

Lesson A. CATEGORIES OF THE UNIVERSE and NOMINAL CLASSES

(Edited by M. Brack; portions translated from Shimamungu and further examples taken from Kimenyi.)

1: The categories of the universe

The Kinyarwanda divides the universe into **nominal classes**. It does not distinguish the genders (male-female-neutral), but the **species** which fall into different classes. (The number of classes depends on authors and schools. Shimamungu uses 11 classes, other authors have even more since they count singular and plural separately. Here we use a standard that has 10 classes.) With the exception of the 1st and the 10th class, the specification of the classes is not unique: one class can be defined with respect to a certain species, but it may also contain vocables that describe beings of other species. Although the 1st class is reserved to human beings exclusively, humans with specific characters or features can also appear in other classes.

The Kinyarwanda distinguishes **three big categories** based on the theme **NTU 'being'**:

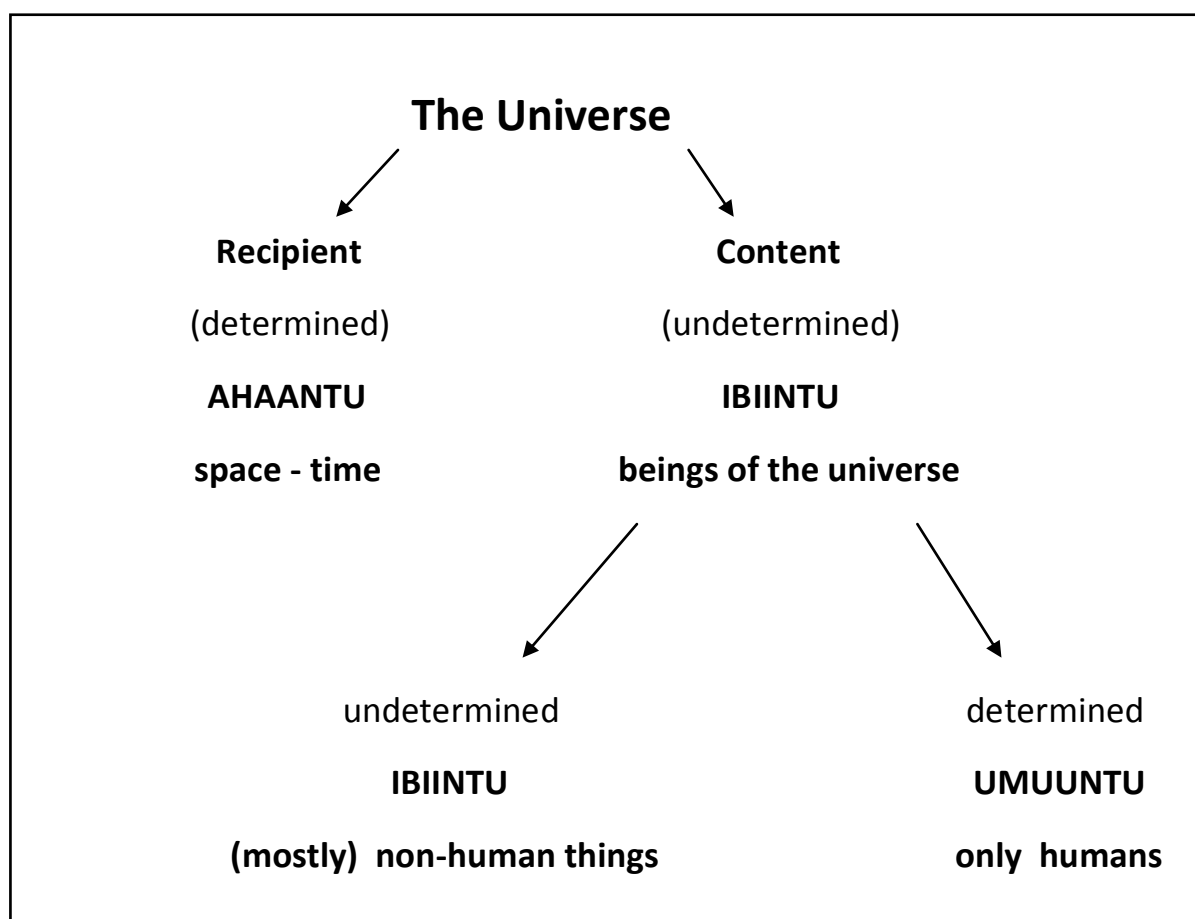
AHAANTU - '**place**' - is a category of **space** and **time** which are often described by the same terms without being mistaken. It forms the **10th class** exclusively.

