



Shifting Tongues: A Case Study of Domain Loss and Intergenerational Erosion in the Lala Language of Serenje District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This study investigates the sociolinguistic factors contributing to the endangerment of the Lala language in Zambia's Serenje District. Motivated by the increasing marginalisation of minority indigenous languages in favour of dominant languages, particularly Ibibemba and English, the research employs a qualitative case study design. Twenty native Lala speakers from Kabamba and Serenje villages were purposively selected. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, and analysed through the lens of Social Network Theory to understand language vitality and shift. Findings reveal that Lala is largely confined to informal domains such as home and village contexts, while being absent from formal spheres including education, governance, and urban life. Key factors driving its endangerment include rural-urban migration, the dominance of Ibibemba in institutional and public domains, weakened intergenerational transmission, low social prestige, and a lack of institutional support. Despite these pressures, some community-driven and familial efforts to maintain the language were noted. The study recommends deliberate policy interventions, including the integration of Lala into local educational curricula and media, to foster its sustained vitality.

Keywords: Language Endangerment, Lala, Domain Loss, Language Shift, Minority Languages, Zambia.

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Introduction

The global linguistic landscape is marked by a rapid decline in linguistic diversity, with a significant number of the world's languages facing endangerment and potential extinction. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2003) warns that a majority of the world's approximately 7,000 languages may disappear by the end of this century, primarily due to the encroachment of dominant languages propelled by globalisation, media expansion, and socio-economic pressures. This loss is not merely linguistic but represents an erosion of cultural heritage, traditional knowledge systems, and communal

identity (Nishanthi, 2020). Language endangerment occurs fundamentally when the intergenerational transmission of a mother tongue is interrupted, a process increasingly common in multilingual settings where minority languages are marginalised by politically and economically dominant ones (Krauss, 1992).

Zambia, with its rich tapestry of approximately 73 languages (Kula, 2008), exemplifies this global challenge. The nation's colonial history entrenched English as the language of administration and formal education, systematically stigmatising indigenous languages (Carmody, 2004). Post-independence language policy, while acknowledging local

languages, has consolidated the status of seven dominant Zambian languages (Icibemba, Kaonde, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Nyanja, and Tonga) for regional administration and early primary education. This policy framework, as articulated in the 2013 language-in-education policy (Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2013), inadvertently sidelines the many minority languages spoken within these regions. Consequently, languages not officially recognised face systemic neglect, reduced functional utility, and social devaluation.

The Lala language, classified as M52 within Guthrie's (1948) Bantu classification, is the indigenous mother tongue of the aba-Lala people in Serenje District, Central Province. Historically dominant in the region, Lala now contends with the ascendancy of Icibemba (M42), which is designated as the Regional Official Language. Studies on similar Zambian minority languages, such as Swaka and Lamba, indicate that the official status of a regional language can significantly accelerate the shift away from local mother tongues (Machinyise, 2018). While factors like migration and economic change are acknowledged in the literature (e.g., Mwanabayeke, 2013; Tsunoda, 2005), a comprehensive, context-specific analysis of the confluence of factors endangering Lala remains underexplored. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by interrogating the sociolinguistic dynamics threatening Lala in Serenje District. It aims to assess the language's current vitality, identify the multifactorial causes of its endangerment, and evaluate existing preservation measures, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on minority language survival in Africa.

Literature Review

Contextualising Language Vitality and Endangerment

Language vitality, defined as "the extent to which the language is used as a means of communication in various social contexts in the community" (Roche, 2017, p. 191), serves as a key metric for assessing a language's health. UNESCO (2003) proposes a framework for evaluating endangerment based on factors including intergenerational transmission, absolute number of speakers, domain of use, and availability of educational materials. Endangerment is characterised by a critical decline in use and transmission (Gyanwali, 2022), often culminating in language shift—the process whereby a community abandons its heritage language for another (Kandler et al., 2010). When a language recedes from formal and public domains, becoming confined to private, informal settings, its long-term sustainability is severely compromised (Fishman, 1991).

Global and African Perspectives on Indigenous Language Endangerment

Globally, language endangerment is frequently linked to the imposition of colonial and national languages. In South

America and Asia, policies promoting English or other dominant tongues for education and officialdom have suffocated indigenous languages (Betancourt et al., 2023; Sun & Goh, 2022). In Europe, nation-building projects centred on languages like French and German have suppressed regional varieties (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2010). A recurring theme is the role of socio-economic aspiration, where communities perceive dominant languages as gateways to education, employment, and social mobility, leading to negative attitudes towards their own languages (Bradley, 2010).

