Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in north and south Kivu provinces, Democratic Republic of Congo

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DOI : 10.66637/xpjsmtknc0

Abstract

This study examined the ecology of the Kihutu language and its intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The study aimed to analyze the ecological environments influencing Kihutu language usage and to identify sociolinguistic factors affecting its maintenance among younger generations. A mixed-methods research design was employed using questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documentary analysis. Data were collected from 400 participants selected from Goma, Nyiragongo, Rutshuru, Masisi, and Kalehe. The findings revealed that Kihutu remains an important marker of cultural identity, particularly in rural communities where family-based transmission is still active. However, urbanization, multilingualism, formal education, media influence, technological globalization, and sociolinguistic stigma increasingly favor Kiswahili, French, and English, contributing to declining active use of Kihutu among youths. The study concludes that although Kihutu continues to survive within family and rural ecological domains, its long-term vitality is increasingly threatened in urban environments. The study recommends strengthening family transmission, educational inclusion, community revitalization programs, and digital promotion strategies to ensure sustainable preservation of Kihutu language and culture.

Keywords: Kihutu language ecology, intergenerational transmission, multilingualism, language preservation, Hutu youths.

Résumé

Cette étude examine l'écologie de la langue Kihutu et sa transmission intergénérationnelle chez les jeunes Hutu des provinces du Nord-Kivu et du Sud-Kivu en République Démocratique du Congo. L'objectif principal était d'analyser les environnements écologiques influençant l'usage du Kihutu ainsi que les facteurs sociolinguistiques affectant son maintien parmi les jeunes générations. Une approche méthodologique mixte a été utilisée à travers des questionnaires, des entretiens, des observations et l'analyse documentaire. Les données ont été collectées auprès de 400 participants sélectionnés à Goma, Nyiragongo, Rutshuru, Masisi et Kalehe. Les résultats montrent que le Kihutu demeure un important marqueur d'identité culturelle, particulièrement dans les milieux ruraux où la transmission familiale reste active. Cependant, l'urbanisation, le multilinguisme, l'éducation formelle, les médias, la mondialisation technologique et certaines formes de stigmatisation sociolinguistique favorisent davantage le kiswahili, le français et l'anglais, entraînant une diminution de l'usage actif du Kihutu chez les jeunes. L'étude conclut que, malgré sa survie dans les domaines familiaux et ruraux, la vitalité du Kihutu demeure menacée dans les milieux urbains. Elle recommande le renforcement de la transmission familiale, l'intégration éducative, les programmes communautaires de revitalisation et la promotion numérique du Kihutu afin d'assurer la préservation durable de cette langue et de cette culture.

Mots-clés : Écologie linguistique du Kihutu, transmission intergénérationnelle, multilinguisme, préservation linguistique, Jeunes Hutus.

Introduction

1. Background to study

Language remains one of the most essential components of human existence because it functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a repository of culture, collective memory, historical continuity, identity, and social organization. Across African societies, indigenous languages preserve oral traditions, customary knowledge, philosophies, social values, and cultural worldviews transmitted from one generation to another. The survival of people is therefore closely connected to the vitality of their language. Scholars in sociolinguistics and African studies consistently argue that language loss threatens both cultural continuity and communal identity.

Kihutu occupies an important position within the sociolinguistic landscape of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Although it belongs to the broader Rwanda-Rundi linguistic continuum, it has developed within a specific ecological, historical, and sociocultural environment in North and South Kivu Provinces. The language serves as a medium through which oral traditions, cultural values, social norms, and historical knowledge are transmitted across generations. According to Fishman (1991), language vitality depends not only on linguistic structure but also on the extent to which communities continue to use their language in everyday communication and cultural transmission.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) explains that language is the "collective memory bank" of a community because it carries historical consciousness, cultural philosophy, and social identity. Similarly, Crystal (2000) argues that the disappearance of indigenous languages results not only in linguistic loss but also in the destruction of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems. Fishman (1991) further emphasizes that the sustainability of minority languages depends primarily on intergenerational transmission within families and communities. When younger generations cease acquiring their ancestral language naturally, language decline gradually becomes inevitable.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is among the most linguistically diverse countries in Africa. According to Guthrie (1948), the country possesses hundreds of indigenous languages and dialects belonging mainly to the Bantu language family. Despite this linguistic richness, the sociolinguistic structure of the DRC remains dominated by French as the official language and four national languages namely Kiswahili, Lingala, Kikongo, and Tshiluba. In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo particularly, Kiswahili functions as the principal lingua franca used in trade, administration, urban communication, education, media, and interethnic interaction. This sociolinguistic dominance increasingly places several minority indigenous languages under ecological pressure.

Among these indigenous languages is Kihutu, predominantly spoken by members of the Hutu community living in North and South Kivu Provinces of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Historically, Kihutu functioned as an important medium of communication, oral literature, social integration, cultural continuity, and indigenous knowledge transmission. Through Kihutu, elders transmitted proverbs, folktales, songs, customs, moral values, agricultural knowledge, and historical narratives to younger generations. In territories such as Rutshuru, Masisi, Nyiragongo, Kalehe, and parts of Goma, Kihutu occupied central sociocultural functions within homes, ceremonies, community meetings, and traditional education systems.

However, contemporary sociolinguistic transformations have progressively altered the ecological environment surrounding Kihutu language usage. Urbanization, migration, globalization, technological modernization, formal education, multilingualism, and media expansion increasingly favor dominant languages such as Kiswahili, French, and English. Haugen (1972), who introduced the concept of language ecology, explains that languages survive only when their social and institutional environments support regular usage and intergenerational continuity. According to Haugen, language ecology examines the interaction between language and social environments including education, politics, economy, culture, technology, and demographic change.

In multilingual African societies, language ecology significantly influences language maintenance and language shift. Mufwene (2001) argues that urbanization and migration create multilingual competition in which minority languages progressively lose functional domains. Similarly, Batibo (2005) observes that many African indigenous languages increasingly experience ecological marginalization because younger generations associate dominant languages with education, urban identity, employment, and modernity.

The ecological situation of Kihutu reflects these broader sociolinguistic realities. Urban centers such as Goma and Nyiragongo expose youths to intense multilingual interaction involving Kiswahili, French, English, and neighboring regional languages. Within such environments, language choice is strongly influenced by formal education, social prestige, professional opportunities, technological communication, and urban adaptation. Consequently, many youths increasingly alternate between languages through code-switching practices or progressively reduce active use of Kihutu.