UMUUNTU (plural: abaantu) - '**human**' - is a category which consists of the **1st class** which is reserved exclusively for **human beings**. (Note, however, that some nouns denoting humans do appear also in other classes.) But this category is contained in another, larger category **IBIINTU** designating all beings in the universe as long as, while speaking, no difference is made between human and non-human beings.

IBIINTU (singular: ikiintu) - '**non-human things**' - is a category which contains all the other classes (2-9) that are more or less undetermined and heterogeneous. They define themselves with respect to one species but can also contain other species. One of the undetermined classes, namely **class 4**, contains (amongst others) the generic word **ikiintu** (plural: ibiintu) - '**thing(s)**'. Note that – in spite of the name of this category – some humans (mostly with specific aspects) do appear in some of the classes 2 - 9.

The diagram on the next page (taken from Shimamungu) visualizes this partition of the universe. It appears in the language at the level of the **accords** of the classes. 'accord' here means the fact that adjectives, numerals, demonstrative and possessive pronouns, and verbs contain class markers that must correspond to that of the noun to which they refer (see the summary chart in Lesson 34). The class of the humans (1) can only have accords within the same class and, likewise, the locative class (10) can only accord within itself. But the other classes (2-9) can have mutual accords from within the whole category of the non-human. Nouns with the same stem, i.e., the same semantic basis, can appear in different classes whereby they acquire variations of their meanings. Examples will be given below (see, in particular, Sect. 6).

In Sect. 2 we will analyze the structure of the nouns and verbs and show how one recognizes to which class they belong. In Sect. 3 we list the general contents of each class (as far as they can be specified) and give many examples. Sect. 4 gives a table with correspondences of the classes used by different authors. In Sect. 5 we discuss the ending vowels and in Sect. 6 we give some groups of nouns with the same stems. Sect. 7 is devoted to the names of family relations which are rather refined due to the strong traditional values of family structures and the different roles of their members.



2: Class indication in vocables

In each noun (including the infinitives of verbs), the class is indicated by a '**classifier**'. The structure of these vocables is the following (the parts in parentheses are facultative while the others are mandatory):

(augment) - **classifier** - root - (suffix) - ending

The combination 'root+ending' is in linguistics called 'theme' (in the Cox Lessons and by Kimenyi also called 'stem'). Examples of vocables with root '**gab**' = 'give, gift':

u	-	mu	-	gab	-	o	→	umugabo = 'man, adult'		
i	-	n	-	gab	-	o	→	ingabo = 'shield, soldier, army'		
								also: 'male animal'		
a	-	ba	-	gab	-	o	→	abagabo = 'men'		
u	-	mu	-	gab	-	a	→	umugabâ = 'commander'		
u	-	ru	-	gab	-	o	→	urugabo = '(nice) fat man'		
i	-	n	-	gab	-	ir	-	e	→	ingabîre = 'gift'
		ku	-	gab	-	a	→	kugaba = 'to give, invest'		
		ku	-	gab	-	ir	-	a	→	kugabira = 'to give, bequeath'
		ku	-	gab	-	iz	-	a	→	kugabiza = 'to report on'
		ku	-	gab	-	ur	-	a	→	kugabura = 'to serve'
i	-	ki	-	gab	-	ir	-	o	→	ikigabiro = 'flat place'
i	-	bi	-	gab	-	ir	-	o	→	ibigabiro = 'flat places'
u	-	bu	-	gab	-	o	→	ubugabo = 'manhood, power'		
i	-	()	-	gab	-	a	→	iqaba = 'time of distribution'		

(The last example has an empty classifier – e.g. none – which is a specialty of class 5.)

