



ASSESSING MINORITY LANGUAGES ENDANGERMENT: A CASE OF THE TABWA ETHNOLINGUISTIC COMMUNITY

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Abstract:

This study investigated the sociolinguistic status of the Tabwa language with particular reference to its level of endangerment, considering its apparent condition as a language threatened with extinction. This situation is primarily attributed to the increasing dominance of Kiswahili language, while other social and economic factors were also found to contribute to the observed decline in the use of the language. The study investigated the sociolinguistic status evidenced by domain function and intergenerational transmission and their possible contributions to the threatened status of the Tabwa language. The integrated approach using both qualitative and quantitative data was adopted in the study. This study targeted the Tabwa people. Stratified random and purposive sampling techniques were used in the study. The respondents were grouped in three different age categories. The first category was children between 10 to 15 years, the second category was that of the youth aged between 16-25 years, and the third and last category was that of adults aged between 26-55. A total of 120 respondents were selected to provide quantitative data. The sample comprised three groups: 40 children aged 10–15 years, 40 youth aged 16–25 years, and 40 adults aged 26–55 years. A total number of 35 respondents were taken for the group that provided qualitative data. The analysed data indicate that, the Tabwa language is potentially endangered. It was observed that there was a lack of effective intergenerational transmission of the language from older to younger generations. The language was also found to have very few functional domains and to possess a very low prestige value.

Keywords: language endangerment, language death, minority languages, language shift, Tabwa language, Moba, Democratic Republic of Congo

1. Introduction

In recent years, a significant body of literature has emerged on language endangerment, most of which specifically addresses minority languages. A number of minority languages in the globe

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are presently in rapid decline, facing a severe threat of death and extinction from the majority languages (Austin & Sallabank, 2011; Campbell & Rehg, 2018). In almost every continent or probably every country, some minority languages are endangered to some degrees. This condition poses a major threat to human linguistic and cultural heritage. Dedicated studies are being made to document decline languages, to maintain and even to revive them once extinct. Language endangerment may arise when communities with different linguistic traditions live side by side. Very often, the communities do not enjoy the same prestige in contact situations; a dominant language versus an inferior status may arise for specific reasons, such as numerical, economic, socio-historical or political strengths of each community. The communities with a lower status commonly acquire proficiency in the language of the dominant group. They may be inclined to abandon their culture, including their language, and may decide to shift and adopt the language and culture of the dominant community (Austin & Sallabank, 2011; Batibo, 2005; Crystall, 2014; Torrence & Jason, 2017). A speech community does not simply lose its sole means of communication and become silent; rather, such a situation rarely occurs. Speakers abandon a language when an alternative means of communication becomes available which they perceive to have greater prestige, often influenced by economic, political, social, or other practical considerations. This is common in cases where a language comes into contact with another language that, for one reason or another, overpowers it either in terms of prestige or in terms of number of speakers (Batibo, 2005, p. 63; Campbell & Rehg, 2018, p. 5).

The Tabwa ethnolinguistic community has had a very long intense contact with Kiswahili. This contact has had a significant impact on the viability of the Tabwa language, as potential speakers of Tabwa have progressively shifted to the use of Kiswahili. This shift by the Tabwa people to the use Kiswahili weakens the vitality of the Tabwa language. The Tabwa language is losing a significant number of domains to Kiswahili and French language to some extent in the Tabwa ethnolinguistic community. It is perceived that the children are not learning Tabwa as the first language in the community; rather, the language is characterized by an elderly population and it is losing an important number of its speakers to Kiswahili. Despite some studies conducted on Tabwa language (Jenkins, 2006; Kalumba, 2010; Mwela-Ubi, 2021) none of them has pointed on its status in term of the degree of endangerment. It remains unclear what status the language currently holds with respect to endangerment. This can only be established by conducting a scientific enquiry of this phenomenon. Therefore, this study aims to determine the degree of endangerment of the Tabwa language by examining the factors contributing to it.

