Morphological leveling of noun class agreement in urban Swahili

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Abstract. In Nairobi Swahili, some speakers exhibit variability between expected, standardized subject-verb agreement markers and non-canonical variants. This paper investigates agreement variation for singular and plural animal-referent nominal subjects in noun classes 9 and 10. The data are drawn from sociolinguistic interviews and a picture description task for a socially-balanced sample of 12 young adult speakers. The non-canonical variants *i-* and *zi-* occur most frequently in the speech of men and in interview style. Men use *i-* and *zi-* at similar rates for all the nominal subjects, whereas women's use is predicted by an interaction of subject number and animacy. Further work is required to determine the diachronic picture and to elucidate whether speakers' multilingualism plays a role.

Keywords. Swahili; variation; subject agreement; animacy; sociolinguistics; noun class

1. Introduction. This paper investigates subject-verb agreement for animal-referent nouns (*mbwa* 'dog', *mbuzi* 'goat', etc.) in Nairobi Swahili. Specifically, we look at the spontaneous speech of young adults, examining variation between Standard Swahili (i.e. Kiswahili) agreement prefixes *a-* and *wa-* and what we refer to as the Nairobi Swahili agreement prefixes *i-* and *zi-*.

Swahili has a grammatical gender (henceforward 'noun class') system whereby the finite verb agrees with the noun class and number of the clausal subject (Ashton 1944; Maho 2003; Spinner & Thomas 2014; Mpiranya 2015; Castagneto 2017). We focus in this paper on animal-referent Class 9 and 10 subjects (explained in a later section) because they represent a well-bounded set for which subject-verb agreement variation has been recorded. For most animal noun subjects the expected canonical Standard Swahili verbal agreement prefixes are *a-* and *wa-* (Ashton 1944; Mdee 2014; Mpiranya 2015). But in the vernacular Swahili spoken in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, speakers have been anecdotally observed to use the prefixes *i-* and *zi-* as well (e.g., Deen 2002:40). To our knowledge, no systematic study of this variation has previously been conducted. We provide an initial quantitative analysis of subject-verb agreement for animal nouns in this variety, drawing primarily from speech elicited in a picture description task, and supplemented by data from sociolinguistic interviews with the same speakers.

For the 12 speakers in this initial sample, we find that men use the non-canonical *i-* and *zi-* more frequently overall than women. Women's likelihood of producing *i-* and *zi-* is dependent on whether the animal subject is alive or dead, and on the morphological form of its nominal prefix. Our preliminary conclusion is that male speakers of Nairobi Swahili exhibit leveling toward *i-*/*zi-*, while women are either preserving or innovating a more complex pattern.

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The paper first provides some background in Section 2 on the Nairobi speech community. Section 3 explains some relevant aspects of Swahili morphosyntax. Section 4 describes the data and methods. Results are given in Section 5, with Section 6 disccussing the finding, along with questions that remain to be pursued in future work, and Section 7 reporting the conclusions that can be drawn from them.

2. The Nairobi speech community. Nairobi is the capital and largest city in Kenya, with a population of around 5 million that is growing rapidly and which skews young: Approximately half of city residents are younger than 35 years old (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019). Nairobi is also linguistically superdiverse (Blommaert & Rampton 2016), largely due to massive rural-to-urban migration (both domestic and international) since Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963. At least 60 languages are spoken in Kenya (Eberhard et al. 2026) and virtually everyone is multilingual. English and Swahili are the official languages of Kenya; Swahili is the national language (Bore 2019:126). Most people also speak one or more additional family languages, although Oduor (2017:178) states that inter-generational transmission of these languages is threatened in Nairobi. She notes further that although national policy recommends that 'mother tongues' be employed as languages of instruction in early primary schooling, no language is sufficiently concentrated in any area of Nairobi for this to be practical. As a result, English dominates from late primary through to tertiary education, with Standard Swahili taught as a subject (Spernes et al. 2025). Beyond school, vernacular Swahili is the lingua franca of day-to-day communication (Oduor 2017:178–179).