The **root** is the semantic basis of the word. An eventual **suffix** (and in verbs also prefixes, see Lesson B) can help to give a more precise idea of what is described. The **classifier**, as the name indicates, specifies the class; singular and plural are different for each class (unless they are in different classes with other authors). The **augment** is always a vowel and agrees with that of the classifier; for the classifiers 'n' and ' ' (empty, class 5 sing.) it is 'i'. The augment is missing in the verb infinitives ('ku-'); it is also dropped from the nouns in various grammatical situations (after certain prepositions, demonstratives, in names, greetings, etc.). The **ending** is also a vowel; in nouns it describes the relation between the condition of the person or thing (activity, passivity, subject or object) and the meaning of the root (see Sect. 4 below). For the endings of verbal forms we refer to Lesson B, Sect. 10.

Classes of the non-human and non-local can have more than one accord in singular or plural: a principal accord (as listed in Lesson 34) which is generally used by the vocables in a given class, and a minor accord (also from a different class) – mostly of expressive nature – which certain vocables of this class can allow. E.g. in class 3 i-n-, i-n-:

	sing.	i-n-k-â	=	'cow'
princ.	plur.	i-n-k-â	=	'cows'
expr.	plur.	a-ma-k-â	=	'bunch of (bad) cows'

Some classes describing continuous quantities (esp. liquids) only have the plural form. An exceptional singular classifier then expresses a diminution or singularisation. E.g. in class 5 'i(ri)-, ama-', we have:

plur.:	amavûta	= 'oil';	sing.:	ivûta	= 'very little oil'
plur.:	(a-ma-az-i →) amâazi	= 'water';	sing.:	(i-ri-az-i →) irîizi	= 'a drop of water'

Certain classes are specialized to describe diminutives (class 7 'aka-, utu-') or augmentatives with both deprecative or appreciative meaning, e.g. class 4 'iki-, ibi-' (see Lesson 15), or class 6 'uru-, in-' (see example above and in Lessons 23, 24). More examples will be given in the corresponding classes in the next section.

3: Contents of classes

In this section we list the dominant contents of each class, as far as they can be specified. The alternative prefixes in parentheses obey Dahl's law and other phonetic rules (see p. vii).

Class 1 'umu-, aba-':

This class is exclusively reserved for **human beings**: **umuuntu** = **human**, **abaantu** = **people**. Ethnic groups of Rwanda: Umuhutû = Hutu, Umutuutsi = Tutsi, Umutwâ = Twa; Abanyarwaanda = Rwandese (pl.). Umuzuûngu = white man, European. In direct (and polite) tale, the augment is dropped and the classifier is spelled with a capital first letter: Mugabo = Sir, Mister; Mugorê = Mrs., Madam; Banyarwaanda! = Rwandese (men)! Banyarwaandakazi! = Rwandese women! In this class belongs also a large number of nouns **without classifier or augment**, which denote **family relations** such as: daatâ = my (our) father; maamâ = my (our) mother; nyirâ = his, her (their) mother, etc. (see also Lesson 73), or people related by **social rank**: daatâbuja = my boss, etc. In Sect. 7 below, these relations are explained systematically and presented in a table.