Fishman (1991), through his Language Maintenance and Shift Theory, argues that intergenerational transmission constitutes the most important mechanism for preserving minority languages. According to Fishman, once children stop acquiring their ancestral language naturally within family environments, language vi-

tality begins to weaken progressively. This sociolinguistic situation increasingly characterizes several African indigenous languages exposed to strong multilingual ecological pressure.

Within eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, multilingualism constitutes an important sociolinguistic reality. Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) explain that Kiswahili has expanded considerably across East and Central Africa as a regional lingua franca dominating urban interaction, trade, education, and media communication. While this expansion facilitates regional integration, it simultaneously reduces communicative domains for several minority indigenous languages. In eastern DRC, Kiswahili dominates urban communication while French remains associated with administration, education, and institutional prestige. English also increasingly gains influence through globalization, digital communication, and international mobility.

African scholars have extensively examined the relationship between language, identity, and cultural preservation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) strongly criticizes the dominance of colonial languages within African educational systems and emphasizes that indigenous languages remain essential for preserving African identity and intellectual autonomy. Bamgbose (2011) similarly argues that African languages continue to suffer institutional marginalization because educational and political systems often prioritize colonial and dominant national languages over local indigenous languages.

In the Congolese sociolinguistic context, Ngalasso-Mwatha (1992) observes that multilingualism in the DRC creates unequal power relations between dominant and minority languages, particularly within urban environments where indigenous languages frequently become restricted to domestic and informal communication. Mulamba wa Mulamba (2007) further explains that Congolese language policy and educational structures continue to privilege French and major national languages while many minority indigenous languages remain excluded from formal institutional systems.

Studies conducted in eastern DRC also reveal important sociolinguistic transformations affecting language practices among youths. Nyunda ya Rubango (2014) explains that urban multilingualism in North and South Kivu increasingly influences youth language behavior and contributes to weakening indigenous language transmission within families. Kambere (2010) additionally highlights the influence of migration, conflict, displacement, and population mobility on traditional linguistic environments within the Great Lakes region.

Beyond academic literature, several Congolese intellectuals, cultural actors, and public authorities have emphasized the importance of preserving indigenous languages and cultural

identity. Mwami de Rutshuru Katurebe repeatedly stressed the importance of safeguarding local linguistic heritage as an essential element of communal identity and cultural continuity within eastern DRC communities affected by displacement and sociocultural transformation. Patrick Muyaya, through various national cultural communication initiatives, has also emphasized the importance of preserving Congolese cultural identity and promoting indigenous languages as instruments of national cohesion and heritage preservation. Similarly, Paul Sebagenzi highlights the importance of maintaining indigenous linguistic identity among younger generations increasingly exposed to globalization and multilingual urban pressures.

Previous studies conducted in Africa have demonstrated that urbanization, migration, multilingualism, education, and globalization significantly influence language maintenance and language shift (Mufwene, 2001; Batibo, 2005). However, limited empirical research has specifically examined how these ecological factors affect Kihutu language use and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. This gap provides the rationale for the present study.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined language ecology, multilingualism, language maintenance, and identity in African societies (Haugen, 1972; Fishman, 1991; Batibo, 2005; Bamgbose, 2011). However, limited empirical attention has been devoted specifically to Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. While previous studies provide important theoretical insights, they do not adequately explain how contemporary ecological conditions influence Kihutu language use, maintenance, and transmission among younger generations. The present study seeks to address this gap by providing empirical evidence from both urban and rural sociolinguistic environments.

1.1. Statement of the problem

The survival of indigenous African languages increasingly faces serious sociolinguistic challenges resulting from globalization, urbanization, multilingualism, migration, formal education, technological transformation, and media expansion. Across many African multilingual societies, younger generations progressively adopt dominant national and international languages associated with education, economic opportunity, urban adaptation, and social prestige while indigenous languages become confined to informal and domestic communication domains.

In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Kihutu language usage among Hutu youths appears to be progressively weakening, particularly within urban and multilingual ecological environments such as Goma and

Nyiragongo where Kiswahili, French, and English dominate communication, administration, education, media, and digital interaction. Although Kihutu continues functioning as an important marker of ethnic identity and cultural belonging, many youths increasingly demonstrate reduced fluency, limited active usage, frequent code-switching practices, and preference for dominant languages in daily interaction.

In several urban families, communication between parents and children increasingly occurs in Kiswahili or French because these languages are perceived as more valuable for academic success, employment opportunities, urban integration, and social mobility. Consequently, natural intergenerational transmission of Kihutu within family environments appears to be gradually weakening among younger generations.

Furthermore, Kihutu receives limited institutional support within educational curricula, literacy development, media representation, digital communication, and administrative structures. Unlike dominant languages, Kihutu remains minimally represented in formal educational systems, technological platforms, publishing structures, and modern communication spaces. This ecological marginalization threatens the long-term vitality and sustainability of the language.

Despite its cultural significance among Hutu communities, Kihutu increasingly faces ecological and sociolinguistic pressures that threaten its long-term vitality. Urbanization, multilingual interaction, formal education, media exposure, migration, and digital communication have expanded the use of Kiswahili, French, and English, particularly among younger generations. As a result, many youths demonstrate reduced active use of Kihutu, while intergenerational transmission within some families appears to be weakening.

Although studies have examined multilingualism, language contact, and identity in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, limited empirical attention has been devoted specifically to Kihutu language ecology and its transmission among younger generations. Consequently, there is insufficient knowledge regarding the ecological conditions that support or weaken Kihutu maintenance in contemporary multilingual environments. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating the factors influencing Kihutu language use and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces. Despite the cultural and linguistic significance of Kihutu among Hutu communities, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the ecological conditions that influence its vitality and intergenerational transmission among younger generations. Consequently, it remains unclear to what extent contemporary multilingual environments are contributing to language maintenance or language shift. This study therefore investigates the ecological factors in-

fluencing Kihutu language use and transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

1.2. Objectives of the study

1.2.1. General objective

To examine the ecology of the Kihutu language and its intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

1.2.2. Specific objectives

1. To examine the ecological environments influencing Kihutu language usage among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces.
2. To analyze patterns of intergenerational transmission of Kihutu within families and communities.
3. To identify sociolinguistic factors affecting Kihutu language maintenance among younger generations.
4. To assess the influence of multilingualism, urbanization, education, media, and digital communication on Kihutu language practices.
5. To propose strategies for strengthening Kihutu language vitality and intergenerational continuity.

