

TWENDE RAFIKI!!

Short Swahili Course

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Introduction

First of all, *karibu sana*, or: you are very welcome! You are very welcome to this short Swahili course, in which you learn the basics of this beautiful East African language.

Swahili (or Kiswahili) and English are the national languages of several East African countries, with Swahili being the most widely spoken native language in Africa. Besides, many people speak a tribal language. In some countries Swahili is the most common language (Tanzania), in others, it's more common to use English or Swahili in a mix with the other languages (Kenya, Uganda).

The basis of Swahili is not difficult to learn. First of all, because the pronunciation is quite easy with just five basic vowels that are always pronounced phonetically. In other words, what you see is what you get. Even typical sounds like mn- (*mnazi*: coconut tree), ng- (*ng'ombe*: cow) or nn- (*nne*: four) are pronounced phonetically. If you then put the stress on the second-last syllable of a word, you are almost always correct.

Grammatically, do not feel the pressure to phrase everything correctly but feel confident to mix and match what you have learned. Language is a tool of communication. As long as you successfully make your message understandable, it is a success! Keep that in mind and you will have some basic conversations in Swahili very soon.

Enjoy!

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Greeting people and introductions

Greeting is important for native Swahili speakers. They can easily spend a few minutes greeting each other. So it is very useful to learn some basic greetings. Practice the greetings below as much as you like with local people along your journey. Enjoy the kindness in return when you make the effort to learn their culture.

The most common forms of greetings in Swahili all mean 'how are you', but they come in different forms. The most commonly used phrase as stated below is mostly used in informal settings:

- *Mambo? + Poa.*
- How are you? + Good.

Alternatively in and around tourist areas people use '*jambo!*' to greet visitors, and you can just reply with the same: '*jambo!*'



FUN FACT

There are many variations of the commonly used '*mambo, poa*' phrase, most of them having similar meanings. When greeting, people normally use several greetings going back and forth, which is usually accompanied by a shake of the hand, or fists bumping. The different varieties then follow one another in different combinations.

Common variations: *mambo vipi, vipi, sasa hizi, mzima wewe, uko poa*, OR *salama* as the initial question, which is then followed by a variety of answers: *safi, mzuri, salama, fresh, mzima, baridi* and so on.

Formal greetings

In hotels or more formal settings, you can use the following greetings:

- *Habari (gani)? Or Habari yako? + Nzuri (sana).*
- How are you? + (Very) good.

- *(Habari) za asubuhi/ mchana/ jioni? + Nzuri (sana).*
- Good morning/ afternoon/ evening! + (Very) good.

- *Nafurahi (sana) kukuona.*
- It is (very) nice to meet you (but in some countries rather: I'm happy to see you).

There is a special way to greet people older than yourself, which sometimes is debated as it puts the younger person in an inferior position. In general, however, it is seen as a sign of respect. A group of children will normally all greet you this way and sometimes even insist on *marahaba* for each of them. A greeting between an older (-) and a younger (+) is always started by the younger and it usually goes like this:

+ *Shikamoo!*

- *Marahaba. Hujambo?*

+ *Sijambo.*

+ Respect to you (or literally: touching your leg!).

- Welcome/hello. Are you good?

+ I am good.



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Introducing yourself

To introduce yourself briefly, you may say:

- *Mimi naitwa John / Jina langu ni John.*
- My name is John.

- *Natoka Uingereza/ Marekani.*
- I come from England/ America.

- *Nina miaka thelathini (30).*
- I am 30 years old.



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To express your gratitude and to respond, you can say:

- *Asante (sana)! Nashukuru!*
- Thank you (very much)! I'm grateful!
- *Karibu (sana)!*
- You're (very) welcome!



