

Chapter 13

Adjectives

In Swahili, any word, phrase or clause used to qualify a noun or to explain the noun is considered an adjective. Therefore adjectives in Swahili are not just simple adjectives as in English, but instead include phrases and clauses that can be used as adjectives. Adjectives in Swahili are divided into several categories, each of which has its own set of rules.

1. Adjectives that take agreement and the agreement prefix is attached to an adjective “stem” which starts with a vowel.
2. Adjectives that take agreement and the agreement prefix is attached to an adjective stem which starts with a consonant.
3. Exception adjectives that take agreement but do not follow the usual agreement of other adjectives.
4. Invariable adjectives which are of Arabic origin and do not take any agreement with the noun they qualify.
5. Compound adjectives made from nouns, verbs and other words in Swahili and combined with the *-a* of Association.

Section A: Vowel Stem Adjectives

Adjectives that must take agreement fall into two categories, adjectives that start with vowels and adjectives that start with consonants. We will begin with adjectives that take agreement and start with vowels. Table 13.1 shows the agreement taken by adjective stems that begin with either *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, or *u*, the letter *y* is not considered a vowel in Swahili.

Table 13.1 must be memorized as the specific rules depend on the noun class and the vowel stem of the adjective.

TABLE 13.1
Vowel Stem Adjectives

| | <i>-angavu</i> | <i>-ekundu</i> | <i>-ingine</i> | <i>-ororo</i> | <i>-unganifu</i> |
|-----------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Sing. M- | <i>mwangavu</i> | <i>mwekundu</i> | <i>mwingine</i> | <i>mwororo</i> | <i>munganifu</i> |
| Pl. WA- | <i>waangavu</i> | <i>wekundu</i> | <i>wengine</i> | <i>waororo</i> | <i>waunganifu</i> |
| Sing. M- | <i>mwangavu</i> | <i>mwekundu</i> | <i>mwingine</i> | <i>mwororo</i> | <i>munganifu</i> |
| Pl. MI- | <i>myangavu</i> | <i>myekundu</i> | <i>mingine</i> | <i>myororo</i> | <i>miunganifu</i> |
| Sing. JI- | <i>langavu</i> | <i>jekundu</i> | <i>lingine</i> | <i>lororo</i> | <i>liunganifu</i> |
| Pl. MA- | <i>maangavu</i> | <i>mekundu</i> | <i>mengine</i> | <i>mororo</i> | <i>maunganifu</i> |
| Sing. KI- | <i>changavu</i> | <i>chekundu</i> | <i>kingine</i> | <i>chororo</i> | <i>kiunganifu</i> |
| Pl. VI- | <i>vyangavu</i> | <i>vyekundu</i> | <i>vingine</i> | <i>vyororo</i> | <i>viunganifu</i> |
| Sing. N- | <i>nyangavu</i> | <i>nyekundu</i> | <i>nyingine</i> | <i>nyororo</i> | <i>nyunganifu</i> |
| Pl. N- | <i>nyangavu</i> | <i>nyekundu</i> | <i>nyingine</i> | <i>nyororo</i> | <i>nyunganifu</i> |
| Sing. U- | <i>mwangavu</i> | <i>mwekundu</i> | <i>mwingine</i> | <i>mwororo</i> | <i>munganifu</i> |
| Pl. U- | <i>nyangavu</i> | <i>nyekundu</i> | <i>nyingine</i> | <i>nyororo</i> | <i>nyunganifu</i> |
| | PA- <i>pangavu</i> | <i>pekundu</i> | <i>pengine</i> | <i>pororo</i> | <i>punganifu</i> |
| | KU- <i>kuangavu</i> | <i>kwekundu</i> | <i>kwingine</i> | <i>kororo</i> | <i>kuunganifu</i> |
| | M- <i>muangavu</i> | <i>mwekundu</i> | <i>mwingine</i> | <i>mororo</i> | <i>munganifu</i> |
| | KU- <i>kuangavu</i> | <i>kwekundu</i> | <i>kwingine</i> | <i>kororo</i> | <i>kuunganifu</i> |

The adjective stem *-ema* meaning “good” or “kind” takes a special agreement when agreeing with nouns from the N- Class. Instead of *nyema* which would be expected from the N- Class in Table 13.1 the stem *-ema* actually takes the agreement *njema*. For example:

Safari njema! – Good journey! (Meaning, *I wish you a good journey!*)

Practice Exercise A

Translate the following sentences into Swahili.

