

Chapter 9

Swahili Noun Classes: N- and U-

This chapter will focus on two more noun classes in the Swahili noun class system namely the N- class and the U- class. We will begin with the N- class.

Section A: The N- Class

The N- class contains words mostly borrowed from other languages primarily English and Arabic. It also contains names of animals and relationship nouns. Due to the large number of borrowed words in Swahili, the N- class is the largest of all the noun classes. However, although the majority of borrowed words are contained in the N- class, some borrowed words can be found in other noun classes.

Nouns in the N- class are identical in both their singular and plural forms and therefore do not have singular or plural prefixes. The only way that singular and plural nouns are distinguished in this class is by the agreement that the noun takes with the subject prefix, object infix etc. Noun class agreements will be taught in future chapters. Here are a few categories of nouns that belong to the N- class:

1. Nouns borrowed from other languages:

baiskeli – bicycle(s)

meza – table(s)

barabara – road(s)

barafu – ice

kahawa – coffee

kalamu – pen(s), pencil(s)

inchi – inch(es)

dakika – minute(s)

bunduki – gun(s)

askari – guard(s)

polisi – police

2. Names of animals:

simba – lion(s)

twiga – giraffe(s)

pundamilia – zebra(s)

paka – cat(s)

mbwa – dog(s)

inzi – fly(ies) (any sort)

samaki – fish

farasi – horse(s)

nguruwe – pig(s)

3. Relationship nouns:

baba – father(s)

mama – mother(s)

dada – sister(s)

kaka – brother(s)

bibi – grandmother(s)

shangazi – paternal aunt(s)

rafiki – friend(s)

ndugu – relative(s)

There are some nouns in the N- class which do not belong to any of the categories listed above:

ndizi – banana(s)

nyumba – house(s)

chumvi – salt

chupa – bottle(s)

simu – telephone(s)

mboga – vegetable(s)

takataka – garbage

Practice Exercise A

Identify the noun classes to which the following nouns belong.

1. *mtoto*
2. *mama*
3. *ua*
4. *pesa*
5. *sigara*
6. *mgeni*
7. *kijiko*
8. *kikombe*
9. *sabuni*
10. *nyoka*

Section B: The U- class

Most nouns belonging to this class are abstract nouns, uncountable nouns and names of some countries. Almost all nouns in this class have the letter U- as a prefix when in singular form however a few nouns begin with the letter W- in the singular form. Here are a few categories of nouns which belong to the U- Class:

1. Abstract nouns:

utata – complication, complexity
ufalme – kingship
uzee – old age
utoto – childhood
Uislamu – Islam
Ukristo – Christianity
ujana – youthfulness
uvivu – laziness
umoja – unity
wingi – plenty
uhuru – freedom
urefu – length, depth, height
uchofu – tiredness
ulaghai – deceitfulness
ulinganifu – harmony
ulinzi – security, defence

ujamaa – relationship, socialism
uchoyo – greed
upendo – love
ukimwi – AIDS

Many of the above nouns are made from adjectives (example: *uvivu* from *vivu*, lazy), nouns from other noun classes (example: *ujamaa* from *jamaa*, relative) and some verbs (example: *upendo* from *penda*, love). Since they are abstract nouns, they do not have a plural form.

2. Uncountable nouns:

ugali – corn meal porridge
ubongo – brain matter
uboho – bone marrow
wali – rice
umeme – electricity

3. Names of countries or regions:

Ulaya – Europe
Uchina – China
Unguja – Zanzibar
Uingereza – Great Britain
Uhindi – India
Uarabuni – Arabia
Umaasai – Maasailand (the land of the Maasai tribe)

Since the above nouns are names of countries, they also do not have a plural form.

4. Nouns which have plural forms:

Nouns in this category have different ways of forming their plurals as listed below.

- The plural form is made by dropping the first letter of the noun as shown in the examples below:

ukuta – wall
kuta – walls
unywele – hair

nywele – hairs
ukumbi – lounge
kumbi – lounges
ukoja – necklace
koja – necklaces
utambi – wick
tambi – wicks
ushanga – bead
shanga – beads

- If after dropping the letter u, the noun begins with d, g or z, then the letter *n-* is prefixed to the noun.

udevu – beard
ndevu – beards
uduvi – shrimp
nduvi – shrimps
ugimbi – beer
ngimbi – beers

- If after dropping the letter u, the noun begins with b or v, then the letter *m-* is prefixed to the noun.

ubao – plank
mbao – planks
ubawa – wing
mbawa – wings
ubinja – whistle
mbinja – whistles

- If after dropping the letter u, the remaining part of the noun is Mono-syllabic, the letters *nyu-* are prefixed to the noun.

uzi – thread
nyuzi – threads
uso – face
nyuso – faces
ua – courtyard
nyua – courtyards
uma – fork
nyuma – forks