In Africa, the colonial legacy persists as post-independence governments often retain European languages for official functions, undermining indigenous languages (Bamgbose, 2011). The use of a foreign language as the primary medium of instruction, as noted by Trudell (2010), hinders academic achievement and disrupts the intergenerational flow of indigenous linguistic knowledge. National language policies can also be detrimental to minority languages. For instance, Malawi's elevation of Chichewa to a national language rendered other local languages obsolete in public domains (Kayambazinthu, 1994). Similarly, parents and learners may express a preference for dominant languages like English, viewing them as more valuable for future success (Ngidi, 2007).

Language Endangerment in the Zambian Context

Zambia's multilingual reality presents a complex scenario where government-selected lingua francas, intended to unify, often marginalise. Kashoki (2003) observed that conferring official status on a few languages elevates their prestige, prompting speakers of non-official languages to adopt them, sometimes at the expense of their mother tongue. Studies on specific languages corroborate this. Simwinga (2006) found that the designation of Lozi as a regional language negatively impacted the vitality of Nkoya in Kaoma District, though Tumbuka in Lundazi demonstrated greater resilience due to strong pre-existing cultural institutions. Machinyise (2018) identified the declaration of Icibemba as a regional official language as a key factor in the shift away from Swaka and Lamba in mining towns, exacerbated by migration-driven language contact.

Other contributing factors documented in Zambia include migration and intermarriage, which lead to language contact and shift (Mwanabayeke, 2013; Hantobolo, 1991, cited in Machinyise & Chabu, 2022), and economic pressures that make languages of trade and commerce more attractive (Mwape, 2002). The cumulative effect of these factors is a gradual erosion of linguistic domains for minority languages, restricting them to the hearth and diminishing their perceived social value.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Social Network Theory (SNT), a sociological framework that analyses how patterns of social relationships influence individual and group behaviour. In linguistics, SNT, pioneered by Milroy (1980), posits that language use and change are mediated by the structure and strength of social ties within a community. Dense, multiplex networks (where individuals are connected in multiple roles, e.g., as kin, neighbours, and co-workers) tend to enforce linguistic norms and support language maintenance. Conversely, loose-knit networks, often formed through urbanisation, migration, or socio-economic mobility, expose individuals to external linguistic influences and are associated with language shift.

SNT provides a powerful lens for analysing the endangerment of Lala. It directs attention to how changes in the social fabric of Serenje District, such as the influx of non-Lala settlers, the centralising role of schools teaching in Icibemba, and migration to urban centres, have altered traditional communication networks. These changes weaken the dense Lala-speaking networks necessary for robust intergenerational transmission. The theory helps explain how the prestige associated with Icibemba within newer, more diffuse social networks (e.g., in markets, government offices) incentivises individuals, especially the youth, to shift allegiances to the dominant language to gain social capital and economic opportunity (Gal, 1979). Furthermore, SNT guides the evaluation of preservation efforts by highlighting the need to strengthen or create dense networks for Lala use, such as through community immersion programs or the formal incorporation of the language into school systems, thereby creating institutionalised domains for its practice.

Methodology

Research Design and Paradigm

This study adopted a qualitative research approach situated within the constructivist paradigm, which posits that knowledge is constructed through human experience and interaction (Honebein, 1996). A qualitative case study design was employed to gain an in-depth, contextual understanding of the factors contributing to Lala language endangerment within the specific setting of Serenje District (Kombo & Tromp, 2006).

Study Area and Participants

The research was conducted in two purposively selected Lala-speaking villages, Kabamba and Serenje, within Serenje District. Twenty (N=20) native Lala speakers participated, with ten selected from each village. The sample comprised an equal number of males and females (10 each), all aged 30 years and above, to ensure they had sufficient life experience

to comment on intergenerational transmission and historical language patterns. Participants were identified with the assistance of local chiefs.

Data Collection Methods

Triangulation was achieved through three primary methods:

1. **Semi-structured Interviews:** Individual interviews were conducted using a guide with 12 open-ended questions, allowing for probing and clarification (Griffie, 2012). Questions explored language use domains, competence, attitudes, and perceptions of endangerment.
2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Participants were divided into four gender-sensitive FGDs (five participants each). A discussion guide with six questions facilitated interactive dialogue on communal language experiences and challenges.
3. **Participant Observation:** The researcher observed language use in natural settings such as markets, village meetings, and religious gatherings to complement and contextualise self-reported data.

Data Analysis

All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis. Data were manually coded and categorised into themes aligned with the three research objectives: (1) vitality of Lala, (2) factors contributing to endangerment, and (3) preservation measures. Recurrent patterns and salient quotations were identified to support the findings.

Ethical Considerations

No ethical approval was required for this study. Nevertheless, informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw without consequence.

