

# Chapter 36

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## Interjections, Idiomatic Expressions and Impersonal Subjects

**I**nterjections, Idiomatic Expressions and Impersonal Subjects are used on a frequent basis by the Swahili people. Therefore, knowledge of these expressions indicates the learner has a better grasp of the Swahili language and culture.

### Section A: Interjections

An interjection is a word used to convey an emotion or fill a pause in conversation. An Interjection can stand as a separate sentence or be added to a sentence. When added to a sentence, the Interjection does not change the meaning of the sentence, and is usually followed by an exclamation point.

In Swahili, there are two categories of Interjections.

#### 1. Words used as Interjections only.

*Aa!* – Expresses surprise, joy or pain.

*Ah!* – Used to express grief, same as in English.

*Aisee!* – Expression used to attract someone’s attention, taken from the British expression “I Say!”

*Ala!* – Exclamation for annoyance or impatience.

*Ati!* – Expression of surprise or for seeking someone’s attention, similar to the English expression “Hey!”

*Bee!* – Response used by females when someone is calling them.

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*Ebu!* or *Hebu!* – Usually expresses surprise or even disapproval.

*Ewallah!* – Expression used by inferiors to agree with superiors.

*Haya!* – Used for expressing agreement, same as the English expression “OK.”

*Inshallah!* – If God wills it!

*Lahaula!* – Expresses inevitability that something bad has happened, such as a death, and it must now be accepted as nothing can be done about it.

*Laiti!* – Expression of disappointment or regret that something could have been done differently.

*Loo!* – “Oh!” Expresses surprise or astonishment, in a positive or negative way.

*Makubwa!* – Expresses unexpected important news.

*Mbona!* – “Why, for God’s sake?” Expression of astonishment.

*Mmm...* – Used to fill a pause in conversation, same as the English expression “Ummm..”

*Ng’o!* – Expression to tell a child “Absolutely not.”

*Shhh!* – Expression to keep quiet, as used in English.

*Ya Allah!* – Mostly expresses amazed frustration but can be used to express pleasant surprise, similar to the English expression “Oh God!”

## 2. Words that may have other uses but are also used as Interjections.

*Astafurulahi!* – This is an expression of seeking forgiveness from God, similar to the English expression “God forgive me.”

*Haki ya Mungu!* or *Wallahi!* – This expression is used to take an oath, similar to the English expression “I swear to God.”

*Hata!* – Expresses complete disagreement, with stress on the 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable.

*Haraka!* – Expresses hurry, similar to the English expression “Quickly!”

*Jamani!* – This is an expression of surprise, similar to the English expression “My goodness!”

*Kweli!* – When used with an exclamation point, it’s an expression of affirmation similar to the English expression “Truly!” However, when *Kweli?* is used with a question mark, it expresses disbelief, similar to the English expression “Really?”

*Mashallah!* – Expression for gratitude to God mostly used to admire his creations.

*Maskini!* – This is an expression of sympathy, similar to the English expression “Poor fellow!”

*Mawe!* – Expression of strong disagreement, exactly as the English expression “That’s garbage”

*Naam!* – “Yes” Response used by males when someone is calling them. Also used as a filler to keep conversation going, similar to the English expression “Uh-huh...!”

*Samahani!* or *Kumradhi!* – “Excuse me” or “sorry,” used to ask for forgiveness or pardon.

*Shabashi!* or *Hongera!* – Expresses congratulations, exactly as the English expression “Congratulations!”

*Subutu!* – This is a challenge, similar to the English expression “I dare you!”

*Vema!* – This is an expression of acceptance, similar to the English expression “Good.”

## Section B: Idiomatic Expressions

An Idiomatic Expression is a set of words that when used together have a different meaning than the individual words when used by themselves. Like other languages, *Kiswahili* has many idiomatic expressions. Most idiomatic expressions begin with the infinitive *ku-* marker followed by the verb.

Listed below are the most popular ones.

Idiomatic Expression – Literal meaning – Idiomatic meaning

*Ni mjamzito.* – She is full/heavy. – She is pregnant.

*Kuvimba kichwa.* –To swell the head. – To become big-headed/arrogant.

*Kufumba na kufumbua.* – To close and to open. – In the blink of an eye.

*Kichwa maji.* – Head of water. – Stupid/dumb person.

*Kumpa mtu kichwa.* – To give someone a head. – To spoil or pamper someone.

*Moja kwa moja.* – One by one. – Straight ahead.

*Mkia wa mbuzi.* – The tail of a goat. – Totally useless person.

*Kuuma meno.* – To bite teeth. – To take a vow of revenge.  
*Kupiga mkasi.* – To hit the scissors. – To expel from service.  
*Kushika sikio.* – To hold an ear. – To reprimand.

## Section C: Impersonal Subjects

In previous chapters, we have learnt about the STV rule, where the “S” denotes a Subject Prefix from any noun class, the “T” for the tense marker and “V” for the verb. However, there exists in Swahili a category of sentences which begin with an Impersonal Subject Prefix. The most common Impersonal Subject Prefix used is *i-*, which corresponds to “it” in English. The prefix *i-* refers to the subject prefix of the N- class in the singular, which is used as the default prefix since the “it” being referred to is unknown. The *i-* Impersonal Subject Prefix is commonly used with any of the following tenses: present, simple past, past perfect, future and occasionally, the *-ka-* tense.

