



# Exploring the Expression of D-Features within Swahili Determiner Phrases

Editha Adolph

*The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, Tanzania*

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## Abstract

This study examines how Swahili's DP structure encodes definiteness, specificity, and focus without relying on overt articles, showing that its nominal system requires analytic tools beyond those developed for article-based languages. Rather than invoking broad cross-linguistic generalities, the analysis focuses on Swahili's internal mechanisms: word-order alternations such as N > DEM for deixis and DEM > N for focus, alongside flexible patterns where N > DEM may also mark focal prominence. Definiteness is further shaped through possessive constructions, whose interaction with demonstratives contributes to familiarity and identifiability. These patterns demonstrate that Swahili projects a functional D-layer, but one realised through discourse-sensitive configurations rather than article morphology. The study's broader theoretical contribution lies in showing that DP theory must accommodate languages where D-features surface through syntactic position and pragmatic inference, thereby expanding cross-linguistic models of nominal architecture.

## Introduction

This study engages directly with recent analyses of Swahili DP structure by re-evaluating the proposals advanced by Kimambo (2018a, 2018b), who applies Hawkins' (1978) spatial model of definiteness and Lyons' (1999) semantic-pragmatic framework, alongside Ndomba's (2017a, 2017b, 2018) minimalist account grounded in Abney's (1987) DP hypothesis and Chomsky's (2000, 2001) AGREE mechanism. While these approaches differ in theoretical orientation, both apply models originally developed for article-bearing languages to Swahili. This study advances the discussion by analysing Swahili's nominal architecture using parameters specifically designed for article-less systems, drawing on Willim (2000), Bošković (2005, 2008, 2009), Langr (2014), and Syed & Simpson (2017). The analysis centres on the syntactic distribution of demonstratives (DEM), possessives (POSS), and adjectives (ADJ) relative to the noun, showing how these elements encode definiteness, specificity, and discourse prominence within a DP that lacks overt articles. A central contribution lies in re-examining the findings of Kimambo (2018a, b) regarding how definiteness is realised within Swahili DPs. Lyons (1999) demonstrates how the placement of demonstratives relates to deixis and topicality, arguing that Swahili contrasts two types of distance and utilises anaphoric demonstratives. While these typically follow the noun, certain prenominal forms such as *h* and *le* signal topicality. Kimambo (2018a:70) interprets this pattern as indicative of two functions: N > DEM reflects anaphoric usage, whereas DEM > N expresses deictic meaning. These interpretations are supported by Swahili



translations of Lyons' (1990) examples, in which demonstratives convey definiteness in both configurations. Challenging the claim that DEM > N is the prototypical structure, this study provides evidence that both word orders –N > DEM and DEM > N– can encode definiteness, contingent on the mutual cognitive context shared by the speaker and listener during discourse.

1. Muda si m-refu ni-ka-m-tambu-a mwana-mke **yu-le**  
 14. time not 14-long SM1-PST-OM1-recognise-FV 1-lady **1-DEM**  
 'I immediately recognised **the woman.**'
2. **Wa-le** wa-toto ni kama ni-li-sha wahi ku-wa-on-a pia.  
**2-DEM** 2-child be like SM1-PST-COMP be 15-OM2-see-FV too  
 '**The children** also looked vaguely familiar.'

Additional perspectives have emerged concerning how definiteness is encoded in Swahili. Kimambo (2018a:78) asserts that pragmatic definiteness arises through the interplay of morphological cues, syntactic configurations, and discourse context. According to his analysis, Swahili deploys a variety of morphological indicators, including subject and object markers, demonstratives (both deictic and anaphoric), possessive constructions, personal pronouns, and proper nouns, to convey definite meanings. Kimambo's (2018b, p. 33) observation that object markers yield definite interpretations with common inanimate nouns requires refinement, since object marking in Bantu is more fundamentally conditioned by animacy hierarchies and specificity rather than definiteness alone. In line with Riedel (2009), evidence from Swahili shows that inanimate nouns can receive definite readings even when no verbal object marker is present, indicating that definiteness does not depend exclusively on morphological marking. Instead, such interpretations arise through mutual knowledge shared by interlocutors, underscoring the pragmatic basis of definiteness in Swahili.

