

LEARNING MADE EASY



Swahili

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Understand the
basics of Swahili

Learn everyday words
and phrases

Achieve your
communicative goals

Seline Okeno

Language teacher and enthusiastic
dabbler in language learning

Asmaha Heddi

Experienced and skilled Swahili
instructor for non-native speakers



Swahili

by Seline Okeno and Asmaha Heddi

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Swahili For Dummies®

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Introduction

According to UNESCO, Swahili, a Bantu language locally known as Kiswahili, is spoken by more than 100 million people. Swahili speakers are spread across East Africa, with other speakers found as far as Yemen and Oman in the Middle East. It is the national language of Kenya and Tanzania and serves as a lingua franca in the wider East African Community. The number of Swahili speakers is projected to grow significantly in the next few years following its adoption as an official working language of the African Union. (Did you know that July 7 is World Kiswahili Language Day? See? You've learned something already!)

Swahili For Dummies covers the basics of the language in a clear and easy-to-follow manner for complete beginners as well as for those with some prior exposure. These topics are presented in a utilitarian style to help users build their confidence in speaking about everyday situations. We also point out regional differences in language use, so you can comfortably switch between the Tanzanian and Kenyan variants of Swahili without difficulty.

Whether you are looking to learn a less commonly taught language, planning a trip to East Africa, or simply looking to explore a new African culture, this book offers the necessary tools for beginning to understand and use Swahili in common interactions, such as asking for and giving directions, placing a food order, and making small talk with people around you.

About This Book

This book is meant to be your companion on your journey to learn Swahili. Pick it up when you need to discover an aspect of the language and then put it away until you need to explore another topic again. This means you don't need to go through the units sequentially — feel free to skip over chapters that do not interest you at the moment. We do, however, strongly recommend starting with Chapter 1, especially if you're a complete beginner in the language and still not familiar with the pronunciation of Swahili sounds. You may also find it useful to familiarize yourself with verb formation and noun class rules in Chapters 3 and 4 for a good foundation of Swahili sentence structure.

Swahili For Dummies begins each unit by outlining the end goals so you can monitor your progress by assessing your ability to complete the communicative tasks in each topic. This book also revisits certain grammatical structures throughout the book so you can gradually grow more comfortable with different aspects of the language.

Conventions Used in This Book

To make the book easy to follow, we've set up a few stylistic rules:

- » Swahili words and phrases are set in **boldface** to make them stand out.
- » Pronunciations, which are shown in parentheses, follow the terms the first time they appear in a section.
- » Within the pronunciation, the part of the word that's stressed is shown in *italics*.
- » English translations, also in parentheses, appear in italics after the pronunciation.

In each chapter, you can also find the following sections:

- » **Talkin' the Talk:** These are short sample conversations designed to illustrate various language points in different contexts. You'll also find out how to pronounce the words plus their English translations. (As an added bonus, we have put some of these dialogues online to help you with your pronunciation; find them at www.dummies.com/go/swahilifd.)
- » **Words to Know:** You may study the grammar of a language all you want, but without a sizeable vocabulary, you'll still struggle to speak it confidently. After each "Talkin' the Talk" section, we have outlined key expressions from the dialogue and other related words and phrases that you may find useful in your own conversations.
- » **Fun & Games:** Practice your language skills at the end of each chapter with short activities in this part. This is not a test, so no need to sweat; use it as a chance to measure your understanding of the information in the topic. You can find answers to the Fun & Games activities in Appendix D of this book.

Foolish Assumptions

Writing this book was like having a conversation with you face-to-face. We had to imagine you seated across from us and picture what you were like. Here are some assumptions we had before starting our talk:

- » You have zero prior knowledge of Swahili or very little exposure to the language.
- » You do not live in an area with a lot of Swahili speakers.
- » You're curious about Swahili culture.
- » You want to travel and visit or conduct research/business in places where Swahili is spoken, so you need to be able to converse in it.
- » You would prefer to be able to use the language in everyday situations, rather than focusing mostly on grammar.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is divided into four parts and then into chapters. Chapters are further divided into digestible sections. The following sections tell you what types of information you can find in each part.

Part 1: Getting Started with Swahili

Explore the foundations of Swahili language in this part — learn how to pronounce different Swahili sounds, get started with basic expressions (stating your name, for example), start constructing simple sentences, and tackle counting in Swahili.