Saying goodbye

There are several ways to say goodbye, but the most important thing to remember is that if there is any chance to see each other again today, people usually say *baadaye* (later). If that chance doesn't exist they either say *kesho* ((see you) tomorrow) or any of the goodbyes below:

- *Kwa heri!*
- Goodbye (to one person).
- *Kwa herini!*
- Goodbye (to several people).
- *Tutaonana!*
- See you again!
- *Usiku mwema!*
- Good night!

Common words and phrases

There are some more words/ phrases/ sentences that you most likely use daily.

Yes	<i>Ndiyo</i>
No	<i>Hapana</i>
Please	<i>Tafadhali / naomba</i>
Ok	<i>Sawa</i>
Excuse me / sorry	<i>Samahani / pole</i>
Friend	<i>Rafiki</i>
Bad	<i>Mbaya</i>
Good	<i>Mzuri</i>
Shilling	<i>Shilingi</i>
Can you give me...?	<i>Naomba...?</i>
Price	<i>Bei</i>
Reduce / lower (the price) a bit	<i>Punguza (bei) kidogo</i>
How much (is this)?	<i>(Hii ni) shilingi ngapi?</i>
How do you say this in Swahili?	<i>Unasemaje kwa Kiswahili?</i>
I don't understand	<i>Sielewi</i>
Go slow	<i>Pole pole</i>
Much used expression of empathy	<i>Pole!</i>

FUN FACT

Swahili is a language of not only words but also of sounds. Yes and no, for example, are hardly used, but mostly indicated by a sound (*ah ah* for no, *eeh* for yes) or gesture (shake of the head for no, slowly raising the chin and eyebrows for yes). And if you call a man by his name, he will usually answer with '*naam*', whereas a woman will answer with '*abeh*' instead of using yes or no.

Also, expressions of surprise (*dah!*), disapproval (*duh!*), and strong disapproval (*tsss*) are common, and changes in pitches are used to emphasize the meaning (*kule*, for example, means 'over there' but when said in a high pitch it means 'way out there'). Also check out [this clip on Instagram](#) to get an idea of how sounds and gestures are used.



Directions and making your first sentences

As you're doing a game drive in the national parks, learning how to say directions in Swahili can be very useful. In this section, you learn some useful vocabulary and basic grammar so that you can make your own sentences. There is some handy information you might want to learn in the appendix section. Don't forget to check it out!

Some basic vocabulary to express directions are:

Front	<i>Mbele</i>
Behind	<i>Nyuma</i>
Left	<i>Kushoto</i>
Right	<i>Kulia</i>
Up	<i>Juu</i>
Down	<i>Chini</i>
There	<i>Pale</i>
Here	<i>Hapa</i>
Straight	<i>Moja kwa moja</i>
Corner	<i>Kona</i>
Roundabout	<i>Kiplefti/ uzunguko</i>
Road	<i>Bara bara</i>
Where is...?	<i>...iko wapi?</i>
Go	<i>Nenda</i>
Stop! (the car)	<i>Simama!</i>
Go back (to)...	<i>Rudi...</i>
Go slow	<i>Pole pole</i>



FUN FACT

Swahili speakers like mixing their Swahili with English words and phrases, and creating their own forms of English, usually called Swanglish. With the funny detail that people often put an i behind any word that sounds English, except for when it actually has one. So people might grab a 'tax' to go to a 'part' on the 'bichi'. Other examples of Swanglish words are: *soseji, komputa, spika, spea, subofa, feni, jenerata, shati, laini, ofa, karoti, begi* (can you decipher them??)

Basic Swahili grammar

A complete Swahili verb starts with “*ku*”, which disappears when it is conjugated. It is very handy to learn some frequently used verbs, such as:

To go	<i>Kuenda</i>
To continue	<i>Kuendelea</i>
To eat	<i>Kula</i>
To sleep	<i>Kulala</i>
To look at	<i>Kuangalia</i>
To see	<i>Kuona</i>
To look for	<i>Kutafuta</i>
To understand / to be aware / to know (a person)	<i>Kufahamu</i>
To return/go back	<i>Kurudi</i>
To be able	<i>Kuweza</i>
To stop / to stand	<i>Kusimama</i>
To want	<i>Kutaka</i>
To like / to love	<i>Kupenda</i>

With the vocabulary above, you can now make your own sentences. It is important to learn some basic rules for making a sentence in Swahili.

