

Introduction to this Basic Swahili Language Course

(designed by *Junyang Shen* specially for *Tanzania Specialist*)

First of all, Karibu Tanzania! It means “welcome to Tanzania” in Swahili, or Kiswahili, the national and official language of Tanzania and the most widely spoken native African language in Africa. Even though Swahili is not the first language for most Tanzanians due to its ethnic diversity, it is fluently spoken as a second language by most people in Tanzania.

Language is the door to learning a different culture. It is also the quickest way to show respect for and connect with the local people. This brochure is specially designed for people like you who are visiting (or going to visit) Tanzania and hoping to make the most of their trip by diving deeper into the beautiful Swahili culture.

The word “swahili” means (the language) “of coasts” in Arabic. The Swahili language dates from the contacts of Arabian traders with the inhabitants of the east coast of Africa over many centuries and was written in Arabic letters at first. During the German colonial period, the alphabet system was changed from Arabic to Latin.

It is quite easy to learn the pronunciation of Swahili because there are only 5 basic vowels in Swahili and the way they are pronounced does not change. In other words, what you see is what you get. Put the stress on the second-last syllable and you are almost always correct. Grammatically, do not feel the pressure to speak everything correctly and feel confident to mix and match what you have learnt. 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 be ready to have some basic conversations in Swahili very soon.



Travelling in the North (Safari)

1. Introduce Yourself and Speak with the Guide

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

Here are some most common examples of greetings in Swahili. They all mean “how are you?”:

- Mambo?/Vipi?/Mambo vipi? -Answer: Poa.
- How is it going? – Good.
- Hujambo? -Answer: Sijambo.
- How are you? -I’m good.
- Habari (gani)?/Habari yako? -Answer: Nzuri (sana).
- How are you? –(Very) Good.
- Habari za asubuhi/mchana/jioni? -Answer: Nzuri (sana).
- Good morning/afternoon/evening! –(Very) Good.
- Ninafurahi sana kukuona.
- It is very nice to meet you.



To greet a senior person, you can say:

-Shikamoo!

And they will reply -Marahaba.

(If someone uses this to you, it is very impolite NOT to respond with *marahaba*. A group of children greeting you this way will sometimes insist on *marahaba* for each of them.)



To introduce yourself briefly, you may say:

- Mimi ni John./Jina langu ni John.
- I am John. /My name is John.*
- Ninatoka Uholanzi/Ulaya.
- I come from the Netherlands/Europe.*
- Nina umri wa miaka thelathini (30).
- I am 30 years old.*



-Ninapenda (utamaduni na) mandhari ya Tanzania sana, kwa hivyo ninakuja Tanzania kwa safari/likizo.

-I love (the culture and) the scenery of Tanzania very much, so I come to Tanzania for a trip/holiday.

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

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

There are several ways to say goodbye:

- Kwa heri! (*goodbye to one person*)
- Kwa herini! (*goodbye to several people*)
- Tutaonana! (*see you again!*)
- Badaaye! (*see you later!*)
- Lala salama! (*good night!*)



There are some more words/phrases/sentences that you may come across on a daily basis during your visit in Tanzania:

yes-ndiyo

no-hapana

please-tafadhali

OK-sawa

excuse me/sorry-samahani

friend-rafiki

bad-mbaya

shilling-shillingi

price-bei

reduce/lower(price)-punguza

(only) a little bit-kidogo (tu)

-Unasemaje... kwa Kiswahili?

-How do you say... in Swahili?

-(Hii ni) bei gani?/(Hii ni) shilingi ngapi?/Shingapi?

-What is the price (of this?)/How much (is this)?

-Punguza kidogo.

-Reduce the price a bit, please.

-Sielewi./Sifahamu.

-I don't understand.



