

A Sociolinguistics Survey of Language Diversity, Attitude, and Use in Bo District, Southern Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated language diversity, language attitudes, and patterns of language use in Bo District, Southern Sierra Leone. It examined the multilingual composition of selected communities and explored how demographic and sociolinguistic factors influenced language practices and attitudes. The study was situated within Sierra Leone's historically multilingual context, in which English, inherited from British colonial rule, has continued to function as the official language, while indigenous languages and Krio have remained important in everyday communication and community interaction. An empirical descriptive design was adopted, combining questionnaires, interviews, and field observations. A total of 200 questionnaires were administered equally among respondents in five selected chiefdoms: Bumpe-Ngawo, Jaiama-Bongor, Kakua, Lugbu, and Tikonko, with 40 respondents drawn from each chiefdom. The findings revealed substantial linguistic diversity, with Mende, Krio, Fula, Madingo, Susu, Loko, Limba, Temne, English, Arabic, French, and Koranko reported across the study sites. Language use was found to be context-dependent and associated with demographic and social factors, particularly age, education, occupation, and chiefdom. Indigenous languages were important for cultural identity, family interaction, and community communication, while Krio served an important wider communicative function, and English was prominent in formal and educational domains. The study concluded that multilingualism in Bo District reflected functional language differentiation, linguistic accommodation, and potential intergenerational language change. It recommended strengthened indigenous language documentation, improved language teaching and learning materials, and greater incorporation of multilingual perspectives into educational and language planning initiatives.

Key Words: Language Diversity: Language Use: Sierra Leone: Bo District: Language Attitude

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone lies on the west Coast of Africa with an estimated population of 5,000,000 (2004 Census). It has an area of 73.326 km², and is bounded by the Republic of Liberia, on the West and South by the Atlantic Ocean and on the North by the Republic of Guinea.





Fig1]: Sierra Leone and its immediate neighbours

The country's modern name, Sierra Leone, is a derivative of the Portuguese word ``Sierra Lyoa'', a name given by its Portuguese Sea Captain/discoverer Pedro da Sintra (Peter of Sintra) in 1462. The name became "Sierra Leone" (now Republic of Sierra Leone), by mid-17th century recognized as a British owned trading company known as the Sierra Leone Company.

The relief of the country consists of Lowlands, Highlands of the East and North-East. Physically, the country is divided into the Coastal Plains, the Interior Lowlands and Plateau, the Freetown Peninsula and the extension of the Fouta Djalloh mountain in the extreme North (Koinadugu District).

Sierra Leone is in the tropics. It enjoys two seasons generally: (i) The dry season comprising the early dries (late November mid-December), the Cool-dry Season locally known as the "harmattan" (Mid December-mid February), the hot-dry season (mid-February – April or May); (ii) the Wet or Rainy Season consisting of early squalls from April to July; followed by the persistent or deep rainy period from July – August and finally; the late squalls from mid-September – Mid November. Although the prevailing climatic conditions make Sierra Leone agriculturally very fertile, especially for subsistence rice farming (Swamp and Upland), cash cropping (cacao, coffee, ginger etc.), the country is also rich in diamonds, bauxite, iron ore, gold and other mineral resources even though it is ranked as one of the poorest nations in the world (Stevens et al. 2025).

The exact numbers of Sierra Leonean Languages are not known for diverse reasons; Firstly, for (possible) political reasons, Sierra Leone like most other African countries does not include extensive questions on language or ethnicity in national census surveys thereby making it difficult to identity and quantify who speaks what language or who belongs to what ethnic group. Arriving at implied conclusions remain guesswork for linguists and other interested parties. Secondly, names of dominant languages such as Kathenne, Mende and Krio known only through documentation, have dialects and dialect clusters some of which non-natives record as languages per se (Stevens and Sheriff 2025; Sheriff et al 2025). Such a situation has largely contributed to some existing main languages being given other or additional names such as Kpaa/K ɔ̃/Sewama Mende, East and West Central Limba, Northern/Southern Kissi; Konike/Tonkolili/Yoni Themne; Maninke/Madingo/Mandinka.

Some "Languages" in the inventory of some researchers such as Gordon (2005):183 (ed), do not exist in Sierra Leone. Such names particularly from the non-Sierra Leonean or non-African perspective bellow has led to continuous variations in the inventories of natively used Sierra Leonean Languages. The current situation is that there is no known definite source of linguistic data which identify the exact number of actually spoken languages in Sierra Leone in general and regrettably in the Southern Region.

Table 1: A comparison of previous language surveys in SL

Sources and Languages Identified			
*Fashole Luke, V. (2008:125)	Dernier mise a Jour (23/03/2008)	Raymond Gordon (Jr) Ed:2005	*Sengova, Joko (1987:520
Fula	Aku	Bassa	Ballam/Sherbro
Gola	Bassa	Bom	Fula
Kissi	Banta Mendé	Bullom So	Kissi
Kono	Banta Themné	Gola	Kono
Krim	Bomu(Bom)	Kissi Southern	Koranko
Krio	Bullom So	Kissi Northern	Krim
Kru	Gola	Klao	Krio
Limba	Klao	Kono	Kru
Loko	Kono	Krim	Limba
Madingo	Krim	Krio	Maninka/Madingo/Mandin
Mende	Krio	Kuranko	ka



Sherbro	Kuranko	Limba East	Mende
Sosu	Kissi du Sud	Limba West-	Susu
Timne	Kissi du Nord	Central	Temne
Vai	Limba	Loko	Vai/Gallines
Yalunka	Limba de Pest	Maninka Eastern	Yalunka
	Loko l'Est	Mende	
	Maninka de l'Est	Pular	
	Mendé	Sherbro	
	Peul (FulaJalon)	Sierra Leone Sign	
	Sherbro	Language	
	Soussou	Susu	
	Themné	Themne	
	Vai	Vai	
	Yalunka	Yalunka	
	Yoruba		
TOTAL = 16	27	23	15

- **Victor Fashole-Luke (2005:125)**
- **Joko Sengova (1887:520)**

As stated earlier, the unfortunate disparity in number “estimates” for native languages in Sierra Leone lends support to my conclusion that no realistic and detailed/in-depth linguistic survey has been done to map out the languages of any one region. All that one can deduce from the various surveys is the simple fact that there is linguistic diversity in the country with an increasingly pluralistic, inclusive language policy and ideology resulting in tolerance and promotion of linguistic diversity and co-existence.

