Urbanity And Changing Patterns of Language Use Among Kîîtharaka (E54) Speakers in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to investigate the changing patterns of language use among Tharaka parents and their children residing in Nairobi, Kenya, with the aim of understanding how urban living and multilingualism influences intergenerational language practices. Nairobi's dynamic multilingual environment presents both opportunities and challenges for language maintenance, particularly for indigenous languages such as Kîîtharaka (E54), which face increasing pressure from dominant languages like English and Kiswahili. The study adopted the mixed-methods case study design and used Joshua Fishman's (1972) Domain Theory to analyze, interpret and discuss data collected. Data was collected through language use questionnaires, structured interviews and participant observations from Kîîtharaka speakers living in Nairobi. The findings indicate a marked generational shift in language preference, with parents relatively using Kîîtharaka in the home and social domains while children increasingly favor Kiswahili and English in home, public and institutional settings. The study reveals that while parents exhibit a strong emotional attachment to Kîîtharaka, they often accommodate language shift in response to their children's linguistic choices, leading to an implicit reduced instances of intergenerational transmission. The study contributes to understanding how urbanity shapes language practices and intergenerational transmission among minority language speakers. The findings of the study will add to the existing literature in the field of sociolinguistics.
Keywords: Kîîtharaka, language use, sociolinguistics, urban, multilingualism, Domain Theory

I. Introduction

This study focused on language use patterns among Kîîtharaka speakers in Nairobi, with a specific focus on how language practices differ between parents and children. This research explores how exposure to multilingualism, urban living, peer networks, schooling and exposure to dominant languages influence the language practices in the family and social domains. This section is divided into language situation in Africa and Kenya and theoretical framework.

Language situation in Africa and Kenya

Urbanization and multilingualism present unique sociolinguistic dynamics that shape language use, especially among minority language speakers. In Kenya, where English and Kiswahili dominate urban communication, indigenous languages such as Kîîtharaka face growing challenges related to intergenerational transmission and maintenance, particularly among younger speakers living in Nairobi. Kîîtharaka is a Bantu language classified within the Niger-Congo language family. All Kenyan Bantu languages are classified under five groups: Coastal, Central Kenya, Taita, South Nyanza and Luhya. According to Guthrie (1967) all the Central Bantu groups are classified as Gikuyu-Kamba group, specifically within the Gikuyu-Kamba cluster (E50), assigning Kîîtharaka the code E54.

Africa is a multilingual continent, which means that its people and communities speak several languages. It is estimated to have between 2,000 and 2,500 languages (Batibo, 2005). Africa's ex-colonial languages include French, English, Italian, Portuguese and German. These languages came with the colonialists that conquered and occupied parts of Africa (Sure & Webb, 2000). Following independence, those languages gained strength as a result of their affiliation with the more powerful and economically developed ex-colonial rulers. These languages have come to occupy positions of high prestige and are widely spoken by many Africans, thus posing a serious danger to the survival and vitality of indigenous languages. Reflecting a broader trend observed across the African continent, Mugambi (2002) notes that Kenya is characterized by multilingualism. Abdulaziz (1978) further describes Kenya's linguistic landscape as triglossic, whereby three distinct languages are routinely used within the daily lives of its citizens. The indigenous language is primarily

used at home and in socialization domains, the lingua franca is used as an interethnic medium and the ex-colonial language is used for official, international and more formal domains. According to Gordon (2009), there are sixty-three languages in Kenya. However, the country has about forty-one documented languages (Whiteley, 1974). At present, there are only two unstable codes used in Kenya, that is, Sheng, and Engsh (Ogechi, 2005). The languages of Kenyan communities are divided into Cushitic, Nilotic and Bantu language groups (Whiteley, 1974). The Bantu language group is the largest consisting of, Luhya, Kisii, Kikamba, Embu, Kiimeru, Kikuyu and Swahili. Under the Cushitic category are languages such as the Rendille, Borana and Somali. The Nilotic groups include Kalenjin, Dholuo, Teso and Maasai. Kikuyu (spoken by 20% of the population), Dholuo (14%), Luhya (13%), Kikamba (11%), Kalenjin (11%), Ekegusii (6.5%) and Kimeru (5%) are the dominant indigenous languages in Kenya (Sure & Webb, 2000).