Therefore, the preconditions in Nairobi are ripe for processes associated with language contact such as leveling, regularization, and new dialect formation. A well-known example of a new dialect in Kenya is Sheng, a so-called youth language that emerged in Nairobi at least 40 years ago and which is now very widespread (Githiora 2018). Although its grammar is similar to Swahili, Sheng incorporates many lexical borrowings from English and other languages (Githinji 2022). The present paper is focused on vernacular Swahili in Nairobi; it is not explicitly a study of Sheng. Rather, we take the position (cf. Githiora 2018) that Sheng exists at one pole on a continuum of vernacularity, with Standard Swahili at the other pole, and the vernacular Swahili of Nairobi in the middle, where it is in contact with both. Importantly, while there is plenty of scholarship on Sheng (Bosire 2006; Githiora 2018; Gibson 2019; Githinji 2022), there is relatively little on Nairobi Swahili.

The next section describes the 'canonical' patterns of subject-verb agreement in Standard Swahili and contrasts them with those observed in Nairobi Swahili.

3. Noun classes and subject-verb agreement in Swahili.

3.1. STANDARD SWAHILI. Swahili, like many Bantu languages, organizes noun roots into classes based (loosely) on their meaning, whether they are singular or plural, and primarily by their nominal prefix and agreement patterns. Noun classes are traditionally labeled with a number, with each class corresponding to a specific morphological shape and agreement pattern, and class pairs often marking singular–plural contrasts (Maho 2003; Spinner & Thomas 2014; Castagneto 2017). For example, most singular nouns referring to humans have a nasal consonant prefix and are assigned to Class 1, requiring the subject agreement prefix *a-* on the verb as in (1a). Their plural counterparts are assigned to Class 2 and require the subject agreement prefix *wa-* on

the verb[1] as in (1b).[2]

(1) a. M-toto a-na-chek-a.
1-child 1SM-PRT-laugh-FV
'The child laughs.'

b. Wa-toto wa-na-chek-a.
2-children 2SM-PRT-laugh-FV
'The children laugh.'

As a further example, nouns in Class 8 are plural, typically referring to tools, utensils, or other small objects. They have the prefix *vi-* and require the subject agreement prefix *vi-* on the verb, as illustrated in (2a) and (2b).

(2) a. Vi-kombe vi-na-anguk-a.
8-cups 8SM-PRT-fall-FV
'The cups are falling.'

b. Vi-tabu vi-na-anguk-a.
8-books 8SM-PRT-fall-FV
'The books are falling.'

In this paper we focus on Classes 9 and 10. Nouns in Class 9 are singular, while those in Class 10 are their plural counterparts. This class pair (henceforward "Class 9/10") includes many foreign loanwords and inanimate entities, and—importantly for our purposes—most of the animal terms in the Swahili language (Contini-Morava 1994). Class 9/10 nouns either have a zero prefix or a nasal prefix as shown in Table 1. For example, *kalamu* 'pen', an inanimate noun and a loanword borrowed from Arabic *qalam* (Schadeberg 2009), has no overt nominal prefix, as shown in Table 1 (a). The same is true of the animal noun *samaki* 'fish', Table 1 (b). By contrast, other nouns in this class such as *mbuzi* 'goat' in Table 1 (c) bear a nasal prefix. The distinction between zero and nasal prefixes will become important when we turn to the results in Section 5.

	Singular	**Plural**
a.	Ø-kalamu 'pen'	Ø-kalamu 'pens'
b.	Ø-samaki 'fish'	Ø-samaki 'fish'
c.	m-buzi 'goat'	m-buzi 'goats'

Table 1. Class 9/10 nouns in singular and plural

When it comes to subject-verb agreement for Class 9/10 nouns in Standard Swahili, the semantics of the verbal prefix must agree in animacy type with the animacy of the noun subject. This was not the case for the Class 1/2 subjects in (1a) and (1b), which obligatorily trigger *a-*/*wa-* verbal agreement prefixes in all cases. For Class 9/10 nouns, however, as shown in (3a) and (3b),

[1] Class 1 nouns happen to also change their nominal prefix to *wa-* when they are pluralized to Class 2 nouns, as shown in (1b). This is not important for the present paper, however.

