Application of the Vitality Test on Small Languages: The Case of Suba in Kenya

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Abstract

As yet, there is no conclusive framework with which the state of the world's languages may be assessed, even when the literature features a strong constellation of the factors[1] that underlie language loss or maintenance. This has probably meant, in the case of assessing revitalizations, that language vitality metrics are used as a scale in defining success or failure with a given language revival programme. As intervention mechanisms, language revitalizations are especially of great interest to Linguists because their outcomes add to what needs to be known about the phenomenon that is language loss. With "small languages"[2] (be they endangered or safe), the application of the vitality diagnostics in reporting on their state appears to lead inevitably to the conclusion that they remain unsafe. This paper seeks to report on some difficulties experienced in applying the existing indices of language vitality in assessing the sociolinguistic state of Suba language of Kenya after some revivalist efforts were employed on it. It is observed, among other things, that parameters of assessing vitality or endangerment designed for "big" languages should never (as they are) be used in the assessment of the sociolinguistic status of small languages.

Introduction

The assessment out of which the illustrations in this paper are drawn aimed to determine whether Suba language of Kenya was gaining vitality due to a 15-year long revitalization programme on it. The revivalist efforts on Suba included a directive from the Kenya government in 1995 to have Suba taught in Suba schools in early primary; the promotion of Suba cultural activities;

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the launch of a Suba radio programme on the national broadcast; and the creation of Suba district among other activities.

As a people, the Suba or Abasuba are an immigrant Bantu group whose origins can be traced in various parts of East Africa, especially in Uganda (Ogot, 1967; Ayot, 1969), but who have been heavily assimilated by their more populous Luo neighbours after nearly 250 years of contact. The Suba language has six dialects[3] spoken at varying degrees in Kenya. Both the Suba and Luo communities stay around Lake Victoria, in Kenya and in Tanzania. Before the revitalization programme, almost all persons who called themselves Suba spoke Luo language, either as a first or as a second language (see Rottland and Okombo, 1986; Kembo-Sure, 1999). At the conclusion of the sociolinguistic survey whose results are referred to in this paper, not much had changed of the sociolinguistic state of this language, the revitalization programme notwithstanding (see Ogone, 2008; 2010).

In approaching the concluded study, the challenges seemed insurmountable. As Huss (2008) rightly observes with assessing language revitalization programmes, the challenge of how fairly to determine the success or failure of this particular language programme meant the method needed to be as objective as possible. The next problem was pondering over a criterion that is free from bias: For instance, would it be prudent to work with the local community's criteria[4] of assessing the success or failure of the revitalization of their own language? Or would it be safe to apply the existing indices of language vitality in the assessment? Since each of these criteria unavoidably entails a bias, the eventual research design considered both criteria as far as possible.

Thus, the sampling unit[5] for the study comprised of Suba adults of child-bearing age, the children, the youth, schoolteachers, the radio anchors, quality assurance officers at Suba district education office and Suba elders. Interviews as well as observations were used with the sampled groups[6]. In total, the responses of 64 Suba adults and 16 elders were considered for the analysis. 12 teachers in the 9 pilot schools were interviewed as well. Also interviewed were the education officers together with the radio anchors. However, schoolchildren were mainly observed within the school and home contexts. The questions and observations used with these groups addressed the variables of language vitality, language variation, group identity, attitudes, institutional support (in school and in the media), cultural

renaissance, literacy, programme goals, and the component of programme resources.

In analyzing the data, these variables were constructed into appropriate indices[7], but presented in the instruments in the form of questions either bearing specific response alternatives or seeking certain responses not specified beforehand. In cases where alternatives or answers were presented, a numerical code representing a descriptive category was either attached or attachable. But where questions were open-ended, thereby yielding responses that would be multiple in character, the responses were considered for their variability so as to establish the degree of occurrence of each response. In this paper, however, most (if not all) of the illustrations were drawn from the interviews with adults and elders from the Suba society.

Conceptual and Evaluation Frameworks
In order to lay the ground for evaluating the Suba language programme, information about all the relevant factors in language loss or maintenance was necessary to consider. With this information, reporting on the state of this language before and after the revitalization programme became a little easier. Most importantly, however, the application of the Ethnolinguistic Vitality theory,[8] Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS),[9] and Haugen's Ecology of Language approach provided a sufficient guide as to 'what' to examine of the language programme.

With respect to 'how' to assess the language programme, the study examined the programme using the indices of language vitality to gauge, and thus report on its sociolinguistic state in contrast to its vitality before the launch of the revitalization programme. As Grenoble and Whaley (2006: pp3) have argued

> Assessing and understanding language vitality is a complex enterprise, as a large number of intertwined factors enter into it, yet the degree of language vitality is the basic indicator used in determining...the language revitalization program...Moreover, assessing changes in language vitality over time provides the easiest measure of success for attempts to revitalize a threatened language.

In doing this, yet another set of challenges surfaced. It seems, from the proposals on setting up and assessing a language programme by Brandt and

Ayoungman (1989) and by Grenoble and Whaley (2006) that the language revitalization project needs to have been systematically set up in order to lend itself to a systematic evaluation.

