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# The Swahili Language in the Context of the Geopolitics of Languages on the African Continent

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**Abstract-** One of the most outstanding characteristics of the African continent is its multilingual nature. It is estimated that around 2,000 languages are spoken across the African continent, many of which are highly dissimilar from one another. This vast linguistic diversity gives rise to a wide range of cultural identities among the social groups who speak them, while also contributing to numerous power rivalries across different territories. In Africa, both colonial and indigenous languages can be identified, creating a geopolitical dynamic in which colonial languages often prevail, despite efforts to reaffirm native ones. When discussing the geopolitics of language, it is essential to consider both the human groups that speak specific languages and the territories they inhabit. Among the indigenous languages showing significant signs of reaffirmation, Swahili stands out. It has undergone a steady process of diffusion, not only throughout the African continent, but also into countries on other continents.

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# The Swahili Language in the Context of the Geopolitics of Languages on the African Continent

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to analyse the status of the Swahili language within the context of language geopolitics on the African continent. To do so, it first explores the multilingual reality of Africa, then defines the concept of language geopolitics, and then analyses the dynamics on this continent. The article concludes by focusing on the specific case of Swahili within this context.

The contribution of this article is significant, as it helps illustrate a key aspect of the complex reality of the African continent — home to 54 independent states, each with its own unique context and internal dynamics. The geopolitics of language is undoubtedly a compelling branch of geopolitical studies, as it examines languages both as markers of group identity and as sources of power rivalries within territory.

## II. THE LINGUISTIC REALITY OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

In short, the linguistic landscape of the African continent is highly complex. This complexity stems from the fact that approximately 2,000 languages are spoken across the continent (Harvard University, 2025; Lodhi, 1993; Nurse, 2001;). It is striking that countries such as Cameroon have nearly 300 languages; Chad, 120; the

Ivory Coast and Ethiopia, 70 each; and Senegal, 35, among others.

However, the complexity lies not only in the number of languages but also in their distinctiveness of one another. Generally, African languages can be divided into two main groups: colonial languages and indigenous languages. Colonial languages were introduced by foreign powers during conquest and colonisation and have remained in use, both orally and in writing, over time. Today, they serve as official languages in several countries. In contrast, indigenous languages developed and evolved within African territories (Bustince, 2002), and many are currently undergoing processes of reaffirmation.

Languages such as Arabic — spread through the expansion of Islam in the 7th century across North Africa — belong to the first group, as do Spanish, French, English, and Portuguese, which were introduced during the 19th-century European colonization of African territories. Currently, English is official in 23 African countries, French in 19, Arabic in 11, Portuguese in 4, and Spanish in 1.

Indigenous African languages are typically grouped into seven linguistic families: Afroasiatic (also known as Canaanite-Semitic), Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo, Bantu, Khoisan, Kordofanian, and Austronesian (Leclerc, 2005; Leclerc, 2023). Of these, Afroasiatic languages dominate the north, northeast, and northwest regions, while Bantu languages prevail in the central and southern parts. Kordofanian languages are the least widespread, found mainly in the central-west region of Sudan.

Concerning to this, Ouane and Glanz (2011) state that "...African languages are treasures that have yet to be discovered, valued and used." Similarly, Nseme (2007) adds: "...African languages serve as privileged means for Africans to circulate information, acquire knowledge, and empower citizens, enabling them to become true agents of their development, that is, of the progressive mastery of their environment in the broadest sense of the term."

## III. ABOUT THE GEOPOLITICS OF LANGUAGES

The geopolitics of languages refers specifically to the role that linguistic elements play in power rivalries within territories, because languages, in addition to being tools of communication and carriers of cultural

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heritage, are also elements that unite people and reinforce collective identity (Giblin, 2002).

When discussing the geopolitics of languages, it is essential to consider the social groups that speak particular languages and the territories they inhabit, or of which they are part as constitutive elements. Thus, when reflecting on the vast number of existing languages, we must draw a parallel with the groups who speak them and the rivalries that either exist or may emerge between them (Momba, 2014).

