

## Kiswahili as a Factor for First Language Attrition Among Chasu Speakers

*The current study made an assessment of the role of Kiswahili as Second Language (L2) in the attrition of Chasu as First Language (L1). It specifically sought to establish how Kiswahili use in home and school settings have resulted into reduced lexical competence of young people. The study involved 100 pupil participants in rural schools in Mwanga district, Kilimanjaro region in Tanzania. These were purposively chosen via convenient sampling. Data were gathered using proficiency test in which the participants to name the organisms, activities, movements and emotional states of people as shown in the pictorial images. Their responses were audio-recorded and later transcribed and organised into six thematic chunks: kitchenware, houseware, domestic animals and their body parts, wild animals, people occupations and people emotions and movements. The findings demonstrates the high degree of lexical loss of Chasu words among the young people the majority of whom replaced the target items with Kiswahili equivalents while others Kiswahilised the Chasu names. It has been concluded that while Kiswahili as a lingua franca and language of education in most public primary schools is appreciated, it has adverse consequences to the growth of heritage languages. If the trend of lexical attrition continues (an in other linguistic levels outside the scope of the study) Tanzania might become linguistically tribeless where only Kiswahili and some foreign languages will be in use.*

**Keywords:** Attrition, Chasu, Kiswahili, L1, L2

### Introduction

#### *Background of the Study*

Language attrition, as a subfield within linguistics, owes its genesis from 1980s by Richard D. Lambert' (1982) "The Loss of Language Skills" (as cited in Köpke and Schmid (2004) which was based on Lambert's introspection since he narrated how he lost proficiency in several foreign languages such as Urdu, Bangali, Sanskrit and Marathi after he had acquired fluency in some of those languages. Cherciov 2011) identified six predictors of language attrition, namely; age (attrition among children and adults), education (literacy in L1 and attrition in L1), length of residence in L2 country (time taken in exposure in L2), language choice and contact (amount of L1 use or type of L1 use), attitudinal factors (either to adopt new language and culture or to remain an outsider and maintain L1 skills) and language aptitude (the potential for learning languages). Majority of scholars who have studied language attrition (first language attrition) focus on one or more of those predictors. Au et al. (2002), for instance, explored the traces of L1 skills acquired during childhood, but later exposed to L2 environment and noted that adults learning a language speak with a more native-like accent if they overheard the language regularly during childhood than if they did not.

The notion of language attrition describes the situation whereby the speaker has lost some knowledge or linguistic repertoire in the first language due to reduced interaction in that language. In other literatures the term is considered as a part of language loss- but loss that does not involve biological or pathological factors such as brain injuries (Köpke and Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2011).

There are several contexts in which language attrition can be tested. De Bot and Hulsen (2002) described language attrition in the following contexts: L1 loss in an L1 environment, L2 loss in an L1 environment, L2 loss in an L2 environment and L1 loss in an L2 environment. Sebina (2014) considers the last context as more highly investigated than the other contexts. With this light, she placed her effort in investigating L1 attrition in L1 environment, which is also the concern of the current study.

However, first language attrition is mostly associated with migration or adoption which involves movement of the speaker from a monolingual environment to a bilingual one. A good number of studies on language attrition have focused on language attrition after migration whereby the speaker, having acquired L1, shifts to a new environment and gets exposed to L2 such that there is a broken communication between the migrant and his/her L1 native speakers (e.g. Schmid, 2011, 2002; Carlisle, 2010; Cherciov, 2011; Pallier, 2007; Ammerlaan, 1996; Ammerlaan, 1991; Au et al. (2002) etc.). However, there is a need to study how the same phenomenon could take place within L1 environment where children's exposure in L2 through schooling has led to the decline in L1 skills. This point is also maintained by Sebina (2014) who argues that even though L1 attrition literature on adult immigrants is abundant, little is known of people going through language attrition in a native environment. This was also the curiosity of the current study. The main assumption here is that children who have been exposed to L2 in L1 environment are also vulnerable to some degrees of L1 attrition. In education settings, the competition between L1 and L2 can indicate some attritional signs due to interference between L1 skills and L2 learning.