2. Directions and What You See on the Road

As you're doing a game safari in the national parks, learning how to say directions in Swahili will be very useful. In this section you will learn some useful vocabulary and basic grammar, so 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-mbele

right-kulia

behind-nyuma

up-juu

left-kushoto

down-chini



The complete form of a verb starts with “ku”. In Swahili, there are many variations of a verb. It is not necessary to master all the grammatical rules now, but it is very handy to learn some frequently used verbs, such as:

-enda-to go

-fahamu-to understand

-endelea-to continue

-rudi-to return

-la-to eat

-weza-to be able

-lala-to sleep

-simama-to stop

-angalia-to see

-taka-to want

-tafuta-to look for

-penda-to like, to love

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. 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, it is “Ni+na+ku+penda”. “Ni” means “I”; “na” indicates a simple present tense; “ku” means “you”; “penda” means the verb “love”.

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

-Tunaenda wapi sasa?

-Where are we going now?

-Tunaenda mbele kutafuta simba.

-We are going forward looking for the lion.

-Angalia kushoto! Simba analala.

-Look to the left! A lion is sleeping.

-Tunaweza kuendelea sasa? Twende kutafuta twiga.

-Can we continue now? Let's look for giraffes.

-Unataka kusimama safari leo na kurudi hotel? Tutakula pamoja badaaye.

-Do you want to stop the trip today and return to the hotel? We will eat together later.

-Samahani, siwezi kufahamu. Tafadhali ongea Kiingereza.

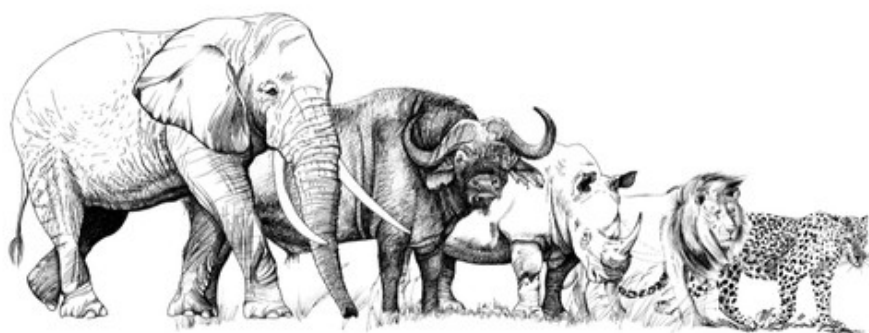
-Sorry, I can't understand. Please speak English.



3. Animals

Wildlife animal is one of the main reasons people from all over the globe visit Tanzania. It is nice to learn some Swahili vocabulary to call the animals. Congratulations to you because I suppose you already have learnt at least one word, “simba”, which means “lion” in Swahili.

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 the 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-mbogo/nyati

lion-simba

elephant-tembo/ndovu

leopard-chui

rhino-kifaru

Other animals you may come across:

antelope-swala

hippo-kiboko

bird-ndege

horse-farasi

cat-paka

hyena-fisi

cheetah-duma

mnyama-animal

cow/ox/cattle/bull-ng'ombe

mosquito-mbu

crane-korongo

pig-nguruwe

dog-mbwa

warthog-ngiri

donkey-punda

wild boar-ngiri

giraffe-twiga

wildebeest-nyumbu

goat-mbuzi

zebra-punda milia

4. Weather

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



Some useful words to talk about weather:

weather (condition)-hali ya hewa

sun-jua

rain-mvua

wind-upepo

kubwa-big

ndogo-small

snow-theluji

cloud-wingu/mawingu<many>

hot-joto

cold-baridi

With the words above, you can try to make sentences like:

-Habari ya hali ya hewa leo/kesho?

-How is the weather today/tomorrow?

-Mvua/Theluji inanyesha.

-It is raining/snowing.

-Jua/Upepo ni kali sana leo.

-The sun/wind is really strong today.

-Ni joto nje lakini ninaona baridi sana.

-It is hot outside but I feel very cold.

5. Vegetation

During your exciting safari trip in Tanzania, you will come across many unique species of vegetation that are home to Africa. It can be overwhelming to learn about them if you're not a biology fan. However, it is always handy to learn some frequently-used names of vegetation and some signature species.