In this sense, the concept of cleavage is helpful for understanding the geopolitics of languages. Cleavage refers to a societal division based on a specific issue, typically expressed through group affiliation, interests, opinions, or voting behaviour. Examples include right wing-left wing, nationalist-regionalist, rural-urban or Catholic-Protestant cleavages.

Thus, linguistic cleavages arise when sectors of the same society speak different languages, thereby forming distinct identities and social groups. As Gourdin (2015) argues, through language human beings express a vision of the world shaped by their historical, economic, political and cultural context.

Language, then, becomes a distinctive marker of nationality or ethnicity, and as it is tied to a group identity within a specific territory, it becomes a factor that contributes to power rivalries —an inherently geopolitical issue. Therefore, discussing the predominance of a language within a territory is, in effect, addressing the dominance of the social group associated with that language.

Language dominance can lie at the heart of conflict, especially when one country seeks to exert influence over another through the systematic promotion of its language. Evidence of this is the worldwide promotion of English, French, Russian, Mandarin and Portuguese, using extensive and powerful communication networks.

Language can also function as a tool of resistance. In contexts of conflict, social groups may defend and promote their language as a means of opposing external domination, highlighting the central role of linguistic identity. A notable example is the promotion of Ukrainian in Ukraine as a form of resistance to Russian influence, which has historically been exerted through the spread of the Russian language across Ukrainian territory (Bories, 2014).

Another illustrative example of the geopolitics of language can be found in the western Balkans —the former Yugoslavia— where Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia now exist as independent states. As Dérens and Rico (2017) explain, the first four countries each claim a distinct official language —Croatian in Croatia, Serbian in Serbia, Bosnian in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegrin in Montenegro. The curious thing is

that these four languages share Serbian as a standard base, despite being identified differently, as Serbian-Croatian or Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian.

In this context, in March 2017, a group of Balkan intellectuals presented a document advocating for a common language during an event in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The proposal sparked some opposition, particularly from the Croatian side. Notably, both the Archbishop of Zagreb, Josip Bozanić, and the President of Croatia at the time, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, suggested that the initiative concealed hegemonic ambitions on the part of Serbia.

#### IV. GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS OF LANGUAGES ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Returning to the idea that languages are associated with social groups which, in turn, are linked to territories and power rivalries, we now turn to a general analysis of the geopolitical dynamics of languages on the African continent.

In this sense, we consider the two major linguistic blocs into which this part of the world is divided, characterised by a dialectical relationship marked by interaction, complementarity, and, at times, rivalry. On one side, we find the bloc of implanted languages. They are associated with territories that were historically conquered and colonised. As a result, they became official languages used for administrative, economic, educational and communicational purposes. These are the cases of languages such as Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

On the other hand, there is the block of languages we have called indigenous. These languages are currently undergoing a process of reaffirmation due to the growing recognition they are receiving. In many countries, they have acquired significant importance. This is the key geopolitical development at this stage. Specifically, it refers to the reaffirmation of indigenous African languages within the broader context of decolonisation. This process began on the continent in the mid-1950s. It carries profound implications for the strengthening of collective identity and social cohesion. These languages are increasingly used in political, economic, educational, and communication spheres (Mhaka, 2022).

In this regard, Ndumbe (2006) states the following: "(...) Africans must reappropriate their languages, making them the fundamental vehicle of their thoughts, their creations, their educations, their dreams, their visions of the world. It is not a simple question of language. It is a question of survival of the nation, of collective dominion, of the destiny of a people. It is a question of development thought and generated by a nation for its flourishing."

To illustrate the above, several examples can be mentioned, which give a general idea of how the

geopolitical dynamics of African languages are occurring. Of course, if we want to have a deeper appreciation of this phenomenon, much more extensive research would have to be done.

Perhaps the most emblematic case is that of the Swahili language (Portillo, 2007). When Julius Nyerere founded the African National Union of Tanganyika in 1954, he asserted that Swahili would serve as a foundational instrument in the struggle for the independence of Tanganyika and Zanzibar. This linguistic unification later played a crucial role in the formation of the United Republic of Tanzania in 1964.

