

Chapter 38

Diminutive, Augmentative and Collective Nouns

Some Swahili nouns can express Diminutives, Augmentatives and Collectives by changing prefixes. Diminutives take *ki-* and *vi-* prefixes from the KI-/VI- Noun Class for singular and plural nouns respectively. Augmentatives take *ji-* and *ma-* prefixes from the JI-/MA- Noun Class for singular and plural nouns respectively. Collectives only take the *ma-* prefix from the JI-/MA- Noun Class for plural nouns. Nouns denoting Diminutives and Augmentatives can come from any Noun Class except the PA- and KU- classes and abstract nouns from the U- class. When some nouns are changed into Diminutives or Augmentatives, they sometimes convey a pleasant or a derogatory connotation. Nouns denoting Collectives come from only the U- and N- classes. It is not easy to determine which nouns can or cannot be made Diminutive, Augmentative or Collective.

Section A: Diminutive Nouns

As pointed out in the Introduction, only some nouns can be made into Diminutives to express smallness. When a noun becomes a Diminutive, it belongs to the KI-/VI- class, and follows the agreement rules for this class even if the nouns involved belong to animate things such people, animals or insects. For example:

Regular – Diminutive Sing.

tunda langu (my orange) – *kitunda changu* (my little orange)
mbugu huyu (this goat) – *kibuzi hiki* (this small goat)

Nouns can be made into Diminutive form using the following rules:

1. After removing the prefix, if the remaining part of the noun has a disyllabic or polysyllabic root stem, the *ki-* prefix is added for singular nouns and *vi-* prefix for plural nouns.

Regular – Diminutive Sing. – Diminutive Pl.

mtoto (child) – *kitoto* (small child) – *vitoto* (small children)
msichana (girl) – *kisichana* (small girl) – *visichana* (small girls)
mkono (hand) – *kikono* (small hand) – *vikono* (small hands)

For nouns with disyllabic or polysyllabic root stems which do not have a prefix, the *ki-* prefix is simply added to singular nouns and *vi-* prefix to plural nouns.

Regular – Diminutive Sing. – Diminutive Pl.

sakafu (floor) – *kisakafu* (small floor) – *visakafu* (small floors)
tunda (fruit) – *kitunda* (small fruit) – *vitunda* (small fruits)
inzi (fly) – *kiinzi* (small fly) – *viinzi* (small flies)

2. After removing the prefix, if the remaining part of the noun has a Monosyllabic root stem, the *ki-* prefix is added for singular nouns and *vi-* prefix for plural nouns followed by the *-ji-* infix.

Regular – Diminutive Sing. – Diminutive Pl.

mtu (person) – *kijitu* (small person) – *vijitu* (small persons)
mto (river) – *kijito* (stream) – *vijito* (streams)
mti (tree) – *kijiti* (small tree/stick) – *vijiti* (small trees/sticks)

Note that in the last example, *kijiti* can be a small tree or a stick depending on the context.

After removing the prefix, if the remaining part of the noun begins with a vowel, the *ki-* prefix is added for singular nouns and *vi-* prefix for plural nouns followed by the *-j-* infix.

Regular – Diminutive Sing. – Diminutive Pl.

mwizi (thief) – *kijizi* (petty thief) – *vijizi* (petty thieves)
mwiko (serving spoon) – *kijiko* (spoon) – *vijiko* (spoons)

3. Nouns that already belong to the KI-/VI- Class and start with the prefix *ki-* are made diminutive by the insertion of *-ji-* between the prefix *ki-* and the rest of the noun.

Regular – Diminutive Sing. – Diminutive Pl.

kikapu (basket) – *kijikapu* (small basket) – *vijikapu* (small baskets)

kidonda (wound) – *kjidonda* (small wound) – *vjidonda* (small wounds)

kisu (knife) – *kijisu* (small knife) – *vijisu* (small knives)

kitanda (bed) – *kjitanda* (small bed) – *vjitanda* (small beds)

This rule does not apply to KI-/VI- Class nouns which start with the prefix *ch-/vy-* as they are treated as regular disyllabic or polysyllabic nouns with no prefixes.