Notwithstanding this, it cannot be ruled out though that the Southern Region (Survey Region) may have native speakers of some indigenous languages with both negative and positive attitudes and beliefs towards the use and usage of minority languages in private and/or public domains and functions.

Conclusively, English as a heritage of British Colonial rule (1908-1961), continues to serve as Sierra Leone’s only official language and language of the elite to-date. The heterogeneous linguistic situation, naturally leads to or causes communication gap/ handicap or barrier salvaged by the existence, acceptance and use of Krio (an English-based Creole) as the nation-wide “Unofficial” lingua franca. This phenomenon provides a good example of nationalism with its native speakers now preferring to be called Krios instead of Creoles.

However, no Sierra Leonean Language has been standardized. The current status is that Standard Orthographies have been developed in all four-core languages, but indigenous writers use their individual dialects to produce such materials.

Interestingly too, is the norm that language is closely related to ethnicity as each is named after its native ethnic group – Mende, (Ka) Themne, Limba, Sherbro, Krio, Madingo, Kɔɔ ... are names of their native speaker communities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Sierra Leone is multicultural, multilingual and multidialectal. The Southern Region comprising five Chiefdoms is not an exception to this norm. For majority of Southerners, the notion of Sierra Leoneans is typically elusive as most of them perceive themselves as belonging to part of what constitutes the Sierra Leone nation including their customs and traditions, cultures, ideologies, religious beliefs and secret/sacred societies especially Sandi (Bondo) and Pɔɔ (Poro) they may graduate from.



Although it may be true that some major languages may have de factor dominance over minority ones in selected survey chiefdoms in respect of language related ideational phenomena such as attitudes, behaviours and ideologies, Linguistic attitudes are often revealed in multilingual communities. In fact, language attitudes (and ideologies) are a part of our linguistic culture; since language policies have more often than not been rooted in the culture that influences our language attitudes and behavior to both the languages and their native speakers, it could only be suppressed; not ignored.

It was to find out or describe instances of such situations and their likes that the researcher chose to carry out a sociolinguistic survey of language diversity, attitudes and use in the Southern region (formerly Southern Province) of Sierra Leone.

Aim: The aim of this research is to conduct a sociolinguistics survey of linguistic diversity, attitude and use in Bo Distract in Southern Sierra Leone.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives include to:

- ascertain Ethnicity and Language diversity in the survey region.
- Determine the:

(1) number of existing languages and their functional roles and,

(2) extent of multilingualism and literacy level in each language by age and gender including attitudes of respondents to the languages in use, the domains in which they are used to the continuous use and supremacy of English in Sierra Leone as the sole official language.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted an empirical, descriptive research design to investigate the linguistic situation, language attitudes, and patterns of language use in selected chiefdoms in Bo District, Sierra Leone. The empirical orientation of the study was considered appropriate because the investigation relied on data obtained directly from respondents through questionnaires, interviews, and field observations. The combination of these methods enabled the researcher to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information on the linguistic characteristics of the study area and to compare respondents' reported language practices with observations made during field visits.

The study employed a combination of questionnaire administration, interviews, and direct observation. These methods were selected because they provided opportunities to obtain information from respondents with different linguistic and educational backgrounds and allowed the researcher to collect data within the available time and financial resources. Unlike web-based surveys, which may exclude respondents with limited access to the internet or digital technologies, face-to-face questionnaire administration and interviews were considered more suitable for the predominantly rural communities included in the study.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Bo District, located in the Southern Province of Sierra Leone. Bo serves as the district headquarters and is strategically situated within the southern part of the country, with relatively accessible links to other parts of Sierra Leone, including Kenema in the east, Makeni in the north, and Freetown in the west. The district shares boundaries with the Eastern Region, Tonkolili District to the north, Moyamba District to the west, and Bonthe District to the south.



Bo District covers approximately 5,219 km² and comprises fifteen (15) chiefdoms. According to the population information available to the study, the district had a total population of 468,671, comprising 257,675 females and 210,996 males. Given the geographical size and linguistic diversity of the district, it was not considered feasible to collect data from all fifteen chiefdoms. Consequently, five chiefdoms were selected as study sites: Bumpe-Ngawo, Jaiama-Bongor, Kakua, Lugbu, and Tikonko. The selection of these five chiefdoms provided geographical coverage of different parts of the district and enabled the study to capture variation in language background, language attitudes, and patterns of language use across communities. The five chiefdoms constituted the immediate study sites from which the respondents were drawn.

Study Population

The study population consisted of adult members of the communities in the five selected chiefdoms who were able to provide information about their linguistic background, language attitudes, and patterns of language use. The target population was drawn from the wider population of the selected chiefdoms in Bo District. Because the investigation focused specifically on the linguistic situation of the communities, respondents were selected on the basis of their familiarity with the languages used in their immediate social and community environments.

The respondents included individuals with different linguistic and demographic backgrounds. Information was sought about their personal characteristics and linguistic experiences, including their ethnic and language backgrounds, the languages spoken in their immediate environments, their attitudes towards languages, and the contexts in which different languages were used. These characteristics were considered important because language choice and language attitudes may vary according to factors such as ethnicity, age, gender, educational background, and social environment.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

A total of two hundred (200) respondents participated in the questionnaire survey. The sample was distributed equally among the five selected chiefdoms, with forty (40) questionnaires administered in each chiefdom. Thus, the distribution was as follows: Bumpe-Ngawo (40), Jaiama-Bongor (40), Kakua (40), Lugbu (40), and Tikonko (40).

The decision to allocate an equal number of questionnaires to each selected chiefdom was intended to ensure balanced representation of the five study areas and to facilitate comparison across the communities. Equal allocation also prevented a larger chiefdom from disproportionately influencing the overall findings and ensured that each selected chiefdom contributed equally to the analysis.

The chiefdoms were selected through random sampling from the fifteen chiefdoms in Bo District. Within the selected chiefdoms, respondents were approached in their communities and selected based on their availability, willingness to participate, and ability to provide relevant information concerning the linguistic situation of their communities. The sampling procedure therefore combined random selection of the study sites with respondent selection at the community level.

