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Table of contents

ChiHwesa Diminutives: Morphology, Semantics, and a Radial Category Analysis 4

¹Chirimaunga Tendai and ²Ngomacheza Loice

Lexical Category Vulnerability in L1 Attrition: Evidence from Heritage Vocabulary among Kara Young Adults in Tanzania 20

Mosi Masatu Mlibwa 20

Evaluating Stakeholders' Efforts in Supporting English Language Teaching and Learning in Day Secondary Schools: A Case of Bunda District, Tanzania 36

Baraka Kasinge Mwikwabe

Code-Mixing in Tanzanian Telecommunication Advertisements: A Matrix Language Frame Analysis of Kiswahili, *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, and English 50

¹Felix Kwame Sosoo, ²Josephine Dzahene-Quarshie and ³Hadija Jilala 50

Euphemism Preferences among Swahili-speaking Netizens in Death-related Communication 69

Lazaro Charles

ChiHwesa Diminutives: Morphology, Semantics, and a Radial Category Analysis

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Abstract

Diminutive systems in Bantu languages have undergone diverse morphological and semantic developments, resulting in considerable cross-linguistic variations. However, the extent to which these developments are reflected in ChiHwesa remains unknown. This study investigated the morphology and semantics of diminutives in ChiHwesa, an under-described Bantu language spoken in Zimbabwe. Particular attention was paid to their formation within the noun class system and the meanings associated with diminutive constructions. Guided by Jurafsky's (1996) Radial Category Theory, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, virtual ethnography, and corpus analysis. The findings show that ChiHwesa marks diminutivity through the prefixes /ka-/ (class 12) and /tu-/ (class 13), and employs the morphological processes of substitution and pre-prefixation, while class 13 exhibits allomorphic variation in certain contexts. Unlike some neighbouring Bantu languages that use suffixal diminutive strategies, ChiHwesa relies exclusively on noun class reassignment for diminutive formation. The findings further reveal that ChiHwesa diminutives form a radial semantic network in which the core meaning 'child' extends through metaphor and inference to related meanings such as 'young', 'small', 'affectionate', and 'pejorative', indicating the cognitive interconnectedness of diminutive meanings. The study contributes to Bantu evaluative morphology by demonstrating how an under-described language preserves a productive noun class-based diminutive system while developing language-specific semantic extensions.

Keywords: ChiHwesa; Diminutives; Noun class reassignment; Evaluative morphology; Semantic extension; Connotative meanings

1 Introduction

Cross-linguistically, diminutives are broadly defined as linguistic elements that contribute a semantic value related to size (Stoll, 2024). However, research has consistently shown that their functions extend far beyond merely expressing physical smallness. Jurafsky (1996), for instance, establishes that diminutives may also encode meanings such as 'young', 'insignificant', 'incomplete', and 'approximate', while simultaneously conveying pragmatic meanings including affection, admiration, intimacy, disdain, and contempt. As noted by Gibson, Guérois & Marten (2017), diminutives in Bantu languages are commonly expressed through noun-class morphology,

in which nouns are reassigned from their original classes to dedicated evaluative classes to achieve particular semantic and pragmatic effects. The rich noun-class system of Bantu languages has made them an important testing ground for studies of evaluative morphology and semantic extension. Consequently, diminutives have been examined in several Bantu languages, revealing both shared tendencies and language-specific patterns in their morphological formation and semantic interpretation (Mudzingwa, 2010; Van der Spuy & Mjiyako, 2015; Akumbu & Kiessling, 2020; Kandolo, 2021; Ndomba, 2022). The studies have indeed enhanced our understanding of the relationship between noun-class morphology and evaluative meaning, while also highlighting the diversity of diminutive systems across the Bantu language family.

Despite the extensive literature on diminutives in Bantu languages, it remains unclear whether the morphological and semantic patterns reported elsewhere adequately account for diminutive formation in ChiHwesa, a minority Bantu language spoken in eastern Zimbabwe. Although ChiHwesa exhibits the noun-class morphology that characterises many Bantu languages (Chirimaunga, 2026), the considerable variation reported in diminutive formation and interpretation across Bantu languages made it impossible to assume that existing findings would apply directly to ChiHwesa. An empirical investigation was therefore necessary to determine whether the language follows broader Bantu patterns or exhibits language-specific morphological and semantic characteristics. This gap is significant because Bantu languages differ considerably in the ways they express diminutivity, with some relying primarily on noun class reassignment and others employing additional evaluative strategies. Consequently, it cannot be assumed that the morphological and semantic patterns reported for other Bantu languages apply directly to ChiHwesa. Against this background, the present study investigated the morphology and semantics of diminutives in ChiHwesa. Specifically, it sought to identify the diminutive morphemes employed in the language, examine the morphological mechanisms through which they interact with the noun-class system, and analyse the semantic meanings associated with diminutive constructions. The study is guided by Jurafsky's (1996) Radial Category Theory, which explains diminutive meanings as interconnected semantic extensions organised around a central prototype. The framework provides a useful basis for analysing the relationship between morphological form and semantic interpretation in ChiHwesa diminutives. It also enables comparisons between language-specific patterns and other tendencies reported in the literature on evaluative morphology. Investigating diminutives in ChiHwesa contributes not only to the documentation of an under-described language but also to discussions on the nature and diversity of diminutive systems in Bantu languages.

2 Literature review

Existing research demonstrates that diminutives constitute an important component of Bantu evaluative morphology and exhibit considerable variation in their formal realisation across languages. In many Bantu languages, diminutives are formed through noun class reassignment involving classes 12 and 13, typically marked by the affixes /ka-/ and /tu-/ (Akumbu & Kiessling, 2020). Other Bantu languages employ additional morphological processes such as affixation, reduplication, and compounding to express diminutive meanings (Gibson, Guérois & Marten, 2017; Kandolo, 2021). Studies of individual languages, including Swahili (Kandolo, 2021; Ndomba, 2022), Zulu (Van der Spuy & Mjiyako, 2015), and Shona (Mudzingwa, 2010), reveal both shared and language-specific patterns in the formation of diminutives. While some languages rely predominantly on noun-class reassignment, others have developed supplementary strategies that coexist with or partially replace the inherited noun-class system. Comparative studies further indicate that the productivity of diminutive marking and its interaction with noun-class systems vary

considerably across the Bantu family (Mtenje-Mkochi, 2018). These findings highlight the diversity of morphological strategies by which diminutivity is encoded and emphasise the importance of examining individual languages to understand both common patterns and language-specific innovations in Bantu evaluative morphology.

Semantically, diminutives in Bantu languages extend well beyond the expression of physical smallness. Akumbu and Kiessling (2020) observe that diminutives commonly encode meanings related to youthfulness, dependency, and reduced size, while Amfo and Appah (2019) note that they may also express pejorative, individuating, and other evaluative meanings. Cross-linguistic studies similarly demonstrate that diminutives frequently convey speaker attitudes such as affection, admiration, intimacy, disdain, and contempt (Stoll, 2024). In many contexts, the diminutive functions not merely as a marker of objective size but also as a linguistic resource through which speakers express emotional attachment, social distance, approval, or disapproval. Jurafsky (1996) argues that these diverse meanings are not arbitrary but are cognitively related through a network of semantic extensions originating from a central prototype. This perspective has significantly influenced research on diminutives by demonstrating that semantic meanings traditionally treated as separate can be understood as interconnected components of an evaluative system. The semantic complexity of diminutives has therefore made them an important area of inquiry within cognitive semantics, pragmatics, and evaluative morphology.

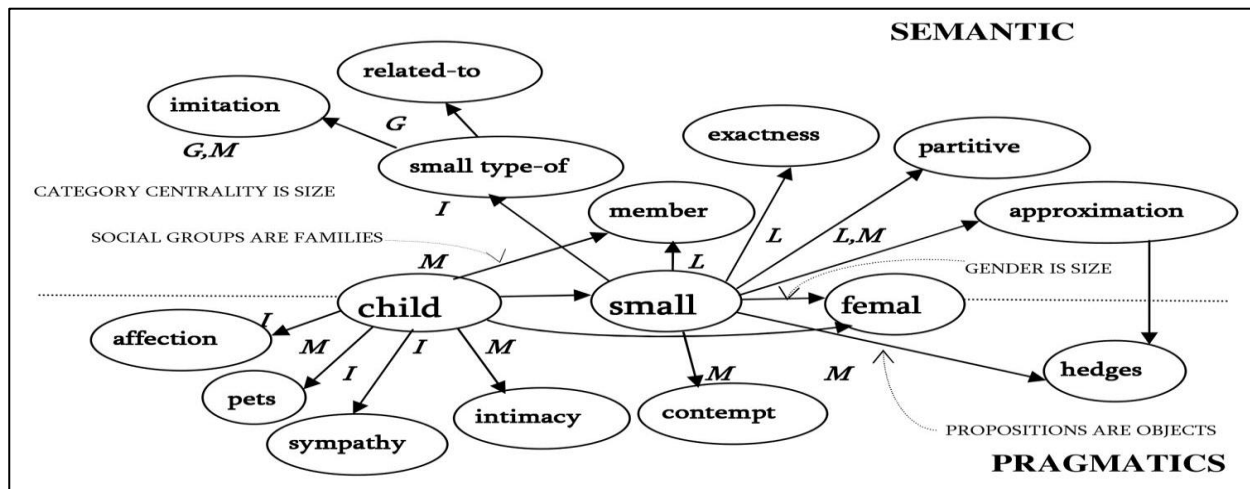
Historical and comparative studies provide further insights into the development of diminutive systems in Bantu languages. For instance, Proto-Bantu employed class 12 /ka-/ for singular diminutives and class 13 /tu-/ for plural diminutives (Ndomba, 2022). The widespread occurrence of these markers across contemporary Bantu languages provides evidence for their historical significance, although their productivity and semantic scope vary significantly from one language to another. Some languages have retained the inherited prefixal system as the principal strategy for diminutive formation, whereas others have developed additional innovations that have altered the original structure of the evaluative system. In Shona, for example, classes 7 and 8 are also used in diminutive formation, while the suffix *-ana* has become an important diminutive marker in many southern Bantu languages (Déchaine et al., 2014; Mtenje-Mkochi, 2018). These developments demonstrate that diminutive systems are dynamic and subject to historical change. Research further shows that diminutives frequently acquire evaluative meanings such as contempt, ridicule, inferiority, or endearment, which illustrates the close relationship between morphological marking and speaker attitude (Tshikota & Mphasha, 2023). Consequently, the study of diminutives offers valuable insights not only into morphological structure but also into the processes of semantic extension and language change within the Bantu family.

Despite these advances, the morphology and semantics of diminutives in ChiHwesa have not been systematically investigated. Consequently, it remains unclear whether the language follows the morphological and semantic patterns reported elsewhere in Bantu, whether it employs additional evaluative strategies, and how diminutive meanings are organised within its noun-class system. This lack of evidence limits our understanding of the extent to which generalisations about Bantu evaluative morphology apply to under-described languages and restricts opportunities to refine cross-linguistic models of diminutive formation and interpretation. The present study addresses this gap by providing a detailed account of the morphology and semantics of diminutives in ChiHwesa. As an under-described Bantu language spoken in eastern Zimbabwe, ChiHwesa (also known as ChiBarwe) provides an important opportunity to broaden current understanding of evaluative morphology and noun-class behaviour. A detailed examination of its diminutive system has the

potential to contribute to ongoing discussions on noun-class reassignment, semantic extension, and the relationship between morphology and evaluation in Bantu languages. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by investigating the morphology and semantics of diminutives in ChiHwesa to determine whether the language follows patterns reported elsewhere in Bantu or exhibits language-specific characteristics.

3 Theoretical approach: The Radial Category

This study was guided by Jurafsky's (1996) Radial Category Theory, a cognitive semantic framework developed to explain the polysemous nature of diminutives across languages. A radial category is represented as a network of nodes and links, where nodes represent semantic senses, and links represent the relationships and processes through which these senses develop. The theory conceptualises diminutive meanings as forming a radial category - a structured semantic network organised around a central prototype from which other related meanings emerge. Rather than treating diminutive meanings as isolated or arbitrary, the theory views meanings as interconnected semantic extensions linked through shared conceptual associations. In Jurafsky's model, the semantic prototype of the diminutive is the notion 'child', which serves as the central node of the category. From this prototype, a range of related meanings may develop through regular cognitive and semantic processes. The theory predicts that meanings such as young, small, affection, pejorative, and other evaluative functions are not independent senses but interconnected extensions of a common conceptual source (child). Figure 1 presents Jurafsky's (1996) proposed universal semantic structure of the diminutive, derived from both synchronic and diachronic evidence.



Source: Appah and Amfo (2011:96)

Figure 1: Jurafsky's proposed universal structure for the semantics of the diminutive

This framework provides a principled explanation for how multiple meanings can coexist within a single morphological category while remaining semantically related. The figure illustrates a radial network in which the prototype 'child' occupies the centre of the category and serves as the source from which other diminutive meanings develop. Meanings such as young and small emerge closest to the prototype, while more evaluative and pragmatic meanings, including affection, sympathy, intimacy, contempt, approximation, and exactness, arise as more distant extensions. The figure demonstrates that diminutive meanings are connected through identifiable semantic pathways rather than through arbitrary associations. The arcs linking the nodes represent the mechanisms responsible

for semantic extension: Metaphor (M), Inference (I), Generalization (G), and Lambda Abstraction (L). Metaphor involves the transfer of meaning from one conceptual domain to another by extending characteristics associated with the prototype 'child', such as youthfulness, dependency, weakness, or smallness, to other referents. Inference, also known as context-induced reinterpretation, occurs when meanings that initially arise from contextual interpretation become conventionalized as part of a form's semantic meaning. Generalisation refers to the broadening or bleaching of meaning whereby specific semantic features are weakened, resulting in wider and less restricted evaluative meanings. Lambda abstraction accounts for the development of higher-order and more abstract meanings from concrete semantic representations, thereby explaining meanings such as approximation, exactness, and other non-literal extensions.

As observed by Appah and Amfo (2011), a major strength of Radial Category Theory lies in its predictive power. The theory proposes that diminutive meanings tend to develop from central meanings towards more peripheral meanings through regular processes of semantic change. Consequently, languages may differ in the specific meanings expressed by their diminutives, but these meanings are expected to originate from the same central prototype and follow related developmental pathways. On the synchronic level, the model explains how diverse diminutive meanings form a coherent semantic category. On the diachronic level, it captures the developmental pathways through which meanings historically expand from the central prototype to more peripheral senses. Perceived this way, the model accounts for the coexistence of seemingly contradictory meanings, such as affection and contempt, by showing how they emerge through different but related processes of semantic extension. In the present study, the framework provides the analytical basis for examining how the meanings associated with ChiHwesa diminutives are organised, related, and extended within the noun-class system. It is therefore particularly appropriate for investigating both the language-specific characteristics of ChiHwesa diminutives and their relationship to broader patterns of evaluative morphology in Bantu languages.

4 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative linguistic approach to facilitate an in-depth examination of the morphology and semantics of diminutive constructions in ChiHwesa. The approach was appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation depends heavily on speaker intuitions, contextualised language use, and the internal organisation of the noun-class system. The study involved 30 ChiHwesa mother-tongue speakers selected to ensure demographic and dialectal representativeness. The sample size was sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no new morphological patterns or semantic extensions emerged beyond this point. Participants were drawn from three age cohorts (18-35 years, 36-65 years, and 66 years and above) to capture possible intergenerational variation in diminutive usage. Data were also collected from speakers of two major ChiHwesa varieties: the variety spoken around Ruwangwe Growth Point, which shows considerable Shona contact influence, and the more conservative variety spoken in Chapatarongo, Kaitano, Fombe, Kazozo, and other communities along the Gairezi River, which borders Mozambique. This distribution ensured adequate coverage of sociolinguistic and dialectal diversity within the ChiHwesa speech community and strengthened the reliability of grammaticality judgments and semantic interpretations. The participants provided the primary linguistic data, including noun stems, diminutive forms, acceptability judgments, and naturally occurring examples of diminutive usage. In addition, three language academics were consulted during the later stages of analysis. Their role was not to generate data but to provide scholarly input that strengthened the interpretation of the findings within established theoretical frameworks, particularly Jurafsky's (1996) Radial Category Theory.

Drawing on insights from comparable studies of Bantu evaluative morphology, such as Gibson et al. (2017) and Ndomba (2022), these specialists helped refine the analysis and ensure that the interpretation of the data remained both theoretically grounded and linguistically robust.

The data were gathered using a combination of techniques that allowed for a rich and reliable dataset. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to elicit noun forms, including their class prefixes and stems, and to test the acceptability and grammatical behaviour of diminutive constructions across a range of noun classes. Focus group discussions supported this process by enabling participants to assess the acceptability of specific diminutive forms, including the use of substitution and pre-prefixation strategies, and to discuss their meanings and usage patterns. Furthermore, a corpus-based examination of the ChiBarwe/ChiHwesa Language Database was conducted. Developed as part of the Cross-Border Languages (CROBOL) Project, the corpus comprises approximately 1.5 million words of digitised and transcribed ChiHwesa texts collected for linguistic description and lexicographic development. The corpus was searched using the corpus query interface developed as part of the CROBOL Project. Preliminary data were obtained through interviews and focus group discussions identified /ka-/ and /tu-/ as the primary markers associated with diminutivity in ChiHwesa. These forms were subsequently used as search terms in the corpus to retrieve naturally occurring examples of diminutive constructions. The resulting concordance lines were analysed for patterns of noun-class reassignment, allomorphic variation, and semantic usage. These corpus findings were subsequently compared with data from interviews, focus group discussions, and observations as a form of triangulation, thereby enabling the validation of recurring morphological and semantic patterns. Before embarking on data collection, the principal researcher had the advantage of being a ChiHwesa speaker. Chirimaunga (2025) notes that there is an added advantage to a linguist who researches a language with which he or she is familiar. When a researcher has prior knowledge of a language's linguistic operations, it becomes easier to recognise and interpret underlying grammatical patterns. However, awareness of potential researcher bias remained an important methodological consideration. To minimise subjectivity, the analysis relied not only on the researcher's intuition but also on data elicited from multiple mother-tongue speakers, whose judgments were compared and cross-checked. In addition, corpus evidence and expert consultation were used to validate the interpretations, ensuring that the findings reflected the grammatical behaviour of ChiHwesa rather than the researcher's individual linguistic intuition.

The semantic and pragmatic data were analysed thematically. Recurring meanings associated with diminutive constructions were identified across the corpus, interviews, and focus group discussions and grouped into broader semantic categories. These categories included meanings related to smallness, youthfulness, affection, pejoration, and evaluation, which were subsequently interpreted within Jurafsky's (1996) Radial Category Theory. The collected data were transcribed and subjected to qualitative linguistic analysis. Noun stems were coded with labels such as CL (noun class), DIM (diminutive), SG (singular), PL (plural), PREF (prefix), and STEM (stem), enabling systematic identification of morphological patterns. Each diminutive construction was first analysed morphologically to establish the strategy of formation, namely substitution or pre-prefixation. The forms were subsequently analysed for their semantic and pragmatic functions using contextual evidence from the corpus, interviews and FGDs data. Particular attention was paid to meanings related to smallness, youthfulness, affection, pejoration, and evaluation, and the semantic relationships among these meanings were analysed within Jurafsky's (1996) Radial Category Theory. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study.

5 Findings

This section presents the findings on the morphology and semantics of diminutives in ChiHwesa. The findings are organised into two broad areas. The first section focuses on the morphological structure of diminutives, specifically the noun classes associated with diminutive formation, the diminutive morphemes employed, and the morphological processes through which diminutive forms are derived. The second part highlights the semantic meaning expressed by diminutive constructions and describes how these meanings are structured within a radial semantic network. The findings are presented using data obtained from elicitation, corpus analysis, and virtual ethnography.

5.1 Morphological strategies

The findings show that diminutive formation in ChiHwesa is closely linked to the noun-class system and is primarily marked by the prefixes /ka-/ (class 12) and /tu-/ (class 13). Analysis of the data revealed two morphological processes by which diminutives are formed: pre-prefixation and substitution. The following sections describe these processes and illustrate their operation across different noun classes.

5.1.1 Pre-prefixation (secondary prefix stacking)

Pre-prefixation is the most common form of diminutive formation in ChiHwesa. In this strategy, the diminutive prefix is stacked onto an already prefixed noun stem, which results in a structure of two prefixes. The diminutive prefix functions as a secondary prefix, a term used in Bantu linguistics to denote an evaluative prefix added to a noun that already carries its primary class prefix (Mudzingwa, 2010). Unlike substitution, where the original class prefix is completely removed, pre-prefixation preserves the primary prefix and adds the secondary (diminutive) prefix before it, creating a layered morphological structure. This strategy often carries a slightly different semantic tone, sometimes emphasising the diminutive meaning more strongly or conveying a degree of affection or contempt.

In ChiHwesa, pre-prefixation is compatible with most noun classes, including classes 1/2, 3/4, 5/6, 7/8, 9/10, 11, 12, 13 and 14, provided the noun has an overt primary prefix. The only classes that do not permit pre-prefixation are class 15 (infinitives), classes 16, 17, 17a and 18 (locatives), and classes 7 and 8 when functioning as augmentatives, as augmentative meanings are incompatible with diminutive stacking. For nouns without an overt class prefix, including those belonging to classes 1a, 5, 9 and 10, pre-prefixation is also available. Although the primary prefix is not realised on the surface, it is represented at an abstract morphological level, allowing the diminutive prefix to attach to the underlying class position. Such nouns, therefore, form diminutives through pre-prefixation as well, not exclusively through substitution. Table 1 presents representative examples of pre-prefixation across selected noun classes in ChiHwesa. The examples illustrate how nouns from different classes take the diminutive prefixes /ka-/ and /tu-/ while retaining their original class prefixes, thereby forming diminutive constructions through a layered prefixal structure.

Table 1: Diminutive formation across noun classes in ChiHwesa

Class pair	Base form	Gloss	Diminutive form	Diminutive gloss	Class shift
1/2 (a)	mu-nhu	person	ka-mu-nhu	small/insignificant person	1 → 12
1/2 (b)	wa-nhu	people	tu-wa-nhu	small/insignificant people	2 → 13
3/4 (a)	mu-ti	tree	ka-mu-ti	tiny tree (emphatic smallness)	3 → 12
3/4 (b)	mi-ti	trees	tu-mi-ti	tiny trees (emphatic smallness)	4 → 13
5/6 (a)	(ri-)dziso	eye	ka-(ri-)-dziso	tiny eye (emphatic smallness)	5 → 12
5/6 (b)	ma-dziso	eyes	tu-ma-dziso	tiny eyes (emphatic smallness)	6 → 13
7/8 (a)	chi-gayo	grinding mill	ka-chi-gayo	small grinding mill	7 → 12
7/8 (b)	zvi-gayo	grinding mills	tu-zvi-gayo	small grinding mills	8 → 13
9/10 (a)	nyoka	snake	ka-nyoka	small snake	9 → 12
9/10 (b)	nyoka	snakes	tu-nyoka	small snakes	10 → 12
14/14 (a)	u-ta	bow	ka-u-ta	small bow	14 → 12
14/14 (b)	u-ta	bows	tu-uta	small bows	14 → 13

In each of these examples, the original class prefix (mu-, wa-, mi-, (ri-), ma-, chi-, zvi-, N-, u-) is retained, and the diminutive prefix /ka-/ or /tu-/ attaches to its left, forming a sequence of two prefixes. This stacking produces a layered structure where the original class identity is preserved. The examples from classes 3/4 and 5/6 illustrate that pre-prefixation can convey emphatic smallness, as seen in *ka-mu-ti* ‘tiny tree’ and *ka-(ri-)-dziso* ‘tiny eye’, where the meaning of smallness is intensified beyond what substitution alone would express. In nouns denoting humans from classes 1/2, the stacked forms *ka-mu-nhu* ‘little person’ and *tu-wa-nhu* ‘little people’ often carry pragmatic connotations such as belittlement or affection, depending on context. Table 1 also demonstrates that pre-prefixation applies productively to nouns with overt prefixes from classes 7/8 (e.g., *ka-chi-gayo* ‘small grinding mill’ from class 7 and *tu-zvi-gayo* ‘small grinding mills’ from class 8), to those with a nasal prefix in class 9/10 (e.g., *ka-nyoka* ‘small snake’ and *tu-nyoka* ‘small snakes’), and to vowel-initial prefixes in class 14 (e.g., *ka-u-ta* ‘small bow’ and *tu-u-ta* ‘small bows’). Pre-prefixation thus allows speakers to layer evaluative meaning while retaining the original class prefix, and its high frequency in ChiHwesa suggests that speakers prefer to preserve original class information when forming diminutives.

5.1.2 Substitution (class reassignment)

The second strategy of diminutive formation in ChiHwesa is substitution. This is when the diminutive prefix replaces the original class prefix. In substitution, the noun undergoes a genuine class reassignment, moving from its original gender to the diminutive gender (class 12 for singular, class 13 for plural). Table 2 below shows examples of substitutions from the data.