Kenyan languages have roles assigned to them. English has been Kenya's official language since its independence. Kiswahili is the Kenya's national language and Kenyan constitution upgraded it to official status in 2010. Mugambi (2002), asserts that in Kenya, English and Kiswahili dominate all spheres of life in that they are given official recognition while indigenous ones are not. As the official language of Kenya, English has a higher profile than Kiswahili. The two are used unequally as a medium of instruction because it is only one subject (Kiswahili), that is instructed in Kiswahili language both in primary and secondary schools. English holds a unique role as it is employed for international business and in administrative agencies. It is also used in institutions as a medium of instruction in the education system right from primary level onwards (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). Given their functional and prestigious positions, English and Kiswahili have grown significantly in the recent years, at the expense of the indigenous languages. As a result, some of native Kenyan languages can be said to be vulnerable based on the nine core factors that guide in assessing and understanding the language situation of those experiencing shift established by UNESCO. The most outstanding ones being lack of intergenerational transmission, loss of existing language domains, lack of material for language education and identity, and unfavorable language government and institutional language policies (UNESCO, 2013).

In general, there is a widespread tendency of speakers of minority languages to shift towards Kiswahili, English or other dominant native Kenyan languages (Barasa, 2017). This gradual shift has contributed to a breakdown in minority language transmission from one generation to the next, placing these languages at risk of erosion or eventual loss. Most minority speakers whose repertoire covers more than one language tend to prefer English, Kiswahili or other dominant languages as these are deemed to have higher social standing within the social context (Barasa, S. 2015). As a consequence, the minority languages are no longer actively used in social contexts like market transactions, communication at home, village public meetings and in religious activities. Literacy for minority language speakers is mostly in English or dominant native Kenyan languages. The lack of literacy material in minority languages as well as unfavorable language policies have led to neglect and thinning of these languages.

Since indigenous languages vary in vitality, in Kenya, the relatively smaller ones such as Bongom, Boni, Burji, Dahalo, Terik, Yaaku, and Suba have experienced greater pressure not only from English and Kiswahili but also from more dominant neighboring languages. This paper sought investigate to what extent English and Kiswahili, have influenced their preference and use over the indigenous Kîîtharaka language under different domains, both in formal domain, that is, school and informal domains, that is, home, social gatherings and playground among Kîîtharaka language speakers living in Nairobi, Kenya. The study of language use and maintenance among minority language speakers in urban environments has received increasing attention in sociolinguistics. Scholars have documented how urban multilingualism fosters both linguistic diversity and language shift, depending on the socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts (Blommaert, 2010; Spolsky, 2004). In multilingual societies such as Kenya, indigenous languages compete with dominant national and global languages, leading to shifting patterns of language preference and use, especially among younger generations (Kembo-Sure & Ogechi, 2009).

How language is used in urban is different from language use in the rural set up. Lanelle (2013) states that mostly, among the rural population, many young children primarily speak one language, their vernacular. Conversely, there is a varied pattern of language use in urban areas as a result of urbanization, increased trade, and intermarriages. In most multilingual societies, people often utilize multiple languages, each for different purposes. One of the central concepts guiding this study is language shift, the process by which a speech community gradually abandons its native language in favor of another, typically more dominant language (Fishman, 1991). This shift often occurs over generations, influenced by factors such as education, media, peer pressure, and perceived socio-economic benefits. In urban areas, where multiple languages coexist and language choices are often tied to mobility and modernity, minority languages face a heightened risk of decline (Gal, 1979; Batibo, 2005).

While rural areas maintain a strong connection to their vernacular languages, urban areas often prioritize dominant languages for practical reasons. These reasons among others include: first, practicality and globalization. In urban areas, there is a tendency to prioritize dominant languages like Kiswahili and English for

practical reasons, including education, employment and social mobility. Urban residents often use English or Kiswahili in professional and social settings, viewing these languages as gateways to better opportunities: second, perceived modernity, that is, association with progress: vernacular languages maybe perceived as less modern or prestigious compared to dominant languages, influencing people to adopt the latter. For instance, parents in urban areas might prefer to enroll their children in English-medium schools to enhance their prospects: third, cultural dilution, that is, blending of cultures: urban setting often experience a blending of cultures, leading to a dilution of traditional language use and a mixed linguistic environment. For example, urban youth might use a combination of English and vernacular in their conversations, reflecting a hybrid cultural identity.