The sample of 200 respondents was considered adequate for the descriptive purposes of the study because the investigation was concerned primarily with identifying and describing patterns of language use and attitudes across the selected communities rather than making statistical estimates for every individual in the entire district. Nevertheless, the findings are interpreted as representing the selected study sites and should not be generalized uncritically to all fifteen chiefdoms of Bo District.

Characteristics of Respondents

The questionnaire included items designed to obtain relevant demographic and linguistic information about the respondents. These included information on the respondents' sex, age, educational background, ethnic



affiliation, linguistic background, and the languages used within their immediate environments. Collecting these characteristics was important for establishing the social and linguistic profiles of the participants and for interpreting variations in language attitudes and language-use patterns.

The demographic information also provided a basis for examining whether reported language practices differed across respondents with different social and linguistic backgrounds. The characteristics of the respondents were therefore treated not merely as descriptive information but as contextual variables relevant to understanding the linguistic situation of the study area.

Instrumentation

The principal instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire comprising five sections. The sections were organised as follows:

Section A: Identification of the Survey District and Chiefdom – This section collected information identifying the geographical location of the respondent and the chiefdom in which the questionnaire was administered.

Section B: Information about the Informant – This section elicited demographic and personal information about the respondent, including characteristics relevant to the interpretation of the linguistic data.

Section C: Ethnicity and Linguistic Background – This section focused on the respondent's ethnic and linguistic background, including languages spoken by the respondent and languages commonly used within the respondent's immediate environment.

Section D: Attitudes towards Language and Language Use – This section examined respondents' attitudes towards different languages and their perceptions of the use, importance, status, and acceptability of those languages.

Section E: Contexts of Language Use – This section examined the situations and domains in which respondents used particular languages, including interactions within the family, community, and other social contexts.

The questionnaire items were developed to correspond with the objectives of the study and to generate information on language diversity, language attitudes, and patterns of language use in the selected communities.

Questionnaire Development and Validation

The questionnaire was developed from the objectives and research questions of the study and from the linguistic issues identified in the relevant literature. Care was taken to ensure that the questions were clear, relevant, and understandable to respondents from different educational and linguistic backgrounds.

Before the main administration, the instrument was reviewed to identify ambiguous, repetitive, or potentially misleading questions. Where necessary, items were revised to improve clarity and ensure that they adequately addressed the linguistic variables under investigation. The questionnaire was also checked for content validity by ensuring that the items adequately covered the major areas of the study, particularly language background, language attitudes, language diversity, and language use.

Where respondents experienced difficulty with the wording of particular questions, the researcher provided clarification without influencing the respondents' answers. The use of face-to-face administration was particularly useful in ensuring that respondents understood the questions and completed the instrument appropriately.



Interview Procedure

In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with selected members of the communities to obtain more detailed qualitative information about language practices and attitudes. The interviews were used to complement the questionnaire data and to provide explanations for responses that could not be adequately captured through structured questions.

The interviews were guided by questions relating to respondents' linguistic backgrounds, the languages spoken in their communities, preferences for particular languages, attitudes towards non-native languages, and the circumstances under which different languages were used. The researcher conducted the interviews personally during field visits to the selected chiefdoms.

The interviews were conducted in a manner that allowed respondents to express their views freely. Where necessary, questions were explained or clarified in a language familiar to the respondent. Responses were documented by the researcher for subsequent analysis. The interview data were subsequently compared with questionnaire responses and field observations to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

Field Observation

The researcher personally visited some of the selected chiefdoms to observe language practices and interact with native speakers. These observations provided contextual information about the actual use of languages within the communities. Attention was given to the languages used during every day social interactions and to the circumstances in which respondents appeared to shift between languages.

Field observations also provided an opportunity to discuss language practices informally with native speakers and community members. The observational information was used primarily to supplement and contextualise the questionnaire and interview findings rather than to serve as a separate quantitative source of data.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through direct contact with respondents in the selected chiefdoms. The researcher administered the questionnaires personally, thereby providing respondents with clarification where necessary and reducing the likelihood of incomplete responses resulting from misunderstanding of the questions.

The researcher also conducted interviews and made field observations during visits to the selected communities. The use of three complementary data collection methods used were questionnaires, interviews, and observations which enabled methodological triangulation. Questionnaire responses provided structured information, while interviews and observations supplied additional explanations and contextual evidence concerning respondents' language practices and attitudes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the data collection process. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the nature of their participation before data were collected. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were given the opportunity to decline participation or discontinue their participation without penalty.

The researcher also maintained the confidentiality of information provided by respondents. Personal information was treated with discretion and was used solely for the purposes of the research. Respondents' identities were not unnecessarily disclosed in the presentation of the findings. The researcher further ensured



that the collection of information was conducted respectfully and with due regard for the linguistic and cultural practices of the communities involved.

Data Analysis

The data generated from the questionnaires were organised, coded, and analysed descriptively. Responses were grouped according to the major variables investigated, including respondents' linguistic backgrounds, language attitudes, and contexts of language use. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise the quantitative responses and to identify dominant patterns across the five chiefdoms.

The qualitative information obtained through interviews and observations was analysed thematically. Responses were examined for recurring themes relating to language choice, language preference, attitudes towards native and non-native languages, language diversity, and the social contexts in which particular languages were used. Relevant qualitative observations were used to explain, support, or qualify patterns identified in the questionnaire data.

The findings from the three sources of evidence were compared through triangulation. This process enhanced the credibility of the findings by allowing information obtained through questionnaires to be considered alongside interview responses and field observations. The results were subsequently presented in relation to the objectives and research questions of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings obtained from the questionnaire survey, interviews, and field observations conducted in five selected chiefdoms of Bo District: Bumpe-Ngawo, Jaiama-Bongor, Kakua, Lugbu, and Tikonko. A total of 200 questionnaires were administered, with forty (40) respondents selected from each chiefdom. The results are presented according to the major areas covered by the questionnaire, namely respondents' demographic characteristics, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, attitudes towards language and language use, and contexts of language use.