However, if we followed their proposals to the letter, problems of the data-fit sort would emerge. Out of the wide range of possible language intervention activities, for instance, the Suba language revitalization programme kicked off with no more than just a handful[10] of these, and even then, without the much advised coordination of activities across the key components. While this is not an exception as different revival movements may have very different goals, the danger of settling for less than helpful goals looms if the programme is not subjected to rigorous assessment.
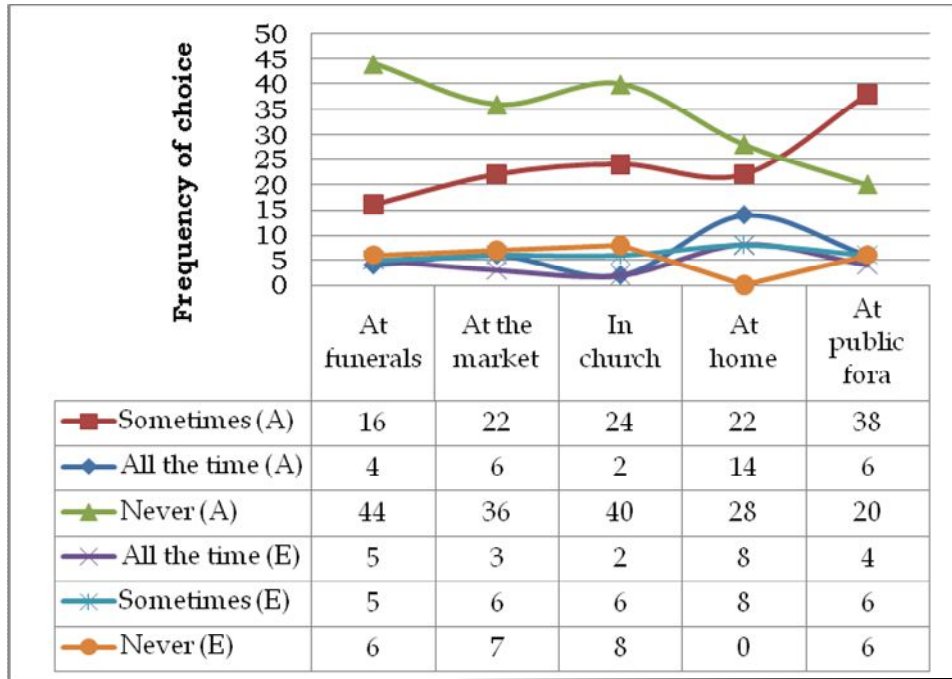
As is already pointed out in the abstract above, if this rigour in the assessment of the state of minority languages is to be guided by the existing parameters of language vitality or endangerment, then no success will be reported with any of these languages. This is perhaps why Grenoble and Whaley (2006) have noted that a honest evaluation of many language revitalization programmes will reveal an invariable failure.

Difficulties arising from applying the vitality measures on the data
(a) Language use or viability
One way to determine the success of a language revival project is by assessing its vitality after the programme has been on for some time. Plainly, the vitality of a language means how normally or actively it is used. Items addressing this variable were presented to all the five groups interviewed. For purposes of illustration, however, we shall consider only one item for this parameter as used with Suba adults and elders. Asked 'how do you speak Suba in the scale of *all the time, sometimes,* and *never* at funerals, at the market place, in church, at home, and at public fora? They responded as in the Figure 1 below.

Fig. 1: Use of Suba by adults and elders in a range of domains

	At funerals	At the market	In church	At home	At public fora
Sometimes (A)	16	22	24	22	38
All the time (A)	4	6	2	14	6
Never (A)	44	36	40	28	20
All the time (E)	5	3	2	8	4
Sometimes (E)	5	6	6	8	6
Never (E)	6	7	8	0	6

Given the relatively low scores on *all the time* and the high scores on *never,* we are persuaded to conclude that the use of Suba is dwindling in these key domains. The other implication is that the proportion of Suba speakers within the Suba community may be considerably low.

Other tests on the variable of language use revealed low levels of proficiency among members of the Suba community, the tendency towards bi/multilinguality, the absence of absolute monolinguals, the absence of people who use Suba as a primary means of communication across domains, and the disruption of intergenerational transmission. Most importantly, such results lead us to the conclusion that Suba language is still experiencing language shift, regardless of the efforts to revive it.