1.3. Research questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Which ecological environments influence Kihutu language usage among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces?
2. How is Kihutu transmitted between generations within families and communities?
3. Which sociolinguistic factors affect Kihutu language maintenance among younger generations?
4. How do multilingualism, urbanization, education, media, and digital communication influence Kihutu language practices?
5. What strategies may contribute to strengthening Kihutu language vitality and intergenerational continuity?

These research questions were formulated to investigate both the ecological conditions affecting Kihutu and the mechanisms through which the language is maintained or weakened across generations within multilingual environments.

1.4. Significance of the study

This study is significant at academic, sociolinguistic, cultural, educational, and policy levels. Academically, it contributes to the growing body of knowledge on language ecology, mul-

tilingualism, language maintenance, and intergenerational transmission in Africa. It provides empirical evidence concerning Kihutu, a linguistic variety that has received limited scholarly attention despite its sociocultural importance in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the study enhances understanding of how ecological factors such as urbanization, multilingualism, migration, formal education, and digital communication influence indigenous language vitality among younger generations. The findings contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions on language maintenance and language shift within multilingual African societies.

Culturally, the study highlights the importance of Kihutu as a vehicle for transmitting oral traditions, indigenous knowledge, cultural values, collective memory, and ethnic identity. By documenting the current state of Kihutu language use, the study contributes to efforts aimed at preserving the linguistic and cultural heritage of Hutu communities in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Educationally, the findings may assist educators, researchers, curriculum developers, and cultural organizations interested in promoting indigenous languages and strengthening local language preservation initiatives. The study may also serve as a useful reference for future research on African sociolinguistics and language ecology.

At the policy level, the findings may inform discussions concerning language planning, cultural preservation, and the promotion of indigenous languages within multilingual societies. The study may further support community-based initiatives aimed at strengthening Kihutu language maintenance, revitalization, and intergenerational transmission.

1.5. Scope of the study

This study focused on Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Geographically, the study was conducted in Goma and Nyiragongo, Rutshuru, Masisi, and Kalehe. These areas were selected because they represent both urban and rural sociolinguistic environments where Kihutu is used to varying degrees, thereby allowing comparative ecological analysis.

In terms of population, the study involved youths, parents, elders, teachers, and community leaders. These categories of participants were considered important because they represent different generations and social groups involved in language use, transmission, and cultural preservation.

Conceptually, the study examined ecological factors influencing Kihutu language use, patterns of intergenerational transmission, multilingual practices, sociolinguistic attitudes, language maintenance, and challenges affecting Kihutu vitality among younger generations.

The study was limited to contemporary sociolinguistic realities observed during the period of data collection and did not attempt a comprehensive linguistic description of Kihutu phonology, morphology, syntax, or historical development.

Although the study recognizes the broader linguistic relationship between Kihutu and other varieties within the Rwanda-Rundi continuum, its primary concern is the sociolinguistic situation of Kihutu as used by Hutu communities in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

1.6. Review of relevant ltterature

1.6.1. Language ecology and language vitality

The concept of language ecology was popularized by Haugen (1972), who defined it as the study of interactions between a language and its environment. According to Haugen, the vitality and survival of a language depend largely on the social, cultural, political, and educational environments in which it functions. Languages flourish when they are actively used within families, communities, educational institutions, and public domains, but may decline when these domains become dominated by competing languages.

Mufwene (2001) further argues that language evolution and survival are strongly influenced by ecological conditions. In multilingual societies, languages compete for communicative space, and those associated with economic opportunity, education, and political influence often gain greater prominence. This perspective is particularly relevant to African societies where indigenous languages frequently coexist with national and international languages.

Batibo (2005) observes that many African indigenous languages face increasing pressure from urbanization, migration, globalization, and formal education systems. As younger generations adopt more dominant languages, the vitality of local languages may gradually weaken. These observations provide an important framework for understanding the contemporary situation of Kihutu in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

1.6.2. Intergenerational transmission and language maintenance

Intergenerational transmission is widely recognized as one of the most important indicators of language vitality. Fishman (1991) argues that a language survives when it is naturally transmitted from parents to children within the family. When this process weakens, language shift often begins, eventually threatening long-term language maintenance.

Crystal (2000) similarly emphasizes that language endangerment frequently starts when younger generations cease using their ancestral language in daily communication. According to Crystal, positive attitudes

toward a language are important, but they cannot ensure language survival unless active transmission continues within families and communities.

Within the African context, Bamgbose (2011) notes that many indigenous languages continue to face challenges because younger speakers increasingly favor languages associated with education, employment, and social mobility. Consequently, maintaining intergenerational transmission remains a critical requirement for language preservation.

1.6.3. Multilingualism and youth language practices

Multilingualism constitutes a central characteristic of many African societies. Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) argue that Kiswahili has become one of the most influential lingua francas in East and Central Africa, facilitating communication across diverse linguistic communities. While this development promotes regional integration, it may also reduce the use of smaller indigenous languages in certain communicative domains.

Studies conducted in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo have shown that multilingual practices frequently involve the use of Kiswahili, French, English, and local languages depending on communicative context (Nyunda ya Rubango, 2014). Language choice is often influenced by social prestige, educational requirements, occupational demands, and urban interaction.

Such multilingual realities increasingly affect younger generations, who regularly adapt their language practices according to social and technological environments. Consequently, indigenous languages may become restricted to family and cultural domains while dominant languages expand into education, administration, media, and digital communication.

1.6.4. Language, identity, and cultural continuity

Language plays a central role in the construction and preservation of cultural identity. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that language functions as a carrier of culture because it transmits collective memory, values, beliefs, and worldviews from one generation to another. The loss of a language may therefore contribute to the erosion of cultural heritage and historical consciousness.

Giles and Johnson (1987), through Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, emphasize that language serves as an important symbol of group membership and social belonging. Communities often maintain their language because it represents a marker of identity and collective solidarity.

In many African societies, indigenous languages continue to play an important role in preserving oral traditions, cultural practices, and communal values. This perspective is particularly relevant to Kihutu, which remains closely associated with identity, heritage, and cultural continuity among Hutu communities.

1.6.5. Research Gap

Although previous studies have extensively examined language ecology, language maintenance, multilingualism, and cultural identity in African societies, little empirical attention has been devoted specifically to Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Existing studies provide valuable theoretical insights into language shift and language vitality, but they do not sufficiently explain how contemporary ecological factors such as urbanization, multilingualism, formal education, migration, media influence, and digital communication affect the use and transmission of Kihutu among younger generations. Furthermore, few studies have compared rural and urban sociolinguistic environments in order to determine how ecological conditions influence Kihutu language maintenance. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in empirical knowledge concerning the factors that support or weaken the vitality of Kihutu within contemporary multilingual contexts. The present study seeks to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence on Kihutu language ecology, intergenerational transmission, and language maintenance among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

1.7. Theoretical framework

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Language Ecology Theory, Language Maintenance and Shift Theory, and Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory. These theories provide an appropriate framework for understanding Kihutu language use, intergenerational transmission, and maintenance within multilingual environments.

