What is a language that uses loan words to describe such basic objects as house = ny-umba < umbe? (Ar.) = create, build; heart = m-oyo < oyn (Ar.) = source; leg = m-guu < rguul/ruul (Ar.) = leg; fire = moto < modd (Ar.) = burning; such essential qualifiers as good, beautiful = -zuri < zuhrii (Ar.) = beautiful; sweet, tasty = -tamu < tacm (Ar.) = taste; small = dogo < doqq (Ar.) = break into tiny bits, and all numerals above five? This is the question that lies at the heart of inquiry in the linguistic study Loan Words and their Effect on the Classification of Shahili Nominals by Sharifa M. Zawawi. (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1979, 159 pages, 6 tables). Zawawi’s study (sometime referred to as “essay” and as “paper”, p. 139) is the kind of book that can excite speakers of any Bantu language even though linguistics may not be their profession. It is exciting and even revolutionary—unpleasant as the reality of this word in our times may be—not because it questions the established linguistic theories of Swahili and by implication also of other Bantu languages, but because it offers logically acceptable and empirically confirmable answers to the crucial question in Bantu linguistics: the classification (or the lack of it) of Swahili nominals.

Can, and how, should we classify Swahili nominals on whose inflections the whole system of Swahili concords seems to hinge? Linguists from Krapf (1850) to Steere (1865), to Bleek (1869), Meinhof (1899-48), Ashton (1944), Loogman (1965), Guthrie (1969), Polomé (1967), and Gregersen (1967) have tried successively to apportion all Swahili nominals between eight and seventeen nominal classes, each characterized by one or several semantic meanings. They assigned appropriate sets of nominal, pronominal, and concordial prefixes to each class and declared the class system of the Swahili nominals to be the main characteristic of the inner nature of this and other Bantu languages. Nouns which did not conform to the outlined classes and took prefixes contrary to the general rules were declared foreign, belonging to dialects, pertaining to bad speech, or simply irregular. The high rate of irregularity prompted Zawawi to reexamine the entire Swahili lexicon. As a result she discovered that the conclusions of all Swahili grammarians were based on one false premise: that the Swahili nominals are classifiable on a semantic basis and for the convenience of speakers and grammarians the resulting classes are identified by appropriate markers or prefixes.

Thorough scrutiny of every word convinced Zawawi that it is not the nominals that should be classed but rather their prefixes. At best, the nominals can be divided into two major categories: animate and inanimate. These categories are not characterized by their nominal prefixes but by the concordial agreements (p. 60). The “systemic nature of concordial agreement” (p. 71) is, in fact, the backbone of the Bantu grammar. All the rest of the well known classification system applies only to the prefixes, not to the nominals. It is the prefix that “expresses the grammatical feature while the lexical stem expresses the general meaning. This general meaning may be changed by shifting the prefix and consequently changing the morphological agreements that cooccur with it” (p. 84). This recognition forces us to acknowledge the Jesuit Father Marconnes, a grammarian of Karanga, who is the least cited authority in modern linguistic studies. Marconnes was the first man to recognize the Bantu prefix as "an article which added a distinct meaning of its own to the noun; it was not an inflection but a
preformative" (Marconnes cited in Zawawi 1979: 21). Zawawi comes to a similar conclusion when she says that the prefixes in Swahili are not markers (of nominal classes) but "indicators or specifiers of meanings." She names them (ki-)vialamisho which is a coined word based on the Swahilized alama form of the Arabic علامة a’lamah, meaning-indication.

There are ten vialamisho in Swahili, each with a specific and uninterchangeable meaning or umaanisho. Umaanisho is a grammatical variant of the Swahilized form maana = meaning, of the Arabic word maa’nam مصطلح with the same meaning (pp. 114-115). The Arabic based descriptive names of the two, out of three, main features of the Swahili grammar are more then practical. They are symbolic. In the total Swahili lexicon of 6300 words of F. Johnson’s Swahili Dictionary, 3006 (47.7%) words are loans from other languages. Of these, 2534 (80.9%) are Arabic according to Zawawi (p. 37). Significantly enough, Zawawi reached the proper grammatical understanding of the kialamisho and umaanisho not on the basis of analysis of the original Bantu fond. She deduced it from the treatment that the loan and, primarily, the Arabic words suffered when subjected to the rigors of the conservative Bantu grammar (p. 137). It is interesting that although the process of Bantu-Arabic interaction lasted up to eleven centuries no Arabic kialamisho entered Swahili and "the principles of Arabic word formation have apparently not influenced Swahili words" (Polome cited by Zawawi, ibid. p. 57). At the same time the massive influx of Arabic words forced certain changes in the rules governing the Bantu morphological combinations. This began to occur, according to Zawawi, at the time when the "non-Bantu words begin to outnumber the Bantu" (p. 134). Recently, change reached the point where "some of the rules are no longer obligatory but optional, and some speakers have abandoned them" (p. 135).

Zawawi does not spell it out, but it appears that the introduction of writing may have marked the advent of the major change in Bantu grammar. In the preliterate period, Swahili speakers followed the largely Bantu grammar and tried to adapt foreign words to its rules. These were the rules of concordial agreement. This inevitably led to certain minor modifications of the same rules. When the language was put on paper—primarily by writers whose cultural links with the Indian Ocean area were stronger than with the hinterland—the modified rules applicable to the loan words became the rules and the emphasis from the concords shifted to the vialamisho. This new emphasis, until now, overwhelmed and kept fettered the thinking of European grammarians. Unlike her predecessors, Zawawi understands the true function of the kialamisho. She joins their ranks, however, when she describes the concord as one of the two functions of the kialamisho (p. 114).

Zawawi suggests that it is semantic rather than phonological criteria that govern the concordial agreement. Yet we notice that while the semantic base of the nominal indicators are consonants: m- ~ mu- ~ mw-, u- ~ uu-, ki ~ ch-, ba-, ma-, wa ~ w-, mi ~ my- ~ vy-, vj- (ji does not seem to belong to this system), the pronominal indicators are based on vowels. This is especially apparent in the concordial indicators of the third person: a-, wa-, u-, i ~ zi-, ki ~ vi- ~ li ~ ya ~ u- (pp. 115-19). Also, it is the vowels rather than the consonants which dominate the symmetry of a rhythmic sound and this appears to be the basis of the concordial agreement. Sure enough we find there are many cases in the large number of Swahili indicators where the rhythm-charged concordial vowel became prominent in the semantically loaded consonant kialamisho of the nominals and vice versa. In most languages it is observable that consonants are the