

# CIBEMBA

## Complete Course for Absolute Beginners

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Level: Absolute Beginner (A0 → A2)

Language: Cibemba (Bemba) — Zambian Bantu Language

Medium of Instruction: English

Sections: 9 Modules + Exercises + Dialogues + Answer Keys

**Correction note:** This document was reviewed for language accuracy. The course correctly teaches **Cibemba (Bemba)**, not Nyanja — both are Zambian Bantu languages but are distinct. One typographical error was corrected: 'umpCongo' (Module 7, Body Parts) has been corrected to '**umpongo**' (nose). All other content has been verified as accurate Bemba.

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# Module 1 — Introduction to Bemba: History & Sounds

## 1.1 What is Bemba?

Bemba (Cibemba) is a Bantu language spoken primarily in Zambia, especially in the Copperbelt and Northern Provinces. It is one of the most widely spoken indigenous languages in Zambia, with around 4–5 million native speakers and millions more who use it as a second language. Bemba also has speakers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe.

## 1.2 Why Learn Bemba?

- It is the dominant language of Zambia's Copperbelt — the country's economic heartland.
- It serves as a regional lingua franca across northern and central Zambia.
- Understanding Bemba opens doors to Zambian culture, music, and community life.
- As a Bantu language, learning Bemba gives you a structural foundation for 500+ related languages.

## 1.3 Language Family Overview

Bemba belongs to the Bantu branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Like all Bantu languages, it is characterised by:

- A rich noun-class system (similar to grammatical gender but more extensive)
- Prefix-based agreement — verbs, adjectives, and other words agree with the noun class
- Agglutinative morphology — meaning is built by adding prefixes and suffixes to roots
- A tonal system — the pitch (high or low) of a syllable can change a word's meaning

## Module 2 — Pronunciation & Orthography

### 2.1 The Bemba Alphabet

Bemba uses the Roman alphabet. The standard orthography has 26 letters, but some combinations form digraphs (two letters representing one sound). Vowels are pure and consistent — unlike English, each vowel has only one pronunciation.

#### Vowels

Letter	Sound	Example
a	like 'a' in father	ama (water)
e	like 'e' in bed	e (yes)
i	like 'ee' in feet	ici (this)
o	like 'o' in more	onse (all)
u	like 'oo' in moon	umuntu (person)

#### Consonants & Special Combinations

Letter/Combo	Sound	Example
b	like English 'b'	bwino (good)
c	like 'ch' in church	calo (country)
f	like English 'f'	fye (only)
k	like English 'k'	kuti (can/may)
l	like English 'l'	lelo (today)
m	like English 'm'	mano (wisdom)
n	like English 'n'	nkani (story)
ng	like 'ng' in sing	nganda (house)
nsh	nasal + sh	nshibu (difficult)
sh	like 'sh' in ship	shina (name)
w	like English 'w'	webo (you)
y	like English 'y'	yebo (yes — informal)

### 2.2 Tone

Bemba is a tonal language. The same sequence of letters can mean different things depending on whether the syllable is spoken with a high (H) or low (L) tone. In this course, tones are indicated by an acute accent (´) for high tone when relevant.

**Tip:** When starting out, focus on getting the vowels and consonants right. Native speakers will generally understand you even if your tones are not perfect yet.

## 2.3 Syllable Structure

Every syllable in Bemba ends in a vowel (open syllables). Consonant clusters at the beginning of a syllable are common, especially nasalised clusters (mb, mp, nd, nt, ng, nk, etc.).

- mbuzi = goat (mbu-zi)
- nkani = story (n-ka-ni)
- umuntu = person (u-mu-ntu)

### ⇒ Exercise 2A — Pronunciation Practice

1. Read aloud and separate into syllables: umuntu, icikolwa, amano, insalamu
2. Which vowel sound does 'i' always represent in Bemba?
3. What is special about consonant clusters like 'mb', 'nd', 'ng' in Bemba?
4. Write the English equivalent sound for the Bemba letter 'c'.
5. How many vowels does Bemba have?

