

Chapter 18

Numbers

In this Chapter we will learn about cardinal numbers, which are used to count in Swahili, numbers that take noun class agreement, and the proper word order when using numbers in a sentence.

Section A: From 0 to 9

Here are the numbers from the “singles column” in Swahili.

- 0 – *sifuri*
- 1 – *moja*
- 2 – *mbili*
- 3 – *tatu*
- 4 – *nne*
- 5 – *tano*
- 6 – *sita*
- 7 – *saba*
- 8 – *nane*
- 9 – *tisa*

When used to count nouns the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8 take agreement with the noun they describe. The numbers 6, 7 and 9 do not take noun class agreement. (See Section D)

10 to 90

Here are the numbers from the “tens column” in Swahili.

- 10 – *kumi*
- 20 – *ishirini*
- 30 – *thelathini*
- 40 – *arobaini*
- 50 – *hamsini*
- 60 – *sitini*
- 70 – *sabini*
- 80 – *themanini*
- 90 – *tisini*

Using the numbers from the “tens column” above and the numbers from the “singles column” in Section A, it is possible to construct any number between 11 and 99. This is done by using a special construction known as the *na* (and) construction. For example, the word for “eleven” in Swahili is *kumi na moja*. This word is constructed from *kumi* (ten) and *moja* (one) and uses the word *na* (and) to join them together. Below are more examples of numbers from 11 to 99.

- 11 – *kumi na moja*
- 19 – *kumi na tisa*
- 34 – *thelathini na nne*
- 66 – *sitini na sita*
- 97 – *tisini na saba*

Practice Exercise A

Write the following numbers in Swahili.

1. 15
2. 26
3. 29
4. 38
5. 47
6. 55
7. 61
8. 72
9. 88
10. 92

Section B: Higher Numbers

100 – *mia*
 1,000 – *elfu*
 100,000 – *laki*
 1 million – *milioni*
 1 billion – *bilioni*

The *na* (and) construction is also used to make higher numbers up to infinity. Here are some examples:

109 – *mia moja na tisa*
 851 – *mia nane, hamsini na moja*
 3,003 – *elfu tatu na tatu*
 75,400 – *elfu sabini na tano, mia nne*

However, not all higher numbers need the *na* (and) construction to form numbers. For example, simple numbers such as 4 000 000 are made by stating the column, in this case *milioni* and then how many millions *nne* to form *milioni nne*. Here are more examples of simple numbers.

3,000 – *elfu tatu*
 500 – *mia tano*
 8,000,000,000 – *bilioni nane*
 100,000 – *laki moja*

Now let us combine all of the rules learned so far and look at numbers consisting of many units.

109,007 – *laki moja, elfu tisa na saba*
 2,908,330 – *milioni mbili, laki tisa, elfu nane, mia tatu na thelathini*
 8,177,345 – *milioni nane, laki moja, sabini na saba elfu, mia tatu, arobaini na tano*

Note that in the second example the *na* at the end of the sentence is optional.

There is one final thing that the reader should be aware of when dealing with higher numbers in Swahili and that is the potential for confusion. This confusion can occur when dealing with numbers containing “thousands” (*elfu*), “millions” (*milioni*) or “billions” (*bilioni*). Some examples will illustrate the problem.

10,004 – *elfu kumi na nne* – literally – thousands ten and four
 14,000 – *elfu kumi na nne* – literally – thousands fourteen

As you can see by the examples above, the words in Swahili referring to the numbers would be written exactly the same. To avoid this confusion many Swahili speakers these days break the normal grammar rule of putting the number of thousands AFTER the word “*elfu*” and INSTEAD put the number of thousands IN FRONT of the word “*elfu*” so 14,000 would be like in English:

kumi na nne elfu – literally – ten and four (fourteen) thousands

This solution is also used for numbers containing millions and billions.

For example, 100 billion would be:

mia moja bilioni – literally – one hundred billion.

Practice Exercise B

Write these numbers in Swahili.