Theoretically and empirically, the conclusion that Suba is yet to regain its vitality is plausible. In reality, however, a completely different trend may obtain. Given the disruption most minority languages have undergone, it may be that the individual speakers use the languages more, or even less,

than they care to admit in self/other reported cases as these. In this test, for example, the question aimed to grade the use of Suba into 3-levels so as to express the results in absolute terms. From the responses, it would be difficult to tell if the confessions are typical of the speakers all the time in these domains. In any case, the range of domains considered for the analysis here are themselves limiting. Determining how a language is used within a community is no easy task, given that social networks can be so complex.
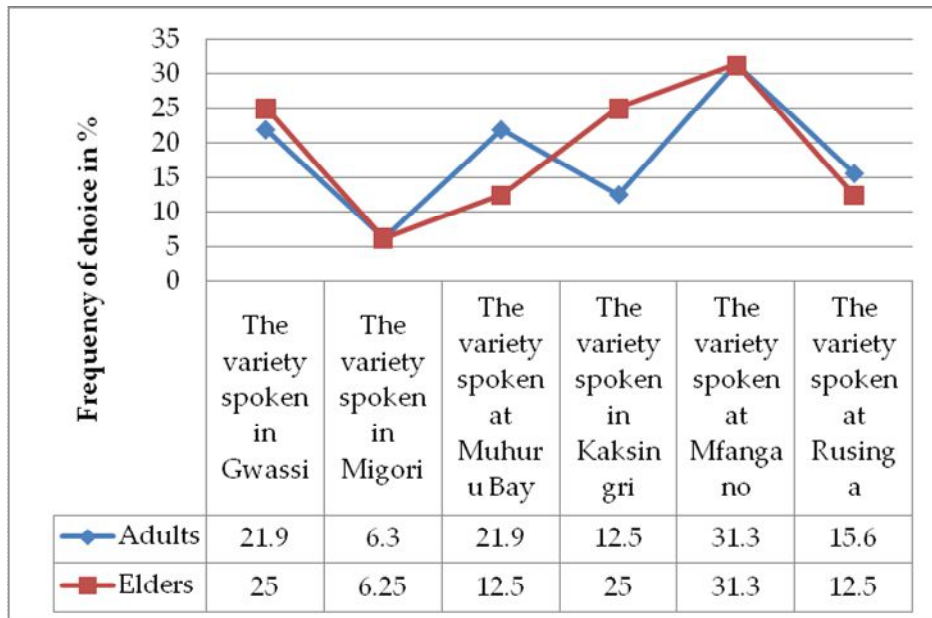
Granted, proficiency in the language obviously went down within the Suba community due to the growing need to use Luo language for wider communication purposes. As a consequence, the absolute numbers of people able to speak Suba together with their proportion in the wider community became affected negatively; and so has been the generational transmission[11]. In spite of this, given the prevalence of bi/multinguality in contexts such as the ones in which Suba is spoken, chances are that the language could be very much alive, even if it were invisible across a wide range of domains as we have seen. In fact, of itself, a loss of language vitality should not be presumed to occasion shift.

(b)   Dialectal variation as a problem to language vitality
Another important dimension to assess of a revitalization programme is that of language variation. This is because side-by-side existence of numerous dialects in the language to be revived may create the challenging need to have them all revived or the need for a consensus (see Tsunoda, 2005; Grenoble and Whaley, 2006).

Asked which of the dialects of Suba they were able to speak, the interviewed adults and elders made the following choices from among the 6 dialects of Suba. (Note: The variety spoken on Mfangano Island had been selected as the standard variety. So it is the one taught in school and also used for broadcast on Suba radio).

Fig. 2: Dialectal variation among Suba adults and elders

	The variety spoken in Gwassi	The variety spoken in Migori	The variety spoken at Muhur u Bay	The variety spoken in Kaksin gri	The variety spoken at Mfanga no	The variety spoken at Rusing a
Adults	21.9	6.3	21.9	12.5	31.3	15.6
Elders	25	6.25	12.5	25	31.3	12.5

Given the competing dialect choices as shown in Figure 2, and consequently homage, we came to the conclusion that tensions were bound to emerge when one dialect is favoured for standardization and development as did the Mfangano dialect by the revitalization programme.[12] One unfortunate consequence of such tensions is their potential to influence attitudes against the dialect identified for development. In an ideal language revitalization situation, the community whose language is to be revitalized needs to be strongly united in the advocacy for their language.

On the other hand, the existence of parallel dialects may not have posed a challenge at all. In many parts of the world, dialects thrive spontaneously, existing side by side as they do in this case. If Suba was no longer used as a normal language of communication within the Suba community, then the prospect of a dynamic revival would lead to such excitement across the community that grumbles over what dialect had been chosen for development would be easily overshadowed.

Secondly, when people are asked to name the dialect they are most comfortable speaking, issues of homage rather than ability are bound to crop

up, causing the emergence of unintended results. We believe this applies to many other minority languages benefitting from rescue programmes; more so to those with high intelligibility across the dialects. Nonetheless, as criteria, dialectal variation may thus be a weak measure.

(c) *Attitudes as a factor in language vitality*

One of the variables of language vitality addressed in the study was about the attitudes the Suba community held towards their language and its revitalization. A key measure in language revitalization is the enhancement of positive attitudes towards the language being revived. The Suba adults and elders were presented with an attitude test featuring 10 statements to which they needed to respond by stating agree (A), undecided (U), and disagree (D). Their responses are here summarised in percentages.

