Language Attitudes and Identity: Perspectives on the Use of Bomu by native Bomu speakers in Bamako

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the language attitudes of native Bwa toward their language Bomu in Bamako, Mali. Bomu, a language spoken by the Bwa, faces marginalization in favor of dominant languages like French, and Bamanankan. The ongoing language shift stems from perceptions of Bomu as less prestigious or economically advantageous. The research investigates how native Bomu speakers perceive their language and how these perceptions shape their linguistic behaviors. It relies on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 50 native Bomu speakers. Social Identity Theory and Language Attitude Theory provide insights into the connection between language use and identity. The findings revealed a strong connection between Bomu and cultural identity, with 85% of participants valuing Bomu for preserving cultural heritage, yet a language shift is evident as younger generations increasingly favor Bamanankan and French for their perceived practical and socioeconomic advantages. Participants recommended incorporating Bomu into education, media, and cultural initiatives to revitalize the language and ensure its transmission to future generations. Bomu plays a vital role in the cultural identity of the Bwa people; however, its survival is threatened by urbanization and the dominance of other languages. To preserve and promote Bomu in contemporary Mali, concerted efforts in education, media, and community engagement are required.

Keywords: Bomu, Cultural identity, Multilingualism, Language preservation, Language shift.

Dil Tutumları ve Kimlik: Bamako'daki Anadil Konuşurları Arasında Bomu Dilinin Kullanımına Dair Görüşler

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Mali'nin Bamako kentinde yaşayan Bwa kökenli bireylerin ana dilleri Bomu'ya yönelik dil tutumlarını incelemektedir. Bwa halkı tarafından konuşulan Bomu dili, Fransızca ve Bamanankan gibi baskın dillere karşı marjinalleşme süreciyle karşı karşıyadır. Söz konusu dil değişimi, Bomu dilinin prestij ve ekonomik açıdan daha düşük algılanmasından kaynaklanmaktadır. Araştırma, yerel Bomu konuşurlarının kendi dillerine ilişkin algılarını ve bu algıların dil kullanım davranışlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler ve odak grup tartışmaları yoluyla 50 yerel Bomu konuşuruyla veri toplanmıştır. Sosyal Kimlik Teorisi ve Dil Tutumu Teorisi, dil kullanımı ile kimlik arasındaki ilişkiye dair kuramsal çerçeveyi sağlamaktadır. Bulgular, katılımcıların %85'inin Bomu dilini kültürel mirasın korunmasında önemli bir unsur olarak değerlendirdiğini göstermiştir. Ancak, pratik ve sosyoekonomik avantajları sebebiyle genç kuşaklar arasında Bamanankan ve Fransızca lehine bir dil değişimi gözlemlenmektedir. Katılımcılar, Bomu dilinin eğitim, medya ve kültürel girişimlere entegre edilmesiyle dilin canlandırılması ve gelecek kuşaklara aktarımının sağlanması gerektiğini önermiştir. Bomu dili, Bwa halkının kültürel kimliğinde hayati bir rol oynamakla birlikte, kentleşme ve diğer dillerin baskınlığı nedeniyle varlığını sürdürme tehdidi altındadır. Modern Mali'de Bomu dilinin korunması ve teşviki için eğitim, medya ve toplumsal katılım alanlarında koordineli çalışmalar gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Bomu, Kültürel kimlik, Çokdillilik, Dil koruma, Dil değişimi

INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a means of communication; it is a vital marker of identity, a symbol of community belonging, and a repository of cultural memory. In multilingual societies such as Mali, language attitudes play a critical role in shaping patterns of social cohesion, identity formation, and cultural preservation. Among the officially recognized languages in Mali, Bomu—primarily associated with the Bwa ethnic group—stands out for its rich cultural and historical heritage. However, in urban areas like Bamako, Bomu is increasingly marginalized in favor of dominant languages such as French (the official language), Bamanankan (the national lingua franca), and to a growing extent, Arabic and English, which are perceived as offering better opportunities in education, employment, and mobility (Seydou, 2015; Djim, 2016; Coulibaly, 2017).