In assessing the presence of multiple determiner features (D features) in Swahili, I will argue that Kimambo's framework conflates morphological expression, syntactic functions, and pragmatic interpretations into a single notion of definiteness – an approach that risks obscuring the language's distinct structural composition.

Turning to Ndomba's (2017b, 2018) work, two core issues arise. First, his analysis positions the demonstrative (DEM) as the sole occupant of the D slot within the DP, positing that the DEM encodes specific deictic reference and limits pronominal demonstratives to referring back to established discourse entities. For instance, post-nominal demonstratives are treated as markers of anaphora. I will challenge this position by proposing that the D position can also be filled by possessive forms (POSS), and that demonstratives frequently appear post-nominally rather than pre-nominally – an observation supported by both Ndomba and Kimambo's own examples.

3. Mu-uuguzi a-li-wa-pa maziwa wa-toto **wa-le.** **Wa-le** wa-toto  
 1-nurse SM1-PST-give 6. milk 2-child 2-DEM 2-DEM 2-child  
 wa-li-ku-wa wa-na njaa  
 SM2-PST-be 2-be 9. hungry  
 'The nurse gave those children some milk. The children were hungry.'

A second point of contention lies in the interpretation of feature valuation within Swahili sentence structure. Ndomba (2017b:42) posits that the language incorporates a determiner in the D slot that functions analogously to the English article. Further, drawing on the probe goal framework, he suggests that modifier agreement occurs within the Swahili DP. In this chapter, I challenge the clarity



and precision of Ndomba’s characterisation of D features in Swahili, contending that the probe goal dynamics involve three distinct syntactic features: person, number, and deixis. I propose that these features are distributed across various lexical items within the DP and should not be consolidated into a singular D head. For instance, numbers tend to be lexically encoded within the noun itself; demonstratives (DEM) contribute deictic and topical interpretations, while person features emerge in pronominal forms. The anaphoric demonstrative may also signal focus – a discourse-related feature tied to specificity as suggested by Lyons (1999).

Additionally, Ström (2015:130) observes that locative demonstratives most frequently precede the locative noun ending in *ni*, forming DEM > N constructions. However, post-nominal placement is less frequent. This observation does not substantiate the claim that DEM > N is the prototypical configuration for expressing deixis. I argue that the N > DEM sequence better reflects deictic definiteness, whereas DEM > N constructions are more indicative of focused elements within discourse. Narrative data further illuminates this distinction. Nicolle (2007) investigates demonstratives in Chidigo storytelling, finding that their functional role varies across narrative stages. Type 1 demonstratives, which mark spatial nearness, typically introduce primary participants in the main event line, whereas Type 2 demonstratives, which express spatial remoteness, reference less prominent or already established participants (Nicolle 2007:170). In light of these distinctions, the ordering patterns discussed by Ström (2015) align with the narrative-specific functions of demonstratives.

Moreover, I contend that Ström’s locative demonstratives – characterised by the DEM > N order – are discourse-focused rather than inherently deictic. This interpretation is scrutinised by Mwamzandi (2014:79), who identifies an ongoing debate over the default sequencing of nouns and demonstratives in Swahili. Mwamzandi’s analysis shows that referential demonstratives predominantly occur post-nominally (Ibid:72), reinforcing their anaphoric role in discourse. Specifically, adnominal DEMs often refer to previously mentioned entities and appear in DEM > N arrangements when the referent serves as a salient topic within the narrative (Ibid:78).

4. Labda     **wa-chawi hawa** wa-na-tu-ka-li-a                     usiku  
    maybe    **2-sorcerer 2.DEM** SM1-PRS-OM2-sit.APPL-FV    14.night  
    ‘May be these sorcerers visit upon us at night.’
5. Ku-geuka     a-li-kotoka,                     a-li-mw-ona                     **yule mbwa....**  
    INF-turn             SM1-PST-LOC.come.from    SM1-PST-OM9.see    **9.DEM 9.dog**  
    ‘On turning back, she saw that dog...’