Table 1: Suba adults and elders' attitude towards their language and its revitalization

Statement	Adults			Elders		
	A	U	D	A	U	D
It is better for our children to learn Luo than Suba	15.6	62.5	21.9	31.3	43.8	25
The use of Suba should be encouraged	40.6	21.9	37.5	75	12.5	12.5
Suba language is as good as dead	31.3	21.9	46.9	12.5	37.5	25
The Suba and the Luo are already one (people)	50	18.8	31.3	43.8	25	31.3
Suba people who can speak only Luo are lost	37.5	37.5	25	68.8	31.3	0
It is impossible to revive Suba	40.6	28.1	31.3	31.3	43.8	25
Suba revival was a political trick by the government	25	34.4	40.6	37.5	25	37.5
Luo is killing Suba	71.9	6.3	21.9	75	0	25
The Suba are happy with the revival programme	43.8	31.3	25	68.8	12.5	9.4
Suba people who cannot speak Luo find it difficult to talk to Luo people	78.1	9.4	12.5	56.3	25	9.4

From this table, attitudes towards Suba language and its maintenance are not uniform within the Suba community. While some segments of the sample felt quite positive about their language and its maintenance, others were indifferent (read undecided), while the rest appeared to hold a negative attitude. This variability could be attributed to the pragmatic choices the speakers would have to make in the face of ethnic loyalty on the one hand, and the fulfilment of immediate communicative needs on the other.

Among these adults and elders, the general feeling about Suba language seems to be deeply positive, however, about efforts at the revitalization of this language, they are more wishful than proactive. The encroachment of Luo seems to have reached an extent that many Suba people feel they cannot do without the ability to speak Luo. So strong is this attitude among some people that they feel resigned about the revitalization of Suba. Due to these realities, the adults and elders seem to regard people who speak Luo (or are bilingual in it) very positively as well. As a consequence, the esteem with which Suba and its revitalization is regarded quietly drops.

Similarly, that is only half the story. To begin with, the fact that the reported attitudes are not uniform across the community of itself creates the possibility that gaps will emerge while generalizing about this factor. For instance, concluding that *all, most, many,* or *a few*, members of the community support language maintenance does not say much about what this means to the language (e.g. how influential are these members? What is the chance that they will follow these feelings with action? And, in spite of positive attitudes, some people still do not teach their children the heritage language). And still, one big problem exists, viz. while negative attitudes of minority members toward their language may hasten its disappearance, positive attitudes are not enough to save it either (see Ulrich Ammon, Norbert Dittmar, Klaus J. Mattheier, and Peter Trudgill (eds)(2006). Thus as a vitality index, language attitudes may not be entirely reliable.

(d) Boosting language vitality through institutional support

Cited among factors that boost language maintenance or vitality is institutional support (see Brenzinger et.al. 2003; Krauss, 1992). According to proponents of this index, if the degree of institutional support for the minority language is high, then its vitality is foreseeable. From the data with Suba, the government of Kenya showed this support in allowing the language to be taught in school within the mother tongue framework. It also created a slot for Suba language within the national vernacular radio broadcast at the launch of the revival programme. Both these programmes are on their 15th year.

Going by UNESCO's grading of the "response to new domains and media" factor, Suba would fall in category 3 because it is receptive of the new domains of school and the radio. However, there seems to be no reverse in sight for the language shift. Even if this trend might be attributed to a fairly parallel low score in other vitality parameters, as an index, the centrality of institutional support is worth further consideration.

Assessing the strength of the Suba programme in school using indices of a normal school programme in no way measures either the vitality of the language or the success of the programme within the school context. Both Suba and Luo[13] are phased out as subjects at the end of the third year in school. Yet Luo remains vibrant within the Suba community. The data revealed good, but not the real reasons for this state of affairs. The following things were found as problematic with Suba in school:

a. Suba is taught for barely 20 minutes a day between grades 1 and 3.
b. Suba lessons focussed more on aspects about the Suba people such as their history and economic activities rather than the language itself.
c. The Suba programme in school did not come with a special syllabus for the language.
d. Suba 'language' is taught as a Subject in Luo language (Kenya's language policy in education has maintained Luo as the language of instruction in Suba schools).
e. The teachers who teach Suba had no special training to teach Suba when it was launched in school. Some of these are themselves not language teachers (-as ability to speak Suba had been used as the only criterion to select them).

f. To date, there is no institutionalised framework within which teachers of Suba language could be in-serviced so that a cycle of the teachers could be perpetuated for the school programme.

g. Away from school, parents used Luo language with their children most of the time.

h. At school, progress with Suba is ridiculed by both teachers and pupils (in upper primary).

i. Nothing is and was known of the pupils' needs with respect to the knowledge gap the Suba programme was going to fill in school.

j. Besides, material selection for the language itself was haphazard. There was no information about what materials existed in the language, what needed to be created, and how the materials would be adapted or put to use.