The demographic characteristics are not treated merely as background information. They provide an important basis for interpreting patterns of language diversity, language attitudes, and language choice. Variables such as age, sex, educational attainment, occupation, marital status, and chiefdom may influence the languages respondents know, prefer, use, and associate with particular social domains. The analysis therefore considers these variables in relation to the linguistic situation of the five chiefdoms wherever the available data permit.

Sex categories of respondents in the study area (five chiefdoms)

The survey was designed to include both male and female respondents in order to obtain a balanced representation of gender perspectives on language diversity, language attitudes, and language use. Overall, the sample comprised 100 males (50%) and 100 females (50%). However, the distribution varied across the five chiefdoms.

Bumpe-Ngawo recorded 23 males and 17 females, while Jaiama-Bongor had 14 males and 26 females. Kakua recorded 24 males and 16 females, whereas Lugbu had 16 males and 24 females. Tikonko recorded 23 males and 17 females. Although the individual chiefdoms differed in their male-to-female composition, the aggregate distribution was exactly balanced.

The balanced representation of males and females is important for examining whether gender was associated with differences in language attitudes and patterns of language use. In multilingual communities, men and women may participate differently in economic, domestic, educational, and community activities, thereby exposing them to different linguistic environments. For example, respondents whose daily activities involve extensive interaction outside the home may have greater opportunities to use languages other than their first language.

The questionnaire therefore provided a basis for comparing male and female responses to questions concerning preferred languages, languages used within the family and community, attitudes towards non-native languages, and language choice in different contexts. Where differences occur in the subsequent language-use tables, such differences should be interpreted in relation to the respondents' social roles and patterns of interaction rather than assuming that sex alone determines language choice.

The equal overall representation of males and females also strengthens the descriptive comparison of gender-related language attitudes within the sample. However, the findings should be interpreted as describing the sampled respondents rather than establishing that one gender generally uses a particular language more than the other across the entire district.

Table 2 -The occupational background of the respondents in the study area.

NO	OCCUPATION	RESPONDENTS BY CHIEFDOMS					TOTAL	TOTAL%
	Chiefdoms	B	JB	K	L	T	5 Chiefdoms	-
	Teacher	6	3	7	3	5	24	12
	Farmer	10	17	3	8	5	43	21.5
	Trader	12	9	20	18	17	76	38
	House Wife	7	7	4	7	8	33	16.5
	Other(Students)	5	4	6	4	5	24	12
	TOTAL	40	40	40	40	40	200	100%

Source: Field Survey 2026

The above table shows the significant occupational background of respondents in the study area based on the illustration $X (y \%)$. That is, $X/200 \times 100$.

Table 2 revealed considerable occupational variation among respondents. Traders constituted the largest category, with 76 respondents (38.0%), followed by farmers with 43 (21.5%), housewives with 33 (16.5%), and teachers and students/other occupations with 24 respondents (12.0%) each.

The occupational distribution was relevant to language use because occupation influenced respondents' social networks, communicative settings, and opportunities for linguistic contact. The high proportion of traders, particularly in Kakua (20), Lugbu (18), and Tikonko (17), suggested greater exposure to speakers from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Such commercial interaction may have encouraged multilingual competence and language switching. Diamond-related activities in Lugbu and Tikonko were classified under trading because respondents regarded buying and selling diamonds as commercial activities. These activities may have further increased contact among speakers of different languages.

Farmers, who accounted for 21.5% of respondents, were likely to interact predominantly within local community networks where indigenous languages remained important. However, participation in markets and wider economic activities could also expose farmers to Krio and other languages. Teachers and students operated within educational environments where English had a stronger functional role, alongside indigenous languages and Krio. Their occupational experiences therefore potentially increased exposure to English. The

findings indicated that occupation was an important contextual factor in language use. Language choice was not determined solely by ethnicity or mother tongue but was also shaped by occupational networks, social interaction, and communicative demands

Table 3: Marital Status of respondents in the study area.

NO	STATUS	Respondents by chiefdoms					Total	Total%
		B.N	J.B	K	L	T		
	Married	8	19	5	16	10	58	29
	Single	14	8	20	13	15	70	35
	Divorce	8	2	8	1	5	24	12
	Separated	6	7	3	7	5	28	14
	Widow (er)	4	4	4	3	5	20	10
	TOTAL	40	40	40	40	40	200	100%

Source: Field Survey 2026

The analysis as seen from the table is calculated using the $(x/200 \times 100)$ to get the total percentages per marital status. Therefore, table 3 indicates that 70 respondents (35.0%) were single, making this the largest marital-status category. Married respondents constituted 58 (29.0%), followed by separated respondents with 28 (14.0%), divorced respondents with 24 (12.0%), and widowed respondents with 20 (10.0%).

Although marital status was not a principal linguistic variable, it provides useful social context for interpreting language use. Married respondents may operate within multilingual family networks involving spouses, children, relatives, and neighbours. Such networks can influence language transmission and language choice within the household. In particular, the language used between spouses may differ from that used with children or members of the wider community.

Similarly, single respondents may have linguistic networks associated with education, employment, peer groups, and social activities. These networks may expose them to languages beyond those used within the family. The relatively large proportion of single respondents therefore provides useful contextual information when interpreting language-use patterns among younger and economically active participants.

Marital status may also interact with age, occupation, and chiefdom. It should therefore not be treated as an isolated determinant of language behaviour. Rather, it forms part of the broader social environment within which respondents acquire, maintain, shift between, and evaluate languages.