Some verbs when used with the *i-* Impersonal Subject Prefix exist in their original form and could take Object Infixes. For example:

Verb stem – Impersonal Subject Sentence

*faa* becomes *inatufaa* – it is useful to us  
*pasa* becomes *imekupasa* – it behooves you (sing.)  
*dhuru* becomes *inadhuru* – it harms  
*bidi* becomes *inatubidi* – it behooves us

Other verbs use a derived or stative form which does not allow the use of Object Infixes. For example:

Verb stem – Derived/Stative Verb – Impersonal Subject Sentence

*sema* – *semekana* – *inasemekana* (it is said)  
*weza* – *wezekana* – *inawezakana* (it is possible)  
*amini* – *aminika* – *inaaminika* (it is believed)  
 no stem – *dhihirika* – *imedhihirika* (it has become clear)

In addition to the *i-* Impersonal Subject Prefix, there exists another Impersonal Subject Prefix which is *ya-*. This also corresponds to “it” in English. The rules governing the usage of *ya-* are the same as taught above for *i-*, except that it cannot take tense markers and is assumed to be in present tense. For example:

Verb stem – *faa*

*i-* Impersonal Subject Sentence – *inatufaa* (it is useful to us)

*ya-* Impersonal Subject Sentence – *yatufaa* (it is useful to us)

Verb stem – *sema*

*i-* Impersonal Subject Sentence – *inasemekana* (it is said)

*ya-* Impersonal Subject Sentence – *yasemekana* (it is said)

Note that there is an exceptional impersonal construction which can only use the *i-* Impersonal Subject Prefix and does not take either a tense marker or an object infix and it is:

*ikawa* – and it was

## Practice Exercise A

Translate into Swahili.

1. I say! Is it possible to get a cup of tea?
2. It behooved him/her to leave late at night.
3. It is disappointing to see him/her tortured again in the jail.
4. It is enough to know you love me very much.
5. It depends on the type of the work itself.

## Section D: Negation of Impersonal Subject

When negating a sentence which uses an Impersonal Subject Prefix, we negate it just as we would negate the present, future, simple past and past perfect tense sentences as taught previously. For example:

*inatufaa* – it is useful to us

*haitufai* – it is not useful to us

*imekupasa* – it behooves you (sing.)

*haijakupasa bado* – it has not yet behooved you (sing.) OR

*haikukupasa* – it did not behoove you (sing.)

*yasemekana* – it is said

*haisemekani* – it is not said

## Practice Exercise B

Translate into Swahili.

6. It is not taught that men are better than women.
7. It is not attractive to me when you smoke.
8. It is not useful for me to collect many shoes.
9. My goodness! It is not possible that he/she is a dumb person.
10. It is not enough to know you love me very much.

## New Vocabulary

- aa!*: expresses surprise, joy, pain  
*ah!*: expresses grief  
*aisee!*: expression used to attract attention  
*ala!*: expresses annoyance, impatience  
*astafurulahi!*: expresses seeking forgiveness from God  
*ati!*: expresses surprise, for seeking attention  
*bado*: still, not yet  
*bee!*: response used by females when someone is calling them  
*bidi*: behoove  
*dhihirika*: become evident  
*dhuru*: harm  
*ebu!*: expresses surprise, disapproval  
*ewallah!*: expression used by inferiors to agree with superiors  
*haki ya Mungu!*: expression used to take an oath  
*haraka!*: hurry!  
*hata!*: expresses complete disagreement  
*haya!*: OK!  
*hebu!*: expresses surprise, disapproval  
*hongera!*: Congratulations!  
*ikawa*: and it was  
*jamani!*: expresses surprise  
*jela*: jail(s)  
*kichwa maji*: stupid/dumb person (idiom. expr.)  
*kufumba na kufumbua*: in the blink of an eye (idiom. expr.)  
*kumpa mtu kichwa*: to spoil or pamper someone (idiom. exp.)  
*kumradhi!*: used to ask for forgiveness, pardon  
*kupiga mkasi*: to expel from service (idiom. expr.)  
*kusanya*: collect

- kushika sikio*: to reprimand (idiom. expr.)  
*kuuma meno*: to take a vow of revenge (idiom. expr.)  
*kuvimba kichwa*: to become big-headed, arrogant (idiom. expr.)  
*kweli!*: truly!  
*lahaula!*: expresses inevitability  
*laiti!*: expresses disappointment, regret  
*makubwa!*: expresses unexpected important news  
*mashallah!*: expresses gratitude to God  
*maskini!*: poor fellow!  
*mawe!*: expresses strong disagreement  
*mkia wa mbuzi*: totally useless person (idiom. expr.)  
*mmm...*: used to fill a pause in conversation  
*moja kwa moja*: straight ahead (idiom. expr.)  
*ng'o!*: expression to tell a child "Absolutely not"  
*ni mjamzito*: she is pregnant (idiom. expr.)  
*pasa*: behoove  
*shabashi!*: congratulations!  
*shhh!*: expression to keep quiet  
*sikitisha*: be disappointed  
*subutu!*: to dare someone  
*tesa*: torture  
*tosha*: enough  
*vema!*: good!  
*wallahi!*: expression used to take an oath  
*Ya Allah!*: expresses amazed frustration, pleasant surprise

## Key to Exercises

### Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. *Aisee! Inawezekana kupata kikombe cha chai?*
2. *Ilimbidi aondoke usiku wa manane.*
3. *Inasikitisha kumwona anateseka tena katika jela.*
4. *Inatosha kujua unanipenda sana.*
5. *Inategemea aina ya kazi yenyewe.*

### Answers to Practice Exercise B

6. *Haifundishwi kuwa wanaume ni bora kuliko wanawake.*
7. *Hainivutii ambapo wewe unavuta sigara.*

8. *Hainifai kukusanya viatu vingi.*
9. *Jamani! Haiwezekani kuwa yeye ni kichwa maji.*
10. *Haitoshi kujua unanipenda sana.*