1.1 The Tabwa People and Their Language

The Tabwa ethnolinguistic community is a group of people residing in the south-west of Lake Tanganyika in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the Tanganyika province, Moba district; Guthrie classifies it as M41. The language is not documented. The few available materials are research reports by some scholars based on the history of the Tabwa people. Its number of speakers goes up to 178,102 people (CENI,2023; Jenkins, 2006). Due to their lack of formal education, the Tabwa people used to have a minority complex but this is changing. Only 25 per cent of the population live in the rural areas in Moba (Mwela-Ubi, 2021, p. 27). The Tabwa people speak a Bantu language called Kitabwa. Language analysts such as Jenkins (2006) and Kalumba

(2010) state that the language is close to the Bemba and Luba of the neighbouring people. Kalumba (2010, p. 47) submits that the name Tabwa derives from a verb in their language meaning "to be tied up," referring to the time when they were targeted by slave traders. The Tabwa people primarily depend on fishing for their livelihood. They also engage in small-scale agriculture and cattle rearing, cultivating crops such as manioc, sweet and Irish potatoes, onions, wheat, beans, and maize (Mwela-Ubi, 2021, p. 29). Alongside the Tabwa language; Moba accommodates other languages such as Kiswahili, Kiluba, Tchiluba, Fulero, Shi and French. While Kiswahili is used by almost everyone in different situations, vernacular languages are restricted to the different ethnic groups and French is mainly used in education and other official communication.

2. General Objective of the Study

To determine the sociolinguistic status of the Tabwa language in term of degree of endangerment.

2.1 Specific Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided the study:

- 1) To assess language use in different domains by various age groups.
- 2) To examine the effectiveness of intergenerational transmission of the Tabwa language in the community.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Concept of Language Endangerment

The concept of language endangerment constitutes a continuum that ranges from the fully thriving and viable languages on one end to those that are extinct on the other. Languages in the progression of vanishing are endangered languages (Bradley & Bradley, 2019; Campbell & Rehg, 2018; Filipovic & Putz, 2016). It is significant to note at this point that, the case of language endangerment is explored with approaches mainly focusing on stratification. Thus, a number of authors (eg. Batibo, 2005; Crystal, 2014; Thomason, 2015) have come up with several subsets of language situations and characteristics to explain this concept.

According to UNESCO's (Brezinger *et al.*, 2003), a language is endangered when its speakers stop to use it, or use it in a progressively reduced number of communicative functions, and stop to pass it on from one age group to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults or children. Several languages in Africa are facing a condition parallel to the one described above. Hence, they may be regarded as endangered, and in some cases, certain languages have already become extinct. Languages such as Beeke, Membi, Dongo, Lonzo found in the Democratic Republic of Congo are not only spoken by few people but also have low intergeneration transmission (Batibo, 2005). On the other hand, Thomason (2015) submits that, a language is apparently endangered when it is at peril of disappearing within a generation or two, that is, when its last fluent speakers are elderly, when few kids are learning it as a primary

language, and when no one is learning it as a second language. Some specialists in linguistics (eg. Brenzinger, 2007; Crystal, 2014; Krauss, 2007, Batibo, 2005) call such language moribund when it is no longer being learned as a mother tongue, a language that is not conveyed to younger generations of native speakers. This has been the fate of many native languages in the world. Among the reasons that have been recorded by different scholars in the field of linguistics as indicators of language endangerment include a language having too few speakers and only old members, a language not being transmitted from the older to the younger generation, a language not actively being used in everyday or new activities; languages not being documented, speakers having negative feelings of ethnic identity and attitudes about their language in general (Batibo, 2005; Campbell & Rehg, 2018; Fishman, 1991; Thomason, 2015; Tsunoda, 2005; UNESCO, 2003). Diverse authors have given importance to different indicators depending on their own investigations and environments. Close analysis of these and other resources exposes that there are three key factors of language endangerment: Overall number of speakers; intergenerational language transfer; language use in various domains and related attitudes (Batibo, 2005; Campbell & Rehg, 2018; Filipovic & Putz, 2016:4; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Wa Mberia, 2014; Tsunoda, 2005).

