

# Tshivenda Is Learned: A Grammar Guide



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Ver 0.2.3

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## Introduction

Welcome. Side comments will be written in to the side like this.

**Get out there and practice.** This guide is intended to be a reference for Peace Corps Volunteers as they learn the wonderful language of Tshivenda. Refer to it if you need to be refreshed about something or if you're curious about a certain aspect of Tshivenda. As with any language, the best and only way to learn it is to practice, and speak the language with people who know it. Attempting to learn from reading this would be unproductive, or worse, boring. Learning to speak with the people you live with shouldn't be a chore, and the purpose of this guide is to make that aspect of your life a little easier.

In Tshivenda and probably in other Bantu languages, the same word is used for "a lot" and "too much". *Tshi a konḁa ngamaanda* means "it's very hard" and "it's too hard", but in South African English, the latter is said more often.

Travel anywhere in South Africa outside of Venda and people will tell you that Tshivenda is too hard. What they mean to say is that Tshivenda is in a class of its own. It doesn't have any close relatives like other South African languages do, such as Sesotho and Setswana. As such, it's harder for a native Bantu language speaker to learn Tshivenda than it is to learn any other South African language, and there aren't a great many resources available for learning Tshivenda. I'm writing this manual in hopes of filling this void. As a Peace Corps Volunteer with presumably no experience with Bantu language, you're in a unique position to prove people wrong when they tell you Venda is too hard. Happy learning!

# 1 Pronunciation

This chapter is about how to pronounce the letters and sounds that make up Venda words. Venda is easy in that every syllable ends in a vowel, but what comes before the vowel can look a little messy at first sight.

As I stated in the introduction, don't expect to learn how to speak Venda by reading this. The best thing to do is listen to other people speaking. Refer to this if you think you're pronouncing something wrong but you can't figure out why.

## 1.1 Capped letters (d, l, n, t)

The cap on the bottom of the letter means that the sound is pronounced with your tongue touching your teeth. In the case of l, this is pretty much how we already pronounce the uncapped version of the letter in English. As for n, there's a subtle difference. Try saying "no" with your tongue resting on the back of your teeth and it will sound as if your tongue isn't moving right when compared with a regular English "no".

Korean writing also uses the <sup>^</sup> symbol to represent dental sounds.

## 1.2 Aspirated sounds (kh, ph, th, th)

"Aspirated" simply means that air is blown out as the sound is made. We're already used to making these sounds, because we Americans normally aspirate k, p, and t when we speak them.

It is important that you don't confuse the Venda "th" with the fuzzy sound those letters make together in English. The sound at the beginning of "throat" doesn't exist in Tshivenda. The "th" in Venda sounds more like the "t" at the end of "throat". Also remember that "ph" does not make the "f" sound like it does in English.

The Venda "th" is like the "th" in "potholder".

### 1.3 Ejectives (k, p, t, ʔ)

According to Wikipedia, ejective sounds are made by opening the glottis at the same time as making the sound. I don't know what a glottis is and neither do you, but if you can't breathe prior to making the sound, you're on the right track.

These sounds are crisp compared to English since they aren't aspirated.

**K** should sound like a horse cantering on cobblestones, or a fresh slice of an apple being broken in half. It might help to push the back of your tongue to the roof of your mouth to make the sound without aspirating.

**T** is pronounced in a manner similar to *k*, but the difference between it and “our” *t* is more difficult to hear. As in English, the tongue is on the alveolar ridge (the bump between your teeth and the roof of your mouth).

**ʔ** is like *t*, except the tip of the tongue is lower. It doesn't quite sound like *d* or the English *th*, but it sounds closer to them than the regular *t* does.

**P** is more similar to the *p* in Spanish in that it's a crisp sound without much exhaling. Hold your hand in front of your mouth and say “pop”. If you say it as if you're speaking English, you'll feel a lot of air against your hand. If you're saying it right, you'll feel much less air.

### 1.4 Nasal sounds (m, n, ɱ, ñ)

I lied earlier when I said that all syllables end in a vowel. Sometimes two nasal sounds are put together (such as *mm*, *nn*, or *ɱɱ*), and when that happens, the first letter is drawn out as if it's a syllable. Of course, this will still be followed shortly by a vowel.

**M and n** are pronounced as they are in English. Lucky us.

**ɱ** is hard to distinguish from *n*, but it's pronounced without moving the tongue much.

**ñ** is pronounced by touching the tip of your tongue to the roof of your mouth. It typically comes before a *w*.

### 1.5 Labiodentals (f, fh, v, vh, bv, pf, pfh)

“Labiodental” simply means that the sound is made with the lips and teeth.

