

Contents

The following Help Topics are available:

[Overview of Swahili](#)

[Alphabet and Pronunciation](#)

[Nouns](#)

[Pronouns](#)

[Adjectives](#)

[Adverbs](#)

[Verbs](#)

[Prepositions and Conjunctions](#)

[Negation](#)

For Help on Help for Windows, press F1.

For Help on Help for Macintosh, select Help with Quick Help from the  menu .

Overview of Swahili

Welcome and congratulations on your choice to learn Swahili! This Grammar Basics help file will serve as your introduction to the most basic aspects of Swahili grammar. This overview will give you some more information about this exciting and different language.

Swahili is more properly referred to as Kiswahili. It is part of the Bantu group of languages which stems from the Niger-Congo language family. Swahili is spoken natively by approximately one million people, mostly in Kenya and Tanzania, but also in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and The Democratic Republic of Congo. However, nearly 10 million people speak it as a second language.

Alphabet and Pronunciation

a	like	a in father
b	like	b in banana
d	like	d in dog
e	like	e in pet
f	like	f in frog
g	like	g in goat
h	like	h in hot
i	like	ee in deep
j	like	j in judge
k	like	k in keep
l	like	l in lion
m	like	m in monkey
n	like	n in nice
o	like	o in hope
p	like	p in potato
r	like	r in red
s	like	s in star
t	like	t in today
u	like	oo in boot
v	like	v in victory
w	like	w in win
y	like	y in yes
z	like	z in zoo

dh	like	th in that
gh	like	ch in loch
ng	like	ng in sing

STRESS

The stress is always on the next to last syllable of a word.

Nouns

A noun is a word that names a person, place, action, thing, or idea.

Swahili nouns fall into one of eight classes. They can be distinguished by the noun prefix at the beginning of the word.

Class 1: The M-WA Class

With very few exceptions, all the nouns in this class denote human beings.

mtu (man) **watu** (men)

mtoto (child) **watoto** (children)

If the stem of the noun begins with a vowel, the singular prefix becomes **mw-** instead of **m-**. The plural form is generated according to the following spelling rules:

wa- + **a** = **wa-**

wa- + **e** = **we-**

wa- + **i** = **we-**

Class 2: The M-MI Class

Nouns in this class denote things. The singular prefix is **m-** and the plural prefix is **mi-**.

mti, miti (tree, trees)
mwaka, miaka (year, years)

Class 3: The N Class

Nouns in this class denote most animals, some fruits, and many words of foreign origin.

asubuhi (morning)
kompyuta (computer)
teksi (taxi)

The singular and plural forms of nouns in this class are identical.

Class 4: The KI-VI Class

Nouns in this class denote concrete things.

kijiko (spoon)
kisu (knife)
kitabu (book)

When the stem of the noun begins with a vowel, there are some spelling changes that take place.

ki- changes to **ch-** when the stem begins with **a- e- o-** or **u-**.

chakula (food)

cheti (note)

Similarly, the plural marker **vi-** changes to **vy-** when the stem begins with **a- e- o-** or **u-**.

Class 5: The MA Class

This class contains many words of foreign origin. The singular generally does not have a prefix, although a few have the prefix **ji-**. The plural is marked with the prefix **ma-**.

chungwa, machungwa (orange, oranges)

dirisha, madirisha (window, windows)

jina, majina (name, names)

Class 6: The U Class

This is a very interesting class that contains primarily abstract nouns, and collective nouns with no plural form. There are a few sub-groups within this category of nouns. One group uses **u-** as its singular prefix and forms its plural according to the rules of the N class.

unywele, nywele (strand of hair, hair)

ushanga, ushanga (bead, beads)

Another group is made up of non-count, or collective, nouns. These do not have a plural form.

unga (flour)

udongo (earth)

A third group denotes abstract concepts. These do not have a plural.

umri (age)

utoto (childhood)

Class 7: The PA Class

There is only one word in this class:

mahali, pahali (place, places)

Class 8: The KU Class

This class contains all of the infinitives used as gerunds (or verbal nouns).

kusoma (reading)

kusafiri (traveling)

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that stands for a previously mentioned or understood noun.

Subject Pronouns

The personal pronouns in Swahili are only used for emphasis since the subject is already indicated by the verb prefix. They are as follows:

Class 1			
I, me	mimi	we, us	sisi
you	wewe	you (pl.)	ninyi
he, him	yeye	they, them	wao
she, her	yeye		

Object Pronouns

The sense of an object pronoun is conveyed using object markers. An object marker is usually formed from the verb prefix (which is noun class-dependent) and attached to the beginning of the verb stem.

Class 1 (M-WA) Object Markers

me	-ni-	us	-tu-
you	-ku-	you (pl.)	-wa-
him, her	-m- (-mw-)	them	-wa-

Mama ananipenda. (Mother loves me.)

Baba anakupenda. (Father loves you.)

The other noun classes use the verb prefixes regularly to refer to it or them.

Class	Singular (it)	Plural (them)
M-MI	-u-	-i-
N	-i-	-zi-
KI-VI	-ki-	-vi-
MA	-li-	-ya-

The object markers noted above are used to refer to definite items that have already been mentioned. If the object is indefinite, an object marker is not necessary.