[2] PRT– Present; SM– Subject marker; FV – Final vowel.

inanimate objects take the Class 9/10 verbal agreement prefixes *i-* and *zi-* on the finite verb, while animate nouns in Class 9/10 take the same verbal prefixes as humans in Class 1/2, namely *a-* and *wa-* as in (4a) and (4b).

(3) a. Ø-kalamu i-na-anguk-a
9-pen 9SM-PRT-fall-FV
'The pen is falling.'
b. Ø-kalamu zi-na-anguk-a
10-pen 10SM-PRT-fall-FV
'The pens are falling.'

(4) a. m-buzi a-na-anguk-a
9-goat 1SM-PRT-fall-FV
'The goat is falling.'
b. m-buzi wa-na-anguk-a
10-goat 2SM-PRT-fall-FV
'The goats are falling.'

Pesetsky (2019) terms this phenomenon *animacy override*, because the expected Class 9/10 agreement prefixes *i-* and *zi-* are overridden when the noun is animate, yielding the Class 1/2 agreement prefixes *a-* and *wa-* as shown in (4a) and (4b).

3.2. NAIROBI SWAHILI. The animacy override thus far observed in (4a) and (4b) for Standard Swahili does not always apply in Nairobi Swahili. For inanimate nouns in Class 9/10, speakers appear to categorically produce expected subject-verb agreement prefixes *i-* and *zi-* as in (3a) and (3b) above. But for animate nouns such as *mbuzi* 'goat', Nairobi Swahili speakers do not always use the Standard Swahili verbal agreement prefixes *a-* and *wa-* as in (4a) and (4b). Instead, they use the Class 9/10 verbal agreement prefixes *i-* and *zi-*, as shown in (5a) and (5b).

(5) a. m-buzi i-na-anguk-a
9-goat 9SM-PRT-fall-FV
'The goat is falling.'
b. m-buzi zi-na-anguk-a
10-goat 10SM-PRT-fall-FV
'The goats are falling.'

In other words, young adults variably produce non-canonical verbal agreement prefixes *i-* and *zi-* on the finite verb for *animate* noun subjects, even though these are the prefixes employed in Standard Swahili only for *inanimate* noun subjects. This indicates that animacy override does not always function in Nairobi Swahili. Thus it is Class 9/10 animate nouns (particularly animals) with non-canonical *i-*/*zi-* subject agreement that constitute the context for variability that we focus on in this paper.

Previous studies have made related observations. Deen (2002:40) for example, states that in vernacular Nairobi Swahili, "all noun classes except 1/2" exhibit *i-*/*zi-* agreement markers.

Ferrari (2014:34) makes the narrower claim that all non-human nouns (except place names and diminutives) take *i-*/*zi-*.[3] Bokamba (1993:228) documented an even narrower phenomenon, noting that Class 9/10 agreement markers are typically employed only when the referent is dead, suggesting that *i-*/*zi-* agreement has long been associated with semantic reinterpretations of animacy.

Although these observations are intriguing, they remain largely anecdotal. To date, there has been no systematic or quantitative investigation of the non-canonical use of *i-*/*zi-* agreement in spontaneous speech. The present paper addresses this gap by asking what factors predict the use of non-canonical *i-*/*zi-* subject agreement prefixes with Class 9/10 noun subjects referring to animal nouns in Nairobi Swahili. Our main hypothesis is that like Bokamba (1993), we will find that the *i-*/*zi-* markers are more likely to appear if the animal subject is dead. The research design also takes into account the possibility that subject number might interact with animacy. Di Garbo & Verkerk (2022:166), for instance, report that in Bomboma (a Bantu language spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo; ISO 639-3: bws), speakers assign Class 1/2 subject-verb agreement markers to singular animals and Class 9/10 markers to plural animals. It is worth noting that in the examples they provide, the animal subject is dead. Data such as these motivate our inclusion of speakers' language background as a potential predictor of *i-*/*zi-* use. Finally, we make the assumption, in line with general sociolinguistic expectations, that a non-canonical agreement feature such as *i-*/*zi-* will be more frequent in the speech of men and in more informal contexts.