The objective was for Swahili to function as a unifying instrument of communication and identity in a country such as Tanzania, where the population spoke over one hundred different languages. This marked the beginning of a process of swahilization within Tanzanian society. Swahili, already established as the lingua franca in both Tanganyika and Zanzibar—and even beyond their borders—played a pivotal role in fostering national cohesion. The language itself emerged from historical migratory movements of populations from what are now Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo toward the eastern coast of Africa, where they came into sustained contact with Arab, Chinese, Greek, Indian, and Persian traders.

As the processes of independence and decolonisation progressed across Sub-Saharan Africa, the Swahili language gradually gained official recognition by African governments and academic institutions across Africa, North America, Asia and Europe. Its dissemination intensified over time, to the extent that current estimates suggest there are now more than one hundred million speakers of this Bantu language.

Another illustrative example of the reaffirmation of indigenous African languages can be found in the cases of Kinyarwanda and Kirundi. These languages are remarkably similar, as thoroughly analyzed by Gasarabwe (1992). Kinyarwanda holds official status in Rwanda, while Kirundi is the official language of Burundi. Both countries, located in the East African region, share a colonial history marked by French and Belgian rule, through which the influence of the French language was inherited.

In recent years, the influence of the French language has significantly diminished in both Rwanda and Burundi. Political leaders such as Paul Kagame in Rwanda and Évariste Ndayishimiye in Burundi have actively promoted the use of Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, respectively, as primary means of communication with their citizens (Bosco, 2023). Within the East African context, both leaders employ Swahili, while in broader African and international settings, they alternate between English and French. Notably, President Paul Kagame has explicitly distanced himself from the French

language, in response to France's controversial role in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

In the case of Madagascar—an African nation situated in the Indian Ocean—the official languages are currently Malagasy and French. Following the election of Didier Ratsiraka as president in 1975, the country initiated a sociopolitical and linguistic reform known as malagasyisation (Leclerc, 2023a). This process centred on the integration of the Malagasy language and culture into national life, particularly through its systematic incorporation into the educational system. The reform began at the primary level and gradually extended into secondary and tertiary education. Broadly defined, malagasyisation is a sociocultural process aimed at promoting and reinforcing Malagasy identity within the population. It seeks to valorise the language, values, traditions, and cultural heritage of Madagascar (La Langue Française, 2023).

It is essential to highlight that malagasyisation occurred in the context of a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary process promoted by the Malagasy Revolution Party (Avant-garde pour la Révolution Malagache), founded by Didier Ratsiraka himself. Ratsiraka served as President of Madagascar from 1975 to 1993, and again from 1997 to 2002.

On the other hand, within the framework of the recent geopolitical transformations occurring in West Africa, a particularly illustrative example is the adoption of a new constitution in the Republic of Mali in July 2023 (Laurent, 2023). The original draft of this constitutional reform was initiated under the leadership of Assimi Goïta, leader of the military uprisings of 2020 and 2021 and currently rules this African country.

Among the most important aspects of this new constitution is the removal of French as an official language, downgrading it to the status of a working language. In its place, thirteen indigenous Malian languages were designated as official: Bambara, Bobo, Bozo, Dogon, Fula, Hassania, Kassonke, Maninke, Miyanka, Senufo, Songhay, Soninke, and Tamashek.

Of these indigenous Malian languages, Bambara stands out as the most widely spoken, particularly in the southern region of the country, where approximately 90% of the population is concentrated. This area is predominantly inhabited by the Bambara ethnic group and includes the capital city Bamako.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Assimi Goïta addresses the Malian population in Bambara, as he did during his meeting with members of the Malian diaspora in Russia at the Russia–Africa Summit held in Saint Petersburg in July 2023.

A similar development to that observed in Mali has taken place in Niger, within the broader context of the Association of Sahel States. In this country, French has ceased to be the official language and has been relegated to the status of a working language. In its



place, Hausa has been designated the official language (Resumen Latinoamericano, 2025). Spoken by the majority of Niger's population, this Afroasiatic Chadic language is widely used not only in Niger but also in northern Nigeria and other West African countries.