1. The piece of wood is thin.
2. The owl is a very watchful bird.

3. The wall was bare.
4. People will not buy many houses next year.
5. The wicked person ran far away.

Section B: Consonant Stem Adjectives

TABLE 13.2
Consonant Stem Adjectives

| | Noun Class | -zuri | -baya |
|----------|-------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Singular | M- | <i>mzuri</i> | <i>mbaya</i> |
| Plural | WA- | <i>wazuri</i> | <i>wabaya</i> |
| Singular | M- | <i>mzuri</i> | <i>mbaya</i> |
| Plural | MI- | <i>mizuri</i> | <i>mibaya</i> |
| Singular | JI- | <i>zuri</i> | <i>baya</i> |
| Plural | MA- | <i>mazuri</i> | <i>mabaya</i> |
| Singular | KI- | <i>kizuri</i> | <i>kibaya</i> |
| Plural | VI- | <i>vizuri</i> | <i>vibaya</i> |
| Singular | N- | <i>nzuri</i> | <i>mbaya</i> |
| Plural | N- | <i>nzuri</i> | <i>mbaya</i> |
| Singular | U- | <i>mzuri</i> | <i>mbaya</i> |
| Plural | U- | <i>nzuri</i> | <i>mbaya</i> |
| | PA- | <i>pazuri</i> | <i>pabaya</i> |
| | KU- | <i>kuzuri</i> | <i>kubaya</i> |
| | M- | <i>mzuri</i> | <i>mbaya</i> |
| | KU- | <i>kuzuri</i> | <i>kubaya</i> |

In general adjectives with consonant stems follow Table 13.2, however when consonant stem adjectives must agree with nouns from the N-Class then the following rules apply.

1. When a consonant stem adjective beginning with the letters d, g, j, y, or z is used to describe a noun from the N- Class then the prefix *n-* is necessary.

2. When a consonant stem adjective beginning with the letter *b* is used to describe a noun from the N- Class then the prefix *m-* must be used.
3. All other consonant stem adjectives do not take agreement when describing nouns from the N- Class.

In addition a few adjective stems take special agreements. The adjective stem *-refu* (long, tall) has a special agreement when agreeing with nouns from the N- Class. The adjective stem *-refu* takes the modified form of *ndefu* when following nouns from the N- Class. For example:

Meza ndefu – The long table

The adjective stem *-pya* (new) has some special agreements. Mentioned below are the noun class agreements that do not follow the regular pattern. All other noun class agreements follow the regular agreements in Table 13.2

Singular JI- becomes *jipya*

Singular N- becomes *mpya*

Plural N- becomes *mpya*

Plural U- becomes *mpya*

Practice Exercise B

Translate the following sentences into English.

6. *Mimi nitaandika mtihani mgumu.*
7. *Bibi alipika chakula kitamu.*
8. *Ndizi kubwa zinatoka Afrika Kusini.*
9. *Debe tupu haliachi kuvuma.*
10. *Watu wanene watarudi kesho kufanya mazoezi.*

Section C: Exception Adjectives

There are four commonly used adjectives in Swahili which do not follow the usual agreement of other adjectives as taught above. These adjectives are *-ote* which means “all” or “whole,” *-o -ote* which means “any,” *-enye* which means “having,” and *-enyewe* which means “-self.” Except for the M-/WA- class all other noun class agreements are easy to remem-

ber because they follow the same agreement as used with the *-a* of Association.

Table 13.3 shows the Noun Class agreement of every Noun Class with the adjectives *-ote*, *-o -ote*, *-enye* and *-enyewe*.

