

swahili for volunteers



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MOTIVATION

I lived in Kenya for nine months, from December 2023 to September 2024, during which I volunteered and learned some basic Kiswahili. I picked up these essentials from various sources, both through instruction and self-study. My goal in writing this short introduction is to help future volunteers have an easier time adapting and connecting with others during their stay.

INTRODUCTION

In this document, each chapter introduces a new topic one by one. Each chapter will begin with a conversation that reflects interactions I could easily have in my village in the Ol Jogi Conservancy, along with a translation. Following the dialogue, I'll explain each word that appears and introduce a relevant grammatical principle.

Speakers of French, English, German, and Spanish will hopefully find this guide particularly engaging. Some grammatical features in Kiswahili parallel structures in certain languages but not others. For example, a Kenyan might ask 'for what' instead of 'why', which may initially sound unusual to a German or English speaker. However, a French or Spanish speaker would recognize this structure from 'pourquoi' or 'por qué'.

I in no way claim to be an expert of Swahili - but I would have the confidence to say that I can give you the basics that allow a lively first weeks in Kenya. The Kenyans always are very excited when foreigners learn their language. I acquired all the knowledge within this booklet in my nine months and the people in my village were very impressed. I think you can learn this much faster and I assure you it will be appreciated by your neighbours.

CHAPTER 1: GREETINGS AND VERBS

Conversation 1	
Swahili	English
Habari!	How's it going?
Nzuri!	Good!
Unaenda wapi?	Where are you going?
Ninaenda nyumbani. Na wewe?	I'm going home. And you?
Nataka kuenda choo. Iko wapi?	I want to go to the bathroom. Where is it?
Choo iko hapo	The bathroom is there.
Ahh ndio, asante!	Ahh yes, thank you!
Karibu sana. Kwaheri!	You're very welcome. Bye!

~

Habari is a classic greeting like “How are you?”. Possible answers are:

- **Nzuri (sana)** - (very) good
- **Samala** - fine
- **Sawa** - okay
- **Mbaya** - bad

Alternative greetings include

- **Jambo** - hello
- **Mambo** - a greeting similar that must always be replied to with “**poa**”
- **Uko aje?** - How are you?

~

VOCAB #1

nyumbani - home

na - and

iko - It is

choo - bathroom

ndio - yes

asante - thank you

karibu - welcome

(both to say after thanks and to welcome s.o.)

kwaheri - bye

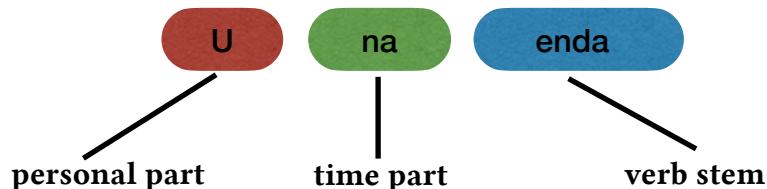
QUESTION WORDS

In the text above, we already see some question words. Note that question words come in the end, as you can see in the conversation above. You wouldn't ask "where is the toilet", but more like in French "la toilette est où?" (=the toilet is where?)

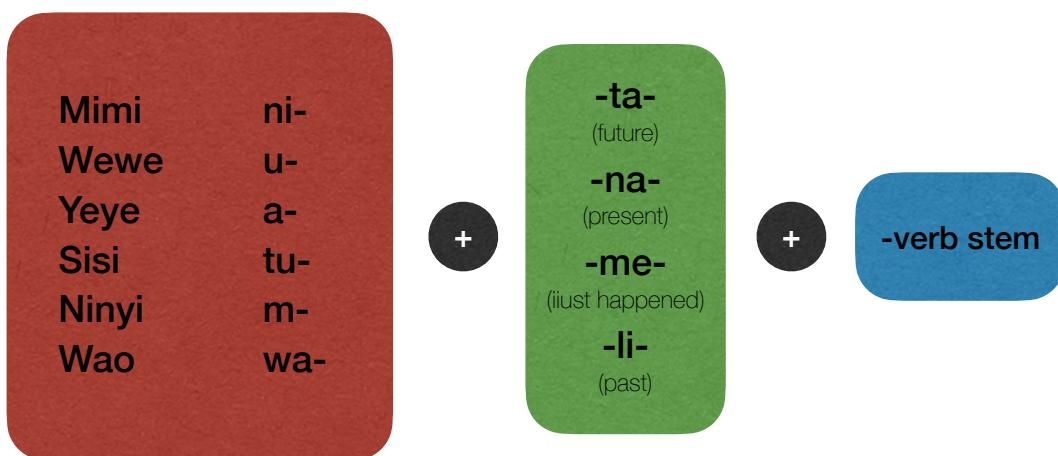
- **Aje?** - How?
- **Wapi?** - Where?
- **Ngapi?** - How much?
- **Lini?** - When? (but not day-time related)
- **Saa ngapi?** - What time? (*Literal German: Wieviel Uhr?*)
- **Kwa nini?** - Why? (*Literal French: Pourquoi?*)
- **Nini** - What?
- **Nani** - Who?