In Nigeria, a country with a population exceeding 200 million, English serves as the official language. However, it is estimated that nearly 500 indigenous languages are spoken within its borders. Among these, three are regionally predominant: Hausa in the northern region, Yoruba in the southwest, and Igbo in the southeast. In 2022, the government approved a new national language policy mandating the use of local languages in primary education, with English introduced at the secondary level (Al Jazeera, 2023). The policy aims to promote and enhance the preservation and use of all Nigerian languages.

Conversely, concerning to Wolof, Gueye (2022) published an article emphasising the need to elevate the status of Senegal's national languages, noting that although French is the official language, it is spoken by only approximately one-third of the Senegalese population.

Located in the Horn of Africa, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has a population exceeding 125 million and was recently admitted as a member of the BRICS coalition. The principal languages spoken in the country include Amharic, Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya. Among these, Amharic is particularly prominent as the official and vehicular language, serving as the medium of instruction within the Ethiopian educational system. Additionally, Amharic is a candidate for designation as a working language of the African Union, whose headquarters are situated in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital (Borkena, 2023).

Recently, information has emerged highlighting the teaching of Amharic in the Russian Federation as part of Russia's strategic engagement with the African continent. In this context, it has been noted that "Ethiopia is one of the most cordial countries with Russia. Amharic is the lingua franca spoken by most, if not all, Ethiopians. To establish diplomatic dialogue or economic ties, Amharic can become a key factor."

Finally, the case of the Somali language merits attention. It is the official language of the Federal Republic of Somalia and is spoken by the majority of the country's population in the Horn of Africa. Somali language resilience is notable, having withstood colonial incursions by the British in the north and the Italians in the south. Despite the continued influence of languages such as English and Arabic among Somalis, Somali has reaffirmed itself as a central indigenous language (Kawa, 2023).

## V. THE RELEVANCE OF THE SWAHILI LANGUAGE

In the context of the geopolitics of languages on the African continent, the Swahili language stands out. Originally linked to the coastal regions of East Africa, it is currently associated primarily with the territories of Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Interest in the Swahili language has been progressively increasing in numerous study centers around the world, as noted by Mulokozi (2002). It is estimated that it is taught in universities in the United States, Great Britain, Russia, France, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Holland, Poland, Sweden, Finland, Norway, China, Japan, Oman and Mexico. Also in Latin America, Swahili has been an object of interest, highlighting the courses taught at the prestigious academic organisation El Colegio de México (Saavedra, 2019).

In Africa, Swahili is taught at universities in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Ghana, Sudan, Nigeria, among others. The language has also been the subject of extensive scholarly research, as evidenced by the bibliographic compilation conducted by Geider (2003), an effort that has continued in subsequent years.

The area of influence of the Swahili language has been expanding, and countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, and Mozambique are now considered part of this sphere. It is worth recalling, for example, that in 2003 Joaquim Chissano, President of Mozambique from 1986 to 2005, in his capacity as President of the African Union, proposed the incorporation of Swahili (a language he also spoke) as an official language of the organisation (CIDOB, 2005). Filipe Nyusi, who governed Mozambique from 2015 to 2025, also speaks Swahili, among other reasons, because he is originally from the province of Cabo Delgado, which borders Tanzania (The Citizen, 2022).

Regarding the presence of Swahili in South Sudan —a country bordering Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the south—Habwe (2021) published an article addressing this topic. The author discusses both the achievements and the challenges involved in further promoting the use of Swahili in South Sudan, where the language arrived through migration processes, commercial exchange and armed conflict.

A similar case is that of Somalia, a country bordering Kenya to the south, which has likewise experienced internal armed conflicts, leading to significant displacement and refugee movements. In this context, Khalif (2023) examines the role of Swahili in southern Somali cities such as Baware and Kismaayo, highlighting its growing importance in these areas.

On the other hand, the Swahili language has received significant promotion from political leaders across the broader eastern, central, and southern regions of Africa. In this context, the current president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, during the graduation ceremony of Swahili students at Kyambogo University (Kampala) in October 2024, urged the people of East Africa — and Africa as a whole — to embrace their commonalities and promote the Swahili language as a powerful instrument for economic integration and continental unification (EAC, 2024), noting that it is a neutral and non-ethnic language.