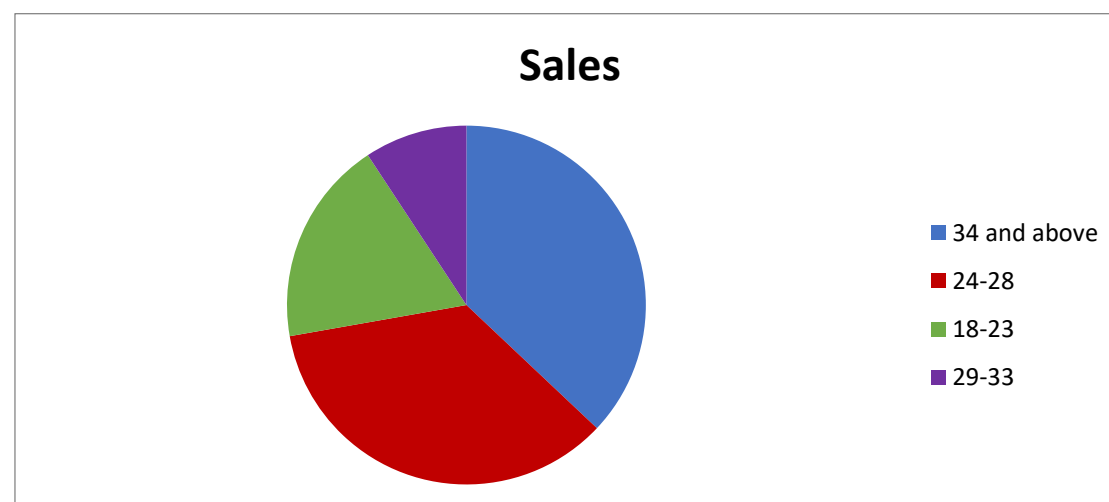




Figure 3: A pie chart showing age distribution of respondents in the study area.

The age distribution shows four major age categories: 18–23 years, 24–28 years, 29–33 years, and 34 years and above. Respondents aged 34 years and above constituted the largest category, accounting for 40% of the sample. Respondents aged 24–28 years accounted for 30%, while those aged 18–23 years represented 20%. The 29–33 age category constituted the smallest group, with 10%.

Age is particularly important in analysing language diversity and language attitudes because language behaviour can vary across generations. Older respondents may have stronger attachment to indigenous languages because of longer exposure to local linguistic practices and may have experienced different patterns of language transmission from those experienced by younger respondents. Younger respondents, by contrast, may have greater exposure to English, Krio, education-mediated language practices, mass media, and wider social networks.

The high proportion of respondents aged 34 years and above is therefore valuable for examining patterns of indigenous-language maintenance and attitudes towards local languages. Their responses can provide evidence concerning languages traditionally used in the communities and the extent to which these languages continue to function in everyday interaction.

The 18–23 and 24–28 age groups are particularly important for examining possible intergenerational changes in language use. Younger respondents may demonstrate greater use of Krio or English in domains associated with education, peer interaction, and wider communication, while retaining indigenous languages for family and community interaction. Where the questionnaire data demonstrate such patterns, they should be interpreted as possible evidence of domain-based multilingualism or generational language shift.

The 29–33 category, although representing only 10% of respondents, provides an intermediate age group through which changes between younger and older respondents can be examined. The age variable should therefore be cross-tabulated with responses concerning mother tongue, additional languages spoken, preferred language, language used at home, language used in the marketplace, language used with friends, and attitudes towards indigenous and non-native languages.

Table 4-Educational background of respondents in the study area.

Level	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Non-formal (NF)	35	35
Primary (P)	87	87
Secondary (S)	60	60
Tech. Vocational (TV)	10	10
University	8	8
Total	200	200

Source: Field Survey 2026

Table 4 indicates that respondents with primary education constituted the largest educational category, with 87 respondents (43.5%). This was followed by respondents with secondary education, numbering 60 (30.0%). Thirty-five respondents (17.5%) had non-formal education, while 10 (5.0%) had technical or vocational education and 8 (4.0%) had university education.

The educational distribution is highly relevant to the interpretation of language attitudes and language use. Education is one of the major social domains through which English is acquired and reinforced in Sierra Leone. Respondents with secondary, technical/vocational, and university education are likely to have had greater formal exposure to English than respondents with primary or non-formal education. This does not



necessarily mean that they use English more frequently in all situations, since language choice remains dependent on context, interlocutor, ethnicity, and communicative purpose.

The relatively large proportion of respondents with primary education is also important. Such respondents may rely more heavily on indigenous languages and Krio in everyday community interaction, particularly where English is not required for communication. Their responses can therefore contribute significantly to understanding the relationship between formal education and everyday language practices. The small proportion of university-educated respondents (4.0%) should be taken into consideration when interpreting educational differences. Although university-educated respondents may demonstrate strong English proficiency and positive attitudes towards English because of their educational experience, their small number means that their responses should not be treated as representative of the entire educated population of Bo District.

More importantly, educational attainment should be examined alongside the questionnaire's language-attitude items. For example, the analysis should determine whether respondents with higher levels of education demonstrate stronger positive attitudes towards English, whether respondents with lower levels of education demonstrate stronger attachment to indigenous languages, and whether education affects the contexts in which respondents use English, Krio, and indigenous languages. Such comparisons would provide stronger evidence for the relationship between education and language behaviour.

Chieftdom as a Linguistic Variable

The equal distribution of forty respondents per chieftdom provides a useful basis for comparing linguistic practices across the five selected communities. However, the equal sample size does not imply that the five chieftdoms have equal populations or identical linguistic compositions. Rather, equal allocation ensures that each selected chieftdom contributes the same number of observations to the comparative analysis. Chieftdom is particularly important because geographical location can influence language contact, ethnic composition, access to education, trade networks, and interaction with neighbouring communities. Consequently, differences in language diversity or language preference between Bumpe-Ngawo, Jaiama-Bongor, Kakua, Lugbu, and Tikonko may reflect differences in their social and economic environments.

The chieftdom variable should therefore be cross-tabulated with the responses on ethnic affiliation, mother tongue, other languages spoken, language used at home, language used in public or commercial settings, and attitudes towards indigenous and non-native languages. This would allow the study to determine whether language diversity and language attitudes are distributed evenly across the study area or concentrated in particular chieftdoms.

Relationship between Demographic Characteristics and Language Diversity

The demographic findings indicate that the respondents came from varied social backgrounds. This diversity is important because multilingualism is a social phenomenon influenced by demographic and contextual factors. Sex, age, occupation, education, and geographical location may all affect the extent to which individuals encounter and use different languages.

The occupational results, for example, suggest that traders constitute a substantial proportion of the sample. Their participation in commercial activities may expose them to speakers of different languages and consequently encourage multilingual practices. Similarly, teachers and students are likely to have greater exposure to English through formal education, while farmers and other community-based workers may have more frequent interaction in indigenous languages and Krio.