Regular – Diminutive Sing. – Diminutive Pl.

cheti (chit) – *kicheti* (small chit) – *vicheti* (small chits)

Also note that sometimes the prefix *ka-* is used instead of the *ki-* prefix. For example

Katoto kazuri – A small nice child

4. As mentioned previously, once a noun becomes diminutive, it can also have a derogatory or pleasant connotation. For example:

Kisichana kinasikia muziki. – The immature girl is listening to music.

Kibuza kimechinjwa. – The small pathetic goat has been slaughtered.

5. Some Diminutives can take the infix *-ji-* to add an extra level of smallness as well as show a derogatory or pleasant connotation. For example:

Kijiduka hiki hakina faida. – This insignificant shop does not make a profit.

Kijiuu kinanukia. – The delicate flower smells good.

Also, there are some nouns that can be made into Diminutives without following the rules above. Some of these exceptions nouns are listed below.

Regular – Diminutive Sing. – Diminutive Pl.

ndege (bird) – *kidege* (small bird) – *videge* (small birds)
nyumba (house) – *kijumba* (small house) – *vijumba* (small houses)
nyoka (snake) – *kijoka* (small snake) – *vijoka* (small snakes)
mbwa (dog) – *kijibwa* (small dog) – *vijibwa* (small dogs)

Practice Exercise A

Change the nouns below into Diminutives

1. *koroboi*
2. *mdomo*
3. *chenezo*
4. *kitabu*
5. *mlima*

Section B: Augmentative Nouns

As pointed out in the Introduction, only some nouns can be made into Augmentatives to express largeness or character. When a noun becomes an Augmentative, it belongs to the JI-/MA- class, and follows the agreement rules for this class even if the nouns involved belong to animate things such people, animals or insects.

Regular – Augmentative Sing.

kisu changu (my knife) – *jisu langu* (my large knife)
mbuzi huyu (this goat) – *buzi hili* (this large goat)

Nouns can be made into Augmentative form using the following rules:

1. For nouns that are not in the JI-/MA- class, if after removing the prefix, the remaining part of the noun has a disyllabic or polysyllabic root stem, the remaining part of the noun stands alone as the augmented noun in the singular form. The *ma-* prefix is added to the already augmented singular noun to make the augmented plural noun.

Regular – Augmentative Sing. – Augmentative Pl.

kikapu (basket) – *kapu* (large basket) – *makapu* (large baskets)
kidonda (wound) – *donda* (large wound) – *madonda* (large wounds)
mtoto (child) – *toto* (large child) – *matoto* (large children)

For nouns with disyllabic or polysyllabic root stems which do not have a prefix, the *ma-* prefix is added to the root stem.

Regular – Augmentative Sing. – Augmentative Pl.

paka (cat) – *paka* (large cat) – *mapaka* (large cats)

kompyuta (computer) – *kompyuta* (large computer) – *makompyuta*
(large computers)

- For nouns that are not in the JI-/MA- class, if after removing the prefix, the remaining part of the noun has a Monosyllabic root stem or begins with a vowel, the *j-* or *ji-* prefix is added for singular nouns. The *ma-* prefix is added to the already augmented singular noun to make the augmented plural noun.

Regular – Augmentative Sing. – Augmentative Pl.

mtu (person) – *jitu* (giant) – *majitu* (giants)

mtu (river) – *jito* (large river) – *majito* (large rivers)

mwiko (serving spoon) – *jiko* (large spoon) – *majiko* (large spoons)

chungu (pot) – *jungu* (large pot) – *majungu* (large pots)

- Nouns that already belong to the JI-/MA- Class cannot be made into augmentatives by using any prefixes or infixes. Their largeness is instead emphasized by the use of adjectives.

tunda (fruit) – *tunda kubwa* (large fruit) – *matunda makubwa* (large fruits)

jicho (eye) – *jicho kubwa* (large eye) – *macho makubwa* (large eyes)

- As mentioned previously, some nouns take the prefix JI-/MA- to emphasize largeness as well as show a derogatory or pleasant connotation. For example:

Jana linasikia muziki. – The ill-mannered youth is listening to music.

