

A Brief Introduction to Tanzanian Swahili

Introduction

The first thing to mention is that Swahili (or Kiswahili as it is known in Swahili) sounds like a very difficult language but it isn't really. The grammar is very different to English but many Swahili speakers don't have very good grammar anyway - Kenyans and Ugandans for example (this is a source of pride for Tanzanians) - so they are used to hearing imperfect Swahili. It's a very forgiving language...if you don't know exactly how to say it it's well worth giving it a stab. Just listen in the jumble of syllables for keywords that you recognise and you'll be able to understand a lot more than you'd imagine.

As for speaking, English will be understood almost everywhere you are going but a little bit of Swahili will be greatly appreciated, particularly with regards to the introductions and pleasantries. As such, I've not included big lists of vocab such as fruits and veg and focussed on the pleasantries.

Borrowed words

You'll also recognise a lot of the words you hear as modified English. Often they just take the English word and add a vowel to the end of it, normally an "i". For example "dress" is "gauni" (gown-i), "shirt" is "shati" (shirt-i), "ticket" is "tiketi". I suggest you try doing this and seeing how far you can get! In fact many Swahili speakers assume that all the English words they use have had vowels added to them, so when speaking English will take vowels off the Swahili word. So you might get the concierge offering to phone you a "tax" rather than a "taxi". Also, if you know any Arabic you'll notice that a lot of Swahili words, particularly the numbers, are straight from Arabic...but with an "i" on the end again!

Pronunciation

Swahili is a phonetic language (only having been written down for a very short time) so should be nice and easy but I've tried to include some clarification anyway. You should be aware that many Tanzanians (especially around Mwanza – the Sukuma tribe) can use the letter L and R almost interchangeably, even when speaking English – similarly to in Japanese. This can get a little confusing e.g. "when there are no zebra, the lion manny eats glass" (apparently this is true, although I've never seen a lion doing it) but when your ear attunes to it then you will find yourself misunderstanding much less.

The basics

<i>Thank you (very much)</i>	<i>Asante (sana)</i>	<i>[a-san-tay sah-nah]</i>
<i>Hello</i>	<i>Hujambo</i>	<i>[hoo-jam-bo]</i>
<i>Goodbye</i>	<i>Kwa heri</i>	<i>[koo-a he-ree]</i>
<i>Good</i>	<i>Nzuri</i>	<i>[(u)n-zoo-ree]</i>
<i>Welcome*</i>	<i>Karibu</i>	<i>[kaa-ree-boo]</i>
<i>Please**</i>	<i>Tafadhali</i>	<i>[ta-fad-ah-lee]</i>
<i>Yes†</i>	<i>Ndiyo</i>	<i>[(u)n-dee-yo]</i>
<i>No‡</i>	<i>Hapana</i>	<i>[haa-paa-nah]</i>
<i>Western person/people!†‡</i>	<i>Mzungu/Wazungu</i>	<i>[(u)m-zoon-goo/Waa-zoon-goo]</i>

* Karibu is used everywhere and it's a lovely word. It can be used as "you're welcome", as a reply to a thank you. It is also used as "welcome to my shop", "welcome to join us for some food",

“welcome to buy my stuff”, “welcome to come into my home” etc and the answer to all of these sort of things is always “asante” (thank you), whether you are going to accept their offer or not.

** Please is not really used (apart from by English Swahili speakers). Instead Tanzanians just ask politely for things (using the subjunctive if you're interested)...see below for how to do this.

‡ Yes and no aren't quite used in the same way as in English and these are approximate words that will work in the majority of situations. One situation that definitely won't work is “no” in “no chilli please” - use “bila” (without) instead in this context.