VERBS

I truly love the Swahili konjugation because it is very logical. For example, let's look at the verb **unaenda**. It can be broken up into three parts:



This pattern repeats for all verbs and I like to generalise it with the table below. Note that I just put the personal pronouns there as you would in English (Mimi - I, Wewe - You, Yeye - He/She/It, Sisi - We, Ninyi - You (pl), Wao - They).



The infinitive of a word always begins with a "ku-". For "going" it then becomes "ku- + "-enda" = "kuenda". With this knowledge and the above table, you can now build any verb for any person and any time.

Note that the Swahili language does not differentiate between different times in future and present. The only real complication here is the "-me-" part, which refers to the past perfect, so things that just happened.

Example: kutaka (to want):

They will want -> **watataka**

She wanted -> **alitaka**

We want -> **tunataka**

I've wanted -> **nimetaka**

In Kenya, natives will often leave out the personal pronouns and only say “**unaenda**” because the “u-“ already makes it clear who is meant. Spanish speakers will be familiar with this. Even more, Kenyans might leave away the “ni-“ part for the first person singular and just say “**naenda**” to say “I am going”.

CHAPTER 1 EXERCISES

Exercise 1.1: Saying Hello

Call three friends with the letter “S” and explain to them how people greet each other in Swahili. Then practice this whenever you call/meet and Swahili may become your secret language (I do this with friends in clubs to communicate that I like someone)

Exercise 1.2: Verbs

Choose the verbs below and pair them with the fitting noun to translate the phrase to Swahili:

Verbs (in infinitive)

kuenda (to go) | **kutaka** (to want) | **kuongea** (to speak)
kusoma (to read) | **kupenda** (to like)

Nouns

gitabu (book) | **kiingereza** (english language) | **chakula** (food)
nyumbani (food) | **Chapati** (a classicl Swahili dish)

- (a) I speak English. (Mimi) ninaongea Kiingereza).
- (b) They went home. _____.
- (c) You (pl) will like chapati. _____.
- (d) He read the book. _____.
- (e) We want food! _____!

CHAPTER 2: How Do You SAY This?

Conversation 2	
Swahili	English
Habari!	How's it going?
Nzuri!	Good!
Mimi ni Alex, na wewe?	I am Alex, and you?
Gina langu ni Wiklister. Niko furaha kukutana wewe!	My name is Wilkister. I am happy to meet you
Asante. Unasemaje "me too" kwa Kiswahili?	Thanks. How do you say "me too" in Swahili?
Mimi pia!	"Mimi pia"
Mimi pia :)	Mimi pia :)

VOCAB #2

gina - name
langu - name
furaha - happy
kukutana - to meet
kwa - with, in, of
(I used "kwa" for any and all propositions and that worked rather okay)
pia - too, also

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Ni vs NIKO

Unlike in English but familiar to all Spanish speakers, the Swahili language distinguishes between being permanently and being temporarily. In Spanish, you have 'estar' to describe things such as location ("estoy aquí" - "I am here") and 'ser' for permanent features ("soy Alex" - "I am Alex").

In Swahili, this exists as well.

Mimi **ni** Alex - I am Alex
is a permanent fact.

Niko furaha kukutana wewe - I am happy to meet you
Is more temporary, even if you may be happy to meet someone forever.

Note, that the "ni" is not conjugated. "Wewe ni nani?" ("Who are you?") works just as "Mimi ni Alex". However, for niko, this is not the same. Here, you have to change the first syllable just as verbs: **Niko, Uko, Ako, Iko (it is), Tuko, Mko, Wako**.

