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**Language Endangerment and Maintenance: Ilwana
Language in Tana River County, Kenya**



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Language Endangerment and Maintenance: Ilwana Language in Tana River County, Kenya

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Abstract

Whether a minority language can resist language shift despite the prolonged cultural contact with a dominant language remains a significant topic of debate among linguistic scholars globally. This study investigates the vitality of Kiwilwana in Tana River County, Kenya, where the language has coexisted with dominant languages such as the Pokomo, Kiswahili, and Orma for many years. Despite experiencing intense cultural contact with dominant language speakers, Kiwilwana has maintained its vitality in many domains of language use. This paper examines the language use patterns among Ilwana speakers in a multilingual and multiethnic setting, focusing on the domains of language use as critical for intergenerational transmission. Data was collected using a mixed-methods research design, from 73 Ilwana speakers across different age groups. The findings reveal that Kiwilwana is maintained primarily in the home domain, with 77% of respondents using it as their primary language. However, the use of other languages in different domains indicates a potential threat to its long-term survival. The study concludes that while Kiwilwana exhibits resistance to language shift, its maintenance is endangered and requires targeted efforts to ensure its continued vitality.

Key Words: *Ilwana, Kiwilwana, Language Vitality, Language Maintenance, Ethnolinguistic Vitality, Language Endangerment*

Introduction

Language endangerment is a pressing global issue in linguistic studies. According to UNESCO (2003), a language is considered endangered if its speakers cease to use it across its most communication domains, and it fails in intergenerational transmission. The rationale behind language endangerment is complex and entails an interplay between dominant and minority languages, and also the attitudes of speakers toward their native language. This study explores the case of the Kiwilwana, a minority language that has been in coexistence with dominant languages in Tana River County such as Pokomo, Orma, and Kiswahili. Despite the intense pressures from these dominant languages, Kiwilwana has managed to maintain its vitality in key domains of language use such as the home. Some scholars argue that a strong sense of identity and positive attitudes toward a minority language can help resist language shift (Aswegen & Barnes, 2012: 29; Smieja, 2003: 9; Dweik & Qawar, 2015: 147). Other linguistic scholars attribute language shift to prolonged cultural contact with dominant speech communities, regardless of the minority speaker's efforts to maintain its vitality (Fabunmi & Salawu, 2005: 29; Ngure, 2020: 7-9; Coluzzi, 2017: 56).

A study carried out by Aswegen and Barnes (2012: 29) found that the Maale language in Ethiopia has maintained its vitality despite prolonged contact with Amharic, a dominant language. The Maale speakers' strong sense of identity and loyalty to their language contributes to their resilience. Similarly, Batibo (2005: 12) highlights cases where the vitality of minority languages declines due to the dominance of national languages. In Botswana, the Khoesan language has seen a decline in use across various domains, with speakers switching to Setswana, the national language. In Kenya, the vitality of the Rendille language has faced a significant decline due to the influence of Samburu (Ngure, 2012: 7-9). The Rendille speech community has increasingly adopted Samburu in various domains of language use, leading to a reduction in intergenerational transmission. On the contrary, Kiwilwana has shown resilience in certain domains, particularly the home domain, where it is used for daily communication and in cultural settings.

The home domain therefore plays a key role in language maintenance. Fishman (1991) asserts that the home domain provides a secure site for a language's intergenerational transmission. Frequent language use in the home setting increases the chances of intergenerational transmission. However, the use of other languages in the home domain can endanger the ancestral language, especially in multilingual settings, where speakers may adopt a dominant language for social or economic reasons. This study seeks to contribute to this debate by examining the case of Kiwilwana, a language that has managed to resist shift despite significant cultural and linguistic pressures.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study is anchored on Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (Giles et al., 1977: 42). The theory posits that the vitality of a language is influenced by a language speaker's perspectives of its status in the speech community and its utility. Landweer (2000: 11) identifies eight indicators of ethnolinguistic

vitality, with the domain in which a language is used, being relevant to this research. Domains of language use entail social-cultural constructs that depict the contexts in which language is used, such as home, education, business, and government services (Fishman, 1972: 35-6). The more domains a language is used, the greater its chances of maintenance.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from speakers of Ilwana in Tana River County, Kenya. It focused on two age groups: children aged 12 and under, and adults aged between 35 and 65 years. The inclusion of children was based on the premise that their patterns of language use provide insights into intergenerational transmission. Data were gathered from 73 respondents in the Bura and Madogo administrative wards, which have a high concentration of Ilwana speakers and significant linguistic diversity. The data collection process investigated language use across various domains, including home, culture, social settings, religion, education, business, government services, and the workplace. Respondents were asked to identify the language they used most frequently in each of these domains. Additionally, the study assessed the availability of printed materials in Kiwilwana and its potential as a medium of instruction.