‡‡ You are an exciting person and will get stared at, particularly by small children and off the beaten track, and will be pointed at and informed of the fact that you are white/Western/unusual at frequent intervals. “Mzungu” is a bit rude (literally means person who wanders about) and can get annoying after a while. There is no official response to it so deal with it as you wish: ignore them, wave and smile, greet them properly in Swahili, pretend not to be amazed that you're white – that you didn't realise, or point back at them and say something like “mafrica” (African person) “mbongo” (a colloquial word for a Tanzanian). All of which will make them shriek with laughter. Whilst I'm on the subject of children, the other likely thing you'll hear is “give me **my** money”, deal with this as you wish but as a word of warning, explanations of proper English grammar or suggestions of using the word “please” will be greeted with blank looks!

Introductions

These form the most crucial part of any conversation with Swahili speakers. Sometimes the intros seem to last forever, as you ask about their day, family, friends, work...but even in a shop or at a market stall the basic pleasantries are expected before getting down to the business of haggling. As a tourist you'll be at an advantage, as they won't expect the normal pleasantries but if you offer them then they'll likely be extremely pleased...and you might even get a better price!

Intros always start with an “any troubles?” question and then move on to asking about aspects of your life – the “any news?” questions.

Initial greeting

This is the “any troubles?” part of the conversation and it almost always comes first. It is equivalent to “hello”. Unfortunately it depends on how many people you are talking to and how many people you are with as to the exact words you use, so it is a little confusing to start with but give it a go, and if you get it wrong there isn't a problem...it'll be understood anyway. Because of this trickiness in touristy places people will often just greet you with “jambo” and expect the same in reply. But this is horrible Swahili and you'll set yourself above all the tourists if you make the effort to speak correctly, even if you get addressed incorrectly!

<i>Jambo</i>	<i>Hello (basic root – actually means “trouble?”)</i>	<i>[jam-bow]</i>
<i>Hujambo</i>	<i>Hello (to one person - “no trouble with you?”)</i>	<i>[hoo-jam-bow]</i>
<i>Hamjambo</i>	<i>Hello (to more than one person)</i>	<i>[ham-jam-bow]</i>

You'll probably be addressing just one person mostly so if you just learn one of them then focus on hujambo.

Now onto the answers:

<i>Sijambo</i>	<i>Hello back (literally “no troubles with me”)</i>	<i>[see-jam-bow]</i>
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Hatujambo *Hello back (literally “no troubles with us”)* *[ha-too-jam-bow]*

Note that even if you have troubles the answer is the same! Use this even if someone greets you with “jambo” and watch their eyebrows raise in impressed surprise (ish). You'll be fine with just those couple but you'll definitely hear some others:

Mambo (vipi) *Yo! (esp between younger people)* *[mam-bo vee-pee]*

answer with:

Safi *Yo back! (lit. safe, clean, fresh)* *[saa-fee]*

Safi sana

Poa

Mambo safi

Fresh

Bomba (mbaya)

...

Another one you may hear directed at you from children or young adults is “shikamoo” which is a greeting of respect for any (reasonably) older person. It is not just for the elderly and it is never an insult. Indeed, if you’re 10 years or so younger than someone you meet it is very respectful to say Shikamoo to them. If you use this it will go down very well. Note that it doesn't depend on position or station, just that they're at least 10-15 years older than you. For example I'd say shikamoo to the older lady who cleans my hotel room in the morning.

Shikamoo *Hello (lit. I kiss your feet)* *[shik-ahh-moo]*

answer with:

Marahaba *Hello, you're too kind!* *[maa-raa-haa-baa]*

Summary, plus some others you might hear:

Greeting		Answer		Comment
<i>Jambo</i>	<i>[jam-bow]</i>	<i>Jambo</i>	<i>[jam-bow]</i>	<i>Pigeon Swahili greeting</i>
<i>Hujambo</i>	<i>[hoo-jam-bow]</i>	<i>Sijambo</i>	<i>[see-jam-bow]</i>	<i>To one person</i>
<i>Hamjambo</i>	<i>[ham-jam-bow]</i>	<i>Hatujambo</i>	<i>[haa-too-jam-bow]</i>	<i>To more than one person</i>
<i>Mambo (vipi)</i>	<i>[mam-bo (vee-pee)]</i>	<i>Mambo Safi Safi sana Poa Mambo safi Fresh Bomba (mbaya) ...etc etc</i>	<i>[mambo] [saa-fee]</i>	<i>Amongst young people. Many different answers that changes with fashion.</i>
<i>Shikamoo</i>	<i>[shik-ahh-moo]</i>	<i>Marahaba</i>	<i>[maa-raa-haa-baa]</i>	<i>To older person</i>
<i>Tupo</i>	<i>[too-poe]</i>	<i>Asante</i>	<i>[ahh-san-tay]</i>	<i>Almost like “welcome”</i>