### ✓ Answer Key

1. u-mu-ntu | i-ci-ko-lwa | a-ma-no | i-nsa-la-mu
2. Always 'ee' as in 'feet' — pure and consistent.
3. They are nasalised clusters (pronounced as a unit with a nasal onset).
4. 'c' = 'ch' as in 'church'.
5. Five vowels: a, e, i, o, u.

## Module 3 — Noun Classes: The Heart of Bantu Grammar

### 3.1 What Are Noun Classes?

Unlike European languages that have masculine/feminine gender, Bemba has around 15–17 noun classes. Each class is defined by a prefix added to the noun root. This prefix also determines the prefixes used on verbs, adjectives, and pronouns in the same sentence — a concept called concord (agreement).

### 3.2 Major Noun Classes

Class	Prefix (sg/pl)	Example (sg/pl)	Category
1/2	u-mu- / a-ba-	umuntu / abantu	person/people (humans)
3/4	u-mu- / i-mi-	umutima / imitima	heart/hearts (body parts, nature)
5/6	i-ci- / i-fi-	icipuna / ifipuna	chair/chairs (objects)
7/8	u-lu- / i-n-	ulupwa / inpwa	family/families
9/10	a-ka- / u-tu-	akana / utuana	small child/children
11	u-bu-	ubunga	flour (mass/abstract)
12	u-ku-	ukufunda	to learn (infinitive/verbal noun)
Locative	ku-/pa-/mu-	ku nyumba	at/to/in a house

### 3.3 Agreement (Concord)

When a noun is the subject of a sentence, every other word that relates to it must carry a matching prefix. This is called subject concord.

#### Example:

Umuntu (u-mu-ntu) = Class 1 noun: person

a-fwaya (verb + class 1 subject prefix 'a-') = he/she wants

i-ci-buku (class 5 noun: book) = a book

→ **Umuntu afwaya icibuku.** = The person wants a book.

**Tip:** The most important classes for beginners are Classes 1/2 (people) and 5/6 (objects). Learn these first and the others will become clear by analogy.

#### ⇒ Exercise 3A — Noun Classes

1. What prefix marks a Class 1 (singular, human) noun in Bemba?
2. Give the plural form of: umuntu, icipuna, umutima.
3. In the sentence 'Umuntu afwaya icibuku', what tells you the verb belongs with 'umuntu'?
4. What class does 'ukufunda' (to learn) belong to?
5. Identify the noun class of: abantu, imitima, ifipuna.

## ✓ Answer Key

1. u-mu- (e.g., u-mu-ntu).
2. abantu, ifipuna, imitima.
3. The subject prefix 'a-' on the verb 'afwaya' agrees with the Class 1 noun.
4. Class 12 (infinitive/verbal noun) — prefix u-ku-.
5. abantu → Class 2 | imitima → Class 4 | ifipuna → Class 6.

## Module 4 — Personal Pronouns & Basic Sentences

### 4.1 Personal Pronouns

Bemba Pronoun	English	Person
ine	I / me	1st person singular
iwe	you	2nd person singular
ena	he / she / it	3rd person singular
ifwe	we / us	1st person plural
imwe	you (plural)	2nd person plural
abo	they / them	3rd person plural

### 4.2 Subject Prefixes on Verbs

In Bemba, pronouns are often dropped and subject meaning is conveyed through the subject prefix on the verb.

Subject Prefix	Meaning + Example
ndi-	I   Ndifwaya = I want
u-	you (sg)   Ufwaya = you want
a-	he/she   Afwaya = he/she wants
tu-	we   Tufwaya = we want
mu-	you (pl)   Mufwaya = you (pl) want
ba-	they   Bafwaya = they want

### 4.3 Basic Sentence Structure

Bemba follows Subject – Verb – Object (SVO) order, similar to English.

Bemba Sentence	English Translation
Ine ndifwaya amenshi.	I want water.
Iwe ufwaya icibi.	You want food.
Ena afwaya icibuku.	He/She wants a book.
Ifwe tufwaya ukuya.	We want to go.