Part 2: Swahili in Action

This part focuses on speaking Swahili in different situations, thus building your repertoire of important vocabulary to use both in social situations and at work. We show you how to navigate topics for small talk and how to make a good impression on your Swahili-speaking friends or colleagues in various situations.

Part 3: Swahili on the Go

Get ready to explore East Africa with this part. Whether you're looking to use an agency or do your own bookings, this part prepares you to communicate your travel wish list, compare prices, understand contracts, and even take care of your health while on the move.

Part 4: The Part of Tens

Flip through three sections of important things to know about Swahili in this part. Learn ten common Swahili proverbs, ten ways to pick up Swahili quickly, and ten words to never say in Swahili unless you're looking for trouble.

Appendices

Use this part for quick reference when you need the following: a summary of Swahili noun classes, verb conjugation tables, a Swahili to English and English to Swahili mini-dictionary, and answers for the Fun & Games activities.

Icons Used in This Book

We have included a number of icons in this book to make it easier for you to access specific types of information. You can find them scattered across the left side of the page:



TIP

This icon shows tips and tricks that can help you grasp a concept quickly or save face in social situations.



REMEMBER

This icon reminds you of special information to pay extra attention to. This may involve an unexpected nuance in the language or important information about Swahili speakers.



WARNING

The Warning icon points out hidden dangers you may encounter as you journey through the deep forest of tangled words, slippery sentence structure, and the like.



CULTURAL
WISDOM

This icon draws your attention to cultural nuances embedded within the Swahili language or explains some cultural aspects relevant to the topic.



This icon marks those “Talkin’ the Talk” conversations that are included online at www.dummies.com/go/swahilifd and reminds you that you can listen to the dialogue by Swahili speakers while you read it.

Beyond the Book

This book comes with a free online Cheat Sheet containing easy phrases to get you through simple conversations or understand your schedule. To get this Cheat Sheet, simply go to www.dummies.com and type **Swahili For Dummies Cheat Sheet** in the search box.

Where to Go from Here

This book is not a one-stop shop, so we recommend expanding your learning through other platforms such as listening to Swahili music and watching Swahili movies and news broadcasts. **Bahati njema!** (bah-hah-tee njeh-mah) (*good luck!*)

1

Getting Started with Swahili

IN THIS PART . . .

See the links between Swahili and English.

Master the basics of Swahili grammar.

Say “Hello” — and “Goodbye.”

Work with numbers, time, and measurements.

- » Swahili words you already know
- » Swahili alphabet sounds
- » Pronouncing consonant clusters

Chapter **1**

The Swahili You Already Know

Welcome to Swahili! You're about to discover the most widely spoken African language and join 50 million other speakers of Swahili worldwide! Let's start by assuring you that it is a relatively easy language to learn, so settle in and enjoy this journey.

We begin this chapter by showing you some Swahili words and phrases that you might already know or recognize from pop culture and everyday usage, before introducing the Swahili alphabet and explaining the pronunciation of common consonant clusters. Be sure to listen to audio files we've put online for you and practice along with the pronunciations for a firm foundation for speaking Swahili like the locals.

Recognizing Familiar Words and Phrases from Pop Culture

Swahili has gained steady visibility worldwide through the influence of pop culture. Most times, when we ask new students what Swahili words they already know, there's a chorus of **Hakuna matata!** (hah-koo-nah mah-tah-tah) (*No worries!*).

Did you know that *The Lion King* has more Swahili words than **hakuna matata**? For example

- » **Simba** (*see-mbah*) (*lion*)
- » **Rafiki** (*rah-fee-kee*) (*friend*)
- » **Pumbaa** (*poo-mbah-ah*) (*chaff*) [used metaphorically to mean “nonsense”]
- » **Shenzi** (*sheh-nzee*) (*stupid*)
- » **Kovu** (*koh-voo*) (*a scar*)

Music is another avenue through which Swahili words and phrases have spread around the world. For example:

- » **Malaika** (*mah-la-ee-kah*) (*angel*) from the song “Malaika” by Miriam Makeba and Harry Belafonte [originally by Adam Salim]
- » **Nakupenda pia** (*nah-koo-peh-ndah pee-ah*) (*I love you, too*) from the song “Liberian Girl” by Michael Jackson
- » **Karamu** (*kah-rah-moo*) (*party*) from the song “All Night Long” by Lionel Richie