It is commonly presumed that a speech community with a small number of speakers is more endangered than one with a large number of speakers. For example, Crystal (2014) suggests that a language community with less than 100 members is considered endangered. However, this is a contentious argument since records exist of languages with a quite huge number of speakers but which are well-thought-out to be endangered due to other factors (Thomason, 2015). There is also evidence of minority languages that are not threatened. This implies that, although the size of the speaker population constitutes a significant factor, it cannot be relied upon exclusively to determine the fate of an endangered language (Harrison, 2007:4). The age distribution of speakers constitutes a more reliable indicator of language endangerment. The greater the number of younger speakers, particularly children acquiring the language as their first language (L1), the less likely the language is to face imminent extinction (Brenzinger & Graaf, 2006; Thomason, 2015; Crystal, 2014).

The second factor is the rate of intergenerational language transfer. A language is threatened if it is no longer transmitted from the older to the younger generation (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006:6). Fishman (1991) came up with a model called “Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale” whose key belief is that when parents fail to transmit their language to their children, the language is endangered. This situation may arise when parents themselves perceive no necessity to transmit the language, or when children resist learning it despite the parents’ willingness to pass it on. In multilingual contexts, children are often exposed to other languages in various domains, particularly in educational settings such as schools. Children acquire the languages they are most exposed to. If they have low contact with L1 than L2, the transmission of L1 is likely to be low and may lead to them shifting to L2. It is of high necessity for the parents to expose children to both L1 and L2 for the preservation of their L1 in the community. The third most important indicator of language endangerment is the domains and functions of use of a language (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006:9). This refers to the settings and situations where the language is frequently used (Fishman, 1991). Although it is true that a

language becomes more threatened as the number of domains in which it is used declines, it is equally important to recognise that certain domains are more critical than others for the maintenance and continued vitality of a language. According to Thomason (2015:7), one indication of language decline is that usage decays in traditional domains such as place of worship, cultural activities, educational institutes and, most significantly, the home setting. Landweer (2016) argues that, the loss of a language in the home setting is a clear sign that it is threatened. Decrease of the number of domains and occurrence of use of a language in a domain may lead to language loss. This situation is further aggravated when dominant languages begin to encroach upon domains that were traditionally reserved for minority languages, particularly within the home. The attitude of the speech community to their group and language is also a significant indicator of language endangerment (Bradley, 2002; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). Members of a speech community with a positive attitude towards their language are less likely to shift to another language. Conversely, individuals who hold negative attitudes toward their language and perceive it as inferior are more likely to shift to another language that they consider more prestigious (UNESCO, 2003:2; Batibo, 2005:65; Thomason, 2015:26; Grenoble, 2011: 40; Bradley, 2002:4; Crystal, 2014).

3.2 Studies on Endangered Languages

Odero (2013) conducted a study on the status of the Elmolo language in Kenya code: ISO 639-3 and the findings indicate that the Elmolo language is in an acute path of death, meaning the language is severely endangered, that may lead to its extinction. The Elmolo people are a numerical minority community; although they live in an originally isolated setting, their isolation has come under serious attack by the influx of the members dominant communities, including the Samburu, Rendille and Turkana. The intermarriages that have been realized between the Elmolo, the Samburu and Turkana, have also affected their ability to continue speaking the Elmolo language. In addition, the economic status of the Elmolo people was established to be weak since they are identified as mainly relying on fishing and cattle rearing. This puts them at a weak point to the extent that they internally viewed themselves and their lifestyle as low in prestige. Moreover, there was a lack of intergenerational transmission of the language from the older generation to the younger generations in the community. Consequently, the younger members of the Elmolo people cannot speak the language, and the language risks extinction. A close examination of the findings discovered that intergenerational transmission, intermarriages, lack of prestige, reduced domains of language use, low attitude towards their language and lack of documentation were the main foundations of the endangerment of the Elmolo language. This falls under the criteria stipulated by UNESCO (2003) on indicators of language endangerment.