Intergenerational transmission is a critical aspect of language vitality. Fishman (1991) emphasizes that the survival of a minority language depends largely on its use in the home, particularly between parents and children. If children do not acquire or actively use the language, its long-term sustainability becomes uncertain. Several studies in Kenya have shown that languages like Dholuo, Kikuyu, and Luhya face similar intergenerational decline in urban areas, despite being widely spoken in rural settings (Nyakoe, 2016; Njoroge, 2008). However, there is limited research regarding smaller, less widely studied languages such as Kîîtharaka. While urban multilingualism can sometimes encourage code-switching and hybrid language practices such as Sheng, it can also undermine the regular use of indigenous languages (Githiora, 2002). Studies on urban youth language practices in Nairobi have found a strong preference for Kiswahili and Sheng, both of which are seen as modern, inclusive, and socially advantageous (Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997). These dynamics often alienate indigenous languages, which are perceived as rural or outdated, especially by younger speakers.

Studies on language use in multilingual African contexts have highlighted the intricate relationship between language choice, identity, and social context. Bokamba (2009) offers valuable insights into code-switching and language mixing, particularly in urban and multilingual settings. His work emphasizes how social, cultural, and contextual factors influence language use. However, Bokamba's focus does not extend to minority language communities such as Kîîtharaka speakers in Nairobi, whose language use is influenced by both urban multilingualism and cultural identity. This paper examines how these factors operate within a specific minority language context. Arua and Magocha (2002) explored language use between parents and children in Botswana, revealing a growing preference for English among children, even in home contexts where parents continued to prefer Setswana. This intergenerational divergence highlights how education and social exposure influence language change. Although geographically and linguistically distinct, their findings offer a comparative framework for understanding similar trends among Kîîtharaka speakers. The current study contributes to this discourse by examining how urbanization influences intergenerational language preferences within Kîîtharaka speakers in Nairobi.

Adams et al. (2012) conducted a case study on Kinubi speakers in Kibera, Nairobi, analyzing how multilingual individuals shift between Kinubi, Kiswahili, and English depending on context, identity, and social relationships. While relevant in its focus on a minority language group in Nairobi, their study primarily examines language use in public and community domains, with limited attention to the home setting. This paper builds on their work by shifting the focus to the home domain, where intergenerational language transmission occurs and where language maintenance is most critical. Irungu (2020) investigated language preferences among residents of Makongeni Estate in Thika, revealing a strong inclination toward local languages and Kiswahili in day-to-day interactions. His findings offer useful context for understanding urban language preferences in Kenya but do not address the specific experiences of Kîîtharaka speakers in Nairobi. The present paper extends this line of inquiry by exploring language use among Tharaka households, with a focus on the home domain as a critical site for language maintenance. Together, these studies form a foundational backdrop for this paper. However, none directly examines how urban living and multilingual exposure shape the language choice practices and intergenerational transmission of Kîîtharaka in Nairobi's urban context. This study provides an in-depth exploration of how Kîîtharaka speakers in Nairobi navigate language use within the home and social domains contributing to a broader understanding of minority language maintenance in urban Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Domains of Language Use model by Joshua Fishman (1972) to examine language use within home and social settings among the urban Tharaka population, focusing on whether mother tongue is used actively between parents and children. The concept of "domains of language use," introduced by Schmidt-Rohr (1932), was designed to classify areas of language practice in multilingual societies, particularly in relation to language choice. His original model outlined nine domains, including family, playground, school (which was further subdivided into subject language, language of instruction, and informal interaction), church, literature, the press, the military, the court, and government. Fishman (1972) later refined this framework, narrowing it to five core domains; family, friendship, religion, education, and employment, highlighting how sociolinguistic contexts tend to favor certain languages in specific settings. He argues that domain is a useful

