

Chapter 12

Possessives

Possessives, “*vimilikishi*” in Swahili, are words which show ownership. In Swahili, possessives have to agree with “what is being possessed” rather than the possessor, as is the case in English. There are two main ways of showing ownership in Swahili. The first one is by using Possessive Suffixes and the second way is by using the *-a* of Association.

Section A: Possessive Suffixes

There are six Possessive Suffixes, which are shown in Table 12.1 in singular and plural forms:

TABLE 12.1
Possessive Suffixes

Singular		Plural	
<i>-angu</i>	mine	<i>-etu</i>	our, ours
<i>-ako</i>	your, yours	<i>-enu</i>	your, yours
<i>-ake</i>	hers, his, its	<i>-ao</i>	their, theirs

In order to use Possessive Suffixes shown in Table 12.1 to denote ownership, it is necessary to explain how this is done by first listing the Noun Classes (See Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10) with their respective Possessive Prefixes in singular and plural forms as shown in Table 12.2.

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TABLE 12.2
Possessive Prefixes

Singular/Plural	Noun Class	Possessive Prefix
Singular	M-	w-
Plural	WA-	w-
Singular	M-	w-
Plural	MI-	y-
Singular	JI-	l-
Plural	MA-	y-
Singular	KI-/CH-	ch-
Plural	VI-/VY-	vy-
Singular	N-	y-
Plural		z-
Singular	U-	w-
Plural		z-
Singular	PA-	<i>p-</i> (specific place) <i>kw-</i> (indefinite place) <i>mw-</i> (inside place)
Plural		<i>p-</i> <i>kw-</i> <i>mw-</i>
Singular	KU-	<i>kw-</i>
Plural		<i>kw-</i>

The way to make words denoting ownership in Swahili is by taking the Possessive Prefix and combining it with the Possessive Suffix (See Table 12.1 and 12.2). For example, if the thing to be owned is a single bicycle (*baiskeli*), which is in the N- Noun Class, we take the Possessive Prefix for this noun in singular which is *y-* (See Table 12.2) and combine it with any of the Possessive Suffixes, “*-angu*” (mine), “*-etu*” (ours) etc.

(See Table 12.1) depending on who owns the bicycle. If I own the bicycle, then I would combine the Possessive Prefix *y-* with the Possessive Suffix “-angu” to form “yangu” (mine.) We would therefore have:

baiskeli yangu – my bicycle
baiskeli zangu – my bicycles

As you can see the word “*baiskeli*” (bicycle) is the same in both singular and plural. In the second sentence “*baiskeli*” is known to be in the plural because of the “-z-” from the word “*zangu*.” The “-z-” Possessive Prefix is taken from the N- Noun Class plural column.

If I want to say “My child” I would combine the Possessive Prefix *w-* in the M-/WA- Noun Class with “-angu” to form “wangu” (mine) . In this case we would therefore have:

mtoto wangu – my child
watoto wangu – my children

Note that in the M-/WA- Noun Class, the noun itself indicates whether it is singular or plural; the singular word for the noun is not the same as the plural word, i.e. “*mtoto*” versus “*watoto*.” Therefore the possessive form “*wangu*” stays the same in both singular and plural because the Possessive Prefix for singular and plural for this Noun Class is the same (See Table 12.2).

Ownership of an object from the M-/MI- Class, for example, such as one tree (*mti*) would require the combination of the Possessive Prefix *w-* in the singular with “-angu” to form “wangu” (mine).

mti wangu – my tree

If there is more than one tree, I would combine *y-* in the plural with “-angu” to form “yangu” (mine).

miti yangu – my trees

By following the procedure used above, we can show ownership of things in the remaining Noun Classes using the Possessive Suffix “-angu”:

Examples:

kitabu changu – my book
vitabu vyangu – my books
jina langu – my name
majina yangu – my names
nyumba yangu – my house
nyumba zangu – my houses
ukuta wangu – my wall
kuta zangu – my walls
mahali pangu – my place (specific)
mahali pangu – my places (specific)
mahali kwangu – my place (indefinite)
mahali kwangu – my places (indefinite)
mahali mwangu – my place (inside)
mahali mwangu – my places (inside)
kusoma kwangu – my reading
kusoma kwangu – my readings

By referring to Table 12.1 and Table 12.2, ownership can be shown by combining the Possessive Prefixes of things in different Noun Classes with the any of the Possessive Suffixes “-ako” (your, yours) sing., “-enu” (your, yours) pl., “-ake” (hers/his/its), “-ao” (theirs), and “-etu” (ours).

