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Lexico-Phonological Comparative Analysis of Selected Dialects of the Meru-Tharaka Group
Chapter 1: Introduction – Background to the Study

Various approaches have been used to classify languages, among them genealogical, areal, historical and typological. The choice of the method of classifying languages is governed by the aim of the classification and the linguistic data available. If the aim is to describe the dialectal and sociolinguistic situation obtaining in a certain area, one will give preference to linguistico-geographical criteria. This method, based on the areal distribution of languages, indicates the presence of certain underlying relations of intercommunication between the languages concerned. If the aim of classification is to describe the underlying historical connections of languages, one may give preference to phonological data that best reflects the presence or absence of genetic relationship, or stratificational relationships from common donor or proto-languages (Möhlig 1980).

The historically oriented comparison is also called Comparative Historical Linguistics. It is done to infer the historical development of languages with the aim of reconstructing the parent language (proto-language). The typological approach entails comparison of structural features of different languages with an aim of establishing any linguistic contact, or to point out and explain the differences without any particular historical considerations. A typological comparison is synchronic whereas a historical one is diachronic. Genealogical classification groups languages into families on the basis of shared features or innovations which have been retained during a process of divergence from a common ancestor. Areal classification, on the other hand, groups languages into linguistic units on the basis of shared features which have been acquired through a process of convergence resulting from spatial proximity. Both the genealogical and the areal systems of language classification depend upon the interpretation of shared isoglosses as resulting from the past history of the languages concerned.

The current study is a morpho-phonological and lexical analysis of six central Kenyan dialects: Imenti, Igoji, Tharaka, Chuka, Muthambi and Mwimbi with a view to establishing differences and correspondences they exhibit. These dialects are closely related and scholars have given different opinions about their relationship based on their classification as either dialects or languages. The
dialects with the exception of Chuka have been grouped as Meru-Tharaka by Möhlig (1980: 28). For the purposes of this study, we wish to re-define the Meru-Tharaka group as comprising the six dialects mentioned above. This is because scholars who have attempted to classify them have come up with very different opinions. Some argue that Chuka is closer to Kikuyu (Möhlig 1980), others believe it is closer to Tharaka (Maho 2008a, 2008b), while yet others believe it to be somewhere in between Kikuyu and Meru (Lambert 1950 in Whiteley 1974). There are still other scholars who make reference to Chuka as a dialect of “Meru” (Bennett 1967). In addition, Chuka has been grouped as a dialect of “Meru” politically. The term “Meru” is also controversial, and this will be revisited in the literature review and methodology sections. Linguistically, as will be seen later in the study, this term is more appropriate to Imenti which has the largest number of speakers. It has dominated all the other linguistic groups politically, linguistically and economically. The groups that have been clustered as “Meru” include: Imenti, Igoji, Miutine, Tigania, Igembe, Mwimbi, Muthambi and Chuka. Igembe, Miutine and Tigania (which Möhlig groups as part of Meru) are excluded in the study because Miutine is considered a mixture zone and the other two border Meru in the north.

Scholars have used different approaches to classify “Meru” and Tharaka (Lambert 1950; Guthrie 1970/71; Fadiman 1973; Heine & Möhlig 1980; Wamberia 1993 among others). According to Lambert (1950), Guthrie (1970/71), Heine & Möhlig (1980) and Wamberia (1993), the linguistic groups are mutually intelligible and found within the same geographical location, but there is no agreement on their status linguistically. Some scholars have argued that two groups, Tharaka and Meru, are distinct languages (Guthrie 1967, 1970/71; Fadiman 1973; Whiteley 1974; Möhlig 1980; Wamberia 1993). This is based on historical evidence. However, initially colonial administrators had classified Tharaka and Chuka as dialects of “Meru”, this was based on geographical proximity and no linguistic evidence was given. The major controversy to date is on the classification of Chuka where some scholars classify this group as a dialect of “Meru” and others as a dialect of Gikuyu (Lambert 1950; 1962 Kenyan Census; Guthrie 1970/71 and Heine & Möhlig 1980). There are yet other scholars who argue that Chuka exists as a dialect on its own without specifying its link to either Gikuyu or “Meru”. This classification is also based on geographical location or dialectal proximity. They refer to Chuka as a dialect without pointing out the main language. For instance, Möhlig (1980: 28) comments as follows about Chuka:
“although being a single dialect, Chuka forms a sub-group on its own as compared to other sub-groups (of the Kamba-Gikuyu). Because of the deeply cut rivers and gorges on the eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya, there was not much interdialectal communication among the East Kirinyaga dialects before the early fifties, when the first road was built on the eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya, crossing the natural boundaries for the first time. Until recently, Chuka has therefore remained uninfluenced by its neighbouring dialects” (in Heine & Möhlig 1980).

