

Some Basic Facts about the Kikuyu Language

1. Genetic Grouping and Related Languages

Kikuyu (or 'Gikuyu'; Gikūyũ / ɣekojo /) is a language from the Bantu language family.

(1) The Bantu Language Family

- One of the major language families of Africa; perhaps the most widely spoken.
- Languages stretch across Central, East and Southern Africa.
- Languages of the family share a number of phonological, morphological and syntactic similarities, *including – most famously – an extremely rich 'gender' system*

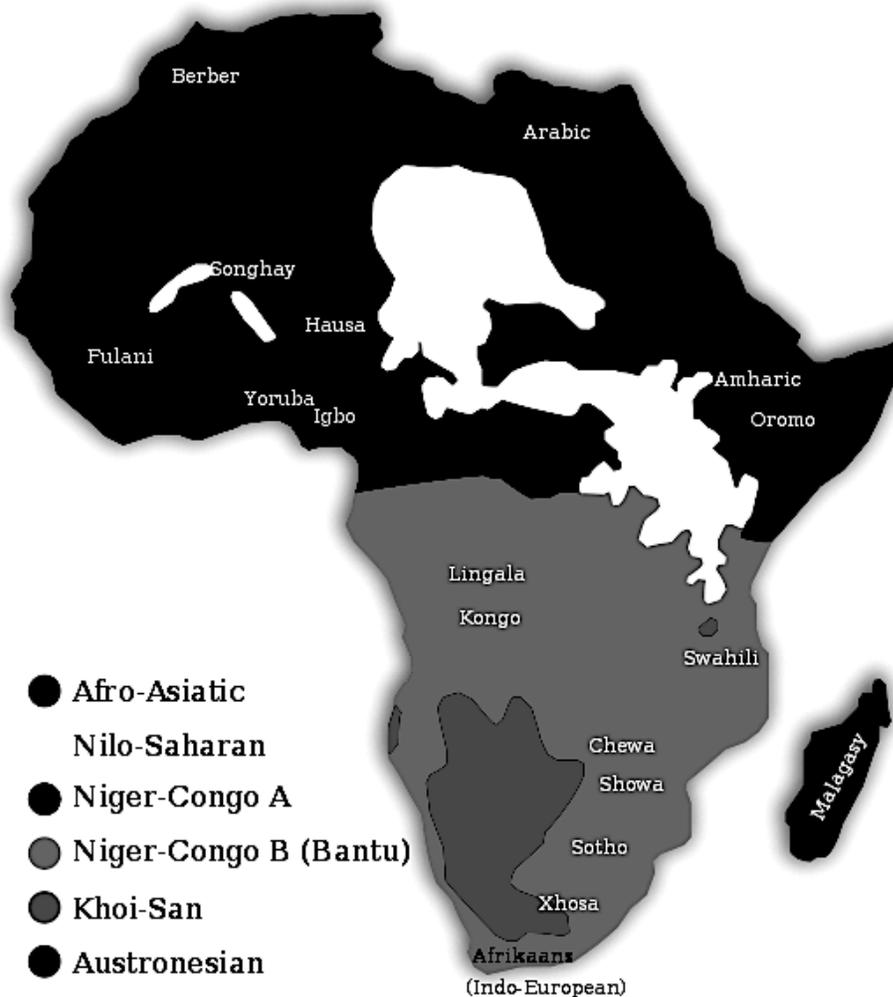


Image taken from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:African_language_families_en.svg

(2) Other Bantu Languages, Related to Kikuyu

- Closet Relatives: Embu, Kamba, Luhya
- Distant Relatives: Swahili, Shona, Zulu, Xhosa, Chichewa

2. Number of Speakers and Vitality of the Language

Kikuyu is spoken by the nearly 6 million Kikuyu people of Kenya, the largest ethnic group of that country. It is by no means an endangered language.

However, it has been relatively understudied by linguists, especially when compared to other major Bantu languages such as Swahili, Shona, Zulu, and Chichewa.

3. Location

As stated above, Kikuyu is principally spoken in Kenya. More specifically, it is spoken in a region between and surrounding the cities of Nyeri and Nairobi in Central Province.



Image taken from: <http://kenya.africa-atlas.com/>

4. Phonological Inventory and Orthography

As mentioned in earlier classes, speakers of Kikuyu use a Roman orthography for their language, one that keeps reasonably close to IPA. In the sections below, the sounds of Kikuyu are illustrated using both IPA and the official Kikuyu orthography.

