This document is intended to be a resource for Peace Corps Volunteers studying Tshivenda during and after training. It was written in 2012 and typset in \LaTeX. Pretend the contents except for the Peace Corps logo are available under a Creative Commons BY-NC 3.0 license.
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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 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.

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 (đ, ł, ň, ť)

The cap on the bottom of the letter means that the sound is pronounced with your tongue touching your teeth. In the case of ꞻ, this is pretty much how we already pronounce the uncapped version of the letter in English. As for ň, 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”.

1.2 Aspirated sounds (kh, ph, th, ťh)

“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 is Tshivenda. The “th” is Venda sounds more like the “t” at the end of “throat”. Also remember that “phi” does not make the “f” sound like it does in English.
1 Pronunciation

1.3 Ejectives (k, p, t, ț)

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).

T 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, n̪, ˙n)

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 nn̪), 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.

N̪ is hard to distinguish from n, but it’s pronounced without moving the tongue much.

˙N 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 the only way that the j sound is made. G is always hard.

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 ň.

It’s easy at first to get l and ň confused, because l sounds weird and ň looks weird.

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 aVHUdì.
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 Concords

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,

\[ \text{Munna } u \text{ khou gidima} \]

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

\[ \text{Munna } \hat{l}i \text{ khou gidima} \]

then you would not be using a noun class for people, which is not only wrong but disrespectful, since \( \hat{l}i \) 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 is 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 Basic Grammar

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

\[ \text{Vhanna vha khou gidima.} \]

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

\[ \text{Muserdzi u khou tshimbila.} \]
\[ \text{Vhasadzi vha khou tshimbila.} \]

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

\[ \text{Mmbwa i khou gidimisa tshinoni.} \]
\[ \text{The dog chases a bird.} \]
\[ \text{Mmbwa dzi khou gidimisa tshinoni.} \]
\[ \text{The dogs chase a bird.} \]

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.

\[ \text{Munna na Musadzi vha a funana.} \]
\[ \text{The man and the woman love each other.} \]

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.
2.1 Noun Classes and Concords

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun class</th>
<th>Concord</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>English meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mu-Vha</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Muthu u</td>
<td>Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vha</td>
<td>Vhathu vha</td>
<td>People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu-Mi</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Mutshelo u</td>
<td>Fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>i</td>
<td>Mitshelo i</td>
<td>Fruits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li-Ma</td>
<td>li</td>
<td>Lito li</td>
<td>Eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a</td>
<td>Ma to a</td>
<td>Eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshi-Zwi</td>
<td>tshi</td>
<td>Tshibode tshi</td>
<td>Tortoise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>zwi</td>
<td>Zwibode zwi</td>
<td>Tortoises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N-Dzi</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>Kholomo i</td>
<td>Cow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dzi</td>
<td>Dzikholomo dzi</td>
<td>Cows</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 L̲i-Ma class has many nouns that don’t start with L̲i 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.

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

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”.

11
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object Pronoun</th>
<th>Subject Pronoun</th>
<th>English meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nge</td>
<td>Ndi</td>
<td>Me (I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rin</td>
<td>Ri</td>
<td>Us (We)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vhone</td>
<td>Vha</td>
<td>Them (They)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ene</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Him/Her (He/She)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inwi</td>
<td>Ni</td>
<td>You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iwe</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>You</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

An important detail to the table above is that everything vhone and Vhone can also mean him or her respectfully. 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.

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

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

No vhala 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.

Nge 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun Class</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td>-anga</td>
<td>-ashu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>-an</td>
<td>-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>-awe</td>
<td>-avho</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun Class</th>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>English meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mu-Vha</td>
<td>w-</td>
<td>Musadzi wanga</td>
<td>My wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vh-</td>
<td>Vhasadzhi vhanga</td>
<td>My wives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu-Mi</td>
<td>w-</td>
<td>Mulenzhe wawe</td>
<td>His leg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>y-</td>
<td>Milenzhe yavho</td>
<td>Their legs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li-Ma</td>
<td>l-</td>
<td>Lino lavo</td>
<td>Your tooth (polite)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Mano anu</td>
<td>Your teeth (familiar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshi-Zwi</td>
<td>tsh-</td>
<td>Tshiifhiwa tshanu</td>
<td>Your gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>zw-</td>
<td>Zwifhiwa zwashu</td>
<td>Our gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N-Dzi</td>
<td>y-</td>
<td>Khuhu yashu</td>
<td>Our chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dz-</td>
<td>Dzikuhu dzanga</td>
<td>My chickens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
2 Basic Grammar

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

**Heyi** nguluvhe ndi khaladzi ya **heyo** nguluvhe.
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.

“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* mun
ho.
There’s no sugar but there is salt.

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

*Ndi na mađabula 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.

### 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 $u\ pe\ a$ when talking about “give” in other contexts.

### 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.

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.

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

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

Pronouns change in a similar manner:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Present Negative</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Past Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ndi</td>
<td>A thi</td>
<td>Ndo</td>
<td>A tho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ri</td>
<td>A ri</td>
<td>Ro</td>
<td>A ro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vha</td>
<td>A vha</td>
<td>Vho</td>
<td>A vho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Ha</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Ha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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 ḥa zwiliwa zwa masiari.
2.6 Conjunctions

I didn’t eat lunch.

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

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 lhu 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”.

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.