- If the noun begins with the letter *w*, the letter *w* is dropped and the letters *ny-* are prefixed to the noun.

waadhi – sermon

nyaadhi – sermons

wadhifa – position

nyadhifa – positions

wavu – net

nyavu – nets

waraka – document

nyaraka – documents

- Some nouns in the U- Class take the plural prefix of the JI-/MA-class after dropping their first letter *u-*.

uamuzi – judgment

maamuzi – judgments

uangalizi – management

maangalizi – management styles

ubainisho – clear evidence

mabainisho – clear evidence

There are some exceptions to the above rules. Example:

ulimi – tongue

ndimi – tongues

Practice Exercise B

Change the following nouns from singular to plural.

11. *ukoo*

12. *Urusi*

13. *wakati*

14. *ukali*

15. *utajiri*

16. *wino*

17. *ufa*

18. *udongo*

19. *upana*

20. *ufunguo*
21. *ubavu*
22. *uwingu*
23. *wingu*
24. *uwongo*
25. *ukosefu*

New Vocabulary

- askari*: guard(s), soldier(s)
barabara: road(s)
barafu: ice
bunduki: gun(s)
chumvi: salt
chupa: bottle(s)
dada: sister(s)
dakika: minute(s)
farasi: horse(s)
inchi: inch(es)
inzi: fly(ies) (any sort)
jamaa: relative(s)
kahawa: coffee
kalamu: pen(s), pencil(s)
kikombe/vi-: cup(s)
mbwa: dog(s)
meza: table(s)
ndizi: banana(s)
ndugu: relative(s)
nguruwe: pig(s)
nyoka: snake(s)
pesa: money
pundamilia: zebra(s)
sabuni: soap(s), detergent(s)
shangazi: paternal aunt(s)
sigara: cigarette(s)
samba: lion(s)
simu: telephone(s)

takataka: garbage
ua/ny-: courtyard(s)
uamuzi/maamuzi: decision(s), judgement(s)
uangalizi/maangalizi: management, management styles
Uarabuni: Arabia
ubainisho/bainisho: clear evidence
ubao/m-: plank(s), board(s)
ubavu/m-: rib(s)
ubawa/m-: wing(s)
ubinja/m-: whistle(s)
uboho: bone marrow
ubongo: brain matter
Uchina: China
uchofu: tiredness
uchoyo: greed
udevu/ndevu: beard(s)
udongo: dirt, soil
uduvi/nduvi: shrimp(s)
ufa/ny-: crack(s), fault(s)
ufalme: kingship
ufunguo/funguo: key(s)
ugali: corn meal porridge
ugimbi/ngimbi: beer(s)
Uhindi: India
uhuru: freedom, independence
Uingereza: Great Britain
Uislamu: Islam
ujamaa: relationship, socialism
ujana: youthfulness
ukali: fierceness
ukimwi: AIDS
Ukristo: Christianity
ukoja/koja: necklace(s)
ukoo/koo: family(ies)
ukosefu: deficit, shortage(s)
ukumbi/kumbi: lounge(s), meeting hall(s)
ukuta/kuta: wall(s)

ulaghai: deceitfulness
Ulaya: Europe
ulimi/ndimi: tongue(s)
ulinganifu: harmony
ulinzi: security, defence
uma/ny-: fork(s)
Umaasai: Maasailand
umeme: electricity, lightning
umoja: unity
Unguja: Zanzibar
upana: width
upendo: love
urefu: length, depth, height, distance
Urusi: Russia
ushanga/shanga: bead(s)
uso/ny-: face(s)
utajiri: wealth
utambi/tambi: wick(s)
utata: complication, complexity
utoto: childhood
uvivu: laziness
uwingu/mbingu: sky(ies)
uwongo/ma-: lie(s)
uzee: old age
uzi/ny-: thread(s), string(s)
vivu: lazy
waadhi/nyaadhi: sermon(s)
wadhifa/nyadhifa: position(s)
wakati/nyakati: time(s), moment(s)
wali: rice
waraka/nyaraka: document(s)
wavu/nyavu: net(s)
wingi: plenty
wingu/ma-: cloud(s)
wino: ink

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. M-/WA- class
2. N- class
3. JI-/MA- class
4. N- class
5. N- class
6. M-/WA- class
7. KI-/VI- class
8. KI-/VI- class
9. N- class
10. N- class

Answers to Practice Exercise B

11. *koo*
12. *Urusi*
13. *nyakati*
14. *ukali*
15. *utajiri*
16. *wino*
17. *nyufa*
18. *udongo*
19. *upana*
20. *funguo*
21. *mbavu*
22. *mbingu*
23. *mawingu*
24. *maongo*
25. *ukosefu*