Some most commonly seen plants along your trip can be:

acacia tree-mgunga

baobab tree-mbuyu

coconut tree-mnazi

flower-ua/maua<many>

grass-nyasi

mtende-palm tree

sausage tree-mvungunya

tree-mti



Here are some words you might find very useful when you have an appetite:

apple-tofaa/matofaa<many>

banana-ndizi

baobab fruit-ubuyu

beans-maharagwe<many>

chili-pilipili

coconut-nazi

date-tende/matende<many>

fruit-tunda/matunda<many>

mango-embe/maembe<many>

orange-chungwa/machungwa<many>

pineapple-nanasi

sugarcane-mua/miwa<many>

tomato-nyanya

vegetable-mboga

watermelon-tikitimaji



Appendix

	Single/Plural	Nominative Form	Subject Marker	Object Marker	Possessive (after noun)
I	single	mimi	ni-	-ni-	-angu
You	single	wewe	u-	-ku-	-ako
He/She/It	single	yeye	a-	-m(w)-	-ake
We	plural	sisi	tu-	-tu-	-etu
You	plural	ninyi	m-	-wa-	-enu
They	plural	wao	wa-	-wa-	-ao

Table 1. Personal Pronouns

Tense	Tense Marker
simple present/on-going/habitual	-na-
simple past	-li-
future	-ta-
present perfect	-me-

Table 2. Frequently-used Tense Markers

what	nini
who	nani
where	wapi
when	lini
why	kwa nini
how	vipi
how many	ngapi

Table 3. Question Words

1	moja	11	kumi na moja	hundred	mia
2	mbili	20	ishirini	500	mia tano
3	tatu	30	thelathini	thousand	elfu
4	nne	40	arobaini	2021	elfu mbili na ishirini na moja
5	tano	50	hamsini	35000	elfu thelathini na tano
6	sita	60	sitini	680000	elfu mia sita na themanini
7	saba	70	sabini	million	milioni
8	nane	80	themanini	billion	bilioni
9	tisa	90	tisini	half	nusu
10	kumi	99	tisini na tisa	1500000	milioni moja na nusu

Table 4. Numbers

Name of Places	Meaning in English
Kilimanjaro	kilima+njaro: “Kilima” is the augmentative of “mlima” meaning “big mountain” and “njaro” means “cold”.
Maji ya Chai	It is literally translated as “water of tea” in Swahili because the ground water has a colour of tea in this area.
Kwa Mrefu	means “for long” in Swahili
Mianzini	means “in the bamboos” in Swahili
Kambi ya Chupa	means “camp of bottle” in Swahili
Mto wa Mbu	means “river of mosquito” in Swahili
Makuyuni	means “in the figs” in Swahili
Mbuyuni	means “in the baobab trees” in Swahili
Ngorongoro	Given by the Massai, the name means “the black hole”.
Serengeti	Given by the Massai, the name means “endless plains”.

Table 5. Meanings of Places

How to talk about some interesting scenes you might see during the trip

<i>Is it difficult to carry so many things on the head?</i>	Ni ngumu kubeba vitu vingi kichwani?
<i>Can I try to carry this bucket on my head?</i>	Ninaweza kujaribu kubeba ndoo hii kichwani?
<i>I didn't know that you can transport a bed on a motorcycle.</i>	Sikujua kwamba unaweza kusafirisha kitanda kwa pikipiki.
<i>Those mountains are so beautiful!</i>	Milima hiyo ni nzuri sana!
<i>The scenery is fascinating!</i>	Mandhari inafurahisha/inavutia sana!
<i>I love the colours of the public transport (daladala).</i>	Napenda rangi za daladala sana.
<i>It is amazing that you can sit on a motorcycle with 5 other people.</i>	Inashangaza kwamba unaweza kukaa na watu tano wengine kwenye pikipiki moja.

Table 6. Talk about Interesting Scenes You See