Globally, scholars such as Garrett (2010) and Edwards (2020) have emphasized that language attitudes directly affect minority language maintenance, intergenerational transmission, and language vitality. In the African context, researchers like Adegbija (2019) and Ndhlovu (2021) have shown that local languages are often devalued in cities due to sociopolitical pressures, colonial legacies, and the global dominance of European and religious languages. In Mali, Minkailou (2017) has conducted influential research on language attitudes and identity, notably among the Minianka community in Bamako. His 2017 study on the Mamara language revealed that many Minianka speakers, especially the youth, preferred Bamanankan to their heritage language due to internalized stigma and societal pressure. His work effectively applies the Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977) to explain how language choices reflect group identity and social positioning.

Although Minkailou's studies offer valuable insights into language preference, identity, and social integration, they focus largely on the Minianka experience and do not address the linguistic realities of the Bwa community or the status of Bomu in urban Mali. Furthermore, his findings are limited by the absence of a broader sample and community-specific investigation of language attitudes in everyday interaction, particularly in relation to youth language practices, identity negotiation, and family transmission. Similarly, while Seydou (2015) and Djim (2016) have provided overviews of the linguistic dynamics of Mali, they did not examine how Bomu speakers themselves perceive their language nor how these perceptions affects their sense of self, community belonging, or decisions about language use in the competitive linguistic environment of Bamako.

This study fills these critical gaps by investigating the language attitudes of native Bomu speakers in Bamako, with particular emphasis on how these attitudes shape and reflect cultural identity, social aspirations, and linguistic behavior. It specifically investigates how Bomu speakers evaluate their language in comparison to French, Bamanankan, Arabic, and English, and how they navigate pressures to assimilate linguistically while maintaining cultural distinctiveness. This study focuses on the Bwa community to offer a clear, local perspective on language shift and revitalization.

The central issue investigated in this study is the ongoing language shift affecting Bomu, a process driven by its low institutional status and the perception that it lacks economic or social utility. As younger generations are increasingly exposed to and educated in more dominant languages, there is a growing risk that Bomu will be further displaced from everyday use. The objectives of the study are threefold: (1) to understand native Bomu speakers' attitudes toward their own language and other commonly spoken languages in Bamako; (2) to investigate how these attitudes intersect with both individual and collective identity; and (3) to assess the implications of these perceptions for language preservation and revitalization strategies in urban Mali. The research question guiding this investigation is how do native Bomu speakers in Bamako perceive their language, and how are these perceptions related to their identity, social status, and cultural belonging?

To answer this question, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews, and literature analysis. This methodological design allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how language attitudes are formed, expressed, and negotiated within specific social and cultural contexts. This research contributes to the broader discourse on minority language resilience, urban multilingualism, and identity politics in contemporary Mali by foregrounding the voices of Bomu speakers in the dynamic and diverse context of Bamako. It also responds to calls by scholars such as Minkailou and Maïga (2023) for more inclusive, community-centered studies that consider the perspectives of underrepresented ethnic groups, such as the Bwa, whose experiences have often been overlooked in national and academic discussions on language and identity.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, guided by a theoretical framework that examines the intersection of language attitudes and identity within the context of language use among native Bomu speakers in Bamako. The theoretical framework is grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which emphasizes how language contributes to the formation and maintenance of group identities. Additionally, Language Attitude Theory (Garrett, 2010) provides insights into how perceptions of a language influence its use and the cultural significance attributed to it. Together, these frameworks facilitate a deeper understanding of how native Bomu speakers perceive their language and how these perceptions are tied to their social and cultural identities within the broader linguistic landscape of Bamako.