“East Kirinyaga” is a term that refers to a geographical grouping of the ten dialects spoken on the eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya, namely: Tharaka, North-Imenti, Nkubu-Imenti, Miutine, Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka, Embu and Mbeere (Möhlig 1974). Interestingly, it has been noted that three linguistic groups, Imenti, Chuka and Tharaka, have varieties spoken in different geographical locations and the speakers are aware of the different varieties of the language they speak (Fadiman 1973; Heine & Möhlig 1980; Wamberia 1993).

Considering studies on classification, scholars have changed opinions on the status of these groups as dialects or languages over the years. A chronological order beginning with early studies displays different views of different scholars on the affiliation of the Kikuyu group, where “Meru-Tharaka” group was earlier classified, as shown in the table below. These early studies include: Johnston1 1919; Tucker & Bryan 1956, 1957; Bryan 1959; Guthrie 1970; Möhlig 1980 and Maho 2008a, 2008b. Maho’s classification is a representation of what other scholars have documented. We will, therefore, not present Maho’s classification in this section, but we will re-visit his opinion later.

1 Johnston’s grouping is very complicated because he considers Kikuyu to comprise Kikuyu proper, which consists of Nyeri, Ndia, Embu (Chuka, Mwimbi, Mbeere, Tharaka and Igoji) and Meru 11a. He observes that Meru is said to be markedly distinct. Therefore, Johnston treats Kikuyu as number 11 and Meru as 11a, which means Meru is a sub-section of Kikuyu. However, Chuka, Mwimbi, Tharaka and Igoji are classified under Embu. He does not explain which dialect or group is called Meru but only uses an umbrella term Meru, or north-east Kikuyu. Kamba is treated as a different language and is, thus, given a number like the other languages in group C.
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<tr>
<td>Group C</td>
<td>Far Eastern Section</td>
<td>Characteristics of Kikuyu Group</td>
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<td>Key List of Bantu Languages</td>
<td>Central Kenya Group</td>
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**British East Africa Languages**

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<tr>
<th>Language group: Gikuyu</th>
<th>Kikuyu Group (only three groups are listed here)</th>
<th>Kikuyu-Kamba group E.50</th>
<th>Kamba-Gikuyu</th>
<th>Meru-Tharaka</th>
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<tr>
<td>– Meru 11a</td>
<td>– Gikuyu – Tharaka – Kamba</td>
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<td>– Kamba 12</td>
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<td>Other languages in group C are:</td>
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<td>– Pokomo 13</td>
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<td>– Taita 14</td>
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<td>– Taveta 15</td>
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<td>– Nika 16 (Giryama, Duruma and Digo)</td>
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Scholars have made reference to Meru and Tharaka as distinct languages as indicated in the table above but their opinion about Chuka is quite uncertain.

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2 Tucker & Bryan (1956: 135) quoting Lambert note: Meru has affinities with Taita Group and Tharaka stands between the two groups, as does the speech of Chuka in Meru District.

3 Bryan quotes Lambert again and notes that Meru has affinities with the Taita group; Tharaka stands between Kikuyu and Taita; and so does the speech of the Chuka in Meru district (Bryan 1959: 115).
Apart from studies on classification, a few linguistic studies have been done on various aspects of the languages of the Meru-Tharaka group as defined by Heine & Möhlig (1980). For instance, Wamberia (1979, 1981 and 1993) studied the consonants and morphophonology of Tharaka. His studies give some insights into the phonology and morphology of Tharaka. Additionally, in connection with Bible Translation and work on Literacy, some survey studies on Tharaka nouns and verbs were carried out in the years between 1985–2001. Lindblom (1914) published an article on Tharaka grammar but failed to fully describe the grammar of Tharaka proper. Moreover, basing himself on Swedish phonological structure, he missed a number of crucial observations pertaining to the sound system of the language. None of the foregoing studies focused on a comparative analysis of the phonology and lexicon of the dialects that are the concern of the current endeavour.