## 1.6 Other consonants (*x, s, sh, sw, z, zh, dzh, h, l, r, tsh*)

**F** is a strong sound that should sound like you're biting back profanities.

**Fh** is a much more airy sound. Round your lips so it's like trying to blow out a candle.

**V** sounds like you're trying to imitate a race car.

**Vh** is made with the lips rounded and air being blown out, like "fh".

As for the consonants that start with b and p, although we don't see letter combinations like bv and pf very much in English, the sound they make is pretty self-explanatory. Try having your lips closed at the beginning of the sound.

## 1.6 Other consonants (*x, s, sh, sw, z, zh, dzh, h, l, r, tsh*)

**X** is the throat-clearing noise that's found in the Welsh or German "ch".

**S** seems a bit more tense than how we say it in English. The tongue is raised higher, creating more of a hissing sound. At least, that's how I explain the following "sh" and "sw".

**Sh** is pronounced like it is in English, unlike *ph* or *th*. This is because of how *s* is spoken in Venda. By changing it a little, you get the harsh "sh" sound that we're used to.

**Sw** sounds harsh like "sh" but the tongue is pulled back to give it that "w" flavor.

**Z** is unsurprising, and it's not a common letter in Tshivenda by itself. It's more commonly found with d in front of it.

**Zh** is pronounced in a manner similar to "sh". It's like the s in *vision*.

**Dzh** is pronounced like the English j, which is a letter that's not used in Venda writing.

**H** by itself is often practically silent. *Mukalaha* (old man) can sound as if it has three syllables instead of four. The only time it's easy to hear is when it comes in front of e, as in *hemmbe* (shirt).

**L** is made by touching your tongue to the roof of your mouth. It sounds similar to ñ.

*Dzh* is the only way that the *j* sound is made. *G* is always hard.

It's easy at first to get l and ɭ confused, because l sounds weird and ɭ looks weird.  
7 Remember that the normal l tells you to lick your tonsils.

## 1 Pronunciation

**R** isn't rolled, but it's "flapped" so it can't be sustained like the "r" in English can.

**Tsh** last but not least, is simply pronounced like the English "ch".

### 1.7 Vowels (a, e, i, o, u)

For the most part, Tshivenda has only the five "pure" vowel sounds like Latin or Spanish or many other languages. However, the e and o sounds will sometimes have a variation. For instance, while the o in *matsheloni* is the "pure" sound, the o in *mishonga* is more like our short o sound.

### 1.8 Tone

Tshivenda has two tones: High and low. Like in English, questions will end with a high tone, unless the sentence ends with *naa*. If *naa* is used, the word before it will end in a high tone, and *naa* itself will have a low tone.

### 1.9 Stress

Like Italian, the stress is always on the second to last syllable in the word. *Ndi MatsheLOni aVHUdi*.



## 2 Basic Grammar

The core structure of a sentence in Tshivenda isn't all that different from English. There's a subject, followed by a verb that says what the subject does, and then optionally an object that says what the subject does the verb to. The main difference, aside from a completely different vocabulary, is how the subject noun is always paired with a concord.

### 2.1 Noun Classes and Concorde

The **concord** is a little word that comes at the end of the subject. The concord is what you listen for in order to determine the tense of the sentence, and the singularity or plurality of the subject if it's not already clear. In some ways, using concords is easier than conjugating verbs, or at least it would be if there weren't so many of them. Tshivenda has a bunch of **noun classes**, and each noun requires a different concord according to its class. For instance,

*Munna u khou gidima*

is the correct way to say "The man is running." The concord "u" works for people. If you said instead

*Munna li khou gidima*

then you would not be using a noun class for people, which is not only wrong but disrespectful, since *li* is used for objects. (This can be made to work, though. See the section in Chapter 3 on augmentatives.)

Venda allegedly has over 20 noun classes, but some of them are very rare if they're used at all. Fortunately, you can often tell what class a noun is in simply by looking at the first syllable of the noun. If that doesn't work, then assume it's in the N-Dzi class (unless it's a person, which falls under the Mu-Vha class).

You may notice some patterns such as there are a lot of trees in the Mu-Mi class or a lot of animals in the Tshi-Zwi class, but these distinctions aren't perfect and you shouldn't read too much into them.

### 2.1.1 Singular Versus Plural Nouns

Consider our earlier example with “the man is running”. What if we want to talk about multiple men running? We can do that. We just change the first part of our noun, and then change the concord to agree with it. After all, that’s why it’s called a concord. *Munna u khou gidima* becomes

*Vhanna vha khou gidima.*

The correct concord doesn’t always match the first syllable of the word, but it’s usually similar.

Does the same trick work on women? Let’s look at “The woman is walking” and “The women are walking” side by side.

*Musadzi u khou tshimbila.*  
*Vhasadzi vha khou tshimbila.*

FYI, *bw* is pronounced like b followed by a soft y sound. I didn’t put this in the pronunciation chapter because this is the only instance I can think of it.

What if we’re using a noun that doesn’t have a plural form, such as *mmbwa* (dog)?

*Mmbwa i khou gidimisa tshinoni.*  
The dog chases a bird.

