

Chapter 30

Imperative Verbs and Their Negations

Imperative verbs are of two kinds: abrupt imperatives and polite imperatives. An abrupt imperative is known as a command while a polite imperative is known as a request. While the subject of an imperative sentence is always the 2nd person singular or plural, the subject is not expressed but rather implied in the sentence. In many cultures, a command seems blunt or even rude, so it is often used with caution. Swahili people never use commands when addressing one's elders but instead they use requests. When speaking to one's equals and subordinates, either a command or a request is acceptable. In English, we can add the word "please" to a command and soften our tone of voice to make it a request. However in Swahili command and requests are differentiated by their prefixes and suffixes. In this chapter, we will learn how to make singular and plural imperative sentences and their negations.

Section A: Singular and Plural Commands

Singular Commands

Many languages, including English, use a verb for a command. In Swahili, the same is done for Bantu and Arabic verbs. Here are some examples:

Bantu verbs:

Fanya! – Do! (sing.)

Kata! – Cut! (sing.)

Ngoja! – Wait! (sing.)

Nunua! – Buy! (sing.)
Safisha! – Clean! (sing.)
Tafuta! – Search! (sing.)

Arabic verbs:

Samehe! – Forgive! (sing.)
Fikiri! – Think! (sing.)
Jaribu! – Try! (sing.)
Jibu! – Answer! (sing.)

For Monosyllabic verbs, the *ku-* infinitive is prefixed to the verb to make it a command. Here are some examples:

Kula! – Eat! (sing.)
Kunywa! – Drink! (sing.)

Plural Commands

While the verb conjugation does not change when giving a command to one person or a group of people in English, a singular and a plural command is differentiated by their suffixes in Swahili. For Bantu verbs, we change the last vowel of the verb (which is always an *a*, see Chapter 5) to the letter *e* followed by the suffix *-ni* to make it a plural command. Here are some examples:

Bantu verbs:

Fanyeni! – Do! (pl.)
Kateni! – Cut! (pl.)
Ngojeni! – Wait! (pl.)
Nunueni! – Buy! (pl.)
Safisheni! – Clean! (pl.)
Tafuteni! – Search! (pl.)

For Arabic verbs, we do not change the last vowel of the verb. The suffix *-ni* is simply added to the final vowel. Here are some examples:

Sameheni! – Forgive! (pl.)
Jaribuni! – Try! (pl.)

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Fikirini! – Think!(pl.)

Jibuni! – Answer! (pl.)

Since Monosyllabic verbs are also Bantu verbs, we change the last vowel of the verb to the letter *e* followed by the suffix *-ni*. Note that in Monosyllabic verbs, the *ku-* infinitive is prefixed to the verb to make it a command. Here are some examples:

Kuleni! – Eat! (pl.)

Kunyweni! – Drink! (pl.)

Practice Exercise A

Translate the following into Swahili.

1. Love! (sing)
2. Cook! (pl.)
3. Thank! (sing.)
4. Sweep! (sing.)
5. Swim! (sing.)
6. Speak! (pl.)
7. Look! (sing.)
8. Touch! (pl)
9. Smell! (sing.)
10. Choose! (pl.)

Section B: Singular and Plural Requests

Both singular and plural commands are changed into requests by following two simple steps: the prefix and suffix steps. These steps are:

- The prefix *u-* is used for 2nd person singular and the prefix *m-* for 2nd person plural.
- The suffix *e* replaces the last vowel of Bantu verbs and Monosyllabic verbs while the Arabic verbs retain their last vowel.

Ufanye! – Would you (sing.) do!

Mfanye! – Would you (pl.) do!

Ukate! – Would you (sing.) cut!

Mkate! – Would you (pl.) cut!

Ungoje! – Would you (sing.) wait!

Mngoje! – Would you (pl.) wait!

Uandike! – Would you (sing.) write!

Mandike! – Would you (pl.) write!

In the above examples, the second person prefixes are pronounced as a separate syllable. For example, the verb *mandike* would contain four syllables and be pronounced as *m-a-ndi-ke*.

Arabic verbs:

Usamehe! – Would you (sing.) forgive!

Msamehe! – Would you (pl.) forgive!

Ufikiri! – Would you (sing.) think!

Mfikiri! – Would you (pl.) think!