<i>Mzima</i>	<i>[(u)m-zee-mah]</i>	<i>Mzima</i>	<i>[(u)m-zee-mah]</i>	<i>Another random one!</i>
<i>Inakuaje</i>	<i>[ee-naa-koo-ahh -jay]</i>	<i>Safi etc...</i>	<i>[saa-fee]</i>	

Secondary greetings

This is the “any news” part of the greeting conversation. There are a bewildering number of ways of asking about one another but the general rule of thumb is if someone says something to you involving the word “habari” then just say “nzuri” in reply. Then just learn a couple of them to use as reply questions and you're away.

<i>Habari gani?</i>	<i>How is everything? (lit. “what news?”)</i>	<i>[ha-baa-ree gaa-nee]</i>
<i>Habari za...?</i>	<i>How is your...? (lit. “news of...?”)</i>	<i>[ha-baa-ree zah]</i>
<i>Habari za asubuhi?</i>	<i>How is your morning?</i>	<i>[...ahh-soo-boo-hee]</i>
<i>Habari za mchana?</i>	<i>How is your afternoon?</i>	<i>[...(u)m-cha-a-naa]</i>
<i>Habari za leo?</i>	<i>How is your day?</i>	<i>[...lay-owe]</i>
<i>Habari za jioni?</i>	<i>How is your evening?</i>	<i>[...jee-owe-nee]</i>
<i>Habari za kazi?</i>	<i>How is your work?</i>	<i>[...kaa-zee]</i>
...etc etc...		

Answer with:

<i>Nzuri</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>[(u)n-zoo-ree]</i>
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You may hear other answers (safi, but you can't go wrong with nzuri. Then follow up with your own habari question. I'd focus on “habari gani”, “habari za asubuhi” and “habari za kazi” (for shopkeepers etc). This too-ing and fro-ing can go on for some time, especially if you know the person.

In restaurants or shops

<i>Excuse me*</i>	<i>Samahani</i>	<i>[saa-maa-ha-nee]</i>
<i>Excuse me sir</i>	<i>Bwana</i>	<i>[bwaa-naa]</i>
<i>Excuse me madam</i>	<i>Bibi</i>	<i>[bee-bee]</i>
<i>Excuse me 'brother'</i>	<i>Kaka</i> (not to old people)	<i>[ka-ka]</i>
<i>Excuse me 'sister'</i>	<i>Dada</i> (not to old people)	<i>[Da-da]</i>
<i>May I have... **</i>	<i>Ninaomba</i> (lit. I beg for)	<i>[nee-nah-omm-bah]</i>
<i>May I have a beer</i>	<i>Ninaomba</i> bia	<i>[...bee-ahh]</i>
<i>May I have a water (big)</i>	<i>Ninaomba</i> maji (kubwa)	<i>[...maa-jee koo-bwaa]</i>
<i>May I have a glass</i>	<i>Ninaomba</i> glassi	<i>[...glaa-see]</i>
<i>May I pay please</i>	<i>Ninaomba</i> kulipa	<i>[...koo-lee-pah]</i>
<i>I'd like the... **</i>	<i>Nipe...</i> (please bring me)	<i>[nee-pay]</i>
<i>I'd like the fish please</i>	<i>Nipe</i> samaki	<i>[...sam-ahh-kee]</i>
<i>I'd like the bill please</i>	<i>Nipe</i> bili	<i>[...bee-lee]</i>
<i>How much?</i>	<i>Bei</i> gani (lit. what price)	<i>[bay gaa-nee]</i>
<i>That's (very) expensive!</i>	<i>Ni ghali</i> (sana)	<i>[nee gaa-lee (saa-nah)]</i>
<i>I don't like it</i>	<i>Sipendi</i>	<i>[see-pen-dee]</i>

