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Overview of Zulu

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

Zulu is more properly referred to as isiZulu. It is part of the Nguni group of languages which stems from the Niger-Congo language family. Zulu is one of the major Bantu languages spoken in South Africa. It is spoken natively by approximately eight million people, mostly in the northern part of South Africa, but also in the southeastern part of Mpumalanga.

Alphabet and Pronunciation

a	like	'a' in father
b	like	(1) 'b' in amber, when it follows 'm' (2) imploded, pronounced with an inward stream of air
d	like	'd' in dog
e	like	'e' in pet or 'ay' in pay
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	(1) 'k' in thinking, a cross between 'k' and 'g' (2) 'k' in king, unaspirated
l	like	'l' in lion
m	like	'm' in monkey
n	like	(1) 'n' in nice (2) 'ng' in sing when it precedes 'g' or 'k'
o	like	'o' in hope or 'aw' in pawn
p	like	'p' in spit, unaspirated
r	like	'r' in red
s	like	's' in star
t	like	't' in stick, unaspirated
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
th	like	't' in tell, aspirated
ng	like	'ng' in singer
ph	like	'p' in pet, aspirated
sh	like	'sh' in show
tsh	like	'ch' in chat

CLICK SOUNDS

- c This click is like the sound one makes when a child has been naughty, 'tisk' 'tisk'.
- q This click is like the sound of a cork popping from a bottle.
- x This click is like the sound one makes when guiding a horse.

Nouns

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

Zulu nouns fall into one of eighteen classes, although it is generally accepted that, for normal purposes, there can be considered eight. There are some singular classes, some plural classes, and two neutral classes. They can be distinguished by the noun prefix at the beginning of the word.

Classes 1 and 2

With very few exceptions, all the nouns in these classes denote human beings.

Class 1 (singular)

um(u)-

umuntu (person)

umfazi (woman)

u-

ubaba (father)

ubhanana (banana)

Class 2 (plural)

aba-

abantu (people)

abafazi (women)

o-

obaba (fathers)

obhanana (bananas)

Classes 3 and 4

Class 3 (singular)

um(u)-

umfula (river)

umuzi (village)

Class 4 (plural)

imi-

imifula (rivers)

imizi (villages)

Classes 5 and 6

Almost all words of foreign origin belong in this class of nouns.

Class 5 (singular)

i(li)-

ihabhula (apple)

iwashi (watch)

Class 6 (plural)

ama-

amahabhula (apples)

amawashi (watches)

Classes 7 and 8

Class 7 (singular)

isi-

isikole (school)

isitolo (store)

Class 8 (plural)

izi-

izikole (schools)

izitolo (stores)

Classes 9 and 10

Class 9 (singular)

in-/im-

Class 10 (plural)

izin-/izim-

indlu (house)
inkomo (cattle, s.)

izindlu (houses)
izinkomo (cattle, pl.)

Class 11

Nouns in this class form their plurals according to class 10.

Class 11 (singular)

u(lu)-

udebe (lip)

ugoma (mountain range)

Class 10 (plural)

izin-/izim-

izindebe (lips)

izingoma (mountain ranges)

Class 14

The prefix in this class does not indicate number.

ubu-

ubuhlobo (friendship)

ubuhumusha (dishonesty)

Class 15

The prefix in this class does not indicate number.

uku-

ukukhukhuleka (erosion)

ukufa (death, illness)

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that stands for a previously mentioned or understood noun. In Zulu, pronouns do not stand alone. They are expressed in forms, or concords, that are attached to the verb.

Personal Pronouns

Use these personal pronoun concords when forming verbs.

I	ngi-	we	si-
you	u-	you (pl.)	ni-
he, she	u-	they	ba-
it	ku-		

Ubaba **uyagula**. (My father is sick.)

Abantu **bayakhala**. (The people are complaining.)

Subject Concords

Subject concords are attached to the verb, just as the personal pronouns are. The noun class of the subject decides which concord is attached to the verb.

Noun Class and Prefix	Subject Concord
1 um(u)	u-
u-	u-
2 aba-	ba-
o-	ba-
3 um(u)-	u-
4 imi-	i-
5 i(li)	li-
6 ama-	a-
7 isi-	si-
8 izi-	zi-
9 in-/im-	i-
10 izin-/izim-	zi-
11 u(lu)	lu-
14 ubu-	bu-
15 uku-	ku-

Object Concords

The sense of an object pronoun is conveyed using object concords. An object concord, like a subject concord, is usually formed from the noun class prefix and is attached to the beginning of the verb stem.