Table 1:

Demographic Characteristics and Language Proficiency of Native Bomu Speakers in Bamako (n=50)

Category	Subcategory	Number of Participants (n=50)
Age Group	18–25	12
	26–35	15
	36–45	10
	46–55	8
	56 and above	5
Gender	Male	26
	Female	24
Occupation	Student	14
	Civil Servant	10
	Trader/Market Vendor	8
	Teacher	6
	Artisan	5
	Unemployed	4
	Other (e.g., NGO worker, retiree)	3
Language Proficiency	**Bomu**	
	Fluent	38
	Semi-fluent	10
	Basic	2
	French	
	Fluent	30
	Semi-fluent	15
	Basic	5
	Bamanankan	
	Fluent	42
	Semi-fluent	6
	Basic	2
	Arabic	
	Fluent	5
	Semi-fluent	10

Basic	35	
English		
Fluent	6	
Semi-fluent	14	
Basic	30	

Koita (2025)

The sample for this study consists of 50 native Bomu speakers residing in Bamako, Mali. These people are selected because of their firsthand experiences and deep connections to the language, making them ideal participants for investigating the complex relationship between language attitudes and identity. Given the linguistic diversity of Bamako, it is important to capture a range of perspectives, reflecting the varying degrees of attachment to Bomu, as well as how these attitudes are influenced by exposure to other languages such as French, Bamanankan, Arabic, and English.

The sampling strategy employed in this research is a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling ensures that participants have a direct or indirect involvement with Bomu, whether through daily use, educational involvement, or participation in cultural activities. This approach guarantees that the data collected are rich and meaningful about the research question. Snowball sampling is used to identify additional participants who may not have been initially accessible, thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of language attitudes within the community. This strategy involves asking initial participants to recommend others who meet the criteria, helping to ensure diverse and in-depth qualitative data.

Data collection involves 30 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus group discussions, each comprising 5 participants, providing opportunities for participants to express their openly and reflectively. These methods are chosen to facilitate an in-depth investigation of attitudes toward Bomu and how these attitudes influence social identity. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, while focus group discussions were moderated to ensure a dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences.

Table 2:

Demographic Characteristics and Language Proficiency of Participants in Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (n=50)

Category	Subcategory	Number of Participants (n=50)
Age Group	18–25	10
	26–35	14
	36–45	11
	46–55	9
	56 and above	6
Gender	Male	27
	Female	23
Occupation	Student	13
	Civil Servant	9
	Trader/Market Vendor	8
	Teacher	7
	Artisan	6
	Unemployed	4
	Other (e.g., NGO worker, retiree)	3
Language Proficiency	**Bomu**	
	Fluent	39
	Semi-fluent	9
	Basic	2
	French	
	Fluent	31
	Semi-fluent	14

Basic	5	
Bamanankan		
Fluent	41	
Semi-fluent	7	
Basic	2	
Arabic		
Fluent	6	
Semi-fluent	11	
Basic	33	
English		
Fluent	5	
Semi-fluent	13	
Basic	32	

Koita (2025)

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data, with a focus on identifying key themes related to language attitudes, identity, and the social functions of Bomu. This process involved coding the data to highlight patterns and insights into how language shapes individual and collective identities among native Bomu speakers. The current study is organized into four main sections: introduction, methodology, findings and discussion, and conclusion. Each section builds on the previous one to explore how native Bomu speakers in Bamako perceive their language and how these perceptions relate to identity, language use, and cultural preservation.

FINDINGS

Findings from interviews

This section analyzes the multifaceted relationship between Bomu and cultural identity in the context of urban multilingualism. It examines the perceived importance of Bomu as a cornerstone of cultural heritage and the evolving attitudes toward its use in urban settings. The influence of dominant languages like Bamanankan and French is analyzed, alongside perceptions of language shift and the potential endangerment of Bomu. The interplay between identity and language preference is also discussed.

Perceived importance of Bomu for cultural identity

Participants expressed a strong attachment to Bomu as a vital marker of cultural identity, emphasizing its role in preserving the traditions, oral history, and values of the Bwa people. One participant noted, "When I speak Bomu, I feel connected to my grandparents and the stories they told us. It's not just a language—it's who we are" (male participant, 42). This sentiment was widely shared, with 85% of participants affirming that Bomu is essential for maintaining a distinct cultural identity amidst the growing dominance of other languages in Bamako.