Examples:

mtoto wako – your (sing.) child
watoto wako – your (sing.) children
mahali penu – your (pl.) place
mahali penu – your (pl.) places
kusoma kwake – her/his reading
kusoma kwake – her/his readings
nyumba yao – their house
nyumba zao – their houses
kitabu chetu – our book
vitabu vyetu – our books

From the examples shown above, it is apparent that possessives in Swahili take agreements with what is being possessed rather than the possessor as we have pointed out in the first paragraph of this chapter.

As a general rule, nouns denoting humans, animals and insects, which are found in Noun Classes other than M-/WA-, still take agreements with the M-/WA- Class (See Chapter 7). However, there is an exception to this rule when it comes to showing possessive forms with any nouns in the N- Noun Class which denote relationships such as the following:

mama – mother
baba – father
dada – sister
kaka – brother
binamu – cousin/nephew
jamaa – relative
rafiki – friend
bibi/nyanya – grandmother
babu – grandfather
shangazi – paternal aunt
shemeji – brother/sister in-law
ndugu – relative

Possessive forms with these nouns take agreement with the Possessive Prefixes in the N- Noun Class which are “y-” in the singular and “z-” in the plural and NOT with “w-” in the M-/WA- Noun Class in both singular and plural (See Table 12.2). For example, with the noun “*dada*” (sister) we combine y- in the singular with “-angu” to form “*yangu*” (mine), thus we get:

dada yangu – my sister

If I have more than one sister, I would combine the Possessive Prefix “z-” in the plural with the Possessive Suffix “-angu” to form “*zangu*” (mine). Thus we get:

dada zangu – my sisters

Examples:

dada yangu – my sister
dada zangu – my sisters
kaka yangu – my brother

kaka zangu – my brothers
shangazi yangu – my aunt
shangazi zangu – my aunts
rafiki yangu – my friend
rafiki zangu – my friends

Practice Exercise A

Translate the following into Swahili.

1. My house
2. Her/his house
3. Your (sing.) books
4. Your (pl.) book
5. Your teacher
6. Her/his father
7. Her/his mother
8. Their books
9. Her/his flowers
10. Their places
11. My sister
12. My grandmother
13. Our university
14. My father
15. Our school
16. My place
17. Our reading
18. Their house
19. My reading
20. Our classroom

There are a few special cases where whole words and Possessive Suffixes can be combined into one word. For example, “*mwenzi*” (a companion) or “*wenzi*” (companions) can be combined with the Possessive Suffixes shown in Table 12.1. The construction of the possessive using “*mwenzi*” and “*wenzi*” result in the dropping of the final “*i*.”

Examples:**Singular:**

- mwenzi* + *-angu* = *mwenzangu* – my companion
mwenzi + *-ako* = *mwenzako* – your (sing.) companion
mwenzi + *-ake* = *mwenzake* – her/his companion
mwenzi + *-etu* = *mwenzetu* – our companion
mwenzi + *-enu* = *mwenzenu* – your (pl.) companion
mwenzi + *-ao* = *mwenzao* – their companion

Plural:

- wenzi* + *-angu* = *wenzangu* – my companions
wenzi + *-ako* = *wenzako* – your (sing.) companions
wenzi + *-ake* = *wenzake* – her/his companions
wenzi + *-etu* = *wenzetu* – our companions
wenzi + *-enu* = *wenzenu* – your (pl.) companions
wenzi + *-ao* = *wenzao* – their companions

Translate into English.

21. *Mwenzangu anasoma Kiswahili.*
22. *Mwenzako jina lake nani?*
23. *Mwenzetu anasoma Kiswahili.*
24. *Mwenzao alikwenda Montreal.*
25. *Wenzetu waliandika barua.*
26. *Wenzangu wanakaa hapa.*
27. *Wenzake wanaangalia sinema.*
28. *Mtoto wangu anacheza na wenzake.*
29. *Mwenzenu anasoma chuo kikuu.*
30. *Wenzetu walinunua Kamusi ya Kiswahili.*

Note on Word order: As you can see the personal possessive word comes immediately AFTER the noun they qualify, no matter which class the noun is from. The position immediately after the noun is ALWAYS reserved for the personal possessive if one is present in the sentence. If personal possessives, adjectives, demonstratives etc occur in the sentence there is a particular word order that must be followed, which is:

Noun, personal possessive, adjective, quantity and demonstrative.¹

Proper word order will be discussed again in future Chapters.