4.1 The Consonants

Below are the consonants of Kikuyu. Each is represented first in IPA and then in official Kikuyu orthography. Paired with each consonant is a list of words from Kikuyu that illustrates that sound, written in Kikuyu orthography.

	<u>IPA</u>	<u>Kikuyu Orthography</u>	<u>Example Words</u>
<u>Labials</u>			
voiced fricative ¹	/β/	b	baba 'my father' bundi 'craftsman'
prenasalized stop ²	/ ^m b /	mb	mbembe 'corn' mbiro 'soot'
nasal stop	/ m /	m	maama 'maternal uncle' mũũndũ 'person / man'
labio-velar glide	/ w /	w	we 'him' wee 'you'
<u>Dentals</u>			
voiceless stop	/ t /	t	taata 'aunt' taara 'advice'
prenasalized stop	/ ⁿ d /	nd	nduma 'darkness' ndaa 'louse'
nasal stop	/ n /	n	nene 'big' ne 'hand over'

¹ The voicing in this sound can be very slight. It is also a rather rare sound in the language.

² In some dialects, the prenasalization in the prenasalized stops is very slight, and is almost non-existent.

	IPA	Kikuyu Orthography	Example Words
voiced fricative	/ð/	th	theru 'clean' thaka 'beautiful'
trilled/tapped rhotic	/r/	r	rora 'look' ria 'eat'
<u>Palatals</u>			
voiceless fricative ³	/ʃ/	c	ciimba 'corpses' cūro 'trumpet'
prenasalized stop	/ ⁿ ʃ/	nj	njira 'path' njirū 'dark'
nasal stop	/ŋ/	ny	nyiinyi 'small' nyūmba 'house'
palatal glide	/j/	y	yakwa 'mine' ndaya 'long'
<u>Velars</u>			
voiceless stop	/k/	k	kīndū 'thing' koora 'little frog'
prenasalized stop	/ ⁿ g/	ng	ngoro 'heart' ngīma 'monkey'
nasal stop	/ŋ/	ng'	ng'ombe 'cow' ng'aragu 'hunger'
voiced fricative	/g/	g	gīkūyū 'kikuyu' gīthitū 'amulet' gatūra 'small village'

³ In some dialects, this sound is pronounced as a palatal stop /c/, and in others it is an apical /s/.

Glottal

voiceless fricative	/ h /	h	haaha	‘here’
			he	‘give’
			hī	‘palms (hand)’

4.2 The Vowels

There are seven basic vowel sounds of Kikuyu. The following is a brief description of each, paired with their representation in Kikuyu orthography, and an example word.

Description	Kikuyu Orthography	Example Words	
High Front Unrounded	i	ciimba	‘corpse’
		irio	‘food’
		giciinga	‘wooden’
		hiti	‘hyena’
Mid-High Front Unrounded ⁴	ĩ	kĩ	‘what’
		kĩimbu	‘chameleon’
		thĩina	‘poverty’
		mĩfi	‘trees’
Mid-Low Front Unrounded	e	ne	‘hand over’
		wee	‘you’
		keene	‘someone else’s’
		weega	‘goodness’
Low Central ⁵	a	aca	‘no’
		thaara	‘grass’
		taara	‘advice’
		haaha	‘here’

⁴ Note that this sound is somewhere between (in IPA) / i / and / e /.

⁵ Note that this sound is a bit more front than (in IPA) / e /.

Description	Kikuyu Orthography	Example Words
High Back Rounded	u	mbura 'rain' muuma 'oath' nduuma 'dance'
Mid-High Back Rounded ⁶	ũ	ũ 'who' mũndũ 'person / man' ndũũma 'tuber' mũkũrũ 'old'
Mid-Low Back Rounded ⁷	o	o 'they' thooma 'read' moori 'cow' nyoota 'thirst'

As you can probably hear, the vowels above roughly correspond (but are not perfectly identical) to the following vowels as represented in IPA.

(3) Rough Correspondence Between Kikuyu Vowels and IPA Representations

Kikuyu Orthography	IPA Representation	English Example
i	/ i /	beet
ĩ	/ e /	bait
e	/ ɛ /	bet
a	/ a /	bot (as in 'robot')
u	/ u /	boot
ũ	/ o /	boat
o	/ ɔ /	bought

While the correspondences above aren't perfect, the IPA representations above will suffice for our purposes in class.