Adjectives

An adjective is a word that limits or qualifies a noun or other substantive. In Swahili, an adjective follows the noun it qualifies. Like nouns, adjectives have a stem that becomes prefixed according to the class of the noun that is modified. Here are some common adjective stems:

-zuri (good)
-baya (bad)
-kubwa (large)
-refu (tall)

Possessive Adjectives

A possessive adjective is a word like my, your, his, or our. Possessives in Swahili change depending on the class of the noun being modified. Here is a list of the possessive stems.

my, mine	-angu	our, ours	-etu
your, yours	-ako	your, yours (pl.)	-enu
his/her, his/hers	-ake	their, theirs	-ao

M-WA Class

The possessive prefix **wa-** is used for singular and plural (although it appears **w-** because of spelling changes). So, the possessives become:

	Singular/Plural		Singular/Plural
my, mine	wangu	our, ours	wetu
your, yours	wako	your, yours (pl.)	wenu
his/her, his/hers	wake	their, theirs	wao

M-MI Class

The singular prefix is **w-** (an altered form of **u-**) and the plural prefix is **y-** (originally **i-**).

	Singular/Plural		Singular/Plural
my, mine	wangu/yangu	our, ours	wetu/yetu
your, yours	wako/yako	your, yours (pl.)	wenu/yenu
his/her, his/hers	wake/yake	their, theirs	wao/yao

N Class

The singular prefix is **y-** (an altered form of **i-**) and the plural prefix is **z-** (originally **zi-**).

	Singular/Plural		Singular/Plural
my, mine	yangu/zangu	our, ours	yetu/zetu
your, yours	yako/zako	your, yours (pl.)	yenu/zenu
his/her, his/hers	yake/zake	their, theirs	yao/zao

KI-VI Class

The singular prefix is **ch-** (an altered form of **ki-**) and the plural prefix is **vy-** (originally **vi-**).

my, mine	Singular/Plural	our, ours	Singular/Plural
your, yours	changu/vyangu	your, yours (pl.)	chetu/vyetu
his/her, his/hers	chako/vyako	their, theirs	chenu/vyenu
	chake/vyake		chao/vyao

MA Class

The singular prefix is **l-** (an altered form of **li-**) and the plural prefix is **y-** (originally **ya-**).

my, mine	Singular/Plural	our, ours	Singular/Plural
your, yours	langu/yangu	your, yours (pl.)	letu/yetu
his/her, his/hers	lako/yako	their, theirs	lenu/yenu
	lake/yake		lao/yao

U Class

The singular prefix is **w-** (an altered form of **u-**) and the plural prefix is **z-** (originally **zi-**).

my, mine	Singular/Plural	our, ours	Singular/Plural
your, yours	wangu/zangu	your, yours (pl.)	wetu/zetu
his/her, his/hers	wako/zako	their, theirs	wenu/zenu
	wake/zake		wao/zao

Adverbs

An adverb is a word used to modify a verb, adverb, or adjective by expressing time, place, manner, degree, cause etc. In Swahili, a noun can be considered adverbial if the suffix **-ni** has been added to it.

hotelini (at, to, in, or from the hotel)

chumbani (at, to, in, or from the room)

nyumbani (at home)

An adverbial phrase can also be constructed using **kwa** + noun.

kwa miguu (on foot)

kwa shida (with difficulty)

Swahili also makes use of three place markers.

-ko (refers to an indefinite location)

-po (refers to a definite location)

-mo (refers to location inside something)

The verb prefix is added to the above stem to convey the sense of being somewhere.

Verbs

A verb expresses action, existence, or occurrence. Verbs in Swahili are made up of several parts. At its most basic level, the Swahili verb contains the verb prefix, the tense infix, and the verb stem.

The verb prefix is used to indicate the subject of the verb. With the exception of Class 1 nouns, each of the noun classes has only two verb prefixes (one for singular subjects, and one for plural subjects).

The six Class 1 (M-WA) verb prefixes are as follows.

I	ni-	we	tu-
you (sing.)	u-	you (pl.)	m-
he/she	a-	they	wa-

Class 2 (M-MI)	
Singular	u-
Plural	i-

Class 3 (N-)	
Singular	i-
Plural	zi-

Class 4 (KI-VI)	
Singular	ki-
Plural	vi-

Class 5 (MA-)	
Singular	li-
Plural	ya-

Class 6 (U-)	
Singular	u-
Plural	zi-

Tense

Tense in Swahili is marked using an infix, which, unlike a prefix, occurs in the middle of the word.

Tense	Infix
Present	-na-
Future	-ta-
Past	-li-

Prepositions and Conjunctions

A preposition is a word that shows the relation of a noun to some other noun in a given sentence. Generally, this is handled in Swahili by the addition of a particular vowel to the root of the verb. If the final vowel of the verb root is **-i** **-a** or **-u**, the prepositional vowel is **-i**. If the final vowel of the verb root is **-e** or **-o**, the prepositional vowel is **-e**. The meaning of this is similar to **for**, **to** or **on behalf of** in English.

Some verbs have the notion of a preposition built into their verb stems. For example:

-eleza (explain something to someone)

-pa (give something to someone)

There are also separate words in Swahili that are considered prepositions and convey the meaning of what would be an entire phrase in English.

juu (on top)

chini (on the floor)

mbele (at the front)

A conjunction is a word used to link two or more concepts together. The most prevalent one in Swahili is **na** (and).

Mohamed na John (Mohamed and John)

Negation

Negation is handled by placing the negating prefix **ha-** before the verb prefix. Negation is regular in all of the noun classes, except the first class (M-WA) of nouns. Here, some spelling changes have occurred.

I	si-	we	hatu-
you (sing.)	hu-	you (pl.)	ham-
he/she	ha-	they	hawa-

A special mention should be made of the negation of the past tense. Here, the infix **-li-** changes to **-ku-**.

Nilinunua chai. (I bought some tea.)

Sikununua chai. (I didnt buy any tea.)