*Mmbwa dzi khou gidimisa tshinoni.*  
The dogs chase a bird.

Even though the noun stays the same, the concord changes to the correct form. In this case, the concord is the only thing telling us how many dogs there are. Notice that *tshinoni* in the object of the sentence does not need a concord. The concord only goes at the end of the subject.

The concord is plural because even though the nouns are singular, there are two of them.

*Munna na Musadzi vha a funana.*  
The man and the woman love each other.

### 2.1.2 Correct Concords

Here’s a table of noun classes and their matching concords with some examples. The first line shows you the singular form and the second line is plural. As always, the best way to learn these is to practice using them. The simplest sentences are nouns with an agreeing concord and a verb. It’s important to learn the concords well because we can describe nouns in different ways just by changing the concord a little.

Noun class	Concord	Example	English meaning
Mu-Vha	u	Muthu u	Person
	vha	Vhathu vha	People
Mu-Mi	u	Mutshelo u	Fruit
	i	Mitshelo i	Fruits
Li-Ma	li	Lito li	Eye
	a	Maṭo a	Eyes
Tshi-Zwi	tshi	Tshibode tshi	Tortoise
	zwi	Zwibode zwi	Tortoises
N-Dzi	i	Kholomo i	Cow
	dzi	Dzikholomo dzi	Cows

When they say that there are 21 noun classes, they're counting the singular and plural cases as separate classes. The "five" classes presented here cover the majority of nouns. Notice that the example for N-Dzi doesn't start with N. This class is kind of a catch-all for nouns that don't obviously fit into other classes. The Li-Ma class has many nouns that don't start with Li as well.

### 2.1.3 Past Tense

To speak about something in past tense, essentially all you do is put an o at the end of the present tense concord. So tshi becomes tsho, and zwi becomes zwo. I becomes yo, because if you say "i" and "o" together quickly, that's what it sounds like.

Noun class	Concord	Example	English meaning
Mu-Vha	o	Mukegulu o	Old Woman
	vho	Vhakegulu vho	Old Women
Mu-Mi	wo	Muswiri wo	Orange Tree
	yo	Miswiri yo	Orange Trees
Li-Ma	lo	Libu lo	Wasp
	o	Mabu o	Wasps
Tshi-Zwi	tsho	Tshikolo tsho	School
	zwo	Zwikolo zwo	Schools
N-Dzi	yo	Thavha yo	Mountain
	dzi	Dzithavha dzo	Mountains

The tricky thing to remember here is that the past tense concord for Mu- meaning a person and for Mu- meaning an object are different.

### 2.1.4 Future Tense

Future tense is easy: just put *do* after the present-tense concord and before the verb. *Do* functions like the English word "will" in this case.

*Nwana u do lindela badani.*

The child will wait at the road.

Another English analogy is that you can use the verb *u ya* to imply future tense, like saying "going to".

## 2.2 Pronouns

### 2.2.1 Personal Pronouns

This is the most important kind of pronouns to know. They're the ones that can function as nouns.

Object Pronoun	Subject Pronoun	English meaning
N̄ne	Ndi	Me (I)
Rīne	Ri	Us (We)
Vhone	Vha	Them (They)
Ene	U	Him/Her (He/She)
Inwi	Ni	You
Iwe	U	You

The subject pronoun is used in the subject of the sentence, and the object pronoun is used in the object.

*U ̄la na rīne. Ri nwa na ene.*  
He eats with us. We drink with him.

*Vhone* can also mean him or her respectfully.

An important detail to the table above is that everything *vhone* and down can be used for “You”, with *vhone* being the most respectful and *iwe* being the least. It's expected that you speak to elders using *vhone*, colleagues using *ene* and friends using *inwi*. *Iwe* is used with children, or not at all in some dialects.

When *iwe u* is past tense, it changes to *iwe wo*. Remember how the past tense of the *u* concord for people is *o*, but the past tense of *u* for objects is *wo*?

If the sentence is in past tense, the subject pronoun will change so the last vowel becomes *o*.

*Ni vhalā bugu na vhone naa?*  
Do you read books with them?

*No vhalā bugu na vhone naa?*  
Did you read the book with them?

Sometimes the corresponding object pronoun will be put in front of the subject pronoun at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis.

*N̄ne ndi a shuma kerekeni.*  
Myself, I work at the church.

### 2.2.2 Possessive Pronouns

These pronouns tell you who the noun belongs to. There are five suffixes, depending on whose exactly it is.

	First Person	Second Person	Third Person
Singular	-anga	-aṅu	-awe
Plural	-ashu	-aṅu	-avho

The prefix to the pronouns depends on what exactly is being possessed. More precisely, it depends on the noun class.