Attitudes toward Bomu in urban contexts

Bomu is predominantly used in familial and communal settings, with limited presence in public or professional spaces. As one participant explained, "I always speak Bomu with my parents and siblings, but outside, I switch to Bamanankan or French so others understand me" (female participant, 26). This pattern of code-switching between Bomu, Bamanankan, and French was commonly reported among participants, reflecting the practical need to navigate the multilingual realities of life in Bamako.

Influence of other languages on attitudes

Bamanankan was widely acknowledged as a practical lingua franca in Bamako, while French was considered essential for education and employment. As one participant noted, "French gives access to jobs and school, but it pushes us to forget Bomu little by little" (male participant, 33). Many participants

expressed concern that the dominance of these two languages is contributing to the marginalization of Bomu, particularly among younger generations.

Perceptions of language shift and endangerment

A recurring concern among participants was the declining use of Bomu, especially among youth, as many children prefer French or Bamanankan, which they perceive as more "modern" or useful. One participant shared, "My kids answer me in Bamanankan even when I speak to them in Bomu. They think Bomu is old-fashioned" (female participant, 38). To counteract this trend, participants emphasized the importance of family storytelling, intergenerational communication, and community gatherings as vital efforts to keep Bomu alive.

Identity and language preference

Bomu was closely tied to participants' sense of identity, with older people strongly associating it with cultural pride, while younger participants viewed multilingualism as a pragmatic choice. As one male participant (22) explained, "I am proud to be Bwa, but I also need French and English to succeed in life." This reflects the tension between maintaining cultural roots and adapting to modern demands.

In sum, the interview findings revealed that Bomu holds deep emotional and cultural significance for the Bwa people, serving as a powerful symbol of identity, heritage, and community continuity. Despite its importance, the use of Bomu is increasingly confined to private, familial spaces, as speakers— especially younger generations—navigate a multilingual urban environment dominated by Bamanankan and French. These dominant languages are associated with wider communication, education, and socioeconomic advancement, leading to a gradual marginalization of Bomu. While code-switching enables flexibility, it also signals a shift that may threaten the long-term vitality of Bomu. Participants expressed both concern and hope—concern over the decreasing transmission of the language, and hope through efforts like family storytelling, cultural engagement, and calls for institutional support. The interviews underscore the need for deliberate, community-led and policy-supported initiatives to preserve Bomu as both a living language and a cornerstone of Bwa identity in a rapidly changing urban landscape.

Findings from focus groups

The focus groups revealed collective perspectives on the value of Bomu, challenges to its use, and suggestions for revitalization.

Cultural significance of Bomu

Bomu was described as a vital link to Bwa traditions and ancestors. "Our language is our soul. If we lose it, we lose ourselves," stated a male focus group participant, capturing the deep emotional and cultural connection many feel toward the language. Participants emphasized that Bomu plays a central role in fostering unity and pride within the Bwa community in Bamako, reinforcing its significance as more than just a means of communication—it is a symbol of collective identity and heritage.

Usage patterns and contexts

Participants agreed that Bomu is mostly spoken in family and community settings, with its public use remaining rare due to the dominance of Bamanankan and French. "Even if I want to speak Bomu outside, I often switch because people won't understand me," noted a female focus group participant, highlighting the linguistic challenges faced in public spaces. Code-switching was consistently mentioned as a practical necessity for navigating daily life in Bamako's multilingual environment.

Perceptions of language shift

A shared concern emerged about the diminishing use of Bomu among youth. "Our children are growing up in a different world. If we don't act now, they may forget our language," warned an elder male focus group participant. This sentiment reflected a sense of urgency among participants, who advocated for community-driven revitalization efforts to ensure the transmission and survival of Bomu across generations.

