Chapter 7

The Swahili Noun Class System: M-/WA- and M-/MI-

Most languages in the world, with English being the main exception, classify nouns into different groups known as noun classes. Historically, the division of nouns into noun classes in Swahili was based on how the East African people perceived the world. For instance, they grouped human beings into one class, animals into another class, sharp and elongated objects into another class and so on. As time passed, the East African region came into increasing contact with the outside world initially due to trade expansion and later, colonialism. This contact caused the Swahili language to borrow new words from other languages such as English, German, Portuguese, Arabic, Hindi and so forth. The increase in Swahili vocabulary brought about the need to revise and expand the noun classes. Currently, nouns are classified into 8 noun classes. Listed below are the names of the noun classes and a brief description of what they contain. We will learn more details about each noun class in the chapters to follow.

1. M-/WA- class contains human beings.
2. M-/MI- class contains trees, plants, etc.
3. JI-/MA- class contains fruits, parts of plants, etc. It also contains mass nouns and collectives.
4. KI-/VI- class contains objects useful to humans and artifacts, etc.
5. N- class contains words borrowed from other languages, names of animals and relationship nouns, etc.
6. **U-class** contains household objects, names of countries, abstract nouns and qualities.
7. **PA-class** contains locatives.
8. **KU-class** contains verbal nouns.

**Section A: The M-/WA-Class**

This is one of the few noun classes in Swahili in which most nouns refer to one particular type of thing. In this noun class, most nouns refer to human beings. It is important to remember that **not** all nouns referring to human beings are contained in this class. We will come across some nouns referring to human beings while studying the JI-/MA-, KI-/VI- and N- classes in upcoming chapters.

Most nouns in the M-/WA-class are denoted by the agreement prefix **m-** in the singular form, which changes to **wa-** in the plural form. Listed below are some examples:

- *mtu* – person
- *watu* – people
- *mganga* – doctor, shaman
- *waganga* – doctors, shamans
- *mgeni* – visitor, guest
- *wageni* – visitors, guests
- *mgonjwa* – sick person
- *wagonjwa* – sick people
- *mpishi* – chef
- *wapishi* – chefs
- *mtoto* – child
- *watoto* – children
- *mtumishi* – servant
- *watumishi* – servants
- *mfanyakazi* – worker
- *wafanyakazi* – workers
- *mzee* – old person
- *wazee* – old people
- *Mzee* is also used as a term of respect for someone older than you are.
There are two exceptional nouns in the M-/WA- class that do not refer to humans. These nouns refer to animals and insects in a general sense. They are:

- mdudu – insect
- wadudu – insects
- mnyama – animal
- wanyama – animals

You will see in an upcoming chapter that the specific names of animals and insects are found in the N- class.

The M-/WA- class also contains many nouns that are denoted by the agreement prefix mw- in the singular form. These nouns also take the agreement prefix wa- in the plural form. With these nouns, when the agreement prefix mw- in the singular form is removed, we remain with a stem noun that begins with a vowel. For example, in a noun such as mw-alimu (teacher), when the agreement prefix mw- is removed, we remain with the stem noun -alimu (meaning knowledge). When such a noun is pluralized, the plural contains two vowels occurring together i.e mw-alimu (teacher) changes to become wa-alimu (teachers) in the plural form. Since it is difficult to pronounce words that have vowels adjacent to each other, the Swahili language has developed the following merger rules:

- a + a becomes “a”
- a + e becomes “e”
- a + i becomes “e”

Hence, when mw-alimu changes into plural, we would expect it to become wa-alimu but based on the above rule, it becomes walimu (since a + a becomes a).

Another example would be a noun such as mw-izi (thief). When mw-izi changes into plural, we would expect it to become wa-izi, but based on the rule above, it becomes wezi (since a + i becomes e). Here are more examples of nouns that begin with the agreement prefix mw- in the singular form and follow the merger rule.