idea in investigating individual and community language use and that different settings characteristically call for the use of different languages in multilingual society. Domains are typically divided into formal such as religion, education, employment and informal such as family, friendship categories (Hyltenstam & Stroud, 1991). In multilingual contexts, dominant languages often occupy formal settings, while minority languages are used in informal ones. Fishman further identified three key factors influencing language use across domains: the topic of communication, the roles relationships among interlocutors and the locale or setting of the interaction. These factors function in alignment with broader societal institutions and community practices, allowing researchers to distinguish between individual behavior and collective language norms (Fishman, 1972). Expanding on Fishman's model, Landweer (2008) introduced a domain-based scale to monitor language shift within ethnolinguistic groups, identifying the home as the "anchor" domain, often the last to be replaced by a second language. As shift progresses, vernacular languages tend to recede from public and formal domains such as education, commerce, and media. Language vitality, therefore, is often measured by the number and range of domains where a language is actively used. Fishman's Domain Theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing language behavior in multilingual urban contexts, such as Nairobi. Given its role in first language transmission, the home domain is crucial in understanding how language practices either sustain or shift indigenous languages in environments with high exposure to dominant languages.

II. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design to investigate language use patterns among Kîîtharaka speakers in Nairobi. Due to the private nature of language practices in domestic settings and the absence of reliable demographic data, snowball sampling was used to access this relatively hidden population. Initial participants ("seeds") were selected from varied age groups and residential areas to ensure sample diversity and minimize bias. The final sample comprised 100 participants, 50 parents and 50 children, aged between 12 to 60 years, all residing in Nairobi. Data collection combined questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Questionnaires captured quantitative data on language use across domains such as home, school, workplace, public spaces, and religious settings. Interviews, particularly with children, provided qualitative insight into language attitudes, preferences, and motivations. Observations in home and community settings documented spontaneous language behavior, with attention to code-switching, interlocutor dynamics, and contextual factors. Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Questionnaire responses were summarized in tables and analyzed descriptively. Interview and observational data were examined thematically to identify patterns in language use and intergenerational transmission, with a focus on the role of the home as a potential site of resistance to language shift. This integrated approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of linguistic behavior and the sociocultural factors shaping language choice.

III. Results

This section presents findings and discussions on the patterns of language use among Tharaka parents and their children in Nairobi, Kenya. The findings are divided into two categories: language use by settings, which refers to physical or social contexts in which conversations takes place and language use by interlocutor, that is, the person with whom communication occurs.

Language Use by setting

The study looked at language use between parents and children across different social contexts. These settings include the home environment, workplace or office, educational institutions such as schools, shopping centers or markets, social functions, and religious activities such as reading the Bible. The way language is used by parents in these different domains is analyzed first followed by a discussion of language use among their children.

Main Languages used in Different Domains among the Tharaka Parents
Table 1 shows the analysis of responses obtained from parents.

Table no 1: Shows the Primary Language spoken by Tharaka Parents in Various Domains

	Parents (35-60 Years)							
	English		Kîîtharaka		Kiswahili		Sheng	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Home	6	12	22	44	22	44	0	0
Office	33	66	1	2	5	10	0	0
Shopping	5	10	4	8	40	80	1	2
School	31	62	0	0	19	38	0	0
Social functions	4	8	3	6	39	78	4	8

Reading the Bible	34	68	9	18	7	14	0	0

Home Domain: Language transmission within a family is very significant in order to ensure language maintenance (Sasse, 1992). The results in Table 1 show that most parents (44%) use Kîîtharaka and Kiswahili equally as the language of communication at home followed by English (12%). This indicates that for many Tharaka parents, the home still serves as a key context for vernacular language use, though a notable proportion already combine Kiswahili and English during the home based interactions. This pattern aligns with Fishman's (1991) argument that intergenerational transmission of minority languages largely depends on consistent home use. The strong preference for Kiswahili in these findings reflects its growing role as a national lingua franca in Kenya, as observed by Muthwii (2002), who noted its increasing adoption in both urban and rural households. Further, in this setting, it was observed that parents made deliberate efforts to use Kîîtharaka when communicating with their children as well as between spouses or with visiting relatives. However, instances of code-switching with English were common, particularly when addressing practical matters like homework or school issues. Generally, these findings reveal a multilingual household environment where identity, practicality, and cultural continuity converge, illustrating both the resilience of Kîîtharaka and the evolving language preferences shaped by broader societal forces.

