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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*)
- » **mgahahawa** (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*)

- » **nyama** (*nyah-mah*) (*meat*)
- » **nyuki** (*nyoo-kee*) (*bee*)

th

The **th** sound is easy because it's also an initial sound in English words like thing, theatre, thirty. However, many foreigners make the mistake of pronouncing the **t** only. Remember that the tip of your tongue must slightly tap the space between your upper and lower front teeth to get this sound right.



AUDIO
ONLINE

- » **thelathini** (*tehh-lah-thee-nee*) (*thirty*)
- » **themanini** (*tehh-mah-nee-nee*) (*eighty*)
- » **thibitisha** (*thee-bee-tee-sha*) (*ensure/confirm*)
- » **methali** (*meh-thah-lee*) (*proverb*)

FUN & GAMES



AUDIO
ONLINE

Say the following tongue twisters as fast as possible. Listen to the recording and compare how you did.

1. **Mpishi kapika mchicha mbichi** (m-pee-shee kah-pee-kah m-chee-chah m-bee-chee) (*The chef cooked raw spinach.*)
2. **Ng'ang'a anang'ang'ana kung'oa nguzo** (ng'ah-ng'ah ah-nah-ng'ah-ng'ah-nah koo-ng'oh-ah ngoo-zoh) (*Ng'ang'a is struggling to uproot a pillar.*)
3. **Kaka kile kikuku kiko wapi kaka?** (kah-kah kee-leh kee-koo-koo kee-koh wah-pee kah-kah) (*Brother, where's that anklet, brother.*)
4. **Katibu kata wa kata ya Mkata amekataa katakata kukatakata miti katika kata ya Mkata.** (kah-tee-boo wah kah-tah yah m-kah-tah ah-meh-kah-tah-ah kah-tah-kah-tah koo-kah-tah-kah-tah mee-tee kah-tee-kah kah-tah yah m-kah-tah) (*The head of Mkata Ward has forbidden the cutting of trees in Mkata Ward.*)
5. **Wale wali walikula wali wangu** (wah-leh wah-lee wah-lee-koo-lah wah-lee wah-ngoo) (*Those young ladies ate my rice.*)