

# Modality in Swahili: Epistemic modal adverbs in Swahili. Insights from a historical Swahili corpus

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## Abstract

In this study, we explore the main set of adverbs – i.e., free-standing, monorhematic and invariable *non*-nominal modifiers; Ramat & Ricca 1998 – used to express epistemic possibility in Swahili.

The adverbs in question are *pengine*, *huenda* and *lab(u)da*. As seen in ex (1) - (3) they all serve to convey epistemic modality, i.e., degree of speaker confidence in a proposition (Boye 2016), and within this semantic subcategory, specifically to convey an “agnostic” or uncertain stance against the proposition they qualify (see, e.g., Nuyts 2001).

In this function, they may also lend themselves to use as interactional and text-structuring devices, such as softeners or politeness markers (4), or as markers of alternations, concession or correction, the latter illustrated in (5) and (6), respectively (cf. Suzuki 2018; Rozumko 2021).

Based on a diachronic Swahili corpus, paired with comparative data from a wide selection of different Swahili varieties, we aim to show that these markers, although assigned a similar functional niche in contemporary Swahili, stem from significantly different historical backgrounds and pathways of development.

Both *pengine* and *huenda* are derived from inherited (East) Bantu building blocks. However, whereas *pengine* as a possibility marker instantiates a regionally common extension of an intersective quantifier inflected with a locative nominal prefix (cf. Bernander 2025), *huenda* has a much rarer etymology, being derived from the motion verb *-enda* and the habitual aspect marker *hu-*.

*Lab(u)da*, lastly, is ultimately of Arabic origin and the result of a complex process of both weakening in form – through the syncopation of the medial /u/ – but also in function, as the original construction *la budda* originally conveyed a much stronger modal force of necessity (i.e., obligation and certainty).

## References

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### Examples

(All examples are drawn from texts in our Swahili corpus)

(1) **pengine** ni fikira z-a ki-toto  
POSB COP 10.thoughts 10-GEN 7-child  
'maybe it's childish thoughts'

(2) **huenda** Rosa pia a-ta-tumi-a dawa siku ya ndoa  
POSB R. also SM1-FUT-use-FV 9.medicine 9.wedding day  
'Maybe Rosa as well will use medicine on her wedding day.'

(3) wewe ni Mgalile **labda**?  
PRO2sg COP M. POSB  
Are you a Mgalile perhaps?

(4) **labda** ni-ku-rudish-e nyuma ki-dogo  
POSB SM1sg-OM2sg-return-SBJV back 7-little  
'Maybe I could take you back a bit'

(5) **huenda** mimi si tajiri, lakini maadam ni-ko hai  
POSB PRO1sg neg 1.rich but provided SM1sg-LOC alive  
ha-tu-ta-omb-a chumvi wala sukari hapa  
NEG-SM1pl-FUT-beg-FV 10.salt neither 10.sugar DEM16  
'I may not be rich, but never in my living days will we beg for salt or sugar here'

(6) mimi si-tak-i chochote, **labda** soda kali  
PRO1sg NEG.SM1sg-want-NEG 7.anything POSB 9.soda 9.strong  
'Me, I don't want anything, maybe a "strong soda"'

(\*cf. Koenings, Nathalie Arnold. 2017. Ikiwa Kuna Shibe, Maziwa Hayauzwi: Food, History, and Community Well-Being in Twentieth-Century Pemba, Zanzibar. *Swahili Forum* 24: 16–36.)