Findings and Discussion

Is the Ilwana language undergoing maintenance or shift? To answer this question, the respondents were asked to indicate the language they used in the various domains most frequently. For a language speaker to interact well, one has to choose which particular language to use and in what domain (Landweer, 1991: 12). Some of the domains include home, cultural, social, worship/religion, education, business/trade, government services, and workplace¹. Specific focus is given to the language of use in the home domain because it is the domain where most of the cultural socialization and intergenerational transmission of speakers' ancestral language occurs.

Language Maintenance in the Home Domain

In the home domain, the respondents were asked to indicate the language they used most frequently to talk to family members and visitors (Pokomo and Orma). Responses to the question are indicated in Tables 1 and 2 below:

¹A domain is a social-cultural construct drawn from the themes of communication, the correlation between locales of communication and communicators following the spheres of the speech community.

Table 1: Language Use in the Home Domain by Young Speakers

Domain	Kiwilwana	Kiswahili	English	Pokomo	Orma	Somali
Younger Speakers	100%	100%	100%	33.3	2.1%	12.5

Table 2: Language Use at Home by Older Speakers

Domain	Kiwilwana	Kiswahili	Kiswahili and Kiwilwana
Older Speakers	77%	6%	17%

The home domain emerged as the key domain to enhance the maintenance of Kiwilwana. Among younger speakers, 100% reported using Kiwilwana at home, while 77% of older speakers also reported using it as their primary language. This suggests that Kiwilwana remains the most frequently used language in the home domain and is considered to be the dominant language. According to Fisherman (1968: 19), a dominant language has a richer emotional structure and is frequently used in the home domain, hence making it dominant. However, the use and influence of other languages, such as Kiswahili and English, observed particularly among younger speakers threatens the vitality of Kiwilwana. The data in Tables 1 and 2 reveals a rich linguistic repertoire among Ilwana speakers, with Kiwilwana recording a high incidence of use in the home domain. However, the use of Kiswahili and English in certain contexts indicates a potential threat to the vitality of Kiwilwana.

Language Maintenance in Other Domains

Language use in the home domain remains the strongest indicator of language maintenance for Kiwilwana. Whereas the language is maintained in the home domain, the use of the language in other domains such as education, government institutions, and business reveals inconsistencies. In the other domains, Ilwana speakers often switch to Kiswahili or English, to enable them to effectively communicate with other language speakers. Besides, the lack of sufficient institutional support for Kiwilwana in these domains necessitates the use of English and Kiswahili as a means of communication. The study assessed the use of Kiwilwana as the language of choice in the cultural, religious, educational, business, government institutions, and workplace domains. The findings reveal that Kiwilwana's vitality in these domains is diminishing. The speakers of the Ilwana language are more likely to switch to other dominant languages such as Pokomo, Orma, English, or Kiswahili in the domains.

Cultural Domain

In the cultural domain, the respondents were tasked to indicate the language that they use most during cultural activities such as marriage ceremonies, circumcision, child naming, and funeral ceremonies. The results are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Language Use in the Cultural Domain among Older Speakers

Domain	Kiwilwana	Kiwilwana and Kiswahili	Pokomo and Kiwilwana	Arabic
Cultural	29%	59%	6%	6%

In the cultural and social domains, the findings reveal that Kiwilwana is still the language of choice. However, Kiwilwana's prevalence is diminishing, especially among younger speakers. The diminishing prevalence of the Ilwana language is evidenced in cultural events and other traditional ceremonies where Kiswahili or a mix of Kiwilwana and Kiswahili is used. The switch from Kiwilwana to other languages can be attributed to the need to enhance understanding and broader participation from other members of the community who do not speak Kiwilwana, especially during funerals and weddings.