Office/Workplace Domain: In professional environments, parents exclusively used English (66%). This aligns with national language practices in Kenya, where English serves as the primary language of formal communication, administration, and employment, particularly in urban areas (Kioko & Muthwii, 2001; Muthwii, 2002). Kiswahili comes second with 10% of office interactions, reflecting its complementary role, especially in less formal workplace exchanges. Notably, only 2% reported using Kîîtharaka at work, and none reported using Sheng, reflecting the sociolinguistic boundaries that restrict local or informal varieties in formal domains. Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) note that local languages, despite being identity markers, are largely excluded from Kenya's elite and economic spheres, limiting their functional expansion.

Shopping and Market Domain: While shopping for commodities, a majority of parents (80%) reported to use Kiswahili. This dominance can be attributed to the fact that Kiswahili is the country's lingua franca. However, 10% of them use English and another 8% use Kîîtharaka when interacting with familiar vendors such as fellow Kîîtharaka speakers to show pride and a marker of identity and solidarity in this setting. Wachira (2006) states that language choice in a multilingual context is determined by purpose of usage. One parent (2%) reported to use Sheng in this domain. This use of Kiswahili, English, Kîîtharaka and sheng in the shopping domain shows the practical need for mutual understanding between buyer and the seller in commercial transactions in urban multilingual setups.

School Domain: The language the majority parents reported to use while at school is primarily English (62%) followed by Kiswahili (38%). They viewed these languages as necessary for their children's educational advancement and upward mobility. No parent reported using Kîîtharaka or Sheng in this domain. This is to be expected since in all Kenyan schools, only English and Kiswahili are used as the official languages of instruction and reading materials, thus, reflecting the formal educational environment emphasis on official languages (Kembo-Sure, 2003).

Religious Domain (Reading the Bible): English was strongly chosen by 68% of parents as the language of religious activity such as reading the Bible. 18% of them reported to read Kîîtharaka Bibles and used them for private devotion. This may be linked to the availability of Bible translations in many minority languages, which often strengthens their use within communities. For instance, the full English Bible was translated into Kîîtharaka and made accessible by 2018, following the earlier release of the New Testament in 2002 (Bible Translation and Literacy, 2018). Some parents represented by 14% owned Kiswahili Bible. It is good to note that many preachers in Kenya today conduct church services in Kiswahili with aim of reaching to diverse audiences in and outside their denominations.

Social functions: A similar trend is observed in social functions such as birthday parties, weddings and Tharaka sports activity. Kiswahili is majorly used by over half of the respondents (78%), with smaller proportions (8%) using Sheng and English each, and only (6%) Kîîtharaka. This overwhelming preference highlights Kiswahili's role as a social lingua franca in urban, multiethnic gatherings, where mutual intelligibility is key. This suggests that in socially diverse urban gatherings, Kiswahili enables broader communication across ethnic groups, while the occasional use of Sheng may reflect informal bonding or generational shifts in linguistic style (Githinji, 2006). Similarly, Mazrui and Mazrui (1995) argue that Kiswahili functions as both a unifier and a neutral choice in public and social domains, reducing ethnic boundaries during communal interactions. This is

consistent with Njoroge (2008), who notes that in urban Kenya, indigenous languages are increasingly associated to intimate or symbolic roles.