Class 2 'umu-, imi-':

There is no particular specification in this class, but it contains many plants: umuneke = (ripe) banana, umukô = coral tree, and abstract things: umusekê = dawn, sunrise. Umugaati = bred, umusôzi = hill, umutî = medicine. In the singular, 'umu-' plus a root of a noun from another class can give a **deprecativ** aspect, e.g.: ihenê (cl3) = goat → umuhenê = 'bunch of ugly goats'. The plural prefix 'imi-' can be combined with a verb root plus the ending '-ere' to yield expressions of **modality**: gukôra = to work → imikorêre = the way of doing (working); gupfâ = to die → imipfiîre = the way in which somebody has died (or is dying).

Class 3 'in- (inz-, iny-, im-), in- (inz-, iny-, im-):

Here we find in particular many **animals**: inkâ = cow, inzoka = snake, ingwe = leopard, intâre = lion; but also some plants: imbûto = seed, fruit, and **natural phenomena**: imvûra = rain, inyenyeêrî = star. Two words where the classifier 'n-' genuinely denotes animals are: ingabo = male animal, ingorê = female animal. We have in this class also a number of **persons** to which one gives special attention: (In-mâana →) Imâana = God, incutî = friend, intoôre = danser, inkûmi = (unmarried) young lady, teen-age girl; inkootanyi = invincible warrior, inkuûndwaakazi = favorite wife, imfûubyi = orphan, inshorêke = concubine. Sometimes this prefix also expresses contempt: inzâana = bad children, (umusôre = young man →) insôre = bad young man (men) (cf. Lesson 7).

Class 4 'iki- (igi-, icy-), ibi-':

This class, besides the generic **ikiintu** = **thing**, **akaantu** = **things**, contains mostly inanimate things and fabricated objects. Some words which in the exclusive plural 'ibi-' denote continuous, non-countable objects, can appear exceptionally in singular form to express **particularization**: ibitôtsi = sleep (noun) → igitôtsi = a fit of sleep. The singular 'iki-' also describes **languages** (and ways of living): Ikinyarwaanda = Rwandan (language and way of living), Igifaraansâ = French; Ikidaâge = German, etc. Here the augment is often dropped to yield Kinyarwaanda, Kidaâge, Kiruûndi, etc. The people speaking these languages are obtained replacing 'Iki-' by 'Umu-, Aba-' or 'Mu-, Ba-'; the corresponding countries begin by 'Ubu-' or 'Bu-' (except Rwaanda!). Humans who are considered as useless, handicapped or irresponsible can also be found in this class: igisaambo = crook, thief; ikireêmbe = impotent; igicûucu = fool, stupid; igikuri = dwarf; igipfâamatwî = deaf (lit: 'one with dead ears'); ikiboondo = infant, baby. (This 'de-humanization' is found also in other Bantu languages.) The class marker 'iki-, ibi-' combined with stems from other classes can also give **expressive** and **augmentative** (both pejorative or ameliorative) meanings: umugorê = woman → ikigorê = attractive woman, disgusting woman, or big woman; igikoôbwa = gorgeous, ugly, or big girl; umwâana = child → icyâana = badly educated child, brat. Finally, the singular marker without augment '**ki-**' can be used to form **adverbs**: ki-gorê = womanly, cyâana = childish; umuswa = ignorant → gi-swa = like an ignorant.

Class 5 'i(ri, ry)-, ama-':

In most words of this class, the classifier in the singular is empty (i.e., the original classifier 'ri' has been lost), so that the singular just is 'i-stem': e.g. ifî = fish. This class again has no particular characteristics, but it contains many body parts: izûuru, amazûuru = nose(s); iryîinyo, (ama-îinyo →) amêenyo = tooth (teeth); (iri-âaso →) ijîisho, amâaso = eye(s); ino = toe, ijosi = (front of) neck. This class contains in the exclusive plural form also **liquids** or other continuous things; their

exceptional singular form can be used for singularisation (see Sect. 2). Some words in this class can also form their singular with 'uku-': ukuguru = leg (plural: amaguru); ugutwî = ear (normally itwî, plural: amatwî).