### *The Problem*

Although a good number of studies have been conducted on first language attrition, not much has been done to investigate whether language attrition can also take place in situations where children are exposed to L2 through education in their L1 environment. Major (1993), for instance, points out that speakers who chose to suppress their first language, who were immersed in the environment of a different language, or who were no longer exposed to their L1, started speaking L1 with an L2 accent. However, little is said as to whether this problem can even take place in the situation where the speaker remains in L1 environment and gets exposed to L2 systems through schooling. Among the few studies are Sebina's (2014) investigation of L1 attrition by the Batswana children who acquired English as an L2 in private English-medium schools in their native environment and Utamwa's (2016) assessment of role of Formal

education as a cause of attrition of Cigogo as L1 in Tanzania both of whom found that their children respondents had experienced a decline in use of their mother tongue. This vacuum forms the quest for the proposed study. It sought to investigate how L1 (Chasu) proficiency has been negatively influenced by L2 (Kiswahili) knowledge to the extent that there is a reduced competence in the L1. It is meant to ascertain the impacts of L2 to L1 proficiency in the length of exposure to L2 in formal schooling.

## **Methodology**

### *Study Area*

This study was conducted in Mwanga district in Kilimanjaro region. The common native language spoken in this area is known as a Chasu (popular as Kipare) and the speakers themselves are called Wapare (in Swahili) but who refer to themselves as 'Vaathu'. Kiswahili is the second language for most of these speakers which is particularly acquired in schools in rural areas (as it is to other rural areas in Tanzania). According to URT (1995), Kiswahili is the medium of instruction in pre- primary and primary schools and a compulsory subject in secondary schools.

Daily communication in primary schools is largely carried out via Kiswahili and pupils are compelled to use Kiswahili all the time while at school, although there is a competition from vernacular languages. In secondary schools daily interactions between students and the general school community are conducted in Swahili, despite the fact that English is a medium of instruction in secondary schools. Additionally, children acquire Chasu at family level and from the general Pare community during childhood and learn Kiswahili after their entrance to pre-primary, primary and post primary levels; whereas, at puberty onset and post-puberty, alongside a continued exposure to Kiswahili, they are exposed to English language. This multiple exposure to new languages nevertheless has a bearing to L1 proficiency and use (which is the main concern of the current study).

### *Study Participants and Instrumentation*

This study was conducted to primary pupils from standard one to standard seven to whom a simple proficiency test was administered to assess their general knowledge of Chasu. The study involved 100 (40 male and 60 female) pupil participants. The means by which the study participants were selected was through purposive and snowball sampling. For the latter, the researcher asked for help from the first informants, which eventually enabled him to access other reliable informants.

Proficiency Test was the sole tool for data gathering. This tool was used to test speaker's vocabulary memory. To achieve this goal, participants were asked to name organisms or things in their community as well as daily

activities. Specifically, they were asked to list the names of animals, traditional utensils, body parts, and animal sounds as well as simple action verbs. All these items were designed to test lexical attrition of the subjects under investigation. Furthermore, the participants were also asked to name different items or activities depicted in pictures and drawings. Performance was measured according to how the participant was able to take a short lapse to supply meaning and how exact the meaning supplied is.

The collection of data was made possible by the following steps: the researcher used a digital voice recorder to record responses during proficiency test. The recorded data were then transcribed and thereafter, they were analyzed with the aid of tables and descriptions where necessary.

## Findings

The findings are organised according to group categories of the lexical items that were used in testing the respondents namely; kitchenware, houseware, domestic animals and their body parts, wild animals, names for occupations, and emotions.

### *Kitchenware*

Retention of the lexicon has been investigated to a greater extent than any other area. In both L1 and L2 attrition research, observes Park (2018), the lexicon has been found to be most prone to attrition, attriting quickly and more severely than other areas, such as grammar or phonetics. The most common manifestations of lexical attrition include lexical access difficulties and forgetting of unused vocabulary. We were interested to find out the extent to which kitchen ware vocabulary in Chasu might have also be lost or is being forgotten by our respondents. Below are findings pertaining to a selected inventory of 6 kitchen-related items.

Kitchenware is a cover term for the tools, utensils, appliances, dishes, and cookware used in food preparation, or the serving of food (Lantz, 1970; Day, 2013). 7 kitchenware that are traditional ones in Chasu speaking material culture were selected and the respondents' responses to these are as summarised in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** *Reponses to labels for Kitchenware*

s/n	item	Gloss	correct	wrong	No response	Total
1	thangu	water pot	0	83	17	100
2	ikothi	big wooden serving spoon	10	90	0	100
3	mko	Wooden spoon	11	82	7	100
4	ivungu	earthen soup bowl	4	54	42	100