⁶ Note that this sound is somewhere between (in IPA) / ɯ / and / o /.

⁷ Note that this sound is somewhere between (in IPA) / o / and / ɔ /.

4.2.1 The Distinctiveness of Vowel Length

While there are seven basic vowel sounds, vowel length in the language is distinctive. This means that each of the seven basic vowel sounds above comes with a ‘short’ version and a ‘long’ version.

Long vowels in Kikuyu are written with doubled letters. Thus a vowel written as ‘u’ is short, while ‘uu’ is long. The following list of minimal pairs illustrates each contrast.

(4) The Distinction Between Short and Long Vowels in Kikuyu

<u>Word with Short Vowel</u>	<u>Word with Long Vowel</u>
iria ‘those’	iriia ‘milk’
kīra ‘cross over’	kīira ‘dawn on’
we ‘him’	wee ‘you’
thaka ‘beautiful’	thaaka ‘play’
kua ‘die’	kuua ‘carry’
thūra ‘spit’	tūūra ‘stay long’
koora ‘little frog’	kora ‘to encounter’

5. Tone

Like most languages of Africa, Kikuyu is ‘tonal’. This means that each word in the language is associated with a specific ‘melody’, and these melodies often play a role in disambiguating word and sentence meaning.

However, like many languages of its region, tone in Kikuyu is comparatively subtle (particularly as compared with Asian languages like Mandarin). In fact, while speakers use tone to signal certain distinctions, the tone is often not critical for communication, and context alone can serve to disambiguate the structures in question.

The following passage by Barlow (1951) nicely describes the overall situation:

Fortunately, although no one can claim to speak ‘as a native’ unless he observes the correct tonal usages, the people in general are able to understand what is said in spite of lack of conformity to their elaborate system of voice modulation. The context is usually sufficient to remove possible ambiguity. Hence, it is unnecessary, for purely practical purposes, to enter into the intricacies of the subject, and to attempt to do so would be beyond the scope of this [introductory] book. (Barlow 1951: 12)

Relatedly, the official Kikuyu writing system does not distinguish tone. For all these reasons, we will not worry too much about transcribing the tone of the Kikuyu words. While you are encouraged to listen for the tones, you may freely ignore them in your transcription.

Nevertheless, to give you some idea of the subtlety of Kikuyu tone, the following are pairs of words that differ *only* in their tone.

- | | | | |
|-----|----|-------|------------------|
| 5) | a. | he | ‘give’ |
| | b. | hé | ‘give me’ |
| 6) | a. | aka | ‘wives’ |
| | b. | áka | ‘build’ |
| 7) | a. | ááĩ | ‘he/she was’ |
| | b. | aaĩ | ‘daughters’ |
| 8) | a. | iria | ‘lake/sea/ocean’ |
| | b. | iriá | ‘milk’ |
| 9) | a. | igána | ‘one hundred’ |
| | b. | igana | ‘be as big as’ |
| 10) | a. | iră | ‘snow’ |
| | b. | ira | ‘yesterday’ |
| 11) | a. | îta | ‘strangle’ |
| | b. | ita | ‘war’ |

6. Gender Concord in Kikuyu

One of the most well-known features of Bantu languages are their especially rich ‘gender’ systems. Every noun in Kikuyu falls into a particular noun-class, called ‘gender’ by linguists. Depending on how you count, there are between 10 and 18 genders in Kikuyu.

The gender of a noun affects the form of certain modifiers of that noun, as well as subject and object agreement in the verb. The following sentences illustrate

19) **Marigũ** **maĩia** **maaku** **mega** **nĩmabuthĩte.**
5pl.banana **5pl.those** **5pl.yours** **5pl.good** \emptyset .**5pl.went-bad**
Those nice bananas of yours have gone bad.

20) **Irigũ** **ĩĩia** **ĩiaaku** **ĩiega** **nĩĩibuthĩte.**
5sg.banana **5sg.those** **5sg.yours** **5sg.good** \emptyset .**5sg.went-bad**
That nice banana of yours has gone bad.

In the glosses above, ‘5’ means that the prefix is that associated with ‘class 5’ nouns.

Rather than start off the class by overwhelming you with this gender system, we’ll instead discover how this system works bit-by-bit as we proceed through the semester...