4. Data and method. The first author recruited a balanced sample of young adults, aged 18 to 25, all of whom moved to Nairobi by age 8 and had lived in the city for at least 5 consecutive years or had not been away from Nairobi for more than two years. All participants were L1 speakers of one or more non-Swahili languages. The sample was balanced by linguistic background, broadly defined for this phase of the project: Half were L1 speakers of other (i.e. not Swahili) Bantu languages and half were L1 speakers of non-Bantu languages, with equal gender representation in each group as shown in Table 2. All participants met a shared baseline criterion for Swahili knowledge by not having taken Swahili coursework beyond high school.

Gender	Bantu speaker	Non-Bantu speaker
Male	3	3
Female	3	3

Table 2. Participant distribution

To investigate speakers' agreement patterns, we employed two data collection methods: A picture description task and an open-ended sociolinguistic interview. The picture task provided a controlled way to elicit the target nouns across multiple predictor conditions, while the interview allowed us to gather more detailed information about individual speakers and to examine whether the use of *i-*/*zi-* increased in more informal speech. Both tasks were conducted and recorded over Zoom during Summer 2025 by the first author.

All interviews were carried out in everyday Swahili. Following standard sociolinguistic methods (Labov 1984), the interview questions were batched into topic-based modules (e.g. family, danger) that could be deployed in different orders.

[3] Ferrari uses the term 'Sheng' throughout to "designate a continuum of different mixed language codes spoken in Nairobi and based on Swahili grammatical structure." (Ferrari 2014:31)

The interviews included a module of questions designed to elicit animal nouns, such as: "Have you been to Nairobi Park? Did any animals surprise you with how they looked when you saw them for the first time?" and "Was there ever a time when an animal tried to steal your food?" The interview concluded with the picture description task (Eski & Luca 2024). Because the picture description task was a controlled activity, purposive sampling was employed to select eight Class 9/10 animal-referent nouns. Half of the stimuli depicted animal nouns with a nasal prefix, such as *m-buzi* 'goat', while the other half included animal nouns with a zero prefix, such as *samaki* 'fish'. Participants were presented with 32 pictures (4 per animal). Most of the images were generated using AI. They depicted the animals in four conditions crossing two predictors, number and animacy state: alive singular, alive plural, dead singular, and dead plural. A sample of the stimuli is illustrated in Figure 1, showing the zero-prefix noun *samaki* 'fish' across the four conditions.

(a) Alive singular

(b) Alive plural

(c) Dead singular

(d) Dead plural

Figure 1. Sample stimuli illustrating the four conditions: alive singular, alive plural, dead singular, and dead plural.

Images were organized into two blocks, Block A and Block B, with half the participants being presented with images in the order AB and half in the order BA. Each block contained images of four target nouns: Two zero-prefix Class 9/10 nouns, one *m-* prefix Class 9/10 noun, and one additional nasal-initial Class 9/10 noun. Within each block, stimuli were organized so that zero-nominal prefix Class 9/10 animal nouns did not appear consecutively, and no adjacent stimuli shared the same number and animacy state.

Six distractor images of humans (three per block) were inserted after every four to five target stimuli. The Class 9/10 human noun subjects were balanced so that each block included one male and one female human across two kinship generations (parent and grandparent). In addition, one human noun from Class 7/8 appeared in Block A, while one from Class 5/6 appeared in Block B.[4] We included human noun subjects from Classes 5/6 and 7/8 because their nominal prefixes are not morphologically related to the noun Class 1 prefixes *m-/mw-, wa-*, reducing the risk of priming effects that might arise from using distractor nouns with Class 1 prefixes.

The picture stimuli were presented one at a time. Participants were asked to describe what was happening in each picture. Altogether, 570 tokens of Class 9/10 animal subjects in agreement with finite verbs were extracted from the combined interview and picture task datasets.