The assumption provided in Kimambo (2017b) and Ndomba (2018b) is challenged by the fact that both word orders provide definiteness in Swahili. Findings by Mwamzandi (2014:106 107) confirm that the most frequent function of adnominal DEM is anaphoric due to the nature of the discourse-oriented texts analysed, hence we obtain less frequency of the word order N > DEM. The proximal adnominal DEM is used as a deictic expression; hence, the word order DEM > N is more frequent for gestural purposes in the discourses. Both strategies are used to express different kinds of discourse pragmatic effects. None can be claimed to be the primary word order for the marking of definiteness, as Ndomba (2018b) claims, as well as functioning as an article, as Kimambo (2017b) claims.

The foregoing discussion entails that both word orders can be used to indicate definiteness; however, the discourse will determine the choice. This is in line with Mwamzandi (2014:128), who suggests that, on the one hand, the word order DEM > N is preferred for the gestural or recognitional functions.



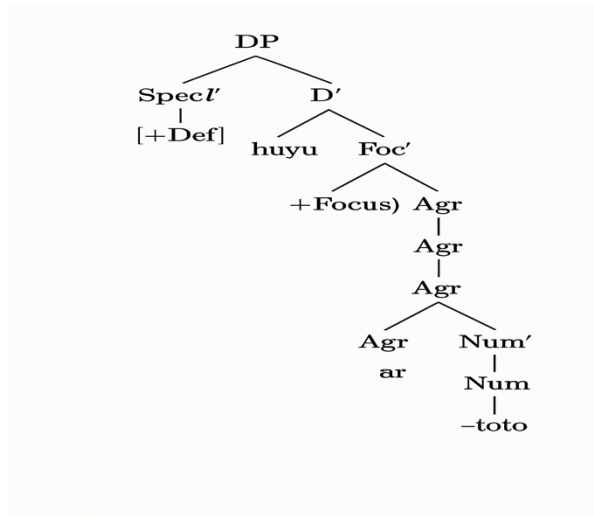
It means that the DEM is used for familiar entities which the hearer can easily recall in the conversation. On the other hand, the word order N > DEM is preferred when the time of reference is a short distance, hence the speaker does not require a strategy to emphasise the referent for the hearer to recall it.

In Swahili, the nominal domain may contain two DEM as well. Therefore, the sequence DEM > N > DEM, which is attested in Shimwela, can be used in Swahili. The example in (6) shows two in DEM in Swahili. Each DEM has a separate role in this sentence.

6. **Huyu** m-toto **huyu** a-na-wa-sumbua wa-tu w-engi  
 1.DEM 1-child 1.DEM SM1-PRS-OM2-annoy 2-person 2-many  
 'This (exact/specifically) child annoys a lot of people.'

The sentence in (34) above contains the DEM **huyu** 'this' repeated twice. The prenominal DEM is used to indicate the focus of the topic **mtoto** 'child'. The postnominal DEM is used to indicate the child's deixis. In this regard, the structure suggested in (34) is satisfied by the construction in (31) above. The tree structure for the DP **huyu mtoto huyu** 'this specifically child' will be as follows. Notice that the prenominal DEM indicates focus while the postnominal DEM indicates deixis.

7. The internal DP structure of the noun **huyu mtoto**



This syntactic diagram represents the structure of a Swahili determiner phrase— “huyu mtoto,” meaning “this child.” At the top is the determiner phrase (DP), which functions as the entire referential unit. It is composed of multiple layers that encode definiteness, focus, agreement, and noun class. The demonstrative “huyu” appears in two locations. First, it occupies the D head, showing it contributes definiteness (+Def). Then it surfaces again within the Focus Phrase (FocP), highlighting its role in encoding [+Focus], a feature often used for topicalization or contrastive emphasis. The phrase branches through a series of projections—FocP, AgrP, and NumP—each responsible for encoding syntactic features. The Agreement Phrase (AgrP) is essential for ensuring the DP agrees with the noun in terms of class and number. It connects downward to the Number Phrase (NumP), where noun class is marked through the prefix “m,” a class 1 marker for human singular nouns. At the base of the structure is the Noun Phrase (NP), containing the stem “toto,” meaning “child.” The nominal morphology combines with “m” to yield “mtoto.” This layered architecture reflects how Swahili



demonstratives like “huyu” are multifunctional—providing not only referential meaning but also grammatical features such as focus and agreement. The phrase elegantly encodes hierarchy and movement, which are hallmarks of syntactic depth in Bantu languages.