Using verbs

In Swahili, there are many variations of a verb. Unlike English where every word is separately written, a Swahili sentence can often simply be only one word based on the variation of a verb. The structure goes like this:

subject marker + tense marker + object marker + verb

e.g., *Ninakupenda* means I love you.

To deconstruct:

Ni+na+ku+penda* = I love you with *na* indicating the simple present tense.

*Please note that when talking about yourself (I) the *ni-* often is left out. So even though officially you would say (*mimi*) *ninakupenda*, in reality, people usually say: *nakupenda*.

To put other pronouns in a verb, use the list below. In [the appendix](#), you can find more pronouns.

Swahili	English	Swahili example	English example
<i>ni-</i>	I	<i>(ni)nalala</i>	I sleep
<i>u-</i>	you (single)	<i>unalala</i>	you sleep
<i>a-</i>	he / she	<i>analala</i>	she / he sleeps
<i>tu-</i>	we	<i>tunalala</i>	we sleep
<i>mn-</i>	you	<i>mnalala</i>	you sleep
<i>wa-</i>	they	<i>wanalala</i>	they sleep

The simplest tense markers are:

na (present tense) -> *tunaenda* -> we go

ta (future tense) -> *tutaenda* -> we will go

li (past tense) -> *tulienda* -> we went

Simple sentences to use during safari

Here are some useful examples you may get to use during your safari:

- *Tunaenda wapi sasa?*
Where are we going now?
- *Twende!*
Let's go!
- *Tunasogea mbele kutafuta simba.*
We are going forward looking for the lion.
- *Angalia kushoto/ kulia! Kuna simba analala.*
Look to the left/ right! A lion is sleeping there.
- *Naomba tuendelea sasa? Twende kutafuta twiga.*
Can we continue now? Let's look for giraffes.

- *Simama! Nilimuona chui.*
- Stop! I saw a leopard.

- *Rudi pale, kuna tembo.*
- Go back there, there is an elephant.

- *Je, tuache safari ya leo na turudi hotelini? Tutakula pamoja badaaye.*
- Do you want to stop the trip today and return to the hotel? We will eat together later.

- *Samahani, sielewi. Naomba uongee Kiingereza.*
- Sorry, I can't understand. Please speak English.



FUN FACT

Except for words and sounds, gestures are very much used as a form of communication, and sometimes in opposite ways to what you are used to. The number five for example is often indicated by raising a closed fist, instead of an open hand with five outstretched fingers. And asking someone to come is not done with the palm up, but with the palm down. Handshakes are important when greeting and come in different varieties. Make sure to only use your right hand when shaking or giving someone something, as the left hand is associated with going to the toilet (!) and it's thus viewed as offensive to use it.

Also, don't get scared if someone strikes a hand along their throat while fiercely exclaiming '*haki ya Mungu!*' - they are not threatening to kill you, but simply swearing to God about something.

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Animals on and after safari

People from all over the globe visit countries in East Africa to come and see wild animals in their natural environment. It's useful to know the names of the animals you most commonly see during your safari, with the most famous one probably being *simba* (lion).

While you're doing a safari trip, don't be surprised if you do not hear any of the words below from the driver, especially when he/she is talking on the radio. That is because they are using jargon, a series of code words to refer to the animals. This can be an interesting topic to discuss with your safari guide.