5. Results. We report on the use of *i-/zi-* as a proportion of all the subject-agreement markers that co-occur with animal-referent Class 9/10 nouns in the data, i.e. all *i-/zi-* plus all *a-/wa-*. For concision in our account, we analyze and discuss some predictors together (e.g. speaker gender and language background) rather than separately.

5.1. SPEECH STYLE. Of the 570 tokens of animal noun subjects + finite verb analyzed in this paper, 74 tokens were produced in the animals topic module of the interview and 496 in the picture task. The rate of non-canonical *i-/zi-* was about twice as frequent in the interview (59/74, 80%) as in the picture task (215/496, 43%) as shown in Table 3. This is unsurprising for a vernacular feature.

Dataset	**Total tokens**	**N *i-/zi-***	**% *i-/zi-***
Picture-description task	496	215	43%
Sociolinguistic interviews	74	59	80%

Table 3. Overall distribution of non-canonical *i-/zi-* agreement across datasets

However, the fact that *i-/zi-* occurs as frequently as 43% even in the more monitored speech of the picture task is an indication that it has made robust inroads into the stylistic continuum. At this point the data are still sparse, but we expect this trend to be confirmed in future analysis of the other 14 participants' interviews. In the remainder of this section, we present only the findings from the quantitatively more substantial picture task data.

5.2. GENDER AND LANGUAGE BACKGROUND. Contrary to expectation, participants' L1 language background was not a predictor of *i-/zi-* use. As shown in Figure 2, gender does appear to predict *i-/zi-* Almost all the women (5/6) have low rates of *i-/zi-* and most of the men (4/6) have high rates of *i-/zi-*, regardless of L1 language background.[5] We return to this in Section 6.

[4] Each block also included one target Class 7/8 animal noun (*kiboko/viboko* 'hippo/hippos'): We do not report on those data in this paper.

[5] The outlier individuals in each gender group merit further investigation, which we will undertake once the entire sample of 24 speakers has been coded and analyzed.

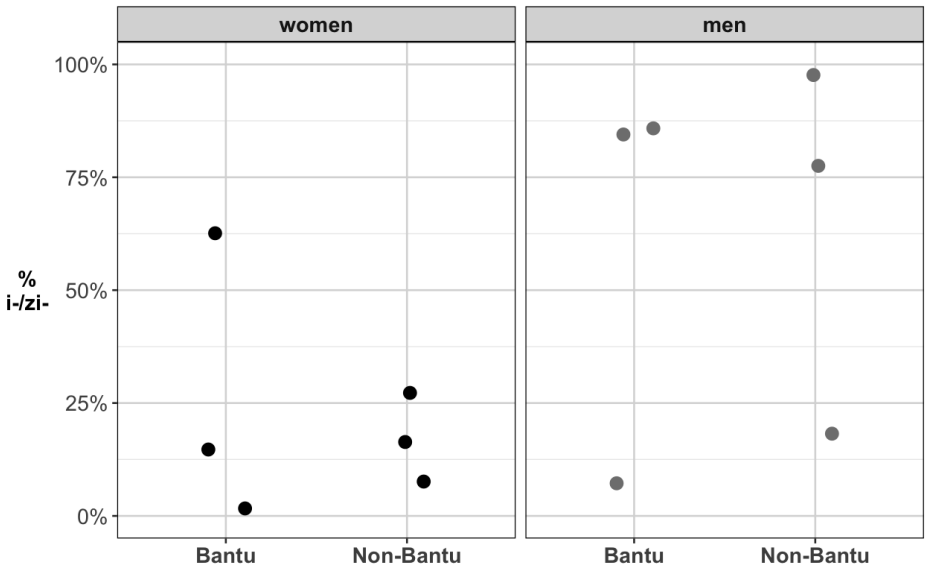

Figure 2. Non-canonical *i-/zi-* agreement by speaker gender and language background