Another study was conducted by Heine, König and Legère (2016) reacting to the endangerment of the Akie language in Tanzania. The first study by Brenzinger (2007) categorizes the Akie language as a severely endangered language. That is, as one that is spoken only by the grandparental generation and above (Krauss, 2007). Based on a field survey conducted by the present authors to examine the current status of the language, with particular attention to language documentation, this study draws on findings concerning the

sociolinguistic situation of the Akie language as reported by Brenzinger (2007). The recent conclusion states that, the Akie is not a severely endangered language, because the status seems to have changed. Primarily, the language continues to be transmitted to children, indicating the presence of intergenerational transmission. Second, it has not lost any of the domains of use that are essential to their current way of life. Third, the majority of Akie individuals express a strong desire for the preservation and continued use of their language. The Akie people characterize a self-protective culture in the sense that they are making boundaries vis-a-vis their human environment, trying to keep their culture clean and to prevent outsiders, and particularly the Maasai, from having access to it. Therefore, one outcome of this behaviour is resistance to language shift and the preservation, maintenance and defence of an indigenous Akie language. Unlike the situation of the Elmolo community in Kenya, they permitted the influx of the people from other communities of the neighbourhood in their location. This situation led the Elmolo people to shift to the Samburu language, along with the adoption of Samburu cultural practices. In contrast, the situation of the Akie language is markedly different from that of the Elmolo.

A study on language endangerment was conducted by Mumbembe, Madoda and Tshotsho (2016) on factors causing the decline of minority languages spoken in Katanga. The study concluded that French, English, Kiswahili are the main causes of minority languages decline in Katanga. Katanga people do not have the occasion to use the minority languages in the education system because the dominant languages were the most useful languages in the education setting and outside the domain. The use of a language in the education system guaranteed its survival. This implies that the speakers of the minority language had no choice than to use the dominant languages at the cost of their own mother tongues. The minority language has no official recognition in the language-in-education policy of the democratic republic of Congo (DRC). This leads to the marginalization of the minority language hence causing the endangerment situation of the minority languages. Katanga people use other languages such as Kiswahili and French in public places and are unable to use the minority languages in the public environments.

A country-by-country case study by Batibo (2005) in the Democratic Republic of Congo reveals that the country, despite its vast geographical expanse, is home to 209 languages, with French serving as the official language. The major dominant languages are Kikongo, Lingala, Tchiluba and Kiswahili. The severely endangered languages in DRC include Beeke, Bolondo, Bomboli, Gbanziri, Kwami, Lonzo, Monzombo, Yango and Dzando. The extinct languages are Dongoko, Kazibati, Mampoko, Mbondo, Mongoba and Ngbee. The author suggests that there is a need to investigate the status of many of the languages in the Democratic Republic of Congo as information is still scanty.

4. Methodology of the Study

An integrated approach using both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques was adopted in this study. Alisson and Smith (2016) state that a mixed method is an investigation approach whereby researchers gather both quantitative and qualitative data within the same study. A qualitative approach was employed in the study, particularly through the use of

interviews and focus group discussions conducted during the fieldwork. Quantitative approach was used through survey which involved administration of questionnaires to a sampled population of study. Stratified random and purposive sampling techniques were adopted. The researcher used purposive sampling in selecting Tabwa elders considered as speakers of the language with solid knowledge of the Tabwa language from which qualitative data would be elicited. Those who were considered as elders in this study were males and females whose ages ranged from 60 years and above. The younger respondents were grouped in three different age categories. The first group was children between 10 to 15 years. The second group was that of the youth aged 16-25 years. The third and last group was that of adults aged between 26-55 years. This stratification was guided by the primary focus of the study, namely the rate of intergenerational language transmission, which serves as a key indicator of the level of language vitality and endangerment. A total of 120 respondents was taken for the group that provided quantitative data. The study comprised of 40 children aged of 10 to 15 years, 40 youth aged 16-25 years and lastly 40 adults aged 26-55years. A total number of 35 respondents was taken for the group that provided qualitative data. Therefore, a total of 10 teachers and 10 youth were selected for interviews, while 5 religious priests and 10 Tabwa elders were selected to participate in focus group discussions.

