

Chapter 16

Question Words, Phrases and Statements

Questions in Swahili are formed from question words, question phrases and by changing statements into questions. Each of these ways is discussed in detail below.

Section A: Question Words

Listed below are nine commonly used question words:

1. *Je?* – Well, how about?
2. *Nani?* – Who?
3. *Nini?* – What?
4. *Lini?* – When?
5. *Wapi?* – Where?
6. *Vipi?* – How?
7. *-pi?* – What?, Which?, or Where?
8. *-ngapi?* – How many?
9. *Gani?* – What?, What kind (of), How? or Which?

Note on word order: As you will see, the majority of question words listed above can appear at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the sentence. The question word *Gani?* is the only one which appears either in the middle or at the end of the sentence but NEVER at the beginning of the sentence as we shall see in the examples below.

Je? (meaning “Well, How about?”)

The question word *Je?* is used in three ways. The first one is when it is used at the beginning of a sentence to alert the listener that a question is about to be asked as shown in the examples below:

Je, mwalimu hajambo? – How is the teacher?
Je, unasema Kiswahili? – Do you speak Swahili?

The second way is when *Je?* is used at the end of the sentence to enquire about someone or something. For example:

Na yule mtoto je? – And what about that child?
Na nyumba ile je? – And what about that house?

The third way of using the question word *Je?* is when it is suffixed to the main verb, no matter where the verb occurs in a sentence. In this context, *Je?* imparts the meaning of “how” something is done. For example:

Kijana aliandikaje barua pepe? – How did the youth write the email?
Mwalimu alifundishaje Kireno? – How did the teacher teach Portuguese?

Practice Exercise A

Translate into English.

1. *Mkulima alilimaje shamba?*
2. *Je, baba yako hajambo?*
3. *Wachezaji walikwendaje Los Angeles?*
4. *Je, wanafunzi hawajambo?*
5. *Tutafanyaje?*

Nani? (meaning “Who?”)

The word *Nani?* is used to ask questions about people. For example:

Nani ni Rais wa Marekani? – Who is the President of the United States?
Wewe ni nani? – Who are you?

Ninataka kujua, nani ni daktari? – I want to know, who is the doctor?

Translate into Swahili.

6. Who is studying in Japan?
7. Who speaks Swahili?
8. Who wrote the song?
9. Who bought the oranges?
10. Who are they?

***Nini?* (meaning “What?”)**

The word *Nini?* is used to ask questions about things. For example:

Anafanya nini? – What is he/she doing?

Polisi walifanya nini dukani? – What did the police do in the store?

Nini ilianguka? – What fell down?

Translate into Swahili.

11. What is Fatima doing?
12. What is the editor reading?
13. What will he/she do tomorrow?
14. What are you doing?
15. What is uncle reading?

***Lini?* (meaning “When?”)**

The word *Lini?* is used to ask questions about when something was done. For example:

Joshua alikwenda lini New York? – When did Joshua go to New York?

Lini utasoma Kifaransa? – When will you study French?

Mgeni alifika lini? – When did the guest arrive?

Translate into English.

16. *Lini atakwenda Ajentina?*
17. *Mwanasiasa atafika lini?*
18. *Lini utanunua Kamusi ya Kiingereza?*

19. *Lini utasoma?*
20. *Lini baba atarudi?*

Wapi? (meaning “Where?”)

The word *Wapi?* is used to ask questions about places. For example:

Wapi tutapata maji ya kunywa? – Where shall we get drinking water?

Thomas anasoma wapi? – Where does Thomas study?

Mwalimu alifundisha wapi mwaka jana? – Where did the teacher teach last year?

Translate into English.

21. *Mhandisi anakaa wapi?*
22. *Msichana alinunua wapi kitabu?*
23. *Utakwenda wapi Jumamosi?*
24. *Wapi atanunua diski madhubuti?*
25. *Atafanya kazi wapi baada ya masomo yake?*

Vipi? (meaning “How?”)

The word *Vipi?* is used to ask about how something was done. For example:

Vipi alisafiri kwenda London? – How did he/she travel to London?

Waliandika vipi? – How did they write?

Mlisoma vipi vitabu vya Kirusi? – How did you (pl.) read the Russian books?

Note: Questions using the word “How?” can also be asked using the question phrases *Kwa vipi?* (How?) or *Kwa namna gani?* (How?). However, these two question phrases can appear only at the end of a Swahili question sentence. For example:

Alisafiri kwa vipi? – How did he/she travel?

Aliendesha gari namna gani? – How did he/she drive the car?

Translate into Swahili.

26. How did he/she swim?
27. How did they build the house?
28. How did they work?
29. How did the child converse?
30. How did he/she travel?

-pi? (meaning “What?,” “Which?” or “Where?”)