1.7.1. Language ecology theory

The principal theory guiding this study is Language Ecology Theory developed by Haugen (1972). According to Haugen, language exists within a broader environment composed of social, cultural, economic, educational, and political factors. The vitality of a language depends largely on the extent to which these ecological conditions support its regular use and transmission.

Language Ecology Theory is particularly relevant to the present study because Kihutu operates within multilingual environments characterized by interaction with Kiswahili, French, English, and other local languages. The theory provides a useful framework for examining how urbanization, migration, education, digital communication, and multilingualism influence Kihutu language practices among younger generations.

The theory further explains why language use may differ between rural and urban environments. Ecological conditions that support frequent

language use contribute to language maintenance, whereas environments dominated by competing languages may accelerate language shift.

1.7.2. Language maintenance and shift theory

The study also draws on Fishman's (1991) Language Maintenance and Shift Theory. Fishman argues that intergenerational transmission constitutes the most important factor in language survival. A language remains vital when parents naturally transmit it to their children within family and community settings.

According to Fishman, weakening family transmission often represents the beginning of language shift. When younger generations increasingly adopt other languages for daily communication, the ancestral language gradually loses speakers and communicative domains.

This theory is particularly relevant to the present study because one of its primary objectives is to examine the transmission of Kihutu between generations and to assess the factors influencing language maintenance among Hutu youths.

1.7.3. Ethnolinguistic identity theory

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory developed by Giles and Johnson (1987) provides a third perspective for understanding the relationship between language and identity. The theory argues that language functions as an important symbol of group membership, cultural belonging, and social identity.

Communities often maintain their language because it represents a visible expression of their collective history, values, traditions, and cultural heritage. Positive attitudes toward a language may therefore contribute to its maintenance even in contexts characterized by strong multilingual pressures.

Within Hutu communities, Kihutu continues to serve as an important marker of cultural identity and communal belonging. Consequently, the theory helps explain why many respondents continue to value Kihutu despite increasing use of Kiswahili, French, and English in other communicative domains.

1.7.4. Relevance of the theoretical framework to the study

The combination of these three theories provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission. Language Ecology Theory explains the environmental factors affecting language use; Language Maintenance and Shift Theory explains the role of family transmission in language vitality; and Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory explains the relationship between language, identity, and cultural continuity. Together, these perspectives facilitate a deeper understanding of the ecological and sociolinguistic realities influencing Kihutu language maintenance among Hutu youths in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

2. Methodology

2.1. Introduction

This part methodological procedures employed in investigating Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It describes the research design, study area, target population, sample size, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, data collection procedures, methods of data analysis, validity and reliability measures, ethical considerations, and limitations encountered during the study.

The methodology was carefully designed to ensure that the study produced reliable, objective, scientific, and comprehensive findings concerning the ecological and sociolinguistic realities affecting Kihutu language maintenance among younger generations.

2.2. Research Approach

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative research approaches within a mixed-methods framework. The quantitative approach enabled the researcher to collect numerical and statistical data regarding the frequency of Kihutu usage, language preference, multilingual practices, patterns of intergenerational transmission, and language attitudes among respondents. The qualitative approach enabled a deeper understanding of respondents' experiences, cultural perceptions, sociolinguistic attitudes, ecological realities, identity-related perspectives, and language maintenance challenges. The integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches allowed the researcher to obtain broader and more comprehensive sociolinguistic insights concerning Kihutu language ecology among Hutu youths. According to Creswell (2014), mixed-methods research combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to produce more reliable and comprehensive findings. This approach was therefore considered appropriate for examining the complex sociolinguistic realities surrounding indigenous language transmission within multilingual environments.

2.3. Research design

This study adopted a descriptive mixed-methods research design in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission. Quantitative methods were employed to measure patterns of language use, language preferences, and multilingual practices among respondents, whereas qualitative methods were used to explore attitudes, experiences, and perceptions concerning language maintenance. The combination of both approaches enabled the researcher to integrate statistical tendencies with sociolinguistic explanations, thereby strengthening the validity and interpretative depth of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

2.4. Study area

The study was conducted in selected territories and urban centers within North and South Kivu Provinces in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo where Kihutu is widely spoken among Hutu communities. The selected study areas included: Goma, Nyiragongo, Rutshuru, Masisi, Kalehe.

These areas were selected because they represent different ecological and sociolinguistic realities influencing Kihutu language usage and intergenerational transmission.

Goma and Nyiragongo mainly represent urban and semi-urban multilingual environments characterized by: intensive multilingual interaction, educational diversity, migration, technological communication, dominance of Kiswahili and French.

Rutshuru, Masisi, and Kalehe represent predominantly rural environments where Kihutu remains relatively active within: family interaction, community communication, cultural ceremonies, agricultural activities, traditional social structures. The inclusion of both urban and rural ecological environments enabled comparative analysis of language vitality, language maintenance, and intergenerational transmission across different sociolinguistic contexts.

2.5. Target population

The target population consisted of Hutu youths, parents, community elders, teachers, local leaders, and cultural actors. The study focused primarily on youths because they represent the generation most exposed to multilingualism, urbanization, formal education, media influence, digital communication, globalization, and ongoing sociocultural transformations. Parents and community elders were included because they constitute key agents of intergenerational language transmission within homes and communities. Teachers and local leaders were selected because of their sociolinguistic knowledge concerning language practices, educational influence, and community language dynamics.

2.6. Sample size

The study involved 400 respondents selected from four major research sites: Goma and Nyiragongo (120 respondents), Rutshuru (100 respondents), Masisi (90 respondents), and Kalehe (90 respondents). These sites were selected because they represent different ecological environments in which Kihutu is used. Goma and Nyiragongo represent urban multilingual settings, while Rutshuru, Masisi, and Kalehe represent predominantly rural environments where Kihutu remains more actively used.

2.7. Sampling techniques

The study employed both purposive sampling and simple random sampling techniques.

Youths were selected through simple random sampling, whereas parents, elders, teachers, and commu-

nity leaders were selected purposively because of their direct involvement in language transmission and community life. This combination ensured both representativeness and relevance to the objectives of the study.