5	lujavia	broken piece of porcelain	23	68	9	100
6	maivu	ash	81	9	10	100

The item to which most participants got wrong was ‘ivungu’ (a small part for securing soup or relish at table) to which only 4 (4%) got right. 43 (43%) mistook it for ‘ilungu’ (a chasu word for being muddle headed) while 6 (6%) gave a Swahili version of it denoting their knowing it but not having its Chasu name in their memory. The remaining 47 (47%) did not respond. As for ‘lujavia’ (a piece of broken cooking pot) 23 (23%) got it right while 45 (45%) used a Swahili label for it (‘kipande cha chungu’), 23 (23%) mistook it for ‘javia’ (a non-word in Chasu). The item which was better known to the majority was ‘maivu’ (ashes) since 81 (81%) got it right. This was probably due to its being closely similar to ‘majivu’ which is a Swahili version of it to which 9 (9%) thought it was the correct name for it. However, ‘ikothi’ was mistakenly called ‘mwiko’ (a Swahili label for it) by 64% of respondents while the remaining 26% called it ‘jiko’ (Swahili for cooker) which is quite unrelated to the item.

At times, the learners showed limited knowledge for Chasu kitchenware by having a single name for all types of pots to which the majority gave it a Swahili term ‘chungu’ for ‘thangu’ (water pot) (54%) and for ‘ivungu’ (small pot for soup or relish (45%). Similarly ‘ikothi’ and ‘mko’ were given Swahili label ‘mwiko’ by 64% and 70%, respectively.

It studying lexical loss, Schmid and Kopke (2011) asked their respondents to name as many semantically related items as they could in a specified amount of time (1minute). He found that the attriters basically used and comprehended their L1 vocabulary as monolingual controls did, but occasionally experienced interference from the L2.

### *Houseware*

The term ‘houseware’ was used in a restricted sense of traditional material for building the traditional house, parts of traditional houses and some traditional furnishing materials. These were 8 in total and the responses are summarised in table 2.

**Table 2.** *Responses to Houseware Labels*

s/n	item	Gloss	correct	wrong	No response	Total
1	kuvimba	thatching	39	53	8	100
2	ngaghe	thatching grass	67	24	9	100
3	ianga	roof air/light opening	21	78	1	100
4	mthodi	roof apex	2	18	80	100
5	mwendeghu	inner fire-place	43	37	20	100

6	mbengeni	cooking and eating place	13	85	2	100
7	kigondi	Main door stepping peg	10	72	18	100
8	kichumbi	wooden stool	62	38	0	100

In table 2 above, data show that eight home pictorial images or sketches were presented to respondents to identify and name. 'kichumbi' (wooden tool) was got right by the majority (62%) of the respondents while 32% referred to it in its Swahili equivalent ('kiti') and 'kigoda' by 6%. "Kuvimba" (thatching) was correctly labelled by 39% of respondents while 50% mistook it for 'kutegha' (which refers to erecting wooden roof structure unto which the roof it put/thatched). So, they were close enough to the target item but failed to get specific label. The 3% who called it 'kwimba' seem to have lost the first syllable 'ku' and still remembered the word stem ('imb'). The houseware to which the respondents were proven to be highly influenced by Kiswahili is 'mbengeni' where 85% identified it as thebuleni (sitting room) a Swahili word, to which they were trying to navitivise with substitution of /s/ with /th/ which is a Chasu consonant. As for 'ngaghe' (thatching grass), 67% correctly identified it while 24% gave generic label "mani eomie" (dry grass) that could refer to any kind of grass. 'Kigondi' (main door stepping peg) was gotten right by only 10% while the majority (72%) referred to it as 'kigogo' a Swahili word to mean 'small log' which again refers to any kind of small log.

Generally, except for 'ngaghe' and 'kichumbi' both of which have over 60% getting it right, the majority of items were wrongly labelled but labels chosen are either Swahili terms for the items or paraphrase of the label.

Park (2018) observes that language attrition is partly influenced by the typological proximity between the two contact languages. In terms of vocabulary retention, he cites studies the findings of which have suggested that L2 cognates were better retained than non-cognates, which were more vulnerable to attrition and some studies like Hansen (2011) which have reported a significant correlation between the rate of lexical learning and loss where typological proximity between the two interacting languages facilitated the attriters' retention of vocabulary. Berman and Olshtain's (1983) showed that some aspects of the lexicon were retained by English L2 speaking children returning to an L1 Hebrew-speaking environment, whereas other lexical features showed attrition where Child returnees were observed to have experienced lexical loss most notably in daily vocabulary for items or events that were typical in Israel including household events.

