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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-angu</td>
<td>mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-etu</td>
<td>our, ours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ako</td>
<td>your, yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-enu</td>
<td>your, yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ake</td>
<td>hers, his, its</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ao</td>
<td>their, theirs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular/Plural</th>
<th>Noun Class</th>
<th>Possessive Prefix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>M-</td>
<td>w-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>WA-</td>
<td>w-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>M-</td>
<td>w-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>MI-</td>
<td>y-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>JI-</td>
<td>l-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>MA-</td>
<td>y-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>KI-/CH-</td>
<td>ch-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>VI-/VY-</td>
<td>vy-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>N-</td>
<td>y-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>U-</td>
<td>w-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>P-</td>
<td>(specific place)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>kw- (indefinite place)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mw- (inside place)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>KU-</td>
<td>kw-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{baiskeli yangu} & \quad \text{my bicycle} \\
\text{baiskeli zangu} & \quad \text{my bicycles}
\end{align*}
\]

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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{mtoto wangu} & \quad \text{my child} \\
\text{watoto wangu} & \quad \text{my children}
\end{align*}
\]

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).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{mti wangu} & \quad \text{my tree}
\end{align*}
\]

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

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{miti yangu} & \quad \text{my trees}
\end{align*}
\]

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.
Possessives

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?*
27. *Wenzake wanaangalia sinema.*
28. *Mtoto wangu anacheza na wenzake.*

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:

\[ \text{kiti cha John} \text{ – John’s chair} \]

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 “vya-” in the plural with the “-a” of Association to form “vya” (of). Thus we get:

\[ \text{viti vya John} \text{ – John’s chairs} \]

Examples:

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

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:


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 wasoma wapi?

Answer the following questions with Ndiyo (Yes) or Hapana (No).
64. Alex, Joshua na Joanna wanawasoma shule ya sekondari.
65. Alex, Joshua na Joanna wanakwenda shuleni kwa baiskeli.
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/vt-: 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
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.