Jizi liliiba dola milioni mbili. – The experienced thief stole two million dollars.

Also, there are some nouns that can be made into Augmentatives without following the rules above. Some of these exceptions nouns are listed below.

Regular – Augmentative Sing. – Augmentative Pl.
ndege (bird) – *dege* (large bird) – *madege* (large birds)
nyumba (house) – *jumba* (large house) – *majumba* (large houses)
nyoka (snake) – *joka* (large snake) – *majoka* (large snakes)

Practice Exercise B

Translate the sentences below into English.

6. *Tafadhali niletee pande la keki.*
7. *Msichana mdogo alibeba maji katika majungu.*
8. *Tulipiga magoma mpaka mikono yetu ilitoka damu.*
9. *Familia ile ilihamia jijini kuwapatia watoto wao elimu bora.*
10. *Kaka yake huvaa masuruali.*

Section C: Collective Nouns

Only some nouns from the U- and N- classes can be made into collectives to represent a collection of living species, objects or concepts. Once a singular noun from the U- or N- class is changed into its plural, it is then made into a collective by adding the prefix *ma-* from the JI-/MA- Noun Class. Since both Augmentatives and Collectives use the prefix *ma-*, the context of the sentence is used to determine whether the noun is an Augmentative or a Collective. Once a noun is collectivized, it follows the agreement rules for the JI-/MA- Noun Class even if the nouns involved belong to animate things such people, animals or insects.

Singular – Plural – Collective

samaki (fish) – *samaki* (fishes) – *masamaki* (fishes in general)
rafiki (friend) – *rafiki* (friends) – *marafiki* (friends in general)
simba (lion) – *simba* (lions) – *masimba* (lions in general)
babu (grandfather) – *babu* (grandfathers) – *mababu* (grandfathers in general)
mama (mother) – *mama* (mothers) – *mamama* (mothers in general)
mia (hundred) – *mia* (hundreds) – *mamia* (hundreds in general)
wukuta (wall) – *kuta* (walls) – *makuta* (walls in general)

Practice Exercise C

Change the sentences below into Collectives.

11. *Twiga anamwogopa simba yule.*
12. *Alishona shuka kwa kutumia uzi wa rangi njano.*
13. *Ng'ombe alisafirishwa kutoka Dodoma.*
14. *Alinunua nguo za kazi kutoka duka la mitumba.*
15. *Bwana Ali anamiliki supamaketi karibu na mlima wa Kilimanjaro.*

New Vocabulary

chenezo/vy-: measure(s)

chinja: slaughter

elimu: education, knowledge

jitu/ma-: giant(s)

kidomo/vi-: small mouth(s) (adj. talkative)

kidonda/vi-: wound(s)

kijitabu/vi-: small book(s), pamphlet(s)

kijito/vi-: stream(s)

koroboi: paraffin lamp(s)

mdomo/mi-: mouth(s)

mtumba/mi-: bundle(s) of clothes, usually second hand from abroad

ogopa: be afraid

shuka: sheet(s)

supamaketi: supermarket(s)

suruali: trouser(s)

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. *kikoroboi*
2. *kidomo*
3. *kichenezo*
4. *kijitabu*
5. *kilima*

Answers to Practice Exercise B

6. Please bring me a large piece of cake.
7. The little girl carried water in big pots.
8. We played the large drums until our hands bled.
9. That family moved to a large city to get their children a better education.
10. His/Her brother wears (habitually, HU- habitual tense) large trousers.

Answers to Practice Exercise C

11. *Matwiga yanayaogopa masimba yale.*
12. *Alishona mashuka kwa kutumia manyuzi ya rangi njano.*
13. *Mang'ombe yalisafirishwa kutoka Dodoma.*
14. *Alinunua manguo ya kazi kutoka duka la mitumba.*
15. *Bwana Ali anamiliki masupamakeki karibu na mlima wa Kilimanjaro.*