It is worth mentioning a dialectological research done by Möhlig (1974), where he provided a detailed comparison of the East Mt. Kenya dialects. In this study the linguistic groups of the current endeavour are investigated. He, however, notes that Chuka is linguistically not very well defined and has features from the neighbouring linguistic groups. It would thus be important to reconsider Möhlig’s classification and investigate this claim and to also observe the patterns that may emerge among the dialects from a narrower perspective, since his study investigates other dialects that are not part of the Meru-Tharaka group, such as Embu and Mbeere. A restriction to the Meru-Tharaka group will help us re-define Chuka in relation to this group in a more strict sense. Moreover, features that are peculiar to this group will be easily identifiable without drawing inferences from the neighbouring dialects and/or languages such as Gikuyu, Embu and Mbeere. However, where necessary, features from these neighbouring dialects that may help explain the status of Chuka will be exemplified.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

As already observed, various approaches have been used to classify the Meru-Tharaka group but none has proven to be sufficient. For instance, Heine & Möhlig (1980) adopted the areal/geographical and historical classification. The emphasis was on the geographical proximity of the linguistic groups and the relatedness of Bantu languages in general without any special reference to lower linguistic relationships. Guthrie (1970/71), on the other hand, used “test languages” in his historical classification of Bantu languages. The approach of test languages has been criticised by scholars because Guthrie assumed the historical process of the splitting and spreading of the Bantu languages occurred in a similar way in all
its “Genetic branches”. The argument here is that language evolution of modern Bantu could not have proceeded exclusively in a monogenic and unilinear way nor could it have been similar in all sections of the family (Heine & Möhlig 1980). Guthrie’s classification may be helpful, but it may not be reliable. Möhlig can be credited for his study on the East Mt. Kenya dialects where he presents an elaborate comparison. He, however, points out some challenges he encountered in trying to make conclusive remarks about Chuka (Möhlig 1974). For instance, he notes that Chuka has features that are unmarked among the neighbouring dialects. Möhlig’s observation confirms Lambert’s (in Whiteley 1974) claim that Chuka perhaps comes somewhere between “Meru” and Kikuyu.

Considering the criticisms raised previously by other scholars on the criteria used to classify the linguistic groups, it was deemed necessary to do a linguistic analysis of the six dialects of the Meru-Tharaka group. The linguistic analysis, focusing on the phonological systems and vocabularies of these groups, will provide important evidence on their level of correspondence. A comparative morpho-phonological investigation founded on an extensive basic vocabulary provides the necessary data for revisiting the classification of the linguistic groups.

Studies based on a large number of languages are bound to leave out some important linguistic information, which can significantly show major differences in small language groups (Mould 1976). A comparative descriptive analysis of linguistic groups at the lower levels, i.e. smaller language groups, can yield results which could not have been obtained through mass comparison.

1.2 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the sound systems of the selected dialects of the Meru-Tharaka group?
- What are the morpho-phonological processes operating in the linguistic systems of the dialects in this group?
- How similar are the lexical forms of these dialects?

1.3 Research Objectives

General Objective
To describe and analyse the morpho-phonological systems of the Meru-Tharaka group and to establish the degree of lexical correspondences based on an extensive basic vocabulary and a list of short phrases, with a view to classifying the dialects on the basis of shared properties and differences exhibited.
Our intention in this study is to identify and give an adequate description of the sound systems of the dialects under investigation. Then, we discuss in detail the morpho-phonological processes operating in the linguistic systems and account for their plausibility and the contexts in which they take place. That is, we will establish the phoneme inventories of the dialects and then examine the processes affecting the sounds when they are juxtaposed in words and sentences. The morpho-phonological processes affecting the sounds will try to shed light on the formulation of morpho-phonological rules that summarise the processes operating in the linguistic systems.

The wordlist is used to establish the degree of lexical variation between the linguistic systems. This implies that lexical differences play an important role in drawing dialect boundaries. For instance, if there are cases where some lexical items are not shared among the dialects of study, such words should be explained and their origins discussed. For example, they could be peculiar to one particular group, hence are a result of innovation, or borrowings from neighbouring dialects. The lexical data will thus help in drawing conclusions based on isogloss evidence and morpho-phonological rules.

1.4 Research Assumptions

It is our assumption that the dialects are separated from each other in a principled way by a system of sounds, morpho-phonological processes and rules. Based on the principles, one can observe that each dialect has its own way of retaining individual characteristics. Consequently, what may be a morpho-phonological process or rule in one dialect, or dialect cluster, need not be the case in other dialects.

The second assumption is that there is consistent variation in the lexical forms of the linguistic groups. A dialect cluster will exhibit features that alienate it from other dialect clusters not only in the morpho-phonological rules and processes but also in vocabulary.