#### *Domestic Animals and Animal Body Parts*

These are animals that have been selectively bred and genetically adapted over generations to live alongside humans (Daly, 2019), 11 most popular among Chasu speaking people of which were presented for respondents to name. Their responses are as summarised in table 3 below.

1 **Table 3.** *Responses to names of Domestic Animals and Animal Body Parts*

s/n	item	Gloss	correct	wrong	No response	Total
1	<b>mbuji</b>	goat	68	32	0	100
2	<b>igonji</b>	sheep	67	33	0	100
3	<b>nzao</b>	bull	14	86	0	100
4	<b>kadama</b>	cow calf	11	89	0	100
5	<b>mori</b>	mature female cow	4	96	0	100
6	<b>nguku</b>	chicken	83	17	0	100
7	<b>ikuruvi</b>	cock	29	71	0	100
8	<b>ibata</b>	duck	82	18	0	100
9	<b>iguro</b>	dog	42	58	0	100
10	<b>Kinyawi</b>	cat	59	41	0	100
11	<b>Kitojo</b>	rabbit	41	59	0	100

2  
3 The domestic animals group and their parts had 11 items which are most  
4 common animals found Tanzania households. To these, most of items were  
5 gotten wrong and a significant group of respondents used Swahili terms for the  
6 target referents. The most notable ones were 81% who used 'mwana wa  
7 ng'ombe' (Swahili for cow's offspring) to refer to 'kadama' (small calf) as  
8 opposed to 11% who got the item right; 71% who referred to 'nzao' (bull) as  
9 'ng'ombe ya kiume' (Swahili for 'male cow') as contrasted with 14% who got  
10 the item right and 68% who mistakenly referred to 'mbuji' ('goat') as mbuzi  
11 (Swahili for goat) while 27% gave the diminutive form of the goat, 'kabuji'  
12 (i.e. 'small goat'). However, 83% correctly referred to 'nguku' ('chicken') in its  
13 correct label. Similarly, as many as 82% got 'ibata' (duck) right and 59% got  
14 "kinyawi" ('cat') right while 40% referred to it as 'nyau' as Swahili slang for  
15 the cat but which closely resembles the Chasu term.

#### 16 *Wild Animals*

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18  
19 These are undomesticated animal species live wild in an area without  
20 being introduced by humans (Usher, 1986). From an array of wild animals  
21 found around conserved animal habitat around Pare mountains and plains, ten  
22 were selected for the respondents to name or label and their responses are as  
23 summarised in table 4 below.  
24  
25

1 **Table 4. Responses on Names of Wild Animals**

s/n	item	Gloss	correct	wrong	No response	Total
1	<b>Thimba</b>	lion	16	84	0	100
2	<b>Nguto</b>	leopard	39	27	34	100
3	<b>Ibau</b>	Wolf	20	43	37	100
4	<b>Itara</b>	python	13	78	9	100
5	<b>nyoka</b>	snake	100	0	0	100
6	<b>nyoki</b>	bees	20	79	1	100
7	<b>nzovu</b>	elephant	24	48	28	100
8	<b>Mbala</b>	impala	21	49	30	100
9	<b>ifude</b>	lizard	10	62	28	100
10	<b>lugwi</b>	chameleon	13	67	20	100

2  
3 It is in table 3 where influence of Kiswahili is most evidenced since 4 out  
4 of the 10 wide animal names present the over 60% of participants called them  
5 by their Swahili names. The most notable is 'thimba' ('lion') to which 84%  
6 referred to it as 'simba' (Swahili for 'lion', while the remaining 16% got it  
7 right, probably aided by its articulatory closeness with the Swahili word.  
8 'Nyoki' (bee) was called by its Swahili name 'nyuki' by 79% while 'ifude'  
9 (lizard) and 'lugwi' (chameleon) were also referred to by their Swahili terms  
10 by 62% and 67%, respectively. One item 'nyoka' ('snake') had had one to one  
11 phonological and orthographic resemblance with the Swahili equivalent, which  
12 most likely explains why 100% got the item apparently right.

13 However, some items were gotten wrong by significant number of  
14 respondents who could neither get the Chasu name for them nor its Swahili  
15 equivalent. The most notable is 'itara' (python) which 78% called 'nyoka  
16 mbaha' (big snake).