Table 2: Noun class reassignment in ChiHwesa diminutive formation

Class pair	Base form	Gloss	Diminutive form	Diminutive gloss	Class Shift
1/2 (a)	mu-phare	boy	ka-phare	small boy	1 → 12
1/2 (b)	wa-phare	boys	tu-phare	small boys	2 → 13
7/8 (a)	chi-gubhu	plastic container	ka-gubhu	small plastic container	7 → 12
7/8 (b)	zvi-gubhu	plastic containers	tu-gubhu	small plastic containers	8 → 13

In each case shown in Table 2, the original class prefix (mu-, wa-, chi-, zvi-) is omitted, and the diminutive prefix /ka-/ (class 12) or /tu-/ (class 13) attaches directly to the noun stem, effecting a genuine class reassignment rather than mere derivational affixation. The stem remains unchanged, which confirms that class information is encoded exclusively in the prefix, a canonical Bantu pattern. This substitution strategy applies uniformly across noun classes. In the class 1 noun *mu-phare* ‘boy’, the original class prefix *mu-* is replaced by the class 12 diminutive prefix *ka-*, yielding *ka-phare* ‘small boy’. Similarly, in the class 2 plural *wa-phare* ‘boys’, the prefix *wa-* is replaced by the class 13 diminutive prefix *tu-*, resulting in *tu-phare* ‘small boys’. The same process is observed in classes 7 and 8, where *chi-gubhu* ‘plastic container’ becomes *ka-gubhu* ‘small plastic container’ through the replacement of *chi-* by *ka-*, while *zvi-gubhu* ‘plastic containers’ becomes *tu-gubhu* ‘small plastic containers’ through the replacement of *zvi-* by *tu-*. These examples validate that substitution operates consistently across noun classes by replacing the original class prefix with the appropriate diminutive prefix and thereby reassigning the noun to classes 12 or 13. These examples show that substitution operates consistently across different noun classes by replacing the original class prefix with the diminutive prefix.

The data further reveal that not all noun classes are equally compatible with diminutive formation. Classes 15 (infinitives), 16, 17, 17a and 18 (locatives) do not permit diminutive prefixation, whether by substitution or pre-prefixation. For instance, the infinitive *ku-ner-a* ‘to beat’ (class 15) cannot become **ka-ku-ner-a*, or **tu-ku-ner-a* with a diminutive meaning. Similarly, the locative *pa-nyumba* ‘at/near the house’ (class 16) does not allow **ka-pa-nyumba* or **tu-pa-nyumba* with a locative diminutive reading. The class 17 locative *ku-tari* ‘far’ cannot become **ka-kutari* or **tu-kutari*, and the class 17a locative *mberi* ‘forward’ cannot become **ka-mberi* or **tu-mberi*. This restriction is semantic: infinitives denote actions or states, and locatives denote spatial relations; neither readily lends itself to the concept of smallness or the pragmatic connotations associated with diminutives. Classes 7 and 8, which in some Bantu languages function as diminutive classes, are in ChiHwesa dedicated to augmentative meanings. The analysis has revealed that the strategy is less frequent than pre-prefixation but remains productive, particularly for nouns that lack an overt primary prefix or for speakers who wish to avoid a layered structure.

5.2 Allomorphic variation

In ChiHwesa, the class 13 plural diminutive prefix exhibits allomorphic variation. While the canonical form is /tu-/, the variant /ti-/ is also attested in the speech of some ChiHwesa speakers. Examples from the corpus include the following.

Table 3: Allomorphic variation of the class 13 diminutive prefix in ChiHwesa

Example	Base Noun	Gloss	Canonical Form /tu-/	Variant Form /ti-/	Diminutive Gloss
(a)	muphare	boy	tu-waphare	ti-waphare	small boys
(b)	mbewa	rodent	tu-mbewa	ti-mbewa	small rodents
(c)	mbuzi	goat	tu-mbuzi	ti-mbuzi	small goats
(d)	motika	car	tu-motika	ti-motika	small cars

Table 3 demonstrates that the Class 13 diminutive prefix in ChiHwesa exhibits free allomorphic variation between /tu-/ and /ti-/, with no evidence of phonological conditioning. The alternation applies uniformly across different phonological environments, including consonant-initial stems (-*phare* ‘boy’, -*mbuzi* ‘goat’, -*motika* ‘car’) and nasal-initial stems (-*mbewa* ‘rodent’), which confirms that the variation is not triggered by segmental context. Instead, the distribution of /tu-/ and /ti-/ reflects dialectal and contact-induced variation, with /ti-/ associated with speakers in contact with neighbouring varieties such as Korekore (Mkanganwi, 2011), ChiBarwe (Mangoya, 2012) and Tsonga/Shangani (Gondo, 2009). The absence of the /-tw-/ allomorph (which is present in other Bantu languages such as Shona) further reinforces the language-specific constraints on diminutive morphology in ChiHwesa. The stability of the singular prefix /ka-/, in contrast, indicates an asymmetry in morphological variation between singular and plural diminutive marking.

5.3 Agreement patterns

A defining feature of noun classes in Bantu languages is concordant agreement. Diminutive nouns in classes 12 and 13 control agreement on modifiers, demonstratives, and verbs. The agreement prefixes replicate the diminutive class prefix, providing further evidence that the diminutive forms constitute genuine noun- class reassignment rather than mere derivational affixation. Examples from the data illustrate this.

- (1) (a) *Ka-mu-nhu ka-thu ka-ri ku-seenz-a.*
 DIM12-person 12-our 12-SM be working
 ‘Our little person is working.’
- (b) *Tu-wa-nhu ta-thu tu-ri ku-seenz-a.*
 DIM13-2-person 13-our 13-SM be working
 ‘Our little people are working.’

In these examples, the head nouns *ka-mu-nhu* ‘little person’ (class 12) and *tu-wa-nhu* ‘little people’ (class 13) control agreement on the possessive pronoun and the subject marker on the verb. The possessive -*thu* ‘our’ takes the class 12 prefix *ka-* in 1(a) and the class 13 prefix *ta-* in 1(b), showing that the agreement morphology matches the diminutive class rather than the original class of the noun stem. Similarly, the subject markers on the verb appear as auxiliary verb *ka-ri* ‘is’ (class 12) and *tu-ri* ‘are’ (class 13), again replicating the diminutive class prefixes. This consistent pattern of agreement confirms that nouns reassigned to classes 12 and 13 function as full members of those classes, controlling agreement across the syntactic domain.

5.4 Semantic and pragmatic meanings

In this section, ‘semantic’ refers to the stable, conventionalised meanings encoded by the diminutive morpheme, such as ‘small’ or ‘young’. ‘Pragmatic’ refers to context-dependent speaker intentions

and attitudes, such as affection or contempt, which arise from inferences in specific discourse situations. The diminutive constructions in ChiHwesa encode a range of meanings that go beyond mere physical smallness. Drawing on Jurafsky's (1996) radial category model, this study identified the following senses, organised around a central prototype.

5.4.1 Core Sense: Child

The sense 'child' constitutes the semantic prototype predicted by Jurafsky's (1996) Radial Category Theory and serves as the starting point for analysing diminutive meanings in ChiHwesa. The ChiHwesa data confirm the presence of this prototype through nouns that directly denote offspring or immature beings. Examples include:

- (2) (a) *ka-mwana*
 DIM12-child
 'small child' (from *mwana* 'child')
- (b) *ka-shere*
 DIM12-kid
 'kid' (young goat)

These examples demonstrate that diminutive marking in ChiHwesa is associated with referents characterised by immaturity or early stages of development. While the existence of the child prototype is not unique to ChiHwesa, its identification in the language provides the semantic foundation from which other diminutive meanings extend. The significance of this finding lies not in establishing the prototype itself, which is predicted by the theory, but in showing how subsequent meanings such as young, small, affectionate, and pejorative develop from it within the ChiHwesa semantic system.

5.4.2 Physical smallness

Consistent with findings reported for other Bantu languages, ChiHwesa diminutives encode physical smallness. The ChiHwesa data show that this meaning is productively expressed across nouns originating from several noun classes, including classes 9/10 and 1/2, suggesting that physical smallness constitutes the default semantic interpretation of diminutive marking in the language. Example 3 illustrates this.

- (3) (a) *ka-nyumba*
 DIM12-house
 'small house'
- (b) *tu-motika*
 DIM13-car
 'small cars'

In (3a), the singular noun *nyumba* 'house' (class 9) is reassigned to class 12 via the prefix /ka-/, denoting a reduced physical size. In (3b), the plural form *motika* 'cars' (class 10) takes the class 13 prefix /tu-/, indicating multiple small cars. Both examples reflect the core semantic extension from 'child' to 'small' and demonstrate that the diminutive operates on both singular and plural nouns without additional pragmatic nuance.

5.4.3 Youth and immaturity

Closely related to smallness is the sense of youth or immaturity. In many languages, diminutives are used not only to indicate reduced size but also to identify referents that have not yet reached full physical, social, or biological maturity. This association arises from the close conceptual relationship between childhood and developmental incompleteness, whereby young beings are often perceived as smaller, dependent, and not fully developed. In ChiHwesa, this meaning is particularly evident in nouns denoting humans and animals, where the diminutive signals that the referent is in an early stage of development rather than merely being reduced in physical size. For instance,

- (4) (a) *ka-phare*
 DIM12-boy
 ‘small boy’ (not necessarily small in stature, but young)
- (b) *tu-mathimbura*
 DIM13-young she goats
 ‘young she-goats’ (not necessarily small in stature, but young)

The ChiHwesa data show that the diminutive may indicate youth or developmental immaturity independently of physical size. In examples such as *ka-phare* ‘young boy’ and *tu-mathimbura* ‘young she-goats’, the primary interpretation concerns age rather than dimensions. This finding supports Jurafsky’s (1996) proposal that the sense ‘young’ emerges directly from the prototype ‘child’. At the same time, the data demonstrate that ChiHwesa speakers distinguish between physical smallness and developmental immaturity, even though the two meanings frequently overlap. The youth interpretation is particularly salient with human and animal referents, suggesting that age-based categorisation constitutes an important semantic extension of the diminutive in the language.

5.4.4 Affectionate meaning

The ChiHwesa data show that diminutive marking is productively used to express emotional attachment even when the referent is neither physically small nor young. In example (5), the diminutive signals the speaker’s positive evaluation of the referent rather than any objective property of size. This finding demonstrates that diminutive morphology in ChiHwesa functions not only as a marker of physical description but also as a resource for expressing interpersonal stance and affective meaning.

- (5) *ka-foni ka-mbuzi*
 DIM12-phone 12-small button phone
 ‘my little phone’ (used affectionately, even though the phone is of normal size)

The affectionate meaning is derived from the association of smallness with the intimacy of parent-child relationships, which then extends to other objects or persons. A key insight of the radial category model is that the same diminutive form can convey opposite meanings depending on context; the affectionate sense arises when the speaker invokes positive associations with smallness, while the pejorative sense (discussed below) draws on negative associations.

5.4.5 Pejorative meaning

Conversely, diminutives can encode contempt, disdain, or belittlement. In this sense, the speaker uses the diminutive not to indicate physical size but to reduce the perceived importance, value, status, or significance of the referent. The pejorative interpretation arises when the notion of smallness is extended metaphorically to imply inferiority, triviality, inadequacy, or lack of worth. As a result, diminutive forms may be employed to express negative attitudes towards people, objects, or situations. Examples from the data include:

- (6) (a) *tu-hembe ta-mubhero*
 DIM13-clothes 13-second-hand
 ‘second-hand clothes’ (dismissive)
- (b) *ka-tukutu ka-nyayi*
 DIM12-basket 12-small
 ‘small woven basket’ (in a context implying insignificance)

The ChiHwesa data show that diminutive marking can be employed to downgrade the social or functional value of a referent. In example (6a), the diminutive contributes to a dismissive evaluation of the clothing, implying that it is of lower quality or lesser status. Similarly, in example (6b), the diminutive conveys insignificance rather than physical size. These examples demonstrate that diminutive morphology in ChiHwesa serves important evaluative functions beyond denoting smallness. The data further indicate that positive and negative evaluations may arise from the same diminutive morphology, with interpretation depending largely on the discourse context and the speaker's intention. The pejorative meaning, therefore, represents an inferential extension from the notion of smallness, whereby what is perceived as small may also be construed as unimportant, inferior, or unworthy of serious consideration.

6 Discussion

The findings place ChiHwesa within the canonical Bantu pattern of using noun classes 12 and 13 to encode diminutives through the prefixes /ka-/ and /tu-/ respectively, a pattern widely attested across Bantu languages (Akumbu & Kiessling, 2020; Ndomba, 2022). Similar class-based diminutive systems have been reported in languages such as Swahili, where diminutives are formed by reassignment to dedicated noun classes, and in several Central Ring Grassfields Bantu languages, as discussed by Akumbu and Kiessling (2020). The ChiHwesa data, therefore, confirm the continued productivity of the inherited Proto-Bantu diminutive system in some contemporary Bantu languages. However, the findings further show that diminutive formation in ChiHwesa is realised through two distinct morphological strategies, namely substitution and pre-prefixation. While substitution reassigns nouns to classes 12 and 13 through replacement of the original class prefix, pre-prefixation retains the original noun class prefix and adds a diminutive prefix as a secondary evaluative marker. The coexistence of these strategies demonstrates that diminutivity in ChiHwesa involves both noun class reassignment and prefix stacking within the noun-class system. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that diminutivity in ChiHwesa is expressed exclusively through prefixation with classes 12 and 13, with no evidence of suffixal diminutive formation, reduplication, or compounding.

The semantic relationships identified in the data reveal that the meanings associated with ChiHwesa diminutives are not isolated semantic values but form an interconnected network organised around the prototype sense ‘child’. The semantic network is constructed through several cognitive

mechanisms proposed by Jurafsky (1996). Through metaphor, the prototype sense ‘child’ extends to ‘young’. Through generalisation, meanings originally associated with human offspring become applicable to a wider range of animate and inanimate referents, including animals such as *tu-mathimbura* ‘young she goats’ and objects such as *ka-nyumba* ‘small house’. Through inference, the notion of smallness gives rise to affectionate and pejorative interpretations, while lambda abstraction accounts for the emergence of individuation as a more abstract semantic category. The sense ‘young’, illustrated by *ka-phare* ‘young boy’ and *tu-mathimbura* ‘young she goats’, emerges as an extension of the child prototype. The sense ‘small’, exemplified by *ka-nyumba* ‘small house’ and *tu-motika* ‘small cars’, represents a further extension within the semantic network. From this notion of smallness arise the evaluative meanings of affection and pejoration. Forms such as *ka-foni ka-mbuzi* ‘my little phone’ express positive emotional attachment, whereas forms such as *tu-hembe ta-mubhero* ‘second-hand clothes’ and *ka-tukutu ka-nyayi* ‘small woven basket’ convey negative evaluation or insignificance. The data therefore support Jurafsky’s (1996) argument that apparently contradictory meanings associated with diminutives are not random but are related through identifiable cognitive pathways. The same diminutive morphology can consequently generate positive or negative evaluations depending on the inferential context in which it is used. The analysis further suggests that the individuation meaning occupies a prominent position within the ChiHwesa semantic network. This meaning is accounted for through lambda abstraction, whereby the diminutive extends beyond the concrete notion of ‘child’ to denote an individuated or bounded entity. While the general architecture of the ChiHwesa semantic network closely corresponds to Jurafsky’s (1996) universal model, the prominence of individuation and the clear separation of affectionate and pejorative meanings via distinct inferential routes constitute language-specific characteristics of the ChiHwesa diminutive system.

The ChiHwesa findings also reveal important differences from neighbouring Bantu languages. In Shona, for example, diminutives are commonly formed through suffixation with *-ana*, often alongside reassignment to classes 7 and 8, marked by the prefixes /*chi-*/ and /*zvi-*/ (Mudzingwa, 2010; Déchaine et al., 2014). Similarly, Van der Spuy and Mjiyako (2015) show that Zulu employs evaluative suffixes in diminutive formation rather than relying exclusively on noun-class reassignment. Kandolo (2021) also notes that some Bantu languages employ reduplication and compounding as supplementary diminutive strategies. In contrast, the ChiHwesa data show no evidence of such strategies. The findings further reveal that classes 7 and 8 in ChiHwesa function primarily as augmentative rather than diminutive classes. This contrasts sharply with Shona, where these classes may encode both augmentative and diminutive meanings depending on context (Mudzingwa, 2010; Déchaine et al., 2014). The ChiHwesa system, therefore, maintains a clearer semantic distinction between augmentative and diminutive categories than that reported for some neighbouring Bantu languages, suggesting a more conservative pattern of evaluative morphology. Overall, the study contributes an important comparative case to Bantu evaluative morphology. The findings demonstrate that ChiHwesa has retained a productive noun class-based diminutive system while simultaneously developing language-specific semantic extensions organised within a radial category structure. The study, therefore, not only supports the wider applicability of Jurafsky’s (1996) Radial Category Theory but also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how diminutive meanings are morphologically encoded and semantically structured in under-described Bantu languages.

7 Conclusion

This study investigated the morphology and semantics of diminutives in ChiHwesa, an under-described Bantu language, with particular attention to their morphological formation and semantic extensions within the noun-class system. The findings established that ChiHwesa forms diminutives primarily through noun-class reassignment into classes 12 and 13, marked by the prefixes /ka-/ and /tu-/, via substitution and pre-prefixation, and also exhibits allomorphic variation in the plural diminutive prefix. The study further established that diminutive nouns fully participate in concordial agreement, thereby confirming their integration into the language's grammatical structure. Semantically, the findings revealed that ChiHwesa diminutives form a radial semantic network organised around the prototype sense 'child', from which meanings such as 'young', 'small', 'affectionate', 'pejorative', and 'individuation' are evoked through cognitive mechanisms including metaphor, inference, generalisation, and lambda abstraction. These findings demonstrate that diminutive meanings in ChiHwesa are systematically interconnected rather than isolated semantic values, thereby supporting cognitive-semantic accounts of evaluative morphology. The study also confirmed the applicability of Jurafsky's (1996) Radial Category Theory to the analysis of diminutive semantics in ChiHwesa, while highlighting language-specific patterns within the framework of Bantu evaluative morphology. Furthermore, the findings contribute to Bantu linguistics by documenting a productive prefixal diminutive system in an under-described language and by illustrating how noun-class morphology functions as a resource for encoding both grammatical and evaluative meaning.

8 Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Lexical Category Vulnerability in L1 Attrition: Evidence from Heritage Vocabulary among Kara Young Adults in Tanzania

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Abstract

Studies investigating the lexical categories likely to attrit mostly focus on EFL contexts. In this regard, little is known about L1 attrition in the L1 context. Hitherto, in the EFL context, there has been a longstanding disagreement about which lexical items are more vulnerable to attrition and the reasons for their latent vulnerability. Consequently, this study identifies lexical categories that are more vulnerable to attrition in a non-EFL context and establishes the theoretical reasons for this vulnerability. It is a mixed research, employing the Cross-Linguistic Influence Hypothesis and the Activation Threshold Hypothesis, integrated into the concept of “Core and Peripheral lexicon”. The study obtained data from 15 Kara young adults aged 18-39 as the target group and 15 older adults aged 40 and above as the control group, purposively selected and recruited through the snowballing technique. Data collection involved proficiency-testing tools such as direct vocabulary elicitation, verbal fluency tests, and picture-naming tasks. Data analysis involved list development, which later formed the Six-Phase Thematic Analysis of information chunks. The study establishes that nouns are more vulnerable to attrition than verbs, primarily because they form the peripheral lexicon (easily affected by borrowing). Meanwhile, Adverbs, adjectives, and minor word classes demonstrated resilience because they constitute the core lexicon. The study establishes, therefore, that lexical attrition in a non-EFL context depends on the degree of interface between a lexical category and the language’s either internal or external system. Moreover, the study recommends further research across diverse contact situations to provide additional insights that will contribute significantly to the debate and yield new theoretically and empirically grounded perspectives on the phenomenon.

Keywords: Heritage Vocabulary, Kara Language, L1 Attrition, Lexical Category Vulnerability, Young Adults, Intergenerational Language Transmission

1 Introduction

The term language attrition refers to the gradual, non-pathological decline in previously acquired linguistic knowledge or skills after prolonged disuse. Attrition can contribute to lost accessibility due to retrieval failure resulting from memory loss of certain long-term disused lexical items (Schmid & Jarvis, 2014) and lexical replacement (also known as lexical shift). It can affect any facet of linguistic knowledge, namely phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, lexicon, or general language proficiency. It differs from language endangerment and language shift in that it takes place (and, of course, is assessed) at the individual or specific social group level, following the influence of a dominant language or infrequent use (De Leeuw, 2009; Cherciov, 2011; Park, 2018). Attrition qualifies as a subtype of language shift and endangerment (see Sands et al., 2007; Killian, 2009; Bibiehome et al., 2019; Okeke & Okeke, 2017) because the only difference between the two is that

language shift and endangerment are intergenerational and often involve the whole community (De Leeuw, 2009; Cherciov, 2011).

A common understanding among scholars has been that attrition affects the lexicon more than other domains of linguistic competence (Alharthi, 2015; Moreno, 2015; Park, 2018). The point of departure, though, is that most of these findings derive from the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or among the migrant speakers of English. This leaves non-migrant contexts, such as among Kara young adults engaging in intensive interactions with Swahili speakers in both formal and informal settings and attributing their heritage vocabularies in situ, unaddressed. In this light, the present study found it interesting to explore the attrition process among Kara language speakers to advance theories and policies on language endangerment and to inform interventions for language vitality and maintenance in the L1 environment.

2 Literature review

Lexical attrition is commonly defined as the loss of lexical-semantic knowledge. Chaouch-Orozco and Martin-Villena (2024) define it as the decline of lexical-semantic abilities due to reduced L1 exposure and/or L2 interference. Likewise, Cohen (1989) considers it the temporary or permanent loss of knowledge about one or more of a word's characteristics, including form, position, function and meaning. Bardovi-Harling and Stringer (2013) consider it a loss of knowledge in the aspect of meaning. According to Zhang (2023, p.75), "lexical attrition includes loss of lexical meaning of vocabulary items; loss of semantic discrimination ability; and loss of vocabulary use and expression ability". Lexical attrition is also associated with loss of vocabulary, loss of semantic distinctions and reduced performance abilities (Sands et al., 2007, p. 55). The indicators of attrition include poor or difficult lexical recall, a lack of certainty in lexical judgements (Sands et al., *ibid.*), and reduced vocabulary size in the context of L1 loss in the L2 environment. Lexical attrition is also characterised by low lexical access and forgetfulness of less commonly used vocabulary (Park, 2018, p. 5). It is associated with cross-linguistic interference, such as borrowing, whose endpoint is forgetfulness of the disused lexical items after replacement. In normal thinking, borrowing enriches the lexicon, but also a pathway to lexical loss, especially when the equivalent lexical items in L2 replace those in L1 (Opitz, 2011; Schmid, 2011; Moreno, 2015; Mlibwa & Sam, 2024).

However, it is contentious whether borrowing always leads to attrition of all lexical categories at equal rates (see Zhu & Xie, 2019, for details on this debate). Some scholars refer to this situation as lexical replacement (Pavlenko, 2004), where L1 items are no longer used frequently, leading to reduced lexical memory. Schmid and Jarvis (2014) refer to it as the loss or lack of lexical accessibility associated with retrieval difficulties. It is argued that the disused lexicon is no longer available in the long-term memory (in the psycho-cognitive view) after becoming a weaker form (in the cross-linguistic influence view) (Park, 2018). This implies that lexical attrition from cross-linguistic interference activates the threshold for unused lexical items, especially those of a non-dominant language. Overall, the current study views lexical attrition as the decline in vocabulary knowledge among potential attriters, to the extent that further lexical accessibility or retrieval is either impossible or only possible with the right cues.

The literature review indicates a longstanding disagreement among linguists over whether lexical categories attrit equally or variably (Zhu & Xie, 2019). Wang (2014), who investigated 130 Chinese non-English majors, for instance, found no significant differences in attrition across word classes (p. 67). Marefat and Roushdad (2007) and Jin and Ni (2011) also found no significant differences in attrition rates across word classes, implying discrepancies in the findings and warranting further

investigation across various contexts. Further studies can underscore cross-contextual findings inferred from context-specific data premises.

Contrarily, several scholars report differences in the rate of attrition among word categories. Several scholars (Cohen, 1986; Ross, 2002) consider nouns the most vulnerable category; others cite verbs or other categories (Kuhberg, 1992). According to Park (2018, p. 5), the stronger forms are formulaic expressions, conventional expressions, idioms, short-form vocabulary, basic vocabulary, and social fillers. Contrarily, some lexical items are very weak to the forces of attrition, including less frequently occurring words and those longer in length (Park, *ibid*). The literature indicates that the lexicon is the most vulnerable linguistic element to attrition compared with other facets of linguistic knowledge (Alharthi, 2015; Moreno, 2015; Park, 2018). Alharthi (2015) considers both verbs and adjectives to be the most vulnerable categories in the context of L2 attrition, with adjectives being more likely than verbs. Overall, the literature above indicates a lack of consensus on whether lexical items attrit equally or variably, and calls for further research (Zhu & Xie, 2019). The controversy thus inspires further longitudinal and cross-sectional studies in different contexts of language contact and attrition, as this study did.

Apart from the controversy over the variability of attrition across word classes, lexical attrition varies with the prevailing context (Mlibwa et al., 2025). In particular, attrition differs between L1 and L2 contexts (Sands et al., 2007; Alharthi, 2015; Moreno, 2015; Utamwa, 2016; Park, 2018). In the EFL context, L2 is the potential language, acquired in school/college (classroom) contexts, and the context of loss is the L1 environment. Quite differently, L1 acquisition takes place at home (a naturalistic setting), and attrition occurs either in a foreign country or within the native environment after exposure to L2 in formal, informal, or both settings. In EFL, the potential attriter loses exposure to the L2 through frequent L1 interaction, whereas in migrant and non-migrant contexts, the speaker prefers L2 forms to L1 forms, resulting in a loss of L1-equivalent vocabulary.