5. Presentation, Analysis of Findings and Discussions

This session gives a detailed discussion of the findings arising from the analysis of the data. The results of the analysis were intended to inform the conclusions that the study arrived at. The findings based on quantitative data are summarized in tables which are the researcher's own approach as instruments that facilitate the presentation of the summarized data.

5.1 Analysis of the Domains of Language Use

In sociolinguistics, the term domain is frequently used to represent the social context of communication. Domain is a zone of human activity in which one particular speech variety or a combination of several varieties is frequently used. The questions that were presented in sought to establish the language use patterns by the respondents in a number of domains. These questions were answered by respondents from all three categories. The following domains were investigated: the home, community members, the school and the workplace.

5.1.1 Home

It was expected that the information on the parentage of the respondents would have an influence on the language use patterns among them and at large the Tabwa ethnolinguistic community. In consideration of this factor, the question on the dominant language of the home area was designed. A summary of the responses to this question is presented in the Table 1.

Table 1: Dominant Language of Home Area of Respondents to the LUQ

Participants' Age Group	Number of Respondents	Dominant Language of Home Area					
		Tabwa		Swahili		French	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
10 - 15 years	40	8	20	32	80	0	0
16 - 25 years	40	6	15	30	75	4	10
26 - 55 years	40	12	30	28	70	0	0

Table 1 shows that the general language use situation among them does not in any way make the Tabwa the most used language among them. Considering the figures summarized in Table 1, Kiswahili is the dominant language, represented by 80 %, 75% and 70% among the children (10-15 years), youth (16-25 years) and adults (26-55 years), respectively. This implies that all the categories observe that the Kiswahili language is the most used within the Tabwa community. It is important to note that this observation records the highest percentage among children, followed by the youth and adults, in ascending order. This pattern implies that the younger the respondents were, the more likely they were to identify with the Kiswahili language. Contrary to the case of Kiswahili, the case of Tabwa is different. Only 20 % of children identified Tabwa as the dominant language of their home area. Among the youth, 15% identified Tabwa as the dominant language, while 30% of adults reported the same. Unlike the case of Kiswahili, a higher proportion of adults indicated that Tabwa remains the dominant language in their home area. However, this proportion decreases with declining age, such that fewer youths identify with the language, while the number of children who identify with it is the lowest. The French language was identified as being dominant in the home area by 10% of the youth respondents, although it had a 0% representation among the children and adults. Of particular interest is the fact that respondents across all age groups, children, youth, and adults, identified Kiswahili as the dominant language. Moreover, having had access to both primary and secondary education, individuals in this age group can be assumed to have internalised the role of Kiswahili as the national language and, consequently, to have increased their use of Kiswahili in general discourse in order to accommodate other participants in communication.

This finding is in agreement with the findings of other studies based on the decline of minority languages, where the use of the mother tongue is being left out of use in the home area. For example, the study by Ochieng and Achieng (2019) was based on the endangerment and possible death of the Terik language in Nandi County in Kenya. The authors of the research came up with the conclusion that the Terik language is endangered due to the lack of use in the home and the lack of intergenerational transmission from parents to their children. People in Nandi prefer the use of English and Kiswahili in all domain functions, therefore endangering the indigenous Terik language.

5.1.3 Language Use in Communication among the Community Members

The case within the Tabwa community, just like in most communities in DRC, is not pure in terms of original ethnic composition. The Tabwa people have experienced both intra-ethnic and interethnic marriages. With this kind of composition, it is expected that general language use within the community would be influenced to a large extent. This section of the language use

questionnaire, therefore, sought to establish the language use pattern among the members of the Tabwa community. The findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Language Use among the Tabwa Community Members in the Community Domain

Participants' Age Group	Number of Respondents	Language Use in Communication among the Tabwa Community Members					
		Tabwa		Swahili		French	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
10 - 15 years	40	6	15	34	85	0	0
16 - 25 years	40	4	10	30	75	0	0
26 - 55 years	40	10	25	30	75	0	0

From Table 2, it is evident that 85% of the children use the Kiswahili language in general community interaction, while 15% use Tabwa language. This implies that the majority of general discourses by the children in Tabwa community are undertaken in the Kiswahili language. Of notable importance is the fact that there is no use of another language. Apart from the two languages, no other language is represented in general usage among the Tabwa children.