Results

Vitality of the Lala Language

Current Situation and Domains of Use

Participants reported that Lala remains active but is primarily confined to informal, private domains. As shown in Table 1, 50% of respondents stated Lala is used in informal settings, while 30% directly described it as endangered. The domain analysis (Table 2) confirms this contraction: 85% reported use at home, and 60% in village meetings, but usage plummeted in formal domains like schools (20%), clinics (25%), and urban centres (15%). One respondent noted, *"In school, they use Icibemba and English. At home, we use Lala"* (Respondent 5). Another stated, *"Even when we go to town, we avoid using Lala"* (Respondent 1).

Table 1: Respondents' Perceptions of the Lala Language Situation (N=20)

Viewpoint	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Used informally, not formally	10	50
Endangered, slowly disappearing	6	30
Already being replaced by other languages	3	15
Not in danger	1	5
Total	20	100

Table 2: Contexts of Lala Language Use (N=20)

Context/Domain	Frequency	Percentage (%)
At home	17	85
In village/community meetings	12	60
At church/religious settings	10	50
By media (e.g., radio)	8	40
In markets	6	30
In clinics/health centres	5	25
At school (informal/partial)	4	20
In CBD/towns	3	15

Competence and Attitudes

Self-reported proficiency revealed a weakening grasp of “deep” Lala. Only 30% considered themselves very fluent, while 35% were moderately competent, and another 30% reported limited knowledge or frequent code-mixing (Table 3). Attitudes were mixed (Table 4): 40% expressed pride, but 35% reported shame or fear of ridicule, especially in public. *“They laugh at us when we speak Lala... We feel ashamed to speak it these days”* (Respondent 1). This stigma actively discourages public use.

Table 3: Self-Reported Proficiency in Lala Language (N=20)

Proficiency Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Moderately competent (not deep Lala)	7	35
Very fluent (original Lala)	6	30
Limited knowledge (mixed with Icibemba)	6	30
Not competent at all	1	5
Total	20	100

Table 4: Respondents' Attitude towards Speaking Lala Language (N=20)

Attitude Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive feelings (pride, comfort)	8	40
Negative feelings (shame, fear of ridicule)	7	35
Neutral or mixed feelings	5	25
Total	20	100

Language Use in Key Domains

The diglossic situation is stark in education (Table 5). Icibemba was cited as the school language by 90% of respondents, and English by 65%, while Lala was mentioned by only 20% (and only informally). At home, Lala use was higher (80%), but 40% reported code-mixing even there. Community meetings were typically multilingual, with 55% reporting a mix of Lala and Icibemba (Table 6).

Table 5: Language Use in School and Home (N=20)

Language Type	At School		At Home	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Icibemba	18	90	10	50
English	13	65	2	10
Lala	4	20	16	80
Lala-Icibemba mix	3	15	8	40

Perceptions of the Future

When asked if Lala could be replaced, responses reflected uncertainty (Table 6). While 50% believed it could not be replaced, 30% thought it could or would be, and 20% were uncertain. *“The coming of Icibemba will eventually cause the extinction of our language... we will have nothing to be proud of”* (Respondent 7).

Table 6: Respondents’ Perception of Lala Language's Future (N=20)

Response Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No – cannot be replaced	10	50
Yes – can/will be replaced	6	30
Uncertain / Conditional	4	20
Total	20	100

Factors Contributing to Lala Language Endangerment

Nine key factors were identified, with the dominance of Icibemba being the most frequently cited (85%). Table 7 presents the factors and their prevalence among respondents.

Table 7: Factors Contributing to Lala Language Endangerment (N=20)

Contributing Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Dominance of Icibemba in schools & society	17	85
Use of Lala only in limited domains	14	70
Migration/influx of non-Lala settlers	13	65
Code mixing & dilution of pure Lala	13	65
Lack of intergenerational transmission	12	60
Government policy & institutional neglect	11	55
Low prestige/stigma against Lala	10	50
Urbanisation/exposure to other cultures	9	45
Economic influence	7	35

Participants directly linked endangerment to educational policy: *“In class, they are taught in Icibemba and English”* (Respondent 2). Migration was seen as a diluting force: *“The language is in its end because of the many languages that have come into our area”* (Respondent 14). The lack of transmission was lamented: *“Original and deep Lala is less these days”* (Respondent 7), and the resulting code-mixing was commonplace: *“I mix Lala with Icibemba”* (Respondent 7). Institutional neglect was evident: government communications and services rarely used Lala.

Measures to Protect the Lala Language

Preservation efforts were found to be informal, community-based, and limited. As shown in Table 8, the most cited measure was the use of Serenje Radio (40%), though respondents criticised the quality: *“They mix too much Icibemba on the radio. It is not proper Lala anymore”*. Teaching children at home and using Lala in traditional ceremonies were each mentioned by 30% of respondents. Only 15% suggested formal education as a solution, highlighting a critical policy gap.