Monosyllabic verbs:

Ule! – Would you (sing.) eat!

Mle! – Would you (pl.) eat!

Unywe! – Would you (sing.) drink!

Mnywe! – Would you (pl.) drink!

Note that the *ku-* infinitive is not prefixed to the verb in Monosyllabic requests.

Practice Exercise B

Translate the following into English.

11. *Mseme!*

12. *Uchague!*

13. *Mkubali!*

14. *Utabasamu!*

15. *Ungoje!*

Section C: The Negations of Commands & Requests

When a command is negated, it is automatically changed to a request, having the meaning of “would you not.” Both commands and requests are negated by following the same 3 simple steps: the prefix, infix and suffix steps. Note that the prefix and the suffix steps are the same as the ones we used in Section B to change commands into requests. Now, in order to change singular and plural commands and requests into their negations, we use a third step, which is the infix step. These three steps are listed below:

- The prefix *u-* is used for 2nd person singular and the prefix *m-* for 2nd person plural.
- The infix *-si-* is used to denote negation.
- The suffix *e* replaces the last vowel of Bantu and Monosyllabic verbs while the Arabic verbs retain their last vowel.

Here are some examples of negative singular and plural commands and requests.

Bantu verbs:

- Usifanye!* – Would you (sing.) not do!
Msifanye! – Would you (pl.) not do!
Usikate! – Would you (sing.) not cut!
Msikate! – Would you (pl.) not cut!
Usingoje! – Would you (sing.) not wait!
Msingoje! – Would you (pl.) not wait!

Arabic verbs:

- Usisamehe!* – Would you (sing.) not forgive!
Msisamehe! – Would you (pl.) not forgive!
Usifikiri! – Would you (sing.) not think!
Msifikiri! – Would you (pl.) not think!

Monosyllabic verbs:

- Usile!* – Would you (sing.) not eat!
Msile! – Would you (pl.) not eat!

Usinywe! – Would you (sing.) not drink!

Msinywe! – Would you (pl.) not drink!

Note that the *ku-* infinitive is not prefixed to the verb in negative Monosyllabic verbs.

Practice Exercise C

Translate the following into English.

16. *Msipende!*

17. *Msipike!*

18. *Msishukuru!*

19. *Usifagie!*

20. *Usiogelee!*

21. *Usiseme!*

22. *Usiangalie!*

23. *Usiguse!*

24. *Msinuse!*

25. *Usichague!*

Section D: Exception Verbs

There are only three exception verbs that do not use the verb stem for a singular command. These verbs are *leta* (bring), *enda* (go) and *ja* (come). The first two are Bantu verbs and the last one is a Monosyllabic verb.

When changing the verb *leta* into a singular command, we would expect it to become *Leta!* – Bring! (sing.) but it is instead *Lete!* – Bring! (sing.)

When changing the verb *enda* into a singular command, we would expect it to become *Enda!* – Go! (sing.) but it is instead *Nenda!* – Go!(sing.)

When changing the verb *ja* into a singular command, we would expect it to become *Kuja!* – Come! (sing.) but it is instead *Njoo!* – Come! (sing.)

When changing singular commands to become plural commands, all three verbs follow the rules listed in Section A. However, the verb *leta* behaves as a regular Bantu verb while *enda* and *ja* continue to behave as exception verbs:

Leteni! – Would you (pl.) bring!
Nendeni! – Would you (pl.) go!
Njoooni! – Would you (pl.) come!

These three verbs behave as regular verbs when singular and plural commands are changed into requests:

Ulete! – Would you (sing.) bring!
Mlete! – Would you (pl.) bring!
Uende! – Would you (sing.) go!
Mende! – Would you (pl.) go!
Uje! – Would you (sing.) come!
Mje! – Would you (pl.) come!

These three verbs also behave as regular verbs when singular and plural commands and requests are negated, here are some examples:

Usilete! – Would you (sing.) not bring!
Msilete! – Would you (pl.) not bring!
Usiende! – Would you (sing.) not go!
Msiende! – Would you (pl.) not go!
Usije! – Would you (sing.) not come!
Msije! – Would you (pl.) not come!

Section E: Imperatives with objects

When singular and plural commands are used with objects, the object infix is used as a prefix. If the verb is of Bantu origin, the last vowel changes from *a* to *e*.