<i>(Very) cold</i>	<i>Baridi (sana) e.g. for beer†</i>	<i>[bah-ree-dee saa-naa]</i>
<i>Little</i>	<i>Kidogo</i>	<i>[kee-doh-go]</i>
<i>Big</i>	<i>Kubwa</i>	<i>[koo-bwaa]</i>
<i>Toilet</i>	<i>Choo</i>	<i>[cho-o]</i>
<i>Food</i>	<i>Chakula</i>	<i>[chaa-koo-laa]</i>
<i>Drinks</i>	<i>Vinywaji</i>	<i>[veen-waa-jee]</i>
<i>Some standard TZ food:</i>		
<i>Rice</i>	<i>Wali</i>	<i>[waa-lee]</i>
<i>Chips</i>	<i>Chipsi</i>	<i>[chip-see]</i>
<i>Chip omelette</i>	<i>Chipsi mayai</i>	<i>[chip-see mah-ya-ee]</i>
<i>“Polenta” (minus flavour)</i>	<i>Ugali</i>	<i>[oo-gaa-lee]</i>
<i>Casava</i>	<i>Mihogo</i>	<i>[mee-hoh-go]</i>
<i>Corn</i>	<i>Mahindi</i>	<i>[maa-hin-dee]</i>
<i>Meat</i>	<i>Nyama</i>	<i>[nee-yaa-maa]</i>
<i>Beef (meat of cow)</i>	<i>Nyama ngombe</i>	<i>[...(un)-gom-bay]</i>
<i>Grilled meat</i>	<i>Nyama choma</i>	<i>[...choh-mah]</i>
<i>Grilled meat skewers</i>	<i>Mishkaki</i>	<i>[mee-sh-kaa-kee]</i>
<i>Grilled pork</i>	<i>Kitimoto</i>	<i>[kee-tee-moh-toh]</i>
<i>Fish</i>	<i>Samaki</i>	<i>[saa-maa-kee]</i>
<i>Chicken</i>	<i>Kuku</i>	<i>[koo-koo]</i>
<i>Goat/mutton</i>	<i>Mbuzi</i>	<i>[(u)m-boo-zee]</i>
<i>Grilled</i>	<i>Choma</i>	<i>[choh-mah]</i>
<i>Boiled</i>	<i>Chemsha</i>	<i>[chem-shaa]</i>
<i>Spicy</i>	<i>Pilipili</i>	<i>[pee-lee-pee-lee]</i>
<i>Hot</i>	<i>Moto</i>	<i>[moh-toh]</i>
<i>Cold</i>	<i>Baridi</i>	<i>[bah-ree-dee]</i>
<i>Vegetables</i>	<i>Mboga</i>	<i>[(u)m-boh-ga]</i>
<i>Spinach/kale</i>	<i>Mchicha</i>	<i>[(u)m-chee-chaa]</i>
<i>Spicy pepper/tomato salad</i>	<i>Kachumbari</i>	<i>[kaa-chum-baa-lee]</i>
<i>Beans (like refried beans)</i>	<i>Maharage</i>	<i>[maa-haa-raa-gee]</i>
<i>Peanuts</i>	<i>Karanga</i>	<i>[kaa-lan-gaa]</i>
<i>Fruit</i>	<i>Matunda</i>	<i>[maa-toon-da]</i>
<i>Sauce (for dish)</i>	<i>Mchuzi</i>	<i>[(u)m-choo-zee]</i>
<i>Dry/plain (without sauce)</i>	<i>Kavu</i>	<i>[kaa-voo]</i>

* This can be used to get someone's attention but is a bit old fashioned so Tanzanians generally attract attention by calling “madam”, “mister”, “sister”, or “brother” as specified. At a pinch samahani can be used if you bump into someone for example but it is better to use the wonderful word “pole” [poh-lay], which is an expression acknowledging someone's misfortune: being bumped into, tripping up, being out of breath from running for a bus, working hard etc. Note if you hear “polepole” [poh-lay-poh-lay] this is different and means “slowly”. You may want to use this to taxi drivers e.g. “polepole kaka!” (“please go more slowly brother!”).