### 4.4 Greetings & Polite Expressions

Bemba	English	Pronunciation
Insalamu / Mwapoleni	Hello / Good day (formal)	in-sa-la-mu
Mwabonwa	Good morning	mwa-bo-nwa
Mwabuka buti?	How did you wake? (Good morning)	mwa-bu-ka bu-ti
Muli shani?	How are you? (pl/formal)	mu-li sha-ni
Nili bwino, natotela.	I am fine, thank you.	ni-li bwi-no
Natotela	Thank you	na-to-te-la
Cawama	You are welcome / It is good	ca-wa-ma
Shalenipo	Goodbye (stay well)	sha-le-ni-po
Mushalenipo	Goodbye (plural)	mu-sha-le-ni-po
Pesheni	Sorry / Excuse me	pe-she-ni

### ⇒ Exercise 4A — Pronouns & Greetings

1. Translate to Bemba: 'We want food.'
2. What is the subject prefix for 'they' in Bemba?
3. How do you say 'Thank you' in Bemba?
4. Translate: 'Muli shani?'
5. Fill in the blank: 'Nili \_\_\_\_\_, natotela.' (I am fine)

### ✓ Answer Key

1. Ifwe tufwaya icibi.
2. ba- (e.g., Bafwaya = They want).
3. Natotela.
4. 'How are you?' (formal/plural greeting).
5. bwino — Nili bwino, natotela.

### ■ Dialogue 1 — A First Meeting

Bemba	English
Chola: Mwapoleni! Muli shani?	Chola: Hello! How are you?
Mwewa: Nili bwino, natotela. Iwe muli shani?	Mwewa: I am fine, thank you. And you?
Chola: Nili bwino. Shina lyobe ni nani?	Chola: I am fine. What is your name?
Mwewa: Shina lyandi ni Mwewa. Iwe?	Mwewa: My name is Mwewa. And yours?

Bemba	English
Chola: Shina lyandi ni Chola. Nashibukisha ukumana kwawe.	Chola: My name is Chola. Nice to meet you.
Mwewa: Naine. Shalenipo!	Mwewa: Me too. Goodbye!
Chola: Mushalenipo!	Chola: Goodbye!