- mwanafunzi – student
- wanafunzi – students
- mwana – child
wana – children
mwenyeji – inhabitant
wenyeji – inhabitants

Other words that need a special mention are compound nouns. Here are some common compound nouns:

mwanamke – woman
wanawake – women
mwanaume – man
wanaume – men
mwanasiasa – politician
wanasiasa – politicians

Since a compound noun is made of two nouns, when changing the compound noun into its plural form, we have to pluralize both of its two component nouns individually. When mwanamke is changed into plural, we have to pluralize both of its 2 component nouns, mwana and mke. When mw-ana changes into plural, we would expect it to become wa-ana, but based on the rules that we have studied, it becomes wana (since a + a becomes a). Mke is a regular noun whose prefix begins with m- in the singular form and changes to wa- in the plural form to become wake. Hence, mwana changes to become wanawake in the plural form.

Please note that when the word mwana is used in compounds nouns, it does not retain its original meaning of “a child.” Also note that the plural form of the noun siasa remains unchanged from its singular form because it belongs to the N-Class. You will learn more about the N-Class in Chapter 9.

Nationalities and some occupations also fall under the M-/WA- noun class. However, they do not follow the merger rules explained above. For example, the noun Mw-amerika (American) in the plural becomes Wa-amerika (Americans). As you can see, the adjacent vowels remain together and are not merged into one vowel. Here are more examples of nationalities:

Mwafrika – African
Waafrika – Africans
Mwarabu – Arab
Waarabu – Arabs
Mfaransa – French person
Wafaransa – French people
Mholanzi – Dutch person
Waholanzi – Dutch people
Mhindi – Indian
Wahindi – Indians
Mchina – Chinese person
Wachina – Chinese people

Here are some examples of occupations:

mkulima – farmer
wakulima – farmers
mchoraji – artist
wachoraji – artists
mwimbaji – singer
waimbaji – singers

Practice Exercise A
Translate the following into their plural in Swahili.

1. student
2. teacher
3. girl
4. patient
5. guest
6. hunter
7. insect
8. boy
9. worker
10. chef

Practice Exercise B
Change the following plurals into singlars.

11. wanyama
12. wenyeki
13. wakulima
14. wazee
15. wanawake

Practice Exercise C

Translate the following nationalities and occupations into Swahili.
16. Italians
17. Russians
18. Iranian
19. Spanish people
20. Nigerian
21. worker
22. players
23. farmers
24. chef
25. writers

Section B: The M-/MI- Class

Unlike the M-/WA- class, the nouns in the M-/MI- class do not refer to one particular type of thing. This noun class contains mostly trees and plants. It also contains natural phenomena, some parts of the body and many other nouns which do not appear to have much in common with other nouns in this class.

Most nouns in the M-/MI- class are denoted by the agreement prefix $m-$ in the singular form, which changes to $mi-$ in the plural form. Listed below are some examples:

- $mti$ – tree
- $miti$ – trees
- $mmea$ – plant
- $mimea$ – plants
- $mbuyu$ – Baobab tree
- $mibuyu$ – Baobab trees
- $mkono$ – hand
- $mikono$ – hands
- $mguu$ – leg
- $miguu$ – legs
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*mchezo* – game
*michezo* – games
*mithani* – examination
*mithani* – examinations
*mto* – pillow, river
*mito* – pillows, rivers
*moto* – a fire
*mio* – fires
*moyo* – heart
*mioyo* – hearts

The M-/MI- class also contains many nouns, which are denoted by the agreement prefix *mw-* in the singular form. These nouns also take the agreement prefix *mi-* in the plural form. Listed below are some examples:

*mwaka* – year
*miaka* – years
*mwezi* – month, moon
*miezi* – months, moons
*mwili* – body (of living thing)
*miili* – bodies (of living things)
*mwisho* – conclusion
*miisho* – conclusions
*mwembe* – mango tree
*miembe* – mango trees
*mwiba* – thorn
*miiba* – thorns

Please observe that there is no difference in appearance between the singular nouns that begin with the agreement prefix *mw-* in the singular form in M-/WA- class and M-/MI- class. Therefore, in order to determine which agreement prefix the noun must take in the plural form, the meaning must be known. If the meaning is a descriptive of a human being, or the word for animal (*mnyama*) or insect (*mdudu*) the plural will begin with *wa-*; otherwise, the plural will begin with *mi-*.
Practice Exercise D
Change the following singulars into plurals.