Together, these findings lead to the erroneous conclusion that had the planning[14] for and implementation of Suba in school followed the proper procedures, a cohort of Suba speakers would be resulting from the school programme. To the contrary, the school programme is a flop mainly due to the fact that Suba is no longer the usual language of communication out of school within the Suba community, which is why pupils between 6 and 8 years who learn it in 3 years would never be able to speak it. In any case, there still exists the interest of the wider community to care about. Kenya's language policy in education recognizes the mother tongue used in early primary as the language of the catchment area. How, for instance, is this to be reconciled with a case in which a language is being revived? In a word, it appears the degree to which a language has declined, together with its individual context, may be worth considering in greater detail before a factor like institutional support through school is applied.

On radio likewise, the efficacy of the Suba broadcast would be foolhardy to determine from mere reports of listenership or popularity. From the data, the following areas were raised as problematic.

a. The Suba programmes on radio are reported as non-interactive, indicating that community participation in their vernacular broadcast is wanting.

b. Of note too is the unfortunate fact that Suba broadcast can last only 1 hour 15[15] minutes each day.

> c. The Suba radio announcer himself reported that a lot of music played on Suba broadcast is still foreign; that there is still no broadcast for schools; and, the fact that Luo is the usual language within the Suba community obliges the studio to occasionally accept announcements as well as advertisements in Luo, rather than in Suba.
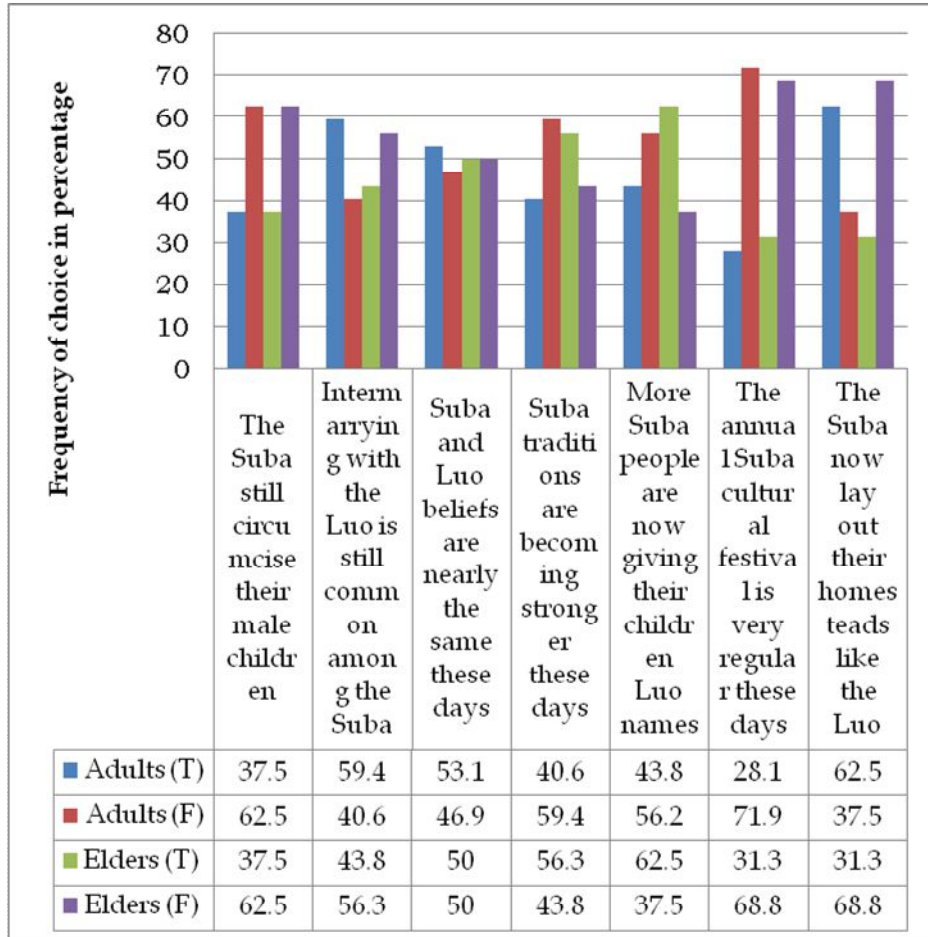
In spite of this, the Suba radio broadcast is on its 15th year since its launch; so it persists; meaning institutional support through the radio has been steady. Boosting minority languages within favourable policies could ensure some ethnolinguistic visibility for them, but not the vitality (as this appears very much beyond planning). Contexts within which languages operate are far too complex [including the wide range of factors identified by Edwards (1992) as demographic, sociological, linguistic, psychological, historical, political, geographical, educational, religious, economic, and technological].

(e)   Cultural renaissance as a means to language vitality

A cultural renaissance is often associated with a returning vitality in the case of languages considered as unsafe such as Suba. In this regard, determining how the Suba went about attempts at revitalizing their ethnic nationalism, together with how that feeling may have been impacted by the revitalization, was interesting.[16] The data analysed under this parameter sought to address the issue of whether the cultural assimilation towards Luo among the Suba was reversing with the revitalization. The answer arising from the data appears to be *not quite*. Asked to respond *(T)rue* or *(F)alse* to an assortment of statements with respect to *cultural renaissance*, the adults and elders responded in the pattern shown in Figure 3 below.

