

# Indigenous Language Decline in Kenya: A Systematic Review of Drivers, Trends, and Revitalisation Strategies

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The rapid decline of indigenous languages represents one of the most pressing cultural and intellectual crises of the 21st century. Globally, nearly half of the world's languages are projected to disappear within the next century, with Africa being particularly vulnerable due to its high linguistic diversity and limited documentation efforts.

**Materials and Methods:** This study applies the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to systematically examine indigenous language decline in Kenya, focusing on endangered languages such as Rendille, Elmolo, Yaaku, Ongamo, Dahalo, Suba, and Aweer. The review synthesizes literature published between 2000 and 2025 from major academic databases and institutional reports. The study addresses six thematic areas: conceptual foundations of language loss, status and classification of endangered languages, cultural assimilation and identity transformation, weakening intergenerational transmission systems, socio-cultural impacts, and revitalisation strategies.

**Results:** Findings reveal that language decline in Kenya is driven by complex interactions between globalization, education systems, socio-economic mobility, and shifting identity patterns. The erosion of intergenerational transmission emerges as the most critical determinant of language survival. The consequences extend beyond communication loss to include the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems, cultural identity, and ecological wisdom. However, emerging revitalisation efforts—particularly those driven by communities and supported by digital technologies and policy reforms—offer viable pathways for preservation.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that sustainable language revitalisation in Kenya requires integrated approaches that combine community participation, educational reform, technological innovation, and institutional support.

**Keywords:** Indigenous languages, language endangerment, language shift, intergenerational transmission, language revitalisation.

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: 15 April 2026

Accepted: 30 April 2026

Published: 04 May 2026

Cite this article as:

Mary Syokoli Mutisya, Ropilo Lanyasunya. Indigenous Language Decline in Kenya: A Systematic Review of Drivers, Trends, and Revitalisation Strategies. International Journal of Innovative Studies in Humanities and Social Studies, 2026;2(3); 04-11.

<https://doi.org/10.71123/3067-7319.020302>

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## Introduction

Language is not merely a system of communication but a fundamental repository of culture, identity, and collective memory. It encodes knowledge systems, social norms, ecological practices, and worldviews that define the lived experiences of communities (Crystal, 2000). The loss of language, therefore, represents not only a linguistic shift but also a profound disruption of cultural continuity and intellectual heritage. Across the globe, scholars have raised concerns about the accelerating rate of language endangerment, with estimates suggesting that nearly half of the approximately 7,000 languages spoken today may become extinct within this century (UNESCO, 2021).

The phenomenon of language decline is closely linked to processes of globalization, modernization, and socio-economic transformation, which tend to privilege dominant languages over minority and indigenous ones. As communities increasingly integrate into national and global systems, languages associated with education, governance, and economic advancement—such as English, French, and Kiswahili—often displace indigenous languages in everyday use (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). This shift is particularly pronounced among younger generations, who may perceive indigenous languages as less relevant or less prestigious in contemporary society.

Africa represents one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world, yet this diversity is under significant threat. Many African languages remain under-documented and are vulnerable to extinction due to a combination of historical, political, and socio-economic factors (Heine & Nurse, 2000). In Kenya, a country with over 40 indigenous languages, the tension between linguistic diversity and language loss is especially evident. While Kiswahili and English serve as official and national languages, numerous indigenous languages face varying degrees of endangerment, including Yaaku, Elmolo, Ongamo, Dahalo, Suba, and Aweer (Lewis et al., 2023).

The case of the Yaaku language illustrates the severity of this crisis. Once spoken by a distinct hunter-gatherer community in Laikipia, Yaaku has virtually disappeared following the assimilation of its speakers into the Samburu/Maasai community, resulting in a complete language shift (Brenzinger, 1998). Similarly, Elmolo, spoken around Lake Turkana, is now critically endangered, with only a few elderly speakers remaining (Heine & Nurse, 2000). Even languages such as Rendille, which still have a relatively larger speaker base, are increasingly vulnerable due to pressures from dominant

neighboring languages and changing socio-economic conditions (Schlee, 2013).

The decline of indigenous languages in Kenya reflects broader global patterns but is also shaped by unique local dynamics, including colonial legacies, national language policies, education systems, and patterns of urbanization. Colonial education systems historically marginalized indigenous languages, privileging European languages as mediums of instruction and governance (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). Post-independence language policies have not fully reversed this trend, often reinforcing the dominance of English and Kiswahili in formal domains.