The Interrogative Suffix *-pi?* can be used to ask questions about people and objects by combining the Interrogative Prefixes with the Interrogative Suffix *-pi?* in both singular and plural forms as shown in Table 16.1

TABLE 16.1
Interrogative Prefixes

Singular/Plural	Noun Class	Interrogative Prefix	Interrogative Suffix
Singular/Plural	M-/WA-	<i>yu-/we-</i>	<i>-pi?</i>
Singular/Plural	M-/MI-	<i>u-/i-</i>	<i>-pi?</i>
Singular/Plural	JI-/MA-	<i>li-/ya-</i>	<i>-pi?</i>
Singular/Plural	KI-/VI-	<i>ki-/vi-</i>	<i>-pi?</i>
Singular/Plural	N-	<i>i-/zi-</i>	<i>-pi?</i>
Singular/Plural	U-	<i>u-/zi-</i>	<i>-pi?</i>
Singular/Plural	PA-	<i>pa-</i> <i>ku-</i> <i>m-</i>	<i>-pi?</i> <i>-pi?</i> <i>-pi?</i>
Singular	KU-	<i>ku-</i>	<i>-pi?</i>

If we want to ask: “Which person?” we combine the Interrogative Prefix *yu-* with the Interrogative Suffix *-pi?* to form *Yupi?* (Which person?) for third person singular. For plural form we combine the Interrogative Prefix *we-* with the Interrogative Suffix *-pi?* to form *Wepi?* (Which people?). Hence we get:

Mtu yupi? – Which person?
Watu wepi? – Which people?

Examples:

Mwanajeshi yupi alipata nishani? – Which soldier received a medal?

Mti upi ulianguka? – Which tree fell?

Maneno yapi? – Which words?

Provide the Interrogative Prefixes by filling the blank spaces before the Interrogative Suffix *-pi?* as shown in the example below.

Question: *Kitabu ___-pi?*

Answer: *Kitabu kipi?*

31. *Mtu _____-pi?*

32. *Mwindaji _____-pi?*

33. *Waganga _____-pi?*

34. *Mti _____-pi?*

35. *Miti _____-pi?*

36. *Baiskeli (pl.) _____-pi?*

37. *Vitabu _____-pi?*

38. *Nyumba (pl.) _____-pi?*

39. *Ua _____-pi?*

40. *Mgiriki _____-pi?*

-ngapi? (meaning “How many?”)

The word *-ngapi?* which denotes quantity, is used to ask questions about people or things. This is done by combining the Plural Nominal Prefixes with the Interrogative Suffix *-ngapi?* as seen in Table 16.2

Note: Since the Question Word *-ngapi?* involves quantities of things, the singular nominal prefixes are not used. As well, plural nominal prefixes are not required for nouns in N- and U- noun classes.

Thus if we want to ask questions relating to people or objects, we combine the appropriate Plural Nominal Prefix with the Interrogative Suffix *-ngapi?* (See Table 16.2). For example:

Alifundisha wafanyakazi wangapi? – How many workers did he/she teach?

Wangapi watasaidia? – How many people will help?

Ulinunua mito mingapi? – How many pillows did you buy?

Walikaa katika nyumba ngapi? – How many houses did they live in?

TABLE 16.2
Interrogative Suffix Nominal Prefixes

Singular/Plural	Noun Class	Plural Nominal Prefixes	Interrogative Suffix
Singular/Plural	M-/WA	<i>wa-</i>	<i>-ngapi?</i>
Singular/Plural	M-/MI-	<i>mi-</i>	<i>-ngapi?</i>
Singular/Plural	JI-/MA-	<i>ma-</i>	<i>-ngapi?</i>
Singular/Plural	KI-/VI-	<i>vi-</i>	<i>-ngapi?</i>
Singular/Plural	N-		<i>ngapi?</i>
Singular/Plural	U-		<i>ngapi?</i>
Singular/Plural	PA-	<i>pa-</i>	<i>-ngapi?</i>
Singular/Plural	KU-	<i>ku-</i>	<i>-ngapi?</i>

Baba alinunua baiskeli ngapi mwaka jana? – How many bicycles did dad buy last year?

Translate into English.

41. *Walikuja watu wangapi?*
42. *Wachezaji walinunua vitabu vingapi?*
43. *Atakaa Ghana siku ngapi?*
44. *Tutasoma Kihindi miezi mingapi?*
45. *Tutanunua meza ngapi?*

Gani? (meaning “What?,” “What kind (of),” “How?” or Which?)

The word *Gani?* is used to ask questions about objects. Note on word order: As mentioned above, this question word appears either in the middle or at the end of the sentence but NEVER at the beginning of a sentence. For example:

Mary anakaa mtaa gani? – On which/what street does Mary reside?

Mtoto alicheza mchezo gani? – What type of game did the child play?

Mtu gani? – Which person?

