REVIEW: THE ROSETTA STONE KISWAHILI.

A Language learning program on CD-ROM for Windows 9x or 2000 (with sound card) and Mac OS 7.0 or higher. Fairfield Language Technologies.

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"The Rosetta Stone Language Library" is a language learning software developed by the American company Fairfield Language Technologies which allows users to learn a foreign language with their computer without the aid of an instructor. The program promises its users they can learn a language faster and with more ease than ever before, without having to learn vocabulary or grammatical rules. Once having completed Levels I and II, learners should be able to make themselves understood in the new language using a basic vocabulary of roughly 3000 words. Both these levels are to be completed within a time frame of one to two years, and the results should be the equivalent of five years of conventional school instruction. The language library up to now offers 23 languages. Since 1993, a Swahili language course has been featured in The Rosetta Stone for which only Level I is currently available. I shall first describe the basic foundations of the program and then address the Swahili course.

"The Rosetta Stone" is the only language-learning computer software to consistently apply the "natural approach" (Krashen and Terrell 1983) in its method. It imitates the acquisition of the mother tongue in that spoken sound sets and/or written texts are presented together with a visual context. The basic characteristics of the computer provide the requirements for this method, which fails in conventional instruction due to the limits of the classroom situation, where instructors are neither able to present a large amount of contexts, nor can they provide each learner with individual attention. The complete, 2-level course uses more than 8000 photographs as visual context cues. Because the meaning of the sound set can always be determined by the objects in the pictures or scenes, learners require no explanations in their native language. Unlike conventional language instruction, grammatical structures are not learned systematically and then practised, but rather the learner is expected to develop an intuitive knowledge of rules during the course of the program. In the most consistently used

type of drill, learners are presented with the task of connecting visual contexts with either written or spoken language or vice versa. In this sense The Rosetta Stone is different from conventional language learning software, which is generally used to complement course instruction and therefore employs numerous tasks and games in order to practise and apply the material learned. Aside from the drill type mentioned above, The Rosetta Stone only provides dictation and pronunciation exercises. The name "The Rosetta Stone"[1] (1) refers to the program's basic principle, which uses a single design for all languages, thereby using the same images of objects, situations, and actions, which are also to be learned in the same order of progression. With regard to the Swahili course, it must be asked if this design can work with a class language just as it does with an Indo-European gender language. The second question addresses the cultural adequacy of the contexts, or more specifically, of cultural knowledge, which must not be excluded from modern language instruction.

Each language course is divided into units and lessons. Each lesson consists of a preview, a tutorial, four exercises, and four tests. Learners are first confronted with the preview, when using the program. Spread over 10 screens, it provides a series of pictures with the corresponding sounds — the words, phrases, or sentences of that particular lesson. The pictures are presented in groups of four and are each assigned to a text through the accentuation provided by a sound set. The tutorial consists of a set of screens from the preview and the exercises. In the exercises the learner must choose either the correct picture from four possibilities for a sound set or the correct sound set for an image. In both cases the exercises are in a multiple choice format with four possible answers each. This means the chances of selecting the correct answer is 25%, quite a high rate. The "correct" or "incorrect" feedback is given immediately in the form of a visual and musical code. Learners may focus on five different skills in the activities: combined listening and reading comprehension, only listening comprehension, only reading comprehension, speaking, or writing. In Exercise 1 of skill A "Listening and Reading", the learner associates written and spoken text with one of four photographs. In Exercise 2 the learner identifies an image with one of four written texts. In Exercise 3 a sound set is identified with one of four written texts, while in Exercise 4 a

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[1] The stone was discovered in the Egyptian city Rosetta in 1799. Its inscription contains the same text in two languages and three writing systems: Greek alphabet, demotic Egyptian, and Egyptian hieroglyphics. It was a key inscription for the translation of hieroglyphics.

written text is identified with one of four sound sets. Skill B, "Listening", combines sound and image. In its two corresponding exercises, learners identify either a sound set with one of four images or an image with one of four sound sets. Skill C, "Reading", presents the images without the support of the spoken word and images must be connected with the correct text. In Skill D, "Speaking", learners are presented with the innovative and interesting opportunity to compare their own pronunciation with that of a native speaker. This occurs using a speech analysis consisting of a spectrograph, waveform and pitch curve. Learners can recognise in which portion of their utterance differences were registered in articulation, stress accent, and intonation. In Skill D, "Writing", learners learn to transform sounds into written letters by writing dictation.

If one is in favour of the nativist approach, which assumes that an innate language acquisition device is at work in child language acquisition, but which stops working after puberty, one would reject this software completely. I feel the program should be evaluated by testing learners who have completed it. This would allow one to form an opinion of the program's effectiveness. One assumes the results of such an evaluation would differ from language to language.

I tested the first lessons from the learner's perspective using the Arabic version, a language of which I have no knowledge, and noted that a lesson's content can indeed be efficiently retained and reproduced. The program is fun at first, a fact to which the immediate feedback contributes, but the exercises are too repetitive. After some time I felt learning the language in the artificial and hermetic space of the presented contexts. The desire to communicate in the foreign language is not well addressed, even though the dialogue situations are part of the lessons' content. These are necessarily schematic, however.