Among the youth, 90% of the respondents use the Kiswahili language, while the 10% use Tabwa language in general community communication. The adults' category, as may be expected, is slightly different from the foregoing cases of the children and youth categories. While the majority of the adults, represented by 75%, use the Kiswahili language in their general community communication, another 25% use the Tabwa language. It is important to note at this point that the effort by the adults to use the Tabwa language in general community communication was observed to be largely unsuccessful since most of the other members of the community cannot use the language. Their communication, therefore, consists of isolated utterances that are not sustained within longer stretches of discourse. This only becomes successful when the discourse is between or among the few adults (most elders) who can use the Tabwa language. No other language was identified by the adult respondents as being used in the general community domain.

5.1.4 Language Use in Schools

Language used for education in the Democratic Republic of Congo schools is a matter largely determined by the Ministry of Education rather than individual preferences. In a follow-up interview, five teachers, whose ages fell in the adults' category, were asked to indicate their language use as the medium of instruction in the classroom with students/pupils. A summary of the language use patterns in this situation is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Language Used as the Medium of Instruction in Classes

Participants' Age Group	Number of Respondents	Language Used as the Medium of Instruction in Classes					
		Tabwa		Swahili		French	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
26 - 55 years	10	0	0	3	40	6	60

Table 3 indicates that 40% of the teachers used Kiswahili as the language of instruction in the classes with pupils. 60% of teachers use the French language as the medium of instruction. None of them use Tabwa language to communicate to pupils/ students. The scenarios presented in the foregoing cases can be explained by the official government of DRC language policy in education system. The policy demands that the language of instruction in the lower classes of primary schools be the dominant language of the community in which the school is located. In the case of the Tabwa community, this language is Kiswahili, which was also largely used in the communication by the teachers to the pupils in schools. The policy, however, provides that the language of instruction shifts to French (for all subjects except Kiswahili should be taught as a subject) from the upper primary classes through the universities (Programme National de L'enseignement Primaire, Secondaire et Professionnel [National Programme for Primary, Secondary, and Vocational Education], 2005). This goes a long way in explaining the high rate of usage of French by teachers and the considerable usage of Kiswahili by teachers. It is also important to note here that the majority of the teachers who mentioned that they talked to pupils/students in Kiswahili did so because they taught in lower primary classes. Moreover, the use of Kiswahili by teachers was also notably high during informal interactions between teachers and pupils or students, particularly among pupils in primary schools. This changed considerably in the secondary schools where the use of French was dominant in interactions both in and outside the classroom. Teachers stated that secondary students are punished when they speak Kiswahili since it does not help them in the world of intellectuals. Students are prepared to go into the world of intellectuals. Here, intellectualism is connected to the use of the French language, which is the official language in the DRC. The competence of students to speak French makes them valuable in society as well as marketable in the employment area. Proficiency in either Kiswahili or the Tabwa language is not a determining requirement for obtaining employment. To obtain employment, one must demonstrate proficiency in the official language, which is French, or in some cases Kiswahili; proficiency in the Tabwa language is not required.

A study conducted by Asante *et al.* (2022) on saving the Ga-Dangme from extinction in Ghana. The study exposed that inconsistent language-in-education policy is a factor leading to the gradual extinction of the Ga-Dangme language. Some years back, children entering school were for the first three years instructed in their native language, with English as a subject; however, this condition has changed. The Government of Ghana has decided to use English as the medium of instruction, along with the child's L1, right from Primary One; while from primary four, English becomes the only medium of instruction. It is said that this new language policy of Ghana aims to alienate the Ghanaian child from its cultural heritage, which is

detrimental to indigenous culture and its language. The current situation in Ghana may be related to forced assimilation.

5.1.5 Language Use in Communication with Government Officials

The researcher set out to establish the language use pattern by the Tabwa people to government officials in the work domain. The government officials who were considered here included the Chief, the Assistant, and the District Officer. The motivation was to establish the language(s) that the Tabwa people use with the government officials in their offices, which was an official domain.