1.5 Scope and Limitations

This study was originally intended to be a description of three dialects: Imenti, Chuka and Tharaka. However, three other dialects, Muthambi, Mwimbi and Igoji, were included due to the fact that these groups are in contact with the other subjects of the study. We could not assume that there exists a linguistic vacuum, yet the groups are in contact and on a geographical continuum. Investigating only Imenti, Chuka and Tharaka would, therefore, have left out some significant
insights. The difference in classification has been a source of controversy, and for this reason a detailed linguistic analysis that would contribute to the classification of these linguistic groups was found necessary.

The study is also limited to the sound systems and the lexical variations of the six dialects. However, morphological aspects seen to play a role in drawing dialect boundaries are discussed and exemplified. The inclusion of other aspects like syntax, supra-segmental phonology such as the syllable, prosodic features among others, would make the study too broad resulting in data handling problems. We do not imply in any way that tonology is an unimportant aspect of the sound system of the Meru-Tharaka group, but earlier studies have shown that tones in these dialects are not clear (cf. Möhlig 1974: 85f.). Moreover, handling both segments and supra-segments would make the study too thinly spread at the expense of an in-depth analysis.

1.6 Rationale of the Study

Due to the controversy regarding the classification of the dialects of the Meru-Tharaka group, this study will present a detailed comparative analysis that will use linguistic data to show the status of Chuka and Tharaka among the Bantu languages and more specifically the Meru-Tharaka group. This is because the two groups have been geographically (and politically) grouped as “Meru” and have been under the strong influence of Meru (Imenti) for a long time (Fadiman 1973). It is, therefore, necessary to do a detailed comparative linguistic study without drawing a general assumption as done by Guthrie in his “test languages” or geographical proximity as done by dialect geographers, but linguistic data that will reveal the degree of variation in the phonological and lexical systems of the groups. This will avail to the linguistic communities important information on the sound system of their languages and/or dialects. In addition, any attempt to show the linguistic relatedness of these three dialects cannot ignore the other dialects that are in contact with them. Therefore, the study will not only show the relatedness of the three dialects (Imenti, Chuka and Tharaka), but also the position of Mwimbi, Muthambi and Igoji. That is, comparing forms from the six dialects will yield a more convincing hierarchy of relatedness as compared to studying dialects in isolation.

The study will also make a contribution to Bantu linguistics, specifically to the phonology and the vocabulary of the six dialects. It will help to show the patterns of sound changes among the groups and the relationships in the vocabulary. This would also give insights to researchers who wish to study/research on Bantu linguistics.
Tharaka and Chuka speakers have, for a long time, been using materials written in Kimeru (Imenti dialect). This research could thus be a contribution to the linguistic groups, in so far as the elaborate discussion of the phonology and the vocabulary would help those involved in developing learning materials to come up with materials written in their languages, if the groups are seen to differ significantly. This study will thus provide a firm basis on which appropriate materials for Chuka and Tharaka, for instance, could be designed such as instructional materials used in churches or mother-tongue education in lower primary school.

There have been earlier studies on Chuka, “Meru” and Tharaka which are either too general or deal with individual linguistic groups (e.g. Guthrie 1967; Wamberia 1981, 1993). The general studies treat the groups as members of sub-groups within the Bantu language family or merely as examples of Bantu languages. Guthrie deals with the Bantu languages as a group. He does not offer sufficient detail on individual languages. For instance, in Zone E group 50 he groups Kikuyu, Embu, Meru, Tharaka, Kamba and Daiso. He does not mention Chuka at all, yet later (1980) Möhlig treats Chuka as a different group along with Tharaka and “Meru”.

Specific studies done on the linguistic groups include Wamberia (1979, 1981, 1993). These studies focus on one group, Tharaka, and reinforce the fact that Tharaka is an independent language and not a dialect of “Meru”. He looks at the phonological conditioning of a distinct/single group. This comparative study will reiterate whether Chuka, Tharaka, Imenti, Igoji, Mwimbi and Muthambi share similar morpho-phonological processes and also discuss the degree of relatedness.

A description and analysis of the dialects will rectify the excessive descriptions of the more familiar dialects (e.g. Kikuyu, Swahili) with those of the obscure. As Bakari (1985: 46) notes:

“Current studies in other areas have indicated a need to describe dialects rather than generalizing on the entire language continuum on the basis of one or two dialects.”

Our research attempts to show how dialects can systematically differ. In addition, it is hoped that this study will be a beginning of a more comprehensive investigation of the whole spectrum of the dialects spoken in the political grouping/demarcation of the so-called “great Meru”, which also includes Tigania, Igembe and Miutini, and possibly other sub-dialects.