Attrition in the African context is mostly an outcome of language shift, which is the prototype of the LI context (see Sands et al., 2007; Killian, 2009; Okeke & Okeke, 2017; Yuka & Bayodele, 2017; and Bibiebome et al., 2019). In the South African context, for example, heritage languages shift to Afrikaans for identity's sake, and due to the war displacement of some communities. Identity also affects minority communities in Nigeria and Ghana, leading to lexical loss after a long time of disuse. Other studies consider lexical attrition to be a consequence of drastic technological and cultural changes, which lead to deterioration of some cultural concepts (Chepkmoi, 2015, in Kenya; Mlibwa et al., 2025, and Msuya, 2021, in Tanzania).

In this light, one of the motivations for the study is that EFL, migrant, and non-migrant contexts differ in attrition trajectories, acquisition processes, attrition environments, patterns of language contact, and underlying cognitive mechanisms. Existing theoretical explanations for why some lexical categories are more susceptible to attrition than others have been developed largely from studies of EFL learners following periods of study interruption or recess (see Zhu & Xie, 2019; Wang, 2014; Zhang, 2023). That is, findings on L1 lexical attrition in the L1 environment are scant in the available literature, suggesting the need for further studies. Consequently, the current study identified lexical categories most vulnerable to attrition against the resilient ones. It uses the findings to discuss the reasons for potential vulnerability. The study envisaged that lexical decline is possible even in non-migrant settings and considered that the debate on lexical category vulnerability should extend to other contexts, including the Kara multilingual situation. The aim is to reflect reality in Africa, where lexical attrition is not necessarily a result of speakers' movement to a foreign linguistic

community but rather of prolonged intensive contact in the native environment, mainly due to linguistic interference. The aim is also to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate on the attrition rate by adding insights from a non-migrant context to inform both theory and practice in language revitalisation and maintenance.

3 Theoretical framework

The study employed two theories: Cross-Linguistic Influence Hypothesis (CLI) by Aneta Pavlenko (Pavlenko, 2000 & 2004) and Michael Paradis' Activation Threshold Hypothesis (ATH) (see Paradis, 2004 and Köpke & Schmid, 2004). CLI views attrition as a product of grammatical conflicts of the linguistic forms of different languages in contact within the bilingual's cognitive system. Thus, generally, L1 lexical items are always weaker than L2 forms. In other words, stronger forms always replace weaker forms. Some lexical items of L1 are stronger against attrition than their equivalent L2 forms due to their semantic significance; hence, they are not easily affected by subtractive borrowing (lexical replacement). In this view, some lexical items are more susceptible to extra-linguistic forces such as cultural, technological, and contact-induced changes. Thus, they are clearly more vulnerable to attrition, as this study argues. Such weaker forms occur less frequently than strong forms. In this, the frequency of occurrence is the concept commonly associated with ATH. In that sense, ATH is a complementary theory to CLI, since the latter links lexical-category vulnerability to the neurolinguistic aspects of bilingualism. In view of ATH, lexical attrition is not merely a sociolinguistic phenomenon but also a psycho-cognitive problem resulting from a low frequency of use of certain linguistic forms. In that light, lexical items that occur more frequently in use are less vulnerable to attrition due to higher activation than replaced forms, which occur less frequently in speech and hence have a higher activation threshold (inhibition). ATH is therefore typically associated with lexical category vulnerability, since lexical categories that are easily replaced by L2 forms are more vulnerable than those that sustain the forces of borrowing in a zone of contact. ATH also posits that language disuse gradually leads to loss, and that the most frequently used elements (such as substrates) of L2 tend to replace their (less-used) L1 counterparts (see Paradis, 2007; Köpke & Schmid, 2004 for details). The resulting feature is the forgetting of disused and less frequent lexical items, while retaining those that are more frequent. In the context of this study, it was hypothesised that Swahili-L2 speakers would readily replace Kara-L1 lexical items due to disuse. Therefore, CLI and ATH played complementary roles in ascertaining aspects of the lexicon that resist attrition, as opposed to those that are easily replaced or lost. CLI explained how certain lexical items are more susceptible to borrowing from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, while ATH related lexical attrition to the cognitive aspects of forgetting (Park, 2018).

Regarding reasons for variations in lexical category vulnerability, this study integrated the two theories into a single conceptual analysis, i.e., the principle of "Core and peripheral lexicon," to discuss these variations. The concept is common in sociolinguistics, contact linguistics, and historical linguistics. Scholars in these fields have slightly different views. For instance, in contact linguistics, Winford's (2003) study demonstrates variation in susceptibility to borrowing across vocabulary types by distinguishing between peripheral and basic vocabulary. According to him, specialised and cultural vocabularies are more susceptible to borrowing, while basic vocabulary such as numerals, pronouns, body parts, kinship terms, natural phenomena, and common verbs is mostly resistant to borrowing. Thus, according to this view, the reason for variations in lexical vulnerability lies in differences in susceptibility to borrowing across lexical items. Items that belong to the core lexicon are said to be more resistant to borrowing, unlike those lexical items belonging to the peripheral lexicon. Winford (2003) further argues that basic/core items are deep-rooted and

embedded in regular communication, hence their high frequency of use, unlike the peripheral lexicon. Thus, borrowing (contact-induced change) results in a low frequency of use of the peripheral lexicon; thus, frequency of use of certain lexical forms is the recurrent reason cited as a determinant of lexical attrition (Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Paradis, 2004).

In sociolinguistics, the core-peripheral concept is associated with variation in use, whereby some lexical items are considered fundamental to the language, whereas others are not. For instance, according to Crystal (2019), the core lexicon constitutes vocabulary that forms the fundamental area of the language, such as words used frequently in everyday communications, virtually common to all speakers, showing relative stability over time, and acquired early. He further argues that peripheral vocabulary is that which is not central to daily communication (implying low frequency of use), including scientific and professional jargon, technical terms, slang, and colloquialisms. Thus, core vocabulary items are less likely to be replaced by their equivalent loanwords of the dominant language due to higher frequency of occurrence, especially those common in the basic vocabulary list (Swadesh, 1952). This is a similar argument to that of Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021), who discuss lexical borrowing or vocabulary change that often affects the peripheral lexicon more readily than the core. Concurrently, from a historical linguistic perspective, Swadesh (1952) postulated a specific set of universally widespread core vocabulary that is more resistant to cultural borrowing across all human languages. Therefore, it can be inferred that variations exist across different word classes when it comes to lexical attrition, and this variation is related to the core-peripheral concept.

The core-peripheral concept is relevant to the present study because it establishes that lexical attrition is driven by borrowing, which affects the lexicon in varying ways. This concept is therefore associated with a high frequency of core lexicon use vis-à-vis a low frequency of peripheral lexicon use. Therefore, the present study adopts this approach to discuss why certain lexical items are more easily attributed to others.

4 Methodology

This study assessed L1 vocabulary knowledge and documented attrition of heritage vocabulary in the Kara language in Tanzania. The study drew on evidence from fieldwork conducted on Ukara Island, the home of Kara, in Lake Victoria, Tanzania. The fieldwork was conducted from January 2024 to April 2024. According to NBS (2022), Ukara is densely populated and experiencing a high influx of multi-tribal people, who come for fishing and trade, with Kiswahili serving as a lingua franca. This creates intensive, long-term interactions in Kiswahili, the dominant language, thereby making cross-linguistic influences prevalent in this sociolinguistic milieu.

The study used a mixed approach (both qualitative and quantitative). Quantitative data were very useful for objectively interpreting the data, ensuring depth of analysis, and providing a vivid description of the problem. Additionally, a quantitative method was used to analyse lexical items, employing a chi-square goodness-of-fit test to determine frequencies across lexical categories in the list. The study also employed measures of central tendency, such as mean scores and frequencies, as well as percentages, to compare performance across participants and to identify potential attriters descriptively.

The study involved young adults aged 18-39 as the target population and the control group of people aged 40 years and above. The study adopted Higley's (2019) definition of young adults (age 18-39). This cut-off was necessary to obtain participants who have attained optimal linguistic proficiency in

the L1 and have a long-term exposure to the L2 (Kiswahili). The study opted for this broader age category to compare the results across a wide spectrum in a single age range. The control group's age range of 40+ was optimal, as it is the group with stable linguistic ability from which authentic lexical knowledge can be measured. The group is also perceptibly conservative of their traditional culture and language. Therefore, participants in this study are native speakers who remain immersed in their native linguistic environment yet have gained exposure to Kiswahili, the dominant language, through both formal and informal communication. The study used a sample of 30 participants, based on Schmid's (2011) manual on language attrition assessment, which recommends 15-30 participants for comprehensive tests. The study employed snowball sampling, with the family as the recruiting agency, whereby one family member, especially an adult, suggested potential participants within the family. The first participant in the chain was provided with important information about the selection criteria, including age, educational background, bilingual proficiency, literacy in both languages, and gender. The aim was to obtain the right participants and ensure a detailed description of participants.

The study collected oral data in the mother tongue using the following tools: Direct Vocabulary Elicitation (DVE), Verbal Fluency Tests (VFT), and Picture Naming Tasks (PNT). The use of multiple methods was important for data/source triangulation to obtain accurate and reliable data. The study used these methods in a complementary manner, since direct vocabulary elicitation measures complex lexical knowledge (no stimulus), whereas the picture naming task assesses lexical recognition with visual aids or stimuli. Contrarily, the verbal fluency test assesses lexical retrieval abilities and accessibility within a given temporal constraint. These tools measure lexical knowledge and quantify the potentially attrited vocabulary in extended lexical domains to ensure cross-validation of the findings.

Each method contained subtasks to measure language abilities in an extensive range of the lexicon. DVE had three subtasks, namely, the lexical judgement task (55 items), the semantic inferential task (130 expressions), and knowledge of kinship terms (30 items). In the first subtask, participants were provided with 55 sentences, each containing Swahili loanwords in bold, for a correction exercise. The second subtask contained 130 supply-type questions for participants to complete by providing corresponding terms from traditional culture, while the last subtask assessed lexical knowledge of kinship terms (also Supply-Type Questions). The study measured performance by calculating the number of correct items out of the total number of items and computing the percentage score, and subjected the output to inferential analysis.

The verbal fluency test, an oral test, was adopted from pathological studies, in which participants had to list vocabulary from different semantic categories within a given time, typically 60-120 seconds (Cherciov, 2011). The current study contained 5 subtasks covering local tools and appliances (C1), fish species (C2), basic numeracy (1-10) (C3), wind types (C4), and numbers beyond 10 (C5). The aim was to measure fluency in various semantic categories corresponding to the language's heritage vocabulary. The last resort was to calculate the number of correct items in proportional time over the total number of items. Another method was the picture-naming task (PNT), which, unlike DVE, used stimuli such as pictures, images, video, or combinations thereof for participants to name the objects. The study used three types of pictures: 20 pictures of wild and domestic animals; 1 picture for each of 5 finger types; and 1 picture for body parts, with a target of 30 body parts in total. All tasks and subtasks were aimed at eliciting and testing retention of specific vocabulary related to Kara heritage vocabulary. This study measured performance by comparing results along the age axis.

To obtain data on lexical items, which are more vulnerable to attrition, the study identified the items to which participants performed poorly during lexical performance tests. All forgotten items were identified by a cross mark on the printout. The next step involved including all candidate terms in the lexical inventory known in this study as ‘Lexical List of Kara Attrited Vocabulary’ (234 wordlist). A lexical item was categorised as attrited when at least 50% of the young-adult participants (8 out of 15) failed to correctly identify, recall, or produce the item. The 50% threshold was adopted because it represents most failures within the target cohort and therefore provides evidence of group-level lexical decline rather than isolated individual forgetting. Moreover, similar quantification approaches have been employed in studies of lexical attrition that identify lexical loss through patterns of reduced recognition or usage across a substantial proportion of speakers (e.g., Sands et al., 2007; Killian, 2009). According to Sands et al. (2007, p.59), “The rate of borrowing is likely to be a good indicator of lexical attrition if it can be quantified and if the borrowing entails the loss or decreased use of another term”. In this line, the main task was to quantify the vocabulary items to demonstrate their candidacy for the list. Table 1 presents a sample lexical list of Kara-attributed vocabulary. The list contains five (5) columns: serial number (S/N), the original Kara terms in alphabetical order and their word classes, the replacing Swahili loanword, and the English gloss.

Table 1: Sample lexical list of Kara attrited vocabulary

S/N	Original term	Word class	Swahili loanword	Gloss
1	Bhakendi	N	Bhasafiri	Travelers
2	Bhalisinzi	N	ziada	Excess
3	Bharongo	N	Mapacha	Twins
4	Bheikisibhwa	N	Abhanafunzi	Pupils/disciples
5	Bhirekeesho	N	Majaribu	Temptations
6	Ikola	V	Ifanya	Pretend or disguise
7	Laabha	ADV	Labda	Maybe
8	Mfura	ADJ	Mpole	Meek/humble

The last stage was to quantify the candidate words by calculating the items in each lexical category to determine which lexical category was most vulnerable to attrition. This was achieved through inferential statistics, such as a chi-square goodness-of-fit test, by calculating the expected frequency for each lexical category and the effect size (Cramer’s V). The result indicated a large effect size of $V=0.62$, demonstrating that the difference among word class frequencies/distributions was both statistically significant and essentially large.

5 Results

Through the administration of various performance tools, this study found that young adults have replaced and attrited various L1 lexicons (Kara lexicon). The study found that different lexical categories were attrited at varying degrees. In this, nouns occupied the topmost layer in the rate of attrition, followed by verbs. Table 2 presents the total number of attrited lexical items and their attendant percentages by word category.

Table 2. Attrition rate across different word classes

S/N	Word class	Total words	Percentage
1	Nouns	145	62
2	Verbs	68	29.1
3	Adjectives	7	3
4	Adverbs	10	4.3
5	Conjunctions	3	1.2
6	Determiners	1	0.4
7	Pronouns	0	0
	Total	234	100

As shown in Table 2, the highest frequency percentage indicates the highest attrition rate, while the lowest indicates the lowest. The percentages were calculated based on the total number of words already attrited (N=234). Furthermore, the study used a chi-square goodness-of-fit test to test the normal distribution of frequency values of word classes in the list. The analysis demonstrated a statistically significant difference in the list of word classes, i.e., $\chi^2(6, N=234) = 538.03$, $p < .001$. In the analysis, the large effect size ($V=0.62$) indicates strong variation across word classes.

As shown in Table 2, the most frequently occurring categories were nouns (62.0%) and verbs (29.1%), which, in total, constituted 91.1% of all words. The adjectives (3.0%), adverbs (4.3%), conjunctions (1.2%), determiners (0.4%) and pronouns (0.0%) were relatively uncommon. The findings demonstrate that the list has a significant bias toward nouns and verbs, suggesting that nouns are more vulnerable to attrition than verbs.

Lexical resilience was more prominent among minor word classes such as conjunctions (3 words =1.2%), determiners (1=0.4%) and pronouns (0 items). The attrited conjunctions were *tali* (but), *laabha* (if/when) and *nólu* (even if), while the determiner was *bhuli* (every). These were replaced by Swahili words like *ila* for *tali* (but), *hata* for *nólu* (even if) and *kila* for *bhuli* (every); the same case was for the conjunction *ama* (or) replaced by the Swahili word “*au*”. These findings demonstrate that minor word classes are more resistant to the forces of attrition and are therefore better retained than major word classes.

Verbs, on the other hand, occupy the second position among the easily attriting lexical categories. This has affected many verbs describing traditional culture and practices of the Kara people, especially those replaced with Swahili loanwords, and have not been in use for a long time. Table 3 presents the sample replaced and attrited verbs of the Kara language.

Table 3. Sample of attrited Kara verbs

Sn	Kara original verb	Swahili loanwords	Gloss
1	Bhonesya	Karibhisya (from Karibisha)	Invite for food
2	Bhubhá	Lola iwivu (from ona wivu)	Be envious
3	Pokera/lia	Lipa	Pay
4	Eleka	Kabhizi (from kapidhi)	Give someone to take care of your cattle
5	Fukama	Uma amagoti	Kneel
6	Ikaana	Laani	Curse

7	Ikala	Funga	Close e.g. door
8	Ipama	Pendeza	Look smart
9	Ikenga	Kwepa	Escape
10	Ikeeya	Ishúsha	Humble yourself
11	Ikilisibhwa	Kubaliwa	Be accepted
12	Ikola	Ifánya	Pretend/disguise
13	Ikomesya	Itaidi	Strive
14	Ikusya	Itukuza	Glorify yourself/boost
15	Induka	Badilika/geuka	Change
16	Kaanya	Onya	Warn/prohibit
17	Kayá	Zarau (from dharau)	Despise
18	Kindika/kánda	Tenga	Dissociate
19	Laalika	Alika/karibhisya	Invite
20	Lamyá	Abudu	Worship
21	Leebha	Fuga	Keep animals
22	Lumwa	Hurumia	Be compassionate
23	Mala líbhanja	Timiza	Fulfil your responsibility
24	Saandika	Chuja	Sieve
25	Sayá/saakya	Zidisha	Pour in excessively
26	Siirika	Rizika	Be satisfied
27	Sobhola	Tája	Mention
28	Sola	Chagua	Choose/elect
29	Solósya	Kusanya	Collect
30	Tangasya	Ongoza	Lead
31	Tobhesya	Lipisya (from lipisha)	Charge levy
32	Tonga	Dai	Request a repayment
33	Utaara	Umia	Be injured
34	Yabhúura	Fafanua	Explain clearly

Table 3 is a sample of attrited verbs in the Kara language by young adults. That is, young adults often could not use the words during the performance tests. Contrarily, they used Kiswahili equivalent words indicated in the middle column. When asked about them, young adults admitted to having known them but have now lost them. This is because they use equivalent Swahili loanwords more frequently, as they have replaced their heritage vocabulary. This finding implies that young adults have completely replaced Kara's original terms with Swahili terms. Due to the disuse of particular lexical items for a long time, they have lost memory of particular items. However, not all verbs are attrited equally. The current study revealed that verbs denoting common actions and short forms, such as lya (eat), fwa (die), sya (grind), and kenda (go), had not undergone lexical substitution and attrition, whereas complex, multi-syllabic verbs had changed. This implies that speech simplification is one of the driving forces behind lexical shift and, in turn, attrition, since speakers always prefer simple forms to complex ones. It further indicates systematic lexical attrition, in which the process exhibits exceptional tendencies, as words within the same grammatical category behave differently in situations of language contact and change. Another assumption is that monosyllabic and common verbs occur more frequently in speech than complex and unusual verbs.

The findings revealed that adjectives were generally more resistant to borrowing and attrition than other word categories. That is, of 234 words, only 7 (3%) were adjectives that had deteriorated

among young adults. However, a detailed analysis revealed that the derived adjectives were more vulnerable than core adjectives. In this, core adjectives encompassed adjectives that are not resulting from affixation such as *-kuru* (greater/grownup), *-lela* (young), *-toto* (small-age), *-nywakale* (thin), *-nene* (big), *-mutuku* (red), *mwirafuru* (black), *mwera* (white), *sósi* (yellow), *-kenyi* (strange), *-fui* (short), *-leela* (tall), *-fwiimbe* (oval), *-lénga* (lazy), *-tiilu* (small-size), though they can derive into other word classes like nouns. On the other hand, the derivative adjectives were those adjectives modified from other bases. These included adjectives such as *mufura* (meek), *chinyooke* (weak), *nzaaka* (remnant), *nzale* (rotten, e.g., fish), *mulenga* (lazy), *ndaro* (boys' hut), *owo bhubheelee* (firstborn) and *kamalisya* (lastborn). The core or basic vocabularies (in this case, core adjectives) appear to have sustained attrition due to their semantic significance and centrality in the language's internal system. Thus, they are more concomitant with the language's internal system than with the external sociolinguistic/extralinguistic interference, which cultivates high frequency of occurrence.

Secondly, adverbs were satisfactorily resistant to borrowing and attrition. The analysis revealed that out of 234 words, only 10 adverbs (4.3%) had deteriorated among the young adults. However, this attrition is more systematic as certain adverbs were more resistant to attrition, including temporal adverbs and spatial deictic adverbs. Temporal adverbs include *lelo* (today), *mutondo* (tomorrow), *liikolo* (yesterday), *echolilya* (the day before yesterday or after tomorrow), *mungeta* (night), *mumwisi* (noon), *keekolo* (evening), *bwiire bhukuru* (midnight) and *katóndo* (morning), and spatial deictic adverbs include *anu* (here), *heyo* (there), *hao* (there- but near), *eliya* (there- very far from here), etc.

6 Discussion

The objective of the present study was to identify the lexical category most vulnerable to attrition. The findings demonstrate variation in lexical category vulnerability across word classes, with nouns showing the highest frequency, followed by verbs. Adjectives and adverbs were among the major word classes showing relative resilience, while minor word classes such as conjunctions, pronouns, determiners, and prepositions were very resistant to both lexical substitution and consequential attrition. The findings imply that vulnerability varies across lexical categories. Through the lens of CLI, which accounts for cross-linguistic interference between languages and forms (Pavlenko, 2004), attrition affects nouns and verbs more than other word classes, since they represent weaker linguistic systems. L2 items act as competitors to those of L1 in the speaker's mental lexicon. From a CLI perspective, nouns and verbs are more vulnerable because they are more exposed to cross-linguistic competition and are continuously expanded and replaced in contact situations. Contrarily, adjectives, adverbs and minor word classes are a minority and less frequently occurring; hence, showing robust resistance to lexical change. The findings also align with those of Cohen (1989) and Ross (2002), who established that the nominal word class is the most vulnerable lexical category. Conversely, the findings contradict those of Jin and Ni (2011) and Wang (2014), who found no significant variation in attrition across word classes. Kuhberg (1992), Ross (2002), Alharthi (2015) and Zhu & Xie (2019) also found significant variations, especially in L2 attrition contexts. In other words, the controversy as to whether different lexical categories are lost equally or variably remains.

I am of the view that the contradiction in the findings stems from a lack of common procedures and contextual dynamics. The context dynamics here imply variations on the sociolinguistic forces underlying language attrition. Most studies investigated the vulnerability in EFL contexts. Thus, cross-contextual variations undermine efforts to reach consensus on potential vulnerability across different lexical categories. Context dynamics implies sociolinguistic and acquisitional variations

among non-migrant, migrant, and EFL subjects. In either context, it is important to establish the conditions or factors that determine various findings. The major focus should be on establishing a theoretical lens and methodological procedures to account for variations in a conventional manner. It is important to understand the sociolinguistic or pedagogical constraints (context-specific) on lexical retention (as presented in the next paragraphs).

The analysis indicates that lexical items with low distribution or frequency in the language and in the list are more susceptible to attrition than nouns and verbs, which exhibit higher distribution frequency and the size effect. Therefore, lexical category vulnerability is partly dependent on cross-linguistic effects whereby competition between L1 original vocabulary and L2 loanwords normally affects the lexical forms of the non-dominant language due to the speaker's use preferences. In Paradis' (2004) view, every lexical item has its own activation threshold that either inhibits lexical retrieval (i.e., accessibility) or ensures accessibility, depending on frequency of use. In other words, frequently used lexical items are invulnerable to attrition compared to infrequently used ones. Thus, one can argue that nouns and verbs are readily attrited due to their extensive exposure to language borrowing, lexical change, and substitution, whereas adverbs and minor word classes such as conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, and determiners have a low activation threshold and hence higher retention. Therefore, frequency of use is another determinant factor of lexical accessibility and vulnerability (see Schmid & Jarvis, 2014, for a detailed account of lexical accessibility). This factor also accounts for variation in vulnerability in EFL contexts: low-frequency words are more vulnerable to attrition than high-frequency words (Ross, 2002). Thus, according to Zhu and Xie (2019) and Ross (2002), nouns are less vulnerable compared to verbs. This finding, however, is contrary to Kara's study, which found nouns to be more vulnerable to attrition. Therefore, although the frequency of occurrence in speech determines attrition, it cannot account for lexical vulnerability since what is more frequent in an EFL context may not be the case in a non-migrant setting. However, although nouns and verbs occur more frequently in speech, lexical forms of the dominant language most likely replace them, since native speakers always prefer the vocabulary of the dominant language to that of the non-dominant language. Consequently, the activation threshold for the substituted, less competitive vocabulary remains higher, making the retrieval difficult.

In the EFL context, "Imageability" is the concept that accounts as a factor linked to the varying attrition of different word categories. Citing Ellis and Beatons' (1993) Imageability Hypothesis, they argue that the greater the degree to which a word arouses a mental image, the more likely it is to be remembered (Zhu & Xie, 2019, p. 80). They further maintained that nouns tend to be more imaginable than verbs since EFL textbooks use more images for nouns than verbs. With this view, nouns are less vulnerable to attrition compared to verbs. This is contrary to Kara's study, which finds nouns more vulnerable to attrition than any other word categories, and Imageability does not reflect the reality in Kara's context.

The present study links variations in lexical category vulnerability to the concept of "Core and Peripheral lexicon" (see Swadesh, 1952; Winford, 2003; Crystal, 2019). Thus, the relevant argument in Kara's context is that the lexicon has a direct interface with either the language's internal system or the externally ever-changing world. In that case, lexical categories central to the internal linguistic system are more resistant to both borrowing and attrition (Winford, 2003), unlike those embedded in the external or sociolinguistic environments of the native speakers. This proposition supports the findings in the current study that major word classes, such as nouns and verbs, are more vulnerable to attrition (peripheral) than minor word classes, since they have a greater interface with the external linguistic system of the speech community. Minor word classes show concomitance with the

language's internal system (core/basic), are semantically significant, and are always preferred in regular use. Any contact-induced change affects the major word classes more than minor words. That is why borrowing and the consequent attrition lead to the deterioration of the major word classes more than of the minor ones.