Age provides another important dimension. Older respondents may represent more established patterns of indigenous language use, whereas younger respondents may reflect newer patterns associated with education,



urbanisation, peer interaction, media, and increased use of Krio and English. Differences between these age groups would therefore provide evidence of either language maintenance or gradual language shift.

Education may also influence linguistic repertoires. Formal education generally increases opportunities for learning English, while community and family interaction may continue to support indigenous languages and Krio. The coexistence of these languages suggests that respondents may not simply replace one language with another but may assign different languages to different social domains.

Relationship between Demographic Characteristics and Language Attitudes

The demographic characteristics also provide a framework for interpreting respondents' attitudes towards the languages in their environment. Language attitudes may be influenced by perceived social status, economic usefulness, educational value, ethnic identity, and frequency of interaction.

Educational attainment is particularly relevant because English is strongly associated with formal education and institutional communication. Respondents with higher educational exposure may therefore attach greater instrumental value to English. At the same time, positive attitudes towards English do not necessarily indicate negative attitudes towards indigenous languages. Respondents may value English for education and employment while simultaneously valuing indigenous languages for identity, family interaction, cultural continuity, and community solidarity.

Age may similarly affect language attitudes. Older respondents may demonstrate stronger attachment to indigenous languages as markers of cultural and community identity, while younger respondents may place greater emphasis on languages associated with education, employment, mobility, and wider communication. Where such differences appear in the questionnaire responses, they should be reported as evidence of generational variation in language attitudes rather than as categorical differences between age groups.

Occupation can also influence attitudes. Traders may value languages that facilitate communication across ethnic and geographical boundaries, whereas teachers and students may attach greater importance to English because of its educational and institutional functions. Farmers may attach particular importance to languages used within local community networks.

Sex should likewise be examined in relation to language attitudes, but the balanced sample alone does not demonstrate a gender difference. Any claim that males or females hold more positive or negative attitudes towards a particular language must be supported by the corresponding questionnaire responses.

Relationship between Demographic Characteristics and Contexts of Language Use

The study's fifth questionnaire section focused specifically on the contexts in which languages were used. This is important because respondents may be multilingual without using all their languages equally in every situation. A respondent may, for example, use an indigenous language predominantly within the family, Krio in interactions involving people from different ethnic backgrounds, and English in educational or formal institutional contexts. Such patterns should be interpreted as functional multilingualism rather than as evidence that one language has completely displaced another.

The demographic results provide possible explanations for these domain-specific patterns. Traders may use a wider range of languages in marketplaces and commercial interactions. Teachers and students may use English more frequently in educational contexts. Farmers may use indigenous languages more frequently within local community networks. Age and education may further influence the extent to which respondents move between indigenous languages, Krio, and English.

Chieftom differences are equally important because the degree of language contact may vary from one community to another. The language-use data should therefore be presented comparatively across Bumpe-

Ngawo, Jaiama-Bongor, Kakua, Lugbu, and Tikonko rather than only as district-wide percentages.

Language Inventory and Classification in the Study Area

The language inventory obtained from the five selected chiefdoms demonstrates the multilingual character of the study area. However, the classification of the languages requires careful treatment because, in Sierra Leone, the name of a language is frequently used as a reference to the people who speak it. Thus, expressions such as Mende, Temne, Loko, Limba, Fula, Madingo, and Susu may function simultaneously as ethnic and linguistic labels in everyday community discourse. For the purposes of this study, however, a distinction is made between ethnic identity and language identity. A respondent's ethnic affiliation does not automatically mean that the respondent is a native speaker of the corresponding language.

This distinction is particularly important in multilingual communities where individuals may identify with one ethnic group but speak several languages. For example, a person who identifies as Mende may also use Krio and English and may have competence in another indigenous language because of marriage, migration, trading activities, schooling, or prolonged contact with neighbouring communities. Consequently, the present study treats language as a communicative resource rather than assuming a one-to-one correspondence between ethnicity and language.

Table 5a: number of languages widely used per Chiefdoms

Bumpeh Ngawo	Jaiama Bongor	Kakua	Lugbu	Tikonko
Banta	Fula	Madingo	Soso	Creole
Soso	LOKO	Limba	Fula	English
Creole	Ka-Themne	Arabic	Madingo	French
Fula	Mende	French	Creole	Arabic
English	Limba	Loko	LOKO	Fula
Limba	Creole	English	Limba	Madingo
Loko		Creole	Ka-Themne	Loko
Ka-Themne		Ka- Themne	Mende	Limba
Mende		Mende		Ka-Themne
		Koranko		Mende
		Soso		
		Fula		

Table 5b: Languages Reported as Being Used in the Five Selected Chiefdoms

Language/ Variety	Bumpe- Ngawo	Jaiama- Bongor	Kakua	Lugbu	Tikonko	Linguistic classification/notes
Mende	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Indigenous language; Mande family
Krio (Creole)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	English-based Creole; widely used lingua franca
Fula/Fulani	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Indigenous/immigrant language variety; commonly identified with Fulani speakers
Madingo/ Mandingo	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mande language; also used as an ethnic designation



Susu	✓	✓	×	✓	×	Mande language; also used as an ethnic designation
Loko	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	Southwestern Mande language; also an ethnic designation
Limba	✓	✓	✓	×	×	Niger-Congo language; also an ethnic designation
Ka-Themne/ Themne	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Niger-Congo language; Temne/Theme/Ka-Themne naming requires standardisation
English	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Official language; principally associated with formal/educational domains
Arabic	✓	×	×	✓	×	Semitic language; likely associated with religious/educational contexts
French	✓	✓	×	✓	×	Indo-European language; not an indigenous Sierra Leonean language
Koranko/ Kuranko	×	×	×	×	✓	Mande language; ethnic and linguistic designation
Total reported varieties	12	11	8	11	8	Based on languages reported in the field inventory

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Note: A tick (✓) indicates that the language/variety was reported in the field inventory for the chiefdom. It does not indicate that all respondents in the chiefdom speak the language or that the language is the dominant language of the chiefdom while (×) indicate that the language/variety was not present

Interpretation of the Language Inventory

Table 5 demonstrates substantial multilingualism across the five selected chiefdoms. The inventory contains indigenous Sierra Leonean languages as well as Krio, English, Arabic, and French. The presence of several languages in individual chiefdoms indicates that language use in the study area cannot be adequately described in terms of a single community language.