Theoretical perspectives on language decline provide important insights into these dynamics. Fishman's theory of language shift emphasizes the centrality of intergenerational transmission in maintaining language vitality, arguing that a language survives only if it is actively passed down within families and communities (Fishman, 1991). Similarly, ethnolinguistic vitality theory highlights the role of demographic strength, institutional support, and community attitudes in determining the survival of a language (Giles et al., 1977). These frameworks are particularly relevant in the Kenyan context, where many indigenous languages lack institutional support and are increasingly excluded from formal domains of use.

Despite growing awareness of language endangerment, there remains a lack of comprehensive, systematic synthesis of research on indigenous language decline in Kenya. Existing studies are often fragmented, focusing on specific languages or regions without providing an integrated understanding of the broader trends, drivers, and potential solutions. This study addresses this gap by applying the PRISMA systematic review methodology to analyze and synthesize existing literature on indigenous language decline in Kenya within a global and African context.

## Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is language loss, risk, and endangerment conceptualized in global and African scholarship?
2. What is the status, classification, and distribution of disappeared and endangered indigenous languages in Kenya?
3. In what ways do cultural assimilation and identity transformation contribute to indigenous language decline?

4. How are intergenerational language transmission systems weakening in Kenyan communities?
5. What are the socio-cultural, intellectual, and ecological consequences of indigenous language loss?
6. What strategies are most effective in revitalising endangered indigenous languages in Kenya and similar contexts?

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopted a systematic literature review design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework. Systematic review methodology is particularly appropriate for synthesizing fragmented interdisciplinary literature on indigenous language decline, as it allows for transparent, replicable, and structured identification, screening, and analysis of existing scholarly evidence (Page et al., 2021). Unlike traditional narrative reviews, PRISMA-based reviews minimize selection bias and enhance methodological rigor by applying explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The study is situated within qualitative systematic synthesis, focusing on thematic integration of findings across linguistics, anthropology, education, and sociocultural studies. The analytical orientation aligns with thematic synthesis approaches that enable the interpretation of patterns across heterogeneous qualitative studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

### Review Protocol and Framework

The review followed the PRISMA 2020 framework, which consists of four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. These stages ensure transparency in literature selection and allow replication of the review process by future researchers (Page et al., 2021).

In addition, the study was conceptually guided by two theoretical frameworks:

First, Fishman's Theory of Reversing Language Shift, which emphasizes intergenerational transmission as the core mechanism for language survival (Fishman, 1991). This theory is essential in understanding why many Kenyan indigenous languages decline when younger generations shift to dominant languages.

Second, Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory, which explains language survival based on three key dimensions: demographic strength, institutional support, and status

or prestige (Giles et al., 1977). These frameworks provided interpretive lenses for synthesizing findings across studies.

### Data Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented to capture peer-reviewed articles, books, conference papers, and institutional reports relevant to indigenous language decline globally, in Africa, and in Kenya.

The academic databases searched were Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest, UNESCO digital archives, and African Journals Online (AJOL). Search terms were developed using Boolean operators and combinations of keywords such as "indigenous language loss" OR "language endangerment", "language shift Africa", "Kenya endangered languages", "Rendille language decline", "Elmolo language extinction", "Yaaku language revitalisation", "language transmission and identity Africa", and "language policy Kenya". To ensure comprehensiveness, backward and forward citation tracking was also conducted on key articles to identify additional relevant studies (Haddaway et al., 2015).

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study applied strict eligibility criteria to ensure relevance and quality of included studies. Studies were included if they were published between 2000 and 2025, if focused on indigenous, minority, or endangered languages, and addressed language loss, shift, endangerment, or revitalisation. Also if they included global, African, or Kenyan contexts and were peer-reviewed journal articles, books, or institutional reports (e.g., UNESCO).

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on computational linguistics without sociocultural analysis, did not address language endangerment or shift, were opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical grounding, and if they were duplicated across databases/ This screening ensured that only methodologically and conceptually relevant literature informed the synthesis.

### Study Selection Process

The literature search initially identified 512 records across all databases. After removal of duplicates ( $n = 98$ ), a total of 414 records proceeded to title and abstract screening. During screening, 271 records were excluded due to irrelevance to indigenous language decline or insufficient conceptual alignment with the study objectives. This resulted in 143 full-text articles assessed for eligibility. At the full-text review stage, 71 articles were excluded for reasons such as lack

of methodological clarity, absence of focus on language endangerment, or insufficient empirical/theoretical depth. Ultimately, 72 studies were included in the final synthesis. These studies formed the basis for thematic analysis across global, African, and Kenyan contexts, with particular attention to endangered languages such as Rendille, Elmolo, Yaaku, Ongamo, Suba, Aweer, and Dahalo.