It has been noticed that 40% of the youth use the Kiswahili language to talk to the government officials in the office. French is used by 60% while the Tabwa language is not used at all to talk to government officials in the office domain, and so registered a 0% score. However, these figures change considerably among children, who appear to have little or no interaction with government officials. Among the adults, the use of the Tabwa language would again register 0% of usage. Kiswahili is used by 70% of the adult respondents, while French is used by 30% of the adults' respondents. Among the adults, Kiswahili register a remarkable increase in preference as respondents indicated that they use it in communicating with government officials. The figures presented above indicate an increase in environmental/ situational awareness and the responding choice of languages with the increase in the age of respondents. While a majority of the youth use the French language to communicate with the officials in the office setting, fewer adults use Kiswahili in such circumstances. Of notable concern is the absolute lack of preference in the use of the Tabwa language in a situation where Kiswahili featured fairly. This implies the dominance of the Kiswahili language in the communication of the Tabwa people. The foregoing scenario was also established in the response given to the enquiry of language use patterns by the government officials as they spoke to the people who visited their offices. The majority of the respondents indicated that the government officers mainly spoke to them in either Kiswahili or French. The officials indicated that they preferred the use of French, particularly when communicating with the youth. In instances where they realised that the respondent could not communicate in French, they resorted to the use of Kiswahili. The Tabwa language, however, has no role in such interactions.

5.2 Effective Intergenerational Transmission of the Tabwa Language

The most widely used factor in examining the strength or viability of a language is whether or not it is being passed on to the younger generation; a continuous transmission within three generations: grandparents, parents and children. A language with a strong intergenerational transmission guarantees its vitality, hence its survival, because such a language is used for communication by and to all members and all generations of the linguistic community and does not show any sign of linguistic threat from any other language.

5.2.1 Intergeneration Language Transmission among the Tabwa Speech Community

For good reasons, this factor is broadly recognized to be the most vital to assess language endangerment. Apparently, the most consistent indicator of potential language replacement is

found in the language behaviour of young people. Fishman's grade intergenerational disruption scale is based on the key role of intergenerational transmission in the maintenance of a language. Fishman (1991) argues that the existence of a language truly depends on its intergenerational transfer. This is applicable to all languages in the world. If children do not learn a language from their parentages, there is a slight possibility that they in turn will be able to pass the language on to their kids. The GIDS not only takes into account that intergenerational transmission is an individual choice made by parents, but also that societal and institutional choices are crucial in influencing the parental choices concerning their language behaviour in regard to their children. These societal factors create social spaces in which languages are used. They are what Fishman (1991) and other linguists (eg. Batibo, 2005; Brenzinger, 2007; Tsunoda, 2006) have identified as domains of use, each constituting a collection of participants, location, and topic that is closely associated with a particular language. Such language choices gradually become sedimented over time as social norms, such that the use of a particular language within a specific participant–location–topic context comes to be expected. If these norms of use begin to decline, language shift will start as the language drops domains in which it is found to be beneficial and in which its use is expected.

The responses obtained from the respondents demonstrate that there is less transfer of the Tabwa language from the older to the younger generation of the Tabwa people, a situation that could hasten the death of the language if no remedy is applied. Below, we find the reactions of the respondents during the interview and the focus group discussions when the researchers asked them about the intergenerational language transmission.

Researcher: *“Do you think Tabwa will die or survive in the future?”*

Respondent: *“I don't know, because very few children speak it. Another problem is that even we adults cannot speak the language properly. You can see in this village, do you hear people speaking it? For the children, the situation is quite different because very few can speak the language; they are not even fluent in the Tabwa language, everyone here speaks Kiswahili.”* (FGDs: 10/04/2025)

From the foregoing excerpt, it can be noted that the Tabwa children do not learn the language. The respondents indicated that there was less intergenerational transfer of the language. A majority of the members of the older generations could not speak it properly, thus hindering the intergenerational transfer. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that the school system, which could serve as an alternative avenue through which children might learn the language, does not recognize Tabwa as the language of the catchment area, largely because the Tabwa people predominantly use Kiswahili.