Class 6 'uru- (urw-), in-':

This class has no generic content; examples: ururîmi, indîmi = language; urwâango (no pl.) = hatred; urusakû (no pl.) = shout, noise; urupfû = death. The plural can also be built with 'ama-' or 'ibi-': urushyî (plur. inshyî) = palm, slap (in face), amashyî = hands (held open), applause; uruhiîndu (pl. impiîndu) = broach (for weaving baskets), amahiîndu = hail. (Attention: Uruhiîndu = Hinduism!). There are many uncountable things in this class: urugano = bamboo bush, urwiîri = weed, urubaânza = trial. This class is often used to express **augmentation, deprecation, appreciation**: urwâana (iby-, inz-) = brat, nasty child (see also Sect. 2).

Class 7 'aka- (aga-, ak-), utu- (udu-, utw-)':

This class is particularly used to form **diminutives**, using roots from other classes: umwâana → akâana (pl. utwâana) = small child(ren); ururâbo = flower → akarâbo = little flower; igisiîmba = wild animal → agasiîmba = insect; igikôokô = beast → agakôokô = insect, bug. **Aka-** also denotes **rivers and hills**, e.g.: Akagéra (river).

Class 8 'ubu-, ama-':

This class contains many **abstract** words, notions of essence, **categories**, and products of nature which have no plural. With theme 'ntu-' = 'being' we get the generic ubuuntu = humanity; other examples: ubwêenge = wisdom; ubugabo = masculinity; ubugorê = femininity; ubusôre = youth (cf. umusôre = young man); ubwêenegîhugu = nationality (cf. umwêene = son of, and igihûgu = country); Ubukristo (Ubukirisîtu) = Christianity; Ubugaanga = medicine (cf. umugaanga = doctor); ubumwê = unity (-mwê = one). The prefix 'Ubu-' or 'Bu-' also denotes the names of **countries**: Buruûndi, Budaâge (Germany), Busuwisî (Switzerland), Bwôngongerêza (England), Buhîindî(-ndê) (India), Bufaraansâ (France), Bugâandâ (Uganda), Bushinwâ (China), Buraaya (-yi) (Europe). (U)bu can also denote **time**: ubu = now, burîije = it gets night, ubuûndî = another time, ubutâaha = next time, ubushîze = last time.

Class 9 'uku- (ugu-, ukw-), ama- (am-)':

This class contains some **body parts**: ukuguru = leg, ukubôko = arm. Besides the generic **ukuuntu = means**, it has also other **abstract** things, e.g. ukurî = truth; ukwîizeera = faith (cf. kwîizeera = to believe, hope, have faith). The classifier '**ku-**' also marks the **infinitives of verbs** (cf. Lesson B). The plural marker 'ama-' often combines with stems from other classes to form their plural: ipaâsi = iron → amapaâsi = irons; ubura → amara = intestines, ubwâato → amâato = canoes.

Class 10 'aha-, aha-':

This class is exclusively reserved for **space-time** vocables (with Shimamungu this is class 11, with Kimenyi class 16). Its only noun is the generic **ahaantu = place(s) (in space or time)**. The adverb '**aha**' means both 'when, where' and 'here, there'. To this class also belong the classifiers '**mu-**', '**ku-**', and '**i-**' (which Kimenyi puts into separate classes 17-19) that form prepositions or adverb prefixes for denoting places or times (see also Lesson 5). The prefix '**ha-**' in adverbs indicates places: hâno = here, hâriîya = there, hagatî = in the middle (of), haambere = before (see also Lesson 33, Par. 66).

An interesting example of **semantic neutralization** (Kimenyi, 2002) is given by the fact that the Kinyarwanda speaker does not distinguish different **spatial dimensions** in the sense that horizontally 'long' and vertically 'high' and 'deep' can be expressed by one and the same word. E.g.: the adjective '-reere' means both 'long, tall', and 'deep'. The adjective '-gufi' can mean both 'short', 'low' (e.g. house), and 'shallow' (e.g. river). For the same phenomenon in the **time** domain, see Lesson B, Sect. 1.