### Is Swahili a DP or NP Language?

Languages are often grouped based on the presence or absence of definite articles and their syntactic projections. One classification suggests three categories: those that use definite articles and project a Determiner Phrase (DP), those without articles and no DP layer, and those that do not use articles but still exhibit DP-like behaviour through distinct word-order patterns. In English, the D slot in the DP is typically filled by articles or other determiners (as discussed by Lyons, Willim, and Syed & Simpson). However, since Swahili lacks articles altogether, it does not fall under this category and is therefore excluded from consideration here. Some languages without articles do not project a D head within their nominal structure. Researchers such as Syed & Simpson and Bošković note that this is the case with certain Slavic languages, particularly Serbo-Croatian, which appear to build nominal phrases up to the NP rather than the DP. Since Swahili does project to D despite being article-less, this typology is also set aside.

Instead, the discussion focuses on how Swahili uses syntactic structure—especially word order—to convey different degrees and types of definiteness. An interesting comparison comes from West Icelandic, which shows rigid internal ordering of morphemes within noun phrases. The general sequence observed is from the nominal root to adjectival modifiers and then structural case. This structure reveals that modifiers such as adjectives, numerals, and demonstratives function as separate units, aligning with the noun in number. Possessives, which precede the noun they modify, also show agreement with the possessor. This pattern suggests that the possessive element operates as the head of a DP rather than residing within an NP.

8. iluliar sua q...  
iceberg big SG.ABS  
'(the) giant iceberg...'

9. qimmi-t qaqrutu-t marluk taakku  
dog-PL white-PL two(PL) those(PL)  
'those two white dogs'

10. illu ga mikisu-q  
house 1SG.SG little-SG  
'my little house'

Langr (2014) points out that possessive agreement offers compelling support for the presence of a Determiner Phrase (DP) in West Greenlandic. Interestingly, similar syntactic behaviour appears in Swahili—a language that lacks overt articles. In Swahili, agreement between possessors and possessums is reflected in the nominal prefixes attached to the possessor. For example, the contrast between **mkono wake** ‘his arm’ and **mikono yake** ‘his arms’, or **gari la Juma** ‘Juma’s car’ versus **magari ya Juma** ‘Juma’s cars’, reveals that the possessum governs features such as number, which the possessor must reflect. This suggests that possessive elements in Swahili occupy the D position in the DP structure.

In addition, Syed & Simpson (2017) observe that Bengali lacks overt articles, yet definiteness is encoded syntactically through internal DP word order. The default arrangement—numeral followed by classifier, adjective, and noun—typically signals indefiniteness. However, when this sequence is



reversed, with elements after the classifier moving to earlier positions, the resulting structure conveys definiteness. For instance, placing the adjective and noun before the numeral and classifier leads to a definite interpretation. This pattern shows that, in Bengali, definiteness is tightly linked to structural positioning within the DP.

11. Jodi        **du** **to**    **chatro**        aše,    ami    porabo  
               if        **two** **CL** **s**    **tudent**    come I        will.teach  
               ‘If two students come, I will teach.’

12. Jodi        **chatro**        **du** **to**    aše,    ami    porabo  
               if        **student**        **two** **CL**    come will    teach  
               ‘If the two students come, I will teach.’