Noun class	Prefix	Example	English meaning
Mu-Vha	w-	Musadzi wanga	My wife
	vh-	Vhasadzhi vhanga	My wives
Mu-Mi	w-	Mulenzhe wawe	His leg
	y-	Milenzhe yavho	Their legs
Li-Ma	l-	Lino lavho	Your tooth (polite)
	-	Mano aṅu	Your teeth (familiar)
Tshi-Zwi	tsh-	Tshifhiwa tshaṅu	Your gift
	zw-	Zwifhiwa zwashu	Our gifts
N-Dzi	y-	Khuhu yashu	Our chicken
	dz-	Dzikhuhu dzanga	My chickens

When used in a sentence, the possessive pronoun goes at the end of the noun it describes and nothing else changes. The correct concord is still used.

*Mmbwa yawe i khou vhulaha khuhu yawe.*  
His dog is killing his chicken.

*Phosho yavho yo dina kilasi yanga.*  
Their noise disturbed my class.

### 2.2.3 Demonstrative Pronouns

If you want to indicate a specific thing, you use a demonstrative pronoun. Again, these depend on the noun class, and there are special pronouns for people.

**Hoyu** munna ndi khonani yanga.  
This man is my friend.

Do you see how similar the pronoun prefixes are to the concords? It's as if the concord and the suffix get smooshed together.

If you're talking about people who are not in the Mu-Vha class, like *khaladzi*, use the suffix with no prefix (eg. *khotsi anga*).

I can't get a lot of information about these because no one can answer my questions about them. I take that to mean that native speakers don't use these pronouns a lot, so it's appropriate that we don't learn them well.

*Havha vha-musanda vha vhenga havho vha-musanda.*  
This chief hates that chief.

It's *heyi* and *heyo* because the noun class is N-Dzi and the concord is *i*. For the Tshi-Zwi class, the pronouns would be *hetshi* and *hetsho*, etc.

*Heyi ngulwhe ndi khaladzi ya heyo ngulwhe.*  
This pig is the brother of that pig.

## 2.3 Identity and Existence

The word “*ndi*” has another use. It works like “*is*” in assigning an identity to the subject.

*Tshivenda ndi luambo. Taki ndi mutukana.*  
Tshivenda is a language. Taki is a boy.

This is just like the Spanish *hay* or *no hay*. Or for that matter, the English “*there is*” or “*there is no*”.

“*Huna*” is used to mean “*there is*”. Use it when stating that something is here. “*A huna*” means that it's not here.

*Huna swiswi.*  
It's dark. (There is darkness.)

*A huna swigiri mara huna muṅo.*  
There's no sugar but there is salt.

To state that you have something, you can use “*na*”.

*Ndi na madabula na nyala.*  
I have potatoes and onions.

If you're talking about people, it's best to use the special adjective “*hone*”.

*Khotsi anu vha hone naa?*  
Is your father here?

*Hai, a vha ho.*  
No, he's not.

## 2.4 Verbs

Verbs normally end in *a*, and when they're in their infinitive form (ie. when you're talking about them instead of actually using them) they're preceded

by a *u*. To imply something is happening now now, the verb modifier **khou** is used in front of the verb. Without *khou*, it's not as clear when the action is happening.

*Goloi i **khou** vhuya shoponi. Goloi i vhuya shoponi.*

The car is returning to the shop. The car returns to the shop.

When you are using verbs together, you separate them with a *u*.

*Ri toda u la.*

We want to eat.

Sometimes *a* is used instead of *khou*. If this is any different from leaving nothing between the concord and the verb, the difference is very subtle.

### 2.4.1 Irregular Verbs

Of course, there are a few verbs that don't follow these rules.

**Uri** means to say. The command form is *iri*.

*Uri a nwale nga hafha. Iri ndo livhuwa.*

He says to sign here. Say thank you.

**Pfi** refers to someone's name.

*Ndi pfi Mpho.*

My name is Mpho.

**Mphe** means gimme. Use *u fha* or *u ŋea* when talking about "give" in other contexts.

This is hard for people to parse until you get really good at pronunciation. *Dzina ŋanga ndi Mpho* has a greater chance of success.

## 2.5 Negation

In order to negate sentences, we need a new batch of concords. That may sound daunting, but the good news is they're based on the original concords we've seen. For the most part, you just slap an *a* in front of the positive concord, but there are some exceptions.

## 2 Basic Grammar

Noun class	Present	<b>Present Negative</b>	Past	<b>Past Negative</b>
Mu-Vha	u	ha	o	ha
	vha	a vha	vho	a vho
Mu-Mi	u	a u	wo	a wo
	i	a i	yo	a yo
Li-Ma	li	a li	lo	a lo
	a	ha	o	ha
Tshi-Zwi	tshi	a tshi	tsho	a tsho
	zwi	a zwi	zwo	a zwo
N-Dzi	i	a i	yo	a yo
	dzi	a dzi	dzo	a dzo

The main exception to the “slapping an *a* in front” rule is that concords *a* and *o* become *ha*.

