

Chapter 2

The Alphabet, Pronunciation and Common Mistakes

The Swahili language is now written in the modern Roman alphabet. In past times, before the colonization of East Africa in the 1890's, any written Swahili would have been written using Swahili words but using the Arabic script and alphabet. As a result some words in modern Swahili retain an Arabic pronunciation and are spelled a specific way in order to evoke the original Arabic sound. A good example would be the combination of DH. The combination of DH in the word *fedha* (money) is NOT pronounced fed-ha, as most English speakers would attempt. Instead the “DH” sound is equivalent to the TH in “That” but NEVER as the TH in “thing.” So *fedha* should sound like “fe-THat” but minus the “t” at the end, producing “fe-THa.” Only 24 of the 26 letters in the modern Roman alphabet are used in Swahili, the letters Q and X are not used.

Vowels

Vowel sounds are the most important sounds to pronounce correctly as this is where most non-native speakers make mistakes. Here are examples on the correct pronunciation of vowel sounds.

A as in “bat” – *barua* (letter)

E as in “end” – *endelea* (continue, progress)

I as the “e” in “be” – *kiti* (chair)

O as in the “o” in “open” – *jambo* (hello)

U as the “u” in “student” – *babu* (grandfather)

Note the double “oo” in Swahili does NOT produce the same “uuu” sound as in English. The double “oo” in Swahili is simply a lengthened “o.” The word “*kioo*” (glass, mirror) is NOT pronounced as “ki-uu” but as “ki-OO.” Giving the double “oo” the “uuu” sound as in “pool” “fool” and “school” is a common mistake for English speakers. Simply make the “regular” sound for the letter “o” and stretch it for an extra half a second.

Stress

One thing to note before continuing, in Swahili stress ALWAYS falls on the second last syllable, as shown by the italicized syllable below. So, if we break up the previous Swahili words into syllables, we would get the following:

ba-ru-a (letter)
e-nde-le-a (continue, progress)
ki-ti (chair)
ja-mbo (hello)
ba-bu (grandfather)

In addition to the stress falling on the second last syllable, words that start with the letter “n” have a special rule when breaking the word up into syllables. When dealing with a word starting with the letter “n” and followed by another consonant the letter “n” either forms a separate syllable or part of another syllable based on the following rule. If the letters following the letter “n” can be broken down into one syllable ONLY, then the letter “n” is treated as a separate syllable.

n-chi (country)
n-ne (four)

However, if the letters following “n” can be broken into more than one syllable, then the letter “n” DOES NOT form a separate syllable, instead it is incorporated into the first syllable.

nde-ge (bird or plane)
nji-wa (dove)

Also note that the letter “m” can at times form its own syllable such as in *m-to-to* (child) or be part of another syllable such as in *mbo-ga* (vegetable).

Consonants

Consonants are the easiest sounds in Swahili, and always stay the same:

B as in “buck” or “bad” – *baba* (father)

C is never found alone, but is always found with H

CH as in “chocolate” – *chafu* (dirty)

D as in “drug” – *dawa* (drug, medicine)

F as in “fast” – *fahamu* (know, understand)

G as in “goose” – *gari* (vehicle). It is always a “hard” G as in “goose” or “gun” and never a “soft” G as in “gym” or “gentle.”

H as in “hat” – *hali* (condition)

J as in “join” – *jambo* (hello)

K as in “kind” – *kaka* (brother)

L as in “love” – *lala* (sleep). In a few cases, native Swahili speakers interchange “L” and “R” so that “*lala*” becomes “*rara*.” However this is considered poor Swahili and should not be done in Standard Swahili.

M as in “mother” – *mama* (mother)

N as in “nice” – *na* (and)

P as in “put” – *paka* (cat)

Q is never used in Swahili

R as in “rope” – *rafiki* (friend) Also see “L” above for the interchangeability of “L” and “R”

S as in “soup” – *soma* (read, study)

T as in “take” – *twiga* (giraffe)

V as in “vest” – *vita* (war)

W as in “wait” – *wapi?* (where?)

X is never used in Swahili

Y as in “yes” – *yai* (egg)

Z as in “zero” – *zawadi* (gift, present)

Swahili also has many letters found in combination that produce specific sounds. There are 3 broad categories of letter combinations, but

only the 3rd category will be of some difficulty to English speakers. The combination letters will be introduced in capital letters below.

