

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.

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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, *mwanamke* 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
Waafrica – 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 singulars.

11. *wanyama*
12. *wenyeji*
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

mchezo – game
michezo – games
mtihani – examination
mitihani – examinations
mto – pillow, river
mito – pillows, rivers
moto – a fire
mioto – 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)
mganga/wa-: doctor(s), shaman(s)
mgeni/wa-: visitor(s), guest(s)
mguu/mi-: leg(s), by foot
Mhindi/wa-: Indian(s)
Mhispania/wa-: Hispanic(s)

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)
mmea/mi-: plant(s)
Mnijeria/wa-: Nigerian(s)
mnyama/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)
Mwafrika/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/miembe: 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. *walimu*
3. *wasichana*
4. *wagonjwa*
5. *wageni*
6. *wawindaji*
7. *wadudu*
8. *wavulana*
9. *wafanyakazi*
10. *wapishi*

Answers to Practice Exercise B

11. *mnyama*
12. *mwenyeji*
13. *mkulima*
14. *mzee*
15. *mwanamke*

Answers to Practice Exercise C

16. *Waitali*
17. *Warusi*
18. *Mwirani*
19. *Wahispania*
20. *Mnigeria*
21. *mfanyakazi*
22. *wachezaji*
23. *walimaji*
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

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