This view echoes Winford's (2003) idea that vocabulary varies in its susceptibility to borrowing, since the process affects technical and cultural vocabulary more than basic vocabulary, such as numerals, pronouns, body parts, kinship terms, and common verbs. The current study found attrition in technical and heritage vocabulary (especially verbs and nouns) and maintenance of minor word classes, adverbs, and adjectives. Winford further argues that elements of the core or basic lexicon are deeply embedded in daily human communication, as similarly maintained in CLI perspectives. Thus, core vocabulary can only deteriorate in the context of intensive long-term contact. Concurrently, Crystal (2019) associates the core vocabulary with higher frequency and the peripheral vocabulary with low frequency, as postulated by Paradis (2004) through ATH. Therefore, various theoretical perspectives can help to explain why different word classes do not deteriorate equally. However, the arguments vary depending on the context in which attrition takes place. In the Kara context, the "core and peripheral" and "frequency of use" concepts are most relevant to account for the variations in lexical category vulnerability, unlike in the EFL context, where Imageability is the point to affirm the fact that nouns are more resistant to attrition than verbs and other word classes.

7 Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion above, this study concludes that, in the multilingual context of Ukara, nouns are more susceptible to lexical attrition. Meanwhile, verbs show a relative degree of attrition while adjectives, adverbs and minor word classes are impervious to borrowing and attrition. This indicates significant variation in attrition across word classes. This study also concludes that the theoretical reasons established to justify lexical category vulnerability are numerous and vary in both L2 attrition in the L1 environment and L1 lexical attrition in the L1 environment. In the EFL context, the problem is associated with the Imageability Hypothesis and the frequency of occurrence. In the Kara context, variability is associated with cross-linguistic interference and frequency of use, which are subsumed under the concept of "Core and peripheral lexicon". The possible inference is that nouns are more vulnerable to attrition because they have a higher degree of interface with the external world (e.g., contact-induced language change), which is always changing to varying degrees. Minor word classes, in contrast, are immune to external changes since they belong to the core lexicon, which is central to the internal linguistic system. In that case, the core lexicon is less susceptible to attrition due to its concomitance with the internal linguistic system, high frequency of use (low threshold), its semantic significance, and resistance to borrowing.

Along these lines, the study recommends future research on lexical attrition in other sociolinguistic contexts, especially in African multilingual communities with long-term, intensive language contact. This recommendation does not imply that the present study failed to address the phenomenon; rather, it acknowledges that the findings reported here are contextual. Comparative studies of different language contact situations would help establish whether the patterns found in this study are context-specific or generalisable across multilingual communities, thus enhancing our understanding of lexical categories that may be more susceptible to attrition.

Future studies should employ either cross-sectional or longitudinal designs to capture more insights and trends rather than relying solely on cross-sectional instances. Future studies should also integrate

lexical data with additional theoretical perspectives to test attrition and identify more reasons for lexical category vulnerability. This could help revise existing theories of lexical attrition or change, rather than relying on traditional hypotheses. In addition, data from this study serve as an alert for further interventions to revitalise endangered languages, document minority languages (through database/list development), and undertake lexicographic activities (e.g., dictionary-making) in less-researched languages like Kara. Moreover, insights and data from this study can inform interventions for intergenerational language transmission.

8 References

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Evaluating Stakeholders' Efforts in Supporting English Language Teaching and Learning in *Day Secondary Schools*: A Case of Bunda District, Tanzania

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Abstract

Despite the expected efforts of stakeholders (teachers, school administrators and education supervisors), learners in day secondary schools continue to show weak communicative competence, implying that stakeholder support is either insufficient, irregular or ineffective. Consequently, the study evaluated the nature of these stakeholders' efforts in supporting English language teaching and learning in Bunda District, Tanzania. Guided by Stakeholder Theory, the study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design involving interviews followed by questionnaires. A total of 142 respondents from four day schools participated, including 128 students, 8 teachers, 4 heads of school, and 2 education supervisors. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that support for English language learning exists but remains fragmented and inconsistently offered. Many learners reported participating in classroom activities, but most of them lacked confidence in speaking English independently, revealing a gap between participation and communicative competence. Teachers were expected to support English language teaching and learning by creating opportunities for learners to practise and use English actively. However, the findings revealed that communicative learning activities such as debates, storytelling, and discussions were not implemented consistently across the schools. School administrators mostly used verbal and material encouragement, while formal motivational programmes were rarely implemented. Education supervisors supported English teaching and learning through inspections, resource allocation, and professional support. However, inspections were irregular and had limited follow-up mechanisms. In general, stakeholder efforts were found to operate largely in isolation rather than as an integrated support system. The study concludes that stronger stakeholder coordination, sustained institutional support, and consistent implementation of communicative language activities are needed in the research area. There was also a need for regular school inspections, periodic stakeholder coordination meetings, expanded English-language programmes, and robust monitoring of classroom communicative practices.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Stakeholder Support, Day Secondary Schools, Communicative Competence, Tanzania

1 Background to the study

English serves as Tanzania's official language of instruction from ordinary secondary to tertiary education, highlighting its central role in academic achievement, employment opportunities, and national development (MoEST, 2023). As the medium of instruction for most secondary school subjects, competence in English is essential for learners to access content and perform well academically. Despite the importance of this policy, many students in rural areas of Tanzania continue to experience serious difficulties using English effectively. In Bunda District, in particular, Patrick (2020) found that students struggled with speaking, reading, and writing in English during classroom discussions and examinations and identified the language of instruction itself as a major barrier to academic performance. Similarly, Swai (2023) showed that although learners may have positive attitudes toward English, low proficiency and weak classroom practices continue to limit effective language use in schools.

These challenges are caused not only by learners or classroom instruction but also by broader institutional and systemic factors. Research indicates that learners face anxiety, weak linguistic foundations, and limited exposure to English, which reduce their confidence and participation in communication activities (Sombonah *et al.*, 2024). In addition, classroom assessment practices often emphasise grammar and writing at the expense of speaking skills, thereby limiting opportunities for the development of communicative competence (Maliva, 2025). Although teachers use different instructional strategies, teacher-centred approaches remain dominant in many schools, reducing learner interaction and meaningful language use (Magidanga *et al.*, 2025). At the same time, inadequate resources, weak institutional support, and limited teacher motivation further constrain effective English language instruction (Bamuhiga & Kimambo, 2025). These challenges suggest that improving English language learning depends not only on learners' efforts but also on the quality and coordination of support provided by key educational stakeholders.

Recent literature shows that motivation, leadership support, and stakeholder involvement through structured programmes significantly improve English language learning outcomes (Chen *et al.*, 2025). Likoko and Wu (2025) stress that effective language education depends on collaboration among policymakers, schools, and other stakeholders to align policies with learners' needs. That is, teachers are expected to support English language learning by preparing lessons, using communicative teaching approaches, providing opportunities for language practice, and encouraging learner participation (Reeve, 2024). Meanwhile, school administrators should create supportive learning environments by providing resources, motivating teachers, supervising instructional activities, and establishing school-based English programmes (Bamuhiga & Kimambo, 2025). Moreover, education supervisors are expected to strengthen English language learning through regular inspection, professional guidance, monitoring of instructional quality, and coordination of educational resources and policies (Wenga, 2023). These responsibilities suggest that successful English language learning depends not only on classroom teaching but also on the collective, coordinated efforts of stakeholders across different levels of the education system.

However, there remains insufficient empirical evidence on whether and how teachers, school administrators, and education supervisors fulfil these expected roles in supporting English language learning in rural *day secondary schools*. Most existing studies in Tanzania, including MoEST (2023), Maliva (2025), and Bamuhiga and Kimambo (2025), focus on individual factors such as learner challenges, teaching practices, motivation, or policy issues, providing a limited understanding of stakeholder efforts as a coordinated system. Consequently, little is known about

how stakeholders provide support, how their efforts are coordinated, and how gaps in collaboration affect learners' English language development. As previous studies have not adequately explained this phenomenon, the current study evaluated stakeholders' efforts to support English language teaching and learning in *day secondary schools* in Bunda District, Tanzania. Guided by Stakeholder Theory, the study evaluated how different stakeholders contribute to learning environments and how their coordination influences learner outcomes. The overall goal is to provide insights to improve collaboration and strengthen English language teaching and learning in secondary schools.

2 Empirical literature review

Studies from different contexts show that English language teaching and learning improve when schools provide strong educational support and stakeholders work in a coordinated manner. In Indonesia, Siregar *et al.* (2026) found that student-centred teaching, technology integration, and continuous professional development improved learners' motivation and performance. In Nigeria, Kenya, Cameroon and Botswana, Omidire and Muhammed (2026) showed that multilingual strategies promoted participation, although weak training, limited resources, and insufficient institutional support reduced their effectiveness. Cabashe and Molotsi (2026) found that teachers used practical strategies for technology integration but still required stronger support and peer mentoring.

Evidence from Tanzanian contexts also shows that school leadership and institutional support play an important role in English language learning. In Tanzania, Michael and Mhando (2024) found that the school management team improved students' performance through monitoring, teacher development, and coordination of support services. Issa and Castulo (2026) reported that teacher-centred methods, inadequate resources, and poor classrooms hindered teaching and learning in public primary schools. Barnabas and Prosper (2024) found that although English teachers used several methods to improve writing skills, a substantial number of learners still struggled because of a limited understanding of the purpose of the syllabus. Alfred (2023) found that school administrators used academic camps to boost motivation, attendance, and learning outcomes through meals, accommodation, and mentorship.

Furthermore, studies in the context of Tanzania show that motivation, supervision, assessment, and policy implementation strongly influence English language learning. Bamuhiga and Kimambo (2025) found that teachers' motivational strategies improved pupils' motivation and engagement. Wenga (2023) identified weak institutional support, inconsistent supervision, and limited follow-up as major constraints. Swai (2023) reported positive attitudes toward English but persistent challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and ineffective teaching methods. Abdala and Vuzo (2024) found that assessment practices often neglect speaking, limiting communicative competence.

At the local level, Patrick (2020) found that students in Bunda District struggled with speaking, reading, and writing English despite its importance for academic success. The study also showed that the language of instruction limited performance, and learners used code-switching as a coping strategy. These findings indicate that English language difficulties in Bunda District were persistent and affected learners' ability to communicate effectively. They also suggest that students need stronger support from teachers, school administrators, and education supervisors to improve their English language learning.

Despite this extensive literature on English language learning in Tanzania, most studies examined isolated factors such as teaching practices, learner challenges, assessment, institutional support, or

language policy rather than their interaction as a system. For example, Patrick (2020) and Maliva (2025) focus on classroom issues, while Wenga (2023) and Sombonah *et al.* (2024) address institutional, motivational, and learner barriers. However, they do not explain how teachers, school administrators, and education supervisors coordinate their efforts. Most studies are also urban- or policy-focused, with limited evidence from rural *day secondary schools* such as Bunda. This leaves a gap on whether stakeholder efforts are integrated or fragmented, which this study addresses by examining stakeholder coordination and its influence on learners' English language development. In light of this, Bunda District provided a relevant setting for examining stakeholder support for English language teaching and learning, as it is a rural area with low levels of English language proficiency. The study sheds light on the effectiveness of stakeholder support systems, learners' challenges and the extent to which support systems addressed those challenges.

3 Theoretical framework

This study was guided by Stakeholder Theory. The theory explains how organisations consider the interests of stakeholders and recognises those affected by organisational activities and their influence on business objectives (Gilbert & Rasche, 2008). The theory posits that society supports an organisation if it receives value in return, and that the key task of the focal organisation is to coordinate value creation with and for stakeholders in line with the joint purpose (Freudenreich *et al.*, 2020). The theory emphasises that stakeholder relations are critical for organisational success and directly aligns with this study's focus on examining coordination mechanisms, communication channels, and teamwork among teachers, administrators, and supervisors in supporting English language learning.

Stakeholder Theory provided a framework for identifying stakeholders, examining their roles, and analysing how their interactions influence English language learning. According to Fassin (2009), stakeholders can be classified into three categories: real stakeholders, stakewatchers, and stakekeepers. In the context of the present study, real stakeholders include teachers, learners, and school administrators, who have direct responsibility for instruction, learning, and school management. Stakewatchers include education supervisors and quality assurance officers, who protect learners' educational interests through monitoring and oversight. Stakekeepers consist of the Ministry of Education and other regulatory agencies that influence schools through policies, regulations, and educational standards. The theory also informed the assessment of stakeholder responsibilities, communication, coordination, and support mechanisms in promoting English language learning. It further served as an analytical lens for explaining challenges such as fragmented efforts, weak supervision, inconsistent institutional support, and poor coordination among stakeholders. The theory helped to explain how stakeholder roles shape English language learning outcomes.

4 Methodology

This study was conducted in Bunda District, Tanzania, and focused on four purposively selected *day secondary schools* experiencing challenges in English language teaching and learning. The district was selected based on prior evidence of persistent difficulties with English language use among learners. For instance, Patrick (2020) reported that students in Bunda District struggled with speaking, reading, and writing English despite its importance for academic success, and that the language of instruction itself constrained performance, with code-switching often used as a coping strategy. This made the district an appropriate context for examining stakeholders' efforts to support English language teaching and learning. The study involved 142 respondents, including students,

English teachers, heads of school, and education supervisors. Participants were selected using purposive, convenience, stratified, and simple random sampling techniques, depending on their roles. Student selection ensured balanced representation across schools, classes, and genders through a lottery method.

The study used a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design, with qualitative interviews conducted first, followed by quantitative questionnaires. Data were collected using structured and open-ended questionnaires administered to students and semi-structured interviews with teachers, heads of school, and district education supervisors. To minimise language barriers and enhance comprehension, questionnaires were administered in Kiswahili. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, with SPSS Version 20. Qualitative data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework, including familiarisation with data, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Interviews and open-ended responses were read repeatedly to identify meaningful units of text. Similar statements were coded, compared, and grouped into themes based on emerging patterns. The themes were then reviewed and refined to support interpretation and reporting. Findings were presented using descriptive narratives and statistical tables, with qualitative themes supported by participant quotations.

5 Results

This section presents findings on stakeholders' efforts to support English language teaching and learning in *day secondary schools* in Bunda District. The findings are organised by stakeholder support, showing how teachers, school administrators, and education supervisors each contribute to creating supportive learning environments. Both questionnaires and interviews were used complementarily: questionnaires provided quantitative data on the extent and frequency of stakeholder efforts across the full sample (142 respondents: 128 students, 8 teachers, 4 heads of school, 2 supervisors), while interviews provided qualitative depth explaining why efforts succeed or fail, revealing coordination mechanisms (or gaps), and capturing stakeholder perspectives on challenges. Representative quotes from interviewees are integrated throughout to illustrate quantitative patterns.

5.1 Teachers' support for English language teaching and learning

Teachers played an important role in supporting English language learning by encouraging students to take part in communicative classroom activities. In the data analysis, 53% of the student respondents (38 of 72) reported that their English teachers involved them in activities such as storytelling, debates, essay writing, and letter writing. Meanwhile, 47% (34 of 72) reported not being regularly involved. This suggests that teachers' support for English language learning is present in some classrooms but inconsistent across all schools. Likewise, one English teacher explained that practical speaking activities were not conducted consistently because of the heavy workload and time constraints:

"We employ talking activities, but not always. Sometimes we have many classes, limited time, and, as you know, preparing debate materials takes extra work. So, we focus on what is in the textbook." (English Teacher, School Upendo)

This response indicates that although teachers recognise the value of practical activities, challenges such as heavy teaching loads and limited time often reduce opportunities for learners to actively

practise English in the classroom. Thus, the findings suggest that nearly half of the learners are not regularly exposed to practical activities that are important for developing English communication skills.

Likewise, 86% (62/72) of learners reported asking and answering questions in English lessons, of whom 81% (50/62) participated willingly. The remaining 19% (12/62) reported participating only when appointed by the teacher. In contrast, 14% (10/72) of learners reported not actively participating in classroom activities at all. Among these non-participating learners, 80% (8/10) stated that they would not participate because they could not speak English comfortably. In the analysis, 90% (9/10) reported remaining silent even when pointed out to contribute to the lesson. One student explained:

“I ask questions when the teacher asks, but I don’t speak freely. I worry about making mistakes and classmates laughing.” (Student, Amani Secondary School)

This statement suggests that the learner’s participation is driven more by teachers’ pointing out than by self-confidence. It also highlights how fear of embarrassment and peer judgement can undermine learners’ confidence, making them reluctant to communicate in English despite understanding the importance of classroom participation. The findings suggest that, although teachers encourage classroom interaction, some learners continue to experience anxiety and low confidence when using English.

Heads of school also acknowledged the importance of improving participation and reported various strategies used to motivate both teachers and learners. These findings suggest that motivation strategies are largely conventional and limited in scope, with fewer schools adopting innovative or competitive language development programmes.

In promoting English-speaking habits, all four heads of school (100%) reported monitoring debates and English-speaking campaigns, while three heads of school (75%) reported monitoring morning talks. In addition, all four schools (100%) reported enforcing punishment for students who did not speak English. This indicates a combination of motivational and punitive approaches. The findings suggest that schools emphasise the use of English, but they may rely heavily on enforcement rather than on purely supportive communicative environments.

Findings from education supervisors reveal significant weaknesses in the school monitoring and support system. It was reported that inspections of secondary schools were irregular and lacked a systematic schedule, particularly at the district level. District inspections were not conducted on a fixed schedule and were primarily triggered by emerging issues. Similarly, zonal inspections would be carried out only every three to four years, depending on inspection plans, thereby limiting continuous oversight. This situation demonstrates a clear gap in consistent monitoring mechanisms within the education system. As a result, many *day secondary schools* are left without regular external evaluation and professional guidance. This weak monitoring structure reduces accountability among schools and limits opportunities for timely instructional improvement. The lack of a structured inspection system may undermine the quality of English teaching and overall school performance.

Findings from education supervisors show that the provision of teaching and learning materials is largely needs-based rather than systematically planned. It was reported that officials first assess the

level of shortage in schools before supplying English textbooks and other instructional materials accordingly. This indicates that material support is largely reactive, with resources provided only after shortages are identified. Although this approach helps in addressing immediate needs, it reveals that a more proactive and well-coordinated system of support is needed to ensure the regular availability of teaching and learning materials across schools. Stronger planning and distribution mechanisms would help schools receive the resources they need in a timely and consistent manner. Consequently, the lack of a systematic supply mechanism may limit learners' access to quality learning materials.

Findings from education supervisors indicate that support for schools and teachers is primarily delivered through formal recognition and professional development. Well-performing schools are awarded certificates, while schools with poor performance also receive certificates indicating their status. In addition, teachers are supported through in-service training courses designed to strengthen professional skills and improve English language teaching. These actions indicate that supervisors provide structured support to encourage performance and build teacher capacity. However, the support appears to be limited in scope, as it does not fully address the wider conditions that influence English language teaching and learning in schools.

5.2 School administrators' support for English language teaching and learning

Evidence suggested that school administrators provided various forms of support for English teaching and learning in the study area. This support included motivating teachers, providing instructional resources, supervising English language activities, and promoting programmes that encouraged the use of English. However, the extent of support was not consistent across schools. While six teachers (75%) reported receiving motivation from their school administrators, two (25%) said they had not, indicating variation in the support offered during the study. This variation was also reflected in interviews, where one head of school explained:

“We give exercise books to A and B students, including English. We also praise teachers publicly. But for competitions, that require money, transport, and coordination with other schools. We do it sometimes, but not regularly.”
(Head of School, Umoja Secondary School)

The response shows that administrators support English learning through motivation, resources, and recognition, but implementation is inconsistent. Financial and logistical constraints limit regular activities, resulting in uneven support across schools.

The findings further reveal that school administrators mainly relied on traditional motivational strategies. All four heads of school (100%) reported providing monetary rewards to high-performing teachers, awarding exercise books to successful learners, and offering words of encouragement and congratulations. These efforts demonstrate administrators' commitment to recognising academic achievement and motivating both teachers and learners. Similar perceptions were reported by all eight teachers (100%), who acknowledged that schools used rewards and recognition as major motivational tools. However, only one (25%) of four heads of school reported organising English-speaking and writing competitions, and only one (25%) reported providing educational field trips. Furthermore, only two (50%) reported ensuring adequate availability of textbooks. The findings suggest that although administrators support English language learning, their efforts are concentrated more on rewards and recognition than on sustained programmes that provide practical opportunities for language use and development.

The findings also show that school administrators promoted English-speaking habits through various school-based activities. All four heads of school (100%) reported organising debates and English-speaking campaigns, while three (75%) reported conducting morning talks. These initiatives provide learners with opportunities to practise English beyond classroom instruction. Consistent with these findings, teachers reported that school administrations encouraged English-speaking programmes, although only two (25%) indicated that such programmes were implemented consistently. Similarly, learners reported engaging in practical activities such as debates, storytelling, essay writing, and letter writing, although only 38 (53%) of 72 confirmed participation in these activities. This suggests that while schools have established mechanisms to promote English language use, the implementation of these activities remains inconsistent across schools and among learners.

Despite these efforts, some administrative practices limited the effectiveness of institutional support. All four heads of school (100%) reported enforcing English-speaking rules by imposing punishments for non-compliance. Although this approach may increase the use of English in school environments, interview findings suggest that it may also create fear among learners rather than confidence. As one teacher explained:

“School has debates and campaigns, yes. But punishment for speaking Kiswahili? That creates fear, not confidence. Students speak English only when monitored, not willingly.” (English Language Teacher, Mshikamano Secondary School)

The observation is supported by learners’ findings, which showed that among ten learners who did not actively participate in English lessons, eight (80%) reported an inability to speak English comfortably, whereas nine (90%) reported remaining silent even when pointed out to contribute. The findings indicate that enforcement measures alone may be insufficient to overcome learners’ anxiety and low confidence.

The findings also revealed concerns about support for English language teaching, including lesson preparation and supervision. Three heads of school (75%) reported that teachers were adequately prepared before conducting English lessons. Six of the eight teachers (75%) reported that they did not make sufficient preparations before teaching. The findings reveal a clear difference between the views of school administrators and teachers: most administrators perceive teacher preparation as adequate, whereas most teachers consider their own preparation insufficient, suggesting weaknesses in monitoring and support for lesson preparation. In support of this, the two education supervisors agreed that lesson preparation and implementation vary across schools. This affects the extent to which communicative activities were effectively facilitated. This inconsistency revealed weaknesses in support due to inadequate preparation.

5.3 Education supervisors’ support for English language teaching and learning

The education supervisors reported that district-level school inspections would be conducted irregularly and usually only when specific issues arose. Meanwhile, zonal inspections were carried out every three to four years, depending on the inspection plan. The education supervisors also revealed that records of earlier inspections were not always easy to access, implying that the supervision system was not consistently organised to ensure regular monitoring and follow-up of English language teaching and learning. One education supervisor explained:

“Inspections happen every three to four years for zonal, district-level, only when issues arise. There is no fixed schedule. We assess shortages first before distributing textbooks. However, English is not specifically prioritised despite being the medium of instruction.” (District Education Supervisor)

The findings revealed that school inspections were conducted irregularly and often depended on specific issues rather than following a structured schedule. The lack of systematic monitoring and follow-up reduces administrators’ ability to identify instructional weaknesses and to support teachers in a timely manner.

The findings further show that both education supervisors (100%) reported assessing the extent of shortages before distributing English textbooks and other teaching and learning materials to schools. This indicates that resource allocation is guided by identified needs, helping schools with greater shortages receive support. Nevertheless, the supervisors’ responses suggest that English language learning does not receive special consideration despite its central role in secondary education. This may reduce the effectiveness of efforts to improve learners’ English language proficiency.

Both education supervisors (100%) reported providing motivation through professional training programmes. They also recognised learners’ academic achievement by awarding certificates to high-performing schools and students. These initiatives contribute to teacher development and learner motivation. However, the findings indicate that supervisory support focuses mainly on training and recognition rather than on strengthening the broader teaching and learning environment. Generally, the findings suggest that while education supervisors supported English language learning through resources, training, and recognition programmes, weak monitoring and follow-up reduced the effectiveness of their support.

6 Discussion

The main objective of this study was to evaluate stakeholders' efforts to support English language learning in *day secondary schools* in Bunda District. The findings showed that teachers, school administrators, and education supervisors all contribute in important ways, but their efforts are weakly coordinated. Learners reported frequent participation in question-and-answer activities, yet many still lacked confidence in spontaneous English speaking. This suggests that participation alone does not produce communicative competence when meaningful practice is limited. This is consistent with Vuzo (2010), who argues that participation must be supported by regular communicative use for language acquisition to develop effectively. From a Stakeholder Theory perspective, the results indicate weak coordination among actors pursuing English proficiency.

The findings also show that stakeholder efforts were present but were not systematically aligned. Teachers attempted to use learner-centred approaches, administrators provided motivation, and supervisors exercised oversight, but these efforts did not function as a single system, resulting in low achievement of the overall objective. This finding is consistent with Kabale *et al.* (2025) who maintain that organisational effectiveness depends on coordinated stakeholder management rather than isolated actions. In this study, inconsistent communicative activities, weak supervision, and limited institutional reinforcement point to fragmented stakeholder implementation. The implication is that stakeholder effort should be judged not only by its presence but also by its consistency, coordination, and impact on learner outcomes.