Note: In the last example, the word *mtu* does not refer to a specific person. Instead, it refers to a person as a general object.

Translate into English.

46. *Mshonaji atakuja siku gani?*
47. *Habari gani bwana?*
48. *Wageni gani walifika jana usiku?*
49. *Mkulima gani alipata trekta?*
50. *Babu alipanda ndege gani?*

Section B: Question Phrases

Phrases that are used to ask questions in Swahili include the following:

1. *Kwa nini?* – Why? or By what means (of transport)?
2. *Kwa sababu gani?* – Why? or For what reason?
3. *Kwa nani?* – At whose place?

Note on word order: Question Phrases are divided into two categories. The first category comprises Question Phrases that can appear either at the beginning or at the end of the sentence as shown in the examples below:

- Kwa nini alisoma Kiarabu?* – Why did he/she study Arabic?
Sarah anakwenda shuleni kwa nini? – By what means does Sarah travel to school?
Kwa sababu gani alikwenda Marekani? – For what reason did he/she go to America?
Waliandika kitabu kwa sababu gani? – For what reason did they write the book?

The second category of Question Phrases is that which is used at the end of the sentence only, NEVER at the beginning as shown in the examples below:

- John alikaa kwa nani?* – At whose place did John stay?

Practice Exercise B

Translate into Swahili.

51. Why is he/she studying English?
52. At whose place did he/she stay?
53. Why did he/she cry?

Section C: Questions from Statements

Another way of asking questions in Swahili is by making a statement and raising your voice slightly at the end of the sentence for the last two or three syllables and lowering the voice for the final syllable¹ just like in other languages including English.

Examples:

Statement: *Anasoma kitabu cha Kijerumani* – He/She is reading a German book.

Question: *Anasoma kitabu cha Kijerumani?* – He/She is reading a German book?

Practice Exercise C

Translate into Swahili.

54. Is he/she teaching French?
55. Are they reading English books?

New Vocabulary

Ajentina: Argentina

baada ya: after, afterwards

barua pepe: e-mail(s)

diski madhubuti: compact disk(s)

endesha: drive

Japani: Japan

Jumamosi: Saturday

Kijerumani: German, German language

kwa nini?: Why?

lia: cry

lini?: when?
Mgiriki/wa-: Greek(s)
mhandisi/wa-: engineer(s)
mjomba/wa-: maternal uncle(s)
mshonaji/wa-: tailor(s)
namna: type(s), kind(s)
nenoma-: word(s)
nini?: what?
nishani: ceremonial medal(s)
-pi?: which?
sababu: cause, reason
safari: travel
shamba/ma-: farm(s)
siku: day(s)
trekta/ma-: tractor(s)
usiku: night(s)
vipi?: how?
wimbo/nyimbo: song(s)
zungumza: converse

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. How did the farmer cultivate the farm?
2. How is your father?
3. How did the players travel to Los Angeles?
4. How are the students?
5. How shall we do it?
6. *Nani anasoma Japani?*
7. *Nani anasema Kiswahili?*
8. *Nani aliandika wimbo?*
9. *Nani alinunua machungwa?*
10. *Wao ni nani?*
11. *Fatima anafanya nini?*
12. *Mhariri anasoma nini?*
13. *Atafanya nini kesho?*
14. *Unafanya nini?*

15. *Mjomba anasoma nini?*
16. When will he/she go to Argentina?
17. When will the politician arrive?
18. When will you buy an English Dictionary?
19. When will you study?
20. When will father return?
21. Where does the engineer live?
22. Where did the girl buy the book?
23. Where will you go on Saturday?
24. Where will he/she buy a compact disk?
25. Where will he/she work after his/her studies?
26. *Aliogelea vipi?*
27. *Walijenga vipi nyumba?*
28. *Walifanya kazi vipi?*
29. *Mtoto alizungumza vipi?*
30. *Alisafiri vipi?*
31. *yupi?*
32. *yupi?*
33. *wepi?*
34. *upi?*
35. *ipi?*
36. *zipi?*
37. *vipi?*
38. *zipi?*
39. *lipi?*
40. *yupi?*
41. How many people came?
42. How many books did the players buy?
43. For how many days will he/she stay in Ghana?
44. For how many months shall we study Hindi?
45. How many tables shall we buy?
46. Which day will the tailor come?
47. How are you sir?
48. What kind of guests arrived last night?
49. Which farmer got a tractor?
50. Which airplane did grandpa fly on?

Answers to Practice Exercise B

51. *Kwa nini anasoma Kiingereza?*
52. *Alikaa kwa nani?*
53. *Alilia kwa sababu gani/kwa nini?*

Answers to Practice Exercise C

54. *Anafundisha Kifaransa?*
55. *Wanasoma vitabu vya Kiingereza?*

Note

1. Wilson, 77.