Fig.3: Suba adults and elders' responses to statements about cultural renaissance

	The Suba still circumcise their male children	Intermarrying with the Luo is still common among the Suba	Suba and Luo beliefs are nearly the same these days	Suba traditions are becoming stronger these days	More Suba people are now giving their children Luo names	The annual Suba cultural festival is very regular these days	The Suba now lay out their homesteads like the Luo
■ Adults (T)	37.5	59.4	53.1	40.6	43.8	28.1	62.5
■ Adults (F)	62.5	40.6	46.9	59.4	56.2	71.9	37.5
■ Elders (T)	37.5	43.8	50	56.3	62.5	31.3	31.3
■ Elders (F)	62.5	56.3	50	43.8	37.5	68.8	68.8

From figure 3:

    a. The Suba are yet to regain their cultural symbols of identity such as circumcision.

    b. They are still torn down the middle between Luo and Suba traditional practices.

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    c.The majority from the sample of adults and elders admit that they have lost the cultural festival (that is meant to be annual, but has never been held again since 1995).

    d. Both groups are persuaded in different ways with respect to naming and laying out the homestead.

Again, this leads us to the conclusion that Suba cultural renaissance has failed, if it was viewed by the revival enthusiasts to benefit the ethnolinguistic vitality of Suba. However, a cultural renaissance as a means to language revival is sometimes very problematic since the essence of community that underlies its conveyance will have become very lose the moment a significant shift has occurred. Aspects of community life expressed in people's attitudes, in their language or dialect proficiencies and preferences, and in their group identity, get to feature less and less homogeneity with language shift to the extent that genuine feelings of community are hard to reconstruct.[17] Moreover, people's values will also have changed, socially as well as culturally, with the dictates of individualism, pragmatism, and materialism. This is why cultural renaissance is unrealistic as a means towards the goal of language revitalization.

Secondly, some traditional cultures have come to run into conflict with modern cultures or trends. For instance, the Sindo cultural festival extolled practices such as traditional circumcision among the Suba. Today, this might be allowed, but the Kenya government might seek a guarantee on the safety of the initiates first, if the practice has to be conducted in the traditional mode; otherwise the ministry of health will most likely insist that circumcision be done by doctors in hospital. In school likewise, the educational requirements of the dominant society spelt out in the syllabus would have to be adhered to, even if this leaves no room for teaching aspects of the traditional culture.

(f)   Group identity and language vitality
According to the ethnolinguistic vitality theory, the stronger the group identity factors, the more a community is likely to maintain its distinctiveness in intergroup situations. Though group identity may be marked or symbolized in a wide range of ways, ethnolinguistic vitality requires that language be an important dimension in that marking. With the Suba study, the group identity factors brought to test included endogamy/exogamy,[18] relative wealth, political determination, relative status, and language status.

In summarizing the results on this parameter by factor: From among the interviewed Suba adults and elders, both endogamy and exogamy was found. This persistence of mixed marriages with the Luo neighbours implies that the assimilation by the Luo may be unabated. With regard to relative social status or wealth, more of the respondents from the Suba community were willing to apply the attribute 'wealthier' with other communities, including their Luo neighbours. Such attributions are known to encourage language shift by means of accommodation. Politically, the respondents favoured autonomy from their Luo neighbours to an overwhelming degree; so was their preference for agriculture as a means to subsistence, as opposed to their Luo neighbours who tend to be fisher-folk.

Interestingly, and contrary to the group identity indices above, the data also showed that the Suba view themselves as a distinctive ethnic group to a large extent (by 75% among the interviewed). Surprisingly, this strong allegiance is not marked by the use of their heritage language in intergroup encounters between them and the Luo, bringing the link between group identity and ethnolinguistic vitality to question. Thus, identity planning initiatives as a means to achieving ethnolinguistic vitality may sometimes not amount to much. One is also tempted to believe that boosting group identity factors as a means to achieving ethnolinguistic vitality is over-simplistic. Fishman (1996) has reiterated that language rescue efforts require a revolutionary reconstitution of society (that we all know is almost unrealistic).

(g)   *Resources as a factor and index of language vitality*

Be they human, financial, or language related, the availability of resources is a key factor in, as well as index of, language vitality (see Landweer, 1998; Yamamoto, 1998; Crystal, 2000; and Brenzinger *et. al*. 2003). Indices of language vitality such as relative prestige, access to a stable economic base, availability of language education and literacy materials, or the amount and quality of documentation are tied to this factor. Thus, the so called 'safe'[19] languages that serve international, national, regional, trade, educational, and literacy purposes are also those that rate relatively high on the resource factor. Consequently, an assessment of the vitality status of a language must give due attention to these resource related issues with it.