**Pronouns** change in a similar manner:

Present	<b>Present Negative</b>	Past	<b>Past Negative</b>
Ndi	A thi	Ndo	A tho
Ri	A ri	Ro	A ro
Vha	A vha	Vho	A vho
U	Ha	O	Ha

These past negative pronouns are actually optional. The present negative pronouns work in their place.

### 2.5.1 Present Tense

Now, if you’re negating a sentence using *khou*, all you do is use a concord from the table above. If you’re not using *khou*, then the verb will change. The *a* at the end of the verb becomes an *i*.

*Tshinoni a tshi khou fhufha. Tshinoni a tshi fhufhi.*

The bird is not flying. The bird does not fly.

The same rule with the verb applies even if you’re using pronouns.

*Ndi funa khovhe. A thi funi khovhe. A thi khou funa khovhe.*

I like fish. I don’t like fish. I’m not liking fish.

### 2.5.2 Past Tense

When negating past tense, the verb will not change. Instead, you use the appropriate past tense concord (or pronoun), and put **ngo** between the concord or pronoun and the verb.

*A tho ngo la zwiliwa zwa masiari.*



I didn't eat lunch.

*Tshimange a tsho ngo dzula hafha.*  
The cat didn't stay here.

I think you can tell a lot about a culture from the words they have and don't have. The fact that Vhavenda have the same word for "sit" and "stay" tells me that they were never a people of dog trainers.

### 2.5.3 Future Tense

To negate in future tense, there are two options. You can use the concord or pronoun for present negative, but put the word **nga** between your concord and *do*. You can also use *nga* without *do* but then the verb will change to its negative form.

*A songo gudisa maths. A thi nga pfesesi.*  
Don't teach [me] maths. I won't get it.

*Musidzana ha nga do tswa heyi bambiri.*  
The girl won't steal this paper.

### 2.5.4 Statements of Identity

If you're saying that something "is" something with *ndi*, you can negate it by changing to **a si**.

*Hai, munna a si dokodela.*  
No, the man is not a doctor.

*Dzina langa a si likhuwa.*  
My name is not likhuwa.

## 2.6 Conjunctions

**Na** is a very versatile word that can join words or clauses together. It means "and" or "with".

**Kana** means "or" or "nor".

**Mara** means "but" or "except".

The word for "but" used to be *fhedzi* (only) but the Afrikaans *maras* is more popular. Some people are rather sensitive about that.

**Nda** is a conjunction you can use when talking about yourself. It goes at the beginning of a clause where you would otherwise say *na ndi* or *na ndo*.

*Ndo vhalisa madi nda tamba.*  
I boiled water and then I bathed.

**Zwino** means “so” or “now”.

**Arali** means “if”. You can make if-then statements with *arali* and **zwiamba**, which literally means “that means”.

**Nga u ri** means “because”. **U ri** by itself means “so that”..

## 2.7 Prepositions

You have to use a preposition that functions like “of” when describing association or possession. Precisely which one you use depends on the noun class of what’s being described.

Noun class	Preposition	Example	English meaning
Mu-Vha	wa	Muthu wa u khwaṭha	Fat person
	vha	Vhathu vha u khwaṭha	Fat people
Mu-Mi	wa	Muṭa wa Mashudu	Mashudu’s family
	ya	Miṭa ya Mashudu	Mashudu’s families
Li-Ma	la	Liṭhogwa la bogisi	The box’s matchstick
	a	Mathogwa a bogisi	The box’s matchsticks
Tshi-Zwi	tsha	Tshanda tsha monde	Left hand
	zwa	Zwanda zwa monde	Left hands
N-Dzi	ya	Tḥoho ya tshikolo	Head of school
	dza	Dziṭhoho dza tshikolo	Heads of school

Two other important prepositions are **nga** and **kha**. *Nga* means “by” or “at” while *kha* means “to”.

*Huna muthu nga hafha.*  
There’s a person in here.

*O vhudzisa kha mudededzi.*  
He asked the teacher.

## 2.8 Adjectives

There are a few adjectives that come after the noun they describe. You should be well-acquainted with *vhudi* by now.

*Ndi matsheloni avhudi.* [Zwithu] *ndi zwavhudi.* *Duvha lavhudi la mabebo!*  
 Good morning. [Things are] good. Happy birthday!

For a list of adjectives like this concerning size and quantity, see chapter 3 in *Luvenda Lu a Gudiwa*.

There are a bunch of verbs whose only function is to describe nouns like adjectives. When you use a verb in this context, it is always past tense.

*Mutukana o lapfa.*  
 The boy is tall.

*Ndo livhuwa.*  
 I am thankful.

When you want to describe something, but you don't want that to be the whole sentence, you can use the "of" preposition followed by the infinitive form of the verb you're using to describe it. There's a bit of an overlap between these adjectival verbs and actual adjectives.

*Mutukana wa u lapfa o rwa nowa.* *Mutukana mulapfu o rwa nowa.*  
 The tall boy hit a snake.