The data show that while Kiwilwana is still present in the cultural contexts, Kiswahili dominates, particularly in urban areas where a majority of the inhabitants are young speakers. The higher incidences of the use of Kiswahili in urban areas as the language of choice is concerning because the cultural domain is a key factor in determining the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge and practices. According to Giles et al. (1977: 27), a language with cultural support in its speech community is considered maintained whereas one that has reduced or no support in a cultural set-up is endangered. A reduction in the use of the Ilwana language in the cultural domain implies that the language is likely to lose its cultural identity among its younger generations.

Religious Domain

Respondents were asked to indicate the preferred language of use during religious activities such as worship, offerings, listening to religious music, and reading the Bible among others. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Language Use in the Religious Domain Among Younger Speakers

Domain	Kiwilwana	Kiswahili	English	Pokomo and Kiwilwana	Arabic
Religious	6%	21%	2%	4%	66.7%

In the religious domain, the Ilwana language is used during traditional ceremonies and religious practices. The study however notes that in formal religious settings, such as mosques and churches, the common languages of choice include Kiswahili and Arabic. The use of Kiswahili and Arabic in the religious domains is necessitated by the need to cater to the needs of a diverse population in urban settings (Andriyanti, 2019: 24). Whereas the use of Kiswahili and Arabic in the religious is justified by the need to reach a wider audience, it also contributes to the decline in the vitality of Kiwilwana. The data in the table indicate that Kiwilwana is used in only 6% of religious contexts,

with Arabic and Kiswahili dominating at 66.7% and 21% respectively. The switch from Kiwilwana to Arabic or Kiswahili languages is important because religion plays a fundamental role in enhancing identity formation and cohesion among diverse language speakers. However, the continued use of these two languages in religious settings may reduce the vitality of Kiwilwana.

Business Domain

The respondents were required to indicate the preferred language of use when engaging in business activities. The results were tabulated, as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Business Domain

Domain	Kiwilwana	Kiswahili	Pokomo Kiwilwana	& Kiwilwana Somali	& Pokomo
Business	35%	47%	6%	6%	6%

In the business domain, Kiswahili is the preferred language, as it is considered more practical for communication in urban centers that are more multilingual and multiethnic society. The use of Kiwilwana in these domains is limited to informal interactions among Ilwana speakers, but even in these cases, Kiswahili is often the language of choice. The data show that Kiwilwana is used in 35% of business/trade interactions. The dominance of Kiswahili language and the exclusion of Kiwilwana in formal economic and administrative contexts further marginalize the language and reduce its functional utility in the daily life of the Wailwana.

Workplace Domain

The respondents were asked to indicate the most dominantly used language when in contact with colleagues, clients, and other stakeholders. The results are presented in Table 6 below:

Table 6: Language Use in the Workplace Domain

Domain	Kiwilwana	Kiswahili	Pokomo and Kiwilwana	English
Language used to socialize with colleagues	53%	35%	6%	6%
Language used to socialize with clients	35%	47%	6%	12%

In the workplace, Kiwilwana is not the preferred language of use, except in informal settings among Ilwana colleagues. In formal work environments, Kiswahili is the dominant language,

reflecting the broader trend of a language switch in professional settings. This switch is driven by the need for effective communication in diverse workplaces, where employees may come from different linguistic backgrounds. The data reveals that Kiwilwana is used in 35% of workplaces when interacting with clients. Kiswahili is most frequently used at 47% while English is used at 12%. This trend highlights the challenges faced by minority languages in maintaining relevance in professional and economic spheres.

Summary of Findings in Other Domains

Across the different domains of language use, Kiwilwana maintains a consistent pattern: whereas Kiwilwana is maintained in the home domain, its use in other domains is limited and declining. Due to the higher incidences of the use of Kiswahili as a language of choice in the cultural, social, religious, educational, business, and workplace domains, one would have expected it to pose a significant threat to the vitality of Kiwilwana. The lack of institutional support for the Ilwana language in these domains further exacerbates the situation, because speakers are compelled to switch to more dominant languages for practical and economic reasons.

Language Maintenance Across domains

To establish the rate at which the speakers switch from Kiwilwana to other languages, a chart analysis using a trend line provides information on the interpretation of language maintenance in the five domains. A trend equation is used to establish the rate of language maintenance in the contact situation as shown in Figure 1.