Noun Class and Prefix	Subject Concord	Object Concord
1 um(u)	u-	-m-
u-	u-	-m-
2 aba-	ba-	-ba-
o-	ba-	-ba-
3 um(u)-	u-	-wu-
4 imi-	i-	-yi-
5 i(li)	li-	-li-

6	ama-	a-	-wa-
7	isi-	si-	-si-
8	izi-	zi-	-zi-
9	in-/im-	i-	-yi-
10	izin-/izim-	zi-	-zi-
11	u(lu)	lu-	-lu-
14	ubu-	bu-	-bu-
15	uku-	ku-	-ku-

The object concords for personal pronouns are as follows:

me	-ngi-	we	-si-
you	-ku-	you (pl.)	-ni-

Adjectives

An adjective is a word that limits or qualifies a noun or other substantive. In Zulu, an adjective generally 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:

- hle (good)
- bi (bad)
- khulu (large)
- de (tall)

Adjectival Concords

Noun Class and Prefix	Adjectival Concord
1 um(u)	om(u)-
u-	om(u)-
2 aba-	aba-
o-	aba-
3 um(u)-	om(u)-
4 imi-	emi-
5 i(li)	eli-
6 ama-	ama-
7 isi-	esi-
8 izi-	ezin-
9 in-/im-	en-
10 izin-/izim-	ezin-
11 u(lu)	olu-
14 ubu-	obu-
15 uku-	oku-

Possessive Concords

In English, we would express a possessive by saying "The dog's bone," or "The boy's ball." In Zulu, however, a possessive is expressed as "The bone **of** the dog," or "The ball **of** the boy." This is formed by using a possessive concord. The possessive concord is derived by combining the subject concord with **a-**. Note that this combination causes some spelling changes.

Noun Class and Prefix	Subject Concord	Possessive Concord
1 um(u)	u-	wa-
u-	u-	wa-
2 aba-	ba-	ba-
o-	ba-	ba-
3 um(u)-	u-	wa-
4 imi-	i-	ya-
5 i(li)	li-	la-
6 ama-	a-	a-
7 isi-	si-	sa-
8 izi-	zi-	za-

9	in-/im-	i-	ya-
10	izin-/izim-	zi-	za-
11	u(lu)	lu-	lwa-
14	ubu-	bu-	ba-
15	uku-	ku-	kwa-

Verbs

A verb expresses action, existence, or occurrence. Verbs in Zulu are made up of several parts. At its most basic level, the Zulu verb contains the subject concord, the tense infix, and the verb stem. The subject concord is used to indicate the subject of the verb. See [Pronouns](#) for further discussion.

Present Tense

The present tense in Zulu is marked using the infix **-ya-**, which, unlike a prefix, occurs in the middle of the word just after the subject concord.

U**ya**khala. (He is crying.)

The **-ya-** is usually omitted when additional information follows the verb.

Future Tense

The future tense in Zulu is marked using one of four infixes: **-zo-**, **-zoku-**, **-yoku-**, **-yo-**.

Ng**yo**qala kusasa. (I will start tomorrow.)

Past Tense

The past tense in Zulu is expressed by adding the suffix **-ile** to the end of the verb stem.

Ngimbon**ile**. (I saw him.)

When additional words follow the verb, the past tense suffix becomes **-e**.

Ngimbone **e** izolo. (I saw him yesterday.)

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 concept is handled in Zulu by modifying the verb stem. For example, the concept 'for' is handled this way. The final vowel **-a** changes to **-ela**.

-biza (call)
Ngizokubiz**ela** ithekisi. (I'll call a taxi for you.)

A conjunction is a word used to link two or more concepts together. The most prevalent one in Zulu is **na-** (and). Some spelling changes take place under the following conditions:

Na- changes to **no-** when the following noun begins with **u-**.

isithelo **nohlaza** (fruits and vegetables)

Na- changes to **ne-** when the following noun begins with **i-**.

uhlaza **nesithelo** (vegetables and fruit)

Na- remains unchanged when the following noun begins with **a-**.

amadoda **nabafazi** (men and women)

Negation

In the present tense, negation is handled two ways: by placing the negating prefix **a-** before the subject concord and making the final verb of the vowel **-i**, and with **-nga-**.

Angibhemi. (I don't smoke.)

The negation of the past tense is handled the same way, except here, the verb ending changes to **-anga**.

Angazanga. (I did not know.)