Category 1

Letter combinations in this category are the easiest for English speakers as they already exist in English and are pronounced exactly the same, for example:

- CH as in “chocolate” – *chafu* (dirty)
- NJ as in “enjoy” – *njaa* (hunger)
- SH as in “shore” – *shule* (school)
- TH as in “thing” – *thamani* (price, worth)
- VY as in “envy” – *vyumba* (rooms)

Category 2

Letter combinations in this category only occur in English in compounded words, i.e. words made up of two nouns. In order to get the correct pronunciation in Swahili one must say the compounded word quickly, so as to get the combined letters to be pronounced as one sound as a Swahili speaker would. Listed below are some of the letter combinations that occur in Swahili.

- BW as in “subway” – *bwana* (sir)
- KW as in “backward” – *kweli* (true, truth)
- MW as in “teamwork” – *mwalimu* (teacher)
- NG as in “sunglory” – *nguo* (clothing, garment)
- NY as in “lanyard” – *nyumba* (house)
- PW as in “upward” – *pwani* (coast)

Category 3

These letter combinations are the most challenging for English speakers at first because they have NO equivalent sounds in English. Only listening to Swahili speakers and some practice will allow Swahili language learners to produce and recognize these sounds.

AA as in *baada* (after). AA is a voiced guttural sound taken directly from the 18th letter of the Arabic alphabet. However, even most native Swahili speakers do not pronounce it the “correct” Arabic way and in-

stead pronounce it in much the same way as an English speaker would attempt to pronounce it. “*Baada*” (after) is pronounced as a lengthened “A” as in “aaa-partment” where the letter “a” is stretched for an extra half a second.

DH as in *fedha* (money). DH makes the TH sound from “THat” but NEVER the TH sound from “THing.”

GH as in *ghali* (expensive). GH is a voiced guttural sound taken directly from the 19th letter of the Arabic alphabet. “*Ghali*” (expensive) is pronounced starting with the hard “G” sound from “gun” but flowing immediately into the “H” sound as in “house.”

KH as in *khanga* (a piece of fabric). KH is a voiceless guttural sound taken directly from the 7th letter of the Arabic alphabet. Anyone who knows Arabic, Persian or Swahili can produce this sound.

NG’ as in *ng’ombe* (cow/cattle). Please note the presence of an apostrophe in this case. When the apostrophe occurs a specialized sound is produced. The sound is closest to the NG in “singer” where air is pushed through the nose making a nasalized NG. A similar sound exists in Spanish with the letter ñ but without the “y” sound associated with that letter.

New Vocabulary

baada: after
baba: father(s)
babu: grandfather(s)
barua: letter(s)
bwana/ma-: sir(s), gentleman/men
chafu: dirty
chumba/vy-: room(s)
dawa: medicine(s), drug(s)
endelea: continue, progress
fahamu: understand
fedha: money, silver
gari/ma-: vehicle(s), car(s)
ghali: expensive
hali: condition, state
jambo: hello
kaka: brother(s)
khanga: piece of fabric
kioo/vi-: glass, mirror(s)

kiti/vi-: chair(s)
kweli: true, truth(s)
lala: sleep
mama: mother(s)
mboga: vegetable(s)
mwalimu/wa-: teacher(s)
na: and, with, by, also
-na-: present tense marker
nchi: country(ies), state(s)
ndege: plane(s), bird(s)
ng'ombe: cow(s), cattle
nguo: cloth(es), clothing, garment(s)
ni-: I
njaa: hunger(s), famine(s)
njiwa: dove(s)
nne: four
nyumba: house(s)
paka: cat(s)
pwani: coast(s)
rafiki: friend(s)
shule: school(s)
soma: read, study
thamani: price, value, worth
twiga: giraffe(s)
vita: war(s)
wapi?: where?
yai/ma-: egg(s)
zawadi: present(s), gift(s)

Simple Sentence Structure in Swahili

We will now introduce students to the construction of simple sentences in Swahili. All of the following concepts will be covered in detail in their relevant Chapters; the purpose here is for students to be able to distinguish the major “parts” of a Swahili sentence. The simple Swahili sentence is constructed using the acronym S.T.V.

S = Subject

T = Tense

V = Verb

Swahili uses a system of prefixes, suffixes and even infixes to communicate the required information instead of separate words as in English. In Swahili an entire sentence can consist of one word, if the sentence contains only one verb.

A simple sentence such as “I am studying” would be translated into Swahili as *Ninasoma*.

Deconstructing the above Swahili sentence we get *ni-na-soma*

Subject = NI - the subject of the sentence, in this case “I”

Tense = NA - the tense marker, in this case indicating the verb is in the present

Verb = SOMA - the verb, in this case “study”

Simple sentences in Swahili ALWAYS follow the structure S.T.V. – Subject, Tense, and Verb. More complicated Swahili sentences will of course contain more “parts” but for now simple Swahili sentence structure will be used in the opening Chapters of this book. The following Chapters will teach each of these “parts” of a Swahili sentence, the Subject, the Tense and the Verb.

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