CHAPTER 2 EXERCISES

Excercise 2.1: ni or niko?

- (a) (He) Yeye ni Mjerumani. - He is German.
- (b) (You, s.) _____ furaha? - Are you happy?
- (c) (We) _____ njaa. - We are hungry.
- (d) (It) _____ hapa. - It is here.
- (e) (They) _____ hapo. - They are there.
- (f) (I) _____ Marisa. - I am Marisa
- (g) (You, pl.) _____ wualimu. - You are teachers

CHAPTER 3: NUMBERS, TIME, FOOD AND BEING POLITE

People say that Swahili was born in Tanzania, is dying in Kenya and buried in Uganda. A real reason for this is that in Kenya, there are more than 50 tribes and languages one has to unite that Swahili really is only the second language to most. I may be wrong here, but my suspicion is that this is the reason why Kenyan people are more basic and direct in their Swahili. For example: A Tanzanian person would say “ningependa kununua maji tafadhali”, which means “I would like to buy water please”. A Kenyan instead would say “ninataka maji”, “I want water”. More straight to the point, is it not?

Conversation 3	
Swahili	English
Mambo!	Hows it going?
Poa!	Good!
Ningependa kualika wewe nyumbani yangu kula na mimi leo, iko sawa?	I would like you to come to my house to eat with me, is that okay?
Ninapenda hii sana. Leo hapana, kesho? Saa ngapi?	I like this a lot. Not today, tomorrow? What time?
Saa sita?	12 o'clock?
Saa sita iko salama. Tutala nini?	12 is fine. What will we eat?
Unapenda ugali na kuku?	You like ugali and chicken?
Ndio! Sana.	Yes! Very much.
Sawa sawa. Kesho!	Alright alright. See you tomorrow!
Kesho!	See you tomorrow!

VOCAB #3

Ningependa - I would like

Kupenda - to like

Kualika - to invite

Yangu - my

Kula - to eat

Leo - today

Hii - this

Kesho - tomorrow

Saa - time

Sita - six

Kuku - chicken

Kesho - tomorrow (plainly used to say “see you tomorrow”)

NUMBERS

Here are the numbers from 0 to 10.

0 sufuri				
1 moja	2 mbili	3 tatu	4 nne	5 tano
6 sita	7 saba	8 nane	9 tisa	10 kumi

From 10 onwards, the system is very easy. 11 is kumi na moja (ten and one), 12 ist kumi na mbili (ten and two), etc. Basically “[insert tens] na [insert ones]”. This also counts for all other tens:

10 kumi	20 ishirini	30 thelathini	40 arobaini	50 hamsini
60 sitini	70 sabini	80 themanini	90 tisini	100 mia
1000 elfu				

Going above 100 then gives the following pattern:

1234 elfu moja, mia mbili, thelathini na nne
elfu [insert thousands], mia [insert hundreds], [insert tens] na [insert ones]

As in English, if the number has no hundreds value, we just leave it out and don't say “one thousand zero hundred” but rather “one thousand”.

TIME

In Swahili, the day starts at 6am. This means that when a Swahili conversation says “saa sita”, which literally would mean “six o'clock”, this actually means “ $6 + 6 = 12$ o'clock”. This has cost me the attendance of an event that was supposed to start at 9, but I thought “saa tatu” was 3pm, not 9am.

0700 (UK) \leftrightarrow saa moja (Swahili)

1130 (UK) \leftrightarrow saa tano na nusu (Swahili, nusu means “half”)

FOOD

Classic Kenyan **foods** are ugali (a corn meal), **chapati** (wraps made of wheat and water and whatever currently is around), **githeri** (a mix of beans and maize) and rice (in Swahili: **mcchale**).

SOLUTIONS

Solutions 1.2

- (a) (Mimi) ninaongea Kiingereza.
- (b) (Wao) walienda nyumbani.
- (c) (Ninyi) mtapenda chapati.
- (d) (Yeye) alisoma gitabu.
- (e) (Sisi) tunataka chakula!

Solutions 2.1

- (a) Yeye ni Mjerumani.
- (b) Uko furaha?
- (c) Tuko njaa.
- (d) Iko hapa.
- (e) Wako hapo.
- (f) Niko Marisa
- (g) Mko wualimu.