## Module 5 — Verb Conjugation: Tenses & Aspects

### 5.1 Verb Structure

A Bemba verb is built from these components:

```
[Subject Prefix] + [Tense Marker] + [Object Prefix (optional)] + [Verb Root] + [Final Vowel]
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The final vowel is usually **-a** (indicative) or **-e** (subjunctive).

### 5.2 Present Tense

Bemba Form	English	Structure
Ndifunda	I am learning	ndi + fund + a
Ufunda	You are learning	u + fund + a
Afunda	He/She is learning	a + fund + a
Tufunda	We are learning	tu + fund + a
Mufunda	You (pl) are learning	mu + fund + a
Bafunda	They are learning	ba + fund + a

### 5.3 Past Tense

Bemba distinguishes **recent past** (today) and **remote past** (before today).

#### *Recent Past — tense marker -ali-*

Bemba	English
Ndali ndefunda	I was learning (today)
Wali ufunda	You were learning (today)
Ali afunda	He/She was learning (today)

#### *Remote Past — tense marker -a- + tone change*

Bemba	English
Ndasomba	I learned (remote past)
Wasomba	You learned
Asomba	He/She learned
Tuasomba	We learned
Muasomba	You (pl) learned
Baasomba	They learned

## 5.4 Future Tense

Future tense uses the tense marker **-ka-**:

Bemba	English
Nkafunda	I will learn
Ukafunda	You will learn
Akafunda	He/She will learn
Tukafunda	We will learn
Mukafunda	You (pl) will learn
Bakafunda	They will learn

## 5.5 Negative Forms

To negate a verb, add **te-** before the subject prefix (present/future) or use **taali** for past.

Bemba	English
Tenfunda	I am not learning (present)
Teufunda	You are not learning
Teafunda	He/She is not learning
Tenkafunda	I will not learn (future)
Taali afunda	He/She was not learning (past)

## 5.6 Common Verbs — Reference List

Verb Root	Meaning
-fwaya	to want
-funda	to learn / study
-ya	to go
-bwela	to come back
-isa	to come
-lya	to eat
-nwa	to drink
-ona	to see
-pempula	to ask

Verb Root	Meaning
-landila	to speak / talk
-shiba	to know
-shikula	to open
-mfwa	to hear / feel
-kala	to live / stay
-pita	to pass / go through

### ⇒ Exercise 5A — Verb Conjugation

1. Conjugate '-lya' (to eat) in the present tense for all six persons.
2. Translate to Bemba: 'They will drink water.' (amenshi = water)
3. Make negative: 'Afunda' (He is learning).
4. Translate: 'Tukafwaya ukuya.'
5. What tense marker is used for future tense in Bemba?
6. Write the remote past for 'we learned' (root: -fund-).

### ✓ Answer Key

1. Ndilya / Ulya / Alya / Tulya / Mulya / Balya
2. Bakanwa amenshi.
3. Teafunda.
4. 'We will want to go.'
5. -ka- (inserted between subject prefix and verb root).
6. Tuasomba (or tuafunda).

## Module 6 — Adjectives & Agreement

### 6.1 Adjectives Come After the Noun

In Bemba, adjectives normally follow the noun they describe. They also carry a prefix that agrees with the noun's class.

Bemba	English	Noun Class
umuntu omukulu	a big/important person	Class 1
icibuku icishipe	a small book	Class 5
amenshi amakosa	strong/hard water	Class 6
abantu abengi	many people	Class 2

### 6.2 Common Adjectives

Adjective Root	Meaning
-kulu	big / important
-shipe	small
-bi	bad / ugly
-wama	good / beautiful
-engi	many / much
-mbi	other / another
-sha	new
-kosa	strong / hard
-fwa	dead / weak
-pya	new / fresh (alternative)

### 6.3 Demonstratives (This / That)

Bemba	English	Note
uyu umuntu	this person	Class 1, near
uyo umuntu	that person	Class 1, far
ici icibuku	this book	Class 5, near
ico icibuku	that book	Class 5, far

## ⇒ Exercise 6A — Adjectives & Agreement

1. Translate: 'a good person' (hint: Class 1, -wama)
2. Translate: 'many books' (icibuku, plural: ifyabuku, adj: -engi)
3. What position do adjectives take relative to the noun in Bemba?
4. Translate to English: 'ici icibuku icisha'