Contexts (such as eating and drinking) are chosen largely for their universality, but remain clearly oriented toward an American or western model (such as eating at a table with plates and cutlery). The farther away a culture is from the American model, the more absurd some contexts appear. On the other hand, the universal approach does not allow for the transfer of culture-specific knowledge. Yet such elements should be an integrated part of language instruction. This would be possible, but only if The Rosetta Stone backs off its "one program for all languages" principle.

The program's explicit goal is that learners connect the language directly with contexts and thus learn the language through these associations. Any linguistic reflection and comparisons with the learner's mother tongue are intentionally blocked out. This means the software can safely be ruled out for Swahili instruction at African language institutes at university level. Because there is no connection to existing instruction materials, it is also not suited as additional material to complement university language courses. Because of its repetitive nature, the program quickly becomes boring for students with some knowledge of the target language. It is best suited to learners with no prior knowledge of the target language whose main goal is practical use of Swahili, although I doubt that learners truly internalise the grammatical rules based on the material provided and that they would be able to apply these rules in an unknown context.

I now wish to address two problematic areas of the Swahili course, namely its cultural specificity and the problem presented by the nominal classes and related agreement phenomena.

The texts are spoken by native speakers, the people presented in the images are largely Africans or Afro-Americans, and the photos sometimes reflect an East African environment. These are the program's only adaptations to the target language's culture, however. This is aptly demonstrated e.g. in Lesson 2, Unit 10, in which a photograph of a cowboy falling off his horse at a rodeo is presented in the English course with the corresponding text "The cowboy is falling". The same image is used in the Swahili course with the text "*Mchumba ng'ombe anaanguka*". A *mchunga ng'ombe* in East Africa would hardly protect his herd from atop a horse. In this case the association of context and language is completely foreign to Swahili culture. Horses play only a very minor role in East Africa, and yet in The Rosetta Stone, horses, cats, dogs, and elephants together form the group of animals which assume syntactic functions such as subject or object. The fruit group consists of bananas, oranges, apples (*matofaa*), strawberries (*strouberi*), grapes (*zabibu*), and pears (*mapera*). Apples, pears, strawberries, and grapes are so rare in East Africa that their inclusion in the basic vocabulary, the very lexical foundation of a language course, is in no way justified. In standard Swahili, *pera, ma-* refers to guavas, not pears, and *strouberi* does not correspond to Swahili phonology. A tiger is provided as a visual context for *chui* (leopard), even though

there are no tigers in Africa. There are also a number of absurd or ridiculous sentences such as *"mwanamume ana nywele za buluu"* ("the man has blue hair", with the visual context of a clown), *"samaki ni mnyama"* ("the fish is an animal" - *mnyama* is not equivalent to animal, but rather denotes mammals), *"paka yupi ni halisi?"* ("which cat is real" – as opposed to artificial). The term "jeans" is translated with *suruali ngumu* (hard trousers), the negation of *amevaa* is *hajavaa* instead of *havai*, which would have suited the specific context. These are just some examples from a long list of linguistic and cultural errors. Because The Rosetta Stone program is based on contexts, its structure does not take the rules of a language into account. So the learner does not get any hint that Swahili is a class language. Lesson 1, Unit 3 focuses on adjectives, and learners are confronted with *mweupe, mwekundu, mweusi, mzee, wa kike, wa kiume* (class 1 agreement), *jeupe, jekundu, jeusi, la manjano, la buluu, la pinki, kuukuu, jipya* (class 5 agreement), *nyeupe, ya manjano, kuukuu, mpya* (class 9 agreement), *nyeupe, nyekundu, nyeusi, za buluu, ndefu, fupi* (class 10 agreement). The agreements result from the subject matter with which learners have already been confronted, namely fish, bird, cat, aeroplane, car, house, hair, woman, man, young man, girl. Learners can recognise that there are stems and prefixes, but not any sort of regularity. How could a learner find an explanation for a car beeing *–kuukuu* but a man *–zee*? Why is *gari la manjano* later replaced by *gari kuukuu*, much like *nyumba kuukuu*, while a house is *nyeupe* and a car *jeupe*? These are examples where differences from the typically Indo-European mother tongue of the learner are simply too great, and the contexts provided are too less for allowing the learner to make hypotheses about the grammatical structure.

There are other problems, such as the opposite pair "with" and "without", which is more complicated in Swahili than in Indo-European languages. Many aspects are translated too schematically and do not reflect a Swahili context. Greetings, which play such an important role in Swahili culture, are not addressed.

The Rosetta Stone Kiswahili Program represents an innovative approach to language learning. Whether or not the method works still needs to be proven by tests. The program is currently underdeveloped, however.

Reference:

Krashen, S. and Terrell, T. 1983. The natural approach. Oxford: Pergamon.