Main Languages used in Different Domains among the Tharaka Children

The children were also asked the languages they mainly use in given domains. The analysis of their responses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Shows the Primary Language spoken by Tharaka Children in Various Domains

	Children speakers (12-18 Years)							
	English		Kîîtharaka		Kiswahili		Sheng	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Home	10	20	11	22	28	56	1	2
Playground	11	22	4	8	34	68	1	2
Shopping	5	10	3	6	38	76	4	8
School	28	56	1	2	18	36	1	2
Social function	7	14	5	10	31	62	7	14
Reading bible	33	66	4	8	13	26	0	0

Home Domain: A majority of children (56%) use Kiswahili and 20% English in conversation when at home. Among these respondents, only 22% reported to use Kîîtharaka when spoken to in same language. Many children reported in interview sessions that they understand Kîîtharaka but feel uncomfortable or "awkward" speaking it. Further, it was also observed that among sibling interactions, Kîîtharaka was almost completely absent, replaced by Kiswahili or English and a little bit of Sheng. The dominance of Kiswahili in the home domain and less use of Kîîtharaka, their mother tongue, shows a difference between them and their parents who reported to frequently use Kîîtharaka as the home language. The children's preference for Kiswahili at home reflects an early stage of language shift, where a national language begins to replace the mother tongue in everyday family interactions. This trend supports Fishman's (1991) theory of intergenerational language decline, which argues that once a language loses ground in the home domain among children, its long-term vitality is at risk.

Playground: The majority of children, with a representation of 68% reported to use Kiswahili when participating in sports related activities. English followed in the second position with 22%. Only 2% reported to use sheng and 8% Kîîtharaka. The contributing factor for Kiswahili dominance could be the fact that when children go out to play and engage in physical activities, they interact with friends from different ethnic backgrounds. This is so because, most urban areas are characterized by people from different ethnic backgrounds. For easy communication and understanding one another, children adopt the common and most understandable language among them so that they can make the activity enjoyable and understood by all participating in it. This aligns with Fishman (1972) who states that language choice is affected by factors such as setting and interlocutors. Therefore, for this case, even Tharaka children who can communication fluently in their MT are forced to abandon it in favor of the common one among their friends' circle.

Shopping and Market Domain: Findings reveal that Kiswahili is the major language for business and transactions. 76% reported that when sent to buy items from supermarkets, shops and from vendors, they use Kiswahili to communicate with the sellers or other buyers. This was the same among parents. As Myers-Scotton states, in urban settings, where diverse populations converge, Kiswahili offers a neutral and widely intelligible medium for public interaction. Thus, Kiswahili serves as a bridge to a better understanding between speakers of different ethnic groups. English and Sheng were other languages with a presentation of 10% and 8% respectively. There was a small number (6%) of the children who report to use Kîîtharaka in these settings.

School Domain: Here, English domineered with 56% of children preferring it followed by 36% Kiswahili. It is a negligible 2% reported using Kîîtharaka and Sheng in school respectively. Local languages are often considered unnecessary in education, a perception that sometimes leads to negative attitudes towards them. In Kenya, English and Kiswahili are the main languages of instruction in all levels of education (Barasa, 2017). This choice among children in this setting could be influenced by the fact that the school environment reinforced their use in order to improve academic performance.

Social Functions (Weddings, Birthday parties, Funerals, Celebrations): When engaging socially, 62% of children use Kiswahili, 14% Sheng and English and 10% Kîîtharaka. Some admitted not fully understanding parts of the Kîîtharaka speeches or songs, highlighting limited proficiency. Interestingly, when interviewed, some reported that they understand Kîîtharaka when spoken to but are not able to express themselves in it thus during such events, they often remain passive participants. The researcher also observed that during social functions, Kiswahili dominated in the giving of speeches among both Tharaka parents and children.

Religious Domain (Reading the Bible): Most children use English or Kiswahili Bibles. 66% reported to use English while 26% use Kiswahili. Only 8% read the Bible written in Kîîtharaka. Even in religious settings, the youth reported limited exposure to their mother tongue, weakening the role of religion as a potential domain for language preservation. According to a study by Mose and Kaschula (2019), Kiswahili is commonly used in church services in Western Kenya, often serving as a unifying language in communities with diverse linguistic backgrounds. English continues to dominate many church practices due to its institutional history and the widespread availability of religious texts in it. This could affect speaker's influence on choice of English over their mother tongues.

Language Use by Interlocutor

To further investigate how the respondents use language, the Tharaka parents and their children were asked to say which of the four languages inclusive of English, Kiswahili, Kîîtharaka, and Sheng they mainly use when speaking to a variety of people including family members, house helps, and friends. Responses obtained from parents are presented in the Table 3.