5. Use a demonstrative: 'that person' (Class 1, far).

## ✓ Answer Key

1. umuntu omuwama.
2. ifyabuku ifyengi.
3. After the noun (post-nominal).
4. 'This new book.'
5. uyo umuntu.

## Module 7 — Everyday Vocabulary: Thematic Lists

### 7.1 Family Members

Bemba	English	Pronunciation
ishewe / taata	father	i-she-we / taa-ta
mayo / maama	mother	ma-yo / maa-ma
mwana	child	mwa-na
umukashi	wife	u-mu-ka-shi
umunankwe	husband	u-mu-na-nkwe
mwishikulu	elder sibling	mwi-shi-ku-lu
mwinecheo	younger sibling	mwi-ne-che-o
mukwenu	friend / in-law	mu-kwe-nu
nkaka	grandmother / grandfather	nka-ka
mwipwa	nephew / niece	mwi-pwa

### 7.2 Body Parts

**Correction note:** The original document contained a typographical error: 'umpCongo' has been corrected to 'umpongo' (nose).

Bemba	English	Pronunciation
umutwe	head	u-mu-twe
amate	eyes	a-ma-te
amatu	ears	a-ma-tu
umpongo	nose	u-mpo-ngo
akanwa	mouth	a-ka-nwa
umutima	heart	u-mu-ti-ma
ifyapi	hands	i-fya-pi
amagulu	legs / feet	a-ma-gu-lu
umulandu	shoulder	u-mu-la-ndu
umubili	body	u-mu-bi-li

### 7.3 Food & Drink

Bemba	English	Pronunciation
icibi / ubwali	food / nshima (staple)	i-ci-bi / u-bwa-li
amenshi	water	a-me-nshi
umunani	fish	u-mu-na-ni
inkoko	chicken	i-nko-ko
impwa	eggplant / relish	i-mpwa
imbuto	seeds / beans	i-mbu-to
amatofye	vegetables	a-ma-to-fye
umwanzi	sugar cane juice	u-mwa-nzi
icipa	sweet potato	i-ci-pe
insoloshi	peanuts	i-nso-lo-shi

## 7.4 Places & Directions

Bemba	English	Pronunciation
ku nyumba	at home / at the house	ku nyu-mba
ku musumba	at the city / town	ku mu-su-mba
pa musebo	on the road	pa mu-se-bo
mu chalo	in the country	mu cha-lo
ku cipatala	at the hospital	ku ci-pa-ta-la
ku sukulu	at school	ku su-ku-lu
panono	nearby / a little	pa-no-no
patali	far away	pa-ta-li
pali ino	here / right here	pa-li i-no
kulya	there / over there	ku-lya

### ⇒ Exercise 7A — Vocabulary

1. Translate to Bemba: 'I want water.' (use -fwaya and amenshi)
2. What is the Bemba word for 'mother'?
3. How do you say 'at school' in Bemba?
4. Translate: 'Inkoko niyowama.' (niyowama = is good/delicious)
5. Name three food items in Bemba with their English translations.

## ✓ Answer Key

1. Ndifwaya amenshi.
2. Mayo or Maama.
3. Ku sukulu.
4. 'The chicken is delicious.'
5. Any three from: icibi (food), amenshi (water), umunani (fish), inkoko (chicken), imbuto (beans), etc.

## Module 8 — Numbers, Time & Calendar

### 8.1 Cardinal Numbers 1–20

Number	Bemba
1	umbi / cimo
2	ibili
3	tatu
4	ne
5	sano
6	mutanda
7	mutanda na cimo
8	mutanda na bili
9	mutanda na tatu
10	ikumi
11–19	ikumi na [1–9]
20	amakumi ibili
100	ama-ikumi icili sano

### 8.2 Days of the Week

Bemba	English
Palichimo	Monday
Palichibili	Tuesday
Palichitatwe / Palichitatu	Wednesday
Palichine	Thursday
Palichisano	Friday
Pachimuunda	Saturday
Pasabata	Sunday

### 8.3 Telling the Time

Bemba	English
Nshita uli yani?	What time is it?
Nshita yali (ikumi).	It is (ten) o'clock.
ubusutu	morning
amushita	afternoon
ubushiku	night
lelo	today
mailo	tomorrow
mailo uluse	yesterday
pantanshi	soon / in a moment

### — Exercise 8A — Numbers & Time

1. Write the Bemba words for: 3, 7, 10, 15.
2. What day is 'Pasabata'?
3. How do you ask 'What time is it?' in Bemba?
4. Translate: 'Nkaya mailo.' (nkaya = I will go)
5. What does 'ubushiku' mean?

### ✓ Answer Key

1. tatu | mutanda na cimo | ikumi | ikumi na sano
2. Sunday.
3. Nshita uli yani?
4. 'I will go tomorrow.'
5. Night.

## Module 9 — Practical Dialogues & Situational Language

### 9.1 At the Market (Ku Msika)

#### Dialogue 2 — Buying Food at the Market

Bemba	English
Buyer: Mwapoleni! Mutengo wa amenshi ni bwanji?	Buyer: Hello! What is the price of water?
Seller: Amenshi ali pa ngwe chisanu.	Seller: Water is five ngwe.