Section B: The *-a* of Association

The second way of showing ownership in Swahili is by using the *-a* of Association. This is done by combining the Possessive Prefixes as listed in Table 12.2 with the *-a* of Association. For example, if we want to show that John owns a chair (*kiti*), we combine “*ch-*” in the singular with the “*-a*” of Association to form “*cha*” (of). Thus we get:

kiti cha John – John’s chair

As we can see in the example above, the word order in Swahili is a complete reversal of the word order in English. The thing being possessed comes first, in this case *kiti* (chair). Next comes the *-a* of Association (*cha*), which links the possessed thing with the possessor, and the person doing the possessing (John) comes last.

If John owns more than one chair, we combine “*vy-*” in the plural with the “*-a*” of Association to form “*vya*” (of). Thus we get:

viti vya John – John’s chairs

Examples:

mtoto wa mwalimu – the teacher’s child
watoto wa mwalimu – the teacher’s children
mti wa baba yangu – my father’s tree
miti ya baba yangu – my father’s trees
jina la mwalimu – the teacher’s name
majina ya mwalimu – the teacher’s names
kitabu cha mtoto – the child’s book
vitabu vya mtoto – the child’s books
nyumba ya mtu – the person’s house
nyumba za mtu – the person’s houses
ua la dada yangu – my sister’s flower
maua ya dada yangu – my sister’s flowers
mahali pa nyanya – grandmother’s place
mahali pa nyanya – grandmother’s places

Practice Exercise B

Circle the correct Possessive forms, which agree with the nouns in the following sentences.

Example: *mtoto (ya, wa) mwalimu.*

The correct answer to be circled is “*wa.*”

31. *Nyumba (ya, wa) familia yangu.*
32. *Mwanafunzi (ya, wa) Chuo Kikuu cha Toronto.*
33. *Mti (wa, za) baba yangu.*
34. *Miti (za, ya) baba yangu.*
35. *Nyumba (sing.) (wa, ya) baba yake.*
36. *Kitabu (ya, cha) mama yangu.*
37. *Vitabu (za, vya) watoto.*
38. *Kusoma kwa wanafunzi (ya, wa) Kiswahili.*
39. *Ua (ya, la) shangazi yangu.*
40. *Darasa (ya, la) watoto.*
41. *Kitabu (ya, cha) rafiki yangu.*
42. *Vitabu (vya, za) darasa letu.*
43. *Kuandika (la, kwa) wanafunzi wa Kiingereza.*
44. *Nyumba (pl.) (ya, za) wafanyakazi.*
45. *Darasa (ya, la) wanafunzi wa Kiswahili.*
46. *Madarasa (za, ya) wanafunzi wa chuo kikuu.*
47. *Kompyuta (pl.) (la, za) watoto wa shule.*
48. *Mahali (la, pa) kusoma Kiswahili.*
49. *Kuandika (za, kwa) mtoto.*
50. *Ua (la, wa) bibi.*

More practice exercises on possessive forms.

Translate into Swahili.

51. The teacher’s book.
52. My sister’s bicycle.
53. Her/his companions are studying in Africa.
54. Her/his sister went to New York.
55. Heather is reading her Swahili book.
56. What is your companion’s name?
57. My brother.

58. My brother's friend.
59. Our books.
60. Their children.

Note on Word Order: As noted in Section A the personal possessive has a particular position in a Swahili sentence and there is a particular word order that must be followed which was:

Noun, personal possessive, adjective, quantity and demonstrative.

However, the *-a* of Association has its own special word order that must be followed, which is:

Noun being possessed, adjective, quantity, demonstrative, the *-a* of Association, and finally the possessor.

If, for example, an adjective were not used in the sentence, quantity would take the position of the adjective, but otherwise word order stays the same as above.

Section C: Reading Practice

Read the following passage and then answer the questions, which follow:

Bwana na bibi Thompson wanakaa katika Mji wa Toronto. Bwana Thompson ni daktari wa Hospitali ya Watoto. Mama Thompson ni mwalimu. Yeye anafundisha katika shule ya sekondari. Bwana na bibi Thompson wana watoto sita. Majina ya watoto wao ni Paul, Jonathan, Joshua, Mary, Alex na Joanna. Paul, Jonathan na Mary wanasoma Chuo Kikuu cha Toronto. Wanakwenda chuoni kwa baiskeli kwa sababu wanakaa karibu na chuo. Joshua, Alex na Joanna wanasoma shule ya sekondari. Wao wanakwenda shuleni kwa motokaa ya mama yao. Wanafunzi wenzao wanakwenda shuleni kwa miguu kwa sababu wanakaa karibu na shule.