5.3. NUMBER, NOMINAL PREFIX, AND ANIMACY. Turning to the language-internal predictors, Figure 3 summarizes the proportional distribution of *i-/zi-* across number, nominal prefix, and animacy state. Number is indicated on the left-hand y-axis, with blue bars for singular subjects and orange bars for plural subjects. Nominal prefix type is indicated on the right-hand y-axis. The zero-prefix nouns such as *samaki* ('fish') are represented in the top two rows of the figure, while the nasal-prefix nouns such as *mbuzi* ('goat') are in the bottom two rows. Finally, animacy type is displayed on the x-axis, whereby living animals ('alive') are in the left-hand column and dead animals in the right-hand column. Thus e.g. the orange bar in the top-left corner shows that 36.9% of plural, zero-prefix alive animal subjects occurred with the *zi-* agreement marker.

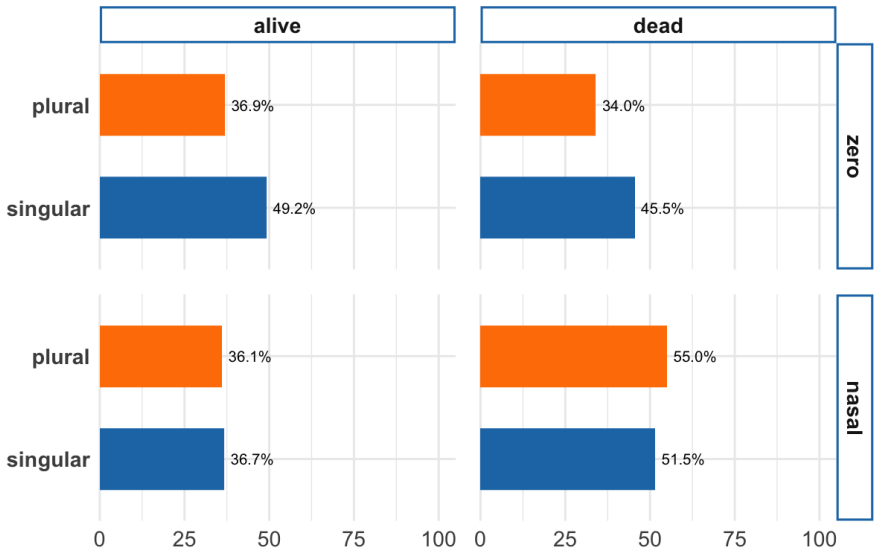

Figure 3. Non-canonical *i-/zi-* by number, animacy, and nominal prefix

We find for Nairobi Swahili—similar to Bomboma (Di Garbo & Verkerk 2022)—that there is an effect of number. In our data, *i-/zi-* appears more frequently with singular noun subjects (blue bars) than with plural subjects (orange bars), but interestingly, this effect is limited to the zero-prefix nouns. As can be seen in the top rows of Figure 3, zero-prefix animal nouns occur with *i-* agreement markers around 40-50% of the time when singular and only 34-37% of the the time when plural *zi-*, regardless of animacy state. No such consistent pattern obtains for the nasal-prefix nouns in the bottom row.

As for animacy, *i-/zi-* is most frequently produced when the animal subject is dead and has a nasal prefix (52-55%), regardless of number.

5.4. INTERACTION OF SPEAKER GENDER WITH NOMINAL PREFIX AND ANIMACY. There is a speaker gender constraint on the preference observed above for *i-/zi-* agreement with dead, nasal-prefix animal subjects. Only female participants exhibit this preference. In Figure 4, male participants employ *i-/zi-* at an approximate mean rate of 65% with both alive and dead animal subjects, regardless of the noun's prefix. Women, on the other hand, distribute their preference for *i-/zi-* asymmetrically, as shown in 5. For zero-prefix noun subjects, they are more likely to employ *i-/zi-* when the animal is alive (29%) than dead (17%). For nasal-prefix noun subjects, the reverse is true: Women are more likely (indeed, much more likely) to use *i-/zi-* when the animal is dead (38%) than alive (10%).[6]