TABLE 13.3
Exception Adjectives

| Noun Class | <i>-ote</i> | <i>-o -ote</i> | <i>-enye</i> | <i>-enyewe</i> |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| M - 1 st Person (Sing.) | <i>wote</i> | | <i>mwenye</i> | <i>mwenyewe</i> |
| WA- 1 st Person (Pl.) | <i>sote</i> | | <i>wenye</i> | <i>wenyewe</i> |
| M - 2 nd Person (Sing.) | <i>wote</i> | | <i>mwenye</i> | <i>mwenyewe</i> |
| WA- 2 nd Person (Pl.) | <i>nyote</i> | | <i>wenye</i> | <i>wenyewe</i> |
| M - 3 rd Person (Sing.) | <i>wote</i> | <i>ye yote</i> | <i>mwenye</i> | <i>mwenyewe</i> |
| WA- Person (Pl.) | <i>wote</i> | <i>wo wote</i> | <i>wenye</i> | <i>wenyewe</i> |
| M- Singular | <i>wote</i> | <i>wo wote</i> | <i>wenye</i> | <i>wenyewe</i> |
| MI- Plural | <i>yote</i> | <i>yo yote</i> | <i>yenye</i> | <i>yenyewe</i> |
| JI - Singular | <i>lote</i> | <i>lo lote</i> | <i>lenye</i> | <i>lenyewe</i> |
| MA- Plural | <i>yote</i> | <i>yo yote</i> | <i>yenye</i> | <i>yenyewe</i> |
| KI- Singular | <i>chote</i> | <i>cho chote</i> | <i>chenye</i> | <i>chenyewe</i> |
| VI- Plural | <i>vyote</i> | <i>vyo vyote</i> | <i>vyenye</i> | <i>vyenyewe</i> |
| N- Singular | <i>yote</i> | <i>yo yote</i> | <i>yenye</i> | <i>yenyewe</i> |
| N- Plural | <i>zote</i> | <i>zo zote</i> | <i>zenye</i> | <i>zenyewe</i> |
| U- Singular | <i>wote</i> | <i>wo wote</i> | <i>wenye</i> | <i>wenyewe</i> |
| U- Plural | <i>zote</i> | <i>zo zote</i> | <i>zenye</i> | <i>zenyewe</i> |
| PA- | <i>pote</i> | <i>po pote</i> | <i>penye</i> | <i>penyewe</i> |
| KU- | <i>kote</i> | <i>ko kote</i> | <i>kwenye</i> | <i>kwenyewe</i> |
| M- | <i>mote</i> | <i>mo mote</i> | <i>mwenye</i> | <i>mwenyewe</i> |
| KU- | <i>kote</i> | <i>ko kote</i> | <i>kwenye</i> | <i>kwenyewe</i> |

When the adjectives *-ote* or *-o -ote* are included in a sentence with other adjectives it is important to note the word order. Since the adjectives *-ote* or *-o -ote* deal with quantity they usually come as the last adjective, unless an adjective is used as a predicate then the predicate adjective must always come last.

Chukua vitabu vikubwa vyekundu vyote. – Take all the big red books.

Vitabu vikubwa vyote ni vyekundu. – All the big books are red.

Chukua vitabu vikubwa vyekundu vyo vyote. – Take any of the big red books.

Vitabu vikubwa vyo vyote ni vyekundu. – Any of the big books are red.

When the words *cho chote* are used without reference to any noun then the meaning is understood to be “any object at all” as it agrees with the missing noun *kitu* meaning “thing.”

When the adjective *-enye* is used in a sentence then it must be followed by either a noun or an infinitive verb.

Kandili yenye mafuta mengi. – The lantern with a lot of oil

Helikopta yenye kufika. – The arriving helicopter

When the adjective *-enye* is included in a sentence with other adjectives it is important to note the word order. The adjective *-enye* must come after all adjectives, including *-ote* and *-o -ote*.

Kitambaa chepesi cho chote chenye tundu kimetupwa.

Any light cloth with a hole has been thrown out.

When the adjective *-enyewe* is used in a sentence it must follow a noun, verb or a pronoun.

Msichana mwenyewe alitaka kuolewa. – The girl herself wanted to get married.

Alifanya mwenyewe. – He/She himself/herself did it.

Mimi mwenyewe sikwenda kazini. – I myself did not go to work.