As Thomason (2015) and Crystal (2014) posit, the endangerment which leads to the death and ultimate extinction of a language is caused by a number of factors, including the lack of intergenerational transfer of the language from the older to the younger generations. In the case of the Tabwa people, the observed lack of usage of the Tabwa language by the parents to their children ensures a breakdown in the transfer of the language from the older to the younger generations. Now, given that in some Tabwa households there is an inclination to use Kiswahili instead of Tabwa, it is useful to determine the features of Kiswahili that induce the Tabwa people

to abandon their own language and embrace the use of Kiswahili. The fact that the Tabwa are not intensively using their language at home, this may result in the death of the language in the near future if no effort to maintain it is not deployed (Batibo, 2005; Thomason, 2001; Tsunoda, 2005).

5.2.2 Motivation to Learn Tabwa Language

While it could be generally easy for the Tabwa people to mention that their language is important to them. This may not be the case with their motivation to learn the language. However, the general expectation that would be held of people who consider their language important is that they would be ready to learn it. To establish this, a question was formulated in the administered questionnaires to enable the researchers to determine whether the Tabwa people are motivated and willing to learn the Tabwa language or not. The respondents from all three age categories were expected to respond to this question.

The motivation to learn the Tabwa language is another factor that varies with age. The figures presented indicate that the children are the least motivated and least willing to learn the language. Asked whether they could learn the Tabwa language, none of the children respondents indicated that they strongly agree, while only 15% indicated that they agree. This implies that only 15% of the Tabwa children are willing to learn the language. Some 30% of the respondents disagreed, while the remaining 55% strongly disagreed. Among the youth, only 10% of the respondents strongly agreed that they can learn the language. Another 10% of respondents also agree that they can learn it. These figures are, however, still quite marginal considering the 35% of the respondents who indicated that they disagree and another 45% who indicated that they strongly disagree that they would learn the Tabwa language. Among the adults, 25% of the respondents strongly agreed that they could learn the language, while another 35% also agreed that they could learn it. However, 35% of adult respondents indicated that they disagreed, while some 5% strongly disagreed with this.

These figures demonstrate the level of threat to which the Tabwa language is exposed. As widely noted in the literature, the future survival of a language depends not only on its current use within the community but also on the extent of intergenerational transmission among its speakers (Crystal, 2014; Fishman, 1991; Thomason, 2015; UNESCO, 2003). The speech behaviour among the Tabwa people exposes the language to the risk of death due to the lack of intergenerational transfer of the language. With the demonstrated case of the younger generations giving up on their learning and usage, the future existence of the Tabwa language is strongly put in doubt. If this situation and prevailing attitude persist, the Tabwa language may ultimately face extinction.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that the Tabwa language is threatened and faces the risk of extinction in the near future. In relation to the classification proposed by Wurm (2001, p. 391), also cited in Moseley (2007, p. xi) and Crystal (2014, p. 27), the Tabwa language can be classified under Stage 1: Potentially Endangered. This stage generally characterises languages that suffer

from low prestige and socio-economic marginalisation and are subjected to strong pressure from dominant languages. In the case of Tabwa, the influence of Kiswahili and French has increasingly reduced the number of children acquiring the language as their first language, thereby threatening its long-term vitality. There is an observed lack of effective intergenerational transfer of the language from the older to the younger generations. Among all the respondents, it was clearly observed that the use of the language, even within limited contexts, was predominantly reported by the older generation, particularly those in the adult age category (26–55 years). Even within this category, only those respondents who were advanced in age gave favourable responses about the Tabwa language. Across all the language domains investigated, children were found to use Kiswahili, except within the school domain, where, in accordance with school policy, the use of French and Kiswahili was both expected and required. Among the Tabwa adults, there was an observed nearly total shift to the use of Kiswahili. All adults indicated that they were more comfortable using the Kiswahili language in all the domains of language use that were investigated.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author of this research declares no conflicts of interest as far as this research is concerned.

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