### 17 *Occupations*

18  
19 These are traditional and modern activities that the Chasu speaking people  
20 are engaged to earn a living, six of which were presented for the respondents to  
21 state their names or labes and their responses are as summarized in table 5.  
22  
23

24 **Table 5. Responses on Names for Occupations**

s/n	item	Gloss	correct	wrong	No response	Total
1	<b>muimi</b>	farmer	9	81	10	100
2	<b>mrisha</b>	pastoralist	52	17	31	100
3	<b>mwapea</b>	priest	10	89	1	100



4	<b>mretegha</b>	roof specialist	2	88	10	100
5	<b>mghanga</b>	doctor/herbalist	61	39	0	100
6	<b>mrechinja</b>	butcher man	13	87	0	100

Six occupations were presented for respondents to name. The grand majority (over 80%) in three items out of six items used Swahili labels to name the activities. These were ‘mkulima (for muimi- ‘farmer’), padiri (for ‘mwapea’ – priest) and mchinjaji (for ‘mrechinja’ – butcher) by 81%, 89% and 87%, respondents, respectively. ‘mretegha’ (roof specialist) was also referred to as ‘theremala’ (a ‘chasunised’ Swahili) by 78% respondents. However, two items: ‘mrisha’ (pastoralist) and ‘mghanga’ (herbalist) were gotten right by 52% and 61% respondents, respectively.

Generally, most respondents were highly influenced by Swahili in naming the activities presented either by using the word from standard Swahili e.g. ‘mkulima’ and ‘mchinjaji’ or Swahili words slightly adapted to Chasu phonological inventory e.g. ‘padiri’ and ‘theremala’. This adaptation is in line with observations by scholars such as Andersen (1983) that similarity between the L1 and the L2 is a condition for transfer. More empirically, in her study of the L1 attrition of German in the context of L2 English, Altenberg (1991) found plural allomorphs were more severely affected than gender-marking and she suggested that gender was less affected because this category was not subject to influence from English.

#### *Labels for Emotions and Movements*

These are universal human behavioural aspects and six were chosen for the respondents to label. Their responses are as summarised below.

**Table 6.** *Responses on Labels for Emotions and Movements*

s/n	item	Gloss	correct	wrong	No response	Total
1	<b>kutonga</b>	to go/leave	15	41	44	100
2	<b>kudha</b>	to come/arrive	24	51	25	100
3	<b>kubigha</b>	to hit/beat	30	21	49	100
4	<b>kutheka</b>	to laugh	20	68	12	100
5	<b>kughesha</b>	to try/attempt	28	34	38	100
6	<b>kuia</b>	to cry/weep	10	72	18	100

In table 4.6 above, too, six items were provided to this category. Three items were gotten right by over half of the respondents. The most notable are emotional states of ‘kuiya’ (to weep) and ‘kuseka’ (to laugh) which were labelled correctly by 72% and 68% of respondents, respectively. Similarly, movement labels ‘kudha’ (to come) was labelled correctly by 51%.

Conversely, another movement 'kutonga' was erroneously labelled 'kuzoka' (Chasu for travel) and 'kuondoka' (Swahili for 'to leave') by 30 % and 11% of respondents, respectively.

In short, the respondents did fairly well in most of the emotional and movement items, indicating their not being attritions in this category. Oller et al. (2007) provided suggestive evidence from L1 attrition research that for children, massive exposure to an L2 results in general inhibition of L1 vocabulary in production, though not (at first) in comprehension. These children, after entering the L2-dominant school system, a suppression mechanism impeded access to L1 vocabulary.

Seliger (1991), subscribing to interlanguage hypothesis for L1 attrition, suggested that after a period without L1 input, learners could unconsciously process L2 input as a kind of indirect positive evidence, which causes them to replace those more complex L1 rules with simpler L2 rules in cases in which the two sets of rules have a similar semantic function. Pavlenko (2004) and Isurin (2007) have also argued that increased exposure to a L2 is likely to involve influence on the L1 but are not convince that such influence always results into attrition.

## Conclusion

The findings have shown that Kiswahili as L2 has heavily contributed to lexical attrition to young people in rural communities who speak Chasu as L1. The majority of the respondents, however, did not lose much of vocabulary related to names of occupations. Conversely, most were proved to have lost vocabulary for wild animals and houseware items. The most plausible explanation is the non-use or rare use of most of the houseware items which have been replaced with modern ones (for the houseware) and the use of Kiswahili in learning and reading Kiswahili textbooks where wildlife is exemplified. In conclusion, the language planning in Tanzania puts emphasis on use of Kiswahili as language of education at primary levels for majority of public schools and as language of wider communication. While this is appreciated, it does have adverse effect on growth of heritage languages like Chasu, which are L1 to majority of rural Tanzanians. This might eventually lead to Tanzania being linguistically 'tribeless' in which only Kiswahili and other foreign languages are used.

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