Mende is particularly important in the inventory because Bo District is situated in the southern part of Sierra Leone, where Mende has historically functioned as a major indigenous language and regional language. Mende belongs to the Mande family and is spoken both by Mende people and by speakers from other ethnic backgrounds in southern Sierra Leone.

Krio occupies a different position from the indigenous languages listed in the inventory. It is an English-based Creole and functions extensively as an inter-ethnic lingua franca in Sierra Leone. Its presence across the chiefdoms should therefore not be interpreted simply as evidence of a distinct ethnic community. Rather, its



widespread use demonstrates its role as a language of inter-group communication, social interaction, and mobility.

The inventory also contains languages such as Fula, Madingo, Susu, Loko, Limba, and Koranko. These languages are associated with particular ethnolinguistic communities but are not necessarily restricted to members of those communities. National survey instruments in Sierra Leone similarly distinguish a broad range of languages, including Krio, Mende, Temne, Kono, Loko, Sherbro, Limba, Fullah, Koranko, Yalunka, Madingo, Susu, Vai, Kru, Gola, and Kissi.

The presence of Loko in the inventory deserves particular attention. Loko is a Southwestern Mande language and is also the name commonly associated with the Loko people. The language is also referred to as Landogo in some sources. This illustrates why the study should distinguish between a language name, an ethnic name, and an alternative name or endonym.

This distinction is necessary because language names in Sierra Leone often overlap with the names of ethnic communities. For example, national datasets may record “Mende,” “Temne,” “Loko,” “Limba,” “Fullah,” “Madingo,” and “Susu” as language categories while also using closely corresponding terms for ethnic identity. The study therefore does not automatically classify a respondent's ethnic identity as evidence of native language status. Instead, respondents' answers to the questionnaire section on ethnicity and linguistic background were considered alongside their reported first language, additional languages spoken, languages understood, and languages used in different communicative contexts.

Why Language Inventories Differ

The differences between language inventories reported in different sources and by respondents in the present study can be explained by several factors. First, naming conventions differ. A community may use one name for a language while researchers or external sources use another. Loko/Landogo provides an example of this phenomenon.

Second, ethnic and linguistic boundaries do not always coincide. A person may belong to one ethnic community but use another language as a result of migration, intermarriage, trade, education, or prolonged contact with another community.

Third, language and dialect classifications vary according to the criteria adopted by different sources. A speech variety may be treated as a separate language by one classification and as a dialect or variety of a broader language by another. Historical linguistic sources, contemporary language surveys, and community self-identification may therefore produce somewhat different inventories. For example, historical sources and modern databases use different labels or classifications for varieties such as Loko, Limba, Koranko, and others (Sheriff et al 2025).

Fourth, the geographical scope of an inventory affects its content. A national inventory may include languages that are not locally significant in Bo District, whereas a community-level survey may identify languages used by small migrant, trading, religious, educational, or occupational groups.

Finally, multilingualism itself produces overlapping inventories. A language may be present in a chiefdom without being the dominant mother tongue of the majority of residents. The presence of English, Arabic, or French in the respondents' reports should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that these languages constitute the principal indigenous languages of the chiefdoms. Instead, their reported presence may reflect education, religion, migration, employment, trade, or other forms of language contact.

Language Diversity Across the Five Chiefdoms

The distribution in Table 5 suggests that Bumpe-Ngawo and Lugbu have the broadest reported linguistic



inventories, while Kakua and Tikonko have comparatively fewer reported varieties in the present dataset. However, the number of languages reported should not be interpreted as a direct measure of the level of multilingualism among residents.

For instance, the fact that a chiefdom has eight reported languages does not mean that every respondent speaks all eight. Similarly, a language appearing in a chiefdom's inventory may be used only by a small number of respondents or within a specific social domain. The appropriate interpretation is therefore that the table identifies the range of languages reported as present or used, rather than the number of languages spoken by every member of the community.

This distinction is important for understanding the relationship between language diversity and language use. The questionnaire data should subsequently establish which languages respondents use as their first language, which they use as additional languages, and which they use in specific domains such as the home, marketplace, education, religious settings, and wider community interaction.

Implications for Language Attitudes and Language Use

The linguistic diversity identified in the five chiefdoms provides an important basis for interpreting respondents' attitudes towards language. Where several languages coexist, speakers may attach different values to different languages depending on their perceived social, economic, educational, cultural, or communicative functions. Indigenous languages such as Mende, Loko, Limba, Temne, Fula, Madingo, Susu, and Koranko may be associated with ethnic identity, cultural heritage, family communication, and community solidarity. Krio may have a broader inter-ethnic communicative function, while English may carry greater institutional and educational value. The languages therefore occupy potentially different functional positions within the respondents' linguistic repertoires.

The field findings should consequently be interpreted in terms of functional multilingualism rather than simple language replacement. A respondent may value an indigenous language for cultural identity, use Krio for communication with speakers from other ethnic backgrounds, and use English for education or formal communication. Positive attitudes towards English or Krio therefore do not necessarily imply negative attitudes towards indigenous languages.

The demographic characteristics reported earlier should also be cross-referenced with this inventory. Age may indicate differences between younger and older generations in language maintenance and shift; education may influence exposure to and attitudes towards English; occupation may increase or reduce opportunities for multilingual interaction; sex may reflect differences in social networks; and chiefdom may reveal geographical differences in language contact.

Classification Adopted for the Present Study

For consistency, the present study uses the language names reported by respondents and commonly recognised in Sierra Leone, while distinguishing these from ethnic labels wherever the analysis requires such a distinction. Alternative names are retained in parentheses where necessary to avoid obscuring local terminology. The classification is therefore sociolinguistically oriented rather than based exclusively on genetic linguistic classification.

This approach is appropriate for the present study because its primary concern is not to reconstruct the historical genealogy of the languages but to investigate language diversity, language attitudes, and language use as experienced by community members. The respondents' own linguistic identities are therefore treated as significant data, while external linguistic classifications are used to clarify rather than override community identification.



