into the interpretation of Diamonds as *kisu* 'knife' and of Clubs as *karanga* 'groundnuts'.

Of course, history does not stop here. We could have added a column Swahili 3 to our Table 1 showing modern colloquial equivalents. In this set, *dume* and *jike* are replaced by *baba* and *mama*. The Clubs suit is referred to as *maua* 'flowers', or even as *mavi ya mbuzi* 'goat droppings', and Diamonds are called *skwea*. This last term is interesting in that it is plainly a borrowing from English *square*, but in English this term refers to the shape of the lozenge-like symbols, not to the card suit. Our inference is that the English word was borrowed in a situation where some level of English speaking competence was available, but no British or American card players were actually present.

#### 4. HOW ARE ETYMOLOGIES MADE?

The coinage of a new word is only rarely documented at the time of creation, and speakers do not generally notice when a word changes its meaning. Most etymologies are therefore based on comparative evidence. When we find similarities in sound and meaning that go beyond what we are prepared to accept as accidental we assume a historical connection: either borrowing or cognation. From a historical point of view, we are particularly interested in etymologies that involve semantic changes. The etymology of, say, *-ona* 'see', which derives directly from the reconstructable PB *\*-bóna*, with identical meaning, can hardly lead to interesting historical inferences. Deductions about the speakers of the proto-language and their environment and culture are sometimes possible when the reconstructed vocabulary covering an entire semantic field is taken into account, e.g., animals, plants, instruments. (This approach is known under the label "Wörter und Sachen"). However, when we are dealing with isolated etymologies, be it borrowings or indigenous innovations, we make historical inferences on the basis of semantic change.

Regrettably, our understanding of possible semantic changes is far less developed than, say, our knowledge about phonological change. And as far as I know, there is not even a good database for semantic shifts that are actually attested in the more thoroughly studied groups of languages of the world.

Consider the following two etymologies that are cited by Ashton (1944), by Polomé (1967) and others: *njia* 'path' is said to be derived from the Applicative *-jia* of the verb *-ja* 'come'; *kiñywa* 'mouth' is said to be derived from *-nywa* 'drink'. Both are plausible etymologies and, as far as Swahili evidence goes, both could be correct. External comparative evidence, however, strongly suggests that these etymologies are both wrong. Thus, the verb 'come' has to be reconstructed with a high front vowel preceding the voiced palatal obstruents; *\*(j)jj-a* is attested, e.g., in Nyamwezi as *-iza* and in Umbundu as *-iya*. The allegedly related noun 'path', however, never shows a trace of this vowel: Nyamwezi *nizila*; Umbundu *onjila*. Similarly, the reconstructed roots for 'drink' *\*-jóa* and



'mouth' \*-*nua* are distinct as to their initial consonant, their vowel and their tone; this can be seen clearly in many languages, cf. Ganda -*nywâ* 'drink' and *akamwa* 'mouth' (and even Ewe *nú* 'mouth' and *no* 'drink').

Insistence on strict regularity of sound correspondences can help us detect false etymologies, but no such corrective instrument exists in the case of borrowing. The example of *kisu* 'knife' may illustrate this. There are good cognates all over East Africa, e.g. Kikuyu *ruhio*, Nyamwezi *lushúú*, and the stem is even attested in as far away languages as Shona (*chisvo* 'blade') and Herero (*oruvyo*). Words have been reconstructed on less compelling evidence, but in this case an alternative etymology regards this word as a loan from Portuguese *fio* meaning 'wire' or 'cutting edge of blade'. Geographical spread, dating of sound changes and other arguments can be brought into the picture to increase the likelihood of one or the other etymology, but there is no guarantee that positive proof will be forthcoming.

When an etymology is proposed, a certain environment is sketched in which the creation or adoption of a new word is plausible. This situation is defined simultaneously in linguistic terms (the state of the language) and in cultural terms (the state of the speech community). In this way, etymologies are testimonies of the past, or, more carefully worded, they are hypotheses about the past.

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The illustrations in Figures 1 and 2 have been reproduced from Denning 1980, Mann 1973 and Tilley 1973.

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