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Swahili noun class system a critical survey of the loan words

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Kiswahili has heavily borrowed lexical items from a number of languages including Arabic and English. The loaned words are then fitted in the Swahili noun class system that acts as the basis of the Swahili grammar. The criteria for the assignment of loanwords into Swahili noun classes have not always been clear. The aim of this study was to account for the factors responsible for noun class assignment of loanwords. In order to achieve this, sixty loanwords were tested for their noun class membership, by administering questionnaires and interviews to respondents regarded as competent in both the recipient language (Kiswahili) and the donor languages (English and Arabic). It was realised that loanwords are adapted into the existing Swahili morphological system. Besides undergoing some phonological changes, loanwords acquire Swahili noun prefixes and follow the Swahili system of concordial agreement. This adaptation is achieved either by re-analysing the initial syllables of the loanwords as noun class prefixes if initial syllables resemble those of specific noun classes, or by prefixing noun class prefixes to loanwords. The native speaker does this by relying on the morphological and semantic rules he or she has acquired.