When the adjective *-enyewe* is included in a sentence with other adjectives it is important to note the word order. The adjective *-enyewe* must come after all adjectives, including *-ote* and *-o -ote*.

Kitambaa chepesi chote chenye kimetupwa. – The whole light cloth itself has been thrown out.

Also note that the word *mwenyewe* is used as a noun to mean “owner,” and *wenyewe* as “owners.”

Practice Exercise C

Translate the following sentences into English.

11. *Askari wote wa Kanada watarudi mwaka ujao.*
12. *Thurea yenyewe imeanguka.*
13. *Mchango wo wote utawasaidia wateswa wa mafuriko.*
14. *Mchinjaji mwenye kisu kikali kikubwa amelala.*
15. *Karoti zote katika mfuko zimeoza.*

Section D: Invariable Adjectives

Invariable adjectives are adjectives that do not take agreement with the nouns that they qualify. There are a large number of adjectives that belong to this category, and many are of foreign origin, mostly Arabic, although some are also of Bantu origin. Invariable adjectives follow the same rules for word order as Variable adjectives. Here are some of the more common Invariable adjectives:

madhubuti – precise, reliable

sawa – equal

safi – clean

karimu – generous

maskini – poor

tajiri – rich

bure – useless

kila – each, every

rahisi – easy

tayari – ready

ghali – expensive

bora – better, best

imara – firm, stable

hodari – brave, serious

maalumu – special

butu – blunt (referring to anything that can be sharpened: pencil, knife)

gubigubi – covered from head to toe (usually clothing or blanket)

kame – barren, arid (referring to land)

chepechepe – wet, moist, soaked

Practice Exercise D

Translate the following sentences into Swahili.

16. The doctor himself covered the sick person completely.

17. We do not want to wear moist clothes.

Section E: Compound Adjectives

Compound adjectives are made from nouns, verbs and other words in Swahili. The construction of compound adjectives is always done by placing the *-a* of Association in front of the word being changed into a compound adjective and must take agreement with the noun being described. The *-a* of Association is used to join two words together to indicate a relationship between them. Below are some examples of compound adjectives:

maji ya moto – hot water

mwili wa baridi – cold body

mahali pa hatari – dangerous place

sehemu ya siri – secret area

duka la mipira – football shop

maktaba ya karibu – nearby library

Note that sometimes the meaning of the compound adjective is different from the original meaning of the noun, for example:

The Swahili word *bure* means “useless” however when it becomes a compound adjective *-a bure* it takes the meaning of “free” (without cost).

In addition to using two nouns to form a compound adjective there are other ways of forming compound adjectives, for example:

Using verbs in the infinitive form:

kaanga – fry

-a kukaanga – fried

bembeleza – sooth
-a kubembeleza – soothing

Using a verb in the Prepositional form (see Chapter 26) which expresses the purpose of something:

makasi ya kunyolea – haircutting scissors
chumba cha kusomea – reading room
nyumba ya kufikia wageni – guest arriving house (guest house)

To express directions in Swahili and indicate gender the *-a* of Association is also used:

-a kulia – right
chandarua cha kulia – rightside mosquito net
-a kushoto – left
gurudumu la kushoto – leftside tire
-a kike – female
bidhaa za kike – products for women
-a kiume – male
mapambo ya vito ya kiume – men’s jewellery

The *-a* of Association can be used to form compound adjectives that describe what “type” of thing something is, for example:

-a kitoto – childish
harakati za kitoto – childish activities
-a kizamani – ancient
magofu ya kizamani – ancient ruins
-a kizungu – European
kofia ya kizungu – European hat

Practice Exercise E

Translate the following sentences into English.