** Some Swahili books will suggest using the verb “taka” in this situation e.g. ninataka but this is Kenyan and rude/strange in Tanzania – like “I want” rather than “I'd like”

† Most western places will serve cold drinks as standard but in many places you get the choice:

“baridi” or “moto” (cold or warm), as many Tanzanians prefer their beer and coke warm. I always order “bia baridi sana” (very cold beer) wherever I go, just in case. If your chosen beer is not cold the waiter may say something like “hamna Kili baridi” (we don't have any cold Kilimanjaro beers) you could always try “bia yoyote baridi” (*any* cold beer will do!) Whilst I'm on the topic of booze, there are many standard Germanic lager beers available: Kilimanjaro (nice and weak and light), Safari (a bit stronger and more malty), Serengeti (ditto) and Balimi (the closest to an IPA you'll get but not very close) to name the most common ones. For wines you won't get a huge choice – lots of South African ones and an increasing number of OK Tanzanian ones. Just beware of the sweetened or fortified ones. Although there are proper words for red and white wine they are very rarely used....just use “redwiney” (although this normally sounds more like “ledwiney” in Swahili) and “whitewiney”. All your mainline spirits will be available but if you're after a gin and tonic why not try the local gin called “Konyagi”. It's actually quite nice and normally very cheap – as for a “Konyagi na tonic” (Konyagi and tonic)...perhaps add “na limao” [naa lee-ma-oo] (with lime) and “na barafu” [na baa-raa-foo] (with ice).

Common questions

As soon as people hear you speak some Swahili they will attempt to continue the conversation with you in Swahili. As soon as you start to struggle they will switch to English if they can but you will probably be able to guess what they are asking, the questions are normally all variations on a couple of themes. Note the “U” meaning “you” at the beginning of most of these, if this changes to “M” then they are talking to both of you i.e. “you” plural.

Unajua Kiswahili! [ooo-naa-joo-aa kee-swahili] *You know Swahili!*

Answer with:

Ndiyo, kidogo [(u)n-dee-yo kee-doh-go] *Indeed/yes, a little*

Unatoka wapi? [ooo-naa-toh-ka] *You are from where?*

Answer with:

Uingereza [ooo-een-ger-ay-za] *England (and essentially the whole of the UK...best of luck if you'd like to differentiate between the constituent countries)*

Ufaransa [ooo-fah-ran-sah] *France*

Uingereza sema gani? [...say-mah gaa-nee] *England...tell me where exactly?*

Answer with:

London/Manchester/Liverpool – depending on whether you want to talk about football next!

Unapenda mpira? [oo-naa-pen-dah (u)m-pee-ra] *Do you like football*

Unapenda mchezo gani [... (u)m-chay-zow gaa-nee] *You like which team?*

Answer with:

Any team, they will know them all I bet...but they will definitely support Arsenal, Liverpool, ManU or Chelsea so best to guess at one of them and have a bit of banter.