2.7.1. Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents possessing relevant knowledge and experience concerning Kihutu language usage, cultural practices, family transmission, and sociolinguistic transformation. This technique was mainly applied in selecting elders, teachers, cultural leaders, and parents. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to obtain detailed qualitative information from participants directly involved in language transmission and community interaction.

2.7.2. Simple random sampling

Simple random sampling was mainly used among youths in order to ensure equal participation opportunities and minimize selection bias. This technique enabled broader representation of youths from different educational, social, and ecological backgrounds. The combination of purposive and random sampling strengthened the reliability and representativeness of the research findings.

2.8. Sources of data

The study used both primary and secondary sources of data.

2.8.1. Primary data

Primary data were collected directly from respondents through questionnaires, interviews, and observation. These data provided firsthand sociolinguistic information concerning language practices, multilingual interaction, language attitudes, intergenerational communication, and ecological realities.

2.8.2. Secondary data

Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, dissertations, reports, conference papers, and online academic publications. These sources provided theoretical and empirical information concerning language ecology, language maintenance, multilingualism, sociolinguistics, African indigenous languages, and intergenerational transmission. Primary data were obtained through questionnaires, interviews, and observation, while secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, dissertations, reports, and relevant policy documents. The use of multiple sources enabled triangulation and enhanced the credibility and reliability of the findings.

2.9. Data collection instruments

The study employed multiple data collection instruments in order to ensure methodological triangulation and reliability of findings.

2.9.1. Questionnaires

Questionnaires were administered mainly to youths in order to collect quantitative data concerning language preference, frequency of Kihutu usage, multilingual practices, digital communication, and sociolinguistic attitudes. The questionnaires contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions facilitated quantitative statistical analysis, while open-ended questions allowed respondents to express personal experiences and opinions.

2.9.2. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, elders, teachers, and cultural leaders. The interviews enabled a deeper qualitative understanding of intergenerational transmission, cultural identity, language shift, ecological transformation, and sociolinguistic challenges. Semi-structured interviews were preferred because they allowed flexibility during discussion while maintaining focus on the research objectives.

2.9.3. Observation

Observation enabled the researcher to examine actual language practices within homes, schools, markets, churches, social gatherings, and community meetings. The researcher observed language choice, code-switching practices, multilingual interaction, and generational communication patterns. Observation strengthened the credibility of the findings by comparing reported behavior with actual sociolinguistic practices.

2.9.4. Documentary analysis

Documentary analysis involved reviewing books, journal articles, language policy documents, previous research, and sociolinguistic reports. This instrument provided theoretical and contextual information relevant to the study.

2.10. Data collection procedures

Before data collection, the researcher sought authorization from relevant local authorities and community leaders within the selected study areas. The researcher then administered questionnaires to selected respondents and conducted interviews with targeted participants. During fieldwork, respondents were informed about the objectives of the study, confidentiality principles, voluntary participation, and the academic purpose of the research. Observation was conducted simultaneously during social interaction, family communication, and community activities. The researcher carefully organized and recorded the collected data for subsequent analysis.

The researcher carefully organized and recorded collected data for subsequent analysis.

2.11. Data analysis techniques

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were employed.

2.11.1. Quantitative data analysis

Quantitative data obtained from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, tables, and comparative interpretation. These statistical tools facilitated the analysis of language usage frequency, language preference, multilingual practices, youth language behavior, and intergenerational transmission patterns.

2.11.2. Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative data collected through interviews, observation, and documentary analysis were analyzed thematically. Responses were grouped according to major themes such as language ecology, multilingualism, family transmission, cultural identity, language attitudes, urbanization, digital communication, and language maintenance challenges. Thematic analysis enabled a deeper interpretation of the ecological and sociolinguistic realities affecting Kihutu language vitality.

2.12. Validity and reliability

Validity refers to the extent to which research instruments accurately measure what they are intended to measure. To ensure validity, the research instruments were designed according to the research objectives and questions, questionnaires and interview guides were carefully reviewed, and ambiguous questions were corrected before data collection. Reliability refers to the consistency and dependability of research findings. Reliability was strengthened through the use of multiple data collection instruments, triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data, and comparative analysis between urban and rural ecological environments. The combination of questionnaires, interviews, observation, and documentary analysis enhanced the credibility and consistency of the findings.

2.13. Ethical considerations

Ethical principles were respected throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, confidentiality procedures, and their freedom to withdraw at any stage. The researcher ensured anonymity and confidentiality by protecting respondents' personal information and using the collected data strictly for academic purposes. Respect for cultural sensitivity, community values, and linguistic identity was maintained throughout the study.

2.14. Limitations of the study

The study encountered several limitations during the research process. Some respondents initially hesitated to discuss language practices because of sociopolitical sensitivities associated with ethnic identity in the Great Lakes region. Additionally, multilingual interaction within urban environments complicated the identifica-

tion of stable language usage patterns because many respondents frequently alternated between Kihutu, Kiswahili, French, and English. Financial and logistical constraints also limited movement across certain remote areas. Despite these limitations, the researcher employed methodological triangulation and comparative ecological analysis to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

3. Results

3.1. Introduction

This section presents and analyzes the findings concerning Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The findings are presented according to the objectives and research questions of the study. The analysis focuses on demographic characteristics of respondents, Kihutu language ecology, intergenerational transmission patterns, youth language practices, sociolinguistic attitudes, and factors affecting Kihutu language maintenance. Both quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated in order to provide a comprehensive sociolinguistic interpretation of the ecological realities affecting Kihutu language vitality among younger generations.

3.2. Demographic characteristics of respondents

The study involved 400 respondents drawn from urban and rural areas of North and South Kivu Provinces. The respondents included youths, parents, elders, teachers, and community leaders.

Table 1: Demographic distribution of respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Youths	260	65%
Parents	70	17.5%
Elders	30	7.5%
Teachers	25	6.25%
Community Leaders	15	3.75%
Total	400	100%

The findings indicate that youths constituted the majority of respondents because the study primarily focused on intergenerational language transmission among younger generations. The inclusion of parents, elders, teachers, and community leaders enabled a broader sociolinguistic understanding of language practices across generations. Urban respondents represented 58% of participants, while rural respondents represented 42%. This distribution enabled comparative ecological analysis between urban multilingual environments and rural sociolinguistic settings.

3.3. Kihutu language ecology

The findings revealed that Kihutu language usage varies significantly according to ecological environment, particularly between rural and urban settings.