4. Correspondence of classes

For better orientation in the sometimes confusing different numbering of the classes, we give here a table. The numbers (1) etc. in brackets refer to the books quoted in the introduction (page ix). Where there are two columns under one heading, the left is for singular and the right for plural. In Shimamungu (1), the plurals of his classes 4, 5, 8, 9 are referred to the plurals of his classes 3, 3, 6 or 7, and 3, respectively. The last column with references (3,4,5) corresponds to the official 'Bantu classification'.

Class	Cox, Dekempe (2)		Shimamungu (1)		Bantu (3,4,5)
1	umu-	aba-	umu-	aba-	umu-
2	umu-	imi-	umu-	imi-	aba-
3	in-	in(z)-	i(ri)-	ama-	umu-
4	iki-	ibi-	i-		imi-
5	i(ri)-	ama-	uku-		i(ri)-
6	uru-	in-	in-	in(z)-	ama-
7	aka-	utu-	iki-	ibi-	iki-
8	ubu-	ama-	uru-		ibi-
9	uku-	ama-	ubu-		in-
10	aha-	aha-	aka-	utu-	in(z)-
11			aha-	aha-	uru-
12					aka-
13					utu-
14					ubu-
15					uku-
16					aha-
17					ku-
18					mu-
19					i-

Overdulse and Jacob (3) have the same classes as Kimenyi (5), so does the On-line Dictionary (4) except for the classes 17-19 which are not differentiated there. Dekempe (2) differentiates classes 5.1 and 5.3 depending on their accords in singular and plural. Shimamungu (1) includes the locatives ku-, mu-, and i- in his class 11.

5: Ending vowels of nouns

The ending vowel in nouns expresses the role or condition of the described being with respect to the semantic meaning of the root: activity, passivity, subject, object, etc. The five different vowels can give the following meanings:

'-a':

This ending is in general neutral (cf. present infinitive of verbs), but it finds itself also often in substantives where the designated being is **active** with respect to the meaning of the root, e.g.: umugabâ = commander; ikirâara = vagabond ('sleeps anywhere', cf. kurâara = to spend the night); ingera = pitcher of beer (cf. kugera = measure).

`-e':

This ending generally describes the state of the designated being. It appears in substantives with passive, abstract, essential meanings: umuneke = ripe banana; umugorê = woman (married), wife; ubuhiînge = cultivated place (city, country) (derived from guhiînga = to cultivate); imyûubakire (only plur.) = architecture ('way of building', from: kûubaka = to build); ibâanzê = beginning (cf. kubâanza - to begin).

`-i':

This ending generally describes the state of the designated being, much like '-e': umwaâmi = king; umwaâri = maiden, virgin, fiancée; ingeri = middle of lake (river) (cf. kugera = measure). Some words can have both endings '-e' and '-i' without changing their meaning, e.g. urugorê = urugorî = hair decoration (in particular for new mothers); urutoke = urutoki = finger. The ending '-i' (sometimes combined with an extra suffix '-i') describes something or somebody **active**: umuhiîgi = hunter (cf. guhiîga = to hunt); umu-hiîng-i-i → umuhîinzi = cultivator, gardener.

`-o':

This ending often appears in nouns describing **places**, e.g. inyûubako = building (from kûubaka = to build). Often they denote a **passive** meaning of something designed for some purpose: umugabo = man (cf. kugaba = to give, invest → umugabo = 'human gift'); umuvûgo = poem (cf. kuvûga = to speak); umuhiîgo = prey ('to be hunted', cf. guhiîga = to hunt); urugero = quantity, amount, example (cf. kugera = to measure).