Example:

Nunua ua! – You (sing.) buy a flower!
Linunue! – You (sing.) buy it!
Nunueni ua! – You (pl.) buy a flower!
Linunueni! – You (pl.) buy it!

If the verb is of Arabic origin, the last vowel is unchanged:

Jaribu tunda! – You (sing.) try the fruit!
Lijaribu! – You (sing.) try it!

Jaribuni tunda! – You (pl.) try the fruit!

Lijaribuni! – You (pl.) try it!

If the verb is Monosyllabic, the *ku-* infinitive is dropped and the last vowel changes from *a* to *e*:

Kula ndizi! – You (sing.) eat a banana!

Ile! – You (sing.) eat it!

Kuleni ndizi! – You (pl.) eat a banana!

Ileni! – You (pl.) eat it!

Note that when commands are used with objects whose object infixes are “-u-” or “-m-,” the resulting sentence can be mistaken for polite imperatives.

Example:

Piga mpira! – You (sing.) hit the ball!

Upige! – You (sing.) hit it!

As discussed in Section B, the word *upige* is also the singular request “Would you (sing.) hit.” This is different from *upige* in the above example which is an order to hit something (in this case, the ball). The context of the situation determines which of the two possible meanings *upige* stands for.

When singular and plural requests are used with objects, the object infix is inserted between the prefix and the verb.

Example:

Ununue ua! – Would you (sing.) buy a flower!

Ulinunue! – Would you (sing.) buy it!

Mnunue ua! – Would you (pl.) buy a flower!

Mlinunue! – Would you (pl.) buy it!

Ujaribu tunda! – Would you (sing.) try the fruit!

Ulijaribu! – Would you (sing.) try it!

Mjaribu tunda! – Would you (pl.) try the fruit!

Mlijaribu! – Would you (pl.) try it!

Ule ndizi! – Would you (sing.) eat a banana!

Uile! – Would you (sing.) eat it!

Mle ndizi! – Would you (pl.) eat a banana!

Mile! – Would you (pl.) eat it!

When a command or request is negated, it is automatically changed to a request, having the meaning of “would you not.”

- Usinunue ua!* – Would you (sing.) not buy a flower!
Usilinunue! – Would you (sing.) not buy it!
Msinunue ua! – Would you (pl.) not buy a flower!
Msilinunue! – Would you (pl.) not buy it!
Usijaribu tunda! – Would you (sing.) not try the fruit!
Usilijaribu! – Would you (sing.) not try it!
Msijaribu tunda! – Would you (pl.) not try the fruit!
Msilijaribu! – Would you (pl.) not try it!
Usile ndizi! – Would you (sing.) not eat a banana!
Usile! – Would you (sing.) not eat it!
Msile ndizi! – Would you (pl.) not eat a banana!
Msile! – Would you (pl.) not eat it!

Practice Exercise D

Translate the following into Swahili.

26. You all read it! (the book)
27. Choose him! (the president)
28. Would you (sing.) burn it! (the letter)
29. Burn them! (the letters)
30. You (pl.) don't cut it! (the bread)

New Vocabulary

- chagua*: choose, elect
gusa: touch
tabasamu: smile

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. *Penda!*
2. *Pikeni!*
3. *Shukuru!*
4. *Fagia!*
5. *Ogelea!*

6. *Semeni!*
7. *Angalia!*
8. *Guseni!*
9. *Nusa!*
10. *Chagueni!*

Answers to Practice Exercise B

11. Would you (pl.) speak!
12. Would you (sing.) choose!
13. Would you (pl.) agree!
14. Would you (sing.) smile!
15. Would you (sing.) wait!

Answers to Practice Exercise C

16. Would you (pl.) not love!
17. Would you (pl.) not cook!
18. Would you (pl.) not thank!
19. Would you (sing.) not sweep!
20. Would you (sing.) not swim!
21. Would you (sing.) not speak!
22. Would you (sing.) not look!
23. Would you (sing.) not touch!
24. Would you (pl.) not smell!
25. Would you (sing.) not choose!

Answers to Practice Exercise D

26. *Kisomeni!*
27. *Mchague!*
28. *Uichome!*
29. *Zichome!*
30. *Msiukate!*