The Noun

Mainly for reference, this lesson presents the basic structure of the language.

In Kinyarwanda the noun is boss. It dictates the structure of all other words in a sentence that are governed by it. Although this lesson is mainly for reference, it will be helpful to have a good understanding of the basic underpinnings of Kinyarwanda—a language that is totally foreign to English. In this chapter, we will focus on five key principles that will help give some clarity to our study of this language.

PRINCIPLE 1

All nouns are made up of two parts: PREFIX + ROOT. The root is the main part of the word. However, unless it has a noun prefix attached to it, it has no meaning. The prefix determines how the root is to be understood.

- To illustrate, take the English word *vapor*. Let it represent the root. Add to it such affixes as ***e-***, ***-ate***, ***-ous***, and its meaning is modified: ***e**-vapor**-ate**, vapor**-ous**, vapor**-ize***, and *vapor**-ization***.

- Now, notice the similarity in Kinyarwanda: Let the root be ***-ntu***. Incapable of analysis, this root in itself conveys absolutely no meaning. Add a prefix, and it becomes a word: ***umu**-ntu (a person)*. A change of prefix modifies, or completely changes, the meaning of the noun:

***aba**-ntu (people)*	***aha**-ntu (a place)*
***iki**-ntu (a thing)*	***ibi**-ntu (things)*
***aka**-ntu (a little thing)*	***utu**-ntu (little things)*
***uku**-ntu (a method, a way)*	***ubu**-ntu (generosity)*

PRINCIPLE 2

In the grammatical system, the noun dominates the sentence. Its prefix (or some inflection of it) will govern every other word in simple sentences such as these:

NOUN	SENTENCE
iki-ntu *(thing)*	**Iki ki**ntu **ki**bi **ki**raboze. *(This bad thing is rotten.)*
ibi-ntu *(things)*	**Ibi bi**ntu **bi**bi **bi**raboze. *(These bad things are rotten.)*
aka-ntu *(little thing)*	**Aka ka**ntu **ka**bi **ka**rashaje. *(This bad little thing is worn out.)*
utu-ntu *(little things)*	**Utu tu**ntu **tu**bi **tu**rashaje. *(These bad little things are worn out.)*

This principle of agreeing concordial prefixes alerts you not only to memorize the meaning of a noun, but also to recognize its prefix.

PRINCIPLE 3

In European languages, we classify nouns into masculine, feminine, and neuter (e.g., governor, governance, government; host, hostess). **In Kinyarwanda, nouns are classified roughly into natural groups and are not based on gender distinction at all:**

1. **Human beings,** marked by the prefixes ***umu-*** and ***aba-:***

   __umu__ntu (a person)   *__aba__ntu (people)*
   __umu__gome (a rebel)   *__aba__gome (rebels)*

2. **Trees and shrubs,** marked by the prefixes ***umu-*** and ***imi-:***

   __umu__nyinya (acacia tree)   *__imi__nyinya (acacia trees)*
   __umu__gano (bamboo)   *__imi__gano (plural form of bamboo)*

3. **Things that spread or extend,** marked by the prefixes ***umu-*** and ***imi-:***

   __umu__gozi (string)   *__imi__gozi (strings)*
   __umu__kandara (belt)   *__imi__kandara (belts)*
   __umu__gezi (stream)   *__imi__gezi (streams)*
   __umu__riro (fire)
   __umu__kororombya (rainbow)

4. **Living things other than humans or plants,** marked by the prefixes ***in-***, ***im-***, or ***i-:***
   Nouns in this class have no distinct plural form, which is indicated by the context:

   __in__tare (lion/s)   *__im__bwa (dog/s)*
   __in__tozi (red ant/s)   *__i__hene (goat/s)*
   __in__zoka (snake/s)

5. **Exceptional beings,** marked by the prefixes ***in-*** or ***im-:***

    in*tore (a chosen one, chosen ones)*   ***im****ana (god, gods)*

6. **Names of enormous or abnormal things,** marked by the prefixes ***iki-*** and ***ibi-:***

    iki*vura (a deluge)*   ***ibi****sozi (a mountain range)*
    iki*gabo (a despicable hulk of a man)*

7. **Things that occur in quantities, but singly as well,** marked by the prefixes ***i-*** and ***ama-:***

    i*buye (stone)*   ***ama****buye (stones)*
    i*jambo (word)*   ***ama****gambo (words)*