In example (11), the sequence of a numeral followed by a classifier and a noun (NUM > CL > N) typically corresponds to an indefinite interpretation. As Syed & Simpson (2017) explain, this structure can be understood as reflecting either a general or specific indefinite reading. In practical terms, the speaker refers to teaching any group of students, without assuming knowledge of their identities, just that there is more than one. In contrast, example (12) presents an alternative word order: noun followed by numeral and classifier (N > NUM > CL), yielding a definite reading. This configuration implies that the speaker is referring to a known set of individuals—two specific students whose identities are shared or recognisable by both speaker and listener—and focuses on their presence or absence.

These observations reinforce the view that Swahili, although lacking articles, still exhibits a Determiner Phrase (DP), and that its internal word order plays a critical role in expressing definiteness. The typical arrangement of noun followed by demonstrative and adjective (N > DEM > ADJ), as seen in example (13), produces a deictic and definite reading. Likewise, an alternative sequence in which the demonstrative comes first, followed by the adjective and noun (DEM > ADJ > N), as illustrated in example (14), also conveys definiteness. Swahili thus leverages syntactic ordering to signal interpretive nuances associated with specificity and definiteness.

13. Ki-tabu    **hi-ki**        ki-dogo        ki-ta-wa-faa        wa-nafunzi  
               7-book    **DEM-7**        7-small        SM7-FUT-OM2-suit    2-pupil  
               ‘This small book will suit pupils.’

14. **Hii**        mbinu        ngumu        i-na-pendw-a        na-wa        andishi  
               **9.DEM**    9.strategy    9.hard        SM9-PRS-like-FV    by-2        writer  
               ‘This difficult strategy is liked by writers.’

In example (13), definiteness emerges through the presence of the demonstrative word – specifically the postnominal form **hiki** ‘this’. This interpretation can be achieved in two distinct ways: either both speaker and listener share mutual awareness of the referent (e.g. a known book), or the speaker is in close proximity to the object, enabling a gestural cue to guide the listener's attention. The demonstrative thus plays a key role in anchoring the referent within the discourse, reflecting Lyons’ (1999) observation that demonstratives serve a function akin to pointing, leading listeners toward a specific object. This reinforces the idea that the noun demonstrative order (N > DEM) aligns with deictic usage and supports a definite reading.

In example (14), the demonstrative **hii** ‘this’ appears before the noun, a strategy often used to highlight the referent. This placement helps reactivate the listener’s memory, prompting them to recall the



referenced topic. Lyons (1999) refers to this kind of topicalization as foregrounding – presenting something already familiar as the foundation for introducing new content. The definiteness in this structure stems not from deixis but from the prominence and recognizability of the referent.

As mentioned earlier, both prenominal and postnominal demonstratives in Swahili can encode definiteness, but they do so via different mechanisms. The prenominal form tends to emphasise topic salience or focus, while the postnominal form supports deictic reference. Mwamzandi (2014) notes that prenominal demonstratives are typically used for topics that are semi-active or inactive due to a shift in discourse or time, whereas postnominal forms are employed for topics recently brought into focus. In light of this, Ndomba's (2017b) suggestion that the prenominal demonstrative could evolve into an article remains speculative and not definitively supported by the data. Contrary to rigid interpretations, the division between these demonstrative positions isn't absolute. Mwamzandi (2014) further observes that anaphoric uses are mostly linked to prenominal demonstratives, although postnominal ones also show anaphoric tendencies – particularly when referencing an already active discourse entity. This nuance challenges Kimambo's (2018b) proposal that the sequence N > DEM inherently marks anaphoricity, as the role of deixis in DEM > N does not appear to hold consistently. The claim by Lusekelo (2013b) that Swahili is an NP language has been convincingly countered by Ndomba (2017b), who argues that Swahili possesses a DP layer – even though it lacks lexical items like articles to fill the D position. Demonstratives and their ordering patterns help illustrate this syntactic tier.

Another noteworthy trait of languages without articles lies in how they handle genitive constructions. According to studies by Willim, Bošković, and Syed & Simpson, such languages typically allow only one genitive per nominal phrase. Swahili stands out by accommodating multiple genitive elements, as demonstrated in examples (15) and (16). This capacity underscores the presence of a D layer and affirms that Swahili's syntactic framework includes a fully projected DP.