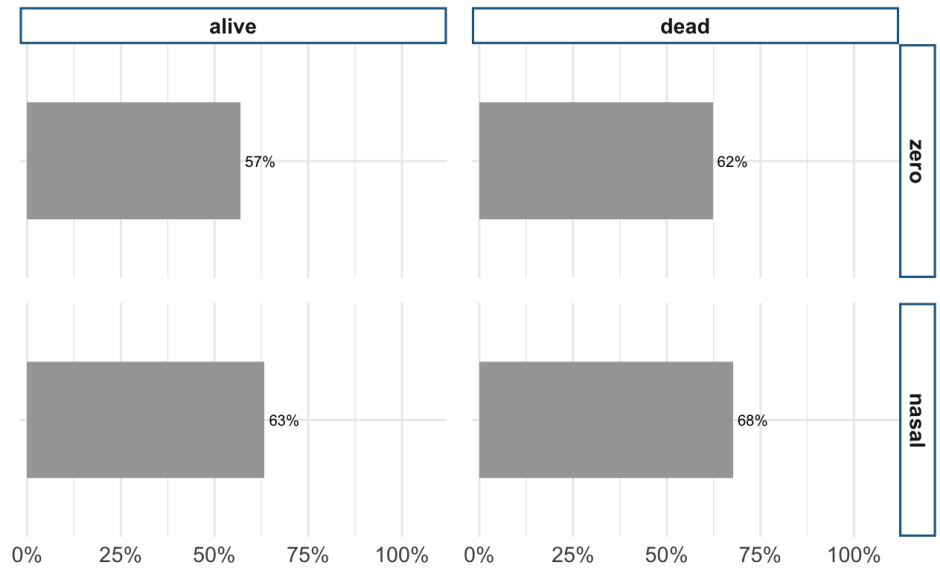

Figure 4. Non-canonical *i-/zi-* by gender (men), animacy, and nominal prefix

[6] An exploratory logistic regression analysis confirms this pattern. We do not report those results here, preferring to set statistical modeling aside until the full sample of 24 speakers has been analyzed.

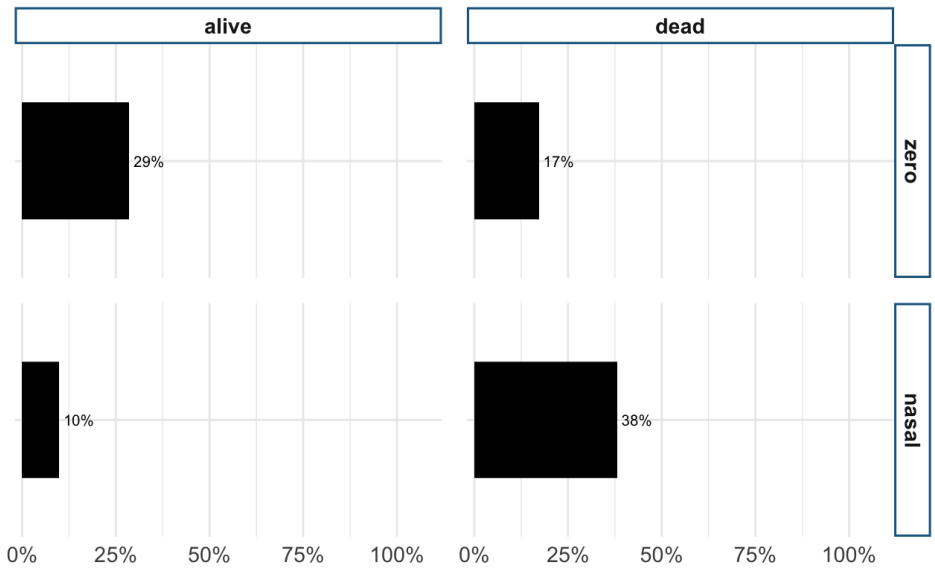

Figure 5. Non-canonical *i-/zi-* by gender (women), animacy, and nominal prefix

6. Discussion. A central question raised by these findings is whether the use of *i-/zi-* with Class 9/10 animal nouns reflects leveling, as might be expected in a multilingual urban environment like Nairobi. For men, the pattern is broadly consistent with leveling. They use *i-/zi-* at relatively high rates, around (65%), across lexical items and grammatical conditions, with limited sensitivity to animacy (dead vs alive) or nominal prefix type.