In creating a language revitalization programme, for instance, Grenoble and Whaley (2006) are very elaborate with the parameter of resources. They argue the human resource factor is key to language revival because it is the

dimension that lends the energy for both the advocacy and the execution of the plan. From within the local community, the few speakers left are critical to the teaching and the learning of their heritage language. But since revitalization programmes require financial resources as well, it is also necessary to determine if the local community is able to spare some money to fund teaching materials, to pay teachers, to outfit schools and so on.

From the data with Suba, *Financially*, the community appears not to have contributed towards the revitalization of their language as both adults and elders were unanimous that there was nothing of this sort. Collectively, 40% from both groups observed that the Kenya government was to fund the revival as is the case with other government projects; 33% argued they were not asked to raise money; while the rest said they were unaware of the need for funding. With respect to the *human resource*, 70% of the interviewed elders admitted they did not contribute to the programme in any way. Similarly, no team of experts other than the Bible Translation and Literacy missionaries worked with the Suba in the revitalization. Also reported is that barely 20% from both groups contributed to the programme in school and on radio. On *language resources*, again (and as we shall see shortly with assessing the state of literacy in Suba), the access the Suba have to literature in their language is limited. Access to oral material may also be said to be limited since Suba is no longer used as a normal language of communication within the Suba community. Besides, the cultural contexts within which one would expect to encounter such oral material have dwindled.

From this evidence, it can be concluded that Suba revitalization was beset by a weak human, financial, and language resource base right from the onset. The absence of fulltime linguists in the Suba revitalization meant the process took off without the help of experts required in the construction of a grammar, a dictionary, and other reference or pedagogical materials needed for language development. Accordingly, the conclusion to be drawn about the current situation of Suba on the vitality scale is that it remains unsafe, owing likewise to the low score on resources.

Yet, some observations with this factor would prove that conclusion anomalous. It is inaccurate to argue a language is unsafe because its speakers are less wealthy, due to lack of access to a stable economic base, or because the language is under-documented. As Lewis (2005) observes, with its concentration of languages, African indigenous languages are also seriously under-documented. This is not to say the languages are not used vigorously

within their respective communities. Bi/multilingual language policies have made it possible for several languages to separate roles, thereby co-existing without conflict or shift. In Kenya, for instance, Kiswahili is used for regional, national, educational, and trade purposes. But this of itself does not make it more vital than, say, Luo language spoken in western Kenya. In fact, within the numerous language communities of Kenya, Kiswahili is relatively less visible, if vital (in spite of its elaborate documentation and status). And, in addition, very few (if any) indigenous languages of Africa are under the threat of shifting as a result of contact with the more resourceful ex-colonial languages.

(h)   *Literacy (and documentation) as an index of language vitality*
Like language documentation, literacy has come to be associated with language vitality. Crystal (2000) argues an endangered language will progress if its speakers are literate in it. According to Grenoble and Whaley, "the position and nature of literacy in the community help shape people's attitudes about literacy and their expectations of what it can bring to the local language"(2006: 43). For purposes of the concluded research on Suba, since literacy would be expected more among adults than elderly people,[20] adults were asked in which language they were most likely to read and write. Their responses, in which they were restricted to only one choice for each language, are as set out in Table 2 below:–

Table 2: Literacy among Suba adults

Language	**Read**		**Write**	
Kiswahili	12	18.8%	6	9.4%
Luo	18	28.1%	26	40.6%
Suba	12	18.8%	8	12.5%
English	14	21.9%	16	25%
(Unable to read/write)	8	12.5%	8	12.5%
Total	64	100%	64	100%

Given that such responses as are laid out in Table 2 may have been motivated by the factor of availability of the reading material, it was prudent to ask the adults in what language they lacked reading material at home. This was so as to determine if the likelihood to read and write in any of these languages was

a function of the access to the material. Their responses were as shown in the table 3 below.

Fig.4: Languages in which Suba adults lacked reading material at home

Kiswahili	English	Suba	Luo
15%	12%	56%	17%

From tables 2 and 3, it was observed that the proportion of literate people among Suba adults is high, yet the proportion literate in Suba is markedly low. The reason for this state of affairs is given in the pie chart, viz. a large proportion of the sample did not have reading materials in Suba. Perhaps because of the availability of literature in these languages, the sample adults were most likely to read or write in Luo, Kiswahili, and English. The implication here is that people able to speak Suba rarely use their literacy skills with it. The general conclusion to be drawn here is that Suba is still threatened owing to these literacy related factors.

Reasonable as this conclusion is, it is not true that a language is threatened or endangered merely because speakers are not literate in it. We already noted that several vibrant languages in Africa and elsewhere in the world are yet to be documented. As a matter of fact, that people do not read or write in their language is no cause for worry at all. This is the norm in several language communities where literacy already exists in the language of education or of wider communication, and where roles of the languages available to a community seem to have been separated. It is thus possible to argue that while literacy may cause language spread or a raise in status, its correlation with vitality as a factor is rather low.