*Mutukana o rwa nowa ya u lapfa.*  
 The boy hit a tall snake.

Lu-Vhu is one of the noun classes they don't teach you. You can probably figure out what nouns fall under this class, and what the concords are.

Sometimes the past tense is used when you're describing things as they are in the present. Chalk it up to African time. By infinitive, I mean the verb with *u* in front. *Ya* means "go", and *u ya* means "to go".

## 2.9 Adverbs

In Tshivenda there aren't adverbs as we think of them in English, but verbs can be used to describe other verbs, just like verbs can be used to describe nouns. For instance, *u tavhanya* means to be fast.

*Mukalaha u a tavhanya.* *Mukalaha u tavhanya u amba.* *Mukalaha u amba u tavhanya.*  
 The old man is fast. The old man is fast-talking. The old man talks fast.

## 2.10 Questions

If you're asking if a statement is true, you put *naa* at the end of a sentence to make it a question.

*Duvha li khou fhisa. Duvha li khou fhisa naa?*  
The sun is hot. Is the sun hot?

If you're asking something that's not a yes or no question, you need to use a different question word at the end of the sentence.

Who	What	When	Where	Why	How	Which
Nnyi	Mini	Lini	Gai Ngafhi	Ngani	Hani Na mini	-ifhio

*Hani* is used for inquiring about conditions, as in "How are you"? If you ask someone *No tuwa hani* (How did you go?), expect them to say *zwavhudi*. If you ask *No tuwa na mini* (What did you go with?), they might say *na golo* (with a car).

You can put these at the end of the sentence and people will still understand you.

There are special words for quantity. If you're asking *how much* something amounts to (such as a price or an answer to a math problem), the word is **vhugai**. If you asking *how many* people or things there are, ask **vhangana** or **ngana** respectively.

These questions words go at the end of the sentence, but the exceptions are **ngani** and **vhugai**. Those go at the beginning of the sentence like this.

*Ndi ngani ni so ngo ya tshikoloni?*  
Why didn't you go to school?

*Ndi vhugai makumba?*  
How much are eggs?

The word **lini** is used for asking for the day. If you're asking for the time, use **nga tshifhingade**.

*No swika lini? Ndo swika mulovha.*  
When did you arrive? I arrived yesterday.

*No swika nga tshifhingade? Nga five.*  
What time did you arrive? At five.

You can also say **tshifhinga tsha mini** if you're referring to something that someone else said.

*Ndi do bika vhuswa. Tshifhinga tsha mini?*  
I will cook porridge. At what time?

**Gai** is used for asking where something or someone is currently. Use **ngafhi** when asking about a permanent location.

*Vhana vhavho vho ya gai?*  
Where did your children go?

*Bannga i ngafhi?*  
Where is the bank?

**Ifhio** adapts to the noun class that it refers to.

*Ni dzhena tshikolo tshifhio?*  
Which school do you attend?

## 2.11 Commands

You can change verbs into commands by putting **-ni** at the end of them.

*Imani! Dzulani!*  
Stand! Sit!

If the verb is just one syllable, then the syllable *i* is added to the beginning of the verb.

*Idani! Iłani!*  
Come! Eat!

As you can imagine, this is rather impolite. It's more polite to change the end of the verb to *e*, which makes it more of a suggestion. If you're speaking to an elder, say *Kha vha* at the beginning of the command.

<i>Dzulani fhasi.</i> Sit down.	<i>A dzule fhasi.</i> Sit down, please.
<i>Kha dzule fhasi</i> Sit down, if you don't mind.	<i>Kha vha dzule fhasi.</i> Please sit down if you don't mind, sir.

Changing the verb ending to *e* is something like a subjunctive tense.

There are other permutations with subtle differences, such as *dzuleni*.

To negate commands, use **a songo**.

*A songo lila. Tou vha malofha nyana.*  
Don't cry. There's just a little blood.

If you want to be so polite that you won't even give a command, you can use the verb *humbela* which means to politely ask.

*Ndi khou humbela ni reme maḡabula.*  
I'm politely asking for you to cut potatoes.

This literal translation of *humbela* may look strange, but you'll notice that people who speak Venda as a first language will say things like this in English.

*Ndi humbela bonndo.*  
I'm asking for two rand.

The special verb *mphe* is used for (impolitely) asking for an object.

*Mphe two rand.*  
Give me two rand.

## 2.12 Locatives

Put **-ni** at the end of a noun when you're referring to it as a location.

*Tshikolo tsho vula. Ndo ya tshikoloni.*  
The school opened. I went to school.

“Home” is an exception in English too. We say that we're going home, not that we're going to home.

The *-ni* is only used if the place is the setting or the destination of the sentence, not if it's the subject. An exception is *hayani* (home), which always has *-ni* on it. If you're asking where something is, whether or not to use a locative depends on the structure of your sentence.