Table 2: Frequency of Kihutu usage among respondents

Frequency of use	Urban		Rural		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Very Frequent	49	21	114	68	163	40.8
Frequent	67	29	37	22	104	26
Occasional	79	34	13	8	92	23
Rare	37	16	4	2	41	10.2
Total	232	100	168	100	400	100

The results demonstrate that Kihutu remains significantly more active within rural ecological environments compared to urban areas. Among rural respondents, 68% reported very frequent use of Kihutu, compared to only 21% of urban respondents. Overall, 163 respondents (40.8%) reported using Kihutu very frequently. Rural respondents reported frequent use of Kihutu in homes, markets, cultural ceremonies, and community interaction.

In contrast, urban respondents reported an increasing dominance of Kiswahili and French in daily communication, particularly within schools, workplaces, social media, churches, and public interaction. Occasional and rare use of Kihutu was considerably higher among urban respondents (34% and 16%, respectively) than among rural respondents (8% and 2%).

Interview findings further revealed that urban multilingual environments expose youths to continuous language competition. Many respondents explained that Kiswahili is often preferred because it facilitates broader communication within cosmopolitan urban settings.

One respondent from Goma stated:

> *"At home we sometimes speak Kihutu, but outside the family most youths use Kiswahili because everybody understands it."*

Another respondent explained:

> *"French is associated with education and professionalism while Kiswahili is the language of urban communication. Kihutu is mostly used with elders."*

These findings support the theory of language ecology, which explains that language vitality depends largely on ecological environments that support regular language use. The findings indicate a substantial ecological contrast between rural and urban environments. The difference of forty-seven percentage points between rural respondents (68%) and urban respondents (21%) reporting very frequent use of Kihutu demonstrates that rural communities continue to provide stronger sociolinguistic support for language maintenance. These findings suggest that urban multilingual environments may accelerate language shift by increasing dependence on dominant languages such as Kiswahili and French.

3.4. Intergenerational transmission of Kihutu

The study investigated the extent to which Kihutu continues being transmitted between generations within families and communities.

Table 3: Language used most frequently at home

Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kiswahili	184	46
Kihutu	124	31
French	60	15
Mixed Languages	32	8
Total	400	100

The findings indicate that Kihutu remains more actively used in rural areas than in urban settings. This suggests that rural environments continue to provide stronger ecological support for language maintenance and intergenerational transmission.

The results show that Kiswahili is the most frequently used language at home, accounting for 46% of respondents (184 participants), followed by Kihutu with 31% (124 participants). French accounted for 15% (60 participants), while 8% (32 participants) reported using mixed languages in household communication.

The findings reveal that Kiswahili dominates household communication among many urban families, while Kihutu remains stronger in rural households. Although several parents expressed positive attitudes toward Kihutu, many admitted that communication with children increasingly occurs in Kiswahili because children are more comfortable using it.

Interviews with elders revealed growing concern regarding weakening intergenerational transmission among younger generations.

One elder from Rutshuru explained:

> *"Children today understand Kihutu but many struggle to speak it fluently because schools and towns push them toward Kiswahili and French."*

The findings further indicate generational linguistic differences. Elders demonstrated high Kihutu fluency, parents showed moderate multilingual competence, and many youths displayed passive understanding but reduced active usage.

This situation reflects Fishman's (1991) theory that weakening family transmission represents a major indicator of language shift. The fact that only 31% of respondents reported using Kihutu as the primary language at home raises concerns regarding the future sustainability of intergenerational transmission. Since the family remains the principal domain through which minority languages are transmitted, reduced home usage may gradually weaken language competence among younger generations and increase the likelihood of language shift.

3.5. Youth language practices

The study also examined multilingual practices among Hutu youths. The findings revealed widespread multilingualism characterized by code-switching, language mixing, and flexible language adaptation according to context. Most youths reported using Kiswahili in public interaction, French

in academic settings, and Kihutu mainly within family or cultural contexts. Digital communication also significantly influences youth language practices. Respondents indicated that social media, online communication, mobile messaging, and entertainment platforms favor dominant languages such as Kiswahili, French, and English.

Table 4: Preferred language for digital communication

Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kiswahili	196	49
French	112	28
English	60	15
Kihutu	32	8
Total	**400**	**100**

The findings demonstrate the limited presence of Kihutu within digital communication spaces. Kiswahili was the most preferred language for digital communication, accounting for 49% of respondents (196 participants), followed by French (28%), English (15%), and Kihutu (8%). Many youths explained that Kihutu lacks standardized digital writing practices and online visibility compared to dominant languages. One respondent stated: *"We rarely write in Kihutu online because most people type in Kiswahili, French, or English."* The findings therefore suggest that technological communication contributes significantly to the ecological marginalization of Kihutu among younger generations. The results reveal a significant digital disadvantage for Kihutu. With only 8% of respondents reporting the use of Kihutu in digital communication, the language remains largely absent from contemporary technological spaces where youths spend considerable amounts of time. This limited digital visibility may contribute to reduced language prestige and declining relevance among younger generations.

3.6. Sociolinguistic attitudes toward Kihutu

Despite declining active usage among some youths, the findings revealed generally positive sociolinguistic attitudes toward Kihutu as a marker of cultural identity and ethnic belonging. Most respondents associated Kihutu with ancestral heritage, family identity, cultural continuity, and community solidarity. However, some urban youths admitted avoiding speaking Kihutu publicly because of fear of ethnic labeling, urban linguistic pressure, and a preference for socially prestigious languages. One university student explained: *"Some youths think speaking only Kiswahili or French makes them appear more educated or modern."* These findings support Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, which emphasizes the relationship between language, identity, and social belonging.

3.7. Factors affecting Kihutu language maintenance

The study identified several ecological and sociolinguistic factors influencing Kihutu language maintenance among Hutu youths.