The Big Five

Buffalo	<i>Mbogo / nyati</i>
Elephant	<i>Tembo / ndovu</i>
Rhino	<i>Kifaru</i>
Lion	<i>Simba</i>
Leopard	<i>Chui</i>

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Other animals

Animals	<i>Wanyama</i>
Antelope	<i>Swara</i>
Bird	<i>Ndege</i>
Cat	<i>Paka</i>
Cheetah	<i>Duma</i>
Chicken	<i>Kuku</i>
Chimpanzee	<i>Sokwe</i>
Cox/ox / cattle / bull	<i>Ng'ombe</i>
Crane	<i>Korongo</i>
Dog	<i>Mbwa</i>
Donkey	<i>Punda</i>
Giraffe	<i>Twiga</i>
Goat	<i>Mbuzi</i>
Gorilla	<i>Gorila</i>
Hippo	<i>Kiboko</i>
Horse	<i>Farasi</i>
Hyena	<i>Fisi</i>
Mosquito	<i>Mbu</i>
Pig	<i>Nguruwe</i>
Warthog	<i>Ngiri</i>
Wild boar	<i>Ngiri</i>
Wildebeest	<i>Nyumbu</i>
Zebra	<i>Punda milia</i>



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The weather

The East African region has a typical equatorial climate, causing it to have two seasons — a dry season and a rainy season. The temperature can vary a lot depending on the altitude. Both seasons are good for visiting the region and can offer very different sceneries.

Some useful words to talk about the weather:

Cloud(s)	<i>Wingu (singular) / mawingu (plural)</i>
Cold	<i>Baridi</i>
Hot	<i>Joto</i>
Rain	<i>Mvua</i>
Snow	<i>Theluji</i>
Sun	<i>Jua</i>
Weather (condition)	<i>Hali ya hewa</i>
Wind	<i>Upepo</i>

Big	<i>Kubwa</i>
Small	<i>Ndogo</i>

Today	<i>Leo</i>
Tomorrow	<i>Kesho</i>
Yesterday	<i>Jana</i>



The Swahili word for hot is *joto*, but only if that heat comes from the sun. If the heat originates from a fire, it's called *moto*. So, for example, warm water is '*maji ya moto*', but if you talk about the hot weather you would say '*kuna joto!*' - it's hot!



Simple sentences about the weather

- *Habari ya hali ya hewa leo/ kesho?*
How is the weather today/ tomorrow?
- *Mvua/Theluji inanyesha.*
It is raining/ snowing.
- *Kuna jua/ upepo kali sana leo.*
The sun/wind is really strong today.
- *Kuna joto nje lakini mi najisikia baridi sana.*
It is hot outside but I feel very cold.



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Plants, fruits and food

During a safari trip, you come across many unique species of vegetation endemic to the country. Besides, the country has an abundance of beautiful tropical fruits for you to try, and it's always good to know some words about eating.



Plants and trees

Some most commonly seen plants along your trip are:

Flower	<i>Ua</i> (singular) / <i>maua</i> (plural)
Grass	<i>Nyasi</i>
Tree	<i>Mti</i>
Acacia tree	<i>Mgunga</i>
Baobab tree	<i>Mbuyu</i>
Coconut tree	<i>Mnazi</i>
Palm tree	<i>Mtende</i>
Sausage tree	<i>Mvungunya</i>

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Fruits

Fruits are common and delicious, so be sure to have some words in mind. Fruits are packed in your lunchboxes but can also be bought along the road:

Fruit/s	<i>Tunda</i> (singular) / <i>matunda</i> (plural)
Apple	<i>Tofaa</i>
Avocado	<i>Parachichi</i>
Banana	<i>Ndizi</i>
Baobab fruit	<i>Ubuyu</i>
Date	<i>Tende</i>
Jackfruit	<i>Fenesi</i>
Mango	<i>Embe</i>
Orange	<i>Chungwa</i>
Papaya	<i>Papai</i>
Pineapple	<i>Nanasi</i>
Soursop	<i>Staferi</i>
Sugarcane	<i>Miwa</i>
Tamarinde	<i>Ukwaju</i> (try the ice cream!)
Watermelon	<i>Tikiti maji</i>



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Eating and drinking

Below you find some words to help you with eating and drinking.