*Tshikolo tshi ngafhi? Tshikoloni ndi ngafhi?*  
Where is the school?

## 3 Advanced Grammar

These are more abstract concepts that don't always come up in normal conversation. You don't need to know the content here to be a good speaker, but it helps.

### 3.1 Verb Suffixes

A lot of verbs in Tshivenda were originally modified from a base verb. Knowing how to use these suffixes cuts down on the number of verbs you need to learn.

These can be combined to have horrifying effects.

**-ana** means that the verb is **reciprocal**: the subject verbs the object, and the object verbs the subject.

*Ri do vhoneana matshelo.*  
We'll see each other tomorrow.

**-ela** is hard to pin down because it has a few different meanings. It could be used to give the verb direction, but there are some words where *-ela* is used in past tense.

*Ndo wa mulindini. Ndo wela mulindini.*  
I fell at the pit. I fell into the pit.

*O kopela bambiri yanga!*  
She copied my paper!

**-elela** means an exceptional case of the root verb. It doesn't apply to every verb, but as an example, *swika* means to arrive, *swikela* means to arrive at a specified destination, and *swikelela* means to reach your dreams.

**-isa** means to do it to someone or something else.

*Vhana vho guda. Ndo gudisa vhana.*  
The children learned. I taught children.

### 3 Advanced Grammar

**-iwa** is like the passive voice in English. It means something happened to the subject.

*Khakhathi dzo sikiwa.*  
Mistakes were made.

**-iswa** means that the subject did the verb because someone else made the subject do it.

*Ndo bikiswa vhuswa nga khotsi anga.*  
I cooked vhuswa for my father.

**-esa** is used for exaggeration. For example, *funesa* means you love something a lot.

*Munna o tshimbilesa dorobo.*  
The man walked [a long time or distance] to town.

## 3.2 Verbs as Nouns

If you want to talk about a verb, then you treat the infinitive verb as a noun. This is actually one of the forgotten noun classes. The concord is *hu*.

*U tamba bola hu huvhadza milenge yanga.*  
Playing ball hurts my legs.

Having said that, there are a lot of verbs that also have a noun form. Sometimes these are thrown into the Lu-Vhu class.

Verb	Meaning	Noun	Meaning
U tenda	To believe in	Lutendo	Faith
U sumba	To show	Tsumbo	Example
U funa	To love	Lufuno	Love
U guda	To learn	Ngudo	Lesson
U imba	To sing	Luimbo	Song

## 3.3 Direct objects

Sometimes you can put pronouns or prefixes in front of the verb to show what you're talking about, when you don't want to say it after the verb.

I'm no linguist (isn't that clear by now?) but I would guess that the concord still has the barely audible *h* on the beginning because it's not used often enough to be changed.



*Ndi a ni funa.*

I love you.

*Mme u khou mu fara.*

The mother is holding him/her.

*No zwi pfa?*

Did you hear that?

### 3.4 Compound subjects

If you're using two nouns in the subject of your sentence, you change the noun class so it's plural.

*Tshikete na tshikafu zwi khou swa.*

The skirt and the scarf are burning.

If the things you're talking about are from different noun classes, it's best not to put them both at the beginning of the sentence. Instead, move one to the end.

*Mtukana u khou tshimbila na tshimange tshawe.*

The boy and his cat are walking. [The boy is walking with his cat.]

### 3.5 Diminutives and augmentatives

When something is from the Tshi-Zwi class, you can make it bigger by upgrading it to the Li-Ma class. You can make it smaller by changing the class to Ku.

<i>Tshimange</i>	<i>Zwimange</i>	<i>Limange</i>	<i>Mamange</i>	<i>Kumange</i>
Cat	Cats	Big Cat	Big Cats	Kitten

This also works when you're talking about people. For example, *lisadzi* means a big musadzi (in the sense that she's strong and muscular), while *kusadzi* means a small musadzi (in the sense that you're belittling her). In the case of *Munna*, the stem changes. A big man is *liduna*, while a small man is *kuduna*.

Ku is a noun class that's only used for talking about cute things. The singular is the same as the plural.

### 3.5.1 Verbs

*Tou* also seems to be used along with exclamations.

To trivialize a verb (that is, to say that you're "just" doing something), you can put *tou* in front of the verb. This has the same effect of saying *fhedzi* (only) at the end of the sentence. *Tou* can be used alone or in conjunction with *khou*, and the order doesn't seem to matter.

*A tho ngo dzi renga. Ndo tou dzi tswa.*  
I didn't buy them. I just stole them.

## 3.6 Comparison

Tshivenda is not rich compared to English when it comes to comparing quantities.

To say that something happened *after* something else, you can use **u bva hafho**.

*Ndi tamba maño u bva hafho nda edela.*  
I brush [my] teeth and from there I sleep.

To say something is better, you can use **funesa** to say that you like it more. There is a more accurate and more complicated way to say it using the adjective *kwine*, but this will suffice.