For women, the pattern is markedly different. They exhibit some degree of leveling in the sense that they have extended *i-/zi-* from inanimate nouns to animate nouns. But they have not leveled *i-/zi-* across the system; instead, they maintain a highly conditioned pattern.[7] The probability of women's use of *i-/zi-* for Class 9/10 animal noun subjects is systematically predicted by nominal prefix and dead-vs-alive animacy. Women favor non-canonical agreement primarily with zero-prefixed nouns (e.g. *samaki* 'fish', *kuku* 'hen') when the referent is alive and with nasal-prefixed nouns (e.g. *mbuzi* 'goat', *ng'ombe* 'cow') when the referent is dead . In complementary contexts, i.e., with living nasal-prefixed nouns and dead zero-prefixed nouns, women are more likely to maintain canonical *a-/wa-* agreement.

We propose that this pattern reflects a conflicting-cues effect (Haskell & MacDonald 2003), at least for nasal-prefix nouns, arising from the interaction of morphological and semantic information. Agreement in these data is shaped by two competing cues: a morphological cue, encoded in the nominal prefix (nasal vs. zero), and a semantic cue, encoded in animacy (alive vs. dead).

Nasal-prefixed nouns play a central role in this interaction. In Swahili, many human-denoting nouns (e.g. *m-tu* 'person', *m-toto* 'child', *mw-alimu* 'teacher') begin with a nasal prefix and require canonical *a-/wa-* agreement. As a result, the nasal prefix can function as a morphological cue to animacy or humanness. When women produce nasal-prefixed animal nouns, this morphological cue may activate an association with human-like referents, favoring canonical agreement

[7] Some of the variation may reflect individual differences in how speakers interpret the animacy of referents (especially dead animals), suggesting a possible cognitive component alongside morphosyntactic variation. Ongoing work by the first author is expanding the dataset and incorporating speaker explanations to better disentangle these factors; a fuller account will be presented in future work.

a-/wa-. When the nasal-prefixed animal is alive, the morphological and semantic cues to animacy are aligned, making it highly likely (90% in our data, see Figure 5) that women will use *a-/wa-*. Crucially, when morphological and semantic cues diverge—i.e., when nasal-prefixed animals are dead—women's variability increases. In our data, this results in 60% *a-/wa-* and 40% *i-/zi-*.

Zero-prefixed nouns, by contrast, lack a morphological cue to animacy. In these cases, women would be expected to rely more directly on semantic information, i.e. whether the animal is alive or dead. Unexpectedly, our results suggest the opposite: Women are more likely to produce *i-/zi-* with living animals (29%) than dead ones (17%). However, it is important to note that the results are based on a relatively small sample (12 participants), and that there is considerable inter-speaker variation. Ongoing work will expand the dataset to include additional participants (including older speakers) and animals in additional noun classes, such as Classes 5/6 and 7/8. This will allow us to determine whether the patterns observed here reflect an ongoing shift toward broader use of *i-/zi-*, or whether this trend coexists with (or is a precursor to) a more structured system that (re-)organizes agreement along morphological and semantic lines.

7. Conclusion. This paper has shown that subject-verb agreement with Class 9/10 animal nouns in Nairobi Swahili is variable in systematic ways. Non-canonical *i-/zi-* appears not only in interviews but also in the more controlled picture task, indicating that it is part of speakers' productive grammar rather than a purely casual feature. At the same time, the variation is socially structured: men use *i-/zi-* at higher rates overall, while women show a more constrained pattern shaped by nominal prefix and animacy. These findings show that agreement with animal nouns in Nairobi Swahili is not simply free variation, but reflects what may be an emerging system with both social and grammatical organization.

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