Table 8: Preservation Measures for Lala Language (N=20)

Preservation Effort	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Use of Serenje Radio Station	8	40
Use in traditional ceremonies & cultural education	6	30
Teaching children Lala at home	6	30
Cultural practices as carriers of language	5	25
Suggestion: Teach Lala in schools	3	15

Discussion

The findings paint a clear picture of a language in the early but advanced stages of endangerment, consistent with Stage 6 on Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), used in the home and community but excluded from most formal domains. The confinement of Lala to private spheres aligns with UNESCO's (2003) indicators of a "definitely endangered" language, where children are no longer learning it as a primary mother tongue in all contexts.

The primary driver of this shift is the dominance of Ibibemba in institutional domains, particularly education. This creates a diglossic hierarchy where Ibibemba (and English) are associated with modernity, authority, and opportunity, while Lala is relegated to tradition and locality. This policy-driven marginalisation echoes findings across Africa, where selected regional languages overshadow smaller indigenous ones (Bamgbose, 2011; Simwina, 2006). The resulting negative attitudes and stigma constitute a powerful social psychological force accelerating the shift, as speakers internalise the low prestige of their mother tongue (Batibo, 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Social Network Theory effectively explains the mechanisms of change. Traditional dense networks that sustained Lala are being disrupted by migration and urbanisation, which introduce loose-knit, multilingual networks. In these new networks, Ibibemba serves as the lingua franca, offering wider communication and economic benefits (Gal, 1979). The lack of intergenerational transmission is both a cause and symptom of weakening family and community networks. As younger generations are educated in and socialised through Ibibemba, they form peer networks where Lala is absent, breaking the chain of natural language acquisition (King & Long-Terry, 2008).

The prevalent code-mixing signals unstable bilingualism and language attrition, a typical feature of communities undergoing a shift (Romaine, 1999). Economic pressures further incentivise the adoption of the dominant language perceived to have higher "market value" (Grin, 2003). The near-total absence of institutional support, through government policy, media, or formal education, fails to counterbalance these pressures, leaving preservation reliant on fragile, grassroots efforts like home transmission and cultural ceremonies. While valuable, such efforts are insufficient against systemic forces (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

The study's findings resonate with the broader Zambian context described by Kashoki (2003) and Machinyise (2018), confirming that the official status of a regional language can endanger minority languages. However, it adds depth by illustrating how this top-down factor interacts with bottom-up social processes like network transformation and attitudinal change in a specific rural district.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, its qualitative case study design, while offering depth, limits the generalisability of findings beyond the two selected villages in Serenje District. Second, reliance on self-reported data through interviews and FGDs may be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall inaccuracy. Although participant observation was used for triangulation, more extended ethnographic immersion could have yielded richer data on actual language practices. Third, the sample size, though adequate for qualitative inquiry, was small and did not include younger children or adolescents, who are critical to understanding transmission breakdown. Finally, the study could not access detailed local government records on language policy implementation, relying instead on participant perceptions of institutional neglect.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Lala language in Serenje District is endangered. Its vitality is undermined by a combination of restrictive language-in-education policy, the socio-economic prestige of Ibibemba, destabilising social changes like migration, and the consequent erosion of intergenerational transmission within weakening community networks. While residual loyalty and informal cultural practices provide a foundation for maintenance, without targeted intervention, Lala risks further domain contraction and eventual loss.

Based on these findings, the following multi-level recommendations are proposed:

- i. **Policy Reform:** The Zambian Ministry of Education should revise its language policy to allow for mother-tongue-based education in the early grades, even for non-official languages like Lala, within their core speaking areas. This aligns with UNESCO principles and could improve foundational literacy.
- ii. **Status and Corpus Planning:** The government, in collaboration with cultural institutions, should initiate status planning to recognise Lala in local governance and official communications within Serenje District. Parallel corpus planning efforts are needed to document and standardise the language for educational use.
- iii. **Educational Integration:** Lala should be introduced as a subject in local schools, and teachers should be trained to use it as a supportive medium of instruction. This creates a formal domain for the language and reinforces its value among the youth.
- iv. **Media and Technology Support:** Serenje Radio and other local media should be supported and encouraged to produce high-quality, monolingual Lala programming (news, dramas, educational content). Digital tools and social media platforms could also be

leveraged to create virtual Lala-speaking networks, especially for youth and diaspora communities.

- v. **Community Revitalisation Programs:** NGOs and community leaders should spearhead campaigns to promote positive attitudes towards Lala, highlighting its cultural value. “Language nest” programs or community workshops that pair elders with youth for cultural and linguistic immersion could strengthen intergenerational bonds and transmission.
- vi. **Further Research:** Longitudinal studies tracking language use among Lala youth and comprehensive linguistic documentation projects are urgently needed to inform revitalisation strategies and preserve the language for future generations.

The fate of Lala is not sealed, but its future depends on conscious, coordinated efforts that address both the institutional structures that marginalise it and the social networks that are essential for its daily life and transmission.

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