*Ndi funesa hezwi zwiliwa.*  
I like this food a lot.

## 3.7 Occupations

A farmer is someone who farms, and a worker is someone who works. In English we just add -er to the end of a verb to mean a person who does that verb. In Tshivenda, we add *mu-* to the beginning to the verb to indicate we're talking about a person, and change the end to -i. So *mulimi* is someone who farms, and *mushumi* is someone who works. *Mudzuli*, a person who stays, refers to a resident of a place. This is more commonly used for occupations than for more temporary things. This means you can call some *muzwifhi* to mean liar, but it's not something you'll hear very often.

## 3.8 Exclamations

In some areas, people will use fixed exclamations at the end of sentences. You can see them in the dictionary as the weirdest-looking words. They don't seem to be used much in practice, but they're probably more popular east of Thohoyandou.

## 3.9 Royal Language

In some areas, royalty (vhakololo) will speak a slightly different language. (In the west, where this guide was written, this isn't used.) The royal language consists of the same Venda words, but they mean something else entirely in the context. For instance, if a chief is eating, the verb isn't *u la* (to eat), it's *u shuma* (to work), or *vha-musanda vha khou ambara malinga*.

## 4 Conversation

This guide is not intended to be a resource for vocabulary, but just the same, here are some phrases you should know. Keep in mind that every village is different and your site might or might not use these.

### 4.1 How are you? Let me count the ways.

This is an attempt at a comprehensive list of all Tshivenda greetings.

Ndaa.	Hello. (Spoken by men)
Aa.	Hello. (Spoken by women)

These greetings depend on the time of day.

Ndi matsheloni.	Good morning.
Ndi masiari.	Good afternoon.
Ndi mathabama.	Good [time between afternoon and evening.]
Ndi madekwana.	Good evening.

Lotsha.	Good morning.
Lokovhela.	Good evening.

Hu rini?	How are you?
Hu ita hani?	How's it going?
Wo twiwa?	How goes it?
Uri mini?	How are you?
	(Lit. What do you say?)

Uri mini fhedzi?

A thi ambi.	I say nothing.
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Ndi/ri hone.	I'm fine.
Ndo/ro hone.	I'm fine.

With these, you can reply by saying "Ndi (whichever they just used) avhudi," or just "Avhudi".

*Naa* may be added to the end of these questions at the speaker's discretion, although *naa* and *hani* won't be used at the same time.

## 4.2 Important Phrases

Wo/No/O/Vho vuwa hani?	How are you? (Lit. How did you wake?)	
Wo/No/O/Vho vuwa?		
Wo/No/O/Vho twa hani?	How are you? (Lit. How did you go?)	
Wo/No/O/Vho twa?		
Ndo/ro vuwa.	I'm fine. (Lit. I awoke.)	It's acceptable to reply with "ri" even if you're alone.
Ndo/ro twa.	I'm fine. (Lit. I went.)	
Zwavhuḍi.	Good.	
Ndi/ri vhudzisa ngeo.	And how are you? (Lit. I ask there.)	
Ndo/ro humbela u pfa ngeo.	And how are you? (Lit. I asked to hear from there.)	
Ndo/ro humbela u pfa vhone.	And how are you? (Lit. I asked to hear you.)	
Ndi/ri nga pfa vhone.	And how are you? (Lit. I can hear you.)	-
Na nṅe ro vuwa.	I'm also fine.	Notice how I'm mixing and matching pronouns here. It's not strictly correct but people still say it.
Na nṅe ndi hone.		

## 4.2 Important Phrases

Ee.	Yes.
Hai.	No.
Khamusi.	Maybe.
Tshanda tshamonde.	Left hand.
Tshanda tshauḷa.	Right hand.

Peace Corps already has a handy Venda phrasebook, provided they can print it right.

## 4.3 Emergency situations

Ndo xela.	I'm lost.
Ndi ngafhi?	Where is this? / Where am I?
Ndo neta.	I'm tired.
Ndi pfa ndala.	I'm hungry.
Ndi na ḍora.	I'm thirsty.
Ndi khou lwala.	I'm sick.

## 4.4 Common phrases

No zwi pfa?

No zwifha.

Zwo fara?

No sea mini?

Ndi amba ngoho.

Duvha li khou fhisa.

Did you hear that?

You lied.

Got it?

What are you laughing at?

I'm telling the truth.

It's hot.

## 4.5 Words specific to South Africa

vhuswa

muladza

makoko

mugayo

tshidamba

randavhula

magwinya

delele

magege

matoko

nzie

bapu

mashondzha

masenga

vha-musanda

musanda

minada

khwanda

pap

leftover pap

dried pap

mielie meal

samp

rondaval

fatcakes

slimy muroho

termites

cow pie

locust

grasshopper

mopani worms

beadwork

chief

royal house

chicken feet

animal feet