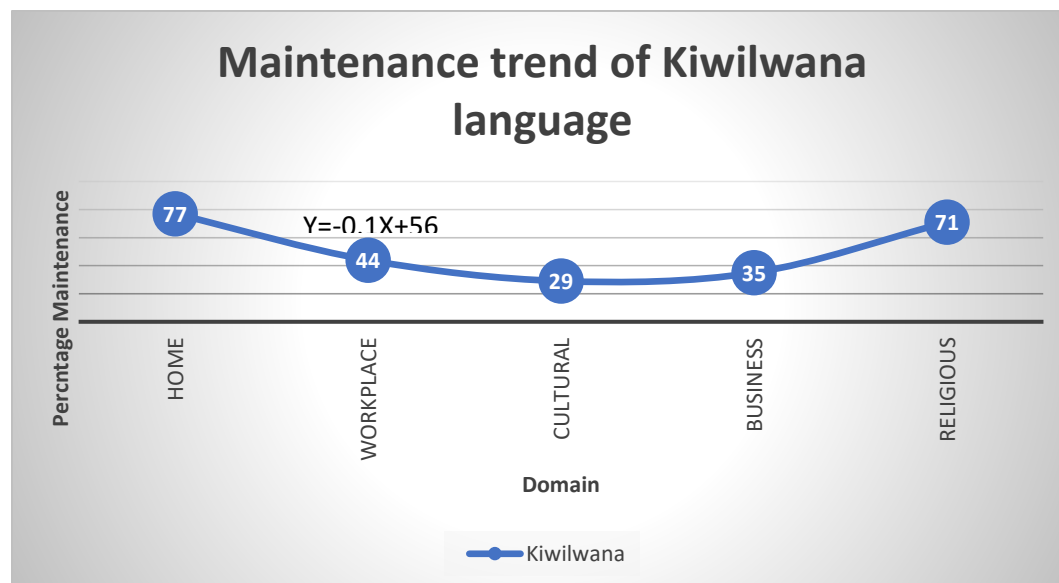


Fig 1: Maintenance trend of the Kiwilwana language across the five domains

In Figure 1, the data points indicate that the Kiwilwana is maintained in the home domain. However, the Wailwana are likely to switch to other languages such as Kiswahili, Pokomo,

Somali, or English in other domains. To assess the maintenance situation of the language in the home domain, the rate at which the language is losing or gaining speakers in each domain is determined using the trend line equation $Y = mX + C$, which is the equation for a straight line (m -gradient of the line, C -point where the graph comes into contact with the y -axis). The trend line equation $Y = -0.1X + 56$ is used to ascertain the maintenance of the Kiwilwana language.

From the trend line equation, the Y -intercept is 56. The y -intercept is an indication of the percentage rate at which the Kiwilwana language is maintained among the respondents in the speech community. The Y -intercept's value confirms that the Kiwilwana language is maintained dominantly in the home domain by both older and younger speakers in the speech community. The gradient of the trend line shows the trend in the maintenance of the Kiwilwana language among the speakers in the speech community. The trend line shows a negative gradient of -0.1 , indicating a reducing trend in the percentage of maintenance of Kiwilwana in other domains.

The negative gradient observed in the trend analysis (Figure 1) underscores the gradual decline of Kiwilwana across domains. The language is losing ground in areas where it was once strong, such as cultural and social interactions, while its presence in formal domains like education and government services is almost negligible. This trend suggests that without targeted interventions to promote Kiwilwana in these domains, the language is at risk of further erosion and eventual endangerment.

Implications for Language Maintenance

The findings have important implications for language maintenance efforts. While the home domain remains a stronghold for Kiwilwana, the Ilwana language, its limited use in other domains highlights the need for broader institutional support. Efforts to promote Kiwilwana in education, religious institutions, and cultural activities could help reinforce its position and ensure its transmission to future generations. Additionally, the development of written materials and digital resources in Kiwilwana could enhance its visibility and utility in formal and informal contexts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that Kiwilwana is maintained primarily in the home domain, where it is used by 77% of respondents. However, the use of other languages in different domains suggests that the language is under threat, particularly in urban areas. The negative gradient in language maintenance across domains highlights the need for targeted efforts to support Kiwilwana, particularly in education and other institutional settings. While the Ilwana community exhibits a strong sense of ethnolinguistic identity, the pressures of multilingualism and the dominance of Kiswahili reveals significant challenges to the long-term survival of Kiwilwana.

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