Table 3: Main Language used by the Tharaka Parents with Different Interlocutors

Parents respondents (35-60 years)								
	English		Kîîtharaka		Kiswahili		Sheng	
Interlocutors	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Aunts/ Uncles	3	6	42	84	5	10	0	0
Brothers/ Sisters	3	6	29	58	17	34	1	2
Cousins	3	6	24	48	21	42	2	4
Grandparents	0	0	47	94	3	6	0	0
Parents	1	2	45	90	4	8	0	0
House helps	1	2	8	16	38	76	3	6
Friends	7	14	4	8	36	72	3	6

According to the findings captured in Table 3, the majority of parents reported using Kîîtharaka with older relatives, particularly grandparents (94%), parents (90%) and aunts or uncles (84%). This is indicative of its continued relevance in intergenerational and culturally sensitive communication. These results relate to Kamau and Motanya (2024) study that examined how minority ethnic groups in Kenya, specifically Shona communities, maintain their cultural identity through the home use of their mother tongue across generations. They found that consistent use of the mother tongue (MT) in domains such as family, religious spaces, and social gatherings is essential to preserving cultural practices and identity. The second highly preferred language among older speakers is Kiswahili. It was the dominant language used by the Tharaka parents with their house helps (76%), friends (72%), cousins (42%), and brothers or sisters (34%) reflecting its status as Kenya's national lingua franca. 14% parents reported to use English when communicating with friends, 6% with aunts or uncles, siblings and cousins respectively especially in professional or educated circles. Sheng was almost entirely absent in parents' responses, suggesting limited use or acceptance of the variety among older speakers. Githiora (2002) states that Sheng is largely youth driven, functioning as an urban identity marker more common among younger speakers.

Children too were asked the language they mainly use with the given interlocutors. Their responses are presented in Table 4. The overall picture points to a clear dominance of Kiswahili across most communicative domains, suggesting it plays a central role in the everyday linguistic practices of Tharaka youth in urban settings.

Table 4: Main Language used by the Tharaka Children with Different Interlocutors

Children Respondents (12-18 years)								
	English		Kîîtharaka		Kiswahili		Sheng	
Interlocutors	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Aunts / Uncles	14	28	10	20	25	50	1	2
Brothers/ Sisters	7	14	10	20	31	62	2	4
Cousins	7	14	7	14	30	60	6	12
Grandparents	3	6	33	66	14	28	0	0
Parents	10	20	15	30	24	48	1	2
House helps	7	14	5	10	36	72	2	4
Friends	11	22	6	12	30	60	3	6

This data indicate that Kiswahili is the most commonly used language by younger speakers when engaged in a conversation with uncles or aunts (50%), cousins or friends (60%), brothers and sisters (62%), house helps (72%), and even with parents (48%). These patterns align with observations by Sure and Webb

(2000), who noted that younger urban Kenyans often adopt Kiswahili as a first or preferred language due to its national status and relevance in education, media, and public life. English, although not as dominant as Kiswahili, appears more frequently used than Kîîtharaka in some peer and family interactions. For example, it is the preferred language with friends (22%) and also commonly used with uncles and aunts (28%), parents (20%), and house helps, siblings or cousins (14%). This pattern supports the idea that English, while valued for education and upward mobility, is not highly preferred for family or informal communication among children.

Kîîtharaka among children, in contrast, is markedly limited. It is used minimally (20%) with uncles, aunts, and siblings, cousins (14%), friends (12%) and house helps (10%), and only slightly more with parents (30%). However, 66% of children mainly use Kîîtharaka to speak to their grandparents. This strong preference serves as implication that it is useful in expressing identity and maintaining cultural ties with older generations. On the other hand, Sheng, an urban youth vernacular that merges elements of Kiswahili, English, and local languages, is notably more prevalent in children's speech than in that of adults. Its usage is most pronounced in interactions with cousins (12%), followed by friends (6%), siblings and domestic workers (4%), and a similarly modest percentage when speaking with parents, aunts, and uncles (2%). These patterns underscore Sheng's function as a linguistic marker of youth identity and urban affiliation.