Conclusion
The difficulties raised with the conclusions based on the data with Suba as discussed in this paper are a matter of serious concern. Even as factors indicative of language vitality or endangerment should be considered with respect to one another (and not in isolation), the collective effect of these observations have real implications upon theorizing about language loss and maintenance. It seems the criteria for classifying the world's languages as safe or unsafe are based on the features of big languages alone. By applying these factors in the diagnosis[21] of the state of small languages (so intervention programmes could appropriately be created for them), linguists are using the

wrong tool. This is why no small language will ever pass the vitality test, regardless of how strong a revival programme on it has been.

It appears we already have wrong ideas about factors that indicate vitality for minority languages. Why, for instance, would literacy as an index be used to judge languages whose speakers use an entirely oral culture? As a matter of fact, the definitions that characterize minority languages as so may themselves have been based on the features of big languages. This is probably why the expectation is too high, even with the revitalizations. With such gaps in knowledge, it is also possible that we are yet to understand why speakers of minority languages stop using them. As McConvell (1991: pp 144) authoritatively argues, "If we have wrong ideas about how and why people change from one language to another, we are not likely to find the right ways of stopping or reversing the process."

To turn around the state of shifting small languages, we need to understand what constitutes their vitality first. From the discussion and the illustrations in this paper, it is very possible that a language can be vital without a visibility in the media, literacy, documentation, a presence in school (for instruction or as a subject), a cultural vibrancy, and without a monolingual allegiance. Since endangered (and minority) languages are in a special state, factors indicative of their ethnolinguistic vitality need to be discovered. Only then can we seek to plan these factors for the benefit of the languages.

Notes

1. At the UNESCO Experts Meeting on Safeguarding Endangered Languages, Brenzinger and others proposed a framework that uses 9 factors of vitality and endangerment in measuring the level of endangerment of the world's languages.

2. As opposed to big languages, the phrase 'small languages' here has been used in the sense of languages that would score invariably low on the vitality or endangerment scales.

3. The six dialects are Olwivwangano spoken on Mfangano, Rusinga, Takawiri, Kibwogi, Ragwe and Kisegi Islands of Lake Victoria; Ekikune dialect spoken in Kaksingri; Ekingoe dialect spoken in Ngeri; Ekigase

dialect spoken in Gwasi hills; Ekisuuna dialect spoken in Migori and Olumuulu dialect spoken in Muhuru Bay.

4. Arguing in favour of A participatory approach to evaluating language revitalization, Lizette et al.(2003:pp 7) have emphasized the necessity of involving the local community as far as possible.

5. As may be noticed, the sample is fairly small. This is because personal interviews needed to be used across the entire sample.

6. In sampling each of these groups, factors that reflected representativeness were considered as much as possible. Some of these included dialectal or areal distribution, Age, and the likelihood of the occurrence of a typical behaviour in cases that needed to be observed.

7. For instance, the observation was structured into a schedule featuring 17 items, 6 of which would be statements about a typical situation, but presented in question form, 11 of which a question was merely posed, that would need an observation or impression to answer. For 6 cases, there were responses formulated into either a 4 - point or a 5 – point continuum.

8. This framework was proposed by Giles et al (1977) to account for the role of socio-structural variables in the inter-group relations, cross-cultural relations, mother tongue maintenance and language shift and loss.

9. In the GIDS model, Fishman (1991) postulates a continuum of 8 stages of language loss or disruption to guide any plan of action that would lead to turning around the fate of an endangered language. The scale is calibrated in such a way that stage 8 indicates near total extinction while stage *1* indicates the least disruption.

10. The Suba programme featured the teaching of the language in school, its broadcast on radio, and the launch of a cultural festival.

11. Intergenerational language transmission seems to be the only reliable way to determine language vitality (- finding accurate reports on this factor is the challenge).

12. See Kembo-Sure (1999) about the report on the standardization of the Mfangano dialect at the revitalization.

13. Luo is the language replacing Suba.

14. Even if all the planning was done with the school programme, not much can be planned about what goes on beyond the school.

15. This is the standard time given by the national broadcaster to all the vernaculars that are on air.

16. This is because a reversal of language shift needs to be accompanied by a cultural renaissance of sorts. Persuaded by this logic, the test was applied with the respondents, but not without reservations because cultural renaissance itself is no easy matter to secure in the wake of the present homogenizing trends.

17. See Ogone (2008) on the contradictory face and place of the local community factor in language revitalization.

18. As a key ethno-sociological variable, Haarman (1986), and later Allard and Landry (1994) consider endogamy and exogamy as important indices in group identity.

19. In proposing a harmonized 13-level model with which the world's languages may be classified, Lewis and Simons (2009) characterize international, national, regional, trade, educational, written, and vigorous languages as safe.

20. In a large number of African communities, most elderly people did not benefit from literacy programmes that came with school education in the 1960s.

21. Ethnologue (see Lewis and Simons, 2009) has since formulated an amplified and elaborated evaluative scale of 13 levels, the E(xpanded) GIDS, with the help of which any known language, including those languages for which there are no longer speakers, can be categorized or evaluated.

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