11. 34,899
12. 555,978
13. 8,132
14. 642
15. 9,437,450
16. 67,000
17. 544
18. 1,220
19. 7,795,794
20. 6,885
21. 11,000,004

22. 78,000
23. 3,710,001
24. 360,009
25. 908,695

Section C: Counting Nouns

Numbers in Swahili are considered to be a type of adjective, however, as mentioned at the end of Section A, only the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 must agree with the nouns they qualify. This is because these numbers are Bantu numbers, the rest having been borrowed primarily from Arabic with a few English words for very large numbers. This noun class agreement is based on the agreement an adjective must take, with a few exceptions. Table 18.1 illustrates the correct agreement (if any) for each noun class.

Please note that when dealing with several of the noun classes, the word for two (*mbili*) changes to the form *-wili* and then has the appropriate prefix attached to it. The number 2 is the only number that changes form before having a prefix attached. The numbers 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8 simply have the prefix attached without any modifications. Here are some more examples using numbers besides 1 and 2.

- Magari matano* – five cars
- Vichwa vitatu* – three heads
- Wafanyakazi wanane* – eight workers
- Mahali panne* – four places

Noun agreement is applied whenever the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 are used in the “single digit column,” even if it is part of a larger number. Here are some examples:

- Vitabu mia moja na kimoja* – one hundred and one books
- Magari tisini na manane* – Ninety-eight vehicles
- Rafiki thelathini na nne* – Thirty-four friends

Note that in the final example *nne* does not have a prefix because the word *rafiki* is an N- class noun.

TABLE 18.1
Agreement Prefixes for Numerals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8

Noun Class	Agreement Prefix	Example	Translation
M-/WA- Singular	<i>m-</i>	<i>mtu mmoja</i>	one person
Plural	<i>wa-</i>	<i>watu wawili</i>	two people
M-/MI- Singular	<i>m-</i>	<i>mti mmoja</i>	one tree
Plural	<i>mi-</i>	<i>miti miwili</i>	two trees
Ji-/MA- Singular	No prefix	<i>jicho moja</i>	one eye
Plural	<i>ma-</i>	<i>macho mawili</i>	two eyes
KI-/VI- Singular	<i>ki-</i>	<i>kiti kimoja</i>	one chair
Plural	<i>vi-</i>	<i>viti viwili</i>	two chairs
N- Singular	No prefix	<i>baiskeli moja</i>	one bicycle
Plural	No prefix	<i>baiskeli mbili</i>	two bicycles
U- Singular	No prefix	<i>nywele moja</i>	one hair
Plural	No prefix	<i>nywele mbili</i>	two hairs
PA- Singular	<i>pa-</i>	<i>mahali pamoja</i>	one definite place
Plural	<i>pa-</i>	<i>mahali pawili</i>	two definite places
	<i>ku-</i>	<i>mahali kumoja</i>	one indefinite place
	<i>ku-</i>	<i>mahali kuwili</i>	two indefinite places
	<i>m-</i>	<i>mahali mmoja</i>	one inside place
	<i>m-</i>	<i>mahali mwili</i>	two inside places
KU- Singular	<i>ku-</i>	<i>kusoma kumoja</i>	one reading
Plural	<i>ku-</i>	<i>kusoma kuwili</i>	two readings

One final note before we continue to the Practice Exercise. Here again is the proper word order for a Swahili sentence.

Noun, personal possessive, adjective,
quantity, demonstrative and possessive.

Example:

Visu vyangu vikubwa vitano vile vya kale. – Those five big ancient knives of mine.

Practice Exercise C

Write the following sentences in Swahili.

26. Three fruits.
27. One hundred and one people.
28. Those three big clay pots of mine.
29. Your (pl.) six apples.
30. His twenty-eight French students.
31. These twelve very expensive shops.
32. I want five tasty mangoes.
33. Where are our two fancy chairs?
34. Our two fancy chairs are here.
35. He will sell twenty-four fresh eggs at the market.
36. They need to buy one bag of salt.
37. The truck is carrying ninety-four barrels of crude oil.
38. The police confiscated twenty-five cell phones.
39. We have drunk five cups of hot tea.
40. There are one hundred and seventy-three pairs of stylish glasses.
41. My friend's house has two stoves.
42. Every year the world uses 800 billion plastic bags.
43. There are six shirts in the suitcase.
44. The government will construct nine hospitals.