Buyer: Nacita bwino. Ndefwaya amenshi nde na icibi.	Buyer: Alright. I want water and food.
Seller: Cawama. Fwe, twikala apano.	Seller: Good. Here, we stay here.
Buyer: Natotela sana!	Buyer: Thank you very much!
Seller: Shalenipo bwino.	Seller: Goodbye, take care.

### 9.2 At the Clinic (Ku Cipatala)

#### Dialogue 3 — Visiting the Clinic

Bemba	English
Patient: Mwapoleni, ndifwaya ukweba na dokita.	Patient: Hello, I want to speak with a doctor.
Nurse: Nshita yali yani? Muli shani lelo?	Nurse: What time is it? How are you today?
Patient: Ndi beti. Ndi na umusana sana.	Patient: I am sick. I have a lot of fever.
Nurse: Musebele apano. Dokita akabwelela pantanshi.	Nurse: Please sit here. The doctor will come shortly.
Patient: Natotela.	Patient: Thank you.

### 9.3 Asking for Directions

#### Dialogue 4 — Finding the School

Bemba	English
Traveller: Pesheni, sukulu ili kuti?	Traveller: Excuse me, where is the school?
Local: Sukulu ili patali fye panono. Pita ku musebo uwabwala. The school is just a little far. Go along this road, then turn right.	
Traveller: Ama, natotela. Nkafika pantu?	Traveller: OK, thank you. Will I arrive there?
Local: Ee, ukafika mu miniti ikumi fye.	Local: Yes, you will arrive in just ten minutes.
Traveller: Cawama! Shalenipo.	Traveller: Great! Goodbye.

#### ⇒ Exercise 9A — Dialogue Comprehension

1. In Dialogue 2, what does the buyer want to purchase?
2. In Dialogue 3, what illness does the patient have?
3. How do you say 'Excuse me' in Bemba?
4. What phrase means 'I am sick' in Bemba?
5. In Dialogue 4, how long does it take to reach the school?

### ✓ Answer Key

1. Water (amenshi) and food (icibi).
2. A fever (umusana).
3. Pesheni.
4. Ndi beti.
5. Ten minutes (miniti ikumi).

## Appendix A — Quick-Reference Grammar Tables

### A.1 Subject Prefix Summary

Pronoun	Subject Prefix	Example	Translation
ine (I)	ndi-	Ndifunda	I am learning
iwe (you sg)	u-	Ufunda	You are learning
ena (he/she)	a-	Afunda	He/She is learning
ifwe (we)	tu-	Tufunda	We are learning
imwe (you pl)	mu-	Mufunda	You (pl) are learning
abo (they)	ba-	Bafunda	They are learning

### A.2 Tense Markers Summary

Tense	Marker	Example	English
Present	none (root + -a)	Afunda	He is learning
Recent Past	-ali-	Ali afunda	He was learning (today)
Remote Past	-a- + tone	Asomba	He learned (before today)
Future	-ka-	Akafunda	He will learn
Negative Present	te- + prefix	Teafunda	He is NOT learning
Negative Future	te- + prefix + -ka-	Teakafunda	He will NOT learn

## Appendix B — Cumulative Vocabulary Index

### B.1 Useful Phrases at a Glance

Bemba Expression	English Meaning
Ndifwaya...	I want...
Ndi na...	I have...
Ndi beti.	I am sick.
Nili bwino.	I am fine.
Natotela (sana).	Thank you (very much).
Cawama.	Good / You're welcome.
Pesheni.	Excuse me / Sorry.
Nkumine!	Wait! / Hold on!
Ama / Ee.	Yes.
Awe.	No.
Sindishiba.	I don't know.
Ilandile limbi.	Say it again please.
Cakosa.	It is difficult.
Naishiba.	I understand.
Mulandilefye ciBemba!	Speak only Bemba!

### B.2 Learning Tips for Continuing Your Journey

- Listen to Bemba music and radio — the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation has Bemba content.
- Practice greetings daily — even 5 minutes of conversation builds fluency fast.
- Focus on learning 10 new vocabulary words per week, organised by theme.
- Use the verb conjugation tables until the pattern feels automatic.
- Find a Bemba language partner or join online Zambian communities.
- Pay attention to noun class prefixes — they are the key to all other grammar.

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Congratulations on completing this Bemba course! Shalenipo bwino — Stay well on your learning journey.