18. *Watoto wengi wa kisasa wamekwenda chuo kikuu.*
19. *Gauni la kijani lilipotea.*
20. *Mwelekeo wa kusumbua si mzuri.*

New Vocabulary

- a *kike*: female, feminine
- a *kitoto*: childish
- a *kiume*: male
- a *kizamani*: ancient
- a *kizungu*: European
- a *kulia*: right
- a *kushoto*: left
- acha*: stop, quit, permit
- Afrika Kusini*: South Africa
- angalifu*: watchful, careful
- angavu*: clear, shining
- baridi*: cold
- bembeleza*: sooth
- bidhaa*: product(s), merchandise
- bora*: better, best
- bundi*: owl(s)
- bure*: useless
- butu*: blunt (referring to anything that can be sharpened: pencil, knife)
- chepechepe*: wet, moist, soaked
- cho chote*: any object at all
- chukua*: take, carry
- debe/ma-*: tin(s), can(s)
- ekundu*: red
- ema*: good, kind
- embamba*: thin, narrow
- enye*: having, using
- enyewe*: -self
- epesi*: light (in weight), quick
- funika*: cover, disguise
- gauni/ma-*: gown(s), dress(es)
- gofu/ma-*: ruin(s), wreck(s)
- gubigubi*: covered from head to toe (usually clothing or blanket)
- gumu*: difficult, hard
- gurudumu/ma-*: tire(s), wheel(s)
- harakati*: activity(ies), struggle(s)
- hatari*: danger(s), emergency(ies)
- helikopta*: helicopter(s)

hodari: clever, brave, serious
imara: firm, stable
-ingi: many
-ingine: another
kaanga: fry
kali: sharp, fierce
kame: barren, arid (referring to land)
kandili: lamp(s), lantern(s)
karimu: generous
karoti: carrot(s)
kijani: green
kila: each, every
kipande/vi-: piece(s)
kisasa: modern, up-to-date
kitambaa/vi-: cloth(s)
kito/vi-: jewel(s), precious stone(s)
kitu/vi-: thing(s)
kofia: hat(s), crown(s)
-kubwa: big, large
maalumu: special
madhubuti: precise, reliable
mafuriko: flood(s)
makasi: shears, scissors
makasi ya kunyolea: haircutting scissors
maktaba: library(ies)
maskini: poor
mbali: far, far away
mchango/mi-: contribution(s), donation(s)
mchinjaji/wa-: butcher(s)
mpira/mi-: football(s)
mteswa/wa-: victim(s)
mwaka ujao: next year
mwelekeo/mi-: attitude(s), tendency(ies)
mwenyewe/wenyewe: owner(s)
nene: fat
-o -ote: any
olewa: get married (for women only)
-ororo: soft, smooth
-ote: all, whole

-ovu: wicked, evil
oza: rot, give in marriage (for women only)
pambo/ma-: ornament(s), decoration(s)
potea: lose, disappear
-pya: new
rahisi: easy, simple, cheap
-refu: long, tall
safi: clean
sawa: equal (to/in)
sehemu: part(s), fraction(s), area(s), portion(s)
siri: secret
sumbua: disturb, annoy
tajiri: rich
tamu: sweet, delicious
tayari: ready
thurea: chandelier(s)
toka: come from, until
tupa: throw away, abandon
tupu: empty
uchi: bare, naked
-unganifu: connecting
vaa: wear, put on
vuma: make noise
zoezi/ma-: exercise(s)

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. *Kipande cha mti ni chembamba.*
2. *Bundi ni ndege mwangalifu sana.*
3. *Ukuta ulikuwa uchi.*
4. *Watu hawatanunua nyumba nyingi mwaka ujao.*
5. *Mtu mwovu alikimbia kwenda mbali.*

Answers to Practice Exercise B

6. I will write a difficult exam.
7. Grandmother cooked delicious food.
8. Large bananas come from South Africa.
9. An empty tin does not cease to make noise.
10. The obese people will return tomorrow to do exercises.

Answers to Practice Exercise C

11. All Canadian soldiers will return next year.
12. The chandelier itself has fallen down.
13. Any donation will help flood victims.
14. The butcher with the big sharp knife has slept.
15. All carrots in the bag are rotten.

Answers to Practice Exercise D

16. *Daktari mwenyewe alimfunika mgonjwa gubigubi.*
17. *Hatutaki kuvaa nguo chepechepe.*

Answers to Practice Exercise E

18. Many children of modern times have gone to University.
19. The green dress was lost.
20. The disturbing attitude is not good.

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