The word for “but” used to be fhedzi (only) but the Afrikaans mara 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 vhilisa 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun class</th>
<th>Preposition</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>English meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mu-Vha</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>Muthu wa u khwaθha</td>
<td>Fat person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vha</td>
<td>Vhathu vha u khwaθha</td>
<td>Fat people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu-Mi</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>Muθa wa Mashudu</td>
<td>Mashudu’s family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ya</td>
<td>Miθa ya Mashudu</td>
<td>Mashudu’s families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li-Ma</td>
<td>ḥa</td>
<td>Lithogwa ḥa bogisi</td>
<td>The box’s matchstick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a</td>
<td>Mathogwa a bogisi</td>
<td>The box’s matchsticks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshi-Zwi</td>
<td>tsha</td>
<td>Tshanda tsha monde</td>
<td>Left hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>zwa</td>
<td>Zwanda zwa monde</td>
<td>Left hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N-Dzi</td>
<td>ya</td>
<td>Thoho ya tshikolo</td>
<td>Head of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dza</td>
<td>Dzitho ho dza tshikolo</td>
<td>Heads of school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 muededzi.*  
He asked the teacher.
2.8 Adjectives

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

"Ndi matsheloni avhudi." [Zwithu] ndi zwavhudi. Dhwa 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 Luwendu 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.

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Where</th>
<th>Why</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Which</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nnyi</td>
<td>Mini</td>
<td>Lini</td>
<td>Gai</td>
<td>Ngani</td>
<td>Hani</td>
<td>-ifhio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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?
2.11 Commands

**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 dzena 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 begging of the verb.

- *Idani! Ilani!*  
  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.

| *Dzulani fhasi.* | A *dzule fhasi.*  
| Sit down. | Sit down, please. |
| **Kha dzule fhasi** | **Kha vha dzule fhasi.**  
| Sit down, if you don’t mind. | Please sit down if you don’t mind, sir. |

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 madabula.**  
  I’m politely asking for you to cut potatoes.

Changing the verb ending to **e** is something like a subjunctive tense. There are other permutations with subtle differences, such as **dzuleni.**
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.

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

\[ \text{Ri do vhonana matshelo.} \]
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.

\[ \text{Ndo wa mulindini. Ndo wela mulindini.} \]
I fell at the pit. I fell into the pit.

\[ \text{O kopela bambiri yanga!} \]
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.

\[ \text{Vhana vho guda. Ndo gudisa vhana.} \]
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 dzosikiwa.
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 hwadza 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U tenda</td>
<td>To believe in</td>
<td>Lutendo</td>
<td>Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U sumba</td>
<td>To show</td>
<td>Tsumbo</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U funa</td>
<td>To love</td>
<td>Lufuno</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U guda</td>
<td>To learn</td>
<td>Ngudo</td>
<td>Lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U imba</td>
<td>To sing</td>
<td>Luimbo</td>
<td>Song</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
Section 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.

- *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.

- *Mutukana u khou tshimbila na tshimange tshawe.*
  The boy and his cat are walking. [The boy is walking with his cat.]

Section 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.

- *Tshimange Zwimange Limange Mamange Kumange*
  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 Advanced Grammar

3.5.1 Verbs

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.

![Tou also seems to be used along with exclamations.](image)

*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 mano u bva hafo 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrases</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ndaa.</td>
<td>Hello. (Spoken by men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aa.</td>
<td>Hello. (Spoken by women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndi matsheloni.</td>
<td>Good morning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndi masiari.</td>
<td>Good afternoon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndi mathabama.</td>
<td>Good [time between afternoon and evening.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndi madekwana.</td>
<td>Good evening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotsha.</td>
<td>Good morning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lokovhela.</td>
<td>Good evening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu rini?</td>
<td>How are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu ita hani?</td>
<td>How’s it going?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wo twiwa?</td>
<td>How goes it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uri mini?</td>
<td>How are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Lit. What do you say?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uri mini fhedzi?</td>
<td>I say nothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndi/ri hone.</td>
<td>I’m fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndo/ro hone.</td>
<td>I’m fine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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?  How are you?
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.)
Ndo/ro twa.  I’m fine.  (Lit. I went.)
Zwavhuđi.

It’s acceptable to reply with “ri” even if you’re alone.

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.)

Notice how I’m mixing and matching pronouns here. It’s not strictly correct but people still say it.

Na mne ro vuwa.  I’m also fine.
Na mne ndi hone.

4.2 Important Phrases

Ee.  Yes.
Hai.  No.
Khamusi.  Maybe.

Tshanda tshamonde.  Left hand.
Tshanda tshauľa.  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 dora.  I’m thirsty.
Ndi khou lwala.  I’m sick.
4.4 Common phrases

No zwi pfa?  Did you hear that?
No zwifha.  You lied.
Zwo fara?  Got it?
No sea mini?  What are you laughing at?
Ndi amba ngoho.  I’m telling the truth.
Duvha l’i khou fhisa.  It’s hot.

4.5 Words specific to South Africa

vhuswa  pap
muladza  leftover pap
makoko  dried pap
mugayo  mielie meal
tshidamba  samp
randavhula  rondaval
magwinya  fatcakes
delele  slimy muroho
magege  termites
matoko  cow pie
nze  locust
bapu  grasshopper
mashondzha  mopani worms
masenga  beadwork
vha-musanda  chief
musanda  royal house
minada  chicken feet
khwanda  animal feet