26. mkono
27. mguu
28. mlima
29. mji
30. mwaka
31. mwili
32. mwiba
33. moyo
34. mkate
35. mzigo

Practice Exercise E
Translate the following into English.

36. mifereji
37. misitu
38. miezi
39. milango
40. mitaa

New Vocabulary

mbuyu/mi-: baobab tree(s)
mchezaji/wa-: actor(s), dancer(s), player(s), athlete(s)
mchezo/mi-: game(s), play(s)
Mchina/wa-: Chinese person(s)
mchoraji/wa-: artist(s)
mdudu/wa-: insect(s)
Mfaransa/wa-: French person(s)
mfereji/mi-: ditch(es)
ganga/wa-: doctor(s), shaman(s)
geni/wa-: visitor(s), guest(s)
guu/mi-: leg(s), by foot
Mhindi/wa-: Indian(s)
Mhispania/wa-: Hispanic(s)
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Mholanzi/wa-: Dutch person(s)
mji/mi-: city(ies), town(s)
mkate/mi-: bread(s)
mke/wa-: wife(ves)
mkono/mi-: hand(s)
mlango/mi-: door(s)
mlima/mi-: mountain(s)
mlimaji/wa-: farmer(s)
mnea/mi-: plant(s)
Mnijeria/wa-: Nigerian(s)
mnjama/wa-: animal(s)
moto/mi-: fire(s)
moyo/mi-: heart(s)
Mrusi/wa-: Russian(s)
msitu/mi-: forest(s)
mtaa/mi-: street(s)
mti/mi-: tree(s)
mto/mi-: pillow(s), river(s)
mtumishi/wa-: servant(s), steward(s)
mvulana/wa-: boy(s)
Mwafrica/wa-: African(s)
mwaka/miaka: year(s)
Mwamerika/wa-: American(s)
mwana/wa-: child(ren)
mwanamke/wanawake: woman/women
mwanasiasa/wa-: politician(s)
mwanaume/wa-: man/men
mwandishi/wa-: writer(s), author(s)
Mwarabu/wa-: Arab(s)
mwembe/miemb: mango tree(s)
mwenyeji/wa-: inhabitant(s), host(s)
mwezi/miezi: month(s), moon(s)
mwiba/mi-: thorn(s)
mwili/mi-: body(ies)
mwimbaji/wa-: singer(s)
mwindaji/wa-: hunter(s)
Mwirani/wa-: Iranian(s)
mwisho/miisho: end(s), conclusion(s)
Mwitali/wa-: Italian(s)
mwizi/wezi: thief(ves)
mzee/wa-: elder(s), old person(s)
mzigo/mi-: luggage(s)

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A
1. wanafunzi
2. walinu
3. wasichana
4. wagonjwa
5. wageni
6. wawindaji
7. wadudu
8. wavelana
9. wafanyakazi
10. wapishi

Answers to Practice Exercise B
11. mmyama
12. mweneyeji
13. mkulima
14. mzee
15. mwanamke

Answers to Practice Exercise C
16. Waitali
17. Warusi
18. Mwirani
19. Wahispania
20. Mnijeria
21. mfanyakazi
22. wachezaji
23. walingaji
24. mpishi
25. waandishi
Answers to Practice Exercise D

26. mikono
27. miguu
28. milima
29. miji
30. miaka
31. miili
32. miiba
33. mioyo
34. mikate
35. mizigo

Answers to Practice Exercise E

36. ditches
37. forests
38. months
39. doors
40. streets