Teachers' instructional practices were found to be inconsistent, especially in communicative activities such as debates, storytelling, and role-plays. Some teachers reported that heavy workloads and limited preparation time made it difficult to apply these methods regularly. This means that teacher commitment alone is not enough unless it is supported by the school system. The finding supports Vuzo's (2010) view that communicative approaches improve language learning when they are applied consistently. The implication is that improving instructional quality requires both teacher effort and institutional support that reduces workload pressure and strengthens planning.

Learner anxiety and lack of confidence also limited spontaneous English use. Many learners responded when prompted but remained silent when asked to speak freely. This indicates that fear, embarrassment, and low confidence still affect oral participation. This finding is consistent with Nurteteng *et al.* (2024), who reported that deficiencies in confidence and classroom anxiety constrain learners' participation and communication. Sombonah *et al.* (2024) similarly highlight fear of embarrassment as a major constraint. This implies that stakeholder effort should be measured by its ability to create a safe and supportive learning environment.

The findings on school administrators show that motivation was mainly provided through praise, rewards, and recognition, with limited use of structured programmes such as competitions and field trips. While these strategies may improve short-term participation, they are not enough to build lasting communicative competence. In some schools, punishment was used to enforce English-speaking rules, but this may create fear rather than confidence. This aligns with Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, which posits that intrinsic motivation grows in supportive, engaging environments rather than through external rewards alone. The implication is that administrative support should move beyond temporary incentives and create sustained opportunities for English practice.

Education supervisors contributed to supporting English language teaching and learning, although their involvement was not always consistent. Findings showed that school inspections and follow-up activities were irregular, limiting monitoring of instructional practices and ongoing support. The respondents also revealed that resource allocation was often reactive, addressing immediate needs rather than being planned in advance, which resulted in uneven support across schools. UNESCO (2016) emphasises that consistent supervision and continuous monitoring are essential for accountability and sustained educational improvement. These findings underscore the need for stronger supervision through regular monitoring, systematic planning, and timely follow-up.

The findings revealed that supervisory training and recognition through certificates did not fully address broader instructional challenges. As a result, inconsistent teaching practices and limited reinforcement of communicative activities continued to be observed in schools. This implies that recognition alone was insufficient to improve classroom practice. From the perspective of Freudenreich *et al.* (2020), this reflected a greater emphasis on compliance and recognition than on comprehensive stakeholder support. Therefore, professional development needed to be accompanied by classroom coaching, monitoring, and follow-up to produce meaningful improvements in teaching practice.

Generally, the results indicated that although each stakeholder group performed some useful roles, their efforts were not integrated into a unified support system. This fragmented approach limited the effect of classroom participation, motivation, and supervision on learner outcomes. Freudenreich *et al.* (2020) describe this as an integration failure, in which stakeholder contributions do not combine effectively toward a shared goal. Hatami and Firoozi (2019) argue that weak stakeholder

relationships reduce organisational effectiveness. Gilbert and Rasche (2008) emphasise the need for active coordination of interests. Improving English language outcomes requires stronger communication, shared planning, regular monitoring, and cooperation among stakeholders.

7 Conclusion

The study evaluated stakeholders' efforts to support English language teaching and learning in four *day secondary schools* in Bunda District, Tanzania. The findings suggest that teachers, school administrators, and education supervisors all contribute to English language education, although their efforts are uneven and only partly coordinated. Teachers show commitment through classroom practices that encourage learner participation, while school administrators support learning through motivation, resources, and English-related programmes. Education supervisors also contribute through school visits and inspections, but limited follow-up reduces the impact of their work. The study shows that stakeholder support exists, but fragmented implementation and weak coordination limit its effectiveness.

The study contributes to Stakeholder Theory by showing that educational outcomes depend not only on the presence of stakeholders but also on the quality of their interaction and shared responsibility. It suggests that isolated efforts are less effective than coordinated action across the classroom, school, and supervisory levels. The study also contributes to the literature by integrating teaching practices, school leadership, and supervision into a single framework. This broader perspective helps explain why support for English language learning may remain limited even where stakeholders are active. In this way, the study extends the theory to a rural Tanzanian context and highlights the importance of system-wide collaboration.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that more coherent support from all stakeholders involved in English language education would be beneficial. Teachers may strengthen learning by maintaining learner-centred and communicative approaches that provide more opportunities for meaningful language use. School administrators may also enhance support by offering more consistent motivation, resources, and structured English-focused activities. Education supervisors could contribute more effectively through regular monitoring, constructive feedback, and follow-up on recommendations. Educational authorities play an important role in ensuring that policies and support systems are aligned and work more cohesively. Such alignment is likely to improve both the consistency and the quality of support for English language learning.

The study also suggests several areas for future attention. Continued professional development could help teachers apply communicative methods with greater confidence and consistency. School leaders may find it useful to place greater emphasis on recognising learner progress and sustaining English programmes over time. Supervisors may improve their impact by maintaining closer contact with schools and supporting practical change after visits. Stronger coordination among teachers, school administrators, supervisors, and education officers may reduce fragmentation and improve learner outcomes. A more integrated approach is likely to create more favourable conditions for communicative competence and overall achievement in English language learning.

In general, the study suggests that stakeholders remain committed to supporting English language teaching and learning, although their efforts are often weakened by inconsistency and limited coordination. This may indicate the need for a more collaborative and sustained approach across teachers, school administrators, supervisors, and education officers. Greater attention to shared responsibility and regular follow-up could strengthen the support system for English-language

education. It is also important for school leaders to recognise incremental improvement among lower-performing learners, including those who remain behind the rest of the class but show progress relative to their previous performance. Such recognition could include appropriate rewards or encouragement, since improvement itself may help sustain motivation and confidence. In this way, support for English language learning would not only focus on high achievement but also on steady progress among all learners. Stronger coordination and more responsive stakeholder support may therefore contribute to more meaningful improvements in learner outcomes.

8 References

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Code-Mixing in Tanzanian Telecommunication Advertisements: A Matrix Language Frame Analysis of Kiswahili, *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, and English

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Abstract

*Although code-mixing has traditionally been discouraged in structured communication (including publications and mass media), telecommunications advertisements increasingly use it to engage diverse audiences, particularly younger consumers, and remain competitive. Meanwhile, previous research has predominantly focused on codemixing in everyday conversations and classroom settings, leaving code-mixing in contemporary media underexplored. Consequently, the present study examined the structural forms of code-mixing in telecommunication advertisements in Tanzania, focusing on the interaction among Standard Kiswahili, Kiswahili cha Mtaani (KcM), and English. The study adopted a qualitative approach and purposive sampling to select audiovisual advertisements from major telecommunication companies on social media platforms in Tanzania. Data were analysed qualitatively using Carol Myers-Scotton's (1993, 2006) Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model. The findings reveal four recurrent structural forms of code-mixing: lexical borrowing, intra-word mixing, register mixing, and transitional (nonce) forms, with Kiswahili consistently functioning as the matrix language. English and Kiswahili cha Mtaani provide embedded lexical elements associated with technology, modernity, efficiency, and urban identity. Transitional forms such as *strimu*, *cheki*, *spidi*, and *supa* exhibit partial phonological and morphological adaptation to Kiswahili, suggesting a continuum between code-switching and borrowing. The study concludes that code-mixing in telecommunication advertising is a systematic and strategically deployed communicative resource that enhances audience engagement while projecting technological modernity and urban identity. Further research may examine audience perceptions of code-mixed advertising across different demographic groups.*

Keywords: Code-mixing, *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, Telecommunication Companies, Sequential Pattern, Formal and Informal Writing

1 Introduction

East Africa is a multilingual region where speakers frequently alternate between languages through code-switching and code-mixing. In many contexts, Kiswahili serves as the primary language in mixed-language interactions because it functions as both a national and regional

lingua franca. Standard Swahili is the preferred form in education and standard communication, because its form and grammar are standardised and officially recognised. Despite the centrality of Standard Kiswahili, urban environments have fostered the emergence of *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, an informal and dynamic variety characterised by linguistic flexibility and frequent interaction with English. English also exerts significant influence in Tanzania, serving as the language of instruction in secondary and higher education and plays an important role in official, technological, and commercial domains. As a result, code-mixing between Kiswahili, *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, and English is very common and is widely accepted as part of language development. Nonetheless, code-mixing is often viewed by linguistic purists as a deviation from established norms and thus unsuitable for official communication and formal business contexts.

Due to the interest generated by the phenomenon, there has been considerable research on code-mixing in general and on code-mixing with *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, in particular (Poplack, 1980; Muysken, 2000; Myers-Scotton, 2006). Githiora (2002) and Githinji (2008) demonstrated that code-mixing is closely linked to identity construction and youth culture. Githiora (2002) further showed that Sheng functions as a relatively stable urban variety with Kiswahili syntax and lexical contributions from English and other local languages in Kenya. Meanwhile, Githinji (2008), who investigated speakers' attitudes toward Sheng, reported that perceptions had shifted from stigma to wider social acceptance. His findings highlight the role of KcM in identity construction and youth culture. Moreover, Mazrui (1995), drawing on descriptive linguistic analysis, characterised *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* as an urban variety shaped by extensive interaction between Kiswahili and English. Mazrui (ibid) argued that Kiswahili provides the grammatical base while English contributes lexical items. This asymmetry supports the notion of Kiswahili as the dominant structural language. Across these studies, there is general agreement that Kiswahili serves as a structural base in KcM, while English and other languages contribute lexical material.

Despite these studies, a gap remained in the systematic deployment of multilingual resources in audio-visual advertising discourse, particularly in the Tanzanian context. Githinji (2008), for instance, focuses on attitudinal and sociocultural dimensions, offering limited insight into the grammatical organisation of mixed codes. This reflects a broader trend in the literature, where social motivations for code-mixing are well documented, but structural patterns, which appear central to the art of persuasion in telecommunication adverts, are often skipped. Meanwhile, Mazrui (1995) emphasised grammatical constraints and asymmetry, whereas Githiora and Githinji foreground social function and language identity. Methodologically, earlier studies relied heavily on observational and descriptive approaches, with limited use of systematically analysed datasets. Moreover, they mostly focused on conversational speech, leaving institutional and media discourse largely unexplored.

Against this backdrop, the present study examined the structural forms of code-mixing in telecommunication advertisements, namely Standard Kiswahili, *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, and English. Specifically, the study sought to identify the dominant forms of code-mixing employed in the advertisements and analyse how the forms are organised within Kiswahili morpho-syntactic structures. The analysis was guided by Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, for its practicality in determining the matrix and embedded languages, classifying mixed linguistic elements, and explaining the grammatical organisation of code-mixed constructions. The insights from the study contribute not only to understanding how multilingual resources are strategically employed in contemporary advertising discourse but also to explaining how code-mixing functions as a persuasive marketing strategy for audience engagement, brand positioning, consumer identification, and commercial appeal within Tanzania's competitive telecommunications industry, for other sectors to emulate (Dzahene-Quarshie & Sosoo, 2023; Jimoh et al., 2025).

2 Literature review

Code-mixing is understood as the insertion of linguistic elements from one language into the morpho-syntactic frame of another (Myers-Scotton, 2006). This definition is adopted because it focuses on the structural organisation of mixed-language utterances, which is vivid in telecommunication advertisements. As interesting as it is, codemixing research has been extensively studied, which means the foundational knowledge is already available. For example, Poplack (1980) demonstrated that code-switching is governed by grammatical constraints, notably the equivalence constraint and the free morpheme constraint, thereby challenging earlier assumptions that language alternation is random. Moreover, Myers-Scotton (2006) provided empirical evidence that bilingual utterances are asymmetrically structured, with one language functioning as the matrix language supplying morphosyntactic structure, while the embedded language contributes primarily lexical content. These studies establish the systematic nature of code-mixing, but their focus remains largely on conversational interactions rather than institutional discourse.

In the Tanzanian context, Mwadilile and Mwakapima (2018) examined lexical borrowing and code-mixing in Kiswahili media discourse, demonstrating that English-derived lexical items are frequently adapted into Kiswahili morpho-syntactic structures. Their findings suggest that borrowing and code-mixing exist along a continuum rather than as discrete categories, particularly in urban and media-driven communication. Exceptionally, their study focused primarily on lexical outcomes and did not analyse how code-mixing is deployed in extended discourse such as advertising. That is, their study did not examine how code-mixing is structurally organised within commercial advertising discourse, particularly in telecommunication advertising.

Subsequent empirical studies extended this inquiry into broader media contexts, including radio programmes, television broadcasts, news reporting, and digital communication, highlighting the strategic role of code-mixing in public communication. For example, Muysken (2000) identified insertion, alternation, and congruent localisation as major patterns of code-mixing, though his analysis remains largely sentence-based. Hence, Muysken's work provides a useful typological framework at the sentence-level analysis, but does not sufficiently account for extended discourse structures such as those found in audio-visual advertisements.

In advertising research, scholars have shown that code-mixing and code-switching serve important persuasive, identity-construction, and audience-targeting functions in advertising, social media, and digital communication environments (Tabe, 2023; Putri et al., 2024; Oso & Babalola, 2025). Studies in multilingual settings (e.g., Luna & Peracchio, 2005; Gerritsen et al., 2007) reveal that mixing languages in advertisements enhances audience engagement, signals modernity, and constructs cosmopolitan or youth-oriented identities. These studies further indicate that English is often used to index globalisation and technological advancement, while local languages maintain cultural authenticity and accessibility. Furthermore, studies have highlighted the increasing importance of code-mixing in media, advertising, and digital communication contexts (Mpofu, 2023; Tabe, 2023; Dzahene-Quarshie & Sosoo, 2023), yet limited attention has been paid to how multilingual resources are structurally organised within Tanzanian advertising discourse.

Overall, previous studies provide valuable insights into the social motivations and communicative functions of code-mixing in conversational discourse or on the social and attitudinal dimensions of mixed-language practices, leaving the morpho-syntactic organisation of code-mixing in commercial advertising underexplored. Consequently, the structural mechanisms underlying code-mixing and how that is effective in persuasion in

telecommunication promotional materials remained insufficiently explored. In this light, this study addressed the gap by examining how Standard Kiswahili, English, and *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* interact within telecommunication advertisements using the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model. In doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of code-mixing as both a linguistic phenomenon and a strategic communicative resource in multilingual advertising contexts.

3 Theoretical framework

This study adopted the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model developed by Carol Myers-Scotton (1993, 2006) as its analytical framework. The MLF model is a structural theory of code-mixing that explains how two or more languages interact within a single clause. It is particularly suited to this study because it provides clear principles for analysing insertional code-mixing, which is dominant in Kiswahili–English contact situations.

The model is built on three key principles. First is the Matrix Language (ML) principle, which states that one language supplies the morpho-syntactic frame of the clause. This language determines word order, grammatical relations, and overall well-formedness. Second is the Embedded Language (EL) principle, in which the other language contributes mainly lexical or content elements, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Third is the System Morpheme Principle, which posits that grammatical or functional morphemes (e.g., affixes, agreement markers) are supplied by the matrix language, while the embedded language primarily contributes content morphemes that assign or receive thematic roles. These principles establish an asymmetrical relationship between the languages involved in code-mixing, where the matrix language dominates structurally while the embedded language enriches lexical meaning. This distinction is central to analysing Kiswahili-based mixed codes, in which Kiswahili typically provides the grammatical frame, while English contributes lexical items.

In the context of this study, the MLF model is not merely described but operationalised as an analytical tool. Specifically, it is applied in three ways. First, it is used to identify the matrix language in each advertisement segment by examining which language provides system morphemes and grammatical structure. Second, it guides the classification of code-mixed elements into content morphemes (e.g., English nouns, verbs, adjectives) and system morphemes (Kiswahili affixes and function markers). Third, it is employed to analyse sequential patterns of code-mixing, examining how embedded elements are distributed across utterances and how they conform to or extend Kiswahili morpho-syntactic rules.

While the MLF model has been widely applied to conversational data, its application to structured media discourse remains limited. This study, therefore, extends the model beyond sentence-level analysis to examine how code-mixing operates across audio-visual advertising sequences, where language use is deliberate and strategically organised. In doing so, the study also identifies transitional forms that are not fully accounted for by the model, thereby suggesting the need for contextual adaptation in analysing contemporary multilingual media discourse.

4 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically a qualitative content analysis approach, to examine the sequential and morpho-syntactic patterns of code-mixing in audio-visual advertising discourse. This design is appropriate because the study sought to analyse naturally occurring language use and uncover underlying structural and communicative patterns rather than measure variables quantitatively.

The data for the study consisted of audio-visual advertisements produced by three major telecommunication companies in Tanzania: Airtel, Yas Tanzania (formerly Tigo), and Vodacom. The companies were purposively selected for their dominant market presence and extensive use of multilingual advertising strategies targeting diverse audiences, which are relevant to the research objectives. The analysed advertisements were sourced from the official YouTube and Instagram platforms of Tanzanian telecommunication companies (The URLs of all sampled advertisements are provided in Appendix A to facilitate transparency, replicability, and future verification of the dataset). YouTube and Instagram were selected because they provide stable, publicly accessible, full-length advertisements suitable for transcription and repeated viewing.

A total of fifteen (15) advertisements constituted the initial dataset and were purposively selected for screening and transcription. The advertisements were selected purposively based on four criteria: (i) they originated from the official YouTube or Instagram platforms of the selected telecommunications companies; (ii) they were publicly accessible during the period of data collection; (iii) they contained substantial spoken or written linguistic content suitable for transcription and analysis; and (iv) they exhibited observable instances of interaction between Standard Kiswahili, *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, and English. The sample size was considered sufficient because, at this point in the analysis, saturation was reached, in the sense that no new code-mixing patterns were emerging. Moreover, the study is a qualitative analysis that requires an in-depth examination of a small sample. Following preliminary analysis, only eight (8) advertisements were found to contain substantial and recurring instances of code-mixing involving Standard Kiswahili, *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, and English. These eight advertisements, therefore, formed the final analytical corpus used for the detailed linguistic analysis presented in this study. Furthermore, they provided sufficient recurring instances of code-mixing to allow identification of consistent morpho-syntactic and sequential patterns across the dataset. However, the remaining seven advertisements were excluded because they contained minimal or no relevant code-mixing patterns.

All selected advertisements were transcribed verbatim and segmented into individual utterances. Each utterance was assigned a unique code to facilitate systematic analysis and referencing. The transcribed data were preliminarily organised according to the types of language interaction observed, including Kiswahili-only structures, Kiswahili and *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* mixing, and Kiswahili–English–*Kiswahili cha Mtaani* combinations, before undergoing detailed morpho-syntactic analysis using the Matrix Language Frame model. Furthermore, recurring linguistic patterns were coded and grouped into thematic categories, including transitional switching, noun mixing, intra-word mixing, and modifier mixing.

Data analysis, in line with Carol Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, proceeded in three stages. First, each utterance was examined to identify the matrix language and embedded language(s) based on morpho-syntactic dominance. Second, linguistic elements were classified into system morphemes and content morphemes to determine how code-mixing is structurally realised. Third, the study analysed sequential patterns of code-mixing, focusing on the distribution of nouns, verbs, and modifiers, as well as patterns of insertion, alternation, and emerging transitional forms. Comparative analysis across advertisements was then conducted to identify recurring patterns and communicative strategies in the use of mixed codes. All advertisements analysed were publicly accessible and were used solely for academic and analytical purposes, as provided in the appendix. All advertisements analysed in this study were publicly accessible and obtained from the official social media platforms of the respective telecommunication companies. As a result, this study did not involve human participants; informed consent was not required. Overall, public advertisements were used exclusively for academic research and analytical purposes; no audiovisual content was reproduced for

commercial use, and all excerpts were cited and acknowledged appropriately in accordance with principles of fair academic use and copyright regulations.

5 Results

This study identified four major structural patterns of code-mixing in telecommunication companies' advertisements in Tanzania: transitional/nonce forms, register mixing, lexical borrowing, and intra-word mixing. The results show that lexical mixing was the most frequent pattern observed, particularly through technological and commercial terms such as *data*, *apps*, *internet*, *charger*, *party*, and *food festival*. Intra-word mixing occurred in forms such as *kustrimu*, *kudownloadi*, *kuperuzi*, and *kuapdati*, in which English lexical roots were integrated into Kiswahili verbal morphology. Nonce borrowing involved forms such as *fasta*, *feli*, *simple*, and *float*, while register mixing was realised through forms such as *poa*, *bomba*, *freshi*, and *fasta*.

The results further indicate that Kiswahili consistently functioned as the matrix language, providing the morpho-syntactic framework within which English and *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* elements are embedded. In addition, the patterns demonstrate that code-mixing in telecommunication companies' advertisements is systematic rather than random and reflects both linguistic and communicative motivations.

5.1 Transitional/nonce forms

Nonce borrowing refers to lexical items originating from an embedded language that are inserted into the grammatical frame of a matrix language and exhibit partial phonological or orthographic adaptation without achieving full lexical assimilation. Within Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, such forms differ from established borrowings because they remain closely associated with the source language while functioning within the grammatical system of the recipient language (Myers-Scotton, 1993, 2006). The present study identifies several English-derived forms that occupy this intermediate position in Tanzanian telecommunication advertisements. These forms demonstrate varying degrees of adaptation and therefore support the view that language contact phenomena occur along a continuum extending from code-switching to borrowing rather than as discrete categories (Matras, 2009). In rapidly evolving domains such as advertising, technology, and digital communication, advertisers frequently exploit partially assimilated forms to convey innovation, modernity, and relevance to audiences. Table 1 presents samples of nonce or transitional forms identified in the analysed advertisements.

Table 1: Transitional/nonce forms from telecommunications advertisements

Company	Data	Mixed form	English meaning
Vodacom	4G ya ukweli ni kustrimu bila wasiwasi kwa spidi ya uhakika.	<i>kustrimu</i> , <i>spidi</i>	True 4G means worry-free streaming at reliable speeds.
Vodacom	Cheki kama una 4G ya ukweli kwa kupiga 14901#.	<i>cheki</i>	Check whether you have true 4G by dialling 14901#.
Airtel	Peruzi, strimu na downloadi kwa spidi ya juu.	<i>strimu</i> , <i>spidi</i>	Peruse, stream and download with high speed

Yas	Ukiwa na Yas, unapata huduma za supa zenye kasi na uhakika.	<i>supa</i>	With Yas, you receive super services with speed and reliability
Vodacom	Naomba niwekee hii hela kwenye M-Pesa fasta.	<i>fasta</i>	Please deposit this money into my M-Pesa account quickly.
Vodacom	Aaa simple hivi!	simple	Ah, it is this simple!
Vodacom	Naweza kupata mkopo wa fasta nikaboost mtaji wangu.	boost	I can obtain a quick loan and boost my capital.
Vodacom	Dah! Float yangu haitoshi.	float	Oops! My float balance is insufficient.

Source: YouTube & Instagram

Analysis in Table 1 reveals the extensive use of English-derived lexical items that have undergone varying degrees of phonological, orthographic, and morphological adaptation while remaining embedded within Kiswahili grammatical structures. Across the examples, Kiswahili provides the morpho-syntactic framework, while English contributes lexical items such as stream, check, speed, supa, fasta, boost, and float. These forms retain recognisable links to their English origins but exhibit different levels of integration into Kiswahili. Their occurrence supports Matras' (2009) argument that language contact phenomena often exist along a continuum between code-switching and borrowing rather than as discrete categories.

The form *kustrimu* in the utterance *4G ya ukweli ni kustrimu bila wasiwasi kwa spidi ya uhakika* provides a clear example of transitional borrowing. The item combines the Kiswahili infinitive marker *ku-* with the English-derived root *strimu* (from *stream*). This structure allows the word to function grammatically as a Kiswahili verb while retaining an identifiable English lexical base. The attachment of a Kiswahili verbal prefix demonstrates integration into the grammatical system of the matrix language, yet the root itself remains only partially adapted. Unlike fully assimilated Kiswahili verbs, *strimu* retains a consonant-final structure that is uncommon in native Kiswahili vocabulary. Consequently, the form occupies an intermediate position between code-switching and borrowing. Its use reflects the capacity of Kiswahili morphology to accommodate technological terminology while preserving grammatical well-formedness.

A similar process is evident in *cheki*, derived from the English verb *check*. In the expression *Cheki kama una 4G ya ukweli kwa kupiga 14901#*, the addition of the final vowel *-i* enables the word to conform to Kiswahili phonotactic preferences, which generally favour vowel-final syllables. The item functions as an imperative verb within a Kiswahili clause and therefore participates in Kiswahili grammatical processes. Despite this adaptation, its English origin remains transparent, preventing its classification as a fully established borrowing. Instead, *cheki* represents a transitional form whose integration is advanced enough to permit grammatical participation but not sufficient to erase its foreign source.

The noun *spidi*, derived from *speed*, illustrates a more advanced level of phonological adaptation. Through the addition of the final vowel *-i*, the word conforms to Kiswahili syllable structure and is easily incorporated into ordinary speech. However, although the form appears natural within Kiswahili discourse, it remains closely associated with technological and commercial communication. Its continued recognisability as an English-derived item suggests that it occupies a middle ground between borrowing and code-mixing. Similar observations have been made by Mwadilile and Mwakapima (2018), who note that English-derived

technological vocabulary often undergoes gradual integration due to the rapid growth of digital communication and media discourse.

The form *supa*, derived from *super*, demonstrates another stage of adaptation. In the sentence *Ukiwa na Yas, unapata huduma za supa zenye kasi na uhakika*, the word functions adjectivally within a Kiswahili grammatical environment. The vowel-final ending aligns the item with Kiswahili phonological conventions while preserving its English semantic associations. Its use allows advertisers to project notions of superiority, efficiency, and modernity without relying on more formal Kiswahili alternatives. The form, therefore, illustrates how partial adaptation can enhance accessibility while maintaining the prestige often associated with English lexical resources.