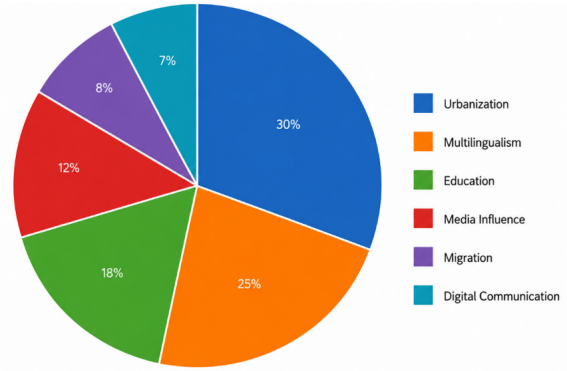


Figure 1: Major factors affecting Kihutu language vitality

The findings presented in Figure 1 indicate that urbanization (30%) represents the most important factor affecting Kihutu language vitality, followed by multilingualism (25%). Education accounts for 18% of the reported influence, reflecting the limited use of Kihutu within formal educational settings where French and Kiswahili dominate. Media influence contributes 12%, while migration accounts for 8% of the factors affecting language maintenance. Digital communication represents the lowest proportion (7%), although its growing role in shaping language practices among younger generations cannot be ignored. Overall, the results suggest that urbanization and multilingualism constitute the strongest pressures on the maintenance and intergenerational transmission of Kihutu among Hutu youths.

3.8. Summary of findings

The findings demonstrate that Kihutu language vitality remains relatively stronger in rural environments while urban and multilingual settings increasingly favor the use of Kiswahili, French, and, to a lesser extent, English among younger generations. The study reveals that urbanization, multilingualism, educational practices, media influence, migration, and digital communication collectively affect the maintenance of Kihutu. The results suggest that the language faces important ecological and sociolinguistic challenges, highlighting the need for stronger family-based transmission, community engagement, educational support, and digital revitalization initiatives to ensure its long-term sustainability.

4. Discussion

4.1. Introduction

This section discusses the major findings of the study concerning Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The discussion interprets the findings in relation to the research objectives, research questions, and theoretical framework guiding the study.

The findings are also compared with previous studies conducted within African sociolinguistics, language ecology, multilingualism, and indigenous language maintenance.

The findings support Haugen's (1972) ecological perspective, which emphasizes the influence of environmental factors on language vitality. They also support Fishman's (1991) argument that intergenerational trans-

mission remains central to language maintenance. Furthermore, the continued symbolic importance of Kihutu among respondents reflects the relationship between language and identity emphasized by Giles and Johnson (1987).

4.2. Kihutu language ecology within multilingual environments

The findings of the study reveal that Kihutu language vitality is strongly influenced by ecological conditions, particularly the distinction between rural and urban sociolinguistic environments. Rural areas such as Rutshuru, Masisi, and Kalehe continue providing relatively favorable ecological conditions for Kihutu maintenance because the language remains actively used within:

homes, community interaction, agricultural activities, traditional ceremonies,local social structures.

However, urban centers such as Goma and Nyiragongo increasingly expose youths to multilingual environments dominated by Kiswahili, French, and English. This ecological transformation contributes significantly to reduced active Kihutu usage among younger generations.

These findings strongly support Haugen's (1972) Language Ecology Theory which argues that language vitality depends largely on environmental support within social, cultural, educational, and institutional structures. The findings further confirm Mufwene's (2001) argument that urbanization and globalization create ecological competition among languages in which minority indigenous languages progressively lose communicative domains to dominant languages associated with urban adaptation and socioeconomic mobility.

Similarly, Batibo (2005) explains that African indigenous languages increasingly experience ecological marginalization because younger generations associate dominant languages with education, modernity, and professional advancement. The present study confirms this reality because many urban youths preferred Kiswahili and French for daily communication while Kihutu remained largely restricted to family and cultural contexts.

The findings also demonstrate that ecological language shift is not merely linguistic but also sociocultural. As communicative domains of Kihutu decrease within urban environments, opportunities for transmitting cultural knowledge, oral traditions, and indigenous identity simultaneously weaken.

4.3. Intergenerational transmission and language shift

One of the major findings of this study concerns the weakening intergenerational transmission of Kihutu among younger generations, particularly within urban families. Although many respondents expressed positive cultural attachment to Kihutu, com-

munication between parents and children increasingly occurs in Kiswahili or French rather than Kihutu. Several youths demonstrated passive understanding of the language while showing reduced active speaking competence. These findings strongly correspond with Fishman's (1991) Language Maintenance and Shift Theory, which identifies family transmission as the most important mechanism for language survival.

According to Fishman, when children cease acquiring their ancestral language naturally within homes, language shift progressively accelerates. The findings further reveal generational linguistic differences, with elders demonstrating strong Kihutu fluency, parents displaying multilingual adaptation, and many youths exhibiting reduced active competence. This generational gap indicates a gradual weakening of intergenerational continuity. Similar observations were made by Crystal (2000), who argues that language endangerment frequently begins when younger generations no longer use the ancestral language actively in daily interaction.

The study also supports Nyunda ya Rubango's (2014) observations concerning multilingual interaction in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where urban youths increasingly adopt Kiswahili because of its broader communicative value and social prestige. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that formal education contributes significantly to language shift because schools largely privilege French and Kiswahili while indigenous languages remain institutionally marginalized. This observation corresponds with Mulamba wa Mulamba's (2007) argument that Congolese educational structures continue privileging dominant national and colonial languages over minority indigenous languages.

4.4. Multilingualism and youth language practices

The findings reveal that multilingualism constitutes a central sociolinguistic reality among Hutu youths in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Most respondents regularly alternated between Kihutu, Kiswahili, French, and English. Code-switching and language mixing emerged as common linguistic practices, particularly within urban environments. These findings support Mazrui and Mazrui's (1998) argument that Kiswahili has become a dominant regional lingua franca across East and Central Africa, influencing communication patterns among urban youths. The sociolinguistic dominance of Kiswahili within eastern DRC increasingly shapes youth linguistic behavior and reduces active usage of minority indigenous languages. The findings additionally reveal that language choice among youths depends largely on communicative context: Kiswahili dominates public interaction, French dominates academic environments, English gains prestige through globalization and digital communication, and Kihutu re-

mains associated mainly with family and cultural interaction.

This sociolinguistic distribution demonstrates ecological compartmentalization of languages according to functional domains. The findings also indicate that digital communication significantly accelerates ecological marginalization of Kihutu because online communication spaces overwhelmingly favor Kiswahili, French, and English. Many respondents reported rarely using Kihutu on social media platforms because of limited standardized orthography, low digital visibility, and lack of technological integration. These findings correspond with Crystal's (2000) observation that languages excluded from digital and technological spaces increasingly face sociolinguistic vulnerability within contemporary globalized societies.