New Vocabulary

-a *fahari kupita*: stylish

-a *moto*: hot

-a *plastiki*: plastic

arobaini: forty

beba: carry

begi/ma-: bag(s)

bilioni: billion

chungu/vy-: pot(s)

elfu: thousand

hamsini: fifty

ishirini: twenty

kumi: ten

kumi na mbili: twelve

kumi na moja: eleven

kumi na nane: eighteen
kumi na nne: fourteen
kumi na saba: seventeen
kumi na sita: sixteen
kumi na tano: fifteen
kumi na tatu: thirteen
kumi na tisa: nineteen
kuna: there is/are
laki: hundred thousand
lori/ma-: truck(s), from the English “lorry”
mafuta ghafi: crude oil
mbili: two
mia: hundred
milioni: million
moja: one
nane: eight
nne: four
nyang’anya: take away (forcefully)
pipa/ma-: barrel(s)
saba: seven
sabini: seventy
sifuri: zero
simu ya/za mkono: cell phone(s) (literally a telephone of the hand)
sita: six
sitini: sixty
tano: five
tatu: three
thelathini: thirty
themanini: eighty
tisa: nine
tisini: ninety
udongo wa kinamu: clay (literally “soil of flexibility”)
uza: sell

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. *kumi na tano*
2. *ishirini na sita*
3. *ishirini na tisa*
4. *thelathini na nane*
5. *arobaini na saba*
6. *hamsini na tano*
7. *sitini na moja*
8. *sabini na mbili*
9. *themanini na nane*
10. *tisini na mbili*

Answers to Practice Exercise B

11. *elfu thelathini na nne, mia nane, tisini na tisa*
12. *laki tano, elfu hamsini na tano, mia tisa, sabini na nane*
13. *elfu nane, mia moja, thelathini na mbili*
14. *mia sita, arobaini na mbili*
15. *milioni tisa, laki nne, elfu thelathini na saba, mia nne na hamsini*
16. *elfu sitini na saba*
17. *mia tano, arobaini na nne*
18. *elfu moja, mia mbili na ishirini*
19. *milioni saba, laki saba, elfu tisini na tano, mia saba, tisini na nne*
20. *elfu sita, mia nane, themanini na tano*
21. *kumi na moja milioni na nne*
22. *sabini na nane elfu*
23. *milioni tatu, laki saba, kumi elfu na moja*
24. *laki tatu, sitini elfu na tisa*
25. *laki tisa, elfu nane, mia sita, tisini na tano*

Answers to Practice Exercise C

26. *Matunda matatu.*
27. *Watu mia moja na mmoja.*
28. *Vyungu vyangu vikubwa vitatu vile vya udongo wa kinamu.*

29. *Tufaha zenu sita.*
30. *Wanafunzi wake Wafaransa ishirini na wanane.*
31. *Maduka ghali sana kumi na mawili haya.*
32. *Ninataka maembe matamu matano.*
33. *Viti vyetu viwili vya kupendeza viko wapi?*
34. *Viti vyetu viwili vya kupendeza vipo hapa.*
35. *Atauza mayai mapya ishirini na manne sokoni.*
36. *Wanahitaji kununua mfuko mmoja wa chumvi.*
37. *Lori linabeba mapipa tisini na manne ya mafuta ghafi.*
38. *Polisi walinyang'anya simu za mkono ishirini na tano.*
39. *Tumekunywa vikombe vitano vya chai ya moto.*
40. *Kuna miwani mia moja, sabini na tatu ya fahari kupita.*
41. *Nyumba ya rafiki yangu ina meko mawili.*
42. *Kila mwaka dunia inatumia mabegi ya plastiki mia nane bilioni.*
43. *Kuna mashati sita katika sanduku.*
44. *Serikali itajenga hospitali tisa.*