Attitudes toward Bamanankan and French

While recognizing the functional value of Bamanankan and French, participants lamented their impact on the visibility of Bomu. "Bamanankan is useful, but it makes Bomu disappear from our daily talk," noted a female focus group participant. Although French was praised for its educational and professional advantages, it was also critiqued for reinforcing linguistic inequality and contributing to the marginalization of local languages like Bomu.

Identity and language

Participants expressed pride in their linguistic heritage but acknowledged the necessity of adapting to urban multilingualism. "I love speaking Bomu. But to live in Bamako, you need more than one language," noted a young male focus group participant. This illustrates the balance many Bwa people navigate between preserving their cultural identity and embracing linguistic adaptability in a diverse urban environment.

Challenges to language preservation

Key barriers cited included urbanization, lack of institutional support, and the absence of Bomu-language content in media and schools. "How can we expect children to speak Bomu when it's not in their books or on TV?" asked a female focus group participant. This comment underscores the need for broader structural efforts to integrate Bomu into formal and public domains, making it more visible and relevant in children's everyday environments.

In whole, the focus group discussions highlighted a shared commitment among participants to preserving Bomu as a crucial part of Bwa cultural identity. Participants expressed deep emotional and cultural attachment to the language, viewing it as a vital link to their ancestors, values, and communal pride. However, they also voiced strong concerns about the declining use of Bomu, especially among children, due to pressures from dominant languages like Bamanankan and French. While recognizing the practical benefits of multilingualism in urban settings, participants lamented the reduced presence of Bomu in public life and educational domains. The lack of institutional support, media content, and school integration emerged as key obstacles to preservation. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated a collective will to act, advocating for community-based initiatives such as cultural festivals, storytelling events, and formal education efforts to revitalize the language. These findings underscore both the urgency and the potential for sustainable language preservation if supported by both grassroots efforts and broader policy measures

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social Identity Theory: Language as a marker of group identity

Social Identity Theory posits that people derive part of their self-concept from group membership, and language plays a critical role in that process. In this study, Bomu clearly functions as a strong symbol of Bwa identity. Participants repeatedly emphasized that speaking Bomu connects them to their heritage, family traditions, and collective memory:

"When I speak Bomu, I feel connected to my grandparents and the stories they told us. It's not just a language—it's who we are."

Such expressions reflect what Tajfel and Turner (1979) describe as positive in-group identification. Bomu is not merely a communication tool—it embodies the values, norms, and shared history of the Bwa people. Even in urban multilingual settings like Bamako, where other languages dominate, the emotional and symbolic power of Bomu reinforces a sense of belonging and cultural distinctiveness.

This aligns with research (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006), which shows that heritage languages play a central role in preserving minority group identity, particularly when those groups are surrounded by more dominant linguistic cultures.

Language Attitude Theory: Attitudes shape language use and maintenance

Garrett's (2010) Language Attitude Theory helps explain how perceptions about the utility, prestige, or cultural worth of a language affect speaker behavior and intergenerational transmission. In this study, participants expressed positive emotional attitudes toward Bomu—describing it as "our soul" and a source of pride. However, these attitudes are also conflicted by perceptions of Bomu's limited functionality in broader society:

"I love speaking Bomu. But to live in Bamako, you need more than one language."

This illustrates what Garrett (2010) describes as the attitudinal gap between emotional value and practical utility, particularly in multilingual societies. The dominance of Bamanankan and French in public, educational, and economic spheres creates a situation in which Bomu, despite its high cultural value, is often seen as less useful—especially by youth. This tension contributes to language shift and a decline in intergenerational transmission, as seen in other minority language communities worldwide (UNESCO, 2003).

Urban multilingualism and code-switching: a coping strategy and a signal of shift

The findings also support literature on code-switching and language adaptation in urban multilingual contexts (see Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993). Code-switching between Bomu, Bamanankan, and French was a common theme across both data sets. While it allows flexibility and inclusion in diverse environments, it also signals that Bomu is being pushed into more private, less visible domains.

"Even if I want to speak Bomu outside, I often switch because people won't understand me."