Drinks	<i>Vinywaji</i>
Food	<i>Chakula</i>
To be full	<i>Kushiba</i>
To drink	<i>Kunywa</i>
To eat	<i>Kula</i>

If you need any of the items below you can ask by saying 'naomba' followed by the desired item:

Drinks

Alcohol	<i>Pombe</i>
Beer	<i>Bia</i>
Coffee	<i>Kahawa</i>
Milk	<i>Maziwa</i>
Tea	<i>Chai</i>
Water	<i>Maji</i>

Utensils

Fork	<i>Uma</i>
Knife	<i>Kisu</i>
Plate	<i>Sahani</i>
Spoon	<i>Kijiko</i>

Food

Beans	<i>Maharagwe</i>
Bread	<i>Mkate</i>
Chicken	<i>Kuku</i>
Chili	<i>Pili pili</i>
Coconut	<i>Nazi</i>
Eggs	<i>Mayai</i>
Fish	<i>Samaki</i>
Fries	<i>Chipsi</i>
Meat	<i>Nyama</i>
Pasta	<i>Tambi</i>
Rice	<i>Wali</i> (when cooked) <i>Mchele</i> (when uncooked)
Sauce	<i>Mchuzi</i>
Tomato	<i>Nyanya</i>
Vegetable	<i>Mboga</i>



Local dishes

<i>Ugali</i>	A strong dough made out of corn, to be eaten by hand
<i>Chapati</i>	Flatbread, eaten in the morning
<i>Mandazi</i>	A doughnut kind of snack in the morning
<i>Sambusa</i>	Meat or potato in pastry
<i>Nyama choma</i>	Barbecued meat, usually in big quantities, especially around Arusha
<i>Matoke/ Ndizi</i>	Plantain dishes

FUN FACT

In the same way Eskimos love their snow and have different words for it, Swahili people love their rice and have different words for it:

<i>Mapuapua</i>	Seeds
<i>Mpunga</i>	Rice in the fields or already harvested but not processed
<i>Mchele</i>	Processed rice, but not cooked (what you buy in the store)
<i>Wali or ubwabwa</i>	Cooked rice, preferably to be eaten by hand!



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Express how you feel

When travelling there might come a time you might want to express how you are feeling, if only to say that you are happy with all the things you are doing and seeing. Below you find a list of the most useful and/or common feelings:

To be (very) happy	<i>Kufuraha (sana)</i>
To laugh	<i>Kucheka</i>
To be cranky	<i>Kununa</i>
To be ill/ have pain	<i>Kuumwa</i>
To be tired	<i>Kuchoka</i>
I have a headache	<i>Naumwa kichwa</i>
I have stomach pain	<i>Naumwa tumbo</i>
I threw up	<i>Nimetapika</i>
To express a feeling of empathy	<i>Pole!</i>

And of course, all the different expressions to say No worries!: *Hakuna matata, hakuna noma, bila shaka, hamna shida, hamna noma, hakuna shida, hamna tatizo, usijali.*



FUN FACT

Pole is an expression that can be used in many situations to indicate a feeling of empathy; no matter if someone just bumps their head, is ill, is asking for money but you cannot give any, or even has a death in the family (*pole sana*). *Pole pole*, on the other hand, just means to go slow.

Appendix

Personal pronouns					
	Single / Plural	Nominative Form	Subject Marker	Object Marker	Possessive (after noun)
I	single	<i>mimi</i>	<i>ni-</i>	<i>-ni-</i>	<i>yangu</i>
You	single	<i>wewe</i>	<i>u-</i>	<i>-ku-</i>	<i>yako</i>
He/she/it	single	<i>yeye</i>	<i>a-</i>	<i>-m(w)-</i>	<i>yake</i>
We	plural	<i>sisi</i>	<i>tu-</i>	<i>-tu-</i>	<i>yetu</i>
You	plural	<i>ninyi</i>	<i>m-</i>	<i>-wa-</i>	<i>yenu</i>
They	plural	<i>wao</i>	<i>wa-</i>	<i>-wa-</i>	<i>yao</i>