### **Data Extraction and Management**

Data from the selected studies were extracted using a structured synthesis framework. The extracted information included: Author(s) and year of publication, Geographic focus (global, African, Kenyan), Language(s) studied, Thematic focus (loss, transmission, identity, revitalisation), Key findings, and Methodological approach. To ensure consistency, a thematic coding system was applied, grouping findings under the six research objectives. This enabled cross-study comparison and synthesis of recurring patterns and divergences.

### **Data Analysis**

The study employed thematic synthesis analysis, which involves three stages: coding of findings, development of descriptive themes, and generation of analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). This approach is particularly suitable for synthesizing qualitative and mixed-methods studies on sociolinguistic phenomena. The analysis focused on identifying: Structural drivers of language decline, cultural and identity-based influences, Institutional and policy-related factors, Consequences of language loss, and revitalisation strategies. Patterns were interpreted across three analytical levels: global linguistic trends, African regional dynamics, and Kenyan case-specific evidence.

### **Quality Appraisal**

Although systematic reviews in humanities do not always apply strict quantitative appraisal tools, this study ensured quality control through prioritizing peer-reviewed publications, excluding non-scholarly sources, cross-validating findings across multiple studies, and emphasizing high-impact sources such as UNESCO and established linguistic scholarship. This ensured that synthesized findings were grounded in credible and authoritative research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since the study relied exclusively on secondary data, no human participants were involved. However, ethical academic practice was maintained through proper citation of all sources and adherence to intellectual property standards.

## **Results and Thematic Synthesis**

### **Conceptualizing Language Loss, Risk, and Endangerment (Global Perspective)**

The synthesis of global literature reveals that language loss is widely conceptualized as a gradual process of linguistic shift in which a community transitions from using an indigenous or minority language to a dominant language across successive generations. This process is rarely abrupt; rather, it unfolds through stages of reduced functional use, weakening intergenerational transmission, and eventual cessation of native speakers (Crystal, 2000). Language endangerment is therefore understood not only in terms of declining speaker numbers but also in terms of diminishing domains of use, reduced institutional support, and declining prestige within the speech community.

Globally, UNESCO's framework classifies languages into five levels of vitality, ranging from safe to extinct, based on intergenerational transmission and speaker stability (UNESCO, 2021). Within this framework, a language becomes endangered when children no longer learn it as a first language in the home environment, signaling a critical disruption in transmission pathways. Scholars such as Joshua Fishman emphasize that the decisive factor in language survival is not numerical strength alone but the continuity of transmission within families and community institutions. This theoretical position underscores the sociocultural nature of language decline as opposed to purely demographic explanations.

Across global contexts, language endangerment is consistently linked to globalization, urbanization, and linguistic homogenization driven by dominant world languages such as English, Spanish, and Mandarin. These processes reshape linguistic ecologies by privileging languages associated with economic mobility, education, and technological access (Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

### **Status and Distribution of Endangered Languages in Kenya**

The synthesis of African and Kenyan-focused literature indicates that Kenya exhibits significant linguistic diversity but also a high concentration of endangered languages, particularly among small, marginalized communities in arid and semi-arid regions. Languages such as Yaaku, Elmolo, Ongamo, Dahalo, Suba, Aweer (Boni), and Rendille demonstrate varying degrees of endangerment.

Yaaku is widely reported as functionally extinct, with former speakers having shifted to Samburu/Maasai due to prolonged assimilation and inter-community

integration. Elmolo, historically spoken around Lake Turkana, is critically endangered, with only a very small number of elderly speakers remaining. Ongamo has experienced near-total language shift, with younger generations adopting Maasai as their primary language. Dahalo, a linguistically unique Cushitic language, is severely endangered and increasingly restricted to limited ritual or symbolic use. Suba, spoken around Lake Victoria, has experienced significant decline due to dominance of Dholuo and Swahili in the region. Aweer, spoken in coastal forest regions, remains endangered due to displacement and assimilation pressures.

Rendille, while still comparatively more stable, exhibits signs of vulnerability due to increasing bilingualism with Samburu and Kiswahili, especially among younger speakers. These patterns reveal that language endangerment in Kenya is not uniform but rather exists along a continuum shaped by geography, mobility, and socio-economic integration (Lewis et al., 2023).