4.5. Language, identity, and cultural continuity

Despite declining active usage among some youths, the findings reveal that Kihutu remains an important marker of ethnic identity, ancestral heritage, and cultural belonging among Hutu communities. Most respondents associated Kihutu with communal identity, family heritage, cultural continuity, historical belonging, and traditional values. The importance of Kihutu extends beyond communication. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues, language carries culture and functions as a repository of collective memory. Through Kihutu, Hutu communities preserve oral literature, traditional knowledge, customary practices, and cultural identity. Consequently, any decline in its use may have implications not only for linguistic diversity but also for cultural continuity. These findings strongly support Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory developed by Giles and Johnson (1987), which argues that language functions as a central symbol of collective identity and social belonging.

The findings also confirm Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) argument that language carries culture and collective memory. According to Ngũgĩ, losing a language gradually threatens cultural identity because language serves as the principal vehicle for transmitting historical consciousness, values, traditions, and worldviews. This perspective also reflects the African sociolinguistic principle frequently emphasized by several African scholars and cultural thinkers that: *"When people lose their language, they progressively lose their culture; and there is no culture without language and no language without culture."* Within the Congolese context, the findings correspond with the perspectives of Mwami de Rutshuru Katurebe, Patrick Muyaya, and Paul Sebagenzi who emphasize the importance of preserving indigenous languages as instruments of cultural identity, communal cohesion, and historical continuity. However, the findings further reveal that some urban youths avoid speaking Kihutu publicly because of sociolinguistic stigma, urban identity pressure, ethnic sen-

sitivity, and preference for socially prestigious languages. This situation demonstrates the complex interaction between language, identity, prestige, and social adaptation within multilingual urban environments.

4.6. Implications of the study

The findings of this study possess important sociolinguistic, cultural, educational, and policy implications. First, the study demonstrates that weakening intergenerational transmission threatens the long-term vitality of the Kihutu language among younger generations. Without stronger family-based communication and community support, progressive language shift may continue accelerating within urban multilingual environments. Second, the findings reveal the necessity of integrating indigenous languages within educational, cultural, and technological spaces in order to strengthen their ecological sustainability. Third, the study highlights the importance of promoting positive sociolinguistic attitudes toward indigenous languages among youths. Strengthening cultural pride and linguistic identity may contribute significantly to language maintenance and revitalization. Finally, the findings suggest that preserving Kihutu requires collaborative involvement from families, schools, community leaders, policymakers, media institutions, digital content creators, and cultural organizations. Such collaborative efforts may help strengthen Kihutu visibility, intergenerational continuity, and ecological vitality within contemporary multilingual society.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This study examined Kihutu language ecology and intergenerational transmission among Hutu youths in North and South Kivu Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The study sought to investigate the ecological factors influencing Kihutu language usage, patterns of intergenerational transmission, sociolinguistic challenges affecting language maintenance, and possible strategies for strengthening Kihutu vitality within contemporary multilingual society.

The findings revealed that Kihutu language vitality varies significantly according to ecological environment. Rural areas such as Rutshuru, Masisi, and Kalehe continue providing relatively favorable sociolinguistic conditions for Kihutu maintenance because the language remains actively used within homes, cultural ceremonies, agricultural activities, and community interaction. However, urban environments such as Goma and Nyiragongo increasingly favor dominant languages including Kiswahili, French, and English.

The study further demonstrated that intergenerational transmission of Kihutu is progressively weakening among younger generations, particularly within urban multilingual fami-

lies. Although many youths continue understanding Kihutu, active speaking competence appears to be declining because communication increasingly occurs in Kiswahili and French. This situation reflects gradual language shift influenced by urbanization, multilingualism, formal education, technological communication, migration, and changing sociolinguistic attitudes.

The findings also revealed widespread multilingual practices among Hutu youths characterized by code-switching, language mixing, and flexible language adaptation according to communicative context. Kiswahili dominates public interaction, French dominates academic environments, and English increasingly gains prestige through globalization and digital communication. Meanwhile, Kihutu remains largely associated with family interaction, cultural identity, and ancestral heritage.

Despite these sociolinguistic challenges, the study revealed generally positive attitudes toward Kihutu among respondents. Most participants considered Kihutu an important symbol of ethnic identity, cultural continuity, communal belonging, and historical heritage. The study therefore confirms that language preservation remains closely connected to cultural preservation because language functions as a principal carrier of collective memory, traditions, values, and identity.

The study concludes that Kihutu currently faces important ecological and sociolinguistic pressures that threaten its long-term vitality among younger generations. The study further demonstrates that ecological conditions significantly determine language vitality. Whereas rural communities continue to provide favorable environments for Kihutu maintenance, urban multilingual settings increasingly promote dominant languages such as Kiswahili, French, and English at the expense of indigenous language transmission. Consequently, efforts aimed at preserving Kihutu must address both family-level transmission and broader ecological conditions affecting language use.

Nevertheless, stronger family transmission, educational inclusion, community mobilization, cultural revitalization, and digital visibility may significantly contribute to strengthening Kihutu language sustainability within contemporary multilingual society.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

5.2.1. Family-Level recommendations

Families should strengthen the use of Kihutu within homes in order to promote natural intergenerational transmission among children and youths. Parents should encourage regular communication in Kihutu during daily interaction, storytelling, cultural activities, and family gatherings.

5.2.2. Educational recommendations

Educational authorities, curriculum developers, and language planners should explore opportunities for introducing Kihutu into community-based literacy programs, cultural education initiatives, and local language promotion activities. Such interventions may strengthen language awareness, literacy development, and positive attitudes toward Kihutu among younger generations. Greater educational recognition of Kihutu would also contribute to its long-term vitality and intergenerational continuity.

5.2.3. Community and cultural recommendations

Community leaders, cultural organizations, and traditional authorities should organize cultural festivals, oral literature programs, storytelling activities, traditional music and dance events, and language awareness campaigns. Such initiatives may strengthen cultural identity and encourage positive sociolinguistic attitudes toward Kihutu among youths.

5.2.4. Media and digital recommendations

Media institutions and digital content creators should increase Kihutu visibility within radio programs, social media platforms, online educational content, digital storytelling initiatives, and local communication platforms. Promoting Kihutu within digital communication spaces may improve the language's relevance among technologically connected youths.

5.2.5. Policy recommendations

Government institutions and language policymakers should strengthen support for indigenous language preservation within national cultural and educational policies. Greater institutional recognition of minority indigenous languages may contribute to improving sociolinguistic prestige and ecological sustainability.

5.2.6. Recommendations for further research

Future researchers should conduct broader sociolinguistic studies concerning: indigenous language preservation in eastern DRC, comparative language ecology among ethnic communities, digital language practices among African youths, multilingualism and identity construction within the Great Lakes region. Further longitudinal research may also help examine long-term changes in Kihutu language vitality across generations.

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