Perhaps you’ve noticed some names from African-American celebrity households but had no idea they have Swahili origins. These include the following:

- » **Sanaa Lathan** ⇔ **sanaa** (*sah-nah-ah*) (*art*)
- » **Zuri Hall** ⇔ **zuri** (*zoo-ree*) (*beautiful/good*)
- » **Taraji P. Henson** ⇔ **taraji** (*tah-rah-jee*) (*hope/expectation*)
- » **Nia Long** ⇔ **nia** (*nee-ah*) (*will/resolve*)
- » **Amani Askari Toomer** ⇔ **amani** (*ah-mah-nee*) (*peace*) **askari** (*ah-skah-ree*) (*guard*)
- » **Imani Hakim** ⇔ **imani** (*ee-mah-nee*) (*faith*)

Some fictional characters also bear Swahili names. For example:

- » **Baraka** (*bah-rah-kah*) (*blessing*), a character from *Mortal Kombat Legends: Scorpion’s Revenge*
- » **Zawadi** (*zah-wah-dee*) (*gift*), a Wakandan from Marvel Comics
- » **Nyota Uhura: nyota** (*nyoh-tah*) (*star*), a character from *Star Trek*

Are you planning on going on **safari**? East Africa is famous for its diverse wild-life and game parks that tourists visit in droves and loudly proclaim that they've booked a **safari**. Even Dora the Explorer uses the word **safari** for a drive around the African wilderness. To Swahili speakers, **safari** (*sah-fah-ree*) (*trip/journey*) can be a bus ride to the next town to visit a friend. (No wild animals involved.)

If you like board games and enjoy socializing with your friends and family over friendly challenges, you probably own a stack of **Jenga** blocks. Now you can tell your friends and family that **Jenga** (*jeh-ngah*) means *to build*.

Lastly, if your local cafe has chai latte or chai tea as options on the drinks menu, be aware that **chai** (*chah-ee*) just translates to *tea* in Swahili.

Discovering Swahili Words that Sound Familiar in English

Sure, there are words that have been taken over whole into the English language, but the Swahili presence in English is more complicated than that. That's because Swahili has evolved by incorporating words from languages such as Arabic, Hindi, German, Portuguese, and even English into its lexicon. You'll notice that such words also adopt vowel endings and phonetic spellings to sound like original Swahili words. If you're a keen listener, you'll be able to create connections instantly and recognize these words. Check out the examples listed below:

- » **biskuti** (*bee-skoo-tee*) (*biscuits*)
- » **bia** (*bee-ah*) (*beer*)
- » **juisi** (*joo-ee-see*) (*juice*)
- » **chokoleti** (*choh-koh-leh-tee*) (*chocolate*)
- » **keki** (*keh-kee*) (*cake*)
- » **supu** (*soo-poo*) (*soup*)
- » **aiskrimu** (*ah-ee-s-kree-moo*) (*ice-cream*)
- » **suti** (*soo-tee*) (*suit*)
- » **soksi** (*soh-ksee*) (*socks*)
- » **sketi** (*skeh-tee*) (*skirt*)
- » **blauzi** (*blah-oo-zee*) (*blouse*)
- » **glavu** (*g-lah-voo*) (*gloves*)

- » **sandali** (sah-ndah-lee) (*sandals*)
- » **tai** (tah-ee) (*tie*)
- » **taulo** (tah-oo-loh) (*towel*)
- » **sweta** (sweh-tah) (*sweater*)
- » **kochi** (koh-chee) (*couch*)
- » **kompyuta** (koh-m-p-yoo-tah) (*computer*)
- » **sayansi** (sah-yah-n-see) (*science*)
- » **teknolojia** (teh-knoh-loh-jee-ah) (*technology*)
- » **maikrowevu** (mah-ee-kroh-weh-voo) (*microwave*)
- » **mashine** (mah-shee-neh) (*machine*)
- » **baiskeli** (bah-ee-skeh-lee) (*bicycle*)
- » **televisheni** (teh-leh-vee-sheh-nee) (*television*)
- » **friji** (f-ree-jee) (*fridge/refrigerator*)
- » **video** (vee-deh-oh) (*video*)
- » **redio** (reh-dee-oh) (*radio*)
- » **picha** (pee-chah) (*picture*)
- » **historia** (hee-stoh-ree-ah) (*history*)
- » **bayolojia** (bah-yoh-loh-jee-ah) (*biology*)
- » **fizikia** (fee-zee-kee-ah) (*physics*)
- » **ofisi** (oh-fee-see) (*office*)
- » **posta** (poh-stah) (*post office*)
- » **benki** (beh-nkee) (*bank*)
- » **hospitali** (hoh-spee-tah-lee) (*hospital*)
- » **hoteli** (hoh-teh-lee) (*hotel*)
- » **nesi** (neh-see) (*nurse*)
- » **daktari** (dah-k-tah-ree) (*doctor*)
- » **dereva** (deh-reh-vah) (*driver*)
- » **polisi** (poh-lee-see) (*police*)
- » **shilingi** (shee-lee-ngee) (*shilling*)
- » **milioni** (mee-lee-oh-nee) (*million*)