Particularly revealing are the forms *fasta*, *boost*, and *float*, which represent different points along the continuum of lexical integration. The item *fasta*, derived from the English adjective *fast*, has undergone phonological adaptation through the addition of the final vowel *-a*. In expressions such as *Naomba niwekee hii hela kwenye M-Pesa fasta*, the form functions adverbially to mean “quickly” or “immediately.” Although its English source remains evident, its widespread use in urban discourse suggests a relatively advanced level of integration. At the same time, its strong association with informal speech prevents it from being regarded as a fully institutionalised borrowing.

By contrast, *boost* in the expression *nikaboost mtaji wangu* exhibits minimal adaptation. The lexical item retains its original English form yet occurs within a Kiswahili grammatical environment. The surrounding clause structure and verbal morphology are supplied by Kiswahili, confirming the dominance of the matrix language. Nevertheless, the absence of significant phonological modification places *boost* closer to code-switching than borrowing. Its repeated occurrence in telecommunication discourse, however, suggests an ongoing process of lexical integration.

The form *float* presents a similar case. In the expression *float yangu haitoshi*, the item appears within a Kiswahili possessive construction while retaining its English form. Within East African mobile-money discourse, *float* has acquired a specialised local meaning referring to the electronic balance used by transaction agents. This semantic localisation demonstrates integration at the level of meaning, even though phonological adaptation remains limited. The form, therefore, illustrates how lexical items may become embedded in local communicative practices without undergoing complete structural assimilation.

Collectively, the forms in Table 1 illustrate varying degrees of lexical integration from English into Kiswahili. The findings support Matras’ (2009) continuum model and demonstrate that advertisers strategically employ partially assimilated forms to project innovation, efficiency, and technological relevance while maintaining audience comprehension.

5.2 Register mixing

Register mixing refers to the incorporation of linguistic forms associated with a particular social group, speech community, or communicative context into a different linguistic environment to achieve specific pragmatic and stylistic effects. In sociolinguistic studies, register is understood as a variety of language shaped by factors such as social identity, communicative purpose, and situational context (Halliday, 1978; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). In urban Tanzanian settings, *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* is an important social register widely used by young people and urban speakers to express solidarity, informality, group identity, and social affiliation. Within telecommunication advertising discourse, such forms are strategically incorporated into

standard Kiswahili structures to create familiarity and establish closer relationships with target audiences.

From the perspective of Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, register mixing differs from borrowing and code-switching because the mixed forms do not necessarily originate from a different language but rather from a socially marked variety of the same language. Nevertheless, these forms remain embedded within Kiswahili grammatical structures while contributing important social and stylistic meanings. The use of urban expressions in advertising reflects advertisers' attempts to align products and services with youthful lifestyles, contemporary culture, and urban identities. The analysis shows that register mixing serves as a persuasive linguistic resource for enhancing audience engagement while maintaining linguistic accessibility. Table 2 presents examples of register mixing identified in the analysed telecommunication advertisements.

Table 2: Register mixing forms in telecommunications advertisements

Company	Kiswahili sentence	Register form	English Meaning
Airtel	Mtandao huu ni bomba sana.	<i>bomba</i>	This network is excellent
Airtel	Pata ofa poa kwa matumizi ya kila siku.	<i>poa</i>	Get a cool offer for everyday use.
Airtel	Huduma zetu ni freshi muda wote.	<i>freshi</i>	Our services are always excellent.
Airtel	Next time tulifanye bongwe la party mshakaji wangu.	<i>mshakaji</i>	Next time, let's organise a huge party, my friend.
Airtel	Mzee wangu hapa tunadondosha taa.	<i>mzee wangu</i>	My friend, we are having a great time here.
Airtel	Lakini tusivuke mipaka maana simba we ninavyokujua huna dogo.	<i>simba, dogo</i>	But let's not go too far because, champ, knowing you, you never do things halfway.
Vodacom	Warawaraaa! Niambie kakaangu, kama kawa karibu.	<i>kama kawa</i>	What's up, brother? As usual, welcome.
Vodacom	Naomba niwekee hii hela kwenye M-Pesa fasta.	<i>fasta</i>	Please deposit this money into my M-Pesa account quickly.
Vodacom	Eeh kumbe naweza kupata mkopo wa fasta nikaboost mtaji wangu?	<i>fasta</i>	Really, can I get a quick loan and boost my capital?
Yas (Tigo)	Mzee wangu, ukiwa na Yas unapata ofa kali kila siku.	<i>mzee wangu</i>	My friend, with Yas, you get great offers every day.
Yas (Tigo)	Mshakaji wangu, hamia Yas upate intaneti ya uhakika.	<i>mshakaji</i>	My friend, switch to Yas and enjoy reliable internet.
Yas (Tigo)	Ofa za Yas ni bomba kwa vijana wa mjini	<i>bomba</i>	Yas offers are excellent for urban youth.

Source: YouTube & Instagram

The analysis in Table 2 reveals the extensive use of *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* and urban colloquial expressions in telecommunications advertisements. The data contain forms such as *bomba*, *poa*, *freshi*, *mshakaji*, *mzee wangu*, *simba*, *dogo*, *fasta*, and *kama kawa*, all of which function as

socially marked expressions associated with urban youth speech. Consistent with Eckert's (2000) notion of social indexing, these expressions allow advertisers to project youthful identities, social relevance, and group affiliation.

From the perspective of Myers-Scotton's (1993, 2006) Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, Kiswahili remains the matrix language throughout the constructions observed in the data. Expressions such as *Mtandao huu ni bomba sana*, *Pata ofa poa kwa matumizi ya kila siku*, and *Mzee wangu, ukiwa na Yas unapata ofa kali kila siku* maintain Kiswahili grammatical structure despite incorporating socially marked urban forms. The inserted expressions do not alter clause organisation or grammatical relations; rather, they contribute stylistic and interpersonal meaning. Consequently, register mixing in these advertisements operates primarily at the discourse level rather than the morpho-syntactic level. This finding supports Muysken's (2000) observation that language mixing may serve pragmatic and identity-related functions beyond the transfer of lexical meaning.

A closer examination of the individual forms demonstrates how advertisers exploit *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* to create social proximity with audiences. The expression *bomba*, found in examples such as *Mtandao huu ni bomba sana* and *Ofa za Yas ni bomba kwa vijana wa mjini*, functions as a colloquial adjective meaning "excellent" or "high quality." Although its literal meaning in standard Kiswahili is "pipe," it has undergone semantic extension and now serves as a positive evaluative term in urban discourse. By selecting *bomba* rather than a more formal equivalent such as *bora* or *nzuri*, advertisers align their messages with contemporary youth language and create a more conversational tone. Similarly, *poa* functions as a colloquial evaluative adjective meaning "cool" or "good" and reinforces the informal, youth-oriented tone created by expressions such as *bomba*.

The expression *freshi* illustrates another important dimension of register mixing. Although historically derived from the English adjective *fresh*, its widespread circulation in *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* has given it a distinct social function within local speech communities. In the statement *Huduma zetu ni freshi muda wote*, the word operates as a colloquial adjective meaning "excellent," "fashionable," or "up-to-date." Its significance lies less in its English origin than in its association with youthful urban identity. This demonstrates that register mixing may involve forms that have become socially embedded and are valued primarily for their stylistic effect rather than their foreign source.

Interpersonal expressions such as *mshakaji* and *mzee wangu* further highlight the social role of register mixing. In standard commercial communication, advertisers would normally employ neutral or formal forms of address. However, utterances such as *Next time tulifanye bongwe la party mshakaji wangu* and *Mzee wangu, ukiwa na Yas unapata ofa kali kila siku* deliberately adopt the language of friendship and peer interaction. *Mshakaji* functions as an informal equivalent of "friend" or "buddy," while *mzee wangu* literally means "my elder" but is used pragmatically to express familiarity, respect, and camaraderie. Their use transforms the advertiser-consumer relationship from a formal transactional encounter into a more personal and socially intimate interaction.

Similarly, *simba* "champion" or "hero" and *dogo* "young person" function as informal address terms that reinforce social identity and reproduce the conversational style of urban youth interaction. Another notable example is *kama kawa*, which appears in the Vodacom advertisement *Warawaraaa! Niambie kakaangu, kama kawa karibu*. Literally meaning "as usual," the expression has become a conventional colloquial marker of familiarity and routine interaction. It thus creates a sense of continuity and establishes a social connection between the speaker and the audience in these advertisements. The phrase, therefore, contributes to the

conversational authenticity that advertisers seek to achieve in audience-oriented communication.

Particularly interesting is the form *fasta*, which occupies a hybrid position between nonce borrowing and register mixing. Structurally, it originates from the English adjective *fast* and exhibits phonological adaptation through the addition of the final vowel *-a*, consistent with Kiswahili phonotactic patterns. However, its widespread use in urban speech has transformed it into a recognised feature of *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*. In expressions such as *Naomba niwekee hii hela kwenye M-Pesa fasta* and *Naweza kupata mkopo wa fasta nikaboost mtaji wangu*, the term functions as a colloquial adverb meaning “quickly” or “immediately.” Its presence demonstrates how linguistic forms may move across categories, evolving from borrowed items into socially meaningful register markers.

The findings support observations by Githiora (2002) and Githinji (2008) that urban linguistic varieties serve as important resources for identity construction and social affiliation. The *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* forms identified in Table 2 are therefore not random slang expressions but socially meaningful linguistic resources that advertisers appropriate to enhance audience engagement, project authenticity, and strengthen brand appeal. Through register mixing, telecommunication companies successfully position themselves as modern, accessible, and closely connected to the everyday experiences of urban consumers.

5.3 Lexical borrowing

Lexical borrowing refers to the process through which lexical items from one language become incorporated into another language and gradually acquire acceptance within the recipient language community. Unlike nonce borrowings, which remain partially assimilated and context-dependent, lexical borrowings exhibit a greater degree of phonological, orthographic, and semantic integration and often become established elements of everyday usage (Matras, 2009; Myers-Scotton, 2006). In Kiswahili, extensive contact with English has contributed to the incorporation of numerous lexical items, particularly within technological, commercial, educational, and digital domains.

Within Myers-Scotton’s Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, lexical borrowings differ from code-switches because they function as accepted lexical items within the matrix language rather than as temporary insertions from an embedded language. Such forms are frequently encountered in telecommunication discourse, where technological innovation introduces concepts that may lack widely used indigenous equivalents. Consequently, advertisers often employ established borrowed forms to communicate technical information efficiently while ensuring audience comprehension. The presence of these forms illustrates the dynamic nature of language contact and demonstrates how Kiswahili continues to expand its lexical inventory in response to technological and socio-economic developments. Table 3 presents examples of lexical borrowings identified in the analysed telecommunication advertisements.

Table 3: Lexical borrowing forms in telecommunications advertisements

Company	Kiswahili sentence	Borrowed form	English meaning
Vodacom	Kutuma na kupokea email au barua pepe zenye viambatanisho vyenye <i>saizi</i> kubwa.	<i>Saizi</i>	To send and receive emails with large attachments.

Vodacom	Kutembelea mitandao ya kijamii bila kudhibiti <i>data</i> .	<i>Data</i>	Data used through the network may affect your usage.
Vodacom	Jumbe mbalimbali za <i>aplikesheni</i> kutoka mitandao ya kijamii.	<i>Aplikesheni</i>	Various application messages from social media platforms arrive quickly.
Yas	Hakikisha <i>wifi</i> yako inalindwa kwa neno la siri.	<i>Wifi</i>	Ensure that your Wi-Fi is protected with a password.
Vodacom	Unaweza kucheza michezo ya <i>kompyuta</i> moja kwa moja mtandaoni.	<i>Kompyuta</i>	You can play computer games directly online.
Vodacom	Unaweza kutazama <i>video</i> moja kwa moja kupitia intaneti ya kasi	<i>Video</i>	You can watch videos directly through high-speed internet.
Yas	Tuma taarifa zako kupitia <i>aplikesheni</i> ya Yas kwa urahisi zaidi.	<i>Aplikesheni</i>	Send your information through the Yas application more easily.
Yas	Furahia matumizi ya intaneti yenye kasi ya 5G.	<i>Intaneti</i>	Enjoy high-speed 5G internet services.
Airtel	Leo nitakueleza vitu vya msingi kuhusiana na intaneti yako ya 4G.	<i>Intaneti</i>	Today, I will explain the basics of your 4G internet.
Airtel	Ongeza ubora wa video unazozistirim.	<i>Video</i>	Improve the video quality you stream.
Airtel	Zuia simu yako kupokea barua pepe bila ruhusa.	<i>barua pepe</i>	Prevent your phone from receiving emails without permission
Vodacom	Data zinazotumika kupitia virtual private network zinaweza kuathiri matumizi yako.	<i>Data</i>	Data used through a virtual private network may affect your usage.
Vodacom	Hakikisha <i>wifi</i> yako inalindwa kwa neno la siri.	<i>Wifi</i>	Ensure your Wi-Fi is protected with a password.
Vodacom	Unaweza kucheza michezo ya kompyuta moja kwa moja mtandaoni.	<i>Kompyuta</i>	You can play computer games directly online.
Yas (Tigo)	Furahia matumizi ya intaneti yenye kasi ya 5G.	<i>Intaneti</i>	Enjoy high-speed 5G internet services.
Yas (Tigo)	Pakua apps zako zote kwa haraka zaidi kupitia mtandao wa Yas.	<i>Apps</i>	Download all your apps faster through the Yas network
Yas (Tigo)	Tazama video zako bila kukatika kwa kutumia bando la Yas.	<i>Video</i>	Watch your videos uninterrupted with a Yas bundle.

Source: YouTube & Instagram

The analysis in Table 3 demonstrates that lexical borrowing is one of the most prominent forms of language contact observed in Tanzanian telecommunication advertisements. The table presents English-derived lexical items that have undergone sufficient phonological,

orthographic, and semantic adaptation to function as established elements in Kiswahili discourse. The borrowed forms identified in the advertisements occur naturally within Kiswahili sentence structures and primarily denote technological and digital concepts associated with telecommunication services. Their recurrent use across advertisements suggests that they are no longer perceived merely as foreign insertions but have become part of the lexical resources available to Kiswahili speakers in contemporary communication.

Evidence in Table 3 shows frequent lexical borrowings such as *intaneti*, *kompyuta*, *waifai*, *data*, *video*, *aplikesheni*, and *saizi*. Although these forms originated from English, they have become established elements of contemporary Kiswahili discourse and occur naturally within Kiswahili grammatical structures. Their widespread use reflects the expansion of Kiswahili technological vocabulary and supports observations that technological innovation accelerates lexical borrowing and lexical integration (Mdee & Abdulaziz, 2001; Mwadilile & Mwakapima, 2018). Consistent with Myers-Scotton's (1993, 2006) Matrix Language Frame model, Kiswahili provides the grammatical framework while the borrowed forms contribute lexical content associated with technology and digital communication. Expressions such as *intaneti* and *kompyuta* function as ordinary nouns within Kiswahili sentence structures, confirming the dominant morpho-syntactic role of Kiswahili. A closer examination of the borrowed forms reveals varying degrees of adaptation. The form *intaneti*, derived from the English word *internet*, exhibits clear orthographic and phonological modification. The insertion of vowels between consonant clusters reflects adaptation to Kiswahili phonotactic constraints, which generally favour open syllables and vowel-final structures. Similarly, *kompyuta* originates from the English word *computer* but has undergone substantial phonological reshaping to conform to Kiswahili pronunciation patterns. The transformation from *computer* to *kompyuta* illustrates a high degree of lexical integration, indicating that the form has become an established borrowing rather than a temporary code-mixed insertion.

The forms *aplikesheni* and *saizi* display comparable patterns of adaptation. *Applikesheni*, derived from *application*, has been restructured to align with Kiswahili orthographic conventions and syllable structure, while *saizi*, derived from *size*, demonstrates phonological modification through vowel insertion and orthographic adjustment. These adaptations enable the borrowed forms to conform more closely to Kiswahili pronunciation patterns while preserving their original meanings. Their repeated occurrence across advertisements suggests that they are widely recognised and understood by audiences, thereby facilitating efficient communication of technical concepts. Forms such as *video*, *data*, and *wifi* retain closer resemblance to their English source forms but function as accepted lexical items within Kiswahili discourse. Their integration into Kiswahili grammatical structures demonstrates that extensive phonological adaptation is not a prerequisite for lexical borrowing, particularly in rapidly evolving technological domains.

The findings indicate that lexical borrowing exists along a continuum of integration, ranging from highly assimilated forms such as *intaneti* and *kompyuta* to less adapted items such as *apps* and *wifi*. This supports Matras' (2009) view that language-contact phenomena evolve gradually through repeated use and social acceptance.

5.4 Intra-word mixing

Intra-word mixing refers to a form of code-mixing in which morphemes from different languages occur within a single lexical item. This phenomenon is particularly evident when grammatical morphemes from a matrix language combine with lexical roots derived from an embedded language to form hybrid linguistic constructions (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Muysken, 2000). Such forms provide important evidence of structural interaction between languages

because the mixing occurs within word boundaries rather than between separate words or phrases.

According to Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, intra-word mixing illustrates the dominance of the matrix language in governing grammatical structure while permitting the insertion of lexical material from an embedded language. In Kiswahili-English contact situations, this process commonly involves attaching Kiswahili verbal morphology to English lexical roots, resulting in hybrid forms that conform to Kiswahili grammatical requirements while retaining English lexical meaning. The occurrence of such constructions in telecommunication advertisements reflects the influence of technological discourse, globalisation, and digital communication practices. These mixed forms allow advertisers to express technologically relevant concepts while simultaneously maintaining the grammatical integrity of Kiswahili. Table 4 presents examples of intra-word mixing identified in the analysed telecommunication advertisements.

Table 4: Intra-word mixing forms

Company	Kiswahili sentence	Intra-word form	English meaning
Vodacom	4G ya ukweli ni kustrimu bila wasiwasi.	<i>kustrimu</i>	True 4G means streaming without worry.
Vodacom	Unaweza kuapdeti programu zako bila kutumia muda mwingi.	<i>kuapdeti</i>	You can update your applications without spending much time.
Airtel	Kuperuzi kwa spidi ya juu.	<i>kuperuzi</i>	Browsing at high speed.
Airtel	Wateja wanaweza kuchat na marafiki wao bila kikomo.	<i>kuchati</i>	Customers can chat with their friends without limits.
Vodacom	Kudownloadi na kuangalia video online.	<i>kudownloadi</i>	To download and watch videos online.
Airtel	Kuperuzi, kustrimu na kudownloadi kwa spidi ya juu ukitumia Airtel 5G.	<i>kuperuzi/kustrimu kudownloadi</i>	Browse, stream and download at speed
Airtel	Na hapo bado kuna cha kudownloadi na kuchati.	<i>kudownloadi, kuchati</i>	There is still enough to download and chat.
Yas	Na hiyo elfu nne niliyosevu kila wiki imenisaidia sana.	<i>niliyosevu</i>	And that four thousand I saved every week has helped me greatly.
Airtel	Baby umeenjoy kasi ya Airtel 5G?	<i>umeenjoyi</i>	Baby, have you enjoyed Airtel 5G's speed?

Source: YouTube and Instagram

The analysis in Table 4 demonstrates intra-word mixing through hybrid constructions in which Kiswahili morphology combines with English lexical roots within a single lexical item. Unlike lexical borrowing, where an entire lexical item is incorporated into the recipient language, intra-word mixing involves the interaction of morphemes from two linguistic systems within the same word boundary. The forms identified in the table illustrate the operation of Myers-

Scotton's (1993, 2006) Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, whereby Kiswahili supplies the grammatical structure while English contributes lexical content. The resulting constructions conform to Kiswahili morpho-syntactic requirements and exemplify how telecommunication advertisements exploit linguistic hybridity to communicate technological concepts in a manner that is both accessible and socially relevant to target audiences.

The analysis presented in Table 4 reveals several instances in which English-derived lexical verbs occur in predominantly Kiswahili utterances. Representative examples include *kustrimu*, *kudownloadi*, *kuperuzi*, *kuapdati*, *kuchati*, *niliyosevu*, and *umeenjoyi*. These forms are structurally significant because they combine English lexical roots with Kiswahili grammatical morphology. In *kustrimu*, for example, the Kiswahili infinitive marker *ku-* is attached to the English-derived root *strimu* (stream), creating a hybrid verb that functions according to Kiswahili grammatical conventions. Similarly, *kudownloadi* combines the Kiswahili infinitive marker with the English root *download*, while *kuapdati* incorporates the English lexical root *update* into a Kiswahili verbal structure. These constructions illustrate a high degree of grammatical integration and provide clear evidence of interaction between Kiswahili and English within a single lexical unit.

Particularly revealing are forms such as *niliyosevu* and *umeenjoyi*, which exhibit more complex levels of morphological integration. In *niliyosevu*, the English root *save* occurs within a Kiswahili relative construction. The form contains Kiswahili subject agreement and tense markers that indicate a completed action while simultaneously embedding the English lexical root. Likewise, *umeenjoyi* combines the English root *enjoy* with the Kiswahili perfect aspect marker *ume-*, producing a hybrid verb meaning "you have enjoyed." These examples demonstrate that English lexical material can be incorporated into highly complex Kiswahili verbal structures without disrupting grammatical well-formedness. There is also often an internal vowel change or vowel epenthesis to conform to the Swahili to satisfy Kiswahili phonotactic constraints. This explains the changes, for example, from *save* to *sevu* or from *update* to *apdeti*. The change from *stream* to *strimu* or *save* to *sevu* is explained by the phonological adaptation, in this case, where diphthongs are monophthongised in Swahili. Such constructions provide strong evidence for the dominance of Kiswahili as the matrix language, as the grammatical information required for sentence interpretation is supplied entirely by Kiswahili morphology.

The form *kuperuzi* deserves particular attention because it represents a more advanced stage of integration than some of the other examples. Derived from the English verb *browse*, the form has undergone substantial phonological and orthographic adaptation in addition to receiving the Kiswahili infinitive marker *ku-*. Unlike forms such as *kudownloadi* and *kuapdeti*, which retain much of their English orthographic appearance, *kuperuzi* reflects greater conformity to Kiswahili phonological patterns. This suggests that intra-word mixing itself may occur along a continuum, with some forms exhibiting minimal adaptation and others showing considerable assimilation into Kiswahili linguistic structures.

The findings support Omondi's (1999) observation that Kiswahili verbal morphology strongly constrains grammatical well-formedness even in mixed constructions. Kiswahili verbs follow an agglutinative structure consisting of prefixes, infixes, roots, and suffixes, with each component contributing specific grammatical information. When English lexical verbs are incorporated into Kiswahili discourse, they occupy the verb-root position while Kiswahili affixes remain intact. This means that the grammatical integrity of the clause is maintained regardless of the language from which the lexical root originates.

The prevalence of intra-word mixing in the advertisements is closely related to the technological nature of telecommunication discourse. Many of the concepts promoted by mobile network providers originate from digital environments where English terminology dominates globally. As a result, advertisers frequently employ English lexical roots while adapting them to Kiswahili grammatical structures to ensure both accuracy and audience accessibility. Forms such as *kustrim*, *kudownloadi*, and *kuchati* allow advertisers to communicate technological actions efficiently while preserving the grammatical familiarity of Kiswahili. This strategy enables audiences to understand modern technological concepts without requiring complete reliance on English.

The recurrent use of these hybrid forms also demonstrates that intra-word mixing serves important communicative and stylistic functions. Beyond their grammatical significance, the forms project modernity, technological sophistication, and contemporary urban identity. Similar observations have been made in studies of digital communication and social media discourse, where English technological vocabulary is frequently integrated into local grammatical systems (Tabe, 2023; Putri et al., 2024). In the context of telecommunication advertising, such forms help position the advertised products and services as innovative and technologically advanced while remaining accessible to Kiswahili-speaking audiences.

6 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that code-mixing in Tanzanian telecommunication advertisements functions as both a linguistic phenomenon and a strategic communicative resource. Across all four forms identified—transitional/nonce forms, register mixing, lexical borrowing, and intra-word mixing—Kiswahili consistently provides the grammatical framework within which English-derived lexical items and *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* expressions are embedded. This pattern supports Myers-Scotton's (1993, 2006) Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, which predicts that the matrix language supplies the morpho-syntactic structure while the embedded language contributes lexical content. The findings, therefore, confirm that code-mixing in advertising discourse is systematic and constrained by grammatical principles rather than occurring randomly.

The prominence of lexical borrowing further supports observations by Muysken (2000) and Myers-Scotton (2006) that lexical items, particularly nouns, are highly transferable in language-contact situations. Borrowed forms such as *data*, *wifi*, *intaneti*, *kompyuta*, *apps*, *video*, and *aplikesheni* occur naturally within Kiswahili grammatical structures and are primarily associated with technology and digital communication. Similar patterns have been reported in media and advertising discourse, where English-derived lexical items are used to index innovation, modernity, and global connectivity while remaining accessible to local audiences (Dzahene-Quarshie & Sosoo, 2023; Mpofu, 2023). The findings, therefore, suggest that lexical borrowing has become an important mechanism through which Kiswahili expands its technological vocabulary in response to contemporary communication needs.

The occurrence of intra-word mixing further demonstrates the structural flexibility of Kiswahili. Forms such as *kustrimu*, *kudownloadi*, *kuapdati*, *kuchati*, *niliyosevu*, and *umeenjoy* show that English lexical roots can be integrated into Kiswahili verbal morphology without disrupting grammatical well-formedness. These findings are consistent with studies of digital communication and social media discourse, which show that English technological vocabulary is frequently incorporated into local grammatical systems through hybrid constructions (Tabe, 2023; Putri et al., 2024). The findings, therefore, highlight the adaptability of Kiswahili in accommodating emerging technological concepts while maintaining its grammatical integrity.