Table 1. Personal Pronouns

Tense markers	
Tense	Tense Marker
simple present / ongoing / habitual	<i>-na</i>
simple past	<i>-li</i>
future	<i>-ta</i>
present perfect	<i>-me</i>

Table 2. Frequently-used Tense Markers

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Question words	
What?	<i>Nini?</i>
Who?	<i>Nani?</i>
Where?	<i>Wapi?</i>
Where are you?	<i>Uko wapi?</i>
When?	<i>Lini?</i>
What time?	<i>Saa ngapi?*</i>
Why?	<i>Kwa nini?</i>
How?	<i>Vipi / kwa namna gani?</i>
How many?	<i>Ngapi?</i>

Table 3. Question Words

*Use this option when asking for a specific moment/ event on the same day, rather than the word 'lini' (when).



Did you know that Swahili people have their own system of telling time? Basically, in Swahili the clock starts at sunrise, goes for twelve hours until sunset, then another twelve hours until sunrise again. And since the country lies close to the equator, this means the clock starts at 6 am (the hour zero). Consequently, 7 am becomes 1 o'clock (*saa 1*), 8 am becomes 2 o'clock (*saa 2*) and so on. The period of the day is then indicated by saying *asubuhi* (in the morning), *mchana* (midday), *jioni* (afternoon/ evening), *usiku* (night) OR *al fajiri* (early hours of the morning).

Needless to say, this can lead to funny mix-ups, where people literally translate their time to English (or vice versa), saying they want to meet at 3 o'clock, where they mean 9 am!

Numbers					
1	moja	11	kumi na moja	100	mia (moja)
2	mbili	20	ishirini	500	mia tano
3	tatu	30	thelathini	1000	elfu (moja)
4	nne	40	arobaini	2024	elfu mbili na ishirini na nne
5	tano	50	hamsini	35,000	elfu thelathini na tano
6	sita	60	sitini	100,000	laki moja
7	saba	70	sabini	680,000	laki sita na themanini
8	nane	80	themanini	1,000,000	milioni moja
9	tisa	90	tisini	0,5	nusu
10	kumi	99	tisini na tisa	250,000	laki mbili na nusu

Table 4. Numbers

Talk about interesting scenes during your trip	
Is it difficult to carry so many things on the head?	<i>Je, ni ngumu kubeba vitu vingi kichwani?</i>
Can I try to carry this bucket on my head?	<i>Naomba kujaribu kubeba maji kichwani?</i>
I didn't know that you could transport a bed on a motorcycle.	<i>Sijajua kwamba kitanda inasafirishwa kwenye pikipiki.</i>
Those mountains are so beautiful!	<i>Milima hiyo zinapendeza sana!</i>
The scenery is fascinating!	<i>Mandhari inavutia sana!</i>
I love lions/ giraffes/ elephants!	<i>Nawapenda sana simba/ twiga/ tembo!</i>
I'm surprised you can sit on a motorcycle with 5 people.	<i>Nashangaa kwamba watu watano wanapanda pikipiki moja.</i>

Table 5. Talk about Interesting Scenes You See



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Swahili song

In lodges, you might encounter the staff singing a song for you when you arrive or leave. A popular one is the one below, an originally Kenyan song - memorize the words and sing along!

Swahili lyrics

*Jambo
Jambo bwana
Habari gani?
Mzuri sana
Wageni
Mwakarebishwa
Tanzania/ Kenya/ Uganda yetu
Hakuna matata*

*Tutembea pole pole - hakuna matata
Tunywe maji mengi - hakuna matata*

English translation

Hello
Hello sir
How are you?
Very good
Visitors
You are welcome
in our Tanzania/ Kenya/ Uganda
This is not a problem

Let us walk slowly - this is not a problem
Let's drink lots of water - this is not a problem



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