`-u':

This ending often gives a **passive** meaning (derived from a passivity suffix '-uk' or '-ur' appearing in verbs): icyaâmbu = port (from ku-amb-uk-a → kwaâmbuka = to pass through (water or land); amahugu = theft, swindle, trick (from guhuguza = to seize property of someone).

6: Groups of substantives with identical themes

With the theme '-kokô' = 'hen' (as zoological species), we have:

inkokô	=	chicken
inkokôkazi	=	hen [using the general adjective ending '-kazi' = female (of)]
umukokô	=	group of (bad) chicken
igikokô	=	fat chicken (appreciative)
agakokô	=	mingy (little) chicken
ubukokô	=	a group of tiny chicken
urukokô	=	big, ugly chicken

With the theme '-ntu' = 'being', we have:

umuuntu	=	human, person (plural: abaantu = persons, people)
umunyabiintu	=	steward, dealer, economist
ikiintu	=	thing, object
ikiintu	=	fat person (deprecatative)
ukuuntu	=	means, method, manner, way
ubuuntu	=	humanity, friendliness, grace, generosity
amaantu	=	so-called 'human' (deprecatative)
uruuntu	=	fat or rude person (deprecatative), human smell
akaantu	=	small person; small thing, embarrassing situation
ahaantu	=	place(s) (in space or time)

7: Family and other related persons

Their names are composed as '**prelude**' + '**nominal**'. The **prelude** indicates either a male (*father-related*) or a female (*mother-related*) **person**; it is declined according to the 'owner(s)' of the relation as a *1., 2. or 3. person* (singular or plural):

	male:		female:
1. person:	daatâ = my (our) father	maa(-mâ)	= my (our) mother
2. Person:	sô(-ko) = your father	nyoko	= your mother
3. person:	sê = his, her (their) father	nyirâ	= his, her (their) mother

No difference is made between **father and paternal uncle**, and between **mother and maternal aunt** (this holds in all 3 persons given above and for all the relations given in the table below). Thus 'maa' can also mean 'maternal aunt'. (See, however, Par. 146.)

Other persons are indicated by their simple nouns: umwâana = child (daughter or son), umubyâarâ = cousin (on father's side), umwiishywa = nephew, umwuûzukururu = grand-child, umwuûzukururuza = great-grand-child; umubyêeyi = (god-)parent, nurse. (For brother and sister, see Lesson 74, for brother and sister in-law, see Lesson 115.)

The **nominal** indicates the **relation** to the person (by family or social rank):

-kûruza	= three generations older or younger ('great-grand-')
-kurû	= two generations older or younger ('grand-')
-sêenge	= sister of father
-rûme	= brother of mother
-bukwê	= by marriage ('-in-law') (cf. ubukwê = marriage, umukwê = son-in-law)
-buja	= by servitude (cf. ubuja = servitude, umuja = female servant)

Table of the most important relations: (note the variations in high tones!)

	relation	1. person	2. person	3. person
<i>father</i>	-kûruza (great-grand-father)	sogôkuruza	sookûruza (sogôkuruza)	seekûruza
	-kurû (grand-father)	sogôkuru	sookûru (sogôkuru)	seekûru
	-seenge (paternal aunt)	maasêenge	nyogôseenge	nyirâseenge
	-bukwê (father-in-law)	daatâbukwê	soobukwê	seebukwê
	-buja (patron)	daatâbuja	shôobuja	shêebuja
<i>mother</i>	-kuruza (great-grand-mother)	nyogôkuruza	nyogôkuruza	nyirâkuruza
	-kurû (grand-mother)	nyogôkuru	nyogôkuru	nyirâkuru
	-rûme (maternal uncle)	maarûme	nyokôrome	nyirârume
	-bukwê (mother-in-law)	maabukwê	nyokôbukwê	nyirâbukwê
	-buja (patronne)	maabuja	nyokobuja	nyirabuja

Out of this scheme is: daughter-in-law = umukazâana (literally: 'woman-child').