Another significant finding is the role of *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* in advertising discourse. Expressions such as *bomba*, *poa*, *freshi*, *mshakaji*, *mzee wangu*, and *fasta* contribute informality, social proximity, and urban youth identity. Their use enables advertisers to align their products with the linguistic practices of target audiences while reducing the social distance between brands and consumers. These findings support studies that view language mixing in advertising as a persuasive strategy for audience engagement, consumer identification, and brand positioning (Dzahene-Quarshie & Sosoo, 2023; Jimoh et al., 2025; Oso & Babalola, 2025).

The study also provides evidence that borrowing, code-mixing, and lexical adaptation operate along a continuum rather than as discrete categories. Transitional forms such as *cheki*, *spidi*, *supa*, *fasta*, *boost*, and *float* exhibit different levels of assimilation into Kiswahili while maintaining identifiable links to English. This observation supports Matras' (2009) continuum model and suggests that media discourse plays an important role in accelerating linguistic innovation. By focusing on telecommunication advertisements, the study extends existing scholarship on language contact in African multilingual settings and demonstrates how linguistic choices simultaneously serve communicative, social, and commercial purposes.

7 Conclusion

This study examined the structural forms of code-mixing in Tanzanian telecommunication advertisements, focusing on the interaction between English, Standard Kiswahili, and *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*. Guided by Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, the analysis identified four major forms of code-mixing: transitional/nonce forms, register mixing, lexical borrowing, and intra-word mixing. Among these, lexical borrowing emerged as the most frequent pattern, particularly in relation to technological and digital vocabulary. The findings further revealed that English-derived lexical items and *Kiswahili cha Mtaani* expressions are systematically incorporated into Kiswahili grammatical structures, with Kiswahili consistently functioning as the matrix language.

The study demonstrates that code-mixing in telecommunication advertising is not random but a structured linguistic practice that serves important communicative and commercial functions. Through the strategic combination of English, Standard Kiswahili, and *Kiswahili cha Mtaani*, advertisers project modernity, technological relevance, youth identity, and local cultural affiliation. These linguistic choices enable telecommunication companies to make their messages more relatable, persuasive, and accessible to diverse audiences.

The findings have important implications for advertising practice, language planning, and communication research. For advertisers, the results suggest that controlled and audience-sensitive code-mixing can enhance consumer engagement and brand positioning. For language planners and regulatory bodies, the findings demonstrate that code-mixing should be understood as a functional communicative resource that reflects contemporary language use rather than as a deviation from linguistic norms. The study, therefore, highlights the need for greater recognition of multilingual communication practices in media and advertising contexts.

The study contributes to scholarship on language contact by demonstrating the applicability of the Matrix Language Frame model to advertising discourse and by showing how borrowing, code-mixing, and lexical adaptation operate along a continuum. Future studies may extend this research to other advertising sectors, investigate audience attitudes towards mixed-language advertisements, and explore how factors such as age, education, and geographical location influence the interpretation and effectiveness of code-mixed messages.

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Euphemism Preferences among Swahili-speaking Netizens in Death-related Communication

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Abstract

Death is a culturally sensitive and linguistically distasteful topic, often requiring euphemisms to refer to it. While previous studies on death-related euphemisms in Swahili have mainly relied on questionnaire-based data, little attention has been given to naturally occurring data in digital communication among Swahili-speaking netizens. Consequently, the present study examined the euphemistic language used by Swahili-speaking netizens when discussing death. Specifically, the study investigated the nature of expressions used to talk about four subthemes related to death, namely dying, the corpse, the grave, and burial, as well as the linguistic strategies underlying their formation. The study is mainly grounded in Politeness Theory and supported by Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The study's data stemmed from naturally occurring interactions on JamiiForums, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Data collection involved observing written comments on JamiiForums and WhatsApp, and listening to YouTube discussions about death. The collected data were analysed qualitatively. The findings indicate that euphemistic language in digital communication about death among Swahili speakers is mainly shaped by their cultural norms, religious beliefs, and social considerations of politeness. Furthermore, the choice of euphemism is mainly determined by the interaction setting on these digital platforms, where users make linguistic choices depending on the audience and the privacy of communication. The identified euphemisms are expressed through metaphors, slang, borrowing, and circumlocution. By identifying and describing contemporary euphemisms used in actual digital communication about death-related issues, and by examining the influence of culture and politeness on their use, this study provides insights into the evolution of euphemistic expressions in Swahili sociopragmatics and digital communication.

Keywords: Digital death euphemisms, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Netnography, Politeness Theory, Swahili death discourse, Swahili-speaking netizens, Swahili taboos

1 Introduction

In different cultures, certain aspects of human experience are perceived as taboo, leading people to avoid referring to them directly (Crespo-Fernández, 2005, 2006; Isaacs et al., 2015; Wang, 2022). To refer to such aspects, one needs to use euphemisms. Euphemisms are linguistic strategies through which one can make statements that may be socially, culturally, or emotionally sensitive softer (Cameron, 1995; Gao, 2013; McGlone et al., 2006). One of the aspects most commonly euphemised is that of death. Death is one of the life experiences considered highly taboo in almost all communities. Due to its sensitivity, it cannot be discussed without linguistic safeguards (Crespo-Fernández, 2006; 2023). Consequently, it has become a significant source of euphemisms, as individuals strive to discuss it indirectly and politely.

Over the centuries, death was a normal event in different communities (Donnelly, 1999). Thus, it was spoken openly and directly, and members of communities treated it as a part of life. As time progressed, people started to consider it a taboo (Lakasing, 2014). This stirred people to speak of it using coded language. Although many reasons are associated with people's desire to avoid discussing the subject of death explicitly, the major one is fear of it (Allan & Burridge, 1991; Bultnick, 1998; Crespo-Fernández, 2006; Jamet, 2010; Kuczok, 2016). Another reason for talking about death euphemistically is the desire to avoid disturbing the family members of the departed person (Enright, 2004). Hence, the use of euphemisms to speak about death is a strategy used to expel it from people's consciousness.

Although people try to avoid mentioning the topic of death, they have not fully succeeded. This is because there are certain circumstances that necessitate the subject to be mentioned. For this reason, the subject has prompted the development of a spectrum of euphemistic expressions for discussing it politely. Allan and Burridge (2006) report instances where some people resort to using some gestures just to avoid mentioning the notion of death. They report cases where gestures, such as a finger-cross or a charm or a knock on wood, are used instead of mentioning death openly. They further report on cases where people opt to remain quiet as a strategy to avoid mentioning the notion of death and dying. All these strategies are used to circumvent the explicit mention of the subject of death.

Although there exists extensive academic literature on euphemisms of death in various languages and cultures (Adepoju, 2016; Barker, 2000; Bultnick, 1998; Cheung & Ho, 2004; Crespo-Fernández, 2006; Hume, 2000; James, 1981; Kuczok, 2016; Marín-Arrese, 1996; Marshall, 2006; Miller-Lewis et al., 2021; Ong'onda, 2018; Owiredu, 2020; Özçalışkan, 2003; Phillips, 2007; Sexton, 1997; Sun, 2005; Tsai, 2010; Yakub & Agyekum, 2022), little attention has been given to the euphemisms of death in Swahili, especially in digital communication. That is, the available studies address several other aspects of Swahili euphemisms in Tanzania, even including death euphemism, but not in the context of mass media (Charles, 2023; Charles & Ochieng, 2023a, 2023b). On the other hand, people's interactions are now increasingly becoming digitalised. For instance, in Tanzania, with an estimated population of 61.7 million (NBS, 2022), approximately 56.3 million people have access to the internet (TCRA, 2025). This means that many individuals interact digitally, thereby widening the creation and use of new linguistic expressions, such as euphemisms, every day. This makes naturally occurring data from digital discourse a valuable resource for research on euphemisms, which cannot be identified through questionnaire surveys, as in previous studies on euphemisms in Tanzania. Currently, little is known about how modern-day Swahili-speaking populations use euphemisms in talking about death online. Such a situation leaves a contextual, methodological, and empirical gap.

The current study attempts to fill the highlighted gap by identifying and analysing euphemisms used by Swahili speakers in their discussions of death on digital platforms that use the Swahili language. This study, therefore, contributes to the existing literature on euphemisms, death discourse, and digital communication, while also documenting current usage of the Swahili language, particularly death-related euphemisms. This is expected to provide insight into the interaction among language, culture, and technology and serve as a useful source of information for scholars interested in Swahili sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Overall, the study enhances understanding of how modern Swahili speakers navigate culturally prescribed demands for politeness and respect in their digital communication regarding death.

2 Theoretical framework

The leading theoretical framework that guides this study is Politeness Theory. Politeness Theory was developed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). It provides foundational explanations of how politeness can be used to save interlocutors' faces in communication. This theory arose from the extension of Goffman's (1955, 1967) notion of face. Goffman was the first one to come up with the concept of face. According to her, face is an individual's self-image delineated in terms of approved social attributes. In developing this concept further, Brown and Levinson postulated that every individual has two types of face: positive face, which concerns the desire to be appreciated, approved of, and liked by others, and negative face, which concerns the need to act freely and independently of others. Consequently, they came up with positive politeness, which involves strategies geared towards satisfying the hearer's positive face by showing solidarity, approval, and friendliness, while negative politeness involves strategies that help reduce imposition on the hearer. Thus, successful communication depends on interlocutors employing appropriate politeness strategies to maintain each other's face and promote harmonious social interaction. The relevance of this theory to the present study lies in the fact that euphemisms for death represent one way for speakers to mitigate the potential danger of offending the interlocutor's face by using appropriate linguistic techniques when dealing with such an emotionally sensitive topic.

In addition, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory was employed in the study. This theory derives its roots from the groundbreaking work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*. Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that metaphor is not just a rhetorical or stylistic device but rather a basic cognitive phenomenon by which people represent and comprehend their abstract experiences using their concrete experiences. According to theory, metaphor entails the transfer of knowledge between the source and target domains, with the former being more concrete than the latter. The mappings between these conceptual structures affect human thinking, reasoning, and communication regarding complicated and emotive issues of life. Since death is both a very abstract and an emotionally sensitive concept, speakers often use metaphorical representations to make it easier to understand and acceptable socially. For instance, death can be thought of as a journey, a going away, a passing, or simply a form of rest. This enables speakers to talk about it in roundabout ways without having to deal with its emotional impact. This theory thus comes in handy to analyse the present study since most euphemisms used by Swahili speakers for death are metaphorically motivated.

3. Methodology

This is a netnographic study complemented by a qualitative approach. The study explored the euphemistic language used by Swahili-speaking netizens to convey information about death by purposively collecting data from JamiiForums, WhatsApp, and YouTube. These sites were chosen because they serve as significant digital spaces where Swahili speakers can naturally discuss various issues, including death, the corpse, burial, and the announcement of death-related events. The data were collected by watching and listening to YouTube videos and reading posts and comments from netizens on the other two online platforms (JamiiForums and WhatsApp). In those posts, the euphemistic expressions used in the discourse surrounding death were identified and recorded for analysis.

To enable data collection, the researcher employed several prompts (involving keywords and key phrases) to locate the posts on the subjects under study. On YouTube, the search terms included obituaries, funeral services, and interviews about death-related subjects. Examples of prompts used in Swahili included “tanzia” (obituary), “mazishi” (burial), “kufariki dunia” (passing away), and “kuzika” (burying), among others. Such prompts led the researcher to the YouTube videos containing the content of death subjects. The researcher then watched the videos and noted the euphemisms that surfaced. On JamiiForums, the researcher used various keywords related to death. Some of the keywords used include “tanzia” (obituary), “mazishi” (burial), and “kufariki dunia” (passing away), among others. These keywords are common in contexts related to death and mourning, making it easier to access the required data. Data from six WhatsApp groups were collected after obtaining permission from their members. Six WhatsApp groups were involved in the study. The inclusion of these groups, of which I was a member, was based on the observed use of euphemisms for death in both interesting and creative ways, which inspired me to explore this topic in depth. The researcher focused on the announcement of someone’s death and the comments that followed. The study also involved 29 threads from JamiiForums and 17 YouTube channels, which provided data up to the point of saturation.

The ethical aspects were considered during the collection and analysis of the data. All the data collected was anonymised, and any information such as usernames, phone numbers, and anything that could have identified any participant was stripped away in order to protect their privacy and confidentiality. On all digital platforms involved in the study, only messages related to the research topic were considered. Direct links are also shared for transparency, except for data extracted from WhatsApp (which do not have links), marked N/A (not applicable) in the link column. During data presentation and analysis, minor changes were made to remove direct quotes and details about the deceased to protect individuals’ identities and privacy. Where necessary, pseudonyms or pronouns were used to replace real names. These changes were made without distorting the original meaning of the message. Data analysis was done with utmost care and respect.

The data were analysed using a qualitative content and discourse-based approach. To start with, all data gathered from JamiiForums, WhatsApp, and YouTube were systematically collated and carefully read several times to become familiarised with them. Next, euphemistic expressions referring to death were identified based on their use in the context and their indirect reference to death-related notions. Then, the euphemistic terms identified were systematically coded and organised in the form of data in a table. After that, the data were systematically categorised depending on the semantic fields pertaining to death-related references, such as euphemisms related to dying, dead body, the act of burying, and euphemisms about the grave. Finally, every category was analysed to establish the linguistic strategies used in the creation of euphemisms, including the use of metaphor, borrowing, circumlocution, and slang. The classification of euphemistic expressions relied upon semantics and context. The first category consisted of expressions denoting the phenomenon of dying, targeting euphemisms implying the transition from life to death. The second group consisted of linguistic expressions employed to avoid mentioning the corpse directly. The third category consisted of expressions used to talk about burial practices, while the fourth category included expressions denoting the grave. Classification was based on context, not on the isolated lexical meanings of expressions, to ensure it reflected their actual usage.

3 Findings

After analysing the data from the three digital platforms, a total of 371 euphemistic tokens were identified, representing 43 unique euphemistic expressions across the four subthemes. This section, along with the subsequent subsections, presents the findings obtained. The presentation begins with euphemistic expressions that netizens utilised to describe the act of dying. This is followed by euphemisms for a corpse, then those for a grave, and finally euphemisms for the act of burying. The section concludes with an overview of the strategies employed to create these expressions.

3.1 Euphemisms preferred for referring to the act of dying

As pointed out earlier, people avoid speaking blatantly about the act of dying. This happens due to the fear and the discomfort that this act generates in the community. This avoidance inspires the search for and use of alternative expressions perceived as more palatable than the explicit Swahili word *kufa* ‘to die’. The analysed data revealed different polite expressions that were used to refer to this phenomenon. Those expressions, which are grouped as formal, informal, and religious, are presented in the subsequent subsections.

3.1.1 Formal euphemistic expressions for dying

These are euphemistic expressions generally accepted across social groups to refer to the act of dying in a respectful manner. These expressions are widely used in various settings, such as the media, government, and professional contexts, to show respect for the deceased, the bereaved family, and the community at large. Consider the italicised expressions in Table 1 in the column titled “euphemism”.

Table 1: Formal euphemisms for dying

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) <i>Ameфарiki dunia ghafla mchana wa leo</i>	He suddenly passed away this afternoon.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) <i>Ameфарiki kwa maradhi ya moyo</i>	He died from heart disease.	YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qS_D_k4KWk
(c) <i>Kilichosababisha kufariki ni majeraha ya kupigwa.</i>	He died from injuries.	YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_t8iarv2TQ
(d) <i>Maisha ya watu yanapotea kisa uchaguzi</i>	People’s lives are lost because of the election.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/g55-wanapaswa-kusimamishwa-uanachama-chadema.2325399/post-53361332
(e) <i>Tumempoteza kiongozi wetu shupavu</i>	We have lost our strong leader.	YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qS_D_k4KWk

(f) Tumefarijika yeye <i>kupumzika</i> kwa amani.	We are comforted by the fact that he has rest in	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jecha-salim-jecha-afariki-dunia-akipatiwa-matibabu-hospitali-ya-jeshi-lugalo.2119267/post-
(g) <i>Ameondoka</i> mapema sana.	He left too early.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/gardner-g-habash-mtangazaji-wa-clouds-media-afariki-
(h) Jasiri <i>ameumaliza mwendo</i> .	He has finished the journey.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/hayati-rais-magufuli-alijua-kuwa-maisha-yake-yapo-

The expressions given in Table 1 are examples of formal polite expressions that netizens used to appeal to the act of dying. Such expressions are common in daily conversation and can be used in any speech situation. The phrase *kufariki dunia* (which means to be separated from the earth) is widely used as a replacement for the word *kufa* ‘to die’, which is highly sensitive in the Swahili-speaking community. The phrase *kupoteza maisha*, which literally means ‘to lose life’, is used diplomatically to refer to the act of dying. It simply means that someone who has had life has lost it, meaning he/she has passed away. The verb *kupumzika* literally means ‘to rest’. This probably stems from the worldview that life is full of struggles and cares (e.g., Kaur et al., 2021). Thus, when one departs, the remaining perceive the departed as having gone to rest from all the troubles. Likewise, the agglutinative word *ameondoka*, which means ‘he/she has left’, when used in the context of death, means someone has passed away. This means that the one who was on the planet Earth has departed to another place. The phrase *kumaliza mwendo* ‘to finish the journey’ probably arises from the worldview that life is a journey (Katz & Taylor, 2008). Thus, the finality of this journey is death. Consequently, when one dies, it is perceived as the end of life's journey.

3.1.2 Informal euphemistic expressions used for dying

Some euphemisms are informal and can be used only by certain groups (mostly uncultured youths) in certain settings, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Informal euphemisms for dying

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Jamaa <i>amelamba sakafu</i>	The man has licked the floor.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) <i>Anakata moto</i> kama mtu wa presha	He cuts out fire like someone with high blood pressure.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51613356
(c) Kila mmoja ana namna yake ya <i>kukata moto</i>	Everyone has their cutting out of fire.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51613415

(d) Bora <i>kadondoka</i> angetuletea balaa	It is better that he has fallen off; he would bring us troubles.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/aliyekuwa-sultani-wa-mwisho-zanzibar-sultan-sayyid-jamshid-al-said-afariki-usiku-huu-omani.2292574/post-52400673
(e) Watu wanazidi <i>kupukutika ghafla</i>	People are increasingly falling like leaves suddenly.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/serikali-haijatanka-kuwa-serious-kuzuia-corona.1894812/
(f) Tayari mtu <i>kaliwa kichwa</i>	Already someone's head has been eaten.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-dunia.2372657/post-54686850
(g) Duh! kumbe huyu mwamba <i>alishavuta?</i>	Oh! So, this man had already conked out?	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/wanachama-wa-jamiiforums-waliotangulia-mbele-ya-haki-fariki-r-i-p.210561/post-52383739
(h) <i>Kayeyuka ghafla</i>	He has melted suddenly.	WhatsApp	N/A
(i) Fasta <i>kakata roho</i>	He died very quickly.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/mchekeshaji-maarufu-mc-pilipili-afariki-
(j) Ilipofika jioni <i>akakata roho</i>	When evening came, he died.	YouTube	https://www.google.com/search?q=video+mijadala+kifo+cha+magufuli&sca_esv=6dd62d64f8d909b8&rlz=1C1GCEA_enRO1099TZ1212&sxsrf=APpeQntPMqq
(k) <i>Kamaliza mwendo</i>	She has finished the journey.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jenista-mhagama-mbunge-wa-peramiho-afariki-
(l) Siku ya pili <i>alilamba udongo moja kwa moja</i>	The second day he died directly.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/tuwe-makini-na-pombe-zinaua.2174673/post-49016980
(m) Mwishowe <i>Jamaa kadedi</i>	At the end, the man died.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/afariki-ghafla-akiwa-na-mpenzi-wake-kwenye-nyumba-ya-wageni-guest-house-huko-

The examples given in Table 2 represent the euphemistic expressions rooted in informal terms or phrases to replace the direct Swahili word *kufa* 'to die/dying'. The use of such expressions is very common among younger users of the language. The use of informal expressions allows people, especially youth, to talk about sensitive subjects, such as death, in lighter, indirect, sometimes

sarcastic, and humorous language. This helps to mitigate fear and emotional distress when discussing the concept of dying. The use of humorous language in the context of death is not a new phenomenon. In fact, in some parts of Tanzania, it is very normal to find the use of jokes in the context of death to alleviate sorrow and pain from the bereaved (see Lucas, 1974; Mikidady, 2023). However, since these expressions are not directly connected to death, they are highly context-dependent and thus make little sense out of context. For instance, the expression in Table 2 (a) can literally mean pulling the tongue out and licking the floor. These expressions help to discuss the act of dying in a more easy and relaxed way.

3.1.3 Religious-based polite expressions for dying

These are euphemistic expressions that are predominantly used in religious contexts. Consider examples in Table 3.

Table 3: Religious euphemisms for dying

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Bwana <i>ametwaa</i> mja wake.	The Lord has taken what is His.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) Ajaliwe <i>kukutana na Mungu</i> muumba wake pasi na shari.	May he meet his Creator peacefully.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51612489
(c) Naona wengi <i>wamerudi</i> kwa Muumba.	They have returned to the Creator.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/balozi-juma-mwapachu-afariki-dunia.2323144/post-53296587
(d) Mungu <i>amemtwa</i> angali kijana.	God has taken him while he is still young.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-
(e) <i>Amerudi mavumbini</i>	He has returned to the dust.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/rais-magufuli-alishatangulia-mbele-za-haki-hakuna-haja-ya-kumtusi-wala-kumsimanga.2072815/
(f) Bahati mbaya mama <i>alishatangulia mbele ya haki</i>	Unfortunately, the mother had gone before justice ahead.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/unarudi-toka-kazini-unamkuta-mkeo-anampiga-mama-yako-mzazi-je-utafanya-kitu-gani-kwa-mkeo.2347950/post-54739632
(g) Jamaa <i>amekwenda mbinguni</i> .	He has gone to heaven.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ujumbe-wa-tundu-lissu-kuhusu-hayati-ally-hassan-mwinyi.2190576/post-49535873 or take one from youtube about Pengo.

(h) Askofu anaogopa <i>kwenda peponi</i> ?	Is the bishop afraid of going to paradise?	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/askofu-bagonza-nawaombea-hata-waliofika-kuniteka-wakakuta-sipo-wasikate-tamaa-narudi-upesi.2401932/post-55312124
(i) <i>Ameitwa</i> nyumbani kwa baba wa milele.	He has been called home by the eternal Father	YouTube	https://www.google.com/search?q=video+mijadala+kifo+cha+pengo&sc_esv=6dd62d64f8d909b8&rlz=1C1G_CEA_enRO1099TZ1212&sxsrf=APpeQnuEXSwVzhXUYhYTbWnAh23OXATSow%3A1782631023045&e

The expressions illustrated in Table 3 (a-i) are common in a religious context. They mirror spiritual beliefs about death. The example in Table 3(a) is connected to the religious belief that every death, regardless of its nature, is permitted by God Himself (Ayodeji, 2013). From this perspective, death is viewed as something predetermined from the moment of one's birth. By associating the phenomenon of death with God's authorization, such expressions not only lessen the severity of the phenomenon but also provide the bereaved with a sense of acceptance and spiritual assurance of meeting their beloved once they themselves die. This is also linked to the idea that, when people die, they meet their Creator (*kukutana na Muumba*) in Table 3(b) to live with Him eternally.

The phrase *kurudi mavumbini*, "returning to the dust", likely comes from a shared belief within many religious traditions that human beings were created out of dust (Brueggemann, 2012). Thus, during death, they return to their source of creation, the dust. This belief echoes the cyclic nature of life and death, in which death is viewed as a return to the original form of life. The phrase *kutangulia mbele za haki* is associated with the religious conviction that every human being will be held accountable for their actions (good or bad) on Earth. It is believed that this judgment comes soon after one passes on (Beshai & Lester, 2013). Such a judgment determines the eternal destiny of the deceased person. The expressions *kwenda mbinguni* and *kwenda peponi* are grounded in the belief that death is a gateway to heaven/paradise. This implies that once one passes, they 'go to heaven'. The religious-based euphemisms pave the way for speaking about death in polite ways that reduce fear and grief in the bereavement.

3.2 Euphemisms used to refer to a corpse

In Swahili, *maiti* is the direct term for a corpse. To maintain respect for the deceased and the community affected by the bereavement, a polite expression is used in place of the explicit term. The widely used polite expression to replace the direct term for the corpse is *mwili*, which literally means 'the body'. This expression was found in statements such as *mwili wake uliokotwa beach* 'His body was found at the beach', and *kuhifadhi mwili* 'to preserve the body'. This expression brings the connotation that the referent is lifeless, a true reflection of what happens when someone passes. Such an expression is used in various contexts, including funeral announcements, discussions, and comments from Swahili-speaking netizens. This is done to show respect and alleviate the harshness of the direct Swahili word *maiti*, which is socially, culturally, and linguistically displeasing.