During the visit of the President of Tanzania, Samia Suluhu Hassan, to Malawi in July 2023, President Lazarus Chakwera announced that he had instructed Malawian education authorities to begin incorporating the Swahili language into the school curriculum. This initiative aims to facilitate communication on commercial matters with *Swahiliphone* countries (VOA, 2023). It is important to note that Malawi borders Tanzania to the northeast, and that the national language, Chichewa, is a Bantu language sharing several features with Swahili.

In August 2024, the National Assembly of Rwanda approved the incorporation of Swahili as an official language, joining Kinyarwanda, English, and French (Africanews, 2024). The diffusion of Swahili in Rwanda has experienced fluctuations due to the country's political instability (Mlaga, 2017). Swahili spread further after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi ethnic group, which caused hundreds of thousands to flee, seeking refuge primarily in Uganda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Following the seizure of power by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, many refugees began returning, many of whom had learned Swahili during their displacement. Notably, the current president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, speaks Swahili.

Something similar has happened in Burundi, Rwanda's twin country, where there were massacres in both 1972 and 1994, causing thousands of Burundians to flee to neighbouring countries, with the consequent spread of the Swahili language. The current president of Burundi, Évariste Ndayishimiye, also speaks Swahili, as well as Kirundi, English and French, like a large part of the Burundian population.

From an institutional and recognition standpoint, the Swahili language has attained significant status. During the 24th Ordinary Summit of Heads of State of the East African Community (EAC), held in Tanzania in December 2024, the designation of Swahili and French as official languages was approved (Gathoga, 2024), joining English, which was already official. The EAC comprises Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia.

Likewise, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has incorporated the Swahili language into its operational framework. The SADC

comprises sixteen countries: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Seychelles, South Africa, Eswatini, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Inusah, 2019).

The efforts of both the EAC and the SADC contribute regionally to the broader initiatives undertaken by the African Union at the continental level, where Swahili is regarded as a significant contributor to the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area (The Citizen, 2022a).

The institutional recognition of the Swahili language has not only occurred on the African continent, but organisations such as UNESCO, in November 2021 (UNESCO, 2023), and the United Nations General Assembly (Mwangi, 2024), in July 2024, have designated July 7 as World Swahili Day.

Significant advances have been made in several non-African countries, reflecting the international reach of the Swahili language. For instance, in China, the official political doctrine known as Xi Jinping Thought has been published in Swahili, thereby providing millions of Swahili speakers access to this material (Mutambo, 2023).

In Russia, the teaching of African languages such as Swahili and Amharic has been incorporated into some schools, a development considered crucial for fostering economic, diplomatic, and cultural ties with the African continent (Language Magazine, 2023). Similarly, in Turkey, the dissemination of Swahili through language courses has been reported, stemming from an agreement between the Turkish association Al Selam and the Tanzanian embassy in this strategic Eurasian country (Kavak, 2023).

In Cuba, the International Kiswahili Conference was held in November 2024, focusing on deepening knowledge of this African language (Prensa Latina, 2024). Notably, in July 2024, during the celebration of World Swahili Day, the Tanzanian ambassador to Cuba, Humphrey Polepole, emphasised the importance of the Swahili language (Prensa Latina, 2024a).

Finally, it is essential to highlight the presence of the Swahili language in major media outlets such as China Radio International (CRI), Deutsche Welle (DW), Radio France Internationale (RFI), and Voice of America (VOA), among others. Additionally, Swahili is supported in digital platforms like Google Translate and integrated into emerging artificial intelligence technologies (Oginga, 2023).

## VI. CONCLUSION

As demonstrated, the African continent is unequivocally multilingual, with countries where the number of spoken languages ranges from dozens to hundreds. Beyond serving as instruments of communication, languages function as vital markers of



identity and social cohesion among the diverse human groups that use them. In Africa, these distinct linguistic identities give rise to power rivalries over territory, that is, geopolitics.

The most relevant aspect of the geopolitics of languages in Africa is the rivalry between colonial and indigenous languages. Notably, many indigenous languages are undergoing processes of reaffirmation; several have been officially recognised in their respective countries and are assuming prominent roles in political, economic, educational, and communicational spheres. Examples include Amharic, Somali, Hausa, and Swahili, among others.

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