Introducing the Swahili Alphabet

Just like English, Swahili uses the Latin alphabet and has both consonants and vowels. Unlike English, however, Swahili pronunciation is relatively easier; you read it as it is written. This section guides you through the pronunciation of Swahili vowels, consonants, and consonant clusters found in the Swahili **alfabeti** (ah-lfah-beh-tee) (*alphabet*).

Discovering simple Swahili sounds

Swahili has five vowels. These vowels are similar to the five English vowels. The difference is in the pronunciation. If you speak German or Italian, you already pronounce Swahili vowels as they should be. Let's have a look at Table 1-1!

TABLE 1-1 Swahili vowels

Letter	Pronunciation	English equivalent	Example	Translation
Aa	ah	"a" in "apple"	mama (<i>mah-mah</i>)	<i>mother</i>
Ee	eh	"e" in "elephant"	pete (<i>peh-teh</i>)	<i>ring</i>
Ii	ee	"i" in "igloo"	giza (<i>gee-zah</i>)	<i>darkness</i>
Oo	oh	"o" in "ostrich"	moto (<i>moh-toh</i>)	<i>fire</i>
Uu	oo	"oo" in "tooth"	ukuta (<i>oo-koo-tah</i>)	<i>wall</i>

Swahili consonants, on the other hand, are largely similar to their English counterparts in pronunciation. One major difference is that Swahili does not use the letters **q** and **x**. You'll also notice that a free-standing **c** isn't used in the Swahili alphabet; it will always be attached to the letter **h** to make **ch**. Check out the examples in Table 1-2.

TABLE 1-2 Swahili consonants

Letter	Pronunciation	English equivalent	Example	Translation
Bb	bah	"b" in "boy"	baba (<i>bah-bah</i>)	<i>father</i>
CHch	cha	"ch" in "church"	chai (<i>chah-ee</i>)	<i>tea</i>
Dd	dah	"d" in "dog"	dada (<i>dah-dah</i>)	<i>sister</i>
Ff	fah	"f" in "fun"	farasi (<i>fah-rah-see</i>)	<i>horse</i>

(continued)

TABLE 1-2 (continued)

Letter	Pronunciation	English equivalent	Example	Translation
Gg	gah	“g” in “goat”	gari (<i>gah-ree</i>)	<i>car</i>
Hh	hah	“h” in “hot”	harusi (<i>hah-roo-see</i>)	<i>wedding</i>
Jj	jah	“j” in “jug”	joto (<i>joh-toh</i>)	<i>heat</i>
Kk	kah	“k” in “kelp”	kiti (<i>kee-tee</i>)	<i>chair</i>
Ll	lah	“l” in “lily”	lami (<i>lah-mee</i>)	<i>tarmac</i>
Mm	mah	“m” in “man”	maua (<i>mah-oo-ah</i>)	<i>flowers</i>
Nn	nah	“n” in “nice”	nanasi (<i>nah-nah-see</i>)	<i>pineapple</i>
Pp	pah	“p” in “pot”	paka (<i>pah-kah</i>)	<i>cat</i>
Rr	rah	“r” in “rock”	radi (<i>rah-dee</i>)	<i>lightning</i>
Ss	sah	“s” in “sun”	sakafu (<i>sah-kah-foo</i>)	<i>floor</i>
Tt	tah	“t” in “ten”	tembo (<i>teh-mboh</i>)	<i>elephant</i>
Vv	vah	“v” in “vogue”	vumbi (<i>voo-mbee</i>)	<i>dust</i>
Ww	wah	“w” in “water”	watu (<i>wah-too</i>)	<i>people</i>
Yy	yah	“y” in “yeti”	yai (<i>yah-ee</i>)	<i>egg</i>
Zz	zah	“z” in “zest”	zeituni (<i>zeh-ee-too-nee</i>)	<i>venus</i>