15. Uchambuzi wa hotuba wa kamati u-me-isha sasa  
11.analysis GEN 9. speech GEN 9. committee SM11-PRS-finish now  
'The committee's analysis of the speech is completed now.'

16. Utangazaji wa michezo wa Kitenge u-na-furah-ish-a  
sport GEN 1. Kitenge SM11-PRS-happy-CAUS-FV  
'Kitenge's commendation of sports is funny.'

The adnominal genitives in the examples above reveal two layers within the DP of Swahili. As suggested by Willim (2000) and Wiltschko (2009), one slot is envisaged in the structure for the D position in the DP layer.

The last evidence for the presence of the D slot is scrambling within the nominal domain. The scrambling of nominal dependents is another criterion that can be used to indicate the D-position in the DP layer. Swahili comprises two lexical entries which license and identify the D position in the DP layer, vis-à-vis the DEM and POSS (Rugemalira 2007; Lusekelo 2015), as shown in the examples (17) through (18).

17. Ki-tabu ch-angu ki-me-chakaa.  
7-book 7-POSS SM7-PRS-fade  
'My book faded/The book faded.'



18. Ki-tabu hi-ki ki-me-chakaa.  
7-book DEM-7 SM7-PRS-fade  
'This book faded/The book faded.'
19. Ki-tabu ch-angu hi-ki ki-me-chakaa  
7-book 7-POSS DEM-7 SM7-PRS-fade  
'This/The book of mine faded.'
20. Hi-ki ki-tabu ch-angu ki-me-chakaa  
DEM-7 7 book-7 POSS-SM7 SM7-PRS-fade  
'This/The book of mine faded.'

In Swahili, both possessives (POSS) and demonstratives (DEM) play a central role in establishing definiteness within nominal expressions. In example (17), the possessive construction identifies the referent through shared knowledge or contextual familiarity. Example (18), on the other hand, demonstrates that the demonstrative achieves definiteness by pointing—via deixis—to a specific entity. Notably, in both cases, the elements occur after the noun, occupying what appears to be the D position within the Determiner Phrase (DP), supporting the view that Swahili includes a projected D layer.

Example (19) illustrates a scenario in which both possessive and demonstrative markers co-occur postnominally. This configuration suggests a hierarchy in which familiarity, conveyed by the possessive, is given precedence over deixis, signalled by the demonstrative. To resolve this potential competition for the D slot, Rugemalira (2007) proposes that the demonstrative element moves to the prenominal position, as seen in example (20). This movement is interpreted as a strategy to realise focus—a higher-order informational feature—within the sentence structure. Consequently, the demonstrative's shift toward the beginning of the phrase licenses focus, while the possessive remains in its more conventional postnominal position, continuing to encode familiarity.

### Conclusion

This article set out to contribute to ongoing scholarly discourse regarding how D features manifest in Swahili's nominal structure. It engages particularly with the views presented by Kimambo (2018b) and Ndomba (2017b), who argue that anaphoric interpretation arises when the demonstrative (DEM) appears before the noun. In contrast, this study highlights how multiple discourse pragmatic elements—such as focus, identifiability, deixis, and familiarity—collectively shape the function and content of the D position within Swahili's DP system. One of the key arguments advanced is that Swahili's DP structure cannot be interpreted within the same framework used for languages with overt articles, as proposed by Ndomba (2017b). This is due to cross-linguistic differences in how definiteness is encoded, and the number of D features involved. The analytical models based on articles in languages such as English, German, Hungarian, and Italian are not directly applicable to Swahili grammar. Instead, Swahili shares structural traits with other article-less languages, such as Bengali, where D features are realised through syntactic ordering rather than overt markers. The study further demonstrates that word order plays a critical role in distinguishing pragmatic functions in Swahili: a noun followed by a demonstrative (N > DEM) signals deixis, while a demonstrative preceding the noun (DEM > N) indicates focus. It also establishes a pragmatic contrast between identifiability and familiarity, suggesting that when the demonstrative moves to the prenominal slot, it foregrounds a topic, whereas the possessive in the postnominal position marks a referent already familiar to participants in the discourse.



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