Unaolewa [oo-naa-oh-leh-waa] *Are you married (to woman)*

Answer with:

Ndiyo (wiki ijayo) [(u)n-dee-yo (wee-kee ee-jay-oh] *Indeed/yes (last week)*

A few other useful words to cobble sentences together

Questions

<i>What</i>	<i>Gani</i>	<i>[gaa-nee]</i>
<i>Where</i>	<i>Wapi</i>	<i>[waa-pee]</i>
<i>Who</i>	<i>Nani</i>	<i>[naa-nee]</i>
<i>When</i>	<i>Lini</i>	<i>[lee-nee]</i>
<i>Why</i>	<i>Kwa nini</i>	<i>[koo-aah nee-nee]</i>
<i>What time</i>	<i>Saa ngapi</i>	<i>[saa-(u)n-gaa-pee]</i> (warning...there is such a thing as
<i>Swahili time, which is 6 hours ahead of 'normal' time and is based on hours past sunrise i.e. 7am is 1 o'clock Swahili time)</i>		

A few verbs

<i>I like...</i>	<i>Ninapenda...</i>	<i>[nee-naa-pen-dah]</i>
<i>I like fish</i>	<i>Ninapenda samaki</i>	<i>[...saa-mah-kee]</i>
<i>I don't like...</i>	<i>Sipendi...</i>	<i>[see-pen-dee...]</i>
<i>It is pretty/nice</i>	<i>Inapendeza</i>	<i>[ee-nah-pen-dez-ahh]</i>

Numbers

<i>1</i>	<i>Moja</i>	<i>[mow-ja]</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>Mbili</i>	<i>[(u)m-bee-lee]</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>Tatu</i>	<i>[taa-too]</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>Nne</i>	<i>[(u)n-nay]</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>Tano</i>	<i>[taa-noh]</i>
<i>6</i>	<i>Sita</i>	<i>[see-tah]</i>
<i>7</i>	<i>Saba</i>	<i>[saa-baa]</i>
<i>8</i>	<i>Nane</i>	<i>[naa-nay]</i>
<i>9</i>	<i>Tisa</i>	<i>[tee-sah]</i>
<i>10</i>	<i>Kumi</i>	<i>[koo-mee]</i>
<i>11</i>	<i>Kumi na moja</i>	<i>[...naa mow-ja]</i>
<i>12</i>	<i>Kumi na mbili</i>	<i>[....naa (u)m-bee-lee]</i>
<i>20</i>	<i>Ishirini</i>	<i>[ee-shaa-ree-nee]</i>
<i>30</i>	<i>Thelathini</i>	<i>[theh-lah-thee-nee]</i>
<i>40</i>	<i>Arobaini</i>	<i>[aa-roow-bah-ee-nee]</i>
<i>50</i>	<i>Hamsini</i>	<i>[ham-see-nee]</i>
<i>60</i>	<i>Sitini</i>	<i>[see-tee-nee]</i>
<i>70</i>	<i>Sabini</i>	<i>[saa-bee-nee]</i>
<i>80</i>	<i>Themanini</i>	<i>[theh-maa-nee-nee]</i>
<i>90</i>	<i>Tisini</i>	<i>[tee-see-nee]</i>
<i>100</i>	<i>Mia</i>	<i>[mee-yah]</i>
<i>200</i>	<i>Mia mbili</i>	<i>[...(u)m-bee-lee]</i>
<i>1000</i>	<i>Elfu</i>	<i>[elf]</i>
<i>2000</i>	<i>Elfu mbili</i>	<i>[...(u)m-bee-lee]</i>
<i>100,000</i>	<i>Laki (moja)</i>	<i>[Lah-k (moh-ja)]</i>

Pronouns

Just so you can get the context of questions or statements (or figure out if they are talking about you!) then listen for the very start of the word/sentence for the pronoun:

<i>Ni-</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>[nee]</i>
<i>U-</i>	<i>You (singular)</i>	<i>[ooh]</i>
<i>M-</i>	<i>You (plural)</i>	<i>[mmm]</i>
<i>A-</i>	<i>He/she</i>	<i>[ahh]</i>
<i>Tu-</i>	<i>We</i>	<i>[too]</i>
<i>I-</i>	<i>It</i>	<i>[ee]</i>

References

There are various free online Swahili dictionaries (kamusi) but Google translate is pretty solid (but always to be taken with a pinch of salt).

Duolingo provides an online Swahili course, as do many other providers.

<https://soundcloud.com/language-transfer/sets/complete-swahili>

<https://kiswahili.ku.edu/lessons>