TIP

If nasal sounds **n** and **m** appear at the beginning of a word followed by another consonant, pronounce the **n**'s and **m**'s as separate, single syllables. For example:

- » **nta** (*n-tah*) (*wax*)
- » **nchi** (*n-chee*) (*country*)
- » **nzi** (*n-zee*) (*fly*)
- » **mtoto** (*m-toh-toh*) (*child*)
- » **mke** (*m-keh*) (*wife*)
- » **mbwa** (*m-bwah*) (*dog*)
- » **mbao** (*m-bah-oh*) (*timber*)
- » **mlimao** (*m-lee-mah-oh*) (*lemon tree*)

Tackling Swahili consonant clusters

To truly master Swahili, you have to pay attention to the consonant and vowel arrangements in Swahili words. While pronouncing consonants separated by vowels is more straightforward, you might benefit from a little more practice with words that use consonants followed by other consonants before a vowel break. These are called consonant clusters. Consonant clusters might seem foreign at first glance, but we'll show you their English equivalents before providing Swahili examples.

dh

The **dh** consonant cluster is similar to the initial sound in English words like *that*, *there*, *this*. Listen to audio files online and repeat its pronunciation in the following words:



- » **dhamira** (dhah-mee-rah) (*intent*)
- » **dharura** (dhah-roo-rah) (*emergency*)
- » **dhaifu** (dhah-ee-foo) (*weak*)
- » **dhuluma** (dhoo-loo-mah) (*injustice*)
- » **dhalilisha** (dhah-lee-lee-shah) (*treat poorly*)

gh

Although this consonant cluster has no English sound equivalent, it's still possible to pronounce it correctly. Try to make a gurgling sound at the back of your throat to get it right. No cause to worry if you cannot get the gurgling sound; several Swahili speakers produce a hard /g/ sound as in *get* instead. Listen to audio files online and follow the example for the following words.



- » **ghafila** (ghah-flah) (*suddenly*)
- » **gharama** (ghah-rah-mah) (*cost*)
- » **lugha** (loo-ghah) (*language*)
- » **ghali** (ghah-lee) (*expensive*)
- » **mghahawa** (m-ghah-hah-wah) (*restaurant*)

ng'

Ng' is the only Swahili sound with an accent mark. To say it correctly, replicate the final sound in English words like *thing*, *sing*, *king*, *bring*. Listen to audio files online and repeat its pronunciation in these words.



- » ng'ombe (*ng'oh-mbeh*) (*cow*)
- » ng'ambo (*ng'ah-mboh*) (*abroad*)
- » kuong'oa (*koo-ng'oh-ah*) (*to pluck/uproot*)
- » kung'aa (*koo-ng'ah-ah*) (*to shine*)
- » kung'ang'ana (*koo-ng'ah-ng'ah-nah*) (*to struggle*)

If a word has **ng** without the accent mark, then pronounce it as you would in words like anger, linger, hunger. For example:

- » ngamia (*ngah-mee-ah*) (*camel*)
- » ngao (*ngah-oh*) (*shield*)
- » nguo (*ngoo-oh*) (*clothes*)
- » ngozi (*ngoh-zee*) (*skin*)
- » ngumi (*ngoo-mee*) (*a punch*)
- » nguzo (*ngoo-zoh*) (*pillar*)
- » ngano (*ngah-noh*) (*wheat*)

Ny

Do not separate **n** from **y** when pronouncing words with the **ny** consonant cluster. To make this sound successfully, think of the underlined sounds in the words *lasagna*; *lanyard*. Listen to audio online and repeat the following words.



- » nyota (*nyoh-tah*) (*star*)
- » nyuma (*nyoo-mah*) (*behind*)
- » nyufa (*nyoo-fah*) (*cracks*)
- » nyati (*nyah-tee*) (*buffalo*)
- » nyimbo (*nyee-mboh*) (*songs*)
- » nyanya (*nyah-nyah*) (*tomatoes*)