3.3 Euphemism used in the context of burial

The entombing of the body is considered a taboo in many communities, including within the Swahili-speaking community. The taboo is probably based on the aftermath of the act, where the body stays alone, followed by decomposition. These imaginations cause great fear and anguish, triggering people to use roundabouts to talk about the act. This is evident among Swahili-speaking netizens, who used several euphemistic expressions to discuss this subject politely. They avoid using the straight term, which is *kuzika* in Swahili. The common verbs that replaced the direct term include *kupumzisha* ‘to lay to rest’, *kuhifadhi* ‘to preserve’, and *kusindikiza* ‘to accompany’. Consider the expressions illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Burial euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) <i>Kupumzisha mwili</i>	To lay the body to rest.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) <i>Kuhifadhi mwili</i>	To preserve the body.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/ali-mayai-nakuheshimu-mno-ila-kitendo-cha-kufiwa-na-baba-yako-na-bado-ukawa-busyna-urais-wa-tff-kumetufanya-
(c) <i>Kumsindikiza mwenzetu</i>	To accompany our beloved	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/mtangazaji-swedy-mwinyi-wa-tbc-afariki-
(d) <i>Kufikiwa futi sita shimoni</i>	To be covered with soil six feet under the pit	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/jiheshimu-wewe-jielewe.2135653/post-47696787

The expressions presented in Table 4 show various conceptualizations of the act of burying the dead body, as used by Swahili-speaking netizens. In Table 4 (a), burying is viewed as the process of resting the body (*laying the body to rest*). This worldview likely stems from the perception of life as marked by struggles and troubles (see Kaur et al., 2021). Within this framework, burying the departed is viewed as relieving them of life's hardships, leading to everlasting peace and rest after their suffering and struggles. Like other euphemisms, burial euphemisms rely on context to make sense. For instance, the expression in Table 4 (b) can also be used to mean preserving the deceased in a mortuary so that it does not decompose before burial. The expression in Table 4 (d) likely relates to the popular myth that the standard depth of a grave is six feet underground. However, studies (e.g., Greinert & Kostecki, 2025; OpenBylaws.org.za, 2003) indicate that six feet is not a standard depth.

3.4 Euphemisms used to refer to the grave

The grave, which in Swahili is *kaburi*, is another subject in death discourse that has taboo connotations. The probable reason for its sensitivity is the imagination of the dark and solitary place where the deceased is buried. Several polite expressions were identified among Swahili-speaking netizens as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Euphemisms for grave

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Wamempumzisha kwenye <i>nyumba yake ya milele</i> .	They have laid him to rest in his eternal home	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) Mungu aendelee kuwapumzisha kwa amani kwenye <i>makazi yao ya milele</i>	May God continue to lay them in their eternal dwelling.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/leo-ni-kumbukumbu-ya-siku-ya-maandamano-makubwa-ya-oktoba-29-2025.2403811/post-55344222
(c) Yeye yuko <i>six feet under</i> ila mwenzake bado anadunda	He is six feet under but his fellow is still living.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/usshauri-idara-ya-makumbusho-ya-taifa-ihifadhi-baadhi-ya-vitu-alivyotumia-jpm-wakati-wa-uongozi-wake.2305228/post-52785301
(d) Yupo kwenye <i>futi sita</i> .	He is inside six feet.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-
(e) Wamempeleka <i>kuzimu</i> fasta	They have sent him/her to hell quickly.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/wananchi-wanaomjua-hamza-wanasema-alikuwa-mtu-mzuri-mwana-ccm-kindakindaki-na-mmiliki-wa-

The expressions illustrated in Table 5 (a-e) signal different perceptions and beliefs towards the grave. The expressions *nyumba ya milele* and *makazi ya milele* translate into ‘eternal home’ and ‘eternal dwelling’ respectively. They regard a grave as a permanent place where the departed remain forever. These expressions are centred on the religious conviction that the deceased stays in the grave forever until the day of resurrection (see Punt, 2009). Such expressions can be used by different social groups in different settings. The expression *six feet under*, which is the English version of *futi sita* (in Table 5 (d)), and *kuzimu* ‘hell’ (in Table 5 (e)) are generally less common in the Swahili-speaking community and are favoured by youth speakers. The first two are associated with the myth that the standard grave depth is six feet.

3.5 Strategies used to form death euphemisms

The analysis revealed that death euphemisms are formed through several linguistic strategies that allow speakers to refer to death indirectly and more acceptably. The following section discusses the use of metaphor in the formation of euphemisms for death.

3.5.1 The use of metaphor

A metaphor is an implied comparison between two dissimilar objects where the conceptualisation of one object is conveyed to another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Sopory & Dillard, 2002; Ullmann, 1972). This comparison enables individuals to understand a sensitive act, such as death, in terms

of other known, non-sensitive life experiences. In the current study, several euphemistic expressions were formed metaphorically. Those conceptualisations are presented in the following subsections:

Death as a journey

The polite expressions that conceptualise death as a journey are based on the worldview that, when a person passes, it is like a traveler moving from one place to another. In this journey, the point of departure is earthly life. In this context, death is not regarded as the end of life, but the beginning of another form of existence. In this worldview, which is primarily rooted in a spiritual context, the destination of this journey is considered to be paradise or heaven, the place where God resides (Mamaug, 2019). The following examples in Table 6 illustrate this conceptualisation.

Table 6: Death as journey euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) <i>Ameondoka duniani</i>	He has departed this life.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/xxxntencion-nyota-iliyozimika-mapema.2416959/
(b) <i>Jasiri ameumaliza mwendo</i>	He has finished the journey.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/nigeria-sis-osinachi-nwachukwu-aliyeshirikishwa-wimbo-wa-ekwueme-afariki-dunia.1972361/post-41793880
(c) <i>Tutaiacha dunia na pilikapilika zake</i>	We will leave the world with its cares.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-dunia.2372657/post-54686761
(d) <i>Siku moja na mimi nitaiacha dunia</i>	One day, I will also leave this world.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/plo-lumumba-wazungu-wanaichukulia-afrika-kama-zoo-hawajali-utu-wa-watu-wa-
(e) <i>Ametutoka mapema sana</i>	She has left us very early.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/gardner-g-habash-mtangazaji-wa-clouds-media-afariki-
(f) <i>Ameondoka mapema sana</i>	He has gone too early.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-dunia.2372657/post-54687354
(g) <i>Unaweza kutangulia wewe ukamuacha yeye</i>	You may go ahead and leave him.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/tanzia-dalila-wa-tamthilia-ya-jumba-la-dhahabu-amefariki-dunia.1433420/post-26805717
(h) <i>Katangulia sisi tutafuata</i>	She has gone ahead of us; we will follow.	JamiiForums	

(i) <i>Kamfuata</i> kaka mapema sana	He has gone after the brother too early.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/prof-alex-lyatonga-mrema-hatunae.2064048/post-45293142
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Within this framework, the act of dying is conveyed through several verbs/verb phrases associated with the journey. These expressions include *kumaliza mwedo* ‘finishing the journey’, *kuiacha dunia* ‘leaving the world’, *kutoka* ‘departing’, *kutangulia* ‘going ahead’, and *kufuata* ‘going next’, among others. The use of these expressions is a linguistic mechanism for avoiding the explicit mention of dying.

Death as a loss

Conceptualising death as a loss probably stems from the worldview that human beings and the life within are very precious. Thus, when a person departs, it is equated to losing something very valuable. To illustrate this, it is common in the Swahili-speaking community to hear the saying *pengo lake halitazibika*, which translates as ‘the void left by the deceased cannot be filled’. This is rooted in the fact that once a person dies, their life cannot be restored. The following examples in Table 7 reflect this conceptualisation.

Table 7: Death as loss euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Alisababisha watu wasio na hatia kupoteza maisha.	He caused innocent people to lose their lives.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jecha-salim-jecha-afariki-dunia-akipatiwa-matibabu-hospitali-ya-jeshi-lugalo.2119267/post-47174165
(b) Hakuna sababu ya kupoteza maisha ya vijana	There is no need to lose the lives of the youth.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/hakuna-sababu-ya-kupoteza-maisha-ya-vijana.2395821/
(c) Wamepoteza mpendwa wao.	They have lost their beloved.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/wanao-jiita-g55-wasiondolewe-chadema-bali-waitwe-waulizwe-kwamba-tunawezaje-kushiriki-uchaguzi-kwa-mfumo-huu-na-tukapata-haki.2325808/post-53375791

Death as a sleep/rest

Comparing death to sleep likely arises from two main imaginations. One is that when a person passes, they enter a sleep from which they can never wake again in the physical world. Another imagination is grounded in associating death with rest after a journey through life, which, in some cases, is marked by turmoil. Within this framework, death is framed as a source of comfort and peace rather than sadness and fear. The expressions in Table 8 exemplify this conceptualisation.

Table 8: Death as sleep/rest euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Mwamba ndiyo <i>umelala</i> milele	The rock (he) has slept forever.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) Mungu <i>amempumzisha</i> mja wake	God has laid His servant to rest.	WhatsApp	N/A
(c) Tumefarijika yeye <i>kupumzika</i> kwa amani	We are comforted by the fact that he has rest in peace.	Jamiiforums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jecha-salim-jecha-afariki-dunia-akipatiwa-matibabu-hospitali-ya-jeshi-lugalo.2119267/post-47180346

Death as a disappearance

A few euphemistic expressions conceptualise death as a disappearance. This conceptualisation originates from the worldview that when a person dies, the feelings of their presence in the physical world cease. The euphemistic expressions in Table 9 represent this idea.

Table 9: Death as disappearance euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Covid ilikuwa rahisi sana <i>kumchukua</i> kama ilivyofanya.	It was easy for COVID-19 to take him as it happened.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/makamu-wa-kwanza-wa-rai-zanzibar-maalmi-seif-sharif-hamad-afariki-dunia.1838713/post-38136328
(b) Mwizi wa kura <i>ametoweka</i>	The vote thief has disappeared.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/katibu-wa-ccm-wilaya-ya-mkuranga-afariki-dunia.2380989/post-54920655

The expressions *kuchukuliwa* ‘to be taken’ and *ametoweka* ‘has disappeared’ indicate the absence of the referred person. These expressions, when used in the context of death, mean that the referent has passed away.

Death as a transformation

Death is perceived as a physical and sometimes a spiritual change. This conceptualisation leads to the creation of polite expressions referring to death that align with this perception. Consequently, euphemistic expressions with verbs such as *kuyeyuka* ‘melting’ and *kupukutika* ‘falling off’ are formed. Consider the expressions presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Death as transformation euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Watu <i>wanapukutika</i> kama nzige.	People are falling off (dying) like locusts.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/makamu-wa-kwanza-wa-rai-zanzibar-maalim-seif-sharif-hamad-afariki-dunia.1838713/post-38132475
(b) <i>Maelfu kwa maelfu wanazidi kupukutika.</i>)	Thousands of people are increasingly shedding/falling off.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/waziri-wa-ulinzi-wa-israel-anaomba-msaada-kwa-raia-wa-gaza-wasaidie-kupatikana-kwa-mateka.2154737/post-48341966
(c) Inasikitisha <i>tunavyopukutika</i> mmoja baada ya mwingine.	It is sad how we fall off one after another.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/mtangazaji-swedy-mwinyi-wa-tbc-afariki-dunia.2212747/post-50222712
(d) <i>Kayeyuka</i> ghafla.	He has melted suddenly.	WhatsApp	N/A
(e) Lazima kuna mtu naye <i>ataanguka</i> tu.	Someone else must also fall.	WhatsApp	N/A
(f) Bora <i>kadondoka</i> angetuletea balaa	It is better that he has fallen; he would cause trouble.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/aliyekuwa-sultani-wa-mwisho-zanzibar-sultan-sayyid-jamshid-al-said-afariki-usiku-huu-omani.2292574/post-52400673

Surprisingly, in example Table 10 (f), the context of the statement shows the speaker is happy about someone's passing, yet the act of passing is mentioned indirectly. This shows the degree of sensitivity of the notion of dying.

Death as the end/termination

Generally, death is considered the end of a human's life. From this perspective, the life cycle ceases when a person departs. Based on this perception, death is not a transitional stage, as some people perceive. Therefore, when it occurs, it means the end of existence. This perception leads to the creation of certain euphemistic expressions grounded in this perspective. Examine the following expressions in Table 11.

Table 11: Death as end/termination euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Covid <i>imemuondoa</i>	COVID-19 has removed him/her	JamiiForum s	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/ningekuwa-rai-wa-tanzania-team-mwendazake-wote-ningekuwa-nishawasweka-ndani-kizuizini-au-

			kuwapoteza-wote.1920779/post-41170377
(b) Korona <i>itatumaliza</i>	COVID-19 will finish us	JamiiForum s	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/makamu-wa-kwanza-wa-rai-zanzibar-maalim-seif-sharif-hamad-afariki-dunia.1838713/post-38144473
(c) Kisukari na UKIMWI <i>vimemfyeka</i> huyu mzee	Diabetes and AIDS have swept him	WhatsApp	N/A

In the examples in Table 11, the expressions *imemuondoa* 'it has removed him', *itatumaliza* 'it will finish us', and *vimemfyeka huyu mzee* 'they have swept him' are used to indicate the end of life (passing away). They come from the verbs *ondoa* 'remove', *maliza* 'finish', and *fyeka* 'sweep/slash', respectively. When used in the context of death, such expressions imply the passing away of the referent.

Death as the return

There is a worldview that humans were created by God (Nainggolan & Gultom, 2025). This view has its foundations in religious beliefs. Based on this view, when one passes, one is perceived as returning to the original source of life (God). This perspective has led to the creation of several euphemistic expressions that align with this belief. Examine the examples in Table 12.

Table 12: Death as return euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Japo <i>ametwaliwa</i> yungali anaishi	Though he has been taken, he is still living.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ruto-asema-hatasaini-miswada-ya-kifisadi-iliyopitishwa-na-wabunge-ili-kujinufaisha-ashangiliwa-magufuli-magufuli-magufuli.2255667/
(b) <i>Mungu amemtwa</i> angali kijana.	God has taken him while still young.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51613852
(c) <i>Amerudi mavumbini</i>	He has returned to dust.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/rais-magufuli-alishatangulia-mbele-za-haki-hakuna-haja-ya-kumtusi-wala-kumsimanga.2072815/
(d) Naona wengi <i>Wamerudi kwa muumba.</i>	I see many have returned to the Creator.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/balozi-juma-mwapachu-afariki-dunia.2323144/post-53296587

(e) Ajaliwe <i>kukutana na Mungu muumba</i> wake pasi na shari	May he meet with his Creator peacefully.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51612489
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3.5.2 Slang

This device uses informal expressions to substitute the direct death-related terms. Slang is widely used by younger speakers and other social groups with special common interests. Such expressions are dominant in casual conversations. Consider the examples presented in Table 13.

Table 13: Slang euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Watu <i>wanakata moto</i> balaa.	A lot of people are kicking the bucket.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/did-a-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51612371
(b) Kila mmoja ana namna yake ya <i>kukata moto</i>	Everyone has their way of biting the dust.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/did-a-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51613415
(c) Duh! Kumbe huyu mwamba <i>alishavuta?</i>	Oh! So, this dude has already checked out?	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/wa-nachama-wa-jamiiforums-waliotangulia-mbele-ya-haki-fariki-r-i-p.210561/post-52383739
(d) Mzee <i>anavuta wakati aliojichagulia aule vyema uzee wake.</i>	The elder is kicking the bucket when the time comes; he has chosen to enjoy his elderhood.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ma-kamu-wa-kwanza-wa-rai-zanzibar-maalim-seif-sharif-hamad-afariki-dunia.1838713/post-38134096
(e) Tayari mtu <i>kaliwa kichwa</i>	Already, he has bitten the dust.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-dunia.2372657/post-54686850

The expression *kata moto*, illustrated in Table 13 (a-b), literally translates to ‘cut out fire’. When it is used in the context of death, it means dying. The association of this expression with death probably emanates from the fact that the body of someone alive is generally warm, but when they pass, the warmth dissipates, making the body (the lifeless body) cold. In this view, life is compared

to fire, representing something active. Thus, when the fire is cut, it is a symbol of inactivity, symbolising death. The expression *kuvuta* is likely associated with breathing, where a person draws their last breath at the moment of death, signifying the cessation of life. Thus, the expression *kuvuta* is probably the shortened form of *kuvuta pumzi ya mwisho* ‘breathing the last breath’, which implies passing away. The expression *kula kichwa* ‘eating the head’ is likely related to the importance of the head to a person’s life. Therefore, in discussions about death, mentioning that someone’s head has been eaten (or removed) suggests the end of that person’s life, indicating death.

3.5.3 Circumlocution

This strategy involves using long expressions (roundabouts) to convey messages about subjects related to death. Examine the italicised expressions in Table 14.

Table 14: Circumlocution euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Wamempumzisha kwenye <i>nyumba yake ya milele</i> .	They have laid him to rest in his eternal home	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) Tutaelekea makaburi ya Njiro kumpumzisha kwenye <i>nyumba yake ya Milele</i> .	We will head to Njiro graveyards to lay her to her eternal home	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/rest-in-peace-valentina-jf-member.2395244/post-55197440
(c) Wanaandaa <i>makazi yake ya milele</i> .	They are preparing his eternal dwelling	WhatsApp	N/A

The examples in Table 14 illustrate paraphrasing with long expressions (circumlocution). Instead of using the single Swahili word for ‘grave,’ *kaburi*, speakers use longer expressions to avoid the harsh, direct term. These expressions are more common in religious settings. They can be used by different social groups.

3.5.4 Borrowing

Data analysis shows two euphemistic expressions stemming from borrowing. In such expressions, phrases from the English language are used in the Swahili language to substitute a death-related subject. This study identified the expression *six feet under* in the statement *Yeye yuko six feet under ila mwenzake bado anadunda*, which refers to a grave, and *kadedi* (adapted loan) from the expression *Mwishowe Jamaa kadedi*, which refers to dying. By using expressions from another language, speakers feel they can reduce the sensitivity of the notion being referred to rather than using the direct term in their own language (Kiswahili).

4 Discussion

Data analysis indicates that Swahili-speaking netizens are sensitive to the discourse surrounding death. As a result, they often use a spectrum of euphemistic expressions to speak about these experiences using diplomatic and respectful language. Apart from demonstrating the prevalence

of euphemisms, these results imply that indirect communication remains an important norm for the Swahili-speaking population, even in digitally mediated communication channels. Despite the informal nature of online discourse that allows for creativity and innovation in language use, conversations about death are still constrained by the need to show respect, empathy, and harmony in society. This means that digital communication is not undermining traditional politeness norms but provides an alternative platform where these norms are practiced through euphemistic expressions.

The study findings reveal that most of the polite expressions used by netizens to discuss death-related notions carry social, cultural, and religious implications. The use of indirect expressions is a diplomatic way to address the distress caused by someone's passing. The euphemistic expressions linked to the religious perspective inform that death is not the end but a continuation of life in another form of existence. Within this framework, death is considered a transition into another phase of existence, not the finality in itself. Such a worldview is closely linked to religious teachings about the afterlife (Mutie, 2025; Potthoff, 2016; Turner Jr., 2018), in which death is seen as a transition from the current physical form to a spiritual form of existence. In the other part of this doctrine, believers are taught that there is a judgment of the soul that determines one of the two eternal destinies: heaven or hell (see Bahadur, 2020; Ehrman, 2020; Engelhardt & Iltis, 2005; Shepkaru, 1999). Therefore, terms related to these doctrines seem to linguistically frame death as a process of transformation rather than an ultimate endpoint. This construct seems to allow speakers a culturally and religiously acceptable way of talking about loss and showing sympathy towards those mourning their loved ones. The current results thus align with the findings from previous research (Crespo-Fernández, 2023; Kaguda, 2012; Nyakoe et al., 2012; Owiredo, 2020; Rawlings et al., 2017; Yakub & Agyekum, 2022), which found that religious euphemisms are often used across different cultures to soften the harshness of death-related discussions. Unlike previous research that primarily focused on face-to-face interactions, the current findings show that these religious perspectives are equally significant in today's digital interactions among Swahili speakers.

The use of religious-related euphemisms is prominent across cultures. Such expressions instill hope in the bereaved that their loved one is going to be rewarded with something good in the afterlife (see Bahadur, 2020; Bhat & Jose, 2022; Ehrman, 2020; Engelhardt & Iltis, 2005; Shepkaru, 1999). Such hopes are vital in consoling the bereaved. This helps mitigate the harshness and sensitivity of the subject of death. However, religious-related euphemisms can be a double-edged sword. The study by Krause and Hayward (2014) indicates that some people who doubt religion may have high depression and discomfort when such expressions are used after the loss of their beloved. This may lead to prolonged recovery from pain after death has occurred. Thus, religious euphemistic expressions should be approached with caution, as they may deepen the pain of non-believers. While Christian doctrine contributes to the large number of religious euphemisms that can be found in this study, it seems that cultural values of respect for the dead and sensitivity towards the feelings of relatives also contribute to the use of euphemisms. This shows that, in addition to being shaped by religious doctrines, the use of euphemisms is influenced by social values that emphasize maintaining good relations with others and avoiding offense.

Furthermore, the study indicates that some euphemistic expressions are in the form of slang. Some of the slang-related euphemisms arouse a sense of humour. The use of humorous expressions may create moments of light-heartedness in the discourse of death. Although the moments of

bereavement in most cases require polite and pleasant language, the use of humour also helps in dealing with the emotional distress in the case of loss. Studies by Bonanno and Keltner (1997), Booth-Butterfield et al. (2014), Lund et al. (2008), and Wilson et al. (2022) report that humorous expressions are favourable bereavement adjustments that help the bereaved to cope with the reality of loss. In certain parts of Tanzania, people even use jokes to help the bereaved family adjust to the tragedy of loss (see Lucas, 1974; Mikidady, 2023). Additionally, the use of slang-based euphemisms in digitally mediated communication reflects the linguistic creativity that defines digital communication. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, JamiiForums, and YouTube provide space for individuals to play around with language through the invention of new terms, the adaptation of slang, and the adoption of terms that circulate widely within the digital community. As such, digital communication is an arena that facilitates the creation and wide dissemination of euphemisms. Instead of simply substituting conventional terms, the use of slang allows one to address sensitive issues in a way that connects well with their modern online audience without losing politeness or humour. Therefore, these results add to the previous research on death euphemisms by showing that digital communication is an important arena for the creation of euphemisms. However, the use of such a language should be taken with caution. This is because some of the humour used may be poorly timed and poorly used. This may unintentionally cause emotional hurt to the bereaved by reminding them of the loss of their beloved (Olatomide, 2024; Wilson et al., 2022).

Moreover, the study observes extensive use of metaphors among Swahili-speaking netizens to address the subject of death diplomatically. The metaphorical expressions used in the context of death often reflect cultural values and societal norms that influence how individuals perceive death. Such expressions serve as vital tools for dealing with the discomfort and sensitivity of the subject of death, thereby enabling individuals and societies to discuss death respectfully and in an emotionally manageable manner. The prevalence of metaphor-based euphemisms indicates that metaphors are not just figures of speech but also a way of thinking about death in a more indirect and emotionally unthreatening manner. By using alternative conceptual systems to represent death, speakers can refer to death without using words that may seem too harsh or inappropriate. The results obtained in this study confirm findings from other studies on death metaphors (e.g., Gathigia et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2025; Igbum & Ishima, 2025; Owiredun, 2020) and show that such metaphors continue to prevail even in everyday digital interactions.

While euphemistic language can be considered a cross-culturally accepted form of communicating about death in a respectful manner, it needs to be used effectively and in scenarios where it can be understood, there are several studies (Collins et al., 2018; Pitt et al., 2022; Rawlings et al., 2017) suggesting that the overuse of euphemisms may lead to confusion and poor communication, especially when decisions need to be made for the family members involved.

Generally, the results show that even today, the topic of death remains very sensitive among Swahili-speaking digital users, necessitating the use of euphemisms to maintain politeness and harmony. It becomes evident that the observed euphemisms reflect the interplay among cultural values, religion, and broader social values. The use of metaphor as the primary linguistic tool for the indirect representation of death is particularly significant. In addition, the results show how important digital communication venues are in fostering linguistic creativity, slang development, borrowing, and the creation of new euphemisms. In other words, not only do they reflect existing cultural traditions, but they also provide a venue for the development of the Swahili euphemisms.

5 Conclusion

This study has revealed that Swahili-speaking netizens realise the cultural sensitivity and linguistic taboo surrounding death-related issues. It is evident that euphemisms employed in discourse on the mentioned topics are aimed at bypassing direct mention of the death-related concepts to ensure respectful and polite communication in such culturally sensitive situations. Based on the principles of politeness, the identified and discussed euphemisms reveal culturally, religiously, and socially acceptable ways to engage in polite communication to manage face concerns when discussing death-related issues. To avoid direct language when discussing these topics, several strategies are employed to produce euphemisms. Metaphorical strategies have been found particularly important in this context, where euphemisms produced associations of death with a range of motions, including journeys and returns to the source of life (God). Furthermore, other metaphors associated death with transformation, suggesting physical and locational changes. Such conceptualisation highlights the view that death is a transition rather than the finality of existence. Metaphorical strategies identified in this study support the concept of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, illustrating how metaphor can serve as a cognitive device for defining topics related to death from socially acceptable viewpoints in digital interactions. The findings of this study show that digital platforms function not only as a medium for information exchange but also as an important means of creating, disseminating, and adapting euphemisms among Swahili-speaking netizens. Thus, digital environments not only enable linguistic creativity but also help maintain culturally and religiously defined norms of respectful discourse about death. Overall, this study contributes to the field of digital sociolinguistics by showing that digital interaction does not degrade existing cultural norms but serves as a dynamic tool for their reproduction. From a socio-pragmatic point of view, the study demonstrates that politeness and face management remain important factors in language, regardless of the use of digital communication. In general, the study contributes to the field of socio-pragmatic studies by showing how Swahili-speaking digital users employ existing cultural rules of politeness in certain digital forums. The study further contributes to the literature on Swahili euphemisms by demonstrating how cultural values continue to influence language use in digital forums.

6 Conflicts of interest

The author of this paper declares no conflicts of interest.

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