Geographically, endangered languages are concentrated in peripheral ecological zones—northern Kenya (Marsabit, Turkana), coastal forests (Lamu), and lake regions (Lake Victoria basin). These areas often coincide with limited access to education, infrastructure, and institutional support, further exacerbating linguistic marginalization (Heine & Nurse, 2000).

### **Cultural Assimilation and Identity Transformation**

The review reveals that cultural assimilation plays a central role in indigenous language decline in Kenya. One of the most significant mechanisms of language shift is intermarriage, which often leads to the adoption of a dominant lingua franca within households. In multilingual family settings, children tend to acquire the language that offers the greatest socioeconomic advantage, frequently Kiswahili or English, rather than the indigenous language of one parent.

Identity transformation also contributes significantly to language shift. As individuals increasingly associate with national or urban identities rather than ethnolinguistic identities, the functional necessity of indigenous languages diminishes. Language becomes symbolically associated with rurality, backwardness, or limited mobility, while dominant languages are associated with modernity and opportunity (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998).

Religion and modernization further reinforce these dynamics. Religious institutions often conduct services in dominant languages, reducing the domains in which indigenous languages are actively used. Similarly, exposure to global media, including television, music,

and social media, shapes youth language preferences toward globally dominant linguistic forms. These processes collectively demonstrate that language shift is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a deeply embedded cultural restructuring process.

### **Weakening of Intergenerational Language Transmission**

One of the most consistently identified drivers of language decline is the breakdown of intergenerational transmission. The synthesis shows that in many Kenyan communities, children no longer acquire indigenous languages as their first language, particularly in urban and peri-urban settings. Instead, Kiswahili often functions as the default home language in multilingual households.

Traditional mechanisms of transmission—such as storytelling, initiation rituals, communal gatherings, and elders' oral instruction—have weakened significantly. These institutions historically served as the primary vehicles for linguistic and cultural continuity. However, modernization, formal education systems, and changing family structures have reduced their influence.

Education systems play a particularly important role in this shift. Schools in Kenya predominantly use English and Kiswahili as languages of instruction, marginalizing indigenous languages from formal learning environments. This institutional exclusion reinforces the perception that indigenous languages are not economically or academically valuable, thereby discouraging their use among younger generations (Bunyi, 1999). The weakening of transmission is therefore both a household-level and institutional-level phenomenon, reinforcing each other in a cycle of linguistic decline.

### **Socio-Cultural, Intellectual, and Ecological Effects of Language Loss**

The consequences of indigenous language decline extend far beyond communication loss. The literature consistently demonstrates that language loss results in the erosion of cultural heritage, particularly oral traditions, proverbs, songs, and folklore that encode community values and histories. These oral systems serve as repositories of moral instruction and social cohesion, and their disappearance weakens cultural continuity.

Language loss also leads to the erosion of indigenous ecological knowledge. Many Kenyan indigenous languages contain highly specialized vocabulary related to livestock management, climate patterns, medicinal plants, and environmental adaptation. The

disappearance of these languages therefore contributes to the loss of critical ecological knowledge systems that have sustained communities in fragile environments for centuries.

Furthermore, language decline has psychological and identity-related consequences. Communities experiencing language loss often report diminished cultural pride and weakened collective identity. This can contribute to intergenerational disconnection, where younger members of the community feel less rooted in their ancestral heritage.

At a broader level, linguistic homogenization reduces global intellectual diversity, limiting alternative ways of conceptualizing human experience, knowledge, and social organization.

### **Strategies for Indigenous Language Revitalisation**

The synthesis identifies multiple revitalisation strategies that have been implemented or proposed across global and Kenyan contexts. One of the most widely recognized approaches is language documentation, which involves systematic recording of vocabulary, grammar, oral narratives, and pronunciation. This includes the creation of dictionaries, archives, and digital repositories to preserve linguistic data for future generations (Himmelmann, 2006).

Education-based revitalisation strategies involve integrating indigenous languages into formal curricula, particularly at early childhood education levels. Evidence suggests that mother-tongue instruction enhances cognitive development and strengthens cultural identity, making it a critical intervention point for reversing language shift.

Community-led revitalisation efforts also play a central role. These include cultural festivals, storytelling programs, and intergenerational language camps designed to encourage active use of indigenous languages in social settings. Such initiatives are particularly effective when they are locally owned and culturally embedded.