Such practices reinforce what researchers have termed "domain shrinkage," where minority languages retreat to limited contexts (Fishman, 1991). Over time, this can lead to attrition and language endangerment, particularly when compounded by institutional neglect, as participants noted with the lack of Bomu in schools and media.

Comparative reflection with recent studies

The findings resonate with recent studies on language shift in multilingual African cities. Batibo (2005) emphasizes that pressure from dominant national and international languages is a major factor in the decline of indigenous languages in urban areas. Similarly, Bodomo (2016) observes that while many African urban dwellers express pride in their ethnic languages, they often prioritize dominant lingua francas for mobility and survival. Supporting this trend, studies in Senegal (Mc Laughlin, 2008) and Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2011) reveal that urban youth tend to associate minority languages with rural life and older generations, unless revitalization efforts are made visible and relevant to younger speakers.

The findings of this study, interpreted through Social Identity Theory and Language Attitude Theory, show that Bomu remains a central marker of Bwa identity and community cohesion, even as its use declines in public life. Positive attitudes alone are insufficient for language maintenance if not supported by institutional frameworks and visible usage in education, media, and public discourse.

Efforts to preserve Bomu must therefore bridge this gap between cultural pride and practical use. This involves strengthening grassroots efforts like storytelling and community gatherings, while also advocating for policy-level interventions, such as bilingual education and media inclusion. Without this, the emotional significance of Bomu may endure, but its everyday vitality may continue to fade in the face of urban multilingual pressures.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the intricate relationship between the Bomu language and Bwa cultural identity within the urban multilingual context of Bamako. Drawing on interview and focus group data and guided by Social Identity Theory and Language Attitude Theory, the study revealed that Bomu is deeply cherished by the Bwa community as a symbol of heritage, communal belonging, and ancestral connection. However, it is increasingly marginalized in the public and institutional spheres due to the dominance of Bamanankan and French, especially among younger generations who associate these languages with socioeconomic mobility.

This research contributes to the growing body of work on language shift and identity by offering a localized, qualitative understanding of how urbanization and multilingualism influences local language vitality. Specifically, it documents the emotional and symbolic significance of Bomu, highlights the tensions between cultural preservation and modern demands, and emphasizes the practical challenges of maintaining minority languages in urban African settings. The study also provides empirical support for theoretical claims about domain shrinkage, attitudinal conflict, and the role of code-switching in linguistic adaptation.

The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive language preservation strategies that go beyond emotional attachment. While Bomu continues to play a key role in personal and communal identity, its limited use in education, media, and public life undermines its long-term survival. The study shows that positive attitudes are not enough; there must be structural support to ensure the intergenerational transmission and everyday relevance of Bomu.

The implications are clear for educators, policymakers, and community leaders: language planning must address both the symbolic and functional dimensions of Bomu use. Without active measures, the language risks further erosion, which would mean not only the loss of a communication tool but also a diminishing of Bwa cultural heritage.

Preserving Bomu in a multilingual urban context requires a collaborative, multi-level approach that combines grassroots, institutional, and policy-level efforts. Community-based revitalization initiatives such as storytelling events, cultural festivals, and Bomu-language clubs should be supported to encourage use among youth and families. Integrating Bomu into local education systems through bilingual programs and culturally relevant curricula can help reinforce language pride and competence, with schools playing a central role. Media and technology must also be harnessed to develop and promote Bomu-language content across radio, television, and digital platforms, enhancing visibility and appeal, especially for younger audiences. In addition, national and local language policies should be advocated to recognize and protect Bomu as part of the linguistic heritage of Mali, including funding for research, documentation, and teacher training. Intergenerational communication must be strengthened by raising awareness among parents about the importance of consistently using Bomu at home. Urban language awareness campaigns in Bamako can further promote linguistic diversity and the value of indigenous languages like Bomu. The emotional and cultural significance of Bomu must be matched by its institutional and practical relevance to ensure it remains a living, thriving part of the Bwa community for generations to come.

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