These findings further affirm Kiswahili's central role as the primary medium of communication across both family and social contexts, reflecting its established status as a national lingua franca and its strong presence in educational settings, mass media, and peer networks. English, widely associated with formal education, modernity, and socio-economic mobility, continues to gain prestige among younger speakers. Although some children reported using Kîîtharaka when interacting with their grandparents, its minimal use in communication with other family members such as parents, siblings, cousins, and extended kin, points to an ongoing shift away from the vernacular language. Notably, only 30% of children indicated using Kîîtharaka with their parents, while a larger proportion reported using Kiswahili (48%) and English (28%). This shift marks a significant generational contrast, given that the majority of parents had previously used Kîîtharaka when speaking with their own parents.

A comparison of the patterns of language use between Tharaka parents and their children in Nairobi illustrated in Table 3 and 4 demonstrates a variation in language choice. According to Mysers-Scotton (2000), the language a speaker uses with fellow speakers of first language (L1) is regarded as a good predictor of a language's future in the community. Parents demonstrate strong retention of Kîîtharaka when in communication with speakers older to them such as grandparents (94%) and their own parents (90%). However, responses from children reveal a slight deviation from that of their parents in that most of them are significantly less likely to use the language in similar contexts. Only 66% reported using Kîîtharaka with grandparents and just 30% with their parents. The data suggests that for children, Kiswahili and English are becoming dominant in both family and social domains. Kiswahili, in particular, has established itself as the main language of communication with siblings, cousins, and even parents, indicating its role as a convenient and socially unmarked medium in Nairobi's urban multilingual context (Muthwii, 2000; Sure & Webb, 2000). These results relate to the findings of Muaka (2009) study that revealed that within the urban sample, youths predominantly operate with English and Kiswahili. English, while not dominant, also enjoys widespread use among the youth, especially with peers and older family members, likely reflecting its high prestige and association with education and socioeconomic advancement (Kioko & Muthwii, 2001). The emergence of Sheng among children, though relatively limited, further points to their engagement with urban youth culture and linguistic innovation (Githinji, 2006). These patterns collectively illustrate a shift away from the native language, with children increasingly aligning their linguistic choices with those favored in the broader urban environment. If these trends continue, the intergenerational transmission of Kîîtharaka among the urban population may weaken further, placing the language at risk of gradual erosion. These patterns underscore the need for targeted language maintenance strategies that support mother tongue use and valorization, particularly into both private and private settings (Batibo, 2005; UNESCO, 2003).

The findings confirm that there is a possible language shift among Kîîtharaka speakers in Nairobi. This is consistent with global patterns of minority language decline in urban, multilingual contexts. The generational divide is particularly striking, with parents holding sentimental attachments to Kîîtharaka while children prioritize functional and social considerations in choosing Kiswahili, English, or Sheng. The home domain, traditionally the stronghold for minority language maintenance, is being eroded by children's reluctance or inability to use Kîîtharaka. This aligns with Fishman's (1991) assertion that once the home domain is lost, the revitalization of a language becomes significantly more difficult. The influence of peer networks and media is substantial. Children are embedded in social systems that reward fluency in Kiswahili and English, both of which are linked to education, mobility, and modernity. Sheng, while not institutionalized, serves as a linguistic marker of urban youth identity, further marginalizing indigenous languages. Interestingly, the attitudinal gap between generations highlights a passive acceptance of language shift. While parents value Kîîtharaka culturally, many do not actively enforce its use, either out of convenience or fear of alienating their children.

This reflects a broader societal trend where emotional attachment does not always translate into proactive language preservation.

IV. Conclusion

This study highlights a notable shift in language use among Kîîtharaka speakers in Nairobi, with younger generations increasingly favoring Kiswahili, English and Sheng over their mother tongue. To counter this trend, parents should be encouraged to use Kîîtharaka consistently at home, while urban schools adopt culturally responsive language policies that include minority languages. Together, these efforts can promote intergenerational transmission and support the survival of Kîîtharaka in an increasingly multilingual urban context.

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