Practice Exercise C

Answer the following questions in Swahili.

61. *Bwana na bibi Thompson na watoto wao wanakaa katika mji gani?*

62. *Bwana na bibi Thompson wana watoto wangapi?*
 63. *Paul, Jonathan na Mary wanasoma wapi?*

Answer the following questions with *Ndiyo* (Yes) or *Hapana* (No).

64. *Alex, Joshua na Joanna wanasoma shule ya sekondari.*
 65. *Alex, Joshua na Joanna wanakwenda shuleni kwa baiskeli.*
 66. *Bwana Thompson anafanya kazi katika Hospitali ya Watoto.*
 67. *Mama Thompson anafundisha sekondari.*
 68. *Bwana Thompson na familia yake wanakaa katika Mji wa Dar-es-Salaam.*
 69. *Alex, Joshua na Joanna wanakwenda shuleni kwa motokaa.*
 70. *Wanafunzi wenzao wanakwenda shuleni kwa miguu.*

New Vocabulary

Afrika: Africa

-ake: hers/his/its

-ako: your, yours (sing.)

angalia: watch, look

-angu: mine

-ao: theirs

binamu: cousin(s)

darasa/ma-: classroom(s), class(es), grade(s)

-enu: your, yours (pl.)

-etu: ours

familia: family(ies)

fanya: do, make

fundisha: teach

hapa: here

hapana: no

hospitali: hospital(s)

kaa: live, stay, sit

kamusi: dictionary(ies)

kimilikishi/vi-: possessive(s)

-kuu: main

kwa: by, to/by means of, for, with, on

kwa sababu: by reason of, because

motokaa: car(s)

mwenzake: her/his companion
mwenzako: your (sing.) companion
mwenzangu: my companion
mwenzao: their companion
mwenzenu: your (pl.) companion
mwenzetu: our companion
mwenzi/wenzi: friend(s), colleague(s), companion(s)
nani?: who?
ndiyo: yes
-ngapi?: how many?
sekondari: secondary
shemeji: brother/sister-in-law(s)
sinema: cinema(s)
sita: six
wana: they have
wenzake: her/his companions
wenzako: your (sing.) companions
wenzangu: my companions
wenzao: their companions
wenzenu: your (pl.) companions
wenzetu: our companions

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. *Nyumba yangu*
2. *Nyumba yake*
3. *Vitabu vyako*
4. *Kitabu chenu*
5. *Mwalimu wako*
6. *aba yake*
7. *Mama yake*
8. *Vitabu vyao*
9. *Maua yake*
10. *Mahali pao*
11. *Dada yangu*
12. *Bibi yangu*
13. *Chuo chetu*

14. *Baba yangu*
15. *Shule yetu*
16. *Mahali pangu*
17. *Kusoma kwetu*
18. *Nyumba yao*
19. *Kusoma kwangu*
20. *Darasa letu*
21. My companion studies Swahili.
22. What is the name of your companion?
23. Our companion is studying Swahili.
24. Their companion went to Montreal.
25. Our companions wrote a letter.
26. My companions reside here.
27. His/Her companions are watching a movie.
28. My child is playing with his/her companions.
29. Your (pl.) companion is studying at the university.
30. Our companions bought a Swahili Dictionary.

Answers to Practice Exercise B

31. *ya*
32. *wa*
33. *wa*
34. *ya*
35. *ya*
36. *cha*
37. *vya*
38. *wa*
39. *la*
40. *la*
41. *cha*
42. *vya*
43. *kwa*
44. *za*
45. *la*
46. *ya*
47. *za*
48. *pa*
49. *kwa*

50. *la*
51. *Kitabu cha mwalimu.*
52. *Baiskeli ya dada yangu.*
53. *Wenzake wanasoma Afrika.*
54. *Dada yake alikwenda New York.*
55. *Heather anasoma kitabu chake cha Kiswahili.*
56. *Mwenzako jina lake nani?*
57. *Kaka yangu.*
58. *Rafiki ya kaka yangu.*
59. *Vitabu vyetu.*
60. *Watoto wao.*

Answers to Practice Exercise C

61. *Toronto.*
62. *Sita.*
63. *Chuo Kikuu cha Toronto.*
64. *Ndiyo.*
65. *Hapana.*
66. *Ndiyo.*
67. *Ndiyo.*
68. *Hapana.*
69. *Ndiyo.*
70. *Ndiyo.*

Note

1. Wilson, 76.