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study established that the five selected chiefdoms in Bo District are characterised by considerable multilingualism. The language inventory included Mende, Krio, Fula, Madingo, Susu, Loko, Limba, Temne, English, Arabic, French, and Koranko. The distribution of these languages across the chiefdoms demonstrates that language use in the study area is shaped by geographical mobility, ethnic contact, education, occupation, and social interaction. The findings further indicate that ethnic identity and language identity should not be treated as synonymous, since respondents may identify with one ethnic group while speaking or understanding several languages.

Krio occupied an important position in the linguistic ecology as a medium of wider inter-ethnic communication, while English was associated principally with formal, educational, and institutional domains. Indigenous languages remained important for family interaction, cultural identity, and community communication. This pattern suggests functional multilingualism, whereby speakers select languages according to context, interlocutor, and communicative purpose rather than using one language exclusively.

The demographic findings provide important context for these linguistic patterns. Traders constituted the largest occupational group (38%), followed by farmers (21.5%) and housewives (16.5%). The prominence of traders is particularly relevant because commercial activities facilitate contact among speakers of different linguistic backgrounds and may consequently encourage multilingual competence and language switching. Farmers, by contrast, are more likely to participate in locally based social networks in which indigenous languages remain important, although market activities may increase their use of Krio and other languages.

Age was also significant for interpreting possible patterns of language maintenance and change. Respondents aged 34 years and above constituted 40% of the sample, while those aged 24–28 years accounted for 30%. Younger respondents may have greater exposure to English and Krio through education, media, and wider social networks, whereas older respondents may demonstrate stronger attachment to indigenous languages. These patterns suggest the possibility of generational variation in language preference and use, although such relationships require confirmation through detailed cross-tabulation of the language data.

Educational attainment similarly provides an important explanation for language attitudes and use. Respondents with primary education constituted 43.5%, followed by those with secondary education at 30%. Since English is strongly associated with formal education in Sierra Leone, higher educational exposure may increase opportunities for English acquisition and use. However, education does not necessarily displace indigenous languages, which may continue to dominate family and community interaction. Thus, educational multilingualism may coexist with indigenous-language maintenance.

The equal representation of males and females (50% each) provides a balanced basis for examining gender-related language practices. However, the demographic distribution alone does not establish significant gender differences in language use or attitudes. Such differences should be inferred only from the corresponding language-use and language-attitude responses.

Chiefdom also emerged as an important contextual variable. Although forty respondents were selected from each chiefdom, the language inventories differed across the study sites. This indicates that equal sampling did not imply equal linguistic composition. Differences may reflect variations in ethnic composition, migration, trade, education, and contact with neighbouring communities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that language use and attitudes in the study area are socially and contextually determined. Age, education, occupation, sex, and chiefdom interact with ethnicity and communicative context to influence linguistic choices. The linguistic situation is therefore best understood as a dynamic system of multilingualism, language maintenance, accommodation, and potential language shift.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study investigated language diversity, language attitudes, and language use in Bumpe-Ngawo, Jaiama-Bongor, Kakua, Lugbu, and Tikonko chiefdoms of Bo District. The major findings were as follows: The study identified considerable linguistic diversity, including indigenous languages, Krio, English, and other languages used in specific social contexts.

The findings demonstrated that ethnic identity does not necessarily correspond to native-language identity because individuals may speak several languages as a result of migration, intermarriage, education, trade, and social interaction.

Krio was identified as an important language of wider communication, while English was primarily associated with formal and educational domains. Indigenous languages remained important for cultural identity and community interaction. Occupation was an important contextual factor. Traders formed the largest occupational group (38%), suggesting considerable opportunity for multilingual interaction through commercial activities.

Age provided an important basis for examining possible generational differences in language maintenance and language shift, particularly between younger respondents exposed to education and wider communication networks and older respondents with stronger links to traditional community languages. Educational attainment was relevant to English exposure and language attitudes, although formal education did not necessarily result in the abandonment of indigenous languages.

The equal representation of males and females ensured balanced participation, but the available demographic data alone did not establish significant gender differences in language use or attitudes.

Linguistic composition varied across the five chiefdoms, confirming that language diversity is geographically and socially differentiated.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the linguistic situation in the selected chiefdoms of Bo District is characterised by complex and functional multilingualism. Indigenous languages, Krio, and English coexist but perform different social and communicative functions. Indigenous languages remain important for identity, family, and community interaction, Krio facilitates wider inter-ethnic communication, and English is particularly prominent in formal and educational domains.

The findings further demonstrate that language behaviour cannot be adequately explained by ethnicity alone. Age, education, occupation, sex, chiefdom, and communicative context contribute to language choice and attitudes. The linguistic situation therefore reflects processes of language maintenance, multilingual accommodation, and possible intergenerational language shift rather than simple replacement of indigenous languages by English or Krio.

The study consequently highlights the need to understand language diversity in Bo District as a dynamic sociolinguistic phenomenon shaped by both demographic characteristics and changing patterns of social interaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that:

Indigenous languages should be documented and promoted through community-based linguistic and cultural initiatives to support language maintenance and cultural heritage.

Educational institutions should recognise the multilingual nature of the communities and use indigenous languages and Krio, where pedagogically appropriate, as supportive resources alongside English.

The government through the Ministry of Education and Learning Institutions should endeavor to achieve mass literacy in the mother tongue country wide with Bilingualism and multilingualism taught and seen as beneficial in any language process. The study of linguistics be done alongside local languages and regular workshops and seminars for current teachers, local language learners, journalists and others involved with national languages. Language surveys should distinguish ethnicity from language identity by collecting separate information on ethnic affiliation, first language, additional languages, language competence, and language use across different domains.

Further research should examine intergenerational language change, particularly differences in language use and attitudes between younger and older speakers. Future studies should also investigate occupation and language use, especially among traders, farmers, teachers, students, and other groups whose activities generate different patterns of linguistic contact.

Chiefdom-specific language planning should be encouraged, given the variation in linguistic composition across communities.

Future research should employ cross-tabulation and appropriate statistical tests to establish relationships between demographic variables and language diversity, attitudes, and use.

Local communities should be actively involved in language documentation and preservation, particularly in identifying local language names, alternative names, dialect distinctions, and patterns of language use.

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