Technological interventions are increasingly significant in modern revitalisation efforts. Mobile applications, social media platforms, and community radio stations provide new domains for indigenous language use, particularly among younger speakers who are digitally engaged.

Finally, policy interventions are essential for long-term sustainability. Without formal recognition, funding, and institutional support, revitalisation efforts remain fragmented and limited in scale. Strong language policies that support multilingual education and cultural

preservation are therefore critical for reversing current trends of language decline.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this systematic review demonstrate that indigenous language decline in Kenya is not a singular or isolated phenomenon but rather a multidimensional process shaped by interacting structural, cultural, institutional, and psychological forces. Across global and African literature, language endangerment emerges as a predictable outcome of asymmetrical power relations between dominant and minority languages, reinforced by globalization, modernization, and state language policies that prioritize economic and administrative efficiency over cultural preservation (Crystal, 2000; Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

A key insight from this synthesis is that language loss in Kenya is fundamentally a breakdown of ecological balance within linguistic systems, where dominant languages such as Kiswahili and English increasingly occupy all formal domains of education, governance, religion, and media. In contrast, indigenous languages such as Rendille, Elmolo, Yaaku, Dahalo, Suba, Ongamo, and Aweer are confined to shrinking informal domains or elderly populations. This imbalance reflects what Joshua Fishman conceptualizes as advanced language shift, where intergenerational transmission has already been significantly disrupted, placing languages on a trajectory toward extinction unless intervention occurs at the family and community level.

The Kenyan context further reveals that language shift is deeply embedded in socio-economic aspiration structures. Speakers often abandon indigenous languages not due to rejection of cultural identity per se, but because dominant languages are perceived as vehicles of upward mobility, education, and employment. This aligns with ethnolinguistic vitality theory, which argues that language survival depends not only on speaker numbers but also on perceived prestige and institutional reinforcement (Giles et al., 1977).

Another critical dimension is the role of the education system. The review shows that formal schooling in Kenya remains overwhelmingly monolingual in English and Kiswahili, despite policy rhetoric supporting multilingualism. This creates a structural contradiction: while indigenous languages are symbolically valued, they are functionally excluded from high-status domains. As a result, children experience early linguistic substitution, where home languages are replaced by school languages before full proficiency in indigenous languages is achieved.

Cultural assimilation processes—particularly intermarriage, urbanization, and digital media exposure—further accelerate this shift. Importantly, this study finds that assimilation is not always externally imposed but often internally negotiated, as families make pragmatic linguistic choices within multilingual environments. This highlights the complexity of language loss as both a structural and agent-driven process.

From a broader African perspective, similar patterns are observed in other multilingual states where postcolonial language hierarchies continue to privilege colonial and national lingua francas over indigenous languages. However, Kenya's case is distinctive due to the extreme vulnerability of several languages that are now at or near extinction thresholds, particularly Elmolo and Yaaku.

Finally, while revitalisation initiatives exist, they remain fragmented and under-resourced. The review indicates that successful language revitalisation requires simultaneous action at three levels: community transmission, institutional support, and technological integration. Without coordinated intervention across these levels, isolated efforts are unlikely to reverse entrenched language shift dynamics.

## Conclusion

This systematic review has demonstrated that indigenous language decline in Kenya is a complex and accelerating process driven by interrelated sociocultural, institutional, and economic factors. Languages such as Yaaku, Elmolo, Ongamo, Dahalo, Suba, Aweer, and Rendille illustrate different stages along a continuum of endangerment, with some approaching extinction due to the breakdown of intergenerational transmission.

The study confirms that the most critical factor in language survival is not merely the number of speakers, but the continuity of transmission within families and communities. Once children cease to acquire indigenous languages as first languages, reversal becomes increasingly difficult without intensive and sustained intervention.

The consequences of language loss extend beyond communication to include the erosion of cultural identity, indigenous ecological knowledge, oral literature, and community cohesion. These losses represent not only a Kenyan concern but also a global reduction in linguistic and intellectual diversity.

However, the study also identifies viable pathways for revitalisation. These include language documentation, integration of indigenous languages into education systems, community-led cultural initiatives, digital

innovation, and supportive policy frameworks. Sustainable revitalisation requires coordinated action across these domains, with particular emphasis on empowering local communities as primary custodians of linguistic heritage.

In conclusion, safeguarding Kenya's indigenous languages is not merely a cultural responsibility but a critical component of preserving national identity, intellectual diversity, and sustainable knowledge systems.

## Funding Information:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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