8. **Parts of the body that go in pairs or sets,** marked by the prefixes ***i-*** and ***ama-/am-:***

    i*vi (knee)*   ***ama****vi (knees)*
    i*zuru (nostril)*   ***ama****zuru (nostrils)*
    i*ryinyo (tooth)*   ***am****enyo (teeth)*

9. **Names of certain liquids,** marked by the prefix ***ama-:***

    ama*zi* (water)   ***ama****ta (milk)*
    ama*vuta (oil)*   ***ama****candwe (saliva)*
    ama*raso (blood)*   ***ama****rira (tears)*

10. **Beings, animate or inanimate, which, according to rule, should have been placed in some other class,** are sometimes relegated to this class. Its prefixes are ***uru-*** and ***in-/im-:***

    uru*hinja (infant)*   ***im****pinja (infants), (see No. 1 above)*
    uru*zi (river)*   ***in****zuzi (rivers), (see No. 3 above)*
    uru*kwavu (rabbit)*   ***in****kwavu (rabbits), (see No. 4 above)*

11. **Names of diminutive things,** marked by the prefixes ***aka-*** and ***utu-:***

    aka*gozi (small string, thread)*   ***utu****gozi (little threads)*
    aka*ntu (a little thing)*   ***utu****ntu (little things)*

12. **Names of qualities, states, or conditions,** marked by the prefix ***ubu-:***

    ubu*te (lassitude, laziness)*   ***ubu****basha (authority)*
    ubu*ntu (generosity)**

---

* This is where the open-source, free-for-all Linux operating system, *Ubuntu*, got its name.

13. Names of actions or of being, marked by the prefixes ***ku-*** and ***uku-:***

    uku*baho (life, existence)*   ***ku****ririmba (singing; this is a verbal noun, i.e., a gerund)*

14. Designations of distance, position, or place, marked by the prefix ***aha-:***

    aha*ntu (a place)*   ***aha****kure (a distant place)*
    aha*bi (a bad place)*

The grouping of nouns, if it ever was perfect, no longer exists. Now there are only 10 classes, but they exhibit underlying concepts similar to those above. We will explore them soon.

PRINCIPLE 4

Kinyarwanda is an agglutinative language. This means that many ideas may be "glued together" into a single word, whereas in the isolating languages (such as English) each word stands for a single idea.

Notice how, by the addition of affixes to a single verb *radical*, a whole sentence is formed. (The *radical* is that part of a verb that is by itself meaningless and unchangeable.)

For our illustration, the verb we will use is *kora (work).* Its *radical* is ***-ko-*** which has no meaning. Add to it the prefix, *nda-,* and the suffix, *-ra, (nda-**ko**-ra)* and it now means *I am working.* Change the prefix and suffix and the meaning changes:

Radical	**-ko-**	*(no meaning)*
Verb	**ko**-ra	*work*
Prefix and Suffix	nda-**ko**-ra	*I am working*
Change of Prefix and Suffix	na-**ko**-ze	*I worked*

Taking yet another step, we can form a whole sentence in one word:

Ntibakin**ko**rera.
They do not work for me any longer.

Broken up, the word-sentence appears this way:

Nti-ba-ki-n-**ko**-rera.
*Not-they-still-me-**work**-for.*

PRINCIPLE 5

This agglutinative tendency comes into play even when one word follows another.
When two vowels come together at the beginning or end of two words in juxtaposition, one vowel is dropped off or modified when spoken. For instance:

I do not know where you are.	written:	Sinz**i** ah**o** uri.
	spoken:	Sinz**'** ah**'** uri.

This process is called *elision.*

I do not know where he is.	written:	Sinz**i** ah**o** ari.
	spoken:	Sinz**'** ah**w** ari.

This process is called *elision and assimilation.*

In a Nutshell, This Is What We Have Learned:

• All nouns in Kinyarwanda fall into classes. Each class is distinguished by its set of prefixes.

• The prefix of a noun determines the prefixes of all other words that are dependent upon it in a sentence. This is termed *concordial agreement.*

• Almost all Kinyarwanda words are made up of two fundamental formatives called *roots/radicals and affixes. Affixes* may be prefixes, infixes, or suffixes. The *root* or *radical* is the unchangeable, meaningless portion of a noun or verb, respectively. It is given meaning by any affixes that may be attached to it.

• No two vowels at word beginnings or endings may occur in juxtaposition without one of them being either elided or assimilated *when spoken.*

• Kinyarwanda is an *agglutinative* language, in which a whole sentence may be contained in a single word.